Traces of Non-Buddhist Belief (Spiritual Worship) in Myanmar Society

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Abstract
Animism and spiritual worship, all of which existed as the Pre-Buddhist since the times immemorial, had deeply rooted in Myanmar society. The beliefs on the animistic phenomena and guardian spirits played crucial role not only in the customary society but also in the society of modern time even though some of these ideals quite contrary to the teaching of Buddha. The people propitiate the guardian spirits to ease their secular sufferings. The kings of Myanmar exploited animism and spiritual worship to buttress their authority. This paper is an attempt to revisit the role of animism and spiritual worship not only in the social life but in the politics of Myanmar. The primary and the reliable secondary source are used to yield new information and new ideas on spiritual worship.

Keywords: Cultural history.

Introduction
The study of animism and spiritual worship is the area of study for both cultural anthropologists and historians. This paper is written from the historical point of view. By omitting rituals of spiritual worship such as propitiating customs and festivals, the author of this paper made effort to deal with the nature of spiritual worship, interrelation between the spiritual worship and kingship, and the role of spiritual worship in everyday life of people. In order to yield the new information and interpretation, author attempted to find some primary sources and interpret these sources.

Nature, Origin and Development of Nat-worship and Animism
The people of Myanmar believed nats as the supernatural beings who are supposed to possess superior power than human. The development of nat worship and animism in Myanmar society is depends on the imagination of people. But their imagination curiously blended with superstition has created a world spirits, which is unapproachable. (Pe Maung Tin, 1913:65) The every-day life of ordinary Myanmar people is partly overwhelmed by the non-Buddhist belief. From the day of his birth to his marriage, and even when he lies on his dead bed, he observes occult science and spiritual worship (Temple, 1991:2). The practice of nat worship seems to have been prosperous in the time of earliest urbanization of the Pyus. The excavation of archeological department in Hmawza, the important historical site of Sriksetra Pyus, yielded the standing posture of Vishnu image. It shows not only the earliest nat worship but also the influx of Brahmanical gods into Myanmar. The influence of Brahmanical gods into Myanmar spiritual worship reached at its high in the Bagan period. (Than Tun, 2002: 229)

Varieties of Nats
The people of Myanmar generally recognize three types of nat. First type is comprised of nature spirits of various kinds which related with prominent trees, waterfalls, hills, paddy fields, and so forth. A second type consists of devas resides in various of the Buddhist heavens and is characterized as the guardian or protector of Buddhist religion. A third type is known as "the Thirty-seven Nats". They are called meiksa nats. (Spiro, 1967:42)

Although Theravada Buddhism had its firm foothold in Myanmar since Pyu period, the people nationalized Brahman devas. (Temple, 1991: 5) The word deva is the Sanskrit term for deity. Myanmar traditionally believes deva as the good nats; they protect the people from harm and accede to their requests for assistance. The average Myanmar, monk and layman alike,
distinguishes two types of devas; thamma devas and byama devas. Although the latter are believed to occupy more exalted position in the hierarchy of devas, they play no role in Myanmar religious thought of practice. Although deva images are frequently to be seen on pagoda platform or in monastic compounds, nats and small nat shrines are rarely seen in pagoda compounds. Among the devas, the female deva namely Wathoundaye (Vasundhara in Pali) is the most popular one. (Spiro, 1967:43-46)

The worship of nature nat had stemmed from fear of people since pre-historic time. Nature nats include a variety of spirits. Myanmar generally believes every prominent trees, hill, field; stream, river, forest and many phenomena of nature are guarded by spirits respectively. Myanmar usually view natural as the dangerous world. If any undesirable thing is happen, e.g: a tree is fall and kill the person walking in its path, other people accept that it was instigated by Youkhaso (tree nat), offended by trespass on his domain or by neglect in making him offering. The nature nat is a jealous suzerain of his domain, harming those who do not recognize his suzerainty. Therefore, these nats are termed "evil" (Meihsa). However they are also viewed as guardians. For example, it a peasant would like to plough or to reap his grain in harvest, he has to propitiate relating nedawshin nat (Lord of the field or region) - alternatively, pedoshin (ne pe) nat or Le- saun nat. The people of Myanmar also believe in personal guardian spirit known as Kosaungnat. Every Buddhist share merit to their Kosaungnat whenever they made meritorious deeds.

The last type of nat, who are most prominent and play most important role in Myanmar nat worship are Thirty-Seven Nats. Those spirits who unlike the devas, are potentially punitive, and who unlike the nature nats are conceived to be the spirits of deceased human being who, because of the "green" (i.e., untimely, unnatural or violent) deaths, became nats. The people believe that when ordinary person died "green" dead, their malevolent spirits made trouble in the vicinity of the accident, and unless propitiated with a shrine. But when a king, his royal family or a national hero died a "green" dead, his potentially malevolent spirit affected the entire culture. Everybody propitiated these violently killed persons with shrines, lights and food and that propitiation covers the wide territory or sometimes related with whole country. No one could tell the beginning of thirty-seven nats worship in Myanmar precisely. Descriptions of the nats and accounts of their associated legends can be found in a number of sources (Temple, 1991: 33-34, Htin Aung, 1967: 6-7).

**Thirty-Seven Nats**

According to U Po Kya, Thirty-seven nats emerged since the reign of Aniruddha (Anawrahta) and Thiluin Min (Kyanzittha). He stated that Anawrahta set up the images of Thirty-seven nats within the precinct of Shwezigon pagoda and placed other images of Thirty seven nats. Therefore inside Thirty-seven nats and outside Thirty-seven nats appeared. Inside nats includes four Lokapalas, Sakka and many of Brahmanical god and goddess. (Po Kya, 1973: 13-16) Outside Thirty-seven nats comprises of Sakka (as chief) and other nats who died "green death". (Po Kya 1973: 32-47) (see Appendix-1). Other sources assume that the number thirty-seven was probably derived from the thirty-three deities of and the Four Lokapalas. (Temple, 1991: 20-21) However their assumption is concern only for inside thirty-seven nats. Indeed, the number of nats worshipped in Myanmar amounts to well over a hundred, but the nats associated with the cult of the thirty-seven nats were drawn up by royal authority, (Htin Aung, 1967: 83) The participants of today Thirty-seven nats are derived from the list of Myawaddy Mingyi U Sa, who complied by making interview with masters of Myanmar orchestra Nga Myat Thae and Nga
Tayok in 1795 A.D. U Sa continued his compilation in 1820 by interviewing with Nathtaingyi (custodian of images) Kawi Dewa Kyaw and other chroniclers. The list of Myawaddy Mingyi is also varied with its such former compilation as Wungyi Padetha Yaza's list. (Po Kya, 1973: 47-56). As regard to the status, period of emergence, and death of Thirty-seven nats are analysed by many sources. (Po Kya, 1973: 55-59, Htin Aung, 1967: 102-104, Temple, 1991: 49, 63,69)

Myanmar people however roughly classify Thirty-seven nats into three subtypes. The first is the household nat. Throughout the whole of the Myanmar the house nat is Min Mahagiri, Lord of the Great Mountain. Although his special abode is in his shrine on Mt. Popa, he is also believed to reside in the coconut which hangs in his honour in every house in Myanmar. The second type is village or town nats. Some nats from Thirty-seven nats are worshipped as village or town nats. The third type is the hereditary nats-Misai Phasai nats (Mother's side-father's side nats). Any of the Thirty-seven nats, with the exception of Sakka, may serve as a nat of this type (U Kyaw Ze Ya, 2017). Apart from above stated nats" public works" nats are who existed. But there are generally unrecognized and unnamed by the Myanmar people.

**Spiritualism and Monarchy**

Every Myanmar King assumed themselves as the Loka-thamudi-nats or living guardian spirit of mundane world. It is the assumption of the kings as deity: devaraja elements. When a king attempted to create moral order, to maintain the law, to look after sasana, and to unify his kingdom successfully he was regarded as the personal savior, resembling the compassionate Mahayanist bodhis-satva or Phayalaung (in Myanmar term) (Aung-Thwin, n.d, pp.56-57). Whenever a king died, the royalties used the word in Myanmar Natywa San The (Passed to the happy state of nats).

In some cases, the kings utilized the nats to assert and to buttress their authority. The Kings of Konbaung dynasty followed the custom of their ancestors. They also held nat propitiation ceremonies at occasional period. Even king Mindon, the great patron of Buddhism, could not oppose the nat ritual customs. In his project of the building of new capital at Mandalay, he ordered to submit the former ritual customs from Nat-ok (chief medium) (Taikkha, 1973: 754-755, Than Tun, 1989: 48-49). Sometime, the reigning king gave the fief to the member of Thirty-seven nats. According to a legendary the king of Bagan (he was probably Thilakyaung (? 344-387) placed a shrine on Mt. Popa for U Tin De (Minmaha Giri) nat. Then the king further ordered that an annual festival (nat-pwè) be in honor in the month of Nayon.

The custom of nat worship mingled in the court ceremonies. The kings, sometime, issued royal order to summon the service of nats in their expending their empire or in pacifying the country. An order by king Badon mentions that the guardian spirits around Amarpura were put on blame for his failure of Ayutthaya military campaigns (Po Kya, 1973: 185-186). King Bagyidaw (1819-1840) of Konbaung dynasty also issued an order for nats in order remove lethal diseases from his people and royal family. (Parabaik No.1) Another order is jocular one and issued by king Tharawaddy (1837-1846). It was issued in his pilgrimage to Shwe Dagon Pagoda in Yangon when his royal barge arrived somewhere below the confluence of Ayawaddy and Chindwin river he went Pakkhangyi and gave the title of Maha Minhla Kyawzwashwe to Pakkhan Min Kyawzwa nat who is in the pantheon of Thirty-seven Nat. He then ordered Kyawzwa nat to accompany in his pilgrimage. (Taikkha, 1969: 601)

Even in the independent period, U Nu the Prime Minister of the state, acted to ordered the construction of two national nat shrines, one for Upper and one for Lower Myanmar at a cost of 100,000 kyats of that time. A week later, it was announced that the government had decided, instead, to build only one shrine on Mt.Pop. (Spiro, 1967: 60-61)
Spiritualism and Ordinary People
Like in the ruling circle, the animistic belief and nat worship played most important role in the every-day life of the ordinary people, it is undeniable that the worship of nats is a question of daily concern to all stratum of Myanmar, while the worship at the pagoda is only thought of some occasional time. They believe that nats may fulfill their secular desire.

The people worshiping not only to devas but nature nats, public work nats, maizain-hpazain nats, (father side-mother side nat), nedoshin (Lord of the regions) nat, village nat and so on. Among them Thirty-seven nats are most important and they also comprise in maizain-hpazain nats. The farmers also propitiate the relating regional nats. Among the farmers from Patheingyi Township in Mandalay district Tabindain Thakinma (Solitary goddess) is very famous (Daw Myint Myint Khin, 2018). They offer and propitiate her to protect them from snakes, skin rash, and all forms of illness in the fields. (Spiro, 1967: 47-49). In the townships, students paid homage to Hindu goddess. Thurathady for they believe that she can assist them to pass examination. At shinpyu (initiation ceremony) the boys dressed as princess and they were introduced to the regional guardian nats by a medium (Bekker, 1989: 53). It often happens that one or more of his parents have emigrated from another region, and in this case instead of presenting boy before the local nat they either have to take him back to his parental region, if it is near enough or to pronounce the formula without taking him before shrine. (Furnivall, 1913: 83)

Sometime the people invented new nats as they like. For a best example, there is a pagoda called Manawmaya Zedi and monastery in the vicinity of Thanlyin Township. Chief Sayadaw of that monastery U Dewun Temiza gave a place for many nat shrines in 1934. Some of these were comprised of images and some are none and all shrines amounted to about 130. Strange thing is that the list of nats consist: Shin Thilawuntha ( monk and great poet of Inwa period ), Mawbi Saya Them, U Paw Oo, U Aung Zeya, Saw Laphaw and Saw Yan Naing (Leaders of armed-struggle against British after annexation) Nga-moe-yeik Migyaung (The crocodile that was the main hero in the legend of Shinmwelun and Minnanda), Saya Toke, U Wat, Ma Mi, (All of them are ordinary civilian ) some of them especially Mawbi Saya Thein and U Dewun Temiza himself became nat before their death. U Po Kya called them with the name of Takkhit Natmya (Nats of Modern Time) (Po Kya, 1973:135)

As the nat worship is spread widely in Myanmar, the famous and small nat-pwè (pwe festival) are held throughout the year. One of the famous nat-pwè is Alon nat-pwè. It has been going on for perhaps eight hundred year, and its popularity is undiminished. Along is a small township in the Monywa district, and in every March of a year thousands of pilgrims flock to it for the annual festival, coming from as far a field as Yangon and Namtu. Certain pilgrims, dwellers on the Chindwin, are bound to attend every year, whether by customs or hereditary and if they fail to come are liable to be stricken with leprosy or other diseases. (Langham Carter, 1933: 97, 105-111) The most famous nat-pwè is Taungbyon. It is held at the end of August in Taungboung village, about ten miles north of Mandalay. The festival is hold a full week-from the eight waxing to the full moon of the Myanmar month of Wagaung. The whole process of nat-pwè was managed by Nan-htein (The custodian of the shrine of two brother nats). Nan-htein is a hereditary post and is handed down from generation to generation. Although the date of the succession of Nan-htein post is unknown, there are four Nan-hteins from the same family inherited the post as follows;

U Phi + Daw So

U Pho Zon

U Po Kya called them with the name of Takkhit Natmya (Nats of Modern Time)
Daw Than Yi

Daw Khin Mya Oo

Below Nan-htein, there was a nat-ok who was responsible for the supervision of nat-kadaw (mediums) during the festival period (Daw Khin Mya Oo, 2010). This festival is celebrated in honour of the two brother nats, Shewphyingyi and Shwephyinnge. (Spiro, 1967: 113-125) Taungbyon festival attracts hundreds of thousands of visitors each year. Many came because of hereditary obligations to propitiate these nats; and since the original fiefs of these nats was very large, this motive accounts for a large percentage of the participants. Most of them, however, attend for jolly sake. The organization of a festival at this magnitude needs joint effort by the government, police, and the bus and railroad lines. Nowadays Taungbyon festival concern with almost Myanmar people and Spiro named it as a national festival. Apart from famous nat festivals, the people, sometime, have to held nat-kanna of their own. It is usually held only, when their secular desire has been fulfilled.

Conclusion

Within the practice of Buddhism, different Buddhist countries have developed animism. Buddhist behavior with each country is constantly modified by historical and sociopolitical forces. Indeed the practice of nat worship would have been traced back to the early Bagan era. From that time onward the kings and the people of Myanmar, were familiar with the nat worship. Buddhist kings could not oppose the existence of nat worship. In some cases the kings utilized the nats to buttress and to assert their power. Like in the life of the kings, the nat worship also overwhelmed the ordinary life of the people. In fact the spiritual belief interwoven into the Buddhist fabric through the ambivalence of its people. However neither animistic practice nor nat worship liberates all sufferings of human being. According to Buddhism "One is one's own refuge". Buddha admonished and encouraged each person to develop himself and to work out his own salvation.

Appendix (1)

List of Thirty-seven Nats

1. Thagya. Sakka
2. Mahagiri Nat : The Lord of Great Mountain
3. Hhnmadaw. Younger Sister of Mahagiri
4. Shwe Nape : Ex-wife of naga (seapent) and later became the wife Mahagiri
5. Thonpanhla : youngest sister of Mahagiri
6. Mahneml: daughter of Thonpanhla
7. Taungmakyi –Shinnyo, son of Shwe Nape
8. Myaukmin- Shinphyu, son of Shwe Nape
10. Htipyusaung medaw : mother of Kunsaw Min
11. Paramma Mingaung : Kyiso Min ( ? 986 – 992) – the sone of Kun Saw Min
12. Shwepyingyi; ) son of byat-ta and me Wana the flower-eating ogress
13. Shwephyinnge; ) son of byat-ta and me Wana the flower-eating ogress
14. Mandalay Bodaw : son of a Brahman and god-father of Shwephyin brothers
15. Shin Kwa : younger sister of Mandalay Bodaw
17. Minsithu: King Alaungsithu (? 1112-1167)
18. Mintha Dan-Maungshin : grandson of Alaungthu
19. Kyawzw̄ : he was differently described as the son of Thain-Khun Min (? 734-744), a minister of Alaungsithu and also Monye Kyawzwa (1416) son of Inwa Mingaung
21. Shwesitthin: son of King Sawmonnit (? 1325-1368)
22. Medaw Shwezaga: queen of Sawmonnit
23. Ngasi Shin: the son of Pinya Thihathu Min
24. Mintaya a Nat: Sinbyushin Taraphya Min (1525-1526) elder brother of Inwa
25. Maung polu: tea-merchant from Pinya-civilian
26. A-nauk Mipha:ya: the western-palace queen of Inwa Mingaung the first
27. Aungpinie Sinbyushin: Thihathu Min (1421-1425) – son of Inwa Mingaung the first
28. Shin Kon: royal concubine of Thihathu
29. Shwe nawrahta: the grandson of Inwa Mingaung the second
30. Minye Aungtin: son of Anaukpetlon Min and son-in-law of Thalon Min
31. Maung Miphiyu: son of a king of Inwa
32. Shin Kon: royal concubine of Thihathu
33. Taung/Shin Mingaung: The King Mingaung (? 1552-1584) son of Myaukpet Shinma
34. Minye Aungtin: son of Anaukpetlon Min and son-in-law of Thalon Min
35. Maung Minphyu: son of a king of Inwa
36. Shintaw Nat: a novice from Inwa
37. Thandawgan: royal secretary of diplomatic affairs-in the service of Mingaung
38. Yun Bayin: The King off Chiangmai who was brought to Bago as a prisoner of war by Bayinnaung (1551-1581)

* The images and analyses were precisely described by Temple's Thirty-Seven Nats.

Source: Po Kya, 1973

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