

# 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

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no role in Myanmar religious thought or 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 nature as the dangerous world. If any undesirable thing happens, 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, if 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 *Kosaungat*. 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 compiled by making interview with masters of Myanmar orchestra Nga Myat Thæ 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.Popa. (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 worshipping 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-pwe* is Taungbyon. It is held at the end of August in Taungboun 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



Daw Than Yi



Daw Khin Mya Oo

Below *Nan-htein*, there was a *nat-ok* who was responsible for the supervision of *nat-ka-daw* (mediums) during the festival period (Daw Khin Mya Oo, 2010). This festival is celebrated in honour of the two brother *nats*, *Shewphyingyi* and *Shwephyinngge*. (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. Hhnamadaw. 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
9. Htiphyusaung : Kunsaw Min ( ? 964.986) – father of Anawrahta (1044-1077)
10. Htipyusaung medaw : mother of Kunsaw Min
11. Paraimma Mingaung : Kyiso Min ( ? 986 – 992) – the sone of Kun Saw Min
12. Shwephyingyi; ) son of byat-ta and me Wana the flower-eating ogress
13. Shwephyinngge; ) 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
16. Nyaungchin-O : relative of ex-king of Thalon-Manuha (Makuta)
17. Minsithu: King Alaungsithu (? 1112-1167)
18. Mintha Dan-Maungshin : grandson of Alaungsithu
19. Kyawzwa : he was differently described as the son of Thain-Khun Min (? 734-744). a minister of Alaungsithu and also Minye Kyawzwa (1416) son of Inwa Mingaung
20. Aungswà Magyi : a minister of Narapati Sithu ( ? 1174-1211)

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 Miphaya : 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 Minphyu : son of a king of Inwa
  32. Shintaw Nat : a novice from Inwa
  33. Tabinshweti : the King of Taungoo
  34. Myaukpet Shinma : a wife of Minye Thainkhathu who was a guardian of Tabinshwehti
  35. Taungoo Shin Mingaung : The King Mingaung ( ? 1552-1584) son of Myaukpet Shinma
  36. Thandawgan : royal secretary of diplomatic allairs-in the service of Mingaung
  37. Yun Bayin : The King off Chiangmai who was brought to Bago as a prisoner of war by Bayinnaung (1551-1581)
- \* The images and analysations were precisely described by Temple's Thirty-Seven Nats.  
Source: Po Kya, 1973

### Acknowledgements

Thanks are also extended to Dr Saw Pyone Naing, Rector and Dr Myat Myat Thaw, Pro Rector from Sagaing University of Education for permitting to publish this research paper.

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