

Draft, not to be quoted.
Revisiting Buddhism and the Spirit Cult in Burma
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The Spirit-possession Cult in the Burmese religion
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In Burmese public discourse, the actual complexity of the Burmese religion is concealed by the pervasive conception of Burmese identity as a Buddhist one: to be a Burmese is to be a Buddhist, it is often said. The complexity of the Burmese religion may be initially addressed as the problem of whether we should speak of one or two religions. In talking about Burmese religion, it has to be first précised that I am speaking only of the Burmese Buddhist religion, the Theravada branch of Buddhism which is the dominant religious tradition in Burma. The other traditions, Islam and Hinduism, mainly among Burmese of Indian origin, and various versions of Christianity, mainly among the minorities, will not be taken into account here. I am only dealing with the debate of whether Burmese Buddhism is composed of one or two religions.

Actually, in the Southeast-Asian societies in which the dominant religion is Theravada Buddhism, one always finds, alongside Buddhism, different religious practices that the populations perceive as non Buddhist. This paper will deal with the interpretation of these practices in the Burmese case. A synthesis of twenty years of research among Burmese spirit-mediums, it tries to assess what an analysis of the Burmese spirit or nat cult that considers it as the product of history and not as superstitions brings to the understanding of the Burmese religion. I shall show how the cult is actually a construct of the Burmese Buddhist kingship in which the local or particular communities have contributed. This building process is still working in contemporary Burma, long after the disappearance of kingship. Moreover, I shall show that the Burmese spirit possession cult and its distinctiveness from Buddhist practices is actually a product of the Burmese localisation of Buddhism. As such, the formation of the cult is a part of the burmanization process: by burmanization I mean the processes through which a dominant culture has emerged in Burma from confrontations between various groups or social practices and not only the imposition of this dominance upon minorities cultures.

The interpretation of these practices perceived as non Buddhist has evolved drastically after the Second World War, when the first village focused anthropological field studies were started in Theravadin peasant societies. These studies were going to revise the then prevalent Orientalist approach of Thevarada, based on the reading of the canonical Pâli texts: by bringing the spirit cult part of the religion back into the analysis they revised the specific Buddhist traditions in such a way as to “rematerialize” them, as stated by Trainor (1997).

At first, Burmese studies developed very much at pace with this post-war trend of anthropological research on Buddhist societies. In *Anthropological Studies in Theravada Buddhism*, the seminal publication edited by Manning Nash in 1966 that brought together social anthropologists concerned with Theravada Buddhism, not less than three scholars contributed papers about Burmese religion, these were David Pfanner, June Nash and Manning Nash. Their contributions, like the others of this volume, dealt mainly with the relationship of Buddhism with spirits cult and came out with diverse views reflecting both the complexity of the religious field and the diversity of their theoretical positions. However, the main analytical line, common to all these studies which dealt with the relationship between practices perceived as Buddhist and non Buddhist, was to see them as belonging respectively

to the “holy” field and to the “secular” field. This was an opposition that resonated with the Buddhist dichotomy of out-worldly (pâli *lokottara*) and in-worldly (pâli *laukiya*) orientations of religious practice. By standing on the position that “the social aspect of religion negated in the Buddhist ideal of the monastic life survives in the nat [spirit] cult” June Nash was very close to the prevalent interpretation of Buddhism conceived of as an “incomplete religion”, concerned only with salvation (J. Nash, 1966).

At that time, Michael Mendelson was independently publishing a couple of papers on the relative position of the different segments of Burmese religion. Taking a broader view than those of the village studies, he came out with a fruitful hypothesis which was both historical and sociological, that authority in Burma is grounded on the relative definitions of orthodoxy and heterodoxy (M. Mendelson, 1963 a & b).

However, the kind of anthropological research about religion in neighbouring societies that was becoming prevalent was bringing the spirit cult part of the religion back into the analysis. They were taking the religious field as a whole rather than considering each system separately. They have sought to demonstrate relationships between the various religious components while demonstrating the dominance of Buddhism. Famous examples of such works are those of Tambiah for Thailand and Obeyesekere for Ceylan. Particularly, the latter has demonstrated that the Singhalese pantheon cannot be differentiated in terms of Buddhist or non Buddhist elements since it is grounded on an overarching system of distribution of power and authority called *varan*, ultimately linked to the Buddha at the top (1966). Hence, the once common qualification of “non Buddhist popular religions” became obsolete, not only because part of the practices involved were not “popular” but linked to the royal tradition as stated by Bechert (1973), but also because they were fully integrated in a Buddhist framework which Obeyesekere termed a “salvation idiom” (1966).

Looking comparatively at the development of Burmese studies in the last thirty years, one is struck by the way they diverged from the main strand of anthropological studies of Theravada Buddhism. Two distinct facts have to be considered.

First is the Melford Spiro’s work on Burmese religion. Spiro is an American anthropologist that had completed his field work in Burma at the turn of the sixties, at the same time as the above mentioned anthropologists. He published three successive books out of his data, two among them dealing directly with the religious field, which became the best known anthropological work about Burmese society outside of the Burmese studies circle. Spiro proposed in his book *Buddhism and Society. A Great Tradition and Its Burmese Vicissitudes* that the main problem the religion dealt with was suffering, a conception of religion mainly grounded on a psychological approach. He subdivided Burmese Buddhism into three distinct subsystems according to different objectives, “nibbanic”, “kammatic” and “apotropaic”, among which he considers only the first to be canonical (Spiro, 1970). In doing so, he was blurring the interrelations between the different aspects of the Burmese Buddhism, as noticed by Lehman (1972:377), and standing very much in contrast with the kind of anthropological research that had been developing in regard to neighbouring societies. Moreover, Spiro has considered the Burmese Buddhist tradition and the spirit cult – which he has labelled together with other practices Burmese supernaturalism – as two distinct aspects of Burmese religion, devoting a separate book to each of these aspects of the religion. In the preface to the expanded edition of his *Burmese Supernaturalism*, in which he answers critics of his “two religions” interpretation, Spiro insists on viewing Buddhism and the nat religion as “two separate religious systems”. The reasons he gives are that their conceptions and modes of

dealing with suffering are different, that they are incompatible and, more importantly, that the Burmese themselves view them as such, a crucial point that will be further discussed (Spiro, (1967) 1978:xxxix).

The later scholars engaged themselves in the task of understanding Burmese Buddhism did not on the whole accept the theoretical frame proposed by Spiro. Nevertheless, the picture drawn by Spiro of the Burmese religion consisting of two separate systems somehow reified canonical Buddhism. This picture had an enduring impact, if only in marking a pause in the attempts to understand the place of the spirit cult in the religion. Aside from my own work, the few papers on the nat religion that appeared after Spiro's book remain marginal and in no way based on intensive field research. For Burmese, the question of whether we should speak of one or two religions, namely the Buddhist tradition and the spirit cult, remains open. That is to say that the question of whether or not we have to consider the religious field of the Burmese society as a whole, is still not settled.

The second fact to consider is that, contrary to what happened in Ceylan and Thailand, the anthropological field researches in the Southeast Asian peasant societies that were launched after the second World War were abruptly stopped in Burma due to the take over of the power by Ne Win in 1962. The generation of anthropologists constituted by Spiro, Pfanner, Mendelson, Manning and June Nash, was brutally separated from the field. There was a gap of more than a generation during which no field research could take place, making the kind of approaches that anthropologists were developing in the neighbouring countries impossible. Although since the eighties, social scientists have begun to slowly return to Burma, in no way, has ethnographical field research been permitted again. Still, stubborn scholars did manage to undertake some sort of field research by adapting methods and research objects to that context. Research in historical and religious studies have been manageable. As a result, Burmese studies have undergone a kind of renewal with new analysis of Burmese religion beginning to spread in the academic world: Schober, Houtman, Kawanami, Carbine, Kumada, Jordt, and Rozenberg, are examples of this.

In the religious field, Ferguson, an historian of the monastic sectarianism, together with Mendelson, has analysed the system of four bonded symbolic dimensions (forest/village, meditation/learning, Upper Burma/Lower Burma and Burma/Ceylan) to determine the internal lines of rupture along which the dynamism of the monastic institution has taken place (see for example Ferguson, 1978). These analysis allow us to better understand the internal complexity of the Burmese Buddhism and have paved the way for more recent research that have explored the internal rupture lines of the Theravada tradition as they manifest in local Burmese society : those between the meditation brands of wipathana and thamatha (Gustaaf Houtman and Ingrid Jordt), between the nuns and the monks (Hiroko Kawanami), between virtuoso and ordinary monks (Guillaume Rozenberg), between ordination lineages (Jason Carbine)... All of them bring a wealth of new data and erudition concerning Burmese Buddhism and society. Another brand of research has been to understand the Buddhist Burmese society as organised by fields of power: this brand is represented by Frank Lehman and Juliane Schober. Naoko Kumada's return to village studies has sought to show how the concepts of the Theravada, no matter their abstraction, were encapsulated in the world of the villagers. All these works have helped to erase the image of the "thin veneer" that the Orientalist approach had projected on Burmese Buddhism, and to replace it with the image of its actual complexity and deep Burmese roots.

However, as a scholar of the Burmese spirit or nat cult, and its main ritual practice of spirit-possession, I am struck by the fact that it remains avoided in these analysis, as if it did not belong to the same religious field. Although passing references to this cult or to some of the figures of the pantheon occur in some of the recent works about Burmese Buddhism, one could read without realizing that the Burmese Buddhists they are concerned with are also the devotees if not the practitioners of the Burmese spirit-possession cult. Actually the disregard for this dimension of the Burmese religion by the scholars reminds me of the very reactions I met in Burma when revealing my object of research: either laughter or aggressive remarks to the effect that the nat cult is not worthy of academic research. An anecdote will give a clear picture of the Burmese ambivalence about it: I was once at the home of my Burmese teacher in Yangon for lessons. When talking about the nat practices, the teacher, a respected and learned Burmese, told me that it was superstitions that were not really followed by Burmese Buddhists. As I pointed at the fact that we did sit just under a nat, that of the domestic shrine of the house, he made the usual answer in this case that it was something he could not refuse to his wife. However, we never sat again under the domestic nat shrine.

The disregard of the occidental scholars could be explained by various reasons: the difficulties of the field research in Burma and the novelty of the renewal of Burmese studies as well as the perfectly legitimate diversity of interests. But I think that their avoidance also reflects the kind of denial I have experienced in Burma, a denial that is grounded on the Burmese view, highlighted by Spiro, that the nat cult is not Buddhist. The distancing effect of this view tends to locate the nat cult in the “superstition”. It is reflected in the academic gaze on it, the Burmese, in which the cult is folklorised (following Temple, from U Pho Kya to Khin Maung Tan) and the western, in which it is marginalized (see Spiro). Yet, this discourse of “superstition” stands in contradistinction to the highly sophisticated structure of the cult ritual system. It is actually grounded on a Burmese Buddhist discourse in which the Burmese identity has been and is still constructed by distinguishing it from such practices qualified as pre-Buddhist practices. As such, this discourse rather than constituting the ground for scientific categories, as in Spiro’s work, should be the object of the investigation.

A way to question this discourse is to take the Burmese spirit possession cult as a field of research. It is all the more legitimate because it displays a rather integrated organisation. The different possible cultural modalities are encompassed under the one cultic framework of its pantheon known, as the “Thirty-Seven Lords”. This integration of the cult is particularly striking when compared to the spirit cults in Northern Thailand for example, for which we have a good deal of outstanding studies (see for example Davis 1984, Turton 1972, Tanabe 1991, Wijeyewardene 1977, Rhum 1994, Morris 2000). Taken together, these studies provide a much more diversified picture of the cultural practices involved in spirit possession in Northern Thailand. What we find there, for instance, are “ancestral spirits” of matrilineal spirit cults, which may be purchased in some cases, and in the context of individual urban possession described by Morris, spirit-possession built in spirits. However, in the Burmese case, the figures of possession always appear as already existing, as cultural heroes whose cults have been settled by kingship, belonging to the fixed pantheon of 37 figures. This means that different modalities of the Northern Thai cults, such those of the tutelary spirits of places or of the domestic spirits of kin groups are articulated in Burma; the tutelary spirit of one’s native place becomes the familial spirit transmitted as a “tradition” (*yô ya*) when moving to another place. Both cultural functions are fused into one and the addition of these *yô ya*/tutelary spirits (the most prominent at least) form the pantheon in which the individuals may tap for the more personally oriented urban practice of spirit-possession. It eventually gives the way to professional mediumship which is linked back to the tutelary spirit cult

through the participation of the spirit-mediums in the festivals. This process implies that the legitimacy of the contemporary urban 'yô ya cults figures resides in their function of place guardian spirits in Central Burma. They are encompassed in the territorial organisation of the Burmese cult that gives this striking integrated dimension. It has to be understood ultimately as a reflection of more general features of the territorial organisation of the communities of the Burmese kingdoms. Although the historical processes involved in the formation of the pantheon are far from well documented, the symbolic material expresses the importance of the Buddhist kingship as the authoritative reference in the process. As for the actual dynamics of the cult, we shall see that its developments are determined by repeated interactions between the local communities and the spirit-mediums standing for the central authoritative reference.

Although the Burmese spirit cult has been taken as the object of the investigation, this does not mean that it has to be analyzed as standing apart of the rest of the religious field. On the contrary, as already stated, it is a product of the Burmese localisation of Buddhism. That implies that it is infused with the same representations and conceptions of the world that those prevalent in Buddhism. That is why the system of offerings to the nat, that of transmission among the religious specialists and representations of the body and the self underlying possession could and should be understood respectively by comparison with Buddhist offerings, conceptions of monks spiritual lineages and the theory of the non-self in the Buddhism: the comparison reveals oppositions as well as overlappings that inform us about processes of differentiation (see Brac de la Perrière, forthcoming a). That the spirit cult is a product of the localisation of Buddhism also means that it is embedded in the Buddhist hierarchical setting. The ultimate values of Buddhism insure its legitimating procedures as an institutionalized cult in the same way that the Sinhalese pantheon is grounded on an overarching system of distribution of power and authority which is ultimately linked to the Buddha at the top (Obeyesekere, 1966). Still further, it means that the process by which the idiosyncratic religious practices have been encompassed in the pantheon of the Thirty-Seven Lords and kept in the same time away of the core of the Burmese Buddhist identity serve also the emergence of these later as an essential one in the Burmese discourse.

The actual intricate articulation of the cult with Buddhism may be first shown at the ideological level, which I have done in the paper "Between Sovereignty and Autochtony" published in a 1996 issue of *Diogenes*. To summarize the main points, Burmese historiography credits King Anawratha not only with unifying the Irrawaddy valley under Burmese Buddhist rule but also with the recognition of the local cult figures that form the pantheon and their placement under the authority of Sakka, the guardian of Theravada Buddhism in Burma. Although the legendary accounts of most of these figures locate them much later in the history, the attribution of the cult foundation to Anawratha stress that the emergence of the Thirty-Seven is the result of the religious policy of the Buddhist Burmese kings. This highlights the fact that it is a *Burmese* pantheon: the policy of unification of the local or autochtonous cults into a centralized pantheon through the casting of historical characters from Burmese dynasties as particular cult figures (see the list published by Temple, 1991, for instance) is a process of Burmanization. It has been a part of the building of the Burmese identity as the dominant one in the Irrawaddy Valley.

These local cult figures or *nat* are spirits resulting from the violent death of human beings, the kind of death that, according to Burmese Buddhist conceptions, prevents reincarnation and leaves potentially dangerous spirits free to roam about. Their violent death is connected to the fact that they were, typically, former rebels or heroes belonging to a rival community that the Burmese royalty wanted to subdue. In the most characteristic cases, the Burmese king first

uses the well-known practice of marriage alliance, marrying the hero's sister. But when the alliance turns out to be inadequate, he finally causes his brother-in-law to die and then resorts to a symbolic procedure, namely, the transformation of the malevolent spirit into a potentially positive spirit by appointing him tutelary spirit of the region and establishing a local cult around him (See Brac de la Perrière, 2002 b). Buddhism is central here as it is Sakka, the guardian of religion in Burma, who gives the sceptre to the king, bestowing on him karmic legitimacy and allowing him to transform the malevolent spirit into a nat subservient to Buddhist symbols. The fact that the establishing of a nat involves the use of Buddhism has to be stressed: it reveals that it is a process of conversion, or civilisation. In short, the nats are subversive local powers captured by the central kingdom and enshrined in the Buddhist system of values: they are the product of a hierarchical process in which "localities" are encompassed within Buddhist society. What appears clearly is the importance of the cult to the Thirty-Seven in the articulation of the "localities" to the core of Burmese policies and identities

Note that this is an analysis of the Burmese historiographical material and as such it represents the point of view of the Burmese kingship. Nat biographies and identifications as told in the Chronicles are often at odds with the local accounts of the life of the local cult figures. More ambiguities, conflicts or interactions between local and central views of the cult will appear more clearly in presenting the sociological and ritual setting of the cult. Even after the collapse of kingship, cultural idiosyncrasies have continued to be encompassed into the Burmese Buddhist society through their integration into the spirit possession cult, that is to say through rituals. It takes the shape of a never ending standardization of local rituals according to the rituals of the cult to the Thirty-Seven. However, the ritual setting of the cult has been almost completely ignored, even in Spiro's book. I draw here for this schematic presentation on my book (1989) and on a number of papers (mainly 1993, 1998 a & b).

Today, the cult to the Thirty-Seven is actually a rather complex ritual system, whose structure follows the different levels of segmentation of Burmese society. It is practiced at the levels of individuals, domestic units, villages, regions and at the general level. However, we will concentrate on the two main categories of ritual on which the reproduction of the whole cult rests. These are the private ceremonies (*nat kanna: pwe*), linked to the general level of the practice because they are addressed to the whole pantheon of the Thirty-Seven, and the local rituals or festivals (*pwe daw*), addressed to the one local figure belonging to the Thirty-Seven that is present in the region.

To perform ceremonies to the Thirty-Seven is the main part of the professional practice of spirit-mediums. They are organised for private people, when needed, in temporary pavilions (*kanna:*) in which the master of ceremony puts in his collection of nat's images and where all the nats are supposed to be embodied successively through possession dances by the spirit-mediums of the master group. These private ceremonies stand in contradistinction to the other main ritual form, that of festivals, the local form of the cult addressed to only one figure of the pantheon, in the domain where he stands as the tutelary spirit. The ritual, organised on a regular annual basis in a collective shrine belonging to the local community or inherited in a local family of custodians, is evocative of royal rituals. During the time of kingship, some of the festivals were supported by the kingship: specialists of the royal cult dedicated to the pantheon of the Thirty-Seven who were dependant upon royal patronage, were sent to officiate at these festivals. This was the way that the local rituals were connected to the general cult at this time.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, however, a new policy of local rituals was implemented that led both to more standardization and to the creation of an independent profession of ritual specialists, the spirit-mediums or *natkadaw*. This development explains the continuation and even expansion of the general cult after the collapse of Burmese royalty and it is probably in this context that spirit-possession in its actual form developed. Nowadays, spirit-mediums must participate in the main local rituals or “royal festivals” (*pwe daw*) as ritual specialists. But they mainly make their professional living out of the celebrations of private ceremonies to the Thirty-Seven (*nat kanna: pwe*) that offer also the main context of spirit possession. This way to have access to the spirits and call upon their potency seems more characteristic of the urban society. It could be a relatively recent development of the cult to the Thirty-Seven linked to migrations of population due to colonisation, to the shift of the political centre toward south and to the more recent trend towards urbanization.

The process through which the spirit-mediums become ritual specialists (*kanna: si-*) who are able to organize ceremonies to the Thirty-Seven starts with what is conceived of as a seduction by a spirit, recognized by a senior spirit-medium while performing possession dances during ceremonies. The process of training is then continued through the participation in the ceremonies of this spirit-medium during which the new recruits will become familiar with possession, first by their seducing spirit (*hkaung swè*) then by other *nat*. The process is sanctioned by different rituals. Among them, the most important is the wedding with the seducing spirit. During all this time the spirit-medium-to-be keeps interacting with the same group of spirit-mediums whose leader is the master of the ceremonies he is attending : this leader (*kanna: si*) could be addressed with kinship terms such as “father” or “mother”, but also as *shaya* and he/she deserves the specific respectful behaviour of the teaching relationships that is the *kadaw* behaviour. It means that he/she is considered a real master.

Those spirit-mediums who have specific functions as ritual specialists in the festivals stand out as the main personalities of the profession. The participation of the spirit-mediums is needed both for the local ritual to which they are instrumental and for their own professional practice as they renew their relationship to the *nat* during his festival - a relationship that allows them to embody the *nat* for the ceremonies to the Thirty-Seven. Actually, the spirit-mediums do travel during the festivals periods, three times a year, from one festival to another, according to journeys that can differ from one master to another, but that altogether follow a trajectory given by the succession of the festivals in space and time, as a circumambulation around Central Burma. That means that the addition of the festivals, or local rituals, constitutes the whole cult or the general level of the cult.

Moreover, festivals are a unique context for interactions between the local level of practice and the general or urbanized one, in the sense that they provide for a ritual organization of these interactions. Local rituals that may last up to ten days are first organized as twofold series of homage (*kadaw*) paid to the *nat* at their main shrines or “palaces”. Homages are compulsory for local population: each household of the *nat*'s domain has to brought to the palace the ascribed offerings, mainly fresh coco nuts, bananas and leaves, presented in a bowl (*kadaw bwe*), on a specified day according to the village. In some cases it is still done through contests, specially boat contests as it is the case of the Tauntheman Bodaw's festival. These offerings are kept by temple custodians (*nan: thein*). General prosperity is expected in return by the villagers.

As for the spirit-mediums coming from all over Burma and settling for the festival in huge camps around the palace, they owe to the nat an homage made of specific offerings, much more expensive than the previous ones, consisting of ceremonial clothes and all the requisites for feasts (*sa daw sa*). They are presented to the nat in his palace during a dance program in which the main spirit-mediums have a right to dance at their turn (*htek pwe*) so long as they pay the dance fee to the palace custodians. The spirit-mediums are ranked in a hierarchy of titled dignitaries, with a chief of the nat heading a number of “ministers” and “queens”, to whom are granted precedence in order and prerogatives in the program. The ritual obligation to dance in the palace during the nat’s festival ends up very costly so that the spirit-mediums have to look for clients ready to finance them. During the possession dances, attendants, mainly the clientele of the spirit-medium, give more monetary offerings to the nat through the medium. These offerings are shared among custodians and titled spirit-mediums. The amount of money circulating at these occasions is so large that the management of the dance’s turn has become the main stake of the festival, harshly disputed by the hierarchy of mediums and the local community as represented by the custodians. Among the spirit-mediums, the competition concerns the hierarchical position and the place in the dance’s turn, a place that is inherited by followers, according to the rule. The problem is in accommodating ritual positions in a limited ritual space and time for an always growing number of spirit-mediums. Both the spirit-mediums community and the local community have an interest in it : festivals are the professional showcases of the spirit-mediums and they are an unique avenue for cash in the local peasant community.

The program of paying homage, one could say tribute, to the nat as the Lord of his domain brings together, in parallel flows, both the local population and the spirit-mediums profession. But as this program is going on, commemorative rituals of the installation of the nat in his shrine are also performed by spirit-mediums having positions of « ministers » and « queens » in the hierarchy, in such a way that they seem to constitute a royal court surrounding the spirit. The opening rituals consist of the calling of the « great nat ». Then the main representation is taken out of the temple and around the domain on a « royal » palanquin or barge and is given a ritual shower. This ritual is comparable to the *abhiseka* in the royal rituals (see Brac de la Perrière, 2005c) and is considered the moment when the nat is coming down in the representation to receive homage. On the way back to the temple he is made to pay respect to a pagoda, especially in Taungbyon, that is to say he is made to recognise the supremacy of Buddhism.

These opening rituals are then followed by rituals re-enacting how kingship transformed the spirit that emerged from violent death into a nat with a symbolic sovereignty over his domain. They are specific to each festival but mainly consist in the re-enactment of the installation in the palace of the statues which are perceived as original ones and self constituted (*pon daw*). Through this installation the deviant and dangerous personalities of the local heroes are transformed into ones that are not only submissive of the Burmese Buddhist order but which also guard this order in their domain. The most suggestive example could be taken from the festival dedicated to the Taungbyon Brothers, “mighty servants of King Anawratha”, — founder of the Pagan dynasty — who were condemned by the king because they had neglected to take part in the building of a pagoda. The commemorative part of the ritual is made up of the “ hunting of the hare ” and the “ felling of the trees ”, during which the most condemned behaviors, sexual provocation and violence, are staged outside the temple by the local population playing the parts of the local heroes and the malevolent spirits. All the while, the nat and high ranking spirit-mediums sit inside the temple, except for the crucial moments when the mediums appear first at the threshold of the temple, to accept the offering of the

hare which has been caught and prepared by the local population, and then, just outside the entrance, to consecrate the tree as it is planted there and to take a branch of it back inside the temple to be saved in order to renew the images' potency before the tree is destroyed by the villagers. The moments when the two parties come together are those when the powers of the spirits are taken from the outside into the temple where they are then established and converted into tutelary spirits (See Brac de la Perrière, 1993 & 2005 a).

If the part of the program dedicated to the homage brings together in parallel flows the profession of spirit-mediums and local populations, these two commemorative rituals show a violent confrontation between these populations. In contrast to the local population and the malevolent spirits, the mediums' and the nat's remaining inside the temple symbolizes their allegiance to the monarchy and the pagoda. Spirit-mediums are then clearly occupying a central position in the spirit cult of the Burmese Buddhists: that of ritual specialists of the general cult encompassing the values of the localities, labeled as "tradition" ('*yô ya*).

In other words, if the subversive dimension of the former local heroes and malevolent spirits is enacted, it is to commemorate their submission to the Buddhist royal order which resulted in the formation of a cult. In this sense, although rituals to the *nat* do offer the possibility of expressing the localities' potential threat to Burmese order they actually participate in their integration into Buddhist society. This is the point I would like to make clear : although at a symbolic level the cult of possession may be seen as allowing the expression of marginal values and, as such, of an opposition to central authority, the rituals only display these images of marginalities in order to enact their pacification through their encompassment within the Buddhist system of values.

If, at a symbolic level, one can say that the ritual framework of the festivals allows the integration of local values into the general cult, it also organizes the cult dynamics by setting the stage for encounters and interactions between local communities and specialists of the general cult at different levels. Nowadays, the participation of the spirit mediums in the local rituals provides for the integration of these latter into the general cult. Adjusting to the increase in the involvement of the spirit mediums, local ritual institutions have been and are still going through significant transformations. Although these transformations may be very different according to the specific context, the general trend is towards further integration of local rituals in the Burmese Thirty-Seven cult through their standardization. This is, principally due to the increased importance of the spirit-medium profession as representative of the general cult.

The actual sociological processes implied are indeed those of frequent interactions between local populations and spirit-mediums, but the ultimate acknowledged reference for these transformations remains that of a governmental power initiative. This emphasizes again the symbolic imperative of the Buddhist kingship authority. The nat are conceived of as having been subdued by the Buddhist royalty, during the monarchy, and the kings are portrayed as having been the master of the spirits. Now that the monarchy has disappeared, it seems that the central government does not intervene directly in their control. Spirit-mediums organized in their role as specialists of the general cult are the main agents of the standardization of the local rituals. As already mentioned, one can make the hypothesis that spirit possession as it is practiced nowadays in this cult has emerged as a consequence of the collapsed Burmese royal authority.

Furthermore, the local communities are far from passive in the standardization processes

through which rituals are encompassed within the general cult. We have already seen that they have an economic interest in the development of local ritual institutions into huge national festivals. To the extent that the standardization processes that accompany this development serve both to erase the idiosyncratic aspects of the local rituals and to enrich the cultural content of the general cult, they are fundamentally of a dialogical nature. Additionally, it is through their very encompassment, that local practices come to be stigmatized as local or 'yô ya, that is to say as idiosyncratic. Looking at the actual development of the cult, it appears that repeated interactions organized by the ritual setting allow the endless integration of localities into the Burmese Buddhist possession cult.

Finally, the strong integrated aspect of the Burmese spirit possession cult is what makes it appear as separate from, if not incompatible with, Buddhism. The encompassment of local practices concerning the nat into an integrated general spirit-possession cult may contribute to the division of the Burmese religion into the Buddhist and the spirits parts. What I mean is that the discourse of two separate religions is very much a Burmese discourse about identity that conceals that what is at stake is the endless integration of localities in the Burmese central order, or rather, the Burmese Buddhist order.

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