



A New Palace for Mra Swan Dewi Changes in Spirit Cults in Arakan (Rakhine) State

This article illustrates the relationship between religion and political power in a particular process of contemporary Burmese nation building. I highlight the symbolic appropriation of a specific national territory through the mediation of a spirit, and the recent building of a sanctuary in Arakan state by the wife of a Burmese military officer posted in the region, an action that is akin to concluding an agreement with a local spirit and then establishing the foundation of central authority over a local population. It highlights a process whereby the use of religion by the Burmese in the configuration of territory is observed as a way of maintaining or legitimizing hegemony over the country's marginal population groups. The article also shows how this process is made possible thanks to a specific segment of the local Arakanese elite, perceived to be the referring authority.

KEYWORDS: Arakan state—spirit cults—nation building—territory—locality—authority and power—tradition

ARAKAN state is in western Burma and borders Bangladesh to the northwest. It is a narrow coastal strip of land open to the Bay of Bengal. The area is subject to heavy rainfall that enables the cultivation of rice, one of the region's most important resources. It is separated from Central Burma by the Arakanese mountains (*Rakhine Yoma*), with their dense vegetation, and both sides regard them as a natural border. The successive capitals of the ancient Arakanese Buddhist kingdom, including the city of Mrauk-U between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, were built on the largest plains of the region, the fertile area located between the River Kaladan and the River Lemro.

In Arakan, like anywhere else in Burma and in many other parts of Southeast Asia, religious practices have been a mix of Buddhism and spirit (*nat*) worship. During my field work in Mrauk-U, Mra Swan Dewi (Mra Svan Devi) was the first *nat* I was informed about when I started research into local worship, and that was probably because her palace and statue had just been built.¹ The story of this spirit, as well as the recent building of her sanctuary, are to a certain extent different from other tales and practices related to the world of spirits and their cults in Arakan. This allows me to highlight a modality of the Burmese implantation in the country's peripheral regions (usually labeled "ethnic"), that is to say—as in this case—a society that is descended from its own ancient kingship in the Arakan region, whereby the Burmese authorities use religion as a means of legitimizing its hegemony over society in the process of nation building. This process, further developed in this article, enables us to have a better understanding of the kind of relationship that exists between central and local political authorities through religious practices. The purpose of this article is also to show how this process of Burmese political consolidation is made possible thanks to a specific social category of the Arakanese population, perceived as the local referring authority. In so doing, it calls into question the notion of "Burmanization" at a very local level.

ARAKAN STATE

Arakan state's geographical location is characterized by a narrow opening to the Chittagong hinterland and the Indian subcontinent, and its relative isolation from the rest of Burma until a new road linking Yangon via Mrauk-U to Sittway,

the state capital, was built in 2001. The first capitals of the kingdoms in Arakan are said to have been established between the seventh and fourteenth centuries. But still very little is known about them, except that they were close to Indian civilization, including Mahāyāna Buddhism, as shown by archaeological and epigraphic remains. During the Pagan period, the region was likely to have been already relatively autonomous from Burmese influence (FRASCH 2002). Despite a complex history and long tradition of conflicts with its neighbors—Burmese, Mon, Indians, and Tripura—the Buddhist kingdom of Arakan during the Mrauk-U period (1430–1785) managed to develop its own autonomous political system.² Due to rice cultivation and extensive commercial relationships with regional traders, the kings ruled the region by progressively dominating the local lords.³ However, the Mrauk-U kingdom collapsed in 1785 when the Burmese conquered the country. Moreover, they removed the most revered Buddha image in Burma today from Arakan to their capital, Amarapura. This statue, the Mahamuni Image, considered to be the palladium of the Arakanese kingdom, was believed to have protected the kingdom and its inhabitants for many centuries.⁴ After the first Anglo-Burmese war of 1824–1826, which ended in the conquest of Arakan by the East India Company, the seaport of Akyab (Sittway) was preferred to inland Mrauk-U due to its better living conditions. During the British colonial era, the new masters did not impose an indirect administrative system, except for populations living in the highlands who were integrated into a special division in the Northern Arakan District. They governed the region in the same way as the rest of Lower Burma, increasing social and cultural interaction among these plain-dwelling populations through equal access to administration and education.⁵ The former capital of the Arakanese kingdom, Mrauk-U, is now the capital of a township in Arakan State, surrounded by rice-growing villages. The Arakanese consider Mrauk-U to be the core of their culture and traditions. It is a small town with a market and an administrative center, with merchants and civil servants occupying an important role amongst its inhabitants. Since 1993, it has also undergone important changes under the military regime in connection with national policies promoting Buddhism and tourism with the intention of transforming it into a second Pagan (DE MERSAN 2005a).

The social and political situation of the country since independence has meant that it remains relatively isolated, especially in terms of the movement of people and the exchange of goods. Slow economic development, the lack of electric power in most parts of the region, and the lack of infrastructure such as roads and bridges are the main factors explaining why, until recently, Arakan has remained mostly agricultural, although it grows hardly enough rice for self-sufficiency.

Burmese and Arakanese share close social, linguistic, cultural, and religious universes, but both insist on being different. Belonging to a distinct group is highly valued, and this is illustrated by the fact that marriage between the Arakanese themselves and the use of the Arakanese language are encouraged and much appreciated. The Arakanese speak a Burmese dialect, considered by linguists to be an archaic form of Burmese.⁶ Schematically, written Arakanese is similar to written Burmese, whereas the spelling is quite different. Syntactic markers and some



The statue of Mra Swan Dewi at her shrine. FIGURE 1 (above left), and FIGURE 2 (above right). Photos taken March 2000. FIGURE 3 (below), photo taken April 2006.



vocabulary also differ (OKELL 1995; BERNOT 1958 and 1965).⁷ Although their Buddhist kingdom ceased to exist more than two centuries ago, the Arakanese today still refer to it and its palladium—the Mahamuni Image—and consider themselves as still belonging to the same particular religious (Buddhist) and historical community, which explains why they have a strong sense of Arakanese identity.

THE WORLD OF THE SPIRITS IN ARAKAN

When the Arakanese talk about *nat* in the context of their beliefs, they are not referring to the pantheon of the thirty-seven *nats* famous in Burma but to the local nature spirits and territory spirits. Each locality and each natural phenomenon provides a potential dwelling place for a *nat* and at the same time, that is regarded as the *nat* itself. In other words, *nat* are guardians of the land but also constitute the land itself. *Nat* is a generic term used to refer to any kind of spirit in general. But in this specific case, as they are believed to possess and control the land, they are called *shan* or *shan má* (Brm. *shin* or *shin má*), meaning “owner,” “lord,” and “lady,” and most of the *nat* connected with the territory are female. This means that *nat* protect the population living on their domain, but at the same time, they can harm people, spoil crops, or provoke misfortune if offended. Thus, the general attitude expressed towards them is a mixture of both fear and respect.

Two different approaches to the world of the spirits can be identified among the inhabitants of Mrauk-U. On the one hand, there are people whom I call “the scholars” (although the term does not perfectly reflect the complexity of the reality). This social category of local figures is characterized by the fact that in general, they have a high level of education, belong to the higher social classes, and enjoy real recognition and prestige from other inhabitants because of their knowledge of texts related mostly to Buddhism and its daily practices and of Arakanese historiography.⁸ Regardless of whether they are monks or lay people, these scholars are respected in Mrauk-U as members of society, defining themselves firstly as Buddhist (to be Arakanese is to be Buddhist). This social recognition, which I call “personal authority” or “influence,”⁹ can be explained by the high status accorded to written culture by Buddhist society and by the scholars’ capacity to share their knowledge. They have an “academic” approach and study historical sources, and ancient monuments, and are familiar with published or written texts such as stone inscriptions or manuscripts, mostly written by people formerly affiliated with the royal court. For them, in contrast to oral tradition, the world of the *nat* is closely linked to the past and to written history, either related to the civilization of ancient India and the world of its deities, or to the equally prestigious history of the former Arakanese kingdom and its royal court practices. They emphasize the association with Ancient India, for example, by finding etymological connections between the names of Arakanese *nat* and those of Indian gods. They also do not worship *nat*, at least publicly. As “true

Buddhists” they are contemptuous of such rituals, which associate them with the superstitions of the uneducated (that is, villagers) whom they consider inferior. In this way, they also implicitly distinguish themselves from the Burmese. However, I came to realize that despite their knowledge, these scholars only had a limited understanding of local practices and rituals nowadays dedicated to *nat*. Mastering this “written knowledge” allows them to be regarded as the best custodians and warrants of the values and traditions of Arakanese society, and, as such, of the moral order. Therefore, people often consult them to obtain advice about issues in daily life.

On the other hand, there are others who have a much more empirical approach to, and knowledge of, the spirit world. They consider *nat* to be everywhere. Whenever they face difficult situations in life in which Buddhism can hardly help (such as illness, money or family problems, and accidents), Arakanese, as Burmese, can choose from a wide range of practices, which are not exclusive, to diagnose, cure and, beyond that, to prevent and protect: astrology, spirit cults, traditional medicine, recitation of magical and protective incantations (*mandan*), amulets, and so on.¹⁰ Following this, *nat* are regularly worshipped, individually or via the cults’ ritual specialists (*nat má* or *nat kaùng má*), when the situation requires it. They are also embodied in songs recited by mediums, and manifest themselves when entering the medium’s body during the annual collective celebrations (*nat pwè*) on the basis of residential groups, and dedicated to these lords of the territory. The cults are followed primarily by those who cannot claim any authority from mastering written knowledge.

The descriptions of both approaches have been simplified. However, there are many different attitudes towards *nat* at the local level, depending on factors such as social and economic environment, educational level, or gender, since women seem to be more active in practices and rituals devoted to *nat* than men. Despite these differences, there are mutual interactions, and both recognize the spirits as lords of an area over which they have jurisdiction. The configuration of these domains, similar to administrative divisions of the former kingdom of Arakan, leads me to assert that there was some kind of dominance among local cults that the Arakanese kingship instituted in order to consolidate its control over local populations. This is in pursuance of the principle according to which local inhabitants admit the authority of those who exert control on local spirits (see DE MERSAN 2005b, part III, and LEHMAN 2003). My fieldwork shows that the most respected and powerful spirits are precisely those lords who are supposed to control either the ancient cities of Arakan or the gates of the kingdom. In other words, both associate the spirit world with the protection of the former kingdom through the ritually organized control of the territory. These two approaches indicate two levels of a cult, one at a local level for which *nat* are associated with the general welfare of a residential group, and another that was more state-centric and was formerly organized by the Arakanese kingship. They constitute a whole Arakanese ritual system linked with their territory.

THE STORY OF MRA SWAN DEWI *NAT*

There are as many different versions to the story of Mra Swan Dewi *nat* as the number of people who tell it, but its basic structure and sequence is always more or less the same. In the following versions, the first was told by a woman, a shopkeeper living in Mrauk-U, and the other by an informant who is a well-known scholar in Mrauk-U and who also plays a part in this story.

*Version One*¹¹

It is said that this lady, Lady Mother Mra Swan (May To Mra Svan Arhan Ma) was the sister of an Arakanese lady. She was once married to an Englishman.

A female *nagá* (snake) abandoned three eggs, two sisters and one brother. A hermit found them. He meditated and decided to keep both sisters, Do Kra Jam (the elder sister) and Mra Swan (the younger one). The hermit could not feed them as he was a man; he then meditated and some milk spurted out of his fingers thanks to his power. This allowed him to feed both sisters as the milk never stopped spurting from his fingers. An old woman came and visited the king. “My Lord, I have two very beautiful daughters but they are not married yet. Keep them close to you,” she said. Because they were too young, they slept in the palace with the servants. They prayed that they would not be forced to marry. Mra Swan fled from the palace because she was young and did not want to be married.

The statue today has bracelets around its ankles and does not look in the direction of the village from where she fled. A poem about her says: “In the Pontut area, if outside the plain of Purin (“Parein” was the name of the kingdom’s ancient capital in the twelfth century), Mra Swan stays away from people” (literally “she does not greet”).

Version Two

The story starts in the time of Vesali (an ancient city-state of Arakan, eighth to tenth centuries). At that time, a powerful hermit named Shida Deva acquired supernatural powers thanks to the practice of meditation. This hermit meditated on top of Babu Hill in Mrauk-U. Whilst meditating, he heard a voice and found two big eggs close to the place where he usually sat for meditation. One week later the eggs hatched and two young female babies appeared. They were twins: Kra Jam (the younger), and Mra Swan (the elder). The hermit visited the king and asked him to look after them at his palace. The king accepted and they grew up in the palace. When they were sixteen years old, they both suddenly disappeared. People searched in vain for them everywhere. The king was very sad. However, thanks to his supernatural powers, the hermit knew that they had both been transformed into *nat*. He then suggested to the king that he make two statues of the princesses to keep them in the palace and worship them as the Ladies of Arakan, the guardian spirits of Arakan. In this way, they both became regarded as the “queens” of Arakan. During the Lemro period,¹² the kings kept these statues on the eastern side of the palace and every year an important celebration (*nat pwè*)

was organized in order to honor and worship them. When King Man Co Mvan established a new dynasty, the capital of which was Mrauk-U, he only kept the statue of Kra Zam, which remained on the eastern side of the palace. She then came to be known as the Lady of Mrauk-U (transliterated as *Mrauk U shan má*) and was honored by every king of this dynasty in a special celebration in November. Nine different kinds of offerings were given to her: nine different kinds of cakes, flowers, umbrellas, and water. These presents were expected to please the lady of the territory (the Lady of Mrauk-U) so that she would protect the inhabitants against illness, help their city prosper, provide good harvests, and secure them from enemies and other misfortunes.

When the Burmese conquered Arakan (1785–1824), they paid no attention to either of these goddesses. Forty years later, when the English took control of the region, their commander Thomas Campbell Robertson settled in Mrauk-U and stayed at Rvhe gu Hill (in Mrauk U). He then married (see below) Mra Swan, the eldest of the queens of Arakan. In 1826, when Akyab (Sittway) became the main British settlement in the region, Robertson moved to the city, took the statue and placed it in a small shrine. Eighty years later, the statue disappeared.

In 1992 three regiments of Burmese soldiers settled in Arakan. Among the leaders of these regiments, a colonel encountered some problems in the front line in the northern part of Arakan where he was stationed. One night, his wife Ma Win Sein was visited in her dreams by a beautiful young woman wearing traditional dress. This lady told her, “If you want your husband’s problems to be solved, you have to worship me. I am Mra Swan. I will free your husband from his problems.” The next day, the colonel’s wife consulted the chief monk of the Sakyamanaung Monastery (in Mrauk-U) in order to find some explanation for her dream. The monk told her who Mra Swan was and encouraged her to build an altar at the same place where Mra Swan was said to have lived in ancient times. (The wife also consulted the narrator of this story. Following what the monk said, he also suggested that she should build a statue of Mra Swan dressed as a Vesali princess. In due course, within a month, a well-known Mrauk-U artist built the statue, and a second one painted it.)

They then installed the statue. Before the installation, soldiers fired twenty-one shots into the air with the intention of protecting people from danger and to repel malevolent spirits. They repeated: “If there are spirits living in this area, they will run away.” Then a celebration took place called *seitti tan*, which means “to become alive” for a *nat*. This was also meant as the consecration of the statue itself.¹³ Monks were invited to recite some *mandan*. An important ceremony followed, organized and led by mediums and musicians, during which Ma Win Sein offered nine different kinds of presents to the goddess, begging her to relieve her husband of his problems. The ceremony took place in 1996. After a fortnight, things were said to have improved for her husband. Three months later, he was promoted and transferred to Lashio, a city in the northern part of Burma. Since then, once a year, Ma Win Sein has been sending money to Mrauk-U in order

to worship and honor the *nat*. The inhabitants of the villages said they have had more protection and better rice and oil crops since that time.

ANALYSIS OF THE LEGEND

In short, the two narratives are about the revival of a cult to a powerful local spirit for whom the building of its statue and shrine are the more tangible aspects, as there were none before. Both emphasize the importance to the Arakanese of spirit cults, the role of protagonists, and point to changes in recent history. The story has to be considered in two parts: the legend, and the other that is found in version two that is related to the construction of *Mra Swan's* image.

Mra Swan is one of the only spirits I have studied for whom I could find such a complete and elaborate biography. Usually only a little information can be obtained about *nat* thanks to the rich oral culture of the spirit mediums and the rituals and ceremonies they perform to honor the *nat*. In songs, *nat* are described in association with their palaces or by particular traits, but rarely by their entire legendary narrative. Thus the first version of the legend told by an ordinary villager, consistent with the kind of information obtained in Arakan about spirits, was less detailed than the second one, but it provided a general framework for the story. The second version, narrated by a scholar, reflects a strong Western influence, probably as a result of his education and the tendency to rationalize. At the same time, the scholar insisted on the continuity of Arakanese society despite the changes that took place during the different dynasties, which even led him at one point to mix the legendary narrative with historical facts.

FOUNDATION OF THE LEGEND: THE BIRTH

The first part of the story is a blend of two recurrent themes found in Burma. In Burmese chronicles and folklore, and in Mon-Khmer traditions, there are many stories of a *nagá* female (or *nagi*) or of a doe giving birth and a hermit taking care of the baby.¹⁴ Despite variations, all versions take up the theme of how human characters, born from *nagi* eggs and endowed with great powers acquired through their birth and/or the hermit, became founders of either a city, a well-known site, or a dynasty. In Burmese stories, however, the children of the *nagi* are more often depicted as brothers, whereas in the Arakanese legend, they are sisters. Thus *Kra Zam* became the lady guardian spirit of *Mrauk-U*, while *Mra Swan* was the guardian of *Parein*, and both were considered as superior *nat* of the territory. Although this point is consistent with the Arakanese configuration in which spirits are most often ladies, we can however conclude from this first part that this legend has nothing specifically to do with the Arakan region. On the contrary, it seems to be linked to an ancient set of legends shared by other populations in Burma. As a human being, it (the *nat*) was an exceptional person with special qualities, and the powers he or she once possessed that continue to exist after transformation into

a *nat* simultaneously mark the site of its territory as the capital of a kingdom. It is also noteworthy that in these legends, also found elsewhere in Southeast Asia, ophidian beings “are a representation of autochthonous principles and, as such, symbolize legitimate sovereignty over the land for the kings who marry them” (BRAC DE LA PERRIÈRE 2002).

MRA SWAN’S DISAPPEARANCE

In both versions of the second part of the *nat* story, the process of transformation from a human character to a *nat* who goes on to protect the capital and its inhabitants remains elusive. This elusiveness is consistent with other Arakanese *nat* stories, in which the process is also not described. We do not know whether this transformation was brought about by its escape during a long journey acting as a rite of passage, or while it was still alive, as the character was equipped with supernatural powers. We also do not know if it took place after a violent death. This was often the case for most of the *nat* belonging to the Burmese pantheon of the Thirty-Seven Lords,¹⁵ and it sometimes also happened to Arakanese *nat*. Indeed, in Arakanese spirit stories, the main if not only recurring theme I have been able to identify in my fieldwork is the one of the king’s queen/wife who also became a powerful spirit known as “the lady,” with an important domain (the whole country, its capital, or a region) after dying from a tragic and violent death. In the Mra Swan legend, however, this is not the case as she becomes a *nat* before (or without) being a queen. Anyhow, it seems to me that it was the escape itself that brought about her transformation into a *nat*, an escape which also meant her refusal to marry the king, despite being brought up to become a queen. I shall return to this theme later in the article.

Furthermore, although a woman, she is seen as a *weikza*. *Weikza* are human beings endowed with supernatural powers as the result of having engaged in specific practices such as alchemy, the casting of spells, magic formulae, and so on. Mra Swan was seen as a *weikza* because of the nature of the milk she was fed and due to her intensive practice of meditation in which, according to my informants, “she kept self-control.” Moreover, the ability to appear and disappear at will is a power usually attributed to *weikza*, which is implicitly given to Mra Swan in the story here, and which underlines at the same time the importance of her escape. It should also be taken into consideration that some informants deny Mra Swan the stature of a *nat*, preferring that of a *weikza*. However, a *weikza* is generally male, and scholars say he cannot be transformed into a *nat* (see FERGUSON and MENDELSON 1981, 63). This was analyzed in the Burmese context. The female *weikza* might be an illustration of Arakanese specificity, but there is a lack of information on this point. The uncertainty surrounding both her transformation and stature—whether Mra Swan is a *nat* or a *weikza*—allows different interpretations and, we assume, anchors the spirit in the locality. It has anyhow to be linked with a growing trend in contemporary Burma to worship powerful and maybe more

consensual figures such as *weikza* because their method of gaining power through meditation, for example, makes them more acceptable in terms of Buddhist values than spirits.¹⁶ Asked for additional information about *Mra Swan*, the spirits' mediums told me little about her, except that she was a powerful spirit, the Lady of *Parein*, the *nat* that protected the city.

Furthermore, compared to the transformation of figures into *nat* that take place in the Burmese pantheon, we can assume, while a human being, she represented symbolically a challenging or subversive power against the king, who was then transformed into a local tutelary spirit (see BRAC DE LA PERRIÈRE 2002, 32, and 2007, 217–18). Indeed, the idea of the ritually-defined alliance between a male human ruler—an Arakanese king, an English governor, or a Burmese military commander—and the female spirit is a central aspect in the cult of *Mra Swan* as it also appears in other Arakanese cases of female *nat*.

RELATIONSHIP WITH POLITICAL AUTHORITIES

Capital cities, and more generally any important part of the physical territory (river, island, villages, and so on), are considered to come under the control of a female spirit in Arakan. This lady *nat* reigns over it just like a lord does over his fief, and thus over its population. Ladies of the territory represent an indigenous principle illustrated by the fact that these spirits were in origin “powers of the soil,” but which have become elevated to that of Lady, Queen of the Place (see DE MERSAN 2005b, 52–62, 278–79). The word *dewi* or *devī*, as in the name *Mra Swan Dewi*, indicates this, with a double meaning that can be translated either as “queen” or “goddess.”¹⁷ However, as already mentioned, the word usually employed in Arakan is *shan* or *shan má*, meaning “lord” or “lady” respectively, or possibly *míphrà*, “queen.”

Further research is necessary to determine more precisely the relationship that spirits have with the kings of Arakan, and at times with queens, and to shed more light on ancient cults in order to understand the link between spirit cults in court rituals and local cults.¹⁸ However, as a general principle, the status of *nat* implies a necessary relation with them, so that the population living under their jurisdiction can be controlled. In the *Mra Swan* story, it is said that the king offered nine kinds of presents to the *nat* so that she would protect the villagers and their crops.¹⁹ There are a few other references made to describe such a relationship, either quoted by spirit mediums or vaguely indicated in local songs, in which the king makes annual offerings to a particular *nat* so that he or she would protect the kingdom against enemies and ensure its health and wealth. The Arakanese configuration of spirits, mostly female, implies the theoretical possibility of an alliance between the king and the locality represented through the cult of these *nat*, characterized by a marriage alliance. In the story of *Mra Swan*, it appears in two forms: the escape of the spirit, which refuses it, and in the marriage celebration ascribed to the English official.

In this context, the episode of Thomas Campbell Robertson is important and all informants have mentioned it. The story of this British officer leads us to assume that “marrying” a spirit and thus controlling it is actually a way of controlling the local inhabitants. In 1825, as the regiment approached the capital Mrauk-U to expel the Burmese occupants who had ruled the city since its conquest in 1785, Robertson, who was in charge of the expedition, took part in a special ceremony after the first abortive attack. The day after, Robertson succeeded in defeating the Burmese Army, becoming master of the city, and inaugurated British rule over the region. The ceremony that took place was called a “marriage,” which literally meant that presents were given, “the offering (to) and worship (for) taking [the bride]” (*yu pa sa puzaw*, from *yu*, “to take,” and also “to marry”). For the Arakanese, there is no doubt that there is a causal link between what they specifically refer to here as a “marriage celebration,” with the *nat* having access to, control of, and rule over the area. A few references to this celebration can be found in articles in the *Journal of the Burma Research Society*.²⁰ For example, SAN BAW U (1923, 105) mentions that “someone advised that if a formal marriage between her and Mr. Robertson was solemnized, victory would be assured.” It should be noted however, that ROBERTSON (1853) himself made no mention of this in his book on the first Anglo-Burmese war. As COLLIS (1923) suggests, he probably participated in a ceremony, whose symbolic meaning was no doubt very alien to him, as it was conducted on the initiative of his Arakanese followers. I found no other evidence of a marriage between a *nat* and the ruler of Arakan. I consider it one of the most important events in the story of Mra Swan, which helps us understand the construction of the shrine and statue to the *nat* in light of the political situation of the country since 1988. This fact illustrates and indicates how the historical figure of this official was appropriated by the local people to explain the British conquest, and also allowed another ruler to imitate it by reactivating (or even inventing) the cult. This representative of an external or foreign power was placed in a position in which he had to submit, at least at a symbolic level, to the local power, as a condition of gaining access to the population.

THE ROLE OF THE BURMESE

The practice of honoring a *nat* in order to obtain success and protection and then worship the spirit after it has provided for them is a common practice among the Burmese urban population. In this regard, I would like to explore the roles of different protagonists in the story of Mra Swan, and specifically those of the Burmese people. For instance, the wife of a wealthy Burmese military officer restored the cult of a local spirit and worshipped it for the protection it had given her husband. However, their role in the revival of the Mra Swan cult in Arakan may have not been so fortuitous, as is highlighted further on.

It has to be stressed here that the Burmese cult of the Thirty-Seven Lords was made popular as a result of the religious policy of Burmese Buddhist kings. The

kings tried to achieve unification by imposing a centralized pantheon of spirits, incorporating local or autochthonous cults, as well as in the process of Burmanization, when historical characters from Burmese dynasties were cast in the form of particular spirit cult figures (BRAC DE LA PERRIÈRE 2002, 33 and 2007, 214–24). The relationship between Burmese kingship and local cults, formed through many levels of interaction, is nevertheless ambivalent. In a way, the cult of the Thirty-Seven Lords reinforces the Burmese king's power over local populations and therefore helps to avoid dissent. In this respect, the Burmese cult of the Thirty-Seven *nat* is not only associated with the edification of Burma, but is also part of this integration process. At a local level, from the standpoint of inhabitants, this cult is regarded only as worshipping a *nat*, viewed as a Lord presiding over his territory, and as the guardian spirit that protects and provides wealth for the region. This means, at least symbolically, that the Burmese king acknowledges the sovereignty and legitimacy of a local figure. However, there are no records of an Arakanese *nat* in the Burmese pantheon, nor is there any mention of them in any historical event or in any story that took place in Arakan.²¹

THE PLACE

This brings us to stress the choice of location for the shrine or “palace.” As mentioned earlier, Parein is the name of an old capital of the Arakanese kingdom. There are a few references to this city in the Burmese chronicles, which tell us of its foundation during King Lek-yaminnan's reign. The ruler, it is said, only recovered his grandfather's usurped throne with the help of the great Burmese King Alaungsithu.²² The purpose here is not to assess the historical veracity of the event, but to underline the fact that the foundation of this Arakanese capital had some connection with Burmese history.²³ In other words, this event justifies, from the Burmese side, the intervention—whether in the past or today—of a Burmese ruler on the pretext of securing the welfare of Arakan and its inhabitants. Additionally, we can make the assumption that in the story of Mra Swan, her refusal to marry the king meant that she refused to form an alliance with this foreign ruler for fear that the locality was to be integrated into a Burmese-centric state, which appears coherent from the Arakanese side.

PROMOTION OF THE SPIRIT CULTS BY THE KINGS

The making of statues and the construction of palaces dedicated to *nat* are not common practices in Arakan. It should also be noted that naming a *nat* shrine a “palace,” as it is usually called, is more of a sign of respect than a depiction of a reality. *Nat* “palaces” are just basic wooden shrines, mostly built on a single pole, and in which nothing specific is placed. It may be just a natural cave, or a magnificent tree, considered as the dwelling place of a particular *nat*. More rarely, small statues of *nat* are found installed in their palaces.²⁴ In the ancient capital of

Mrauk-U, there is one at the Lady of Mrauk-U's palace, and another in the shrine of the guardian of the king's palace. We assume that Arakanese kings sponsored or supported the *nat* cult to which these statues were dedicated, but they mostly disappeared after the kingdom's conquest. The statues represented powerful *nat* because they were believed to protect the kingdom as guardians of its gates, of the king's palace, or of its capital cities. However, the statues visible today are generally small, if not hidden, in sharp contrast to the new dwelling place of the *Mra Swan Dewi nat*.

The construction of *Mra Swan*'s shrine is emblematic of a recent trend in building or restoring minor figures' statues in the Mrauk-U region, whether *nat* or other beings.²⁵ This trend could be partly explained by initiatives conducted by Burmese authorities to restore the city and refurbish it in order to attract tourists and pilgrims after the ancient capital of Arakan's kingdom was declared an "archaeological zone" in 1993.

THE PALACE OF THE *NAT*

The shrine dedicated to *Mra Swan* is quite different from others in Arakan. This "palace" is located right in the middle of fields, about five miles east of Mrauk-U, near the village of Pan Mo, and half a mile from the village of Parein. Built on top of a hillock, a bamboo pavilion protects the palace, which is basically a room built with bricks and cement, and closed on three of its four sides by "half" walls connected to the roof by thick steel latticework. A villager²⁶ opens the door to this pavilion for any visitor who comes to make offerings. The statue is located in the middle by the east wall, facing west.

The human size of the statue and dimensions of the palace are both remarkable. There is also clear evidence of wealth in the decoration of the palace (plastic floor covering,²⁷ brick walls, large offering pots), which may be aimed at Buddhist worship but not necessarily for Arakan spirit cults. On the right-hand side, there are traditional offerings to the Buddha (a coconut and three bunches of bananas in a large pot). Above this, a glass case protects an Arakanese Mahamuni-style Buddha statue beneath two white umbrellas (*hti*). In front of this area for offerings, there is a box for donations and a flat, round wishing stone placed on a table.²⁸ On the left-hand side, there were four golden plastic pots of offerings when I visited the site and a cord on which the medium's costumes for future celebrations were hooked together.

The statue of *Mra Swan* faces the entrance, her head is slightly turned upwards, and the Parein Palace is supposed to be located in the direction behind her. It is carved in a single block of stone. Two *hti* are placed on each side. She is also supposed to be dressed "in the traditional way," which means that she wears bracelets around her ankles, and is dressed in a way that corresponds to the fashion of ancient times.

Worshippers have stuck golden leaves on the surface of the statue to show their respect. This is probably the only evidence of local worship of the spirit by the inhab-

itants of Mrauk-U and its surrounding villages.²⁹ The general aspects of the shrine and various items inside it differ from other places dedicated to *nat* and, in comparison, generate a feeling of strangeness, indicating an unusual way of worshipping.

To summarize, there are three significant points regarding this shrine: its size, its iconic presence, and its ostentatious wealth. These aspects contrast with that of the usual spirit cults, which, if not hidden, are at least usually more discreet in Arakan as people believe that the spirit world should not be publicly exposed. The wealth dedicated to this shrine is all the more relevant as, on several occasions, people told me that due to recent inflation and growing poverty, they could no longer afford to give annual offerings for various *nat* they worship.³⁰ This was indicative of the wealth of the new sponsor and his correlative stature.

THE CULT OF THE *NAT*

There are, however, different kinds of *nat pwe* still held in Arakan today to honor the guardian spirit of the village and the guardian of the region, called an “island.” This means that every household in the area has to contribute to this communal ceremony of offerings to the guardian *nat* in order to have protection, health, and eventually good crops for the coming year. During ceremonies, all the powerful spirits of Arakan are invited to be propitiated. However, to my knowledge there are no ceremonies specifically organized to worship the guardians of Arakan state or cities, such as the *nat* of Parein or the Lady of Mrauk-U at their respective shrines. They are only honored during the ceremony organized for the guardian of the village. If we are to accept the assumption that ancient kings used to patronize the shrines of most important guardian spirits at the state level, we can see through these examples how the Burmese are symbolically acting like rulers of ancient Arakan. By building an ostentatious shrine (compared to others in Arakan) dedicated to Mra Swan and worshipping it in an annual ceremony, the Burmese protagonists have come to own the ancient local cult and have established how to worship the divinity *in a Burmese way*. Although the building of Mra Swan shrine was originally a private initiative, this event probably had implications beyond the mere protection of an individual. The Burmese wife of a military officer played a role which was all the more significant, since her husband represented the central political power. As in the case that Robertson depicted in his story, through the act of worshipping this *nat*, the Burmese could reinforce their power and legitimize their control over the local population by means of the spiritual world. It became all the more obvious as the army took part in the actual building of the shrine, and during the consecration ritual in repelling bad spirits. We have to relate this detail to the 1988 situation when the Burmese military power decided to deploy new resources and build new army camps throughout the country in order to consolidate its power following the anti-government demonstrations. By reviving a cult, which probably was formerly sponsored at the (Arakan) state level, the Burmese military acted symbolically, as if it was doing it

towards the ancient Arakanese kingship. This provides an interesting illustration of how the power of a new ruler can be legitimized, whether it is by English or Burmese rulers.

The construction of the shrine to the *nat* Mra Swan needs to be situated within the wider context of building and renovating sites dedicated to spirits in contemporary Burma, in Central Burma (see BRAC DE LA PERRIÈRE 2007, 219–24), and also in Shan state (see TAKATANI 1999 and BRAC DE LA PERRIÈRE 2008, 107–108). In the latter case, the Burmese figure of “Shan-ess” was introduced. Officially, the Burmese government does not support spirit cults, contrary to the policy that existed in the past in the Burmese Buddhist kingdom, which was well attested to during U Nu’s government (see BEKKER 1989, 51–52).³¹ Although there is no evidence of any explicit support from the junta,³² its indirect implication is clearly made by that of the military family members, as in the case of Mra Swan.

However, the recent trend of restoring local spirit cults in Arakan is somehow surprising for, as I have already stated, there has been no such “Arakanese spirit” that was worshipped in the Burmese pantheon of the Thirty-Seven *nats*.

THE ROLE OF THE ARAKANESE

Should my assumption be valid, it is interesting to consider the role played by Arakanese protagonists as intermediaries through their participation in the process, which at first appears like “Burmanization.” It seems to me that the fact that local people are involved as part of this process legitimizes the actions of Burmese rulers. More precisely, as we have analyzed, the worship of a local *nat* by a Burmese officer, through the actions of his wife, at a symbolic level transforms and confirms him as the “Lord of the place.” This provides him with the legitimacy of domination over the local population, as we have seen in the case quoted in the oral tradition regarding the British officer. Although the parallel observed between the two stories seems to confirm my assumption, it is nevertheless important to be cautious about how to interpret why the Arakanese took part in the event as agents of their own subordination. First, the Arakanese may have had no other choice than to obey this order, which actually was more of a command than a request, to build a statue. Indeed, although Arakanese experts may have an advisory capacity, their opinion is usually not taken into consideration in the case of disagreements with the Burmese authorities, which have coercive power.

Another approach is to regard the Arakanese protagonists involved in this story from a more sociological point of view: the monk, the painter, the narrator of the story, and the craftsman. Indeed at first glance, it is strange—from an orthodox point of view—to imagine that a Buddhist monk acted as a central agent in the origin of the statue. This monk from Sakyamanaung Monastery, who was consulted by rich donors from Mrauk-U, had spent several years in Pagan, and was probably influenced by religious practices in Central Burma. Although monks are supposed to be confined to and follow the monastic rules in Buddhism, it is well-known that

they were often engaged in other domains of activities such as astrology, alchemy, and traditional medicine associated with magical and religious practices.³³ It is also important that the monk as well as other Arakanese protagonists belong to the category of scholars that I mentioned earlier whose knowledge is based mostly on textual tradition, on Buddhism, and on the history and civilization of the ancient Arakanese Buddhist kingdom. In the *Mra Swan* story, it is precisely because of the nature of such knowledge, and not as local specialists of spirit cults, that people take their opinion or advice seriously. It further suggests that their contribution to the building of a shrine to the *nat* is a factor that gives them this social recognition, and is included as part of the process which constitutes their scholarship, as we shall see when looking at the notion of “Burmanization” in the next section.

Also, as mentioned earlier, they generally do not worship *nat* and for that reason have a limited knowledge of spirit rituals that they tend to look down on, if not actually reprove, for the sake of their rational position and exclusive view of Buddhism. This is probably why Burmese donors, who spend so much money and energy on practices that concern spirit worship, which they know little about and consider inferior, do not bother them.

One anecdote indicates the need to consider the different protagonists. The first time I visited Parein in order to see the *nat* statue, the shrine was closed so I had to wait for villagers to open it. They clearly had no intention of talking about *Mra Swan*. However, I learned from them that there was no statue of the *nat* or any practice of spirit cults around the site before the shrine was built. Despite my questions, they remained vague in their answers. It is generally the case that people consider themselves as “true Buddhists,” and are especially reluctant to talk about spirits, not only because of being considered “backward” or “superstitious,” but because they fear that the information collected could be used improperly by the researcher. They may also have feared that honoring *nat* without following traditional rules could offend them and make them angry. The spirit world, for those villagers who do not belong to the social category of scholars that I mentioned, is real and present. It was also probably out of the question for them to participate in what they might have considered to be the appropriation by the Burmese regime of their territory and inhabitants through spirit powers. It would also have meant that they recognize, at least at a spiritual and symbolic level, the sovereignty of the Burmese authorities.

BURMANIZATION?

I define the main underlying question of “Burmanization” as a process of establishing Burmese domination on the country’s peripheral population through cultural and religious policies.³⁴ The cult of the Thirty-Seven Lords is about the integration of groups seen to be marginal both geographically, ethnically, and from Burmese rule. Thus, we have to distinguish two aspects in the process: the imposition of Burmese culture on the locality itself, and the ethnicity issue.

As a first step, the building of *Mra Swan* palace appeared to me to illustrate an “obvious” Burmanization process in a peripheral region of Burma through local cults. Following what has been said about the role of the Arakanese, it is important to look more closely at the process of local inscription. I suggest here that to a certain extent this event has been integrated in such a way as to create a tradition (*rò ra*) that is truly labeled as Arakanese.³⁵ Two factors would strengthen this hypothesis: after its construction, pictures of the statue were sold in Mrauk-U inside the emblematic pagoda of this ancient capital of Arakanese heritage. The *Mra Swan nat* appears in the *Encyclopedia for History of Buddhism and Rakhapura* (Arakan) written by an Arakanese (DANYA WATI AUNG ZAY YA 2003), dedicated to Buddhism and Buddhist sacred places and shrines in Arakan, whereas to my knowledge there was no prior mention of the shrine in Arakanese literature. In this book, the caption under the picture of the statue is in English: “Guardian Princess Mother *Mra Thwin*, Mrauk-U”; and also in Burmese: *Mrauk U mró saúng nat thamì Mya Thwin may daw pon*. A short mention in Burmese states that “It is the picture (of *Mra Swan may daw grì*) which was wonderfully worshipped at the beginning of the British period (by the masters-to-come), owing to a saying (‘In the Pontut area, if outside the plain of Parein, [*Mra Swan*] stays away from people’).” It is equally significant that there is no reference to the recent building of the sanctuary by the Burmese, and that the image is presented in connection with Mrauk-U and ancient Arakanese history with facts found in colonial writings. It is thus progressively integrated or reintegrated into Arakanese historiography and tradition. This is supported by the fact that the statue is supposed to be truly designed as a typical Arakanese princess because local and well-known Arakanese craftsmen of Mrauk-U did the work. They usually copy models from Mrauk-U ancient temples.

However, beyond changes in the local “spiritual visual landscape” with new sanctuaries such as the one dedicated to the *nat* *Mra Swan*, one should not draw too hasty a conclusion on the “Burmanization” issue. And more importantly, one should consider if there has not been a true change in Arakanese ritual activities. For example, who are the worshippers involved in the annual celebration dedicated to the spirit? And who, in this case, is performing the ceremony? As BRAC DE LA PERRIÈRE has demonstrated (2007 and 2008), spirits’ mediums are major agents in the integration of local cults to the Burmese nation. These questions require investigation.

The construction of the shrine and the *nat*’s statue has been analyzed as a method by which a Burmese military officer obtained symbolic recognition as the ruler of a region and in doing so settled his domination. This is based on the fact that Burmese historiography legitimized the intervention in this former capital (Parein) during the Pagan period, as well as the episode involving the British officer, and indicates a way, attested in historiography, of legitimizing the position of a ruler. The Burmese here act as kings, as they used to, by constructing a shrine and statue and sponsoring them, and by providing wealth and special offerings

and consecrating the palace of the *nat*. Such actions correspond to the common Burmese way of introducing Burmese cults into localities and thus “Burmanizing” local cults. This implantation of a Burmese cult in Arakan was made possible because the local legend had few bibliographical elements.³⁶

However, there was no “Arakan-ess” figure in the Burmese pantheon, nor was there any local alliance with this implicit Burmese ruler because of her refusal to marry the king in the story of *Mra Swan*. The progressive transformation of the *nat* *Mra Swan* into the figure of a *weikza* seems to overcome some of these difficulties. Different elements from the Burmese side would support this idea: the appearance of the *nat* in the dream of the military officer’s wife, and the nature of her powers and the demonstration of their efficiency by her disappearance, which at the same time indicate a *weikza* stature.³⁷ Her refusal to marry the king no longer appears to be negative, but on the contrary is valued as a sign of a religious calling dedicated to Buddhism, in the same way as certain meditation practices and other spiritual movements well attest to among women in contemporary Burma.³⁸ This figure of *weikza* then appears in the vocabulary, as she is designated as a *may to*. The expression has a double meaning, since *to* is an honorific term, and can be translated as either “royal mother” or “a [female] *weikza*,” similar to the popular *bodaw* (transliterated as *bhui: to*) which is its male counterpart in urban Burma. Different items in the shrine would indicate the same thing. *Mra Swan*’s shrine and statue play on this double meaning, but as a royal figure, it conforms to Arakanese literary tradition.

It is significant that several words designate the *nat* *Mra Swan*. Suffice it to say here that, even for one denomination (*may daw*), some meanings differ from one informant to another, which might indicate that the localization of a Burmese cult is still in progress and maybe in transformation. Localization might not have occurred at the origin but later, and in doing so may gain more local support from urban Arakanese followers. This transformation occurs easily as the legend was not elaborated at the origin, and also because there was no figure of an “Arakanese *nat*” to (re-)settle in Arakan.

The story of the *nat* *Mra Swan* illustrates ancient, complex, and mutual interaction between Arakanese and Burmese with constant influences and adjustments, one opposite the other. As BRAC DE LA PERRIÈRE has demonstrated (2008), the importance of dialogical relations is inherent to the process of identification for both sides (see also LEIDER in this issue).

CONCLUSION

Although sharing many common features in their religious traditions with the Burmese, the Arakanese have built their own specific relationship with *nat* in their local rituals. The Arakanese spirit world is connected to their own history and physical territory through the presence of their former kingdom. Even if the Burmese presence started to influence the Arakanese, probably with the

beginning of the Burmese conquest or during the nineteenth century, cults of local spirits continued to be the expression of Arakanese local culture. The recent building of spirit shrines, however, presents a dynamic insight into the actual relationship that takes place between the central Burmese and other minorities in Burma, in this case, the Arakanese. This specific example of a new spirit cult is not just an isolated event, but belongs to the more general process of Burmanization in the building of the Burmese nation-state.

To a certain extent, the building of the shrine honoring *Mra Swan* and the spirit cult associated with it corresponds and shows the revival or the re-emergence of political power that is exerted over local spirit cults. To this extent, and as shown in the local legend, there is a historical continuity of the relationship between this local spirit and the representative political power—only the representative of this central authority changes. Control over the local population and the appropriation of local spirit cults, which allows political authority to strengthen its power and increase its legitimacy at a local level, is somehow typical of the history of the construction of the Burmese Buddhist nation. Its application to the region of Arakan, as demonstrated in this article, is, however, quite new.

NOTES

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1. In this article, Burmese terms have been transliterated. I also sometimes use the phonological transcription of terms according to Arakanese pronunciation when it concerns something Arakanese, as here “*Mra Swan*” (pronounced *Myá Thwin* in Burmese) is an Arakanese *nat*. I also chose to use *Mrauk-U* instead of *Myauk-U* or *Myauk-Oo*. Some Burmese words are given according to their usual transcription in English publications (for example, *weikza*).

2. The *Mrauk-U* period is better known than other periods in Arakanese history thanks to archaeological remains, accounts left by Westerners, and academic work done in the last fifteen years. This region and this period in particular have been widely studied over the last ten years. On history, see (among others) GOMMANS and LEIDER 2002, LEIDER 1998, 2002, and 2004, GALEN 2008, and CHARNEY 1999. On art and archaeology, see GUTMAN 1977 and 2002, RAYMOND 1998, and KYAW MINN HTIN 2008.

3. See LEIDER 2004 and GOMMANS and LEIDER 2002. This development is described as an “aggressive policy of conquest in the northwest, directed towards Chittagong and a cautious, compromising policy towards Upper Burma, under the king of Ava” (LEIDER 2002, 129).

4. See LEIDER in this issue on the Mahamuni in Arakan, and DE MERSAN (2005b). On the statue, now in Mandalay, and its worship, see SCHÖBER (1997b). The end of autonomy and the removal of the statue are always stressed as being closely linked.

5. The colonization had a major impact on the settlement of a large population coming from Central Burma and India, a majority of whom were Muslim; at present, the most important Muslim community in Burma lives in Arakan. The purpose of this article, however, is not to describe the complex relationships between Buddhists and Muslims in Arakan.

6. Some other small Tibeto-Burmese groups live in the region, such as the Mro, the Khami, and the Chin.

7. However, people say that after a short time the Burmese are able to understand what the Arakanese are saying.

8. On this historiography, see LEIDER in this issue.

9. This *àwza* (notion) as opposed to *ana* (a kind of coercive power) has been developed in the context of Burma in general. Also, *àwza* (influence, prestige) has to be linked with *hpòn* and *dagò* (both of these terms mean “power, glory, influence,” *hpòn* due to past meritorious deeds); see NASH 1965, 76–93; SCHÖBER 1989, 103–107, 120–36; and HOUTMAN 1999, chapter 6.

10. This is not the place to look for the motivation behind the use of one possibility or another and to describe in detail these practices and actors in Buddhist societies, which can even be a single person, and is often a monk.

11. The two versions were collected in 1999. People’s names have been changed in this article.

12. The Lemro period corresponds to the twelfth to fifteenth centuries, during which successive small kingdoms, or city-states (including Parein) established their capitals on the banks of the Lemro River.

13. This is the narrator’s translation. In the literal sense of the word, it means “to bring power in/on” and is also the word for “to consecrate.” In theory, it can be used both for Buddha’s image or a *nat*’s statue; see SCHÖBER (1989, 36) and BRAC DE LA PERRIÈRE (2005). However, in Arakan, the word was used only for the consecration of a *nat*’s statue. For a Buddha’s image, Buddha *bhiseka mangala* or *aneigaza-tin pwè*, which is the stanza recited during the pouring of the water, corresponds to the libation itself.

14. See, for example, LUCE and PE MAUNG TIN (1960, 8–14, 33–36); on the origin of Kyai-ktiyo, see ROZENBERG (2008, 41–44); see the myth of origin of the Pao in ROBINNE (2000, 64–67); on Sri Ksetrya, see TAW SEIN KO (1890, 487); and on the origin of the Marma, see Lucien BERNOT (1967, 140–50). On Thaton and Pegu, see SHORTO (1967, 127–41). The *nat* Shwenabe among the Thirty-Seven Lords is also considered to be a *nagi*; see BRAC DE LA PERRIÈRE 1998a.

15. For a description of this Burmese pantheon, see TEMPLE 1906, SPIRO 1967, and BRAC DE LA PERRIÈRE, particularly 1989, 1992, 1998a, 1998b, and 2002.

16. New research has been conducted on this subject in Burma; see SADAN 2005 and ROZENBERG 2005.

17. *Dewi* (transliterated as *devī*) is a Pāli term and has the same meaning as *nat*, but is more prestigious because of its Pāli origin.

18. This is not the case for the Burmese spirits, for which more material exists and provides the explanation for the relationship. See MENDELSON 1963, SPIRO 1967, 127–42, and BRAC DE LA PERRIÈRE, particularly 1989, 1996, 1998a, 1998b, and 2002.

19. These kinds of (nine) offerings from the king to a lady are supposed to be inscribed on a stone and are copied on to a manuscript I was unable to have access to. I was also told about the same offering for other *nat* such as Kra Zam (Mrauk-U) or Utussama, whose shrine is very close to Mrs Swan’s. The numerical importance of the number nine for the Burmese should also be stressed, and also that the Burmese officer’s wife gave this ceremony (information pointed out by Brac de la Perrière, oral communication, 18 November 2007).

20. See COLLIS 1923, SAN BAW U 1923, and HARVEY 1923. Other texts mention that Robertson stopped one night at this place before the assault of Mrauk-U, but they do not specifically quote the event; see MAUNG BOON (1923, 273).

21. Nevertheless, some *nat* in Central Burma are said to be Arakanese; see MARQUES GUEDES (1998, 237–38) and BRAC DE LA PERRIÈRE (2002, 42–43), connected in this case

with the Mahamuni Shrine in Mandalay. The *nat* of Prome are sometimes considered as Arakanese (Brac de la Perrière, oral communication, 18 November 2007).

22. See LUCE and PE MAUNG TIN (1960, 121–22). See also FRASCH's point of view (2002). Alaungsithu also appears in an identical role among the Intha; see ROBINNE (2000), particularly chapter 1 on the process of "Burmanization."

23. Although it is not strictly speaking a historical document, the famous "Egyin to the Arakanese Princess" also glorifies Alaungsithu; see LUCE and PE MAUNG TIN (1960, 121–22).

24. Pieces of statues might be found inside but they are not connected to the spirit itself. It is common to find archaeological remains where former capitals stood, and inhabitants usually deposit them in monasteries or in *nat* shrines.

25. In the town of Man Pra for example, two statues were built in 1994, in a place where there were previously no such statues: one of Ramon *nat*, another famous Lady of Arakan, and the other of her grandson, Sa Tui-on. However, the real shrine of Ramon is located further above the Lemro River and consists of a simple wooden shrine on a post, near a beautiful banyan tree. It was also empty when I visited it but a black and white photograph picturing the old *nat* could be seen inside. These statues were built on the initiative of rich Arakanese people who lived in Yangon. In Mrauk-U, some statues regarding keepers of (Buddhist) buildings were renovated or rebuilt as was the case of Mra Wa, an astrologer and *weikza*, who is said to have been sacrificed for the welfare of Mrauk-U, the two *bilu* (ogres) of the Sakya-maung Pagoda, and other protective spirits of the city.

26. Is he the keeper of the palace? This function does not usually exist in Arakan as there is nothing to be kept.

27. Plastic floor covering is still considered to be modern, new, and a rather expensive product for most people in Arakan.

28. This stone is quite heavy. Students, for example, believe that they can pass their exams if they manage to lift it a certain number of times.

29. This is the usual offering to a *nat*: a pair of golden papers, whereas only gold leaves are used as offerings for the Buddha, showing a different degree in the hierarchy of values.

30. In Arakan, being a medium is not a lucrative activity.

31. This is contrary to official Burmese policy of building a *mingala* (auspicious) country by means of Buddhism to both strengthen the junta's authority and legitimize its power through the erection of new religious monuments or enshrining relics; see HOUTMAN (1999, chapter 5) and, among others, SCHÖBER (1997a).

32. BRAC DE LA PERRIÈRE (2007, 220–21) stresses this fact and analyzes it.

33. On recent work on monks connected with unorthodox or magical practices, see ROZENBERG (2005) and LEIDER (2006), who suggest that even in the past it was more often the norm than the exception. More research has to be undertaken on the influence of Buddhist monks as agents of diffusion and maybe the standardization of social and religious practices all over Buddhist Burma.

34. BRAC DE LA PERRIÈRE has described and analyzed the process of the integration of localities to the former Burmese Buddhist kingdom (1996) and in contemporary Burma (2007 and 2008) through the ritual institution of the Burmese cult of the Thirty-Seven *nat*. She justifies (2008, 98–99) the use of "Burmanization" rather than "Myanmafication" (HOUTMAN 1999) to stress that it has been an ancient historical process. Furthermore, she demonstrates that Burmanization is the process of the elaboration of Burmese identity as hegemony through the cult of the Thirty-Seven Lords, and that localizing particularism for subordination is part of the Burmese ethnicity process itself (2002, 32, 43; 2007 and 2008). However, I will not discuss this issue in this article. For the Burmese, among the many *nats*, there is one specific cult, a pantheon, which used to be organized by Burmese kingship called, by the Burmese, the cult of the Thirty-Seven Lords or the cult of the Thirty-Seven

nats, but usually they use the first expression. Arakanese don't worship the Thirty-Seven *nats* or Lords.

35. There is also a recent trend among some Arakanese scholars to consider spirit cults as “traditions” more than “beliefs” or “superstitions” and, as such, more valued and worthy of study thanks to their implicit historical “depth.”

36. In this respect we can compare this with the Kethè's Cult described by BRAC DE LA PERRIÈRE (2008, 108, 115).

37. On *weikza*, I refer here to ROZENBERG (2005, chapter 2) who summarizes and analyzes all previous works on the question and clearly presents this rather complex phenomenon.

38. This also explains the presence of a Buddha image inside the palace of the *nat* Mra Swan, which at first is surprising in Arakan.

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