

Min NyiNaung Nat (*Spirit*) worshipping and Beliefs a case study on Residents of the Ma-kyee-tan Ward Pyapon Township Ayeyarwaddy Region

Aye Thant Syn*

Abstract

In Myanmar, people's belief and worship differ according to the ethnic groups and traditions they belong to like other people in the world. Most Myanmar are Buddhists, but Nat (*Spirit*) worship still practices. Most Myanmar are Theravada Buddhism and some still believe in Nat-worship. Pyapon residents believe that going around the town with Min Nyi Naung Nats as a sign of worship could dismiss the dangers and promote their economy. Consequently they celebrate this ceremony annually and hand down from generation to generation. This tradition is not only religious ceremony but also related to social and economic issues. This paper intends to find out how the annual celebration of Min Nyi Naung traditional Nat worship ceremony is celebrated in Pyapon Town. The objectives of this paper are to search out how the worship of Min Nyi Naung Nat started in Pyapon, to elaborate the processes of Nat worshipping ceremony and why this ceremony is celebrated as a tradition. In this research, qualitative research method was used. Thus, key informant interviews (KII), focus group discussions (FGD) and participant observation have been employed. This research finding was approached from cultural anthropological point of view. Field-work is done during two years. Pyapon residents still worship Nats vigorously, and believe that the Nats can bring good luck and prosperity to the worshippers and can also bring danger to those who do not respect them.

Key words: Nat-worship, beliefs, pay-homage, ceremony, tradition

Introduction

At Lower Paleolithic, agriculture and animal husbandry were the special issues for stone-aged man. They did not need to hunt the animal all the time and they had free-time to do the pot making and basket weaving. They started to live as permanent housing and after that time household spirit, village guarding spirit were worshipped. Anthropologists Malinowski said for the beliefs and worshipping that

“Human beings could not control the situation of his environment by his own knowledge; there appeared the sensitive behaviors, beliefs and worshipping.”

The livelihood of American Indians from Labareda was hunting and when they did not get the preys, they would die for lack of food. Therefore, when they had little food or could not find the preys, they had the custom to ask the spirit (“*Nat*” in Myanmar) for

* Associate Professor, Department of Anthropology, Yadanabon University

their fortune. Spiritualist asked the authorized concerned celestial being by putting the shoulder bone of deer on the fire place to show the place where the preys would exist. Under the intense heat, the shoulder bone of deer crushed the crack lines were assumed as the map for the preys' existing place and they can get the preys later they believed.

In Union of Myanmar, there exist over 100 ethnic groups and every ethnic group has its own traditional beliefs and worship. When Human beings faced difficulties and they couldn't control the situation of their environment by their knowledge and could not manage according to their own consent, and there started beliefs and other concerned issue. When a mother faces with difficulties during giving birth, facing food storage, disease, and natural disasters were occurred; they worshipped the concerned Nats from generation to generation. *Shwe Byin "Nyi Naung"* (Royal brothers) served King *Anawrahta* (1025 E.E) and they led the team to march to carry the Buddha Relic in China. On the way back, when they arrived in Taung Pyone Village, King *Anawrahta* built "*Su-taung-pyae*" (have one's wishes full-filled) Pagoda. When building the Pagoda, all the followers need to put one brick and one grasp of sand as their labors but *Shwe Byin Nyi Naung* failed to perform, instead they enjoyed outside. Two bricks are still needed to finish building. When the King saw the lack place for two bricks, he felt angry and punished them. So he told Prince *Kyan Sit Thar* to give punishment and resumed his journey by boat. Prince *Kyan Sit Thar* executed them and these two brothers became Nats. And then, the royal boat stopped in the Ayeyarwaddy River. The King *Anawrahta* consulted his ministers about the mystery, and they informed him that the two brothers who were executed by royal command, had become Nats, and that they resented that their valuable services should have been requited by death. So King *Anawrahta* had ordered to build a Nat temple near "*Su-taung-pyae*" pagoda and people living in nearby to make regular offerings to the Nats that he was able to resume his journey and arrive at his capital in safely. The space for the missing bricks still found at the "*Su-taung-pyae*" Pagoda.

After that, the Taung Pyone area was Shwe Byin Nyi Naung's own territory and then there celebrates the *Min Nyi Naung* Nat ceremony in Taung Pyone Village; 14 Kilometers from Mandalay on "*War Khaung*" (the fifth month of Myanmar calendar) 10th to 15th annually. On the evening of the 10th of War Khaung, Taung Pyone *Min Nyi Naung* Nat celebrates conference. At War Khaung 11th, there celebrates bathing ceremony and Nat worshippers from the whole country participate and it is always very crowded. At War Khaung 14th, hunting rabbit ceremony is held. On this day, people who believe in Nat from Amarapura pay homage to Min Nyi Naung with roasted male and female rabbit and "*Htanye*" (palm wine). They let people feel happy freely and during this day people make dirty jokes loudly. At Full Moon day of War Khaung, there celebrates cutting tree

ceremony (“*htein-pir*” in Myanmar) and people believe that spiritual chiefs (“*Nat-htein*” in Myanmar) cutting htein tree with his knife become very lucky and want to bring the htein branch to their home. In 2018, H₁N₁ disease suffered in Myanmar, Taung Pyone Min Nyi Naung ceremony was stopped. There is a taboo that the way to Taung Pyone Min Nyi Naung ceremony, no one takes and eats the pork because Min Nyi Naung did not like to eat. The Min Nyi Naung Nat ceremony celebrated in Pyapon Township as an annual traditional ceremony since Myanmar Era 1272 (1910 E.E), 1st waning day of “*Kason*” (the second month of Myanmar calendar year). By celebrating Min Nyi Naung Nat ceremony in Pyapon, people believe that they are free from danger and diseases and they get developing economic status.

Min Nyi Naung Nat ceremony is held for the two young men who helped to build the Shwe “*Nat Ku*” (helping by celestial being) Pagoda and then they were disappeared. So that native people celebrates annually every 1st Kason waning day by going around the whole town. To study Min Nyi Naung Nat worship ceremony, key informant interviews (KII), focus group discussion (FGD) and participant observation were conducted. Key informants were chosen some people who know well with the local people of Pyapon. One abbot, one monk, four men of committee members were involved in it. There were seven FGDs were conducted for data collection. In these groups, thirty men and twenty-six women were involved. They were some officials, elders and the knowledgeable people, the spiritual chiefs, the players of Myanmar orchestra, the native people who always performs the ceremony, people who pay homage to the Nat and people who usually come to visit to the ceremony. Participant observation were done in collecting donated money, arranging offertories and worshipping the Min Nyi Naung Nat. This research was carried out from December 2017 to December 2019.

History of Pyapon Min Nyi Naung ceremony

The first celebration of Min Nyi Naung ceremony was learnt by the historical record of *A-tu-la-Ma-ra-zain Ae-kan-kyaw-kyia Shwe Nat Ku* Pagoda; Ma-kyee-tan Ward, Pyapon Township. In Myanmar Era 1222 (1890 E.E), at *Thi-ri-min-ga-lar-a htoo Kan-oo Narma Wihaya* Monastery abbot U Nayeinda who resided temporarily tried to build the bronze Buddha statue with the help of expert bronze craft. However, they tried harder to conduct, they did not succeed. One day, two young stranger men arrived to the bronze fire places carrying two big beautiful silver bowls. They asked the abbot U Nayeinda, the president of bronze statue making team that

“We would like to put these silver bowls to each bronze fire place by ourselves.”

After the permission of the abbot, they could make easily the bronze Buddha statue. People watched wonderfully these two young men but they disappeared from

sight in the crowd. So the abbot and his followers thought that even the experts tried to make again and again to become the bronze Buddha statue but they could not make successfully. These two strangers after they denoted their silver bowls and made the bronze Buddha statue successfully by themselves meant they were not ordinary men but they were supernatural ones. The abbots gave the speech to his audiences about this bronze Buddha statue that it was made by human being and celestial being together and according to his speech the Pagoda was called “*A-tu-la-Ma-ra-zain Ae-kan-kyaw-kyia Shwe Nat Ku Pagoda*” and started to worship in Myanmar Era 1222 (1890 E.E), Kason Full Moon day at Ma-kyee-tan Ward, Pyapon Township. That men were believed to be Min Gyi and Min Lay and started to celebrate Min Nyi Naung ceremony from 1272 Myanmar Era (1910 E.E), 1st Kason waning day to nowadays and it was celebrated 109 times.



Fig. (1) Image of Shwe Nat Ku Pagoda

Preparation for the Min Nyi Naung ceremony

There has a meeting for the committee members before one month of the Min Nyi Naung celebration at the compound of Shwe Nat Ku Pagoda. In the meeting, the pagoda trustees divided the labors and duties to do the functions of celebration. These duties are: establishing the financial committee, hiring cars for going around the town, hiring five Myanmar orchestras and hiring two spirit mediums to perform as *Mae-oo-lu-hpi* Nat (Mae-oo becomes human being) and *Mae-oo-nat-hpi* (Mae-oo becomes spirit).

Spirit mediums (“*Nat-Kadaw*” in Myanmar) of Min Nyi Naung ceremony are residents of Pyapon. When they choose spirit mediums for Nats, they prefer to choose the one who did this job from generation to generation. If a spiritualist becomes older or dies or transfers to other place, the committee chooses another spiritualist for substitution at the meeting. The committee members choose the people according to the character and role that they have to perform. Most of the spirit mediums of Min Nyi Naung ceremony are not professional ones and they are native amateurs’ men and women who they are volunteers according to their hobby. They perform in Nan-twin Ramayana Court Drama and only hire the leading role character; Mae Thidar actress from outside and other actors and actresses are Pyapon residents. Pyapon residents are familiar with Myanmar orchestra and they celebrate ceremony like Min Nyi Naung and

Nan-twin Ramayana Court Drama with Myanmar orchestra. They are also familiar with Nat special music and choreograph harmoniously since their childhood. Before two weeks of Min Nyi Naung ceremony, financial committee members go around the town collect the donation money. People donate not only for ceremony but also special donation for renting a car for Nat. Moreover, some people allowed to use their own cars for going round the town. Most local people prefer to use their own cars annually for specific Nat: Bago Mae Daw, Min Nyi Naung, Pakhan U Min Kyaw, Shan Maung Hna Ma, Kayin Maung Hna Ma and Poppa Mae Daw. Five Myanmar orchestras were hired for amusing to the Nats when they go around the town for ten days before ceremony. According to 2019 record, one Myanmar orchestra was charged 15,000 MMK.

Before one week of ceremony, the committee members negotiate the house owners about the plan of Nat ceremony when go around the town. Though Pyapon Township has 19 wards and the processing could not go around all the wards. Before one day of ceremony, Full Moon day of Kason, the compound of Shwe Nat Ku Pagoda, men from Ma-kyee-tan Ward build a pavilion for paying homage to Nats. At the ceremony day, 1st Kason waning day morning, youths volunteer started to decorate the cars which are going to use for going around the town.

Taboo and Mana of Min Nyi Naung ceremony

If the 1st Kason waning day is on Wednesday, Min Nyi Naung ceremony is not celebrated because Pyapon residents believe that Nats have to attend the meeting at the abode of celestial beings on Wednesday and they do not come to any place even they are invited. For this issue was asked to the 62 years old man and he said that

“ I believed that if you invite Nats on Wednesday, even a foolish Nat does not come.”

Therefore, the celebration day will be on Wednesday, they celebrate another day; 2nd waning day of Kason on Thursday.

Mana of Min Nyi Naung ceremony is that people who pay homage to going around the town Nats have to do annually. There assigns mana of three types of worshipping; *Mi-yo-pha-la* (traditional Nats worshipping), *Deid-htan-aung pwe* (pay homage for the fulfillment wish) and *Thet-Kyi-thu Pu-zaw-pwe* (pay homage to elderly persons) except *Deid-htan-aung pwe*, the other two types have to do annually by the people who pay homage to them.

Processing Min Nyi Naung Ceremony

Min Nyi Naung ceremony started to celebrate go around the town from Shwe Nat Ku Pagoda at the evening of 1st Kason waning day annually. At 11 am of 1st Kason waning day, spirit mediums wore their traditional dresses and came to Shwe Nat Ku Pagoda. At the afternoon, they pay homage to the Buddha statue at Shwe Nat Ku Pagoda and Kan

Oo Kyaung abbot. Then, they go to the specific cars individually and at 3 pm, they invite one Nat after another at the pavilion near Shwe Nat Ku Pagoda by dancing.

When they go around the town, the first car carries Buddha image in the proceeding and after that Indra or Sakkaor ("*Thagya*" in Myanmar), Pon-na-ka, Ye-ngan-paing U Shein Gyi, Ko-myo-shin and Pale yin, Myin-phyu-shin Nat, Moe-khaung-kyaw-swa, Pa-khan U Min Kyaw, Khun-cho Khun-tha, Poppa Mae Daw, Mae-oo-lu-hpji (including Mae-oo's parents and Min Nyi Naung's tiger), Min Nyi Naung, Household spirit Min-maha-giri and his sister Shwe-na-pai, Tha-khin-ma Ma Ma Hne, Ko Htwe Lay, Shan Maung-Hna-Ma, Shwe Kayin Maung Hnan, Bago Mae Daw (including Ko Aung Naing, Ah-tha-koun-ma Min tha), Mae-oo-nat-hpji, Ko Yin Maung and his wae group, etc. After 2012, Anawrahra Nat, guardian spirit of tree ("*Jou' gazou*") of htein-tree and Buffalo Nat did not go around the town and they were offered within the pavilion near the Shwe Nat Ku Pagoda because there has some financial problems. The two spiritual chiefs' roles are very important in this ceremony. They have to watch at the back of the spirit mediums when they were possessed by a Nat on the car harmoniously and when the Nat leave away from the body of the spirit medium, they control the body not to fall down. Sometimes, one spirit medium has four or five spiritual chiefs and they change their duties alternatively. Couple performances like Min Nyi Naung and Shwe Kayin Maung Hnan, the spiritual chiefs change alternatively. So, the spiritual chief has to be strong, active and supportive to the spirit medium well. For amusing three Nats, one Myanmar orchestra has to play. For going around the town with Min Nyi Naung ceremony, altogether 16 Nats amused, there need to hire five Myanmar orchestras. Their proceeding around the town started and ended at Shwe Nat Ku Pagoda.

People who pay homage to Min Nyi Naung serve the guest with cold drinks and collecting donation items for Nats at their home in the morning: put some items on the table which is in front of their houses. Two people who assign the duties by the committee guard two Nats because they hire one Myanmar orchestra for amusing three Nats. Then the singer of Myanmar orchestra invites the Nats to come to the donar's house and play the Nat music. In Pyapon, there has a custom that people invite Nats to their new house, pay homage them with Myanmar orchestra and sing the Nat-song and their neighbors and friends also participate to dance happily. Spirit mediums dance with holding the worshipping item donated by the host Nats worshippers. While the spirit medium dancing, the believers request the Nats to help them and to promote their wealth and fulfill their needs. After singing song, the spirit that possessing by the Nat get out of the body and spiritual chief help him or her not to fall down and if the spirit medium pay homage to the Nats, the ceremony of pay homage to the Nats was finished.

Spirit medium men who perform as *Min Nyi Naung* have to tie with red scarfs on their head and chest and white long sleeve dress, red three-quarter trouser, pink sarang and hold the long swards and dance. Min Nyi Naung ceremony is the custom mainly pays homage to Min Gyi and Min Lay who are two stranger men helped Shwe Nat Ku Pagoda building and the residents of Pyapon believe and pay homage to them. Most of the worshippers of Min Nyi Naung are sellers and merchants of Pyapon Myo Ma market and people who face problems and traditional worshippers. For this issue, conducted an interview to 64 years old man and he said that

“We make a wish to Min Gyi and Min Lay for our children to pass their exams with high score and if they get the success, we have to pay homage according to our promise....”

It shows that, there exists the mutual relation within human being and Nat. People request Nats their needs in mind and if they get the success, they have to donate the Nats according to their promise.



Fig. (2) Performers in Min Nyi Naung Nat

The spirit medium who performed as the Min Nyi Naung Nat were hold in the twentieth car and in front of this car is a famous Nat: Mae-oo-lu-hpji. Ma Mae-oo was a weaver and she was married with Ko Yin Maung. One day during the absence of her husband, she was weaving and did not notice the approaches of the younger brother: Min Lay. He proposed her and she did not accept him. But Min Lay is being a Nat; he pretended as a tiger and carried her in his mouth. With the wickedness characteristic of a Nat, he made a tiger kidnap her since she has refused to be his mistress when he was alive, she would now become the wife of a Nat. The tiger dragged Mae-Oo off. The wife, virtuous to the end, died in the struggle. And then Ma Mae-oo became a “*Thaung-thaw Tha-khin-Ma*” (Lord of mountain) Nat. Behind Ma Mae-oo’s car, her parents and Min Lay’s riding tiger is put in a cage and follow on the car. They pay homage not only her but also Min Lay’s riding tiger and this pay homage ceremony is called “*Kyar pwe*” (offertory for tiger). In this *Kyar pwe*, spirit medium man of tiger has to jump from the cage about ten feet high, split the coconut with mouth, scratched the ground with his claws and eat it and people believe that tiger’s spirit medium possessed in the body of performer. And then the audiences pay homage with money and ask the tiger that they

want to know. When worshippers pay homage to tiger, they perform Mae-oo-Kyar-chi drama. Mae-oo was carried by tiger and her father and mother told not to carry her, Mae-oo has husband and they did not agree the drunkard Min Lay, etc. When Min Nyi Naung ceremony goes around the town, spirit of tiger enters to the spirit medium; people believe him and asked him about the dead person's new life, asked for lost things, asked for two digits and three digits for lottery, etc. So, worship for Nat concerned with religious beliefs, social affairs and economic issue could be learnt.



Fig. (3) Performers in Mae-oo-Kyar-chi drama

The worship finishes when Min Nyi Naung are worshipped around the town and taken back to Shwe Nat Ku Pagoda about ten or eleven o'clock at night. On the fourth or fifth day after Min Nyi Naung worship, committee members, males and females performers, and youths ended by donating money to pay pagoda trustees. The total of Min Nyi Naung group donated 1,500,000 MMK (2019).

Beliefs of Pyapon People on Min Nyi Naung

Pyapon Myo Ma market trade man and woman believe that they may be free from any kind of danger if Min Nyi Naung ceremony go around the town annually. When the Military Government ruled in 1988, the Distinct leaders and respectful persons of the town discussed to celebrate Min Nyi Naung Nat ceremony and they went around the town from 10 am to 6 pm. Even five people were not allowed together, the Pyapon residents could celebrate their Min Nyi Naung ceremony. The traditional worshippers of both parent's Nat ("*Mi-sai Pha-sai Yoyar Nat*" in Myanmar) believe the fact, Nats will look after them and if they fail to pay homage they will face the difficulties on their economy, social matters and health. *Mi-sai Yoyar Nat* is worshipped by women or daughters of the family and similarly, *Pha-sai Yoyar Nat* is worshipped by men or sons of the family.

Nat's believers are mostly *Mi-sai Pha-sai Yoyar Nat* worshippers and people who stand their livelihood with water business because Pyapon town is located along the Pyapon River. So that there is a custom even some of the Nats are not their traditional spirit, they have to pay homage to the Nats who related to their livelihood. People believe that pay homage to Nats has related to their religious beliefs and their daily life social matters. When Pyapon residents start new jobs, facing with problems in social, health and economy, they witness ("*Nat-kou*" in Myanmar) as a few money and donate to the Buddha statue. When the Min Nyi Naung Nat goes around the town, the money is

donated to nats. The end of Min Nyi Naung worship in Kason, the heavy rain falls. So, town's folk in Pyapon Township is that rain showers torrentially after they have celebrated Min Nyi Naung worship around the town.



Fig. (4) Promise sign to Worship Nats



Fig. (5) Some interviews with informants

Conclusions and Recommendation

In the Union of Myanmar, over 100 ethnic groups live together and have various traditional customs from an ancient time. Traditional ceremony is the custom that celebrates from generation after generation. After King *Anawrahta* (1025 E.E), Shwe Pyin Nyi Naung Nat began worshipped in Taung Pyone. Some the year 1910 E.E up to now Min Nin Naung Nat ceremony has celebrated annually in Pyapon Township, Ayeyarwaddy Region. Min Nin Naung ceremony is not only for the religious ceremony but also for relating the social and economic affairs as the worshippers and traders from Pyapon Township usually come to participate in the ceremony. In addition, this custom can be compared to study the celebration of other places in Myanmar and there have different traditions and beliefs.

There has a taboo that if the celebration to go around the town day will be Wednesday, people do not celebrate on that day because that day is the meeting day of Nat and they will celebrate on Thursday. Min Nyi Naung ceremony is the last ceremony of the year and people believe that after celebrating the Min Nyi Naung custom ceremony, there will come the heavy rains to the town and also it is the custom that the finding the finance for Shwe Nat Ku Pagoda. Most spirit mediums men and women performed as Min Nyi Naung are not professional spirit mediums and they are residents of the Pyapon.

Most of them are actors and actresses of *Nan-twin Ramayana* Court Drama and based on their hobby and if they can get the donated money by the audiences, they enthusiastically donate back to *Shwe Nat Ku Pagoda*. At the *Min Nyi Naung* ceremony, there could be found three types of worship. Moreover, when people pay homage in mind with the Nats and if they get the success or fulfill their wish, they pay homage to the Nats according to their promise and one can learn the relationship between the Nats and human beings with the mutual respects and beliefs.

As *Min Nyi Naung Nat* ceremony goes around the *Pyapon Town*, the Nats worshippers can pay homage to them from their own houses. This is the advantage for believers. Paying homage to the spirit (nat) is not the character of real Buddhism. So, the disadvantage of *Min Nyi Naung Nat* ceremony is the worship to the Nats and it is against the beliefs of Buddhism. Almost all the *Pyapon* people, except those who are true Buddhists, have faith in Nats and worship them. They are faced with fear, fright, respect, and obedience in their mind, thereby thinking of Nats' mystic power, they regard Nats as a refuge and shelter for their safety and prosperity. The fact that since when worship had rooted in the mind of our ancestors could not still be traced. According to the concept of *Brahman*, there exist all kinds of Nats on earth long before the advent of Buddhism. When the *Pyapon* people meet uncontrollable conditions with their knowledge and they are facing difficulties, they have started to worship Nats for help. *Min Nyi Naung Nat* ceremony in *Pyapon* is the ceremony not for the Nat worship but for the memorial of the two young men who came to help to succeed in moulding the ceremony of the *Bronze Buddha* statue of *Shwe Nat Ku Pagoda* and disappeared suddenly from the crowd. The ceremony is always celebrated on the 1st waning day of *Kason*. Nowadays this ceremony has been celebrated for 109 times. People living in *Pyapon Township* believe that they celebrate *Min Nyi Naung* ceremony annually as a result, the residents escape from the dangers and their economy is developing and their life is peaceful. So the residents of the whole town participate to celebrate this *Min Nyi Naung* ceremony.

To sum up, *Min Nyi Naung Nat* ceremony goes around the town on 1st *Kason* waning day of the year at *Pyapon Township*, *Ayeyarwaddy Region* has various religious beliefs and traditional customs and also economy and social affairs correlation. It is not similar to the largest Nat Worship of *Taung Pyone* *Min Nyi Naung* ceremony in Myanmar and it is only the ceremony that most of the residents of *Pyapon* favoured paying homage to Nats goes around the town. By studying this custom, the researcher believes that people from other areas of Myanmar get knowledge about how to celebrate *Min Nyi Naung* ceremony in *Pyapon*, value this ceremony as traditional beliefs and get mutual-understanding among local residents.

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