

The Puppet of Myanmar

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Abstract

Puppet is a (*Yoke Thè*) is the Burmese name of marionette puppetry. In the world there are different kinds of puppet. Like most of the Burmese refine art, *Yoke Thè* performance originated from royal patronate and were gradually adopt for wider populace. The probable date of the origin of Burmese marionettes is given as around in 1780. Anyone allowed to make the figure expect the authorized person. They held the ceremony which propitiation to the spirits (*La-maing Tin*). According the tradition, the puppet was classified into two groups. Myanmar traditional entertainments are puppet show and *Zat-pwe*. Burmese marionettes also served as a conduct between the ruler and his subject, many time, people would also the puppeteers to mention in veiled fashion a current event or warning to the ruler. Most forms of traditional artwork, the support dried up upon the colonization of Upper Burma by British in November 1885 following Third Anglo-Burmese War. In late 1990s, General Khin Nyunt of the ruling junta lent official support to marionette actors and troupes. Marionette show is very scarce to be found nowadays. Even though the competition from movies and television is great. Puppet Theater is still holding its ground, by adapting itself to modern times. Where Kings were the patrons in the past, tourist are the patrons of today.

Puppet is a (*Yoke Thè*) is the Burmese name of marionette puppetry. In the world there are different kinds of puppet: String Puppet, Rod Puppet, Glove Puppet, Leather Puppet, Shadow Puppet, Water Puppet and Bandraku Puppet. In Myanmar Puppet is String Puppet. Although the term can be used for marionette in general, its useage usually refers to the local form of string Puppetry. Like most of the Burmese refine art, *Yoke Thè* performance originated from royal patronate and were gradually adopted for wider populace. *Yoke Thè* are almost always perform in operas.

Burmese marionette is very intricate and dexterous as they employ 19 wires (strings) for male and female characters respectively and each puppet is control by only one puppeteer.

History of Puppet

The probable date of the origin of Burmese marionettes is given as around in 1780 during the reigns of Singu Min and their introduction is credited to the Minister of royal Entertainment, U Thaw. From their marionette grow in popularity in the courts of Kongbaung Dynasty. Little has changed since the creation of the art by U Thaw, and the set of characters develop by him is in use today. Until the conquest of Upper Myanmar by the British in late 1885 during the Third Anglo-Burmese war. The troupes thrived under royal patronage.

Making the Puppet

A Burmese marionette troupe has 28 character figures.

Anyone allowed to make the figure expect the authorized person. The person who was hereditary in making of the puppet figure. While the making of the figure, the figure was made with the full parts of their body including their sex organ by the sculptor. The limited wood were used to make these figures.

1. Made with the *Aye-karyit* wood for Deva, King and Hermit.
2. Made with *Yamanay* wood for horse, elephant and nat spirit.

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3. Made with *Latpan* wood for others. After making the figure, they held the ceremony which propitiation to the spirits (*La-maing Tin*).

Classifying the Puppet

According to the tradition, the puppets were classified into two groups. They are called left group and right group. In the left group following puppets are included.

1. The nat votaress
2. The horse
3. The tiger
4. The elephant
5. The parakeet
6. The organ
7. The dragon
8. The garuda
9. The old woman
10. The court jesters

In the right group of puppet are as follows:

11. The hermit
12. The deva
13. The king
14. The ministers
15. The Prince
16. The Princess
17. The astrologer
18. The necromancer or *Zawgyi*.

When dancing the show the puppet entered to the stage according to their limited side. After the show, the puppet were hanging on the shelf which back of stage by the order.

Special stage for the puppet show

The stage for the puppet show is constructed with bamboo and thatch or *danior* leaves. Decorated with a hanging of white cloth cut in the motif of lotus petals. Change the scene with music.

Music

A traditional Burmese orchestra known as a *hsaing-waing* usually provides the music. The puppeteers themselves often provide the voice of the characters.

The Procedure of Performance

In Myanmar pagoda festivals are not complete without a marionette show. The marionette show goes on through the night of festival. Myanmar traditional entertainments are **puppet show and *Zat-pwe***. Every Myanmar entertainments must have a special meaning and every scene was meant not only to entertain but also to instruct. Myanmar *Zat-pwe* is a national institution, educator of the masses, a store house of culture where folklore, scripture stories, Buddhist thought and social either mingle with music, songs and dances are communicated to the people. *Zat-pwe* and Puppet show always starts at early night. The premier show starts with the dance of nat votaress. At mid-night they play the *Zataka* (the

past life of Buddha) or other plots relating with the circumstance of the country. When the early morning of next day, they end their performance with the dance of couple's romantic dance called *Hnint-Pa Thwe*.

Zataka

In the second part of the performance, a jataka is enacted, one of the 547 stories about the past life of the Buddha. The last 10 jataka are often used for puppetry. These stories feature kings, princes and princesses, hermits and wise men who undergo all kinds of adventures. A happy end is mandatory: virtue is rewarded and evil is punished. Each jataka symbolises a specific virtue such as honesty, wisdom, love of a son for his parents, etc.

Political Role

The Burmese court was concerned with the preserving the dignity of its members and marionettes were often used to preserve the esteem of persons who reckless ways. While the reprimand would be obvious to anyone who was in the known, it could largely pass unheeded by the people looking on something that has a great deal of value in a court that could, and did, contain hundreds of people. Burmese marionettes also served as a conduct between the ruler and his subject, many time, people would also the puppeteers to mention in veiled fashion a current event or warning to the ruler. Thus information of popular discontent could be transferred on without any disrespect, as marionettes could say things that a human could be punished for with death.

Decline

Yoke Thè troupes, like most artisans in pre-colonial Burma alongside the Sangha, enjoyed great Royal patronage. However, like most forms of traditional artwork, the support dried up upon the colonization of Upper Burma by British in November 1885 following Third Anglo-Burmese War.

Revival

In late 1990s, General Khin Nyunt of the ruling junta lent official support to marionette actors and troupes, reviving a rapidly dying tradition. Nowadays, marionettes are very common in tourist attractions and also amongst the populace, and they have resumed their role of relatively safe political satire reflecting popular discontent.

A new genere of Yoke Thè is emerging where a character and a real life actor perform the same feat, usually with the Yoke Thè puppets able to mimic and sometimes outperform their human counterparts.

Luckily, a number of old puppeteers are still active, and passing on their knowledge to a younger generation. Among them: U Pan Aye (Mandalay), U Thun Gyi (Rangoon), and U Maung Hla (Bagan). U Pan Aye is the 'star' of the Mandalay Marionettes Theatre, which was built especially for tourist performances that last approximately one hour. U Maung Hla ('Zawgyi Pyan') performs on a small stage in the courtyard of his home. The younger generation also performs so-called 'dinner show' in tourist hotels. Mandalay Marionettes Theatre has been performing regularly abroad, with much success. Their performances in Burma have also increased, for instance at the occasion of Pagoda festivals.

Marionettes show is very scarce to be found nowadays. Dr. Tin Maung Kyi is an enthusiastic researcher, who gives talks about marionettes around the world. Daw Ma Ma Naing, together with her group, present Marionette Shows at Marionette Festivals abroad annually. Even though the competition from movies and television is great, puppet theater is still holding its ground, by adapting itself to modern times. Where Kings were the patrons in the past, tourists are the patrons of today.

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