

The Worship of Nats: Agricultural Custom in Myanmar

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Abstract

The agriculture sector is the backbone of the Myanmar economy. In Myanmar society, *Nats* worshipping has existed before Buddhism arrived. Good weather, pest control, and good yields are important for cultivators. They pray that the weather is fine and the crops are good. This paper studies the custom of Ponmakyi *Nat* worshipping which is the culture of offering to the spirit called Ponmakyi *Nat* before the harvest or after the harvest hoping that she will help for high yielding. The qualitative method was applied and the data were collected from personal interviews and published books. The research argues that while Myanmar people follow different traditional agricultural practices, they all believe in Ponmakyi *Nat*. They hoped that Ponmakyi *Nat* would help them to have good yielding. In modern days, Myanmar people know that good yielding depends on fine weather, good seeds and advanced technology. However, they continue to worship Ponmakyi *Nat* still believing that she has power over successful yielding.

Keywords: worship of *Nats* agricultural practices, the traditional practices, Ponmakyi *Nat*, makes an offering to the *Nats*

Introduction

Nat in Myanmar society

“*Nat*” the term, came from Pali word “*Nahta*” which means a protector, master or opulence.¹ It means resplendent being, worthy of veneration, formally recognized as three kinds of *Nat*: *Thamutti Nat* (King), *Upappati Nat* (Celestial being), *Withuddhi Nat* (Lord Buddha). There are *Nats* in the *Pihittaka* treatise, the secular treatise, the history, the *Mahawin* treatise, *Sarsanawin* treatise, the spirits in Ancient Literature, Traditional spirits and so on.² In Myanmar society, *Nat* can become from any age, rich or poor. Generally, some *Nats* existed at their accidental death, and people say that they are the spirits of those who have compassion, mercy, and praise.³ *Nat* worship is not only prevalent in Myanmar but also around the world. It is because *Nats* have supernatural powers than the others.⁴ Myanmar have worshipped the *Nats* before the flourish of Buddhism. There were many changes in everyday life when Buddhism became a religion. However, they have adjusted to the ancient tradition and ambivalence. If you believe in a *Nat*, the devil helps you, in reverse the devil interrupts. (*Nat Kaingthi* in Myanmar) Therefore, they had to worship spirits.⁵

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¹ U Hot Sein, *Pali-Myanmar Abidan* (Pali-Myanmar Dictionary), Yangon, Government Printing, 1954, p.513

² *Myanmar Sweson Kyan*, Vol,VI (Encyclopedia of Myanmar), Yangon, Myanmar Translation Association, 1970, p.128 (Henceforth: *Myanmar Sweson Kyan*,1970)

³ U Pho Kya (Educational Officer), *37 Min* (37 Nats),Second Printed, Yangon, Parami Bookhouse, 1999,69 (Henceforth: U Phy Kya,1999)

⁴ *Myanmar Sweson Kyan*,1970,130

⁵ *Myanmar Sarpay Myanmar Hmu*(Myanmar Literatuer), “ *Myanmar Sarpay Thamaing Asa*” (History of Myanmar literature), Dr.Than Tun, Yangon, Seik Ku Cho Cho Bookhouse, 2010, p.262 (Henceforth: *Myanmar Sarpay* ,2010)

In Myanmar, spiritism is the same as those in the world. The forms of worship are the same. According to the history of the *Nat*, it has appeared that from the worship of the parents and grandparents of the dead. Similar to all other spirit worship on earth, Myanmar also believes in various forms of spiritism.⁶ They are known as the local *Nats* and the occupational *Nats*. Performing rituals held during harvesting period in the field is common after becoming Buddhists. They became accustomed to the adaptation of the Buddhist Lent and performing rituals.⁷

Thirty seven Nats

In Buddhism, people believed that thirty-seven *Nats* (the nine *Nat Mingyi* and twenty-eight *Nat Sitthugyi*) in Bagan period. It is called the interior thirty-seven *Nats*, with its images on the inner wall of Shwezigon Pagoda.⁸ The thirty-seven *Nats* were adopted from Mon.⁹ Maung Tint Tay and his wife and two sisters and niece, who have become spirits, including them, are placed outside the wall of Shwezigon Pagoda and are called the exterior thirty-seven *Nats*. In the legend, he was a blacksmith in Tagaung. As he was strong, the king tried to kill him. He ran away and then his younger sister became the queen. The king tried to deceive him.¹⁰ The king of Tagaung killed Mg Tint Tay and the Bagan king worshipped him as a *Nat*.

The Kings and Nats

In Myanmar, the popularity of *Nats* is from the inspiration of the King. King Theleykyaung (AD 344-387) placed Mahagiri *Nat* and their family at Mount Popa with spirit shrine. King Anawrtha (AD 1044-1113) ordered Shwephyin Nyinaung in Taungpyon, in the same way King Kyansitha (AD 1084-1077) believed in Mahagiri *Nat*. The head of Sak King Katon was kept up in Tuywintaung by King Alaungsithu (AD 1113-1163) and King Narapatisithu (AD 1174-1211) gave the name as Myinphyu Shin to Myinsi Nga Pyi after the death, respectively.¹¹ Minyarza Thihathu judged in the theft case, confirmation of spirit medium is possessed by the Shwephyin Nyinaung on 13 September 1796.¹² Therefore, in Myanmar society, the practice of spiritism has taken root between the king and the people.

Aim and Objectives

The paper aims to identify the tradition of *Nat* worship and practice in society.

The objectives are:

- to know the influence of *Nat* worship since the Bagan period
- to record the custom of making an offering to spirits before the harvest or after the harvest
- to examine the relationship between human and *Nat*

⁶ Sir R.C Temple, *The Thirty-seven Nats*, London, W.Griggs, Chromo-Lithographer To The King, 1906, p.1-2

⁷ *Myanmar Sarpay*, 2010, 262-3

⁸ U Pho Kya, 1999, 9-12

⁹ Shwe Yoe, *The Burman, His Life and Notions*, New York, The Norton Library, 1963, 253 (Henceforth: Shwe Yoe, 1963)

¹⁰ U Kala, *Maha Yazawingyi*, Volume I (Great Chronicle, Volume I) Volume I, Yangon, Yapyi Book House, 2006, p.140

¹¹ *Hmannan Razawintaw gyi* (Glass Palace Chronicle) edited by Daw Kyan et al, Yangon, Seikku Cho Cho Book House, 2017, p.202

¹² Dr Toe Hla, *Konbaung Khit Myanmar Lu-phwe-asi Hnint Tayahmukhinmya* (Myanmar Society of Konbaung and Legal cases), Yangon, Department of Historical Research Center, 2004, 25-27

Research Questions

Why do they believe in *Nat*?

Which society practiced *Nat* worship?

How is a ritual practiced in Myanmar agriculture?

Research Method

The study used qualitative method. Data were collected from interviews and published books written by scholars. The information from the interviewees' discussion was gathered for the qualitative data. They were accustomed to traditional custom till today. This paper analyzes their tradition.

Literature Review

Sir R.C Temple studied to understand the daily life of the Myanmar people who became the believers of Buddhism. However it is necessary to know that they believe in *Nats* and to take advantage of this faith which influence them in their daily life. (Temple, 1906) *Nats* existed at their accidental death and have to get compassion, mercy, and praise from others. (U Pho Kya, 1999) Not only in agriculture but also in other cases, worship of *Nats* is practised today. The custom was an ancient practice of the self-sufficient economy when paddy was cultivated only for their family. It was ill-adapted to a market economy. (Furnivall, 1911) In the twenty-first century, Furnivall's comments are misleading. Traditional farming practices have not completely disappeared in the days when modern industrial cultivation systems were implemented.

The Worship of *Nats*: Agricultural Custom in Myanmar

The practices of worshipping *Nats*

When the Indian tradition came into Myanmar, it became a series of additions and rituals, similar to the themes from the 550 *jatakas*. The Myanmar people are mountain dwellers and are worshipers of the gods before they reached the land.¹³ Anthropologists believe that spirits are created by human fear and ignorance. The fact that how *Nats* respond to human needs to know the nature of spirits. The royal officers specified to list the exterior thirty-seven *Nats* that are well-known spirits among the people. The people do not know the list of the exterior thirty-seven *Nats*. The well-known spirits among the people are unregistered spirits. Mahagiri, Taungyi-shin, Shin-phyu and Shin-nyo are Mountain *Nats* as well as Shin-nemi, Ma Kyar-u, Ma Thalekyaw and Laykywin-maung are the spirits of children. The Mandalay Bodaw *Nat* is a devout worshiper of the astrologers and fortune tellers. Thonban-hla *Nat* concerns with beauty affairs. Aungzwamingyi *Nat* is the city's guardian god and Minphyu-Shin is the village guard. Maung Po Tu *Nat* is the merchant of Pinya and was killed by a tiger. The farmers will be able to improve their productivity and reduce losses. They make offerings to the spirits who are Ma Kyar-u, Ma Thalekyaw and Ponmakyi.¹⁴

The Ponmakyi *Nat*

Those who have suddenly died became *Nats* and they are called *Nat-sein*.¹⁵ However, the Ponmakyi is an ogress of the Yamakavagga, the Kalhayakkhani Vattu in the Dhammapada. It was reported that in the Yamakavagga, the Ponmakyi was offered as the spirit in the Mjima Region in the 6th century BC. The concept of morality in the

¹³ Myanmar Sarpa, 2010, 265

¹⁴ Khin Maung Than (Psychology), *Ro-rar Nat Yinkyehmy Hnint Dhale- hnton-sanmya* (Traditional belief in Nat and Custom) Yangon, Linotaryar Book house, 1997, p.5-7

¹⁵ Shwe Yoe, 1963, 239-240

Dhammapada is also found in ancient writings before the emergence of Buddhist literature. Buddhism originated in Central India. Some of principles of the Buddhism are the same to those of the Hinduism. Especially sacrifices and religious ceremonies were common.¹⁶ The Ponmaki story said that there was a householder, whose wife was a barren and then he married second time. When the second wife has pregnancy, the first wife was jealous and planned to miscarriage. After three times of miscarriage, the second wife died. Knowing the plan of the first wife before dying, she wished for revenge. In the next life, they were reborn as a hen and a cat, in the second life a doe and leopardess and final was the daughter of a wealthy family and an ogress. The Kalhayakkhani ogress ate the baby when the woman gave birth to a child. Again the ogress was in pursuit of the baby when the Buddha' was giving a Dhamma at Zatawan. The Buddha told them about their past feuds as rivals of one husband. At the end of the discourse of Buddha, the ogress became *Thotapan* .¹⁷

Till today, the countryside *Nat* is Ponmaki or the harvest spirit as it is a traditional belief that it comes from religious orders. Even the cultivators regarded her as the goddess of protection and increase the output of the crops. The Ponmaki has written in various spelling as follows:

Ponmaki (ပုန်းခကြည်) = only when hiding in a quiet place can the mind is clear

Ponnaki (ပုဏ္ဏကျီ) = *Ponna* + *Kyi* means to fill the granary of grains

Pobbagrai (ပုဗဂြီ) = *Pobbha* + *grai* means the worship of a housemaster

Pobbagraha (ပုဗဂြဟ) = *Pobbha* + *graham* means East planet¹⁸

Influence of constellation is effective on the earth, notably in agriculture. In *Thingyansa*¹⁹ and the astrology, at the Tabaung (March) the *Pubba Kyi*²⁰ rests on a certain plant which contains the fertility. When the plant is sown in the field, grows well the fruit. They assume that the plant of *Pubba Kyi* is possessed by *Nat*.²¹ Farmers today recognize that the Ponmaki *Nat* keeps the crop from growing, as well as the weather, seeds, modern tools, fertilizers, human labour, and cattle.

Offerings to the Ponmaki Nat

The rites of Ponmaki *Nat* was practised in the whole Myanmar but not included in 37 *Nats*. Early in the morning, the cultivators took dress and mirror and comb. When they reach the field there is a festivity, people from the neighbours are summoned, and Ponmaki appeased with offering food. They believed that Ponmaki should be kept in the granary, while there are faint uncertainties of weather at the next season, in which Ponmaki was represented by the crop. It is said that an archaic *Nat* has been took off the harvest custom.²²

¹⁶ Daw Ohn, MA, *Pali Sarpay Thamaing*, (History of Pali Literature), Yangon, Department of Religion, 1981, p.218-9

¹⁷ The Dhammapada Verse and Stories, Translated by Daw Mya Tin, Yangon, Myanmar Pitaka Association, 1995, p.138-9

¹⁸ Min Sithu , *Myanmar-naing-ngan Ro-rar Nat Yinkyehmy Hnint Dhale- hton-sanmya* (Traditional belief in Nat and Custom) Yangon, Linootaryar Book house, 1997, p.212-3 (Henceforth: Min Sithu, 1997)

¹⁹ A bulletin predicting the time of transition into the new year

²⁰ Harvest deity propitiated by cultivators at the onset of harvesting paddy

²¹ Min Sithu, 1997, 214

²² J.S Furnivall, "Harvest home in Burma", Journal of Burma Research Society, Vol.I, Part,I, 1911, p 93-4

On the third day of Tabaung before the planting of the *Marin* paddy²³, the traditional offerings are held on the field to the Ponmakyi *Nat*. In some regions, the ritual occasion was held at harvest time. On the evening of the second waxing day of Tabaung, the house was covered with sand (white and dry) at the entrance of the house, with a staircase leading to the back of the house to invite the Ponmakyi *Nat*, saying, “Let’s eat, rest, drink, and urinate”. It has been invited since night. In the morning, *Thanakha* was smeared on a new pot which made of clay or metal. The sample tools made of rice and glutinous rice, he used to buy and sell his occupation were put into the pot (Harrow, Plough for the farmer and bradawl, mason's trowel for carpenter etc.). The pot was bound with sewing thread for seven times and Ponmakyi flowers. They make offering to the Ponmakyi *Nat* with the tealeaf, fried fish (in seven with head and tail) and plain rice. At 11:00 AM they have to throw away and feed the *Dana*(charity). In the same way, they also offer in the fields. In a verse composed by Venerable of Tayiwtaung, it stated “to full granary, keep disease, keep crops free from animals.”(See Appendix)

In sowing the field, the female transplanters searched the mud cell built by the wasp in the fields and it was used as a cash or a gift from the landowner.²⁴ The owners of the farm have been making fun of the idea that the hideout is a Ponmakyi *Nat*. In the agricultural-based society, they help one another in harvest time. Ethnic groups in Myanmar held New Year Festivals during the annual harvest season. The New Year Festival of Bamar is water festival. It is noteworthy that before they cultivate summer rice, when the harvest time is over, offering to Ponmakyi *Nat* is accustomed.

Findings and Discussion

Myanmar has many traditional or seasonal fairs. One of them was *Nat Pwe* or festival in honour of *Nats*. Today, the next generation do not fully understand the customs, but they are still following the traditions of their ancestors. Although it is a ritual ceremony, it should not be practiced extremely in daily life.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there are various kinds of devotions. Often they rely on the *Nats*, whether it is traditional or their due to fear. Ponmakyi *Nat* watches over farmers every year, reliably to ensure that their farming is smooth in every Tabaung Month. In the ancient texts, the Ponmakyi *Nat* has not become demonic, for some reason like other spirits in Myanmar. Myanmar society regarded it as a cultural heritage that still exists for many decades in the cultural-economic history.

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²³ Species of paddy which is grown with the help of irrigated water

²⁴ U Soe Ko, Age of 64, Taung Inn Village, Singu Township, 13 December 2019

Photos

Photo(1)

Offerings of food to the Ponmakyi



Photo by Aye Thida Hlaing (Taungtha, 24 February 2020)

Photo (2)

Offerings of food to the Ponmakyi *Nat* with Ponmakyi flowers



Photo by Aye Thida Hlaing (Taungtha, 24 February 2020)

Appendix

“ အို မေ့ဒီပါ၊ တောင်မျက်နှာက၊ အလှတင့်တယ်၊ မိသူကြွယ်။
 တင့်တယ်ခံစား၊ မိဖုရား၊ ခေါ်ငြားထိမ်ဆူ၊ ကျွန်းမေ့တွင်၊
 တောင်အူ(တောင်ငူ)တောင်တွင်း ရမည်းသင်း၊ ရင်းတော်
 ဆောနှင့် ညောင်ရွှေ၊ ရှမ်းပြည်မကြွင်း၊ မိုးညှင်းကလေး၊
 နီးဝေးကျော်ဇော၊ ယော ဆော လောင်းရှည်၊ ကုလားပြည်၊
 ရွှေ ငွေဥစာ၊ လွယ်၍လာက၊ ကျီတော်အတွင်း၊ အပြည့်သွင်းပါ၊
 ဘေးကင်းရန်လွှဲ၊ ခေါင်းခဲဝမ်းနာ၊ ကိုယ်မှာတစေ့၊ မရှိရောဂါ၊
 ကိုယ်၌ကွာ၍၊ လယ်ယာလုပ်နည်း၊ ကျီထုတ်ကျီအောက်၊
 ဖြိုးမောက်ပြည့်လျှံ၊ အစွန်အနက်၊ ခန့်တိုင်းထွက်၍၊
 ကျေးငှက်မစား၊ ကျွဲနွားသမင်၊ ကျားဆင်မြွေကင်း၊
 လယ်ယာတွင်းသို့၊ မဆင်းစေရာ၊ ဆီးပါဝေးဝေး၊
 ရန်သူဘေးကို၊ အဝေးလွှတ်ပါ၊ အို(ပုန်းမကျီ)သခင်မ၊
 ဣဒံဘတ ဘောဇနံ ဘုညဟိ-စားတော်ခေါ်ပါ သောက်တော်ခေါ်ပါ”

ပုဂံတူရွှင်းတောင်ပေါ်ကျောင်းဆရာတော်

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