

From Deity to Advisor: Ganesh in Shwedagon Stupa, Colonial Period

Soe Ni Tun¹

Abstract

Ganesh, the elephant-headed god, is one of the major gods and goddesses in Hinduism. Hinduism spreads to Southeast Asia with trading in early Christian eras. Buddhism also arrived to Myanmar and trails and traces of these two religions were found in old Pyu cities. In Bagan period, Buddhism became the major religion but Hinduism was just a part subsidiary of Bagan religious culture. The major god, *Ganesh*, was accepted as a guardian in late Bagan period. The festival for *Ganesh* was held in November in successive historical periods with the support of the Myanmar monarchs. In colonial days, Hinduism gained momentum and many Hindu temples were built in and around Yangon: most of them were dedicated to *Ganesh*. The findings of the images of *Ganesh* in pavilions indicate that the popularity of *Ganesh* in Buddhist Society became faded in colonial days.

Keywords – Ganesh, Colonial Period

Introduction

Ganesh, one of the major gods in Hinduism, is easily recognized by his elephant head. He is first worshipped before commencing every activity. *Ganesh* has many names and some of them are *Vishneshvara*-controller of obstacles, *Gasadipati*- lord of the elephants, *Ekadanta*-having one tusk. He is the son of god *Shiva* and goddess *Parvati*. *Parvati* created a boy from her sweat and scurf and asked the boy to guard their home. The boy refused the entry of *Shiva* and he was cut off the head off. *Shiva* fixed the head of an elephant onto his son's body. *Ganesh* has only one tusk and wears a snake belt. His vehicle is a mouse. In his four hands, he carries a shell, a discus, a sweat cake and a water lily. The images sculptures and paintings of *Ganesh* were found throughout the Myanmar historical periods. In colonial days, a lot of temples were built and he was sculpted as an advisor in Buddhist religious edifices.

Research Questions

1. Why was the *Ganesh* decorated sculpted in Buddhist edifices?
2. Why are there only two hands with no attributes in his sculptor later?

Research Procedures

The primary and secondary data was collected from the documents in libraries, archives and made interviews. Field works, doing surveys the sites, taking photographs of the artifacts and taking the measurement of the objects were done.

From Deity to Advisor: *Ganesh* in Shwedagon Stupa, Colonial Period

After the three Anglo- Myanmar wars in 1825, in 1852 and in 1885, Myanmar became one of the colonies of British Empire. Yangon became the capital of Myanmar. Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity and Islam became the major religions in colonial days. Even in the present days, majority of people in Myanmar believe in Buddhism, but trails and traces of Hindu beliefs and customs can be observed not only in the daily lives of people but also in the Buddhist religious edifices. *Ganesh*, the elephant-headed god, accepted as the remover of the

¹Associate Professor, Dr, Department of Archaeology, University of Mandalay

obstacles, was sculpted as a member of Mara army in Buddhist stupas and temples in colonial days.

Arriving of Hinduism to Myanmar

Animism was the prehistoric religion of the people of present days in Myanmar as well as the other parts of the world. In protohistoric period due to the direct contact with India and China, Pyu, Mon and Yakhine old cities, such as Beikthano, Halin, Sriksetra, Pinle (Maing Mao), Wadi, Thahton, Dhanyawadi, Vesali, received Indian and Chinese cultural, social and religious ideas. "With the inter mingling of natives and immigrants, the practice of ancestor-worshipping and Hindu Brahmanic beliefs and custom were added to the native religion".¹ The findings of trails and traces of Hinduism and Buddhism in old cities are the evidence of contact to India.

Hinduism in Historic Periods

Historic period of Myanmar can be divided into eight eras. They are Bagan era (11th-13th CE), Pinya era (14th century CE), Innwa era (14th-16th century CE), Taungoo era (16th century CE), Nyaung Yan era (17th-18th century CE), Konbaung era (18th-19th century CE), under colonization (1885-1948 CE) and after independence (1948 CE). The trails and traces of Hindu gods and goddesses, especially, Ganesh, have been found through the historical periods.

Ganesh in Bagan Period

Bagan, the capital of the first Myanmar Empire, situated on the eastern bank of Ayeyarwady River in central Myanmar, is the archaeological and historical paradise. There are over 3822² religious edifices in Bagan. Shwesandaw Stupa aka Mahapeinhne ceti with the evidence of Ganesh stone sculpture and some are Hindu Temples such as Nat-Hlaung Kyaung, the temple of Vishnu, and Nanphaya Temple for Brahma. The gigantic paintings of four-headed Brahma at the Ananda Temple, the images of Hindu gods and goddesses at the Abeyadana Temple, the images of *Ganesh* in Bagan Museum indicate that Hinduism was part of Bagan religious culture in early Bagan era, in the 11th century CE. In late Bagan era, in the 13th century CE, the role of Hinduism became less prominent: no traces of Hindu gods and goddess, except *Ganesh*, were discovered. The paintings of *Ganesh*³ on the lower parts of the walls in Sapwetin Temple points out that Hindu gods and goddess, especially *Ganesh*, were not abundantly found in late Bagan eras.

Ganesh in Nyaung Yan Period

The sculptures and the paintings of *Ganesh* are not yet discovered in Pinya, Innwa and Taungoo periods. The two images of *Ganesh*, set up at the northwest corner of Shwezigon Stupa in Innwa, were found to be sculpted in Nyaung Yan era (1600-1750CE): they were made of alabaster 20"x10"x6". *Ganesh*, seated on his vehicle mouse, has four hands: two upper hands holding a goad and a loop and two lower hands holding his tusk and trunk. There was a festival for *Ganesh* in November and it was held grandly with Myanmar and Mon musical ensembles. The two images of *Ganesh* were carried on a chariot and went around the town in November-*Nattawla*. In *Lawka-byuha Kyan*⁴, detail procedures for the festival of *Maha Peinne-Ganesh* were recorded.

¹Dr. Khin Maung Nyunt, *Welcom to Myanmar*, Yangon, 2003, p-7. (Hereafter cited as Dr.Khin, *Welcome*.)

² Interview: Phyto Pyeit KoKO, the research officer in Bagan Archaeological office. 12.1.2018.

³Dr. Soe Ni Tun, "Sapwetin: A Symbol of Peaceful Coexistence with Hinduism", *Mandalay University Research Journal Vol. 9*, Mandalay, Mandalay University Press, 2018, p-223. (Hereafter cited as Dr Soe Ni Tun, "Sapwetin".)

⁴Dr.Khin, *Welcome*

“In the season of *Nattaw* (November), the traditional festival of *Maha Peinne* (*Ganesh*) takes place. On the 13th waxing moon of *Nattaw*, the image of *Maha PeinneNat* housed in *zayat* (pavilion) in the precinct of *Shwezigone Stupa* was worshipped. One Myanmar Saing (musical ensemble) and one Mnon Saing (musical ensemble) and dancers performed their talents (to entertain the worshippers). At the palace, milk, butter, sweets and fruits were offered to *Maha Peinne Nat* (*Ganesh*). Princes and princess, royal grandchildren and ministers were instructed to hold the ceremony of '*Puja*' (worship) for *Maha Peinne Nat*'¹

Ganesh in Konbaung Period

The tradition of paying respect to *Ganesh* in November was continuously carried out in Konbaung era, during 1752-1885 CE, and the ruined images of *Skanda*- younger brother of *Ganesh* was repaired². *Skanda* was also worshipped in March in King Bodaw time. *Skanda* was carried on a chariot with a white flag. In Konbaung era, the festivals for *Skanda* and *Ganesh* were held in March and November.

Ganesh in Colonial Period

After the three Anglo- Myanmar wars in 1824-26, in 1852 and in 1885, Myanmar became one of the colonies of British Empire. Under colonization from 1885 to 1948, a lot of Indian migrant workers came to Myanmar and the population of Indian workers was growing greatly in a short time. They built a lot of Hindu temples in and around Yangon. *Vishnu*, *Shiva*, *Karliman* and *Ganesh* were the major gods and goddesses in those days and most temples were dedicated *Ganesh*. The four major religions, Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity and Islam were part of religious culture of Myanmar at that time. The trails and traces of Hindu beliefs and custom can still be observed in Myanmar Buddhist edifices.

Ganesh in Pavilions

A lot of religious buildings were built in and around Yangon and among them Shwedagon Stupa is the oldest. It is well-known for its architecture and decorated artworks in pavilions. According to the legend of the stupa, it was built by King Ookkalapa, in corporation with two merchant brothers, who had been to India for trading and they got the eight sacred hairs of Gotama Buddha. Those relics of Buddha were enshrined in a relic chamber. The original stupa, might be eastern structure, was 66 feet high and it was built in 578 BCE. The original stupa was rebuilt many times. The present stupa was built by King Shinphyushin in 1775 CE and it became the height of 326 feet.³ On the spacious stupa's platform are a lot of '*ta-zaung*' (pavilions) of various sizes and decorations and most of them were built in colonial days. It is better to add some more about Shwedagon Pagoda are total 160 buildings on Shwedagon Pagoda ground and most of them are pavilions and rest houses.⁴ Among 87 buildings, two pavilions have the images of *Ganesh*.

The first pavilion, No. 41 was built by U Thet Shei, Daw Ein Kan and Sammahme Daw Mya Aye in colonial period. Now, it is called "*Khun-hnit-yet-tha-thami-myar*" pavilion meant

Dr Soe Ni Tun, "Sapwetin"

¹ 1.1 U Maung Maung Tin, "Myanmar Min Oat-chok-pon-sar-tan haint Bodaw Phayar Gyi Yazathat A-mein-taw-gyi", *The Royal orders of King Bodaw and the state crafts for Myanmar monarchs*, Yangon, Seikku Cho Cho, 2012, p- 368. (Hereafter cited as U Maung, *The Royal Orders*.)

1.2 Dr. Khin Maung Nyunt, *Myanmar Traditional Festivals*, Yangon, Innwa Publishing House, 2005, p-117. (Hereafter cited as Dr. Khin, *Myanmar*.)

1.3 Myansar Myae Thein Lwin, *Maha Peinne Nat Haint Myanmar Yinkyehmu Ganesh and Myanmar Culture*, Yangon, Pyitsagan Press, 2017, p-68. (Hereafter cited as Thein, *Ganesh*.)

² U Maung, *Royal Orders*, p-368.

³ Dr Khin, *Welcome*. P-36.

⁴ Maung Su Shin, *Myat Phaya Shwedagon*, Shwedagon Stupa, Yangon, Pan Wai Wai Press, 2012, p-180. (Hereafter cited as Maung Su Shin, *Shwedagon*.)

as the pavilion donated by seven day born people. The whole pavilion was decorated with floral motifs and images. Inside the hall there are eighteen concrete pillars that support the upper structure, which is made of seven-tiered roofs. The whole upper structure is decorated with the episodes of Buddhism and most of them are in poor condition. They need urgent conservation. Under the roof, along the caves are decorated with floral motifs and they are in good condition. The hall can be entered from the southern entrance and '*lin-no-daun*' (the wing of a bat), corner motif, the usual decorative artworks in a pavilion, which is beautifully and patiently made can be seen on the upper part of the two main columns. It is seven feet long and four feet wide. The '*lin-no-daung*' is generally composed of two layers: the lower layer, the floral motifs and the upper part, the sculptures. The upper part on the '*lon-no-daun*' was portrayed with the narration of the Buddha, the history of the stupa and the stories related to Buddhism.

The wooden sculptures on the '*lin-no-daun*' depict one of the scenes from one of the episodes of the eight conquests of Buddha¹; the first is the conquest of *Mara*. The scene 'the conquest of *Mara*' is very popular topic of the life of the Buddha and it has been depicted since Bagan period to present time.

At the middle of the '*lin-no-daun*' is the Buddha in seated *bhumiphasa* mudra on a throne, under a banyan tree. In front of the seated Buddha is the standing earth god '*wa-thundari*' holding his long hair with his two hands. The right side of the Buddha is the group of celestial beings who came to worship or support Buddha. There are total six celestial beings on the right side of the Buddha. On the left there is the *Mara* and his troop. *Mara* who is destroyer, one enemy of Buddha and Buddhism², seated on the elephant holding six different weapons in six hands. Behind the *Mara* is his troop of such mythical creatures as two-headed turtle with eight legs, a big turtle, a deer-headed human and a standing man. The last one is *Ganesh*: who is seated on the ground, rising one knee and laying down the other. He has only two hands but the standard *Ganesh* posture has four hands, holding a shell, a discus, a club or sweet cake and a water lily.³ In Konbaung Period, *Ganesh* carries a goad, a nook, a tusk and a trunk, riding his vehicle mouse.⁴

The seated *Ganesh* has only two hands holding no attributes. The hand postures of *Ganesh* are rather peculiar, the right hand is raised up, and the left one is bent down to the ground. Herein '*lin-no-daun*' of pavilion No. 43, the image of *Ganesh* is certainly not a god, he is a member of the troop of *Mara*.

***Ganesh*, an advisor**

Another interesting image of *Ganesh* can be observed in '*lin-no-daun*' of pavilion No. 83, Daw Nan Hlaing's donation. It was built in colonial days. This pavilion No.83 is rather spacious and sturdy. There are fourteen concrete columns that support the upper structure that composed of five-tiered roof. Under the caves of the pavilion are very fine floral motifs. There are five '*lin-no-dauns*' in this pavilion and all faces to the main stupa.

¹Eight conquests of Buddha are (1. Defeating *Mara*, 2. Taming the celestial Ogre, *Alavaka*, 3. Subduing the fierce elephant, *Nalagiri*, 4. Overcoming the cruel man, *Angulimala*, 5. Exposing the tricks of the beautiful *Cinca Manavika*, 6. Making the hermit *Saccaka* answer the *Buddha*'s question in a debate, 7. Subduing the celestial gigantic dragon, *Nandopananda* through *Venerable Moggalana*, and 8. Expounding a doctrine to *Brahma Baka* in the higher heaven.)

²Maneka Gandhi, *Dictionary for Hindu Names, New Delhi*, Penguin Books, India, 1993, p- 254. (Hereafter cited as Maneka, *Dictionary*.)

³Kailash Nath Seth & BK Chaturvedi, *Gods and Goddesses of India*, Delhi, Diamond Pocket Books, 2003, p-15. (Hereafter cited as Kailash, *Gods*.)

⁴Thein, *Ganesh*., p-102.

All '*lin-no-dauns*' consist of two layers: the lower layer of floral artworks and the upper layers with the sculptures of various episodes. Most of the depictions on the '*lin-no-daun*' are related to the life of Gotama Buddha and sometimes the history of stupa.

The '*lin-no daun*' no.1, that bear the image of *Ganesh* and other interesting scene, is eight feet long and four feet wide. The scene on the '*lin-no-daun*' is the conquest of *Mara*. At the center of the '*lin-no-daun*' is the Buddha, seated on the plinth, with '*bhumiphasa mudra*'- the right hand of the Buddha is touching the ground under a Bodhi tree.

On the proper left of the Buddha are the four standing celestial beings. One of them is the earth god '*wa-thon-dari*'¹, holding his long hair with his hands. On the proper right is the '*Mara* and his troop'. *Mara* on elephant back is holding as assorted weapons in his six hands came to fight the Buddha with his followers of mythical creatures. Here in the scene, a deer-headed man and a standing celestial being represent the troop of *Mara* army.

On the far corner of the '*lin-no-daun*' is the *Ganesh* in standing position: it is eleven inches high. The grotesque figure of *Ganesh* is very amusing with the big elephant head, the big ears, the pot belly. The elephant head of the *Ganesh* is the main attribute of *Ganesh* and he is called *Gajanana*-elephant- faced, *Gajadhipati*-lord of the elephants². He has big ears and that is why he is named *Lambkarna*-long eared.³ The standing *Ganesh* has a protruding belly and became *Lambodara*- pendant bellied.⁴ His other names are *Ganapati*-lord of the tribe or attendants, *Vighneshvara*- controller of all obstacles, *Vinayaka*- the prominent leader, and *Ekadanta*-possessing one tusk.⁵

The big elephant head, big and long ear, one tusk, pot belly and human body indicate that the small standing image of eleven inches high is the *Ganesh*. Here in the scene, *Ganesh* is standing a little bit far from *Mara* troop. His left hand is pointing to the Buddha as if he is advising, and his right hand is placed on his hip impertinently. The upper part of *Ganesh* has no upper garment-half-naked and the lower part wears the Indian *dhoti* in grid his lion. The usual attribute of *Ganesh*, the snake-belt and his vehicle mouse are not presented.

Discussion and Conclusion

The images of *Ganesh* were first discovered in Bagan period and they are made of sandstone, stucco, bronze and mica. The presence of sculptures and paintings of *Ganesh* indicates that he was one of the major gods in early Bagan period. In late Bagan period his popularity declined and he was drawn in the paintings in lower part of the Buddhist temple as guardians. In successive historical periods, he was respected and the festival for him was often held grandly in November. The festival for his younger brother, *Skanda* was also held in Konbaung era in March.

Ganesh became a popular god of Hindus in line with the population growth of Indian migrant workers in colonial days. A lot of temples for *Ganesh* were built in and around Yangon. Trails and traces of these temples can be observed in Yangon. The cult of *Ganesh* was rather popular in those days. *Ganesh* became one of the major gods in Hinduism and he was sculpted as emblem Buddhist edifices. He has been depicted as a member of *Mara* troop in pavilion no. 43 and in pavilion No. 83 he was depicted as an advisor of *Mara*. The images of *Ganesh* in Buddhist edifices point out that the role of *Ganesh* faded in colonial days.

¹Maneka, **Dictionary**, p-477.

²Chaturvedi, **Gods**, p-13.

³Ibid, p-138.

⁴Ibid, p-13.

⁵Chaturvede, **Gods**, p-13.

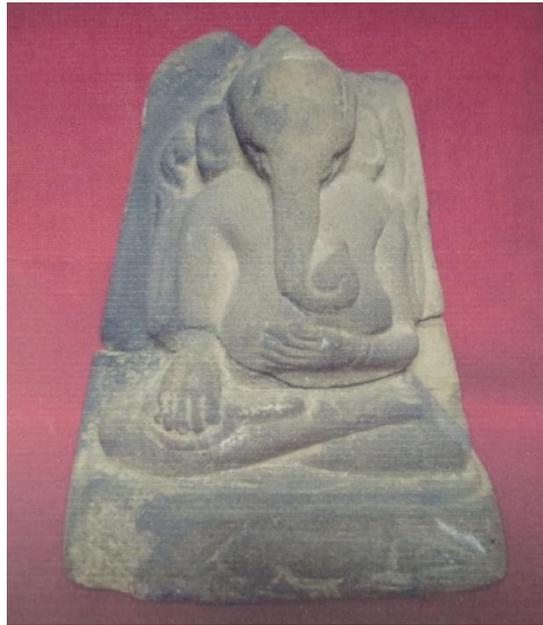


Fig. (1) Ganesh Sandstone Height 7 inches (Bagan Museum)



Fig. (2) Ganesh Wood Height 13 inches

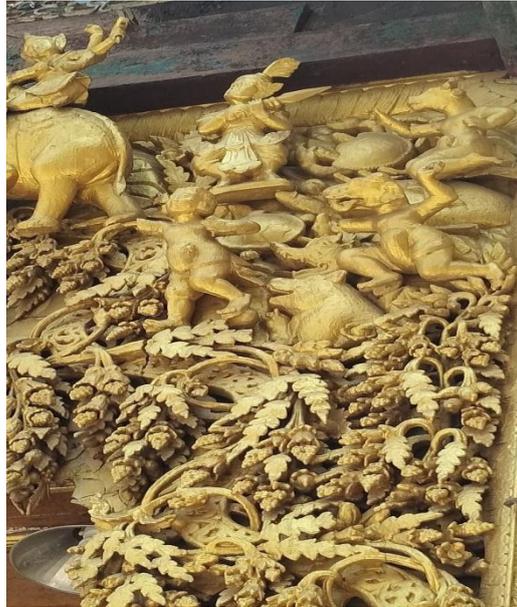


Fig. (3) Ganesh Wood Height 4 inches

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Field Note 2018, 2019

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