

The Dance of the Drunkard Prince. A Celebration for the Spirits in Central Burma (Myanmar)

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Abstract

Every year, in central Burma (Myanmar), crowds of pilgrims, devotees and professional spirit mediums (*nat kadaw*) gather in the little village of Shweguni, near the town of Pakhan, to celebrate the festival (*nat pwe daw*) for the local spirit (*nat*) Min Kyawswa, the drunkard prince – also known as Ko Gyi Kyaw. The sound of the *do waing* (the music ensemble playing at the main shrine of the spirit) and of several other ensemble marks the ritual activities: the royal showering of the spirit statues (*hkya yay daw thoun*), the celebration of a traditional spirit ceremony (*yoya pwe*), and the spirit possession dances to honour the spirit (*tat pwe*). Based on ethnographic film recordings made in the field, the film provides an account of the first days of the festival in February 2018. Focusing on the musical activities of the different ensembles supporting the celebration, the film presents the multi-layered sensory experience of the festival, and documents the relationship between ritual, music, dance, and spirit possession.

La danza del principe ebbro. Una celebrazione per gli spiriti in Birmania centrale (Myanmar). Ogni anno, in Birmania centrale (Myanmar), folle di pellegrini, devoti e specialisti rituali (*nat kadaw*) si riuniscono nel piccolo villaggio di Shweguni, vicino la città di Pakhan, per celebrare il festival (*nat pwe daw*) per lo spirito locale (*nat*) Min Kyawswa, il principe ebbro – anche noto come Ko Gyi Kyaw. Il suono del *do waing* (l'ensemble musicale che suona al principale santuario dello spirito) e di altri ensemble scandisce le attività rituali: la doccia reale delle statue degli spiriti (*hkya yay daw thoun*), la celebrazione della tradizionale cerimonia per gli spiriti (*yoya pwe*) e le danze di possessione in onore dello spirito (*tat pwe*). A partire da riprese etnografiche realizzate sul campo, il film dà conto dei primi giorni del festival documentati nel febbraio 2018. Concentrandosi sulle attività musicali dei diversi ensemble

che supportano la celebrazione, il film presenta la stratificata esperienza sensoriale del festival, ponendo in evidenza le relazioni che intercorrono tra rituale, musica, danza e possessione.

Preamble

The film *The dance of the drunkard prince* documents the ritual, music, and spirit possession dances of the Shweguni festival, a celebration for the Burmese *nat* (spirit) Min Kyawswa (also known as Ko Gyi Kyaw), Lord of Pakhan, one of the most prominent and revered spirits in Central Burma. The filming was carried out in February 2018, while I was engaging in research on the music and dance of spirit ceremonies between the cities of Yangon and Mandalay, as part of my doctoral degree at SOAS University of London. The ethnographic filming was an attempt to capture the multi-form dimension of the festival, including the numerous stratifications of the often-uninterrupted torrent of sounds, dances, and ritual events (Scaldeferri 2015). Due to the nature of ethnographic fieldwork and to the limited technological means (I used only one camera, equipped with an external microphone), the original filming often appeared as incoherent video ethnographic notes – a perfect metaphor for the incoherence often characterising the ethnographic fieldwork experience of the researcher. At that time, the footage was not intended to take any narrative form, nor to become an ethnographic documentary. No interviews with the festival protagonists were shot. However, I believe that although incoherent and incomplete (or maybe: precisely for this), these raw ethnographic materials powerfully evoke the details of the fieldwork experience – as I discovered myself while re-watching them again and again, in the attempt to select meaningful footage. Sitting in a small room in the premises of the DAMSLab (University of Bologna), Stefano Daniele Orro (with whom I am deeply indebted) and I worked at the final editing of this audiovisual essay. While watching the film slowly taking its final form, we tried to preserve the immediacy of the original recordings, so that the film would convey the intense feeling of participating in the Shweguni spirit festival – in particular, its sounds, music, noises, and spirit possession dances.

Several works by anthropologist Brac de la Perrière (1993; 1998a; 1998b; 1999; 2005) address Burmese spirit festival celebrations; a number of ethnographic documentaries offer a unique view of the cult of the spirits in Burma (Merrison 2001; Bishop 2004; U Hein Soe 2005; Naing Oo 2013).¹ However, these works often look at ritual processes and dynamics, presenting the legendary tales of the *nat* and the figures of professional spirit mediums. The musical practices supporting the possession dances are often pushed to the background, if not entirely overlooked.

The Shweguni festival presents several unique features. The celebration takes place near the town of Pakhan Gyi, in the village of Shweguni, on a small island at the con-

¹ For an analysis of Merrison's (2001) *Friends in High Places* and U Hein Soe's (2005) *The Legend of Lady Hill*, see Ho 2009. The controversial aesthetics of Bishop's (2004) *Burma's Carnival of Spirit Soul* are summarised in Veal and Kim 2016.

fluence of the Chindwin and Ayeyarwady rivers.² Unlike other spirit festivals in Burma, where a full *hsaing waing*³ ensemble is in use, the celebration of this festival traditionally revolves around the music of the *do*, a sacred double-headed drum. The sacred *do* drum leads a small ensemble (*do waing*) including *hne* (shawm), *linkwin* (large cymbals), *lay lon pat* (four tuned drums),⁴ *si* (bell) and *wa* (clapper), and one singer.⁵ This small ensemble supports the possession dances at the main shrine (*nan gyi*, “great palace”) of the *nat* and accompanies the important moments of the ritual. The music of the *do waing* follows a precise series of music and choreographies identifying the *nat* Min Kyawswa: *sidaw* underlines the high-status of the *nat* prince; *nan gyi tabaung* indicates his royal power, and supports a wobbly drunkard dance; the dancer follows the driving *do* drum music by mimicking the act of playing the sacred double-headed drum; the fast and vital *bein maung* supports *kyet laung*, the fast acrobatics of the dancer with a cockerel and a bowl, signifying the bets on cockfighting – one of the *nat* prince’s favourite activities. As Brac de la Perrière (1993: 228) suggests, the performance of *kyet laung*, the bets on cockfighting, represents the distinctive feature of the Shweguni festival, an explicit actualisation of the legend of the *nat* (Fig. 1). The same series of dances and sounds, although adapted to a full *hsaing waing* ensemble, accompanies the dance of the *nat* Min Kyawswa during *nat kana pwe* private ceremonies (Chiarofonte 2021).

In the past decades the practice to perform music and possession dances in a secondary shrine (*kyet taik nan*, “cockfighting palace”) emerged in Shweguni, thus challenging the sonic monopoly of the main shrine. To ensure its competitiveness, the ensemble of the secondary shrine is larger and includes instruments (such as the *maung hsaing*, gong-chime, and *sito*, barrel drums) that do not perform in the main shrine’s ensemble. Finally, at the same time of the festival but outside Shweguni, in the village of Yesagyo, spirit possession dances for the *nat* are performed in a third shrine, supported by a full *hsaing waing* ensemble – the *ba ba Kyaw do kyi*, “drums and gongs [of] daddy Kyaw”.

The chapters constituting this film document the musical practices of these ensembles during the first days of the celebration – from 15 to 19 February 2018. The chapters correspond to different ritual activities:

² The places of the festival are part of a sacred ritual geography. The area of Pakhan Gyi, the main urban centre, is considered the territory over which the *nat* Min Kyawswa has regional authority (*apain sar*).

³ “Hsaing waing” literally means “suspended in circle”. The name refers to the leading instrument of this ensemble, the *pat waing*, a drum circle constituted of 21 tuned drums, suspended inside a wooden circular and richly decorated framework. The ensemble normally includes *pat ma* (suspended drum), *chawk lon pat* (six tuned drums), *sito* (large barrel drums), *linkwin* (large cymbals), *si* (bell) and *wa* (clapper), *kyi waing* (gong circle), *maung hsaing* (gong-chime), *hne* (shawm), plus one or more singers.

⁴ The introduction of this instrument in the *do waing* probably represents a relatively recent innovation. See Garfias (1985).

⁵ In 2018, the *nan daw gyi do ahpwe* (“do group of the great royal palace”) consisted of the following musicians: U Soe Ni (*do*), U Sein Win (*hne*), U Maung Win (*lay loun pat*), U Maung Lwin (*wa*); U Hsan Hnyunt (*linkwin*). The singers were taking turns, changing continuously: some of them (for example, Ma Lay Lay) I would have met again later, during my fieldwork in Mandalay.



FIGURE 1. A *nat kadaw* performing *kyet laung*, the dance representing the bets on the cockfight.

1. *hkyo yay daw thoun*, sacred washing of the statues. It takes place on the large riverboat cruising the river; it is accompanied by the music of the *do waing*, led by the sacred *do*.
2. *yoya pwe*, possession dances celebrating all the Burmese spirits. The dances take place in the main shrine in Shweguni, supported by the sound of the *do waing* ensemble.
3. *tat pwe*, possession dances celebrating the *nat* Min Kyawswa. The film shows the dances taking place in a secondary shrine in Shweguni, supported by a secondary ensemble.
4. *Yesagyo pwe*, a celebration for the Min Kyawswa taking place in the *nat* shrine of Yesagyo village. The film shows the dance of a *nat kadaw*, supported by a full *hsaing waing* ensemble, led by the drum circle *pat waing*.

Focusing on the music of the Shweguni festival, the film doesn't lose sight of the important aspect constituting the larger ritual context. The images and sounds included in the introduction testify to the feverish and noisy atmosphere of the festival, animated by the large crowds who come to pay homage to the *nat* prince. In the first chapter, the film documents the slow and long procession that takes the spirit images from the main shrine to the riverbanks, bearing witness to the large presence of young drunk participants who enliven (some would say dangerously too much) the festive atmosphere of the celebration.

In the second chapter, the film offers a comparison between the controlled dances of professional spirit mediums (*nat kadaw*) and the uncontrolled possession of the devotees surrounding the main shrine. The third chapter presents the participation of the devotees to the spirit possession music and dance performed at the secondary shrine. Finally, the last chapter shows a glimpse of the music and dance performed at the Yesagyō shrine, outside the boundaries of the Shweguni village.

The Burmese spirit cult

In Burma, local spirits are organised in a pantheon of Thirty-seven Lords (*Thounze-hkun-na Min*), legendary heroes who encountered a violent death at the hands of a Burmese king. Instituted and patronised by the Burmese monarchy throughout the centuries (Bamford 2019; Temple 1991 [1906]), today the cult is articulated in both a private and a public dimension.

Devotees pay homage to the spirits by sponsoring private ceremonies (*nat kana pwe*) (Brac de la Perrière 1989): in these ceremonies, one or more *nat kadaw* (professional spirit mediums) consecutively embody the *nat* belonging to the pantheon (plus several other spiritual persons). The possession dances are supported by the *nat hsaing*: the loud and fast music of this drums and gong chimes ensemble contributes to make the *nat* present. The sound of intense drum cycles, accompanied by intricate melodies and shouted vocals, blares out from towers of amplifiers, supporting the possession dances of all the spirits involved in the celebration (Chiarofonte 2022b).

The most eminent spirits of the pantheon are individually celebrated in public festivals (*nat pwe daw*). These celebrations are held yearly in the spirit's own domain – normally, the region where the hero has accomplished legendary deeds, only to find a violent death and finally transform into a powerful and vindictive *nat*. Today, the *nat* occupy their domain in the form of a statue (*poun daw*, “royal image”) placed in a shrine (*nan daw*, “royal palace”) in which the spirit is believed to reside (Brac de la Perrière 1998a).

Pilgrimage in Burma

The canonical account of the last days of Gotama Buddha, the *Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta*,⁶ «serves as the charter» for pilgrimage to the places associated with Gotama's life – birth (Lumbinī grove, Nepal), Enlightenment (Bodh Gayā), first sermon (Sārnāth, near Varanasi) and death (Pāvā, Bihar) (Gombrich 1988: 122). Although these and other sites are at the centre of transnational religious networks (Geary 2014; Keyes 1975), pilgrimage is not mandatory in Buddhism. As Gombrich explains:

⁶ The *Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta* is part of the Sutta Pitaka, the collection (*pitaka*, “basket”) of the discourses (*sutta*) included in the *Tripitaka*, the Pali collection of Buddhist writing (Gombrich 1988).

Pilgrimage is not an obligation, like the Muslim *hajj* to Mecca. There is not even a Buddhist word for “pilgrimage”; it is referred to as a “worshipping journey” or some such. No one think the worse of a fellow-Buddhist for not having gone on a pilgrimage. (Gombrich 1988: 122-123)

My research participants explain that, in Burmese language, a common expression designating the undertaking religious trip is *hpaya phu thwa*.⁷ The term *hpaya* refers to the Buddha and, by extension, Buddhist reliquary monuments (*stupa*), as well as images and statues of the Buddha. *Hpu-* translates “to worship”: it indicates the gesture of joining hands on one’s forehead. *Thwa-* translates into “to go”. The expression implies a visit to one of the countless Buddhist stupas and/or images of the Buddha scattered in Burma (Stadtner 2011).⁸ Similarly, the expression *nat pwe thwa-* is used to indicate the undertaking of a trip to a *nat* shrine, especially in occasion to the annual celebration for a spirit (*nat pwe daw*).⁹

A few kilometres from the ancient city of Bagan, Mount Popa constitutes the centre of the cult of Burmese spirits (Mendelson 1963; Brac de la Perrière 1989: 20-27). Besides the Buddhist monastery of Taung Kalat and numerous spirit shrines, the site hosts the shrine of the *nat* U Tin Dae, also known as Min Mahagiri “Lord of the Great Mountain”, head of the Thirty-seven Lords. The founding myth of Min Mahagiri establishes a direct connection between the power of Burmese kings and the cult of the spirits (Htin Aung 1962: 61-67), thus making Mount Popa an important spiritual site at least since the Bagan era (11th century).¹⁰ The strong connections between the spirit cult and the monarchic power becomes even clearer in Taungbyone – today, without doubt the most popular *nat pwe daw* (Brac de la Perrière 1993; 2005; Bishop 2004). Held around August for the two Muslim Brothers *nat*, the celebration attracts every year hordes of ritual specialists, devoted pilgrims, curious tourists, and nosey researchers, thus transforming this small village just a few kilometres north of Mandalay in a bustling centre.

The celebrations at Popa and Taungbyone are part of a larger network of ritual programs involving several other *nat* shrines, placed in various villages in Central Burma.

⁷ A different expression, *gambiya kayi htwet-*, is connected to Buddhist esoteric practices linked to the way of *weikza* (Brac de la Perrière *et al.*, 2014; Patton 2018). According to my research participants, the expression designates the undertaking of a trip (*kayi*) outside (*htwet*) to fulfil a specific vow; the origin of the word *gambiya* is uncertain.

⁸ Famous religious places in Burma are at the centre of international flows of devotees, especially from Thailand – as in the case of the Shwedagon pagoda (Keyes 1975) and Myan Nan Nwe’s shrine at the Botahtaung pagoda (Brac de la Perrière 2022) in Yangon.

⁹ Htoo Zaw, pers. comm., 6 July 2022. Although *nat* spirit cult and Buddhism can be considered part of the same religious system (as explained by Brac de la Perrière, *passim*), Burmese often make a distinction between the two, and generally assign a higher moral and ethical status to Buddhism.

¹⁰ In the 19th century, the site has reconfigured its spiritual significance, becoming an important centre for the practitioners of the *weikza* path (esoteric practices). The *weikza* Bo Min Kaung is believed to have “exited” the human world from the Taung Kalat monastery on the top of Mount Popa. The famous *weikza* is celebrated with a large festival in September, competing in popularity with the spirit festival for the *nat* Min Mahagiri, which takes place in December (Brac de la Perrière 2012).

As Brac de la Perrière (1998a) explains, the festivities take place on fixed dates, one after the other, according to the Burmese lunar calendar. The three festive periods take place every year – during the moon of Tabauing (March-April), Wagaung (August-September), and Nadaw (December) – according to a circumambulation in the central valley of the Ayeyarwady River that links certain spirits with others, connecting their respective legendary cycles. Besides Taungbyone and Popa, the most popular *nat pwe daw* celebrations today include the Amarapura festival (often associated to Taungbyone) and the Shweguni festival for the *nat* Min Kyawswa.

For many professional spirit mediums, devotees, and musicians, the pilgrimage to *nat* festivals represent a round trip journey that takes place annually (Gold 1988). Most pilgrims spend more than a few days on the site, often living side by side for the duration of their stay: this allows musicians and ritual specialists from different parts of the country to exchange competences, contributing to the creation of standard “ways” (*nat lan zin*) to celebrate the spirits – but also making people aware of the differences characterising opposite traditions. For the duration of a spirit festival, a village is filled with large and diverse crowds. In Burmese language, this concept is expressed through the locution *lu si dae*, “crowded, full of people” in a positive sense, comparable with the Indonesian *rame* – «a magnified aesthetic state of liveliness», a «state of heightened spiritual awareness» (Harnish 2006) that represents a sociocultural goal of festival celebrations in Lombok, Indonesia. The heightened experience of the festival contributes to call upon the presence of the spirit, reinforcing the relationship between the human and non-human participants. The experience of a “commonness of feeling” constituting the *communitas* (Turner, Turner 1978) is achieved through musicking: ritual music, dance and participation contribute to produce intense feelings of togetherness that construct the festival experience in space/time through embodied sonic devotional practices (Jones 2015 and 2016).

The *nat* Min Kyawswa

Min Kyawswa, Lord of Pakhan, is one of the most prominent figures in the pantheon of the Thirty-seven Lords.¹¹ Also known as Ko Gyi Kyaw or Pakhan Kyaw, the *nat* appears to be a multi-layered figure, probably resulting from the overlapping of different legendary figures from different eras (Temple 1991 [1906]: 57-60). Legendary tales describe Min Kyawswa as a vengeful prince and a jealous lover, fond of alcohol, cockfighting, sex, and music (Fig. 2). The tales I collected from *nat kadaw* in the field are often in contrast with each other, presenting different variants and connecting the figure of Min Kyawswa with that of several Burmese spirits. According to the most common version of his legend, during his life, prince Kyawswa was estranged from the royal court as a punishment for

¹¹ In Temple’s (1991 [1906]) account of the Thirty-seven Lords, the *nat* is listed as no. 32, «Min Kyawzwá».



FIGURE 2. The statue of Min Kyawswa in the main shrine, covered with offerings of rum and whiskey bottles.

his bad behaviour and sent to oversee the realisation of water canals. One night, he heard the sound of his Indian workers celebrating with music and palm wine, and commanded to bring them inside the palace to perform for him. The musicians played with the *do* (a double-headed drum), a shawm (*hne*) and small percussions (*si*, bell; *wa*, clapper). From that day on, the royal halls resounded every night with the music of the Indian *do* and were flooded with palm wine.

Today, the *nat* is annually called back to join the celebration of his festival in Shweguni through the sound of the *do* drum and honoured with rivers of beer and whiskey and bets on cockfighting. The ritual activities of the celebration re-enact the life of the prince, actualising the legendary tales and the transformation from human into *nat*.

Although he doesn't occupy the top of the Thirty-seven pantheon, the spirit plays a primary role in all *nat* ceremonies, both private and public. Brac de la Perrière writes that:

le culte du Fameux [Min Kyawswa/Ko Gyi Kyaw] est indiscutablement important: nous avons vu qu'il est central dans l'organisation des rituels aux 37 parce que les offrandes monétaires permettant de rémunérer l'orchestre lui sont adressées; il s'agit des offrandes faites lors des "paris sur les combats de coq", un élément de rituel que l'on retrouve dans toutes les fêtes de *naq*. (Brac de la Perrière 1998a: 310-311)

Discussing the rigid spirit hierarchy characterising the Taungbyone festival, the anthropologist specifies the prominent role of Ko Gyi Kyaw in public *nat* festivals: «Il semble donc que le Fameux [Min Kyawswa/Ko Gyi Kyaw] soit considéré comme celui qui gère les célébrations et, de ce point de vue, domine la hiérarchie» (Brac de la Perrière 1993: 218). The *nat* enjoys a particular connection with the *nat pwe* celebrations and music. Brac de la Perrière explains:

Le lien privilégié du Fameux avec les musiciens, surtout avec celui du tambour *do*, est particulièrement mis en valeur à sa fête annuelle, à Shweguni; après la descente à la rivière des statues, le rituel commence par la suspension du tambour. (Brac de la Perrière 1989: 130n9)

The double-headed drum in Shweguni is believed to be inhabited by the *nat* Min Kyawswa: at the time of the festival, when the drum gets struck, the spirit comes out of the drum and dances to the sound of his favourite music.¹² The drum rests suspended in the shrine of the *nat* in Shweguni, attached to a large red pillar around which the possession dances of the *nat kadaw* take place during the festival (Fig. 3). On the third day, when the drum is taken down (*do hswé*, "pulling the *do*", also meaning "to play the drum"), the celebration officially begins: in the first days, only the sacred *do* drum

¹² On the sacredness of musical instruments in general, see Kartomi (1990). Gongs in Bali and Java are regarded as particularly sacred (McGraw 2019; Becker 1988); the Thai barrel drum *taphôn* is considered quasi-sacred, and it must be kept in a high place (Miller 1998: 255); the Makassarese *gendang* is considered powerful aesthetically and spiritually (Sutton 2002: 134-136).



FIGURE 3. Before the beginning of the festival, devotees pray to the *nat* by circling the red pillar and by touching the sacred *do* drum, still suspended.

is allowed to resound.¹³ This underlines the supremacy of the main shrine and of the *do waing* ensemble led by the sacred drum. Brac de la Perrière (1993: 220) informs us about the explicit prohibition, for the Shweguni festival, to perform music and dance in secondary shrines, and indicates the Taungbyone and Amarapura as the only festival where the ritual dancing is allowed outside the main shrine. However, since 1995, the primacy of the main shrine (*nan gyi*, “great palace”) of Shweguni has been partially challenged by a new shrine: the structure was built in place of a large banyan tree, whose shade sheltered those people betting on cockfighting – according to legends, one of the favourite activities of prince Min Kyawswa. The new shrine was then called *kyet taik nan*, “cockfighting palace” (Brac de la Perrière 1998a). Today, the shrine houses large statues of the Thirty-seven Lords: under their watchful eyes, the dances of the *tat pwe* for the *nat* are performed, starting from the fifth day of the festival.

¹³ Several *nat kadaw* (Kyaw Win Naing, pers. comm., 26 January 2018) underlined that, in order not to compete with Min Kyawswa, it is impossible to celebrate full private spirit ceremonies for the whole duration of the festival. Brac de la Perrière (1993: 220) explains that, during the time of a public spirit festival, the *nat kadaw* are only allowed to celebrate a “seated *kana*”, i.e. a private celebration where the spirit possession happens without music and dance. While this rule applies to all spirit festivals, it seems to be particularly respected in the case of the Shweguni festival.



FIGURE 4. Local people collecting alms in a station on the way to Pakhan.

The Shweguni festival

The festival takes place for fifteen days, during the waxing moon (*la hsan*) of Tabaung, until the full moon day (*la pyay*). According to the Burmese lunar calendar, when I visited the festival in 2018 the waxing days of Tabaung started on 15 February; full moon day was 1st March. The film shows the celebration taking place on 17-19 February (festival day 3-5). The following account of the festival activities represent a condensed version of my original ethnographic fieldnotes – corresponding to, and in part integrating what the film shows.

- Day 1-2: constant streams of pilgrims reach the town of Pakhan. On the roads surrounding the city, local people attempt to stop the vehicles and collect alms: their stations are heavily equipped with loudspeakers blaring out spirit songs (*nat chin*) of Ko Gyi Kyaw (Fig. 4). The ferryboat service relentlessly transports pilgrims across the Chindwin River: many carry spirit statues, food offering, and all the things necessary to make their stay at the village as comfortable as possible. On the other side of the river, the little village of Shweguni is already crowded: a market has grown around the central pagoda; Buddhist prayers are broadcast from loudspeakers; temporary bamboo accommodations are ready to welcome devotees and ritual specialists. At the main shrine, many pilgrims present ritual offerings of bananas and coconut (*kadaw pwe*) or flowers to the *nat* images and circle the large red pillar from which the sacred *do* drum is suspended, hitting the drum to acknowledge their offering.



FIGURE 5. A *nat kadaw* spills whiskey to bless the *do* drum and the player.

- Day 3: the *hkyo yay daw thoun*, the “royal showering” of the spirit statues marks the beginning of the ritual activities. In the morning, the *do* drum is taken down, and the *do waing* ensemble performs *sidaw*: this music once marked the procession of Burmese royalty; today, it announces the entrance of high-status figures. The royal and majestic character of this music results from the slow interlocking of tuned drums and idiophones, on which the shawm *hne* perform rapid melodies. The celebration officially starts: the statues of Min Kyawswa (represented as a horse-rider), his wife Shin Bo Mae, his elder brother Mani Sithu, and his sister-in-law Weluwaddy are taken from their shrines and put by an excited and loud crowd of young and drunk bearers on a palanquin (*waw daw*) pulled by an oxcart. The statues are transported to the riverbanks for the ritual washing. The *do waing* musicians follow on a second oxcart: they keep playing during the slow procession to the river, followed by large crowds. On the riverbanks, the spirit statues and the musicians get on a riverboat (*hpaun daw*, “royal barge”, or *thinbaw gyi*, “great steamboat”), while the drunk bearers who took the statues there are left behind. Each *nat kadaw* enters the ritual space and performs possession dances for the *nat*. For each dancer, the *do waing* performs a precise series of musical sounds, corresponding to specific choreographies: the sound of *nan gyi tabaung*, signifying the king’s power, accompanies a wobbly drunkard dance; during the performance of *do* drum music, the possessed dancer mimics the



FIGURE 6. Screenshot from the film *The dance of the drunkard nat* showing the ritual washing of the statue with whiskey.

gesture of playing the double-headed drum; the intense *bein maung* music supports the fast *kyet laung* acrobatics. The *nat kadaw* dances in front of the statues, sometimes spilling alcohol on the sacred *do* drum to bless it (Fig. 5). Surrounded and supported by their followers, the spirit mediums throw money on the drunk participants and distribute bottles of whiskey and beer. During the trip, the huge riverboat is reached by smaller boats, blasting loud music – most of the time a remixed version of the spirit song *Do Ko Gyi Kyaw* by Thxa Soe (Chiarofonte 2022a) – out of large conical speakers. Drunk youngsters try to board the riverboat, their attempts thwarted by several police officers, who push them away. The dances continue for several hours, while the huge riverboat cruises the waters of the Chindwin up and down. Towards the end of the day, the statues get washed with water collected from the Chindwin, whiskey and beer offered by the devotees (Fig. 6). Water splashing and throwing seems to be the norm: everybody gets soaked wet. Finally, the riverboat reaches land again: the cleansed statues are taken back to the shrine by oxcart, followed by the musicians, and repositioned on their respective altars.

- Day 4: The spirits belonging to the official pantheon of the Thirty-seven are celebrated with a *yoya pwe*, a “traditional ceremony”. The dances take place in an enclosed space in front of the main shrine. All the *nat* dance consecutively, according to the same precise order of music and choreographies also characterising private spirit ceremonies (Brac de la Perrière 1989). Each spirit is identified by one or more

specific dance gestures. The appearance of the *nat* prince lasts longer than the other dances, but the choreographies (and the music supporting them) are the same as the day before. This does not prevent the pilgrims to get involved in the celebration. Just outside the fenced area, many devotees show signs of intense spirit possession. Driven by the fast music of the *do waing*, they dance energetically facing the statue of Ko Gyi Kyaw, to whom they came to pay homage by offering their bodies. The physical relationship between the devotees and the *nat* images is a constant throughout the celebration.

- Day 5: The *tat pwe* (lit. “stepping up ceremony”) begins. This consists of music and dances exclusively for the *nat* Min Kyawswa. In the main shrine, the *nat kadaw* queue patiently, waiting for their turn to dance. The ritual protocols are the same for each one of them: the dancer enters, pays respect to the *nat* statues, and the *tat pwe* begins. The *do waing* performs the same series of music as the days before, supporting the very same choreographies. A constant feature of the *tat pwe* in the main shrine is to dance around the large red pillar from which the *do* drum is suspended. The *nat kadaw* circle the pillar, touching it with their back, sometimes stretching towards the musicians or the crowd. The demonstration of support from the donors is an integral part of the ritual performance. Each dancer is accompanied by a consistent group of followers; they encourage “their” *nat kadaw* by shouting, throwing money, and dispensing gifts. Perfume and whiskey are regularly sprayed and poured over the musicians and their instruments, the column, and other participants. The film does not show these scenes, and focuses on the spirit performances at the secondary shrine instead. With similar dynamics, the celebration of *tat pwe* takes place also in the *kyet taik nan*, the secondary “cockfighting palace”. While the *nat kadaw* dance one after the other in front of the shrine, masses of drunk pilgrims dance just outside the metal fence, moving to the songs performed by the secondary ensemble.¹⁴ Compared to the *do waing*, the secondary ensemble includes a *sito*, large barrel drum, and a *maung hsaing*, gong-chime. These additional instruments provide an invaluable sonic support to the performance of the ensemble: the deep sound of the large drum contributes to the incisiveness of the other drums, while the presence of the gong-chime provides a richer heterophonic texture to the performance. In this way, the secondary shrine, although ritually, hierarchically, and sonically subordinated to the main shrine, ensures its competitiveness, offering something that the main shrine, for ritual reasons, cannot possibly provide.

The main chapters of the film end with the *tat pwe* dances at the *kyet taik nan*. However, several *nat kadaw*¹⁵ described the main events of the rest of the festival celebration to me:

¹⁴ Possibly because of its controversial un-officiality, the ensemble performing at the secondary shrine seems to have no official name.

¹⁵ Kyaw Win Naing, pers. comm., 26 January 2018; Htoo Zaw, pers. comm., 30 May 2022.

from day 5 to day 15, the *tat pwe* dances continue as before, but are organised into three periods: *pwe oo* (“beginning of the festival”, days 5-8); *pwe lay* (“middle festival”, days 9-13); *pwe thein* (“conclusion of the festival”, days 14-15). According to the *nat kadaw* I encountered, this is necessary to manage the flow of pilgrims to the festival and to avoid concentration of people in the small Shweguni. However, it also brings certain ritual obligations: the pupils of a *nat kadaw* must dance *tat pwe* in the same period of their master. The *tat pwe* dances continue uninterrupted, except for a few occasions. On day 9, traditional cockfighting competitions (*kyet taik pwe*) take place in the secondary palace. This challenge seems to require an extreme muscular effort: crouching down, two people (in particular, young women) must perform fast jumps, shifting the weight on their legs, facing each other. The surrounding audience bets on which of the two opponents will resist long enough or fall first. The challenge is considered a popular village entertainment in Burma. On days 10-11, the statue of Mani Sithu, elder brother of Min Kyawswa, is transported from his nearby village to Shweguni, and positioned in a temporary *nat* shrine; on day 13, the statue of Shwe Gaing Medaw, the prince’s mother, enters Shweguni facing backwards, disapproving of her son’s immoral conduct. On day 15, full moon day, the festival ends with a large donation to the local Buddhist monks – stressing once again how the cult of the spirits is integrated with Theravada Buddhism in Burma. In 2018, I was forced to return to Mandalay ahead of schedule, missing the rest of the celebration. As of today, to return to Burma and stay for the entire duration of the festival remains difficult.¹⁶

In 2018, before leaving the festival to return to Mandalay, I paid a short visit to the Yesagyo shrine. Situated just a few kilometres north of Pakhan Gyi, the shrine is believed to mark the spot where Min Kyawswa lost his life, becoming a *nat* (*tat pyaut nan*, “departure shrine”). The final film chapter documents the short experience: in the little shrine, surrounded by locals, one *nat kadaw* dances for the *nat* Ko Gyi Kyaw. The performance appears almost as a private *nat kana pwe*: with playful verbal exchanges, the spirit medium requests several songs to the musicians of the *ba ba Kyaw do kyit*, “drums and gongs [of] daddy Kyaw”. The music group is constituted by a full *hsaing waing* ensemble: the drum circle *pat waing* leads the performance, supported by the suspended drum *pat ma* and a set of large *sito* drums; a gong-chime *maung hsaing* and a *hne* shawm perform complex melodic elaborations; the penetrating sound of the *si* (bell) and *wa* (woodblock) coordinates the *nat kadaw*’s dance steps; a singer sings one song after another, fulfilling the requests of the spirit medium and entertaining the spirit (*nat chawt*). Only the presence of a double-headed *do* drum, sometimes replacing the large *pat ma*, betrays the fact that the ceremony is part of the annual celebration of the Shweguni festival for the *nat* Min Kyawswa.

¹⁶ In February 2021, as a result of a military takeover, many Burmese people joined a quickly growing civil disobedience movement, marching in the streets in defiance of the military. The protests have been brutally repressed in an escalation of violence that continues today in both urban and rural areas.

The Dance of the Drunkard Prince. A celebration for the Spirits in Central Burma (Myanmar)
<https://player.vimeo.com/video/753830983>



Multimedia contents are available
 via QR code

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