



HAL
open science

Presence and use of the Burmese legend heritage in the dynamic of inter-ethnic supremacy and transethnic partnership (South Shan State)

François Robinne

► **To cite this version:**

François Robinne. Presence and use of the Burmese legend heritage in the dynamic of inter-ethnic supremacy and transethnic partnership (South Shan State). Christian Culas; François Robinne. Inter-Ethnic Dynamics in Asia. Considering the Other through ethnonyms, territories and rituals, Routledge, pp.167-181, 2010, Routledge contemporary Asia series, 978-0-415-83678-4. <halshs-01866842>

HAL Id: halshs-01866842

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01866842v1>

Submitted on 4 Sep 2018

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 - Attribution - Non-commercial use - No Derivative Works - International License

9 Presence and use of the Burmese legend heritage in the dynamic of inter-ethnic supremacy and trans-ethnic partnership (South Shan State)

François Robinne

What coherence in the multi-ethnic landscape?

Inter-ethnic relations are generally confined to relations between central government and minorities, usually in the sense of the influence exerted by central government on the minorities. The contributions from the ASEMI volume (1973: IV-2) entitled *Inter-ethnic Relations* all deal with this issue, and there are many of them, one of the most important being D. Brown's comparative work (1994). Here I wish to look again at this premise applied to the Burmese context and, more specifically, to the Lake Inle region in South Shan State, with an analysis on two levels of scale: that of relations between central government and minorities, by deciphering the use made locally of the Burmanization process, and that of relations between minorities themselves in the unstable hierarchical relationship maintained between the forces present.¹

In the analysis of inter-ethnic relations, that of the exchange networks between neighbouring populations still remains marginal despite the work of anthropologists and historians who, from Leach to Aung-Thwin or from Taylor to King, have contributed to the renewal of the ethnicity field in South-East Asia. This is partially due to the visibility of the cultural markers which some consider to be so many impermeable frontiers. The premise developed here attempts, on the contrary, to show that the village exchange networks represent locally a trans-ethnic dynamic whereas, conversely, the relationship to central government tends towards a reification of the ethnic categories. In the multi-ethnic context prevailing on Lake Inle and in the surrounding mountains – not less than four linguistic families are represented, amongst which figure various dialectal forms – understanding that there exists a dual level of scale, national and regional, should make it possible to define the *other* as being the Burmese central government; as for the minorities, they stand in a partnership relationship structured by the economic, matrimonial or religious exchanges.

In his denunciation of ethnic groups considered as discreet, culturally and socially homogeneous entities, Victor T. King (2001: 5) defends the position according to which 'Bounded entities are fundamentally mistaken and [...] one needs to understand and analyse ethnic units as interrelated one with another in

broader sets of conceptual and social relationship'. Unlike the categorial approach, which would put the emphasis on some specificity or another particular to each ethnic group, and going beyond the option which consists in establishing links between the groups constituted on an ethnic base, I wish to show that the overall dynamic of exchange networks in a given region determines the coherence of the social landscape. While G. Condominas (1980: 14) has defined social space as being 'the space determined by all the systems of relationships, characteristic of a considered group',² the concept of social landscape is extended here to intervillage relations on which intra-ethnic, even inter-ethnic, exchanges depend; combined in the same articulation, the parts composing this exchange network all converge towards a trans-ethnic space whose coherence remains to be defined. To assert that a trans-ethnic space emerges locally from the overall dynamic does not amount to saying that the underlying coherence is fixed; as with exchange networks, the overall coherence evolves, changes and is even metamorphosed according to, on the one hand, the strategies and interests peculiar to the different forces or partners present and, on the other, events involving, directly or indirectly, the central government.

While exchange networks contribute to the overall dynamic, the common practice of Theravada Buddhism constitutes the unifying vector in the region. Two religious congregations are present in the Inle region. Until the past few years, the reforming Shwe-Kyin movement, which came into being in the nineteenth century under the Burmese Konbaung dynasty, had established its headquarters in the regional capital of Nyaung-Shwe, along the access canal to Lake Inle. Characterized by its members' strict asceticism and by the simplicity of its rites, the Shwe-Kyin congregation differs from the Thudamma movement, the largest in Burma, known on the contrary for the splendour of its ceremonies. The developments in space and time of the circumnavigation known by the name of 'Phaung Daw U Pheya Pwè', the 'Ceremony of the Buddhas of the Royal Barge', bear witness to the scale these ritual performances can attain.

This processional ritual takes place once a year, during the waxing moon of the seventh lunar month (October–November); like the pirogue races which take place at the same time, on Lake Inle as elsewhere in Buddhist South-East Asia, the circumambulation accompanies the ebbing of the waters and announces the beginning of a new agrarian cycle (Archaimbault 1972). Only four of the five Buddha images – small and deformed by all the gold leaf stuck on them by pilgrims – are now placed in a barge with a mythical bird figurehead towed by a variable number of pirogues. They are thus led to an ever-increasing number of villages situated on the lake itself or near its banks. The extensions successively added to the procession acquired considerable importance from the late nineteenth century on, at the time when the deposition of King Thibaw by the English plunged the country into uncertainty. Monopolized by the Shan until 1962, when the Burmese central authorities deposed the *sawbwa* or Shan 'princes', the procession is now under the control of the Intha, most of whom live in lakeside villages.

The configurations successively given to the processional ceremony are substantial, on the one hand, with the influence exerted by the Burmese central

government and, on the other, with the region's multi-ethnic complexity. By integrating this dual horizontal and vertical level of scale into the exchanges, I propose to show that:

- the processional ritual is sensitive to events which rock the central government;
- the minorities benefit from the Burmese legend heritage and the Burmanization process which is used locally, in this multi-ethnic context, to reply to the question of autochthony and its corollary, the legitimacy of each of the groups considered;
- the reinterpretation of the Burmese legend heritage by some ensures that the social landscape is dominated by those who have managed to appropriate it;
- the dynamic of exchange networks locally corrects the hierarchical element to the benefit of trans-ethnic partnership.

In other words, going beyond the mere taking into account of the central government's instrumentalization of minorities, the premise envisaged here may be defined as follows: to what extent – and by what means – does the coherence of the multi-ethnic landscape locally integrate this dominant *other*, the Burmese central government?

A regional ritual sensitive to the ups and downs of Burmese central government

Burmese epicentre and peripheral shock waves

The successive changes made to the processional ceremony, in terms of enlarging it, are part of the consequences of the major political seisms whose epicentre was the central government but whose tremors spread instability and insecurity throughout the peripheral regions. In the Lake Inle region, the processional ceremony thus became a focus for increasingly decisive federating power; after becoming a crucial power issue under the Shan *sawbwa* from the nineteenth century on, it represented until the early 1960s a symbolic extension of a crumbling political hegemony.

Without going into the details of a ritual which has been studied elsewhere (Robinne 2000a), let us just remember here that the gradual development from the original pagoda festival to an ever larger circumambulation radically transformed the configuration of the social landscape; whereas in the first case the pilgrims go to the sacred place and walk round it in the direction of the sun's course, in the second case it is the Buddha images that are moved in a great *pradakshina* around the lake so that the villagers of each village at which they stop on the way – as well as the mountain dwellers from the surrounding villages – can pay them homage. From one ritual form to the other, from the pagoda festival to the ceremonial procession, we thus pass from a village scale to a regional one. The developments added to the circumnavigation are part of a more general

historical chain of events which, each time, shook the Burmese monarchy and, later, the junta in power. Five main phases can thus be identified:

- 1st phase.* The first years of the seventeenth century announced the decline of the Burmese kingdom of Taungu and its concomitant splitting up into a handful of belligerent States, with the consequent emergence of an era of insecurity throughout all of Upper Burma. In order to protect the five Buddha images from looters, according to the version chosen in the chronicle of Phaung-Daw-U (Anonymous 1890), but also doubtless to strengthen the legitimacy of an interim government which remained in power from 1608 to 1615, a woman *sawbwa*, Sao Nang Nung Pe, transferred the images from the periphery to the centre of the lake, to the spot they still occupy today.
- 2nd phase.* The year 1885 sounded the knell for the Burmese Konbaung dynasty when the British deposed King Thibaw. The same year, conflicts opposed the *sawbwa* of Nyaung-Shwe, the regional capital situated on the access canal upstream of Lake Inle, and its administrator, the 'town eater' stationed at Indein, further downstream, near the site where the five Buddha images were kept. In order to highlight his victory with a strong symbolic act, the *sawbwa* took the images from the reception hall downstream of the lake to the regional capital upstream, where they temporarily stayed.³ The reinforcement of the *sawbwa's* legitimacy was all the more crucial as the British were preparing for the conquest of Shan State, which they achieved the following year.
- 3rd phase.* Burma gained independence in 1948. The same year, the *sawbwa* of Nyaung-Shwe, Sao Shwe Taik, became the first president of independent Burma; a new extension was added to the procession bringing to twelve the number of villages at which the procession stopped.
- 4th phase.* The Burmese coup d'Etat of 1962 marked the end of all the hierarchical administrations controlled by the Shan *sawbwa*. The number of stop-over villages increased to seventeen, the procession now going from one end of the lake to the other, but without as yet any real coherence from the spatial organization point of view.
- 5th phase.* A new extension took place in 1989. The 1988 pacifist popular uprising rocked the central government before the latter repressed it in bloodshed; this was one of the very rare years during which the Inle procession was cancelled. It was between these events and the 1990 elections – whose results were not endorsed by the Burmese junta, the main loser and ever since in search of a symbolic legitimacy for want of a political one – that the last extension to date occurred in the processional ceremony, which now has twenty-one village stopovers.

The developments brought to the procession affect both space and time. Originally taking seven days and stopping at five villages, today it lasts twenty-six days and includes twenty-one villages. Its extension helped to strengthen com-

munity cohesion locally, while conferring legitimacy and supremacy on the organizing authorities. Nonetheless, the configuration given to the ritual is taking on such proportions that it tends nowadays to reduce the importance of local issues.

Towards a neutralization of the processional ritual

The setbacks suffered by the Burmese central government have resulted in an intensification of the Burmanization process over the past fifteen years. In a previous study (Robinne 2000a: 326–333) I had the opportunity of showing that the Burmanization process' structural triad relies on interaction between the people and the Buddhist clergy, both positioned on a median level between on the one hand the central government and on the other the potentially 'subversive' forces in being, represented by the Christian or Muslim religious communities, the ethnic nationalisms and the political organizations. The manipulation of the people and the clergy united in the same network of material offerings and symbolic counter-offerings constitutes a decisive propaganda vector in the relationship opposing the Burmese junta and opposition forces. In the sense used here, the concept of Burmanization must not, therefore, be confused with simply the Burmese junta's domination of the whole country, even if in the unstable political situation which has characterized Burma for decades the Burmanization process has been a vector impossible to dissociate from the maintaining of power through fear.

Apart from its immediate implications in the political field, there is a general tendency towards a uniformization of Buddhist values in their ritual and architectural⁴ forms, a concomitant expansion of the so-called cult of the Thirty-Seven Spirits and the distribution of a Burmese historiography taught in schools. Lay and religious education does not escape the Burmanization' process; while the number of State schools having teachers trained in Burmese universities who teach minorities 'our ancestors the Burmese' is on the increase, the members of the Sangha and the great Buddhist ceremonies are strictly controlled by the Burmese authorities. Another notable repercussion of the process is the diminishing of the processional ritual's importance on a local level.

Seeking legitimacy in Buddhism, the Burmese junta tried in vain to have the Inle images brought to Rangoon. Failing this, it turned its efforts, successfully this time, to the images of the Bogyaw Pagoda in the north of Shan State (Robinne 2008b). They were taken on a long peregrination from one end of Shan State to the other, then again through central and lower Burma. There they spent a few days in the capital before being sent back to Bogyaw to be placed at the four cardinal points of the pagoda; this resulted in the sedentarization of a processional ceremony which was as famous as that of Lake Inle (ibid.). The purpose was threefold: first, to neutralize the two rituals so as to gain control over them; second, to destroy the inter-ethnic dynamics the procession generated; and third, to give symbolic power to the new parade the junta had recently created on Lake Kandawkyi in Rangoon.⁵ After the failure of the attempt to reduce the Inle processional ceremony to a simple pagoda festival, as happened

for Bokyaw, the Inle circumnavigation, on the contrary, expanded as we have seen above. However, in both cases, at Bokyaw as at Inle, the process initiated is aimed at neutralizing the two rituals (Robinne, *ibid.*).⁶

It is in this context of a spatio-temporal overflowing and political hijacking of the circumnavigation that the transfer in the early 2000s of the headquarters of the Shwe Kyin congregation at Nyaung-Shwe upstream of Lake Inle to Mandalay in central Burma must be seen. Officially, the death of the superior was used as an excuse for this relocation, which weakened local power a bit more. After having partially lost its status of regional capital during the British occupation and having been completely deprived of the political structures set up by the Shan, Nyaung-Shwe now lost its religious predominance.

In parallel to this, the junta strengthened its grip on the processional ritual. From 1994 on, the visit of the highest authorities has been a recurrent feature: military representatives preside over the opening ceremony then, at the half way stage, over the reception of the images in the reception hall of Nyaung-Shwe and finally over the closing ceremony. The presence of the Burmese authorities from Rangoon made the headlines of the pro-government daily paper *The New Light of Myanmar* on the fifth day of the waxing moon in the month of Thadingyut in the year 1356 (24 October 1994):

Vice-Chairman of the State Law and Order Restoration Council Deputy Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services Commander-in-Chief (Army) General Maung Aye, accompanied by Secretary-1 of the State Law and Order Restoration Council Lt-Gen Khin Nyunt [...], ministers, senior Tatmadaw officers, local populace and pilgrims throughout the nation paid homage to the Buddha images being conveyed on board the float back to the pagoda...

It is, in fact, in a particularly tense political context that the circumnavigation of Lake Inle should always be placed. In its extensions, as in the evolution of its ethnic components, the ritual is sensitive to the nation's history. The process is not new; it merely reproduces the appropriation of the physical, social and ritual landscape by the kings of the first Burmese Empire whose mark is recurrent on the lake and in the surrounding mountains.

Marks of the Burmese king Alaungsithu in the Inle region

Presence of the five Buddha images

Although there are several variations regarding the lake's origin (Robinne 2000a), the most popular is that linked to the presence of the Burmese king Alaungsithu who reigned in Pagan in the twelfth century of our era. He is known throughout the region for having, on the pretext of proselytizing, extended the Pagan kingdom's area of influence via a great peregrination during which he is said to have carried away several Buddha images aboard his royal barge with the

mythical bird figurehead. According to *The Crystal Palace Chronicle* (Pe Maung Tin and Luce 1960: 120), the images carried off were those of the White Lord and the Handsome Lord, Shinbyu Shinhla, who gave their name to one to the Sagaing sites:

Then he [king Alaungsithu] thought: 'It were better for the benefit of all beings to set images of The Lord, Shinbyu and Shinhla, where the Lord is fain to dwell than to keep in the palace and worship them'. So he set the two images of the Lord upon a raft and went upcountry attended by an host of fighting men, thirty-six million by land and thirty-six million by water.

The collective memory and the Inle Phaung-Daw-U chronicle give a local sequel to this legend related to the Burmese king. In this it is taken for granted that the two Shinbyu Shinla images from Sagaing were a constitutive part of a group of eight images including the Glorious Mansu of Mandalay, as well as the Inle images: the three earlier Buddhas, the present Buddha and the future Buddha. This formation of five images is at the origin of the procession on the lake.⁷ According to this version, the king embarked aboard his barge to fly through the air in search of Mount Meru, the sacred mountain of the Hindu-Buddhist pantheon of which it represents, with the four islands which surround it, the paradigmatic configuration of cosmic order. During his journey Alaungsithu is supposed to have met Sakra, the Indra of the Hindu pantheon; having adopted the appearance of a frail old man accompanied by his wife, the superior divinity is said to have tried to divert the Burmese king from his solitary quest in order to encourage him to spread the teachings of Buddha all over the world. This is where the episode of the competition opposing Sakra, the old man, aboard a heavy boat and the Burmese king aboard his barge with supernatural powers comes in; the event is described here as being at the origin of the pirogue race which, at Inle, coincides with the processional ceremony.

Having won, Sakra gave the king five Buddha images which he placed on his barge. The king then promised to take them everywhere he went so that people could pay them the homage due to them. This is how he is said to have come to the Inle region. His barge is supposed to have been stopped by a chain of mountains. Grabbing hold of his sceptre, he is said to have hit the mountain three times in order to create a passage through it. This place has been known as 'Gap of the Royal Barge', Phaung Daw U Pauk, ever since, and the three little hills situated at its foot are meant to be the remains of the mountain which was thus cut away.⁸ It is through this opening, to the south-west of the lake, that the water which formed Lake Inle is supposed to have surged. It is meant to be not far from here that the king placed the five Buddha images before they were gradually taken – following a more or less identified route – to the reception hall situated in the centre of the lake, where they are found today. Several toponyms testify to the visits the Burmese king is said to have then made all around the lake.

As well as the marks of the Burmese king on the landscape, the ambulatory principle linked to a barge with a mythical bird figurehead testifies to Burmese

influence. Ritual processions are recurrent in central Burma, the historical seat of the Burmese royal family. Whether these be during the consecration of Buddha images, the robing ceremony for young novices or the funeral of a bonze, in all of them a vehicle representing a barge with a mythical bird figurehead is pulled along on a rope by the villagers, while women sitting on each side of the vessel row symbolically. From Pagan to Mandalay, the Burmese royal family was renowned for such processions; the royal barge was towed by pirogues each representing different bodies of the royal administration, the exact model the Burmese junta attempted to copy with the newly created parade on Lake Kandawkyi in Rangoon – in vain, as we have seen (Robinne 2008).

Besides being sensitive to the palpitations of the Burmese central government of which it is indirectly a product, the processional ceremony appropriated locally made elements: the formation of five Buddha images is thus found in several regions of Shan State, wherever Tai influence is predominant. But there again the Burmanization process has taken its course: in the collective memory, the presence of the five Inle images is henceforth indissociable from the Burmese king Alaungsithu to such an extent that their presence in the region is attributed to him.

Alaungsithu is, moreover, at the heart of a Burmanization process with a twofold effect, national and local; whilst the Burmese *Crystal Palace Chronicle* identifies the king as being the reincarnation of the Indian prince Pedikaya, the Intha systematized the reinterpretation of this Burmese myth by giving it a local flavour.

Alaungsithu, the son of Kyanzittha and the reincarnation of Pedikaya

The figurehead of the barge on which the Inle images are placed represents, according to some, a *karaweik*, a mythical bird in whose form Buddha is supposed to have been reincarnated in one of his previous lives or, according to others, a *hamsa* given as the guardian of the Buddhist canon (Robinne 2000a: 264–265, 286–290). In both cases the mythical animal is represented holding in its beak a red ball hanging on a thread. This ball – sometimes presented as a ball of mercury, at others as a gem with supernatural powers, even as a philosopher's stone – refers directly to the identified reincarnation of the Indian prince Pedikaya in the person of the Burmese king Alaungsithu. The legend is known all over Buddhist Burma, throughout the Irrawaddy valley as well as in the peripheral regions. In order to understand the process by which the Intha appropriated it, it is important first to reconstruct the historico-legendary context of Indo-Burmese relations of which the legend is part.

According to Luce (1969: 119), Pattikkaya (Pedikaya) is a toponym mentioned in the first Pagan inscription – the Dhammarajaka stone dating from 1198 – in the form of Pattikkara, here transcribed as Pedikaya in order to be closer to the current Burmese pronunciation. It is thought to correspond to a Bengal kingdom, more precisely to a region situated in the Tippera district to the north-east of Chittagong (Aung-Thwin 1998: 12). The kingdom of Patikkara is associated with a sad episode in Burmese historiography during which one of

Alaungsithu's successors is said to have been murdered by the Indians. This is what Aung-Thwin (*ibid.*) says about it:

The story of his death in AD 1171 is found only in the Burmese chronicles. They claim that he was killed by assassins from the kingdom of Pateikara, thought to have been in East Bengal. Its king had sought to avenge the murder, ostensibly by Kulakya, of his daughter, who had been given to Alaungsithu.

Than Tun (1978: 12) too records that Narathu, also called Kakagya, was said to have been murdered by Indians from Pattaikhaya (Pedikaya) seeking revenge for an affront they had suffered. Using the Burmese chronicles as evidence, Luce (1969: 118–119) describes the murder of the Burmese king as follows:

The King was a usurper, supplanting his elder brother, Min Shin Zaw. The chronicles make him a parricide, who smothered his aged father within his own temple, the Shwegu. He is described as a tyrant, the murderer of his wife Kraphan, her son Uttarasu, and her father's younger brother, Mahabuil the scribe. His chief wife, daughter of an Indian (*kula:*) king, the king of Pathikhaya, shocked at his uncleanly habits, avoided him: whereat enraged, the king stabbed her. Her father pledged eight of his fighting men to take revenge at the cost of their lives; and the eight, disguised as Brahamans, came to Pagan, entered the palace, pierced the king with their swords, and then committed suicide. Thereafter the king was known as *kula: kya*, 'Killed by Indians' – a name which he is certainly called in late inscriptions.

As for the Burmese *Crystal Palace Chronicle*, it identifies Pateikara (Pedikaya) with a prince from Kala, a term very widespread in South-East Asia, that one finds in the name of king Kalagya, or Kulagya closer to the Burmese written form. In its Burmese sense, the semantic value of the term 'kala/kula' designates a foreigner from the Indian subcontinent and, in its restricted form, an Muslim Indian; in both cases the use of this word is pejorative. Not only is the Kala a Muslim, but all Indians with black skin are Kala: two damning criteria in the eyes of a great many Burmese buddhists. Although the origin of the term 'kala/kula' remains unknown, the Burmese refer to its two parts – whose respective meanings are 'to cross' and 'to come' – to attempt to prove that the Kala crossed the Indian Ocean to reach Burma. Whatever the case may be, this term has strong racist connotations; it is never used in front of the people who are thus designated, but in an aside. If the Burmese chronicle written in the nineteenth century under the Konbaung dynasty is to be believed, the same was doubtless true in the eleventh century; in this context, King Kyanzitha's refusal to give his daughter to the Indian prince Pedikaya is understandable:

Now the king (Kyanzitha) loved his daughter Shwe-einthe and he kept her in a palace with a single post. When the prince of Pateikara heard thereof, he set

in his mouth a live gem and came through the sky: and when he had come he gave the Kyanthaing ministers who guarded her a bribe of ten baskets of silver, and became familiar with Shwe-einthe. And (king) Htilaingshin (Kyanzitha) heard thereof and he called his ministers and consulted them, saying, 'Whether should I marry my daughter to the prince Pateikkara or to Sawyun (Alaungsithu), my master's grandson?' Thus made he comparisons. And his ministers answered, 'Great king! If thy daughter wed the Prince Pateikara, ere long this will be nought but a Kala country (that is India)!'

(Pe Maung Tin and Luce 1960: 105–106)

Though associated with a toponym in the inscriptions, Pedikaya is identified as an Indian prince (Kala) in the Burmese chronicles. The identified reincarnation of Pedikaya in the person of the Burmese king Alaungsithu appears as a process of purification – that is of Burmanization – of a negatively perceived Indian influence. An extension is given to this process in the Inle region.

Latterly, the Intha have reinterpreted the version proposed in the Burmese chronicle in their own fashion. Here, I shall only recall a broad outline of what I recorded in the field (Robinne 2000a: 38–40). In this, Pedikaya is presented as a rich Indian merchant. He is said to have arrived at Pagan and fallen under the spell of Princess Shwe-In-Se, the daughter of King Kyanzitha. However, given his origins, the king preferred his nephew, Prince Sawlu, for a son-in-law. Pedikaya is then said to have met a group of bonzes in the air. When he asked them where they came from, the usual polite phrase when encountering someone, he is said then to have learned by chance of the marriage of his beloved. Stupefied, he is supposed to have choked and let out of his mouth the ball with supernatural powers. When this fell on the earth it is supposed to have impregnated Princess Shwe-In-Se and carried the seed of a banyan whose growth accompanied that of the child: the first bore the future king Alaungsithu, while it was from the wood of the second that Alaungsithu is said to have made the five so-called Phaung-Daw-U Buddha images.

An attempt was made recently to hijack the legend using a trivial event which happened in 1988 – the year popular uprising prevented the processional ceremony taking place. That year an Intha fisherman said he had found a ball of mercury in the waters of the lake. Frightened by its magic powers, he gave it to the superior bonze of Waytakin, on the south-east of Lake Inle. The latter tried to use it to his advantage. After having himself noted the powers of this stone capable, according to him, of levitation, he identified the object with the ball which had produced the identified reincarnation of Pedikaya as Alaungsithu. A photo hanging on a post in the monastery testifies, if it were necessary, to the existence of this ball and to its magic powers. In fact, it is the only visible evidence of the famous ball. The bonze said he had buried it in the monastery grounds: on this spot grew the banyan considered to be the resurgence of the *Ficus* in which Alaungsithu carved the five pious images at the origin of the circumnavigation. To begin with, the discovery of this ball of mercury and its assimilation to the Burmese legend earned the bonze the favours of the local military authorities whose names figure among the main donors.

Given the political context of those days, this fact is to be compared with what happened to the Bokyaw processional ceremony in North Shan State; the junta intervened to reduce this to a simple pagoda festival again. It is likely that the bonze and the local authorities had the joint intention of sedentarizing the Inle processional ceremony in the same manner. Nonetheless, the attempt later led the bonze to be snubbed by his hierarchy; he was obliged to go into temporary exile for family reasons, and his return to favour a few years later was extremely discreet. The sedentary ritual did not catch on, while the processional ceremony continued to grow.

The identified reincarnation of Prince Pedikaya in the person of King Alaungsithu is not only substantiated by all, but the manipulations it is subject to locally saw other developments. In particular, it is to the arrival of the Burmese king in the region – held to be a historical truth (like, moreover, that of Açoka) in the collective memory – that the presence of the images is attributed. Whatever the variants may be, the legend is part of a specific Burmanization process – the Indian prince reincarnated in the Burmese king – that the Intha subsequently reappropriated. It is around this Burmese legend heritage that the processional ceremony developed, and it is this that helps to give to the Intha the legitimacy and the pre-eminence they acquired after the deposition of the Shan *sawbwa* in 1962.

The Burmese legend heritage as a vector of Intha legitimacy and supremacy

The construction of the community ideal has sometimes been accompanied by nationalist movements: the Pao have an army (PNA) and a political organization (PNO) with which the Burmese authorities signed a ceasefire in 1994. The existence of a political structure strongly encourages the perenniality of cultural markers: meant to recall their mythical origin, the Pao's dress is emblematic of the community ideal; teaching is done in Pao whilst the bonzes preach in a mixture of Pao and Pali; and the founding myth is a recurrent theme in vernacular language publications. It is also in this sense that the importance given recently to the Buddhist site of Kakku, to the south-east of Inle, which the Shan and the Pao fight over in their search for a powerfully emblematic site, should be understood. The Shan have organized themselves into various paramilitary organizations, but their influence and physical presence in the Inle region have been marginal since the 1962 Burmese coup: only the inhabitants of a few villages in the centre of the lake still speak their mother tongue among themselves. Of course, the other groups are also developing their own cultural markers, but the Shan and the Pao are the only ones to have equipped themselves with a governmental structure: neither the Intha, nor the Taungyo, nor the Danaw ever had a politically and militarily structured organization, even during the civil war years when they were merely the victims of its vicissitudes.

Each group perpetuates its own legend heritage inspired by the Buddhist tradition or which Buddhism has assimilated. Hence the Pao say they were born of a

wizza father – a man with supernatural powers – and a *naga* mother, a mythical animal known to be recurrent in the Buddhist pantheon: from their union three eggs are said to have hatched, one of which is supposed to have contained the Pao's ancestor. As for the Taungyo, they say their mythical mother was 'the princess born from a bamboo', whom they honour once a year. In their respective developments, these different legends have striking similarities with the Burmese legend heritage as described in *The Crystal Palace Chronicle*. The appropriation of the latter is not specific to these populations: the Austro-asiatic Ta-An – or Palaung – have, for example, a founding myth which is in many aspects similar to that claimed by the Pao-Karen. The Danaw, linguistically close to the Palaung, explain for their part that the Buddha had run out of languages when they were the last to arrive in the Inle region, and could only offer them a mixture of several languages chosen from among the bordering populations. As for the Intha, they, of course, have their own myths – be they about the *bilu*, a monster whose presence is recurrent in the Hindu-Buddhist pantheon, and the fish king whose encounter is given as one of the origins of the lake and its populations; or about the egret which Sakra, a Buddhist version of the Hindu Indra, will finally call to his side to reign in the upper regions; or, finally, about the same Sakra advising king Alaungsithu to make a show of proselytism – in all cases, the Intha draw from the same Burmese-Buddhist legend heritage as the other ethnic groups present in the region.

These different groups also all define themselves as migrant populations. The circumstances which led them to migrate, the routes taken and the time of their arrival in the Inle region rely essentially on oral tradition and the historical value that can be attributed to it. Even though the written sources contain part of the answer, field investigations show that arrival time, even approximate, in the region is not a relevant criterion for the people concerned themselves. The groups which arrived first enjoy no supremacy over the last to arrive. Although the Danaw, the Pao and the Intha all agree that the Taungyo settled in the region before the others, the latter are the focus of negative judgements. In fact, it seems that legitimacy in the region – and the supremacy this can lead to in inter-ethnic relations – depends more on the symbolic manipulations of the Burmese legacy of myths and legends than on the historical reality of the migratory movements whose impact is marginal in power struggles.

Having revisited, to their advantage, this composite heritage which conferred a symbolic extension on their economic pre-eminence, the Intha did not attempt to secure a political grip on the region, as the Shan *sawbwa* had done before them. Instead, they accumulated a federating power around themselves on a consensual and not a coercive basis, for the notion of partnership prevails locally over that of hierarchy.

Trans-ethnic partnership versus minorities – central government hierarchy

Despite the linguistic diversity which prevails in the Inle region, neither language nor the ethnic referent constitutes an obstacle to the dynamic of

exchanges. On this local level of scale, the cultural markers are all mirages that village interdependence transgresses.

I shall not return in detail to the articulation of this exchange network structured – as well as by the Intha's craft skills – by the buffalo transhumance, the cycle of markets and the processional ceremony (Robinne 1998, 2000a). Briefly, the villagers from the lake depend on the *Cordia* planters' leaves to make their cigars, those from the mountains depend partly on irrigated rice-growing, and the rice-growers depend on the breeders of the buffaloes necessary for ploughing. The pagoda festivals develop and extend intervillage bonds, and it is at the markets accompanying them that adolescents of both sexes hail each other; because of their expense and the extent of the social networks they create, the initiation rituals are all opportunities for orientating the dynamic of intervillage exchanges towards the owner–client relationship. In many cases, matrimonial alliances more reinforce commercial relations between the partners' families than follow a logic of ethnic endogamy. Considering how interwoven the networks are, it is in terms of partnership that, on this local level of scale, relations between members of different villages are focused, whatever their ethnic or linguistic membership may be. In other words, the partnership logic – in its different economic, religious and matrimonial forms – introduces a trans-ethnic dimension to the exchanges.

In such a context, where ethnic isomorphs disappear behind the 'chains of societies' (Amselle 1999), the issue at stake is to give coherence to a composite and interactive ensemble. A real metronome of exchanges, the cycle of a market every five days, constitutes one of the artefacts – of Tai influence – by which the region organizes itself into one and the same entity, the populations from the high and the low lands and irrespective of ethnic groups. In the Inle region, Buddhism constitutes another consensual sphere. On the condition the sociological visibility of the ensemble is not affected and that the assigned limits of Buddhism are not exceeded – that is to say, by staying within the framework of the consensual norms identified as such by the majority – a set of symbolic manipulations can be added to the ritual forms. Distinguishing itself from the discontinuity of the village pagoda festivals, without however breaking with the actual spiritual essence behind them, the processional ceremony thus introduced a principle of continuity. As we have seen, its origins go back to the first tangible signs of weakness of the Shan principalities that first suffered from the colonial authorities who, after a period of indirect administration, imposed direct administration, and later from the Burmese central government, which put an end to the all-powerful Shan administrations.

The change that took place in 1962 was brutal and without transition. Deprived of the political formation which used to govern it and on which it depended, divested of the federating but coercive structure with which it identified, the social landscape had necessarily to create a new coherence. This is what the Intha undertook to do by constantly extending the circumnavigation while at the same time juxtaposing the Burmese referent to it. The circumnavigation is thus inspired by King Alaungsithu's peregrination in his search for Mount Meru,

and stages the voyage made by the five Buddha images which Sakra is supposed to have given to the same Burmese king. The principle of continuity behind the procession and the Intha's grip on the ritual's organization helped forge a community bond which until then only the Shan – and potentially the Pao – could boast of. In this, the partnership between the powers present also found its symbolic expression.

To return to the concept envisaged previously, it is, from this point of view, the community construction which creates legitimacy at the expense of autochthony, and it is the last community process established that triumphs. If the Pao did not manage to succeed the Shan in the federating role, it is not so much because they were from the highlands – many *sawbwa* were mountain people of non-Shan origin. The reason is that they themselves had a political organization the Burmese central government was fighting against. Having put an end to the Shan's hierarchized administrative bodies, the Burmese generals could even less conceive of seeing the Shan leadership succeeded by a paramilitary political structure now the civil war was entering into one of its most dramatic phases. The success of the process undertaken by the Intha is due to the fact they included the Burmese parameter in their community construction and their concomitant pre-eminence in the region.

If we consider, like Louis Dumont (1966: 64), that 'there is a close link between hierarchy and interdependence', the very notion of partnership contained in the exchange dynamic introduces a stratification of the social landscape: this may be like that between overlords and vassals, as was the Burmese royal family with regard to the principalities; like that between lords and serfs, as were the Shan administrators with respect to the minorities placed under their yoke; or yet again it may stem from economic and/or religious pre-eminence without any coercive vector. Since the fall of the *sawbwa*, local interdependence has been divested of its, strictly speaking, hierarchical dimension. If the processional ceremony helped forge the Intha community bond, the presence of the Burmese – at least that of the legend heritage and the use made of it – was the vector of their supremacy in the region.

For Buddhism is not sufficient to establish the legitimacy and supremacy of one group or another. All the powers present in the Inle region practise Theravada Buddhism, without this being a factor of homogeneity; the ritual variants are numerous, but they depend less on some ethnic determinant than on individual choices. There may thus be more differences between one village and another whose members nonetheless claim to belong to the same ethnic group than between the Pao and the Intha, for example. And though it is consubstantial with all the forces present in the Inle region, the practice of Buddhism is not the only determinant in the power-struggle hierarchy. The Shan *sawbwas*' authority in the region relied on the unity of a hierarchical political system of which Buddhism was the symbolic prop. Once this political structure had disintegrated, the Intha systematically replaced it by the reference to the Burmese royal family and the legend heritage it serves as a vehicle for; they are thus the only group who explicitly link their presence in the region to the first Burmese kings of

Pagan. The systematic reference to this dual Buddhist and Burmese element is what supports their primacy of which the processional ceremony is the vector.

In this multi-ethnic context, the *other* was long assimilated to Shan power with, in the background, the relationship of overlord to vassal, which itself defined the power struggle between the Burmese and the Shan; after the 1962 coup d'Etat, perception of the *other* was focused on the Burmese authorities, with the direct consequence being the rise of nationalist movements and ethnic reification. However, on the strictly local level of exchanges, the nature of relations between populations remained essentially unchanged: partnership continues to determine the relations between the different forces present, and the dynamic of intervillage networks remains, on this local level of exchanges, more influential than inter-ethnic relations – and, *a fortiori*, ethnic categories – which it transcends.

Notes

- 1 For a detailed analysis of the Burmanization process, see Robinne 2000a: 326–333 and 2008a.
- 2 My emphasis.
- 3 Today these five images are left for three nights in the reception hall of Nyaung Shwe, a stopping place halfway along the procession's route.
- 4 At Inle, monastic architecture has suffered considerably, either by the systematic destruction of the old wooden monasteries in whose place brick monasteries on the Burmese model are built, or by the conversion of the former on the latter model with the Buddha images being moved from the centre and now placed along the gable opposite the entrance staircase (Robinne 2000a, 2002).
- 5 Lacking the symbolic support that the presence of the Inle or Bokyaw pious images would have conferred on it, this parade on Lake Kandawkyi in Rangoon fizzled out at the beginning of this millennium.
- 6 A similar phenomenon of a ritual's neutralization took place on the Kyaiktiyaw site, the famous Golden Rock in Karen State, which from being a pagoda festival controlled by the Karen and the Pao became a Burmese place of pilgrimage.
- 7 Although the same Alaungsithu legend also prevails in North Shan State, a different version is given for the identification of the images and their location. The recent Lway Shaing Chronicle (Anonymous 2005: 26) written by the pagoda servants thus mentions twelve images carved out of sandalwood (*sarakkhan*), ten in North Shan State and two in South Shan State, without featuring the five Inle images, the two Sagain images or the Mandalay image.
- 8 The Burmese influence shows through this 'gap'. In the third of the seven levels constituting the roof of a religious building or of a palace, an opening is made to the north-west in order to allow Sakra to pass through when he comes down to earth once a year at the Buddhist new year.