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CHAPTER 8

*Theatre of death and rebirth: monks'  
funerals in Burma*

*François Robinne*

RITUAL REWRITING OF THE BUDDHIST CANON

*Temporary substitute for death*

Among the nine Buddhist congregations officially recognised in Burma, the Tudhamma congregation has the largest number of saṅgha members. It is particularly renowned for the size of its ritual performances which include the funeral ceremonies of a superior monk.<sup>1</sup>

To my knowledge, only two vernacular texts describe these in detail. The one concerns royal funerals – but also those of monks and Shan sawbwa – at the court of Ava from the second half of the seventeenth to the first half of the eighteenth century (Siri Ujuana 1962), the other the funeral of a monk who lived in the nineteenth century under the Konbaung dynasty (Anonymous 1 1988).<sup>2</sup> Valuable information is sometimes contained in the eulogies published on the death of a monk: besides the deceased's biography, we also find in these the texts recited on the occasion by the Buddhist community and the groups of women as well as a detailed account of the festivities (Anonymous 2 2003). Though these vernacular documents

<sup>1</sup> Louis Gabaude did a critical reading of a first draft of this chapter, which has been totally rewritten, including the title, which uses one of his suggestions. I take the opportunity of thanking him sincerely for this. My kindest regards go to Guillaume Rozenberg, with whom I conducted two field investigations. The actors U Win Thun and Daw Tebyè, along with their daughter who is a dancer, played a decisive role in my comprehension of the ritual. Maé helped me translate the whole two and a half hour recording of this theatrical genre known as *eyin*. Despite these different contributions, any errors that may be found, like the opinions expressed, are the author's sole responsibility. Unless otherwise specified, Burmese terms are given in a literal transcription and in italics; for technical reasons, the dot that should be over 'n' is written 'ñ', while the dot that should be over 'm' is missing (as in *cam* for 'model' or *kam* for 'karma'). The vernaculars are in normal characters when romanised; this is the case notably for Buddha, Dhamma, Saṅgha or sawbwa, referring to the 'Shan princes' whose administrations were dissolved after the 1962 Burmese coup.

<sup>2</sup> This text was given to me in August 2004 by Daw San San May, the librarian in charge of the Burmese department at the British Library in London (shelf mark MYAN.A.857). It is also the document on which B. Brac de la Perrière (2006) recently based her 'Analyse des rituels de la royauté birmane'.

are extremely valuable, they are not sufficient to make up for the lack of anthropological analysis.

The shortage of studies on the subject contrasts with the splendour of the ceremonies of a monk's funeral, one of the most impressive ritual performances I have ever seen; during the three days and two nights this ritual lasts, festive and funerary elements combine in the same show staging Buddhist rebirth and the concepts related to it.<sup>3</sup> This funeral performance appears in a way to be a ritual rewriting of the Buddhist canon when the latter proves insufficient or, at the very least, when the texts' ambiguity leaves open this space of liberty Buddhism allows.

The Buddhist concepts of not-self (*anattā*), suffering (*dukkha*) and impermanence (*anicca*) dictate the ritual performances' conceptual framework. Nonetheless, in this domain as in others, the same norms refer to different forms. The two cremations undergone by the abbot's corpse in the village of Tèkè-Khyin were an unexpected example of this. Casts had been made of the deceased's face and feet before the body was cremated two days after death, thus avoiding the trouble entailed in evisceration. The ashes and the uncalcined pieces of bone were retrieved and put in a reliquary. This, in turn, was placed between the two reconstituted parts of the body then covered with a saffron robe, as if the monk were draped in it. In the glass coffin the body thus gave the impression of having been preserved intact as is usually the case. Another cremation took place three months later, at the close of the funeral properly speaking. This is the only attested instance – though certainly not an isolated one – of a double cremation, first of the corpse then of the reconstituted body. And it is likely that many other variants are in use here and there.

But the purpose of the comparative approach is not of an encyclopaedic nature. It is a matter of understanding the process that makes rebirth, which some say takes place simultaneously with the last breath, the subject of a ritual performance which extends the operation both in time and space. Just as the first step of – or preliminaries to – the funeral, a few days after the last breath, makes the decomposition of the body into a kind of temporary substitute for death, so the cremation or burial ceremony organises the

<sup>3</sup> It was possible to observe several ceremonies of a superior monk's funeral (cremation and burial as well) in the villages of central Burma: the first time at Pagan Nyaung-Oo in January 1995; then a few years later, in the village of O-Phaw south-west of the Chindwin river on the third, fourth and fifth day of the waning moon in the lunar month of Tebawdwè (February 2002). In March 2004 I was able to observe two entire funeral rituals which took place one after the other in February 2004 in the village of Ton-Zè-Pé, then in that of Tèkè-Khyin. Three films were made: the nine hours of film are currently being edited; a first film of about forty-five minutes was shown at the Rangoon cultural service in January 2004, and again in March 2010 in Paris at The Musée du Quai Branly.

process of rebirth which we literally see take place before the very eyes of the monk's pupils. Though the endless cycle of rebirths is subjected to social control during the ritual, it also acts locally as the demonstration – 'the proof' – of its reality and the reality of the Buddhist concepts related to impermanence.

As the approach adopted here consists in letting the monks, pilgrims and troupes of actors speak, our analysis is governed by the discourse of the people who participated in the rituals observed; therefore, there will be no analysis of canonic texts or of the comments they can occasion but a study of the texts recited, declaimed or sung. In particular, the recording of the two and a half hours or so the *eyiñ* initiatory performance lasts – between the moment the coffin leaves the monastery and the cremation of the deceased – will constitute the main theme of my analysis. It is on the observation of these ritual performances in several central Burmese villages, on the recording and the translation of the plays acted and on inquiries carried out among the participants, whether monks or lay people, that the following analysis of the interpretation of the conditions of existence and the process of rebirth, as they are shown to us, will be based.

#### LULLABIES FOR THE BABY AND LAMENTATIONS FOR THE DEAD

In accordance with the Buddhist canon, the ritual staging of death and rebirth takes place in a temporary pavilion called *cam kyoñ:*, that is to say '[built on the] model (*cam*) of a monastery (*kyoñ:*)'. This can be erected in the monastery grounds, as was the case in the villages of O-Phaw and Ton-Ze-Pé, or in the village square as at Pagan Nyaung-Oo and Tèkkè-Khyin. Intended to be taken down and put up again, the framework of the temporary pavilion is made of bamboo and decorated with gilt. On the first day of the ritual a play is acted in it at the beginning of the afternoon. In some cases, a second performance is given the next day, before the cremation. There may also be several pavilions, thus creating a kind of competition between the troupes performing: the audience judges the quality of the show by its presence or lack of interest. Improvisation – and therefore the acting and the richness of the actors' repertoire – is decisive in the show's success. It is not an easy genre for, besides the principal actress's performance, it involves Buddhist concepts and Pāli terms. They would remain incomprehensible for most people if they were not part of the framework of a story which unfolds throughout the show known by the name of *eyiñ* and

if, within the story itself, famous legends from a Burmanised Buddhist heritage were not enacted.<sup>4</sup>

In its original meaning, now obsolete, the noun *eyiñ* and its verbal form *eyiñ kyū* designate a lullaby sung for a prince (Myanmar–English Dictionary 1998: 614).<sup>5</sup> Nowadays *eyiñ* is the name of a play systematically performed on the death of a monk. The lullaby has been replaced by the lamentations of a woman who sings the virtues of the departed monk while desiring to keep him with her. During the performance, the term *pukhak* (pronounced ‘pekhè’) is substituted for the term *eyiñ*: both mean ‘cradle’ but whereas the latter refers to the cradle of a member of the royal family, the former is the word commonly used for children’s cradles. Here the ‘cradle’ designates the bamboo structure hanging at the back of the stage on which the monk’s coffin is placed and remains throughout the performance.

The cradle will be pulled vigorously back three times during the part of the play in which the main actress confronts Sakra’s messengers; afterwards it will be swung three times in the opposite direction when the actress finally resigns herself to the monk’s departure: she then gently rocks the cradle while singing a melancholy lullaby. Whereas, in the one case, both sides quarrel over the coffin, in the other, the fight has given way to tender resignation: the actress has come round to the views of Sakra’s messengers and pays her last respects to the deceased monk by rocking his corpse as a mother would her baby. Birth and death will thus be recurrently correlated throughout the ritual including during the process of mental and corporeality separation and aggregation.

The *eyiñ*’s central theme is the pain of the living mourning the departed. The main actress’s long, uncombed hair, her cries, her tears, the blows she inflicts on herself and on others and those she receives, all contribute to the staging of despair. Through her, the villagers express their wish to keep the deceased with them, even to bring him back to life or to find a substitute (*acā: thuī: kyōñ:*) for death which would put an end to the process of rebirth. The pointlessness of this attempt is illustrated by the fight – and, as we shall see, it really is a matter of physical confrontations – between an actress symbolising the humans and two male characters representing Sakra’s messengers. It is through them that during the two and a half hour long

<sup>4</sup> This is the case, for example, for Maung Seitta the beekeeper, the only man capable of lifting the corpse of the venerable Shintamwara, a theme found in another form in Cambodia (Adhémard Leclère 1906: 5).

<sup>5</sup> *Eyiñ* designates a royal cradle while *kyū* means ‘to emit a melodious sound’.

show, the Buddhist concepts of not-self (*anattā*), impermanence (*anicca*) and suffering (*dukkha*) – the three conditions of existence – are developed.

The story is taken from a dual Buddhist and Burmese legend heritage whose framework forms the basis around which the Buddhist concepts related to death are developed. Although the story's theme is the death of a monk, this is not strictly speaking the monk in whose honour the funeral is taking place. His presence is nevertheless recurrent throughout the play: physically because his coffin is placed on a 'cradle' and in thought because the villagers constantly recall the dead man's merits, associating them with the details of the monk's life and death: his age, his education, the date of his robing ceremony, the name of the monasteries he had been to, or even the three stomach operations he had undergone before dying and his death throes. But these references to the dead monk's life course are added to legends famous throughout Buddhist Burma which are thus personalised. In other words, the basic story is more or less identical from one funeral ceremony to another, its variants depending on the different theatrical troupes.

#### SHOWING IMPERMANENCE

The *eyiñ* show, which is predominantly religious – with a background of sadness and violence – is presented alternately with scenes of dance and singing and predominantly sexual sketches; these secular interludes come from the theatrical genre known as *añyen*. I shall come back to it later.

After a short offstage prelude spoken by Sakra, the *eyiñ* itself is composed of four acts.

#### *Act 1: The brother and sister's dreams*

On the way to go and give their brother, the monk, a present of a saffron robe, the brother and sister talk. The younger brother interprets the fall he had as a bad omen; in her turn his elder sister then tells him about her dream and the bad omens she saw in it. In fact, this is a long monologue declaimed by the principal actress and addressed to the Sakra's messengers:

[The younger brother]: Lord Bonze, I was saying to myself that as soon as I arrived at your monastery I would go and get something to eat and drink in the stores. Yes, I was saying to myself that I would do that. I was telling myself that I would be happy there and I would have something to drink and to eat. Elder sister, how come, elder sister, how come the easiest roads are always, always paved with obstacles for your young brother? The dirt road was flat, straight and level – you

don't see many like that. Big sister, it wasn't like a village road but like one in town. The road was a real pleasure. So why did I trip up on that road then? Oh well, it was like a bad dream, yes like a bad dream. It really was. When I tripped, I broke my big toe. I stayed sitting there, stuck, not able to get up, as if I was dead, beloved elder sister.

[The elder sister]: Listen to the nightmare I had. It was full of signs and I haven't felt calm ever since. Sunday's dream: offerings to the king, Monday's dream: husband, Tuesday's: close relations, Wednesday's dream or Buddha's day: children and family, Thursday's dream: friends, Friday and Saturday's dream: buffaloes, cows, elephants, horses, Sunday's dream: about myself, and the dream I had was in the night between Tuesday and Wednesday, yes, yes, that's it. That dream was to do with bad omens. Yes, bad omens. Everyone will tell you so, it's in the astrological treatises, no possible error, the dream I had on Tuesday night was very frightening. How can I ignore the omen in it, violent death cannot leave me serene. It's an ocean of sadness [which is overwhelming me], your dear older sister is terribly scared of this omen, as if she was going to be brought to court for malpractice.<sup>6</sup>

When they get to the monastery where their brother, the superior monk, lives, they learn he has been dead for three days.

*Act 2: The minister's anger*

By order of the minister – the story is meant to take place in the days of the monarchy – the common people may pay their last respects to the deceased monk on the first day; the second day being reserved for merchants and the third day for court personalities. As they arrive on the third day, the monk's brother and sister are not allowed to pay their respects to him. Because of their family ties with the monk, the minister's representative does them the favour of letting them spend an hour at the dead man's side. But the brother and sister want to stay longer than the time allotted and anger the minister and his assistant. The verbal exchange is stormy.

[The minister]: The Buddha and Dhamma cannot be unaware of it, nobody, not even the most ignorant or the greediest, not even the Buddha nor the Dhamma nor the saṅgha members can be unaware that you're treating us like louts, like louts, aren't you? Come here, come here. You've been with the monk and you are insulting me, are you? Yes, you are insulting me.

[The monk's sister]: Don't come near, don't come near me!

[The minister]: Come here, come here! Like louts!

[The monk's sister]: Don't come near! Don't come near!

<sup>6</sup> Wednesday is called *bhuddhabhū*, or Buddha's day. The usual expression for 'violent death' is *acim*: *se*, 'green death'. However, it is the Pāli term *upaccetaka* the actress uses.

[The minister]: Hey! What do you think of me to insult me so? For you have insulted me. I'll pull your teeth out, I'll kill you, that I will. Your skin is tender, soon it will bear the very visible marks of my five fingers, I'll hit you, I'll hit you, go away or I'll beat you until your teeth fall out!

[The monk's sister]: Listen, we [she and her brother] will cook big pieces of pork and rice, very big pieces of pork and perfumed rice, for you both [the minister and his subordinate].<sup>7</sup> Is it true? Yes, it's true. It's true. And we'll also make you vermicelli soup with peas and our wonderful savoury *bhalakhyoñ* with fermented fish paste. And ... and ... everything you like. Tasty bitter mangoes! Yes yes, alright! All this, with big pieces of pork, it's certain, we'll give you all that! Is it true? Of course it's true! Don't come near me! Don't slap me!

Having finally convinced the minister and his subordinate, the sister turns to the two messengers sent by Sakra. A struggle for power – in the true sense of the term – ensues. As for the brother, he stays in the background contenting himself with coming to his sister's aid, mostly when she is already on the ground.

*Act 3: The fight between the dead monk's sister and Sakra's messengers*

In order to keep the dead man with her, she first asks for permission to erect a tomb to him:

[Sakra's messengers]: Because of the old monk's praiseworthy deeds we came down to the land of human beings where we do not usually dwell; from there we went to Mandalay division, to Matteya district, to the village of Ton-Zè-Pé, into the grounds of Meizzuma monastery. The donors – all the men and women without exception – from the village of Ton-Zè-Pé want to hold a cremation ceremony [in conformity with the concept] of not-self – this is good, this is good – thus upsetting – this is bad – the relatives from the village of Saung-Kyi.<sup>8</sup> What should we decide? To ascertain this, we must consider everything carefully.

[. . .]

[The monk's sister]: Lords and masters who have Ananda's qualities, I appeal to your great kindness, I will give you the most varied offerings, my hands joined above my head. Let me do this. Oh abbot, your disciples want to accompany you one last time. Oh monk, your older sister wants to take you to the cemetery, this is a good thing isn't it? You lived in Pegu Division, in Pan-Taung district, in the Nay-Ye-Lay group of villages, then you came to Mandalay Division, to the town of Matteya, to the village of Ton-Ze-Pay and your beloved sister's last wish is to lay your coffin

<sup>7</sup> Pork is most appreciated in Burma among Buddhists. The woman just wants to offer to the minister the finest dishes, and, as far as I know, there is in the matter no allusion to the story from the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta where the Buddha died of eating pork.

<sup>8</sup> The expression used is *anattā* (not-self) *ma* (main) *zāpana* (cremation, funeral). The usual expression for 'good' is *sādhu*, generally said three times in succession. Here the actress uses the expression *sādhu kilena*, from the Pāli *sādhu kilana*. The Pāli expression used for 'bad' is *brāpāda*.



where you lived [. . .] Our monk lived for sixty-four years, oh venerable abbot, you were over sixty-four and it is in this monastery that your beloved sister and all your disciples have always seen you and that is why we now want to erect a brick monastery to you, it is the most appropriate place to live and to continue to meet you . . .

Three times the actress tries to approach the hanging coffin and get past Sakra's messengers who bar the way with their bodies. She forces her way past, literally throwing herself onto the cradle, which tilts over under her weight. During one performance, it did not stand up to the violence of the attack and partially collapsed under the impact, almost tipping the coffin off. The *nat* grab hold of the actress and pull her hair. Frenzied, on her knees, lying with head and shoulders on the coffin which she kisses and strokes with her hands, she mourns the deceased monk and begs the Sakra's messengers to let her keep the corpse with her. Twice they push her away, throwing her to the ground, hitting and trampling on her. A third time, the actress is thrown off the stage into the crowd. With difficulty she climbs back onto the podium, in pain and tears. She continues thus to implore the two messengers then, in desperation, she challenges them:

[Sakra's messengers]: Hey all of you, exercising his power, our Lord [Sakra] has ordered the corpse be cremated on earth by the *nat* which heat between the fourth level of the Tawadi region and the summit of mount Wirazein.<sup>9</sup> Hey, if you don't do this, our Lord will use his weapons to smash the brick building containing the corpse.<sup>10</sup> Do as he commands, carry the corpse if you want to avoid punishment.

[The monk's sister]: If that's the way it is, big brother *nat*, to avoid having to fight with you, we shall place the monk's corpse between us, his relatives, and you, the spirits, and a rope will be used to pull it.

[Sakra's messenger]: If that's the way it is, mother Maya, let us place the monk's corpse as you said and pull it with a rope without having to fight each other.<sup>11</sup> It's agreed. You, mother Maya, hey! and you little brother Subhadwaruray, will place the corpse between you, with the divinities on one side and the humans on the other and you will pull it with a rope without having to fight each other. The corpse automatically consumes the fire<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> The Pāli-Burmese expression used here for 'fire' is *mī: gruiha*, word for word: 'fire (Burmese term) + Pāli term for cremation'. *Nat wīn*: 'the spirit penetrates', the equivalent of *nat pū*, that is to say 'the spirit heats'. If the *nat* heat, it means they possess the person they enter or, as here, that they inhabit the region indicated.

<sup>10</sup> *Warazin* in its Burmese form, from the Pāli-based *wazira*, a term which also has the second meaning of 'lightning'.

<sup>11</sup> The expression used here is *nat ruā cam* 'like the *nat*'s village' *kam tō kun* to 'the consumed karma' *alum*: 'corpse', that is literally: the corpse without karma in the spirits' village.

<sup>12</sup> The Pāli-based expression used is *tezō* (fire) *dhāt* (element). At the beginning of her performance the actress enumerates the eleven sorts of fire to which death has put an end: *rāga, bhoga, moha, jāti, jara, maranā, soka, patidewa, dukkha, domanasā, upavāpa*. The same is true for the corpse which, indirectly, itself settles the matter at issue by avoiding any form of quarrel.

[The monk's sister]: It is thus, our monk consumes the fire. It is thus, our very great and venerable monk loves all his relations. And because the monk also loves all his donors [she turns towards the audience], men and women together, they will also pull the corpse with us.

[Sakra's messengers]: Ah well, of course, you humans are very numerous, that's why you provoke the *nat* like this.

[The monk's sister]: The relations [of the monk] are really very numerous. Big brother *nat*, you would do better to give [the corpse] back to us.

[Sakra's messengers]: Give the corpse back to you, you must be joking! All the *nat* together are also very numerous! We'll take you on. Hey, all the *nat*, gather round me! And you human beings, I won't give you two chances, don't forget. We'll go along with the challenge because it will prevent a real battle, come on, let's take up our positions as we said.

[The monk's sister]: Big brother *nat*, you must take up the bet three times, three times, do you hear?

[Sakra's messengers]: We'll take up the bet. And you, the conductor, have the percussion play and don't make any mistakes!

Then we see them go into action: the sister and brother positioned besides the dead man's feet and Sakra's two messengers at his head. Three times in a row they pull the coffin from both sides. The first time the brother and sister win because the spirits' rope breaks and they fall into the orchestra; the second time, it's the turn of the brother and sister's rope to break, making them fall into the crowd and the Sakra's two messengers are victorious; the third time the latter win.

#### *Act 4: The monk's sister's resignation*

In tears, the monk's sister is finally convinced by the *nats'* words that it is impossible to keep the dead monk with her, and of the stupidity of trying to escape from the three conditions of existence which are once again enumerated: not-self (*anattā*), suffering (*dukkha*) and impermanence (*anicca*). In the ode she then begins to sing, she tells the story of a woman looking for a substitute for the death of her baby. The didactic purpose of the theme thus chanted uses scenes of everyday life, in the same way that monks illustrate their preaching with concrete examples; here, the reference to Gautami, Gautama Buddha's mother-in-law, gives even more weight to the actress's words:<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Thanks to L. Gabaude and F. Lagirarde who indicated some references on Kisa Gotami. One of them, easy to consult via the Internet is: 'Gotami Sutta: Sister Gotami' (SN 5.3), translated from the Pāli by Thanissaro Bhikkhu ([www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sno5/sno5.003.than.html](http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sno5/sno5.003.than.html)). See also Kloppenborg and Hanegraaf 1995: 163.

[The monk's sister in the role of Gautami]: My son no longer sucks milk from my breast. He no longer yells neither does he cry. So I took him in my arms and I went to find my neighbours. My son no longer breathes, his body is lifeless. Help me. That's when an old man answered me: 'Madam, if you go on tearing yourself apart, you will end up dying. The very venerable Buddha lives over there in the monastery called Zetawun.' So I went there to ask the Buddha if he had a cure, something to bring back life. A remedy for death. I took my child in my arms and I asked the Buddha if there was any medicine for death. 'How can you ask that? Gautami, my beloved daughter, how can you get into such a state of sadness?' But Buddha! Your disciple's son no longer cries and no longer yells. Buddha, he no longer suckles either. Find me a remedy capable of curing my son and bringing him back to life. Treat my child, Buddha. Then the Buddha smiled and said: 'My daughter, go and travel through the Sawadi region, and try just to bring back a handful, or even a mere finger, of mustard seeds corresponding to the number of houses in which there have been no deaths.<sup>14</sup> If you bring back a finger of mustard seeds your son will come back to life.' The beloved daughter then picked up her son in her arms and travelled all through the region as far as the four outer walls. Hey, you mothers, the mothers of all the houses, give me a few mustard seeds if no one has died in your home. Hey, mother! 'But, my good woman, my little boy died in this house a few days ago'. I went to the house next door asking: oh, mother, if no one has died yet, give me a mustard seed. I travelled the whole country again going into seven billion houses, but once more I was told: 'My good woman, my old mother died a month ago.' I couldn't find one. None of the houses I visited had been spared by death. Having been all over the place carrying my son in my arms in search of a remedy for death, I decided to return to Zetawun monastery where the Buddha lives. Very venerable Buddha, I went everywhere but I couldn't find one. So I decided to stay there as a nun to listen to the Buddha's sermons.<sup>15</sup>

The actress goes on to recount the death and the cremation of the monk Shintanwarama Thera, as well as the burial of his bones and ashes under a *zedi*. Although this long passage explains the *eyin's* origin, it does not seem useful to reproduce it here. The end of the play marks the coffin's transfer to the tomb or the cremation place and, with this, the crossing of the third and final threshold.

#### ALTERNATION OF SECULAR AND RELIGIOUS FORMS

As well as the feminine divinities, a man – or a woman dressed as a man – wearing only a loincloth pulled up between his thighs, also boards the *karawik*. While the first are placed at the bows, the second goes to the stern. They remain standing. Seated on either side of the vessel, the women

<sup>14</sup> The Sawadi region is the upper region where Sakra reigns.

<sup>15</sup> The Pāli-derived term for nun used is *bhikkunī ma* and not *silā rhan*, which is more commonly used.

rowers form the middle part of the tripartite structure, whose recurrence we have noted above. The harmony of this structure restores the contrast between the two opposites. On the one side, the grace and elegance of the dance steps performed by the higher divinities, on the other, the casualness and vulgarity of the human being who gesticulates, jumps, jokes and fools around with his oar; on the one side, a half-naked man, on the other, women dressed in heavy, shimmering clothes. It is the actors themselves who during the *eyiñ* justify such a contrast: at the end of the comic show performed intermittently in front of the coffin, they remind the audience that if suffering is part of the order of things, so too is joy. Therefore, this fact is not peculiar to the show performed on Sakra's vehicle. As in initiatory robing ceremonies (Robinne 2000 and 2002), in monks' funerals there is an alternation of religious and secular phases. This is the reason for the presence of the half-naked man and the higher spirits on the *karawik*. The same principle is found in a performance given at night.

Besides the *eyiñ*, another theatrical genre, known as *zāt* or *zāt pwè* is performed at funerals. Unlike the *eyiñ* show, the *zāt* is not specific to monks' funerals. At pagoda festivals, but also during rituals to spirits of some importance, one or several bamboo marquees are erected for this purpose in the village square. The religious themes developed in the *eyiñ* and the *zāt* are respectively the unavoidable nature of the three conditions of existence, with lamentations in the background, and the Buddha's previous lives, which are tending to be eclipsed by the theatrical and musical productions in which the most popular groups perform. Certain scenes of Gautama Buddha's previous lives are, nonetheless, still sometimes acted, hence the name given to the show: for in *zāt* (*jat* in transliteration) we can recognise the Burmese form of the Pāli term *jātaka*. At Ton-Zè-Pé, the scenes danced by the Mandalay National Theatre company gave a folk version of the *jātaka* presented as traditional.

At a monk's funeral, the two shows, *eyiñ* and *zāt*, are performed alternately, both in time and in space: the *eyiñ* takes place during the day, generally in the monastery grounds, while the *zāt* is performed at night in the village square. The alternation principle is also found within the two predominantly religious theatrical genres themselves in the middle of which is inserted a predominantly secular show known by the name of *añyen*. The theatre troupe, comprised of both men and women, performs sketches on very different themes during which several prohibitions are transgressed. One of them, for example, makes fun of the monks' litanies by perfectly imitating the characteristic tone used in Sutta recitation. Another theme, and this is part of the trend of current government propaganda, is the

caricaturing of Westerners. For example, a woman interrupts the classical dance she is performing to launch into a gestural and musical parody of rock'n'roll: the orchestra contributes to the comic effect of the scene. But criticism can just as easily be aimed at the junta. On one occasion, one of the actors was dressed as a soldier: with a colander for a helmet and a broom for a rifle, unusually audacious in the context of the Burmese dictatorship. Only the show called *ariyen* and the puppet shows, which are in the same vein, can break the rules like this. The sketches vary from one troupe to another depending on the actors' improvisation talents.

Sexuality is a dominant theme which continues and exacerbates the conception/death relationship staged in the *eyiñ*. During these sketches, a favourite gag is the disproportionately large end – mirroring the actors' exaggerated gestures and words – of the garment the men drape themselves in; they use the protuberance formed by this in a mime to represent an enormous erect phallus with which they run after their female partner. Another sketch consists in a play on the words 'little sister' to designate a 'girlfriend'; using the description one of the actors gives of his younger sister whom he praises, another actor begins to measure the 'smallness' of the sister, who gets smaller and smaller as he lowers the flat of his hand towards the ground until, when he is nearly touching it, he concludes: 'your sister is really very small, no bigger than a clitoris': the audience's laughter accompanies the faces the actress makes.

In some cases, the theme of sexuality is illustrated in a much more spectacular way. This was the case in the village of Tèkkè-Khyin, the only one of the four villages where the second funeral involved a bamboo tiger whose size was as impressive as that of its sex. This tiger, placed at the top of framework also made of bamboo and fixed to a cart, was jointed: attached to a central axis, it could turn in all directions; in addition, the jaws and the erect sex – painted pink – were operated by two men hidden inside the animal. The tiger was big enough for it to be able to pick up in its mouth a woman lying on her back, her legs and head hanging in thin air on either side of the animal's jaw. The tiger had been commissioned to replace another older one during the lifetime of the monk whose funeral was being celebrated that day. Some claimed that this practice was more common in the past than it is today. These informants gave as an example the funeral of the monk of Mingun, famous throughout the country for having recited the whole Tipitaka from memory.<sup>16</sup> When he died, in the

<sup>16</sup> Situated on the river bank opposite Mandalay, a little further upstream, Mingun is a major tourist destination because of a monumental temple built there in the Konbaung era.

early 1990s, the donors wanted to place his coffin in the mouth of a bamboo tiger but the government is said to have forbidden this, on the pretext that tourists would have been shocked.

According to my informants, the origin of the tiger scene at a second funeral ceremony refers to the death of Sariputta, the disciple on the Buddha's right: his corpse is said to have been carried off in the mouth of a tiger built by villagers. In the village of Tèkkè-Khyin, the reason the dead man's coffin was not put in the tiger's mouth would seem there again to rest on the monk's decision; he is said to have expressed the wish while alive that a 'princess' or an 'actress', depending on the translation of *mañ: samī:*, be placed in it.<sup>17</sup> The scene of a feline carrying off a young woman between its jaws also goes back to an old legend which is very well known in Burma. It is about the 'two brothers' of Taunbyon, a spot near Mandalay where once a year, in August, a ritual centred on these two spirits, represented iconographically by a tiger, is held (Brac de la Perrière 1992). The story was described briefly by Daw Tebye, the principal actress of the *eyiñ* described here:

A very long time ago, Ko Yin Maung, who worked as a woodcutter in the Taunbyon region had married Ma Shwé U. Two messengers from King Anawratha [the founder of Pagan], Shwé Pyin the elder and Shwé Pyin the younger, went to China to get one of the Buddha's teeth. On their way back, they stopped at Taunbyon. The two brothers fell in love with Ma Shwe U. But she rejected them. So they sent a tiger to kill her. They became *nat* but still remained in love with the young woman. Having taken on the appearance of a tiger, they tried to kidnap her when she was weaving on the verandah of her house.

These two spirits are known as 'outside' spirits (*aprañ nat*): outside the Buddhist pantheon and therefore outside the cycle of rebirths because of the bad death which characterises them. They must be distinguished from those called 'inside' spirits (*atwañ: nat*). The latter 'inside' spirits are reborn in one of the thirty-one regions which comprise the *samsāra*, while the former 'outside' spirits become wandering spirits (Robinne 2000). Some are identified and iconographically represented: these are the '37 Lords' whose cult Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière studies (1989). The Taunbyon spirits are here the counterpart of the two inside spirits sent by Sakra and presented in the *eyiñ*, just as the weaver and her husband are the counterpart of the principal actress and her brother.

<sup>17</sup> It would seem this was a good decision for the scaffolding on which a little house had been built and in front of which the young girl was weaving collapsed during the performance.

Whether it be the meaningfulness of popular beliefs, the challenging of Buddhist concepts or of accepted hierarchies, the fundamentals of society – Burmese, royal and Buddhist society and its contemporary metamorphoses, no sphere escapes caricature. The comic tone makes it possible to point out failings, limitations and excesses, even of the junta represented with a colander on its head or of monks who make everybody laugh when they are imitated. Relations between men and women, an underlying theme throughout this theatrical performance, are a pretext for staging the most serious concepts in a humorous form or using a dramatic approach. At once entertaining and didactic, the exercise lends itself to an interpretation of the process of rebirth which it invites us both to watch and to reflect on. The theme of corporeality and mental separation and aggregation is part of this: linked to the process of the body's decomposition, it is implicit throughout the ritual performance.

#### SHOWING REBIRTH

##### *Conceptual amalgams*

During the initiatory show called an *eyin*, the troupe of actors stages the fundamental Buddhist concepts related to death. Thus the principal actress begins her lament in front of the 'cradle' holding the coffin:

Today, the poor and the rich come despite themselves to pay their last respects to your body, oh lord monk. Food (*ahara*), the cycle of the seasons (*udu*), desire (*cit*) and karma (*kam*) are sources of suffering against which one cannot fight and death's generals exercised their art successfully when they caused your death, venerable abbot. Because of the three conditions of existence *rūpa nāma anicca* (impermanence), *rūpa nāma anattā* (not-self) and *rūpa nāma dukkha* (suffering) you have departed, venerable monk.<sup>18</sup>

In this reminder of the three conditions of existence, the latter are associated with the nouns *rūpa* and *nāma*. These two terms are of Pāli origin. They refer respectively to the corporeality and mental components of all living beings.

*Rūpa* refers to the corporeal order, with the connotation of 'physical form', of 'appearance', of 'matter'.<sup>19</sup> It is from this term, for example, that

<sup>18</sup> The Pāli-Burmese expression used for 'Existence' is *lakhana sum: pā*.

<sup>19</sup> *Rūpa* must be distinguished from the human body itself designated by the term *khandha* and used to form several compounds: *khandhamara* or *khandha upadhi*, 'the five aggregates of existence' (Anonymous 1996: 302); *viññānakhandha*, 'consciousness aggregate' (*ibid.*: 336).

the Burmese words for 'sculpture', 'puppet' or even the neologism 'cinema' are derived.<sup>20</sup> The four main elements (*dhāt kri:*): water, earth, fire and air – with which even numbers are associated – condition the corporeality element. *Rūpa* is symbolised by a square in esoteric treatises.

As for *nāma* it refers to the mental order: it is on this term that the three words for 'name' in Burmese are based: *nām*, *amañ*, *nāmañ* or *nāmañ nāma*.<sup>21</sup> The three constitutive parts of *nāma*: the spirit, acts and seasons – with which uneven numbers are associated – condition the mental element. *Nāma* is symbolised by a triangle in esoteric treatises.

The corporeal and the mental are interactive and a source of harmony. It is on the combination of each constitutive part of the two orders, and on the combination of the two orders in a general sense, that the harmony of everything depends. This is the reason why, in the many astrological representations arising from the concepts of *nāma* and *rūpa*, even and odd numbers are alternated. We can thus understand why, during the *eyiñ* funeral performance, the actress associates these two elements *rūpa* and *nāma*, symbolising harmony, with the three conditions of existence (*anicca*, *anattā* and *dukkha*), symbolising suffering. It is for this reason too that the triangular representation of the mental and the quadrangular representation of the corporeality are intertwined and surrounded by a circle, the symbol of entity; this is the model on which the *zedi*, at whose base the relics of the Buddha are said to have been placed and under which, in Burma, monks' ashes and bones are only placed exceptionally, are built.

Let us pause a moment to consider the concept of *nāma*. The translation given by Adoniram Judson ([1852] 1966: 568): 'mind, spirit' is quite close to the 'mental order' chosen here. On the other hand, Melford Spiro (1971: 85) has shown this and investigations carried out recently have confirmed it, the Burmese first make an amalgam between the concepts of *nāma* and *wiññyan* which are indiscriminately translated by 'soul':

Using the Pāli-Burmese term as *nan-teiya* (Pāli, *nāma*) or the Burmese *wiññyan* (Pāli *viññāna*), to refer to a person's spirit, consciousness, mind or soul – for Buddhism distinguishes between the psychological (*nāma*) and the physical (*rūpa*) dimensions of all organisms – the more sophisticated villagers agree that this entity is impermanent; it comes to an end with a person's death.

<sup>20</sup> The life-size cast of a monk is called *rup tu*, a term built on the root *rūpa*; the definition given of this bisyllabic word in the Myanmar–English Dictionary (1998: 411) is: 'image; idol; statue; sculpture'.

<sup>21</sup> Judson (1966: 568); Robinne (1998: 91–105).



The definition given in the Myanmar–English Dictionary (1998: 475) for *wiññyan* is ‘consciousness’, ‘spirit’<sup>22</sup>. As an identification principle, it is acquired when the name is given: this is not surprising when we remember that ‘name’ and ‘mental’ are built on the same root; and, because its medium is the body, it disintegrates at the same time as the corpse decomposes at death. An initial conclusion seems obvious: the *wiññyan* is not – contrary to what is generally thought – at the origin of death.

The notion of ‘consciousness’ is, theoretically, indissociable from the notion of self, or more correctly of no-self, designated by the Buddhist concept *anattā*. Yet, just as the Burmese generally confuse *nāma* and *wiññyan*, they also tend to reduce the notion of not-self (*anattā*) to that of impermanence (*anicca*) – a second amalgam. According to Spiro (1971: 86), this is partly due to the fact that ‘in adopting the Hindu doctrine of reincarnation while rejecting that of a self or an eternal soul (*ātman*), Buddhism created a serious paradox’.

This idea is continued in the assimilation – a third amalgam – of the non-Buddhist concept of butterfly soul (*leippya*) and of the Buddhist one of consciousness (*wiññyan*). In their popular sense, butterfly soul, consciousness and mental order refer to the same notion, often translated – inappropriately – by soul. But if *nāma* and *wiññyan* are two distinct yet Buddhist concepts, this is not the case for the *leippya* which, after a transitional period after death, becomes a wandering spirit in search of a new corporeality medium. The very concept of butterfly soul, and that of the life principle which is attached to it, is in opposition to the two fundamental concepts of the Buddhist doctrine which are, on the one hand, the impermanence of all things and, on the other, the non-existence of a soul associated with the negation of the egocentric principle, ‘this illusion of the self as an entity’ (Anonymous 3 1996: 282). Instead of imprisoning them in an impossible antinomy, the Burmese interweave these two notions, that of self-contained in *leippya* and of not-self-contained in *wiññyan*, in their complementarity.

A fourth amalgam is made between consciousness (*wiññyan*) and ‘life’ in the sense of ‘breath’ designated by the term *asak*. Yet the distinction between the two is fundamental. Consciousness is an identification principle: a baby, for example, only acquires its own identity several weeks or months after birth when it is given a name: this is the moment when its *wiññyan* is supposed to separate from its mother’s. It disintegrates at death

<sup>22</sup> In order to avoid any confusion with *nat* translated by ‘spirit’ and to be done with the notion of ‘soul’ with which it is often inappropriately associated, the term of Pāli origin *wiññyan* refers here to the Buddhist concept of ‘consciousness’.

at the same time as the body decays. As for the concept of life, it is the fruit of the aggregation of the corporeality component (*rūpa*) and the mental component (*nāma*). In other words, the entity *asak* – the uniting of *rūpa* and *nāma* – is a life principle: it is the separation of the mental and the corporeality which is at the origin of death, while *wiññyan* is an identification principle.

These amalgams or confusions cannot be simply attributed to ignorance. From the point of view considered here they are meaningful. It is particularly in this space of liberty Buddhism contains that the idea of consciousness associated with life (*asak*) is interpreted, at the very point where the notion of self is fundamentally alien to the doctrine, at the very point where the Pāli word acts as a conceptual tool denouncing the very concept it designates.

### *Explanatory metaphors*

What is reborn – or, possibly, reincarnated? The question often sows confusion. Investigations on this subject have not been confined only to people – monks or lay people – present at funerals; they have been undertaken for many years, in urban and rural settings, in central Burma as elsewhere in Shan State. It is generally accepted that it is the dead person's *wiññyan* or *leippya* which follows the cycle of rebirth. In almost all cases, the answer is identical: the *wiññyan* 'clings', the literal translation of the expression *wiññyan tway* that the Myanmar–English Dictionary (1998: 475) gives as 'to come into another existence'.

A case in point is the notion of identified reincarnation according to which a dead relative's *wiññyan* or *leippya* has again taken on a human form in the person of one of their descendants: the physical signs or the resemblances to a dead person are presented as 'the proof that the person 'eaten' is the reincarnation of someone who has died (Robinne 2000).<sup>23</sup> The people concerned – and the case is very frequent – say they are both themselves and someone else. A well-known Burmanisation process is based on this type of identified reincarnation: the Burmese king Alaungsithu (1112–67) is thus presented both as the grandson of Kyanzittha and as the identified reincarnation of the Indian prince Pedikaya (Pe Maung Tin and Luce 1960: 105–6). Let us briefly recall this episode. While he was travelling through the air, Pedikaya heard from some monks of the marriage of his beloved, the

<sup>23</sup> The Burmese expression associated with this concept is *lū wan cā*, literally: 'person + to enter + to eat'.

Burmese princess; stupefied, he let fall from his mouth the ball of mercury which gave him supernatural powers: the ejection of the ball not only caused the Indian prince's death but also impregnated the Burmese princess who gave birth to Alaungsithu, the future king. Such a principle of identified reincarnation contains the idea of the *wiññyan*'s perennality and the continuity of the rebirth process. As such it is in opposition to the two Buddhist notions of impermanence and not-self.

Some, on the other hand, claim that the *leippya/wiññyan* couple disintegrates at death. When someone dies, their consciousness also ceases to exist: it is 'gagged', this being the semantic value of *khyup* in the expression *wiññyan khyup*, that is to say 'to die'. This was, in particular, the opinion of a monk from the village of Tèkkè-Khyin, who strongly and spontaneously opposed the idea that the *wiññyan* is reborn in one of the thirty-one regions. The monks from the Tudhamma congregation of 'Pariyeitta', the Buddhist University in Mandalay and those of the Shwe Kyin congregation from Mahandhayon monastery in Amarapura share this opinion. These monks, without exception, give as a synonym for *wiññyan* the term *asak*, that is to say 'life', with the connotation of 'breath'. According to this meaning, life stops when consciousness disintegrates with death. It is significant that the terms *wiññyan* and *leippya* are not mentioned once during the two and a half hours the *eyiñ* performance lasts and this could be analysed as follows: though the *wiññyan* and *leippya* are identification principles, neither of them is at the origin of death.

Opinions are divided on the *wiññyan*'s continuity or discontinuity. Two metaphors are generally used to illustrate the rebirth process: the flame of a candle passed on to another candle or one's own reflection in a mirror. Neither of them, however, explains the *modus operandi* of rebirth. This vagueness is maintained in the very expression meaning 'to die' when talking of a monk: *Bhawa nat tham pram [pyan] lwan tō mū*, that is to say 'flight to the land of the spirits'. Written *pram*, according to the most common spelling (Anonymous 1: 89–90), this term means 'to fly' in the cycle of rebirths, just like a bird continues to fly from branch to branch to return to the metaphor generally used; this expression appears to infer a principle of continuity. On the other hand, if this term is spelt *pyan*, as some recommend it to be, it has the meaning of 'to return', thus inferring the idea of discontinuity peculiar to rebirth.

Discontinuity and continuity, both processes have their followers. The ritual shows links to an individual's initiatory path – the family ones for the giving of a baby's name, those concerning the whole community for the

robing rituals or the holistically orientated ones of a monk's funeral – seem to have resolved the question.

### *Analytical reconstruction*

Far from explaining a process, the metaphors are part of the continuity of the amalgams made: they illustrate the difficulty of conceptualising the process of rebirth. The ritual stagings of death and rebirth belong to the same empirical process. Therefore, let us now try to go a step further by giving a conceptual dimension to the process.

The *rūpa/nāma* association is not only a source of harmony; it is also a source of life (*asak*). The principal actress of the *eyiñ* reminds us of this, death is the result of the separation of the corporeality and the mental, for if they separate permanently, life, in the sense of breath, expressed in the term *asak*, stops: most monks agree on this.<sup>24</sup> Then the body's decomposition commences; having once more sung the pointlessness of trying to struggle against death, the actress of the *eyiñ* begins a detailed description of the process:

On the first day after death, the joints can no longer move; and even though the five aromatic substances are applied, one mark, then two gradually appear on the cheekbones; the cheeks and the eyelids cave in.

On the second day, the food rots, the intestines overflow, the stomach loses its shape and swells up out of all proportion.

On the third day, it is impossible to love the deceased any longer, the heart feels only hate; the veins on the corpse swell and liquid seeps out of all the orifices.

On the fourth day, protuberances appear on the body which, through lack of air, looks like a bag of skin on the bones.

On the fifth day, it's really disgusting, the two eyes bulge from their sockets and the tongue hangs out like a monster's.<sup>25</sup>

On the sixth day, pus flows out: it would be a lie to say it smells nice, it stinks, it's disgusting and you want to be sick.

On the seventh day, it is impossible to love the deceased, the kidneys and the liver mix as they decompose, the guts are in shreds, shit flows out constantly.

On the eighth day, a breath of air is enough to detach the skin, the body withers and falls away like rotten fruit before disappearing into the ground, it is written in the Dhamma that all is doomed to disappear and die.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> *Khandhā khwè swā: pyi. Rūpa nē. Khwè swā: tē. charatō bhurā*, that is: 'the body has separated. The monk's *rūpa* and *nāma* have separated.'

<sup>25</sup> 'Tebè', *sabbak* in transliteration, a category of *pratta* located in the lower regions of rebirth.

<sup>26</sup> The term used here is *krwe*, which means 'to fall' when talking of fruit and, by extension, 'to die'.

On the ninth day, it's disgusting to see the marrow coming through the bones and these whitening in places like depigmented skin.

On the tenth day, the veins and arteries are in shreds and the body in pieces. There is no hope of escaping the endless cycle of *samsara*, the Buddha himself was not spared it.

The *wiññyan* is meant to roam around the corpse for a time, then around the spot where it lay in the house: several days after the funeral of a layman, the dead person's circle of family and friends put his clothes on the mat where he used to sleep; for a week food is placed there specifically for the *wiññyan*, to prevent it wandering about. The end of this offering marks the definitive disappearance of the body and consciousness which is sanctioned by offerings to the monks and the preaching of the latter at a final ceremony.

The process of the corpse's decomposition is designated by the Pāli-Burmese expression 'the ten meditations on impurity', *asubha chay pā*. The different stages in the body's decomposition are punctuated by the growing physical disgust and the concomitant erasure of feelings. And it is only when the body merges with the earth and when feelings have completely disappeared that the concept of impermanence openly and publicly finds its full expression. Here we find, applied to the Buddhist concept of rebirth, Robert Hertz's analysis (1928: 32) of the transmigration process: 'Death is consummated only when decomposition has ended: only then does the deceased cease to belong to this world so as to enter into another existence.' Decomposition is also a process of separation: when, on the one hand, the corpse decomposes, on the other, rebirth takes place. Just as the giving of a name (*nām* or *nāman*) to a child or the giving of a new name to a novice marks the fact that the mental component (*nāma*) has combined with a new medium, the *nāma* of a dead person undergoes a change of the same order.

The corpse's decomposition is both hastened, because the entrails are scooped out, and partially interrupted because the body is embalmed in order to preserve it temporarily. The artificial preservation of the corporeality component can be explained by the necessity of stopping the concomitant disintegration of the mental component which is alone destined to be reborn. For this, it must go through a preliminary stage which enables it to separate from the corporeality component – of which the body is the human form (*khandhā*) – and then to aggregate to a new corporeality component whose form and nature vary according to the region of rebirth. The upper regions inhabited by the Brahma are of two sorts: the first, *rūpa brahma*, possess a corporeality dimension, the others, *arūpa brahma*, have no corporeality dimension; at this level of rebirth, the mental dimension is self-sufficient. Although rebirth in one of the

regions inhabited by the Brahma is potentially possible, it is on one of the six levels inhabited by the *nat dewa* that rebirth is generally envisaged. *Rūpa* and *nāma* reunited generate in their entity a 'breath' principle (*asak*), from which a new life course (*bhawa*) can begin. In the absolute, a new consciousness should be added to this entity, just as a baby acquires its own identity when a name is attributed to it.

According to this pattern, the principle of 'consciousness' (*wiññyan*) is no more a source of life than the origin of death: its disappearance or reappearance is merely the result of one or the other, it is not the agent of it. It disintegrates at the same time as the corpse decomposes and this is probably one of the reasons why an earthenware pot at the dead person's feet is broken when the coffin is taken out of the monastery: it is no longer necessary to feed the *wiññyan* of the deceased whose end is physically marked by the fragments of the earthenware pot.<sup>27</sup>

As we have seen, opinions are divided on whether the *wiññyan* is reborn or not. The fact of considering it in the absolute is the only way to see clearly the structure inherent to the rebirth process. This involves, on the one hand, abandoning the idea of the *wiññyan*'s rebirth and, on the other, considering the *rūpa/nāma/asak* trilogy as an entity and in its internal dynamics. If the separation of the mental and corporeality is the explanation of death, this separation is itself at the origin of the stopping of life (breath) just as the aggregation of the mental to a new corporeality medium gives rise in the absolute to life or rebirth<sup>28</sup>. *Rūpa* and *nāma* are connected 'for life and beyond the grave' as it were. But whereas the corporeality element and consciousness are doomed to follow the same course of decomposition, the mental component is destined to undergo a metamorphosis enabling it to aggregate to another corporeality medium in the region where it is meant to be reborn.

To summarise, after death, the process set in motion is the following:

By separating, the corporeality (*rūpa*) and mental components (*nāma*) cause death (*ase*).

The body (*khandha*) decomposes at the same time as consciousness (*wiññyan*), an identification principle, disintegrates.

Embalming temporarily delays the decomposition process.

The mental component must find a new corporeality medium in a rebirth region, if not it too will disintegrate.

<sup>27</sup> Lagirarde (1998: 55), writing about funeral rites in Lanna and Laos, talks of the 'pot of disgust or of separation' and, quoting Terwiel (1994: 155) recalls a similar practice among the Tai of Assam (*ibid.*).

<sup>28</sup> A concept expressed by the Pāli term *paṭisandhi*.

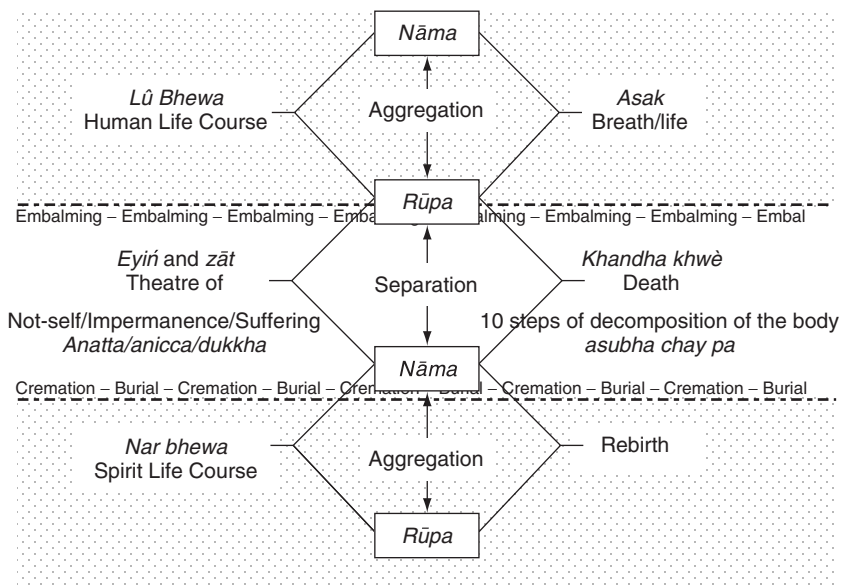


Figure 8.1 Process of separation and aggregation

The initiation's purpose is to enable the mental component to pass from a human corporeality medium to a corporeality medium whose nature depends on the region of rebirth.

The new corporeality and mental entity generates life (*asak*).

In theory, a new identification principle should be given to this entity.

This process is synthetised in Figure 8.1.

We now understand why it is necessary to delay the body's decomposition during the funeral: it is a question of preserving its mental alter ego in order to subject it to the initiation without which the process of separation from the human body and that of aggregation to a new corporeality component would not be possible. If the mental component decomposed like the corporeality component, there would be no rebirth possible.

The intermediate vigil period between the lying in repose of a lay person's body and its cremation – or burial – is, in the case of a monk's second funeral, the corollary of the *eyiñ* theatrical performance. The lying in repose, for a few hours in the case of a lay person or for several months in a monastery for a monk, does not only allow anyone who so wishes to come and pay their last respects, but also is the prelude to an initiatory phase during which the separation of the corporeality and the mental

component, the metamorphosis of the mental element, followed by the aggregation of the mental to a new corporeality component occur. Even though it is not expressed in these terms, this is essentially the reason why the body's decomposition must be temporarily interrupted. It is also the reason why the funeral takes place in three stages.

The tripartite structure of the *eyiñ* initiatory performance is found not only in the form of the second funeral but also in the first and second funeral ritual taken as a whole. In the first stage, during first funerals, the concomitant disintegration of the body (*khandha rūpa*), of consciousness and of the mental component (*nāma*) is controlled. The second stage is the intermediate phase – 'preliminary' in Arnold van Gennep's terminology ([1909] 1981) – between the first and second funeral, during which the corpse is presented in its glass coffin so that the disciples (*tapañ*) and donors (*dakā* and *dakāma*) can pay their last respects to the deceased monk. The third stage is the ritual performance of the rebirth process. The necessity of a transitional initiatory phase, be it in the form of an *eyiñ* or simply a vigil of a few hours or several months, is the reason for the existence of a first and second funeral.

#### REPRESENTATIONS OF SUPERIOR MONKS

Far from challenging the concepts related to rebirth, the variants observed from one village to another highlight, sometimes in an almost caricatural fashion, the fact that they are deeply rooted in social life. Thus the play known as an *eyiñ* accentuates the terms of the conception/death relationship by giving them an extension of a sex/violence kind, a tendency which is further accentuated by the scene connected with the bamboo tiger. At the same time, the variants indicate, under a guise of 'tradition', a leitmotiv running all through the ritual wherever it is performed, certain paradoxes or vaguenesses contained or maintained in the Buddhist canon. This is the case, as we have seen, for the confusion generated by the concepts of butterfly soul, consciousness, life in the sense of 'breath', or of the mental element, which are used in place of one another. It is also the case for that between the astrological short term and the long term of the rebirth cycle: if astrological calculations are used, it is doubtless in order to harmonise the social and the cosmic order and to endow the rituals with the best signs but it is also – above all even – in order to organise and purify a life course. During a ritual, the notion of merits shared by all the men and women donors gives the life course its collective dimension. The ritual shows both stages of the canonic texts by



visualising the process of rebirth and emphasises the social bonds by transgressing some interdicts such as relationship between genders or between military authorities and civil society.

Alongside these variants, some more radical changes are also emerging. For instance, the proliferation over the last few years of iconographic representations of monks. In agreement with the villagers, during their lifetime the latter sometimes commission a life-size statue of themselves. To celebrate his forty fasts, that is to say the number of years he had been ordained, the monk of Ton-Zè-Pé commissioned a cast of himself, a practice which is becoming more and more common in Burma as in Thailand (Gabaude 2003). Protected by glass walls, the iconographic representation of the monk stood imposingly first beside the mortal remains, then in the teaching hall (*dhamma rum*), before being moved into the monastery where pilgrims will be able to continue to pay him their posthumous respects. In doing this, the villagers are not so much trying to acquire some form of power (*dago*) contained in the hyperrealist representation – the monks all reject this interpretation which the villagers tend to adopt – but paying their respects to the acknowledged qualities (*gun*) of the dead monk.<sup>29</sup> The members of the Shwe-Kyin congregation are not exempt from this tendency: two sculptures, representing the two previous superior monks, stand outside Mahagandhayon monastery at Amarapura, on the east side, in vaults built on the actual spot where their cremations took place.<sup>30</sup>

Such hyperrealist representations which endure after the monk's death call into question, to say the least, the contemporary meaning of the Buddhist concepts of not-self and impermanence. These representations should not be put on the same level as the use of medicinal injections instead of evisceration. Embalming the body provisionally stops the decomposition process in order to make possible the ritual passage from life to death and from death to rebirth; because of its perennial – and not temporary for ritual purposes – nature, the presence of statues of dead monks in monasteries seems on the contrary to be a response to the actress in the *eyiñ* in search of a substitute for death. In the one case, embalming

<sup>29</sup> *Dago* is *Tankhui*: in Burmese, a term doubtless of Mône origin; the Sanskrit equivalent is *pratibhaya* (Myanmar–English Dictionary 1998: 186). *Gun* is from the Pāli *guṇa*. The definition given in the Myanmar–English Dictionary (1998: 86) is '(a) qualities; characteristics; attributes; (b) prestige'. The Burmese Pāli expression used for the monk is *ārum pyu*, 'evoke the good characteristics' [of the dead monk].

<sup>30</sup> The Pāli term designating this building is *bhimān*.

provides a short-term transitory solution needed for the ritual process of separating the corporeality from the mental; in the other, the iconographic representation is a choice in the long term.

The paradox created by the dead man's statue with regard to the concept of impermanence is not new in itself. It is found in the practice, which is very rare in Burma, that consists of burying a dead monk's ashes under a *zedi*. The expression designating this funeral practice is 'to gather the bones together', *arui: kok pwè*. It is not attested in the Ava era (Siri Ujanā: 1962) and the author of the document about the death of a monk who lived in the Konbaung period says it was reserved for the Buddha's disciples and lesser Buddhas (Anonymous 1 1988). I have never to date had the opportunity of observing this final phase. The last ceremony of gathering together the bones was, to my knowledge, that performed at the funeral of Ledi Seyadaw, a spiritual authority whose charisma spread beyond the Tudhmma congregation alone. The *zedi* under which his ashes were buried was built within the actual monastery grounds and the spot was later abandoned. The reason for this was given to me indirectly by the monks of the village of Tèkkè-Khyin. The remains of a superior monk had been placed in a building erected on the other side of the outer walls of a *zedi*. 'How could I bow down before this *zedi* if the ashes of a monk younger than I, with perhaps less fasts than I, [the dead monk had in fact sixty-nine fasts, a kind of record] and whose karma is perhaps inferior to mine, were in it?' Contrary to what seems to be practised in Laos (Ladwig 2003), there is, therefore, in Burma no phase for the reintegration of the deceased into social life. It is the opposite that happens: if a monk's ashes are found to have been buried under a *zedi*, it is social life which moves away from the dead man.

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