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François Robinne

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## Chapter Six

# Emergence of a Leading Group: A Case Study of the Inter-Ethnic Relationships in the Southern Shan State

*François Robinne*

### MIEN, MRAMMA, BRAMMA, BURMA

The seven administrative Divisions of the so-called Union of Myanmar are situated along the Irrawaddy River, in the delta and along the Mergui archipelago. They are mostly occupied by the Burman as ethnic group, even if Môn and Karen minorities are also representative. But nothing to do with the seven peripheric and mountainous States where the minorities are the majority. All of them recognise themselves as Burmese, it means as inhabitants of Burma or Myanmar with their own ethnonyms which can differ from that one used by the Burman. Despite the names given to the Arakanese, Chin, Kachin, Shan, Kayah, Karen or Môn States, the administrative demarcations do not correspond to the linguistic distribution. In the Southern Shan State on which this article is focused, the Shan are a minority among the minorities. Most of them use two main ethnonyms with which they design the Burman specifically: Bu(r)ma and Mien on which it is not useless to recall some precisions.

Myanmar is the designation by which the Burman design officially the Union since the State Law and Order Restoration Council took the decision to change the name few years ago. According to this official denomination, Myanmar is reserved to the country and Myanma to the ethnic group. Whatever the particular circumstances which imposed that appellation, Myanma(r) has its historical justification. It is under the form *mranma* or *mramma* that the ethnonyme was written in the inscriptions (Luce, 1959: 53; Than Tun, 1990, X: 1), before to be changed for the current *myanma*. According to Luce, the change from the dental *n* to the labial *m* by which the final syllab ends is attested from 1341 A.D., but it is as soon as 1190 that *mramma* appears for the first time on a burmese inscription. It is most probably from that word that the ethnonym Marma, a Tibeto-Burmese group of Arakan, is derived. It is under this designation, transliterated *marama* or *mran ma* that the Marma call the Burman (Lucien Bernot, 1967: 9).

Interpreting a myth contained in the *Abhidamma*, some authors – Shway Yoe (1963: 96), Max and Bertha Ferrars (1900: 111), Phayre (1967: 2) – have suggested that *Mranma* is derived from *s*, written also *Byammâ* or *Bamâ*, by reference to the cast of the Brahmans in India. This explanation is wrong, at least for two reasons.

If the word is a traveller one, it is not from West that we can follow its peregrination. The origin of the ethnonym is to be found in a Chinese etymology. The Chinese called the Burman *Mien* also pronounced *Man* or *Myin* (Hanson, 1954: 448). This ethnonym appears relatively late in the inscriptions, in 1271 only, after the Chinese expeditions to the doors of Pagan (Luce, 1959: 53). Marco Polo himself describes the war which opposed the Great Khan to the King of Mien, it means the Burmese Pagan Kingdom (1980: 309–318). We find this word among some Tibeto-Burmese groups: *Myen* – or *Myen ga* – for the Kachin or Jingpo (Hanson, 1954: 448), *Myen(-waw)* for the Maru (Clerk, 1911: 70). If the exact etymology of *Mranma* remains uncertain, it appears that the first syllable *Mran* is most probably derived from the Chinese designation *Mien*: people inhabiting originally the Nan-Chao, a meridional part of the Yunnan (Luce, 1959: 53).

According to Luce and Pe Maung Tin, the Chinese of the IXth century included the Mien into the Mang tribes – localised between the ‘Nam Hka’ and the Salwen rivers in the Shan State – whose kings were called *mang* or *mang-chao*. These authors specify that the name of Aniruddha [Anawratha], the first historical king of the Pagan dynasty, was preceded by such a half Burmese half Shan title (Luce, 1959: 77, Luce & Pe Maung Tin, 1960: 394). But it was later established that the combination Mang-Chao correspond in fact to the Shan title ‘Min-saw’ (Maung Htin Aung, 1970: 12). We find this first syllable in the *Mân* by which both the Pao-Karen of the Nyaung-Shwe District in Southern Shan State and the Khamti of Kachin State (J.F. Needham, 1894: 139), as well as others Tai sub-groups of the Shan State, call the Burman.

We know the influence of the Môn civilisation towards the Burmese civilisation. Luce (1959: 53) mentions a môn inscription in honour of a Kyanzittha palace where it is question of ‘*mirma* (Burmese) songs, *rmen* (Môn) songs, and *tircul* (Pyu) songs’. But a distinction has to be made between the written form and the pronunciation. It is probable that the change from Myanmar to Burma occurred through the Môn established in the Irrawaddy delta. The pronunciation of the toponym /bye/ written *mrit*, a city localised in the Tenasserim, is an example of such a môn influence, and it is to a similar phonetic corruption of a labial written *m* pronounced *b* that *Mirma* became *Birma*, *Burma* and so on.

With the arrival of the Portuguese in the delta during the XVIth century, the appellations derived from Burma knew a rapid diffusion. Berma is mentioned for the first time in 1516, in the travel account due to Duarte Barbosa (J.S. Furnivall, 1960: 61–62; Yule and Burnell, 1989: 131). *Bamâ*,



Biamma, Byammâ etc., appeared afterwards in the Western literature; the library of the Oriental Civilizations and Languages in Paris have an *Alphabetum Barmanorum* published in Roma in 1776 and 1787 (Christina Cramerotti, 1998: 396). During the colonial period, the British form 'Burma' became the norm. The designation is still adopted by some Tibeto-Burmese ethnic groups: the Cak say *Bama*<sup>2</sup> (Luce, 1985: chart L 133), and it is like this that the Tibeto-Burmese minorities still call the Burman. We will follow them in the development below.

### THE NETWORKS' HIERARCHY

The Nyaung-Shwe district, with the Inle Lake running from North to South between two steep mountains, is characterized by an important ethno-linguistic complexity (map 1). The Sino-Burmese family is represented by the so-called (Matisoff, 1991) LoLo-Burmese branch with the Intha, the Taungyo and the Danu, and by its Karennic branch with the Pao; The Austro-Asiatic family is represented by the Danaw and few decades ago by the Yin people; The Austro-Tai family and its Tai-Kadai branch is represented by the Shan, whose transliteration form *shyam*: links straight with the words Assam and Siam (Gait, 1933). To be complete, we should add the Indo-Muslim community for its interference in the commercial road with Mandalay, and also the increasing number of tourists whose presence is not without repercussions, among them the 'importation' of some Padaung women to hold a museographic role. The historical and social comprehension of the Region cannot avoid this complexity and the subsequent inter-ethnic relationships. The minorities operate as a whole, and each identity is dealing with the others.

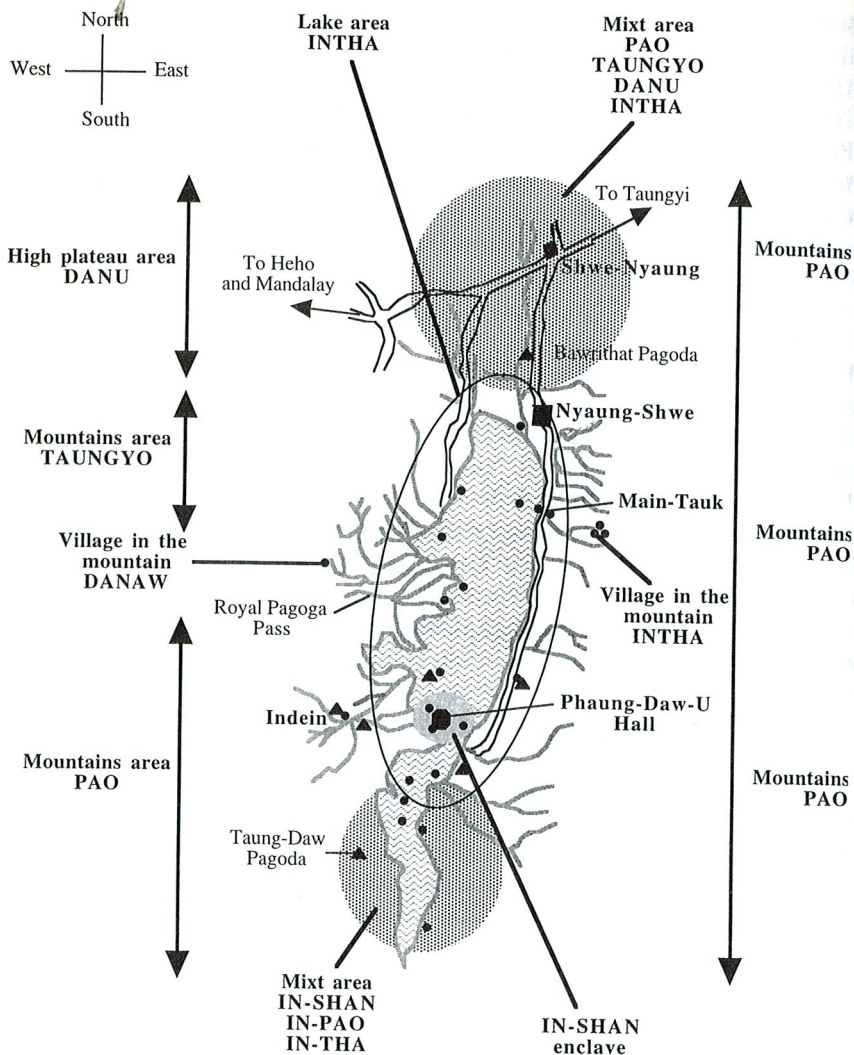
My aim is not to identify the relations of the Burma central power towards these minorities, as did historians like Victor Lieberman (1984), Michael Aung-Thwin (1985) or Pierre Fistié (1985), nor to understand how the minorities 'come to terms with more than one state civilization' as suggested by Peter Hinton (1967 & 1978). My intention is to analyse the interactions of these neighbouring minorities and to understand the process by which one becomes leader in social terms.

The last fifty years place the Nyaung-Shwe District as a very significant field of analyse, since the decline of the Shan administration left a vacant place to be provided by one of the local ethnic groups in accordance with the Burma administration. Based on my field works which started in this part of the Southern Shan State in 1994, this paper is in line with two previous works to be published in French language. (See list of references)

The emergence of a leading group and the inter-ethnic relations and hierarchical organization process are recurrent questions in Burma and in Southeast Asia generally speaking. I agree with Edmund Leach (1954) when



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he writes in his *Political Systems of Highland Burma* that some 'unstable balances' situations are always set up. But I am leading away from his structural demonstration when the unstable balance is reduced to one model extracted from a diachronic dimension. The studies of F.K. Lehman (1963) about the Chin Society and that one of Pascal Bouchery (1988) about the Naga have pointed out some important variations compared with the socio-political systems of the Kachin. Furthermore, following Fredrik

Barth's proposition (1969) by which the structure gives place to the process, it is a social process I will speak about.

The situation of Inle shows that the emergence of one leading group appears to be an appropriated social construction among many other possible, according to the ethnics representation, to the Buddhist norms and to the historical context. The social landscape's appropriation process of the Nyaung-Shwe District by the Intha is different from the one used by the Shan when they imposed themselves in Nyaung-Shwe area after the fall of Pagan. While the emergence of the Intha as a leading group is built on the basis of a same Buddhist conceptual norms, shared in common by the Pao and the Taungyo, the Intha community developed it in a form original enough – original in the Nyaung-Shwe District – to give its economic and social supremacy a symbolic settlement.

The 1962 events ended six centuries of an almost undivided power of the Shan administration in this area. As Lieberman (1984) showed, the Burma monarchy had only a distant control in 'the tributaries zone', and although the colonial administration played an important part in the sawbwa's decline, the British leaned on sawbwa's power over the other minorities of this area. The disintegration of the Shan administration made the Intha able to assert their social supremacy, giving a symbolic extension to their economic dynamism. Several historical assertions favoured the Intha for that, among them the legitimacy acquired during the first Burma historical monarchy and perpetuated by the oral tradition ever since.

The relative isolation in which the minorities live is broken by the cyclic rhythm of pagoda's festivals as well as by the cyclic rhythm of the markets. In the mountains, the succession of the pagoda festivals create a discontinuous network which ends with the third festival: after the fourth one, anyone participating to the first pagoda festival is no more present. On the contrary, the Phaung-Daw-U festival on the lake establish a continuous network inside the Intha community, while mountainer are kept away in any officiant functions: rawers, trustees and even monks. Concerning the moving markets which take place on the lake once every five days, the Pao, Taungyo, and Danaw mountain people make a one-day trip to sell the raw material and to buy manufactured products from the top to the bottom. When the exchanges are made from the bottom to the top, the established balance is even more evident: school masters, iron masters and art masters are called from time to time in the mountains on Pao and on Taungyo request. Only the buffalos' transhumance reverse a little bit the process. Buffaloes are partly in the hands of Pao, but following the phenom of sedentarization and a consecutive specialisation in *Cordia* leaves, oranges and garlic, the cattle becomes mostly the property of Taungyo and Danu who still need it on their open-fields. The Intha are depending on this cattle which they rent or borrow depending to the dry or rainy season for their rice crops twice a year. Anyway, it is far from restoring the balance. Both,



these vertical and horizontal inter-ethnic networks introduce a hierarchic dimension turned to the advantage of the Intha.

Strengthened by an economic dynamism which, from the beginning, gave advantage to them in the Shan administration struggle, the Intha have started a real symbolic appropriation of the landscape since the 1960's. The process is directly linked to the development of the annual 'circumnavigation' of the Phaung-Daw-U Buddha images. The increase in population, associated with the Shan power struggle evolution, makes way for a whole new configuration the structure and the extent of which were never seen before.

The institution of the first Shan administration during the 14th Century, the British colony which precipitated the sawbwa decline, and the eradication of the Shan administration due to the 1962 events, each one of these three main transitional periods – to which we should add the internal guerillas warfares which occurred at that time and the consecutive dissensions between the Myoza of Indein and the sawbwa of Nyaung-Shwe – had direct repercussions on the annual ceremony on the lake. The structural adaptations were gradually made, each new adaptation being marked by a manifestation of the five Buddha images: storms, shipwrecks and other natural events were interpreted as signs of supernatural reprisals. The subsequent adaptations were made possible only because they came within the same conceptual norm, unless being exposed to new manifestations. This conceptual field is based on the notion of a vital principle, and on the Buddhist notion of four points around a center contained both in the Phaung-Daw-U processional ritual. The concomitance and the combination of this vital principle and of this cosmogonic model confer to the Intha process the dimension of a social strategy to affirm their leadership.

#### THE VITAL PRINCIPLE OF A DYNAMIC IDENTITY IN THE PHAUNG-DAW-U PROCESSION

The Buddhist concept of a soul, *wiñña* is different from the vital principle concept contains in the *lipprā* or butterfly spirit. If Buddhism recognizes a soul, it is in its negation, the concept of non existence of ego, *anattā*, or 'doctrine of nonself' (Spiro, 1971: 84). Nevertheless, this vital principle is closely associated with the initiation rituals which are the ceremony of a name, the novicehood ceremony or shinbyu and the funeral performances. The analysis of these three rituals show that the vital principle occurs at two levels, individual and collective. During the post-native rituals, the white cotton threads divide the butterfly spirit by sticking it both on the mother and on the baby: the baby got its own *lipprā*. During a shinbyu, the white cotton threads make, in a first step, a distinction between the teen-agers and the laic community, and, in a second step, they identify the teen-agers as sangha members. During a funeral ceremony, the white



cotton threads mark the separation of the dead's spirit and of the familial environment.

From one ritual to another, these white cotton threads belong to different categories depending on the level of analysis and on the rituals in their particularities. At a micro level in each initiation ritual, the white cotton threads sanction a new state. During the Intha shinbyu ceremony, the threads occur at two successive steps: running along the shoulders of the Sangha, novices and monks, the threads have in this time step power to transmit the initiatic message – a Tai influence –, while the threads sanction in a second step the novicehood status when untied and stuck around the neck as an individual property, exactly like for a birth or a death. In all cases, each step of these initiatic rituals 'stick' – *kap tay* in Burma – or restick the butterfly spirit to the new status. At a macro level, the white cotton threads participate to a social construction always reaffirmed and precised; they seal a new karmic destiny which is going on wider and wider, from mother to son, from a laic community to a Buddhist community, from an alive world to a dead world along the process of reincarnation cycle.

The initiatic rituals have not the exclusive property of vital principle's concept. As soon as a double function of animation and identification occurs, the same vital principle can be applied in other social spheres. For example, we find such cotton threads in the aspect of a white cotton strip – together with a red one about which I will not elaborate here – stuck by the carpenter and then by the owner of a new house on the top of the main six piles of Intha, Taungyo or Pao houses. Then this recurrence of a vital principle is common to all Buddhist ethnic minorities of Nyaung-Shwe without exception. The Intha people extend this vital principle to the community as a whole, pushing so the logic at end through the Phaung-Daw-U procession. In that way, I agree with the historian Jacques Revel (1996) when he affirms that 'level variation show versions nor attenuated or partial or mutilated, but different versions of social realities'. To stay in its inseparable functions of animation and identification as defined by Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière (1989), the vital principle has, at a domestic level, the same role which it holds at the collective level of the Phaung-Daw-U procession: the vital principle is contained in the structure of the cortège, in the structure of the circular process around the lake as well as in the ethnic appropriation of the processional ritual.

In its linear configuration, the cortège is entity. It consists of a succession of pirogues attached to each other by a rope, and it is the succession of pirogues that pulls the two sacral barges. The way of fixation is specific: the pirogues are not attached from prow to stern but from stern to stern, the ropes running along each pirogue from the end of the first one to the end of the second one and so on. This way of fixation gives its cohesion to the cortège. It is expressly like this that it is conceptualized, and it is on such a principle that the rowers organize themselves to accompany the four images

from village to village. The rowers from a new staging village reach the previous village where the Phaung-Daw-U images are used to stay one night, and then, they go back in a processional cortège up to their village. All the pirogues – from three to thirteen or more – come from one village group depending on the same monastery. At each new stage correspond a new rowing team. In its different components, the cortège is organized as a continuous entity.

Linear in the structure of the cortège, the procession ritual is circular in the configuration as a global entity, reproducing at an ethnic level the inalienable entity formed by the Phaung-Daw-U images. This configuration given to the processional ritual around the lake took place step by step. Briefly speaking, we can distinct in the diachrony four main steps which are:

- 1 From its origin, after Alaungsithu trip in the region and up to the colonial period, a small pagoda festival was probably limited to the South of the lake, starting in a cave near Indein and moving towards Phaung-Daw-U.
- 2 In 1886, after the British pression on sawbwa administration, we can read in the short chronicle written by the In-Shan trustees of the Nam-Hu village that two barges met each other near the village of Lin-Kin, on the Northeast side of the lake, one barge starting from Phaung-Daw-U with the images on board and one barge starting from Nyaung-Shwe with the sawbwa and its Court on board. At that time the procession was limited to six villages.
- 3 Around the Second World War and the following years, the procession crossed the lake right through without a real coherence. But it was a first decisive step by which the lake became an homogeneous and pertinent entity. This means that a break was introduced compared to the sabwa organization in different Myo-Za, and, mostly, compared to the fragmentated Intha community in a multitude of quasi-autonomous villages, each one with its own monastery, its own cimetary, its own Nat altar and its own pagoda festival. Nevertheless, a tight identity was enlarged to the whole Intha community and annually reaffirmed.
- 4 The fourth and last step – last for the moment – occurred after 1962 and the subsequent dissolution of the sawbwa administration. From that time on, the processional ritual all around the lake became organized in a cardinal configuration.

These transformations in the structure of the cortege as well as in the cardinal organization of the procession were accompanied by an evolution of the ethnic appropriation of the ritual. The ethnic dimension of the procession is not a new fact. Up to the sixties, if we remove an uncertain Pao or Taungyo episode due to the presence of two Phaung-Daw-U images – an original and a copy – in the Min-Khyaung monastery, the ceremony was the prerogative of the Shan. The Phaung-Daw-U trustees in charge of



the transfer of the images from one barge to another, then from a staging monastery or staging hall to another one, these trustees were Shan or In-Shan, which means Shan of the lake. This ethnic appropriation does not go on any more. Since the sixties, the ethnic representation evolved from In-Shan to In-Tha. Meanwhile the sawbwa administration collapsed, the traditional hereditary function of the trustees was substituted with an elective function. Only half of the In-Shan trustees take place in the smallest of the two barges, while Intha trustees take place in the great one where stand the Phaung-Daw-U images.

The coherence of the lake was realized in concomitance with the Intha community construction. The principles of animation and of identification of the procession were superimposed on a cosmogonic principle of a social order.

### THE MODEL OF FOUR POINTS AROUND A CENTER

As I said, the Phaung-Daw-U procession was most probably originally a simple pagoda festival. The five images were located on the Western slopes of the mountains in the current Pao area. While the procession spread right through the lake, important changes occurred in the social organization of space. Traditionally situated outside of a village, upstream or downstream, the monasteries are moving to a central position as fast as their architectural renovations or reconstructions. Exogeneous reasons can explain this tendency. Among them the demographic pressure by which the number of villages increases, while the number of the monasteries is stagnant or do not increase in the same ratio.

This tendency towards a central position can be observed not only among the Intha villages, but also among the Taungyo and Pao villages. Nevertheless, by spreading this tendency to different stratum of spacial organization, Intha people turn it into a structural artefact of their social organization.

Traditional Intha, Taungyo and Pao monasteries keep the numerous Buddha images along one of the gables, i.e. along the wall opposite to the entrance. The modern Intha monasteries develop an architectural structure totally different, by placing the Buddha images towards the center. The number of the central images are consecutively reduced to five, exactly like the Phaung-Daw-U images. In Nyaung-Shwe as well as in a quasi systematic manner in the villages of the Inle lake, the new monasteries are built on such an axial structure, and such adaptations can be observed on more traditional monasteries.

This architectural evolution of the Intha monasteries develops along the social organization of the village space. In its current development, spatial organization of the Intha groupments of villages are based on a Mandala model. The social order fits in with the cosmic order. As soon as it does not go outside or against the Buddhist cosmogonic order, the social artefact



knows a universe of possibilities. The outlying or non axial position of the monasteries is one of the possible alternative which differ in Intha, Taungyo and Pao spatial organization. By giving their monasteries an axial position, and by spreading the paradigmatic ratio to other social spheres, Intha people go beyond the proposition according to which social organization emerges. For Intha community, social order *is* cosmic order. In other words, if the Intha, the Pao and the Taungyo, all Buddhist, operate on a same relationship towards a cosmogonic order, Intha distinguish themselves from their neighbours by elaborating a social order understood as universal and as an absolute principle.

This sketch is becoming the norm at any social level among the Intha community. At an individual level, it is the model on which tattoo representations are based. At the family level, it is on this model that piles of a house are erected. At a level of villages groupment, the monasteries move from an outside to an axial position. And last, at the level of the lake and of the District, the great Phaung-Daw-U hall holds the central position. As all the pagodas, the Phaung-Daw-U hall is by itself a representation of the world, one more in this multitude of stupas. But the evolution of Phaung-Daw-U differs from the general tendency. This is due to the presence of the five Buddha images understood as a powerful and inalienable entity. Gathered in the central altar of Phaung-Daw-U, it is in this homogeneous shape that they were transferred from one barge to another one.

After barges capsized for a first time, 'a long time ago', it was decided that Maitreya, the future Buddha, would not anymore be taken on board for the circumnavigation. A supernatural interpretation was eventually given to the accident. It was said that the new developments applied to the procession and the increase in the number of participant villages did not suit the cosmic order. After a memorable night during which seven lightnings flashed the lake, the trustees decided to turn back after the first stopping place at Indein and to cancel the festival. From that time on, the disorganized procession was replaced by a circular one, moving from West to East and keeping the axial hall of Phaung-Daw-U on the right hand side. By giving to the circumnavigation the aspect of an organized and significant *pradakshina* conform to the cosmic order, nothing was going to stop the ritual process anymore whatever the increasing number of staging villages and the consecutive duration. From six in 1886, the number of staging villages climbed to 19 between the World War II and the 1960s, and up to 21 now, while the duration of the circumnavigation increased from six days to 15, and to 21.

In the same manner, an explanation was given to the enlargement of the circumnavigation when, after in fell in the lake and 'drowned' a few decades ago, one of the five images mysteriously reappeared at the center of its Phaung-Daw-U altar. In consequence, the Maitreya image was kept later

on in its axial position, four other images were temporarily placed around her, while the originals were embarked all along the duration of the circumnavigation. Two levels can be pointed out: a traditional local level with the five Buddha images in the center of Phaung-Daw-U, and a regional level with an enlarged formation of four original Buddha Phaung-Daw-U images turning around the fifth one. (Such an enlargement is not specific to Nyaung-Shwe, and it would be interesting for example to compare the development of the Phaung-Daw-U festival and the evolution given to the festival which still occurs in a reduced form in Thibaw, a City of the Northern Shan State) In present time Phaung-Daw-U, it appears that the evolution from a localised pagoda festival to a regional circumnavigation was possible on condition that the socio-spatial development conformed to the cosmic order.

Nowadays, the enlargement of the procession is accompanied by a recomposition of the lake built on a model of a Mandala as defined by Adrian Snodgrass in his comparative study on *The symbolism of the Stupa* (1992). The situation of Phaung-Daw-U in the center of the lake is the result of the successive movements from the top of the Western mountains to the middle of the lake. Then the four surrounding cardinal points found their place: Nyaung-Shwe to the North probably from the end of the XIXth century, Kyain-Kham to the South around the first half of the XXth century, Indein and Naung-Daw for the Western and Eastern ends whatever the difficulties to reach these two archaeological sites (because of the narrowness of the Bilu River in one case, because of the draining of the small canal in the other case).

Started by the first historical Shan sawbwa of Nyaung-Shwe, developed after the colonial period and accentuated since by the combined efforts of the Burma and the Intha, the tendency has known for a few years a further acceleration. On the South-East portion of the lake, the development given to the Wak-Ta-Kin pagoda reflects such an evolution. Built on the ruined foundation of thirty-two older pagodas, the new structure differs radically from any other in the region by its reproduction of a specific Mandala structure. Inaugurated on the eleventh day of *tapon* month of the Burma year 1356 (1995 A.D.), the new pagoda has the shape of a golden dome divided by four corridors, on which stand four Buddha images surrounding a fifth one. Contributing to distinguishing this pagoda from the other ones in the region, two cosmic flagpoles are erected on each site of the dome: unusual for the region, they accentuate the Burma influence. This tendency through the centuries finds here an abrupt but significant short cut to the general level of elaboration. While the previous and successive developments occurred after empiric adaptations and supernatural reprisals, from now on the organization of space becomes conceptualized: through the Intha community as a whole, the Inle lake is conceived as the representation of a cosmic order.



## *Emergence of a Leading Group*

While such a case study is by definition limited to a context and cannot be generalized, the evolution of an empiric construction towards a conceptualized strategy belongs to a more global problematique. By substituting a diachronic process to a structural analysis, it becomes possible to understand how one group is able to build a leading position on neighbouring minorities with which it shares a closed political and social organization, and whose worshipping system involves the same conceptual field. In that perspective, as initiated by Charles F. Keyes and Peter Kunstadter (1979), the analysis could be enlarged to a more comparative study wherever the inter-ethnic relationships are similar in Southeast Asia.

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