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Chapter 2

Mya Nan Nwe's Birthday: A Forum-like Ritual Event at Botataung Pagoda (Yangon)

Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière

The Botataung Lady, also known as Mya Nan Nwe, belongs to a category of Burmese spiritual beings that are associated with the guardianship of Buddhist pagodas.¹ This chapter relates the remarkable formation of an annual celebration focused on Mya Nan Nwe worship since the beginning of the new century. Among pagoda-guardian spiritual figures, one can include 'respected grandfathers' (*bobogyi*) and voracious ogres (*bilu*) as well as young *naga*-like ladies in charge of pagoda treasure troves or reliquaries – like Mya Nan Nwe, whose generic designation is *thaik nan shin* (lit. 'in charge of the treasure palace'). Cults whose members worship these kinds of figures, linked to the guardianship of pagodas and thus considered to be caretakers of the Buddhist material dispensation (*thathana*, Pali *sāsana*), have grown dramatically since the 1990s. This is partly related to the Burmese junta's policies of self-legitimation through sponsoring religious foundations and the subsequent rediscovery and materialisation of spiritual figures connected to restored pagodas.

At first glance, this transfiguration of Burma's religious landscape may be compared to the efflorescence of 'prosperity' cults in neighbouring Theravadin countries in a context of rapid modernisation and globalisation.² In Burma, brand new images that materialise pagoda guardians have appeared in many sanctuaries where they had not previously existed, or replaced tiny, old-fashioned images. However, this has transpired during an era when the

¹ In literature about Burma and for the Burmese, 'pagoda' (*hpaya*) is used to designate a stupa, the main Buddhist monument generally containing relics, together with its cultic architectural environment dedicated to lay devotion. 'Pagoda' (*hpaya*) is used for both the compound and the reliquary monument. Also, as sanctuaries devoted to the laypeople worship, pagodas (*hpaya*) are clearly distinguished, conceptually and spatially, from monasteries (*hpongyi kyaung*) where monks reside.

² Peter Jackson was among the first to identify and comment on these developments in Thai religiosity in two seminal contributions (Jackson 1999a and 1999b). On the formulation of 'prosperity' cults, see also Pattana Kitiarsa 2011.

military's grip on power left the country behind the global modernisation trend and seemingly cut it off from foreign influences, yet beginning to experiment with a market economy.³

Changes in Burma's economic conditions had a broad range of consequences for religious practices. The junta embellished the Buddhist material dispensation and financed restorations by offering monopolistic positions to tycoons who were willing to provide major religious donations.⁴ However, the mushrooming of the iconography of pagoda guardians in many Buddhist sanctuaries since the 1990s cannot be attributed solely to the junta's intervention. This new iconography also reflects the new needs of growing urban populations and their impact on the practices of ritual specialists of various stamps. On the one hand, the growing visibility of pagoda guardians, which are associated with the protection of the Buddhist material dispensation, is interlocked with the expansion of the sphere of esoteric Buddhist practices known as the *weikza* path under the post-1988 juntas. On the other hand, pagoda guardians also entered the spirit mediumship domain through being summoned and embodied by spirit mediums during spirit possession ceremonies – a point of intersection of spirit possession with Buddhism in the field of religion that parallels the cases presented in this book by Visisya Pinthongvijayakul, Kazuo Fukuura and Irene Stengs. The growing visibility of pagoda guardians throughout Burma also corresponds to a new stage in these processes of

³ Prompted by the regime's economic failure, General Ne Win's one-party-led 'Burmese Way to Socialism' ended with the 1988 general insurrection. In September of the same year, a coup restored military rule under the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), which subsequently mutated into the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) in 1996. Both these regimes allowed for a market economy that mainly profited military allies. While a 'Roadmap to Democracy' had already been laid out in 2003 it was only implemented in 2008, following the monk-led Saffron Revolution and the Nargis cyclone disaster, when a new constitution was submitted to the people. In 2011, a first semi-civilian government was set up with a mandate to lead the political transition, after the military-linked USDP (Union for Solidarity and Development Party) had won the general elections. The Aung San Suu Kyi led National League for Democracy won the 2015 general elections, enabling the first democratic transfer of power under the new constitution as well as the subsequent elections, in November 2020, by landslides. However, the then-chief of the army, Min Aung Hlaing, contested the result and took over power on 1 February of 2021, thus bringing an abrupt end to the democratic experiment.

⁴ Juliane Schober (2011) explains how the Burmese junta's post-1988 systematic policy of funding and supporting Buddhist institutions as an alternative source of legitimation led to the transformation of the whole Buddhist national community into a ritual network. To date, documentation of cases of junta-sponsored foundation or renovation of Buddhist monuments and institutions, which networks were activated, and under which procedures, has not been undertaken systematically.

simultaneous and recurrent identifications and differentiations within the ‘religious field’ (Bourdieu 1971).

The growing fame achieved by Mya Nan Nwe, the guardian lady of Botataung Pagoda in Yangon, pertains to this broader ritual context. Mya Nan Nwe, the personal name by which she came to be known, could be rendered as the ‘Creeper of the Emerald Palace’. Recently, she has gained repute among tourist devotees from Thailand as the ‘Whispering Lady’. However, when ritual specialists evoke various *thaik nan shin*, they call her the ‘Botataung Lady’ (Botataung *medaw*), thus acknowledging the name of the Buddhist sanctuary in Yangon that she presides over.

She gets her own dedicated sanctuary located outside of the Botataung Pagoda enclosed compound, which occupies about half of a city block, 100 meters by 150 meters, with gardens and various pavilions around the platform that supports the stupa and its surrounding walkway. Outside of this enclosure and across from its main entrance, a two-storey pavilion hosts a beautiful golden image of Gotama Buddha replete with royal paraphernalia. In the middle of the large room, one’s eyes are drawn to the image of Mya Nan Nwe, pictured as a young, kneeling woman. Surrounded by all sorts of offerings, she is dressed alternatively in the pink attire of a Buddhist nun or in the green regal costume of a *naga*-like princess, according to the time of the year and the particular vows of devotees who dress her on a given day. This difference in dress reflects the ambiguity of this figure who is imagined both as a Buddhist devotee and as a *naga* species: *naga* are mythical ophidian beings living underground. With time, Mya Nan Nwe’s public support has grown and devotees now must queue to get closer and address their requests to her; as she is known to whisper messages in reply to her worshippers.

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(Insert Figure 2.1 around here).

Caption: Devotees presenting a glass of milk to Mya Nan Nwe in her green attire. Photo: Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière.

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The Lady's pavilion is a unique invention from the late 1990s; before this, as with most pagoda guardians, she occupied a humble shrine on the platform around the stupa. As her cult gained popularity, however, critics of a variety of stripes converged on the idea that her image should be relocated outside of the pagoda enclosure. This speaks of a possible contestation regarding what is 'acceptable' or not in a 'religious' space, according to relative positioning in a given socio-religious context.

Debates about the delineation of 'religion' are largely informed by the construction of this normative category in the wake of the 19th-century Western imperial encounter with the 'other'.⁵ In Burma, the overall relationships between lay and monastic domains were reordered to conform with the construction of Buddhism as a 'religion'.⁶ This reordering had multiple implications. Among them was the autonomisation of the pantheon of tutelary spirits (*nat*) known as the Thirty-seven Lords from the overarching sovereignty of Buddhist kingship and the subsequent development of professional spirit mediumship, as I discuss in other works.⁷ Another effect was the coalescence of a distinctive esoteric field around the *weikza*. *Weikza* are figures representing lay religious virtuoso experts in various mundane 'knowledges' (*weikza* from the Pali *vijjā*) that gradually had been expelled from the monastic curriculum through various reforms implemented by 19th-century kings Bodawpaya and Mindon (Dhammasami 2004). Through intensive religious practice and expertise, these

⁵ 'Religion' is a Western category initially meant to designate Christianity. The modern understanding of this term emerged both out of the encounters of Christendom with other 'religions' and of the Enlightenment struggles to differentiate rational knowledge from doctrinal precepts. First appropriated by Western scholars to make sense of a wide variety of practices, beliefs and experiences observed among non-Western peoples, 'religion' emerged from this genealogy as a prescriptive and normative category that was then re-appropriated by those non-Western peoples. In other words, as a category, 'religion' is the product of entangled histories between the West and the rest of the world and needs to be analysed as such. For a critique of 'religion' as a category, see, among others, Masuzawa 2005. For its appropriations in Southeast Asian contexts, see Picard's *Introduction* to his edited volume (Picard 2017), and my chapter in the same volume (Brac de la Perrière 2017).

⁶ On the impact of the Western encounter on the Buddhist religious field in Burma, see Houtman 1990, Alexey Kirichenko 2009, Turner 2014, and Brac de la Perrière 2017. 'Religion' in the Western sense of a faith individually professed appeared for the first time in Anglo-Burmese dictionaries around 1850 as one of the meanings of *batha* (from Pali *bhāsā*, language), in addition to the pervasive notion of *thathana* (Pali *sāsana*) denoting the Burmese Buddhicised social space.

⁷ For a synthesis of these works, see Brac de la Perrière 2016. For an account of the late 20th-century emergence of professional spirit mediums in urban Thailand inspired by Bourdieu's theory of the dynamics of religious fields, which is akin to my own, see White's thesis, 2014.

virtuosi were considered to have gained extraordinary powers that enabled them to escape the cycle of rebirth while remaining available in this world to rescue people and defend the Buddha's teachings and dispensation (*thathana*, from the Pali *sāsana*). A number of these figures are known to have headed the insurrections that followed Upper Burma's annexation by the British in 1885.⁸ Today, the most-worshipped figure among *weikza* followers is Bomingaung, a virtuoso who is supposed to have escaped from the cycle of life and rebirth at Mt Popa (Central Burma), in 1952.

Nat and *weikza* domains continued to evolve throughout the 20th-century in Burma through continuous interplay with one another and also with the domain of monasticism. Together, the three domains now bound the entire 'religious field' defined as the Buddhist *thathana*. Insiders on each of these paths assert that their specific beliefs and practices are 'truly' Buddhist and Burmese. *Nat* worshippers also make this claim, but modernist Buddhists dismiss them on the ground that *nat* worship is more 'traditional' than 'pure' Buddhism. Similarly, claims by *weikza* followers are seen as reminiscent of the 'false' medieval *ari* Buddhism, which had been eradicated when new doctrinal trends introduced from Ceylon were institutionalised. In other words, practitioners on these paths evaluate each other in relative terms, according to a Buddhist discursive scale of value in the overall 'religious field' as captured by the term, 'Burmese Buddhism'.

Another debate affecting the understanding of the development of new cults, such as that of Mya Nan Nwe, pertains to 'new animism' ontologies, as expounded by Benjamin Baumann in his chapter here, which posit a kind of relationality that crosses human and nonhuman realms. As we shall see, as an object of worship, Mya Nan Nwe displays a marked ambiguity, being both a devotee who works at the pagoda and a female *naga* who emerges from the underground and can assume a womanly form for periods of time. This ambiguity, created by the varieties of practice associated with her, makes it difficult to understand this cult as the pure product of an 'animist collective' rationale. It also brings to light the fact that religious change emerges from shifting ground rather than forming a linear continuity: Mya Nan Nwe is not uniquely shaped by analogical 'traditional' worship of tutelary spirits (*nat*) nor by animist logic.

⁸ On the *weikza* path as an original aspect of Burmese Buddhism see Mendelson 1961, Spiro 1967 and Brac de la Perrière, Rozenberg & Turner (eds) 2014.

In this chapter, I show how such internal dynamics of the religious field operate today in a specific place, the Botataung religious complex in Yangon, by focusing on the annual celebration of the *thaik* Lady, Mya Nan Nwe. In a previous paper, I argued that by relocating the image and shrine of the Lady outside of the pagoda compound in the late 1990s, her ambiguity as a religious and spiritual figure has been allowed to fully express itself (Brac de la Perrière 2011: 172–173). I now want to show how the Lady’s birthday celebration emerged as a complex event that combines features of a religious virtuoso anniversary with those of a spirit festival; of a traditional seasonal ritual to the Buddhist saint Upagot (Upagutta) together with a typical pagoda festival. In other words, this celebration has become a *forum* where actors from various segments of the complex Burmese religious field interact, compete and differentiate themselves.⁹

After locating Botataung Pagoda as a place in Yangon’s Buddhist landscape, this chapter proceeds to trace the postwar history of the Lady’s place in the religious complex. Competing interpretations of the Lady’s relocation out of the Buddhist sanctuary are then analysed before discussing day-to-day and birthday ritual practices. I propose to analyse the Lady’s birthday as a forum-like ritual event, in light of divergent embodiment politics displayed according to multiple, involved segments of the religious field.

Botataung Pagoda as a place in the Buddhist city landscape

As is the case for all pagoda guardians, the *naga*-like Lady known as Mya Nan Nwe is spiritually attached to the Buddhist stupa she is supposed to serve, even though her own sanctuary has now been relocated outside of the pagoda enclosure. Botataung Pagoda is located at the southeast corner of Yangon’s urban grid. The British authorities designed this grid when they choose to make Yangon the capital of their new colony after the Second Anglo–Burmese war in 1853. The grid, positioned with Sule stupa at its centre, stretches from

⁹ Materials for this chapter have been gathered during my recurrent visits to the site since the end of the 1990s. I conducted a more systematic observation of rituals and interviewed local personalities in 2010, 2011, 2013, 2015 and 2016, particularly during the Lady’s birthday period at the end of December. Finally, I met with the new trustee-board members of the Botataung religious complex in February 2019, for an interview aimed at following up changes since their coming to office in 2016, and I also observed the January 2020 celebration.

West to East along the Yangon River. It was organised in such a way that all the Buddhist monasteries were relocated to either end, along Phongyi Road to the west, and Botataung Road to the east.¹⁰ Botataung Pagoda sits on a large esplanade along the river leading to the Botataung jetty, where many commuters from the suburbs across the river arrive and depart daily. Dockworker housing is located to the west, on the street behind the pagoda enclosure, and the large grounds devoted to port activities are just beyond the grid, behind the monasteries towards the east. Botataung Pagoda is thus a port landmark, as well.

To the North of the colonial urban grid lies Shwedagon Pagoda, which contains a major historic stupa that served as a pilgrimage centre for Buddhist kings and is still the dominant feature of the Yangon cityscape. All three Buddhist sanctuaries, Shwedagon, Sule and Botataung, are famous for their ancient stupas, which are known to contain hair relics of the Buddha. Together with Kyaikkasan Pagoda and other sanctuaries located in the neighbouring towns of Hmawbi and Twanthe, they contribute to an overarching narrative of the Irrawaddy delta's Buddhicisation, conveyed through evolving pagoda histories and imaginings. This narrative focuses on Shwedagon Pagoda and is the outcome of a progressive elaboration that followed the urban development of Yangon (Brac de la Perrière 1995).

The founding legend of Shwedagon deals with hair relics given by the living Buddha to two merchant brothers who brought them back from India to Okkalapa, a legendary Mon king (Pearn 1939: 9). The hair relics were then enshrined on the top of Shwedagon hill, identified as a site where Buddhist relics from Buddhas of preceding eras had been buried and, thus, was imagined worthy of receiving the new relics. According to this story, King Okkalapa's rediscovery of this Buddhist site during Gotama's time was facilitated by very old Buddhist spirits known as *bobogyi*, who had been granted guardianship of relics by Thidja/Sakka, the head of the abode of divinities and guardian of Buddhism. As the Yangon urban space developed, this story evolved as well; the agency of *bobogyi* figures was invoked to describe and explain a single network that came to include several neighbouring ancient hair relic pagodas (Brac de la Perrière 1995, 2019).

According to Donald Stadner (2011: 86), the Botataung Pagoda had not been a part of this narrative until World War II, when bombings destroyed the masonry of the original stupa and

¹⁰ On urban planning as a secular colonial pedagogy, see Turner 2021.

disclosed a hair reliquary in the inner chamber. The reconstruction of the sanctuary was one of the collective undertakings that bonded the Burmese Buddhist community together during the early independence period. A completely new design was envisioned to keep the newly discovered inner reliquary visible for devotees. While the architectural change supported the narrative evolution, it also sustained the imagination of reliquary guardian spirits. At this time, Botataung Pagoda's history was rewritten and included in the Shwedagon founding narrative as follows: King Okkalapa would have insisted that one of the merchant brothers build a stupa for one of the hair relics on the spot where the boats had landed, that is, Botataung.¹¹ Further, when the newly designed monument was first presented to the public, a *bobogyi* image appeared, on the sanctuary platform (Stadner 2011: 86). In other words, Botataung Pagoda can be seen as one of the places where the Burmese have imagined their collective Buddhist identity as a modern and independent national community after independence – and also as one of the sites that mark the urban landscape of Yangon as Buddhist.¹²

The research setting

The Botataung Lady made her appearance in parallel with the *bobogyi*'s entry in the pagoda compound when the stupa was rebuilt after the war. Nobody remembers who first donated the small statue of the Lady, the one that graced the restored stupa's platform until the 1990s. But the common opinion is that it must have been someone among the volunteers who enthusiastically contributed to the rebuilding of the monument. Because they are believed to be in charge of protecting the concealed riches of pagodas, most pagoda treasure-guarding Ladies (*thaik medaw*) are imagined as *thaik-naga*, that is, *thaik* of the *naga* species, which take on a human appearance.¹³ Like many other *thaik*, the Lady of Botataung was then represented as a young and beautiful standing woman with a *naga* headdress and holding

¹¹ While I was unable to locate Botataung Pagoda's history pre-dating World War II, I recently collected a book on Mya Nan Nwe by the late pagoda trustee, Aung Hsu Shin, in which he refers to three successive versions of the Botataung relic history (2008).

¹² Of course, this imagination of the Yangon urban landscape as Buddhist flies in the face of numerous mosques, Hindu temples and churches, particularly inside the colonial urban grid where the colonial authorities had set aside locations for various other religious communities' sanctuaries in addition to Buddhist ones.

¹³ However, as we shall see, the *naga* nature of *thaik* Ladies may be contested by some informants. The ambiguity of these spiritual beings may be associated with that of *naga* as a species in the Buddhist cosmology.

naga heads in each of her hands. She stood in a small shrine on the stupa's platform, and devotees would present small offerings, such as flowers, in exchange for her blessings. When the boon requested of the Lady was significant, she was presented with the standard offering of *kadaw bwe*, comprised of a coconut, some bananas, some betel and assorted leaves, and which may be offered to any spiritual being in Burma.

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(Insert Figure 2.2 around here)

Caption: The original tiny image of Mya Nan Nwe holding *naga* heads and with a *naga* headdress. Photo: Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière.

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This was what I observed when I visited the pagoda in the mid-1990s, before this original image of the Lady was moved to her new location in a pavilion outside of the pagoda compound. At that time, Botataung Pagoda was somewhat forgotten, nothing more than a remote and poorly maintained urban pagoda, lying amidst sluggish port activity in a part of the city with many decrepit old buildings, which seemed asleep and flooded badly during the monsoon rains. Nothing is the same today. Since the middle of the first decade of the new century, this part of the city has undergone tremendous change. Large middle-class housing has been systematically developed. Gradually, a more cosmopolitan population has inhabited the area and Botataung open space has become a favourite spot for new open-air activities. Port traffic is now vigorous, and piles of containers jut out just beyond the monasteries' luxuriant gardens. Above all, the pagoda has been refurbished again, and is now visited by flocks of Burmese pilgrims and foreign tourists who add vigour to the local economy.

This restored prosperity, although mirroring the renewed affluence of the surroundings, seems to have been first elicited by the increase of worship to the Botataung Lady, which is consistent with the general intensification of *thaik nan shin* worship. During the 1990s, Mya Nan Nwe attracted ever more numerous worshippers beyond the local public, many of whom sought specific boons from her. Because of the growing number of worshippers, the pagoda's trustee board decided to accommodate her devotion in a specific two-storey building that has since served as her sanctuary, opposite the entrance of the pagoda compound. The decision was made partly out of convenience, to rationalise the collection of the growing offerings to the Lady that benefited the whole religious complex. At the same time, it returned the focus

within the pagoda to the Buddha's relics inside the stupa; the Lady was relegated outside to a less valued location that was in keeping with the trustees' understanding of her religious status.

In this sense, the Botataung Lady, whose post-Independence representation preceded a wave of pagoda-guardian materialisations of the 1990s, has met with a unique destiny by being ousted from the Buddhist sanctuary. Since that time, Mya Nan Nwe's new shrine has become a major attraction of the Botataung religious complex, which has led to further developments and diversifications of the ritual activities associated with her. Further, in a major policy change following trustee elections in 2016, the new board decided that all contributions collected from the Lady's worship would be devoted to her pavilion maintenance.

The Lady's ability to flourish despite banishment is a significant precedent of the new pervasiveness of pagoda guardians. Local ritual activities have expanded at an incremental pace, and Mya Nan Nwe's influence goes beyond Botataung and into various domains of Burmese religiosity. Together with Saw Mun Hla,¹⁴ she has even become one of the two main *thaik nan shin* figures of possession in spirit possession ceremonies to the Thirty-seven Lords.

A pluralistic history of the Botataung Lady's displacement

While talking with various people linked to Botataung religious complex in the course of my observations, I came across competing versions of the Lady's relocation outside the pagoda enclosure. Her particular destiny is related to the fact that the inner reliquary of the stupa to which she is bound as a spiritual figure was uncovered during World War II. However, stories of the Lady are not willingly revealed by devotees. Only when I discovered her transfer, in 2002, was I told that cultic activities around the Lady had grown to such an extent that it was no longer possible to accommodate them on the walkway around the stupa. The pagoda trustees had decided to expel the Lady from the Buddhist sanctuary because the devotions she received were not compatible with such a place.

¹⁴ Saw Mun Hla, a Shan spouse of King Anawratha, is the guardian Lady of Shwezayan Pagoda, on the road from Mandalay to the Shan states in Upper Burma. See Foxeus 2017 about her cult new developments.

However, the story I heard in 2011 from Uncle Hsu, then head of the pagoda's trustee board, was somewhat different.¹⁵ I had been introduced to this official by Daw Saw, a woman professing to be a specialist of the *weikza* path and active in the celebration of the Lady's birthday, performed around the end of December since its inception in 2001. An old man of 86, Uncle Hsu had worked as an architect. Bright and articulate, he was also fluent in English and turned to this language every time he addressed me specifically. Daw Saw, who also understands English, concluded with a disapproving air that the story he had told me was different from the one she had previously heard from him. Here is the version he gave me.

When he became the head of the trustee board in 1988, Uncle Hsu immediately planned to repair an old pavilion that housed a valuable Buddha image opposite the entrance of the pagoda compound. The image probably had been donated long ago by a rich woman who owned a ruby mine in Mogok, Kachin State. He looked for her without success. She was probably already dead. Then he thought about secretly ordering a statue that represented this rich devotee in a unique, kneeling position, and to place it in the pavilion. He tried to convince the trustees to support his project, but they asked him to first gain support from the nearby monasteries. Seven monks voiced their strong opposition against this iconographic innovation, even after he pointed out the economic value of his proposal. They finally changed their minds after he took them to the Ananda Pagoda in Pagan and showed them a representation of King Kyanzitha kneeling in front of the Buddha's image that convinced them of the acceptability of this iconography.

The head trustee told me this history without any reference to the *thaik nan shin* Lady, although the image of the Lady that had graced the stupa platform was duly relocated outside the compound, next to the new representation of the kneeling devotee-woman. He presented this new development of the Botataung Buddhist establishment as the result of his negotiation with the monks and of the devotion of the general public. Indeed, devotees come in large numbers to worship Mya Nan Nwe and make ritual offerings to her in her new sanctuary. The

¹⁵ Uncle Hsu, aka Aung Hsu Shin, was head of the trustee's board from 1988 until his death in 2015. He had already been interviewed by Western scholars on the cultic history of the Lady, as we can learn from Mandy Sadan (2005: 98) and Donald Stadner (2011: 86). He had also authored a book in Burmese on Mya Nan Nwe about which he told me nothing when I met him; I discovered it recently, while conducting background research for this chapter (Aung Hsu Shin 2008).

tiny golden statue of the standing *thaik-naga* Lady is still visible close to the shiny colourful new one of the kneeling devotee-woman, testifying to their spiritual connection. In Uncle Hsu's narrative, the elision of the previous appearance of the tiny *thaik-naga* Lady statue on the stupa walkway bespeaks of his reluctance to make a place for her in the picture he drew for me. I had received a somewhat rationalised version of the Botataung Lady's worship history, which contrasted with his Burmese-language book's narrative that can be read as seeking to arouse uncanny feelings and a sense of devotion among the Burmese Buddhist public.¹⁶

The new image is alternately dressed in the flashy green robes of *thaik-naga* Ladies or in the pink ones of nuns, testifying to the caring love of her worshipers as well as of their imagination of her as both a Buddhist devotee and a *thaik-naga* being. The space around the statue is full of coconuts along with glasses of milk, a specific *naga* food. Glass donation boxes are full of banknotes. To everyone in the public, the figure of the kneeling devotee-woman is that of the Botataung Lady. Even the head trustee's plan to rationalise the collection of religious donations was meant to direct the economic elements of this growing devotion toward the religious estate more generally. When I remarked that his actions contributed to her fame, he agreed, somewhat mischievously. Actually, the old man had played on the ambiguity of the kneeling woman, who captures the imagination of Mya Nan Nwe's devotees and can also be interpreted as an ancient representation of 'pure' Buddhist devotion, complete with an incontrovertible historical precedent at Pagan.

The abbot of the Neikban Kyaung, a nearby monastery belonging to the monastic complex opposite to the pagoda, has a somewhat different version of Mya Nan Nwe's story. He was not part of the meetings related by Uncle Hsu. But he had heard the story from one of the monks involved in the decision to develop a new Mya Nan Nwe sanctuary. According to this story, Mya Nan Nwe was a woman who volunteered to rebuild the pagoda after World War II and who later offered the valuable Buddha image before she disappeared. Nobody has ever heard from her since, nor has she ever been seen, of course. Without establishing an explicit causal link, the monk then further explained that she was a *naga*, a being linked to the water

¹⁶ Uncle Hsu's somewhat flattering declaration during our discussion that I would be an ambassador of Burmese culture in writing about Mya Nan Nwe made it obvious to me that he was fully aware that his statements about the Lady of Botataung could impact Westerners' perceptions of Burmese Buddhism abroad.

realm. *Nagas* are snakes created out of the imagination of craftsmen, he told me, but the way he explained the weird vanishing of the woman fits well with one of the features of *naga* imaginary. *Nagas* can only take on the appearance of human beings for a short time. Quite reluctantly, the monk implicitly revealed the story as it is envisioned by many devotees: the woman who helped restore the pagoda and who offered a Buddha image was actually the *thaik-naga* guardian of the pagoda. In the monk's story, the figure's rationalisation takes a deeper dive: the focus on the pagoda-builder aspect of the Lady nurtures her role as a pagoda guardian.

The old muddy market for ritual offerings (coconuts, bananas, leaves and flowers) was rebuilt to new standards in 2016. Here, a vendor of coconut and banana offerings for the Lady's worship told me yet another tale. In his eyes, to worship Mya Nan Nwe in this way was not 'truly' Buddhist. This was an Indian practice, he explained to me, using the common but derogatory term *kala* for 'Indian'. Indeed, the offerings to the Lady were called *puzaw bwe*, a word that derives from the Sanskrit word, *pūja*.¹⁷ Besides that, among the flock of devotees, "only 6 out of 10 were Burmese". Distancing himself from these practices – which in his eyes were not Buddhist enough because they were not Burmese enough – the sceptical merchant nevertheless stated that selling coconut and banana offerings was *ahlu*, a Buddhist meritorious deed. *Ahlu*, Burmese for the Pali *dāna*, means 'religious donation' that forms the heart of the religious practice of lay Buddhists in Burma. While criticising the worship of the Lady with offerings, he nonetheless believed that the devotees' purchases from his business rose to the level of *ahlu* and contributed to his own merit.

Well aware of the developments involved with the place, the seller accurately stated that many devotees were not Burmese. A lot of them are from the newly expanding middle classes of Burma's Theravada Buddhist neighbour, Thailand, who have started to tour the region in imitation of the global touristic leisure culture. The rumour about the 'Whispering' Lady's powers has quickly disseminated among Thai tourists, many of whom request a visit to Botataung Pagoda as a part of their visit to Yangon. This has contributed to reinforcing the transformation of the whole site as a commodified cultic place while also boosting the

¹⁷However, the devotees would rather use *kadaw bwe*, 'ritual offerings', for the offerings to the Botataung Lady. By using *puzaw bwe*, the merchant clearly located himself in a Buddhist reformist discourse, dismissing devotional offerings to spirits as not 'truly' Buddhist. On the differentiation of religious transactions, see Brac de la Perrière 2015.

worship of Botataung *bobogyi*, the male guardian who remained inside the pagoda compound while the Lady's worship was taken out. A special corner of the market is now well stocked with Thai-style glass amulets containing a miniature of the Botataung *bobogyi*, making it a body-portative image, something never heard of in Burma before this market's renovation.¹⁸ Finally, in the pagoda compound, the *bobogyi* pavilion has been renovated by the new trustee-board so as to accommodate the growing flux of tourists and pilgrims coming to pay him their homage.

Commodification of devotional practice is clearly on the rise, facilitated by the development of inter-Asian tourism. However, the Burmese public continue largely to distance themselves from Thai tourists' behaviour at religious sites and they have not adopted Thai-style amulets. Still, unlike the coconut seller above, they do not dismiss Thai tourists' practices as not being truly Buddhist. Some Burmese devotional figures have been introduced into the Thai spiritual landscape and, when tourists visit them at their original sanctuaries in Burma, Thai ways of worship have been accommodated at touristified places such as the Botataung complex, even though they have not entered Burmese practice. However, the high regard that Thai tourists have for the Botataung Lady and *bobogyi* enables Burmese to grasp something of the potency that their devotional figures may have for Thais.

The Lady's fame not only contributes to making the Botataung site a forum-like place where all kinds of Burmese religious practitioners converge, but also adds a new sense of cosmopolitanism that fits well with the development of the urban surroundings. The large religious estate and the port open space have also become a major recreational spot. Going from one group to another among those making their living out of Mya Nan Nwe's fame, one encounters various impressions of the mysterious Lady. Above all, she is a polyvalent figure that can accommodate various personae: at the very least, a *thaik naga*, a Buddha devotee or a

¹⁸ Amulet worship in Thailand dates back to the 1950s and has since developed into a prosperous economy of commodified religious goods. See particularly Tambiah 1984, Jackson 1999a, 1999b and Pattana 2012. Significantly, Burmese *bobogyi* have also found their way to Thailand as explained by Neeranoch Malangoo in her talk at the workshop 'Interrogating Buddhism and Nationalism' (Oxford, 27–28 January 2018). Temples with Burmese *bobogyi* now exist in Thailand, which speaks to the development of transnational ritual exchanges. In the past decade, the cult of Botataung *bobogyi* has been established in Thailand where he is renamed in Thai as *Thep Than-jai*, 'the deity who grants boons expeditiously'.

nun, a multiplicity that appeals to growing flocks of devotees from various strands of the complex religious field described above.

Day-to-day devotional rituals: A spiritual presence without embodiment

During everyday rituals performed by devotees and visitors alike at the Mya Nan Nwe's temple, people come in small groups to present their requests to her and offer the standard basin with coconuts, bananas and leaves (*kadaw bwe*), together with foods specific to the worship of *naga* beings (fruits and milk), and the green scarves that are given to all *thaik* ladies. Until recently, no ritual specialist had been assigned to the Lady's sanctuary, which instead had been a public worship place open to anyone wishing to experience personally her spiritual presence through her figurative image. It was made for devotees who arrived as individuals, presenting their offerings and their requests to the Lady. However, with the increase in the size of the crowds over time, the new trustee board has allowed registered laymen with a religious inclination to assist the many devotees who do not dare to address the Lady directly, phrasing their requests in an appropriate way.

The main activity in the shrine is the presentation of these offerings to the main image of the Lady. The devotees do not carry these items themselves. Rather, a team of women makes a meagre living from bearing basins filled with newly purchased offerings from the nearby stalls of the sellers into the sanctuary and placing them near the Lady's figure, and replacing them with new ones. In addition, the board of trustees hires custodians who maintain vigil all day long and ensure that everything goes well. The continuous flow of devotees and their offerings speaks to the Lady's popularity.

However, the success of the Lady would not have reached such heights without the mediation of ritual specialists who bring their devotee-clients to the Lady. Most of these specialists, identified as *medaw* or *bodaw* – mostly but not exclusively women (*medaw*) from what I have observed – are followers of the *weikza* path whose mediation with spiritual entities related to the *weikza* sphere — *bobogyi*, *thaik* ladies, *bilu* and other *weikza* figures – is sought after by simple devotees.¹⁹ Guiding their clients to the shrine and presenting their offerings to Mya Nan Nwe, *medaw* sometimes start to speak with the Lady's voice, softly, foretelling the

¹⁹ *Medaw* may also be addressed as *hasayama*, 'female teacher' (See Foxeus, this volume).

devotees' future.²⁰ If a custodian takes notice, he swiftly puts an end to the process – unless he is offered a small bribe for his understanding. However, the main activity in the sanctuary remains individual, face-to-face encounter with the Lady, whose numerous devotees whisper their most secret wishes directly into her ears.

Some professional spirit mediums (*nat kadaw*) come to the Lady's shrine as simple devotees, without performing spirit possession in this context. Indeed, at one time, signs written in bold red letters warned the public that any manifestation of the Lady through oracles or any embodiment of the Lady through dances was forbidden inside the building. Her role as a caretaker of the local Buddhist material dispensation has led the pagoda trustees' board to ban any form of spirit mediumship inside her shrine. However, striking features of the place are the multiplication of pictures of the Lady donated by devotees and the mirror reflecting her representation. In these many images, she is dressed in her various religious or regal clothes. These many images create a saturated visual space, producing a deep feeling of Mya Nan Nwe's presence, what Irene Stengs in her chapter here aptly describes as an 'oneiric space'²¹.

This charged atmosphere may compensate for the ban on the Lady's manifestation through possession dances or oracles inside her sanctuary. But it may also induce embodiment among the ritual specialists who practise in the contiguous field of spirit possession. Possession dances are certainly not expected in the Lady's sanctuary, contrary to what happens in temples of the Thirty-seven Lords' pantheon and in Saw Mun Hla's sanctuary at Shwezayan pagoda (Foxeus 2017), the other *thaik* Lady who commonly possesses specialists during spirit possession séances.

Actually, the absence of any dance or music orchestra marks out Mya Nan Nwe's sanctuary as distinct from spirit (*nat*) temples and Saw Mun Hla's shrine. The spatial ordering also contrasts. Offerings and devotion focus on the central kneeling Lady's figure, herself paying homage to the Buddha's image, rather than on the 'sacred' side of the room where the golden statue of Gotama sits. Through this *mise en abyme* of devotion to the devotee, the Lady's worship in her new Botataung sanctuary is distinguished from the worship of other spiritual

²⁰ I occasionally observed this form of oracular possession in this context some years ago, but not recently: its repression seems to have put an end to these possessions.

²¹ See Chapter 9 in this volume.

figures by various specialists, such as the spirit mediums (*nat kadaw*) or *medaw* and *bodaw* who follow the *weikza* path. Particularly, spirit mediums' practices in their respective ritual contexts focus instead on spirit mediumship, that is, on the re-presentation of the spiritual through its embodiment.

The Lady's annual birthday celebration: A forum-like ritual event

Truly diversified ritual practices come together during Mya Nan Nwe's annual birthday celebration. On this occasion, the ability of the figure to attract a large range of specialists is fully visible. The Lady's birthday has been celebrated around the end of December every year since 2001, two years after she had been relocated to her new pavilion opposite the pagoda compound main entrance. This probably started as a limited celebration by her closest followers.²² Mya Nan Nwe's birth date was determined by the pagoda trustees' board after the Lady's main *medaw* reported having learnt this date by a direct oracular message from the Lady in her dreams.²³ The event started as a small affair: *medaw* and *bodaw* who claimed to be spiritually linked to the Lady presented religious offerings, shared birthday cakes, and called on their followers to take turns celebrating in the privacy of the shrine's upstairs room.

The celebration of her birthday in 2020 took place from 2–4 January to give devotional space to the three main original groups of devotees, led by *medaw* who took charge, in turn, of each day's celebration.²⁴ The birthday program started the night before, when the kneeling Lady

²² To note, the anniversary of Bomingaung, the main cultic figure among the *weikza* today, started in the same way as a limited celebration from 1994 onwards to celebrate the *weikza*'s exit from the life cycle (*htwek yap pauk*) on the second waning day of Tawthalin (in September) in 1952 at Mt Popa in Upper Burma. Since 2002, it has become a huge gathering of *weikza* followers and ritual specialists known as the festival of (Bomingaung's) "way out" (*htwek bwe*) (Brac de la Perrière 2014).

²³ This event reveals the importance of oneiric manifestations in the development of Mya Nan Nwe's cult, which is also consistent with the development of many cults pertaining to the *weikza* field. In his book, Uncle Hsu does not identify who among the main actors of the celebration was his informant, but he does include a photograph of the Buddha image Mya Nan Nwe had donated. The photo includes a black signboard that identifies the Lady's birth date as 22 December 1906; this signboard is no longer exhibited publicly (Aung Hsu Shin 2008, picture 5 and pp. 27–28). The date corresponds to the 9th of Pyatho according to the Burmese calendar, which is the reference used to calculate the date every year.

²⁴ The three main devotee leaders are Daw Wa Wa Tan, Shwe Naga Daw Saw and Daw Tin Myint, who set up the birthday celebration together with the trustees around twenty years ago. The two associate devotees in charge of the floral decorations are Hsaya U Nan Way Aung

was given new make-up and clothes, a ritual repeated each evening as the *medaws* competed to create the most resplendent figure. Each day's program combined birthday celebration with Buddhist prayers and meritorious practices.

On the first day, a marginal group led by two male devotees calling themselves *nagani* (red *naga*) set up luxuriant flower decorations around the kneeling Lady. They also made three impressive flower piles inside the Lady's pavilion for the three main guardian divinities of Botataung Pagoda and at 10:00 a.m. led the collective Buddhist recitation of the "flower *cetiya*" (*pan zaydi*) prayer in front of the Buddha image, which really started the celebration. The opening ceremony was then performed outdoors, in front of the pavilion's entrance with a release of balloons, group photographs, and music and dances performed exclusively by ordinary devotees; as usual, devotee leaders refrained from dancing in public. Then, a chapter of 11 monks whose day had begun with breakfast served upstairs at 5:30 a.m. came back from their monasteries where they had retired in the time between. The senior monk delivered a Buddhist predication to the collective of devotees, also upstairs, which was followed by a joint merit-sharing ritual, before the monks' principal meal service around 11:30 a.m. This program was replicated on the following day with the addition of spectacular birthday cakes being shared among the leaders' entourages and the singing of *Happy Birthday to You* in English, followed by hand clapping. The third and final day concluded with a final predication by monks, upstairs in the pavilion, and sharing of merit. Then, the celebration was declared successful as audience members threw banknotes and proclaimed 'Victory!' (*Aung bi*).

During these upstairs proceedings, ordinary devotees and pilgrims continued to pay their respects to the Lady in the temple's main room, which became overloaded with flower decorations and offerings. A number of food distributions also occurred downstairs, offered by devotee leaders to any visitor, which added to the affluence and the joyful atmosphere. Over the years, this birthday celebration program has progressively expanded outside of the temple and, by 2020, it had become an extraordinarily complex and festive event, a forum-like one in which various actors – other than the three original devotee leaders – come

and Naga Ni Ko Nyunt Win. These two devotees claim to have had a long spiritual relationship with Mya Nan Nwe and to have organised the cult to her before her first birthday celebration. They are also critical of the trustees' version of Mya Nan Nwe's emergence story.

together, each with a discrete agenda associated with their specific religious or ritual strand. Snowballing awareness via word of mouth and reports that appeared in the specialised press explain this success.

Relatively new innovations to the basic celebration include rituals that take place outside of the shrine and involve boatmen who work at the nearby Botataung jetty. Independent groups of devotees buy makeshift palanquins adorned with the Lady's image and loaded with *kadaw bwe*, fruits and milk bought from local vendors.²⁵ They form pageants that include groups of invited musicians called *shan Osi* – from the Shan drum that every group features – who perform mainly for Buddhist ceremonies but not for spirit possession séances (*nat kana bwe*), which require a classical music orchestra (*hsaing waing*). After having paid their respects to the pagoda and the Lady's temple, the pageants head to the jetty where the palanquins are taken by boatmen to be discarded in the middle of the river.

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(Insert Figure 2.3 around here).

Caption: Mya Nan Nwe palanquins departing on the Yangon River. Photograph: Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière.

**

The parade has become an occasion for the Lady's manifestation within the bodies of female devotees. To the sound of the lively *shan Osi* music, devotees perform the same stunning *thaik-naga* dance that one observes in spirit possession ceremonies (*nat kana bwe*) in two occasions: when Amay Shway Nabay, a *naga* lady in the Thirty-seven Lords pantheon, enters her female mediums;²⁶ and during spontaneous 'wild' (*yain*) possession dances by women in the audience, dances that are usually attributed to unidentified *thaik-naga*. The *thaik-naga* dance is performed with both arms stretched upward along each side of the head, with intermingled hands. In the open-air context of the Botataung parades, dancers remain standing

²⁵ The image composing the background of the palanquins was first that of the tiny golden *thaik* Lady holding *naga* heads in each hand. The number of palanquins that featured the kneeling devotee-woman was far greater in 2020 than ever before (personal observation).

²⁶ Amay Shway Nabay is an exception among the spiritual figures fostering dances in spirit possession séances in that she mainly possesses female mediums, which contrasts with all the other possessing figures that can enter men as well as women, regardless of their own gender identity.

while in the indoor context of spirit-possession ceremonies, they end up rolling on the ground (*lu-*), ‘as a crawling snake’ after having fallen down backwards, forming an arch.²⁷ Women involved in *thaik-naga* dances during Mya Nan Nwe palanquin pageants look as if their actions are spontaneous, not displaying any particular link to professional mediumship or to a particular *weikza* ritual specialisation. However, a closer look at who participates in these dances soon reveals that a lot of them do in fact belong to these circles. The series of palanquin pageants such as these, accompanied by dancing groups of devotees, make the three-day event a joyful and very entertaining one.²⁸

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(Insert Figure 2.4 around here)

Caption: Performing the arch in the *thaik-naga* dance in front of the palanquin, with a *shan Osi* orchestra. Photograph: Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière.

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In 2015, one famous spirit medium, U Win Hlaing, started to perform a full spirit possession ceremony on the occasion of the Lady’s birthday, using his connections to charter a boat for the elaborate ceremony. He first dedicated his own palanquin to the Lady after having it blessed by a monk and before the boat left the jetty for the one-day performance of Thirty-seven Lords possession dances. Then, he introduced the celebration day by embodying the *naga* king. Indeed, as documented in previous works (Brac de la Perrière 2011, 2014), in the wake of growing figurative representation of pagoda guardians during the 1990s, the growth of devotion to these figures has also allowed for their embodiment during spirit possession performances. However, as *thaik nan shin* are considered to be of a higher rank than spirits belonging to the Thirty-seven Lords, their embodiment at the beginning of the séances is characterised by hieratic dances, which contrast with *thaik-naga* dances performed for Amay Shway Nabay incarnation or outbursts of ‘wild’ possession. U Win Hlaing, one of the most innovative and up-to-date spirit mediums today, has enthusiastically embarked on this path and has sought to enhance his style even more by organising his on-the-water event.

²⁷ An instance of *naga* dance ending up with rolling on the ground in an outdoor context is that of the Amay Shway Nabay festival at Myittou, when the spirit medium rolls out of the shrine on the ground all the way to the waters of the canal (Brac de la Perrière 1998a).

²⁸ During the 2016 celebration, according to vendors at the pagoda market who make the palanquins and sell them for 40 to 100 USD, up to 100 palanquins were sold. And according to the boatmen, 11 boats were fully employed during the three days of the festival to dispose of the palanquins in the river.

For the past few years, another kind of palanquin has entered Botataung jetty: the Botataung dockyard corporation has set up temporary pavilions that back onto the seafront and are used to celebrate Shin Upagot (Upagutta). During a traditional seasonal Buddhist ritual, rafts loaded with images representing this Buddhist saint are released on waterways. He is pictured as a monk sitting and holding his alms bowl, looking upward, illustrating that he is supposed to dwell in the ocean and wait there for food offerings. Because Shin Upagot is linked to the water realm, seamen and boatmen alike worship him. He is commonly called on at the beginning of any Buddhist event to keep trouble away.

Combining its own specific devotion to the seasonal tradition and taking advantage of the Lady's birthday, the dockyard corporation thus adds its own celebration to those of *weikza* path followers and of spirit mediums. The Shin Upagot pavilion is open to the public throughout the Lady's birthday celebration; donations are expected and these are managed by the dockyard event's leaders. On the second day, monks are invited to recite *aneikaza*, the first verse of the first sermon delivered by the Buddha, in front of Shin Upagot's image. In Burma, this performance in the presence of a representation of the Buddha takes place at the consecration of Buddhist images (Brac de la Perrière 2006). Then, the meritorious offering of a meal to monks (*ahlu*) takes place and members of the corporation and their families also share a festive meal together. On the third day, Shin Upagot is released onto the river, retrieved and then taken to the monastery of another community down the river. The leaders of the dock corporation hold that, although its ritual palanquin processions look similar to those for Mya Nan Nwe, and although the two kinds of rituals are celebrated simultaneously, the two celebrations are entirely separate from one another. According to their stance, the Shin Upagot celebrations are exclusively auspicious (*mingala*) and meritorious in intention, and thus 'truly' Buddhist in nature.

In 2020, the celebration further evolved when cruise boats were rented by affluent donors to devotee groups and, following U Win Hlaing's initiative, accommodated a *shan Osi* orchestra and *thaik-naga* dances on board, after having poured onto the waters a special milky preparation to feed the *naga* supposedly living under water. The number of pageants has also grown. On the last day of the 2020 celebration, the trustees opened the pagoda's gardens to eleven pageants, each complete with palanquins, *shan Osi* musicians, specialists and devotee groups, as they waited for tide time, because the port esplanade was too crowded to

accommodate them. All devotees, some hundreds of people, were busy eating snacks, performing various devotions and fidgeting with impatience inside the pagoda precincts before the start of the pageant on the port esplanade. In this febrile atmosphere, some rhythm could not be prevented from being beaten by a drum, which immediately prompted dances by devotee-women. This drew U Ye Myint, the new trustee head, to the spot with two guards who he ordered to suppress the dance upsurge. When I asked him, U Yè Myint repeated that possession dances were strictly forbidden in the pagoda precincts and he revealed to me that for him they were just *meihsa*, 'heresy'. As a trustee, he had to manage the pageants, but next year the board would implement new arrangements to avoid such embarrassment!

Concluding Comments

Altogether, the pageants of Mya Nan Nwe devotees, the spirit possession ceremony of a spirit medium, the celebration of Shin Upagot by the dockworkers, plus the commercial fair and the night sermons delivered by famous monks that the pagoda trustees arranged for the same period, contribute to making the Botataung Lady's birthday an important festive event in Yangon. The whole celebration is characterised by its polymorphous dimensions, informed by the polyvalence of its central figure. Inside the Lady's temple, the combination of Buddhist devotion with the birthday celebration is addressed to Mya Nan Nwe as a Buddhist devotee by the main original devotee groups, while on the port esplanade palanquin pageants accompanied with *shan Osi* music prompt *thaik-naga* dances by ordinary women-devotees.

While not commenting on the arguably competitive relationships between local actors involved (the pagoda trustees' board, the local monasteries' abbots and the Botataung dockyard community), their respective roles need to be further explored in this history of ritual development. Paradoxically, this history is linked to the growing importance of both male and female *weikza* path ritual specialists who, with all their rivalries between themselves and with spirit mediums (*nat kadaw*), act in common as devotee-group leaders during Mya Nan Nwe's birthday celebrations. Interestingly, the Lady's banishment from the pagoda facilitated spirit-oriented ritual developments that would not have occurred so readily if she had remained inside that space.

While all these ritual formats are well represented elsewhere in Burma, their combination in the Botataung Lady's celebration gives the gathering a remarkable forum-like aspect. In this

regard, it resembles annual festival celebrations of the *nat* in their respective original places in Upper Burma, except that the latter are perceived as ‘traditional’ (*yoya*). Another instance of forum-like celebration, calling on a range of spiritual beings and practitioners from various strands of religious life, is the *weikza* Bomingaung’s wayout anniversary at the Mt Popa religious complex, which took this dimension from the 2002 celebrations onwards (Brac de la Perrière 2014). In the Lady’s celebration, this combination has developed across the same period of time, and precisely following the transfer of the Lady’s figure to her new pavilion at the end of the 1990s, when a broader efflorescence of devotion to pagoda guardian spirits was also witnessed throughout Burma.

Comparatively, the development of Mya Nan Nwe’s birthday in a forum-like ritual event may be seen as paralleling the expansion of the festival to the Lady of the Kingdom at the South Vietnam border, since the Doi Moi opening of the Vietnamese economy (see Philip Taylor 2004). There too, groups of recently urbanised devotees attend the festival led by spirit mediums whose practice of goddess embodiment through dance is severely restricted within the temple by the officials in charge, but is expected on the outside, where no oversight is exercised (*ibid.*: ch. 6).²⁹ In this case of a newly developed ritual event that reflects the dynamics of rapid social change, the growing fame of a public devotional figure elicits the spontaneous development of celebrations and attracts specialists from various brands of religiosity. At the same time, at least within the temple, divinity’s dignity is shielded from practices deemed to devalue it as the embodiment of spiritual beings through possession dances.

Mya Nan Nwe’s celebration has produced palpable ritual innovations that draw on many sources. The processional aspect and discarding onto waters of this celebration clearly borrows from the traditional Shin Upagot ritual form. At the same time, the popularity of the Lady’s celebration surely figured in the dockyard community’s decision to revive the Shin Upagot celebration. Another influence at play is the Myittu festival in Upper Burma,

²⁹ It also evokes large-scale Hindu festivals such as Navaratri in Bangkok as analysed by Erick White, in which a diverse collection of Thai Buddhists also participate. He observes that spirit mediums take part in the final procession with all other Thai Buddhist devotees, setting up temporary altars along the route that become focuses of religious devotion. White underscores the ‘social possibilities opened up by a large-scale spectacle of Buddhist devotionism ... sanctioned by orthodox Hinduism’. (2017: 287)

dedicated to Amay Shway Nabay, one of the Thirty-seven Lords. Here, Amay Shway Nabay, a *naga* Lady, is embodied by a female spirit medium who ends her performance by rolling down from the ritual pavilion into the canal waters (Brac de la Perrière 1998). This very specific feature serves as the template for the specific *thaik-naga* dance seen in Botataung, as well as for the discarding of the Lady's palanquins in the river. Further, Botataung pageants have developed in a way that allows independent groups of devotees to conduct *thaik-naga* possession dances outdoors. Thus, the ritual form of sending the Botataung Lady into the river via a palanquin parade is a local innovation that makes use of selected features from various paths of Burmese ritual practices.

Botataung pageants provide ritual space for *thaik-naga* possession dances outside of the institutionalised setting of the Thirty-seven Lords possession séances. In fact, the embodiment of pagoda guardians seems to be a recently developed practice in ritual settings that accommodate spirit mediumship. As guardians of the *thathana*, the relatively high status enjoyed by pagoda guardians forces spirit mediums to give them precedence under their ceremonial pavilions: they are the first invited to 'enter' their mediums through hieratic dances. Spirit mediums now call upon pagoda guardians to provide new avenues of spiritual embodiment practice, in order to satisfy the needs of a diversifying urban public. For them, embodying pagoda guardians through possession dances is one among several strategies that aim to upgrade their practice in Burma's total Buddhist-dominated religious field.

For *weikza* specialists, the manifestation of spiritual partners relates to the display of an energy (*dat si-*) produced by spiritual perfection and departs significantly from the dances characteristic of spirit possession (*nat win-/nat ka-*).³⁰ The embodiment of perfect beings such as *weikza* within human specialists tends to be devalued among their followers. If it occurs at all, it is conceived of as *ideally* being a masculine role. It is static and seated manifestations in the context of *medaw* and *bodaw* private shrines or in pagodas known as places where *weikza* have practised religion, and thus where energy (*dat*) has been accumulated. By contrast, the *nat* dances are performed by spirit mediums *ideally* conceived of as women (*nat kadaw*, the 'female spouse of a male spirit') in the context of spirit possession séances. Obviously, this stereotyped contrast needs to be nuanced. Men and transgender women, are also preeminent actors on the mediumship scene. Nevertheless, in spirit possession ceremonies (*nat kana*

³⁰ Brac de la Perrière 2011.

bwe), the spirit medium's role ideally requires the crossing of gender boundaries.³¹ The gender contrast in the manifestation of the spiritual by spirit mediums and *medaw* or *bodaw*, is expressed at a discursive level and takes complex forms in the actual performances.

As for the manifestation of *thaik* ladies in spirit possession séances, they now are performed right from the start by both male and female spirit mediums in hieratic dances which serve to upgrade these events. More traditional *thaik-naga* dances occurs later on during the séance, either to embody Amay Shway Nabay or when 'wild', unidentified *thaik-naga* break in with intermingled hands, arch and roll on the ground. By contrast, *thaik* ladies are also embodied by devotee-women in front, for example, Saw Mun Hla's shrine at Shwezayan pagoda, through *thaik-naga* dances similar to those performed during spirit possession séances. As for Mya Nan Nwe devotees' outdoor dances along the palanquin parades, they are also of the *thaik-naga* kind, except that most of them stop before rolling on the ground. The case of Mya Nan Nwe stands out as an exception among pagoda-guardian ladies in two ways; because her shrine has been displaced outside of the pagoda that she guards and because, even so, *thaik-naga* dances of her devotees occur mainly outside her pavilion, on the port esplanade.

Arguably, by making use of selected features of various ritual practices, Botataung's innovative ritual pageants can be seen in light of hybridity theories that Pattana Kitiarsa suggests make sense of the changing landscape of contemporary Thai religion (Pattana 2005: 468). However, considering the processes involved in the cultic history of the Botataung Lady, one realises that rather than 'hybridisation' it is constituted by a series of appearances of her spiritual agency, each time removed from the core of mainstream official religious institutions. After World War II, uncovering of the Buddhist sanctuary relics enabled the efflorescence of the Lady in a material form. In the 1990s, her growing fame surfed on the wave of pagoda guardian appearances and led to her relocation in a separate shrine. Then, the attention received by this newly prominent spiritual figure led spirit possession manifestations to be banned from her sanctuary. These developments occurred as a series of practice purifications whose **ultimate** target has been spirit possession manifestation. Particularly, *thaik-naga* dances have been discriminated against because they are deemed less 'religious' in

³¹ About the gender qualification for spirit medium's role, see Brac de la Perrière 1998b and about the presence of transgenders on the mediumship scene, see Brac de la Perrière 2022.

some contexts, while indulged in for their evocative power of the Lady's presence in other settings.

Finally, it seems that the displacement of the Lady of Botataung has created a space where her polyvalent nature as a pagoda guardian has been allowed to fully express itself. In this place different lines, more or less 'religious' – which is mutually evaluated according to their respective compliance to mainstream Buddhism – meet around her new material manifestation as a devotee-woman rather than a *thaik-naga* Lady. But rather than a blurring of delineations, this forum-like place produces a reinforcing of boundaries between devotions to the Buddha and his saints, *medaw* and *bodaw* direct communication with the pagoda guardians belonging to the *weikza* field, and spirit mediums' (*nat kadaw*) danced embodiment of spiritual beings.

Lines are manifested side-by-side, but they do not merge. In this sense, the forum-like quality of the event actually expresses and reinforces the process of autonomisation of each field through mutual confrontation. The Lady's birthday celebration may be seen as a perfect site to illuminate processes of identification *and* distinction selectively operating through competition, disregard or contempt between ritual specialists belonging to different mutually determining segments of the religious field. While these dynamics do occur in the contemporary context of urban modernity, they belong to a longer story of 'religious' differentiation.

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