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Author(s): Louis Vossion
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NAT-WORSHIP AMONG THE BURMESE.[1]

About 200 B. C., shortly after the great council held in Pataliputra by the pious king Asoka, the Buddhist religion was established, at the mouths of the Iraouaddy and Salween rivers, where once existed the old kingdoms of Pegou and Thaton, the land of Souvarna-Bhoumee. But in Upper Burmah proper, the seat until 1885 of the independent kingdom of Burmah, the Buddhist religion was firmly established, only in 1020 A. C., by the king Anaoyatazô, the builder of the beautiful temples of Ananda, Thapiniou, and Gaudapaléne, at Pagan, so well described in Colonel Yule's "Mission to Ava."

It may be firmly asserted that in no country in the world, Ceylon even not excepted, a purer form of Buddhism exists than in Burmah; the great monasteries of Mandalay are really the best Buddhist academies of the world, containing the richest libraries. The Tathanâbaïn, or head-priest of Burmah, is for that country what the Archbishop of Canterbury is for England, the undisputed head of the religion. And, at the same time, we observe the very strange and seemingly incredible phenomenon, that in no country does geniolatry, or spirit-worship, retain a firmer hold on the inferior classes of the population. That spirit-worship is a direct remnant of the old faith of the Burmese before the introduction of Buddhism. In fact, the wild tribes which surround the Burmese on all sides, the Kyens, the Katchyens, the Karens, have no other religion than this primitive cult of the spirits of nature, and their influence is clearly felt in this strange survival of this same cult among their more enlightened neighbors.

The spirits, in Burmah, are called by the name of *Nats*. The word *Nat*, whose etymology has not yet been definitely settled, even by Burmese scholars, such as Mason, Judson, Sir Arthur Phayre, Bishop Bigandet, has two widely different meanings. The first is properly applied to the Dewahs, or inhabitants of the six inferior heavens belonging to the Hindu system of mythology. The second sense is entirely different: it means the spirits of the water, of the air, of the forest, of the house, in fact of all nature, animate or inanimate, under all its aspects and manifestations. For example, the word *Nat*, in its first meaning, is found in the following expression, used by the Burmese when their king has breathed his last; they say: "*Nat youâ sanvi*," "he left for the country of the Nats." But the second meaning is much more accessible to the imagination

[1] Read at the Annual Meeting of the American Folk-Lore Society at New York, November 28, 1890.

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of the masses, and consequently more universally understood by them; the Nats are to them like the thousand genii of their popular Panthéon to the Greeks. We may remark, by the way, that in Japan the decease of the mikado is mentioned in the official documents in nearly the same terms; viz.: "his return to the celestial spirit world." The same exists in China, Siam, and Annam. In such cases the word *Nat* is used in its first sense; but the second one is much more commonly understood by all, small or great, in Burmah. I have seen very few villages, especially in the extreme northeast, and in the villages scattered over the mouths of the Iraouaddy, where there does not exist a special shrine, called Nat-tsin, dedicated to the worship of the spirits. Sometimes it is simply a kind of cage; sometimes a kind of zéyat, or caravansary, with a roof of carved teak timber, pillars red-lacquered, and a dais, at the extremity of which is seated on a platform a sort of idol, the eyes protruding, a spire-crown on the head, representing, or intending to represent, the Nat of the village. Offerings of food, fruits, and water are constantly placed at the foot of the dais by all the villagers. These idols are generally hideous, and remind one of the ugliest African fetiches.

The principle of these offerings to the Nats is not dependent at all on any idea of atonement, but simply of propitiation. I may add that bloody sacrifices are never made before these shrines; the repulsion for the shedding of the blood of living beings, taught by the Buddhist religion, has thoroughly penetrated the masses in Burmah, even when addicted to the most primitive form of geniolatry.

The wild Karens, especially the Karennî or red Karens, recognize only bad Nats: at the entrance of every Karen village are laid down carefully bamboos with rice-spirit, food, and also axes, swords, and arrows, in order that the Nats, finding on their way everything they want, even arms to fight amongst themselves, if so inclined when drunk, they do not come to the village, for disturbing and alarming the inhabitants. The Burmese, on the contrary, believe in good Nats (Nat-gon) and bad Nats (Nat-sô); they believe, moreover, that each man has his own good or bad spirits, who are constantly fighting, and he is good or bad himself according to the victory of the one or the other. It is the Zoroastrian principle, as found everywhere under its primitive form in the far East.

Each house is also believed to possess its own spirit, called Eing-song-nat. In no part of the Burmese beliefs can be better or more clearly observed the coexistence of the two religions, the old and the new, the Shamanism of the ancestors transmitted by tradition, and the orthodox Buddhism imported from India. On the veranda

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of nearly every house in Burmah, a common earthen pot, full of water, is placed on a little stand against a post of the house. Over this water certain prayers, or magic formulæ, have been pronounced by the astrologers of the village. When the astrologers come to the house to perform these purely pagan rites, they are as well and as respectfully received as the Buddhist monks of the next monastery. This water, in which are soaked some leaves of the sacred Thabié-péne, is sprinkled at times in the rooms, over the beds, and all over the house, to avoid the visits of spectres, beloos, or evil spirits. During the four years I resided in Mandalay, I never could help having on my veranda my own pot of water, consecrated during my absence, and, what is worse, water sprinkled lavishly all over the house, sometimes even on my books and papers, to my great discomfort. If I had rudely objected to these practices, I could not have kept the peace and respect of my Burmese servants. I told my visitors that it was holy water, without any explanation, and some believed it. Amongst the peasants of Russia, as it is said, a domovoï, or house spirit, is believed to exist in every house, and to be, like the Nat, malicious if ill treated, and very kind if well treated. In Russia small cakes and oil are placed on the stove for the domovoï, as in Burmah roses and fruits are placed in the village shrine of the Nat-tsin.

When a grave, contagious disease appears in a city or a village, the figure of a beloo, or evil monster, is roughly painted on a water-pot, and at the end of the day the pot is broken in pieces by the stroke of a dah, or native sword. When the sun has set, all the men ascend the roofs of the houses, armed with bamboos, and there for nearly half an hour they keep beating the teak-timber posts and the roof, to frighten out of his senses the mischievous Nat; at the same time the women and children scream and yell at the top of their voices, making a hideous noise. This is repeated two or three nights, until they think the Nat has fled. I was witness of it many times in Mandalay and in Rangoon. Of course the Buddhist priests or monks, yahans or ponghis, are opposed to these practices, and call them idolatrous. In 1876 the king Mendoume-men, who died in November, 1878, and who was a scholar in Pali literature, having been a priest before ascending the throne, issued himself a strong edict against the cult of the Nats, but it was of no avail: this cult to-day is more popular than ever, in fact it forms a religion that coexists with Buddhism.

The special character of the Burmese is a great gayety. They are absolutely free from the prejudices of castes, and have much tenderness for animals. Their religion is easy, and they are very far from being fanatical or angry worshippers: their orthodox religious ob-

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servances have more or less the character of pleasure parties. The families go regularly to the pagodas every ouboth-né, or duty-day, viz., at full moon, the eighth day of the waning, the change, and the eighth day of the crescent. After a short visit to the statue of Gautama, they breakfast heartily in one of the numerous zéyats of the place, smoke long perfumed cheroots, chat and gossip with each other; the women are dressed in their best, with brilliant silk robes, the head crowned with fresh flowers; a regular courtship is freely indulged in by the young boys and the beautiful *maïnklé*, or young girls of the party.

Moreover, the Buddhist priestcraft in Burmah is very far from active or proselytizing; the priests live quietly in their monasteries, and their power is purely moral. They have never succeeded, and will never succeed, in removing the traces of the ancient pagan cult of the Nats. The Burmese, although profoundly respecting their ponghis, go on as before, worshipping, at the proper time and occasion, the Nats of the wind, of the fire, of the metals, of the earth, of the thunder, the clouds, the house, the torrents, the mountains, and the forests.

When a Burmese has to leave his village to go to another part of the country, he will never start without having consulted his horoscope, and also without hanging to the wheels of his bullock-car a few branches of the sacred Thabié-péne (Eugenia Malaccensis) to propitiate the Nats who may reside in the points he is about to cross. The same fact may be observed in the very heart of the forest: when a hunter or traveller comes across a big tree he never fails to deposit an offering of flowers and rice at its feet, in case it be the residence of a special Nat; if no special Nat reside there, the Nat of the forest will appreciate his intention and protect him on his way.

Some of the Nats are more celebrated in certain districts, and special festivals are held for them at regular periods. The spirit of the forests is called Hmin-Nat; Oupaka-nat reside in the clouds. Before harvesting, the Burmese cultivators have regularly a Nat-feast, marked by a procession around the fields, and large offerings to the Nat of the district, in order to get a good harvest.

Many villages have a special woman, young or old, called Nat-maïmma. At the Nat festivals she dances before the procession going to the shrine, and at other times she is regularly consulted on every kind of matter, just as regular sorceresses, or the witches of the Middle Ages.

Each boat, and especially the race-boats, in Burmah has invariably on its bows a representation of the Kalawaïk, the bird of Wishnou, and a branch of the sacred Thabié-péne. One of the favorite pas-

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times of the Burmese is boat-racing. Lovers of the picturesque could never dream of anything more beautiful than a boat-race in Burmah, on the blue waters of the great Iraouaddy. When one of these races is to take place, the rowers of each of the concurrent boats never fail to place at the prow a bunch of roses, some bananas, and some branches of the sacred Thabié-péne, to propitiate the Nats, whose special abode is that point of the river where the race is to take place.

The traveler can see at Tagong, a village between Mandalay and Bhamō, the image of a Nat, which is simply a head roughly carved at the extremity of a wooden post six feet high. The Burmese believe that when the inhabitants do not make the usual offering of flowers, or when the passers-by, foresters, huntsmen, or fishermen pass before the Nat without bowing with respect with joined hands in his direction, the Nat has the power of inflicting terrible colics on his contemptors. So widespread is this belief that among the diseases whose remedies are inserted in the Burmese medicine book is gravely inserted "the Tagong colic." It may be mentioned, by the way, that the medicine-men have an extreme influence among the Burmese; they are more or less sorcerers, without any of the remarkable powers of some Indian fakirs, and are rather comparable to the Red Indian Wahkan men.

When a Burmese is very sick and at the point of death in a house, the priests of the nearest monastery are called by the family to his deathbed, but not at all for comforting or converting in any way the afflicted man. The Buddhist doctrine teaches, in fact, that no force on earth can have any influence on the destiny of a person, such destiny being regulated entirely by his or her own *Karma*, the balance between his (or her) good or evil actions, by his (or her) own merits or demerits. The presence of such pure persons as are the priests is deemed sufficient to destroy the influence of the evil Nats which may be around. If the ponghis are requested to touch the sick persons with their holy hands, it is because their mesmeric aura is believed to have a good and curative influence, and that they have what the Hindu calls "Hastha Viseshan," the lucky hand. But in such matters the Burmese has two strings to his bow. The Nat is never forgotten. At the precise moment when the priests are busy at the deathbed, reciting the sacred prayer, "Aneissa, dokka, anâta" (all is illusion in life, all is pain, all is unreality and a passing shadow), the friends and relations of the sick man slip quietly out by a back door, and wend surreptitiously their way to the shrine of the nearest Nat, with large offerings of roses, rice, and honey.

Some travellers have said the Burmese is lazy. I am afraid their opinion is only just in appearance, for the following reason. When

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a child is born, the very first thing his mother does is to have the horoscope cast by the nearest astrologer; the little palm-leaves are carefully preserved, and now, until his grave, all the days of the owner are, according to its indications, fortunate or unfortunate. It may be these travellers I mention above observed some Burmese in one of their unfortunate days when they object to working; but their objection is born of prejudice, not of laziness.

All over Burmah, Friday, as a rule, is an unlucky day; "*Thouk-kyā, ma thouā t'néne*" (Don't go on Friday), is a current proverb. The new year of the Burmese commences by the month of Tagou, corresponding to the first part of April. The tradition, purely Indian, is that on that occasion, *Thagiâmin*, the king of the Nats, descends upon the earth for three or four days. The festival is called water-feast. The Brahman astrologers, called poonahs, and who are found in Mandalay, Prōme, Rangoon, and every important city, determine by astronomical observations of their own if the king of the Nats will reside three or four days on earth, and, what is more important, the exact time of his apparition. At the time appointed by these fellows, who reap a good harvest from the public credulity, guns are fired everywhere, water and offerings are brought to the monasteries; the statues of Buddha are washed by women with silver cups full of water; young and old people, meeting in the streets, throw goblets of water over each other, young people using mischievously large syringes; the merriment is extreme everywhere, all the strangers, Chinese, Chans, Karens, Indians, Europeans themselves, taking part in it good-humoredly. The houses are open; fruits, tea, cigars, betel, are provided freely for all passers-by. At the end of three days, or four days, if the king of the Nats has been good enough to stop so long on earth, guns are fired everywhere, and the festival is over until next year. The king of the Nats has ascended again to his happy abode. The belief in the two different kinds of Nats is clearly illustrated in many such occasions.

All these religious festivals have their special rituals, formulas, and invocations. These legends or traditions are not only entertaining, but are of great value to the student; it would be interesting for the general history of folk-lore to have them carefully collected, a thing not altogether impossible, now that all Burmah is in the hands of the British.

The belief in the Nats is not special to the Burmese; it is found amongst all the nations of Indo-China. The *Mahâ yazâ Ouin*, or "Royal Chronicle of Burmah," narrating the battles of the Burmese against the Peguans, Chinese, Muniporis or Siamese, reports the Guardian Nats of these nations fighting in the midst of their respective armies.

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The Burmese have a curious idea of what we call the soul. Unable to understand the rather abstract and complicated system of the elevation of the mind on the Path of Truth, as taught by the Buddhist philosophers, they have given a form to the immortal part of our being, and they call it *Leip-bya*, the exact translation of which is *butterfly-spirit.* They say that when a man is asleep his Leip-bya is wandering around, sometimes very far from his body, and that it returns when he wakes again. Thus dreams are explained by the various good or bad encounters made by the Leip-bya when it is wandering about. When a man falls really sick, the Burmese pretend that his Leip-bya has been swallowed or captured by a bad Nat, and if the medicines of the doctor (ze'thama) are of no avail, the ceremony of the *Leip-bya ko* takes place immediately. Offerings of the most tempting sort are laid down by the family of the stricken man at the shrine of the Nat of the village. He is humbly requested in long prayers to consent to eat the good fruits, the excellent fish, the sweet honey, provided humbly for him, and in exchange to let the Leip-bya of the sick man alone. If he accepts the bargain the man is cured, and his Leip-bya returns to his body ; if he dies it is because the Nat has swallowed honey, fruits, offerings, Leip-bya, and all ; and he is freely cursed by the family, until another case of grave sickness arises, when another ceremony of Leip-bya ko takes place in the same manner.

The Burmese believe that it is extremely dangerous to awaken anybody suddenly, for fear his Leip-bya may have no time to return, in which case death is sure to follow immediately. A foreign tourist could never prevail, unless with extreme difficulty, on a Burmese to awaken him in the morning from his slumber, by the fear that his Leip-bya might be wandering too far from his body, and have no time to regain its quarters if he were suddenly awakened. I tried myself, on many occasions, to break that strange prejudice among my own servants ; but I saw them so half-hearted and low-spirited in obeying my orders that I gave up my efforts, fearing that if I felt sick the poor fellows would believe really my Leip-bya gone for good. I simply bought, in a Mandalay bazaar, an unprejudiced alarm-clock, to awaken me in time when I had to start early in the morning.

The priests say vainly that the belief in the Nats incapacitates a man for obtaining the Niebban.[1] Their advice is useless. Nothing is more remarkable than the tenacity which characterizes the survival of these doctrines and strange beliefs of old. At the brightest hours of Buddhism, even at the epochs of its most fervent revivals, the Nat-worship is never entirely eradicated, but simply sleeping.

The word "worship," which I employed as the title to this paper,

[1] Nirvāna.

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is not entirely correct. It is not a worship in the exact sense of the word; it is not even the Indian occultism, or study of the unknown forces of nature: it is a simple propitiation of spirits, which a thin veil only separates from the exterior world, in fact a pure geniolatry. The old popular beliefs of the aborigines have persisted in Burmah in spite of the purer influences of Buddhism, just as they are found nowadays in the table-lands of the Himmalayan Mountains, whence the Burmese emigrated to the Iraouaddy valley. It is the old phenomenon so well known to the students of folk-lore, and which nowhere can be more clearly traced than among the populations of Indo-China, and especially among the Burmese.

Louis Vossion.

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