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THE USES OF RELIGIOUS SCEPTICISM IN MODERN BURMA

Anyone who has had any dealings with Burma and its religion will know the difficulties involved in the definition of the word *nat*. My own views will, I hope, become clearer in the course of this paper. At the start, however, I should perhaps stress two principal meanings. In the first place, nat refers to beings superior to humans who live very long lives in a number of refined abodes situated above the earth. Many of these nats are recognizable as Hindu deities who have remained in the Buddhist adaptation of Hindu cosmology and the Hindu pantheon. The word nat also refers to certain historical spirits, that is human beings, often but not exclusively Burmese, who—usually after a violent or unpleasant death—have assumed a superhuman status and are still held to play a role in the affairs of men. These nats are usually referred to as the "37 nats" though there are many more than 37 and this principal list of 37 only represents a particular case of a general process whereby certain human beings are still held today to become nats after their death.

In this paper, however, I am only indirectly concerned with the definition of the origin and nature of nats. Rather, I want to examine a process whereby religious authority is achieved in Burma with the aid of a concrete example involving beliefs about nats. In other words: I am not interested so much in beliefs themselves as in the way in which people manipulate them for reasons which are not always entirely religious. The first part of my paper is a case study which will, I hope, interest you on its own merits. In the second part I shall take this study as a springboard to illustrate a few general contentions about the nature of Burmese religious authority.

My case study is not in this instance drawn from field observation. I wish here, for a change, to indulge in a little textual analysis. I am choosing a text called *Natkadawloka*, the world of the natkadaws—*natkadaw* meaning both bride and medium of one or more spirits. It is one of those cheaply produced little books available to the people at large in the bookstalls usually found near most major Burmese pagodas. It is so obviously meant for local consumption, rather than the foreigner's eye, and so full a statement of a particular point of view that I ascribe to it the same value as if I had come by the same information directly from a Burmese informant—indeed the likelihood is that few such complete statements would ever have been orally available. As it is, the work suffers even more than most from the great love of popular Burmese literature for discursive rambling; it is written in such a mixture of past, present and future tenses that my expert assistant-translator had the greatest difficulties with it and, in addition, there is a great deal of skirmishing and bluff with the author's real identity and purpose before he ever manages to settle down to his basic plot. We thus have much internal contradiction, the author, here, stating deferentially that he is not a very good writer and must be forgiven for the inadequate presentation of his tale and, there, when he has written himself into a semblance of courage, flatly claiming to be a university graduate.

The skeleton of facts that my assistant has so far been able to establish is as follows: the author is not a graduate. He is the son of fairly well to do traders. After providing him with a wife, these gave him a small capital and told him to seek

his fortune. He worked as a peon at about £7 a month but to make ends meet he sold goods by the roadside at night. The proceeds he converted into jewelry for his wife, intending to put it back into cash for buying goods when the market became favourable. He did take a mistress, but not at the time his wife accused him of doing so. He runs a smart Nat shrine and holds nat shows there. I will now try to isolate his plot and argument from the welter of confusion in which it is plunged by frequent digressions into Buddhist texts for the buttressing of his arguments and by the fact that the author never makes up his mind whether he is writing a novel or a true story, thus leaving us with two sets of characters instead of one.

A prelude, in which a man and his wife are introduced as the hero and heroine of a novel, brings out the main themes of the story: the husband works hard to fulfill the needs of his wife and child and thus comes home very late; neighbourhood gossip seizes on this and envenoms marital relations by inventing a mistress for the husband. The wife tries to find out the truth by consulting the natkadaws and loses her money to them. The husband, finding his money gone, cannot get rid of his wife because of his attachment to the child. Nor can he bring a case against the natkadaws "for the whole of Burma practically is engrossed in nat placation." This leads him to think on the rights and wrongs of nat propitiation. Here, as elsewhere in the book, arguments are constantly adduced to show the writer's degree of literacy in Buddhist matters and to confirm his righteousness in the reader's eyes. That a father should look after his son is natural enough; here it requires buttressing with a Jataka story. A long tale, involving excellent data on witchcraft, is told to explain how gossip wrecks marriages. A Pali tag is quoted to show that a son arises from the contact of two bodies just as desire arises from the contact of the eye with a precious object. And so forth. At the end of this prelude, the author admits and repeats several times that the hero and heroine are really himself and his wife. He claims that a novel would sweeten the pill of fact about a social disease, just as pills nowadays are coated with sugar by doctors. On the other hand, sugar weakens the medicine in the pill so that it is best, in the last resort, to take the medicine straight.

A general commentary on nat worship follows and will be amplified, not always consistently, throughout the book. The author wants to help the people by showing that "apart from the path laid down by the Buddha, one should not take refuge in or worship any base forms." He prays that his liver, seat of emotions, be pure while he writes and invokes the authors of the past and their wisdom. A Pali tag serves to show that the word *Myanma*—the Burmese word for Burma—denotes a respect for Buddhism: shades of "angles" and "angels"! Yet, according to ancestral custom, refuge is also taken in the 37 nats. We must note here that the author never asks whether these exist or not. He merely asks whether we can be sure that they have not passed on to another existence, that is whether they are still nats or not: I draw your attention here to the fact that nats, like all other things, are impermanent in Buddhism, although they have far longer lives than men. He then describes the orthodox Buddhist cosmology and identifies nats with "*weynipartika pyettas*," that is: monstrosities and evil spirits of the departed belonging to the third of four abodes of damnation. Thus, he argues, they should not be called nats at all, a term that should be reserved to describe the higher beings, once Hindu, and now translated into Buddhist guardian spirits.

At this point the author digresses to show how the foreigner will misunderstand Buddhism if he sees a *nat pwe* or mediums' invocation session, even though Buddhism is good and great enough to stand up to any other religion. He gives a graphic picture of the tourist, with camera, tape recorder and notebook getting the mistaken notion that nats are Burmese gods through the casual informant's use of the confusing word *paya*, and going back to publish these gods "in dailies, periodicals and journals." Of this the Burmese should be very ashamed. In his contention that the 37 nats cannot be worshipped because they came to a sticky end, he seems to be revealing an old indigenous view which equates violent death with evil in the victim, only imperfectly rationalized by the Buddhist idea that a bad end indicates bad karma in the victim's past. Contrasted with this picture of the bad nats who eat unclean food and drink liquor—not unlike the spirits of savages and Mahomedans (the author has the idea that Islam sacrifices to an evil spirit he calls the

yit nat), is an account of good nats like Thagyamin (the Burmese version of Indra). Thagya, the texts say, has to bow to good human beings. This leads to a justification, traditional to Buddhist thought, of the advantages of the human situation for achieving religious salvation. If men behave well and merely share out their merits with the good nats as with all other men and classes of beings, there is no need for bowing the knee and taking refuge in the bad nats. On the contrary, according to the old tag "Unless man approves willingly, the nat will not; unless the nat approves willingly, the stars will not be effective," it is the nats who depend on good men and not vice versa, for the actions of the just will make the nats' haloes brighter and their food more tasty to them. The author thus attempts to lift himself into orthodoxy by recognizing only the higher nats of the Hindu-Buddhist cosmology and refusing to the 37 nats the true nature of nat.

Finally, referring to the traditional role of government in the purification of the religion, the author cites the oldest purification myth of the Burmese, to wit King Anawratha's bringing of Theravada to Pagan in mediaeval times and his destruction of the Mahayana there. This allows him to claim that kings have always purified the religion in favour of the good, or Buddhist, nats and allows him to introduce the theme he sees as Buddhist: that men can do something to help bad nats out of their long, fruitless lives. We shall see what he makes of this idea further on.

After this preliminary commentary, the author tells again the story of the husband and wife, this time more or less in true confession form, and constantly stresses how he meets his wife's fears of the nats' retaliation with Buddhist justifications and the demonstration that return gifts made to her by natkadaws are ineffective. For instance, he unrolls a little copper scroll and shows her that there is no magic sign inscribed on it: it is thus illegitimate. This point is important because it introduces another limitation to the author's scepticism: you will remember that the existence of the nats as a whole was not questioned; it was only asked whether they still existed as nats. Here a distinction is made between real and fake natkadaws, that is, women who are really possessed by nats and women who only pretend. The

author claims that his wife was taken in by fakes. Again this is an important foundation for his later argument.

To underline this point, he arraigns his own mother, herself a natkadaw, whom he tested once by stealing some cult objects from her shrine. This allows a long digression on the tricks of natkadaws which is ethnographically revealing but does not belong directly to this analysis. It enables him to make some further accusations against the nats in general, for instance if the nats are so good at helping people as the mediums claim, why don't they look after their own brides in the first place, most of them living in dilapidated huts as they do? Does the fact also that nats marry human women not contravene the Buddhist precepts of marital fidelity? And finally, do not the nats draw away to themselves the respect which is due by wives to the true nat of the House? In Burma, the husband is often called the forenat of the house, an indication of another kind of meaning of the word nat altogether.

At this stage, the wife breaks down, half regretting the money, half still afraid of the nats and their brides. The author investigates the possibility of going to law under section 406—misappropriation of public property, and section 420—cheating, but a high ranking police officer tells him that since his wife freely gave to the mediums, these cannot in any way be attacked by law.

It is here that the author has his great idea and that the picture of a good "Defender of the Faith" becomes considerably blurred. Since he cannot get his money back by law, he will recuperate it by launching a nat house to beat all nat houses. There follows a lyrical description of the ideal nat house, with a fine building, fine furniture and neon lighting, the latest in gilt shrines, the wives of high government officials arriving in large black Studebakers, an imposing natkadaw brought down from the famous Taungbyon shrine at a fat salary, pretty assistant dancers and himself as Master of Ceremonies. He still retains the idea of true and false natkadaws in stating that the Taungbyon woman is presumably a true medium while women, as easy to find in Rangoon as footprints, who love nat shows without being true mediums can be brought in for paltry fees. He caps all this by claiming that his enterprise can only flourish

in that either 1) there will always be plenty of suckers ready to spend money, or 2) the nats are still in existence and can only love him and make him prosper for giving them such a beautiful shrine and cult. It is noticeable that he takes the prevalence of nat worship among the official classes for granted, stressing the womens' interest in finding out about their husbands' mistresses. His description of the ideal nat house, while quite out of keeping with rural shrines is not too far off from urban cult centres actually in existence.

While his description seems to be written with some irony and the reader can suspect that there is still an anti-nat man in the background, the picture darkens when he suggests to the government that it should purify the natkadawloka by testing mediums and separating out the good from the bad. Whether this suggestion ever came to anything or not is left in doubt by the text, but what is clear is that our author either obtains, or sees himself as getting, a prominent role among the judges. We are given a picture of what this association was or would have been. (My assistant feels that it did exist for a time, though not necessarily with government support.) Mediums will be issued with licenses on a series of conditions. The upshot of these is that possession is thoroughly emasculated, the mediums being dictated to as to what they can and cannot do. They must be prepared to pass a test as to whether they are really possessed or not. Their fees are to be regulated. They must register. Strong drinks are forbidden. The possessing nat must be made to take the five Buddhist precepts. The medium must know the entire biography of the possessing nat. Branch associations will be formed in every district, township, village. The puritanical streak of some of the rules: that the nats will not drink, that they must be abjured from using spicy language before taking possession etc., is perfectly consonant with the tone of contemporary Buddhist ethics.

A favourite hobby among Burmese Buddhists today is the writing of articles proving that Buddhism and modern science are in perfect agreement; indeed that modern science was, especially in the field of atomic physics, preceded on many points by Buddhist philosophy. The scientific standard of such discussions is not usually high. Our author too is not unimpressed by the

need for scientific explanations and concocts a series of tests to see whether a nat still exists or not. One asks a natkadaw who has been possessed by the nat U Min Kyaw for 40 years to invoke the nat. The nat installed will be asked whether or not he is the real one and, if no one in the association contests his claim, he will be asked to recite his autobiography. This will be taken down on a tape recorder. The recorded version can then be compared with printed versions and the association will decide which is the true account: the nat's or medium's, or the text's. Or again, 100 members of the association are to go incognito to the great Taungbyon festival where between 200-300 mediums assemble each year. At a fixed moment, all the 100 members will invoke one nat. If 100 mediums become possessed by the nat invoked, which shall be the real one? Can the nat take on 100 forms? If so, the accounts given should tally, and if they do, then "it is very possible and believable" that this nat still exists as a nat. The stories must tally just as one television programme tallies on all the different television sets which receive it. "We are living in a scientific age" concludes the author "and must take thought on these points also." It need hardly be pointed out that nat recognition prevents these tests from being truly scientific.

The purpose of these exercises is to pin down the nat and to liberate him into a better existence by means of an act of merit. A "real" natkadaw must invoke a chosen nat and then wait seven days lest anyone should contest that he is real. Then monks must be invited as witnesses and charity made, while thinking on the Buddha. During the transference of merit ceremony, the nat should be able to call out personally "well done" thrice, according to custom, and if he can do that "there is no reason why he should not leave the world of the pyettas." He is invoked again and if he does not take possession, he is deemed to be free. The Government of Burma can then declare in print and on the air that a nat is free and that only 35 are left (Indra is of course left out of this). These must in turn receive the same treatment. The Cinema Department of the Government should take films of the nat liberation ceremonies and distribute them throughout the land.

On the vexatious problem of what happens if a nat refuses

to be liberated, the author first says that he will no longer deserve the propitiation of the people of Burma. A little further on, however, he covers himself by contradicting this and asserting, without any supporting argument, that nats who are not liberated will automatically become good nats who attend to the prosperity of the people and could, if the need arises, be consulted on how to run the country, the religion and personal affairs. In this way the 37 nats are tacitly assimilated with the guardian nats of the Hindu Buddhist cosmology whom the author had previously separated out as being unequivocally good nats whom the good man could salute without shame. It is hard not to feel that this *volte-face* is a protective measure taken by a man whose real occupation still appears to involve the propitiation of nats. In the meantime, my assistant criticizes the author by declaring that, since the karma of any being, whether good or bad, has to run itself out in its own time, any so-called help from humans to these stranded nats will not avail one jot unless it happens to coincide exactly with the coming of their time for liberation. I mention in passing that the same assistant pours scorn on all the pseudo-tests of the author, substituting for them "really real" tests which he claims to have seen practiced in his youth by real nat masters.

Finally I should mention that the author is careful to tempt the Government of Burma by what he presents as serious financial arguments. You will remember that he had been claiming that, if nats did exist, they should first of all look after their own brides, instead of letting them live in dilapidated huts. It now suits his book to perform another *volte-face* and present the natkadaws as "sitting on the heads of the people." If there are, say, 10,000 natkadaws in the Union, without any other employment, then it means that they are being maintained by the people. Now if these 10,000 should each be charged 8 kyats (there are roughly 40 kyats to the $) for a license, the Government would reap 80,000 kyats a year. In return for this suggestion, the Government would give the Association a "ratio" of 1,000 kyats with which it could hold a great nat festival. Another financial argument, based on as dubious a set of figures, is introduced when the author asks whether the cult of Mahagiri nat is really worth its while. If out of 17 million people in

Burma, 10 million hang votive coconuts in their homes and if the nut is changed every four months at an average cost of 2 kyats per nut, then at least 20 million kyats are wasted per quarter and the price of fresh nuts and food generally is affected by this waste. While the author prefers to forget that a household offers a nut, not an individual, and that many nuts last much more than four months, this particular outcry can probably be seen as a masked suggestion that the Burmese spend too much on religion and not enough on social welfare and other "modern" expenditures.

The book peters out with bows in the direction of the powers that be, extolling U Nu's religious virtue and his religious programmes and suggesting that, when the nats have all been liberated, the religion of the Buddha can shine forth unimpaired. If the batteries of religious energy serve the several bulbs of Buddhism, gaing worship (I shall explain this term later) and hereditary nat worship, then these bulbs will shine weakly; if all the energy goes into one bulb, Buddhism, this one bulb will shine brightly. Despite his earlier suggestion that the government should give him 1,000 kyats to hold a great nat festival, he expresses the hope that the Government will not at one and the same time promote the Sixth Buddhist Council and the cult of nats, and also that his story will bring the people of Burma to the right understanding as the husband in his tale brought his wife.

For lack of further data on the type of man the author really is and the nature of the nat cults my assistant claims that he still pursues, it is difficult to come to any absolute conclusions on this strange compilation. My, admittedly small, experience of Burmese popular literature, suggests that Burmese stylistic conventions allow of many mechanisms for telling stories within stories with the purpose of leaving oneself a way out should one be attacked by the majority of conservative opinion. It is perfectly possible that we have here an elaborate rigmarole designed to ridicule the cult of nats in the eyes of the reader and bring him to the pure path of Buddhism. The author in short may have one perfectly sincere aim. If, on the other hand, we follow the evidence of his still having a nat shrine and stress the tortuous way in which he appears to make capital

of what he defines as "inferior" nat beliefs by stressing the purity of his own intentions while still playing a role in the natkadwaloka we may be tempted to conclude that he is merely a cleverer charlatan than the others.

The problem of religious sincerity is a notoriously difficult one and in this case only the constant pressure of the informant's own remarks misleads the anthropologist into dealing with the problem at all. Leaving it aside then, I think that I can still lead on to some considerations of general interest by studying the *process* of argument used in the text, irrespective of the whole question of the author's sincerity. It seems fairly clear, for instance, that spirit recognition is unquestioned: we are not asked whether nats exist or not, but rather: granted that they do exist, do we have to go on propitiating them, thereby allowing them a lazy and unsalutory existence, or do we, by following Buddhist principles, eject them from the nat sphere into a better world? The continued recognition of spirits as opposed to the wholesale denial of their existence vitiates, from the observer's point of view, the author's attempt at scientific scepticism. More important than this, however, is to notice the way in which the author courts the authorities above him—the ancient writers, the holders of Buddhist wisdom and the Government—by stressing the orthodox purity of the way in which he claims authority over the misguided people below him, as represented in the first place by his own wife. It is this purity, shining in a misguided world, which he claims as the authority allowing him to tell his tale and set up his nat shrine, which protects his shrine in an all-ways insurance system against the nats themselves should they react unfavourably, and finally allowing him to set up a system whereby the authority of natkadaws and indeed the very need for them would disappear, while he himself would be left in control of the field for as long as necessary in the nat shrine to beat all shrines. The author stresses sufficiently the difficulty of getting away from old Burmese hereditary customs for us to feel that he knows he will always be able to take money from someone. We also know that in all closed systems of magic, there are enough ways to account for failure and turn the continued needs of the people to good account.

The *Process of Argument* whereby an individual accuses

those he would control of holding unorthodox, that is un-Buddhist, views while interpreting what he does himself in orthodox Buddhist terms, or claiming for what he does the sanction of Buddhism, is one which I find at large in Burmese religious behaviour and which I associate with the manipulation of authority in Burmese society. In short, an individual expresses scepticism concerning the orthodoxy of those he wishes to influence and that very expression of scepticism is so much in keeping with the nature of Burmese religion that it is, in itself, the mark of a leader. I now want to try to illustrate this contention in a more general light, and, since my work was concerned with the relations between religion and politics in Burma, I shall try to stress the way in which a charismatic ideal of leadership informs Burmese notions about authority in both spheres. I shall ask you to remember that my brief was to cover a whole nation and that I must therefore work at times on a fairly high level of abstraction.

Until recently, the religion of Burma has been treated mainly by historians and historically minded ethnographers, some of them missionaries. Broadly speaking, they have seen Burmese religion as compounded of a "pure" religion stemming from the Pali canon and practiced in full by members of the Order of monks, and, on the other hand, an "Animism" concerned with the cult of certain spirits or nats which had survived from pre-Buddhist times. In their remarks about syncretism, these scholars have been hampered by their own vision of a pure, textual Buddhism, living perforce side by side and inactive with Animism. Arguments as to whether Burmese religion was Buddhism tempered with Animism or Animism with a thin veneer of Buddhism on top have done little to relate the village cults with the world of the monastery in a manner satisfying to a sociologist of religion.[1]

Evidence suggests, however, that most Burmese do not see the Animism-Buddhism dichotomy in straight historical terms: that is "Buddhism came and should have wiped out spirit cults

[1] The locus classicus is H. L. Eales, *Report on the Census of Burma for 1891*. Discussions of nuances can be found, for example, in Scott and Hardiman, *Gazetteer of Upper Burma and the Shan States*, I, 2, ch. 10 and in W. C. B. Purser and K. J. Saunders, *Modern Buddhism in Burma*, Rangoon, 1914.

but never quite managed to do so, and they keep arising again." For this would ignore the fact that orthodox Buddhism recognizes its own spirits: gods left over from Hinduism and made into guardian deities of the Buddhist religion and people, as well as a considerable number of nature spirits, displaced ghosts, etc. The indigenous spirits, wherever Buddhism went, were integrated into a hierarchy of spirits, usually on a level below that of the Hindu-Buddhist gods. Thus the question, even among an élite, would be not: "Are there or are there not spirits?", but rather: "Of what order of merit is such and such a spirit and, granting that he exists, do we owe him anything?". Spirit recognition then is general, spirit propitiation depends on the degree of sophistication which the worshipper himself has reached on the ladder of merit. What I call the historical view sees Buddhism as a far more exclusive religion than it really is and it was led to this, I believe, by its notions, derived from the culture it had been evolved in of what a religion should be. I believe that, in fact, Buddhism everywhere has been consciously living with Animism from the beginning to a greater or lesser degree and that recognition of Animism is "built into it" from the start. "Where we condemn and exclude" says Louis Dumont in his 1958 Frazer Lecture, "India hierarchizes and includes."[2] The Buddhist "message" is recognized in the Pali texts as a difficult one and it is accepted that few men will accede to its understanding. Wide recognition of inferior ways in which different categories of laymen can lead the good life ensues. To digress for a moment: it seems no mere chance that when the *Mahayana* evolved, it did not always throw out the *Hinayana* as a heresy, but incorporated it on a lower level. The sociological significance of as metaphysical a text as the *Lotus of the Good Law* is that it shows the Hinayanists participating in an assembly where the Buddha teaches and, *through their own weakness in comprehension*, leaving the assembly before the great revelations because they thought that all had in fact been said.

It is most important to understand the two different ways in which Animism can be said to be "built into" Buddhism. In

[2] I have worked from L. Dumont, "Le renoncement dans les religions de l'Inde," *Archives de Sociologie des Religions*, No. 7, Paris, 1959.

that I have always stressed in my work the necessity to understand the role of initiated persons in many non-Western religions and their influence upon less sophisticated members of their society, it was with excitement that I found Dumont writing of distinguishing "different levels of experience and thought" in religion and stressing the role of the world-renouncer in formulating Indian religious categories.[3] The "wide recognition of inferior ways in which...laymen can lead the good life" pertains, of course, to the philosophers and writers of sacred texts. It sets, from the top, an example of great tolerance as well as a goal to which all members of society might aspire. At the same time, and in another direction than that followed by Dumont, the relative status of the layman, which he compares to an absolute status of the world-renouncer, must mean that the layman's view of the whole religion is limited at the worst to his own position and at best to that position vis à vis a few ranks higher and lower than his own. In that relative position, the amalgam of religious beliefs and behaviour cannot be, and is not, separated out consistently into "Buddhist" and "Animist" components: only the whole amalgam can be claimed by the individual to be coloured by the ideal set from the top.

Indeed, one aspect of the tolerance which marks the whole system can be held to offer the best excuse for not moving upwards as much as the ideal doctrine urges one to: since there is transmigration, it suffices that works of merit should be performed in each life so that the final goal can be achieved very gradually at the end of a long series of enjoyable lives. Holding the great good of Nirvana at arm's length, as it were, is a sport which can be witnessed by any reader of the lithic inscriptions of medieval Pagan.

There are, further, some very concrete fears which hold up the individual from progress towards his goal. The saying "Buddhism for the next life the spirits for this life" has much truth in it and promptly turns spirit recognition into spirit propitiation. In the first place dangerous spirit have to be propitiated if one is to lead ones life at all. But we also find positive bargaining

[3] E. M. Mendelson, "Mondes Africains," *Critique*, No. 93, February 1955 and "De l'Olympe à la Guinée," *Critique*, No. 133, Paris, June 1958.

with the spirits in which they are asked for material advantages. More than this, I shall show elsewhere that the spirits are manipulated in such a way as to oblige them to yield material advantages. At this point, I must refer again to levels of doctrinal comprehension.

There has always been considerable ambiguity as to the nature of the powers which the practice of Buddhist precepts grants to the adept and we can sees this either as due to Animism being built into Buddhism from the start, or, in terms of such scholars as Paul Mus, due to Buddhism having its roots in Animism. I must ask you for the sake of brevity to accept my contention, that, while, from the upper levels of comprehension, the religious process is seen as a gradual shedding of power, it is seen from the lower levels as a gradual amassing of power, ever more refined in some ways but still very *material* and defined in magical terms as immortality, the ability to fly, to travel underground, to become invisible and so on. In this process, the sign of success is defined as the capacity for being able to control and submit to oneself ever higher types of spirits in the pantheon. But one does not gain something for nothing: one has to abstain from various goods in order to acquire these powers. If a man tries for certain powers without observing a set of taboos—regarding food and sex mainly—he is in danger of going mad at the hands of the very spirits he is trying to control. More generally, the expression *hpon pide* is used of any Burmese who is in danger of being crushed by assuming behaviour too high for his level of attainment: as when a man gives his son a too distinguished name and the child falls ill of cholera. The answer to our previous question "Do we owe this spirit anything?" will be determined, then, by the level of power reached by any given individual. One will often hear an adept saying "Oh, such and such a spirit I will be careful of, but let those others come and I'll beat them up!". It is interesting to note, in passing, that spirits were at one time human beings and still behave anthropomorphically, and thus the acquisition of power is still a dominant theme on a scene where the process of transmigration minimizes the separation created by death between two different categories of being. But this point must be left for development on another occasion.

For the mass of people, I would hold then that the different levels in the hierarchy are seen not so much as levels of *comprehension* but rather as levels of *power.* I would therefore rephrase the old writers' distinction between Animism and Buddhism in Burma, ignoring for a moment the historical view of their interaction, into a distinction between a process whose ultimate aim is complete abstention from power and another whose ultimate aim is the wholesale acquisition of power, both being available to the Burman at the same time through the very permissiveness of his religion. At all points on the ladder, except the highest, these two are in danger of confusion. In the first place, both processes are seen as upward progress through hierarchical levels of attainment. In the second place, prestige in society is common to both for, even if the monks enjoy supreme prestige, they leave the world's practical affairs to others. Thirdly, the lack of influence of caste or class stratification on religion allows the personnel to be common to both: it is merely a matter, at any time, of individual choice. And in the fourth place, both demand that certain goods and enjoyments should be abstained from so that greater progress can be made. The latter point is of great importance for it does most to *mask* the fundamental incompatibility of the two processes by confusing them. For the individual acquiring power, the process of abstaining from enjoyments is not seen as an aim in itself but merely accepted as a way of acquiring more power. Only the world-renouncer proper understands that abstention is an aim in itself: that at the highest level of development, the sum of power gained will automatically turn back into the comprehension that will destroy it since even supported by power, the individual will disappear. By this time, however, such an individual is out of society and the nearest the latter can get to honouring him is to treat the whole monkhood as supreme because from time to time a saint may appear within it.

What I have been saying is that, for the overwhelming majority of individuals in a religion of the Burmese type, their relative position in respect of an absolute goal which they cannot know before obtaining it must result in a view of religious behaviour which stresses above all the acquisition of power and I think that this paradox must have been perceived by the

founders of the religion in the broadest sense of that term. This should, I venture to hope, provide an important clue to the meaning of my earlier contention regarding the nature of religious authority in Burma. I trust by this time, however, that many of you will be begging for what is called sociological contextualization. Here I must admit that my difficulties are extreme for the fact is that we still know very little about the traditional or contemporary organization of Burmese society.

This, however, is clear: "The situation I have outlined would clearly be most difficult to contemplate if a system of laws, with sanctions, existed which clearly postulated what a Burmese Buddhist should and should not believe, what he should or should not do. The fact is, however, that there never appears to have been such a system. Even at the time of its highest degree of organization, under the kings, the Buddhist monk, in the sacred text and in fact, is basically a free agent and has always been able to set up shop on his own as the spirit moved him—he is very much a *local* monk as the locality-linked titles of the highest *sayadaws* often testify—to enter the Order and leave it at will. He has always been a teacher of the highest goal and as such he has been revered in Burma and bowed down to even by kings. I have argued, however, that in the last resort the Order is always vulnerable to control by laymen and that it has at most times been directly or indirectly controlled by laymen in all matters pertaining to the mundane sphere.[4] I say in passing, to those who would object that some kings passed laws regarding religious behaviour, that these at best may have struck at superficial aspects of behaviour—prohibitions of alcohol, meat slaughter, even some particular major nat cults—without ever making fundamental changes in the system as a whole.

There is, in Burmese society at large, a strong association of Buddhist merit with social prestige. That is: whether in a village or town, an individual acquires prestige by passing through, being educated in, building for, and giving to, the monkhood, which is the prime way of giving generally, whether it be through money, or food at communal feasts, or anonymous gifts of water

[4] E. M. Mendelson, "Religion and Authority in Modern Burma," *The World Today*, March 1960, Oxford University Press.

in jars by the wayside for passing thirsty people. At least one observer, working with sophisticated villagers, has claimed that there is a clear distinction between merit connected with Buddhist activities which comprise "Religion" and other activities which are not held to be religion.[5] I am, for my part, too impressed with the lack of a break in continuity between certain tribal features which are non Buddhist, such as the so-called Feasts of Merit, and Burmese Animism, noticed since the time of Sir Richard Temple, to take this objection too seriously. Further: not only the association of merit with social prestige, but also the very notion of merit stored up by one individual entity as a kind of propulsion mechanism towards better and better lives, is contrary to the world-renouncer's definition of Buddhism—as has been stressed indeed by the existence of certain super-orthodox elements in the monkhood (classed loosely as *paramats*) and also in the Singhalese monkhood according to a mimeographed paper by Yalman I read only two days ago.[6] In the second place, the monk's is only the highest position on a ladder which includes a variety of other religious personages: yogis, hermits, and masters of various ritual and magical arts, not to speak of spirit-mediums of all grades, whom I shall be describing in some forthcoming articles on Messianic Buddhism and Nat propitiation in Burma. I add that their sociological characteristics are the same as in the case of the monkhood: anyone of these magicians gains a popular following only by the degree of religious purity he can convincingly lay claim to: his day is short and his province narrow; we have no more than a proliferation of little sects. As for spirit mediums, they are, by definition, tied down to specific localities of which the spirit is patron and perhaps the symbol.

You will remember that I spoke of those who saw Burma as a Buddhist country and of those who saw it as an animist country with a thin layer of Buddhist cream on top. It is interesting that, by and large, the former have stressed the absolute authority of the Burmese kings, whereas the latter have held

[5] J. Brohm, *Burmese Religion and the Burmese Religious Revival*, Ph. D. Thesis, Cornell University, 1957 (microfilm).

[6] N. Yalman, *The Ascetic Buddhist Monks of Ceylon* (mimeographed), 1961.

to the view that this absolutism is largely a fiction.[7] I am not aware that these writers have noticed the connection. If, within what I have said of Burmese society so far, we take the indigenous religion to be one of locality—with the nat as its typical divinity—and the imported religion to be a centralizing one—with a deified king as its typical divinity, we are perhaps close to an understanding of the relations of Animism and Buddhism to Burmese history as a whole. While stressing strongly that this subject needs independent elaboration, I can give the general orientation of my thinking in the following very compressed sketch.

Following suggestions in the work of Paul Mus and other scholars of his lineage, I would say that the origin of the central list of 37 nats lies somewhere in a centralizing process similar to that which brings local chiefs and their lineages into vassaldom to a principal chief established as king.[8] Insofar as Burmese history can be read as one of constant rebellion against the king is prominent in a large number of biographical myths of the nats. The function of royal priesthoods, over time, has been to subordinate these local indigenous nats to the royal religion and we still find today Indra (alias Thagyamin)—the divine equivalent of royalty—as head of the 37 nats. You may have been startled by the mention of a deified king, so that I must mention one complication. Hinduism and the early mixed Hindu-Buddhist royal religions were close to Animism in that they stressed the acquisition of supreme power in the king and sanctioned it with the divinization of royalty. When Theravada—a religion in which the world-renouncer was set higher than the king in the most definitive manner yet evolved—because firmly established divinization of the king appears not only to have been continued but to have been exasperated into aberration, as would be shown especially by the famous episode of Bodawpaya setting himself up as Maitreya Buddha described in Sangermano. The continuation of this process and its permeation into the lives of the people at large I have classified as Messianic Buddhism: it

[7] For an example of the latter, see R. Grant Brown, "The Pre-Buddhist Religion of the Burmese," *Folklore*, XXXII, 1921.

[8] E. G. Paul Mus, *Cultes indiens et indigènes au Champa*, Hanoï, 1934.

covers those yogis, hermits and magicians I have previously mentioned and is equivalent to the "*gaing* worship" referred to by the author of *Natkadawloka.* I place it halfway between Buddhism and Animism and here define it as the vortex of conflicting principles inherent in the clash of the localizing tendencies of Animism and the centralizing tendencies of the royal religions.[9]

The continued existence of this conflict I see reflected in the failure on the part of the central authority in Burma ever to evolve a satisfactory system of local administration, a failure constantly stressed by Harvey and other observers of the Burmese scene. If more data becomes available, and I think we await it from Mr. H. Shorto, we shall probably be able to follow the religious aspect of the royal efforts in this line first in the manipulation of nats cults as attached to villages and districts, in Lower Burma to craft and military guilds in Upper Burma—the hereditary element being variable but always important. Perhaps the insensate ambitions of the kings were responsible for the ultimate failure, or rather their anachronistic nature: Harvey says "Their ideas remained in the 19th century what they had been in the 9th: to build pagodas, to collect daughters from tributary chiefs, to sally forth on slave raids, to make wars for white elephants, these conceptions have had their day and a monarchy which failed to get beyond them was doomed."[10] I find it significant that the first post-Independence government in Burma deemed it necessary for its prestige to perpetuate the old symbolism in the religious sphere: Great Buddhist councils, the restoration of major pagodas, even the white elephant is still important in Burma. True, these are the symbols of peace, but we must also remember that Burma's history has been one of constant insurrection in the last 13 years, as E. Leach stresses in his recent article, "The Frontiers of Burma."[11] It is important

[9] Sangermano, *A Description of the Burmese Empire*, Rangoon, 1924, p. 61; E. M. Mendelson, "A Buddhist Messianic Association in Upper Burma," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, London, Oct. 1961, and "The King of the Weaving Mountain," *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society*, London, Oct. 1961.

[10] G. E. Harvey, *History of Burma*, London, 1925, p. 249.

[11] E. Leach, "The Frontiers of Burma," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, III, 1, Oct. 1960.

to understand that Buddhism is a gift which the country can make to the world, the justification for a struggle against Marxism, and also a vindication of Burmese hegemony over the tribal societies which they govern.

In this paper, Leach examines the differences between Indian-inspired ideals of Burmese charismatic royalty among Buddhist Valley Peoples and the Chinese-inspired non-charismatic polities of the non-Buddhist Hill Peoples. Like Harvey and others before him, he stresses the importance of the royal charisma in the expanding and contracting "frontiers" of Burmese states at different times: a powerful prince built up in his life time what his weak successor would just as promptly lose. Without going into detail, I would question Leach on two points. First, in order to stress his contrast, Leach bases himself on a Hill situation where Hill People who have merged with Valley People must cut themselves off completely from their Hill colleagues "for in this part of the world a Buddhist cannot be a kinsman of a non-Buddhist." But does he really cease to be a *co-religionist?* That social relations may be cut off is possible, that cultural associations are cut seems highly doubtful in the light of all I have tried to say on the nature of Valley Peoples' Animism. Thus, as far as religion is concerned, Leach bypasses a Valley polarity by restricting the presence of one pole uniquely to the Hills. What he also does, by taking a non-historical view, is to preclude discussion of the independence of the township and village units in the Valleys, units which may well have been constantly fed by tribal personnel. My second question is related to this. For Leach the royal authority is absolute and the resulting administration hopelessly arbitrary. Granted a central, fully administered territory, this is nevertheless surrounded by marginal zones with conquered-province status, hostile to the government, with insurrections endemic and the political alignment of local leaders "possessing the maximum uncertainty." These provincial leaders, Leach seems to consider merely in their aspect as potential kings: an uneasy but lasting balance between a central power claiming to have more authority than it had and, on the other hand, provincial governors holding this power at arms length carrying into their own provinces the same pretences as the king's is therefore played down. Similarly with the independent

village.[12] But there were after all *some subjects* under the king's authority. Theoretically and practically absolute under a great charismatic ruler; theoretically absolute and practically relative under a weak leader—both types of royal authority must be taken into consideration.

Theoretically absolute, in practice relative—it is the second alternative, as we might expect, that most echoes what I have tried to say here about religious authority in Burma. The sword is after all more powerful than the spirit. In practice strong forces prevent the individual, trapped in his relative level, from rising in the ladder of perfection. He is always at the mercy of his superiors' scepticism and, as a result, he must keep one eye open towards them and bow to their superiority. The very process, however, gives to his cult the appearance of aspiration which attracts those who wish to follow a purer path. He claims power, knowledge, revelation of a type purer and closer to the ideal than is held by those he wishes to attract. With these, however, he abstains from mentioning superior persons: to his little circle he is absolute lord, claiming his absolute right to teach to a following. I remember seeing few things as pathetic as a small-time, self-appointed future world ruler stating his overweening claims to a handful of followers in a small village in Lower Burma and the claims of the author of *Natkadawloka* are probably just as humble in real life. The absence of any absolute social authority backed by adequate sanctions allows him his little kingdom and his little day but also insures that both will remain little.

There are many further problems that could be looked at here. Caste for instance, whose absence is notable in Burma (though Leach suggests it may have existed in some form) but which is fundamental to Dumont's Indian material and has been made much of by those who study politico-religious relations in Buddhist Ceylon.[13] I shall be satisfied however, if with the aid

[12] I refer here to the whole question of hereditary officials of the *myothugyi* type who protected their people against the royal *myowuns*, see J. F. Cady, *A History of Modern Burma*, Cornell, 1958, p. 29.

[13] I have also avoided discussion of increased stress on religious purity in modern Burma due to 1) the identification of Buddhism with what was best in

of what are no more than working hypotheses—many admittedly very contestable—I have been able to illustrate some of the principles which govern Burmese religious behaviour and said something, however high flown, about its social context.[14].

Burmese nationalism and 2) the influence of Western scholars and missionaries in their Buddhism—"inferior" Animism distinction. This stress emerges well from the *Natkadawloka* book.

[14] We are eagerly awaiting ethnological studies like those of M. Nash, K. Lehman, M. Spiro who have recently had occasion to work in new areas, as a result of which we may look forward to a renewal of Burmese ethnography.