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Relations de germanité dans les histoires de nat du culte birman des « Trente-sept »

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Sibling Relationships in the *Nat* Stories of the Burmese Cult to the “Thirty-seven”

Bénédicte BRAC DE LA PERRIÈRE*

The aim of this paper¹ is to analyze one symbolic aspect of the main sociological relationship sustaining the practice of the Burmese cult in honor of the *nat*,² known as the cult to the “Thirty-seven Lords.” This pantheon, the object of a widespread cult among the Burmese, is actually a collection of local cult figures that are often associated with siblings. It is this sibling relationship linking together the main figures of the local forms of the cult that will be examined as a symbolic aspect of Burmese integration of localities, which is, from my point of view, the grounding sociological process involved in the cult.

The sibling theme will be highlighted through an examination of *nat* stories or biographies, a number of which are included in the chronicles of the Burmese kings.³ This fact is of much interest as it reveals mutual influences between local symbolic material, such as cult figures, and Burmese historiography, which has become the reference for the Burmese cult of the Thirty-seven. The interactions between these two levels of the foundations of Burmese tradition are complex and cannot be fully dealt with in this paper. Suffice it to say that by using primarily the statements of the chronicles, I will analyze historic relations of sovereignty over local regions by the central royal authority. The first part of the paper, offering a general introduction to the *nat* cult, may help better understand the connections between the cult to the Thirty-seven and Burmese kingship.

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THE CULT TO THE THIRTY-SEVEN LORDS

First of all, the very category, *nat*, is a highly inclusive one in Burmese, encompassing various spiritual beings such as Hindu divinities (*dewa*) and mere nature spirits. The *nat* belonging to the pantheon of the Thirty-seven⁴ are neither *dewa* nor nature spirits; they may be described as spirits resulting from the violent death of human beings and having subsequently become the focus of an institutionalized cult on a regular basis. By contrast, beings such as *dewa* and nature spirits (*bommaso*, *yokkaso*, and others), of which Burmese cosmogonies are replete, are not the objects of an institutionalized worship. Thus, when referring here to the cult of the *nat*, I will be referring specifically to the cult of figures related to the pantheon of the Thirty-seven.

The story of how king Anawratha (1044-1081) founded the cult of the Thirty-seven *nat* is well known.⁵ Burmese historiography depicts Anawratha as the first king to unify the Irrawaddy valley under Burmese rule. This king is also said to have first planned to destroy the various autochthonous cults of the populations under his rule in order to promote Theravada Buddhism. Considering the obstacles to this task, he decided instead to recognize the cult figures, up to the number of thirty-six, and to place them under the authority of Sakka,⁶ the guardian of Theravada Buddhism in Burma. This decision was then allegedly materialized by the collection and erection of thirty-seven images of the *nat* and Sakka on the platform of the Shwezigon pagoda, which the king was then founding close to his royal city, Pagan. This story tells that the emergence of the “Thirty-seven” as a national pantheon can be considered a result of the construction of Burmese territory under Burmese Buddhist kings or, in other words, of the unification of Burma. It provides many clues about the symbolic structure of Burmese kingship, in which Buddhism encompasses *nat* worship, among other practices.

However, the thirty-seven figures supposedly gathered by king Anawratha from autochthonous religious practices could not, at that time, have been *nat* as they are viewed by the Burmese today. *Nat* are depicted through their legendary biographies as products of Burmese kings’ religious policy. The very existence of many of the thirty-seven *nat* worshipped today is ascribed, according to these stories, to a period subsequent to Anawratha’s reign. The number thirty-seven did not correspond to the number of autochthonous cults but rather was a cosmological number meant to stand for a global entity, that of the kingdom that the Burmese dynasty was then constructing.⁷ If king Anawratha may have founded a pantheon from which the cult of the Thirty-seven *nat* was to emerge, the processes involved were more complex in their developments than a mere gathering of images linked to already existing local cults.⁸

As for their nature, the *nat* related to the Thirty-seven may briefly be described as spirits resulting from the violent death of human beings, the kind of death that, according to Burmese Buddhist conceptions, prevents reincarnation and leaves potentially dangerous spirits free to roam about. But the *nat* belonging to the Thirty-seven are not just any kind of such spirits: They are, typically, former rebels

or rivals of kings, and their violent and unfair death is connected to this fact. Moreover, the king transforms them into potentially positive spirits by establishing a local cult around them, that is, by incorporating them into an image and in a shrine and by appointing them as tutelary spirits of a region. In short, the *nat* are subversive local powers captured by the central kingdom. This process of capture continued until the local figures of *nat* were replaced by *nat* of royal blood, and most of the *nat* included on the official list of Thirty-seven *nat* were princes. This explains why their legends are part of the chronicles, although the basic facts may have been borrowed from local traditions.

The cult of the Thirty-seven is the result of the religious policy of the Burmese Buddhist kings, which, concerning local or autochthonous cults, consisted in their unification in a centralized pantheon, as well as in their Burmanization through the casting of historical characters from Burmese dynasties onto particular cult figures. Thus the duality of this cult, simultaneously popular and state-sponsored. This is still obvious today when analyzing the rituals addressed annually to the *nat* at their main shrines. These festivals, *nat pwe*, combine a local dimension, as the population of the *nat*'s domain is bound to pay homage to him and expects general prosperity in return from him, and a national dimension, as ritual specialists from all over Burma gather to pay homage to the *nat* (see Fig. 1).

The ritual specialists are called *nat kadaw*, "wives of *nat*," although they may be men as well as women. This phrase denotes the particular relationship linking a ritual specialist to one spirit among the Thirty-seven, that spirit who is supposed to have chosen her or him to become a spirit-medium. This bond is represented as a nuptial one and the main initiation ritual is a wedding ceremony with the *nat* (see Brac de la Perrière 1998b). The link supposes that the *nat kadaw* allows the *nat*, by incarnating him, to manifest himself on any possible ritual occasion. The *nat kadaw* is actually a specialist of spirit-possession. If the original vocational *nat* is the first one from whom s/he experiences spirit-possession, s/he is eventually trained afterwards to incarnate any of the Thirty-seven. Only then may s/he become a ritual specialist of the cult, officiating, in particular, during ceremonies organized for private people and devoted to the Thirty-seven (*nat kana pwe*).

Besides the festivals, the ceremonies to the Thirty-seven (*nat kana pwe*) form the second most important type of rituals addressed to the Thirty-seven.⁹ They seem to constitute a relatively recent development linked to modern urban life and to the adaptation of the cult to a developing cash economy through the professionalization of the spirit-mediums. Nevertheless, the festivals do remain the principal context in which the cult and its practices are reproduced. This is so because it is through these festivals that the main sociological relationship sustaining the cult is expressed and constructed. This relationship is one of encompassment, the encompassment of the locality in the global entity, that is, historically, into the Burmese Buddhist kingdom; it remains today the matrix governing the current dynamics of the cult.

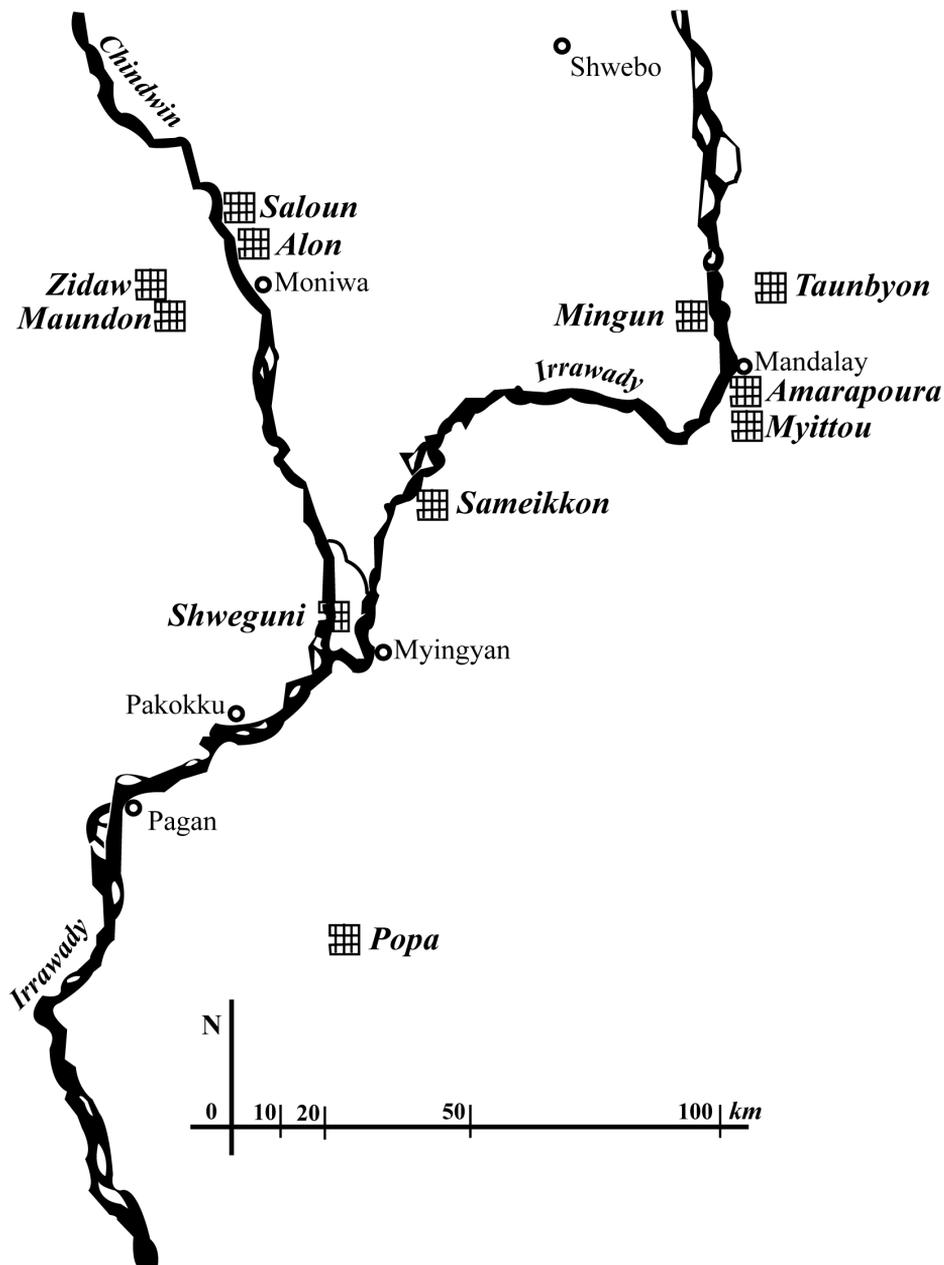


Fig. 1. Location of *nat* festivals in Central Burma (source: Brac de la Perrière 1998c: 325).

SERIES OF BROTHER-SISTER PAIRS

We can now turn to the *nat* stories and look at how this relationship is symbolically expressed and constructed. We have said that these legendary biographies are mainly stories of people becoming *nat* out of their relations to Burmese kings. Another important fact is that in a number of stories the principal heroes are siblings who became *nat* or *nat thami*.¹⁰ First, let us examine some of the stories involving brothers and sisters.

The story of Min Mahagiri and his sister Taunggyi Shin may be the best known of the *nat* legends (see Fig. 2).¹¹ It is also a foundation myth for the *nat* cult. Min Mahagiri, a Pyu spirit from Tagaung, is supposed to be the first *nat* according to the mediums. The Pyu were a Tibeto-Burmese people that developed a brilliant civilization in the Irrawaddy valley before the Burmese came and took over, claiming legacy from them.

The main stages of Min Mahagiri story, as told in the *Glass Palace Chronicle* (Luce & Pe Maung Tin 1960: 45-46), are as follows: The hero is a famous



Fig. 2. Images of Min Mahagiri and his sister in their temple in Sameikkon (photo by the author, March 2000).

blacksmith in the Pyu kingdom and his powers frighten the king; the king marries the blacksmith's sister in order to draw the blacksmith to his city; the blacksmith is seized upon his entering the city and put to death in a fire, into which his sister, out of sorrow, throws herself; the brother and sister then become malevolent spirits residing in a *champak* tree; the king therefore orders that the tree be felled and thrown in the Irrawaddy River; washed on the shores of Pagan, the tree trunk is retrieved from the river on the order of the Burmese king of Pagan, following a dream; images are carved out of the trunk and the spirits are then settled on Mount Popa as the *nat* Min Mahagiri and Taunggyi Shin.¹²

Compared to other *nat* stories, this one differs in that the two main stages of a *nat* emergence – the unfair death and the establishment of a cult to the spirit – are not the works of the same kingdom: The Pyu king is responsible for creating two malevolent spirits, but it is the Burmese king who transforms them into *nat*, following the advice of his Brahmans, who interpret his dream. This is a classical method in the chronicles to indicate a Burmese invention. The Burmese king invents the way to create a *nat* out of a malevolent spirit. And this is why the story appears as a foundation myth of the Burmese *nat* cult.

This is also why it is particularly significant that this story displays the brother-sister pattern in such a typical way. In this pattern, the king first marries the hero's sister but finally causes his brother-in-law to die, a death that is followed by the sister's. The cult is addressed to both the brother and sister, and they both become tutelary spirits, but the brother is usually the dominant character.

A second example of a story along this pattern is that of the Shan brother and sister, the tutelary spirits of Kyaukse.¹³ Kyaukse, a district famous for its irrigation system, is located just to the south of Mandalay district and bordering the Shan State. The hero of the story, Ko Thein Shin,¹⁴ is a Shan prince in the times of Anawratha's reign. Anawratha married Ko Thein Shin's sister to conclude a tributary pact with the then Shan states. But on the way to remit his tribute to Pagan, the prince, ashamed, chooses to drown himself in the Zawgyi River, right on the boundary of the Burmese kingdom and the Shan States. Furious at this act of rebellion, the king comes to the place and, with the scepter given by Sakka, he makes the spirit of the drowned prince appear in a posture of homage. Then he appoints him as the *nat* in charge of Kyaukse district. The sister joins him in this function in a somewhat indirect way, as she is buried alive to protect irrigation works.

This story tells something more that allows to connect the brother-sister pattern with the process of the making of Burma, or its unification, a process that, as we have said, lies behind the foundation of the cult. The hero belongs to a rival polity that the Burmese kingdom wants to subdue. For this purpose, the king uses the well-known practice of marriage alliance, and the fact that he chooses a wife from this people suggests a hierarchical relation and the domination of the wife taker – the Burmese king – over the wife giver – the Shan prince. In Burma, this kind of marriage alliance was used particularly by kings, who associated it with another typical and reverse form of marriage, the marriage within the king's kinship – that

is, among the “same” – in order to preserve the purity of the royal lineage.¹⁵ In contrast, among common people, marriage does not imply a hierarchical relationship between the bridegroom’s and the bride’s kinship groups.

But in our story, the king’s alliance with the hero does not work out. Although he has given his sister in marriage to the Burmese King, the Shan prince does not accept Burmese supremacy. The alliance marriage turns out to be inadequate and the king has to resort to a symbolic procedure, the transformation of the local insubordinate hero into a local protective spiritual entity who has submitted to the Buddhist king. Buddhism is central here, as we have seen that it is Sakka, the guardian of religion in Burma, who gives to the king, according to his karmic legitimacy, the scepter allowing him to make the drowned prince appear in the homage posture. Through this, the king demonstrates his capacity to subdue a spirit: He transforms a dreadful spiritual being into a potentially positive *nat*. He does so on behalf of Sakka, the nominal master of the spirits, by using royal paraphernalia linked to his accomplishment as a Buddhist king. The fact that the making of *nat* involves the use of Buddhism has to be stressed. It allows to interpret this process as one of conversion, or of civilization.

It has also to be stressed that the Shan prince becomes the guardian of a Burmese district and that he then belongs to the Burmese cult. Shan people do not honor him with a cult, nor do they address any cult ritual to any of the other Shan *nat* belonging to the cult of the Thirty-seven.¹⁶ It is the same for the other brother-sister pairs originating in ethnic groups and appearing in the ceremonies to the



Fig. 3. The Shan Pinlebyin brother-sister pair, as incarnated during a ceremony to the Thirty-seven (photo by the author, Yangon, 1984).

Thirty-seven (see Fig. 3). That is, if these *nat* are remembered as originating from peoples of the margins, they have been Burmanized through the symbolic process described above, and so have been their followers after them: They were absorbed in the Burmese Buddhist kingdom.

At this point, it appears that this particular pattern of *nat* stories consists of a pair of tutelary spirits who are brother and sister, the sister having been taken as a wife by the king in order to subdue the people and territory that the brother was controlling. One may wonder why the sister must join her brother as a tutelary spirit. Beside expressing the strength of the sibling link in such a cognatic society as the Burmese, it may also have something to do with the way this symbolic relationship shapes the Burmese relationship between locality and center.

To help understand this, we have to turn to a ritual, the Myittu festival, addressed to a *nat* and a *nat thami* who are not brother and sister: Myin Byu Shin, the Lord of the White Horse, and Ame Shwe Nabe, the Lady of the Golden Sides.¹⁷ The Lord's story is told in the *Glass Palace Chronicle* (Luce & Pe Maung Tin 1960: 135-139) in a somewhat incoherent way, but it is connected to the overthrowing of king Naratheinkha (1170-1173) by his brother Narapatisithu (1173-1210). The hero is not the brother of any royal spouse, but either the unfortunate guardian of the famous Veluvati – for which the two royal brothers were in contest with each other – or the man who killed the king on behalf of his brother and wanted a royal spouse as a reward. Both men were executed, and the Lord of the White Horse seems to originate from both characters. If he is not the brother of the royal spouse, his death is indeed connected to one royal spouse, and particularly Veluvati, who displays all the virtues of a queen. In the Myittu festival, he is even said to be an in-law to the king (*khami-khamek*). However, he is not associated with Veluvati in the festival, but with the Lady of the Golden Sides. This *nat thami* is a female naga (*naga ma*), who had been Min Mahagiri's wife. But her death is not connected to Min Mahagiri, but rather to the death of the two sons she begot from him and to their transformation into *nat*.

What is significant here is that the Lady is a female naga, one of these ophidian beings who, in Southeast Asian mythologies, are representations of autochthonous principles and, as such, symbolize legitimate sovereignty over the land for the kings who marry them.¹⁸ This is why they are also ideal royal spouses. The presence of a female naga besides Myin Byu Shin in the Myittu festival explains why it is necessary that the royal spouses join their brothers as tutelary spirits: It is because they are representations of autochthonous principles in the territories of which their brothers are appointed guardians, or to put it in other words, upon which their brothers are conceded by the king a symbolic and limited sovereignty. They grant legitimacy to their brothers' sovereignty.

VARIATIONS OF THE PATTERN

We can now look at some of the variations of the brother-sister pattern in the *nat* stories. The first pair to be examined is the Lady of the Running Waters (Ame

Yeyin) and her brother, the Lord of Toungoo. Their story, not to be found in the chronicles, was collected by Langham Carter (1933: 133) and is well known among the spirit-mediums. As the famous Sawmunhla, the Lady of the Running Waters, a Shan princess married to king Anawratha, was charged with sorcery by the king’s other wives. Together with her brother, the Lord of Toungoo, she was banned from the court and appointed collector of taxes in an oil-producing district of the Lower Chindwin region. The two drowned in a river, having been refused help by the local people who despised them. When the king learned of their misfortune, he came to establish them as *nat* in two distinct localities, the Lady of the Running Waters at Maundon (see Fig. 4) and the Lord of Toungoo in the nearby village of Pyanhlè, both places located on the west shore of the Chindwin. The festival celebrated at Zidaw is mainly dedicated to the sister (see Fig. 5).



Fig. 4. Devout visitors making offerings to Ame Yeyin in her temple in Maundon (photo by the author, March 2000).



Fig. 5. The pilgrims' camp during the festival dedicated to Ame Yeyin in Zidaw
(photo by the author, March 2000).

The first peculiarity of this pair is thus that, although connected, the cults of the two figures are distinct. This is probably due to the fact that, unlike in all the other cases, the sister is clearly the dominant character in the pair and she is regarded as a particularly powerful spirit on account of her mastery of sorcery. The process of the making of the *nat* pair originates from the fact that the sister was charged with sorcery. In this case, the efficiency expected from the cult is actually merged with the potency attributed to sorcery. While in most of the cults it is the local sources of power that are encompassed in the Buddhist Burmese kingship, here it is an outstanding source of power, sorcery. Incidentally, this exceptional source of power is also related to Shan identity.

The Lady of the Running Water is sometimes associated with the story of Shan princes, the Lord of the Nine Towns, Ko Myo Shin, and his sister, Puleyin, although it is a completely different story. Here the brother and sister have contracted a celibacy pact that leads the sister to first resist her brother's rival, U Min Kyaw, another famous *nat*. But U Min Kyaw incites the adopted children of the brother and sister – in fact, the children of another Shan prince whom Ko Myo Shin had previously eliminated – to kill Ko Myo Shin. Ko Myo Shin becomes a *nat* and later draws his sister into the *nat thami*'s status to prevent her from breaking the pact of celibacy that binds them together. This story presents many particularities. One is the celibacy pact between the brother and sister, which appears as the converse of

the incestuous theme underlying the whole pattern. The other is descent through adoption, here a conflict-prone pattern, which points to another specificity of the pattern, that is, the brother-sister pairs of tutelary spirits are necessarily infertile ones.

This leads us to a feature of the brother-sister pattern of the Burmese cult: Such pairs are never thought of as ancestral spirits. This sets the *nat* apart from local tutelary spirits in other Theravada countries in Southeast Asia, which are often regarded as couples of ancestors.¹⁹ The specificity of Burmese symbolic articulation between local spirits and the communities that honor them in a cult deserves to be underlined. I have argued elsewhere that this can be explained by the peculiar ambiguity of the Burmese cult of the Thirty-seven, in which the principles of autochthonous power and central sovereignty are fused through the integration of *nat* into a national pantheon (Brac de la Perrière 1996).

Another point must be made about the story of Ko Myo Shin and his sister: These *nat* are not directly connected to a Burmese king and, in consequence, they have no main shrine in central Burma, no particular domain, nor are they the object of a festival. Although they did not belong to the official list of the Thirty-seven, they do belong to the actual cult, in which they represent Shan origin in general, beside being the guardians of the cities. Like Ko Thein Shin, they are not the objects of a cult performed by Shan people. Rather, the cult to them is performed by Burmese claiming some Shan origin.²⁰ Here the relationship that we are concerned with is somewhat different: It is not "locality versus center," but rather a particular identity versus a Burmese one. This is also true of an obscure series of pairs originating from different ethnic groups that are part of the ceremonies to the Thirty-seven, although we know almost nothing about their biographies. To be sure, as we have seen, the pattern of the sister's marriage with the king, which is the symbolic expression of the relationship of locality versus center, always involves an element of identity as well. However, in the first cases examined, the process of Burmanization also involved the encompassment of this element into a mere territorial relationship. This is not so in the Ko Myo Shin story, which may well explain why there is no marriage with a Burmese king, but rather a pact of celibacy between the two heroes.

THE BROTHERS PATTERN

Let us now contrast with the brother-sister stories above those stories involving pairs of brothers, those of the Taungbyon brothers and of Lord White and Lord Brown being the principal ones. The first, well known story deals with brothers whose special powers assisted king Anawratha in the campaign that he launched against Yunnan to seize a Buddhist relic (a tooth of Buddha). Upon their return, however, the brothers were executed for neglecting the construction of a pagoda in Taungbyon, where they were subsequently settled as *nat*.²¹ The story told by the *Glass Palace Chronicle* (Luce & Pe Maung Tin 1960: 83-84) makes clear that the king was suspicious of the brothers' exceptional powers, which they had inherited from their Indian father, who himself had obtained them, together with his own

brother, by eating the flesh of a dead yogi. The Taungbyon brothers are the tutelary spirits of the Taungbyon region and are also addressed a cult by Buddhists claiming Muslim ancestors. As a mark of this origin, the cult's followers avoid eating pork meat.

Another story concerns the two brothers born from Min Mahagiri and the female naga, already mentioned above. These, also endowed with great powers, became tax collectors for the Pyu king of Sri Ksetra, Duttabaung. But the king, becoming suspicious of them, caused them to get into a fight with each other, in which both subsequently died. Although these brothers belong to the group of *nat* that depend on Min Mahagiri (the *eim twin nat*, or domestic *nat*), they are not the object of a well-developed cult of their own. Known as Lord White and Lord Brown, they have shrines in the towns of Prome and Taungdwingyi and are often represented with six arms.

Compared with the preceding stories, these two stories obviously display a very different pattern of relationship with kingship. The heroes are the children of *nat* and already belong to the royal administration. But they are endowed with powers that make them useful, as well as dangerous. Although it is not stated in their stories, they apparently are twins. At the same time, they represent differences in Burmese identity, especially the Taungbyon brothers, who forgot to work on a pagoda – the reason given for their execution – and are associated with Muslims. What is involved here is no longer the integration of populations or territories, but internal power conflicts.

From this point of view, it may be interesting to compare these stories to those of kingdom founders in Burma, who are often brothers: the brothers of the former Mon city, Thaton, who founded a new city at Pegu; those of Arakan; or those of Tagaung – the older brother's son, Duttabaung, is credited with the foundation of the last Pyu city, Sri Ksetra. In all these stories, the brothers have to flee their birthplace to face dangers and, then, establish together a new kingdom. But once the kingdom is founded, one of the brothers has to be eliminated. It is as if power, to be established, requires brotherhood but, once established, it can no longer be shared.

Like *nat* legends about brothers, these brothers stories are about internal power conflicts, contrasting with those involving brothers and sisters, which have to do with the articulation between the central power and the localities. They seem to concern different sociological levels.

CONCLUSIONS

Nat stories are not all about siblings: Some are about isolated male figures called “grand-fathers,” others about mothers, and others yet about infants. The brother-sister pattern however, is the most pervasive. Only the most representative cases of this model have been presented here. The local *nat* that are brothers and sisters are actually more numerous: for example, the Lords of the Royal Lake, a pair of Pyu spirits established in Prome; or the Arakanese *Thek Thein* brother and sister, linked

to the Mahamuni image in Mandalay; not to mention the numerous anonymous brother-sister pairs from different ethnic origins.

All the stories following this pattern and analyzed here may be considered as variations of the Min Mahagiri legend, which is presented as the origin of the Burmese cult of the *nat*. Min Mahagiri, together with his sister, is said to have been the focus of a dynastic cult for Burmese kingship. Nowadays, he is the object of a general cult as the *nat* protecting all Burmese households (*eim twin nat*), as well as being the object of a local cult in the Mount Popa region. This local cult is of the same kind as the cults of most of the *nat* linked to the Thirty-seven pantheon that have been referred to.

The brother-sister pattern in the *nat* stories is distinctive as the most representative of the ethos of Burmese local cults to tutelary spirits. These stories also tell us that the institution of the local cults to the *nat* enabled the integration of different components of the Burmese whole. Integration is presented as the aim of the marriage contracted by the king with the sister. Thus, the pattern of brothers and sisters linked to the king by a marriage alliance symbolically expresses the main relationship involved in the unification of Burma, the encompassment of localities within the Buddhist kingdom.

By localities I mean not only local communities established within a territory, but I include all the specific components comprising the Burmese Buddhist kingdom. The range of stories presented here is indicative of the variety of the configurations involved, ranging from the integration of ethnic components, such as Shan identity, to that of specific knowledge, such as sorcery. In the idiom of the cult of the *nat*, one could say that the Burmese cult has been created from the integration of a variety of forces in a hierarchical system dominated by Buddhism. The reason why I choose to associate these components with localities is that, through the cults, the process of Burmanization achieved the encompassment of components within a mere territorial relationship: As individual figures, the *nat* are now the objects of local cults, and this is how they have come to belong to the Burmese cult of the Thirty-seven.

As stated in the introduction, the brother-sister stories stand for the Buddhist kingdom's point of view on the integration of localities.²² They are also a statement about the fact that the marriage alliance contracted by the king was not sufficient to achieve the loyalty of a people to Burmese sovereignty. Contracted in order to bring about the submission of a people, as recounted in these stories, the marriage alliance failed, and the king had to use other means, that is, a new method, to bring about the transformation of the character standing for this people into a local tutelary spirit. This leads us to the conclusion that the imposition of a Burmese order was achieved through the replacement of ancient hierarchical relationships based on marriage alliances between dominant and dependant populations with ritual relationships based on the supremacy of Buddhism as a new system of values.

It is striking that these stories present the older way to establish domination through marriage alliance as embedded in Shan identity, notwithstanding the fact

that the Shan are actually Buddhist like the Burmese. Shan identity appears emblematic of all ethnic differences in the Burmese cult. This could be linked to the fact that, in Burmese history, Shan chiefdoms have often occupied an intermediate position between Burmese kingdoms and the populations living at the margins.²³ However, stories of *nat* convey an image of the superiority of the Burmese polity over the Shan political order. In other words, they are conveying Burmese conceptions of the differences between the working of Burmese society and that of neighboring societies.

It is of interest here to look at this proposition in the light of Leach's thesis in his major work, *Political Systems of Highland Burma* (1954), which may be the best known of the studies dealing with inter-ethnicity in Burma. Leach has argued that the different groups living in the Kachin region were interacting through a political order that was understood by every one, although it was not more coherent than stable. He did refer incidentally to the fact that Shan chiefs (*sawbwa*) considered themselves as Burmese kings, but he did not include the Burmese polity in his analysis.²⁴

What one learn from the Burmese *nat* stories is that the Burmese have a specific understanding of their neighbors' methods to establish domination, and that this specific understanding allowed them to establish more enduring hierarchies. It means that, at the upper end of the hierarchized groups, the Burmese have played and still play their part by interacting with "others" through different uses and interpretations of the same tools. This should argue for inter-ethnic studies taking a larger view on interactions in this area.

The brother-sister pattern of *nat* stories is in its way emblematic of the new Buddhist order that insured the supremacy of Burmese polity. Within this new order, the *nat* appear as intrinsically ambiguous figures, being as much the protectors of local communities as the agents of Buddhist Burmese sovereignty, an ambiguity that the pattern of brothers whose sisters have been married to kings still aptly expresses on a symbolic level.

Notes

- 1 This is a revised version of a communication I read at the symposium in honor of Sayagyi U Pe Maung Tin at SOAS, London, in 1998. I am grateful to the anonymous readers of *Moussons* for their useful comments.
- 2 Burmese words are given here according to the usual transcription found in the English literature. In my works in French, I prefer a transcription adapted for French speakers. This is why the spelling of *nat*, among other vernacular terms, differs from that of my earlier publications – *naq*, to render the glottal stop. The *nat* are identified with the titles given to them in their cults. As this paper deals with matters that are not only contemporary, I have kept the names of Burma and Burmese rather than the official name Myanmar that the actual government has adopted.
- 3 The Burmese kings' chronicles have been composed late in time: *The Great Chronicle of Maung Kula* was finished in 1721 (see U Kala 1956) and *The Glass Palace Chronicle* was composed a hundred years later (see Luce & Pe Maung Thin 1960). Both were compilations of earlier local chronicles and other historiographic material. This implies that statements about *nat* express the beliefs prevalent at the Burmese kings' court in the eighteenth century. Nowadays, local traditions may be significantly different

- from the versions found in the chronicles, although the latter are considered the reference among the ritual specialists of the cult to the Thirty-seven. For an interesting instance of such discrepancies, see my paper about Myittu *pwe* (Brac de la Perrière 1998a). A number of Burmese authors have collected traditions about *nat*: Khin Maung Than (2001), Bha Nyunt (1981), Maung Maung Tin (1985), and Pho Kya (1973). Among them, Khin Maung Than’s book is especially useful, as it quotes the existing sources, either written or oral. See also the works in English of Rodrigues (1992) and Temple (1906).
- 4 Although the pantheon is said to consist of thirty-seven members, it is not a closed list, and the cult actually comprises more than thirty-seven *nat*, those not included in the pantheon being nevertheless associated with it.
 - 5 See, for instance, the story as told by Htin Aung (1959: 74).
 - 6 Sakka is a Pāli name, corresponding to Sanskrit Sakrā and Burmese Thagya. This divinity is the Buddhist form of Indra, the Hindu king of the city of the thirty-two gods, the Tavatimsa.
 - 7 The number thirty-seven is actually borrowed from the number of inhabitants of the Tavatimsa: Indra, thirty-two gods, and four guardians of the Orient (see Brac de la Perrière 1989, Mendelson 1963, and Shorto 1967).
 - 8 Moreover, in king Anawratha’s time, the local cults were most probably not so focused on images as they are today. The habit of worshipping statues representing the *nat* must have appeared much later, deriving from court practices (see Brac de la Perrière 2002).
 - 9 Other kinds of rituals are performed at domestic or village level, especially on life-crisis occasions, and usually by senior women (see Nash 1966, Spiro 1978, and Brac de la Perrière 1989).
 - 10 *Nat thami* is the feminine form of *nat* (*thami*, “daughter”).
 - 11 Both titles mean Lord of the Great Mountain, the former (the brother’s title) in Pāli, the latter (the sister’s title) in Burmese.
 - 12 Actually, according to a manuscript written by the *nat* ritual specialist of the Court in the nineteenth century, the Kawi Dewa Kyaw Thu, their permanent shrine was first established in the very palace of Pagan (see Kyaw Thu 1856).
 - 13 This particular story is found in the *Burma Gazetteer. Kyaukse District* (Stewart 1925; see also Brown 1916).
 - 14 Ko Thein Shin, the *nat*’s title, means Lord of the Nine-Hundred Thousand and refers to the number of political units under his command as a Shan prince. He is sometimes identified as the King of Myogyi, an old Shan city located to the east of Kyaukse.
 - 15 This kind of marriage was called *tabin tain*, lit., “from one branch.”
 - 16 In his book about the relationships between ethnic groups around Lake Inle, a region of the Shan State, F. Robinne shows that, although in cities such as Nyaung Shwe, once a center of Shan administration, some shrines have been lately dedicated to spirits belonging to the Thirty-seven due to Burmese influence, the ritual specialists are still Burmese nowadays – a fact that I have been able to observe myself. Robinne states that, in this region, a distinction is made between the *nat* guardian of the religion (*sasana nat*) and the *nat* from the outside (*apran nat*), not belonging to the Burmese pantheon of the Thirty-seven (see Robinne 2000: 179-183). However, the situation regarding these matters may evolve quickly as the Burmanization process is at work there also.
 - 17 For a detailed analysis of the Myttu festival, see Brac de la Perrière 1998a.
 - 18 See Przyłuski 1925.
 - 19 See the synthesis by B. Formoso (1996), referring among others to Maspero (1950) and Tambiah (1970).
 - 20 On this point, I have revised the statement I made previously about Ko Myo Shin (Brac de la Perrière 1989: 43): He is not the guardian of the Shan States.
 - 21 As an example of the resilience of *nat*-story themes in today’s representations of events, it is interesting to stress that the two brothers’ dreadful spirits had to manifest themselves to the king by preventing his royal barge to leave Taungbyon, in order for them to be settled as the tutelary spirits of Taungbyon. They

are said to have manifested themselves again in the same way in the year 2000, when Burmese officials undertook to transport a huge block of alabaster from this region down the Irrawaddy River to Yangon to erect there the country's tallest Buddha image. Burmese officials had to offer the Taungbyon brothers a big ceremony in order to make them accept that the barge carrying the stone float down the river along their domain.

22 Locally one can hear very different stories about local configurations of *nat*, for instance, those involving male characters belonging to the Thirty-seven, who had harassed young Buddhist village girls, beautiful as well as virtuous. The girls, after their death due to this persecution, became guardian spirits of mountains in their persecutor's domain. Such female guardian spirits of mountains are associated with, for instance, the younger of the Taungbyon brothers and with U Min Kyaw. The inversion of values credited to the figures standing for the two levels of cult organization is typical of this kind of configuration and would warrant a study on its own.

23 See, for instance, Robinne 2000.

24 This was noticed by Kupper: "He did not take the obvious next step and relate the petty politics of the Highland tribes to the imperial ambitions of their Burmese and Chinese neighbours..." (Kupper 2002). Later on, however, Leach did take that step to look at Chinese and Indian influences in Burma (Leach 1960).

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Abstract: This paper analyzes one symbolic aspect of the main sociological relationship sustaining the practice of the Burmese cult in honor of the *nat*, known as the cult to the “Thirty-seven Lords.” This pantheon, the object of a widespread cult among the Burmese, is actually a collection of local cult figures often involving sibling pairs. It is the bond between the main figures in the local forms of the cult and their siblings that is examined through legendary bio-

ographies, as a symbolic aspect of Burmese integration of localities, which is the grounding sociological process involved in the cult.

Relations de germanité dans les histoires de nat du culte birman des « Trente-sept »

Résumé : dans cet article est analysé un aspect symbolique de la principale articulation sociologique qui fonde la pratique du culte birman des naq, connu sous le nom de culte des « Trente-sept Seigneurs ». Ce panthéon dont le culte est très commun parmi les Birmans est en fait une collection de figures de cultes locaux, qui sont souvent impliquées dans des liens de germanité. Cette association des principales figures des formes locales du culte avec des germains est examinée à partir de biographies légendaires comme un aspect symbolique de l'intégration birmane des localités, ce qui constitue le principal processus sociologique à l'œuvre dans le culte.

Key words: siblings, brother-sister pattern, Burmese Buddhist kingship, cult of the *nat*, local cults, national pantheon, localities, integration.

Mots clés : *germains, modèle frère-sœur, royauté bouddhiste birmane, culte des naq, cultes locaux, panthéon national, localités, intégration.*