

The Burmese *Nats*

Between Sovereignty and Autochthony

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In Burma, the rituals connected with the earth concern the relationship between the local communities of rice-growers and the political whole that encompasses them. The structure of this totality is a result of the history of the Burmese Buddhist monarchy which was, from the tenth century to the end of the nineteenth, the dominant political institution of the Irrawaddy valley. The Buddhist kings were viewed as the masters of the earth, a role symbolized by the ritual of the first furrow, which they "traced" in the soil in order to inaugurate the work season. Moreover, the native Burmese religious system does not include a deity exclusively associated with the earth and who could, by this right, be the object of a systematic cult. This complex religious system, dominated by Buddhism, includes another cult, that of the thirty-seven *nats*, whose history is linked both to the Burmese monarchical system and the adoption of Theravada Buddhism as the state religion. The fall of the monarchy in 1886 did not bring about its disappearance. On the contrary, this cult is still quite alive and touches all levels of Burmese society. It is especially vibrant in those local communities that worship the thirty-seven *nats* of the national pantheon, viewed as the protector of their land.

The Genesis of the Pantheon: Local Powers and the State

The foundation myth of the *nats* cult attributes the institution of the pantheon of the Thirty-Seven to Anawratha (1044-1077), the first king to establish Burmese dominance over the entire Irrawaddy

valley.¹ According to this story, the king initially tried – in vain – to convince the local population, which he had assembled under his crown, to do away with its local religious practices and to convert to Buddhism. Faced with this failure, he decided to take thirty-seven statues, representing the religions practiced at this time, and have them placed around the Shwezigon, the state pagoda, the construction of which had just begun. Although it is difficult to say exactly what the religious practices of this period were, it is likely that the *nats* cult that resulted was of a different kind than the cult that preceded it. Indeed some of the legends concerning the worship of the *nats* ascribe their very existence to a period subsequent to Anawratha's reign, which presumes that the cult did not yet exist in its present form. Whatever the case, it is said that the *nats* were placed under the authority of Thi'dja, the Burmese version of Indra, the king of the Vedic gods. This god, whom the Buddhists call Sakra, is asserted to be the protector of Theravada in Burma. Thus, by the intermediary of Thi'dja, the king made clear the subordination of the former cults to the new state religion, Theravadan Buddhism.

The thirty-six *nats* plus Thi'dja make a pantheon of thirty-seven, a number which corresponds to the sum of $32 + 4 + 1$: thirty-two being the number of divinities gathered at Tavatimsa, the city of the Hindu gods, to which Indra, their leader, is added, as well as the four guardians of the orient, called the *lokapala*. The number thirty-seven, which constitutes a cosmogonic category, had been used before the Burmese, by the Pyus and Mons, for the socio-religious organization of the Irrawaddy valley.² The thirty-seven *nats* surrounding the Shwezigon pagoda can be taken as the original list of *nats*. Later, the officers of the royal family in fact kept an official list. The last of these, dating from 1805, states that only some of the *nats* lived during the era of Pagan. Thus the original list of *nats* was fundamentally changed after the institution of the pantheon. This list in fact constitutes a catalogue of characters whose identities changed over the course of the centuries and probably never comprised the actual totality of *nats* worshipped in Burma. Thus the number thirty-seven does not correspond to the number of spirits believed to have existed at the time of the creation of the cult: rather it represents another totality, that of the kingdom that the Burmese dynasty was then constructing.

Just like the organization of the cults into an institutionalized pantheon, the nature of the spirits also reflects royal authority. *Nat* is a generic term that can designate Hindu divinities, spirits of nature or of death. The Burmese, however, do not confuse these various categories: *nat* specifically designates the members of the Pantheon of the Thirty-Seven, that is to say, the unfortunate dead and evil spirits who have undergone a transformation intended to make them benevolent. This transformation is brought about by attaching the spirits to an altar. Instituted by the kings, it is similar in form to an act of ritual atonement for an injustice. Indeed, an examination of the legends of the *nats* reveals that they are depicted as rebels or potential rivals of the king, who must rid himself of their presence. However, an unjust or violent death brings not reincarnation, the standard destiny of the Buddhist dead, but rather a potentially dangerous wandering of the soul. The king, in order to lessen the risks that a region exposed to such a form of death might incur, instituted a local cult: he had a temple built, a statue sculpted, and ordered the local population to carry out appropriate rituals.

The elevation of a spirit to the rank of *nat* was the object of a royal decree. As a result, the spirit received the title of sovereign, was installed in a temple called a "palace," and fell under the jurisdiction of the lands received: indeed the role of the *nat* – already recorded in administrative reports in the sixteenth century – is to guarantee that local custom is respected, including the ritual obligations of the local population to it. From the point of view of the monarchy, the cult of the *nats* is thus imposed from above. Yet it is clear that it emanates equally from the local population itself: the monarchy merely channels the local power. In return for respecting the components of the cult and the prohibitions imposed by the *nat*, the local population receives prosperity. This spirit thus becomes the protector of the region in which it rebelled. By transforming it into a *nat*, the king implicitly acknowledges a certain sovereignty for a particular region, or rather, acknowledges a degree of sovereignty in the spirit itself, as if appointing the *nat* a local representative of the royal power. However, from the point of view of the local populace, it is the *nat* who has had his way with the king

This ambiguous position of the *nat*, who – depending on one's point of view – is either imposed by or on the king, finds a parallel in the role of *myo'thou'dji*, or "city head," in the administrative hierarchy. The *myo'thou'dji*, although a hereditary role, must be confirmed both by the royalty and local consensus. However, while the ambiguity of the "city head" is a function of his role as administrative intermediary, the ambiguity of the *nat* is inherent in its very nature. As a subversive force, the *nats* were originally captured and propitiated by the centralizing monarchy, a process that continued until the local *nats* were replaced by others of royal blood. Indeed, with barely a single exception, all the *nats* catalogued on official registers are connected to the reigning dynasties, which contradicts the foundation legend of the cult, stating that it was an expression of autochthonous cults organized by Anawratha. The individual legends indicate that these princely figures were replaced by royalty in the domain that became their own. It must therefore be assumed that these figures were superimposed on ancient local legends, whose motifs they borrowed. Yet this act of appropriation of the *nats*, by identifying the *nats* with royal personages, did not reduce the fundamental duality of the cult itself, which is simultaneously popular and state-sponsored.

Nat, Royalty, and Buddhism

One aspect of this ambivalence is manifested in the role played by the cult in relation to Buddhist worship. Although there can be no confusion or mixture of Buddhist rituals with those addressed to the *nats*, no *nat* ritual can take place outside of a Buddhist context. Indeed the cult of the Thirty-Seven is explicitly designated as that of the "Burmese Buddhists." Moreover, although the cult is situated in a Buddhist context, it is nevertheless inferior to it. This inferiority is embodied both in the different height of Buddhist and *nat* altars, and also by the fact that when a man enters a Buddhist monastery to become a monk, even on a provisional basis, his possession by the *nats* is voided, since the status of bonze confers on its possessor a higher spiritual rank than that of a *nat*. What's more, the bonzes are even forbidden merely to attend a ceremony

addressed to a *nat*. This is because the ceremony is perceived as a violation of the principle of detachment advocated by Buddhism.

The depreciation of the cult is justified by the failure of the *nats*, over their history, to live up to Buddhist values, which is confirmed by the very character of the *nats*. At the same time, the transformation these spirits undergo at the moment of their submission to the king implies their integration into the Buddhist value system. This process can be observed in ritual; for example, in the one celebrated at Tauntbyon. The Tauntbyon ritual concerns two brothers, depicted as Muslims, to whom it is forbidden to offer pork and who were executed for refusing to participate in the construction of a pagoda: nevertheless, the ceremony includes an homage to the pagoda paid by these two *nats*. As an extreme case, that of the Lords – a brother and sister – of Prome Lake, the transformation into a *nat* is depicted as a brother's conversion of his sister to Buddhism.

Although the *nats* cult is thus encompassed by Buddhism, it remains a framework within which behavior judged by Buddhism to be deviant or devalued can be expressed in the form of a hitherto disobedient spirit. In such cases, the role of the cult is to treat this deviance. The cult of the *nats*, taken in by Buddhism, thus retains its subversive potential. The non-conformity to values taught by the Enlightened One is in fact an aspect of a rivalry between the local heroes and the royalty; a rivalry expressed on the symbolic level by the submission of the *nats* to Buddhism, and on the political level by their federation in a pantheon, that of the Thirty-Seven. While it is likely that originally this pantheon was only the object of a royal cult, local communities worshipping at that time a limited number of local spirits united in a *nat* that was itself obedient to the royal power. As for the royal power, its strength lay in the concentrated ritual activity – as much centered on Buddhism as on the cult of the *nats* – in regions subservient to the king. The *nats* thus seem not only to be tied to but are an actual expression of the process of Burmese unification; this by the way in which their changing status embodies the absorption of values that can be called autochthonous within the scheme of general values of Burmese Buddhism.

It should also be pointed out that the non-conformity of the *nats* is analogous to the position of the king, in regards to partici-

pation in the world. The *nats*, by their actions, oppose the renunciation of the monks just as the king does with his wives, his wealth, his power, and even his long hair. But the king makes up for these demerits inherent in his function by making donations to the monks: this is the basis of their interdependence. For their part, the *nats* can make no such contributions; they cannot accumulate merits as the king does. Instead, by the paradoxes of Buddhist logic, they are trapped in a cycle of interrupted rebirth, unable to get out of it. Still, from the point of view of participation in the material world, the *nats* are in the same position as the king, equally distant from the monks' renunciation of the world.

The local sovereignty of the *nats* is achieved by surrendering the spiritual power they represent. One of the most striking images in the legends is that of a king who, having destroyed his enemy and transformed him into spirit, calls him back to life in a position of homage.³ He obtains this homage of the spirits by using a scepter given to him by Thi'dja, a divinity of Vedic origin whom we encountered earlier. As the cult's foundation myth states, Anawratha subordinated the Burmese *nats* to Thi'dja, who is of a different nature than they. However, the authority of Thi'dja over the *nats* is only nominal: as the legends tell, Thi'dja intervenes neither in their federation nor in the creation of the *nats*; nor does he intervene in their rituals. In fact, according to the Chronicles, he acts only through the intermediary of the scepter, which he gives to the king with the rest of the royal regalia. As for the exercise of concrete power over the spirits, it is up to the king to keep them respectful and to make *nats* out of them. The king thus appears to fulfill the function attributed to Thi'dja himself in the foundation legend of the cult.

How is this relationship between the king, Thi'dja, and the *nats* to be understood? In the Chronicle Thi'dja is depicted as intervening at the outset of important reigns to hand over the instruments of royal power to the new sovereign. Significantly, he does so for Duttabaung, the first king of Sri Ksetra. This city, which was the capital of the Kingdom of Pyu and located in the central plain of Irrawaddy, was the immediate predecessor to the Kingdom of Burma. In this episode, which was a founding one for the Burmese, who were laying claim to the Pyu legacy, Thi'dja directs the con-

struction of the city, crowns the king, and bestows the instruments of power that will permit, without a blow being struck, the collection of tributes and taxes from the dependent states. In short, he establishes the monarchy. Later, Thi'dja bestows upon one of the legendary kings of Pagan, Pyusawti, the instruments necessary to overcome the kingdom's enemies. Then he gives to Anawratha the scepter that confers upon him the power to control spirits. And this is to mention only the most important actions of this divinity. The Burmese king, without being himself divinized or absorbed by Thi'dja, nevertheless owes his sovereignty to him.

Nonetheless, this sovereignty is only guaranteed when the pretender to the throne benefits from the karma of the Buddhist king and behaves as such. According to the Chronicle, Thi'dja only intervenes for those who, without necessarily being heirs to the throne, possess the inherent virtues of a Buddhist king. Moreover, once they have exhausted their good karma, or if they violate the code of Buddhist virtue, their sovereignty is taken from them. Thus, in the Chronicle, the instruments that Thi'dja conferred on Duttabaung lose their power over his subject populations because of the king's illegitimate confiscation of a religious good. It is at moments like these that the king loses his control over the spirits, which allows them to turn against him: Anawratha's death is an example of this phenomenon.⁴ The king-*nat* relation is thus reversible. It is in this context that the full ambivalence of the *nats* becomes manifest: while their subversive potential is unleashed when Buddhist legitimacy, guaranteed by Thi'dja, is lacking, this potential is controlled by the king when legitimacy is present.

Thi'dja therefore has a complex function. It should be recalled, in this context, that he is Indra, that is to say the king of the gods, and, because of his mount, the white elephant Airavata, he is also associated with magical fertility and rain, simultaneously ensuring prosperity and the cosmic order. As such, he confers legitimacy on Burma in two distinct ways: as protector of Buddhism and as master of local spirits, the latter through magic. These two aspects, karmic legitimacy and the power of magic, correspond to the two faces of the personality of the Buddhist sovereign; that of the protector of Buddhist dharma, and that of the conqueror. These two aspects are already contained in the life of the Buddha:

renouncing royalty in order to seek salvation, he teaches the means of obtaining it. The Buddhist monarch assumes an inverse and provisional renunciation, i.e. he is the king who gives up nirvana. Thus, in spite of his good karma, he takes upon himself the inherent defects of the royal condition in order to safeguard the Buddha's teachings. From the point of view of the Burmese royalty, it is Thi'dja who coordinates these two aspects, by making karma the power that confers legitimacy on the king's rule, Thi'dja makes it possible for the king to exercise concrete power.

It should be noted that, although the opposition "of the world"/"out of the world," which characterizes the king/monk relationship, is mediated by Thi'dja, Thi'dja himself does not personally exercise his functions of sovereign of the Burmese *nats* (he leaves these functions to the king), thereby occupying a median position from the point of view of participation in the world. Finally, this account of the model of mutual relations in force among elements of the Burmese royalty shows that the *nats* play the role of intermediary in the symbolic chain of authority linking Thi'dja to the local communities. The king's actions come as if from the outside, since his power is legitimized by values that are themselves external, that is to say the values of Buddhism.

The Burmese and Thai Cases in Perspective

The interdependence that simultaneously separates and unites the king to the monks has often been portrayed as the defining relation of Buddhist monarchies. This emphasis has tended to understate the importance of the relationship between monarchy and local authority, the effect of which has been to blur the particularities of each monarchy. However, P. Mus has already underscored the importance of "the overlap between royal power and its judicial apparatus with the local fabric, rich in territorial cults and non-written practices."⁵ Thus, the study of the totality of relations uniting the king, monks, and *nats* reveals that there existed in Burma an institutional interface linking the powers conferred by Buddhism to the temporal authority: the person of Thi'dja/Indra. It would seem that by comparing the different ways that this over-

lap, an essential element of the system, was constructed, we can begin to characterize the various Buddhist monarchies. How then does this overlap manifest itself in Royal Thai Buddhism?

The Cakri dynasty, currently reigning in Bangkok, uses an Emerald Buddha as its palladium. This jewel, sculpted from a semi-precious stone, is located in the sanctuary of the royal palace and has been studied by numerous commentators, most notably F. Reynolds and S. J. Tambiah, who have interpreted the legend associated with the statue as being an affirmation of the specificity of Royal Thai Buddhism.⁶ This legend includes a Burmese episode in which Anawratha “forgets” about the Emerald Buddha from Ceylon,⁷ thereby emphasizing the variety of ritual forms then practiced in Pagan; for example, with the arrival of the Buddhist Canon in the eleventh century, a cult of the *dharmaraja* (the dharmic king) arose, while at the same time in Angkor the cult of the *devaraja* was practiced. This difference is expressed in the separation, during a voyage to Southeast Asia, of the *Triptaka* from the Emerald Buddha, which had been joined together in Ceylon and corresponded to two aspects of Buddhist religious practice: one emphasizes the Scriptures or teachings of the Buddha as the only object of worship; the other worships relics and images of the Buddha. The Emerald Buddha given to Anawratha was supposedly a copy of another legendary object: the very first representation of Buddha, made from a gem that Sakra (Indra) had supplied to the Buddhist king Milinda and which is associated with the figure of Cakkravartin, the Buddhist Universal Emperor. This kind of representation was thus already associated with the Buddhist monarchy in Ceylon, which explains why a copy of it was given to Anawratha.

The Emerald Buddha, which legend reported as having been stranded in Angkor, reappears on the historical scene in the sixteenth century, at Chiang Mai, then capital of a Thai kingdom. As it was in Ceylon, the Emerald Buddha was associated with Buddhist writings. In 1778, the Siamese dynasty of the Thonburi adopted it as their palladium; it is currently housed in the stupa of the ancient palace at Bangkok, along with a copy of the *Triptaka*. S. J. Tambiah, in his analysis, ascribes the reuniting of the statue and texts at Chiang Mai to the synthesis of two currents of influence,

which began in Siam at the beginning of the sixteenth century: one emanated from Pagan, the other at Angkor.

The legend of the Emerald Buddha therefore bears witness to an awareness, on the part of Thai culture, of a common history linking the Theravadan states of Southeast Asia; although the two forms of Buddhism, Theravada and Mahayana, were known before the eleventh century, it was during this period that for the first time the Sinhalese form of Buddhist royalty, which would determine the politico-religious history of the entire region (the sole exception being Vietnam), was adopted. At the same time, the legend, as told in the Thai Chronicle, served to affirm the specificity of the Siamese form of monarchy; this form, which was more in accord with the Theravada monarchy of Ceylon, its model of origin, conferred a certain preeminence upon Siam in relation to its neighbors. And it was the Emerald Buddha that especially crystallized this specificity.

F. Reynolds has clearly demonstrated the degree to which this symbol is overdetermined. The Emerald Buddha, carved from a green, translucent stone that is probably jasper, is similar to statues found in the Thai-Lao region. These statues were believed to possess powers attributed to the stone itself. Identified with light, lightning, rain, and fertility, the symbolism of the Emerald Buddha overlapped in part with Indra, the divinity who in fact provided the stone from which the statue was sculpted. The Emerald Buddha also evokes the figure of Cakravartin, the Universal Emperor, whose adornments he wears. In Thailand, the royal princes recited their oaths of loyalty to the reigning monarch in the presence of this statue. A symbol of the Buddhist monarchy, the statue, which legend says was based on a Sinhalese model, became the symbol of the Thai Buddhist sovereign whose power the statue helped legitimate.

At the time of its appearance in Chiang Mai, the Emerald Buddha was superimposed on the cult of *lak muang*, which was one of the forms of spirit worship common in Thai communities prior to these spirits being organized under the tutelage of Buddhist royalty. The *lak muang* ("pillar-principality") was the spirit of the chief's ancestor, to whom the chief devoted a personal cult. This spirit was differentiated from the *phi muang* ("spirit-principality"),

which was the tutelary spirit of the land on which the community lived and was the object of collective worship.⁸

The spread of Buddhism to the Thais of Laos and Thailand did not result in the total disappearance of the distinction between *lak muang* and *phi muang*, with its dual ritual orientation, one dynastic and the other territorial. Although it may have been expunged in some areas,⁹ F. Reynolds has shown that the worship of the Emerald Buddha, at the time of its introduction in Chiang Mai, was a transference of the worship of the cult of the ancestral lineages of the chiefs of the pre-Buddhist Thai populations. As an embodiment of the Buddhist monarchy in Bangkok, the statue, the king's palladium to which he devotes a private cult, presents itself as the projection of the dynastic aspect of Thai ritual, with the statue being housed in the central stupa which is endowed with territorial signification that is further strengthened by the cosmological structure of this type of building.

If Reynolds' analysis bears up under scrutiny, then it can be affirmed that the dual orientation of ritual in Thai communities, with its combination of ancestral spirits of the chiefs and tutelary spirits, is encountered once more in the symbolic structure of the Thai monarchy, that is to say on a totally different level and furnished with the new values of Buddhism. The dual orientation of this ritual accounts for the distinction of the two principles – that is to say, autochthony and sovereignty – in the political order.¹⁰

This kind of double orientation in ritual is not present in Burma. The *nats* simultaneously represent autochthony – as emanations of the local communities, which provide the *nats* with their subversive potential – and the local sovereignty that the king is compelled to acknowledge for them on the level of spirituality. As we have seen, the *nats* of the pantheon of the Thirty-Seven are presented as ambivalent, simultaneously tutelary spirits of the local communities and obedient to the sovereign. This is thus a rather different situation than the one found in Thai communities, where the chief's ancestors and later his palladium have a parallel existence to the particular spiritual principle of the local communities.

In my view, this difference accounts for certain specific qualities found in local Burmese cults: notably their arrangement into an integrated pantheon on a national level, which is absent in Thai-

land; also, on the level of symbolic construction of the royal principle, the absence, in Burma, of a private royal cult dedicated to a statue of Buddha worshipped as a palladium. Finally, while the importance accorded to ancestry in the definition of royalty among the Thais is revealed in the belief, among non-Buddhist Thais, in the existence of the spirits of ancestral chiefs and in the Emerald Buddha as symbol of the royal dynasty in modern Thailand, this principle is of little general importance for the Burmese and is completely absent in the formulation of ties linking the Buddhist monarchy to local cults.

The Community of Worship: Between Filiation and Locality

Let us return to the king-*nat* relation as it exists in Burma, and to the ritual form of the mandate that the king gives to the *nats*. The most characteristic relation uniting the king to these types of spirits is that of affinity: the king, who is a stranger to the community, imposes his domination on it by taking a wife from among its members, the sister of a *nat*.¹¹ The taking of a wife, or more exactly, the taking of the sister of a local hero or chief as a wife, implies – in the monarchical language – the submission of this chief to the king. However, in the legends surrounding the *nat*, the king's brother-in-law refuses to submit, in spite of their familial alliance: it is this rebellion that causes his loss and transformation into a *nat*.

These legends of the *nat* communicate – at least in part – the idea that the alliance did not succeed in securing Burmese domination over the local populations. The brother-in-law had thus to be transformed into a *nat*. Also, the queen, sister of the *nat*, does not survive the transformation of her brother. As if she in some sense belongs to him, they join together to form a pair of infertile brother-sister tutelary spirits. Here again, we can see how this pattern is opposed to the model found in Thai communities, where the community's protectors are usually a pair of fertile ancestors.

The absence in Burma of ancestry in the relations of a community to its territory finds expression in one of the primary modes of ritual worship. As we have seen, each *nat* is, among

other things, a tutelary spirit in a region in which he is an object of a special cult practiced by the population in acknowledgment of his belonging to this local community. However, when members of the community move, they bring their cult of origin with them, which they practice in the unity of the extended family and transmit to their descendants. This mode of worship is called *yoya*, which literally means "by the bone." Although it is not subject to rules acknowledged by all, research data show that the eldest of a sibling group tends to be responsible for the cult of the parents at their death: in the case of exogamic marriage from the point of view of the region as the unity of the cult, the son tends to guarantee the continuation of the cult of the father while the eldest daughter does the same for the mother.

The variability of the criteria determining whether one belongs to a particular cult, of the relationship between residency and descent, is, at first glance, troubling. It arises when the fact of belonging to a local community is disturbed, which occurs frequently in the urban milieu. In such cases, the cult seems less concerned with assuring the prosperity of the local soil to which one belongs than it is with being an identity cult. When this identity has been abandoned or forgotten, which is often the case, a person turns to a medium who will search among the *nats* to find the one who is the client's *yoya*. In such cases, the emphasis is on the equivalence of the *yoya* and the origin of the person. However, these assertions, which accord with the ideology of the cult, do not stand up to the systematic survey of these cults that I carried out in the suburbs of Rangoon. My survey revealed a recurring and stereotypical pattern in which the Buffalo Mare of Pegu was identified with the *yoya* of the mother, and the Lord of the White Horse with the *yoya* on the father's side. This configuration corresponds, moreover, to the image that many citizens of Rangoon have of their identity. It is a composite identity, resulting from the frequent marriages of male immigrants from Central Burma with females from the Delta area. In this way the cult succeeds in giving expression, although in a more complex and modern way than in the past, to the real state of local ties.

The variability of the criteria determining whether one belongs to a particular cult, of the relationship between residency and fili-

ation, which has become especially important in the modern context, throws a different light on the religious policy of the Burmese monarchs regarding popular cults. Various hypotheses have been offered about the nature of the religious practices that the *nats* cult supplanted. E. M. Mendelson, while emphasizing the difficulties in trying to establish a general model capable of accounting for the transformation of the *nats*, nevertheless hypothesizes that they are descended from the ancestral spirits of tribal leaders that each community worshipped separately before their unification in the eleventh century.¹² A better idea of the precise nature of the transformations implicit in the institution of the *nats* can be obtained by studying the case of a female spirit, the Buffalo Mare of Pegu, whose cult – probably because it was only recently integrated into the cult of the Thirty-Seven – preserves traces of the ancient practices that it supplanted. One version of the Buffalo Mare ritual, which takes place during the ceremony of the Thirty-Seven, includes the sacrifice of buffaloes, a practice engaged in by the Mons for the marriage of their daughters.

Yet, as I see it, the most important overall benefit to the Burmese kings, in making a *nat* a cultural hero tied to a specific region, is to have territorialized the link of the *nats* to the communities that depend on them. In so doing, the Burmese kings changed the very nature of the ties of identity in these communities: probably quite diverse before their Burmesization, community identity seems now to be defined as a form of local particularism, limited to a defined territory that is part of a national expanse. Moreover, it is embedded and absorbed in the hierarchy of the Buddhist religion, symbolized by an alliance that simultaneously unites and opposes the king to the *nats* through the intermediary of their sisters.

In fact, the essence of this policy has consisted in using the *nats* alone to fuse, on the local level, autochthony and sovereignty. The Thai legend of the Emerald Buddha, by insisting on the act of “forgetting” by the Burmese, seems to point to a specifically Burmese quality. This fusion implies the ambivalence of the cult. Thus the great annual rituals devoted to the *nats*, which take place in the territories they serve, simultaneously contain a regional and national dimension. By the same token, the *nats*, who are supplied with disciplinary power, can turn against either the local population –

through disease, when the local population neglects its *nats* – or the king, when the latter loses his karmic legitimacy. Just as the *nats* serve, on the local level, to uphold simultaneously the principles of autochthony and sovereignty, Thi'dja-Indra occupies an analogously comprehensive position in the symbolic expression of the relationship between the local communities and the monarchy.

Notes

1. This legend is well-known to the mediums. It also told by the Burmese folklorist A. Htin in: *Folk Elements in Burmese Buddhism*, Rangoon, 1975, p. 74. What is interesting about it is the link it establishes between the origin of the cult and the establishment of the Burmese monarchy. However, the actual attribution of the foundation of this cult to Anawratha must be approached with caution: it corresponds to the "necessity" of portraying the first Burmese king to have conquered the Irrawaddy valley as the founder par excellence.
2. See E.M. Mendelson, "L'utilisation du scepticisme religieux dans la Birmanie d'aujourd'hui," *Diogenes*, No. 41 (1963); see also H.L. Shorto, "The Dewatau Sotapan: a Mon Prototype of the 37 Nats," in: *B.S.O.A.S.*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (1967), pp. 127-41.
3. This is the case, for instance, with the Lord of the 90,000, the protector of the irrigated district of Kyaukse. Prince Shan, who is ashamed to have to pay homage to Anawratha, prefers to commit suicide, throwing himself into the waters of the Zawgyi river, which is located at the border separating the territories from those of the Burmese king. The latter, infuriated by the disobedience of the prince, rushes to the site of the suicide. Striking the surface of the water with his scepter, he causes the prince to rise to the surface in a position of homage. See also the history of Grandfather Alon that I recounted in *Les Rituels de possession en Birmanie*, Paris, 1989.
4. Anawratha was killed on the horns of a wild buffalo which was the incarnation of a spirit whom Anawratha had castrated using Thi'dja's scepter.
5. Quoted in S.J. Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer. A Study of Buddhism and Polity against a Historical Background*, Cambridge 1976, p. 73.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 91-101. See also F.E. Reynolds, "The Holy Emerald Jewel: Some Aspects of Buddhist Symbolism and Political Legitimation in Thailand," in: B.L. Smith (ed.), *Religion and Legitimation of Power in Thailand, Laos, and Burma*, Chambersburg, 1978, pp. 175-93.
7. G. Coedes presents a version of this legend in his "Documents sur l'histoire politique et religieuse du Laos occidental," in: *BEFEO*, Vol. 25 (1925), pp. 287-96. According to this version, which is based on an excerpt from the Thai chronicle called the *Jinkalami*, the Emerald Buddha (of Sinhalese origin), along with the group of texts comprising the canon of Theravada Buddhism, was given to Anawratha in the eleventh century. On the return voyage, the ship carrying the statue, along with some of the texts, lost its way in a storm and finally reached land not far from Angkor. Later, Anawratha is reported to

have come to Angkor in search of the missing texts but supposedly “forgot” the jewel. The Burmese Chronicle does not mention this incident, asserting instead that these were obtained by the Pagan from the Mon people of Lower Burma, rivals of the Pagan.

8. H. Maspéro, *Le taoïsme et les religions chinoises*, Paris, 1971, pp. 244-53.
9. See B. Formoso in this issue; also Ch. Archambault, *Le Sacrifice du buffle à S'iang Khwang (Laos)*, Paris, 1991.
10. As H. Shorto (note 2 above, p. 136) has shown, the double orientation of rituality was also present in another form in the Mon kingdom of Lower Burma.
11. The most celebrated example of this phenomenon is that of the Lord of the Great Mountain and his sister, Golden Face, wife of the Pyu king of Tagaung; but there is also the Lord of the Nine Cities and his sister, Puleyin, wife of Anawratha; and the Great Father of Alon and his sister, the Mother of Running Waters, also a wife of Anawratha. Finally, in the case of serial incarnations, there are brother-sister pairs of minority ethnic origin who follow one after another. Although I am unacquainted with the details of these legends, it is probably fair to assume that they closely follow the above schema.
12. E. M. Mendelson (note 2 above), p. 788.