

DORISEA-Workshop
“Religion, Place and Modernity in East and Southeast Asia”
Goettingen, 19.-22.09.2012

How the Lady of Bottataung was Displaced from the Inside to the Outside of the Buddhist Sanctuary

Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière
(Centre Asie du Sud-Est, Paris)

How the Lady of Bottataung was Displaced from the Inside to the Outside of a Buddhist Sanctuary (Burma)

Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière (CNRS/EHESS)

In this paper, negotiations of the category of “religion” in contemporary Burma will be examined through the case of the Lady of Bottataung. The Lady is a spiritual figure linked to Bottataung pagoda, an ancient Buddhist site located in the port of Yangon that the Burmese consider as a place where their religion was introduced at an early time. As the story goes, the merchant brothers Tapussa and Bhalika having travelled to India came back with hair given to them by the Buddha himself. They were welcomed at this location by the Mon king of the time, Duttabaung and his army of ten thousands men, hence the name of Bottataung given to the sanctuary. From this spot a network of pagodas established to enshrine the hair relics was extended in the region, including Shwedagon pagoda, an important site of pilgrimage long before the British administration decided to develop Yangon as a provincial capital of the colonial empire. At the end of the Second World War a bomb exploded on the Bottataung stupa causing much destruction and the opening of the inner reliquary. Reconstruction of the sanctuary was one of the collective undertakings that bonded the Burmese Buddhist community during the Early Independence period: a completely new design was planned in order to keep the unveiled content of the inner reliquary visible to the devotees. In other words, Bottataung pagoda can be regarded as one of the places where the Burmese have been able to imagine their collective Buddhist identity as a modern nation.

As for the Lady of Bottataung, she belongs to a category of spirits including old spirits (*bobogyi*) and ladies guardian of treasures (*thaik*) associated with the Buddhist sanctuaries, namely a category that we could identify as “guardians of pagoda”. The cults of this kind of figures linked to the guardianship of pagodas have grown in number and importance parallel to the politics of legitimization of the military juntas, SLORC and SPDC, since 1990. Such politics consisted in sponsoring restorations and foundations of pagodas to such an extent that religious landscapes have been transfigured in Burma. It should be noticed that the change of religious landscape also took place in neighbouring Theravadin countries during the same period, although under very different conditions, particularly because of the growing impact of the globalized market¹. In Burma, brand new images materializing pagoda guardians have appeared in many sanctuaries where they did not have any representations before; new and tallest representations have replaced the former tiny ones when they were already existing, in such numbers that they have define a SLORC style of religious representations.

Such is the general context for the growing fame met by Myat Nan Nwe, the Lady of Bottataung. In this regard, the development of her cult during the nineties pertains to a very general evolution of the religious practices in Burma. However, the destiny of Myat Nan Nwe proved to be singular, compared to other pagoda guardians, particularly because she was ousted of the Buddhist space in the course of her rise and displaced outside of the pagoda, which revealed contestations about what is considered as

¹ See for an example and comment on the malayo-thai border Marc Askew (2005).

acceptable or not in that space. However, her fame continued to increase. Particularly the anniversary of this spirit celebrated during the full moon of December has come to attract such an affluence that people talk about as one of the “strange phenomena” of the time (*thu kya hmu*), in other words as a significant manifestation of the spiritual in the contemporaneous.

Burmese Buddhism as “religion”

For sure, what the Burmese would consider as suiting a space marked as Buddhist may differ according to their relative positioning. Moreover, it is a product of the construction of Buddhism as religion, a construct that has been analyzed following post-colonial and post-orientalist studies as a consequence of the Western encounter. Seminal publications have led to question the textual and doctrinal paradigm that has dominated Buddhist studies since its inception during the nineteenth century. Philip Almond’s *Discovery of Buddhism* traced how Buddhism was discovered by Westerners as a corpus of manuscripts brought back in England. This corpus was put under the scrutiny of Sanskrit and Pâli scholars who emphasized an idealized doctrine of the origins rather than practical Buddhism. The authors of *Curators of the Buddha* extending the critic a step further also revealed how these Westernized views of the Buddhist traditions did resonate strongly with positions of local elites at that time; this in turn reinforced trends to value texts and doctrine over the practice that had been developing internally, in local traditions². Furthermore, this scholarship has shown that what has been invented at that time through the Western gaze is Buddhism as “religion” according to Christianized definitions of religion, a concept that was then appropriated in local contexts.

The appropriation of the idea of “religion” in Burma has first been studied by Gustaaf Houtman in a 1999 paper. The Burmese term used today to translate Western terms for “religion” appeared for the first time in dictionaries of the mid-nineteenth century and in the census of colonial administration to denote religious identity or belonging³. It is built on the word *batha* whose first meaning is language and is meant to designate “religion” as professed to distinguish between different religious belongings. *Botdabatha* thus means Buddhism while *Kirianbatha* means Christianity. Houtman revealed how the introduction of this new category did moved away from the pre-existing views of Buddhism as inscribed in the word *thathena* (Pali *sâsana*): he equates the difference to that of Buddhism with Buddhendom. It should be noted that *thathena* comes from *sâsana* meaning in Pali “teachings” and was used in Burmese to designate Buddhist teachings and the institutions serving the transmission of these teachings: it cannot refer to any other religious doctrine than the Buddhist one.

Recently, A. Kirichienko went further into the indigenisation process of the category “religion” in Burma and into the transformation that this appropriation reveals. In pre-colonial Burma, *thathena* referred to discrete sets of observances applied to different classes of people, mainly lay people and monks, ordered in a functional hierarchy. Monks were the upholders of teachings while laypeople were the supporters of

² See among others A. Blackburn on Ceylan and M. Charney’s *Burmese Litterati*, on Burma.

³ According to A. Kirichienko, 200? *botdabatha* (Buddhism) comes into existence in two dictionaries both published in 1852 by J.G. Wade and A. Judson.

monasticism. The *thathena* was segmented and hierarchical and there was no idea of an encompassing religious community. At first, when *botdabatha* was introduced, it seemed identical to *thathena*, without the latter's social and practical implications, except that *batha* could be applied to others religions. Gradually, through identification as buddhists (*botdabatha-win*), particularly in the context of the Chicago Congress (1893), Burmese came to differentiate *batha* as religious belonging from *thathena* as exclusively designating the Buddha teachings. Meanwhile, *thathena* had come to evolve from a hierarchy of observances to a single set of doctrines, in compliance with more universal definitions of world religions.

An important aspect of this transformation was the relative lessening of the gap between laity and monasticism. Specially significant in this regard was the British crushing of Burmese kingship. Burmese kings had been the main upholders and sponsors of Buddhist institutions, particularly of court monasticism where Buddhist learning was emulated and of sanctuaries enshrined with Buddhist relics that defined the Burmese domains as Buddhist. The brutal disappearance of kingship did cause among people a feeling that the presence of Buddha's teachings in Burma (*thathena*) was suddenly endangered. People came to realize that it was now up to their responsibility to maintain these teachings alive. This evolution that was to promote the idea of an encompassing Buddhist community of Burma also fostered the rise of lay Buddhist associations⁴ and of various Buddhist practices such as meditation, Buddhist learning and so on among the laity, practices that were previously limited to the monastic domain. In other words, while the support of the community of monks (*sangha*) through religious merit-bearing donations remained the single identifying way to be a Buddhist for laity in Burma, people increasingly took to a range of differentiated practices relative to the ultimate Buddhist goal, i.e. liberation from the cycle of rebirth, allowing for a new and more exclusive religious positioning.

This overall reordering of lay and monastic domains around new and more exclusive definitions of Buddhism as religion in the context of the confrontation with modernity and colonial rule had enduring implications. One was the coalescence of a distinctive field of the occult around the figure of the *weikza*, that is lay religious virtuosos combining a soteriological orientation to the Buddhist quest of liberation and producing beings having exited from the cycle of rebirth but available in this world to rescue people⁵. This field continued to evolve through ceaseless interplay with contiguous domains such as monasticism and spirit cults with the specific particular aim of saving *thathena* from adverse forces, which leads us to take a broader view of religious facts to understand the contemporary evolution of the religious landscape.

In this regard, social change affecting the overall economic conditions had a broad range of consequences on religious practices. In the past decade, dramatic transformations of the urban scene took place due to the transfer of large segments of downtown Yangon Burmese inhabitants to satellite towns and their replacement by a newly emerging middle class of a more complex origin; this was followed by the displacement of the central administration to Naypyidaw, the brand new capital. Thus the mushrooming of the iconography of pagoda guardians in many Buddhist sanctuaries since the nineteen-

⁴ On the formation of lay Buddhist associations in Burma, see Alicia Turner.

⁵ See John Ferguson and Michael Mendelson for the hypothesis that the *weikza* figure developed its soteriological dimension during the 19th century (1981:74).

nineties is not only the result of the junta's involvement in embellishing material *thathena* and its financial system through appeals to public contributions. It also reveals the needs of new urban populations and impacts on the practices of ritual specialists of various brands. Pagoda guardians are related to the *weikza* sphere of practices to the extent that they insure the protection of the material dimension of the *thathena*. And they have also entered the contiguous spirit-possession domain and are now manifested by spirit mediums during spirit possession ceremonies (Brac de la Perrière, 2012 a and b).

A short history of the Lady of Bottataung's displacement

The contrasted destiny of Myat Nan Nwe is a significant example of this ubiquity of pagoda guardians. Stories of the Lady are not told by devotees. Nobody knows any longer who donated the small statue of the Lady of Botataung that used to grace the platform of the restored pagoda until the late nineties. Because they are in charge of the concealed riches of pagodas, most of the Ladies guarding pagoda treasures (*thaik medaw*) tend to be imagined as of the naga species with a human appearance. Like the other *thaik*, the Lady of Bottataung was then represented as a young and beautiful woman dressed in green, standing in a small shrine. Devotees passing by would present petty offerings, some flowers or, when the case was of importance, the standard offering of a coconut. But during the nineties, the fame of Myat Nan Nwe grew and attracted always more numerous worshippers with specific requests to address to the Lady. Eventually, the Lady ended up having her own regular celebrations, particularly on her anniversary performed around the full moon of December.

At that time, cultic activity around the Lady had grown to such an extent that it was no longer possible to accommodate it on the main platform of the pagoda. At least, that was how things were explained to me when I discovered her transfer, in 2002. Then I was told that the pagoda trustees had decided to expel the Lady from the pagoda because the devotion she received was not appropriate for the Buddhist sanctuary.

The story served to me in 2011 by the head of the trustees' board was somewhat different. I had been introduced to this official by a woman professing to be a specialist of the *weikza* path and active in the celebration of the Lady's anniversary since its inception (around 2000). An old man of 86, the head of the board had worked as an architect before his retirement and was in charge of the administration of the pagoda since 1988. Bright in his expression, he was also fluent in English and turned to this language every time he was addressing specifically to me. The rationalised explanations he produced led the *weikza* specialist accompanying me, a woman also understanding English, to conclude with a disapproval air that the story he had told me was different from the one she had previously heard from him.

When he became the head of the trustees board, he told me, he immediately planned to repair an old pavilion hosting a valuable Buddha image, opposite to the entrance of the pagoda. The image had probably been presented long ago by a rich woman, owner of a ruby mine in Mogok. He looked for her without any success, she was probably already dead, and then he thought about secretly ordering a statue of a kneeling woman, that would not look like any other representation, to be placed in the pavilion. He tried then to convince the trustees to accept his project, but they sent him to the monks residing in the monastery close by — seven monks that were strongly opposed to the project. Although he argued that it would help to gather religious donations for the religious

estate, they still objected to his plan. He had to take them to the Ananda pagoda in Pagan and to show them the representation of King Kyanzitha kneeling in front of the Buddha's image to change their minds.

To sum up, the head of the trustees told me the history of the statue of the kneeling woman worshipping the Buddha in the pavilion without any reference to the *thaik* Lady. He presented this new development of the Bottataung Buddhist establishment as the result of his negotiation with the monks and a devotion of the general public. However devotees coming in large numbers to the pavilion intend to worship Myat Nan Nwe and make religious donations to her. The tiny statue of the standing *thaik* Lady is still visible close to the shiny new one of the kneeling woman dressed in the green flashy robes of pagoda guardians Ladies or in the pink ones of nuns, according to donations of her devotees. The space around the statue is full of the coconuts offered to her together with glasses of milk specific of *naga* food. To every one in the public, the figure of the kneeling woman is that of the Lady of Bottataung whose representation has been displaced from the inside of the pagoda to this external pavilion. Even the plan of the head of the trustees to optimize religious donations was meant to capture the flux of this growing devotion to Myat Nan Nwe. And as I remarked that through his action he did, in fact, contribute to her fame, he did flatly agree. Actually the old man seem to have played on the ubiquity of the representation of the kneeling woman, able to capture the imagination of of Myat Nan Nwe's devotees and acceptable to the monks as a token of devotion to the Buddha, of which a historical precedent did exist at Pagan. Eventually, devotion to the Lady of Bottataung was really displaced from the inside of the pagoda to the pavilion whose setting facilitates a more efficient collection of the continuous incoming offerings meant to help financing of the whole religious establishment.

In the pavilion, collection of the offerings has been organized by the board of trustees, with custodians of the shrine sitting all the day long to keep an eye on it. Devotees come in small groups to present the standard coconuts offerings they buy from the stalls of the sellers attached to the Bottataung site. The sanctuary is full of these offerings first exposed around the image in a closed space before being replaced by new ones, which speaks for the Lady's popularity. However the success of the Lady would not have reached such heights without the mediation of ritual specialists who bring their clients to the Lady. These specialists are mainly followers of the *weikza* path developing a clientele through their mediation with spiritual entities related to the *weikza* sphere such as the pagoda guardians. Guiding their clients to the shrine, presenting the offerings to the Lady for them, these specialists –women for hat I observed - happen to speak with the Lady voice, confidentially, to foretell the future of the devotees. If by chance a custodian takes notice of the fact, he swiftly puts an end to the process unless he is rewarded with a small bribe for his understanding. Indeed, as the public is informed by red signboards around the shrine, any manifestation of the Lady through oracles or her embodiment is forbidden in the sanctuary.

It is interesting to note here that the installation of the Lady in a specific space dedicated to her, outside of the pagoda precincts, understood as an attempt to remove her devotion by advocates of a rigorous Buddhist point of view, had the result to open the way to new developments that would not have so readily occurred inside the pagoda. In fact, embodiment of pagoda guardians is a practice that seems to have developed recently in ritual settings fitting spirit possession. These are ceremonies to the Burmese spirit possession pantheon gathering thirty-seven spirits guardians of Burmese domains

whose specialists are professional spirit mediums. Pagoda guardians are different from the spirits of the locality from an ontological point of view and they do not belong to the spirit possession pantheon formed by Burmese kings. But the growth of their devotion that has been on a par with the development of their figurative representation in pagodas has recently led to their manifestation by spirit mediums in spirit possession performances usually occurring inside purposely erected ceremonial pavilions. However, as guardians of the *thathana*, pagoda guardians enjoy a comparatively higher status that forces spirit mediums to give them precedence under ceremonial pavilions. Spirit mediums now call upon them in order to fill the need for new avenues of spirit possession practice to satisfy the needs of a diversifying urban public.

The opening of a new durable sanctuary for the Lady of Bottataung, outside of the pagoda, offered a new context for her manifestation by specialists related to the *weikza* field of practice. For these specialists, manifestation of their spiritual partners in the *weikza* sphere relates to the manifestation of an energy produced by spiritual perfection (*dat si-*) and departs obviously from the dances characteristic of spirit possession (*nat win-*)⁶. While among *weikza* followers, the manifestation of the perfect beings that are the *weikza* tends to be devalued, it is still conceived of as a masculine role. These manifestations of *weikza* energy occur in the private shrines of specialists or in pagoda known as places where *weikza* have practiced religion, and thus accumulated energy. As for *thaik* Ladies who are now embodied by spirit mediums in spirit possession *séances*, I do not know about their manifestation in front of their shrines in the pagodas, except in the case of Myat Nan Nwe whose shrine has been displaced outside of the pagoda. In this case, manifestations occur in spite of the interdiction of the religious establishment trustees but only in an euphemized way. This situation reveals how different agents of the religious scene converging in the Lady of Bottataung new sanctuary, particularly those belonging to the monastic establishment and the specialists belonging to the *weikza*, deeply diverge in fact on what is suiting or not religious space.

One striking feature of the sanctuary is the multiplication of the Lady images donated by devotees, dressed in her different clothes, religious or princely, producing a deep feeling of Myat Nan Nwe's presence. This loaded atmosphere may compensate for the ban on the Lady's manifestation in the sanctuary, but it may also induce embodiment among ritual specialists influenced by practices of the contiguous field of spirit possession. Finally, it seems that the displacement of the Lady of Bottataung has produced a place of her own where her ubiquity as a pagoda guardian is allowed to fully express itself. In that place different religious lines meet around her new representation that stands for her material manifestation and disclose new religious positioning. It may be that this singular destiny for a pagoda guardian to have been displaced out of the pagoda has something to do with the fact that she is the guardian of a pagoda whose inner reliquary has been disclosed.

⁶ Brac de la Perrière, 2012.

Bibliography

Almond, Philip, 1988 : *The British Discovery of Buddhism*. Cambridge University press.

Askew, Marc, 2005: "Materializing merit: the symbolic economy of religious monuments and tourist-pilgrimage in contemporary Thailand" in Pattana Kitiarsa *Religious Commodifications in Asia. Marketing Gods*, Routledge.

Blackburn, Ann, 2001: *Buddhist Learnings and Textual Practice in 18th Century Lankan Monastic Culture*. Princeton.

Brac de la Perrière, Bénédicte, 2012a: "Being a spirit medium in contemporary Burma" in Kirsten Endres and Andrea lauser (éd.), *Engaging in Spirit World. Popular Beliefs and Practices in Modern South-East Asia*, Berghan Books.

Brac de la Perrière, Bénédicte, 2012b : « From weikzahood to mediumship. How to master the world in contemporary Burma » religion Compass, vol.6, n°2, fév. 2012, p.103-112.

Brac de la Perrière, Bénédicte (forthcoming) : « Spirits versus Weikza : two competing ways of mediation » in *Journal of Burma Studies*.

Charney, Michael, 2006: *Powerful learning. Buddhist Litterati and the Throne in Burma's Last Dynasty, 1752-1885*. Michigan University press.

Ferguson, John & Mendelson, Michael, 1981: "Masters of the Buddhist Occult: the Burmese weikza" in *Essays on Burma. Contributions to Asian Studies*, Ferguson ed. 62-80.

Houtman, Gustaaf, 1990 : »How a Foreigner invented Buddhendom in Burmese : from *Tha-tha-na* to *Bok-da' ba-tha* » Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford, 21,2:113-128.

Kirichienko, Alexey, 2005: "From Thathanadaw to Theravâda Buddhism: Construction of Religion and Religious identity in Nineteenth- and early Twentieth-Century Myanmar" in *Casting Faiths...* 23-45.

Lopez, Donald, ed. 1995. *Curators of the Buddha. The Study of Buddhism under Colonialism*. The University of Chicago Press.

Turner, Alicia, 2009: *Buddhism, Colonialism and the Boundaries of religion. Theravada Buddhism in Burma (1880-1920)*. Chicago University Phd

