

# CERTAIN RITES OF PASSAGE IN BURMESE AND JAPANESE SOCIETIES

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## Introduction

Of several adapted loanwords from Pali, the Burmese word *min-ga-lar* (mangala in Pali) is a very popular term in national vocabulary, indicating any ceremony or occasion or event or affair which pertains to auspiciousness or luckiness. Originally meaning the source of prosperity (vuddhi-karana), *min-ga-lar* in the vernacular now comes to express all thoughts or words or actions in one's life which are associated with propitiousness and blessing. Accordingly, the word is widely used in combination with such happy occasions as *Mway-nei min-ga-lar* (Birthday Celebration), *Shin-byu min-ga-lar* (Buddhist Initiation Ceremony), *Let-htap min-ga-lar* (Wedding Ceremony), *Ein-tak min-ga-lar* (House-warming Ceremony), etc.

The earliest occurrence of the word "mangala", in the sense of an auspicious ceremony, is found in a Bagan inscription dating to the first quarter of the twelfth century A.D.<sup>1</sup>, and it has apparently been used in that sense throughout the history of Burmese literature since then. In today's Burma, "*min-ga-lar ba*" (It is auspicious to see you or Blessings upon you) is a formal greeting word, suitable for people of all ages for all times of the day, and every Burmese Buddhist, male or female, young or old, is very much concerned to experience, in his or her daily life, *min-ga-lars*, accruing from good and fortunate things around him. In order to meet these ends, the Burmese people used to resort to several forms of rites of passage, at every stage of their life, which will bring to them good fortune and good health or *min-ga-lar*.

According to one Pali Buddhist tradition, there drifted in the air, even before the birth of Buddhism into mankind, an exclamation about an impending appearance of "mangala-s" in twelve years' time.<sup>2</sup> Many gods and men, therefore, vigorously conducted an extensive search for them. Then came the Buddha who, while once residing at Zetawana monastery in Savatthi (modern *Sarvat*), was approached in the middle of the night by an obscure god (supposedly Sakka, the king of gods). To him, he taught in detail, for the benefit of gods and men, the thirty-eight mangala-s or religious duties to be performed for the good of this life and the life hereafter.

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This canonical set of thirty-eight *mangala-s*, however, are widely regarded by Burmese Buddhists as something sacred, something highly ecclesiastical, and they consider the group as belonging to Lokuttara or the sphere of supra-mundane world. Instead, they accept another popular set of twelve rites of passage which, though handed down by tradition, betrays some traits of Hinduism as well as their professed religion---Buddhism.<sup>3</sup> Recognizing these twelve national practices as belonging to Lokaia or the sphere of mundane world, the Burmese Buddhists nowadays believe them as propitious as the canonical *mangala-s* and respectfully hold ceremonies in their honour. This traditional list, however, comes down in two versions, which overlap each other in many places, as shown in the following table.

**TRADITIONAL BURMESE RITES OF PASSAGE  
WITH TIME OF PERFORMANCE RECOMMENDED**

No.	List I	List II	Meaning	Time
1	Buddha-Pujavanta	Vijata	Paying Homage to the Buddha/Birth	time of nativity
2	D h a m m a - Pujavanta	Mukha-dassana	Paying Homage to The Dhamma/Paying Homage to Three Refuges	third day
3	Kesacchedana	Kesacchedana	Shaving in-born Hair	seventh day
4	Dola-karana	dola-karana	Placing in the Cradle	two months
5	Tambula-patta	Tambula-patta	Feeding quid of Betel	seventy-fifth day
6	Ravindudassana	Ravindudassana	Showing Sun and Moon	ninetieth day
7	Sanna-dinna	Nama-karana	Bestowal of Name	hundredth day
8	Pabbajita	Pabbajja	Buddhist Initiation	proper time
9	Kanna-Vijjhana	Kanna-vijjhana	Ear- boring	proper time
10	Avaha	Pathama-bhatta	Patrilocal Marriage/Feeding First Porridge	proper time / six months
11	Vivaha	Kesa-bandana	Matrilocal Marriage/Knotting The hair	proper time
12	Sankanta	Avaha-vivaha	New Year Festival/wedding	when time comes/ proper time

Despite certain contrariety in terminology and items, the two sets faithfully present a full list of Burmese customary practices and manners which, if combined together, amount to fourteen different articles. Of these fourteen, the *Sankanta-min-ga-lar* or *Thin-gyan*<sup>4</sup> (New Year Festival) is a national celebration in which almost every family takes a full participation. Equally popular with every Burmese family are *pabbajja-min-ga-lar* (Buddhist Initiation ceremony) and *avaha-vivaha-min-ga-lar* (Wedding ceremony) which, sooner or later, become a welcomed duty of parents. *Vijata-min-ga-lar* (Birth-day celebrations), *sanna-dinna-min-ga-lar* (Name-giving ceremony) and *kannavijjhana-min-ga-lar* (Ear-boring ceremony) constitute optional, ritual functions for some families, which are both tradition-loving and well-to-do, in modernized and urbanized areas. Here in this present paper, it is intended to give detailed description of two most common but yet most important ceremonies in the Burmese life---Name-giving Ceremony and Wedding Ceremony.

### Names-giving ceremony

The Pali *sannadinna/namakarana min-ga-lar* (Name-giving Ceremony) is generally called in vernacular as *Kin-bun-tap-min-ga-lar*<sup>5</sup> and, as a matter of fact, it is the only rite of passage or *min-ga-lar* performed ceremoniously for a Burmese baby. Since, as is shown in the above table, this rite has to be performed on the one-hundredth day of the baby's birth, the ceremony is often projected to cover six other observances (numbered 1 to 7 in List II) that fall in that time-limit.

Invitation cards are sent out to relatives and friends at least ten days prior to the date of ceremony, which is always celebrated at the home of the parents. On the day of celebration an early morning soone (cooked rice) is offered to the Buddhist monks who usually recite Paritta<sup>6</sup> for the well-being of the child. In some cases, this recital is done while the monks sit squatting in a circle with the child in the centre, and after the ceremony a piece of parit-cord<sup>7</sup> may be tied around the neck or wrist of the baby. This Buddhist part of the ritual comes to an end with throwing of libation-water by one of the parents or both.

For the wealthy families, the celebration is officiated by a paid master of ceremony. Locally called *bi-theik-saya* (Master of Consecration), he supervises everything from arrangement of flowers to the actual performance of the necessary rituals.

As items of requirement for the ritual, three *ka-daw-bwe*<sup>8</sup> (oblation for paying homage) are prepared before the family altar, each for three principal objects of worship for the baby respectively :-----Buddha, its parents and Upper and Lower Nats<sup>9</sup> guarding the family<sup>10</sup>. Again, there should be in readiness three bowls, usually silverware, each filled with, respectively, some flowers including eugenia-leaves<sup>11</sup>, a conglomerate of nine kinds of precious stones<sup>12</sup> mixed with dyed, uncooked rice and pop-rice, and shampoo solution prepared from *kin-bun* fruit and *ta-yo* bark<sup>13</sup>. The baby is brought out before the audience and placed either in a cradle or on a cushioned mattress.

Then the Master of ceremony officially opens the ceremony by holding a religious rite in which he pays respect to the Three Jewels of Buddhism---Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha--- followed by an inaugural talk mainly on the loveliness of the national traditions, the respectability of the family lineage of the baby, its luckiness to be born into such a family, etc. The talk is usually made in simple prose in modern Burmese, but some tradition-prone *bi-theik-saya-s* would read some pages, already deliberately composed in rhymed prose, in classical Burmese for hours. Then the head of the baby is shaven (*kesacchedana min-ga-lar* or rite for cutting the in-born hair) with a razor and the tonsured head is washed with the ritual shampoo. This rite is primarily done by the Master of Ceremony, but on most occasions he is joined by guests in applying small doses of shampoo to the child as a token of their love and goodwill. The child is then dressed in new clothes and the Master of Ceremony solemnly announces the official name<sup>14</sup>, by which the child is to be known throughout its life.

Then come the mysterious and strange part of the rituals. The child is made to look in a mirror and to touch such essential articles of Burmese life as a sword, a knife, a needle, an utensil or a spade in the case of an agrarian family.<sup>15</sup> It is also made, for the first time in its life, to touch the earth seven times with its feet pretending to walk. While these rites are being observed, the Master of Ceremony is incessantly engaged in reciting some auspicious, fortune-inducing stanzas or passages selected from Buddhist scriptures.<sup>16</sup>

The guests, particularly elderly ones, express their love and goodwill to the baby by giving blessings in the traditional Burmese way<sup>17</sup>, while all give presents in the form of useful items for the child, such as toys, powder tins, towels, etc. It is also customary for grand-parents on that occasion to give the child some ornaments of gold or silver, a bracelet or a necklace with a locket to wear around its neck, as a lucky charm called *kha-me*<sup>18</sup>. Many guests will also bring for the baby some sort of charms or amulets which are kept on its body or on its cradle as a protection against ills and evils. Then the child is given the first taste of specially prepared porridge, placed in a new bowl, as a token rite of *tambula-patta min-ga-lar* or the rite of First Feeding of a quid of Betel<sup>19</sup>. The ceremony comes to a close with some entertainment with delicacies for the guests amidst pleasant chatters and laughs.

Similar ceremonies held by ordinary and less well-to-do families, however, do not generally have a professional Master of Ceremony, because he tends to charge his fees as high as his fame. There are also some alterations in the general procedure. The celebration is focussed on the central, dominant them of naming the child alone, and left six other rites unobserved.

As has been remarked previously, the *Kin-bun-tap-Min-ga-lar* (Naming Ceremony) is the only function the Burmese parents enact for their babies, and it often includes six other Min-ga-lars which are to be performed within one hundred days after the birth. It is uncertain when the practice was introduced into Burmese society. The ancient lithic inscriptions, some of them dating as old as the early years of twelfth century, do not give any hints to the custom. The national literature,



however, extant since the turn of the fifteenth century, is rich in detailed descriptions of grand occasions celebrating Naming Min-ga-lar, Cradle-placing Min-ga-lar, Ear-boring Min-ga-lar, etc. for royal off-springs, and it even possesses a special collection of poetic compositions, called *E-gyin* (an epic-like, lyrical poem narrating the glorious ancestry of little princes and princesses) which are deliberately composed for the occasions. (Pe 1985 : 9).

### Wedding Ceremony

**Building a pagoda, tattooing and marriage are three things hard to repair.**

**(An Ancient Burmese Proverb)**

*Avaha-vivaha Min-ga-Lar* or Marriage<sup>20</sup> forms the last item of all fourteen min-ga-lars which make up the rites of passage for the Burmese people. As has been described in the chart, the Burmese marriage is also called, technically, *avaha* or the patrilocal marriage and *vivaha* or the matrilocal marriage, depending on the newly-wed's choice of stay either with the groom's family or with that of the bride. The tradition, however, seems to claim the former case as the custom, because, one popular saying in this context goes that "the hair-hive follows the hair-knot", in which man and wife are figuratively depicted as hair-hive (a female's hair-do) and hair-knot (a male's hair style).

A turning point in life or a deciding factor to steer one's own way in this life-time, marriage for a Burmese Buddhist is a social contract for living-together and enjoyment of sex. The very idea of marriage, therefore, demands a series of thinking, considerations and a weighing in mind to arrive at a correct decision based on valid facts and sound reasoning.<sup>21</sup> The matter is taken more seriously by the bridal party, because the society tends to condemn the woman, as the greater loser for reasons, both realistic and imaginary, in case of failure. Burmese language, moreover, has a large stock of wise maxims, like the one at the beginning of this paper, which warns the bride to think seriously before her final decision. "Loss in trade of goods is only for once, but loss in trade of husbands is for life;" or "It is better to be sitting; only when one walks, one's disability is exposed" are only a few of shrewd words of advice for women contemplating marriage.

Besides, Burmese is not a permissive society and monogamy is an unwritten custom praised and practised across the land. There are, moreover, only two ceremonious occasions or min-ga-lar for a girl, Ear-boring ceremony (*kannavijjhana*) and wedding ceremony (*avaha-vivaha*). (Since in most cases Ear-boring is an optional ritual for privileged few, marriage poses as the sole min-ga-lar to celebrate in her honour.

Again, the purpose of marriage may be said differently of the man and the woman. Generally speaking, a man contemplates marriage, in order to have a life-partner for 'counsel in whisper', while a woman does so to ensure her own security in life, socially and economically, because Burmese families are more or less patriarchal in nature.<sup>22</sup> Both parties, however, will make

enquiries, openly or secretly, as to the pedigree, the status, the character, the finance, the educational quality and, in certain cases, even the amounts of dowry affordable by each side.

Though the legally marriageable age in Burma is sixteen for both sexes, marriages are normally arranged when the boy is about 28-32 and the girl 22-26 years of age.

There are four ways of accomplishing a marriage in Burma.

1. It may occur between two adult partners who meet each other and fall in love, of their own accord, at a university or in office or in a factory they are working, etc. This may or may not be known to the families concerned. In any case, when the youths feel that they should get wedded legally, the groom's party will formally inform the matter to the bride's, either through a mediator or someone in their circle who knows the other party. This act is called *nar-phauk-te*<sup>23</sup> (to prepare the ground for a proposal of marriage) and necessary engagement, etc, will follow in due course. Such a marriage may be called a love-marriage.

2. Another type of love-marriage, parallel in origin to the first, may be noticed among members of two families which are gapped either by religion or politics or hatred or social standing. The formal consent being refused by either side, the two lovers, with the help of their mutual friends, elope from homes, get married secretly in a law court and stay together as husband and wife. Depending on the conscience of the two families, a formal engagement or marriage may or may not materialize in such cases.

3. The third type may be termed as "secret union". These are comparatively few but are met with particularly in upper stratum of the society. The two partners, without the knowledge of many, have a marriage certificate signed secretly and live together at an undisclosed address. The announcement of their wedding may appear in the classified pages, but because their names are deliberately bereft of official designations or professions, people hardly know who they are. Such cases are popular with partners who are too old to have a celebration or too popular to attract a wide public attention, or with widows or divorcees.

4. Of the four types of marriages common in Burma, the last or the arranged one entails a series of procedures which consume both time and money.

Here the role of a matchmaker is essential.<sup>24</sup> A marriage-mediator, naturally a female jewel-broker or perfume-dealer accessible to many families of social standing or a relative of either party with wide contacts in society, may find out an eligible suitor for the groom or bride she has in mind. She will then go to the party more familiar with her and *tee-khauk* (talk indirectly but persuasively to sound out) the opinion of the family and the individual concerned. It often happens that the two youths in question and their families are total strangers. In that case she will use her shrewdness to approach first the parents, usually the mother, because she has closer contacts with her children. If a nod is received, she will approach the other party for proposal. In case her operation is successful, further arrangements for a lunch or dinner is made for the two prospective partners and their families usually at the girls' place. This visit is only an introduction to the scene where no serious talk what-so-ever is made. After this initial meeting, if the two parties come to like

each other, more visits are made naturally by the future groom. The intended partners normally spend the time eating and going out together for a considerable period of time<sup>25</sup>, during which they study each other or try to adapt to each other's expectations. This may be called the beginning of their courtship.

### A Visit to an Astrologer

Before the final decision is made, the elderly members of both parties, especially mothers and grand-mothers, would visit an astrologer for professional consultations. The horoscopes of the two youths or their dates of birth, in case no horoscopes are available, will be given to him for predictions. This act is called *za-ta-taik* (to compare the horoscopes) and its out-come is seriously followed by both sides.

In his astrological calculations, the sooth-sayer used to employ diverse versified formulae which foretell the fate of the union, whether they will match well and fare well in their married life. It will be of some interest to see how they work, and here are a few examples in translation with explanations, the original texts being given in the foot-notes. In choosing the matching days for a happy life of the two prospective partners, formula in the foot-note speaks of fixed combinations which are to be avoided. Unions between, for example, *Dam* (Saturday) and *Mar* (Thursday), *So* (Friday) and *Ka* (Monday), *In* (Sunday) and *Wa* (Wednesday morning), *Yar* (Wednesday evening) and *Zar* (Tuesday) are fated to failure, ruin and sorrow, because these days do not match well with each other.<sup>26</sup> For those favourable and lucky pairs, another formula is used.<sup>27</sup> Partners between *U* (Sunday) and *Thar* (Friday), *Sein* (Tuesday) and *Ban* (Thursday), *Dan* (Saturday) and *Hla* (Wednesday morning) and *Go* (Monday) and *Shar* (Wednesday evening) will lead long, prosperous and happy life. Similarly another set of words indicate a flawless combination of 'elements', inherent in every one, which make up his or her 'person'.<sup>28</sup> If correct pairings and beneficial friendship between two persons are desired, one must follow the advice contained in the appropriate canon.<sup>29</sup>

In cases where the prospective partners belong to the same day of the week, this special formula will be applied to find out proper matches :

If Sunday unites with Sunday, a divorce results.

If Monday unites with Monday, prosperity is expected.

If Tuesday unites with Tuesday, one partner will meet death.

If Wednesday unites with Wednesday, quarrels and disputes will dominate.

If Thursday unites with Thursday, there ensues distress.

If Friday unites with Friday, the match fares well.

If Saturday unites with Saturday, fire consumes them.

There are many reported cases in which proposed unions become abortive, simply because the astrological predictions do not favour them. If this stage proves successful, further arrangements are prepared for a formal engagement.

### Engagement Ceremony

This ceremony may take place in a public hall, hireable for some charges in big hotels, or at one of the partner's homes with adequate space for reception. The charges for the celebration are usually borne by the groom's side. An auspicious day of the week is chosen in consultation with the national calendar (a Lunar calendar). Here also people stick to a fixed formula which indicates good-omen or bad-omen days of a particular month.<sup>30</sup> It is exclusively a social function which involves neither religion nor ritualism. But the two host-families will choose to invite to the occasion only 'couples' with a succession of off-springs.

Some grand-scale celebrations may engage a professional *bi-theik-saya* or Master of Ceremony plus two speakers, each to play a referee for the bride and groom, respectively.

When the appointed time comes, the Master of Ceremony will formally open the ceremony by an inaugural talk, mostly religious in nature, and will introduce to the audience the date, the time, the purpose of occasion, the youths and parents concerned and invite the speaker for the groom's side to start. In his speech, the referee will make attempts to declare and justify the good pedigree and personal virtues of the lad in his 'charge' and the unanimous desire of his party to seek the hand of the girl in marriage to the boy. He may probably introduce into his speech some highlights in the boy's career, if there is any, and will eventually end his talk by a very polite request to the other part for a formal permission to arrange a wedding. He is then followed by his counter-part for the girl's side. Similarly, his speech also is full of extolment for the virtues of the bride as well as the respectable ancestry of her family and concludes with words indicative of the formal acceptance of the offer. Naturally, these talks are very flowery and picturesque and they earn much fame and popularity for the orators.

Then comes the exchange of engagement rings which is often considered the highlight of the celebration. This rite is to be performed by a couple whose married life is stable; stainless, successful and exemplary for many. Such a couple has already been ear-marked previously and is invited to the occasion. The Master of Ceremony then invites them to the dais to perform the ceremony.<sup>31</sup> The gentleman will first take into his hands both rings, usually set in beautifully-carved cases marked with the initials of the groom and the bride, puts one on the fourth finger of the left-hand of the groom and passes the other to his lady. The lady in her turn takes the ring and puts it on the same finger of the bride, amidst a loud clapping from the audience.

With the rite of ring-exchange over, the ceremony concludes with a feast of food to all.

The small-scale engagements, conducted among ordinary and mediocre class families, however, are not so elegant and expensive. It is generally held at the bridal home following a pre-



arrangement with the groom's side. A few guests of family men in the neighbourhood are invited. The groom's party, led by his parents or, in cases parents are not available, some ward-administrators would visit the bridal family at an appointed day and time. Food is served to all and someone from the visiting party talks, very informally, on the purpose of their visit, thereby introducing the matter and, at the same time, requesting the bridal party for a formal permission. Someone from the host side will then reply in affirmation, because the matter has already been discussed and settled down previously. In such cases, a marriage ceremony may or may not materialize, depending on the whims of the youths in question. The pair may conduct a court-marriage in the presence of a legislative agent and start a living with the money which they have hoarded for the ceremony.

### Signing the Marriage Certificate

The next proper stage, after a legal betrothal where rings are changed, is an occasion for signing the wedding certificate before a magistrate or a legislative officer.<sup>32</sup> It can be done at a law court, easily accessible to every family at every level of local administration, or at one of the future partner's residences. In the latter case, a legislative person must be invited to witness the act and to have it legally recorded. The guests invited to the occasion must be adults in pairs, usually seven in number, whose off-springs should stay alive and in good health. The wedding certificates, available at every government agent in cities and towns all over the country, are already filled up with necessary, legal terms in typing and one has to fill in one's own particulars needed for identification. Two sets of certificates are needed, each for the groom and his bride. After a few questions by the law-man as to their identity, their age, their mutual desire to wed and to live together, the bridegroom, the bride, two witnesses representing each side and the officer himself will put their signatures on the certificates to make them legal. At the same time names of the couple, their NRC (National Registration Card) numbers, date and place of registration, the name of the witnessing law officer, etc. will be entered into a register which is to be kept at the court concerned.

A couple of days after signing the certificate, the final ceremony for wedding is usually celebrated. Here, too, is involved a series of formularies in the choice of the month, the day, the place and the time of this auspicious occasion. Consequently, the role of an astrologer becomes a necessity.

As regards the favourable months of the year for wedding, Burmese accept only six months, or half of the year, out of their lunar calendar as befitting. The other half or six months are considered unlucky and improper for a propitious event like marriage, because, according to tradition, they bring to the pair dire and destructive consequences as follows.<sup>33</sup>

- (a) Marriages in *Waso* (c. July) and *Wa-gaung* (c. August) result in the death of one partner.
- (b) Marriage in *Taw-tha-lin* (c. September) results in famine and poverty.
- (c) Marriage in *Nat-taw* (c. December) results in barrenness of children.

(d) Marriage in *Pyatho* (c. January) results in destitute.

(e) Marriage in *Da-baung* (c. March) results in divorce.

In choosing the lucky day for the occasion, Burmese people follow the same principles, as in the case of engagement.

As for propitious time of the day, the astrologer will point out the right hour and the right moment for the deed.<sup>34</sup>

The greatest problem for many families is to get a proper place for the occasion. In the days prior to the country's independence (1948), Burmese weddings took place at a residential place of either family for an unlimited period of time. But today, in urban localities like Yangon, so many plots of open land have been turned into settlement areas or industrial zones that privately-owned land is both extremely rare and dreadfully expensive. So, for all big gatherings and receptions, etc, spacious and decorated halls, generally attached to hotels, have to be hired on hourly basis. If the place has once been booked for the date and hour desired,<sup>35</sup> invitation cards are issued to relatives and friends. The quality and quantity of the card often indicate the size and status of the social or economic standing of the families involved.

In today's Burma, two types of wedding ceremonies are common--- Traditional and Modern. The traditional ones, though still popular in upper Burma towns and villages, are hardly witnessed to in lower Burma, partly because the impact of modernization in the area is comparatively great and partly because the ceremony demands a virtual presence and officiation by a *pon-nar*<sup>36</sup> who naturally lives in Mandalay and its neighbouring places.

### Traditional Ceremony

As with all other Burmese Buddhist ceremonies, the occasion is preceded by an offering of *soone* (cooked rice) to Buddhist monks on, or prior to, the day of celebration.

The central figure of the entire celebration is the *bi-theik-saya* or Master of Ceremony, usually a professional *pon-nar*. He will instruct, supervise and initiate every step of procedure at every stage of the ceremony. As a requirement of the ritual, there must be in readiness five *ka-daw-bwe*<sup>37</sup> (an item of offertory) each for five principal objects of importance involved in the process--- the Buddha, the bridegroom, the bride, the Upper Nats and, lastly, the Lower Nats.<sup>38</sup> In addition to these there should be two silver bowls, of which one is filled with flowers like eugenia-leaves and the other with nine-fold jewel or Navarat<sup>39</sup> mixed with uncooked dyed rice and pop-rice.<sup>40</sup>

At the appropriate moment pre-set by the astrologer, the Master of Ceremony will formally open the ceremony by reciting a very popular Pali verse which is supposed to induce auspiciousness and good luck.<sup>41</sup> He continues to pay homage to the three objects of Buddhist worship---Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha---with prayers in a mixture of Pali and Burmese. The orchestra now plays a classical tune, with harp and xylophone, to render the moment more solemn and sacred. After a lengthy talk on the purpose, the date and the moment of gathering, the Master of

Ceremony invites the groom and his bride to the auspicious seat, specially prepared for them on the dais at the other end of the reception hall. The pair, now beautifully dressed in the lucky color of pink or yellowish, will then be ushered to the seat by bride-maids and bestmen together with the parents of both sides.<sup>42</sup> The procession is accompanied with a special song and music, opportune to the occasion, taken from a collection of Burmese classics.

Once seated at the seat with the bride-groom on the right, the Master of Ceremony will tell them to keep their hands capped in the mode of worship on their foreheads, while he recites a particular prayer to invite the Buddha to the site of ceremony.<sup>43</sup> The bridegroom and the bride are then asked to pay obeisance to the five Buddhist objects of infinite virtues<sup>44</sup>, beginning with the Buddha. They will keep on paying respect to the group, one after another, while the orchestra changes to play a particularly soft note reserved for religious festivities. This procedure of paying obeisance to the Buddhist Holy Trinity is immediately followed by an inaugural speech, also by the Master of Ceremony, in which he particularly extolls the immeasurable virtues and boundless gratitude of one's parents and teachers, quoting from Buddhist scriptures to explain what kind of obligations stand between parents and their children, and so on.<sup>45</sup> Then the pair is asked to pay homage to their parents and teachers. The Master of ceremony will then proceed to request the parents to give blessing to the newly-weds to which the elders willingly assent and respond. Then follows what is supposed the climax of the festivity, the wedding ceremony.

After the formal act of paying respect to the Buddhist Five-fold Infinite Venerables, the Master of Ceremony will again change the theme of his recitations. He will now begin to chant, in a different tone for a different purpose, certain incantations to invoke all the Nats, all from Upper and Lower abodes, to honour the occasion with their personal presence and protection. Then he will take the right hands of both the bride and bridegroom and place them, immersed in water in the pre-arranged bowl, with the boy's palm, turned up-side-down, on that of the girl.<sup>46</sup> Then chanting incessantly appropriate words, half in Pali or Sanskrit and half in Burmese, he will sprinkle on the heads of the youths the sacred water from a white conch-shell.<sup>47</sup> The Master of Ceremony will then go on reciting special formulae to propitiate the Upper and Lower Nats and offer them the two *Ka-daw-bwe* dedicated to them.

The prayers to Buddha etc. and propitiations to Nats over, the Master of Ceremony, as the final part of the festivity, now instructs and admonishes the newly-weds as to how one should treat, and behave to, the other to make their married life as successful and happy as possible. Throughout this speech, he will often draw materials from *Sone-ma-sar* (Book of Homily), a voluminous collection of words of admonishment in national literature. He ends his speech with a few words of gratitude to the guests and to all responsible persons who help make the celebration a success.

The food is then served to all and the entire ceremony eventually comes to the end amidst a series of pleasant music and cheerful chats among guests as well as words of thanks-giving and congratulations to the newly-weds and their families.

Generally speaking, there are only a few differences in the traditional and modern ceremonies. The latter is often referred to as “reception” rather than “ceremony”, because it lacks in much ritualism. Prearrangements and preparations for the occasion-----horoscope-reading by the astrologer, formal engagement, contract-signing, hall-reservation, distribution of invitation cards-----are done in time as in the former celebration.

In the actual ceremony, however, no *kadaw-bwes* are necessary, because there will be no ceremonial ritual of “joining palms together,” and this seems to be the paramount dissimilarity between the two.

The Master of Ceremony in charge of the procedures may be a professional one or simply a volunteer, a respectable and dignified friend of one of the families who knows skills and has experiences in such matters. Of all the customary formalities performed in the traditional celebrations, only two are compulsory here; “ceremonial procession of the two youths to the auspicious dais” and “presentation of garlands”. Exchange of rings may form another agenda, provided that there had not been a formal engagement previously.

Moreover, both celebrations may include a recital by a celebrated singer of a lyrical ode called *Ya-du* to extol the occasion and to wish newly-weds a happy future. This is usually followed by the reading of a similar eulogy known as *Obha-sa* whose major duty is to record in rhymed prose exact date, day and moment of the auspicious occasion. Both are usually accompanied by a melodious, soft and sensational music.

Then follows the final thanks-giving speech by the Master of Ceremony, on behalf of the couple, their parents and relatives to all person concerned.

In some cases, the traditional custom of “barring” the couple to their bed-chamber is in popular practice. On their way back home, the two are “barred” from entry by their young friends with a “golden rope”, for which they have to pay money for a special dinner that evening. Throwing stones at late night on the roof of their bed-room still remains a strong ritual in certain, rural areas and money, called *khe-bo* (price for the stone), have to be paid to local youngsters as a ransom.

### Overview

This is a general description of popular wedding ceremonies common in Yangon or Mandalay or in their neighbouring areas where the majority of population are Burmese Buddhists. Allowing certain differences in certain details, such as simultaneous food-entertainment in cities while it is served on a first-come-first basis in the country-side, the general pattern and procedures are very similar. Nevertheless, one may expect dynamic diversities in localities of Nat-cultus strongholds, in some parts of upper Burma, where ‘spiritual weddings’ between human beings and Nat-spirits are not uncommon.<sup>48</sup> Varieties in procedure may also be encountered in Ra-khine Division (on Burma’s west coastal line) or in Da-wei district (in Ta-nin-tha-ri Division) where local



traditions play more important role than the Burmese ones. Several ethnic groups in the union choose to follow their own customs which markedly differ from Burmese ones.

In recent years, some novel concepts have come into national thinking and certain changes are visible in the venue and shape of the ceremony. Today several wedding receptions are held at Buddhist monasteries which are newly instituted as centres of Pali studies and monastic education, with hundreds of student-monks. A couple of reasons may be responsible for this change. One is that the couple's savings can now be used for buying food for the monks, than for those lay-people, whereby the newly-weds acquire a great deal of merit at the start of their new life. Another reason lies in the fact that it saves them a lot of trouble for booking the hall, for arranging the decorations, for hiring a master of ceremony and music, etc., which always consume both time and money. Some families even forgo the celebration and instead, use the money for such philanthropic works as donations to pagodas, hospitals, homes for the aged, schools for the deaf and dumb, troops on the front line and the like.

Now we may compare the Burmese *min-ga-lars* with the Japanese rites of passage to scrutinize to what extent Buddhist elements influence them, because traditions of both peoples have long been effected by Buddhism.

As for the rites of passage relating to the infancy and youth of a person, Japanese have more rigid and systematic formularies than Burmese. The Japanese use of a sash-type corset with a lucky sign, during the pregnancy, in order to ease the mother-to-be's stomach muscles (Hendry 1987 : 121) may be paralleled to the Burmese practice of drinking coconut water for a similar end. It is also very similar for pregnant women in both countries to make prayers for a safe delivery before an image of the Buddha. (Statler 1983 : 35). The use of amulets and charms to keep the pregnancy in good shape is common to both nations. A case in point here is the popular exercise of country women with pregnancy to wear a *sin-mee-let-sut* (ring made from the tail-hair of an elephant), thought to be efficacious enough to ward off evils and harms. The Burmese society is an unpermissiver one with a plethora of taboos for talks on sex, so a public announcement of pregnancy as in Japan (Hendry 1987 : 121) is unknown to Burmese society.<sup>49</sup> The popular Japanese rite of *Oshichiya* or Naming the infant on the seventh day (Hendry 1987 : 121 Ichiro 1984 : 132 ; Matsunami 1984 : 150) may find its paralled in the Burmese custom of keeping a horoscope upon which one's exact date and time of birth is recorded with the child's appropriate name given in accordance with the day of it's birth.<sup>50</sup> The Japanese beliefs concerning the pollution period (Hendry 1987 : 122) may find their equivalents in Burmese superstitions related to the time of confinement. Deliveries at hospitals or clinics in urban areas, under proper medical treatment, do not usually ensue any rituals of importance. But when it takes place in a private home there are certain formularies to comply with.

The room marked for confinement must be away from the family shrine as well as the *u-yu-daing*, or the post in the south-east corner of the house, which is reserved either for *ein-zaun-nat* (the guardian nat of the family) or a green coconut offered to him. The door and the walls of this

room are usually hung with some amulets or card-papers upon which are written some spells, as means of warding off the evils. The husband has to store enough fire-wood to burn bricks for traditional heat-treatment to the stomach muscles of the mother. She also has to eat and anoint saffron to balance the blood and to induce perspiration. There she and the baby have to stay for a couple of weeks, and males of any age, including her husband, are not allowed to enter this room.

As the saying goes that 'Life is risky for a man working on a raft and a woman in confinement', the Burmese pay much attention and show great concern for a mother about to be confined. Many Burmese Buddhists, particularly the elderly ones, on the occasion of an imminent birth, will recite, openly or secretly, the Angulimala-sutta or Discourse delivered by Angulimala the Arahat<sup>51</sup>, which is considered capable of rendering births easier and safer for both mother and child. Telling beads are not uncommon on such moments to offer security and safety to the mother in labour pains. Burmese superstition, on the other hand, has it that the *mi-nei-tha-mein* or the skirt worn by the mother during delivery possesses, merely by virtue of its utmost filthiness and loathsomeness, certain mystic influences to counter and mitigate sacred powers or virtues of good men.<sup>52</sup> This skirt is, therefore, often fetched by witch doctors for use in their preparation of black magic. As regards the umbilical cord the Burmese, unlike the Japanese sentimentality (Hendry 1987 : 121), bury it together with the placenta where the delivery takes place, which is known as '*chet-mhyute-te* (to bury the umbilicus)'. Consequently, the word '*chet-mhyute*' now becomes a standard vocabulary in Burmese that means a 'birth-place' of some body. At the end of this period, friends and relatives visit the mother and the new-born, bringing usually some items of gift for the child. This act is called *mi-nei-win-de* which literally means 'to enter the room of confinement' and the occasion marks the end of confinement-period. The other practices of presenting the infant to local Shinto shrine (Ichiro 1984 : 132 ; Hendry 1987 : 122) , subsequent visits of the child, at the ages of three, five and seven consecutively, for propitiation of Shinto Kamis for their life-long protection, the grand ritualistic ceremony marking the first anniversary of the child, etc, are not known in Burma. Generally speaking, boys in youth are presented to local Nats when they are about to enter Buddhist novice-hood or when they are to stay *po-thu-daw* or white-robed acolyte, but even this practice is non-Buddhist and restricted to some localities only.<sup>53</sup>

The Burmese *kin-bun-tap min-ga-lar* or the Name-giving ceremony, generally performed when the child is about one hundred days old may find its parallel in the Japanese Tri-ratana service done for the child on or around one hundred days after its birth. (Matsunami 1984 : 150). As has been described in great details, the Burmese ceremony includes all the seven rituals to be performed within this time-limit and it includes the rite which requires the child to pay respect to three jewels of Buddhism called *Ti-ratana* or *mukha-dassana min-ga-lar*. This is purely a Buddhist ceremony the two nations share from their adopted religion --- Buddhism. Totally unknown to the Burmese society is the celebration for coming of Age (*seijin shiki*) (Hendry 1987 : 144). Generally speaking, Burmese boys are considered to have attained manhood, between the ages of fourteen and eighteen,

after they have spent some times as a novice in the monastery. As for the girls, the first occurrence of menstruation is usually regarded as the mark of their maturity.<sup>54</sup>

*Avaha-vivaha* min-ga-lar or marriage, as has been explained before, is the most important and most critical event in the life of a Burmese Buddhist. A milestone in the life of a person, it not only recognizes the maturity of the partners both physically and spiritually but it also changes the course of one's life for future. It is also an adventure which challenges for self-reliance and individual worthiness. To be settled down in marriage and to start a new family, therefore, presents a very big question, at least for Burmese youths, because normally they will do so only once in Life.<sup>55</sup>

As regards the encounter, consequential attachment, mutual love and eventual emergence into a single life as husband and wife for two strangers, Buddhism explains that circumstances so happen, due to the fact that 'In a previous existence these two must have lived together and in the present they help each other'.<sup>56</sup> Moreover the Burmese communal belief also accredits this coincidence of things to the mystical operation of a nat (god), *satta-bhaga* (Distributor of Partners in Marriage) by name, whose principal duty is to bring a man and woman into union in marriage, by creating in each an uncontrollable passion for the other.

Moreover, the Burmese also believe that he chooses among the human-folk partners for future pairs, by marking in writing on the forehead of each the name of his or her prospective spouse.<sup>57</sup>

Just as in Japan (Hendry 1987 : 125; Wakayama 1995 : 194; Befu 1981 : 48-9) the majority of wedlocks in Burma are brought about either by a mutual love between two partners (*renai kekkan*) or a pre-arrangement by two families (*miai kekkan*). Whatever the case may be, a formal engagement, either on a grand scale or otherwise, has to be arranged. A girl from a conservative family with a traditional upbringings, for instance, when wooed by a man of her likes or dislikes, will decorously ask him to come and ask for her hand, if he is 'a son of good parents.' Even in cases of elopement or in cases where the parental consents on both sides are already confirmed, it is the duty of the groom's family to conduct a formal engagement. Unlike in liberal Japan (Befu 1981 : 48), however, 'datings or pre-marital sex are not allowed before or after engagement, because, for Burmese Buddhist girls, virginity is a highly treasured thing.<sup>58</sup>

The Burmese national concept in marriage as the most auspicious event in one's life may be understood from the use of vernaculars for the occasion as well as for the partners involved. The ordinary word for a wedding is '*min-ga-lar-saung*' which literally means "bestowal of auspiciousness on the couple". Similarly, they always refer to the groom and bride as '*tha-doe-thar*' and '*tha-doe-thamee*', respectively. It is an old royal custom for Burmese kings to give their sons the princely title '*tha-doe*', before they take another longer and more elegant one when they themselves become rulers. *Tha-doe*, as a matter of fact, is a Burmese derivative from Pali *Thatti-dhara* or Bearer of Qualities.<sup>59</sup> By adding this propitious title to their names, it is believed that the future husband and wife will live a princely life full of wealth and luxury.

The Japanese custom of exchanging betrothal gifts between the intended partners is unknown in Burma. If there be an exchange of anything on this occasion, it is the exchange of rings between the fiances, but the custom may be a recent introduction on the style of western betrothals. The ring-exchange, as it has been described above, is one of the legal actions by doing which a man and a woman can be considered as having accomplished a marriage under the customary law. The role and influence of a mediator for Japanese weddings (Hendry 1987 : 126), however, is uncommon in Burma. The presence of a go-between (nakodo) is rare with the Burmese, and even if there is one, he or she will have little say for further arrangements such as wedding ceremony, etc., because these are ordinarily left to the families rather than to individuals. A guarantor for the wedded (Hendry 1987 : 127); however, is totally absent for a Burmese wedlock. His role may be likened to the Burmese "speaker" who admonishes the newly-weds how to live in harmony and happiness. The sharing cups of sake, the highlight of a Japanese wedding (Hendry 1987 : 127) finds its parallel in the Burmese practice of placing the groom's right palm on that of the bride in water, as in the process of the traditional wedding. Burmese weddings, however, do not know the sharing of a wedding cake as in the Japanese one (Hendry 1987 : 128). Feeding each other between the newly-weds, however, is often 'unceremoniously' done at the urge of some young friends of the couple.

As a way of summing up our observation, we may here state that the two nations, both influenced by Buddhism as well as other folk-religions, have in common many beliefs, superstitions, practices and rites of passages, which affect their way of life as its own, unique national traditions. While the Burmese Buddhist used to practise as their national heritage those twelve (fourteen) *min-ga-lars*, the Japanese, among other minor ones, cherish and respect in their life the four most important rites (kankon sosai), viz. Coming of Age, Marriage, Funerals and Ancestor Worship (Wakayama 1995 ; 289). As for the Burmese Buddhists, however, it may be said that the most common and compulsory *min-ga-lars* are Homage to Buddhist Jewels (mukha-dassana), Buddhist Initiation (pabbajja), Marriage (avaha-vivaha) and New Year (san-kanta), the others being optional and less popular. Nevertheless, both nations will continue to respect, along with Buddhism, these rites of passage, as a means of pacifying their inner self or, more appropriately, as a national identity distinct from others.

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#### Note

<sup>1</sup> Unearthed in two copies at Bagan, the so-named Rajakumar Inscription is quadrilingual, the same story being recorded on the four faces of a single stone in four different Languages of 1113 A.D. Bagan, viz. Pyu, Pali, Mon and Burmese. In recounting a very pathetic story about a dying, royal father and his disadvantaged but grateful son, the Pali version uses the word *mangala*, in the sense of an auspicious occasion, when it describes the scene of golden image of the Buddha brought to the presence of the



king on his death-bed. Famous for its historical significance and linguistic values, the inscription is often referred to by scholars as the Rosetta Stone of Burma.

<sup>2</sup> These thirty-eight *mangala*-s, traceable in two places in the Pali canon, form a popular discourse or sutta, called *Mangala-Sutta*, among the shorter discourses constituting the *Khuddaka-nikaya* (the collection of Smaller Discourses). In Burmese society, *Mangala-sutta* is very well-known. Monks recite it on every ceremonious occasion as a powerful Paritta (protective formula) and it is also included in the syllabus for monastic education all over the country. Moreover, the nation-wide Mangala-examinations, held by religious and cultural associations regularly every year, help the popularity of this small sermon.

<sup>3</sup> Many of these rites are probably borrowed from Hinduism which came to Burmese soil prior to the advent of Buddhism. It is obvious that early Burmese had incorporated into this list of Indian customs certain native ones like, for example, the shampooing of the baby (in Naming Ceremony), the First Feeding of quid of Betel (*tambula-patta*) and showing the initiate-to-be to village god (in Initiation ceremony) which are non-Buddhistic in nature. E. Spiro and Dr. H. Aung give a long discussion on the last point. (Spiro 1964 : 97; Aung 1962 : 116-7)

<sup>4</sup> *Thin-gyan* (P. Sankanta or movement of the sun from the sign of Pisces to the sign of Aries) marks the Burmese New Year when the water throwing upon one another is done nation-wide, as a sign of purity and peace for the times to come. Definitely borrowed from Hindu practices, it now becomes one of the national festivals to be celebrated in earnest zeal in the middle of April every year.

<sup>5</sup> *Kin-bun* is a tree (*Acasia eoncinna*) whose fruit is used, together with the solution of some *ta-yo* bark (*Grewia Pofygama*), in preparing native shampoo to be ceremoniously applied to the tonsured head of the baby. *Tap* here means "to attach (a name) to," and so the entire title comes to signify a ceremony in which "the baby is given a shampoo as well as a name". There is, however, no mention of shampooing among the articles of traditional lists, but the practice figures prominently among the functions of Sankanta or New Year for the royal family as well as for commoners. It seems very probable, therefore, that the indigenous rite of shampooing was incorporated into the Indian custom of name-bestowal and the two are performed together in the same ceremony. Consequently, the word *kin-bun*, originally meaning shampooing only, through its long and close association in action with "tap" (to name), has shifted its focus of interest in semantics and has come to mean "a name"

<sup>6</sup> *Paritta* (Parit+kyi in Burmese) is a collection of versified texts selected from different parts of Pali Buddhist literature. Eleven in all, some of them are as old as the Pali canon, while others are later compositions by individual authors belonging to eighteenth century. Parit (protective formulae) + *kyi* (great) is a popular Pali work to be found in many Buddhist house-holds as a charm against evil. Buddhist monks learn this text by heart and recite certain portions of them, from memory, on every religious or ritual occasion.

<sup>7</sup> On occasions when Paritta is being recited, people customarily place before monks certain amount of water, flower, sand and thread, in proper receptacles, which they believe would attain protective powers as efficacious as the Paritta-s themselves. After the ceremony, they either plant some of them at eight

corners of the building or respectfully keep the rest on the family shrine for further uses in future. This practice is found recorded on an ancient lithic inscription in Mon as old as the eleventh century at Bagan.

<sup>8</sup> Mainly consisting of a green coconut, three bunches of bananas and certain amount of betel-nut, betel-leaves, etc., *ka-daw-bwe* is a very popular item for all occasions involving worship or paying respect to superiors.

<sup>9</sup>The Burmese word Nat, an adapted loanword from Pali *natha* (Lord or protector) is a generic term for all supernatural beings, benevolent or malevolent, who, like *kami* in Japan, are commonly venerated by many natives and, in whose honour the national calendar has named its ninth month as Nat-taw or "the month when nats are worshipped", though the tradition is no longer in practice. When Buddhism introduced into Burmese folk-beliefs the idea of Buddhist gods (*devas*) living in six deva-worlds, the Burmese generally call them, for the sake of distinction and classification, *sammadeva* (Good Nats) or Upper Nats, while the others, dwelling among the people and interfering with human affairs, are called *Micchadeva* (Bad Nats) or Lower Nats.

<sup>10</sup> Burmese Nats can conveniently be classified, according to what they are believed to do, into Regional nats, Local nats, Family nats, Occupational nats, etc., and Burmese animism claims, convincingly or unconvincingly, that every family has a particular, patron Nat or Guardian Nat who is to be worshipped hereditarily from generation to generation.

<sup>11</sup> Eugenia-leaves, called in Burmese *Tha-pyay* are traditionally regarded as a symbol of victory and stand almost a national flower of Burma. They are used on all occasions, religious or otherwise, involving *min-ga-lar* or auspiciousness.

<sup>12</sup> Always collectively called in vernacular as *navarat* (*nava-ratana* in Pali) or nine kinds of precious stones, the group consists of ruby, diamond, pearl, coral, garnet, sapphire, cats' eye, topaz and emerald.

<sup>13</sup> *Kin-bun* fruit (*Acacia Concinna*) and *ta-yo* bark (*Grewia-Pofygama*) are proportionately mixed together and kept in hot water for some time until the mixture turns into a liquid. It is popularly used as a shampoo in many tradition-loving house-holds all over Burma.

<sup>14</sup> The Burmese system of giving secular names to their children, irrespective of sex, is closely akin to that of bestowal of religious names the Buddhist novices, in that both have to be done in accordance with the alphabets belonging to the day of the week the baby is born. Of the 33 alphabets (all consonants) in the Burmese writing system, 23 letters (i.e. their phonetic realizations) are used. Days of the week and their corresponding letters are as follows :

Sunday	possesses	a
Monday	--	ka, kha, ga, nga
Tuesday	--	ca, cha, ja, nya
Wednesday	--	ya, ra, la, va
Thursday	--	pa, pha, ba, ma

Friday	--	sa, ha
Saturday	--	ta, tha, da, na

Then again, according to certain astrological formulae, the first letter in a name should be followed by a letter or letters belonging to the fifth day from it ; a Sunday-born, for example, must have a particular name associated with a-sound in the first place, in combination with one or two of *pa, pha*--- sounds governed by Thursday. Some conservative families accept a name only after a professional consultation with astrologers specialized in the field. Many youths, however, do not pay much attention to these traditions and take names appealing to them, some of which even seem queer and awkward in spelling, sound and sense in national orthography. Since there are no first and last segments in a Burmese name, some modern and liberal families would introduce into the names of their children, after the western fashion, the last syllable in the name of the father as a family name. The same name will be entered in his or her horoscope as well as in the official NRC (National Registration Card) to be prepared when he or she reaches the age of twelve.

<sup>15</sup> Making the baby look in the mirror, it is traditionally believed, is a substitutive alternative for the baby for looking at sun and moon (*ravindu-dlassana-min-ga-lar*) and touching some essential items of life serves as a symbolic introduction of the child to the realities of life.

<sup>16</sup> A popular practice on such occasions is to chant special stanzas or verses, called *patthana-gatha* or Praying verses, selected from a *paritta*, named *Pubbanha-sutta* (the discourse to be chanted in the early morning), which naturally expresses faith in Buddhist Three Jewels and blessings for the child.

<sup>17</sup> The traditional style of giving blessings is to say : "May you possess glory; may you possess longevity, may you be free from dangers and harms. May you survive three great disasters of famine, war and epidemics. Also may you neither touch a snag on your way nor be caught among thorns. You may also succeed in carrying your body wherever your mind goes and getting whatever you wish!".

<sup>18</sup> *Kha-me* is a special charm in the form of a piece of ornament in gold or silver or alloy or iron for the child to wear on his body. One of the live pet animals like a cow, a cat or a chicken for the child to own can be a *kha-me*. A *kha-me* is always believed to avert danger and bring fortune to the receiver.

<sup>19</sup> Both *Tambula-patta* (Feeding of Betels) and *Pathama-bhatta* (First Feeding of Porridge) are two different items of *min-ga-lar*, mentioned in list II, and ancient Burmese literature is rich in describing splendid royal occasions celebrating them at the palace. The modern ceremonies, however, though actually performing the rite of the latter, often pass by the former name. It seems, therefore, that there is a confusion between the two rituals and the latter, by virtue of its being more natural and more familiar with the natives, lingers on, while the two names becomes mixed up. The common Burmese expression "*soon koone*" (cooked rice and betels or *koone* in Burmese), meaning "food for monks", may probably help the transference of semantic implications of the two words.

<sup>20</sup> The vernacular has a number of cognate words for marriage... *htein-myar* (to be engaged and married), *Let-htap* (to wed by placing palms one upon the other), *Let-hset* (to join hands together), *min-*

*ga-Lar-hsaung* (to bring about auspiciousness), *ein-daung-pyu* or *ein-daung-kya* (to raise a family), *mein-ma-yu* (to take a woman) and *yauk-kya-yu* (to take a man).

<sup>21</sup> As a means of evading this entanglement, many men and women in Burma choose to stay single and sex-free celibates for life. Despite lack of an official census or the like, Burma has a considerable number of such people, excluding Buddhist monks and nuns whose number amounts to about 150,000 in all.

<sup>22</sup> Buddhism neither encourages nor discourages marriages, though all the Buddhas are said to be family men in their secular days. But Burmese language has many proverbial sayings or advisory counsels for women, apparently on the line of Hindu Niti-literature, that urge them to have husbands and to leave off-springs for posterity. The father also is generally respected as *ein-u-nat* (lord of the household) under whose patronage children of the family often group and grow up in unity and peace.

<sup>23</sup> *nar-phauk-te*. Literally meaning 'to pierce the ear' is always to be carried out by the groom's party and the answer is almost always in affirmation. The act is only a formality to pave the way for engagement or wedding.

<sup>24</sup> There are no professional marriage go-betweens in Burma. But the work is usually carried out by some one who is familiar with one or both families. He or she is often awarded by the side which first approached him or her for help.

<sup>25</sup> Traditionally, this courting period lasts for three years. In the meanwhile, the two youths attempt to share each other's opinions, habits, hobbies and even life-styles for a final union. Dating or pre-marital sex is not permitted; so a sister or an elderly person or the bridal mother herself will be around while the two are together in the day-time. If a failure results from this probation period, the two parties will silently break up with or without formal announcement.

<sup>26</sup> *Dam-mar, so-ka, in-wa, yar-zar Ein-htaung phet, a-thek ma-shay-yar.*

"Unions between these days in pairs will meet death."

Certain letters (or rather their phonetic realizations) from the national writing system are assigned to each day of the week. Also allotted to each are a number, a guardian animal, a life-term and their corresponding angles of direction, as shown below.



DAY	NUMBER	LETTERS	GUARDIANS	ANGLE	LIFE
Sunday	1	A	Galon-bird	North-East	6 yrs.
Monday	2	ka,kha,ga,ng	Tiger	East	15 yrs.
Tuesday	3	ca,cha,ja,nya	Lion	South-East	8 yrs.
Wednesday (Morning)	4	la,wa	Elephant	South	17 yrs.
Thursday	5	pa,pha,ba,m	Rat	West	19 yrs.
Friday	6	a	Guinea-pig	North	21 yrs.
Saturday	7	sa,ha	Dragon	South-West	10 yrs.
Wednesday (Evening)	8	ta,hta,da,na ya,ra	Tuskless Male Elephant	North-West	12 yrs.

<sup>27</sup> *U-thar, sein-ban, dan-hla, go-shar, ein-daung pyu, kaungmhu a-phyaphya.*

"If marriage developed between these pairs of days, they will live well and happily."

<sup>28</sup> *An-to, gab-be, ca-re, wan-the paung-phet-nyar, toe-pwar-kyet-tha-ye.*

"If combinations of these 'elements' are made, then there grows the glory".

The Burmese animism claims that every human being, from the very onset of his birth, possesses certain inherent, organic principles, called *datu* (i.e.-elements), which make up his personality, and that these shape his mind, his disposition, etc.

<sup>29</sup> *Aung-pa, ku-lar, swe-thar, taw-yin, meik-phet-kyin.*

"Pairings in friendship must be made between these days."

<sup>30</sup> According to Burmese calendar, each month is divided into two equal halves—each normally having 15 days—of which the former is called waxing moon and the latter waning moon. Former half again begins from 1st and always ends on the 15th day of the month called *La-pyi* (Full Moon Day) and the latter on the 15th or 14th, as the case may be, called *La-kwei* (New Moon Day). To each month, moreover, is allotted a couple of days known as *Yet-yar-zar* (King of Days) and *Pyat-tha-da* (Bad Days). Apart from the two, every month has some unlucky days called *Wa-ra-meik-tu* or the Day of Enemy. If the combination of day and date happens to be 13, it is regarded as the Day of Enemy. When, for example, the 12th day of the month happens to be Sunday (1), it is an unlucky day, because 12+1 is 13. Only *Yet-yar-zar* days are favoured.

<sup>31</sup> This practice of exchange of rings at engagement was non-existent in pre-war Burma. The Burmese tradition, however, recommends a successful and legal marriage through an exchange of rings between a man and a woman. The exercise of using rings as a sign of betrothal, therefore, may be modern copy of similar rituals in western culture. This ring-exchange, however, is an optional exercise popular only in higher society.

<sup>32</sup> Burmese Customary Law allows ten different types of legal unions between a man and a woman. But a 'marriage by certificate' is not among these ten, as seen from the following list. Signing legally a wedding

certificate, however, probably introduced into post-Independence Burma (1948), now becomes a prominent feature dominating, as a rule, every layer of Burmese society. Those ten forms of traditional weddings are as follows :

- (a) By placing certain items of the groom's attire on the rope inside the bridal bed-room.
- (b) By sitting face to face at the same table and eating together.
- (c) By an exchange of rings between man and woman.
- (d) By giving a shower and dressing the bridegroom by bridal family on his arrival at their home.
- (e) By placing the right palm of the groom over that of the bride.
- (f) By placing a single necklace around the necks of the bride and bride-groom.
- (g) By wrapping the two together in the same stole the bride used to wear.
- (h) By adorning a garland around each other's neck.
- (i) By dipping the right palms of the two in water.
- (j) By pouring on the fourheads of the two lustral water in which nine-kinds of jewels and cugenia-leaves are dipped.

(Ruby, diamond, pearl, coral, garnet, sapphire, cat's eye, topaz and emerald constitute what is popularly called Navarat or nine kinds of jewels)

<sup>33</sup> Many Burmese Buddhist families seriously take these advices and during the said six months the hall-bookings and wedding announcements in the papers markedly go down to the lowest minimum. Of these six, the first three months --- July, August and September --- constitute the Buddhist lent during which Buddhist monks and novices are confined to their monasteries. The Hindus also believe that this is the time when Vishnu, one of their Holy Trio, 'retires' and so is not "available" to bless the ceremony.

<sup>34</sup> Nowadays this time-factor can hardly be taken seriously for celebrations that take place at hired halls, for the allotment of time for each reception is limited to two hours only.

<sup>35</sup> The reservation of date and hour cannot properly be done these days. Bookings for these places (very few in Yangon at the moment if compared to the population) are so plentiful that some families have to wait for months, if not for years, and time allotted to each booking is extremely short. Date also may pose some problems for workers, so it is in vogue to celebrate weddings on public holidays.

<sup>36</sup> *Pon-nars*, a native appellation for a high-caste brahmin (Pali-brahmana), have long been in Burma, serving at palaces as royal tutors or earning their livelihood by preparing horoscopes and telling predictions. Mainly responsible for introducing Hindu religion and culture to animistic Burma, *pon-nars* are held in high respect for their knowledge of Vedas, mastery in fortune-telling and skillfulness in conducting ritualism, etc.

<sup>37</sup> A *ka-daw-bwe*, a vital item for every Burmese occasion, religious or ritual, contains either a green coconut and three bunches of bananas for the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, or a coconut and two bunches of bananas, for Nats and the like.

<sup>38</sup> For Upper and Lower Nats in Burmese animistic belief, see Notes 1 and 2 in Names-giving ceremony .

<sup>39</sup> The Nawarat, consisting of ruby etc., is always considered highly auspicious and lucky. Many Burmese would choose to wear them as a ring for the gents and a bracelet for the ladies. Even the water, in which the jewels are immersed for a time, is supposed propitious and favourable and often thrown on the head of a newly-bought cattle or the bonnet of a new car, etc.

<sup>40</sup> Obviously copied from Hindu practices, these become compulsory items of Burmese ritualism for many ceremonial occasions. The mixture is scattered over the audience while the celebration is in process. The modern practice, however, is to use small money coins, wrapped in gold or silver papers, to replace the real Navarat.

<sup>41</sup> Taken from the last sutta in the collection of *Parit-kyi*, the verse runs thus :

"Prince Siddhatha (the Bodhisat), the jewel of the entire Sakyan clan, conquers Mara, at the foot of the Bo. tree; just in the same way you gain victory and success by winning all which is to be won".

<sup>42</sup> The groom and the bride need to have bestmen and bridesmaids, usually two for each, who stay with them from start to finish. These must be unmarried boys and girls whose parents are still alive. It is almost the custom for two families to pay for all expenses they incur for the mission.

<sup>43</sup> Purely a worldly event meant for the secular life of a person, weddings have no reference to Buddhism, directly or indirectly. But, as giving a Buddhist veneer to the ritual, Burmese Buddhists introduce into this social practice a religious custom of paying respect to Buddha, etc.,

<sup>44</sup> Generally referred to as Five Infinite Venerables (*pancananta*) in Burmese Buddhism, this five-fold object of worship is made up of Buddha (The Blessed One), Dhamma (the Law), Sangha (the Order of Monks), Matapitaro (one's parents) and Acariya (one's teachers). It seems that the practice is conspicuous of Burma alone, because it is not found in the Pali canon.

<sup>45</sup> Buddhist rules of conduct or mutual obligations between such pairs of parents and children, teachers and pupils, etc, said to have been laid down and recommended by the Buddha, are found in a canonical discourse called Singalovada-sutta (Discourse on Admonishment to Singala the Lad) in *Digna-nikaya* or Book of the Dialogues of the Buddha.

<sup>46</sup> This 'joining hands in water' symbolically expresses attainment of purity, coolness, freshness and peace in the future of the newly-weds. More importantly, it symbolizes 'a permanent union' between the two partners, because water can never be separated or divided. Since the act of placing palms one upon the other is in vernacular called '*Let-htat-te*', the wedding ceremony, among others, is often known as "*Let-htap-min-ga-Lar*"

<sup>47</sup> Sprinkling water on the body of a person is unmistakably a Hindu ritual, but it has now become a common practice in both forms of Buddhism. Also a conch-shell, one of the sacred attributes common to several Buddhist and Brahmanical gods, like Sakka or Vishnu, is originally used as a horn to frighten away the enemy. Consequently, it is regarded as a powerful weapon and is now used in ritualism as a symbol of victory.

<sup>48</sup> Apart from intermarriages among themselves, Nats marry human beings whose souls (*Leik-pya* or butterfly in native vocabulary) are said beautiful and attractive. A man or a woman may have, in addition

to his or her biological spouse, a Nat who, in his or her turn, is already married to more than one partner. Polygamy, therefore, seems at work in contradiction with customary monogamy. Marriage ceremonies, or rather rituals symbolic of these ceremonies, are often held with 'invisible' brides or bridegrooms who are 'represented' by another shaman already married to that particular Nat. For this interesting topic, see Spiro 1967 : 209-17.

<sup>49</sup> Despite the fact that Burmese have adopted a great deal of Hindu customs and manners, it is surprising that there are very few traces of thought or practices in Burmese derived from *Kama-sattha* or Science of Love which nevertheless forms one of the three principal branches of Hindu culture. Consequently, the Burmese society as a whole is so sensitive and loathsome to all talks and actions related to sex that even the dictionaries on the vernacular deliberately leave the four-letter word and the like, un-mentioned and un-explained.

<sup>50</sup> This name may or may not be the one given on the Name-giving ceremony held about four months after birth. Legally speaking, the one entered on the NRC (National Registration Card) is always taken official. If someone wants to have his name changed, he or she has to apply for it and use it only as an alias in his NRC. Nick-names are not uncommon and are in popular use.

<sup>51</sup> The ninth in the Parit-kyi collection, the sutta was taught by the Buddha to Arigulimala the Buddhist Arahat, to save a Lady-devotee who was in trouble for her delivery.

<sup>52</sup> Even if a man comes into contact with this particular sarong, it is widely and strongly believed, he loses all his manly powers both physical and mental. A belief in this superstition is reenforced by a popular legendary account of the Taung-byone Brother-Nats, the most famous of the Thirty-Seven Nat-cultus in Burma. According to this legend, Byat-ta the father of Taung-byone Brothers and his elder brother Byat-wi, after eating the flesh of a sleeping alchemist, became to possess some supernatural powers which made them both exceptionally strong and totally invulnerable to weapons. Fearing for his royal seat, the king ordered his men to have the brothers caught and killed. Byat-ta fled to Bagan where he eventually begot the Taung-byone Brother Nats by marriage with an ogress from Mt. Poppa. Byat-wi, however, challenged the royal servicemen and stayed home to make regular, nocturnal visits to his lover. One night, while entering his lady's room, he passed under the entrance-door upon which such a skirt was clandestinely placed, whereby he lost his supernatural powers. He was then over-powered by the king's men who killed him by burying alive.

<sup>53</sup> Buddhist Initiation or Burmese shin-byu ceremony is evidently an event fashioned from an actual episode in the life of the Buddha, the scene of great renunciation, which includes no visit to the local gods. Dr. Aung, therefore, regards the custom as a pre-Buddhist folk-element, interpolated into this Buddhist ceremony in course of time (Aung 1962 : 116-7).

<sup>54</sup> Under the law in present-day Burma, sixteen is the age-limit for both sexes for marriage and eighteen for legal voting. No particular date is recognized for maturity or individual freedom for Burmese youths. The ties between parents and children are so strong and so intimate that parents' advices are always sought for and respected.



<sup>55</sup> Two reasons may be accounted for. One is that the popular Pali saying "Difficult is the married life" (*gharavaso sambadho*) might have had it's impressions on the Burmese Buddhist society in which the majority either embraces monogamy or practises a life-long, sex-free chastity. Another reason may be the fear of being censured as '*myet-hna-myar-de*' or "You have so many faces!!" by the society. As a matter of fact, even widows and widowers hardly remarry, partly because they prefer to stay with their off-springs by the first marriage and partly because they are afraid of public disdain.

<sup>56</sup> 'By being together in the past and contributing to the good of each other in the present, there arises love between a man and a woman, just as a lotus does so out of the water'. This Pali verse occurs in the Jataka, Birth-stories of the Buddha, and is always used as the standard Buddhist explanation for 'marital unions'. 'Being together' in the saying, however, does not necessarily imply that the two were marriage partners. They might have been in such relationships as father and daughter, mother and son, brother and sister, etc.

<sup>57</sup> Totally unknown to the Buddhist, or Hindu or Burmese pantheon of gods, this Satta-bhaga or *Phu-zar-yei-nat* (the Scribe of Forehead Writings) is believed to be a super-natural match-maker who oversees and arranges the wedlock for all men and women. According to national folk-belief, his markings or choices can by no means be altered or ignored, and the pair must be united willy-nilly in one way or another. Those match-less singles are said to lack in this "forehead inscriptions".

He is an independent figure who never belongs to the native group of *Thirty-Seven Nats*, but his popularity with love-hunting teenagers is so great that he figures prominently in numerous works of literature and music, both classical and modern. A winged, mischievous-looking boy, with bow and arrows in hand, *Satta-bhaga* is definitely a creation of Burmese imagination, about sixteenth century A.D., in whom are invested certain attributes of Brahma (Brahmanical Creator of the Universe), Kama (Hindu God of Love) and Cupid (Roman God of Love).

<sup>58</sup> There are reported cases in which girls commit suicide for being raped or sexually violated. Even when such unlucky victims do not kill themselves, they choose to stay away from society or go into oblivion.

<sup>59</sup> These qualities are three in number, namely, the quality of merit-accumulation in a former life, the quality of perseverance in the present and the quality of possessing intelligence and knowledge. Native words *thar* and *thamee* stand respectively for son and daughter or for, in this context, husband and wife.

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