

## The Relationship between Spirit Propitiation Ceremony and Drum Ensemble

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### Abstract

This study explored how to maintain Drum Ensemble (“*saing wain:*” in Myanmar) as Myanmar cultural heritage. The paper described especially relationship between spirit propitiation ceremony (“*nat pwe*” in Myanmar) and drum ensemble. Yangon Region is presumed to be the most developed place in the country that it could be very much liable to any infiltration of foreign culture and music. But fortunately, it was found that Big Drum Ensemble is still being used in some downtown areas and some adjacent area in Yangon region. Therefore, study sites were chosen some wards and villages of some Townships in Yangon Region to collect information and data regarding with the usage of drum ensemble. The three studied groups of the community were divided as follows: (1) The drum ensemble members of musicians whose livelihoods depend solely upon *Bamar* drum ensemble (2) appropriation ceremony (“*na’ kana:*” in Myanmar) professionals consisted of a woman or a sissy said to be chosen as consort by a spirit (spirit medium) (“*na’ gado*” in Myanmar), a leader of spirit medium (“*kana: si:*” in Myanmar), and other followers and (3) the audience. Then the audience comprised the doers and related persons, people who sponsored expenditure of ritual event (“*kana: pwe:*” in Myanmar) and people who come to watch entertainment. Again it could be classified two categories of audiences who came and watched drum ensemble entertainment. The first said to be the ones who are coming to watch according to their hobby who watch and listen with artistic ears and the remaining groups represent the ones who come and see just for fun. Field ethnography, focus group discussion (FGD), key informant interviews (KII), in-depth interview (IDI), informal conversation (IC) and direct observation (DO) were used for data collection. For qualitative data, information gathered by focus group discussion, key informant interviews, in-depth interview, informal conversation were transcribed and organized on the basis of emerging themes and subthemes. And then some people from village and wards in the study areas were general participated and using in drum ensemble (“*saing wain:*” in Myanmar) at auspicious and inauspicious ceremonies, direct observation was conducted with them. Observation was carried out at the ceremonies accompanied with drum ensemble, some data of *Bamar* traditional musical instruments especially, library of Department of Anthropology, Yangon University and Internet libraries. Moreover, data relating to *Bamar* traditional musical instruments were collected from newspapers, journals and magazines. Taking photographs and recording of music played with *Bamar* drum ensembles were conducted.

**Key words:** Drum Ensemble, *saing wain:*, *na’ pwe*, *na’ gado*, cultural heritage

### Introduction

It has been observed that ancient *Bamar* have created a musical material culture of their own to suit the nature and culture of the people. They have also produced the non-material culture through which they could reveal their mood and feelings. These materials, together with the music that were produced, give proof that *Bamar* have a sound cultural property throughout the periods. Thus *Bamar* have a prestigious international standard as regards culture owing to this property. To uncover today's extraordinary influence of the drum ensemble on the *Bamar* society, the relationships such as culture and traditions between the daily life of *Bamar* and the ensemble itself have to be observed. In the study, the role of the ensemble at social occasions such as weddings and funerals need to be focused upon as well.

From the period of ancient Myanmar Kings, entertainment had been incomplete without the Big Drum Ensemble as portrayed in the paintings and literature. In the *Kone-baung* Period, music, art, and literature were at the peak and kings used to have the Right ensemble and the Left ensemble on each side of the throne for court entertainment. In the *Kone-baung*

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Period, the ensemble expert *Sein Baydar* was conferred the title of *Nay Myo Bala Kyaw Thu* and was commissioned governance of a large village by King *Thibaw*. Such evidence indicated how much value Myanmar kings placed on the drum ensemble. Although the big drum ensemble was mainly used for the royalties in olden days, it is now used for all strata of the *Bamar* society for religious, social, commerce, and national functions.

On religious occasions, the drum ensemble is used for pagoda festivals, novitiation ceremonies, inauguration ceremonies of monks and monasteries, honouring of monks, monk funerals, meal offering ceremonies and spirit ceremonies. Regarding commercial activities the drum ensemble is used at theatres, hotels and restaurants. It is also used as background music in films. For national occasions, the drum ensemble is used at State dinners, cultural exchange programmes, entertainment for diplomats, opening ceremonies of roads and bridges, and national sport programmes such as boxing, martial arts, and cane ball competitions. In this paper, the significant features of the drum ensemble in the light of religious functions were taken into the lime light. First the traditions and customs in the *Bamar* society were looked at. After that the focus was shifted to the drum ensemble.

Drum Ensemble was used in various ceremonies such as life-cycle rituals, annual-cycle rituals and crisis rituals in *Bamar* societies. According to study, in the period of ancient Myanmar Kings it was widely performed in religious, social, and political sectors and various royal ceremonies. Later period, drum ensemble was used in auspicious ceremonies (donation, novitiation, propitiation for spirits) and inauspicious ceremony (funeral rite). Moreover, some people used to include drum ensemble entertainment among other programs in relative processes. Therefore, this study was conducted instrumental rendition by a *Bamar* orchestra (“*bala saing*” in Myanmar), and a “troupe” which plays at offerings of food to spirits (“*na’ saing*” in Myanmar). The paper described only relationship between spirit propitiation ceremony (“*nat pwe*” in Myanmar) and drum ensemble.

### **Aim and Objectives**

The aim of this article is to find out how *Bamar* Society maintains the roles and functions of *Bamar* Traditional Musical Instruments

The specific objectives are:

- i. To describe the background of *Bamar* Musical Instruments
- ii. To find out the traditional functions and roles of *Bamar* Musical Instruments in the daily life of *Bamar* society
- iii. To explore the creative process and the interaction of artists and their audience
- iv. To examine the relationships between other aspects of culture and society

### **The Spirit Propitiation Ceremony and Drum Ensemble**

The most *Bamar* ethnic group, they are Buddhists as well as propitiation of traditional *nat*-spirits. The latter exists because of their belief that spirits could bring them a happy worldly life. Some animists hold spirits propitiation ceremonies for traditional spirits well as some spirits of their choice, where at the *Bamar* drum ensemble is often hired for its services.

### **Historical background of spirit worship and holding the spirit propitiation ceremony**

The word “*nat*” comes from *nātha* (Pali), which means somebody to take refuge in. It is found in particular and special songs for and about spirits (“*nat’chin*.” in Myanmar) of ancient poets that *Bamar* nationals have been worshipping spirits since many centuries ago. The particular and special songs for and about spirits is a special song for and about worldly spirits, especially the 37 spirits. Some facts testify to the origin of spirit worship in Myanmar, namely: *Shwenabe* spirit is known to have been worshipped in *Pyu* and *Sriksetra* Periods; the

worship of spirits of Blacksmith *Maung Tint Tae* and sister in their special shrine since their execution during the reign of seventh king of *Tagaung* dynasty. *Thay Laekyaung Min* in early *Bagan* Period; and the worship of spirits of *Shwephyin* Brothers in their special shrine at *Taungbyone* since their execution in by King *Anawrahta* of *Bagan* period. The *Bamar* nationals are found, together with their Buddhist belief, to have been engaged often in the worship of traditional spirits. They are doing so because they believe spirits can fulfill their wishes. To communicate with spirits some friendship is required, so they use the services of a shaman (spirit possessed person). The spirit possessed person is the go-between which caters to mutual exchanges between man and spirits. When people have their wishes fulfilled they hold spirits propitiation ceremonies to make their loyalty and promise keeping known to the spirits. Some hold a spirit propitiation ceremony believing that it is beneficial to all if their protectors' spirits get merit through their alms-giving, sharing of merit, and showing of friendly behavior to them. On this a 57-year-old female holder of spirits propitiation ceremony said: In this study it is found that votaries hold propitiation ceremonies because they have their desires fulfilled.

### **Troupe which plays at offerings of food to spirits**

Troupe which play at offerings of food to spirits (“*nat' pwe*” in Myanmar) was meaning (“*nat'saing*” in Myanmar); music played for dance of votaries”, according to *Dictionary of Performing and Plastic Arts*, 2001, p. 64. By definition it means drum-based ensemble (“*saing* or *saing wain:*” in Myanmar) which performs at spirit propitiation ceremony, or instrumental theme for *spirit* songs. By another word it is called *bali nat'sar* (food offertory for *spirit*) troupe. A *natsaing* leader needs to be well versed in the histories and ways of ‘*Atwin*’ 37 spirits, ‘*Apyin*’ 37 Spirits, manifestation as spirit before death, being possessed by spirits, start and cessation of being possessed by spirits and the history of spirit worship. In holding spirits propitiation ceremony the drum ensemble is not hired by the holder but by leader of votary team (“*kana: si:*” in Myanmar). In other words the ensemble is ordered about by the votaress because she has made her choice to stage it. There are two kinds of votary team leader, a votaress (female) or a votary (male). A votaress usually leads the *nat' dou:* she has hired, but the *nat'saing* leader mostly leads the drum ensemble, which has been hired by a votary (**sissy**). It is so because some votaries (**sissies**) are not versed in *nat'saing* and chronicles of spirit.

A *nat'saing* usually includes about nine people: player of drum circle; player of brass gong circle; player of gongs; player of big drum at drum *corner*; player of *six-drum set*, cymbals player; player of short drums; oboe player; and one or two vocalists. Nowadays some drum ensembles include a set of gongs, unlike the practice in the past. Sometimes at spirit propitiation ceremony drum circle player and other members participate in singing songs at high note.

In the evening marking the start of spirit propitiation ceremony steamed glutinous rice and white and red snacks are offered as spirit's food to *Indrecitta Boe Boe* spirit by the votaress. The drum ensemble is believed to be in his possession and under his protection. By way of propitiation the votary says pleasing words accompanied by instrumental is called *lamain pwe'-art*, done as such believing the drum ensemble in session will be rich in variety. When music performed by the ensemble works out well (i.e *lamain ka* ^) and rich in variety people watching the spirit propitiation begin to have goose pimples sometimes and can barely resist joining the dancing votaresses.

The *nat'saing* leader's protocol is usually observed at a spirit propitiation ceremony, it is learnt. So he must be versed in the instrumental of doing obeisance and ‘marriage’, and in differentiation from one another of male spirit, female spirit and child spirit. By *nat'saing* leader's protocol, doing obeisance to the Buddha is performed first on the next morning, to be followed by respectful invitation of monks and persons with supernatural powers and for

*Bamar* nationals' belief *Indra* (Sakka) the king of devas and others are respectfully invited. In other words *Indra* is chanting a ballad about himself. It goes: then the *nat'saing* goes instrumental for a particular song about spirit, like: to serve as base. The usual instrumental coming from the drum ensemble meant for “*Shwe Pin Shwe Phone Pa Pa Win*”-beginning *kyo* song, “*Shwe Phone Taw Le Twe´ Hma*” song, melodious *kyo* song on entry of *Indra* and “*Wei Ba Gi Ji*” *kyo* song. Sometimes it is meant for the melody played during the playing of boat in the royal moat, and goes “*Hton Hton TonTon TonTap, TonTapTonTon, Htee*”.

Then the respectful invitation of spirit concerned is followed by *satawtaik*, ie the vocalist sings songs about that spirit while the drum ensemble plays the tune concerned. It is learnt that *satawtaik* is meant to allow votaresses some time for preparation. After *satawtaik* the votaresses enter to do *nat´kjpint*, which is respectful invitation of 37 spirits in due order through recitation of *nat´pint* text. Then they are respectfully sent back with the royal drumbeat. Thus some of invitational pieces, special songs about spirits and instrumental play of tune are studied thus:

For example, when the votaress turns towards the ensemble to solemnly say, “*O Ywasa* [honorific name for ensemble leader], let's invite Household Father (spirit of Blacksmith *Maung Tint Tae*) and sister”, the vocalist utters, then the ensemble plays up to the end of spirit song thus: based on three-time *nat´*- propitiatory music (“*nat´ dou:*” in Myanmar) the ensemble strikes up firstly with “*Byong Bebe Htee POUNG Byong*” of royal drum music, followed by *minthwar* rendition of “*TupOUNG ByOUNG TupOUNG ByOUNG TupOUNG ByOUNG TupOUNG ByOUNG BepOUNG TupOUNG ByOUNG*”. Moreover, spirit song beginning *Hpoun: Hpoun: Dan: Tei Za ...* is usually played.

When spirits are invited at spirit propitiation ceremony relevant ballads about them must be chanted. Moreover the vocalist must expertly sing spirit songs, the instrumental rendition of which is excitingly performed by the drum ensemble. While the votaress is being possessed by a spirit, drum ensemble members exclaim the names relevant to it as well as “*Wai Lei Lei*” so as to facilitate the spirits visit and participation. In other words the *nat'saing* leader must be able to play well enough to excite the votaress as well as to instill in the audience an almost uncontrollable urge to join the votary dance. In this way the votaress becomes possessed by spirit soon enough; her utterances are effective and appeal to the audience so spirit propitiation supposedly continues in existence for people's interest and belief in spirit propitiation ceremonies.

During her performance as if possessed by spirit, the votaress gives away some cash to the drum ensemble which is known as (*nat'suntkyay* in Myanmar) (or) (*letpyitkyay* in Myanmar). Rental fee of a *nat'saing* cannot compare with that of the (*bala saing* in Myanmar), drum ensemble purely to entertain, so it has to depend much on *letpyitkyay* money which the votaress gives away. *Nat'saing* Leader's fee and *letpyitkyay* are linked; the latter lies at the votaress's discretion. *Nat'saing* Leader would feel well compensated if *letpyitkyay* is amply given. In fact *letpyitkyay* is a bonus awarded by the votaress to the drum ensemble. However, *letpyitkyay* which the drum ensemble leader receives depends on his expertise, articulation and eloquence, it is learnt. An ordinary *nat'saing* leader will fare enough at an ordinary spirit propitiation ceremony held in this or that township. But he will become well versed in this profession only if he is very much enthusiastic about it. Then he may well participate in the famed *Taungbyone Spirit Festival*.

Especially in Yangon in Lower Myanmar *nat'saing* leaders mostly decline to give services for inauspicious events. This trend is dictated by the nature of *na'saing* profession where a votaress chooses a *nat'saing* for performance at her discretion. Some votaresses demand that a *nat'saing* that has been involved in an inauspicious ceremony be cleansed and

its players are washed with traditional shampoo made of *Grewia polygama* bark and soap acacia nuts. Especially the gap (“*min: bau*”) by which the player enters his drum circle is to be thoroughly cleansed, it is learnt. Only then would votaresses accept a *nat’saing* ensemble for use at spirit propitiation ceremony. For a theatrical performance the drum ensemble player can conduct rehearsals with dancers but the *nat’saing* player does not enjoy that opportunity; he has to play on the spot for dances relevant to the spirit which possesses the votaresses. It is learnt that to become a famous, successful *nat’saing* leader needs such qualifications as: ability to expertly know and play ‘doing obeisance’ instrumental as well as ‘marriage’ instrumental; ability to quickly identify the spirit which is possessing the votaress; to uplift the dancing votaress’s mind to a level of great emotion by his performance; and ability to enticingly play so well that the audience nearby can barely control an urge to join the votaresses in their act.

### Discussion

There were some people in *Myanmar* who are Buddhists and believed in spirits. They believe that spirits tend to protect them from evil and misted. And also believe the spirits look after them for their good health and wealth. Therefore they worship and praise spirit and conduct festival in honour of spirits (“*nat’pwe*” in Myanmar) or hold a ceremony to propitiate spirits. When they are in need of help, or protection, they want to be answered about their future. They conduct festivals in honour of spirits and ask those questions per favour of spiritmedium (“*nat’gado*” in Myanmar). The profession of spiritmedium is conducted by women, men and inevitably gay, (mostly women and gay man) Most of the women spiritmediums are supposed to be very professional, because they are skillful in the business and actually their livelihoods. The major item for festival in honour of spirits is drum ensemble playing in festival in honour of spirits (“*nat’saing*” in Myanmar). It is learned to be necessary to know what kind of spirit is representing in spiritmedium so that the Drum Ensemble players could play relative drum ensemble and the singers could sing relative 'songs' which is most liked by relative spirits. If only, the drum ensemble, the song, and the spirits are in a harmony and in good terms, the predictions’ coming out from the mouth of spiritmedium got to be comes correct and makes much money for the spirits. It is learned that the income of *Nat’saing* drummer is actually less than the tip money given by spiritmedium when the spirit is in her soul. Therefore, it could be assumed that, the tripartite group composed of a ceremony to propitiate spirits sponsor, spiritmedium and *Na’saing* drummer are said to be benefited each other in the event of festival in honour of spirits. Furthermore, customary worshipping practice of traditional spirits, with the drum ensembles said to be supporting effect upon preservation of folk songs of particular and special songs for and about spirits (“*nat’chin:*” in Myanmar) and *Bamar* drum ensembles as national characters and culture.

It is found that the local people in the study area celebrate a ceremony to propitiate spirits (“*nat’kana: pwe:*” in Myanmar) due to their belief in the spirits. The aim of celebrating such a ceremony is to make the spirits happy in order to put them in a generous mood to grant the donor favors and to fulfill his wishes. As the spirit ceremony aims at entertaining the spirits, there is always plenty of merriment and often personal events are celebrated simultaneously in red-curtained bamboo pavilions (“*kana:*” in Myanmar) by the road. The donor of a pavilion has to hire a spiritmedium troupe complete with images, traditional orchestra and singers. Accordingly it can be assumed that the traditional orchestra (“*saing wain:*” in Myanmar) plays a key role in celebrating a ceremony to propitiate spirit which reflects the local people’s traditional belief in the spirits.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

According to above-mentioned findings, it was learned that, evolution of *Bamar* traditional musical instruments was found in aspects of people’s daily life, in politics, religious

affairs, livelihoods (especially in agriculture) and various social events. It could be described as a 'bare-necessity' of *Bamar* society as a symbolic cultural heritage that get along well with annual-cycle rituals, life-cycle rituals and crisis rituals. It could be concluded that survival of *Bamar* drum ensemble up to present time is, its usage as essential entertainment item for the people who love, adore and get along at any time and place according to the events. In Upper Myanmar, the drum ensemble is classified into three categories: the drum ensemble is use for auspicious ceremonies ("*min gala saing*" in Myanmar), the drum ensemble is use for funerals ("*amin gala saing*" in Myanmar) and the drum ensemble is use for spiritual ceremonies ("*bali. nat' sa saing*" in Myanmar). Although *Bamar* music has advanced through the ages with a variety of instruments, most of the musical instruments are based on the leather instruments of the *Bamar* drum ensemble is apparent. There may develop one-man-band instruments from electrical components of modern orchestras, but the *Bamar* drum ensemble still has not lost its originality throughout all the advancements and innovations in music composition, and has to be performed with a full group of musicians. In conclusion, today a merger of both kinds of instrument is common. In religious ceremonies, audio and video tapes of the bands are used which helped make the traditional drum music survive. In spite of all these influences, the prestigious *Bamar* drum ensemble which is based on the five basic instruments, brass, wind, string, leather, and percussion, survived due to typical *Bamar* characteristic of preserving tradition, and the love of *Bamar* of its culture.

According to the studies and research on the role and usage of *Bamar* Big drum ensemble ("*saing wain: kji.*" in Myanmar), the compilations of the recommendations are described as follows:

- The sustainability of *Bamar* drum ensemble could not be gained by just keeping those instruments in the museum. But by encouraging *Bamar* traditions and customs that is supposed to be associated with *Bamar* Society.
- It is suggested for the government, to make plans for welfare of ensemble members whose livelihoods solely depends upon *Bamar* drum ensemble.
- The musicians should try new creations; at the same time not destroying good old customs and tradition of *Bamar* culture. To organize young generations to be awarded of principle of *Bamar* traditional music, it's composition and the instruments.
- To maintain the big drum ensemble as a national and cultural heritage. Integrated and harmonious efforts for much more skills among creators of the musical instruments, players, singers and comedians are considered to be recommended. Recommend "would-be researchers" on this subject should try to discover those aspects.

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Fig. 1. Spirit propitiation ceremony  
("na' pwe" in Myanmar)



Fig. 2. Troupe which play at spirit propitiation ceremony  
("na' saing" in Myanmar)



Fig. 3. A votary (male)



Fig. 4. "na' suntkyay" (or) 'letpyitkyay'<sup>1</sup>



Fig. 5. lamain: pwe<sup>2</sup>



Fig. 6. Interviewing with a family member whose family hosted the "na' pwe"

<sup>1</sup> The votaries gives away some cash to the drum ensemble which is known as ('na' suntkyay' in Myanmar) (or) ('letpyitkyay' in Myanmar).

<sup>2</sup> This is that glutinous rice and *Mote-see-kyaw* (Fried sweet pan-cakes made from glutinous rice) are offered as spirit's food to Indrecitta Bo Bo spirit by the votaress