

## THE NATS OF MYANMAR

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Although it is estimated that around 90% of Myanmar (Burmese) people are Buddhist, many retain an ancient belief in the nats, guardian spirits that have evolved from ancestor worship and a belief in supernatural forces resident in features of the landscape. In the complex spiritual framework of Myanmar life, which also has space for astrology, divination, alchemy and other spiritual practices, the nats are believed to have hegemony over 'their' area - be that a home, road, field, village, river or mountain - and are often feared for the harm they may cause if not correctly acknowledged and appeased with offerings. Appeasing the nats ensures the health and well-being of one's family and community, safe passage through the territory governed by a particular nat, or the success of a planned venture. Belief in the nats is common to all sections of Myanmar society, and their shrines may be seen in homes and businesses, attached to prominent trees, guarding roads and on the outskirts of villages.

The colourful creation legends of the nats have afforded artists the opportunity to portray them in a wide variety of artistic contexts. Their images range from crudely carved and painted figures to beautifully worked statues combining the talents of master wood carvers, goldsmiths and jewellers. While most nat images are three-dimensional, they are also commonly found in relief carvings decorating pagodas and monasteries, are depicted in paintings, textiles, ceramic plaques, metalwork and tattoos, and are also made as puppets.

Two pairs of protective spirit figures, found at the ancient Myanmar city of Srikssetra, are dated to as early as the 5th century (Hudson & Lustig 2008). Made of iron - a metal believed to have protective properties - these figures attest to a long tradition of representing protective guardian spirits in Myanmar art. Pagodas dated to the 13th century show that by this time, the nats were fully integrated into the corpus of art created for Buddhist merit making. Elements of royal regalia have conventionally been employed by artists to distinguish nats of the *deva* (or deity) class from as early as the 17th century.

Nat imagery since the late 20th century has evolved to portray each nat as an ageless and more 'humanised' being, with props and costumes used to represent elements of their creation story, or to distinguish each

TYPICAL ROADSIDE NAT SHRINE BETWEEN MT POPA AND BAGAN. THE SIGN AT LEFT WARNS PEOPLE NOT TO CUT DOWN THE TREES LEST THEY OFFEND THE NATS. © SALLY BAMFORD 2012



nat from its fellows. This practice appears to have its roots in the traditional costumes worn by professional nat *kadaw*, the spirit mediums who channel nats at festivals held in their honour, as recorded by the Governor of Myawadi in 1805 (Temple 1906).

The practice of placating the nats is believed to stem from the ancient tradition - still practiced today - of constructing a miniature house to appease a tree-nat whose home is lost when its tree is felled for house-building (Maung Htin Aung 1962). This notion of spirits inhabiting trees is reflected in the creation legends of many well-known nats, such as Min Mahagiri and his sister, Shwe-myet-nha, who were burned alive by the King of Tagaung, Myanmar's ancient capital. Their spirits took up residence in a tree, but as anyone who walked in its shadow was killed, the King had it uprooted and thrown in the river. It floated downstream to Bagan, where the two nats appeared in a dream of the King of Bagan, Thinlikaung (r. 344-387 CE) who rescued the tree, had carvings of Min Mahagiri and Shwe-myet-nha made from its wood, and installed them in a shrine on Mt Popa, thus beginning the long tradition of patronage of a pantheon of Thirty-Seven particular nats by Myanmar royalty.

Tree-spirit nats are illustrated on one of the glazed brick plaques depicting *Jataka* tales which decorate the 11th century Shwezigon pagoda at Nyaung U, near Bagan. Based on its location, it may be identified as an illustration

of the *Rukkhadhamma Jataka*. In this tale, the Buddha had come to life as a tree-spirit in a Himalayan forest, and advised his kinsfolk to take up their abodes in the surrounding trees. Those who did not heed his advice and chose to dwell in giant trees growing in open spaces, were uprooted and flung to the ground by a mighty tempest, while the interlaced trees in the forest withstood the might of the storm. When telling the tale, the Buddha unfolded the truth in the stanza:

'United, forest-like, should kinsfolk stand;  
The storm o'erthrows the solitary tree.'  
(Chalmers 1895)

On the Shwezigon plaque, the Buddha is the tree-spirit appearing on the right, identifiable by his crown, while the poor tree-spirit who took up residence in the solitary tree sits astride his former home, now uprooted and thrown to the ground.

It is not uncommon to find nat imagery placed within the grounds of Myanmar pagodas, as the nats are conceptually a part of Myanmar Buddhism, where nats and humans are both a class of being engaged in the cycle of multiple rebirth. In Myanmar Buddhist cosmology, thirty-one planes of existence are divided into three spheres. The first, *kama-loka*, includes hells, animals, ghosts, demons, and the human and nat worlds, along with six lower *deva* abodes. Above *kama-loka* are sixteen planes of *rupa-loka*, where the devas retain a measure of corporeality, then the four planes of *arupa-loka*, where there is no



corporeality (Spiro 1978). The nats Po Sin Taung and Pwa Sin Taung (Grandfather and Grandmother Elephant Mountain) occupy a niche set into the inner wall of the Yadana Man Aung Pagoda at Nyaungshwe. These two statues are typical of late 19th / early 20th century nat images, being carved from wood, depicted in traditional costume and with their features highlighted in paint or gilt. The tiered crown of the Grandfather identifies his status as a Lord, in this case of 'Elephant Mountain'. The stance of the Grandmother – leaning slightly forward with one hand loosely by her side – is a conventional attitude of obeisance to the king, as many nats received their fief by royal decree. Statues like these were made in workshops whose artists specialised in a motif group known as *nari pan*, which included Buddha images, human beings and nats in human form (Moilanen & Ozhegou 1999).

Probably the most visible nat in Myanmar art is Thagyamin, *Sakka* in Pali, in his role as the protector of Buddhism. In this context, his image is commonly seen within pagoda and monastery precincts, incorporated into architectural or decorative features beside or above a doorway or in an attitude of homage to a Buddha image. As a *nat-saw* or *deva* nat, Thagyamin presides as a lord over the second level of *nat rwa*, perhaps more familiarly known to Buddhists as Tavatimsa heaven.

Thagyamin is conventionally portrayed wearing elements of royal costume, usually including a tiered crown, ornate jewellery and a *yin-hlwan*, the long front piece with flaring lappets shown in a folding manuscript illustrating sumptuary dress from King Thibaw's court in the 1880s. Historically, Thagyamin always appeared in full royal ceremonial dress in traditional puppet theatre, whereas human actors portraying royalty were limited to symbolic attributes. Today, Thagyamin puppets are still portrayed in full ceremonial dress, an enduring reminder of the splendour of the royal court and a popular tourist souvenir.

The use of *nat-saw* imagery in artistic contexts remained the prerogative of Myanmar royalty until its abrupt demise in 1885, accounting for the common occurrence of these images within the many religious foundations commissioned as acts of merit by Myanmar kings. *Nat-saw* imagery was included in the decorative schema of pagodas from at least the 13th century; the Thambula pagoda at Bagan features a stucco decoration over its arched doorway in the form of a winged nat figure standing on a three-headed *naga*. The use of the royal *yin-hlwan* and tiered crown is found on sandstone images of Thagyamin dated to



the 17th century, while by the 19th century, *nat-saw* images were conventionally carved in hieratic, formal postures of adoration.

In stark contrast, more naturalistic poses are found in carvings of non-*deva* nats, which are usually portrayed in narrative scenes related to their creation legend, often alongside carvings of *Jataka* tales. An elaborately carved screen was created in the 1920s to decorate the entrance to the Hall of the Buddha's Footprint at the Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon, featuring the story of Ma Mei U and the nat Shwebyin Nyidaw, also known as the younger of the Taungbyon Brothers. A soldier of King Anawrahta in the 11th century, Shwebyin

Nyidaw was executed by the King – thereby becoming a nat – for failing to contribute his share of bricks to the building of a pagoda. He had fallen in love with Ma Mei U, a virtuous wife and weaver who spurned his advances. As a nat, angered at being refused, he sent a tiger to drag her away while she sat at her loom (U Tun Aung Chain & U Thein Hlaing 1996).

While all the nats are essentially guardian spirits, they can be deemed to fall within three categories relating to their origin: as an ancestor or nature spirit; as a *deva* nat such as Thagyamin, or as a human – sometimes mythical – who has become a nat after meeting a violent or unexpected death. Today,





the two foremost places to see assemblies of various nats are at Mt Popa, the site of an important shrine, while another pantheon of ancient nats may be seen in their own shrines within the Shwezigon pagoda compound. The Shwezigon sculptures clearly reference the nats' origins as nature spirits by depicting them as anthropomorphised supernaturals, while the majority of imagery found at Mt Popa is more 'human' in appearance.

Two important nat images found at the Shwezigon pagoda are the father and son Shwe Myo Zin and Shwe Zaga, sea-spirits known collectively as 'Son one month older than the Father', who were summoned by the King to take up residence at the Pagoda and act as guardians of Buddhism. As Shwe Zaga arrived one month earlier, he was given a higher position in the shrine than his father. In these massive, squat figures seated in *ardhaparyankasana*, the pose of royal ease, it is evident that the artists conceived these nats with nature spirit origins as semi-human in appearance.

In a photo published in 1915 of a statue of Shwe Nabe, a nat who can take the form of a



woman or a *naga*, her supernatural origin is expressed by giving her a semi-human face with a distinctly serpent-like cast, featuring slitted eyes and a protruding lower face (Brown 1915). A more modern image of Shwe Nabe, housed in a major nat shrine at Mt Popa, illustrates how nat imagery has evolved. While both statues have exactly the same stance, wear a *naga* headdress and grasp a *naga* in both hands, the more recent statue at Mt Popa seems, to Western eyes, to have the rather bland appearance of a department store mannequin. Here, her hieratic posture and frozen features demonstrate her agelessness and supernatural origin, while her *naga* 'nature' is further illustrated by her shimmering green *longyi*, clearly patterned to show the scales of a serpent.

There are few known and documented early examples of nat imagery, and many older examples have disappeared into private collections, their stories unrecorded and their provenance lost to art historians. Those still extant in Myanmar are of course revered as representations of the spirits they embody, and remain an invaluable resource to historians of Myanmar art and culture.

Sally Bamford first visited Myanmar in 1995 and completed her art history Honours thesis on the 'art of the nat' in 2011. She is planning to undertake a PhD on the history and representation of the nats in Myanmar material culture.

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