Flights of Fancy

Hintha and Kinnaya, the Avian Inspiration in Myanmar art

Elizabeth Moore
Daw San San Maw

For thousands of years, Burmese artisans have been inspired by mythical birds. The fanciful imagination of these wood-carvers and painters has resulted in the fabulous winged creatures which inhabit Myanmar art. The two winged-beings which are the subject of this article, the hintha and the kinnaya, are not the only birds in Myanmar art. They share the celestial realms with the royal peacock, the owl, parrot garuda, karunak and pynahtadinna. However, the hintha duck and half bird-half human kinnaya have an unusually rich literary and artistic history, and present two important aspects of the country's art: the incorporation of religious symbols into the royal arts, and the interplay of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic images in the country's ritual practices.

The question of the origins of anthropomorphic imagery in Burmese art are buried in the iconography of the country's pre-Indic religions. It is likely that prehistoric spirit and ancestral veneration evolved into the present anthropomorphic convention for portraying many spirits, the nats. But it is noteworthy that while some nats – devas, legendary figures, and those derived from Hinduism – are shown in human form, others such as tree and water spirits, are disembodied.

The arrival of Buddhism in Myanmar is traditionally linked to the visit of the monks Sona and Uttara in the 3rd century BC. However, the earliest dateable Hindu and Buddhist artefacts from Pyu sites are placed in the 1st to 5th centuries AD.

Fig. 1. Kinnara corner piece from manuscript cabinet, 18th century, Gilded wood, 46 cm. Courtesy of U Sein Myint, Mandalay.
suggering that the arrival of Indic religions coincided with the first appearance of images of the Buddha in India around this time. It could therefore be argued that an important artistic innovation arising from the new religions was anthropomorphism. To date, no anthropomorphic nat have been recovered from Pyu sites, although Myanmar chronicles, recording the legends of the Pyu and Pagan periods include many nat histories which explain later iconography.

A terracotta figure commonly identified as a kemari was recovered from the 1st-5th century AD site of Beikthano (Aung Thaw 1968). The kemari interpretation of the figure is open to question, but it is clearly anthropomorphic, perhaps a dea (U Maung Maung Tin, personal communication, 1993). Thus there was already a history of experimentation with the human figure across a range of Indian icons. Although the kemari from Beikthano presumably took her form from imported texts or images, the point here is that anthropomorphism was not restricted to a very few important Indic religious images. Even if the concept of an anthropomorphic icon departed from existing visual practices, it does not seem to have posed a threat, either artistically or conceptually to Myanmar artists. In the absence of further excavated evidence, the date and nature of the inception of anthropomorphism is, of course, unknown. It is a question, however, which is central to the two main sources of hintha and kemarya stories – the Buddhist jatakas, previous lives of the Buddha, and local legends. In both cases, animals often adopt human behaviour, but rarely human features.

The Hintha

Some people believe the hintha to be a representation of the common goose (see Vogel 1962, for discussion of the bird
in Indian art). Generally, however, in Myanmar, hintha means \textit{wuake} or duck. (Somewhat confusingly, the word \textit{wuake} was also used in the Pagan period to refer to the mythical \textit{wuake} bird.) The \textit{wuake} can be the Brahminy or the Mandarin duck. The Mandarin duck, found in Vietnam and China, is not local to Myanmar (Gear 1992:114). The word \textit{hintha} derives from the Pali word \textit{hantha}, the syllable "han" having been transcribed into the Burmese as "hin" (Bo Kay 1981; Hla Myint (Sageing) 1955:13; Kyaw Nyein (She Haung) 1974; Hla Myint (Zageing) 1972). The alteration to \textit{hintha} incorporates the bird's celebrated fidelity: it is said to have the habit of committing suicide at the death of its mate. It also refers to its ability to travel vast distances (Hla Myint 1955:13; Kyaw Nyein 1974).

The earliest written reference to the \textit{hintha} bird is, as the Myanmar word \textit{wuake}, seen in the ink inscriptions of Pagan, the labels for the \textit{jataka} stories in the temples (Bo Kay (Mon) 1984; Kyaw Nyein (She Haung) 1974). These \textit{jatakas} stories provide explanations for two of the main \textit{hintha} icons in Burmese art—prayer posts and betel boxes. The \textit{hintha} is not, however, only referred to in the previous lives of the Buddha, but is also in designs of the Buddha's footprint, as one of the 108 auspicious symbols. The \textit{hintha} also appears yet again as the vehicle of the \textit{mar Tharewadi}, here derived from Sarasvati, the Hindu goddess of knowledge.

The first stone inscription, rather than ink inscription, reference to the \textit{hintha} is in a transcription of a stone inscription from Sihumingsyi Pagoda (Government of the Union of Myanmar, Pagan Inscription Books). Despite its Pagan provenance, the style of writing, the form of the letters, and the usage of the passage, suggest that it was carved during the second Inwa (Ava) period (17th-18th century). The early part of this period was the "heyday" of Burmese literature, during which time poets and composers wrote lyrics about the \textit{hintha} and the \textit{wuake}, each being described differently. Sometimes, they even combined the two birds into the \textit{hinthawake} (Kyaw Nyein (She Haung) 1974). In later periods, when describing the Pagan era, the words \textit{hintha} and \textit{wuake} were both used to refer to figures of \textit{wuake}.

The Mon peoples in Myanmar have never interchanged hintha and wuake, and according to Mon legends, the birds have always been different species. In the old history of Pegu (Hanthawaddy), hintha birds were already present when the Buddha visited the site, causing him to predict that the place would in future be known as Hanthawaddy, place of the \textit{hintha} (Bo Kay 1984). The legendary founding of Pegu involves two hintha birds: the male lands, alighting on the only piece of dry land amidst a great marsh, the female comes to rest on his back. (Interestingly, to this day the men of Pegu are thus said to be dominated by their wives (Khin Myo Chit 1984)).

Among the \textit{jatakas} featuring hintha, the Javana Hamsa
has been the most popular in Myanmar art (Cowell [V:476]). It is this jataka which explains the presence of beautifully carved hindas on top of thousands of prayer posts, dagoba linga, in pagoda precincts (Min Thurein 1982, Myint Tun (Theteh)1983). According to the Javana Hansa, after a long series of events, the Lord Buddha was a king of the hindas, who competed in a race against the sun. When the human king praised the bird's speed, the hinda replied that his swiftness was nothing compared to the passing of a human lifetime. The king, who was deeply afraid of death, fell unconscious to the ground. His people also became stricken with fear. Eventually, the king sought instruction from the hinda. The bird counselled him not to be troubled, to practise the ten laws incumbent on kings, particularly charity. In memory of the swiftness of death, which comes faster than the flight of the hinda king, respect is paid to the wisdom of the hinda by placing him at the summit of prayer posts throughout Myanmar.

The Javana Hansa jataka provides ample explanation for the presence of the hinda on prayer posts in a Theravada context. Interestingly, aspects of Mahayana doctrine also support its iconic use. According to the Mahayana text, the Yathawadaya (Yasodhara, wife of Prince Siddhartha), the Arika (arhat), having reached the time to enter heaven, transformed himself into a hinda bird and flew up to heaven to pay respect to the Buddha. This account is a Mahayanaist response to queries about why hindhas appear on top of Burmese prayer posts.

In the Sulanthha jataka, a hunter snared the hinda king. However, the earthly monarch, seeing the ruby-coloured blood of the bird caused by his hunter's net, took pity on the hinda, nursed and eventually freed him. In reference to this story of royal compassion, many royal figures, particularly in the 18th-19th century AD Konbaung period, commissioned wood and lacquer betel boxes in the shape of hinda birds, kama sa, which became part of the identification of royal rank, or insignia (Yi Yi 1960a:161). The ruby red blood of the story may explain the many pagoda donations of miniature prayer posts with ruby-studded hindas holding a red jewel in his mouth.

Royal patronage of the hinda is also seen in the use of the bird on one of the eight thrones of Mandalay Palace. The Hambuka Lone throne is carved of Thingasa (bogwood) wood and placed in the Zaydeaun or Goose Throne Room, chamber of the palace (Yi Yi 1960b). The king was said to always use this throne when praying. King Mindon purportedly sat upon the hinda throne when chastising his eldest daughter. In both instances, the actions recall the Javana Hansa jataka, where the king prayed to the hinda, and was also chastised by the bird.

Royal artists also used the hinda motif in opium weights. King Bayinnaung, in the 16th century, ordered standard weights produced. The weights were called "standard weight" (Kyaw Nyin (She Hlaung) 1974, Ba Aye 1959). Because the weights were also used for measuring opium during the reign of King Bodawpaya in the 19th century, they were also called "Bodaw weight" or "golden weight" (shwe) (Tha Myat...
Kinnari and Kinnara

The female kinnari and male kinnara (pl. kinnaya) are a mythical composite of avian and human attributes. As with all Burmese icons, their history is complex. In India, the kinnaya can be either half horse or bird. The half-bird is favoured throughout Southeast Asia, although some Myanmar sources concentrate more on the half-human aspect, contending that the reason it is named kinnara is the ambiguity of its human-ness. Some take the word as a translation of the Sanskrit *kinnara* meaning “human, in a very ugly state” (Nyo Lwin 1955, San Thamein 1986).

One dictionary avoids the problem by simply defining kinnara as a “A mystical winged human being” (UI Hoke Sein). Others describe it as a mythical bird with human head and torso (Burmese Commission), or state the animal has a bird’s body and human head, or a human body and a horse face (U Wun). Despite the availability of an Indic horse depiction, the kinnaya in Myanmar are half-bird. Artistic changes over the centuries have particularly concentrated on the human features of the kinnaya, such as costume and hairstyle (Ellis Myint (Zagani) 1971).

Like the bogy, the source and celebrity of the kinnaya icons stem from the jataka. However, unlike the bogy, the power of the kinnaya centres around its anthropomorphic nature. The kinnara is honoured for its avian characteristics, such as speed of flight, and beauty of colour. The kinnaya are instead recalled for their fidelity and human, tender, caring.

In the Canda-kinnara-jataka, a king who loved a kinnari shot a poisoned arrow at her kinnara. However, the Bodhisattva, Sakka, who knew of the kinnari’s loyalty and love for her husband, revived him with holy water and they lived happily ever after (Cowell IV: 485). The Bhallaliya jataka describes the love of the kinnari and kinnara as a model for an estranged king and queen (Cowell IV: 504). In the Tetcaliya jataka, the parable concerns an overly talkative hermit whose wordiness leads him into trouble. The Buddha used the kinnari and kinnara as ideals, for they were so wary of telling lies that they were most often silent (Cowell IV: 485).
481). In the Atthasadda jataka, a king heard eight horrific sounds in the middle of the night. A hermit explained to him that the sounds were cries of various animals. In the Burmese, but not the Indian version of this story, among the eight sounds the seventh cry was that of a kimari who pined for her kimura. Upon the advice of the hermit, the king set all the animals free (Cowell IV: 418).

A famous kimura tale is found in the Mahawshatha uminga jataka, shown in six mural panels in the 11th century in the Abeyadana Temple at Pagan (U Mya (Thimpyanchu) 1974). In the Burmese version of this jataka, a Brahmin named Wissa, tired of worldly pleasures, left his wife, children and servant, and became a hermit in the Himalaya forest. Near his small monastery was a cave. In it lived many kimari and kimura. At the entrance of the cave, however, an evil spider had made his web and caught unwary kimura who flew in and out. In horrific detail, the spider would bite off the heads and drink the blood of the kimura. The spider’s body was said to be like a big cart-wheel and was full of strength. By nature, the kimura were timid so they could not kill or destroy the big spider. One day they came before Wissa and told him about the big spider. They pleaded with him to get rid of the predator so that they could live in peace.

To this, Wissa scolded them in anger, and sent them away, saying that hermits should not take the lives of others. The distraught kimuras went back to their cave. However, among them was a kimari called Yawawaddy, who was of age, very beautiful, and single. One day, the kimuras dressed her like a heavenly dua (nat) and took her to Wissa’s monastery. They begged him to kill the spider, and to be their lord, with Yawawaddy as his mate. When Wissa saw her, he was overcome by her beauty and desired her. Wissa agreed to fight the spider in exchange for Yawawaddy. Then, taking his hammer, he killed the spider which was coming out to look for food. Wissa lived happily, until he died, in the Himalaya forest with Yawawaddy, who bore him many children.

In Konbaung courts, the kimari and kimura were seen carved on either side of the throne of the king thus denoting his fidelity and recalling the festive dancing of the kimura when the Buddha attained Enlightenment. They are also seen on royal boats and barges and in the emblem of the Kaya (Karen) peoples of the country. Another use is on the four corners of the coffin at the cremation festival of a monk.

Summary and Conclusion

In Myanmar, the earliest known kimari was found at Baktano, although this identification is questionable. However, in Pagan, kimari and kimura are seen in many guises. This continued after Pagan, at Pinyu, the various Inwa periods, and to the present day. They are popular as a symbol of marital love and fidelity. Unlike the hindu belt boxes and opium weights, the kimari was not as ubiquitously incorporated into three-dimensional objects for royal use.
Charming exceptions can be found, particularly when the kimnara is cast as a loom weight, the bells on the weight jingling as the pulley turned, to allow the mother of a young girl to ascertain that she was indeed at work at the loom.

In general, however, the kimnaya motif was restricted to occasions of great significance, linking religious and royal realms, such as coronations and funerals of monks and royalty. It also continued to be seen as a motif in pagoda depictions of the heavenly forest. Likewise, the appropriation of the kimhna by the king did not pre-empt its use within pagoda precincts. The predominant relationship in the kimnaya jatpakha is between bird and king, helping to explain the Konbaung Dynasty’s fondness for incorporating the kimhna not only on thrones, but in objects of personal use. It was also during the Konbaung Dynasty that the motif of kimnara and kimnaya became a popular symbol of conjugal bliss. Even in this process of secularisation, however, the kimnaya and kimnara never lost their position within the mythical world.

In contrast, it will be remembered that the kimhna is variously defined as a goose or a duck, but always based on an actual bird. Rooted in reality, the kimhna is elaborated in the jatpakha as a paragon of royal wisdom and in legend as a symbol of fidelity. The kimhna image recalls the king of the birds offering advice to a human king. It also reminds the viewer of the greatness of royal power, be it zoomorphic or anthropomorphic. The kimhna and kimnaya also present differences in stylistic evolution. The majority of stylistic changes in kimnaya involve the creature's human characteristics. Thus hairstyles and clothing reflect contemporary practices. Because the kimnaya remained predominantly two-dimensional, the style did not have to adapt to additional practical needs. The kimhna has remained more variable, the form being determined more by use and the material the object is made of.

The depiction of the kimnaya has derived more from human than mythical conventions, but although the kimnaya have both bird and human features, they are considered to be neither bird nor human. Today kimnaya images abound: they continue as part of the religious decoration of pagodas, and are also a popular motif on greeting cards, especially sent to married couples. However, despite (or perhaps because of) being part-human, they have remained other-worldly. The kimnaya is uniquely anthropomorphic amongst the birds of Myanmar art and is the creature’s human aspects which account for its popularity. The kimhna, on the other hand, presents worldly transformation, from a common bird to the deeply wise favourite of the king.

Dr Elizabeth Moore, Lecturer, South East Asian Art and Archaeology, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.
Daw San San Minn, Research Officer, Department of Archaeology, Ministry of Culture, Yangon.

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