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Powerful sounds: Music, dance and ritual efficacy in Burmese *nat kana pwe* spirit possession ceremonies

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Powerful sounds

Music, dance and ritual efficacy in Burmese *nat kana pwe* spirit possession ceremonies

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Thesis submitted for the degree of PhD

2020

Department of Music

SOAS University of London

ABSTRACT

In the highly urbanised centres of Yangon and Mandalay, people pay homage to the Thirty-seven Lords, an official pantheon of tutelary spirits of central Burma, through the organisation and performance of *nat kana pwe*, private spirit ceremonies in their honour. In these possession rituals, professional spirit mediums (the *nat kadaws*) and *nat* devotees embody the *nats* and other spiritual beings, dancing while possessed by the spirits, and supported by the fast and vital sounds of the Burmese *nat hsaing* ensemble. Through the performance of ritually effective musical sounds and dance movements constituting a network of performative meanings, the spirits come-into-presence, dancing with and through the possessed human bodies.

Based on ethnographic data from multiple fieldwork trips in the region, this study aims to provide in-depth analysis of the ritual efficacy of the musical sounds and dance movements in Burmese spirit possession ceremonies. Focusing on the relationship between sounds, movements and spirit embodiment, and through musical, performance and experiential analysis, this dissertation considers the ritual efficacy of *nat hsaing* musical sounds and possession dances. Drawing on other research in ethnomusicology and anthropology, this study explores the sonic dimension of *nat kana pwe* possession ceremonies, considering how sounds contribute to the interaction between human and spirit persons. Starting from the life experiences of the protagonists, and analysing their social relationships, this research presents the forms of spirit embodiment characterising the experience of professional mediums, devotees, and musicians. Finally, this study analyses the *nat hsaing* performance practice, contextualising its particular musical idiom and transformational dynamics within the larger frame of Burmese performing arts and of the neighbouring Southeast Asian musical cultures. This research contributes to the study of the relationship between music and spirit possession, and to the understanding of Burmese music and of performing arts – a field of study that has so far not received much attention from ethnomusicological scholarship.

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Note on Burmese language: romanisation and pronunciation

Burmese, a member of the Tibeto-Burman language family, is the language of the Bamar, the majority ethnic group in Burma/Myanmar. It is recognised as the national language of the country and is used as a *lingua franca* by the many other ethnic groups of Burma. The script in which Burmese is written was adapted from the script used by the Mon people for their language (around the 11th century), which in turn was derived from India (Okell 1994:8-12). Burmese incorporated and assimilated Indic (e.g. Pali and Sanskrit) and English loan-words into the literary and colloquial register (Waxman and Soe Tun Aung 2014).

Burmese syllables can be regarded as composed of five parts: consonant, medial consonant, vowel, final consonant, and tone. The phonology of Burmese includes voiced, voiceless and aspirate plosives (e.g. /g/, /k/ and /kh/), plain and breathed sonorants (e.g. /l/ and /hl/), and there are four tones (high, low, creaky, killed).

A standard method of representing Burmese sounds in the roman alphabet does not exist. In this dissertation, the romanization of Burmese terms generally follows the ‘standard conventional system’ recommended by John Okell in *A Guide to the Romanization of Burmese* (Okell 1971a), with some modifications. The following list and description have been adapted from *Burmese: An Introduction to the Spoken Language* (Okell 2010[1994]:244ff.).

Consonants

Romanization	Burmese script	Description
/b/	ဗ	as in English <i>bore</i>
/c/	၏	as in Italian <i>ciao</i>
/ch/	ခ၏	see ‘aspirate consonants’ below
/d/	ဒ	as in English <i>door</i>
/dh/	ထ၏	like /th/ in English <i>this, there</i>
/g/	ဂ	as in English <i>gore</i>
/h/	ဟ	as in English <i>hoar</i>
/hl/	လ၏	see ‘breathed/voiceless consonants’ below
/hm/	မ၏	
/hn/	န၏	
/hng/	င၏	
/hny/	ဉ�၏	
/hw/	ဃ၏	
/j/	ဂ၏	like /g/ in Italian <i>Giorgio</i>

/k/	က	like /c/ in French <i>corps</i>
/hk/	ဗ	like /c/ in English <i>core</i>
/l/	လ	as in English <i>law</i>
/m/	မ	as in English <i>more</i>
/n/	န	as in English <i>nor</i>
/ng/	င	like /ng/ in English <i>long oar</i>
/ny/	ဉာဏ်	like /gn/ in Italian <i>gnocchi</i>
/p/	ပ	as in French <i>port</i>
/hp/	ဖ	as in English <i>pore</i> ; see ‘aspirate consonants’ below
/t/	တု	see ‘final consonants’ below
/r/	ရ	as in English <i>raw</i>
/s/	စ	as in English <i>soar</i>
/hs/	ဆေး	see ‘aspirate consonants’ below
/sh/	ရွှေ	as in English <i>shore</i>
/t/	တေး	as in French <i>tort</i>
/ht/	တေး	as in English <i>tore</i>
/th/	တေး	as in English <i>thaw</i>
/w/	ဤ	as in English <i>war</i>
/y/	ယ	as in English <i>your</i>
/z/	ဇ	as in English <i>zone</i>

Aspirate consonants /ch/, /hp/ and /hs/ are characterised by a short puff of air expelled after the consonant is pronounced, similar to the English pronunciation of *kill*, *till*, *pill*. Breathed/voiceless consonants /hl/, /hm/, /hn/, /hng/, /hny and /hw/ are pronounced like the plain set (/l/, /m/, /n/ etc.) accompanied by breath expelled through the nose before voicing.

Medial consonant

A consonant can be followed by the medial consonant /y/ or /w/. For example:

p+y in Apyo Daw	အပ္ပါဝေး	Royal Maiden
p+w in pwe	ခဲ့	Ceremony

Vowels

Vowel sounds are illustrated here with the vowel /a/.

/a/	အ	like /a/ in English <i>about</i>
/a/	အာ	like /a/ in English <i>car</i>

/at/ and /an/	အတ် / အန်	like /a/ in English <i>cat</i> and <i>can</i>
/aik/ and /ain/	အိက် / အိင်	like /i/ in English <i>site</i>
/auk/ and /aun/	ဒောက် / ဒောင်	like /ou/ in English <i>lounge</i>
/ay/	ဒော	like /é/ in French <i>élève</i>
/ae/	အော်	like /e/ in English <i>sell</i>
/et/	အက်	like /e/ in English <i>set</i>
/eit/ and /ein/	အိတ် / အိန်	like /a/ in English <i>late</i> and <i>lane</i>
/i/	ဒီ	like /i/ in English <i>ravine</i>
/it/ and /in/	အော် / အောင် / အောုံ	like /i/ in English <i>sit</i> and <i>sin</i>
/aw/	ဒော်	like /aw/ in English /saw/
/o/	ဒို	like /eau/ in French <i>peau</i>
/out/ and /oun/	အိတ် / အိန်	like /o/ in English <i>tote</i> and <i>tone</i>
/u/	ဒူ	like /u/ in English <i>Susan</i>
/ut/ and /un/	ဒွော် / ဒွောုံ	like /oo/ in English <i>foot</i> and <i>full</i>

The vowel sound /e/ in the word *pwe* (ceremony, Burm. ပြော) or *hne* (shawm, Burm. ဆုံး) is like /e/ in English /when/.

Tones

Tones are illustrated here with the vowel /a/:

/a/	အ	No tone
/a/	အော	low pitch, ‘low tone’
/a:/	အေား	high pitch, ‘high tone’
/at/	အော့	‘creaky tone’
/at/	အော်	stopped/killed tone

‘Low pitch’ and ‘high pitch’ are relative. Stopped/killed tone is the term used for the tone of a syllable that ends with a glottal stop (Watkins 2000).

Final consonants

-n	-န / -ဉ် / -နဲ့ / -ဉဲ့	represents nasalization
-t	-တ် / -စံ / -တဲ့ / -စဲ့	represents a glottal stop

The transliteration of some terms made in the past by English-speaking scholars differ from the Okell’s system, which I have just shown. Moreover, Burmese native speakers pronounce some terms differently from the way they are spelled in Burmese script. Since some of these terms are quite diffused and

popular, I have decided to maintain this form to facilitate their reading and comprehension. For example, For example, [ကျေး] - may be pronounced /gy-/ or /ky-/:

Ka gyo	ကာဂျွှါး	Choreographed sets of movement for a dance form
Kyi waing	ကျေးရိုင်း	Gong circle, instrument of the <i>hsaing waing</i> ensemble
Ko Gyi Kyaw	ကိုဂျိုးကျော်	Personal name of a <i>nat</i>

Finally, in this dissertation tones are generally not included, but may figure in those words whose transliteration has already become conventional standard.

A glossary, including Burmese script, can be found in Appendix 3: Burmese glossary.

List of Audio-Video Examples

[Video 2.1](#): Final part of the *pya zat* (dramatic representation) of the ogre *nats* Pyay Kan Daw Mounhnama (the Siblings of the Royal Lake of Pyay)

Kana si/dancer: Kyaw Win Naing

Ensemble: Aung Hein Hsaing

Yangon, 10 December 2017

Link: <https://youtu.be/Zn91beOoAYI>

[Video 2.2](#): Sudden spirit embodiment of a devotee during the dance of the *nat* Nankarine Medaw

Kana si: Maha Myain Aba Lay

Ensemble: Min Kyawswa hsaing

Mandalay, 28 July 2018

Link: <https://youtu.be/4sTOMyLloNc>

[Video 2.3](#): Embodiment of a tiger *nat* in a semi-professional spirit dancer during a *nat kana pwe* at the Bo Min Kaung festival

Dancer: unknown

Ensemble: unknown

Popa, 3 July 2017

Link: <https://youtu.be/i77Px2TI2K0>

[Video 2.4](#): Musicians' point of view during the dance of the Apyo Daw (the Royal Maiden) for the Lamain *nat*

Kana si: U Min Soe

Ensemble: Yelin Bo hsaing

Yangon, 17 December 2017

Link: <https://youtu.be/mbxMgsMOtuo>

[Video 3.1](#): Dance of the main donor, with friends and family, during a *nat kana pwe (chawt pwe)*

Donor/dancer: Daw Chit Su Htwe

Kana si: U Win Hlaing

Ensemble: Kyi Lin Bo hsaing

Yangon 26 October 2013

Link: <https://youtu.be/kHYOU0rnU08>

[Video 3.2](#): *Nat kadaw* conducting the *nat hsaing* ensemble during the spirit dance for the *nat* Ko Gyi Kyaw

Kana si/dancer: U Win Hlaing

Ensemble: Kyi Lin Bo hsaing

Yangon, 26 Ottobre 2013

Link: <https://youtu.be/5gJXsBLSUrQ>

[Video 3.3](#): *hsaing* musicians and spirit dancer attempt to synchronise together during the performance of the *kyet laung* acrobatics for the *nat* Ko Gyi Kyaw

Kana si/dancer: Hnin Ko Hein

Ensemble: Aung Ko Min Hsaing

Mandalay, 1 April 2018

Link: <https://youtu.be/l4i9q13uJzw>

[Video 4.1](#): Sounds for Nankarine Medaw (the Buffalo Mother of Pegu): *nat hkaw-* (calling the spirit), *nat ka-* (spirit dance), *nat po-* (dismissing the spirit)

Kana si/dancer: Kyaw Win Naing

Ensemble: Aung Hein hsaing

Yangon, 9 December 2017

Link: <https://youtu.be/3-v3H69JTFc>

Video 4.2: Sounds for Ko Myo Shin (the Lord of the Nine Cities): *nat hkaw-* (calling the spirit), *nat ka-* (spirit dance), *nat po-* (dismissing the spirit)
Kana si: U Min Soe
Ensemble: Yelin Bo hsaing
Yangon, 17 December 2017
Link: <https://youtu.be/xeSAvn5aYFQ>

Video 4.3: Performance of the modern *nat chin Do Ko Gyi Kyaw* during the *chawt pwe*, with possession of the spirit dancers
Kana si: U Win Hlaing
Ensemble: Kyi Lin Bo hsaing
Yangon, 4 August 2013
Link: <https://youtu.be/KIAjNKH0CjM>

Video 4.4: Animated score of the performance of the modern spirit song *Do Ko Gyi Kyaw*
Ensemble: Kyi Lin Bo hsaing
Yangon, 4 August 2013
Link: <https://youtu.be/FUN3T-QsDeI>

Video 6.1: *Sidaw* sound (Burmese royal music) for the invitation of the *nat* Min Sithu/Ko Gyi Kyaw
Kana si/dancer: U Kyaw Soe Moe
Ensemble: Yelin Bo hsaing
Yangon, 11 February 2017
Link: <https://youtu.be/Hik3mzxYJ6Y>

Video 6.2: *Do waing* ensemble of the Shweguni *Nan Gyi* (Great Palace) performing during the first day of the *Yoya Nat Pwe* for Ko Gyi Kyaw
Shweguni, Pakhan, 18 February 2018
Link: <https://youtu.be/R9I1ywGOpZg>

Video 6.3: Variations on the rhythmic cycle *Nan Gyi Tabaung* for the *nat* Ko Gyi Kyaw
Kana si/dancer: U Win Hlaing
Ensemble: Kyi Lin Bo hsaing
Popa, 6 september 2017
Link: <https://youtu.be/VafyIeGss5U>

Video 6.4: *Pya zat* (dramatic performance) and spirit dance for the *nat* Nankarine Medaw (the Mother Buffalo of Pegu)
Kana si/dancer: Kyaw Win Naing
Ensemble: Aung Hein hsaing
Yangon, 10 December 2017
Link: <https://youtu.be/LSi2vAoQa5o>

Video 6.5: The Nayee Si ensemble performing *Yay hkin* at the Mahamuni Pagoda, 4 pm
Mandalay, 13 August 2018
Link: <https://youtu.be/nV4GYOahO5Q>

Video 6.6: Variations on the *Yay hkin* rhythmic cycle performed by the *nat hsaing* ensemble during the dance for the *thaik* Naga Medaw
Kana si/dancer: Hnin Ko Hein
Ensemble: Aung Ko Min hsaing
Mandalay, 31 march 2018
Link: <https://youtu.be/NPiVJsJeiFI>

Video 6.7: Progression of sounds for the dance of the *nat* Shwe Nabe: *Way lar*, *Myin hkin*, *Bein maung* and *Nat do*
Kana si: Kyaw Win Naing
Ensemble: Aung Hein hsaing
Yangon, 10 December 2017
Link: <https://youtu.be/c7kwjWouY9I>

Video 6.8: A group of devotees getting possessed during the dances for the *thaik* Naga Medaw ensemble: Min Kyawswa hsaing
Pathein Gyi, Mandalay, 24 March 2018
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Video 7.1: *nat hsaing* performance of the modern *nat chin Shwe Do, Ngwe Do* for the dance of the *nat* Ko Gyi Kyaw
Kana si/dancer: U Win Hlaing
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Yangon, 27 October 2013
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Video 7.2: Dance of the *nat* Popa Medaw, supported by the performance of the court song *Nawarath ko thwe (pat pyo)* and other dance styles (*anyeint dance, yokhtay dance*)
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Ensemble: Kyi Lin Bo hsaing
Yangon, 02 August 2013
Link: <https://youtu.be/h2gkKo5iAC8>

Video 7.5 Burmese popular song *Maung lu chaw* ('The handsome boy') by Takhato Lay Lay
Singer: Takhato Lay Lay
Link: <https://youtu.be/L0TELwYkbI0>

Video 7.6: Remixed version of the modern *nat chin Shwe do, ngwe do* by U Win Hlaing
Dancer/singer: U Win Hlaing
Link: https://youtu.be/IP4w3A_C3kE

Video 7.7: Thxa Soe live performance of *KGK* ('*Do Ko Gyi Kyaw*') *nat chin*
Link: <https://youtu.be/IVLxn84WX1I>

Introduction

The spirit cult of the Thirty-seven Lords – the official pantheon of tutelar spirits of Central Burma – represents a ritualised and institutionalised spirit possession cult, integrated within the framework of Burmese Theravada Buddhism. *Nat* devotees direct their prayers to one or more *nats* through the help of a *nat kadaw* (spirit dancer, medium, and fortune-teller) in order to receive guidance, mostly in matters of wealth and economic investments, and to pay homage to the *nats* through the celebration of private possession ceremonies – *nat kana pwe*. In the highly urbanised centres of Yangon and Mandalay, these celebrations represent an important aspect of many Burmese beliefs and of religious life. During the ritual, human and spirit persons are invited to gather and amuse themselves: a *nat kadaw* embodies consecutively the *nats* belonging to the official pantheon, plus a number of secondary spiritual beings. Through the *nat kadaw*, the devotees donate a variety of offerings to the spirits: they also offer themselves as vessels for the spirits through dance and music.

To dance while possessed by a *nat* (or by another spiritual being invited to join the ritual) is a way for the human dancer to maintain – both personally and socially – a link with the spirit, and is an act of devotion which allows the spirit to experience the joys of earthly life. The social interactions between spirits and human participants are supported by ritually effective music and dances: by (socially) participating in the ritual performance, the participants experience the presence of the *nats*. Music plays a pivotal role in these *pwes*: the sound of the *hsaing waing*, the Burmese outdoor ensemble, sets the stage for the celebration, calls and dismisses the spirits to and from the ritual space, and supports the possession dances of mediums and devotees.

The *hsaing* ensemble playing in *nat* ceremonies is termed *nat hsaing*: it consists of tuned percussion instruments (drums and gong-chimes), accompanied by one or more shawms, and at least one singer. The main repertoire is represented by *nat chin* (spirit songs), used to call and amuse the *nats*, and to entertain the human and spirit participants. Alongside other ritual media, the sound of *nat chins* and the movements of the dancers make the presence of the *nats* actual and real, so that the community of human devotees can interact with the spirit world. During the celebration of a *nat kana pwe*, the combined action of *nat hsaing* sounds with *nat* dances shape the ritual performance: sounds musically enact the action displayed by the human medium's dance movements, making the *nat* come-into-presence.

Aims of the dissertation, research questions, and research outcome

The primary objective of this dissertation is to document the music and dance performances of *nat kana pwe*, spirit possession ceremonies in Burma (Myanmar). In investigating the sounded and

danced practice of Burmese *nat hsaing* musicians and *nat kadaws*, I have tried, as much as possible, to include the point of view of the local performers – or at least to find a good compromise between it and the researcher's academic gaze. As in many other performance contexts in the world, in Burma, music and dance are often not separated. For this reason, this work aims at describing how and why musical sounds, *combined* with dance movements, are ritually effective. In this dissertation, I argue that *nat hsaing* sounds represent more than just a mere support for possession dance movements: together, musical sounds and dance movements convey multi-layered meanings which are recognised and experienced by the participants, inducing a physical and emotional response, thus contributing to the triggering of spirit possession. These are the questions that intrigued me most during my research and my fieldwork; this dissertation aims to provide some answers to them:

1. How are *nat hsaing* musical sounds and *nat* dance movements imbued with meaning?
2. How do the combined action of musicians and dancers contribute to the enactment of the ritual process of a *nat kana pwe* ceremony?
3. Considering *nat* rituals and musics as a multi-layered system of signs, how is this network constructed through *nat* sounds and movements?; and last but not least,
4. How do the ritual participants experience the ritual performance?

Along with these core questions, in this dissertation I will address a series of related issues. These focus on the ritual performance from different angles, looking at its protagonists, musical practice, and dynamics of change. In addressing these arguments, I hope that this research will bring an original contribution to the investigation of the relations between music and spirit possession by providing an alternative theoretical framework and case study. I also hope that my work will contribute to the understanding of Burmese music by providing original material about a performance practice (that of *nat hsaing* and *nat* dance) which has so far received little attention from ethnomusicological scholarship.

Burma/Myanmar: Socio-political background

Compared to other Southeast Asian cultures which have been the object of anthropological and ethnomusicological investigations, there is an almost complete lack of sources related to the performing arts of Burma, primarily for historical reasons. Since the consolidation of military power in 1962, strict limitations were imposed on foreign visitors and researchers: with some exceptions, almost none were able to undertake extensive fieldwork during the dictatorship years (1962-1988 and 1988-2015). It was during the 1980s that the political and economic reforms entailed the loosening of the previous restrictions, thus making new research projects somewhat easier. During over fifty years of dictatorship, the lives of many people have been disrupted by civil wars, ethnic insurgencies and religious clashes.

Some of these conflicts still persist today, even under the government of the National League for Democracy (NLD), the democratic party lead by Aung San Suu Kyi.¹

Studies on Burmese performing arts and related Southeast Asian studies

Keeping in mind that ‘Boundaries [of musical styles, ethnic groups and language families] tend to be fluid or ambiguous’ (Becker 1980:453), ethnomusicologists recognise, *mutatis mutandi*, some shared features identifying a Southeast Asian musical style. At the intersection of strong influencing cultures, like that of China and India, Burmese performing arts represent a perfect example of how Southeast Asian traits are encompassed into a specific regional tradition. These traits include the organology of *hsaing waing* and chamber musical instruments, the characteristics of Burmese *hsaing waing* music in its various performance contexts – *bala hsaing pwe* (performances with music only), *anyeint pwe* (variety show performances), *zat pwe* (dramatic performances on stage), *yokhtay pwe* (marionette shows), and of course *nat kana pwe* (spirit ceremonies) – and the dialogue with modern contexts of performance more linked to popular music. While I will develop the discourse about these issues in the dissertation, in this section I summarise the main studies that have been produced on Burmese performing arts.²

Studies on Burmese musical instruments and tuning systems

One of the main features that unites the diverse musical cultures of both mainland and insular Southeast Asian musics is the diffused use of gong-chime idiophones. This peculiarity, defined by Hood (1980a) ‘gong-chime culture’, originally derived from the circulation of bronze drums among Southeast Asian people (Hood 1980b; Cooler 1986; Nicolas 2009). The presence of cross-cultural similarities can be explained with the diffusion of these traits due to contacts (not necessarily peaceful) between Burma and the neighbouring cultures (Khin Zaw 1981). Contact with China since the 9th century (Picken 1984; Twitchett and Christie 1959) is verifiable; a strong Mon influence started after the conquest of Thaton in the 11th century; after the seizure of Ayutthaya in the 18th century, Siamese culture brought a decisive contribution to Burmese music (Wolf 2010).

Except for an early account of Burmese instruments given by Sachs (1915), the earliest musicological works on Burmese court music are due to Reinhard (1939) and Khin Zaw (1940), who

¹ On the history and recent political developments in Burma, see Charney (2009), Skidmore (2005), Cheesman et al. (2012), Simpson et al. (2018) among others. In this dissertation, the denomination ‘Burma’ has been preferred over ‘Myanmar’, as it remains easier in English to form the adjective ‘Burmese’, indicating in general the language, culture and music of the Bamar ethnic majority.

² Several albums and documentaries have been realised on Burmese music and the spirit cult. A selected number of them are listed in Discography and Filmography.

described instruments and tuning systems. Both the *Garland* (Keeler 1998) and *The New Grove* (Becker et al. 2001) give some general descriptions of Burmese instrumental ensembles, differentiating between indoor (*pattala*, xylophone; *saung gauk*, harp) and outdoor (*hsaing* ensemble) instruments. Emmert and Minegishi (1980) give detailed descriptions of the indoor and outdoor instruments – including construction, playing techniques and etymology. Maung Thu Hlaing (1993) describes instruments, their history, and performance contexts. Webster (2013) and Elias (2020) discuss the historical variations of the Burmese piano (*sandaya*) and of the Burmese slide guitar respectively.

Garfias (1985a) hypothesises on the historical processes that made *hsaing waing* the main outdoor ensemble today. Uncertain about its origin, Garfias speculates on a possible Siamese derivation³ and explains how the development of solo style in chamber ensembles eventually influenced the style of the drum circle *pat waing*, the main *hsaing* instrument. Describing the origin and organology of the *hne*, Okell (1971b) explains that the technique and idiom characterising the Burmese shawm allows the player to perform fast variations of the main melody. Garfias (1975b) explains that the *hne* fingering is used as a system of reference for numbering the notes of the Burmese scale – which appears “reversed”, starting from the highest note and descending to the lower octave.⁴ Analysing the Burmese modes, Garfias deduces two pentatonic models out of all seven tones available in the Burmese scale:⁵ the two exchange/secondary tones are used only in the high register to perform melodic ornamentations.

Other scholars (Becker 1967; Williamson 1968, 1975a, 1975b) prioritised the study of the harp *saung gauk*. Williamson (2000) exhaustively links the mouth-music tradition to the modal structure of classical pieces: through the analysis of three songs’ *atàw* (cadential-phrases of octaves and fifths),⁶ she outlines each song’s progression through five pentatonic modal levels, identified by their component tetrachords.

In performance, some Burmese musicians must retune their instruments according to the musical mode in use (Otake 1980). Modal progressions, common in Southeast Asian dramatic performances (Hood 1954:238; Mrázek 2005:196), are not always used. Khin Zaw (1940:743) underlined that a prescribed order of songs/modes exists: to subvert the order would ruin the musical progression, compromising the effectiveness of the performance; Garfias (1975a:10) describes the

³ Garfias relates the *hsaing* to other Southeast Asian counterparts but remarks on its uniqueness. The only other examples of drum-chime instruments can be found among the Mon of Thailand (Morton 1976:113-114) and in the *gondang* ensemble in Sumatra (Sutton 2001:96).

⁴ A similar process characterises Sundanese music (Van Zanten 1986, 1989).

⁵ The same happens for the Javanese system, where pentatonic sub-sets (*pathet*) are used out of the full seven-tone *pelog* scale (Hood 1954; Jones 1963; Rahn 1978).

⁶ Prevalence of ‘fifthness’ and fifth-modulation in Southeast Asian musics has been observed by Giuriati (1993:95), Hood (1980b:177), Morton (1964:255ff., 1976:137), Trần Văn Khê (1962:225).

shifting between modes in a *nat kana pwe* performance. The hypothesis of modal progression in dramatic performance is rejected by Keeler (1998:395).

Studies on Burmese music

As in other Southeast Asian musical cultures, Burmese music is characterised by square rhythmic patterns, organised through metric structures (Becker 1968), and florid heterophonic variations of a melody (Giuriati 1996; Perlman 2004), usually through a continuous melodic interaction between the performers (Brinner 1995; Sumrongthong and Sorrell 2000; Sutton 1998; Sutton and Vetter 2006). These and other traits are largely discussed by the Burmese author U Goun Ban (1998; 2001), who also described aesthetics and performance style of Burmese music.⁷ Although suffering from a strong terminological and conceptual Western influence, Khin Zaw (1981) also described aesthetics and performance contexts of Burmese music practice and musicians.

The two Burmese idiophones *si* (bell) and *wa* (clapper) construct double or quadruple metric cycles: the last beat provides the main metric accent (Douglas 2010; Otake 1980). In Thai traditional music, similar metric units are constructed by the alternation of *ching* (weak beat) and *chap* (strong beat) (Morton 1976; Silkstone 1993); more complex and highly hierarchical squared metric structures can be found in Javanese music (Brinner 2007; Hood 1988; Pickvance 2005).

According to Becker (1969), Burmese untrained listeners recognise the musical mode based on recurrent stereotyped musical sentences, constructed on a music syntax based not on single tones, but rather, on short melodic segments combined into pattern and phrases. The realisation of melodies depends on the modal category, which guides the musician in performance and improvisation. Williamson (1979b:168) informs us that, despite all the intertwined strains, ‘the tune always remains the same’, suggesting the existence of a ‘conceptual *basic tune*’. Williamson (1981; see also Garfias 1981) also shows that the musical setting of text-syllables reflects the tonal character of the syllable, according to the singer’s individuality, skills, and creativity. Tokumaru (1980) explains that while all instrumentalists are supposed to learn singing, singers are requested to practice only with the support of idiophones: a deeper insight of melodic instruments would compromise the singer’s ability to create independent and original vocal lines. Cox (1985) deduces the basic tune of a court song *Myan man giri* by comparing different performances of the song, highlighting the relation between text-phrases and music-phrases.

More recently, Douglas (2001, 2007) has detailed the hegemonic dynamics carried out by the military governments through the sponsorship and standardisation of traditional music, and the

⁷ To this day, the prints of U Goun Ban’s “lectures” (his 1950s speeches on Burmese music were printed and distributed only in the 1990s) are hard to find in Burmese book shops, and unfortunately remain untranslated.

patronage of the National music competition of Sokayeti; he has reflected on the effect of globalization, explaining how it has led to a form of Burmese world music (2005a, 2011), and has addressed the Myanmar nation-building processes in musical events (2005b, 2007). In recent years, Douglas has focused his attention on religious sound (2017, 2019b; see also Greene 2004; Coderey 2019).

Inoue (2008, 2014a) explores the construction of Burmese court musical genres. By comparing different manuscript versions of the *Mahagita* (the collection of *Thachin Gyi*, courtly ‘Great Songs’) Inoue explains how the boundaries between different court genres are not rigid and cannot be identified by specific musical features. Inoue (2014b; 2019) has also investigated the function of *bazat-hsaing*, or mouth-music, in music oral transmission. Lu (2009) has summarised a large number of aspects related to Burmese court music and investigated the drifts of Burmese court music into popular music contexts. In recent years, a reinvigorated musicological focus has privileged the study of popular music phenomenon among the Burmese (MacLachlan 2009, 2011; 2016; Htein Lin 2010; Keeler 2009) and other minorities (Shan: Amporn 2007; Ferguson J.M. 2012, 2013; Sino-Burmese: Lu 2011, 2015).

The contributions by Tun (2013) and Brac de la Perrière (1994) are the only ones that shed some light on the music of the spirit cult. Drawing on archaeological sources, Tun (2013) summarises the historical evolution of Burmese performing arts throughout the centuries; focusing on the *hsaing* ensemble, she discusses the organological classification of the musical instruments, performance contexts and regional styles. In describing the music for *nat kana pwes*, Tun describes the interaction between the performers, and provides information regarding the repertoire of *nat chins*, spirit songs. Brac de la Perrière (1994) highlights the importance of *nat hsaing* music and lyrics to summon the spirit to the ceremony, underlining that particular lyrics and melodies are associated with each spiritual entity invited to the ceremony. Focusing on the *nat chin* texts, Brac de la Perrière explains that lyrics have the important function of communicating ritual meaning to the untrained participants.

Studies on theatrical arts and other performance contexts

Several authors underlined the connection between performance and *nat* cult: Alton Becker (1974:159) referred to ‘obscure ritual roots’ for the Burmese marionettes, where puppets representing spirits and mediums are in use; Brandon (1967) considered animist cults the origin of Southeast Asian theatre(s), including that of Burma:

In the sixteenth century Indian-influenced Burmese dances were being performed by professional entertainers. They called themselves “spirit dancers”, and the type of performance they gave was called *nibhatkhan* or “spirit play.” Actually, these performers were vagabond entertainers, who used religion as a convenient cover for their secular activities [...]. A clown was the main character in most Burmese spirit plays. The present day nat pwe or “spirit show” is a direct descendant of these earlier spirit plays. Interestingly enough, the animistic element is more important in nat pwe than it was centuries ago. (Brandon 1967:71)

Htin Aung (1937) highlighted the ‘essentially dramatic’ character of Burmese spirit mediumship but rejected the idea that the early practice of impersonation of the *nats* by mediums to be the origin of Burmese drama. Music, theatre and ritual are strictly related in many cultures (Schechner 2006; Turner V. 1982; see also Leiris 1989[1958]; Métraux 1959; Firth 1967; Hamayon 1994). The Burmese word *pwe* itself has differing, yet related meanings: *pwe* can in fact be translated as ‘offering’, as well as ‘show’ or ‘celebration’. A *pwe* is a ‘show for the spirits’ and at the same time a ‘show of the spirits’, presenting many ludic aspects which look more theatrical to an uninitiated Western eye. In *nat kana pwes*, drama and worship, ritual and performance, music and dance merge together. All the elements of the performance, including those which appear to be the most entertaining ones, are necessary for the development of the ritual process.

Other contributions include Hla Pe’s (1944, 1952) translation of the text of the Konmara *pya zat* (dramatic performance), accompanied by a history of Burmese plays; Sein and Whitey’s (1965) on the life of the famous dancer Po Sein, responsible for the revitalisation of the *zat pwe* performance practice in the past century (see also Hansen 2017); and Singer’s (1995), who provides an account of the most traditional forms of Burmese theatre. Ye Dway (2013, 2014; see also Bruns 2006) has described the historical evolution of Burmese dance, drama, and marionette theatre. Focusing on the performance of marionette shows, Foley (2001; see also Chiarofonte 2019) describes how nationalism and tourism have contributed to the revival of this performing art. Keeler (2005) puts a spotlight on the conception of masculinity in *zat pwe* performances. Diamond (2017) analyses the contemporary situations of the performing arts in Burma, discussing their sustainability after the recent democratic shift. Focusing on the relationship between Buddhism and the performing arts, Douglas (2019a) analyses human-puppet dance, highlighting the blurred boundaries of the dancer’s self during the performance. Douglas’ analysis of human-puppet dance performances strongly resonates with several anthropological works on spirit embodiment, and the phenomenology of spirit possession that I describe in Chapter 2.

Studies on spirit embodiment and Burmese spirit cult

In my conversations with Burmese people, I have been told more than once that ‘*nat shi dae*’ – ‘the spirits exist’. In the Burmese perspective, the statement means that the spirits are real and present, they exist in the world, and that they can influence humans’ lives – i.e., they are provided with agency and potency. These considerations are relevant in situating the case of Burmese spirit cult into the recent debate on animism.

In recent years, the anthropological debate has been animated by an “ontological turn”, which contributed to the revitalisation of the notion of animism. In describing a range of Amazonian societies, Viveiros de Castro (1998, 2004, 2012) has introduced the idea of perspectivism. Because they share the same world, all subjects share the same point of view; however, because they possess a different kind

of body, they perceive and experience the world according to their own perspective. In Viveiros de Castro's famous example, animals and spirits 'see themselves as humans: they perceive themselves as (or become) anthropomorphic beings when they are in their own houses or villages and they experience their own habits and characteristics in the form of culture' (1998:470). Like Viveiros de Castro, Descola's ethnographic work is also based on Amazonian societies. In a rigorous attempt to transcend the Eurocentric dichotomy of nature/culture, Descola (2013[2005]) creates four modes of relation into which people classify ontological categories – animism, naturalism, totemism, and analogism. Descola's classification is based on the contrast between interiority and physicality: in animist ontologies, spirits and humans present 'similar interiorities', but 'dissimilar physicalities'. In this mode, non-humans (animals and plants) have social life and agency, interact and communicate with humans. While Descola's model is an attempt to abolish the nature/culture divide, re-discussing Western forms of classification in dialogue with non-Western ones, Viveiros de Castro aims to reverse the nature/culture relation, and considers alternative 'cosmologies' in an attempt to further decolonise anthropological theory (Latour 2009).⁸

The echoes of the debate have had profound influence in the study of Southeast Asian animism. Århem and Sprenger (2015) explain that, in its Southeast Asian form, animism is characterised by human-spirit relationship rather than human-animals/plants. This relationship is often asymmetrical, since different interiorities present different degrees of potency. Following Sahlins (2014), Århem introduces the idea of hierarchical or transcendent animism:

hierarchical animism posits a universalized subjectivity – but one that is graded along a vertical scale rather than segmented along a horizontal plane. While, in standard animism, beings are integrated by a principle of symmetric intersubjectivity between ontologically equivalent beings and differentiated along a somatic axis on the formula 'same spirit (interiority), different body (physicality)', in hierarchical animism beings are integrated by a principle of asymmetric intersubjectivity between 'unequal souls' and differentiated according to the formula 'different degrees of spirit/potency, different body'. (Århem 2015:25)

This ontological asymmetry is constantly reinforced by the type of interactions between humans and spirits. In Southeast Asian 'social cosmos', ensouled animals, plants, natural objects are characterised by agency and potency: humans and the 'sentient nature' actively interact with each other. Sprenger (2015a) explains that this interaction is based on exchanges which are often asymmetrical, since 'An exchange is possible only between actors who are different' (ivi:33). Through exchange, social cosmos of humans and non-humans are unified, but 'internally differentiated' (ivi:35).

⁸ For a critical discourse about "new animism" and "perspectivism", see Turner T.S. (2009) and Brabec de Mori (2013).

Similar ideas resonate in more than one work on Southeast Asian animism. Endres and Lauser (2011) offer a multi-vocal reflection on the many possession idioms present in Southeast Asia: dealing with the idea of multiple dynamics of modernity in the area, the authors consider possession as a ‘relational agency’ between the human body and the spirits, the latter being considered ‘as authentic social and political actors/agents in network of distributed agency’ (ivi:11). In non-Western ontologies, spirits are real, they ‘exist in the world’, to borrow Bird-David’s (1999) words, and interact with humans. When called, they do not ‘come-into-being’: rather, as Lambek (2010:27) remarks, they ‘come-into-presence’, or materialise, to socially interact and share the experience of “being in the world” alongside humans. Following this thread, in this dissertation I describe *spirit(s)* as *person(s)* rather than *persona(s)*: in this way, I hope to highlight how, according to the Burmese perspective, spirits exist (*‘nat shi dae’*) and have agency on this world, and that their manifestation in the ritual is not just a mere “theatrical performance” – as the term “persona” seems to suggest.

These considerations clearly emerge in the work on Burmese spirit cults carried out by Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière. Discussing the ontological implications of the Burmese expression ‘*nat shi dae*’, the French anthropologist explains that the *nat* ‘inhabit the social world of the Burmese’:

les pratiques auxquelles est liée cette forme de possession d'esprit s'inscrivent exclusivement dans le monde des vivants. La position des esprits de la possession dans la cosmogonie birmane est d'abord celle d'entités habitant le monde social des Birmans. (Brac de la Perrière 2009b:38)

The Burmese *nat* do not occupy a different ontological plane than humans: they both share the same plane of existence, the same world. According to Brac de la Perrière (2016:16), a *nat kana pwe* is a ‘possession-enabling device’ necessary to put humans (devotees, or neophytes) ‘in the presence’ of the possessing powers. In the ritual pavilion, this function is carried out by the *nat* images. Brac de la Perrière writes that:

les statues disposées sur les autels sont centrales: en tant que représentations figurées des puissances possédantes, elles sont, en effet, un élément indispensable du dispositif qui contribue à l'expérimentation du monde des esprits dans le culte de possession (Brac de la Perrière 2009b:40)

The *nat* images (*poundaw*) are “sacred” and represent an emanation of the *nats*. A specific ritual is necessary to make them alive, introducing a piece of the soul (*leikpya*, lit. ‘butterfly’) of the spirit person. As I argue in Chapter 3, while the *nat* images can be considered the source of the presence of the *nat*, other performative ritual media also contribute to the manifestation of the spirit persons in the ritual area. The experience of the spirit possession is multi-sensorial: all the aspects of perception contribute to trigger and control the spirit embodiment – including smell, touch, taste and, of course, hearing sounds.

The case of the Burmese spirit cult described by Brac de la Perrière strongly resonates with the discussed concepts of ‘social cosmos’ and ‘relational agency’ characterising Southeast Asian animism. However, the Burmese cult of the Thirty-seven Lords presents its own idiosyncrasies within the larger frame of Southeast Asian animism. One of these is represented by the figure of the Burmese spirit medium (the *nat kadaw*) and their mediumship. Brac de la Perrière (2009b; 2016) notes that, after an initial submission to the power of the spirit, the spirit medium-to-be re-gains agency over the *nat*, becoming a *virtuoso* of spirit possession – although never a ‘master of the spirits’. In the course of a ceremony, a *nat kadaw* sequentially embodies all the *nat* belonging to the official Pantheon (*Thounze-hkunna Min Atwin*, the ‘inside’ Thirty-seven Lords), accompanied by other secondary figures – spirits belonging to a secondary list (*Thounze-hkunna Min Apyin*, the ‘outside’ Thirty-seven Lords), *thaiks* (spirits linked to a religious compound), *bobogyis* (guardian spirits), and *weikzas* (occult practitioners). During the spirit embodiment and the spirit dance, the Burmese mediums remain in-between a state of possession and self-awareness.⁹ Spiro had already noticed the co-presence of what he identified ‘shamanic’ and ‘possession’ traits in the figure of the Burmese *nat kadaw*:

The *nat kadaw* is certainly not a shaman in the classical Siberian sense. She does not ascend to the spirit world, nor does she perform other types of “supernatural” feats, nor does she even cure illness. She does, however, display other shamanistic characteristics. She is an oracle, a medium, a diviner, a cult officiant; she performs these aspects of her role in a state of spirit possession.

(Spiro 1978[1967]:205-206)

Possession and shamanism have long been considered as two opposite extremes.¹⁰ This distinction has been proved to be too simplistic, not including the local declinations of a complex and differentiated phenomenon. Rejecting this old-fashioned dichotomy, Schmidt and Huskinson (2010) support the new perspectivist paradigm for spirit possession which involves the use of native categories rather than attempt to operate a transcultural classification of the phenomena. Following this approach, I believe it is necessary to use the locals’ categories as much as possible: Burmese spirit cult practices present, in fact, aspects of both possession and shamanism. How should these practices be categorised – and why? A focus on native perspectives can enrich and contribute more exhaustively to the description of the complexity of all those forms of ‘meeting the spirits’ (Hoppál 1998:11).

⁹ The sequential embodiment of spirits and the status of ‘aware possession’ also characterise Vietnamese *len dong* possession rituals (Norton 2009; Larsson and Endres 2006).

¹⁰ Among others, see Bourguignon (1968), Eliade (1951), Firth (1959, 1967), de Heusch (1981[1971]), Lewis (1971). Interestingly, Condominas (1976:216) suggested that the compresence of shamanic and possession features in Southeast Asia can be ascribed to ‘un espace géographique parfois très restreint’. An investigation on such topics is beyond the scope of the present work. For an historical overview of the main theoretical approaches to the study of spirit possession, see Boddy (1994) and Cohen (2008).

Studies on spirit cult in Burma

Early anthropological studies on Burmese culture started to develop thanks to missionaries and colonial officers (Shway Yoe 1963[1882]; Halliday 2000[1917]). A first attempt to consider Burmese Buddhism and spirit cult is Temple's *The Thirty Seven Nats* (1991[1906]): he describes Burmese Buddhism as a form of religion deeply intertwined with local forms of Hinduism and animism – a study continued eventually by Htin Aung (1962).

After independence in 1948, and the advent of the military rule in 1962, several anthropologists focused on Burmese religion and spirit cult (Brohm 1957, 1963; Mendelson 1963a, 1963b; Nash J. 1966, 2007[1966]; Nash M. 1963, 1965, 1966; Pfanner 1966; Shorto 1963, 1967). Spiro's research represents a landmark: in *Burmese Supernaturalism* (1978[1967]; see also Spiro 1982[1970]) Spiro offers a psychoanalytical analysis of Burmese religious behaviours, considering spirit cult of *nats* and other local beliefs as separated from the official Buddhist religion – thus exposing his work to many critics (Tambiah 1984:315; Brac de la Perrière 1989).

Brac de la Perrière's (1989) *Les Rituels de Possession en Birmanie* represents another important landmark in the study of Burmese spirit cult. The French anthropologist underlines how the spirit cult and Theravada Buddhism in Burma coexist and merge together (2000). Brac de la Perrière also underlines the historical connection between the Pantheon of the Thirty-Seven and the Burmese monarchy (1996); she reveals how, after the collapse of the Burmese monarchy, the *nat* tradition was maintained by *nat kadaws* (2009a, 2009c; see also Bekker 1994) through the celebration of public festivals (1993a, 1998b, 2005) and private rituals (1993b); she analyses the link between local cults of specific *nat* figures and territorial identity (1995, 1998c), investigates the role and identity of the ritual specialists (1998a, 2007, 2009c), the experience of possession (2009b), the relationship with other Burmese beliefs systems (2016; Brac de la Perrière et al 2014), and the function of exchange (2015). Other authors also investigate particular declinations of Burmese spirit cult, including Bekker (1988), Nu (1989), and Rodrigue (1992). More recently, de Mersan (2009, 2010, 2016, 2018) focuses on the form of spirit cult in the Arakan state; Ho (2009; see also Keeler 2016) analyses the figure of the Burmese medium from a gender perspective; Skidmore (2007) considers the charisma of Burmese women related to spirit mediums and spirit representations. A discourse about the social position of women and spirit mediums emerges briefly in Keeler's (2017) larger analysis of Burmese hierarchical thinking. Keeler highlights how, throughout different social contexts, the Burmese recognise status differences in their social interactions. As I explain in Chapter 1, these structures of power emerge in the world of the *nat kana pwe*, affecting the lives of *nat hsaing* musicians, *nat kadaws* and devotees.

Spirit encounters in Ethnomusicology

During a *nat kana pwe*, *nat hsaing* musical sounds facilitate the communication between spirits and humans. While the dance of the devotees can be uncontrolled, that of the spirit medium is always choreographed: when the *nat kadaw* embodies the *nat*, the spirit dances and speaks through the medium, interacting with the devotees. The spirit embodiment is expressed through the dance, supported and controlled by the *nat hsaing* musicians through specific rhythms and melodies, most of which belong to the repertoire of spirit songs (*nat chin*). This repertoire narrates the stories of the Burmese *nats*, communicates their personalities, and make the spirits present and real. Through the sound of *nat chin*, spirits and humans are brought together as part of the same community.

How spiritual entities summoned to a ceremony are made manifest by music has been a long-investigated topic in ethnomusicological scholarship.¹¹ In the seminal *Music and Trance*, Rouget (1985[1981]) explained that music is a technique of communication that socialises the trancers into culturally specific states and behaviours. Analysing the relationship between music and trance comparatively throughout different cultures, he outlined that while music is necessary for trance to occur, no specific musical traits are necessary: the relationship between music and trance is culturally situated, and different sets of instruments, tunes, tempos, melodies can be a support for trance states. However, Rouget did not pay attention to native categories of trance: in a universalistic/structuralist approach, he reconducts different forms of trance to specific typologies, analysing trance behaviour from its performative angle.

In recent years, the analysis of the relationship between music and trance has been polarised into two different extremes, represented by Steven Friedson's (1996) phenomenological approach, and Judith Becker's (1994, 2004) neuroscientific explanation. In analysing Tumbuka's *vimbuzza* drumming music (Malawi), Friedson (1996) explains that multistable acoustical phenomena – i.e., the simultaneous perception of three- and two-pulse metrical structures – are ‘conducive to loosening up perceptual boundaries between object and subject’, thus promoting trance states (ivi:143). Friedson's first-hand experience of this shifting perception/trance simultaneously represents the strengths and weaknesses of his work: perception is influenced by culture (ivi:156), and the metric ambiguity that induced ‘trance’ in Friedson might not necessarily affect Tumbuka.

Becker's *Deep Listeners* (2004) represents a more rationale based, deterministic and universalistic study of trance states in relation to cultural, social, and emotional contexts. To Becker, a trance state is ‘a bodily event characterized by strong emotion, intense focus, the loss of the strong sense of self, usually enveloped by amnesia and a cessation of the inner language’ (ivi:43), and she considers possession as a form of trance. Becker focuses on trance as an object – the only limit of this study.

¹¹ For an account of the main ethnomusicological paradigms, see Jankowsky (2007).

Drawing on neuroscientific research, she describes trance states as an ‘overdrive’ of the nervous system driven by musical and rhythmic entrainment which affects the body. Musical stimuli trigger neurons clustered by ‘the habitus of listening’, thus enhancing deep emotive states and bringing ‘deeply emotional’ people into trance.

Other authors situate themselves in a continuum between these two extremes: Jankowsky (2007) believes in the existence of an in-between, a middle ground of productive dialogic engagement with the Other. Jankowsky underlines the usefulness of a ‘radical empiricism’ approach – an ethnographic methodology that ‘focuses on the reality of experience’ which ‘acknowledges the primacy of sensory experiences in finding that common ground’ (ivi:192-193) – a space long recognized by ethnomusicologists, who make connections with Others through an interest in music and co-participation (Rice 2010). Jankowsky explains that, in Tunisian *stambeli*, music induces the arrival of a dyadic pantheon of (black, pre-Islamic) Spirits and (white, Muslim) Saints (Jankowsky 2006), mediating the encounter with humans by making the spirits perceptible. Each Saint or Spirit is associated with a specific tune, played according to a loosely prescribed hierarchy which structures the ritual through chains of song. Jankowsky (2010:206) considers trance a ‘behaviour’, and possession the ‘cultural theory for explaining that behaviour’.

In Southeast Asia, several authors contributed to delineating the role and functions of music and performing arts in animistic rituals and performances. Among others, Becker J. (2004); Foley (1985); Groenendaal (2008); Kartomi (1973); Norton (2009); Pugh-Kitingan (2017); Shahriari (2006); and Wong (2001) described how, in spirit possession cults, the embodiment or manifestation of a spiritual being is accompanied by a specific set of musical sounds and dance movements. This idea emerges decisively in the ritual performances of Burmese *nat kana pwe* and can be also found across different cultures.

In *Songs for the Spirits*, Norton (2009; see also Norton 2000b) analyses the relation between the *chau van* music ensemble and modern Vietnamese mediumship *len dong* rituals – a religious practice intertwined with institutional religions Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism. In *len dong*, a hierarchically organised pantheon of spirits is summoned and invited to descend into the human world. Possessed mediums enact different identities, performing fortune-telling and healing. Sequences of *chau van* songs, or ‘songscapes’, constitute a ‘continually changing sonic environment in which spirits are immersed and their presence is articulated’ (2009:79). The idea that sounds and dances are strictly connected in ritual performances emerges in Alter (2017[2008]). In analysing North-Indian Garhwal music, Alter explains that: ‘Through the powerful sounds of their drumming musicians cause *devtās* to dance in the bodies of their mediums’ (ivi:3). In *Pāñdavalīlā*, danced re-enactment of scenes from the Mahabharata epic, the dancers establish a communication, or a unity, with the divine: in this sense, the ‘spiritual quest becomes a musical performance’ (ivi:10-11).

These studies highlight how, in spirit possession rituals, powerful sounds entwine with dance movements, creating an effective performance that put into communication the world of the spirits with that of humans: to paraphrase Stoller (1997[1989]), ritual sounds can make worlds – that of humans and spirits – fuse together. In this sense, sounds are not just songs, and dance represents something more than a representation.

Studies on ritual, performance and meaning in Southeast Asia and elsewhere

As in other Southeast Asian contexts, music, dance, spirit embodiment and entertainment in *nat kana pwes* are completely integrated into an inseparable entity (Mohd Anis Md Nor and Stepputat 2017). All the participants – humans and spirits – attend and actively participate the ritual, but also enjoy the performance rigged up by musicians and *nat kadaws*. The sound of the *hsaing waing* marks the beginning of the *nat kana pwe*, ratifying the entrance into a different experiential world (Wong and Lysloff 1991) in which to dance for the *nats* and to dance embodying the possessing *nat* can easily overlap.

Together with dance and other ritual media, *nat hsaing* musics *perform* a ritual and *constitute* a ritual, making the ceremony effective and the spirits manifest. Wong (2001) explains that, in Thai *wai khruu* rituals, music and dance *are* the action. Through music, Thai musicians convey meaning, invite and actualise the spiritual presence of all their teachers, thus experiencing a simultaneity between past and present, and reconstructing the original power of performance. Pieces embody ‘a particular movement, action, or emotion’, and ‘their melodies, or even fragments of their melodies, can create or modify the dramatic context’ (ivi:107). Similarly, in *nat kana pwes*, the medium, possessed by a spirit, *dance as* and *is danced by a nat*, performing the spirit’s most iconic gestures and behaviours, and speaking his/her words. Ritual action and offerings, costumes and dances, vocal and musical sounds shape the ritual, making the *nats* manifest.

The coming-into-presence of a *nat* could be described and analysed as a mimetic process. Mimesis, as Taussig (1993) explains, is not just an imitation, but rather a creative and performative act: in Chapter 5 I argue that the combination of mimetic sounds and dances – a ‘mimetic performance’ (Sum 2013; see also Porath 2019b) – make the spirit dancer *become* the *nat*. Mimesis constitutes an important element in Roseman’s (1991) work. Analysing the ritual performances of the Malaysian Temiar people, Roseman explains how music and healing are intrinsically connected. Healers and singers, the Temiar spirit mediums acquire the knowledge and ability to cure illness from the spirits: revealed in dreams, songs are the travelling spirit-guide’s ‘paths’ or ‘ways’ (ivi:66-67) that link humans and spirit worlds, mimetically re-enacting the agency and healing power of the spirits through the music performance.

In *nat kana pwe* ceremonies, sounds and movements are more than just what they seem. In the ritual context they are provided with a performative character which make them powerful tools necessary for the manifestation of the spirits. Burmese mediums and musicians agree on the fact that each ceremony must be performed with the correct set of ritual tools – dance, sounds, offerings, actions. The interlocking of various ritual media generates a polyphonic network of meanings, which in turn delineates the spirit person. Instrumental music represents probably the most difficult meaning to decipher. To an unexperienced public, as observed by Brac de la Perrière (1994), it is the *nat chin* text that gives meaning to the ritual. However, I believe that *nat hsaing* instrumental music represents an intrinsic support to spirit invitation and possession. Widdess (2012:89) seems to share this idea when he writes that ‘even apparently abstract musical structures can contain cultural meaning’ and that “meanings” might be definable in terms of a relatedness between music and context’ (Widdess 2006:182). His analysis of the stick-dance music in Bhaktapur, Nepal, shows how cyclical rotation and expansion/contraction of the music (ivi:199-200) ultimately reflect the Hindu-Buddhist conceptualisation of the universe, and can be considered ‘cultural models’ (Widdess 2012; see also Becker and Becker 1981; Roseman 1991). Similarly, in studying the music and dance performance of the Wangga people (Northwest Australia), Marett (2009) explains that elements of vocal style and texts, as well as instrumental music, articulate multivalent levels of semiosis (mythology, space, and kinship relationship) into very condensed performances. An essential support for liminal ceremonies (in particular, mortuary), composition and performance of Wangga songs offer a link between the society of the living and the ancestors, so to allow the dead to continue their existential journey. Music and dance performances are embedded in a network of meanings that relates to the ancestors, dreams and the land, and re-links them to the social.

In *nat kana pwe*, participants respond with greater or lesser degree of involvement to different spirit persons and different sounds/dances. In grounding my analysis in the Burmese perspective, in Section 5.2.2 I have constructed my argument around the Burmese emic concepts of *athan* (sound) and *poun san* (free form, in relation to the dance). In the context of spirit ceremonies, Burmese musicians use the word *nat than* to generally indicate the sounds (vocal and instrumental) necessary to call the spirits, make them dance, and dismiss them. A necessary support to spirit embodiment, *nat chins* (spirit songs) represent a part of a *nat than*. Each spirit song may present multiple layers: a *nat chin* might include rhythms and melodies (also referred to as ‘sounds’) belonging to other repertoires and performance contexts; or, the dance of a *nat* might be supported, not by *nat chin*, but by an unrelated repertory – e.g. court songs, popular songs, or theatrical tunes. Depending on the spirit person, musicians constantly switch between several musical codes. In the ritual performance, *nat* musical sounds are associated with *nat* dance movements. The performance of these dance movements is not completely prescriptive, thus allowing the performers to express their emotions. Burmese call these semi-

choreographed movements *poun san*, ‘forms’, to distinguish them from the highly choreographed dance movements of other Burmese dance practices.

As I discuss in Chapter 6, the recognition, even unconscious, of spirit *athan* and *poun san* performing a multiple chain of meanings can bring the devotee(s) to have an emotional response to the presence of the *nat*, resulting in spirit embodiment/possession. In this sense, musical sounds and dance movements can be compared to signs conveying powerful meanings, and can be analysed through a semiotic approach. Turino (1999, 2014) referred to Peircean semiotics to develop a phenomenological theory that linked music and emotions. His aim is to ‘understand music’s special potential for creating emotional effects’ (1999:232) by connecting the different levels of musical signs and linking them to the context of performance and experience. Turino considers music to possess a multi-componential iconic and indexical potential which, expressed at a macro-level, is interpreted according to the social frame. Peircean categories of experience provide a theoretical basis to explain the relation between conveyed musical meaning and spirit possession. Anthropologists have also embraced the use of Peircean semiotics as a theoretical tool for the study of rituals. Kreinath (2006, 2009; see also Porath 2019b) argues that by looking at ritual performances through the lenses of Peircean indexicality, it is possible to consider each ritual as a process with an efficacy and a pragmatic agency. This allows one to explain ‘what the participants are actually doing when they perform their ritual actions (and utterances)’ (2006:468), and its impact on social reality.

Together with the afore-discussed notion of mimetic performance, the Peircean notion of indexicality – as interpreted by Turino and Kreinath – provides the theoretical framework of Chapter 5, where I explain how the combination of sounds and dances become ritually effective, manifesting the spirit person. One of the advantages of this approach is its flexibility: as I explain in Chapter 7, the Burmese idea of tradition (*thamazin*) is not static and monolithic, but rather continuously changing (Handler and Linnekin 1984; Bakan 2007). Extra-musical elements are integrated into the *nat hsaing* musical style through processes of adaptation and referentiality. The *nat kana pwe* and *nat hsaing* network of meanings – created through sound/dance indexicalities and mimetically performed – is constantly re-negotiated between human and spirit actors, adapting to new musical genres (popular and electronic music) and performance aesthetics, and yet maintaining its ritually efficacy (Gold 1998).

Fieldwork methodology

My first exposure to Burmese *hsaing waing* music happened through a recording from the French ethnomusicological label Ocora, *Birmanie: Musique d’Art*. The sound of the Burmese *hsaing waing* ensemble impressed me with its fast tempo and the melodic ornamentations. It was different from any other Southeast Asian music that I had encountered. At that time, I was enrolled in an ethnomusicology MA course at La Sapienza University of Rome, feeding on ethnomusicological

literature and performing with the University's Central Javanese *gamelan* group. Because of my background in cultural anthropology and history of religions, I was interested in investigating the relationship between music and spirit possession – anything that would allow me to experience first-hand what Ernesto de Martino (2008a[1961]) and Gilbert Rouget (1985[1981]) described in their works. The lack of studies on Burmese music (which unfortunately continues today) had no other effect than triggering my curiosity and my thirst for new sounds.

I conducted my initial fieldwork in Burma in July-December 2013, in order to complete my MA dissertation. In Yangon, I got in contact with two groups of mediums – one led by U Win Hlaing, whose fame I soon discovered was international; another by U Aung Min and his wife Daw Min Zin Aung.¹² I joined *nat kana pwe* ceremonies in their houses in Yangon, and observed two *nat hsaing* ensembles in performance. In particular, I focused on the ensemble performing with U Win Hlaing, led by the *hsaing saya* (*hsaing* master) Kyi Lin Bo. During those six months, I had close contact with Kyi Lin Bo's (for friends, just Lin Lat) musicians and U Win Hlaing's troupe of *nat kadaws*, following them to national *nat pwe* festivals throughout Burma. This allowed me to understand how musicians and mediums carry out their profession in their daily life.

This fieldwork and the dissertation that originated from it served as a starting point for my current doctoral research. I embarked on my second long stay in Burma in June 2017-September 2018. During this second period of fieldwork, I extended my investigation to several groups of mediums and musicians in the different urban scenarios of Yangon and Mandalay.¹³

As in the previous case, the ethnographic research was carried out using a combination of participant-observation, audio-visual recording, interviews, and bi-musicality training. Fieldwork, participant observation and ethnography represent the bedrock of anthropology and ethnomusicology. The distinctive trait and real challenge of fieldwork is to establish social relationships and to deal with very private and delicate matters (Nettl 2005:133ff.). Despite critics (Bourdieu 2003) and crises (Barz and Cooley 2008), participant observation remains an effective research method in anthropology: living in a context for a long period of time, learning the language and engaging with locals in their daily routines sets a framework for qualitative collection of raw data in the form of fieldnotes, which eventually become part of the ethnographic analysis (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011; Emerson et al. 2007).

During the first half of my fieldwork in Yangon, I engaged with several groups of *nat kadaws* and *nat hsaing* ensembles. At U Win Hlaing's ceremonies, I found my friends Lin Lat and his musicians again; I had the chance to engage more with one of U Win Hlaing's pupils, Kyaw Win Naing, and thus to encounter *saya* Aung Hein's *hsaing*. Later, I was introduced to Yelin Bo, considered one of the best *nat hsaing* *saya* players in Yangon, and I started to follow his group closely. I have been able to film

¹² Daw Min Zin Aung passed away in 2016.

¹³ For a discourse on urban ethnomusicology, see Reyes (2009, 2012).

Yelin Bo's ensemble performing in several private ceremonies, with different groups of mediums (U Kyaw Soe Moe and Sithu Thet; Daw Kin So Lin; U Min Soe).

In February 2018 I moved to Mandalay: compared to Yangon, engaging with *nat kana pwe* performances was difficult due to having fewer connections. I encountered several *nat kadaws* (Htoo Zaw; Maha Myain Aba Lay; Ko Ba Nya Aung, Hnin Ko Hein and Ko Thar Nge; Daw Khin Ma Ma) and engaged with two *nat hsaing* ensembles – U Soe Win and Daw Ma Lay Lay's *nat hsaing*, and Aung Ko Min's *nat hsaing*. *Nat kana pwe* occurred more rarely than in Yangon, giving me fewer opportunities to document private ceremonies. On the other hand, it was easier to join and film national *nat* festivals in the villages surrounding Mandalay. The audio-visual data that I collected at national festivals in the villages was determinant in expanding my understanding of Burmese spirit cults; however, primary data for this dissertation originates from the private ceremonies that I have documented in the urban centres.

Interviews

In my fieldwork experiences, semi-structured interviews (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011:137) were very productive: given a few central questions, the interviewer must necessarily “go with the flow” and “improvise” questions according to the answers. This method allows the research participant to feel more comfortable, the interview becoming more like an exchange than an interrogation (Sherman Heyl 2007; Spradley 1979). I organised two different kinds of interviews: single-interviews and group-interviews. In single-interviews, I have privileged the key figures among *nat kadaws* and *hsaing* musicians. This method was useful to delineate mediums and musicians' personal histories and points of view, but it has proved to be less effective in gathering information about the music. Group-interviews/rehearsals represented the only possible way to collect information about *nat hsaing* music: on three occasions, I hired the musicians for a rehearsal session where they were asked to perform and explain about the pieces they had just played. In 2013, the whole Kyi Lin Bo's *nat hsaing* ensemble was involved, performing in sequence, the music of a typical *nat kana pwe*.¹⁴ In 2018, I organised one recording session/group-interview in Yangon with the *hsaing saya* Yelin Bo, who performed some *nat chins* at the *pattala* (xylophone), accompanying the singer Daw Thin Zar Moe, with the explanation of the *nat kadaw* Sithu Thet;¹⁵ another recording session took place in Mandalay, this time involving the *hsaing saya* U Min Soe, his wife and singer Daw Ma Lay Lay and their son Ko We Yan, who played the *maung hsaing* (gong chime).¹⁶ Although exhausting, this method has proved very fruitful.

¹⁴ Kyi Lin Bo (group interview), Yangon, 12 October 2013.

¹⁵ Yelin Bo, Daw Thin Zar Moe and Sithu Thet (group interview), Yangon, 11 July 2018. Daw Thin Zar Moe passed away in 2018.

¹⁶ U Min Soe, Daw Lay Lay Min and Ko We Yan (recording session), Mandalay, 09 July 2018.

Much data about music came from informal discussions. In some cases, the information revealed during my music classes, or while drinking a glass of beer, or sharing a plate of *lahpet* (Burmese pickled tea leaves) with my masters, were decisive for the understanding of religious or musical concepts. These, and the discussions I had with the devotees, are recorded only in my fieldnotes. They appear in the dissertation as ‘personal communication’.

Audio-visual ethnography

Nat kana pwe rituals last more than six hours, usually throughout multiple days: throughout this time, music continues almost seamlessly; *nat kadaws* summon different *nats* alternating singing and dancing; a crowd of devotees continuously interact with musicians and mediums throwing money, bringing offerings, taking part in the dances and being possessed by the *nats*. Participating in a *pwe* represents a multi-stimuli sensorial encounter (Pink 2015) on several levels, including loud sounds, the taste of the offerings, the smell of the cigarettes, the bodily experience of being pushed by an excited crowd. To give an account of all the processes going on at the same time is an impossible task – but video recordings represent a fair compromise. Through the eye of a video-camera equipped with an external microphone, I captured on video what I believed to be the salient moments of the *pwe*, switching from the dances to the musicians, focusing on the ritual action or the music performance (Scaldaferri 2015). For practical reasons (necessity of manoeuvrability in the crowd) I gave precedence to video recording rather than photos.

To be able to track the movements of a musician through audio and video represented an important resource: a *nat hsaing* ensemble is stratified in terms of instrumental timbre and shooting videos of musicians performing was important, enabling more complete and exact music transcriptions.

Acquisition of performance skills

Comprehension of theoretical music issues becomes much more immediate and clearer when you experience them first-hand: in 2013, my *hne* (shawm) lessons with *saya* U Ohn Htay introduced me to the Burmese scales and tuning system; in 2017-18, the study of the Burmese court songs at the *pattala* (xylophone), first with *saya* U Than Aye at Gitameit Music Institute in Yangon, and then with *saya* Kyaw Myo Naing privately in Mandalay, helped me to comprehend the processes behind melodic elaboration of Burmese tunes. My *pat waing* (drum circle) learning experience with *saya* Myanmar Pyi Kyauk Sein was unfortunately too short, but it proved to be useful in understanding the interlocked movements constituting the basics of this instrument’s idiom – as well as the physical consequences of this musical practice on the hands of the player. Occasional classes at Gitameit Institute introduced me to other repertoires and performance contexts (e.g. Burmese court dancing and marionettes). While the

training I have received in learning the court repertoire helped me in the comprehension and analysis of the spirit songs repertoire, I did not acquire enough skills to be able to perform any *nat chin*: the only direct engagement I had with this repertoire was in performance, when musicians handed me the idiophones *si* (bell) and *wa* (clapper), daring me to accompany the rest of the *nat hsaing* ensemble. Being occasionally invited to dance in several ceremonies provided insightful information about the interactions between dancers and musicians. ‘Bi-musicality’ (Hood 1960, 1971:241-42), or ‘learning to perform’ (Baily 2001), represents an essential tool to sharpen analytical thinking and criticism about the music culture under investigation (Witzleben 2010): being able to play an instrument, no matter how well, is massively helpful to musical comprehension, transcription and analysis – processes that may involve local performers directly (Widdess 1994). Moreover, the learning process helps the researcher in getting more confident with locals: musical experience places the ethnomusicologist in a space in-between the categories of emic and etic where s/he can conduct open conversation with the teacher and help interpretative description (Rice 2010; Titon 1995).

Music analysis and transcription

With its intense repetition of rhythmic cycles, fast heterophonic ornamentations and loud vocal lines, *nat hsaing* music renders the *nats* sonically palpable, linking them to the mediums and participants. The analysis of musical forms and structures allows us to identify the elements perceived as meaningful. Musicological theory and analysis must not be detached from the cultural context: they serve to answer anthropological questions (Blum 1992; Ellingson 1992; Solis 2012).

Due to the oral/aural nature of their music culture, many *hsaing* musicians find it difficult to conceptualise about their own music. For this reason, Tenzer’s (2006a) notions of ‘structural listening’ and ‘periodicity’ represented valid approaches for the analysis of Burmese *nat hsaing* music. Influencing and influenced by the ritual context, the case of the Burmese *nat hsaing* could be understood in terms of what Tenzer defines ‘sectional periodicity’: the reiteration of a single musical time cycle is in dialogue with other musical forces, such as a ritual’s progress. *Nat hsaing* music fluctuates, alternating soft dynamics in slower passages, and louder dynamics in faster passages. Continuous shifts in tempo and dynamics shape the ritual performance, inducing and supporting possession through the recurrence of rhythmic cycles. Tenzer (2006b) recognises similar processes in Balinese music: he exploits tempo and dynamics analysis to determine the articulation of structure and provide formal analysis.

Judith Becker (1968) divides Southeast Asian drum patterns into four main categories depending on the presence or absence of clusters of characteristics, identified through a comparison of different ‘percussive phrase units’: in this way, Becker constructs ‘a systematic method of describing the rhythmic organization of percussive patterns’ (ivi:177). Tenzer (2011) details an analytical method to explain which traits of rhythmic cycles vary according to the nature of music and to performance:

Tenzer identifies four parameters of rhythm – colour, duration, envelope and punctuation – which ‘determine all possibilities for the motion of sound in time’ (ivi:372). Comparing the *nat hsaing* rhythmic cycles to those delineated by Becker, I operated a classification of rhythm cycles and categorised them; Tenzer’s approach was used to delineate the rhythmic identity of each cycle and to understand how variations for each of them are operated. The analysis is further complicated by the fact that the *hsaing* is an ensemble constituted by tuned percussion instruments: rhythmic cycles and melodic patterns are strictly interrelated.

Nat hsaing instrumental melodies flow seamlessly, played in strict conjunction with the vocal line. Musical phrases are repeated and reused, slightly changed or completely modified according to the situation and the musician’s idiom (Giuriati 1995; Sam 1988). Becker (1969) details a method for the analysis of Burmese melodies which considers syntactical structures: short segments of tunes (the smallest units) combine into patterns to make phrases, which eventually unite to make verses. The recurrence of formulas constructs the song through pattern arrangement: skilful musicians operate between composition and improvisation (Nettl 1974; Silkstone 1993; Gray 2010), introducing new material at each verse repetition. Formulas also guarantee, to single and groups of songs, a recognizable wholeness, allowing untrained listeners to identify music genres.¹⁷

I recognised the efficacy of Becker’s analytical method during my Burmese music classes (*hne* and *pattala*): my teachers proceeded by teaching me short and concluded melodic patterns, to slowly transmit a complete musical sentence. Despite Becker’s study being limited to Burmese court repertoire only, I believe that her method can find a concrete application in *nat chin*: the continuous flow played by the *nat hsaing* melodic instruments can be broken up into verses, pointed out by cadential phrases, and divided into phrases and patterns according to the prosody of the text and the structure delineated by the metric section. In this way, it was possible to identify characteristic segments of tunes.

Analysis and transcription rely on the recordings of actual *nat hsaing* performances, in general following a descriptive approach (Seeger 1958). Transcription involved diverse methodologies: capturing the performing musicians and dancers on video represented an invaluable resource which helped the analytical and transcription process (Kubik 1965, 1972; Stone 1978). I employed several types of software in the computer-assisted analysis of the audio-visual data: Audacity and Windows Movie Maker for audio-video editing; Transcribe! as a support for manual music transcription; Sonic Visualizer and Tony for the computer-assisted analysis of timbre, dynamics and melodic profiles. Music transcriptions were realised through a combination of graphic editing software (Adobe Illustrator) and

¹⁷ For a critique of Becker, see Inoue (2008). I preferred Becker’s method over Williamson’s (2000) analysis of tetrachords because *nat hsaing* musicians seem to be more accustomed to speaking in terms of melodic phrases rather than of complex modal structures.

the music notation software Finale; animated scores were created with iAnalyse and Microsoft PowerPoint.

Despite its limits long being recognised (Carpitella 1974; England et al. 1964; Hood 1971; List 1963, 1974), Western staff notation, adapted to better represent Burmese music and instruments, has the great advantage of providing a more immediate sense in the transcription of rhythm. Melodies can also be represented with improved staff notation. I also combine staff notation with forms of notation in use in the local culture. Some (Southeast) Asian music communities have developed cipher notation systems to represent and transmit their music (Bent et al. 2001): it is important to try to exploit both an emic and emic approach to transcription and analysis, in order to have a good balance between the recorded sounds, the cultural concept behind them, and their representation. As Ellingson explains:

the transcription is rendered in the form which most clearly and efficiently illustrates the relation between concept and sound in the musical system and performance. (Ellingson 1992:142)

Finally, in my investigation of meanings in *nat kana pwe* ceremonies, I associated each musical sound to a specific dance movement. Sounds and movements, music and dance, are complementary and cannot be detached from each other (Mohd Anis Md Nor and Stepputat 2017). For the analysis and representation of the dance movements I decided to apply the method employed by Burmese dance teachers. Inspired by several unpublished manuals that some dance teachers have confidentially given me, I created a visual representation of the movements, putting them in sequence to show the process, and adding arrows indicating the movements of the limbs. This method, although probably less exact than others in use in (ethno)choreology (e.g. Labanotation), has the advantage of being immediately clear to a wider audience – including a Burmese one.

Structure of the dissertation

In chapter one, I consider the social and financial status of *nat kana pwe* performers and devotees. By delineating several *nat hsaing* musicians and *nat* dancers' experiences from Yangon and Mandalay, I first discuss what it means to be part of the *nat kana pwe* community, and how social relationships are shaped by hierarchical thinking. Then, I discuss the relationship between *nat* devotees and the spirits, highlighting the reasons that bring devotees to the organisation of private *nat kana* ceremonies.

Chapter two discusses the experience of spirit embodiment of *nat kana pwes* ritual participants. Starting from the idea that spirits and humans remain involved in the circuit of exchanges of the *nat kana* community, I present the different conceptions of spirit embodiment according to different ritual participants – *nat kadaws*, *nat* devotees, and *nat hsaing* musicians. Drawing on ethnographic interviews, observations and videos, in the last part I analyse these actors' spirit embodiment from a performative point of view.

In chapter three, I analyse the sound dimension of *nat kana pwe* ceremonies. I consider the role that sounds have in facilitating the construction of a social space-time in which spirits and humans can interact together, *de facto* creating a fertile environment for the manifestation of human-spirit communitarian bonds. Drawing on ethnographic videos, first I analyse the interactions between musician, *nats*, and dancing devotees; then, I outline the collaborative interaction processes between *nat hsaing* musicians and *nat kadaws*, necessary for the construction of an effective ritual performance.

Chapter four is devoted to the description of Burmese *nat hsaing* musical features. Drawing parallels with other Southeast Asian musical practices and other Burmese performance contexts, I discuss the formal structure of spirit sounds. Through a case study on one specific spirit song, through musical analysis I highlight the fundamental musical aspects of the *nat hsaing* performance practice.

Together, the fifth and sixth chapters present a theoretical framework and the analysis of the network of meanings linking spirit sounds to dance movements and spirit embodiment. Drawing on the Burmese concepts of *athan* (sound) and *poun san* (dance form), in chapter five I discuss the ritual effectiveness of music and dance in *nat kana pwe* ceremonies. I explain how mimesis and indexicality represent useful tools for the analysis and understanding of spirit embodiment rituals. Following this, chapter six presents several ethnographic examples demonstrating the applicability of this theoretical framework. I discuss the performance of *nat hsaing* sounds and dance movements linked to the manifestation of three spirit persons belonging to different spirit categories – the *nats* Ko Gyi Kyaw and Nankarine Medaw, and the *thaik* Naga Medaw. In retracing the inter- and intra-referentiality associated with the main elements of these figures, I analyse the network of meanings that makes sounds and movements ritually effective, bringing these spirit persons into-presence.

Finally, chapter seven considers continuities and changes in the *nat kana pwe* performance practice. I discuss the Burmese ideas of ‘transmitted knowledge’, highlighting the differences with the Western classical concept of “tradition”. In the second part, I describe and analyse the use of musical repertoires not belonging to the ritual practice (such as court and popular songs) and the changes concerning the repertoire of ritual spirit sounds – e.g. the popularisation of new spirit songs.

1. Hierarchies and communities in the *nat kana pwe* world

“Don’t you feel ashamed of sitting on the ground?”

Ma Lay Lay, Mandalay, 5 April 2018

If the people are talking to the *nat kadaw*, they have to speak politely.

Htoo Zaw, Taungbyone, 16 August 2018

Yangon, 17 December 2017: I am taking part in a *nat kana pwe* by invitation of the *hsaing saya* and my friend Yelin Bo. It’s early afternoon, and after the long introduction that typically opens the first day of a ceremony that unfolds over multiple-days, the dances have finally started, and the musicians are playing at their best. Yelin Bo’s group is, not surprisingly, considered by many to be the best *nat hsaing* ensemble in Yangon: the musicians perform with dynamism and confidence, revealing refined, yet intricate melodies for the dance of gracious *nats*, and relinquishing a compact sonic strength to support the embodiment of spirits. Yelin Bo is behind the drum-circle, proudly leading his ensemble, especially when framed by my camera.

I am filming the gong circle player, when someone taps on my shoulder: I turn around and I see *saya* Hla Myaing, one of the most famous *hne* players in Burma. Hla Myaing and I met a few weeks before, introduced by my drum circle master, Kyauk Sein – another *hsaing* legend, Yelin Bo’s friend and senior colleague. Hla Myaing smiles at me, and shouts something to the *kyi waing* player. In evident embarrassment, the musician leaves the gong circle, yielding his place to Hla Myaing, who begins to play his instrument together with the rest of the ensemble. For an instant, I can catch Yelin Bo’s gaze on me, but it is hard for me to decipher it – is he happy because a famous *hsaing* musician has joined his ensemble, something he can show off about, or is he worried that Hla Myaing’s presence might outshine his own? Is he worried that Hla Myaing might not appreciate the abilities of the rest of his ensemble? Or is he wondering if, because my connections with the community of *hsaing* musicians are not limited to *nat hsaing saya* only, I might direct my attention to them and forget about Yelin Bo’s *nat hsaing*?

At a certain point in the course of my fieldwork in Yangon, I started to become aware of the hierarchical structures governing the community of *hsaing* musicians and *nat kadaws*. A famous *hsaing* musician suddenly showing up at a *nat kana pwe*; my old *hne saya* scolding me because, as his pupil, I was supposed to spend more time with him and not with other musicians; a spirit medium who did not appreciate the fact that I was rejecting his offer of hospitality at a *nat* festival (because I already had previous arrangements with other spirit mediums); and in general, the askew look that I sometimes got

when I said that I used to spend most of my time surrounded by *nat kadaws*. The common denominator of all these small events is the existence of implied hierarchical structures that shape the relationships within different Burmese communities, which became evident (at least to me) during, and sometimes, due to my presence in the field. These expanding demonstrations of hierarchy made me realise that some musicians and spirit mediums were contending for my ethnographic attentions – not merely to be the attention of my camera, but to be able to say that a foreigner was their close friend. It was (and it still is, since I remained in contact with all these people) a matter of prestige and of personal status, governed by hierarchical thinking.

In the recent volume *The Traffic in Hierarchy*, Ward Keeler (2017) describes Burmese society as characterised by hierarchical thinking. Keeler draws on the classical work by Louis Dumont (1980[1966]) on the Indian caste system. In Dumont's paradigm, 'traditional/holistic' societies are opposed to those which are 'modern/individual' (ivi:232-233). The first are characterised by 'hierarchy': society is organised 'with respects to its ends (and not with respect to individual happiness)' (ivi:9). On the other hand, 'modern/individual' (i.e. Euro-American) societies are characterised by 'equality': with an inversion of values, 'what is still called "society" is the mean, the life of each man is the end'. Discussing the example of the Indian caste system, Dumont explains how, in Hindu holistic society, different castes complement each other, in a delicate balance of power and prestige – as in the case of the mutualisms between Brahman priests and Kshatriya rulers (ivi:77) – and economy – as in the *jajmani* system (ivi:97).

Keeler acknowledges that Dumont's work has been criticised for its oversimplifying dichotomies, not least the orientalist 'the West vs. the rest' (Keeler 2017:113ff.). However, Keeler defends Dumont's intellectual project: Dumont was aware of how such concepts, which distorted contemporary societies in the West and beyond, were the legacy of the Western Enlightenment, and for this they must be subjected to critical analysis. Instead of rejecting Dumont's paradigm, Keeler uses the concepts therein articulated in his own work. Keeler retrieves Dumont's idea of 'a society as whole' (holism) characterised by an 'overarching system [that] connects all constituent elements' and applies it to the Burmese context. He writes that:

the form that hierarchical thinking takes in Burma does not shore up any so pervasive a set of social categories as Indian caste. But it does catch everyone up in a preoccupation with their place in a system of relative prominence and prestige, quantities that usually line up with the distribution of power and wealth but do also implicate a hierarchy of values [...] (Keeler 2017:124)

While the holism of Indian castes is based on the value of 'purity' (Dumont 1980:46ff.), the Burmans' society is based on a cosmic hierarchical scheme that links the nation and the state to Buddhism. Keeler suggests that if the Burmans found the secular authorities' support for their religious superiors (during the Burmese kingdom as well as during the military dictatorship) 'laudable', then to draw a line

connecting the Hindus described by Dumont and Burma is not absurd, despite the different context.¹⁸ Keeler compares the interdependence between different castes in India to the interdependence between, for example, laymen and the monks in Burma. He writes that:

Everything about the bonds that tie any given monk and any given donor together stems from the fact that they are different. [...] A great deal of this basic arrangement defining the respective roles and interaction of monks and laypeople corresponds closely to Dumont's analysis of hierarchical relations as based on mutual interdependence through difference. (Keeler 2017:127)

In Burma the community of monks/nuns (the *sangha*) and the laymen/women constitute a religious community based on ‘mutual interdependence through difference’. Starting from this idea, Keeler explains how this kind of hierarchical thinking is widespread throughout the whole Burmese society, and can be observed in the metropolitan traffic, during *dhamma* talks (monks’ public sermons), or in the activities of the many tea shops that populate the Burmese landscape.

The holistic idea that a society’s diverse elements are connected can also be found in the *nat kana pwe* communities. Drawing on Keeler, the relationship between musicians, spirit mediums, devotees and spirits might be indeed described as being ‘based on mutual interdependence through difference’. These differences, however, exist not only within the *nat kana* community (with evident hierarchical differences between its actors), but are consistent between the *nat kana* community taken as a whole, and the rest of Burmese society. In Burmese scholarship, the most well-known example is surely that of the urban *meinsmasha nat kadaw*, trans-gender spirit mediums, stereotyped by the rest of Burmese society as deviant and dangerous ones to be avoided (Ho 2009; Keeler 2016, 2017). Similarly, *nat hsaing* musicians are usually looked down by other *hsaing* performers for their professional status (Merriam 2000[1964]). On the other hand, *nat* devotees are looked at with a mix of envy, for their financial success, and judgment, for being involved with a world which is dealing with evil and greedy spirits instead of just Buddhism.

By retracing the stories and points of view of some *nat kana pwe* protagonists, this chapter describes the interactions taking place within the *nat kana* community, and between the community and wider Burmese society. Strongly based on ethnographic data, this chapter aims to highlight the implicit hierarchical structures that govern the world of *hsaing* musicians, *nat kadaws*, and devotees in their interaction with the spirits. The first part investigates the status of the *nat hsaing* musicians, highlighting the financial hierarchies within the *nat hsaing* group, and the differences of status existing between *nat hsaing* musicians and performers belonging to other *hsaing waing* contexts. Following a similar structure, the second part explores the figure of the urban *nat kadaws*: it describes the spirit mediums’ ritual role and the prejudice that wider Burmese society shares about them, especially because of their alleged immoral sexuality, and the tensions between different spirit mediums. The final part analyses

¹⁸ For a comment on Keeler (2017), see Brac de la Perrière (2019).

the relationships between the urban devotees and the spirits, describing the reasons behind the organisation of a *nat kana* ceremony, and the financial and devotional aspects that bind humans to hierarchically different categories of spirit persons.

1.1. Hierarchies within the Burmese performing arts

On a particularly boiling morning in 2018, I am sitting in a restaurant on the 62nd street, in Mandalay, waiting for the *hsaing saya* U Soe Win, the leader of the *nat hsaing* group *Shwe Man Min Kyawswa Mingala Hsaing Daw* (The Auspicious Min Kyawswa Royal Hsaing [from the] Golden Mandalay). I first encountered this ensemble during a *nat kana pwe* in Pathein Gyi, near Mandalay, only a few weeks before. During the performance, I realised why this *hsaing* group is considered the best *nat hsaing* in town by all the spirit mediums I have encountered: the ensemble performs as a single organism, the interaction among the musicians is immediate, and the response of the *hsaing saya* to the ritual action is attentive. When U Soe Win arrives, accompanied by his wife and singer Ma Lay Lay, they tell me how they began to perform for the spirits.

U Soe Win: One of my uncles is a *hsaing saya*, he plays *zat pwe*. In Mandalay there was [about 30 years ago] Mandalay Thein Zaw *zat pwe*, it was famous back in the days. And another teacher was the singer [of Mandalay Thein Zaw], I've been playing with them for 20 years.

Ma Lay Lay: I was [a dancer] in that *zat pwe*, but the group had to stop because of the [1988] protests.¹⁹ At that time my brother Ko Khin Maung Than told me that in his *hsaing waing* there wasn't a singer, they needed one. So, I didn't go back to the *zat pwe*, and I followed my brother instead, he taught me how to sing.

U Soe Win: We stopped for the 1988 protests. Then Mandalay Thein Zaw *zat pwe* called us back, after the protest. But we decided not to follow them anymore. At that time, I had a dream, Ko Gyi Kyaw *nat* asked me: 'Do you want the tray with the diamond or the tray with the ruby?'. I choose the diamond tray. After that, one of the *hsaing saya* wanted to sell their *hsaing* instruments, and the *hsaing* was decorated with diamonds. We bought it right away! It was 55.000 kyats, almost for free. With that *hsaing waing* we [...] became *nat hsaing*. That's why we changed the name to Min Kyawswa, because of the dream.²⁰ We always believed and loved the *nats*, that's why even if we don't get a lot of money, we want to serve the *nats*. It is about believing [...].

Ma Lay Lay: In Mandalay Thein Zaw [*zat* troupe] there was a famous dancer. He called us again and again, he was the troupe leader. He once asked me: 'Don't you feel ashamed of sitting on

¹⁹ The series of nationwide protests, strikes and marches, mostly organised by Burmese students, that reached a climax in August 1988, with key events on the 8th – hence the name 8888 (8-8-88) Uprising. See Charney (2009).

²⁰ Min Kyawswa is another name for the Ko Gyi Kyaw.

the ground?’.²¹ (Figure 1.1) I didn’t feel ashamed because I believe in *nats*, and I want to serve for them. The dancer said: ‘Maybe this is the time for you to serve them, maybe the *nats* choose you.’

U Soe Win: [We play in] no other context. We only play *nat hsaing*.²²

U Soe Win and Ma Lay Lay’s account of the beginning of their experience as *nat hsaing* performers sheds light on how musical practice, devotion and social prestige can be inseparably linked. For them, performing *nat hsaing* came up naturally because of the influence of Ma Lay Lay’s brother and famous *hsaing saya*, Ko Khin Maung Than: he offered the young couple an alternative to the engagement with the *zat pwe* group, teaching them how to perform for the *nat* according to his *thamazin*, ‘tradition’ (see Section 7.1). Besides, to play *nat hsaing* was a way for them to fulfil their devotion as *nat* believers.

They pointed out how adherence to the tradition and devotion are the main reasons for their success as *nat hsaing* players:

U Soe Win: I have studied for a long [time], my *thamazin* is a very old, old version, and I know it well. That’s why even when an 80 year old *nat kadaw* is dancing, I know what he likes.

Ma Lay Lay: Also, we have good will for everything. If the *nats* are dancing, we feel that they are *nat*. We respect them, that’s why we are blessed by the *nats*.²³

The idea that the Min Kyawsa ensemble is blessed by the spirits came up several times, even during informal discussions. Probably for this reason, U Soe Win and Ma Lay Lay do not seem to care much about the lower social prestige that playing *nat hsaing* is generally associated with.

²¹ Since colonial times, *zat pwe* performances take place on stage. See Sein and Whitey (1965); Ye Dway (2014).

²² U Soe Win and Ma Lay Lay, Mandalay, 5 April 2018.

²³ U Soe Win and Ma Lay Lay, Mandalay, 5 April 2018.



Figure 1.1 The *hsaing saya* U Soe Moe (right) performs with his wife Ma Lay Lay (left), singing *sit* on the ground. In the background, playing the gong circle, their son, Ko We Yan. Mandalay, July 2018.

A few months before I met with U Soe Win and Ma Lay Lay in Mandalay, my *hsaing* teacher in Yangon, the famous *hsaing saya* Myanmar Pyi Kyauk Sein, introduced me to his younger colleague Yelin Bo – an emerging *bala hsaing saya*, and one of the most requested *nat hsaing* players in Yangon. Yelin Bo comes from a family of musicians: he started to learn *hsaing waing* when he was still a child, joining the *zat hsaing* of his uncle regularly, and more sporadically, the *nat hsaing*. His experience as a *nat hsaing* musician started at the time of the 1988 protests, after avoiding an arrest for opening an illegal tea shop. At that time, Yelin Bo started to play *nat hsaing* ‘to make a living’. Eventually, he became a pupil of the great master U Sein Ba Mo, becoming part of the line of other great and famous *bala hsaing* musicians. Today his *hsaing* group, the *Maha Yangon Yelin Bo Mingala Hsaing* (The Auspicious Hsaing [of] Yelin Bo [from the] Great Yangon) performs both *nat hsaing* at spirit ceremonies (Figure 1.2) and *bala hsaing* at minor pagoda festivals (*paya pwe*) (Figure 1.3). When I asked him if he feels to be judged by other musicians for his *nat hsaing* activity, he replied:

I never worry about that. Even if some of the musicians might say something to me, I realise I just come from *nat hsaing* family. When I was young, I started with *nat hsaing*, and I have a lot of knowledge about *nat hsaing*. I wish to play *bala hsaing* as Kyauk Sein and have many *bala hsaing* every year. But I am not as famous as Kyauk Sein. For my life [to survive], I have to play whatever. [...] I think these [*hsaing* contexts] are just arts, they are all the same. But, at my age now, sometimes, when I have two [options], *nat hsaing* and *bala hsaing*, I choose *bala hsaing*, and I send my son to play *nat hsaing*.²⁴

²⁴ Yelin Bo, Yangon, 15 December 2017.

Yelin Bo combines the figures of *nat hsaing* and *bala hsaing saya*. The ritual sounds of the *nat* ceremonies represent a sort of restraint to someone with his artistic creativity; for this reason, these days he enjoys performing *bala hsaing*:

in *bala hsaing* I can play whatever I want. I can play whatever I feel. But the *nat hsaing* is already fixed, we have to play only those songs. That's the difference. [...] [I still enjoy playing for] Ko Gyi Kyaw, Nankarine Medaw... those parts are very flexible, I can play whatever I want, softly or energetically, it's up to me. But other spirits are more limited, we have to play only that. I enjoy it most in that kind of flexible moment, whatever I want to play, I can.²⁵

While he cannot have contempt for the *nat hsaing* practice, he is still trying to emerge from that world and become a recognised *bala hsaing saya*. As any other *hsaing* master, Yelin Bo is aware of the fact that while playing *nat hsaing* secures his economic stability, it also brings him less social prestige compared to other *hsaing* contexts in which he could perform and, eventually, demonstrate his prowess to other musicians.



Figure 1.2 The *hsaing* *saya* Yelin Bo pays homage to the *nat* Ko Gyi Kyaw. Yangon, October 2017.

The previous accounts highlight how the environment of the *hsaing waing* musician is governed by hierarchical thinking and relationships (Anderson 1972; Keeler 2017) and shows how interactions among musicians and groups of musicians are assessed in terms of social prestige, technical skill and finances. Many *nat hsaing* musicians are professionals: they are self-supporting through music, and their specialisation is socially acknowledged (Merriam 2000:124-125). However, performing exclusively at the *nat* ceremonies, they occupy the lower level of this hierarchy and are generally looked down on by

²⁵ Yelin Bo, Yangon, 15 December 2017.

other professionals, who perform in more prestigious contexts ‘on stage’ – such as *bala hsaing* (*hsaing* music only performance, lit. ‘plain *hsaing*’), *zat hsaing* (*hsaing* theatrical performance) and *anyeint hsaing* (*hsaing* and dance performance) (Garfias 1975a). *Nat hsaing* musicians, on the other hand, perform ‘on the ground’, in tiny, uncomfortable spaces usually filled up with crowds of excited devotees who do not really pay much attention to the music and focus on the spirit possession dances of the *nat kadaws* instead. Prestige is based on the number of followers and supporters that an artist has: as performing *nat hsaing* does not give access to large crowds, it is generally considered inferior. A famous *hsaing saya* outlined this issue clearly when he said: ‘I have a big name because I go on the national TV, everyone knows my name. How many people know [the name of] a *nat hsaing* *saya*?’.



Figure 1.3 Yelin Bo’s ensemble performing at the Phaung Taw Oo pagoda festival. Yangon, December 2017.

1.1.1 Performing music for a ritual

Nat hsaing music is considered functional to support the dances of the spirit mediums: without the dance, the *nat hsaing* practice is mostly considered useless and uninteresting. In other *hsaing* performance contexts, the *hsaing saya* is not just the leader of the ensemble, but also the director of the whole show – all the spotlights are on him. A *nat hsaing* *saya*, on the other hand, is compelled to follow the ritual advancement of the ceremony, and to react accordingly; he must follow the instruction of the *nat kadaw* to the letter, and accommodate any request coming from the spirit mediums or the other ritual participants. He remains in charge of the direction of the ensemble, and in some cases he (and

consequently, the whole ensemble) can have a certain hand in the ritual's development – choosing which song to perform, or when to stop supporting the possession dances of unexperienced devotees. However, compared to other *hsaing* performance contexts, a *nat hsaing saya*'s agency is less developed, and his figure less authoritarian.

Consequently, higher status musicians question the musical skills of their *nat hsaing* colleagues, whose practice is considered 'manual labour'. Compared to the court repertoire, the *nat hsaing* sounds are considered less elaborate – especially that of the leading drum circle (*pat waing*). Because the drum circle is tasked with supporting the possession dances of the spirit mediums, it isn't required to replicate the intricacies of style that characterise other repertoires and performance contexts, and its action remains mostly percussive. In fact, *nat hsaing* musicians compensate for a minor degree of elaboration with a greater intensity of percussiveness, which plays a central role during the ceremony. What is contested is not the spirit song (*nat chin*, see Chapter 4) repertoire *per se* – which is regarded as part of Burmese music tradition, and so maintains a certain degree of prestige – but rather how these songs are performed during the ceremonies. On more than one occasion, musicians stated that 'the *nat hsaing* never performs the full version of (any) song'. As the sound must follow the development of the ritual, in a ceremony there is usually no time to perform a *nat chin*, or any other court piece, in its entirety: the songs performed are usually the result of an extemporaneous bricolage where songs get cut before the piece is completed.²⁶ What is contested is the contemporary practice of *nat hsaing*, stepping away from the performance of "traditional" pieces and including more modern and Western-like popular pieces rearranged for the amusement of the paying devotees.²⁷

1.1.2 *Financial status of nat hsaing musicians*

The economic aspect of *nat hsaing* practice is another vexing issue. Notoriously, a large amount of money, either distributed or thrown in the air for the people to catch, circulates in spirit ceremonies. As I will explain later (Section 1.2), this raises questions of morality linked to the Buddhist ideal of detachment from the material world. Higher status musicians accuse *nat hsaing* performers of being attached to money, and playing only to make a profit, and not 'for the sake of art'. It is true that money circulation is part of the hierarchy between musicians and among the other ritual participants. With the conclusion of each day's ceremony, the *hsaing saya* receives a fixed wage from the *nat kadaw*, distributed amongst the musicians according to the skills necessary to play their instrument, and the

²⁶ The idea "to perform a piece in its entirety" is a view shared also by *nat hsaing* performers to support the claim of a higher quality of their musical style: Yangon's musicians blame Mandalay's musicians for not performing the full, traditional pieces, and vice versa. In my listening experience, neither Mandalay or Yangon *nat hsaing* ensembles ever perform *nat chin* repertoire only, and never a spirit song in its entirety.

²⁷ The menace of globalization for the Burmese music tradition is felt at all levels of Burmese performing arts, not only for the *nat hsaing*. To preserve the tradition, in 2017 the Theatrical Arts Association (Thabin Asiyoun) released a list of rules to that applied to musical and theatrical performances – but they are seldom adhered to.

prestige associated with it: as *hsaing saya*, a drum circle player is accorded more money than anyone else: beside his starting wage, as a rule he receives an extra 10000 kyats during the acrobatic dance of Ko Gyi Kyaw *nat* with the bowl (*kyet laung*); *hne* (shawm) and *kyi waing* (gong circle) players get more money than *pat ma* (suspended drum); *sito* (barrel drums), *linkwin* (large cymbals) and *si* and *wa/walethkout* (bell and woodblock/clapper) are generally considered beginners' instruments, and they get less money than anyone else. Singers (*ahsodaw*) are technically not considered part of the *hsaing* ensemble, and do not take part in the sharing of a fixed wage: their income is determined on the direct donation of money during the ceremony – usually after the performance of songs on request – and on their ability to grab the notes shared through throwing by the *nat kadaw* (Table 1.1).

Musician	Wages (in Burmese Kyat)	Conversion into USD
<i>Hsaing saya</i> (drum circle player)	15000 + 10000 ks (Ko Gyi Kyaw's bowl)	15 + 10 USD
<i>Hne saya</i> (shawm)	10000 ks	10 USD
<i>Kyi ti</i> (gong circle player)	10000 ks	10 USD
<i>Pat ma ti</i> (suspended drum)	7000 ks	7 USD
<i>Sito</i> (barrel drum player)	5000 ks	5 USD
<i>Linkwin</i> (cymbals player)	5000 ks	5 USD
<i>Snewa / walethkout</i> (bell and woodblock/clapper player)	5000 ks	5 USD
<i>Ahsodaw</i> (singer)	Not paid by the <i>hsaing saya</i>	

Table 1.1 Nat *hsaing* musicians' one-day fixed wages in Yangon, 2017.

The throwing of money during the ceremony is one of the main features of the celebration: this modality of sharing (Section 2.1) represents a way for donors, dancers, spirits, musicians and participants to interact together (Brac de la Perrière 1989:201ff.), and contributes to the building of an interactive network among the ritual actors of the ceremony (Section 3.3).

Counting the money that one has received (or managed to catch!) during the *pwe* is the first thing that musicians do when the ceremony is over; mocking and teasing those who didn't earn as much as their same-status musicians is the convention, as is complaining for not having been paid enough. For many musicians, playing for a *nat hsaing* remains an easy, accessible and remunerative activity. In interview, Yelin Bo (Yangon, 15 December 2017) proudly stated, referring to his house in Yangon: 'I earned the money to buy this property and build this house just with the *nat hsaing*.'; and despite his strong belief in *nats*, U Soe Win's activity is of course not a selfless act of devotion: I overheard him complaining about disparity in the distribution of money more than once.

In my earlier research, the *hsaing saya* Kyi Lin Bo clearly outlined the difficulties that derive from the organisation of a *hsaing* ensemble, and the reasons why he prefers to remain a *nat hsaing* performer:

It is easier to organise a *nat hsaing*. For example, for *bala hsaing* you have to pay cash to the comedians and the musicians for one year in advance, for the whole season. There is a contract, you have to invest at least 5 million *kyats* [about 5000 USD], all in advance. And you must know the right people. If you don't have a name, if people do not know you, it is not possible to gain [these money] back. There is a lot of competition. Everyone tries to make a name. If you are not a big name you play only three or four times a year, not enough to cover the expenses. For the *nat hsaing* all this is not necessary. We follow the *nat kadaw* any time he needs us. It is much easier. We play regularly with U Win Hlaing, it is safer.²⁸

The *Maha Yangon Kyi Lin Bo Mingala Hsaing Hpwe* (The Auspicious Hsaing Group of Kyin Lin Bo [from the] Great Yangon) performs exclusively for the famous *kana si* (a senior *nat kadaw*) U Win Hlaing. Probably the most requested and successful *nat kadaw* in Yangon, given the large number of followers, U Win Hlaing cannot afford to stop celebrating his ceremonies, which sometimes go on for seven days a week and for several months. The spirit medium and the *hsaing saya* stipulated an exclusivity contract: U Win Hlaing ceremonies come before any other engagement Kyi Lin Bo might find. There are benefits for both sides: the spirit medium does not have to spend time and energy looking for a *hsaing* ensemble, and the musicians can count on an almost regular income. This link is rooted in the previous generation: Kyi Lin Bo's uncle, *hsaing saya* before him and his teacher, used to maintain a special relationship with U Swan, a famous *nat kadaw* in Yangon, uncle of U Win Hlaing and his teacher. The musicians and mediums have been working together for more than thirty years (Figure 1.4).

Kyi Lin Bo and U Win Hlaing's case might be exceptional, but it exemplifies how *hsaing sayas* and *nat kadaws* tend to maintain a regular working relationship over the years. In Yangon, Yelin Bo has been playing at ceremonies hosted by the *kana si* U Kyaw Soe Moe for the last fifteen years: U Kyaw Soe Moe explained that he prefers Yelin Bo to other *hsaing sayas* because he listens to the *nat kadaw*'s instructions, and he stays on the straight and narrow.²⁹ In Mandalay, the *kana si* Maha Myain Aba Lay postponed the celebration of a *pwe* for a few weeks, waiting for the Min Kyawswa group to be available: according to him, U Win Soe has no rivals in terms of skill, and the spirit medium will not perform with anyone else.³⁰

²⁸ Kyi Lin Bo, Yangon, 12 November 2013.

²⁹ U Kyaw Soe Moe, Yangon, 24 September 2017.

³⁰ Maha Myain Aba Lay, Mandalay, 16 March 2018.



Figure 1.4 The *hsaing saya* Kyi Lin Bo (left) and the *kana si* U Win Hlaing (right) during the dance of the nat Ko Gyi Kyaw. Yangon, October 2013.

The working agreement takes place between the *kana si* and a *hsaing saya* only. It is the *hsaing saya* who takes care of organising the rest of the ensemble. While the main core of a *hsaing* group remains generally stable, the composition of the rest of the ensemble can be quite fluid. Occasionally, some musicians might be replaced: a *hsaing saya* might look for replacements among his family, friends and acquaintances. It is not rare to find *nat hsaing* musicians coming from the same families, or from a core of different families living in the same neighbourhood – sometimes even from the same street. Joining a *nat hsaing* ensemble represents for many people an accessible and remunerative activity, and those with enough musical training are generally inclined to join. During a *pwe*, continuous rotation of musicians and instruments is the rule. As a ceremony lasts for at least six hours, those musicians playing more physically challenging instruments may occasionally want to take a break – or to switch to another instrument. The presence of the *hsaing saya* of the ensemble is generally requested only for crucial moments in the ceremony – such as the dance of the most important spirits: the rest of the ceremony is usually covered by a *saya*'s pupil, or by another member of the group who is capable and experienced enough to play the drum circle: following the ritual action directing the rest of the ensemble. As a result, most *hsaing* musicians are multi-instrumentalists. Finally, it is quite common for other musicians to pay a visit to their friends who are performing at a spirit ceremony. In these cases, the guest musician is invited to temporarily take the place of someone from the performing group. A *nat hsaing* ensemble is a fluidly organised group, whose extension can vary according a musician's connections and ability to source other musicians.

I found this fluidity to be particularly true in Mandalay. Maybe because of the free movement that the city offers – motorbikes can freely circulate, while in Yangon they are forbidden – I would say that Mandalay's *nat hsaing* groups and musicians tend to mix more. Yangon *hsaing* groups, on the other hand, tend to be much more fixed, and their relationships with a particular spirit medium more structured and constant. Also, as Brac de la Perrière (personal communication, 2018) once outlined, *nat* ceremonies tend to be considered as a more serious thing in Yangon than in Mandalay, where they are enjoyed as entertainment. However, as I will now explain, even in Mandalay, the presence of transgender spirit mediums affects the respectability of *nat hsaing* musicians.

1.2. Spirit mediums and the question of (im)morality

Not all musicians are willing to show their face at *nat kana pwe* and play with a *nat hsaing*. The lower prestige that characterises the *nat hsaing* practice is not only due to the lower status attributed to the art and the moral criticism concerning the circulation of money. *Nat hsaing* practice and musicians' social prestige are both affected by the common prejudices concerning the spirit mediums, enforced by a widespread sense of Buddhist ethos.

29 October 2017. It is early morning and I am on the ferry, crossing the dark waters of the Yangon River, heading towards Dala, the most southern township of the city. The *nat pwedaw* (national spirit festival) for Minye Kyawsya *nat* (also known as Talaing Kyaw, a fierce elephant-rider warrior who fought against the Mon army) is taking place at the spirit's palace, and Yelin Bo is performing there. I have no precise information whereabout the spirit's palace is, but I have been assured that everyone knows it and that it will be easy to reach. As soon as I set foot off the ferry, a bunch of men start asking if I need a ride. I explain where I am heading, and after some negotiations I jump on the back of a one of the men's motorbikes. We leave behind the busy ferry terminal, and after a few minutes I am immersed in the green landscape of the township: the cement and asphalt have not reached Dala yet, and the view of paddy fields and palms that dominate the sides of the bumpy road is a nice break from the congested traffic and pollution of central Yangon. After about half an hour, it is clear that my driver has absolutely no idea of where the *nat* palace is: when I disappointedly ask him why he picked me up anyway if he did not know the way, he apologetically says that he does not follow the *nats*, but only the teaching of the Buddha, and that is why he is not familiar with this palace. When we finally reach our destination, after a few more wrong turns, some *nat kadaws* at the palace entrance welcome me with ambiguous giggles. Some of them are barely teenagers, probably still in the process of learning how to properly propitiate and dance for the spirits, helping in the house of a *kana si* who came here to attend the festival; other older participants wear the ceremonial make-up and perfectly mastered head-dressing, which contrast with their *pahso* (Burmese sarong) tied with a large man-like knot. The driver puts on the compliant smile that Burmese have when they try to mask embarrassment. He checks out the dancers

while taking my money, and before riding away he giggles to me and whispers: ‘So, you like faggots’ celebrations [*achauk pwe*]?’.

This is but one of the many exchanges that I had with people in regard to *nat* ceremonies. While not wanting to generalise, I would say that these kind of opinions and stereotypes about *nats* and *nat kadaws* are quite common and accepted; only a few times did I meet someone who did not have (or demonstrated that they had) any reservations about that world.

To the Burmese, the spirits are ontologically real: everyone *believes* in (*youn-*) them – usually out of fear and respect. However, *worshipping* (*kokwe-*) spirits is a completely different matter: to begin following the *nats* constitutes an obligation full of taboos and restrictions for the worshipper; if not respected, the spirits might cast their wrath on the unfortunate subject. Despite the worldly benefits that a relationship with the *nats* could bring, not everyone is ready to roll down this potentially mischievous slope. For this reason, the cult of the *nat* remains something from which some people keep a certain distance – or at least this is how they prefer to appear. Many people told me that they consider themselves ‘real Buddhists’ because they follow the Five Precepts (abstention from killing, stealing, illicit-sexual relations, lying, and imbibing any intoxicant), pray every day, and make donations to the monks – seemingly a more practical code of morality (M. Nash 1963). In the urban centres, the ambiguity associated with spirit cult ceremonies is linked to socially accepted norms, and specifically to the large presence of spirit mediums performing cross-dressing and displaying ambiguous gender identities. As Keeler explains:

Many female mediums behave in a forthright manner, smoke cigarettes, and drink alcohol: their demeanor befits the masculine identity of the spirits who enter them. Male mediums, in contrast, comport themselves in an effeminate manner. It is not that they grow shy and self-effacing, as the model for young, modest women would encourage them to do, but rather that they affect graceful gestures and feminine pronouns to go with the extravagantly colorful outfits and elaborate makeup they put on. For the rest, though, in contrast to idealized feminine comportment, they speak with authority: like high-status, middle-aged women, they advise, instruct, and chide people freely. (Keeler 2017:170-171)

In the urban centres, most of the spirit mediums are *meinmasha* (trans-gender men). The social stigma is quite strong and widespread (Spiro 1978[1967]:209ff.): people refer to them with the pejorative *achauk* or *achaukma* (faggot, lit. ‘dry’);³¹ an object of mockery and ridicule, they are believed to not to

³¹ As Keeler (2017:171) points out, the word *achauk* implies not only cross-dressing, but also to be ‘attracted sexually to masculine-gendered males, while themselves choosing to take the passive (anal-receptive) role in sex.’ According to Ho (2009:286-287), ‘Achauk seems to have become synonymous with *nat kadaw* and the older Burmese term *meinmasha* when Ne Win and the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) criminalized the supernatural, forcing its articulation underground. These government restrictions apparently opened a professional vacuum that became increasingly occupied by a stigmatized minority called *meinmasha* or *achauk*, near synonyms which could be loosely understood as “transgendered/effeminate homosexual men”’.

be living according the Five Precepts – particularly, exceeding in the consumption of alcohol (and to find good excuses for that during the spirit ceremonies) and having illicit and indecent sexual intercourse. Trans-genderism is justified from a religious point a view: being *achauk* is often viewed as a karmic consequence for a fault in a past life (Ho 2009:294) and it is generally associated with karmic inferiority (Keeler 2016:800).

Following an initial submission to the power of the spirits, after a few years of apprenticeship with a *kana si* (a senior *nat kadaw* organising ceremonies) the *nat kadaw*-to-be will regain agency and authority over, and the power to control the *nats* – but without becoming a ‘master of the spirits’ (Brac de la Perrière 1998a). During and after this process, his/her social status is somehow improved: the *meinmasha*, who in the eyes of Burmese lack power and social respect, go into a professional/social role which guarantees a certain respectability (Keeler 2016:797; see also Endres 2006; Endres and Lauser 2011). These matters emerged clearly in an interview with Htoo Zaw (Figure 1.5), a young pupil of U Win Hlaing and one of my main informants in Mandalay:

If the people are talking to the *nat kadaw*, they have to speak politely. But normal gay... [makes a sudden hand gesture indicating disdain] U Win Hlaing always says: ‘Buddha said that the monks are kind of begging, begging the food from the people. The *nat kadaw* has to beg too. And the people have to pay respect.’³²

Being a *nat kadaw* is a guarantee of respect – not only because they communicate with the spirits, but also because of the knowledge they must have about Burmese culture in order to perform the ceremonies. Some informants have stressed how the success that *meinmasha* spirit mediums encounter in the urban contexts is linked to their gender identity. In interceding to the spirits on the account of a devotee, a *nat kadaw* performs fortune-telling – an ability acquired through practice during the apprenticeship, but somehow assisted by his male/female, and eventually human/spirit, in-betweenness (Keeler 2016). Fortune-telling can take two forms: one, *nat haw-*, takes place during the spirit possession dance, and the spirit medium speaks directly with the voice of the *nat* who is possessing him; the other, *nat kywe haw-*, is performed through the dropping and reading of ritual cowrie-shells (*kywe*), which are believed to be expressing the will of the spirits. In both cases, the *nat kadaw* negotiates between the devotee and the spirits, adapting his speech and mannerisms to the different situations. Fortune-telling depends directly on the ability of the *nat kadaw* to read and get in contact with the requesting devotee:

Men and women, we [*meinmasha*] can understand both. If you’re [a] man, you can’t understand women, and women cannot understand you. To be a *nat kadaw* you have to *nat haw dae* and *kywe haw dae* [do the fortune-telling] ... sometimes we can feel like them. If someone asks me, and I am a man, I can convert my soul to feel like a man. So, my talking is more manly. And same for the women. We can, you know... communicate very easily with the people. But for

³² Htoo Zaw, Taungbyone, 16 August 2018.

men or women *nat kadaw*, they cannot understand the [other] men [or women]. This communication is a little bit in conflict. So that's why this kind [*meinmasha*] of *nat kadaw* is more successful. [Because] they are in the middle.³³

1.2.1 Performing gender

From a purely performative point of view, some mediums believe that cross-genderism positively influences the possession dance. The embodiment of male and female spirits is facilitated for those *nat kadaws* whose gender identity is not tied to Burmese canonical gender roles:

How could a male *nat kadaw* dance Amay Gyan, or another female *nat*? They have a strong [mannish] body. And female *nat kadaw*, they have breasts, how could they dance Ko Gyi Kyaw? But the *achaik* can dance as ‘real men’ [*yauk kya asit*, ‘heterosexual man’] or women. There is no difference in the meaning, only in the performance.³⁴

Performing in a *nat kana pwe*, the Burmese spirit mediums embrace fluid gender identities, transcending their sexed bodies: they must embody many different spirits, moving fluidly between masculine and feminine, young and old, refined and harsh spirit characters. Gender transformation is linked to the ‘process of coming closer to the sacred’ (Tedlock 2003:304). Despite a potentially parodic element (Butler 1999[1990], 1993), this is not the intent of the transvestitism. Through performance, the *meinmasha nat kadaw* actually becomes a (spirit) woman:

Most of the gays, the *meinmasha*, they want to be women, girlish. That's why they wear make-up. Wanting to be a girl means wanting to be beautiful! [laugh] They are just smart! So, when wearing make-up or well dressed up like women, instead of normal clothes, [they feel] more confident being a girl. [...] The gays, we are physically male, sex is male, but we want to be girls, so we learn a lot about ‘girl life’, we are interested in girl life, so we understand the women. Also, being a man, we understand the men, too.³⁵

Despite the success and the improvement in social status that *meinmasha* encounter as spirit mediums, that of *nat kadaw* is not an exclusive cross-gendered role. As a rule, both male, female and cross-gendered can move towards spirit mediumship; moreover, in Burmese belief, it is the *nat* who initially takes the initiative to engage in a relationship with a human: one cannot really choose to become a *nat kadaw*. Because of this, *nat kadaw* has been interpreted as the figure of a ritual specialist with a

³³ Htoo Zaw, Taungbyone, 16 August 2018.

³⁴ U Win Hlaing, Yangon, 29 November 2013. See also Ho (2009:290).

³⁵ Htoo Zaw, Taungbyone, 16 August 2018. These words strongly resonate with the case of the Chilean *machi*, a spirit medium of the Mapuchi people: according to Bacigalupo (2004:451), the *machis* do not perform a different gender identity to transgress or to celebrate femininity, but to become a woman; their rituals are performances of fluid gender identities (Bacigalupo 2007:79). In Vietnamese *len dong ceremonies*, Norton (2006:90) explains that ‘When possessed by the spirits, mediums traverse genders’, adopting the spirit’s gender through ‘clothes, mannerisms, way of speaking, ritual acts, and way of dancing’.

feminine dimension. A *nat kadaw* is literally a ‘spirit’s spouse’.³⁶ The relationship with a *nat* begins with the spirit seducing/afflicting (*swe-*, lit. ‘to grip’) the human, because attracted by his/her *leikpya* (‘soul’, lit. ‘butterfly’); eventually, the seducer *nat* will likely become the *nat gaung swe* (lit. ‘spirit gripping to the head’), with whom the medium will maintain an elected relationship of the marital kind.³⁷ The ritual introduction of the *nat*’s *leikpya* into the human (*leikpya theik-*) definitely stipulates the relationship (Brac de la Perrière 1998a). Among *meinmasha*, Ma Ngwe Daung (Lady Silver Wings) is a quite common *nat gaung swe*: she is believed to seduce men, transforming them into transvestites; transvestites and women alike are believed to have ‘weaker soul’ (*leikpya nge-*, or also *leikpya mu-*, lit. ‘small’ or ‘soft soul’), and so are more likely to be subjugated by the power of a spirit. In this, Brac de la Perrière (2007; 2016:8ff.) recognises the general structures of power already present in Burmese culture: Buddhism and marital life both enforce the idea of the feminine being karmically inferior, not to mention a menace to men’s *hpoun* (an innate power that justifies the superiority of men and monks) and characterised by an unquenchable sexuality to be kept under control through men’s authority.

Some ‘real man’ (*yauk kya asit*) *nat kadaws* I have encountered express harsh critique towards the whole category of *meinmasha nat kadaws*: they were accused of having become spirit mediums just for the sake of being beautiful, to show off in their ceremonies with unorthodox costumes and expensive jewels, and in so doing, taking serious and real traditions for frivolities. Experienced *nat hsaing* musicians told me that they ‘believe in *nats*, but do not trust the *meinmasha nat kadaw*’, because their dance (*nat aka*) is not a real manifestation of the presence of the spirit (*nat winpu-*), but just a performance (see Section 2.2.1). These comments highlight how *nat kadaws* society is not free from envy and jealousy: those comments directed towards homosexuals are sometimes enforced through the social stigma generally associated with *meinmasha* in Burma.

³⁶ With the intention of distancing themselves from criticism, some spirit mediums stated that the word *nat kadaw* is not to be intended as /nat kadaw/, a ‘spirit’s spouse’, but as /nat ka taw/, lit. ‘[one who is] clever [at] dancing the *nat*’. In Burmese, the two configurations are written in the same manner, but are pronounced slightly different.

³⁷ The *nat kadaws* I have encountered are said to maintain a family relationship with their *nat gaung swe* – older/younger brother (*ako/maung*), older or younger sister (*ama/nyima*), or mother (*amay*). Not all the *nats* are eligible for this: only those whose cult is quite recent and active can become someone’s *gaung swe*. Ancient *nat* or spirits believed to be not powerful enough are excluded. Non-specialist spirit mediums, devotees and followers become *nat thathami* (lit. ‘spirit’s son(s)/daughter(s)’ – another indication of the ritually established family ties); only the ritual specialist is regarded as ‘spirit’s spouse’.



Figure 1.5 Htoo Zaw before dancing as Ma Ma Oo nat, a young woman killed because she rejected the sexual attentions of a Taungbyone brother. Thakinma Mountain, Mandalay, March 2018.

1.2.2 Competing nat kadaws

That world of the *nat kadaws* remains a very competitive environment: when participating at national festivals (*pwedaw*), all the spirit mediums I had already encountered were trying to convince me to stay at their place for the night, and did not seem happy to find out that I had already made arrangements to stay at another medium's place; on one occasion, returning from a *nat kana pwe* in Mandalay, being driven by a *nat kadaw* friend, I spotted another *nat kana* taking place on the way home: however, we could not stop by and have a look because the *kana si* holding that ceremony was an ex-pupil of my friend, and for reasons he did not want to explain, the two did not have a good relationship. Competing *nat kadaws* look at each other's performances to either criticise and/or 'steal' each other's 'tricks' and clients. These kind of exchanges mostly take place at national festivals, where hundreds of *nat kadaws* come, living in temporary camps side by side for several days, to honour a specific spirit in the domains they belong to: during this time, the constant confrontation among different *nat lanzin* (the 'school' of a *nat kadaw*, lit. 'the path of the *nat*', see Section 7.1) also contributes to the integration of local practice into a national standard of *nat* performances (Brac de la Perrière 2011:165).

Some of these festivals present a precise ritual hierarchy of *nat kadaws*. At a national level, the most celebrated is the Taungbyone festival. The ritual activities are carried out by the *Nat Ouk* ('Master of the *nats*', a hereditary function) who coordinates a court of *nat kadaws* acting as Ministers (*Baung*),

Queens (*Tho*), and other courtiers (lancers, musicians, etc.) according to precise hierarchical royal protocols.³⁸ Ministers and Queens are prestigious figures who accompany the offering dance (*tet pwe*) of the ordinary *nat kadaws* in the Great Palace (*Nan Gyi*) of the two Taungbyone Brothers, Min Gyi and Min Lay. The order and duration of each spirit medium's *tet pwe* is decided hierarchically, as is the size and disposition of their temporary pavilions around the palace (Brac de la Perrière 1993a).

The celebration of the festival of Yadanagu, in Amarapura, also presents a hierarchical structure of Queens and Ministers. Ba Nya Aung (Figure 1.6), one of my main research participants in Mandalay, is proud of his position as Minister at the Yadanagu *pwedaw*:

the *nan htein* [a palace's trustee] at the Yadanagu [festival], asked me to take the *baung* [headgear identifying a Minister]. But I only had three years of experience in the *nat* field, and I thought I was too young. I asked my teacher for advice, he said: 'You are [a] very young *nat kadaw*, and if you are young the *baung* is very heavy [i.e. it's a big responsibility], that's why [you should] wait'. So, I waited seven more years, and I accumulated ten years of experience in the *nat* field, and when the *nan htein* asked me again, this time I decided to accept the *baung*. [...] I always behaved and remained humble, that's why they chose me. Also, Popa Medaw *nat* really loves me, so the *nat* put some pressure on the *nan htein* to make them choose me.³⁹

Beyond the spatial and temporal limits of the Yadanagu festival however, Ba Nya Aung specifies that he does not enjoy a particular privileges or respect because of his role as a Minister. In private ceremonies, his position is just the same as any other *kana si* in Burma. However, some *nat kadaws* explained that the role of Yadanagu's Minister is not really prestigious, especially compared to a Taungbyone's Minister. Moreover, some do not regard Ba Nya Aung as a good and honest *nat kadaw* because of his questionable past.

In an interview, Ba Nya Aung explains that his activity as a *nat kadaw* started at the time of his arrest by the military during the dictatorship, when he was in his twenties. A Mandalay University Alumnus in chemistry, after his degree he started to tutor unofficially in a high school. Caught by the police without the necessary permissions, he spent two weeks in jail: desperate, he turned to the *nats* to seek their help with his difficult situation; after many prayers, the Mother of the two Taungbyone Brothers, the Lady of Popa, visited him in a dream and answered his prayers. The next day he was free. After this epiphanic experience, he observed the promise (*adeit than*, lit. 'vow') to 'offer himself' he had made to the Lady of Popa: without having received any training yet, he went to Mount Popa and performed a proper possession dance, under the astonished eyes of many spirit mediums. He was evidently favoured by the spirits. After this, he turned to the *nat kadaw* path, studying with two different

³⁸ According to Brac de la Perrière (1993a), the ceremony represents a celebration of the Burmese kings' authority over the *nat* cult – an authority the kings received from Thagya Min, Lord of Heavens and Protector of Buddhism. Each year, the festival reinforces the links between Buddhism, Burmese royalty, the cult of the Thirty-seven, the *nat kadaws* and the devotees at a national level.

³⁹ Ba Nya Aung, Taungbyone, 16 August 2018.

teachers: four years later, he was officially invested as *nat kadaw*, under the protection (*nat gaung swe*) of the powerful witch-*nat* Amay Yay Yin.

Ba Nya Aung's vicissitudes are well known among his fellow *nat kadaws*. Dark gossip of the *real* reason why he was arrested circulates. His competence as a *nat kadaw* is also questioned: according to some, he never really completed his apprenticeship, so he should not be called a *nat kadaw*, let alone a real *kana si*, a Master of Ceremony. All these rumours affect Ba Nya Aung's reputation: even after he was trusted with the position of Minister at Yadanagu, the rumours never really stopped. Also, for this reason, he found a peculiar way to continue his spirit medium activity.

I firstly met Ba Nya Aung at the Shweguni festival for the *nat* Ko Gyi Kyaw, in February 2018. At that time, I was wandering around the village's Great Palace with my notebook and my camera, chatting with the pilgrims and the *nat kadaws*. The spirit mediums were queuing, waiting to dance in the Palace of the great drunkard Prince. Ba Nya Aung, in casual clothes, was there to support his friend Hnin Ko Hein, who was dressed up for the ritual dance: I didn't recognise him for a *nat kadaw*, and when he invited me to 'his' *nat kana pwe* in Mandalay, the next month, I thought him to be one of the many followers and donors that support the activity of a spirit medium. A month later, on the day of the ceremony, I met with Ba Nya Aung and three more *nat kadaws* in Pathein Gyi, one of the districts of Mandalay, about twenty minutes' drive east of the city. Riding our motorbikes, they took me to a beer shop before the ceremony started. In front of quite a few beers and snacks, Ba Nya Aung introduced me to his friends, Ko Thar Nge, U Aung Kyein and Hnin Ko Hein. He explained that they were all *kana si*, and they called themselves, not without a certain irony, the "Golden Brothers": instead of competing, Ba Nya Aung and his friends decided to support each other every time a *nat kana* ceremony took place.



Figure 1.6 Ba Nya Aung (left) and Ko Thar Nge (right) in their full nat kadaw attire before the ritual dancing.
Pathein Gyi, Mandalay, March 2018.

That of Ba Nya Aung and his friends is a unique situation. In their group there is no a main *kana si*. As I have already explained, a *kana si* oversees the organisational matters of a private *nat kana* ceremony – making arrangements with the donors, contacting the musicians, preparing the offerings, and generally directing the ceremony. These responsibilities are reflected in the authority that the main *kana si* exercises in one particular ceremony: pupils, other *nat kadaws* and even elder *kana sis* invited to join as special guests usually do not dance for the main spirits called to the *nat kana* – most of all for Ko Gyi Kyaw. The most important *nats* are always reserved for the *kana si* who oversees the *pwe*. The organisation and the performance directly reflect a small-scale hierarchical structure of power in a troupe of spirit mediums. This is a commonality that I recognised among all the *kana si* I have encountered in Yangon and Mandalay: one *kana si*, “ruling” over a group of more or less experienced spirit mediums and devotees. On the other hand, the four “Golden Brothers” are equals: whenever a *nat kana* takes place, they call each other for mutual support; they cooperate for the organisation of the ceremony, and equally share the income; during a *pwe*, they take shifts to dance the main roles.⁴⁰ They explained that

⁴⁰ In regard to the *nat* shrine (*nat sin*) temporarily set up in a *nat kana pwe*, Ba Nya Aung and his friends never clearly explained whose *nat* statues (*poundaw*) they used. Whose statues would be used is not a secondary matter. The *nat* statues are believed to be alive, imbued with the soul of the *nats*; in a *pwe*, they are the source of the possession dances. A *nat kadaw*’s statues represent something really personal: old, inherited images signify the teachers’ lineages, whose transmission can become the object of great discussion and contention among pupils (Brac de la Perrière 2009c); the carving and consecration of a new image depends on the taste of the *nat kadaw*.

they decided to work together because they do not want to have pupils: in order to perform a good *nat kana*, at least a few dancers must be employed, to ensure they can dance for all the *nats* without exhaustion; pupils dance for those less important but mandatory *nats* whom a *kana si* does not bother to dance. Having decided to do without pupils, the deal among Ba Nya Aung and his friends provides the necessary number of dancers for a proper *nat kana*.

As they share the organisation of their ceremonies, the four Golden Brothers also share the success that automatically comes with it. The success of spirit mediums is directly connected to their authority as *kana si*. Greater *nat kadaws* are looked up to for their success – but are not necessarily seen as examples to follow: some value financial success more; others stress their adherence to Buddhist moral ideals; all underline the importance of the relationship with their donors and supporters. Sithu Thet, an emerging young *nat kadaw* operating in Yangon, explains:

There are many successful *nat kadaws* in Yangon and Myanmar, they show their power, especially how many donors and followers they have, what kind of *taung shay* [long and richly decorated *longyi*] [...] Many are in competition. [...] But some are going the wrong way, they dance just to show off their diamonds, their necklace, their gold, what they wear, what sort of donors they have, only for competition. I don't think it is right. All followers, maybe some are poor, some are rich, some are normal... whatever they are, whoever they are, we must take care of their life, not distinguish [between] high or poor class. On behalf of them, we must donate, we must [make the] offer. This is the responsibility of the *nat kadaw*. A good *nat kadaw* must have a good character, he must be honest and friendly. But each *nat kadaw* is unique.⁴¹

What assesses the success of a spirit medium is both the size and status of the supporters they manage to attract to their rituals – a direct expression of their “charismatic power” – *dago* (Brac de la Perrière 2009c:290; Keeler 2017:153). The more the supporters and the participants, the more successful the spirit medium is considered. It can be understood that of the supporters are central to a *kana si*'s activity: in the past, spirit mediums spread the word of a coming ceremony through word-of-mouth; nowadays, they also “advertise” ceremonies through social media, thus being able to reach more people. The participation of a larger number of devotees and random people to a ceremony is a guarantee of a merrier performance. With this in mind, let's now consider the role of donors, devotees participating in urban *nat kana pwes*.

and indicates his/her social status. Despite the equality that the Golden Brothers said was characteristic of their group, the use of one or another's statues might reveal how one of them has more authority over the others.

⁴¹ Sithu Thet, Yangon, 2 June 2018.

1.3. Seeking the help of which spirits? Cosmological hierarchies and the urban devotees

Most of the ceremonies I have attended in Yangon and Mandalay took place in a devotee's private house. Part of the house's living area – due to the hot temperatures, usually an outside porch, or a prolongation of the living room on the adjacent street – was converted into a *kana* ('temporary pavilion') and arranged for the celebration of the *nat kana pwe*. I used to arrive at the designated place at least a couple of hours before the beginning of the ceremony. The activity was already intense: the musicians were setting up their instruments; the *kana si*'s attendants were running around, making the final adjustments to the *nat* shrine, preparing the necessary ritual offerings, and choosing their dresses; the host was coordinating all the members of the family, readily providing whatever musicians and mediums needed for the preparation of the *kana*. No guests had arrived yet. Usually, my presence was immediately noticed by the owner of the house: with the kindness that characterises any welcoming host, I was usually offered a seat in the *kana* area and a cup of *mohinga*, the national Burmese hot fish soup dish. Surrounded by the host and other familiars, I was asked many questions, mostly food-related, about Europe and my culture. I answered according to the possibilities given by my slowly improving skills in the Burmese language; in return, while I sincerely praised Burmese food, I asked them questions about their lives, their jobs, and their belief in spirits – until the ceremony was about to start.

As owner of the house, the devotee hosting the *pwe* is the *ein shin* ('house lord'); as the sponsor of the ceremony, s/he is the *pwe shin* ('ceremony lord'), or *kana shin* ('pavilion lord'). In any case, s/he is addressed as *ahlu shin/shinma*, 'donor lord/lady', or 'main donor'.⁴² Though the reasons for hosting a ceremony can vary from person to person, they can be reduced to two main motives:

1. to fulfil an inherited family ritual obligation (*yoya*, 'tradition'); or
2. to celebrate the relationship entered into with a particular spirit because of *belief* (*youn kyi hmu*).

In the first case, the devotees honour the spirit(s) overseeing the geographical area they consider to be their natal territory (a specific village or an entire region), with a ceremony (*yoya pwe*); in the second case, the *nat kana pwe* is conceived as a thank-giving ceremony for the helpful advice (mostly relating to economic success) that a devotee has previously received from the spirits (*adeit than pwe*): the benefits one has obtained through their help must be reciprocated in the form of a donation, according to the vow (*adeit than*) pronounced at the time of the request. In both scenarios, the spirits are believed to cast their benevolence over the devotees, who thus get health and prosperity. To have the (financial)

⁴² Ceremonies can also be host in a spirit medium's house, in the shrine of a religious compound, and sometimes on the road. In any case, the celebration of the ceremony must be approved by the council authorities responsible for that area.

means to celebrate the *nats* convinces people to consider themselves to be under the spirits' protection (Brac de la Perrière 2016:15).

Depending on the benefits obtained, the donation can vary from a simple *kadaw pwe* (an offering made of coconut and bananas) to a *nat kana pwe*, a proper celebration where not only the spirits, but also familiars, friends – and potentially random passers-by – are invited to join and share a part of the – mostly financial, but also spiritual – benefits.

The relationship between a devotee and the spirits is usually mediated by a trusted *nat kadaw*, who interprets the advice of the spirits and prays on behalf of his/her supporters. This relationship tends to be endured for many years: spirit mediums maintain a certain number of faithful followers (*nat thathami*, ‘son(s) and daughter(s) of the spirits’) that support his/her activity – not only through the donation of *nat kanas*, but also by providing financial support to allow the medium to join national festivals or go on pilgrimage to important religious sites. When a supporter needs advice from the spirits, s/he visits the *nat kadaw*, who promptly contacts them. The spirits’ advice is revealed by the *nat kadaw* through two different forms of fortune-telling:

1. *Kywe haw*-: the prediction is made through the reading of seven conch-shells (*kywe*) imbued with the power of the conch-shell spirits; this oracle is usually considered more objective: the *nat kadaw* formulates yes-or-no questions for the conch-shell spirits, and interprets the positions of the conch-shells;
2. *Nat haw*-: the prediction is given by a *nat* belonging to the Thirty-seven Lords who speaks through the mouth of the *nat kadaw*; the prediction can occur in the controlled environment of a house, where the *nat kadaw* invites the spirits to enter his body without any dancing, or in a ceremony, during the performance of the possession dance (*nat kana haw*).

Most of the *pwes* I have witnessed in the urban centres did not only involve *nats*, but *thaik* (a type of spirit, protectors of a religious compound) and *weikza* (practitioner of occult arts): among these, that of the *thaik* Naga Medaw (Dragon Mother) and of the *weikza* Bo Min Kaung are the most revered and celebrated. Consequently, urban *nat kana pwe* also included a shorter celebration of pagoda spirits (*thaik pwe*) and *weikza* (*dat pwe* – from *dat*, ‘spiritual power’).⁴³

Different spirits can provide different kind of help and advice. Among the Thirty-seven, Nankarine Medaw, the Buffalo Mother of the city of Pegu, and Ko Gyi Kyaw, the Prince of *nat kana* celebrations, are quite popular. The help of the latter is particularly sought by those who are involved in show business: in 2013 I witnessed a young man, who intended to pursue a career as a TV presenter, putting his stock photo in the *nat*'s ritual offering and profoundly bowing, assisted by a *nat kadaw*; as

⁴³ On the *weikza* figures and *dat*, see Rozenberg (2015) and Patton (2018).

Ko Gyi Kyaw is fond of music, dance, and entertainment in general, to ask for his assistance in such matters is an obvious choice. The advice of the Buffalo Mother of Pegu is requested in matters related to financial investments or trade: if we hypothesise a connection between previous buffalo sacrifice practices, transferred and adapted into the Buddhist milieu, and represented in the *nat* cult practices, the association the Burmese make between finances and the figure of a buffalo – symbolising wealth in many Southeast Asian cultures – is not too odd.

However, other spirits can undertake a similar function: in a *nat kana pwe* in Mandalay, in 2018, the hosting *ein shin* explained to me that it was thanks to the favours of the *thaik* Naga Medaw that her business in the timber trade had improved exponentially in the last years; for this reason, she feels compelled to offer an *adeit than pwe* every year to the spirit. She believes herself to have been a *naga* in one of her previous lives: obtaining more wealth means that she can use that money as donations to monasteries, and share it with her family and friends. She believes in behaving according to the will of the *thaik* spirits who sent her into the human world to support the Buddhist faith: the accumulation of wealth, she explained, is directly connected to the increase of her *kutho* (Buddhist merit), and so she aims to improve her chances of eventually reaching *Neibban* (Nirvana) in one of her next lives. From a Buddhist point of view, compared to others, her position is karmically better; however, she has to preserve this pre-established karmic advantage through works of merit. As Aung Thwin explains:

The association of merit (and ultimately salvation) with rank and birth, power and money, did indeed “teach” that hierarchy was pre-ordained and that salvation could be attained by those who were higher in rank and power than by those who were not. It was an argument that the established order itself could not be transformed; one changed only oneself. (Aung Thwin 1981:49)

Some Burmese believe that those who wish to rid themselves of the vice of drinking, should better not ask the *nats*, as many of those spirits indulge in the very same vice – and turn to the *weikza* Bo Min Kaung instead, an example of perseverance in the study of the occult arts to attain *Neibban* used as an encouragement to abstain from drinking.⁴⁴

The range of beings potentially included in a *nat kana* ceremony can be very wide. Each celebration can be easily “customised” to meet the devotional needs of the devotee: almost all the ceremonies I have attended consisted, in fact, of *pwes* where *nat*, *thaik* and *dat* ‘lines’,⁴⁵ were bridged together by the efforts of the ritual specialists – while it is normally asserted that those ‘lines’ cannot

⁴⁴ Maha Myain Aba Lay (Mandalay, 16 March 2018), a spirit medium belonging to both the *nat* and *dat* lines, explains that ‘some people don’t want to worship the *nats* because it’s something that you have to do continuously. If you don’t, they will punish you. So, those who are afraid of the *nats* prefer to pray to Aba [weikza] Bo Min Kaung. They prefer the Buddha’s way. They must donate to the Buddha, the Sangha [the monks] every day... there is no punishment. [...] It’s better with the Aba.’

⁴⁵ People often referred to the celebration of these ‘lines’ in *nat kana* ceremonies as *thaik pwe* and *dat pwe*. For practical reasons, in this work I will keep referring to the entire ceremony using the term *nat kana pwe* only.

really be crossed or combined (Brac de la Perrière 2011:179). However, *nats* remain the key, mandatory figures to be celebrated, according to a precise cosmological hierarchy: *thaiks*, *weikzas* and other beings are included to fill the interstitial spaces of this hierarchy.

The inclusion of *thaiks*, *weikzas* and other beings, represents a response to the emergence of the new Burmese urban classes, who prefer to deal with figures more closely associated with Buddhist values, than with the religious sphere of the Thirty-seven Lords (Brac de la Perrière 2011, 2012). Most of the ceremonies I attended in urban centres were dominated by people belonging to the emerging Burmese middle and high class: their houses were large and modern, equipped with all the latest technological comforts; in some cases, a donor family's younger generation was working abroad, occupying important and remunerative posts. These families have moved to the cities and partly lost the connection to their rural roots; sometimes, they are influenced by criticism of the backwardness and amorality of *nat* worship. Nevertheless, in these times of economic development for the whole country, their requests for updated versions of *nat kana pwe* makes sense: to run a successful business, the emerging urban classes of traders and dealers may need all available assistance, included that of the spirits. While economic development can be beneficial, with it comes new types of financial risk and insecurity, psychological, and very real fears that people attempt to negate by seeking the help of a superior authority. As true believers, they attribute the successes of their business activities in recent years⁴⁶ to the influential powers of the spirits and other beings (Brac de la Perrière 2011:169). More than one *nat kadaw* in Yangon told me that, in the recent years, the number of *nat kana pwes* had increased considerably.

⁴⁶ In the 1990s, Burma's reengagement with world markets resulted in an economic growth.



Figure 1.7 A devotee, overwhelmed by the presence of the thaik spirit Naga Medaw, is assisted by two nat kadaws (left) and her family. Yangon, November 2017.

1.3.1 A women's ritual world?

Packed in the crowd alongside dozens of other people, possibly in rather uncomfortable sitting positions, weakened by the melting heat but excited by the blasting sound of the *nat hsaing* and the choreography of the dances, whenever I looked around in any *nat kana* I could not help but notice how there were always more women in attendance than men. (Figure 1.7)

Burmese women have long been considered by Westerners to enjoy a certain autonomy, to the point of spreading a false impression of gender equality in Burma (Ho 2011, 2015; Ikeya 2005, 2011).⁴⁷ As I have already explained in the beginning of this chapter, gender hierarchies do exist in Burma, and are quite rooted in Buddhist-based social mores: women are considered not only karmically inferior to men (they cannot attain *Neibban* in their life as women, and must be reborn as men), but represent a potential menace to the men's innate spiritual power (*hpoun*); for this reason, several taboos and restrictions affect their behaviour in their daily lay and religious lives. While men are traditionally expected to be preoccupied by lofty spiritual topics that detach them from practical matters, women must deal with more material, everyday matters – particularly money and finance. As the participation

⁴⁷ Keeler partly disagrees with Ho and Ikeya's points: he argues that, despite remaining subordinated, Burmese women enjoy, 'at specific times, within specific limits', certain privileges and prestige. (Keeler 2016:237)

in spirit ceremonies is strictly connected to financial success, it is not a surprise to find significant participation of women in *nat kana pwes*. To use Keeler's words:

To many Burmans, it is obvious that women (and their transvestite friends and associates) are likely to interest themselves in this sort of activity, since women focus so much on material matters, on forging (dependent) connections with powerful others, and on finding opportunities to enter into exchanges by which to gain immediate profit. [...] Men should not display any such interest. Or rather, they cannot do so without risk of injury to their impression of their own dignity. (Keeler 2016:172-73)

Among the Burmese, one often hears another explanation for women engaging more prominently in these ceremonies: as is the case for cross-gendered spirit mediums, women's feminine souls are considered 'weaker' (*leikpya nge-*), and consequently more easily accessible to the *nats*. In the *nat kana* ceremonies I attended, stronger manifestations of spirit embodiment were much more common among women than men: in particular, *naga thaik* spirit possessions were manifested through strong trance behaviours, which forced one or more female dancers to suddenly start rolling on the floor, imitating the movements of the mythical serpent, driven by the intense *nat hsaing* sound, completely overwhelmed by the power of the spirits – in some cases for several, long minutes. I will discuss these matters more extensively in Section 2.1 and 3.2; for now, it is sufficient to state that some devotees justified their behaviour due to a special connection to the *naga thaiks* in their previous life. When I questioned some of them about what they remembered after the trance, they could not recall anything of those experiences; all reported similar feelings – the impression of floating above the ground, a diffuse sense of ecstatic power dominating them, and memory loss concerning specific actions.

Naga thaik possessions were the most common, but on more than one occasion, female (and in minor a few male) devotees also experienced the entering of *nat* spirits. These experiences were characterised by a different kind of trance: depending on the power of the embodied spirit, the devotee could partly recall things, or experience a complete loss of memory; while evidently 'mounted' by a spirit (*nat si-*), the *nat* person replaced that of the human host, thus enabling her to 'access transgressive opportunities' (Ho 2009:277).

However, it was very rare to see any spirit (*nat* or *thaik*) entering the bodies of random people during a ceremony: a certain spirit was always expected to enter the body of a specific person (specifically the *ahlu shin* and/or members of her family) at particular moments. The whole ritual architecture of a *nat kana pwe* is designed to leave the devotees a window in which they can dance with, and for, the spirits by themselves, without the "interference" of the *nat kadaw*, directly enjoying the celebration with their close relatives and friends, dancing and singing to the songs that they love most. However, these moments are not completely free from the cosmological hierarchies that organise the stages of the ceremony where the *nat kadaw* is in charge.

1.4. Conclusions

Hierarchies and hierarchical thinking govern the *nat kana* community. The relationships between actors within the community, and between its actors and the larger the Burmese society, are shaped by differences of status, determined by prejudices, assessed on financial success, moral behaviour, or karmic position.

In the larger scheme of Burmese performing arts, *nat hsaing* musicians are considered to occupy the lower levels: they perform ‘sitting on the ground’, usually for just a few people and small amounts of money; they are not in charge of the performance: they hardly play any song in full, because they have to follow the caprices of the participants, or the ritual indications of the *nat kadaw*. Performing side-by-side with *achauk nat kadaws* (‘reprobate’ cross-gender spirit mediums), contributes to the contamination of their reputation. The widespread prejudice demonstrated against spirit mediums depict them as amoral, engaging in homosexual intercourse (*meinmasha*), alcohol intoxication and so forth, – activities that they perform in deference to the *nat*, to whom they submit and marry, and against Buddhist morals. However, in the urban centres, *meinmasha* spirit mediums enjoy a certain success. Being ritual specialists, these *nat kadaws* enjoy more respect than the regular cross-gender Burmese: as the monks depend on the donations from the community of laypeople, a *nat kadaw* depends on a community of devotees. However, in *nat kana* ceremonies, *nat kadaws* and *nat hsaing* musicians ‘reverse normal relationships of power’ (Alter 2017:220) by negotiating fees with the donor(s), and by being in control of the ritual process – which includes control over the possession dances of the devotees.

In urban *nat kana pwes*, *nat* devotees consist mostly of women: the common belief being that women possess ‘weak souls’ (*leikpya nge-*), and become more easily involved in exchanges with the spirits, in order to manage ‘material matters’. The devotees attribute their financial success to the spirits protecting them: to honour them, to thank them for the help they provided, they organise sumptuous *nat kana* ceremonies: here they get possessed, to express this successful relationship with the spirits in front of family and friends, and to indulge in otherwise inaccessible ‘transgressive behaviours’.

For reasons of space, I could describe only in part how hierarchies can be found also among spirit persons. Following the predominant view in Burmese society, that ‘the closer to Buddhism, the better’, *thaik* spirits and *weikza* are generally believed to occupy a higher position than that of most of the *nats*. For this reason, these figures enjoy a greater role in urban ceremonies today, than they did in the past (Brac de la Perrière 2011). As I explained, *nat kana* ceremonies can be easily customised to meet the requests of a devotee: while all the spirits must be invited to the ceremony, those who enjoy a larger role are the most popular *nats* – the most entertaining, or the most powerful, or those with whom the donor feels they have a special relationship.

The examples I provided in this chapter describe Burmese thinking as hierarchical, based on prestige and social status. *Meinmasha nat kadaws* suffer due to gender hierarchies, and their condition

is reflected upon musicians and devotees. However, their position as spirit mediums, enabling the negotiation between spirits and humans, ensure them a certain social status, and the respect of the people. Devotees are affected by the religious and moral hierarchies, with Buddhist morals allocating them a lower status. However, they exhibit a certain karmic hierarchy, manifested through their financial success, obtained through the advice of the spirits and the help of the *nat kadaws*. The financial means one donor has obtained are eventually spent in religious donations, and in support of the devotees' families.

The *nat kana* community is, as Keeler (2017) explains, ‘based on mutual interdependence through difference’: devotees need the advice of the spirits to gain financial success; the *nat kadaws* negotiate between the spirits and the devotees, and with the *hsaing* musicians, celebrate the success of the human-spirit relationship. The *nat kana* community constitutes ‘a whole’ in itself and within Burmese society, where ‘all constituent elements’ are connected through one ‘overarching system’. This system is represented by the logic of exchange – a Buddhist principle deeply ingrained in Burmese culture – which I am going to address in the next chapter.

2. Exchanging bodies, experiencing spirits

နတ်ခိုတာကတော့ အငွေအသက်နဲ့ ကပ်တယ်၊ ပူးတယ်၊ တုန်တယ်၊ ဒါပေမဲ့
သတိလစ်သွားတာတော့ မဟုတ်ဘူး။ မူးမေ့သွားတာတော့ မဟုတ်ဘူး။ မေ့ပြီး ဘာမှ
မမှတ်မိတော့ဘူး ဆိုတာ လိမ်တာ။ နတ်ကသိတယ်။ လူပူးတာပဲ၊ မသိဘဲ နေမလား။

A *nat* permeates like mist, adheres to the body and shakes it, yet the mind never strays or passes out. If a *natkadaw* were unaware or didn't know what was going on, that would be deceit. How could a spirit not know when it's in someone?

Nu Nu Yi, *Smile as They Bow*
(2008:117)

It is early September, Taw Thalin month's full moon is approaching, and the festival for the *weikza* Bo Min Kaung is currently taking place at the small village under Mount Popa. Situated about 60 kilometres South-East of Bagan, the village is considered the *nat* village *par excellence*: the stairs to the Taung Kalat sanctuary, on the top of the mountain, is populated with shrines of the spirits of Burma. When I arrive, in the middle of the night, the village's only main road is still swarming with people. Market stalls and tea shops run all day long, continuously serving Burmese tea and sweets. Despite not being a celebration directly connected to the *nats*, many *nat kadaws* attend the festival anyway. People believe that it is from the top of the mountain that the famous *weikza* Bo Min Kaung "died", and come to the sanctuary to celebrate the "exit" of the *weikza* from the human world.

On one hot afternoon of the festival, I am attending the ceremony of the *kana si* U Win Hlaing. His *nat kana* takes place in one of the main new shrines built at the foot of the mountain, and it always attracts hundreds of people. The hall is swarming with devotees, the sounds of the *nat hsaing* fills the air. As one of his dances finishes, U Win Hlaing turns to me and invites me to dance. Despite being embarrassed to perform in front of all those people, it would not be polite to refuse: as his guest, I feel like I have to accept. Some of his attendants dress me up – *longyi* (Burmese sarong) and *baung daw* (headband) – and throw me in the dancing area. The *hsaing* starts to play, and I clumsily try to imitate the movements I have seen performed so many times. It was not the first time I had danced, nor would it be the last, but this time it goes differently.

I hear the general laughs when my dance starts. I point my index fingers out, over my head – a gesture indicating the younger Taungbyone brother, while the ensemble plays the *nat*'s distinctive sound. People pass me cigarettes and a coke. I cannot see properly, as someone has taken my glasses. I approach the drum circle and ask the *hsaing saya* to play faster and louder. The ensemble raises the

volumes, and I keep dancing. When the Taungbyone dance finishes, I am breathless. A *nat kadaw* comes towards me and gives me some water. Then, without a pause, the ensemble starts to play the music for Ko Gyi Kyaw, the drunkard Prince. I kneel twice towards the *nat*'s image and I start to move, weaving my closed fist with my thumbs up over my head – a distinctive gesture for Ko Gyi Kyaw. It is at this point that I stop being completely aware of what is going on. People bring more cigarettes, but I am not sure if I am smoking them. I hear the sound of the ensemble, but not the different songs the *hsaing* plays. I know I am jumping around, but all the other people me around are indistinct. The *hsaing* plays the concluding sounds, the dance comes to an end. It must have lasted fifteen minutes in total, but to me time had just flown.

Later, while having dinner with the musicians, they tell me that it looked like I was possessed by Ko Gyi Kyaw. The signs were all there: ‘You were following the music, you did not care about other people... everyone was shooting a video of you, have you noticed?’ – they laugh. When I ask the *nat kadaws*, they are of the same opinion: ‘It was not like you were continuously possessed, but rather the spirit was continuously entering and going away!’.

Today, if someone asks me exactly what happened and for how long I danced, I still have an indistinct memory of it all. Is this what happens when Burmese people get possessed? Was I actually possessed? How can they tell the difference between a real possession and an active dancer who knows how to move? The fact that an outsider got possessed was taken as an irrefutable proof of the real existence of the *nats* – not that the devotees ever doubted that.

This chapter explores the different forms of experiences of spirit persons in the *nat kana pwe* ceremonies, taking into consideration the point of view of the ritual participants. The first section, delineates the dynamics of exchange and sharing between humans and spirits. Following the theories on exchange in Southeast Asian animistic practices presented by Århem and Sprenger (2015), I argue that the existing network of exchanges includes the bodies of the participants as well: the circulation of material and immaterial goods facilitates the construction of a community of humans and spirits (Bird-David 1999; Brac de la Perrière 2016). The second part explains these processes in detail. Starting from the ontological reality of spirit persons, I rely on the idea of a distributional and relational agency (Endres and Lauser 2011): spirit persons need the human bodies to come-into-presence, thus remaining involved in the circuit of exchanges of the *nat kana* community. Considering the differences between the Western and non-Western conceptions of personhood, I describe the Burmese ideas on spirit embodiment. Analysing the Burmese idiomatic linguistic expressions indicating the experience of the presence of the spirits in the human body, I distinguish between the experiences of dancers (professional *nat kadaws*, experienced and unexperienced devotees) and musicians. In the final part of the chapter, I rely on ethnographic interviews, observations, and videos to describe these experiences: focusing on the prowess of the spirit mediums, I look at how the performances of otherwise “impossible feats” are considered possible only because of the presence of the spirits in their dancing bodies, and compare

these to the spirit embodiment among unexperienced and experienced *nat thathami* (devotees). Finally, describing the musicians feeling of “being inspired” as a form of spirit embodiment, I explain how the ritual effectiveness of *nat hsaing* sounds is affected by the presence of the spirits during the ceremony.

2.1. The meaning of exchange

Being a white guy going around asking questions with a camera, during fieldwork I sometimes felt discomfort and awkwardness (*anadae*) at intruding into the private lives (and spaces) of people who were celebrating a *nat kana*, especially when I was not acquainted with them yet. However, the initial embarrassment, sometimes reciprocal, was usually rapidly overcome. People – mediums, musicians, and hosts – take pride in having an important guest participate in their ceremonies. Despite all my efforts to stay in one place while filming, trying not to disturb the ritual performance, my presence was seldom ignored: during a ceremony, possessed *nat kadaws* would come to me with their jokes, sometimes asking me to dress up and dance; musicians shared *kun ya* (betel quid), Burmese cigars and cigarettes with me, and invited me to perform with them; the hosts happily entertained me with food, drinks, and chats. Looking around, I realised that other people inside the pavilion’s ritual space were having similar experiences.

Interaction and exchange are at the bottom of *nat kana pwe* ceremonies. Through the circulation of material and immaterial items and services – such as ritual offerings, songs, and bodies – all the actors of the ceremony share the same experience as part of the same social group. Family, friends and spirits share a communitarian experience where exchange becomes a joyful activity where all the participants interact with each other. Through exchange, spirits and humans become part of the same community (see Section 3). For this reason, the distribution and re-distribution of offerings – from the devotees to the spirits, and from the spirits to the devotees – is not left to chance: when important spirits are dancing in the *nat kana*, the main donor and the family take priority in donating to them. In return, the spirits share with these people first, and then with the larger circle of friends and guests, whatever has been put at their disposal – money, food, alcohol, cigarettes. *Nat kadaws* can keep only part of what they obtained during the spirit dance for themselves. The rest of the offering must be put into circulation, in different degrees among different people. A similar situation has been described by Chauvet with regard to North-Vietnamese *len dong/hau bong* ceremonies:

The more they offer to the spirits, the more generous the latter are expected to be in return. When worshipers present offerings directly to the spirits – embodied in the mediums – the spirits estimate the quality and quantity of the goods placed on a tray. Depending on the attitude of the worshipers, the spirits will be more or less generous. (Chauvet 2011:96)

An offering of food is not just food. Money is not just money. Music is not just music. The practice of exchanging has meaning that goes beyond the mere circulation of material goods. To exchange means

to establish and express a relationship, and to create the community (Brac de la Perrière 2015). Through sharing, ritual participants engage with each other: humans share and relate with the spirits, directly and friendly addressing them by kinship terms; humans and spirits become one unique ‘we-ness’ (Bird-David 1999). All the material and immaterial items that circulate through exchange in *nat kana pwes* assume a specific ritual importance: from everyday items, they are transformed into *kadaw pwes* (ritual offerings) and eventually, during, and after the end of the ceremony, into *nat sunt sa* – ‘relinquished food [gifts] from the spirits’ redistributed among the devotees.⁴⁸

I realised the twofold nature of exchanged items in one of the small epiphanies that characterise fieldwork. I have just arrived at the house of a friend *nat kadaw* in Yangon, where a *pwe* is currently taking place. Finding my way through the outside crowd and entering the *nat kana*, the medium invites me to take a seat on the floor, amongst the first line of devotees, and gives me a 1000 *kyat* note.⁴⁹ Drowned out by the *nat hsaing* sound, I silently show him gratitude by touching my forehead with the note – a common gesture of respect towards someone whose authority you acknowledge. Sitting cross-legged, squeezed between two smiling and curious women, I distractedly put the note between my toes, so I can pull the camera out of my backpack. Immediately, the women beside me open their eyes wide, starting to indicate the “blessed” money that I received from the *nat*, touching one of the most impure part of my body, shouting ‘No, no, no!’. I promptly take the money back in my hands and apologise. Too late: for the rest of the ritual, they do not look at me in the same way.

Exchange represents an important element in Århem and Sprenger’s (2015) theory of social interaction between hierarchically different cosmos. Drawing on Viveiros de Castro’s ‘perspectivism’ (1998) and Descola’s ontological scheme (2013), Århem describes the concept of animism in Southeast Asia, introducing the idea of hierarchical or transcendent animism. In his perspective, the relationship between humans and spirits is often asymmetrical, organised according to a vertical scale – thus its hierarchical character (Århem 2015:25). Århem expresses the idea of hierarchical animism in a phenomenological cosmos where the ‘sentient nature’ – i.e. “ensouled” plants, animals and natural objects – actively interact with humans, thus constituting a “social” cosmos’ (ivi:5). Focusing on the notion of interaction, Sprenger introduces the idea of exchange as a constitutive and peculiar feature of Southeast Asian animism. He explains that:

An exchange is possible only between actors who are different, exchanging often creates these differences even between nominally equal or similar groups [...] Exchange here is understood in an encompassing sense, [...] as the circulation of material and immaterial items and services that create and sustain particular socio-cosmic relationships. (Sprenger 2015a:33-34)

⁴⁸ The morning offering to the Buddha’s altar includes food that will be retrieved by noon before being consumed as a meal (*Paya hswandaw suntdae*). A similar logic applies to the food offered to the spirits as *kadaw pwe*. For a parallel to Vietnam, see Bräunlein (2013:8).

⁴⁹ At the current rate, a little more than 1 USD.

In other words, it is through the asymmetry of exchange that Southeast Asian animist systems create hierarchies; through exchange, ‘humans and non-humans are involved in a unified, but internally differentiated social cosmos’ (Sprenger 2015a:35).

When a *nat kana* begins, the spirits are invited to join the ceremony: to the Burmese devotees, their presence in the ritual space is just as concrete as that of any other human guest. In the course of the ceremony, spiritual beings incarnate in humans: in this bodily form, they receive offerings of money, food, cigarettes, prayers and music; in return, they offer guidance, and grant favours.

The common offering to the spirits (*kadaw pwe*) is represented by a tray containing, in its simplest form, a green coconut and at least three bunches of bananas. These trays are prepared in advance for a ceremony, and occupy the main space in front of the spirit images on the temporary altar of the *nat kana*. However, these do not represent the only kind of offering: in fact, each spirit is associated with a particular kind of offering – alcohol and cigarettes for the drunkard prince Ko Gyi Kyaw, boiled eggs and sweets for the little lady Ma Ne, huge cigars and rice for the rude mother Amay Gyan, flowers and fruits for the vegetarian ogress Popa Medaw. The altar is a colourful pastiche of all the offerings that will be presented to each *nat* in the course of their dance.

The circulation of material and immaterial items and services is related to the performance of meritorious deeds (*dana*), whose final goal is represented by the sharing and accumulation of Buddhist merit (*kutho*) between humans and spirits. In fact, *nats* cannot accumulate religious merit through meritorious acts, and are thus unable to escape the cycle of interrupted rebirth.⁵⁰ As Brac de la Perrière explains:

Making offerings to the Thirty-Seven, they would say, is a way to transfer Buddhist religious merit (*kútho*; Pali: *kusala*) to the Lords to better their *kan* (Pali: *kamma*); as the spirits of people whose lives were cut short by violent death or suicide, these *nats* are trapped in a cycle of rebirths and are unable to strive toward the way out by themselves. In short, they depend on humans, their devotees, to acquire Buddhist religious merit. (Brac de la Perrière 2009a:198)

However, merit sharing is directly connected to social status and prestige. According to the Burmese logic, ‘the larger the tiger, the larger the footprint’ (*‘kya gyi daw, kye ya gyi’*) – which means, the more you have, the more you are supposed to donate. To use Aung Thwin’s words:

social concerns of status and prestige demanded that merit be shared. If there were to be harmony in society between those who were rich and those who were not, and if wealth were to be spent

⁵⁰ This element emerged in interview with some spirit mediums: while some agreed that *nats* depend on the devotees’ offerings (U Aung Min and Daw Min Zin Aung, 6 December 2013, Yangon), others gave me a more evasive answer (Kyaw Win Naing, 26 January 2018, Yangon). From a Buddhist point of view, this would put humans on a higher step than the *nats*; however, some mediums explained that because the *nats* can perform acts that humans cannot, they are usually considered to occupy a hierarchically superior position in Burmese Buddhist cosmos.

on merit making and not hoarded, the merit received should (like wealth) be parcelled among one's fellow Buddhists. (Aung Thwin 1981:49)

Although outsiders might assume that money and the Buddhist value of detachment are poles apart from each other, wealth and success are considered the result of a favourable karmic position. According to Brac de la Perrière, the money circulating in *nat kana pwe* ceremonies falls under two orders of value:

obtenu grâce au pouvoir des *naq*, [l'argent] est redistribué sous la forme d'offrandes qui leur sont faites. Cette redistribution peut être simplement un moyen de gagner encore plus d'argent, dans un circuit fermé où s'échangent pouvoir et argent. Mais on peut aussi la considérer comme un acte méritoire, d'autant plus que le bénéfice karmique en est alors partagé avec les *naq*, ces êtres désincarnés qui dépendent des hommes pour accumuler des mérites et progresser dans la voie karmique. Dans ce cas, argent et pouvoir sont tous deux transformés en mérites. Dans ses manifestations contemporaines, le culte des trente-sept est donc encore un moyen de composer avec des forces ambivalentes dans le système de valeurs bouddhiste. (Brac de la Perrière 1998a:179-180)

In *nat kana pwes*, power and money form a circuit where the one strengthens the other. Wealth and power, and the resulting social prestige, intersect with the Buddhist logic of meritorious deeds and merit sharing (*kutho ahmya*), thus linking material and karmic personal success.

2.2. Controlled mediums, uncontrolled devotees and inspired musicians

Exchange is not limited to material (food, alcohol) or immaterial (music, entertainment) offerings to the spirits. Human bodies are also part of the circuit of donation: *nat kadaws* offer their bodies to the spirits so they can inhabit them (or just a part of them); as I explain in Section 3.2.1, in particular moments (*chawt pwe*) of the *nat kana* ceremony, the host, family and friends are expected to offer themselves to the spirits and dance with/for them in front of the community. The offering of bodies is passive only in appearance. In fact, spirit mediums and devotees voluntarily submit to spirits' presence emanating from the *nats*' images, and dance supported by the *hsaing* sound – a self-offering, in the sense of the spontaneous offering of one's own body. Spirit mediums and human participants choose to be caught between two forces, that of the ensemble and that of the spirit images: when they surrender to them, the spirits come-into-presence (Brac de la Perrière 1994:180-181). The voluntary exchange of bodies is the real manifestation of an interrelationship between human individuals and community, and spirits: the embodiment of the spirit in one's body, in front of the community, is recognised as a sign of the spirit's favour; the spirit needs the human body to come-into-presence. Self-offering to a spirit represents a direct expression of the offering subject's agency. Keller (2002:82) has defined this agency 'instrumental': allowing the possessed body to be used gives the only apparently passive spirit medium ritual authority in front of the community. However, the concept of a body being "used" as an

“instrument” suggests too passive an agency. In place of instrumental agency, Endres and Lauser (2011) introduce the idea of a “distributed relational agency”,

as it is in the interrelationship between the spirit or deity who needs the human body in order to come into presence, the possessed body that is worked on by a supernatural power, and the ritual community for whom the spirits have an ontological reality that agency resides. (Endres and Lauser 2011:10)

In Endres and Lauser’s paradigm, agency is not only a human property, but is rather distributed among all the ritual actors – spirits included – forming an agentive network (Sax 2006). Invited and then embodied, the spirits materially come-into-presence among their fellow humans: in this way, they can be directly involved in the circuit of exchange of the *nat kana* community, and directly participate in the social life of the Burmese (Brac de la Perrière 2009b:38), engaging in particular and continuous social relationships (Lambek 1993:309-310) under community control (Hamayon 1995:27).

During my fieldwork, whenever I asked someone what kind of relationship s/he had with *nats*, the answers were either *nat youn-* (‘to believe in *nats*’) or *nat kokwe-* (‘to worship the *nats*’). Believing and following/worshipping represent two separate ideas: people might *worship* the *nats* out of fear, or because of their family tradition (*mi hsain pa hsain*), even if they does not *believe* in them (or in the *nat kadaw*). In both cases, the existence of the *nats* is not called into question: *nats* and other spiritual beings are ontologically real – *nat shidae*, ‘the spirits are there’, they ‘exist-in-the-world’ (Bird-David 1999:74). To pretend that spirits are a metaphor, a symbol, or psychological reality means to perpetrate a ‘positivists’ denial’ (Turner E. 2003:146).

The statement ‘the *nats* exist’ is conclusive and definitive: the fact that ‘the *nats* are there’ (in reference to their *poundaw*, ‘sacred images’, different from *yokhtu*, just ‘statues’) make them a reality that can be genuinely and bodily manifested by the *nat kadaw* during the dance (Brac de la Perrière 2009b). The ritual of consecration of the statues is called *leikpya theik-*, ‘introducing the butterfly’, or *athet twin-*, ‘introducing the life’: with the introduction of a fragment of the *leikpya* – vital principle, soul) of the *nat*, the images, from unanimated objects, are made alive (Brac de la Perrière 1989:111ff.; Severi 2018). From that moment on, the spirits are there. A similar process is performed for the investiture of a new *nat kadaw*: a piece of the human’s *leikpya* is substituted with a fragment of the *nat*’s *leikpya*. The trained *nat kadaw* is then able to get in contact with his/her *nat gaung swe* (the *nat* who the soul fragment belongs to) and recall all the other figures of the Pantheon of the Thirty-seven Lords whenever necessary (see Section 1.2.1).⁵¹

⁵¹ In the last few years, *nat poundaw* are becoming larger and more complex (Brac de la Perrière, personal communication, 2018). The fact that today Burmese tend to create images of spiritual beings with more realistic human characteristics denotes that these beings are regarded as real and actual human figures. ‘When we pray to Turathadi’ a devotee once told me, discussing an extremely realistic photo-portrait of the *nat dewi* (goddess), ‘we imagine her to be exactly like this.’ (see Bekker 1988).

The *nat kadaw* Htoo Zaw (personal communication, 2018) once pointed out that the embodiment of a *nat* does not necessarily involve the whole body of the spirit medium: ‘sometimes the spirits enter only our mouths and speaks through us... sometimes [the *nat*] only enters our head’. When this happens, the mediums remain perfectly in control of the rest of their body, intellectually alert and interactive with/as a spirit with the devotees. The person and the body are not regarded as a unique, impermeable unity, but rather as a discrete and fragmentable permutation of singular parts. Just as a spirit can introduce themselves into just a part of the body of a medium, the simultaneous embodiment of the same spirit into different human bodies is also possible.

Several anthropologists have underlined how the concept of personhood in South Asia is fluid and permeable, multivalent and partible (Freeman 1998; 1999; Ishii 2013; Smith 2006), and not reducible to the typical Self-Other binarism (Mayaram 1999; Strathern 1988; Marriot 1976) that characterises the Euro-American idea of an impermeable and autonomous self⁵². Considering personhood from the angle of exchange, Sprenger (2015a:38) writes that ‘the various aspects or components of personhood are constituted by exchange and circulation between humans and non-humans’. In this view, a multiplicity of relations constitutes the concept of personhood, which is experienced through exchange:

Objects and animals are persons to the degree that they are involved in the same exchange networks that humans or spirits are. By being involved in the relationships which constitute humans as persons they, almost by necessity, acquire degrees of personhood. A relation that constitutes a person and does so by involving a non-human entity ascribes personhood to that entity as well, as otherwise the relation could not produce personhood in the first place. The condition for this is the superiority of relations between persons over relations between persons and things. (Sprenger 2015b:84)

Similarly, in Burma, the concepts of self, personhood, and identity are fluid and discrete. The idea of a permeable and mutable self dominates in the Jatakas, stories of the past lives of the Buddha: the stories ‘blur the identity of a discrete bodied individual and relay a self that travels through a multitude of different forms’ (Douglas 2019a:253). Similarly, in the performance of the *zawgyi yokhtay* (the puppet of an alchemist), the boundaries between puppet, puppet manipulator, and puppet’s voice become blurred. Douglas explains:

⁵² Western philosophers and anthropologists have long discussed this concept. For example, drawing on the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty (1962[1945]) and Bourdieu’s *habitus* (1977, 1984), Thomas Csordas (1994:5) describes the self not as a substance or an entity, but rather as ‘an indeterminate capacity to engage or become oriented in the world, characterized by effort and reflexivity’: starting from the post-structuralist concept of rhizome developed by Deleuze and Guattari (1983), Tim Ingold speaks of individuals not as ‘self-contained object’ but rather as ‘an ever ramifying web of lines of growth’ inhabiting the world and animistic environments (Ingold 2006:13-14).

The illusion of puppet agency is a combined product of the puppeteer, the puppet-singer, and the musicians. The sounding (voicing, singing, growling, purring, etc.) of a puppet is not articulated by the puppeteer but, rather, by a behind-the-curtain vocalist working in close conjunction with the *hsaing* orchestra and the puppeteer. Here an identity conceived as singular—the marionette character—is brought to life through the composition, or merging, of different forces; the voice, the puppeteer and the musicians. (Douglas 2019a:254)

Despite being ontologically real, even when formally invited, spirits are still not able to directly join a *pwe*. The spiritual substance they are believed to be made of seems to prevent it. In order to join the celebration, spirits need the support of human bodies. Htoo Zaw explains quite clearly when he says:

We say *kywa hlan pyaw ba Paya*. It means ‘Please come in and enjoy, oh Venerable [Ones]’. They are spirits, they can come but they cannot join, when they want to join, they have to use our body. It means they share our body.⁵³

In *nat kana* rituals, the spirits’ person comes-into-presence through, and in the network of ritual exchange. Manifested in the bodies of the dancers, the spirits become real and tangible, and active subjects in the circulation of material and immaterial goods (Figure 2.1)



Figure 2.1 Maha Myain Aba Lay embodies Ma Ma Ne, his personal nat (nat gaung swe), embracing Ma Ma Ne’s statue; during the dance, the personalities of the human and spirit become one. Mandalay, July 2018.

In Burmese language, the embodiment of a spiritual being (spirit possession) is conceptualised with different words depending on degree and subject of the embodiment (Table 2.1). The verbs *win-* ('to enter') and *pu-* ('to be joined') are general terms indicating the initial moment when a spirit makes

⁵³ Htoo Zaw, Taungbyone, 16 August 2018.

contact with the human (usually indicated by a trembling of the hands of the ritual specialist): the two words are interchangeable and are sometimes used in combination (*nat winpu-*). The verb *ka-* ('to dance') indicates the following manifestation of the spirit through dances (Rouget 1985) performed with the indispensable support of specific *nat* sounds (B.Brac 1998a:170) (see Chapters 5 and 6).

Burmese	Translation	Meaning	Affecting:
<i>nat win-</i>	The spirit enters	<i>Nat</i> spirit possession	Spirit medium (<i>nat kadaw</i> , devotee)
<i>nat pu-</i>	The spirit joins		
<i>nat ka-</i>	The spirit dances		
<i>nat si-</i>	The spirit mounts	<i>Nat/weikza</i> spirit possession	
<i>nat kat-</i>	The spirit attaches, or 'to be inspired'	Lamain spirit possession	<i>Hsaing</i> musicians (and dancers)

Table 2.1 Burmese vocabulary for the embodiment of spiritual beings.

The verb *si-* ('to mount' or 'to ride') is also used to indicate spirit possession. Brac de la Perrière (2009b:37) notes that this terminology is used to indicate the manifestation of *weikza* beings, characterised not by dance, but by "inspiration". However, in the course of my research people used the word interchangeably with *win-* and *pu-*. It is possible that the recent transformations occurring in the spirit cult, characterised more and more by the integration in the cult of practices and figures belonging to the *weikza* 'line' (Brac de la Perrière 2011) caused a shift in the terminology. Despite the words' interchangeability, the two embodiment experiences remain quite different for the practitioner. The *nat kadaw* Maha Myain Aba Lay, who has a past as a *weikza* practitioner, explained his different experiences of *nats* and *weikzas* embodiment:

Lorenzo: Is there a difference when [the *weikza*] Bo Min Kaung and a *nat* is possessing you?
What do you feel?

Aba Lay: It's different when Aba possesses me [*si-*]. I feel more exhausted, and also heavier... he is an old man [*lu gyi*, also 'important'], so when I talk to the people, even my voice [is different]. The inner force [of Bo Min Kaung] is heavier than the *nats*, the *nat* are lighter, with the music and dancing... it's more flexible. Aba Bo Min Kaung makes me feel more tired.

Lorenzo: After the possession, how do you feel? Do you remember what you said?

Aba Lay: I remember what I said after the *nat* possession. But when Aba possesses me, sometimes I don't remember, and sometimes I don't even understand what it means. [...] Sometimes [it's like a] teaching, in Pali language, and sometimes is a prophecy, that's more like a poem.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Maha Myain Aba Lay, Mandalay, 16 March 2018.

Embodying spirits is a technique that *nat kadaws* learn throughout their apprenticeship, and with years of practice. Compared to the dance of the devotees, they remain partly in control and intellectually alert – a state that Norton (2000a, 2000b, 2009),⁵⁵ concerning Vietnamese *Len Dong* spirit mediums, defines ‘aware possession’:

mediums are aware of everything that is going on around them. [...] Despite being ‘aware’ during possession, mediums still ‘follow the orders’ of the spirits [...] and are compelled to act by the spirits in ways that they would not be able to otherwise [...]. (Norton 2000a:54)⁵⁶

In order to clarify how all this relates to my research, I will provide different examples of spirit embodiment, drawing on my own fieldwork experience. Based on ethnographic observations, discussion, and videos, I will outline the different experiences of spirit embodiment among Burmese spirit mediums, devotees, and musicians.

2.2.1 *Dancing with the spirits, dancing for the spirits*

Dance is considered the expression of this embodiment. The dance of the mediums usually remains quite controlled, and the experience of the *nat* presence can be reduced to a fleeting instant (Brac de la Perrière 1989:97). Experienced *nat kadaw* can dance with skilful and controlled movements, while the dance of young and unexperienced apprentices can be extremely energetic and less controlled. The controlled dance movements of the *nat kadaw* resemble more a “fake” performance than a “real” spirit embodiment. To my surprise, I found out that many Burmese people enjoyed discussing if a dancer was really “dancing with a *nat*” or not, when I showed them my *nat kana pwe* videos. While I believe that the urge to distinguish between “real” manifestation of the spirit and “mere performance” is often dictated by the bias of Western perspective, it is a distinction that some Burmese locals also make (Becker 2004:30). Incarnation and performance represent two sides of the same coin.⁵⁷ The performance of the spirit person is considered *nat ka-*, ‘the spirit dances’, a full manifestation of the spirit. According to Brac de la Perrière, the *nat kadaw*

is a virtuoso in his/her relations to the *nats*, knowing how to give the latter space as s/he suspends his/her *leikpya*. This mastery of relations with the *nats*, however, does not mean that the medium

⁵⁵ See also Atkinson (1989:93); Mills (2003:27); Wong (2001:11).

⁵⁶ A similar point was raised by Ernesto de Martino (2008b [1958]:80ff.) in regard to the funeral lament in Lucania, Southern Italy. The Italian anthropologist explained that, during the performance of the mourning cry, a *lamentatrice* would experience a dual psychic state: vigilance is necessary to guide the ritual; on the other hand, the oneiric state embodies the lament. This would allow her to perform apparently ‘distractedly’, beginning, interrupting and starting the mourning again, at her will.

⁵⁷ Discussing Vietnamese *len dong* ceremonies, Fjelstad and Thi Hien (2006:10-11) distinguish incarnation (the ‘medium gives bodily form to a spiritual being’) from performance (a ‘presentation before an audience’). From the perspective of the medium, *len dong* involves both: ‘whenever mediums are possessed, they are giving the spirit a bodily form and, at the same time, they are pleasing the spirits by wearing attractive clothing or dancing in a beautiful way.’

is in control of the spirits. On the contrary, throughout the possession dance, the medium disappears behind the persona of the spirit, all of whose excesses s/he must bear. (Brac de la Perrière 2016:6)

During my fieldwork, I asked several *nat kadaws* what the experience of *nat winpu-* meant to them. The *kana si* Kyaw Win Naing describes his experience with the *nat* embodiment in these terms:

a *nat* is just a spirit, [s/he] doesn't have a body. They come like smoke, just in a [makes a sudden gesture], they tell [you] something, and then go back. Even when you are dancing for one hour, they cannot be with you for one hour. [They are] just spirits.⁵⁸

Other spirit mediums describe the embodiment of the spirits as a much more intense experience for the mind and the body. To 'disappear behind the persona of a spirit', as Brac de la Perrière says, means that spirit persons can manifest themselves in quite intense ways, compelling the *nat kadaw* to perform tasks, usually quite spectacular to Burmese eyes, that s/he would otherwise not be able or normally willing to perform. The spirit mediums ascribe their prowess in performing such acts to the presence of the spirit. Performing these and other tasks is a way to soothe (*chawt-*) the embodying *nat*. As the *kana si* U Kyaw Soe Moe (Figure 2.2) explained, this is a way to assess the presence of the *nat* inside the dancer's body:

We know [that the *nat* is there] because of the soothing of the *nat*. For example, when we pay respect to the Pyay Kan Daw [ogre siblings], [we consume] raw meat. It is not possible to soothe them [without that]. If you don't close off your human mind, [you can't eat] that raw meat. But at the time when the *nat* is inside, you just eat whatever they want to. The *nat kadaw* must be clever about this kind of things. You are in contact with the *nat* [who possesses your]self. You completely release your mind, without control, and you just do whatever the *nat* likes. Look at my body, now I can't even sit on the floor... what are you going to say if I dance for one hour and half? [That's because] the *nat* is not going out. [...] when I get possessed [pu-] [by Ko Gyi Kyaw], I never get [so drunk] to the point of doing something crazy. I don't need to be carried, I don't feel like throwing up.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Kyaw Win Naing, Yangon, 26 January 2018. However, in later interviews, Kyaw Win Naing gave deeper and more detailed descriptions of his feelings during the spirit embodiment.

⁵⁹ U Kyaw Soe Moe, Yangon, 24 September 2017.



Figure 2.2 The kana si U Kyaw Soe Moe (left) performing *nat haw* (fortune-telling) to a devotee (right) while embodying the drunkard nat Ko Gyi Kyaw. Yangon, February 2018.

Without the *nat*, the performance of the task would induce some physical consequences for the dancer's body. According to what U Kyaw Soe Moe explains, when embodying the drunkard prince Ko Gyi Kyaw, large quantities of alcohol can be consumed without getting intoxicated; when dancing as the savage Pyay Kan Daw ogre lady, taking large bites of raw chicken meat does not represent a problem. Other cases can be observed: in Yangon, the *kana si* Daw Tin Soe Lin embodies the Indian *nat* Kali Medaw quite effectively: she wears an Indian *sari*, balancing a tray of burning candles on her head; during the performance, she effortlessly pierces her tongue with a long piece of metal, and dances to the sound of an "Indian tune" keeping her eyes wide open, possessed by the Indian *dewi* (Figure 2.3). In Mandalay, during the embodiment of the *nat* Amay Yay Yin, the *kana si* Maha Myain Aba Lay performs fire eating, introducing two large burning candles to his mouth, thus demonstrating the immense sorcery power of this witch *nat*; the *nat hsaing* ensemble supports this with the sound of Amay Yay Yin's *nat chin* (Figure 2.4).



Figure 2.3 The kana si Daw Tin So Lin embodies Kali Medaw, an Indian dewi nat, piercing her tongue and dancing in an Indian sari. Yangon, October 2017.

However, the Burmese *nat kadaws*' performances do not seem particularly 'impossible', and a good degree of control is always there. In comparison, to mention just two examples, the *kris* dance performed in Bali by the *bebuten* (trance dancers) in the *calonarang* ceremonies and the Maggiri dance performed by the *bissu* (spirit mediums) in Sulawesi, involve trance dancers turning sharp *keris* blades on their bodies without injuring themselves, supported by the intense sound of the gamelan and Bugis ensemble⁶⁰ respectively (Becker 2004:82-86, 102-105). However, the urban Burmese remain quite impressed by the *nat kadaw*'s prowess. The effectiveness of these performances depends not only on the kind of performance itself, but also on its theatrical elements and cultural meanings.

⁶⁰ During my experience as a Darmasiswa student in Indonesia (2014-15), I conducted brief fieldwork amongst the Bugis people in Watampone, Bone regency, South Sulawesi. I met with the community of *bissu*, and I attended and filmed a *maggiri* ceremony: supported by the cyclical sound of a *gendang*, shawm, gongs and cymbals, a group of *bissus* performed the trance dance, showing themselves to be immune to self-stabbing and fire-burning. A brief extract can be observed at the following link: https://youtu.be/QMGcq_wbiRQ.



Figure 2.4 The nat kadaw *Maha Myain Aba Lay*, embodying the witch nat *Amay Yay Yin*, performs fire-eating. Mandalay, July 2018.

The dance of Pyay Kan Daw Maunhnama, the Siblings of the Royal Lake of Pyay, takes place near the end of a ceremony. Two *nat kadaws* embody the two siblings, brother and sister; they dress in red and wear no ogre headgear. The dance is an example of *pya zat* ('dramatic representation') occasionally performed during the *nat kana* ceremony. The *pya zat* for the two Siblings of the Royal Lake consists of a performance that combines revenge, bloodshed, and Buddhist values. According to the legend, an Arakanese (current Rakhine State, South-West Burma) prince and princess, brother and sister, are fleeing into the Sri Ksetra kingdom (current central Burma). They reach the city of Pyay, ruled by king Duttabaung, where a sacrifice for the blessing of the new royal lake was taking place. Following the instructions of the royal astrologer, when the siblings are captured, they are sacrificed. Furious at the unjust death sentence, they become ogre (*yekkha*) *nats* and start to take their revenge by making anyone who dared to reach the lake disappear. King Duttabaung then decides to institute a cult to appease the wrath of the two siblings. In the performance, the brother, who carries a *badi* (Buddhist rosary), tries to convince his sister to not take revenge against the people who have had them executed, and to embrace Buddhism instead. Three times the sister tries to escape her brother, attempting to reach a piece of raw chicken meat, offered in a plate at the limit of the ritual space. Eventually she reaches the plate and consumes the raw meat, embracing her feral nature.

[Video 2.1](#) features the *kana si* Kyaw Win Naing performing as the Peaceful Brother, while one of his *nat kadaw* pupils embodies the Furious Sister. The Brother attempts, for the last time, to talk the sister out of her fury, and to embrace Buddhism. She sits down with her brother and assists him during the meditation [00:15]; but then her feral nature prevails. She jumps up, running away from her brother,

and grabs the raw chicken [00:35] made available for her right outside the ritual area. Accompanied by the intense sound of the *nat hsaing*, she takes large bites of the raw chicken, climbs the small platform by the *hsaing* ensemble, to show the large audience her anger and fury [01:22]. Some attendants try to get the meat back, but the furious *nat* refuses: she licks her fingers, enjoying the taste of meat, and exhibits her prey/meal. After one last bite, the meat is returned, the Sister comes back into the ritual area to dance as a *yekkha*, a furious and powerful ogress, to the sound of the *karaung* music [01:58] – which always indicates *yekkha* figures. The transformation into a dreadful *nat* is complete: the dance is over, the *hsaing* dismisses the ogress spirit, and the *nat kadaw* bows one last time to the image of the Sister before leaving the ritual area [02:30].

The fierce nature of *yekkha* is made manifest through the performance of a carnivorous ritual. Brac de la Perrière (1989:191) recognises in the carnivorous ritual ‘un rapport de cause à effet entre l’introduction du bouddhisme et la forme actuelle du culte’. She explains that the ritual is something incompatible with Buddhism: for this reason, the dance of the Siblings occupies the final sequence of the ceremony. The liminality of the carnivorous ritual is underlined through a liminal position in the order of the possession dances. (ivi:193). The contrast between the pious Buddhist brother and his wild sister devouring the raw meat is something that captures the devotees’ imaginations, and is a reminiscent of animal sacrifice practices once performed in these rituals. (ivi:27ff.)

Whether the *nat kadaw* should be considered a ritual specialist with an active or passive role is debateable. While a certain passivity seems to characterise the initial stage of the apprenticeship, with time and experience the *nat kadaw* gains a certain mastery in handling his/her relationship with the spirits (Brac de la Perrière 1998a:175-176). The classical dichotomy of shamanism-possession (Eliade 1951; Bourguignon 1968, 1973; de Heusch 1981; Lewis 1971) is considered biased by many, and it has been criticised in more than one study (Atkinson 1992; Aigle et al. 2000; Johnson 2007; Condominas 1973, 1976; Hamayon 1995; Harvey 2010; Schmidt and Huskinson 2010; Tedlock 2003). Neither of these two categories is useful to describe the Burmese spirit mediums.

Compared to the skilled and controlled dance movements of the *nat kadaws*, the dance of the *nat thathami* (‘sons and daughters of the spirit’, devotees) is usually less controlled and more violent. From the Burmese point of view, a less controlled dance of a devotee is regarded as a real sign of the presence of the spirit (*nat win-*, *nat pu-*), especially in its most violent expressions. In this regard, Brac de la Perrière writes:

La violence de la danse, qui est supposée faire souffrir le possédé, est parfois expliquée comme une vengeance du naq, notamment lorsque la personne a longtemps repoussé le moment de rendre au naq le culte qu’elle lui doit. (Brac de la Perrière 1989:96)

However, when I asked the devotees about their feelings during the spirit embodiment, none of them reported such negative experiences. Most of the testimonies I collected describe a positive feeling,

usually accompanied by complete or partial memory loss, and a feeling of power – features that seem to characterise the experience of spirit embodiment in different ritual contexts – e.g., in Vietnamese *len dong* (Fjelstad and Maiffret 2006:116-117) and in Bali (Suryani and Jensen 1993:39). Describing the experience of being entered by the spirit of the Buddhist saint Myan Nan Nwe, one devotee explained to me that:

When Myan Nan Nwe enters me, I feel like a strong light in all my body, and I have the feeling of floating in the air.⁶¹

The idea of ‘floating in the air’, or ‘to be up’ was repeatedly stressed during my conversations with the devotees. It might be possible to recognise in this sensation a distinctive element characterising *nat* dance movements – in general, energetically propelling the dancer’s body into the air – compared with other forms of choreographed dance movements – where the expert dancer is supposed to remain more attached to the ground. While these aspects need further research and remain for now a matter of speculation, it is certain that occasional ritual participants experience the spirits in a more violent way than trained *nat kadaws*.

Spontaneous and casual spirit possession among the devotees seems to be quite rare. During my fieldwork, I have never witnessed any of the many passers-by, who remain confined outside the ritual space, to be affected by the presence of any spirits. It is easier for the members of the *nat kana* community to embody the spirits during their dedicated moments, the *chawt pwe* (see Section 3.2.1). However, in some cases, the spirits can enter a devotee during the dance of the *nat kadaw*; this seems to always occur after the *nat kadaw* has called, and started to dance [with] the spirit.

[Video 2.2](#) exemplifies one of these moments. The video shows the final moments of the *pya zat* (dramatic representation) performance for Nankarine Medaw, the Mother Buffalo (see Section 6.3.2). In the video, the *kana si* Maha Myain Aba Lay, who is embodying the Mother Buffalo, has just removed the Buffalo headgear, to indicate that the slaughter of the Mother, and her consequent transformation into a *nat*, has happened. Athakouma, the young prince responsible for the Mother’s death, is embodied by one of Aba Lay’s attendants: he dances energetically, holding the severed head of the Buffalo Mother. The ensemble supports the performance with a vibrant rendition of the instrumental Mon sound, thus indicating the Mon ethnicity of this respected *nat* [00:05]. While Aba Lay’s attendants help him to fix his costume, some devotees pay respect to the powerful Mother Buffalo *nat*, joining their hands as a mark of respect. One lady sitting in the back seems to be quite absorbed; at about [00:45] she stands up, moves towards the centre of the ritual area. With her hands still folded and her eyes tightly shut, she begins to jump and to shout, completely overwhelmed by the presence of the Mother Buffalo in her body. She jumps as a buffalo would jump in the water, struggling to climb out of a muddy river to reach

⁶¹ Daw Chit Su Thwe, Yangon, 30 November 2013.

its bank; her impulsiveness might be compared only to that of the river's streams. The singer and the *hsaing* ensemble respond to the Mother's sudden manifestation, encouraging the unofficial dancer with shouting and a new instrumental intensity. Some devotees flock around the possessed lady, providing her with help, and trying to keep her safe. At [01:21], when the vocal part of the *nat* song resumes, the intense *nat* manifestation nears its end: the woman is bowed down, apparently exhausted, surrounded by concerned humans. They pet her as they would pet an animal, quickly rubbing her back. Meanwhile, the ceremony continues along with the sound of the *hsaing*. The *kana si* Aba Lay has to take care of the main donors of the ceremony, and cannot pay much attention to the situation: he remains aside while other devotees provide assistance and comfort to the woman, and at [01:52] he leaves the ritual space to reach the shrine of the Mother Buffalo, outside the house compound, as any animal normally resides. Meanwhile, the woman has not regained her strength yet: she is dragged by three women back to her sitting place, where other devotees starts to fan her, helping her to recover. At [02:25] the lady appears to have finally recovered: her eyes are watchful, and she is again aware of where she is, and of what is going on.

After the conclusion of the ceremony, I managed to have a brief encounter with the possessed lady. During our exchange, she stated she was feeling well and happy: the manifestation of the Mother Buffalo, although very intense and physically challenging for her, was the sign that the Mother granted her favour over her; the lady could not remember anything of the experience itself: the moment before her memory loss, she was sincerely making a vow (*adeit than*) to Nankarine Medaw *nat*, asking for her help.

According to my experience and interpretations of the ritual events, I am confident in saying that the embodiment of certain spirits by specific devotees is not random, and reflects specific social dynamics (Rouget 1985). As Brac de la Perrière (1989:159) writes, the possession dance of the participants 'fait partie intégrante de la cérémonie'. In fact, the embodiment of the spirits by the participants seems to represent, according to the testimony of many *nat kadaws*, the main aim of the ceremony. Especially in those moments of the *nat kana* ceremony when the members of the community dance with, and for the spirits (*chawt pwe*), their dance is intended to be a celebration of their covenant with the spirits in front of the community. In these moments, the host and members of the inner circle share what they have obtained through the help of the spirits. If the main donor is dancing, s/he is somehow expected to embody the most important spirits called to the celebration, to make manifest those spirits belonging to their family tradition, and to celebrate those spirits who provided him/her counsel and help. The spontaneous offering of the devotees' bodies to the spirits represents a way to thank them for the help received, calling them into the circuit of exchange in first person, thus allowing them to receive other offerings – and sometimes, if the possession is particularly strong and the devotee capable enough, to speak through the devotee's mouth.

September 2017. The festival for the *weikza* Aba Bo Min Kaung, in the famous *nat* village of Popa, is taking place. Guided by the sounds of a *hsaing* ensemble, my friends and I reach one of the many spaces available for the celebration of a *nat kana pwe*. The group performing there, one man tells me, is from the town of Kyaukse, 50 kilometres South of Mandalay. We enter the ritual space and take a seat with the other participants. Large Buddha statues sit on one side of the hall; strobe lights and lasers give the *nat kana* a colourfully enlivened atmosphere; a couple of *yawgis* (*yogi*), *weikza*-path practitioners characterised by their dark brown robes, sit at one angle, in front of the massive speakers, enjoying the performance. In the area in front of the *hsaing* ensemble, a *chawt pwe*, the dance of the participants, is taking place. Together with a group of women, a man is dancing as Ko Gyi Kyaw: he does not wear the attire of the *nat kadaw* – magnificent dresses, jewels, make-up – but only a simple blue band tied on his torso. Compared to the rest of the women, his accomplished *nat* dancing skills appear immediately evident. The *chawt pwe* continues, and the man keeps dancing alone. He consecutively embodies the *nat* Amay Yay Yin, her spirit tiger, and then the *nat* Amay Gyan: while embodying these spirits, he effectively performs *nat haw*, fortune-telling through the voice of the spirit, plus several feats – including harmlessly self-stabbing his lower abdomen with two swords (Figure 2.5) and opening a coconut bare-handed.



Figure 2.5 Harmless self-stabbing dance during the embodiment of the *nat* Amay Yay Yin. Popa Village, July 2017.

The embodiment of the *nat* tiger, a vehicle for the *nat* Amay Yay Yin, is particularly violent. After a short invocation, the ensemble starts to play *bein maung* – a constant in the embodiment of tigers in *nat kana pwes*, as the sound of this music cycle indicates strength and prowess (see Sections 3.3.2 and 6.2.4). The tiger jumps into the air, pushing out its forelegs, and lands on the floor on all-fours. The

fierce animal stays on the floor with eyes open wide; some attendants try to give it bananas, but the tiger shakes its head; with speechless gestures, it makes the attendants understand that it is requesting a coconut. Trembling and shaking on the floor, the tiger puts the green fruit in its mouth, then furiously starts to peel it using its jaws, sometimes playing with the fruit as if it were a ball and trying to open the hard coconut shell by crushing it with its head. The performance lasts several minutes. [Video 2.3](#) shows the final moments: two attendants try to retrieve the coconut from the tiger, without success; the animal keeps peeling the coconut, playing with it and sometimes hitting it using its forehead and paws. He points at one specific person among the group of participants [00:57]: the woman respectfully comes forward and kneels to look the tiger in the eyes; she gets closer to the animal *nat*, asking for its blessing, and donating some money; the tiger nods in approval, hands her a piece of the peeled coconut skin, and accepts the money donation with his mouth – signs that her wishes will be granted. As the woman retreats, the tiger completes the feat of opening the coconut, smashing it on its head, spraying its liquid all around, under the wondering gaze of the participants, and of three concerned attendants. While the *hsaing* plays the *bein maung* sound with reinvigorated energy, the embodiment of the tiger spirit comes to an end [01:30]. Supported by one attendant, the dancer violently brings his shaking hands to his forehead, as the *nat* is leaving his body. After a few intense moments, the dancer regains consciousness, and bows respectfully one last time, before continuing his performance.

In urban *nat kana* ceremonies, the embodiment of spirit tigers represents one of the most intense spirit embodiment performances. These animals are considered vehicles of five of the most popular *nats*⁶² who appear in the ritual space. There seems to be no particular reason why tigers, and not another creature, are associated with these *nats*. Tigers are generally regarded as strong and dangerous wild animals which only *nats* can tame (Sein Tu 2004). Considered more as vehicles for spirit possession, tigers are not completely regarded as spirits: as part of the ‘ensouled nature’, tigers embody spiritual powers (Århem and Sprenger 2015), but they also reflect the power of the *nat* they are associated with. Their power is expressed through the performance of the fast *bein maung* music, and through a generally physically intense dance. The performance I just described, however, was in my experience unprecedented. The feat of opening the coconut barehanded clearly manifested the violence of this tiger spirit embodiment. After the conclusion of the whole performance, in a brief exchange, the dancer (I was not able to record his name) did not show any signs of the extremely challenging physical feat he had just accomplished: he could walk and move normally, and his head did not show any sign of contusion. More interestingly, he confessed not to be a professional spirit medium, a *nat kadaw*. According to other members of the Kyaukse group, he just travelled with them, and joined the group in order to participate in the festival. After that day, I neither saw, nor heard of him again, anywhere in the village of Popa.

⁶² Ko Myo Shin, Min Mahagiri, the two Taungbyone Brothers, Amay Yay Yin.

From the Burmese point of view, the fact that a non-professional dancer could embody the *nats* with such a skilful and effective technique is proof of the spirits' existence and agency. Surely the dancer I just described must have had some sort of training: while, according to the Burmese logic, it is possible to experience the spirits 'naturally', making the experience of *nat pu-* (spirit possession) into a proper *nat ka-* (spirit dance) performance, requires training. Being continuously exposed to the presence of the *nats*, professional spirit mediums can embody the *nats* in a more controlled way than the devotees. The ontological reality of the spirits, their manifestation in the human world, and the skills humans can learn to properly embody them, constitute a fluid and dynamic continuum, in which it is difficult to place figures like a non-professional dancer effectively embodying animal and human *nat* persons.

2.2.2 *Playing with the spirits*

Hsaing musicians do not experience the presence of the spirits in the same way as the dancers. Rouget (1985:102ff.) wrote extensively in regard to the state of ritual music makers. Concerning *nat hsaing* performers, Brac de la Perrière (1994:186) makes an analogy between the Burmese verbs /pu:-/ (high tone), 'to be hot', and /pu-/ (low tone) 'to be possessed'. She writes that, while the experience of the dancing *nat kadaw* is characterised by a certain 'hot-ness' deriving from the presence of the spirits, *nat hsaing* musicians, on the other hand, remain 'cold'. While a difference between the experience of spirit mediums and musicians does exist, the latter do not remain indifferent, or completely juxtaposed, as the word 'cold' seems to suggest. In performance, musicians experience a state of excitement they refer to as 'Lamain *kat-*', from the name of the patron *nat* Lamain. Lamain is a *nat* unique in its genre: any group of performers is considered to be under the protection of this spirit. To pay homage to Lamain, musicians and dancers perform Apyo Daw, the Royal Maiden, (Figure 2.6) who dances for the *nat* Ko Gyi Kyaw, the Prince of *nat kana pwe*. The boundaries between these three figures (Lamain, Apyo Daw, Ko Gyi Kyaw) are blurred, but they are conjunct in their function to ensure the success of every art performance – from pagoda festivals, to marionette theatre (Ye Dway 2013:64; 2014:70ff.). In the *nat kana pwe*, the invitation and performance of Apyo Daw/Lamain *nat* represents the opening of the *nat* embodiment dances: when the dance for Lamain is undertaken effectively, musicians and dancers perform with a particular energy for the rest of the ceremony (Brac de la Perrière 1994:180; Tun 2013:95).



Figure 2.6 A group of four nat kadaws dance as Royal Maidens, presenting the kadaw pwe to the Lamain nat. Yangon, November 2017.

[Video 2.4](#) shows some of the main moments of the Lamain invocation and dance, during a *nat kana* ceremony in Yangon, December 2017, performed by the *hsaing* group of the *hsaing saya* Yelin Bo. In the video, two dancers belonging to the group of the *kana si* U Min Soe move into the dancing area, dressed in the attire of the Royal Maiden, Apyo Daw, representing the Lamain *nat*. Positioned behind the ensemble, my camera captured the inspired state characterising some musicians. The video highlights the introductory part of the *nat* song for Apyo Daw: following the drum circle cues and the intense sound of the wood idiomophone *wa*, the *kyi ti* (gong circle player) performs with speed and intensity – which are quite recognisable in his body movements, at [00:34], when he starts to accompany his playing with movements of his head and body, in time with the music. At [01:28], one of the dancers grabs the *kadaw pwe* for the Lamain *nat* positioned in front of the ensemble, and returns to the dancing area to present the offering (*Kadaw pwe pay dae pou san aka*, ‘dance form of presenting the offering’). This represents the main moment of the Lamain/Apyo Daw dance: swinging the *kadaw pwe* in four directions, the dancer blesses the performing areas, and calls the invited spirits to join the celebration. At each swinging movement, the ensemble plays with increasing speed, to come to an almost complete stop when the dancer raises the offering over his head; the process is repeated three times, until finally, the dancer turns in the direction of the ensemble, thus infusing the presence of the Lamain in the *hsaing* [02:54]. The musicians play intensively: the tempo reaches a climax when the dancer positions the *kadaw pwe* in contact with the drum circle [03:01] and the drum *pat ma* [03:06], bowing in respect. The

act is supported by the *bein maung* music. The performance of this intense sound underlines that the bond between the Lamain *nat* and the musicians/performers has been established: the musicians experience the presence of the Lamain *nat* – ‘Lamain kat-’. After this, the ritual of presenting the offering is soon over: after a short return to the dancing area, the dancer repositions the *kadaw pwe* on its stand [03:19], while the performance of the *nat chin* for Lamain/Apyo Daw continues, until the manifestation of Ko Gyi Kyaw.

In everyday language, the expression ‘Lamain kat dae’ indicates a state of creative inspiration that positively affects the activity of the inspired one. This feeling does not really correspond to a state of spirit possession, but rather to the attachment (*kat-*) of a positive influence. Different musicians reported such inspired feelings or states. The *hsaing saya* U Soe Win and the singer Ma Lay Lay explained their experiencing of Lamain in these terms:

Lorenzo: When you play, is Lamain possessing you?

U Soe Win: Yes, [Lamain] mounts! [*si-*]

Ma Lay Lay: In some *nat pwes*, when we raise the offering [*hmyauk-*] to Lamain, the Lamain reaches Apyo Daw [i.e., the dancer] from the *hsaing saya*.

U Soe Win: The person dances in front [of the ensemble]. Whatever s/he dances, the player knows if the *nat* has arrived [*yauk-*] or not [inside them]. We get goose pimples!

Lorenzo: When the Lamain *nat* arrives, do you play and sing better?

Ma Lay Lay: Of course, it gets better! Lamain mounts [*si-*] and attaches [*kat-*] [on us]!

U Soe Win: Sometimes, the *nat kadaw* is tired because of the number of festivals. In case s/he is not dancing very well, if I personally give energy [*lout pe laik-*] from the *hsaing*, s/he receives it. [Like], ‘EH!’, when I play energetically and strike the drums, the dancer receives the *nat* [*nat yauk thwa-*]. Just like this.

Lorenzo: You said that when the *nat* arrives, you get goose pimples. Does it only happen for Ko Gyi Kyaw, or also with other *nats*?

Ma Lay Lay: Lamain is the most important at the beginning of the ceremony [*pwe u lamain*]. In that moment, whomever of the 37 Lords can step in [*kywa-*], the important thing is that the *nat* arrives [*nat yauk-*].

Lorenzo: After the Lamain *nat* arrives and mounts, when other *nats* dance, does that feeling remain? Does the Lamain stay attached to you?

Ma Lay Lay: Eh! It gets better! Because if the Lamain *nat* comes, others of the 37 Lords will come. [Whoever *nat* arrives,] [the dancer] receives the Lamain automatically. [...] When Lamain mounts [*si*], I can automatically sing and play without [making] any mistake. [...] Yes, of course, [Lamain] stays. That starting point with Lamain is the most important. Even if [the dance of] the

Great Apyo Daw is finished, Lamain *nat* remains. Among the 37 Lords, Lamain is the very first one. [...] When Lamain mounts...

U Soe Win: ...the whole rest of the celebration will be good.

Ma Lay Lay: ... the rest of the celebration goes on without mistakes. [...] Lamain is known as Apyo Daw. [But] actually, Lamain is Ko Gyi Kyaw. It is established that we start with Ko Gyi Kyaw first. We just call him Apyo Daw. When Apyo Daw [dance] is finished and the Great Apyo Daw has left, we have to play *do*, and that is Ko Gyi Kyaw. Among the 37 Lords, if one Lord loves you, all the 37 Lords love you. If one Lord hates you, all the 37 Lords hate you.⁶³

To *nat hsaing* musicians, the feeling of the presence of Lamain *nat* staying with them (*Lamain kat-*) ensures the success of the entire performance. The presence of Lamain is experienced by musicians and dancers alike. The *kana si* Kyaw Win Naing describes the Lamain as the *nat* who brings together the feelings of dancers, musicians, and the other participants, guarantying the success of the ceremony:

At the time of dancing, the main thing is to fulfil [the wishes of] the donor, to make her happy. I also have to enjoy it when I dance. The main thing is Lamain – to get the Lamain *nat* attached [i.e. ‘to be inspired’]. When you dance you have to get in the mood. Sometimes, in some *pwe*s, when the Lamain doesn’t attach [i.e. if you are not inspired], dancing doesn’t come out well. It depends on the donor, and on me. As for those who work for the *hsaing* ensemble, sometimes the Lamain doesn’t attach to me and to them. At that time, when the Lamain attaches, dancing is good and enjoyable. Of course, the main thing is that the *nat* is riding [si-]. When the *nat* rides, the person is happy, and dancing is good.⁶⁴

With the *nat* Lamain by their side, musicians and dancers believe their performance will not only proceed smoothly, but will also be particularly effective. In this sense, ‘Lamain kat-’ could possibly be likened to the psychological experience of “flow”, described by Turino as:

[A] state of heightened concentration, when one is so intent on the activity at hand that all other thoughts, concerns, and distractions disappear and the actor is fully in the present. The experience actually leads to a feeling of timelessness, or being out normal time, and to feelings of transcending one’s normal self. (Turino 2008:4)

Through the feeling of Lamain, the musicians experience, and feel, the presence of the other *nats* invited to the ceremony, and dancing in/through the body of the *nat kadaw*. According to the words of the two musicians, once the *hsaing saya* has ‘received’ the Lamain and feels inspired, he is able to “send” this feeling towards the dancers, who in turn become inspired: the feeling of Lamain is handed to the dancers through the performance of sounds, which become faster, louder, and more intense, and the performance of body movements, becoming more pronounced. Conceptualised as a feeling, and experienced by the

⁶³ U Soe Win and Ma Lay Lay, Mandalay, 5 April 2018.

⁶⁴ Kyaw Win Naing, Yangon, 20 July 2019. See Section 5.2.2.

dancers as sounds and movements, the Lamain *nat* represents the way through which dancers and musicians interact with each other, and perform as one (see Section 3.3.1), to create a collaborative performance that involves human and spirit participants, and makes them feel part of the community.

2.3. Conclusions

In *nat kana pwe* ceremonies, the exchange of bodies moving, and being moved by sounds, represents the main element through which the spirits become manifest. In this chapter I argue that it is through the exchanges (Århem and Sprenger 2015) taking place in the ritual area that the presence of spirit persons can be directly experienced. Spirit persons are invited to join the circulation of material and immaterial items, coming-into-presence in the human bodies, and becoming actively part (Sax 2006; Endres and Lauser 2011) of a network of exchanges that defines the community of the *nat kana* ceremony. As objects of the exchange between humans and spirits, human bodies become the receptacle of different spirit persons, who manifest themselves differently, depending on their personality and that of the human host.

According to the Burmese ontology, *nats* and other spiritual beings constitute an unquestioned reality (in Burmese, *nat shi dae*, ‘the spirits exist’); however, their actual coming-into-presence and manifestation in the ritual area is sometimes questioned. In his study on *weikzas*, Rozenberg explains the Burmese belief system in the following terms:

What [the Burmese] believe in – one or several *weikza* and their powers—stands, they say, beyond ordinary human understanding. The phenomenon relates to an alternative mode of reality, a reality ruled by a logic that the common run of mortals are incapable of grasping or explaining. If this were not the case, then they would not believe. Only the extraordinary generates believing. [...] Thus skepticism, as opposed to disbelief (which is absent), is endemic in Burmese society. Rather than eating away at believing, skepticism is a constituent part of it, precisely because believing would have no place were a phenomenon not unbelievable, were it not taken at first to be so and thus in need of no proof. (Rozenberg 2015:24)

Similarly, while the Burmese believe in the existence of *nats* and other spiritual beings, they can be sceptical about their actual presence in the ritual ceremony. While, as Rozenberg suggests, scepticism represents a constituent part of belief, it is through different kinds of embodied performances that, in *nat kana pwe* ceremonies, the actual presence of the spirits is assessed. As the ethnographic examples provided in this chapter demonstrate, in *nat kana pwes* the embodiment of spirit persons differs greatly between professional *nat kadaws*, who dance in a state of ‘aware possession’ (Norton 2000a, 2009), and devotees, who experience the presence of the spirits, sometimes in extremely powerful ways. The actual presence of the *nat* in the spirit mediums is demonstrated through the performance of tasks otherwise considered normally impossible to accomplish – including several forms of self-injury performed without consequences (fire-eating, self-stabbing, etc.).

Being able to perform such tasks without consequences on the performer's body is often considered as proof of the presence of the spirit person. In this way, spirit and human become one person: not only does the spirit exist, but s/he is manifested in the body of the spirit medium (*nat kadaw* or devotee). The process of spirit embodiment is facilitated by the performance of sounds and dances (Section 5.2.2).

Just as any other ritual actors, the *nat hsaing* musicians take an active part in the network of exchanges that constitutes the *nat kana* community. Compared to the dancers, musicians conceptualise the experience of being inhabited by the Lamain *nat*, the spirit who oversees the performing arts, as 'being inspired' (*nat kat-*) instead of 'being possessed' (*nat winpu-*). After the initial invitation of the Lamain *nat*, for the rest of the ritual performance, musicians exchange with the dancers, the energies received by this spirit. Through the performance of spiritually inspired musicians who support the dances of *nat kadaws*, and devotees embodying different spirit persons, all the ritual actors of a *nat kana pwe* ceremony are brought together as a community.

Alongside other ritual offerings, *hsaing* musical sounds are part of a network of exchange – which is determinant in the construction of the community. Musical sounds open, close and dominate the ritual for the entirety of its duration. Songs are the first thing that *nat kana* participants begin to share and exchange with each other. After the spirits have been invited to join the ceremony, musical sounds bring them into-presence, so that offerings of material and immaterial items can be donated, shared and exchanged with them, and with the other participants. Music itself is regarded as *an offering* to the spirits – a concept that we also find in other Southeast Asian cultures (Brunet 1974:219; Forest 1992:55; Giuriati 1999:91; Wong 1998). In this sense, musical sounds are part of the network of exchange that they contribute to create: *nats* and other beings invited to the ceremony enjoy listening and dancing to the songs they like most; it is not rare that a spirit expressly requests that musicians perform a particular song, for his/her enjoyment and that of the rest of the human participants. In doing so, not only does the embodied spirit become an active part of the community, but s/he also includes and co-opts the musicians into it. In describing the relationship between musical sounds and spiritual beings, Aubert underlines how the efficacy of music depends on its social function:

[U]ne musique donnée ne peut réellement être opérante qu'au sein du contexte social et événementiel auquel elle s'intègre. Cette efficacité - pour autant qu'elle soit attestée - ne relève ainsi pas seulement de la nature des sons, de leurs propriétés acoustiques, mais tout autant de la fonction socialement attribuée à la musique et des codes sonores qu'elle émet dans une situation précise, lesquels sont immédiatement perçus et appliqués par les adeptes en position de "musiqués." (Aubert 2006:17)

Musicians are considered part of the *nat kana* community: they are well acquainted with the spirit mediums and they know which donors host bigger ceremonies; some donors and mediums specifically request that one particular *nat hsaing* perform, both for the musicians' musical skills or moral character.

To have a good ensemble means to donate better music to the spirit, thus making them happier, and the ritual more effective. These and other matters will be addressed more specifically in the next chapter.

3. Space-time and community: the ritual through sounds and movements

Mei Gyi felt she had become part of another world. Though daylight streamed into the pavilion from three sides, a muslin backing hung behind the altar shutting out the mundane world from her view, so that nothing distracted her senses from the beat of the music, the chant coming from one of the attendants, and the twisting figure of the natkadaw. She waited in fascinated absorption for the coming of the spirit.

Kenneth Sein and Joseph A. Whitey, *The Great Po Sein*
(1965:65)

It is a bright morning of March in Mandalay. I am riding my motorbike on 26th street, heading towards the bustling commercial heart of the last royal capital of Burma. The huge royal palace walls and its large moat stand on my right, but I am too busy trying to survive the traffic to notice. Moreover, I am late: today is *nat kana pwe* day, and the ceremony must have started already. The *nat kadaw* (spirit medium) Ba Nya Aung and the Golden Brothers invited me to join their *pwe* a few days before, but they could not provide me the exact location of the *kana*. ‘West side of the Palace, around 19th street’ was the only vague information I got. When I turn onto the wide 19th street I slow down – but instead of looking for evidence of the ritual pavilion, I open my ears: the ceremony has probably already started, and I know from experience that the sound of the *nat hsaing* ensemble can travel quite far. With my eyes fixed on the unpredictable traffic, I start to pay attention to the sounds around me, trying to isolate that of a *hsaing* ensemble, from the noise of horns, cars, motorbikes, shouting vendors, and shops’ music. I cross yet another intersection, and finally the distinctive but still faint sound of an electrically amplified *hsaing* reaches me. Triumphant, I let it pull me away from the main road: it guides me behind corners, onto small secondary roads. Every passing metre, after every turn, the sound becomes more definite, growing in presence and (distorted) details. It triggers my active listening: is it a familiar melody that I am recognising? Which song are they playing? Have they started to dance yet? Finally, after one last turn, I see the *kana*: the bamboo structure, covered with the typical red drapes, occupies part of the road, protruding from the private house of the donor. Some passers-by are already surrounding the pavilion, listening and enjoying the manoeuvres of the musicians performing a *mingala hsaing*, the auspicious sounds that welcome people to the *pwe*. The dances have not started yet.

Hanging on one corner of the bamboo structure, a large conical speaker is projecting the revering *hsaing* sound along the road, filling the air of the entire block with distorted sounds. I park my bike under it, and while I instinctively cover my ears, I silently send it my thanks for having successfully guided me here. I proceed inside the *kana*, where the *nat kadaws* fill the altar with fragrant flowers and

offerings of fresh food. The sonic force of the amplified ensemble hits me: a tower of massive speakers stands on one side of the pavilion, right next to the main entrance of the house. Only a few instruments are wired up, but that is enough to make speaking at a normal volume impossible: to be heard one must shout. From inside the drum circle, the ensemble leader (*hsaing saya*) throws his gaze upon me: I have never seen him before; from the chatter of the mediums I learn that his group is considered one of the best *nat hsaing* in Mandalay. I greet him; then, turning around, I take a moment to politely bow to the spirits: their golden images dominating the dancing area in front of the altar, just opposite to the ensemble. The *hsaing* sounds, played out in front of the images of the Spirit Lords of Burma, always gives me goose-bumps. The mediums complete the preparation of the altar: the smell of incense and cooked food reaches me. I set up my recording equipment and start recording the *hsaing* performance. I exit the pavilion to get better shots of those instruments which, for space reasons, were relegated to the back. The musicians look at the camera and smile at me, playing more intensely when they realise they are in the frame. After a few more pieces, the *hsaing* ends, the echoes fading to silence: the preparations are complete, and the devotees start to take a seat on the ground mats, facing the *nats* altar, gathered around the *kana si*, the senior spirit medium: he is about to thank the donors, praise the Buddha, and call the spirits. The *pwe* is, only now, beginning, but the atmosphere is already electric.

A *nat kana pwe* represents a multi-sensory experience: during the ceremony, not only sound, but also the smells and tastes of the offerings, the colours of drapes – usually red, indicating royalty and thus being preferred by the spirits – and, as the ceremony proceeds, the movements of the dancers and the response of the participants, contribute to create a ritually charged atmosphere that the participants experience through all their senses (Stoller 1989; Pink 2015).

In the *nat kana pwe*, ordinary space-time is ritually transformed through the establishment of a link between sounds and the other ritual devices. The relationship between sounds and ritual – and the various functions that ritual sounds accomplish – has been explored in several scholarly works (e.g. Desroches 2003; Harris and Norton 2002; Howard 2006; Rouget 1985; Wong and Lysloff 1991; Yung et al. 1996). Sound – and specifically, *all ritual sounds* (Beck 1993:6; Yung 1996:17) – represents but one of the ritual sensory elements that, following Tambiah (1985:128), constitute a network of multiple ritual media, constructing, through performance, a system of communication. In this sense, the *nat kana* represents a multi-dimensional space-time, in which the unseen world of the spirits is brought-into-presence.

In order to describe this space-time, I depart from Schafer's (1994[1977]) concept of soundscape. Schafer's 'acoustic ecology' evaluated sounds through physical space and historical time – a "flat-scape" connected to the idea of landscape (Samuels et al. 2010), a container in which sounds are considered as objects, thus substituting visual-centrism with aural-centrism. Other authors consider sounds as a bodily experience rather than an object: in his seminal work *Waterfalls of Song*, Feld (1996; see also Feld 2015, 2017) proposes the idea of acoustemology (acoustic knowledge) as an alternative to

soundscape, in an attempt to overcome the ‘visual-auditory great divide’; Helmreich (2007) defines the perception of sounds spatialities, with different textures as ‘soundstate’; Ingold (2007), describes sound as breath, ‘experienced as a movement of coming and going’.

The need for a different theoretical approach derives from the fact that the space-time created in *nat kana pwe* cannot be regarded as a *-scape*. In animic ontologies, the beings made manifest through sounds *inhabit* the world (and not just occupy it): their (sonic) path ‘is a way *through* the world, rather than across.’ (Ingold 2006:14). By experiencing sounds, one can experience spiritual beings. *Nat kana pwe* space-time is an experienced multi-dimensional and multi-sensorial in-between space-time which connects worlds (Stoller 1997). Through sounds, domestic/public, present/past, human/spirit space-times are merged together. The lively atmosphere of the ceremony is reached through the musical sound of the ensemble and the active participation of the devotees: in this sense, this in-between space-time must be considered as multi-sounded (and multi-heard) – a dimension far more complex than a *-scape*.

The chapter is organised in three parts. First, I focus on the role that sounds have in constructing and defining the ritual space-time of the temporary pavilion. I consider aesthetics and ritual meanings behind the use of sound technologies in these ceremonies, arguing that the use of echo/reverb effect helps enable the creation of an in-between space-time separated from the ordinary world. The second part is devoted to the analysis of the participation of the ritual community: looking at one fieldwork video, I explain how the *nat hsaing* sounds, together with the sounds and the movements created by the participating devotees, contribute to the creation of a heightened state in the dancers. I argue that the combined actions of performers and participants is responsible for the manifestation of the spirits, and thus, for the construction of an active *nat kana* community. The final part describes the conjunct actions of *nat kana* performers and participants as a collaborative system. I describe the different cues and signals in use between dancers and musicians: by referring to another fieldwork video, I analyse timing, reactions and responses of *hsaing* musicians and of one dancer during a performance.

3.1. Constructing *nat kana*’s ritual space-time and community

The *nat kana* is an in-between space: built as a temporary extension of the household, the pavilion is an extension of a defined domestic space – where outsiders are not allowed – “invading” the public space of the street. Only family and friends are welcomed into the domestic space: the *ein shin* (‘house lord/lady’) takes care of them by offering food and reserving them a seat in the *mye waing* (‘ground circle’, where the dances take place); within certain limits, passers-by are welcomed to take part to the ceremony: mediums and donors interact with them, but keep them outside of the domestic space, physically delimited with bamboo racks. (Figure 3.1)



Figure 3.1 The kana, the temporary pavilion erected as an extension of a private house, protrudes on the street. On the right corner of the structure, a conical loud speaker. Mandalay, March 2018.

The domestic/inside space is organised so that the *nat kana* can function as a ‘possession-enabling device’ (Brac de la Perrière 2016:16) – i.e., a means for the invitation and the manifestation of spiritual beings through the human bodies: the two main elements of this device, the *hsaing* ensemble and the *nat* altar, occupy two opposed extremities of the pavilion. The spirit souls (*leikpya*) encapsulated in the *nat* images are brought-into-presence through the sound of the *hsaing* ensemble, and embodied in the possession dances taking place in the middle space (Brac de la Perrière 1993b). In the *nat kana*, the everyday life that normally characterises the household is transformed: the invisible beings inhabiting the domestic space and other beings from outside, temporarily assume a concrete and tangible character. In this sense, the *nat kana* space in-betweenness could be described not only through the opposition of the domestic/inside-public/outside realms, but also the human world-spiritual world.⁶⁵

Talking of opposition would be only partially correct. In fact, the *nat kana* favours the fusion, rather than the opposition, of these spatial dimensions (Stoller 1997): the domestic dimension partially penetrates the public space, and vice versa; the human world temporarily melds with the spiritual world,

⁶⁵ From a spatial point of view, *nat* cult and Buddhism appear to be separated and differentiated, as a spirit possession ceremony cannot be performed in the compound of monastery or a pagoda (Brac de la Perrière 2009a:199). However, in the course of my fieldwork I have seen several exceptions to this rule.

so that humans and spirits can directly, and physically interact. As I will now explain, this fusion is facilitated by sound.

3.1.1 Sound aesthetics and sonic space-time

The in-betweenness of the *nat kana* is articulated through sound. As the *nat kana* occupies an ambivalent space, the *nat hsaing* sounds separates and merges ordinary space and time by creating a new ritual space-time dimension characterised by liminality. As the pavilion protrudes from the household, the *hsaing* sound both fills it and spreads outside of it; sound separates and merges different social spaces – domestic and public – of the human participants, including several domestic ‘social worlds’ – of neighbours, strangers, and passers by. Although being ‘of this world’, the *nats* remain normally unseen, beyond the reach of humans: sound, in this sense, brings human and spirit ‘worlds’ together, contributing to the creation of a different experience of time in which past and present exist side by side in the ritual performance.

The loud volumes that the *nat hsaing* ensembles reach through heavy amplification and the echo/reverb effect – whose use is not limited to the *nat hsaing* only (Keeler 1998:399; Douglas 2011; see also Sutton 1996) – respond to a precise religious aesthetic which cannot be ascribed to the *nat* cult only, but in general to the sphere of Buddhist religious values and behaviours. Music and sound are considered offerings, just as the material offerings of food, drinks, flowers, and bodies for the spirits to enter, are. During a ceremony, sound represents a consistent part of the exchange among humans, and among humans and spirits. The more people (and spirits) are reached by the sound, the more the shared offerings contribute to the elevation of a donor’s Buddhist merit (Brunet 1974; Giuriati 1999; Wong 1998).⁶⁶

The same ‘sharing the merit’ logic links together loud volumes and the sound of *kyi si* (percussion plaques) and *hkaung laung* (bells) with *dana* (meritorious deeds) in Buddhist contexts. Analysing Buddhist soundscapes in Burma, Douglas explains:

Metta [Loving Kindness] and *mudita* [Sympathetic Joy] in particular are connected to the act of sounding and hearing the bells. After one makes an offering or prayer of any sort, in a public space or at a home shrine, one strikes the bells, usually *kaung long* or *kyi si*, to acknowledge the offering. As an act of loving kindness (*metta*) they invite others who hear the bell to share in the merit that has been made. To make an offering truly meritorious, other sentient beings such as humans or spirits are invited to participate in the *khammic* deed as well. (Douglas 2017:13)

⁶⁶ In fact, I do not agree with the analysis by Bekker (1994:296): she posits that *nat hsaing* loudness is something to be ‘feared’, as ‘expression of strong emotion of any sort is abhorrent to the Burmese’, due to the Burmese Buddhist ideal of the Middle Way.

Considering Buddhist chanting and ceremonies in American-Burmese Buddhist congregations, Greene highlights similar aspects:

It is believed that the religious merit (*punya*) generated through the ritual can be shared by all who hear this sound; benefits of the ritual radiate outward, much like sound itself. Anyone hears the sound the the *kyé si:* and then recites "*thādhu, thādhu, thādhu*" [Burmese for *sadhu*, "well done" in Pāli] believed to receive the same *punya* as those who performed the ritual. Through the *kyé si:*, the benefits of the ritual radiate outward much sound itself. (Greene 2004:59)

The amplified sounds of *nat kana* ceremonies reach, and surpass, the surroundings of the pavilion, spreading through the air: they are used, to borrow Douglas' (2017; 2019b) words, 'as donation and as a sound of donation', or 'donating and being heard donating'. In this sense, the sound of *nat hsaing* is produced to also acknowledge that a donation in the form of a *nat kana* is taking place: the performance of a ceremony is announced by the *hsaing* sound, propagating through massive speakers oriented towards the street. Just as any other Buddhist, *nat* devotees take pride in the meritorious act of donating. Modern amplification technologies allow people to achieve this aim in a way otherwise unthinkable. (Figure 3.2, Figure 3.4, and Figure 3.5)



Figure 3.2 The *hsaing* says sings into one of the microphones wired to his drum circle. Mandalay, March 2018.

As sound radiates beyond the physical limits of the *nat kana* and world of spirits and humans, it could hardly be considered as an element dividing the space into the simplistic binary categories I have so far outlined. However, a domestic/inside vs. public/outside dichotomy can still be observed. Different technologies iconically mark the propagation of sound inside and outside the *nat kana*: inside, massive loud-speakers provide the loudest volume that the ritual organisers can afford; outside, huge

conical speakers project distorted metallic sounds. Both these systems are managed through the same mixer; both bring the volume to almost unbearable levels. (Figure 3.3)

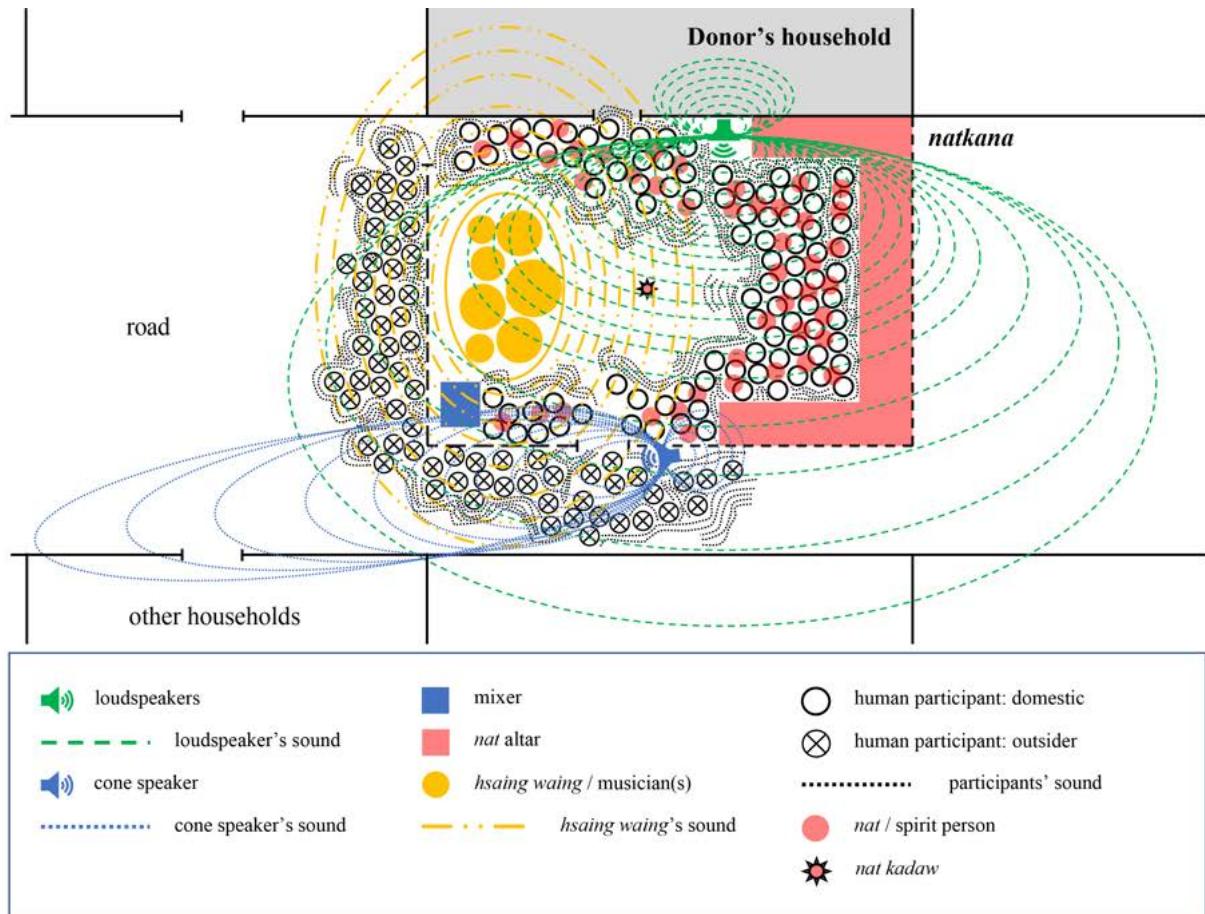


Figure 3.3 Model of a typical nat kana pwe sounds' sources and spatial reach.

Nat hsaing practice is generally associated, not without reason, with high volumes: in 2013, while I was still in the preparatory phase of my first fieldwork trip, Ward Keeler suggested that I bring earplugs in case I went to the Taungbyone festival, where the *nat hsaing*'s sound is almost unbearable. According to my *nat hsaing* informants, loud amplified sounds are necessary to support to the spirit dances: the louder the volume, the more exciting the sound, the better the performance. One could be tempted to think that loud volumes are somehow used by *nat hsaing* musicians as a compensation for the apparently less elaborated style of their musical practice; actually, similar volumes characterise other performance contexts in Burma: when I went to the celebration of an *ahlu pwe* (donation ceremony) where my *hsaing saya* friend Bo Naing performed, in Mandalay, the sound of his *bala hsaing* was just as deafening. (Figure 3.5)

Electronic amplification also involves another aesthetic implication: the heavy use of electronic effects, such as reverb and echo. All the microphones wired to the instruments, as well as those handled by the singer(s), are set up with it: sometimes, these effects are so heavily used that it is difficult to understand spoken words, even when the rest of the ensemble remains silent. Together with loud

volumes, the reverb effect contributes to the release of significant acoustic energy: loud sounds are perceived as louder – especially the singing. With the reverb effect, the *nat kana* sound becomes more powerful for the listeners, immersing them in the sounds. Sonic qualities, and especially sensations of loudness, are central in “extreme” music genres. In describing the experience of noise in *Japanoise* live performances, Novak explains that:

Noise fans and performers sometimes describe their experiences at live performances as a state of hypnosis, dreamlike sleep, or trance. This immersion in volume is not a moment of social collectivity but a personal encounter with the overwhelming presence of sound. The stress on sensory immediacy does not mean there is no social “there” there. (Novak 2013:47)

Although this strongly resonates with the experiences of spirit embodiment that I have described in Section 2.2.1, I believe that, in the case of *nat kana* pwes, sonic qualities (including loudness) are also a determining factor in constructing and bringing together the ritual community, and space-time – and not just in isolating the participants in ‘idiosyncrasies of individual sensation’, as Novak explains.



Figure 3.4 Mixer in use in one nat kana pwe. Yangon, February 2018.

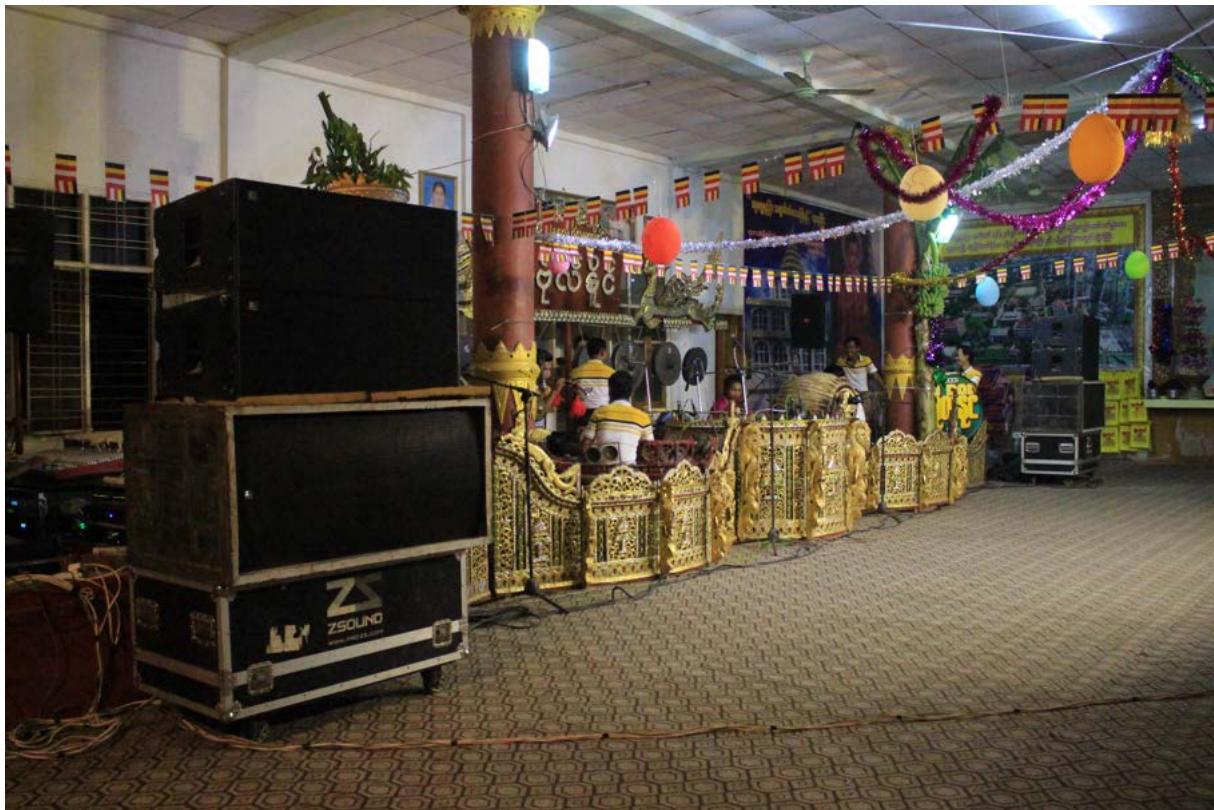


Figure 3.5 Massive amplification for saya Bo Naing's hsaing ahlu pwe (donation ceremony). Mandalay, March 2018.

The heavy use of reverb effect is not an exclusive characteristic of the *nat kana pwe*'s sound. Today, it is apparently desirable across a diverse array of contexts: it can be easily detected in public contexts – such as dramatic performances, pagoda festivals, or monk speeches – and in the more intimate environment of KTVs (Karaoke television), as well as in different studio recordings. In some of these contexts, the reverb effect's uses partially overlap with those I have so far outlined for *nat* ceremonies.

When I spoke to *nat hsaing* and *bala hsaing* musicians about the use of reverb, many replied that ‘it makes everything sound better’;⁶⁷ some musicians, though, stated that they do not really like it: in an interview,⁶⁸ U Kyaw Nyunt, master of the ensemble of the Taungbyone village’s *nat* palace, considered by many to be the best and most traditional *nat hsaing* in Burma, told me that they do not use any reverb effect in supporting the Taungbyone festival ceremony. But just a few hours later, when the Taungbyone *hsaing* started to play, the reverb effect was markedly in use.

More than one analogy can be drawn between the Burmese heavy use of loud volumes and echo/reverb effect, and the recent sound studies literature concerning Muslim sounds. Describing the sonic dimension of *na’t* (devotional Urdu poetry in honour of the Prophet) among Mauritian Muslims,

⁶⁷ U Pit Tain Htaun, Mandalay, 07 August 2018.

⁶⁸ U Kyaw Nyunt, Taungbyone, 17 August 2018.

Eisenlohr (2018) underlines how reverb effect has become an integral part of the recording technique. Drawing on the neo-phenomenological approaches to atmospheres, Eisenlohr (ivi:98) explains that reverb multiplies and exerts the power of the *na't khwan's* (reciter) recorded voice; the reverb effect reminds the listeners of the sound of the *azan* (call to prayer), a core element of Islamic practice, associated with an ‘otherworldly quality’; as a spatial phenomenon, the reverb effect

creates the sense of being in a very large hall or other spacious built environment where distances are great enough for the voice to audibly reverberate, and where the size of the space in question is large enough for the reverberation time – that is, the time it takes for a sound to die away when being reflected – to be sufficiently long [...] the echo effect creates the sonic sensation of distance and the dilation of sound in a large space. (Eisenlohr 2018:99)

Similarly, in *nat kana pwes*, a larger spatial effect is achieved through reverb: the physical limits of the *kana* become irrelevant; the heavy use of such effects creates a virtual expanded spatiality – an acoustic marker for a grandiose hall. Through reverberation, the humble bamboo pavilion is transformed into the *nat kana*, a royal palace for the spirit Lords of Burma: contextually, the red drapes, the offerings, and the costumes and dances of the *nat kadaws* combine to indicate the opulence generally associated with royalty and power. In this sense, reverberated sound becomes an essential element in creating a sacred space, at the same time different to, but still linked to the profane world.

Eisenberg’s (2013) study focuses on sound, space, and Islam in Mombasa, Kenya. He explains that public neighbourhoods are transformed into private spaces through the Old Town’s sounds – especially that of *azan* and *khutba*, the Friday Sermon, which calls humans and spiritual beings alike. Analysing the relationship between space and Islamic sound, Eisenberg explains that:

Sound thus becomes a material tendon linking sacred and profane realms, thereby transforming (sacralising) the latter; or, better, sound becomes a *potential* tendon linking the sacred and the profane, as human beings also play an essential role in this sonic sacralisation of space. (Eisenberg 2013:194)

As in the case described by Eisenberg, in *nat kana pwe* ceremonies sound encompasses spaces, putting in contact different dimensions and worlds. Loud volumes and reverb become essential in trying to spread the sound as far as possible, covering other urban sounds and creating a “sacral” sound space whose boundaries between public-domestic space and human-spiritual worlds are blurred. However, space is not the only dimension to be affected by ritual sounds: *nat kana* also create a different temporal dimension.

After the *nat hsaing* ensemble starts to play, the sounds and spirits progression becomes the main reference through which the ceremony is experienced by the participants: they stop measuring the passing of the day in terms of regular time and become fully immersed in the flow of the ritual time, regulated by the sequence of spirit embodiments, and of the sounds that supports them. Seeger explains it quite clearly when he writes that:

Time as a socially relevant experience is created by societies and individuals acting within them. [...] Just as singing, dancing and other ceremonial activities clarified or re-defined certain spaces, so they re-established periods of time and some of the relationships among them. (Seeger 2004:70)

In performance, the flow of the ritual performance is experienced through the flow of sounds and movements. Listeners/participants and performers find themselves together in the measured time of the (musical) sound. The flow of time is experienced on the basis of intervals of (musical) sound durations that interact with the possession dances. This time is not experienced diachronically. As Wong and Lysloff explain:

When music is made in a ritual context, the created space is sacred. The result is a new and extraordinary environment, a pocket of time and space within "real" time and space. (Wong and Lysloff 1991:316)

In other words, 'the essential quality of music is its power to create another world of virtual time' (Blacking 2000[1973]:27); through the act of listening, mundane time is immobilised in a 'synchronic totality' (Levi-Strauss 1970[1964]:16).⁶⁹

In *nat kana pwes*, *nats* enter the bodies of unexperienced devotees. These devotees are usually overwhelmed by the spirits: for the whole duration of the embodiment, their perception of the flow of time is lost, while their movements are still in time with the sound of the ensemble; after the spirits leave, they keep no memories of what happened. In those moments, ordinary time ceases to exist for them: the flow of the ritual time, organised through the sound of the *nat hsaing*, becomes a shared time experience, linking together musicians, spirits, and devotees.

3.2. Being part of the community: participants and audience

The experience of a ritual time, marked by the consecutive embodiment of different spirits, in a ritual space filled up with loud, reverberated sounds, contribute to create a sense of community. To be allowed in the *kana*'s space allows one to enter a domestic dimension: as I describe in Section 2.1, the exchanges taking place could be described, not just as a host-guest relationship, but as being part of the same community. All the supporters of a certain *nat kadaw* – his/her entourage, also composed of pupils and friends spirit mediums – are usually considered to be part of the same family:

The relationship is conceived as filial in nature: clients are known collectively as "seven day[s] children of the *nats*" (*nat khuhnit yek thathami*). The medium, his/her troupe, and his/her

⁶⁹ However, a sense of the "mundane clock time" is not completely lost: someone – usually the *kana si*, or his attendant(s) – has to make sure the ritual performance begins and finishes within certain time limits. Neither devotees, musicians, nor mediums want a ceremony to last too long; as permission from the local council office is needed to celebrate a *pwe* in the urban environment, exceeding the time limits may occasion a fine.

clientele together are deemed a “*nat* family”. It is this relationship with the medium that underlies the decision to organize such [a] ceremony. (Brac de la Perrière 2016:16)

During a ceremony, this sense of community is achieved in different ways. One of these is the proximity of bodies: except for the central space, where the dance takes place, not a single area of the *kana* is left empty; the community is constantly moving, interacting with each other or with the spirits embodied by the *nat kadaw*; the bodies are pressed one to another for hours, and despite the heat, this extreme proximity is experienced as a happy occasion. This concept is expressed through the locution *lu si dae*, ‘crowded, full of people’ in a positive sense, comparable with the Indonesian *ramé* – ‘a magnified aesthetic state of liveliness’, a ‘state of heightened spiritual awareness’ (Harnish 2006) that represents a sociocultural goal of festival celebrations in Lombok, Indonesia. As for Burma, a larger number of participants ensures a livelier performance – thus confirming the *nat kadaw* as a successful spirit medium, and the *ein shin* and his/her family as welcoming and generous hosts.

Another way to construct a sense of community is through sounds. Sound contributes to creating more or less liveliness. The sonic impact of the volumes is stronger in the immediate surroundings of the inside/domestic space, and ritually effective (i.e. supporting and controlling the embodiment of the spirits) only inside the *nat kana*: people occupying the public/outside space, but standing next to the limit of the domestic/inside space, are not supposed to be affected by the performance as much as the members of the domestic community – and that is because they are not part of it, even if they are exposed to the same ritual stimuli. As Rouget (1985) explained, ritual sounds (music) socialise the embodiment of the spirits (trance): taking part in the *nat kana* performance, responding to the socialising function (Seeger 2004; Turino 2008) of self-recognition as the domestic community of participants – i.e., as a family, separated from the rest of the participating audience, who remain outside.⁷⁰

In a ceremony, the movements, both physical and emotive, of the domestic community of participants are supposed to respond to the *nat hsaing* sounds more than that of the rest of the public audience. Rhythms and tunes pervade the air in a very physical way, making the social body of the participants vibrate, charging the ritual atmosphere (Groenendaal 2008:167; Kartomi 1973:203). When involved in the ritual performance, the devotees become ‘happily active’ (*seit myu kywa*): they not only actively respond, but participate in performance, talking with the spirits embodied by the mediums, dancing the spirits themselves, singing the lyrics of the song along with the singer, clapping their hands in time with the ensemble, or feeling emotionally moved by the sad fate of a performed *nat* legend – generally interacting with musicians, mediums, and spirits. In ceremony, performers and audience can be considered ‘as one group of participants constructing the event together’ (Clayton 2007:73; see also

⁷⁰ This separation of domestic/community vs. outsider devotees resonates with Friedson’s (1996:110-111) account of participants and audiences in Tumbuka healing ceremonies: he explains that, ‘although everyone in the temple is supposed to contribute to the music’, some people remain ‘on the periphery’, ‘minimally involved in music making’.

Qureshi 1995[1986]). The participation of the devotees is an integral part of the ritual performance. The clapping and shouting contribute sonically and kinaesthetically to the liveliness of the atmosphere: the movements and sounds that they make represent both a response and a trigger for musicians and dancers. The energy level of the audience builds following the music and dance performance; the sound energy is transferred to kinaesthetic energy, and vice versa.

Ethnomusicological studies explain that sounds ‘manipulate subjective time’ (Wong and Lysloff 1991:338) creating ‘the possibility of an objective intersubjectivity between individuals’ (Friedson 1996:125), ‘create a sense of ritual time which enables mediums to carry out ritual action’ (Norton 2000b:81), and ‘encapsulate the sacred time’ (Harnish 2006:216). As I explain in Section 2.1, in the case of *nat kana pwe* the community includes the spirit persons alongside the human persons (Bird-David 1999). The spirits are invited into the *nat kana*: they join the community and celebrate with them, manifesting themselves through spirit embodiment and contributing to the ceremony.

During the dances – especially during the *chawt pwe*, when the main donor becomes protagonist – family and friends actively contribute to the creation of this sense of community and celebration: they interact with the dancing donor, they move with him/her in the ritual area to present their offerings or encourage the spirit dance with shouts and loud clapping.

Inspired by Qureshi’s (1995[1986]) analysis of Qawwali, and Clayton’s, Dueck’s and Leante’s (2013) approach to the analysis of the interactions between musicians and audiences, the following part analyses a *chawt pwe*. [Video 3.1](#) documents part of a ceremony I attended in Sanchaung Township, Yangon. The *nat kana* lasted for two days, and it represents one of the most magnificent and long ceremonies I have ever attended. The main donor, Daw Chit Su Htwe (the main dancer in the video) is a renowned *bedin sayama* (astrologer); in 2013, she requested an equally famous *kana si*, Yangon U Win Hlaing, to organise an *adeit than nat kana pwe* (a ceremony in fulfilment of a vow) to renew her covenant with the Thirty-seven Lords (*nat pwe*), the *thaiks* (*thaik pwe*), and the *weikza* (*dat pwe*). I will describe the main nodes of Daw Chit Su Thwe’s (the main dancer) performance. These are represented in a diagram alongside the actions and sounds produced by the other ritual participants, and the sounds produced by the *nat hsaing* performers.

The table (*Transcription 3.1*) describes the unravelling of the process during the ritual dances. The focus is on the Main Dancer (MD); her actions are described in comparison with the action of the participants (P, devotees and supporters), occasional possessed dancers (PD), the *nat hsaing* (H) and the singer (S). The timeline marks the moments when the action takes place; the colours indicate the continuity of an action. The actions in the ritual space are graphically rendered in Figure 3.6, which must be read by looking at the diagram and the video.

3.2.1 Chawt pwe: moving the ritual space, sounding the ritual community

26 October 2013. Last week, the Thadingyut full-moon day marked the end of the *Watwin*, the Buddhist lent during the monsoon season. The ritual activities, which have been considerably slowed down, are now starting to increase again: the *kana si* U Win Hlaing is celebrating the *nat kana pwe* out of his house for the first time in three months. For this, the ceremony donated by the astrologer Daw Chit Su Thwe is particularly sumptuous: the *pwe* starts in the late morning, and from the beginning, U Win Hlaing is able to show off his best costumes and dances, while Daw Chit Su Thwe took care to arrange particularly rich and diverse offerings to the spirits, and to call many friends and family members to the ceremony. The participation of Daw Chit Su Thwe's community was already quite enthusiastic in the earliest stage of the ceremony – but it is now, in the afternoon, that things are getting more intense.

I am surrounded and jostled in the busy crowd, trying to document the event to the best of my abilities. Standing on one side of the *kana*, ease of movement is limited, and I am sometimes forced to respond to the pushing of the excited crowd in order not to fall over. I hold up my camera using my tripod, trying to save it from damage, shooting [Video 3.1](#).

In the video, Daw Chit Su Thwe (MD) occupies the central area of the *kana*. She is dressing as a *nat* dancer, performing *chawt pwe* to celebrate her covenant with the spirits in front of, and together with the rest of her community. Three more dancers stay behind her, dancing and participating by occasionally interacting with her. All eyes are on Daw Chit Su Thwe. Figure 3.6 shows her, and other participants', positions and actions: Daw Chit Su Thwe is surrounded by her people, to the point that she can barely move around; she ignores completely the musicians and the ensemble, with whom she does not directly interact at all. The ensemble occupies one side of the *kana*: in the diagram, the musicians' orientation is represented by the position of the “yellow men” icons. At [00:35], after the initial invocation, the musicians start to perform a well-known *nat chin*, *Shwe Byone*, *Ngwe Byone*. The alternation between vocal (S) and instrumental parts (H) progressively builds up the excitement of the participants (P), both triggering and feeding off it. The sound of the ensemble, together with the proximity of bodies and the actions of the participants (clapping, shouting), increases the excitement to the point that some members of the community (PD) get suddenly possessed by the *nats*. Some participants are more active than others in supporting and assisting the occasionally possessed dancers, and in triggering the general excitement.

The climax signified by the increasing of tempo and dynamics and the devotees' participation is reached with the spirit embodiments in three different extents – at [02:22] (phase a1), [02:54] (phase 8), and [03:56] (phase b1). These moments are marked in red in Transcription 3.1. They correspond to the instrumental parts of the song – at [01:17], [02:32], [04:06], [05:40] – when tempo and dynamics generally increase. During the vocal part, the participants remain quieter – except for [02:10], when the

singer performs the main line of the song, the part everyone is familiar with. In general, the responding of the participants happens during the instrumental part of the *hsaing*, when the sound intensity grows.

At [04:52] the song is about to finish: the singer performs the last verse; the main dancer receives several notes as offerings, blessing her family with them, and preparing to share them with everyone. This happens after the last instrumental section begins, at [05:41]: a few seconds later, the main dancer starts to throw the money (phase 12), first inside the *nat kana* (at [05:51]), then to the people outside (at [05:55]). The audience outside the *nat kana* shout in excitement and fight to pick the money up. Immediately after that, at [05:59] the ensemble concludes the song, sending the *nats* away; the donor and the other dancers hug in front of the *hsaing* at [06:06], exhausted but happy.

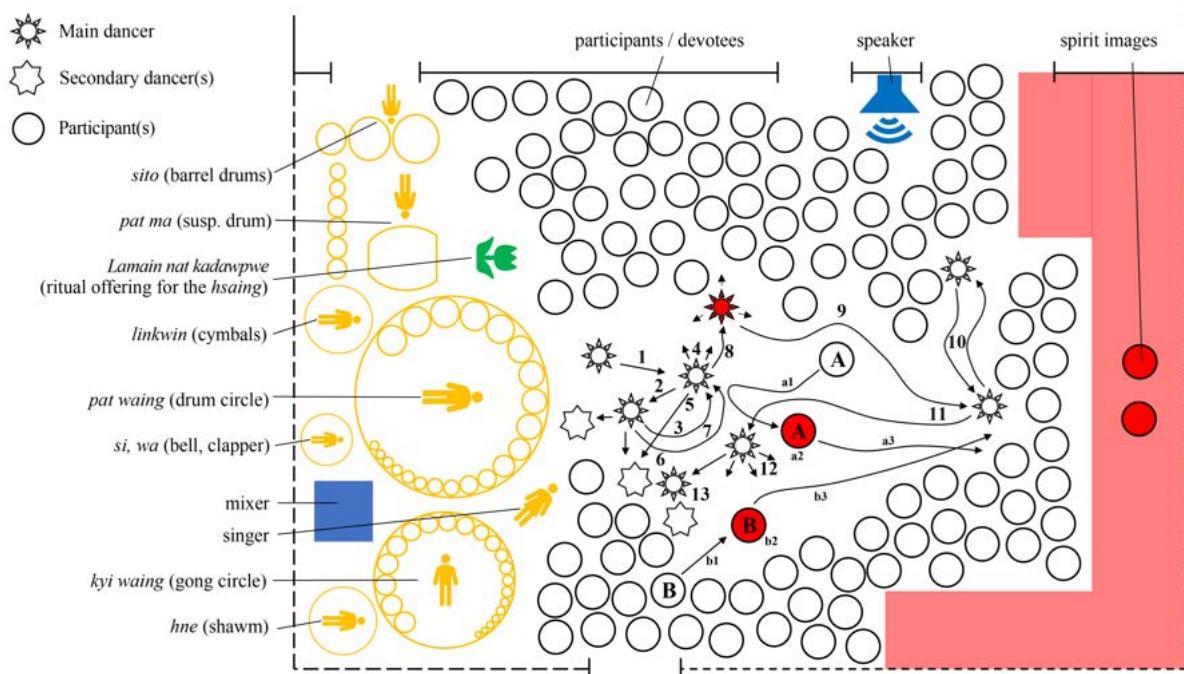
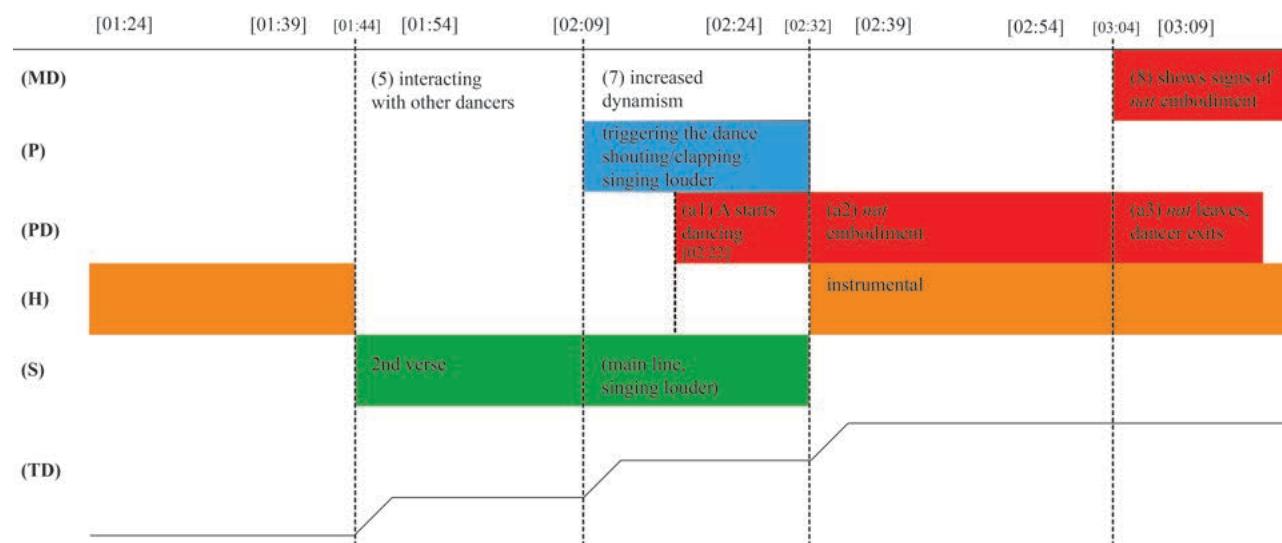
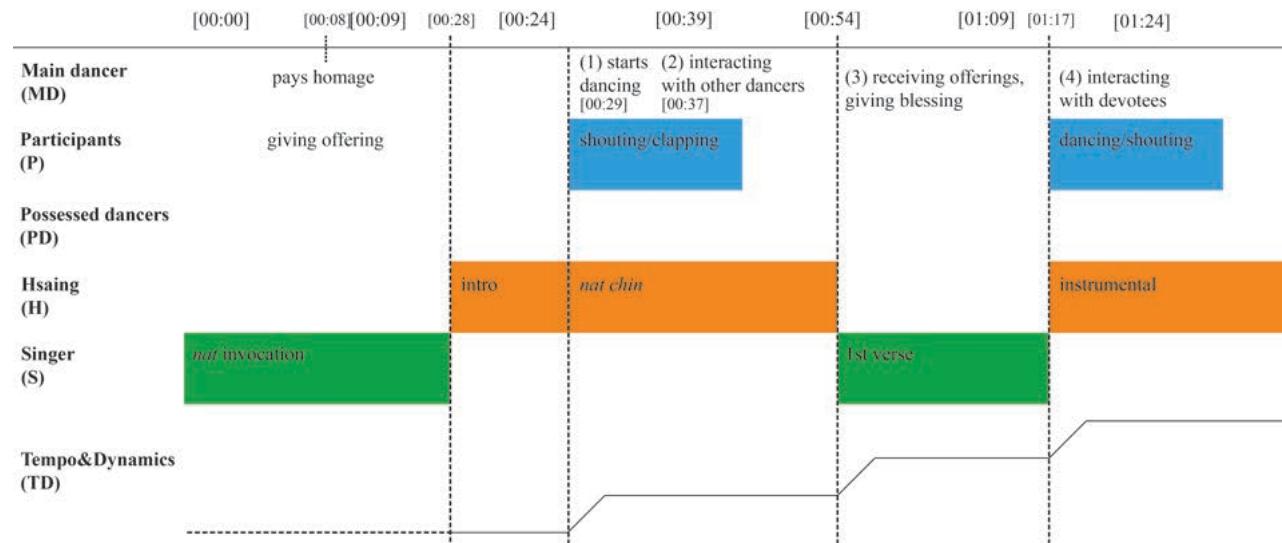


Figure 3.6 Diagram representing the dance of a group of devotees dancing for the two Taungbyone Brothers nats.



	[03:09]	[03:20]	[03:24]	[03:36]	[03:39]	[03:54]	[04:06]	[04:09]	[04:24]	[04:39]	[04:52]	[04:54]
(MD)					(9) moves towards <i>nat</i> images			(10) blessing family/friends possession ended (?)				
(P)				surround MD donate money				intense shouting				
(PD)							(b1) nat embodiment [03:56]	(b2) dance		(b3) nat leaves, dancer exits [04:49]		
(H)							instrumental					
(S)			3rd verse							4th verse		
(TD)												
	[04:54]	[05:09]	[05:16]	[05:24]	[05:39]	[05:54]	[06:09]					
(MD)					(11) receiving money, blessing family/friends			(12) throwing money [05:51] (inside) [05:55] (outside)		(13) hugging other dancers [06:06]		
(P)						shouting, clapping	intense shouting					
(PD)												
(H)						instrumental			conclusion [05:59] [06:06]			
(S)									cadential phrase			
(TD)												

Transcription 3.1: Table representing the salient moment of the performance (Video 3.1), including the actions of the main dancer (MD), participants (P), possessed dancers (PD), in relation to the *hsaing* (H) and singer's (S) shifts in tempo and dynamics (TD), represented by the continuous line at the bottom.

The previous analysis shows the processes through which the whole community comes together during the ceremony. The direct participation of the devotees is linked to the dance of Daw Chit Su Thwe, the main donor of this *nat kana* ceremony: during her *chawt pwe*, the crowd of family and friends actively participate in the performance, encouraging and supporting the ritual actions with clapping and shouting, making the ritual space of the *kana* alive. They participate by making sounds at specific moments, following the song structure outlined by the *nat hsaing* and the singer. The continuous alternation between vocal and instrumental parts coordinates quieter and more intense phases in the dances, and in the devotees' participation. It is during the instrumental parts that tempo and dynamics increase. The climax is reached with the spirit embodiment: not only humans, but also the spirit persons manifest themselves, joining the community of the *nat kana*, dancing and interacting with the devotees through the bodies of the dancers. The performance of the spirit sounds from the musicians, together with the intense participation of the devotees, successfully create a feeling of community in the ritual space.

The example highlights how the connections between *hsaing* sounds and dances are interconnected. The performance is in fact the result of collaborative processes involving musicians, dancers, participants and spirits. These interactions depend on an interactive network between the performers and the participants.

3.3. Interactive network of the *nat kana pwe*

The collaborative relationships that take place among all the ritual actors in a *nat kana pwe* performance can be analysed as an interactive network, system and sound structure. As Brinner explains:

Interactive network comprises the roles assumed by performers and the relationships or links between them, *interactive system* refers to the means and meanings of communication and coordination, and *interactive sound structure* is a constellation of concepts associated with the constraints and possibilities inherent in the ways that sounds are put together. (Brinner 1995:169).

Trying to develop a theory of musical interaction, Brinner considers the interactive network in Javanese *gamelan*: leadership, he explains, ‘is shared among several musicians, each with his own domain of control and influence’ (ivi:171). In performance, decisions are communicated musically rather than verbally through the use of cues suggested by a ‘leader’ or by the ‘followers’: in fact, the latter ‘interact with that leader without actually following’ (ivi:173), resulting in an overlapping of leading-following roles. Musical, verbal, visual or kinaesthetic acts – cues, responses, prompts, signals, and markers – allow the performers to communicate and coordinate. Cues are always intentional and are meant to produce a response, thus creating ‘the basic unit of interactive communication’ (ivi:188). These

interactions affect and are affected by sound structures: these form ‘a frame of reference for performers’ and determine ‘when interaction can or should take place and in what form’ (ivi:192).

Drawing on Brinner, Norton (2000a; 2009) analyses the musical interactions between musicians, spirit mediums and *chau van* songs in Vietnamese *len dong* spirit ceremonies. Being part of an interactive network, ‘the medium and the band feed off each other’s energy’ (Norton 2009:100). As they are not musically competent, the mediums “control” of the ensemble is limited to dictating the approximate timing of song changes during possession; they demonstrate musical preference to specific songs by donating money to the players, influencing the choice of melodies (Norton 2000a:101). The musicians, in turn, do not maintain just a ‘leader-follower’ relationship: while the leadership role is assigned to the moon-lute player, the ensemble does not conform to a rigid hierarchy (Norton 2009:102). Mediums and musicians communicate through a set of visual and kinaesthetic cues, which produce flexible musical responses (ivi:104). The association between songs and spirits creates an interactive sound structure: the performance of specific songs is limited to certain spirit figures (or group of figures) and to specific ritual actions (ivi:105). In fact, Norton explains that:

As the progression of ritual acts is quite fixed, spontaneity is not a crucial part of ritual practice.

Mediums rarely deviate from the conventional sequence of ritual actions, but when ‘unusual’ ritual actions do occur, the band may take a few seconds to adjust. (Norton 2000a:107)

The *nat hsaing* case does not differ much from the Vietnamese case provided by Norton. As with *chau van* ensembles, the *nat hsaing* recognises in the *hsaing saya* (the drum circle player) its musical leader. A *hsaing saya* needs to be well versed in the *nats*’ stories and legends, so that he can identify at once, which spirit medium is embodying. Drawing with him the rest of the ensemble, a *hsaing saya* must be able to communicate emotions: his performance represents a determinant support to the spirit embodiment process, and it entices spirits, mediums, and devotees to participate in the ceremony. As Tun writes:

the *na'saing* [*nat hsaing*] leader must be able to play well enough to excite the votaress [*nat kadaw*] as well as to instil in the audience an almost uncontrollable urge to join the votary dance.

In this way the votaress becomes possessed [...]. (Tun 2013:101)

The rest of the ensemble is organised in subnetworks (Brinner 1995:181) or sections – rhythmic (*pat ma*, suspended drum, *chauk lon pat*, six tuned drums, played by the same musician; *linkwin*, large cymbals; *sito*, barrel drums), melodic (*hne*, shawm; *kyi waing*, gong circle), and metric (*si* and *wa*, bell and clapper) (see Section 4.2). Musicians belonging to the same section interact and synchronise with themselves and with the other sections through sonic/aural, visual, kinaesthetic and verbal cues given by the leading *hsaing saya*. For this reason, they can be considered ‘followers’. (Figure 3.7)

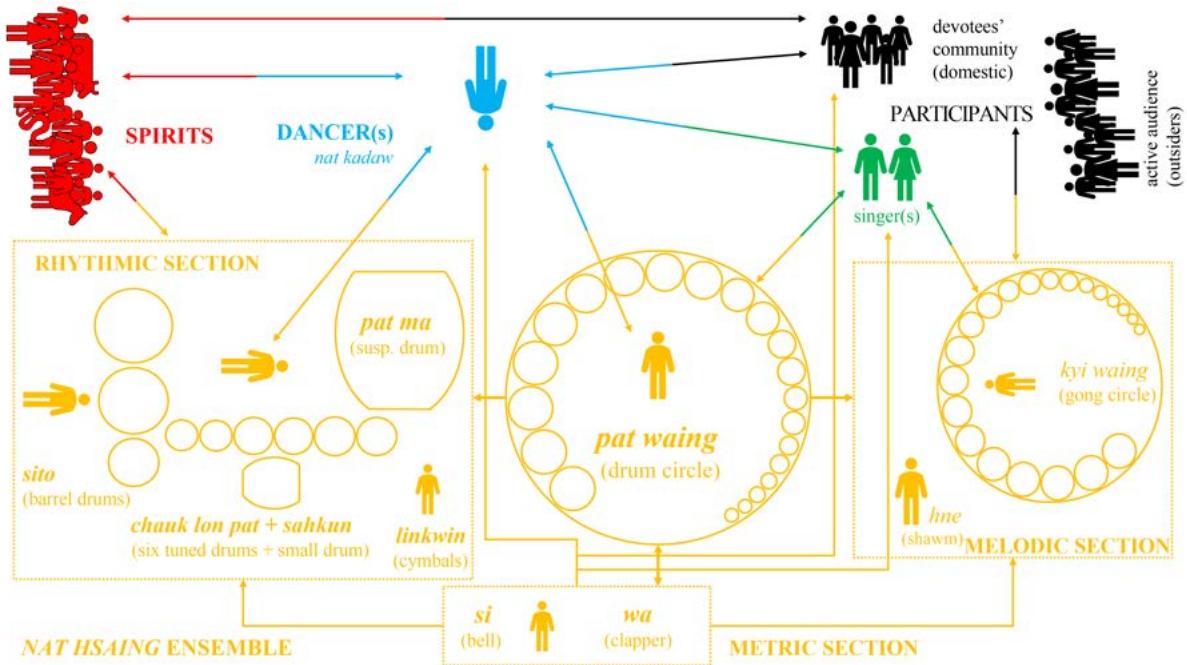


Figure 3.7 Example of the interactive network of a nat kana pwe, including spirits, dancers, participants, and nat hsaing's musicians. The orientation of the musicians' figures refers to the direction they are normally facing during the performance. Colours indicate different actors. Single-headed, direct arrows (e.g. the pat waing) indicate a general leader-follower tendency; double-headed arrows indicate mutual interdependence.

In Figure 3.7 I grouped together in yellow box the ‘follower’ musicians of different sections – rhythmic, melodic, and metric. These musicians perform together, interacting by giving-and-taking different kinds of cues. Similar processes of interaction take place between the sections and the *pat waing*. As the ensemble leader, the drum circle stays in the middle and interacts with the different sections – and, as I will explain further on, with the singer(s), and the dancer(s).

3.3.1 Collaborative performance

Hsaing music is a highly collaborative performing art. Musical complexity in rhythms and melodies is achieved through “shared” or “interlocked” parts. A drumming part complete in itself is not produced by any musicians: instead, each musician plays a specific sound at a specific time; together, following a hierarchical-like metric squared structure made of timbral and agogic accents, they generate a complete rhythmic part (see Section 4.2.4). As *hsaing* percussion instruments are tuned, the rhythms also contribute to the melodic part. In the melodic section, the melodic parts are sometimes realised through heterophony – the performance of simultaneous variations of a single melody. Burmese musicians state that only one melody is performed at the same tempo by all the melodic parts (homophony); however, heterophonic passages clearly take place in performance, due to improvisation; the fact that musicians do not consider these heterophonic moments tell us something about the Burmese conceptualisation of their music (see Section 4.2.2).

The musicians work together as a whole organism. The coordination between the different parts of the ensemble is normally dependent on the cues of the *hsaing saya*. As the ensemble leader, the *hsaing saya* interacts with the rest of the ensemble (and the dancers) by giving and responding to different types of cues. However, the use of cues is not exclusive to the drum circle player. Some musicians (especially the *pat ma ti*, the suspended drum player) can interact directly with the dancers and the participants, thus giving, instead of receiving, cues, and prompting a response from the leader. On several occasions, I witnessed fatigued and distracted *hsaing saya* making the ensemble stumble: in those cases, the *pat ma* player would cover for him, briefly taking the leadership role to rectify the situation through rhythmic and vocal/ kinaesthetic cues; or maybe, the *kye waing* player, or of the *hne saya*, would produce a sonic cue to make the *hsaing saya* aware of his mistake, not without an embarrassed smile. The hierarchies characterising a *nat hsaing* group from an economical point of view (see section 1.1.2) do not always correspond to the fluid musical hierarchies and the collaborative musical practice that can be observed during a performance.

Another element suggesting the absence of a rigid hierarchy in the *nat hsaing* ensemble is the role of the singer. Despite their status as performers, singers are not considered part of the *hsaing* ensemble (see 1.1.2). In performance they normally take a position in front of the ensemble, right in front of the drum circle, and close to the melodic instruments, which provide the essential melodic support. From this privileged position, singers mediate between the dancers and the musicians. As musical performers, they stick close to the ensemble, but at same time they are free to enter the dancing area, sometimes helping the *nat kadaw* with the ritual dress and offerings, and directly interacting with the devotees. The singers' interactions with the *nat kadaws* can involve allusive cues as well as direct requests. The *nat kadaw* would explicitly specify to the singer which spirit will be embodied and danced. In turn, the information is received and used by the *hsaing saya* (and from him, transmitted to the rest of the *hsaing* ensemble) – but the singer might also announce it with the microphone, so that the devotees (and the musicians) can follow the ceremony. Since the same singers, *nat kadaws* and musicians work frequently together, all are aware of the ritual progression. However, variations also happen, especially in the choice of the songs: when the ritual action allows it, it is very usual to see singers taking the initiative, deciding which song to perform next by just starting to sing, thus imposing their decision on the *hsaing saya* and forcing the ensemble to follow them. The unique role that singers have in *nat kana* celebrations confirms the dominance of the vocal part in Burmese music (see Sections 4.2.1 and 4.2.2).

3.3.2 Analysis and performance of cues and signals

Cues and signals constitute what Brinner (1995) calls the *interactive system*. In performance, the constant interaction between performers is negotiated through intra-cueing (among the members of one group of performers, e.g. between the musicians or the dancers) and inter-cueing (between more different groups of performers, e.g. the musicians and the dancers, or the dancers and the participants).

I became aware of the function of these cues during the festival of Taungbyone, while I occasionally joined a group of musicians introduced by the *hsaing saya* Yelin Bo. They put in my hands a *wahlekou*, a large bamboo clapper with an essential musical role (see Section 4.2.3) and a clear snapping sound, and made me stand on a wooden box, so that everyone could see a foreigner performing with them. In terms of listening experience, I was familiar with the repertoire – the dance of the Twelve Great Nats, characterised by sudden shifts in tempo and dynamics – but it was the first time that I was actually performing it, moreover with musicians I was not acquainted with. When the *hsaing saya* realised that I was struggling, especially with tempo changes, he turned around and told me that I had to listen attentively to his playing and look at his hands movements if I wanted to keep up with the rest of the ensemble. After that, every time a change in the musical texture was about to happen, he would turn his head towards me and reinforce the musical cues with a movement of the head and a glance until I was finally able to follow.

In trying to elaborate a theory of cueing that covers all the different kind of signals used in a *nat kana* performance, I rely on the existing literature produced on the relationship between *dalang* (puppeteer) and musicians in *wayang kulit* (shadow puppet) performances of Malaysia (Matusky 1993; 2017), Java (Heins 1970), and Bali (Sedana 2005; Rubin and Sedana 2007). Specifically, I draw on Sedana's (2005) analysis of the Balinese *wayang purwa*, a model for other Balinese *wayang* genres. Sedana considers the *wayang* performance a collaboration between the *dalang* (puppeteer) and the *penabuh* (musicians) playing *gender* (Balinese metallophone). He distinguishes groups of 'structural songs' (where musicians and *dalang*'s choices are constrained by the structure of the performance) from 'dramatic songs' (depending on the choice of the *dalang*). Using percussion (*tabuh cepala*), movement of the puppets (*tetikasan*) and voice (speech or singing), the Balinese *dalang* communicates and interacts with the musicians. The performance is collaborative: the puppeteer-musicians interaction 'always results in creative expression; the *dalang* and the musicians actively and consciously collaborate to express the dramatic contours of the performance' (ivi:56).

Following Sedana's work, in the Burmese *nat kana* I first distinguish between two different kinds of changes, supported by two kinds of cues (Table 3.1 Types of change in the nat kana pwe performance.

Type of change:	Description:
Structural	Expected and known, because part of the song structure, coordinated by the leader
Semi-dramatic	Expected, but not completely known; communicated by the leader
Dramatic	Unexpected and unknown, completely improvised in the course of performance by the leader

Table 3.1 Types of change in the nat kana pwe performance.

Structural changes in a song take place exactly when everyone is expecting them. However, they are still cued by, for example, the *nat kadaw* or the *pat waing* player, steer the rest of the performers.

An example could be the approach of the vocal part in a well-known song, signalled by the *pat waing* player with a typical cadential phrase that prepares the introduction of the singer. On the other hand, dramatic changes are completely unexpected: when they are cued by the leader, the rest of the performers might take some time to assimilate the information and adjust to the new situation. Improvised changes in melody and rhythm may even bring the musical performance across genres, for example, switching from court music to *yokhtay pwe* (marionette theatre) music. A third group is represented by semi-dramatic changes: these take place, for example, when the musicians have just finished performing a song and have received no instruction on which song they should continue with; they expect to be asked to play another song, but they cannot be sure of which one will be requested.

The shift between these situations is constant in *nat kana pwe*. In order to communicate these changes, leaders and followers interact each other with several kind of cues (Table 3.2):

Type of cueing:		Description:
Sonic/aural	Instrumental	Performed with <i>hsaing</i> instruments
	Direct request	Speech specifying the title of the requested song
	Vocal Indirect request	Singing first words of a song, or indirectly making a reference to the song meaning/lyrics
	Shouting	
Body percussion		Handclapping
Kinaesthetic		Synchronisation of the body movements/gestures
Visual		Eye contact, head gestures, etc.

Table 3.2 Types of cues in the *nat kana pwe* performance.

I distinguish between sonic/aural, kinaesthetic, and visual cues. Sonic/aural cues are the most elaborated, and present different forms and sub-groups. They can be instrumental, when performed by the musicians with their instruments, both in structured and dramatic situations; or vocal, when someone, usually the *nat kadaw*, makes a direct or indirect request to the musicians, indicating to them what to play next, mostly in semi-dramatic situations. Indirect cues are the most fascinating ones: *nat kadaws* can use quite poetic and allusive words to make the musicians understand what song they should perform. Shouting (by the *nat kadaw* or the musicians) and body percussion (by the *nat kadaw*) usually happen in structured situations, as they simply communicate the starting point of an expected section. Kinaesthetic cues include those body gestures that make the musicians and dancers perform synchronically: they refer to the dynamism which can be seen in the musical or dance movements of the performers – e.g. the raising and lowering of a musicians' arms and hands. They become particularly evident and important in dramatic situations. Visual cues include body language's mannerisms and gestures: they are used by the musicians to make sure they are playing in time with each other, or to underline an obvious mistake. In this sense, they mostly feature in structural situations. Further and more detailed examples will be discussed later.

Compared to singers, the *nat kadaw*-musician(s)' interactions are mostly based on visual and kinaesthetic cues. Despite being a leading figure, the *hsaing saya* (and the rest of the ensemble with him) generally follows the movements of the dancing *nat kadaw*: he must be ready to respond to his/her aural/visual/kinaesthetic cues, providing the correct support to his/her ritual action. When the *nat kadaw* is present, the musicians rarely take the initiative into their own hands – except for those structural moments in which they will not wait for a specific call. In fact, the general outline of the ritual is known to those *hsaing* musicians accustomed to working alongside the same spirit mediums. However, changes can always take place: the *nat kadaw*'s performance is influenced by the participation and reaction of the devotees, and in some cases s/he might need to adjust the performance.

The following examples are an account of the kind of interactions and cues through which *nat kadaws* and *hsaing* musicians construct a collaborative performance. The first one demonstrates the *nat kadaw*'s degree of control over the ensemble. In [Video 3.2](#), the *nat kadaw* gives an evident and continuous visual/kinaesthetic cue with the intention of making the ensemble reduce the tempo, so that he could start dancing at the appropriate speed. His gestures appear quite similar to that of a conductor.

A second example ([Video 3.3](#)) demonstrates a *nat kadaw* Hnin Ko Hein and the *nat hsaing*, led by the master Aung Ko Min, interact with each other through kinaesthetic cueing. The acrobatics with a bowl filled with money and whiskey in one hand, and the image of a cockerel in the other hand, are called *kyet laung*: it represents a long-awaited performance for the dance of the drunkard *nat* Ko Gyi Kyaw (see Section 6.2.4). The performance consists of keeping the bowl on the open palm (or as in this case, on the points of the fingers) and making it rotate on the hand, drawing an arch with the arm and the rest of body while reaching the lower position, going back to the raised position and staying for a few moments in that position. To perform *kyet laung* is quite difficult: it represents a point of pride for all *nat kadaws*, who also perform it with larger bowls or opened bottles of whiskey. It is believed that if the *nat kadaw* can perform these tricky acrobatics without spilling whiskey or dropping the money out of the bowl, 'the *nat* is with him/her'.

The ensemble supports the acrobatics with the intense *bein maung* music, enriched with dynamic accents every time the dancer reaches and stays in the raised position. The musical accents are guided by the kinaesthetic cues of the *nat kadaw* and anticipated by the *hsaing saya* at the drum circle: the musicians must look at the dancer and listen to the drum circle to synchronise their performance.

The following analysis (Transcription 3.2, Transcription 3.3 and Transcription 3.4) based on [Video 3.3](#) shows how the synchronisation process works. Using the software Sonic Visualiser to find and annotate the main sound moments on the waveform, I first marked the initial vocal cue (black line) and the main beats of the ensemble (pink lines); I identified the main accents of the ensemble (red lines), the slightly anticipated accents of the *pat waing* (orange lines), and the sonic cues of the *pat waing* (blue lines). Then, using the software Transcribe!, I identified the physical cues of the dancer, distinguishing

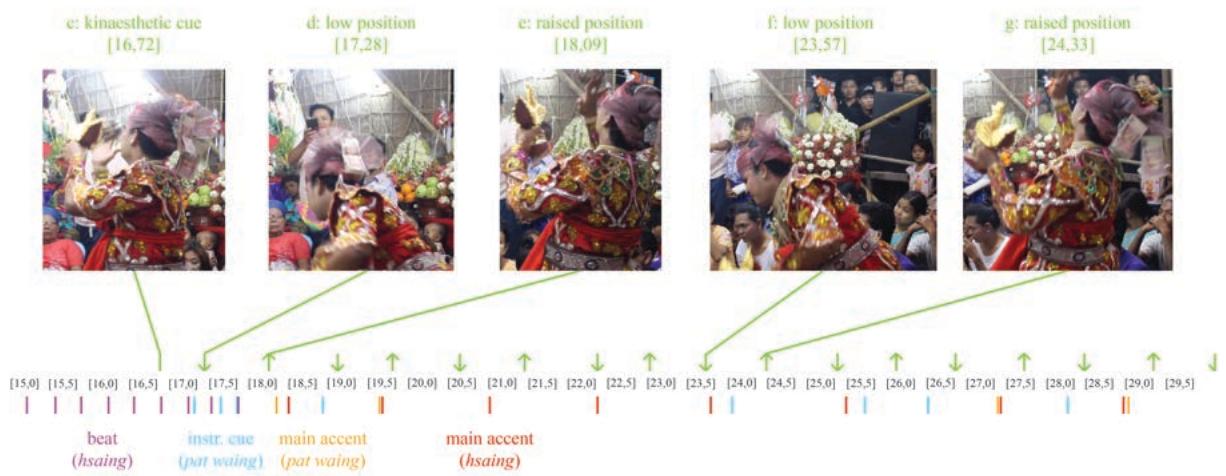
raised positions and lowered positions; I screenshot these moments, and annotated them on the Sonic Visualiser waveform (green lines). I transferred the final graphics onto Adobe Illustrator and combined them with the Transcribe!'s screenshots. The results are shown in Transcription 3.2, Transcription 3.3, and Transcription 3.4: knowing that the dancer's raised position should correspond to an accent of the ensemble (red line), the figure shows the timing of the different moments when the dancer and the ensemble are – or are not – synchronised.

After a vocal cue from the singer (at [00:02,60], black line), the *pat waing* gives a longer cue (starting at [00:03,8], blue lines) to which the ensemble responds by starting to play *bein maung* (the strong beats are marked with pink lines after [00:06,0]). The dancer presents the bowl and cockerel to the ensemble at [00:06,0] (a), then they turn around to face the *nat*'s image at [00:14,0] (b).



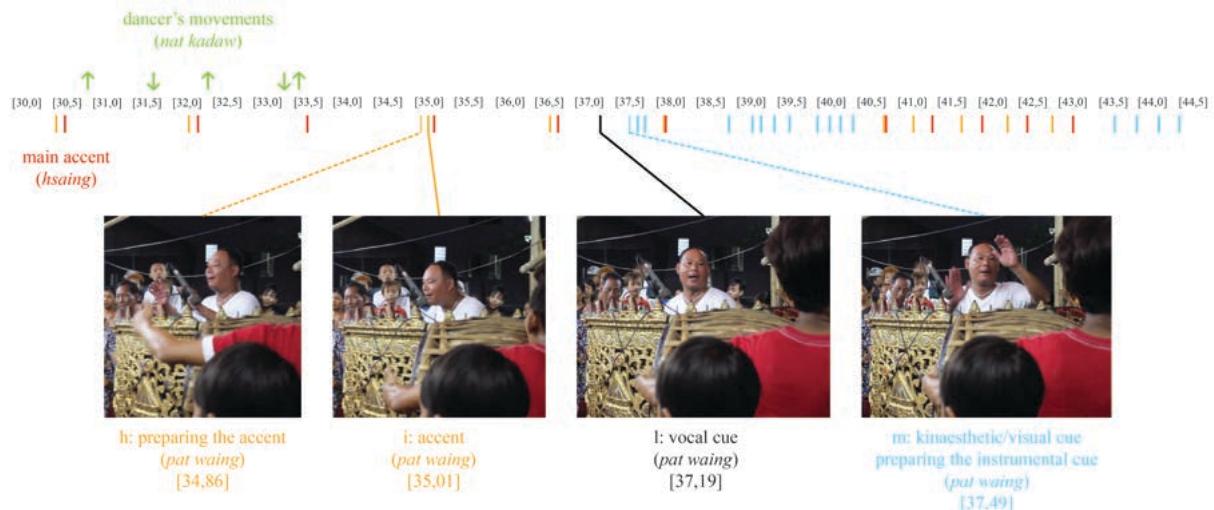
Transcription 3.2 Analysis of the cueing and synchronisation processes between the nat hsaing and the nat kadaw during the kyet laung (bets on the cockfight) for the nat Ko Gyi Kyaw, supported by the bein maung sound. Presentation of the cockerel and the bowl.

At [00:16,72] he gives a physical cue to the ensemble (c) to reach the lower position at [00:17,28] (d). The *hsaing saya* follows the dancer's movement, cueing the ensemble at [00:17:16] (blue lines). After a few seconds of uncertainty, the regular beats stops. In synchrony with the dancer reaching the raised position at [18,09] (e), the *pat waing* plays the main accent at [00:18,19] (orange line) immediately followed by the rest of the ensemble at [00:18,33] (red line). The second round goes like the first. But at the end of the third round, at [00:20,85], the *hsaing* misses a step and goes out of time: the *hsaing saya* tries to recover giving a cue at around [00:23,89] (cue, blue line), but it's too late. The actions of *hsaing* and *nat kadaw* are now completely reversed: when the dancer reaches the lower position, the *hsaing* marks the accent (f, at [00:23,57], red line); when he reaches the raised position, the *hsaing* does not provide any accent (g, at [00:24,33]) (Transcription 3.3).



Transcription 3.3 Successful and unsuccessful synchronisation processes between the nat hsaing and the nat kadaw.

The *hsaing saya*'s attempt to recover and guide the ensemble is clear in the final stage: he is attentively looking at the dancer's movements, preparing the accent (h, at [00:34,86]) in advance, so as to enable the rest of the ensemble to follow him (i, at [00:35,01] – note that at this moment the left hand of the *pat ma* player has not reached the drum yet). Finally, he guides the ensemble into the conclusion, using vocal (l, at [00:37,19]), visual and physical cues (m, [00:37,49]), anticipating the instrumental cue (blue lines) (Transcription 3.4).



Transcription 3.4 Cueing and signals of the hsaing saya playing the pat waing.

The previous analysis shows how the action of the musicians depend on the physical cues given to them by the *nat kadaw*. To show a performance where things somehow “went wrong” is constructive for two reasons: first, one becomes immediately aware of how sounds and movements are supposed to be synchronised; secondly, as the performance is not working as it should, the cueing and signalling between the performers become discernible, and its necessity, more evident. The example demonstrates

how musicians must be ready to respond with the expected sonic support – otherwise the success of the whole performance is compromised.

3.4. Conclusions

In discussing the importance that sounds have in defining ecologies, Jeff Todd Titon (2015:37) argues that ‘It’s all connected: music to sound, human to animal, culture to nature’. Sound emerges from the ‘vibration of a living creature’, whose presence is asserted on the reception of it as a sensory signal. In his words,

[S]ound signals presence. [...] two beings present to each other constitute co-presence. Sounding is one of several means of co-presence. Touching is another. But unlike other sensory signals of co-presence, sounding involves vibrating at the same frequency, the basis for a sound community. In human music, of course, copresence enables coordination so that people may sing and play together. (Titon 2015:28)

As I have explained, sounds have several functions in *nat kana pwes*: as in Titon’s argument, sounds signal the presence of an ongoing ceremony, and bring together the community of humans and spirits who are participating in it. This aural experience can at first be quite shocking. Once a *pwe* has started, different kinds of sounds (the *hsaing*’s tuned drums and gongs, cymbals, shawms, together with the singing and the sounds of the community) come into play. Some of these sounds are enhanced through loudness and reverberation. All this contributes to idea of a resounding sonic chaos. This resonates with what Guy Beck describes for the sacred sounds in Hinduism:

[T]he ambience of the traditional Hindu [person] is consistently saturated with an astounding variety of different sounds. Drums, bells, gongs, cymbals, conch shells, flutes, lutes, and a wide assortment of vocalizations are often heard simultaneously, blending together to create a vibrant sonic atmosphere within the Hindu temple, home, or sacred space. (Beck 1993:6)

Similarly, the aesthetic of sound in these ceremonies contribute to the creation of a liminal space-time, different from the ordinary. I consider the *nat kana* as a multi-sensorial and multi-dimensional space-time, in which sounds contribute to connect the human with the spirit worlds (Stoller 1997). The creation of an in-between space, characterised by what can be defined – for a lack of a better word – as a certain sacredness, contribute to the manifestation of the spirits: *nats* and other beings are directly involved in the ceremony, and participate actively to the life of the community.

The contribution of the participating community is central to the creation of a heightened state during the ceremony (Harnish 2006): during the *chawt pwe*, the bodies of the devotees move in time with the music and with the rest of the community, clapping and shouting to support the dance of the donors. Especially in these moments, the community moves and makes sounds as a whole body, animating the ritual (Clayton 2007). The musical sounds of the *nat hsaing* help to coordinate and

increase the excitement of the participants: shifts in tempo and dynamics, which intensify in the instrumental parts of the performance, trigger the movements of the dancer and the actions of the participants.

However, *nat hsaing*'s actions also feed and depend on the action of dancers and devotees. Musicians respond to lesser or greater involvement of the participants by constantly adjusting their performance and feeding back to the participants what they need. The result of these interactions, mediated by sound, is the embodiment of spirit persons, who can in this way, come-into-presence in the ritual area and directly interact with humans.

Dancers and musicians are linked together: their combined action constructs a collaborative performance. The control over the musical performance is shared between the *nat kadaw* and the *hsaing saya*. In the ritual practice, the *nat hsaing* does not appear to be a rigidly musically hierarchised ensemble. The spirit medium is not a music specialist, but when s/he directs the ritual performance, his/her choices also effect the music performance; the *hsaing saya* leads the ensemble, but it is not rare to see some other musicians taking over the leading role momentarily, due to ritual necessities; sometimes, the participants also have a voice in orienting the musical performance. Musical agency is shared amongst the performers and the participants, binding humans and spirit persons in an interactive network that follows the rules of a specific interactive system (Brinner 1995) of cues and signals.

In the next chapter I will delve more directly with musicological matters, focusing on some general aspects of Southeast Asian and Burmese music, with special attention to the practice of the *nat hsaing* ensemble.

4. Sonic elements of *nat hsaing* performance practice

At this moment the music burst out with a fearful pandemonium – a strident squeal of pipes, a rattle like castanets and the hoarse thump of drums, above which a man’s voice was brassily squalling.

George Orwell, *Burmese Days*
1989[1934]:103-104

I am sitting in front of friend *saya* Yelin Bo, in his house in Yangon, listening and watching attentively while he demonstrates a new piece with the *pattala*, the Burmese xylophone. Yelin Bo’s hands move quickly, performing melodies that I in part recognise, although I am not always able to follow – especially when the *hsaing saya* shows off his musical skills, extemporising intricate melodic phrases on the main melody. Yelin Bo performs sitting on a chair at the centre of the room: his right foot moves in correspondence to the main beats, stressing the sound of the *wa*. Another musician, Kyaw Lin Htut, sits on the ground, leaning against the wall, right behind the *hsaing saya*: he articulates the metric cycle, playing the bell *si* and the wooden clapper *wa*: the sound of the latter marks the cadential phrases, concluding longer or shorter melodic patterns. Sitting on a chair on the other side of the room, Daw Thin Zar Moe is singing a *nat chin* for Nankarine Medaw: vocal and instrumental parts merge together, creating a blended flow of sound. When the piece is finished, Yelin Bo smiles at me and says, handing me the beaters: ‘You can play the *pattala*, play this piece!’. All the people in the room start to laugh, knowing that the piece is well beyond the reach of my current musical abilities. I have been studying and playing the *pattala* since the beginning of my fieldwork, more than a year ago, and now that it is about to end, I am still not able to perform any *nat* song – the repertoire being too advanced, or maybe I have not been committed enough to developing my bi-musicality. I take the joke and nod, saying: ‘Give me the *si* and *wa*, I can play that!’. The joke seems to be successful: people burst out laughing once again; the discussion continues in a climate of friendship.

By organising this session with Yelin Bo and Daw Thin Zar Moe,⁷¹ I was aiming to record *nat chins* (spirit songs) outside the ritual context, in order to focus on the musical aspects of the repertoire – particularly the melodic and vocal parts. However, according to the musicians, not all songs are suitable for being deconstructed and performed only in sections or parts: in some cases, the song could not be performed without the contribution of the rhythmic section of the ensemble. Yelin Bo and Daw Thin Zar Moe did their best to choose ‘traditional spirit songs’ (*yoya nat chin*) which could be performed without drums; however, at the end of each piece, Yelin Bo explained that I had to imagine the action

⁷¹ Yelin Bo, Daw Thin Zar Moe and Sithu Thet, Yangon, 11 July 2018.

of the drums in this or that part in order to have a complete idea of how the song goes. Similar concepts have been confirmed by several *nat hsaing* practitioners throughout my research. The *hsaing saya* Kyi Lin Bo and his musicians explain that the performance of a *nat hsaing* ensemble (and a *hsaing waing* in general) cannot function properly without the melody: most of the ensemble's drums are in fact tuned, and despite their function in the *nat hsaing* being mostly rhythmical, they are usually considered melodic instruments by Burmese performers; moreover, the contribution of the melodic instruments (gong circle and shawm) is functional, and is vital for the correct development of the performance. 'Different kinds of instruments compose the ensemble, just like the *pyinsa rupa*' (Figure 4.1) – they continue – 'they are all important'.⁷² On another occasion, I am chatting with the *kana si* Kyaw Win Naing about whether one particular instrument of the *nat hsaing* could be considered an essential support to possession dances – when suddenly Kyaw Win Naing's mother steps into the conversation. The old woman states that:

if I have to say, [...] if it's just one [instrument], the sound would just be 'taung-taung-taung'.

The *si*, the *wa* – all these [instruments] must work together [*nyi-*, lit. 'unite'], only in that case is it good to listen to.⁷³

The *hsaing* is a collaborative art form (see 3.3.1). Melodic and rhythmic interlocking between the different sections of an ensemble, the punctuation of the smaller idiophones, and the essential contribution of the vocal and melodic parts are determinant in constructing an effective performance.

What are *nat hsaing*'s original characteristics, and how can this musical practice be compared to that of other Southeast Asian ensembles and orchestras? The *hsaing* is composed of tuned drum- and gong-chime instruments, which make it rightly part of the so-called 'gong-chime culture' (Hood 1980a; see also Sutton 2001; Nicolas 2009). As these percussion instruments are tuned, it would be more correct to talk of the melodic-and-rhythmic activity of the *hsaing* ensemble. In the *nat hsaing*, the tuned drums (*pat waing*, *pat ma*, *chauk lon pat*) interlock, usually reiterating the same rhythmic phrase in the form of pre-composed rhythmic cycles. Repetition and periodicity (Tenzer 2006a) represent the main character of *nat hsaing* style and can be linked to deeper cultural and religious meanings (Becker 1979, 1981). Despite their limited melodic role in the *nat hsaing*, performers consider the tuned drums to be melodic instruments: the drums' contribution to the melody is as important as that of the gong circle and the shawm. In this sense, the Burmese *hsaing* practice could be described as characterised by the intertwining of multiple melodies – a process that Hood (1975, 1993) described as 'polyphonic stratification'. Compared to the large *gamelan* orchestras of Java, however, the *hsaing waing* (and other ensembles of the mainland) is not characterised by such levels of stratified melodies. Heterophony

⁷² Kyi Lin Bo (group interview), Yangon, 12 October 2013. The *pyinsa rupa* (a word derived from Sanskrit) is a mythological animal composed of five (*pyinsa*) different shapes (*rupa*) of animals: fish/dragon body and tail, horse/goat hooves, bird/goose wings, lion head, elephant trunk and tusks. The carved image, usually richly gilded, decorates the support of the suspended drum *pat ma*.

⁷³ Kyaw Win Naing, Yangon, 20 July 2019.

variations (Giuriati 1993) of the same melody, which usually remain unplayed (Perlman 2004; Swangviboonpong 2003), describes more accurately, the performance practice of the Burmese ensemble – and Burmese music in general.



Figure 4.1 The carved image of the pyinsa rupa overlooks the nat hsaing ensemble. Taungbyone, August 2018.

The tuned drums also contribute to the construction of metric cycles. As in other Southeast Asian music cultures, the *nat hsaing* (and Burmese music in general) is characterised by square metrical patterns: an emphasis on specific beats constructing hierarchical metric cycles. As I will explain, these hierarchical metric cycles – Becker (1968) calls them ‘colotomic’, following Kunst (1975[1949]) – can be particularly long and complex metrical forms in Maritime Southeast Asia but are shorter and simpler on the mainland. While these forms are outlined by the idiophones *si* and *wa*, the melodic-rhythmic instruments (the tuned drums) also contribute to the outline, through sound and expressivity: the main beat of a metric cycle, for example, is usually emphasised by the suspended drum *pat ma* by a strike on both of the drum’s heads.

At this point, it should be clear that the distinction I make, between metric, rhythmic, and melodic instrumental sections and functions of the ensemble (see 3.3), is purely artificial, and that it responds to the necessity of providing a general background on Burmese music and analysis of the *nat hsaing* practice – which is what this chapter aims at. In order to do so, this chapter alternates between two vistas: a broad one, drawing parallels to similar Southeast Asian musical practices; and a narrow one, focusing on the *nat hsaing* practice. I first describe the formal structure of *nat than* (spirit sounds),

distinguishing between the different phases of invitation, dance, and dismissal of a spirit. Then, I introduce the case of one emblematic spirit song. Drawing on my listening and performing experience, and my exchanges with Burmese performers, I describe the different musical elements of the song (metric cycles, rhythmic interlocking, vocal and melodic variations), reframing them within Southeast Asian musical cultures.⁷⁴

4.1. Listening to the *nat hsaing*

As I have learned in conversations with *hsaing* musicians and spirit dancers, *athan* (lit. ‘sound’) can infer a large array of different musical concepts. Used in the substitution of words such as *than sin*, ‘melody’, or *thachin*, ‘song’, the meaning of *athan* is understood differently by Burmese speakers depending on the context.⁷⁵ The semantic evolution of the word *athan* in the context of spirit possession ceremonies is interesting: *nat thans*, in the sense of ‘spirit sounds’, are both instrumental (which in turn could be divided in other subsections) and vocal (*ahso*) melodies (*tay thwa*). They are performed to call the spirits (*nat hkaw-*), dismiss them (*nat po-*) and make them dance (*nat ka-*). Rather than just ‘spirit songs’ (*nat chin*), the sounds performed by the *nat hsaing* ensemble are imbued with powerful meanings: *nat thans* make the spirits come-into-presence and trigger the human dancers’ experience of them. *Nat thans* are determinant in manifesting the spirits and constitute the main element of spirit songs. Songs (*thachin*) are performed after the invocation and the embodiment, to soothe or please them (*nat chawt chin*, or *nat pyawt chin*). I will further explain the implications of the concept of *athan* in Section 5.2.2. Following Tenzer’s (2006a) idea of ‘structural listening’, in the next section I address the formal structure of spirit sounds. Drawing on two music examples, I first outline the main structural parts of *nat than* in general, linking each of them to a musical form and a ritual function. Then, I focus my attention on one spirit song (*nat chin*) in particular, describing in detail its formal structure and analysing its musical elements.

4.1.1 Nat than: *formal structure*

Burmese musicians identify the beginning of a *nat than* with the initial spoken invocation (*nat pint*), necessary to call and introduce the spirit person into the body of the dancer. The *nat than* concludes on a final cadential phrase (*athan kya-*), which sends the spirit away. Between these two boundaries, vocal (*ahso*) and instrumental melodies (*tay thwa*) can vary from spirit to spirit. According to the

⁷⁴ In terms of musical conceptualisation, chamber music (for the harp *saung gauk* and the xylophone *pattala*) is characterised by different terminology than outdoor music (for the *hsaing waing*); musical concepts, however, remain the same. In the following description, I will be using the *hsaing waing* terminology only.

⁷⁵ The term *athan* can also indicate the modal category of a song, and single pitches. To complicate things further, I occasionally heard some young musicians using the word *athan* to refer to the melody of a song.

musicians I have spoken with, *nat thans* are not characterised by a specific formal structure (*poun san*, lit. ‘form’). It is still possible, however, to recognise some recurrent instrumental/vocal parts constituting what can be considered a general formal structure (Table 4.1):

	Structural parts	Musical form	Ritual function
1.	Introduction (<i>lay pyay</i>)	instrumental	Calling (<i>nat hkaw-</i>)
2.	Introduction	spoken	
3.	Invocation (<i>nat pint</i>)	vocal	
4.	a) <i>Nat do</i> b) <i>Thabyay hkan</i>	instrumental	
5.	Spirit sound(s) (<i>nat chin/nat than</i>)	vocal/instrumental	Dancing (<i>nat ka-</i>)
6.	Entertainment phase (<i>thachin</i>)	vocal/instrumental	Soothing (<i>nat chawt-</i>)
7.	Spirit sound(s) (<i>nat chin/nat than</i>)	instrumental	Dancing (<i>nat ka-</i>)
8.	Final cadential phrase (<i>athan kya-</i>)	instrumental	Dismissing (<i>nat po-</i>)

Table 4.1 Formal structure of spirit sounds.

This structure is not identical for each spirit. The following descriptions of the different phases refer to the sequences characterising the Buffalo Mother Nankarine Medaw ([Video 4.1](#)) and the Lord of the Nine Cities Ko Myo Shin ([Video 4.2](#)).

1. [Video 4.1](#) [00:05-00:49]: Only very important figures are introduced by the instrumental introduction (*lay pyay*). This part is performed mostly by the shawm *hne*, with the partial support of the rest of the ensemble: the deep sounds of the drums enter only when the melody is about to conclude, in a climax of speed and dynamism.
2. [Video 4.1](#) [00:49-01:32]: The spoken introduction is not necessarily performed: the speaker (either the dancer or the singer) might outline with a few words, the *nat* who is about to dance, or praise the donors for the organisation of the ceremony.
3. [Video 4.1](#) [01:33-01:59]; [Video 4.2](#) [00:8-00:22]: The *nat pint* (spirit invocation) introduces all *nat* spirit beings.⁷⁶ Its basic form, characterised by the same main melodic profile, is common to all the *nat hsaing* groups I encountered during my fieldwork. The singer (sometimes the dancer) performs it without the support of the *hsaing* – except for the gong circle *kyi waing* and shawm *hne*, which might complete the invocation by playing some supporting notes. Thus, the vocal part remains quite free, from a metric point of view: the singer can perform the *nat pint* with more or less melodic ornamentation, and make it last just a few seconds or longer,

⁷⁶ On the other hand, *thaik* spirits are not introduced by any vocal part.

depending on the occasion. In this time, the dancer would face the spirit statue, joining his/her palms and bowing in a sign of respect towards the *nat*.

The text is highly poetic: the words address the person of the spirit more or less directly, describing his/her domain and/or character. The following analysis is based on the *nat pint* performed for the Buffalo Mother Nankarine Medaw (Table 4.2):

Monye myay Talaingko myaehmar hsaingmha[tine]tithaw
May the Mon land of the Talaing [people] mark my real words
Hsaingyar pinelo asinalarhmar
We apportion what is due according to tradition
Tinyar shomyemoh puzawyar [unintelligible]
We make the customary offerings and worship her [unintelligible]
Kywe amayko tinkyabadot manhay, tinkyabadot manhay
Make offerings to the mother who fed us, don't delay.
Amyo myat ba tay Pegu nat ba paya
She is of noble descent, the <i>nat</i> of Pegu.

Table 4.2 Lyrics of the *nat pint* (spirit invocation) for Nankarine Medaw.

This invocation represents the most common form in which standard *nat pint* are performed. While a *nat pint* can be longer and very elaborate, due to time constraints it is usually performed in this most basic form.⁷⁷

- After the invocation, the *hsaing* might perform an additional instrumental part. Depending on the tradition of the *nat* who has been invoked (*nat lanzin*, see Section 7.1), the ensemble might perform *nat do* or *thabyay hkan*.

Nat do ([Video 4.1](#) [02:00-02:16]) takes its name after the *do*, a short double-headed drum, in the past, a leading instrument of the *nat hsaing* instead of the drum circle.⁷⁸ In today's common language, *nat do* has come to signify the *nat hsaing* practice in general, its repertoire, and the dances it supports. As the following excerpt shows (Transcription 4.1 Excerpt from *nat do* (beginning).), as part of a spirit sound, *nat do* identifies a specific musical phrase, characterising certain spirits only.

The *nat do* sound is generally performed three times, at the end of which the ensemble continues the *nat* sound/song. The drunkard prince Ko Gyi Kyaw, the Lord of the Great Mountain U Tin Dae, and the Buffalo Mother Nankarine Medaw, are only a few of the spirits characterised by this sound.

⁷⁷ Yelin Bo, Daw Thin Zar Moe and Sithu Thet, Yangon, 11 July 2018.

⁷⁸ One should not confuse the *nat do* with other *do* sounds associated with specific spirits. One of these sounds, the *Shweguni do* for the *nat* Ko Gyi Kyaw, will be discussed in Section 6.2.5.

The term *thabyay hkan* ([Video 4.2](#) [00:23-00:50]) describes a dance movement, but it is used by musicians to indicate the supporting musical phase. The dancer sits on his knees: at each repetition of the melodic phrase, the dancer waves back and forth two bunches of *thabyay* leaves (or two swords, depending on the *nat*) with both hands on his/her flanks. The phrase is usually performed three times (each time slightly varied): at the end of each repetition, the dancer bows, touching the ground with their forehead, and leans forward, placing the two hands between their head (Figure 4.2 The kana si Aba Lay invites the *nat* Shwe Gaing Medaw, performing *thabyay hkan*; in front of the dancer, an attendant swings the ritual offering. Mandalay, July 2018..

Thabyay hkan seems to be strictly connected to the presentation of an offering: *thabyay* indicates the bunches of the Eugenia plant, used for ritual purposes in many contexts in Burma. None of the people I have encountered during my research have been able to explain to me why this dance movement/sound are associated with spirits such as the Lord of the Nine Cities Ko Myo Shin, the witch Amay Yay Yin, or Shwe Gaing Medaw, mother to the drunkard *nat* Ko Gyi Kyaw.

Spirits introduced by the *nat do* are generally not introduced by the *thabyay hkan*. However, not all the spirit dances are characterised by one of these two instrumental introductions: in these cases, the ensemble will pass from the invocation to the performance of the *nat* dance.



Figure 4.2 The kana si Aba Lay invites the *nat* Shwe Gaing Medaw, performing *thabyay hkan*; in front of the dancer, an attendant swings the ritual offering. Mandalay, July 2018.

than yoe

$\text{♩} = 140-150$

accelerando

hne
(shawm)

kyi waing
(gong circle)

si (bell)
wa (clapper)

pat waing
(drum circle)

*Transcription 4.1 Excerpt from nat do (beginning).*⁷⁹

ngā pauk

$\text{♩} = 120$

hne
(shawm)

kyi waing
(gong circle)

si (bell)
wa (clapper)

pat waing
(drum circle)

Transcription 4.2 Excerpt from thabyay hkan (beginning).

⁷⁹ Detailed explanations on *nat hsing* instrumentations and transcription methods will be provided in Section 4.2.

5. [Video 4.1](#) [02:17-03:37]; [Video 4.2](#) [00:51-03:47]: Spirit dances include the performance of spirit songs and sounds, ritually indicating and supporting the embodiment of a spirit person. Strictly linked to the spirit manifestation, spirit songs (*nat chins*) are usually constructed on the alternation of vocal and instrumental parts: during the latter, the ensemble usually acquires speed and intensity, thus triggering, supporting, and controlling the spirit dancers. These instrumental sounds do not exclusively belong to the repertoire of *nat* songs: some of them are borrowed from other musical contexts, but in the *nat hsaing* they take a precise meaning, connected to the spirit person (see Chapter 5).

This phase is generally considered as the moment of true manifestation of the spirit person. Inhabited by the *nat*, the spirit dancer receives donations in exchange for fortune-telling and blessings, and speaks with, or harangues his/her supporters, frequently stopping the ensemble.

6. During the entertainment phase, the spirit dancer is generally not considered inhabited by the *nat*. In this part, the *nat hsaing* performs songs (*thachin*) by request, so that the spirit medium can dance to entertain human and spirit guests; jokes between the *hsaing saya* and the spirit dancer are quite common; sometimes, the spirit dancer might also sing themselves, demonstrating their multiple talents. As any kind of song or repertoire could be requested, it is in this part that the *hsaing* ensemble and the dancers show their musical ability and eclecticism (see Section 7.2.4).
7. [Video 4.1](#) [03:43-05:24]; [Video 4.2](#) [03:48-04:37]: If an entertainment phase took place, it is necessary to return to the spirit sound in order to dismiss the *nat*. Depending on the spirit person, the ensemble might perform a condensed version of the sounds that characterised part (5) or introduce new sounds. In both cases, this part remains generally quite short. Spirit dancers briefly return to the possession dances, sometimes reaching an intense climax, before dismissing the *nat*.
8. [Video 4.1](#) [05:25-05:34]; [Video 4.2](#) [04:38-04:42]: The final cadential phrase (*athan kya-*) concludes the spirit dance and embodiment. While placing their palms together again, the spirit dancer closes his/her eyes and starts to shake – a sign that the spirit has left the body. Two main cadential phrases are in use, depending on which modal category⁸⁰ characterises the *nat* sounds. Sounds in the *than yoe* tuning end on the following cadential phrase (Transcription 4.3):

⁸⁰ Burmese modal categories are pentatonic, based on a heptatonic scale with an interval structure close to that of a Western diatonic scale. The modal category *than yoe* and *hkun hnathan chi* correspond to the pentatonic scale 1-3-4-5-7, where 1 = C and 1 = G respectively. More details on Burmese modality and transcription methods will be provided in Section 4.2.1.



Transcription 4.3 Than yoe cadential phrase.

Conversely, sounds in *hkun hnathan chi* are characterised by the following cadential phrase (Transcription 4.4):



Transcription 4.4 Hkun hnathan chi cadential phrase.

Compared to *than yoe*, in the *hkun hnathan chi* cadential phrase, the final notes are slightly delayed: the melody hovers over the ensemble for a few instants, giving a feeling of suspension. This moment is usually longer in the final cadential phrase, and not present at all in the intermediate cadential phrases performed during the *nat sound*. Some musicians (especially *hne sayas*) enjoy performing a more ornamented version of the cadential phrase – whose basic melody remains always clear.

Only the dance of a few spirits is characterised by all the sections of this formal structure. In its most basic form, a spirit sound remains limited to the invocation (3), the spirit sound itself (5), featuring one or more spirit songs, and concludes with a final cadential phrase (8). With these structural notions in mind, I will now focus on part (5), and provide a more detailed analysis of one *nat chin*. In order to do so, I will discuss central aspects of Burmese music, and specifically of the *nat hsaing* practice.

4.2. Analysing the *nat hsaing*

The *nat chin Do Ko Gyi Kyaw* ('Our Big Brother Kyaw') is one of the most popular spirit songs in Burma: everyone can recognise it and sing along with its catchy melody; different renditions of the song, including several remix versions, can be heard at Buddhist donation pavilions, KTVs, music concerts, clubs; radios and televisions also broadcast it (Section 7.3). The song is strictly linked to Ko Gyi Kyaw, the Prince of *nat kana pwes*. The lyrics paint the *nat* as a drunkard and a gambler ('If you are a real drunkard / If you are a real gambler, let's compete and fight!'), a womaniser ('Daddy Kyaw who is the partner of many girls'), but also highlight the *nat*'s power and influence all over the country ('We worship Big Brother Kyaw in every city'). Despite its many incarnations, the song is not very old.

In interview,⁸¹ the *hsaing saya* Sein Moot Tar explains that he composed *Do Ko Gyi Kyaw* and other ‘modern *nat* songs’ (*hkit paw*, ‘modern’)⁸² around the 1970s. He created new lyrics, based on the legend and the personality of the *nat*, and created new melodies inspired by older ‘traditional songs’ (*yoya nat chin*) for the *nat*.

The following analysis is based on repetitive listening, and discussions with Burmese musicians throughout my research visits. Primary data for the analysis is based on one live performance of the song which I filmed in Yangon, August 2013, at the house of the *kana si* U Win Hlaing. In [Video 4.3](#), where Kyi Lin Bo’s ensemble, together with the singers Ma Than Dar and Daw San Htay, perform the song to support a group of unprofessional dancing devotees. More details regarding the dancing and spirit embodiment will be discussed in Section 6.2.2.

The song is constructed on the alternation of vocal and instrumental parts, framed by an intermediate cadential phrase. In Table 4.3, the song starts after an initial Cadential Phrase (CP) (a) with the verse (b) (*paik*). Here the vocal section (2 female singers) is dominant: the singers alternate performing the verses; the melodic section (gong circle *kyi waing* and shawm *hne*) and *hsaing* drums remain in the background as a support; the metric section plays the regular *wa lat si* cycle.

	Part(s)	Vocal section (2 ff. ss.)	Melodic section (gong circle+shawm)	Rhythmic section (<i>hsaing</i> drums)	Metric section (<i>si+wa</i>)
a	CP				
b	<i>paik</i> (vocal)	Singing	Supporting	Background/support	<i>Wa lat si</i> (regular)
a1	CP	Supporting		Acceleration	
b1	<i>paik</i> (instrumental)	Supporting (shouting)	Elaboration (tempo+dynamics)	<i>Nan Gyi Tabaung</i> (speed+dynamics)	<i>Wa lat si</i> (expanded)
a2	CP			deceleration	
b2	<i>paik</i> (vocal)	Singing	Supporting	Background/support	<i>Wa lat si</i> (regular)

Table 4.3 Formal structure of the nat song *Do Ko Gyi Kyaw*.

The cadential phrase (a1) marks the end of the vocal part and the beginning of the instrumental part (b1): the *hsaing* drums become the protagonist, accelerating tempo and playing louder; the melodic instruments perform the same melody as the vocal part, but with more ornamentation and variation; the metric cycle expands; the singers are only a support for the dancers and the musicians. The cadential phrase (a2) marks the end of the instrumental section, and a return to the previous vocal part (b2). The

⁸¹ Sein Moot Tar, Mandalay, 12 June 2018.

⁸² Including *Shwe Byone Maung* ('The Two Golden Brothers') for the two Brothers of the Taungbyone Village, and *Shwe Myo Daw Shin* ('Lord of the Royal Golden City') for the Lord of the Nine Cities, Ko Myo Shin *nat*.

central cadential phrase (**a1**) represents the fulcrum of the song: it marks the transition where, tempo, dynamics, and the roles of the single sections change, making spirit embodiment occur. In order to make the reader familiar with Burmese/Southeast Asian musical concepts and terminology, I will now analyse the musical changes taking place in each *hsaing*'s section.

4.2.1 *Scale, modal categories (athan), and basic melody (yoe than sin)*

26 September 2017. In one of the piano rooms of Gitameit Music Institute, Ne Myo Aung and I are having a discussion about Burmese music. Ne Myo is the dean of Gitameit Yangon Institute and an ethnomusicologist. He wishes he could call himself a Burmese pianist: 'I do not practise enough' – he laments – 'I barely have the time to meet with the other masters and learn from them.' Ne Myo started with the Western classical piano, eventually turning to the *Thachin Gyi*, the Great Songs of the Burmese court music tradition, collected in the *Mahagita*. Today, he only focuses on the Burmese piano, the *sandaya*.⁸³ He is browsing through an old version of a *Mahagita* book that I found in downtown Yangon: 'There is no real standardisation for *Mahagita*. The same main melody can be rendered in many ways. That's why I keep studying with my old *saya* and other masters.' He puts his hands on the piano and starts to perform, at the same time singing out loud the lyrics as written in the volume. He explains that each version can be different, but that the basic melody of the song remains the same. He performs another version of the same song and asks me if I recognise the main melody. Hard to admit, but I cannot: I got lost in the intricate melodies of the two hands and of the vocal part. Laughing, he begins to play another song: masked in a cascade of notes and fast embellishments, I distinctively recognise the melody of 'When the Saints Go Marching In'.

The presence of a basic tune, the importance of lyrics and vocal part, the complex melodic elaboration – these concepts are essential to understanding how melodic parts and melodic elaboration work in Burmese music. As musical processes, they can be recognised in several Burmese repertoires, including the court canon *Mahagita*, the musical practices of *zat pwe* and *yokhtay pwe* (human and marionette theatre performances), and the ritual practice of the *nat hsaing*.

Burmese musicians indicate the modal category of a piece as *tuning* (in English), or *athan* ('sound'). Burmese modal categories are pentatonic, obtained by selecting five tones out of a heptatonic scale. The pitches of this heptatonic scale are named after the fingering positions of the large shawm (*hne gyi*) in a descending progression (Khin Zaw 1940; Okell 1971b).⁸⁴ The traditional scale presents

⁸³ On the Burmese piano, see Webster (2013).

⁸⁴ Garfias (1975b:39) recognises in this descending scalar model the reason for the predominance of descending melodic profiles in Burmese music. A similar scalar model is present in the West Javanese *gamelan degung* (Cook 2001:338-339).

some analogies with a Western diatonic C-major: however, the presence of tones pitched somewhere between Western natural and flattened notes (a sharpened 4th and a flattened 7th) may give the ‘overall impression of “neutral” intervals’ (Garfias 1975b:40). Moreover, in absence of a standard diapason, and probably before the encounter with Western tempered tuning, the main sound of this scale (*than hman*, lit. ‘correct sound’) was tuned somewhere between the Western C and D. Most of the *nat hsaing* ensemble I have encountered in my research still uses this old tuning, which to the ears of some musicians is better to play, sing and listen to.⁸⁵ However, today most musicians refer to the *than hman* as C, and to the rest of the scale as ‘the white keys of the piano’.⁸⁶

Out of these seven tones, the five tones composing a pentatonic *tuning* are considered primary; the remaining two are secondary and can be used as embellishment in the melodic elaboration. Garfias (1975a:44) has recognised two basic types according to the position of the secondary tones.

Type one	I	–	III	IV	V	–	VII
Type two	I	II	III	–	V	VI	–

Table 4.4 Types of modal categories as schematised in Garfias (1975b:44).

Each of these types could be potentially applied to every degree of the 7-tone scale, which in this way would become the main sound. However, only a few combinations constitute the actual possibilities of tuning of the *hsaing waing* ensemble: Garfias (1975a) describes eight of them; Douglas (2010:46) indicates only four, the most common used by the *hsaing* ensemble.

To my knowledge, in today’s *nat hsaing* performance practice, two modal categories are prevalent – *than yoe*, type one, with *than hman* in C, the most used; and *hkun hnathan chi*, also type one, with *than hman* in G. *Nga bauk*, belonging to type two, with *than hman* in F, can also be found. The rest of the tunings described by Garfias are used more rarely.

	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII
<i>Than yoe</i>	C	–	E	F	G	–	B
<i>Hkun hnathan chi</i>	G	–	B	C	D	–	F
<i>Nga bauk</i>	F	G	A	–	C	D	–

Table 4.5 Most used modal categories in today’s nat hsaing practice.

⁸⁵ U Chit Win, Yangon, 16 November 2013.

⁸⁶ Khin Zaw (1940:745) informed us that in the past even the Burmese piano was tuned following the Burmese scale ‘to make their own songs still sound Burmese in their ears’. In time, the impact of Western music has modified the perception of the Burmese sound, resulting in ‘a shift away from indigenous tuning toward Western diatonic tuning’ (Keeler 1998:387). Today, the last traces of the traditional alterations are disappearing, and the scale is more and more resembling a Western C-major.

In cipher notation,⁸⁷ the relationship between *than yoe* and *hkun hnathan chi* could be schematised as follows (Table 4.6).

<i>Than yoe</i>				1	3	4	5	7
<i>Hkun hnathan chi</i>	1		3	4	5	7		

Table 4.6 Fifth-degree relation between *than yoe* and *hkun hnathan chi*.

The arrangement of these modal categories affects the tuning of the drums of the ensemble, especially of the drum circle *pat waing*. Changing the tuning consists of applying a different amount of tuning paste (*pat sa*, lit. ‘drum food’) to the head of each drum – a difficult process to carry out during the ritual. By reducing the tunings to just these two, the *pat waing* player is able to rapidly retune only a few drums/pitches (one in each octave; see Appendix 2: Instruments and tunings) making the player ready to immediately switch to another tuning, without interrupting the ritual performance.

In *zat hsaing* practice, tuning shifting (*athan pyaun-*, ‘moving sound’) articulates the night performance: according to the *hsaing saya* Kyauk Sein,⁸⁸ each tuning is associated with a specific mood or feeling; during the performance, they become progressively more difficult to play and exciting, building up the musical and dramatic climax; the *hsaing saya* shows off his musical skills only in the most challenging parts, leaving the rest to an assistant or a young pupil.⁸⁹ In the old days, this flow made sure to capture the attention of the audiences; today, however, my *saya* Kyauk Sein explains that more and more “chromatic songs” (i.e., songs performed in the Western tuning, with chromatic scale instruments) have to be played, to keep the young audiences interested. Several *nat hsaing* musicians underline that tuning shifting does not have any role in structuring the *nat kana* ritual performance. In Interview,⁹⁰ the singer Ma Lay Lay clearly states that ‘in the *zat hsaing* you change the sound according to the time. This doesn’t happen in the *nat hsaing*’.

The use of different tunings in performance compel the musicians to use different cadential phrases (*athan kya-*), as previously described in Section 4.1.1. However, in a *nat kana pwe*, the *than yoe* tuning dominates most of the musical performance: the tuning is considered by the musicians quite

⁸⁷ Cipher notation is widespread in Southeast Asian music cultures. It associates numbers to the degrees of the heptatonic scale: 1 to the first, 2 to the second and so on. In the following transcriptions, points below and above indicate the octave’s range; the short trait above halves the relative duration value of the note. In the following analysis, I use cipher notation to render the basic melody, and modified Western staff notation to render the *nat hsaing*’s rhythmic/melodic elaborations and variations.

⁸⁸ Kyauk Sein, Yangon, 22 January 2018.

⁸⁹ Similarly, in Javanese *wayang kulit, pathet* (modal category) ‘is associated with the division of the whole night performance into three parts, and the names of the three parts are the same as the names of the three *pathet*’ (Mrázek 2005:196; see also Keeler 1987; Walton 1987). On Burmese theatrical performing arts in general, see A. Becker (1974:154-164); Brandon (1967:70-73); Keeler (2005); Htin Aung (1937); Ye Dway (2014); Young and Ne Myo Aung (2015).

⁹⁰ U Soe Win and Ma Lay Lay, Mandalay, 05 April 2018

flexible; within the performance, it can easily and effectively perform relocation on the fifth grade – a common feature of *nat hsaing* practice, which in this case brings in the second most popular tuning, *hkun hnathan chi* (Table 4.6).⁹¹ The latter is used to create exciting atmospheres for specific spirits. Other tunings can also be used for other spirits, or to perform songs on request. However, this strictly depends on singers' knowledge of songs and ability. *Nat hsaing* musicians explain that *than yoe* represents an easier tuning to sing to for most of the singers, so this represents another reason for its more frequent use in the *nat hsaing* practice. The five primary tones of a tuning constitute the main elements of the basic melody. *Nat hsaing* musicians indicate the vocal part as the main reference for the melodic part and elaboration: it is in the vocal part that the basic melody can be recognised.

Lyrics and vocal parts generally represent one of the fundamental elements of Burmese music. Words and melodic profiles are strictly interrelated (Cox 1988; Williamson 1981); transmission and memorisation takes place through singing: experienced Burmese musicians need to listen to just a few lines to immediately recognise the tune of a song and to start playing or singing along. Burmese *hsaing*, and musicians in general, are able to recognise the basic melody everywhere – but it is to the vocal part that they point in order to refer to it. As it became evident to me through interviews and informal discussions, *nat hsaing* musicians perform the melody by relying on the lyrics and the vocal part. In the absence of a singer, each musician just refers to an abstract vocal part, which they had previously memorised; in these cases, an instrument might seem to be assuming the role of leader (in the *nat hsaing* practice, usually the shawm *hne*) and performing the main melodic part in a more elaborate way. Williamson (1979b:168-169) informs us that, despite all the more or less intertwined strains, ‘the tune always remains the same’, supporting the idea of a ‘conceptual *basic tune*’ which is ‘carried by the syllables of the song text’. This melody, including rests and pauses, identifies the song – and it is normally hummed or sung even by those Burmese unversed in music. The musicians call this basic melody *yoe than sin* (‘bone melody’).⁹²

⁹¹ Modulation (also indicated as *athan pyaun*) has been observed in Burmese music by Garfias (1995), Khin Zaw (1940:29ff), and Williamson (2000:63). In non-harmonic/linear music systems, this change process is known as *metabole*. The Vietnamese ethnomusicologist Trần Văn Khê (1962:225-229) first used this term in Southeast Asian music to describe the relocation by a fifth through the substitution of one degree in a pentatonic scale. The importance of the fifth is recurrent in Southeast Asian musics: Hood (1980b:177ff.) spoke of the “fifthness” of Javanese music; Morton (1976:128ff.) and Giuriati (1993:95ff.) recognise relocation by a fifth in Thai and Cambodian music respectively.

⁹² The search for a basic melody has characterised Southeast Asian ethnomusicological scholarship since the very beginning of the discipline. A discussion of such complex and long discussed issues is beyond the aim of the present work. To explore the main positions, see, amongst others: Hood (1954); Sumersam (1975); Giuriati (1989); Sumrongthong and Sorrell (2000); Swangviboonpong (2003); Perlman (2004).

In her seminal work on Burmese modal analysis, Becker (1969) describes Burmese basic melodies and songs as a multi-leveled hierarchical system. At the base of this system she put the *segments*,

since the word "unit" implies a single item. The segments are not single notes or single clusters, but a combination and sequence of two, three, more tones. (ibid.)

Burmese performers refer to the segments as *cho*. A *cho* is considered the most basic element of the basic melody. *Cho*/segments can be combined to create patterns, as Becker explains:

segments are organized into larger units which are called patterns. Most of the patterns are themselves repeated at some point in the corpus. (ibid.)

The concept of patterns can sometimes correspond to concluded metrical cycles (*tawa*). However, as I have already mentioned, the melody does not always correspond to the beginning and end of a metric cycle.

Segments and patterns combined create a *paik*. The word can indicate alternatively a sung verse/line or an entire sung stanza, depending on which repertoire the song belongs to. The elements so far described, when combined create the song (*pouk*):

The segments, combined into patterns, combined into verses, combined into songs make Burmese music a multilevelled hierarchical system. [...] the Burmese musician manipulates the various levels of the hierarchy to create a song [...]. (ibid.)

Becker's valuable contribution focuses on the instrumental part, and does not consider the vocal part. Despite her intuition being generally correct, in the following analysis I look at the song text and prosody to recognise the basic melody of this Burmese tune and identify its elements.

Like other songs for the drunkard *nat*, the song *Do Ko Gyi Kyaw* is constructed on the modal category *hkun hnathan chi* (1 3 4 5 7, where 1 corresponds to G). To Burmese ears, *hkun hnathan chi* is experienced as an exciting sound: it communicates vivid energy, which makes the song very enjoyable and easy to dance to. It represents the perfect accompaniment for the dance of the exuberant Ko Gyi Kyaw. I extracted an approximation of the basic melody of the song *Do Ko Gyi Kyaw* by grouping sounds on the basis of the text: looking at the lyrics (Table 4.7), I identified complete sentences and recognised the melodic formulas associated to each of them; I then cleared the vocal melody of all the singer's idiomatic elaborate interpretations: the resultant melody is one characterised by the most rarefied melodic density, where the syllables of each verse tend to correspond to a specific note of the melody. I applied the same method to several renditions of the song and compared the results; eventually, I discussed my transcriptions with several local musicians and performers (Widdess 1994).

Transcription 4.5 shows the basic melody (*yoe than sin*) transcribed in cipher notation and associated with the text syllables.

<i>Ko Gyi Kyaw</i>	Big Brother Kyaw
<i>Do Ko Gyi Kyaw</i>	Our Big Brother Kyaw
<i>Do Hpe Hpe Kyaw</i>	Our Daddy Kyaw
<i>Htuleh htudeh muleh mudeh</i>	He's awesome and he's drunk
<i>Do Ko Gyi Kyaw</i>	Our Big Brother Kyaw
<i>Ayet tha ma hman yin tawbya / shin ka taik laik chin dae</i>	If you are a real drunkard / let's compete and fight
<i>Kyet tha ma hman yin tawbya / shin ka taik laik chin dae</i>	If you are a real gambler / let's compete and fight
<i>Eindain hma kwe Ko Gyi Kyaw ko pa tha ba deh</i>	We worship Big Brother Kyaw in every house
<i>Maungma mya ne ka te Hpe Hpe Kyaw</i>	Daddy Kyaw who dances with many girls
<i>Kyaw Kyaw Kyaw Kyaw</i>	Kyaw, Kyaw, Kyaw, Kyaw
<i>Palinahpoun kainhswe htaukme Ko Gyi Kyaw</i>	Uncork the bottle and bottoms up, Ko Gyi Kyaw

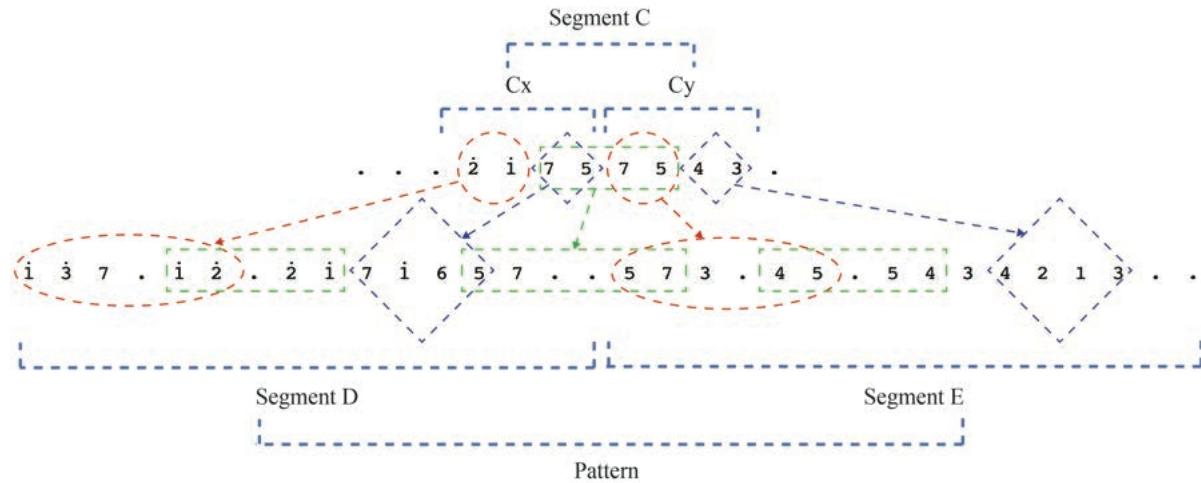
Table 4.7 Original text of the spirit song *Do Ko Gyi Kyaw*, by Sein Moot Tar.

Segment A	. 3 5 1 . 3 5 1 Ko Gyi Kyaw _____ [x2]
	2 7 2 i 2 7 2 i Do Ko Gyi Kyaw Do Hpe Hpe Kyaw
Pattern [x2]	Segment C . . . 2 i 7 5 7 5 4 3 . Htu- le htu- dae mu- leh mu- dae
	Segment B 2 7 2 i Do Ko Gyi Kyaw
Pattern [x2]	Segment D i 3 7 . i 2 . 2 i 7 i 6 5 7 . . Ayethama hman yin taw- bya shin pyain ka taik laik chin dae _____
	Segment E 5 7 3 . 4 5 . 5 4 3 4 2 1 3 . . Kyetthama hman yin taw- bya shin pyain ka taik laik chin dae _____ Ein-dain hma kwe _____ Ko Gyi Kyaw ko pa- tha ba dae
	Segment F 5 3 . 4 1 . . . 2 1 2 . 4 . . . Maung-ma mya- ne ka te Hpe Hpe Kyaw
	Segment G 4 . 5 . 6 . 7 . 2 i 7 i 7 5 4 5 Kyaw Kyaw Kyaw Kyaw palin(ah)poun kain- se htauk- me Ko Gyi 3

Transcription 4.5 Formal structure of the song *Do Ko Gyi Kyaw* showing the relationship between lyrics and basic melody.

This analytical methodology is substantially inspired by the hierarchical organisation described by Becker (1969), with the difference being, that I started from the lyrics to identify melodic formulas, as suggested by Williamson (1979b). This allowed me to find the most basic elements of the melody, i.e. units of (melodic and textual) meaning which, to Burmese ears, if separated have no meaning.

In order to explain how the hierarchical system works, the following analysis (Transcription 4.6) focuses on the processes of the re-combination of the melodic material of segments [C] into a larger pattern, constituted by segments [D] and [E].



Transcription 4.6 Melodic processes of Segments C, D and E.

In segments [C], [D] and [E], lyrics and melody get developed. Segment [C] constitutes what Burmese musicians call *cho*(segment) because the lyrics associated with the melody make a complete sense. In order to maintain it, the single melodic parts cannot be dissociated from the lyrics. The same can be said of segments [D] and [E].

From an analytical point of view, the melodic material contained in these segments can be divided into smaller elements and organised into larger patterns. Segment [C] can be considered as constituting two half-segments – [Cx] and [Cy] in Transcription 4.6: the melodic formula they compose would be incomplete if one of the two was missing. Together, the two half-segments show a descending melodic profile, with a partial overlap on the central edges (marked by the green box in Transcription 4.6) revolving around scale degree 5. The following segments [D] and [E] consist of an expansion/elaboration of the melodic material presented in the two previous half-segments, [Cx] and [Cy]. In continuity with segment [C], the two melodic segments [D] and [E] present the same descending melodic profile, derived from the overlapping – in each single segment and at the junction of the two segments (green boxes); segments [D] and [E] also show similar melodic elaborations around scale degrees 1-2 and 5-7 at the beginning (red boxes), and a similar conclusion on scale degrees 7-5 and 4-3 (blue box). It would be tempting to consider segment [D] and [E] not as separate melodic units,

but as two expanded half-segments: to Burmese ears, though, segment [D] is textually concluded, and makes complete sense; only the melodic line remains somehow suspended, to be concluded in the following segment [E]. The independence of the two segments can be proved by looking at the original lyrics of the song: here, segment [E] is repeated twice, with a different textual line. Segment [D] and [E] thus constitute a larger pattern. Combined together, patterns like this one and other segments form the verse (*paik*). How is this structure actually realised in performance?

4.2.2 Melodic parts and elaboration(s)

Looking at the basic melody (or just listening to it, if one's ears are sufficiently trained), it is possible to recognise the tuning of the piece. Knowing how the main melody goes also allows one to recognise the melodic elaborations. These are performed by the melodic section, composed of the gong circle *kyi waing*, one or more shawms *hne*,⁹³ and sometimes a square gong-chime *maung hsaing*. While each of these instruments perform variations in their own idiom, they do so according to the same basic tune – which identifies the song. In regard to the Burmese shawm *hne* performance style, John Okell explains that:

every song has, in a sense, a basic, skeleton tune, in performance there is much variety of figuration to be found both between one player and another, and one player's renderings of the same phrase at different times. Part of the player's skill lies in his ability to invent new and more rapidly or appropriately figured versions of the phrase he has to play. (Okell 1971b:29)

Okell's definition is quite precise. Burmese musicians perform variations on the very same basic melody; their inventiveness, however, is restricted by 'appropriately figured version of the phrase' – and by the instrument's idiomatic characteristics. Variation, or 'sonic discrepancies' (Tokumaru 1980:70), rather than rendition, better describes the heterophonic processes (see Cooke 2001) through which Burmese musicians differently interpret the same melody.

In other Southeast Asian ensembles, the practice of heterophony produces 'polyphonic stratifications' (Hood 1975, 1993): the term has been used to describe melodic "layers" of different rhythmic density simultaneously occurring in large ensembles, and has been coined to describe the heterophonic processes of Javanese gamelan orchestras. However, maritime Southeast Asian orchestras are more stratified than the mainland ensembles. Here, a stratification is present, but usually remains limited to a restricted number of instruments and does not take the polyphonic character typical of the maritime orchestras. A *hsaing* does not present the complex melodic stratifications typical of Javanese

⁹³ *Hsaing* ensembles including two *hne* players are common in upper Burma (both in Mandalay private ceremonies and in the village festivals), but they are not common in the lower Yangon area.

gamelan, but its timbral stratification can be compared to that of the Thai *pinpeat* ensemble (Silkstone 1993:14).



Figure 4.3 Two hne players. Mandalay, July 2018.



Figure 4.4 Maung hsaing player performing in a bala hsaing ensemble for a donation ceremony (ahlu hsaing). Mandalay, March 2018.

Following Cooke's (2001) definition of heterophony, Giuriati (1996) distinguishes between degrees of heterophonic variations of a common melody process in Southeast Asia. In the 'intentional' model, the main melody works as a structural reference for melodic parts, which deliberately and simultaneously variate it. In the 'non-intentional' variation model, Giuriati includes Cambodian ensembles: despite the presence of embellishments, the main melody remains clearly recognisable. He explains that, in Cambodian ensembles,

non si può parlare di sistematica e articolata stratificazione polifonica come nel caso di Giava.

La stratificazione è presente in filigrana, ma non sembra essere un fattore fondamentale dell'organizzazione plurilineare. (Giuriati 1996:192)⁹⁴

Giuriati explains that each Cambodian musician plays the same melodic line simultaneously (identifiable through the analysis of the tones performed on the main accents of the metric cycle – see Giuriati 1995), but develops his own melodic line through embellishments and micro-variations – hence the term 'non-intentional'. Looking at the analysis and music transcriptions of the court song *Gandamar taung* made by Williamson (1979b), it is possible to recognise the 'non-intentional' melodic variations of vocal and instrumental parts (on the harp *saung gauk*), based on the same basic melody – a model which seems to resemble the heterophonic processes characterising the Chinese *jangnan sizhu* ensembles (Thrasher 1985, 1993).

In Burmese music, melodies are always highly ornamented and embellished; melodic variations are always performed but are not considered as ornamentation by the performers. During my *pattala* learning, my *saya* Kyaw Myo Naing and I would perform the same song simultaneously, in order for me to get 'in the flow' with the music. In such cases, Kyaw Myo Naing would sometimes play a slightly different version of my tune. When I asked him about these and similar processes, he clearly explained that 'there is only one melody', and everyone plays just that. As I am now going to explain, similar processes also apply to the *nat hsaing* performance style.

The formal structure of the *nat chin Do Ko Gyi Kyaw*, which I described in Transcription 4.5, can undergo substantial variations during a performance. When Kyi Lin Bo and his ensemble performed this song in 2013, the extemporaneous choices of the two singers, performing in alternation, generated repetitions and different elaborations of melodic segments and patterns, as well as variation in the lyrics.⁹⁵ In the following chart, the additional segments/patterns are highlighted in bold:

⁹⁴ [It is not possible to speak of a systematic and articulated polyphonic stratification as in Java. Stratification is present between the lines, but it doesn't seem to represent a fundamental element in the plurilinear organisation.]

⁹⁵ Transcribing the actual lyrics performed by the singers was no easy task and required a certain amount of informed guessing. From a ritual point of view, devotees are not always supposed to comprehend the lyrics, the language of songs being old, cryptical, and poetic (see Zurbuchen 1987), and the sonic environment being

	A	<i>Ko Gyi Kyaw</i>	Big Brother Kyaw
	B	<i>Do Ko Gyi Kyaw</i>	Our Big Brother Kyaw
pattern	C	<i>Htule htudae myule myudae</i>	He is awesome and exciting
	B	<i>do Ko Gyi Kyaw</i>	our Big Brother Kyaw
pattern	C	<i>Kele kedae kywele kywedae</i>	He goes beyond the limits and flatters everyone
	B	<i>do Ko Gyi Kyaw</i>	our Big Brother Kyaw
pattern	C	<i>(A)hmale hmadae htole htudae</i>	He gets things wrong, he flings punches, and he's awesome
	B	<i>do Ko Gyi Kyaw</i>	our Big Brother Kyaw
pattern	C	<i>Kele kedae chwele chwedae</i>	[He] also loves to have fun and to be flattered
	B	<i>do Ko Gyi Kyaw</i>	Our Big Brother Kyaw
pattern [x2]	D	<i>Myodainhmakwe Ko Gyi Kyawko pathabadae</i>	We worship our Big Brother Kyaw in every city
	E	<i>Nehdainhmakwe Ko Gyi Kyaw ko pathabadae</i>	We worship our Big Brother Kyaw in every region
	F	<i>Maungma mya ye achit hpaw Hpe Hpe Kyaw</i>	Daddy Kyaw who is the partner of many girls
	G	<i>Kyaw, Kyaw, Kyaw, Kyaw</i> [unintelligible] <i>Ko Gyi Kyaw</i>	Kyaw, Kyaw, Kyaw, Kyaw [unintelligible] Big Brother Kyaw

Table 4.8 Changes in the formal structure of the song *Do Ko Gyi Kyaw* during the performance.

Since each singer interprets the basic melody according to her personal style and vocal skills, consistent variations and elaborations on the basic melody are not surprising. The melodic instruments of a *nat hsaing* ensemble (shawm, gong circle) depend on, and follow the choices of the singer, supporting his/her performance with a more elaborate version of the same basic melody. Transcription 4.7 shows a transcription of segments [D] and [E], performed by the two singers.⁹⁶

purposely loud (Section 3.1.1). Discussing this with some *nat chin* singers, I found this to be true for them as well: the language is sometimes too difficult for them to fully understand what they are singing, and it appears to be addressing both humans and spirits (see Brac de la Perrière 1994).

⁹⁶ See [Video 4.4](#) for a full and animated transcription of the song, complete with rhythmic and melodic part.

Hkun hnathan chi
(1 = Sol)

basic melody

vocal part
1st singer
pattern [D]

kyi waing
(gong circle)

vocal part
2nd singer
pattern [Dz]

kyi waing
(gong circle)

segment D segment E

Transcription 4.7 Realisations of the basic melody: segments [D] and [E] – [00:30 -00:45].

The transcription shows the degree of variation of the singers on the basic melody. The areas in the red boxes highlight the similarities between the basic melody and the vocal part(s) and the gong circle part.

The two vocalists vary the same segments using a quite different style: Ma Than Dar, the main singer, remains more adherent to the basic melody, and she clearly outlines the two melodic segments ([Video 4.3](#) [00:30-00:38]). Daw San Htay, the support singer, makes a larger use of glissando, almost shouting the improvised new lyrics: in her variation, the two segments [D] and [E] are joined tight together by a high glissando ([00:38-00:45]). Although different, both variations can be related to the basic melody. Similarly, U Chit Win, the *kyi waing* player, elaborates on the basic melody according to the instrument's idiom and his personal playing style: he adds shorter note figurations and plays with an accented style, loosely following the vocal part, thus giving a certain dynamism to the performance.

When the vocal section is concluded, in the instrumental *paik* the melodic instruments are the only ones that outline the melody. After the transition ([00:53-01:00]), the shawm *hne* makes its entrance. Alongside the gong circle, the *hne saya* U Ohn Htay improvises on the basic melody: together they produce a more elaborate version of the basic melody, following different but partly parallel heterophonic paths (Transcription 4.8).

Transcription 4.8 Instrumental elaboration of segments [B], [D] and [E] – [01:09-01:18].

Segment [D] shown in Transcription 4.8 is almost unrecognisable. I was able to detect it just because of its position – after segment [B], and before segment [E], clearly outlined by the *hne* melody (in the red boxes). The realisation of segment [D] does not resemble the basic melody a times. This might be interpreted as a moment in which the musicians were temporarily “lost”, and then rapidly catch up with the rest of the ensemble; but if that was the case, we would not see such a close resemblance, especially rhythmic, between the two parts. It is easier for the musicians to elaborate more in metrically longer segments.

4.2.3 Metric cycles

It is a sunny day in Yangon. I am sitting in the courtyard of Gitameit Institute, having lunch with my friend and music teacher Nay Win Htun. Ko Htun is singing the praises of the lecture I gave just yesterday at Gitameit about *hsaing waing* music and *nat kana* ceremonies. Young students at the school, he laments, study Western classical music, but are not aware of their own Burmese music tradition. They can play Bach or Mozart, but they do not understand the *si* and *wa*. ‘They don’t even know from where to start!’. I admit to still being confused about *si* and *wa*, sometimes: I point out that, while the *wa* always marks the final beat, Burmese melodies sometimes start on the *wa* rather than on the *si*. How does one understand the beginning or the end of the measure? ‘How do you count?’ – I ask. Ko Htun remains silent for a second, as always does when he tries to find the appropriate words. ‘There is no point in counting the *si* and *wa*’ – he explains. Burmese music is cyclical, the feeling of the beats is different. ‘You should listen to the melody. That is the only important thing.’

In Burmese music, metric cycles are determined by the two idiophones *si* (bell, characterised by a tinkling sound) and *wa* (clapper, ‘bamboo’, making a single, percussive sound). These two instruments constitute the metric section of the ensemble (see Section 3.3), together with the *walethkout*,

a large bamboo clapper, supporting or replacing the *wa*; and, occasionally, the *maung kwe* (or *linban kwe*), a small flat gong played with a beater, reinforcing the beat of the *wa*.⁹⁷ The sound of *si* and *wa*, which particularly stands out in the chamber music repertoire for harp (*saung gauk*) and xylophone (*pattala*), represent an essential part of the performance. *Si* and *wa* provide a guide to the rest of the ensemble, articulating the metric form of a musical phrase on primary and secondary beats (Keeler 1998:371; Maung Thu Hlaing 1993:63).⁹⁸ Such hierarchical-like structures of accents have been originally defined colotomic by Jaap Kunst (1975[1949]) in regards to the Javanese *gamelan*. The phenomenon is found in many Southeast Asian ensembles, and has been described by scholars as indicating the hierarchical-like occurrence of accents by punctuating instruments. In maritime Southeast Asia, colotomic forms are generally outlined by larger gong instruments (the hanging *gong* and *kempur* in Bali, or the gong chime *kenong* in central Javanese *gamelan* (see Sutton 1991; Tenzer 1998); on the mainland, a smaller set of hand cymbals and/or clappers are usually in use (Douglas 2010; Giuriati 1993; Morton 1976; Norton 2009; Swangviboonpong 2003). Large gongs are not common in mainland Southeast Asian ensembles. In merit of Thai court music, Morton explained that:

[I]n Thailand a set of three large gongs, no longer used, is said to have been a part of the ensembles in the old days. That it played a structure somewhat similar to that of the Javanese and Balinese instruments is at least possible. (Morton 1975:14)

In Burma, a set of large, pitched suspended gongs (*maung gyi*) can be present. Due to their cost, only important ensembles can afford them; the others usually replace them with a keyboard.⁹⁹ These gongs, however, do not play any role in the construction of colotomic forms; rather, they function as melodic embellishment.

⁹⁷ I found this instrument to be in use only among *hsaing* ensembles in Mandalay. The gong might have possibly been adapted from Chinese music, whose influence might be stronger in the Northern Burmese capital.

⁹⁸ In other mainland Southeast Asian countries, primary and secondary beats are underlined by a different sound, corresponding to different playing techniques, of an idiophone similar to the Burmese bells *si* (Giuriati 2003:42-43; Morton 1976:64-65 for Cambodia and Thailand respectively).

⁹⁹ This situation is rapidly changing; between 2013 and 2017-18, I have seen an increased number of ensembles adopting at least the basic set of three large *maungs*.

Figure 4.5 The idiophones si (bell) and wa (woodblock). Taungbyone, August 2018.

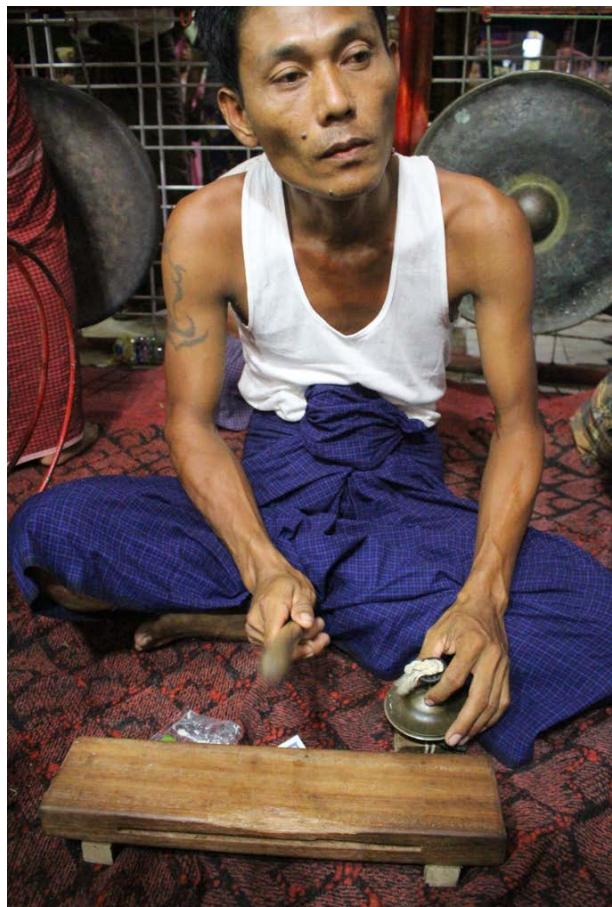


Figure 4.6 Maung kwe (flat gong) and linkwin (cymbals). Mandalay, March 2018.



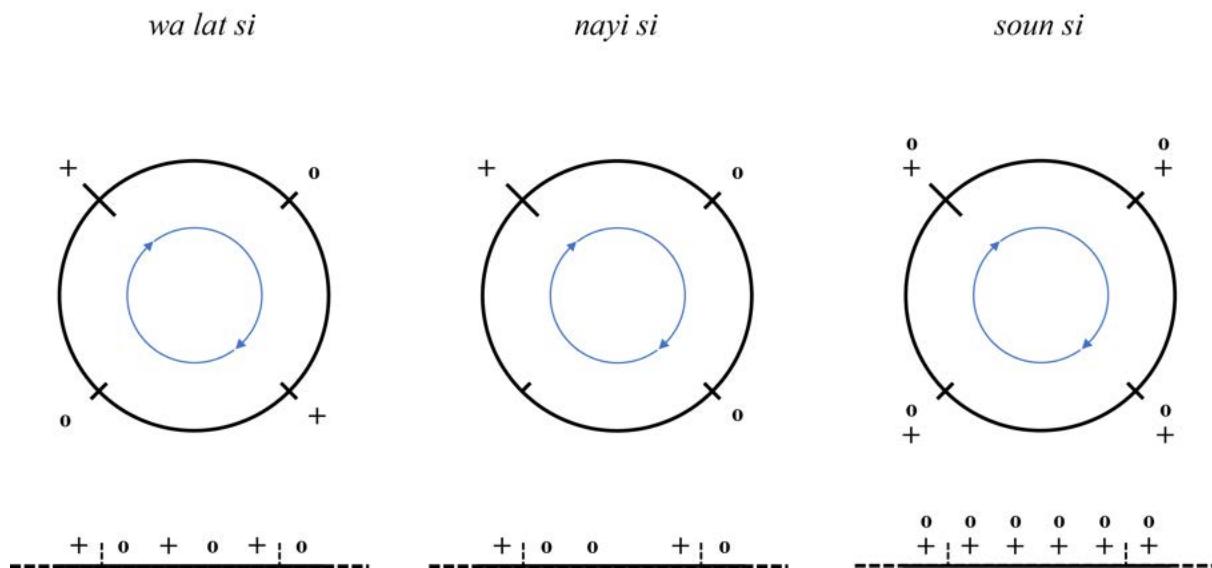
Figure 4.7 Maung gyi (large suspended gongs). Taungbyone, August 2018.

Becker (1968b:177) explains that ‘all hierarchical, binary, un-syncopated, cyclical, 8- or 16-beat phrase units marked by gongs, cymbals, hand cymbals, and clappers in Southeast Asian music’ should be considered colotomic. Despite Becker’s definition applying to the music cultures of mainland Southeast Asia, they do not present the same complexities and stratifications of, for example, a central Javanese *gamelan*. Metric forms or cycles, rather than colotomy, better describes the role of these groups of instruments on the Mainland.

In discussing the rhythmic emphasis of such metric forms, Becker writes that the final beat is usually perceived as the one towards which the tension is constructed and resolved: it represents the main primary beat. In merit of Burmese music, Williamson agrees with Becker: the strong beat ‘is generally felt to be the terminal beat toward which the tension builds’; however, ‘This does not preclude the use of the clapper as the initial beat of the voice part’ (Williamson 2000:62). In fact, Khin Zaw (1981:93) referred to the beat of the *wa* as ‘our accent at the beginning of each bar’, and not at the end. During my research stay, several musicians referred to the final beat of the *wa* either as the first or the last of the metric cycle – always perceived as the strongest. It seems then, that both a Western and a Burmese style of counting the beats is in use. Referring to the Indian *tāla* cycle, where the first beat is both the beginning of the cycle and the end, Otake (1980:62) hypothesized Burmese music’s idiosyncrasies to be the result of ‘Burma’s geographical position between India and Southeast Asia’.

The cyclic recurrence of melodic/temporal units marked by different instruments represents a common feature of many Southeast Asian music traditions. Studying the cyclical structure of Javanese *gendhing* (court pieces), Becker (1979, 1981; see also Becker and Becker 1981) argues that the cyclical structure of Javanese pieces reflects a Hindu-Buddhist conception of time, a circular logic which remains even after the diffusion of Islam on the Indonesian island.¹⁰⁰ The structure emerging from *si* and *wa* cycles (sometimes called *tawa*) may reflect a similar logic: in Burmese Buddhism, cycles of re-births span over universal cycles of creation and destruction – a time dimension of incredible duration.

Taking inspiration from Becker's intuition, and to avoid any ambiguity, in the following transcriptions (Transcription 4.9) I represented the different typologies of metric cycles in circular diagrams. In Burmese music, the *si* and *wa* can be combined into three main metric forms, constructing squared cycles:



Transcription 4.9 Metric cycle forms. The signs '+' and 'o' stand for the wa and si respectively. In the circular transcription, a large line indicates a beat hierarchically more important (generally corresponding to the wa).

In the linear transcriptions (below) a trait line separates the metric cycles: in this representation, the wa generally marks the final beat.

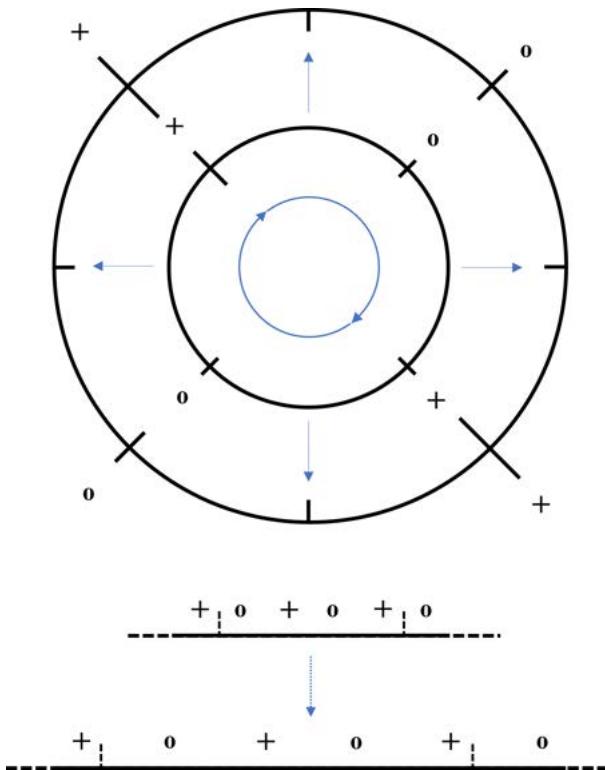
Musicians and dancers describe *wa lat si* as the form which allow them to easily reach fast tempos. For this reason, in the *nat chin* (spirit songs) repertoire, the *wa lat si* form is prevalent: it provides the proper support to the intense spirit dance and embodiment. This metric form cyclically accompanies the different sections of most spirit songs but can easily be replaced by other forms: as other repertoires can be interpolated into *nat chin*, the presence of other metric forms should not surprise. The *nayi si* is

¹⁰⁰ Tenzer (2006b:206) has objected that line/progression vs. circle/stasis is a false dichotomy: even static musics, built on circle-like patterns, progressively moves forwards in time through repetitions, in what he calls 'discursive isoperiodicity' (Tenzer 2006a).

commonly found in the *yodaya* and *pat pyo* court repertoires: in the *nat hsaing*, this metric form is used to support the refined dance of spirit princesses. The *soun si* ('parallel') form is found in the *karaung* music: the sound supports the dance of ogres in the Ramayana, and by indexical extension (see Section 5.3.1), of every ogre spirit in the *nat kana* practice. It is important to specify that metric forms should not be strictly associated with specific repertoires, as Inoue (2008, 2014a) underlines. In fact, Williamson (2000:62) reminds us that, during the performance of a song, these cycles can undergo substantial variation. Especially during dance and dramatic shows, the *hsaing* ensemble would suddenly speed up or slow down, keeping or varying the same metric cycle, alternating between them, inventing a new form or perform an incomplete one, according to the situation. These shifts respond both to the musical necessity of supporting dancer(s) on stage, to an aesthetic dimension, and to the necessities of the ritual performance.

While I generally agree with Williamson, I must warn against mistaking the *si* and *wa* metric *forms* for *levels*. Processes of expansion/rarefaction and re-contraction of the metric forms are common in other Southeast Asian contexts (Becker 1980). These processes produce metrical levels where the metric structure expands (the tempo is "slower") while the instruments "fill-in" the melody to create a higher ("faster") density of equal notes. In Java, the drummer governs the gamelan ensemble, making the other musicians change levels of *irama* – expanding the metric structure marked by gongs and the main melody (*balungan*) to progressively large densities, thus allowing a more agile playing by the embellishing instruments, then re-contracting it (Brinner 2007:25ff; Keeler 1987:225); this phenomenon is found in Khmer (Giuriati 1995) and Thai (Morton 1976:40ff.; Silkstone 1993:25ff.; Swangviboonpong 2003:5-6) music cultures, but not in the Balinese (Tenzer 2000:258n). As a general rule, the phenomenon is absent in the Burmese musical practice. However, exceptions exist – and as I will now explain, one is found in the *nat hsaing* practice.

During the performance of some *nat* songs, the *wa lat si* can expand, doubling its beats (*si* [o] and *wa* [+]: from: 1 2 3 4 to: 1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4), leaving some beats "empty" (the trait line [-] in Transcription 4.10).



Transcription 4.10 Expansion/rarefaction of the metric cycle wa lat si.

I noticed this process in the performance of the spirit song *Do Ko Gyi Kyaw* (for the *nat* Ko Gyi Kyaw, [Video 4.3](#)) and *Shwe Byone Ngwe Byone* (for the two *nat* Brothers of Taungbyone, [Video 3.1](#)). When I found out that these processes were taking place in the Burmese *hsaing*, I was exultant: not only instruments, but also Burmese musical processes could be considered Southeast Asian in their own right. However, it was not long before I realised that the variation in density of metric forms represented an exception: in fact, the musicians I have spoken to do not recognise expansions and contractions of metric forms in Burmese music. There is no Burmese word or concept for this phenomenon: the musicians only speak of a *wa lat si* cycle performed slower or faster. Moreover, in the *nat chins* *Do Ko Gyi Kyaw* and *Shwe Byone Ngwe Byone*, the expansion/contraction of the metric structure does not correspond to an expansion/contraction of the melodic material (as it happens in Java and Thailand): as I explained, the melody performed by the gong circle and shawm remains substantially unvaried, however it presents more ornamentations. What radically changes, is the drum part.

4.2.4 Rhythmic cycles and interlocking

October 2018. I am having a coffee with the *hsaing* master Yelin Bo, just outside the shrine of Minye Kyawswa, or Talaing Kyaw, the mighty elephant rider *nat*, in Dala, Southern Yangon. The festival for the *nat* is currently going on, and Yelin Bo, who is in charge of the *hsaing* at the Main Palace, is taking a break from playing. He shows me the calluses on his hands and invites me to touch

them. He is in pain. No other instruments are played with bare hands, so only *pat waing* and *pat ma* players have these strong calluses. ‘*Pat ma* and *pat waing* make you dance’ – explains – ‘We work together. When we play loud and fast, the dancers get excited!’. He joins his hands between the thumbs and the fore-finger and says ‘*pat ma ne pat waing kyar dae*’ – *pat ma* and *pat waing* are interlocked (lit. ‘in-between’).

Throughout my research trips, many *hsaing* musicians underlined the importance that drums have in the *nat hsaing* ensemble. They describe the sound of the *pat ma*, the large suspended drum, as deep and powerful, which can be heard over long distances. Working together with the *pat waing*, the drum circle, these two instruments are capable of exciting the participants, making them dance, filling the air of the *nat kana* with the presence of the spirits. In performance, the rest of the rhythmic instruments – the large barrel drums *sito*, the large cymbals *linkwin*, and the six tuned drums *chauk lon pat* – are generally supporting, reinforcing, or embellishing the two main drums’ parts. Together, *pat ma* and *pat waing* constitute the backbone of the *nat hsaing* rhythmic section: the rhythmic part is the result of an interlocking between these two drums. Burmese musicians have described this process to me as *apay-ayu* (lit. ‘give-and-take’), *bayhti* (from the words used to indicate the right hand’s action in the *pat waing*, *bay*, and of the left hand’s action in the *pat ma*, *hti*), or *akyar* (‘in-between’).

Compared to other *hsaing* performance contexts, the *nat hsaing* ensemble performs ‘in a simpler and more direct style’ (Garfias 1985a:10). The strength of the ensemble does not reside in the embellished style of the drum circle player, but in the fast, intense and loud sound that the drums can achieve, working as a whole unit through thick interlocked parts. In an attempt to classify these parts, I created the following schemes. The action of the drum circle and of the suspended drum is considered in relation to the metric structure outlined by the two idiophones *si* and *wa*. In the first form, *pat waing* and *pat ma* are symmetrical, parallel, and un-syncopated (i.e., their action corresponds to the beat marked by the metric instruments):¹⁰¹

Metric form	<i>si</i> and <i>wa</i> (idiophones)	o	+	o	+
Interlocking form	<i>pat waing</i> (drum circle)	•	•	•	•
	<i>pat ma</i> (susp. drum)	•	•	•	•

Transcription 4.11 First form of rhythmic interlocking.

¹⁰¹ In the following classification, the symmetrical and asymmetrical forms could be referred to as Becker’s (1968) metronomic and durational patterns respectively. However, the terminology and the classification employed by Becker does not account for all the cases present in the Burmese *nat hsaing*.

The second form is still symmetrical and un-syncopated, but present a clear interlocked alternation:

Metric form	<i>si and wa</i> (idiophones)	o	+	o	+
Interlocking form	<i>pat waing</i> (drum circle)	•		•	
	<i>pat ma</i> (susp. drum)		•		•

Transcription 4.12 Second form of rhythmic interlocking.

The last form, less common, can be sub-divided into 3+3+2 units: it is then asymmetrical, and presents a polyrhythmic character:

Metric form	<i>si and wa</i> (idiophones)	o	+	o	+
Interlocking form	<i>pat waing</i> (drum circle)	•	•		•
	<i>pat ma</i> (susp. drum)	•		•	•

Transcription 4.13 Third form of rhythmic interlocking.

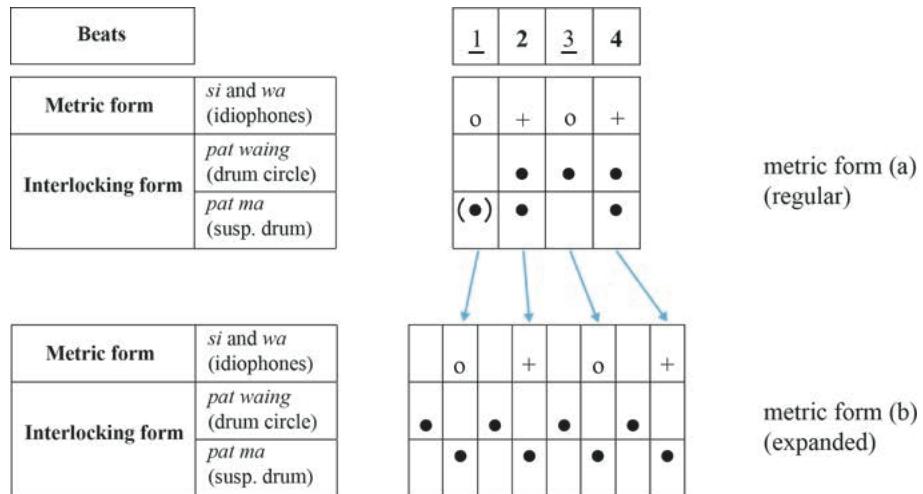
In the *nat hsing* musical practice, these interlocking forms give rise to pre-composed rhythmic cycles which, as I explain in Section 5.3.1, consist in powerful musical indices, capable of bringing the *nat* into-presence. In performance, the drums tend to repeat the same cycle, creating a sense of recurrence and stability ‘in dynamic dialog with change’ (Tenzer 2006a:22ff.); extemporaneous micro-adjustments and variations (mostly of the ‘tone colour’ and partly of ‘duration’, but never of ‘envelope’ and ‘punctuation’; see Tenzer 2011) are present – though they do not undermine the identity of this cycle. From this point of view, *nat hsing* music could be considered an example of *sectional periodicity* – i.e. ‘isoperiodicity in dialogue with the demands made by a variety of forces’ (Tenzer 2006a:29), in this case, ritual’s progress. In fact, each *nat chin* present structural shifts between pre-composed rhythmic cycles, generally signalled by the leading drum circle *pat waing*, determining and determined by the flow of the ritual time. This resonates with what Moore and Sayre (2006) describe in Afro-Cuban *batá* drumming: they explain that ‘drumming, song, and dance are crucial for facilitating possession’ (ivi:122); among other things, drummers must ‘be sensitive to constant musical cues offered throughout the ceremony from the lead singer and other drummers, and to respond appropriately with metrical shifts, improvisations, or elaborations of the basic pulse’ (ivi:123).¹⁰²

In the song *Do Ko Gyi Kyaw* ([Video 4.3](#)), the expansion of the metric form *wa lat si* that I previously discussed is accompanied by an evident change in the rhythmic section. The drums of the ensemble suddenly awake, passing from being a sleepy background support to the vocal and melodic

¹⁰² This corresponds to what Tenzer (2006a) defines as ‘sectional periodicity’: the reiteration of a single musical time cycle is in dialogue with other musical forces – in this case, a ritual’s progression.

part, to an intense protagonist role. This is underlined by the introduction of a completely different drumming style.

In the first part of the song, the *pat ma* is not really playing;¹⁰³ the *pat waing* performs the first form of interlocking: it plays symmetrically and in parallel with the last three beats outlined by the a 4-beats metric form *wa lat si*, in an unsyncopated fashion (Transcription 4.14.a). At the end of the vocal part (about at [00:58]), the drum circle signals the beginning of the instrumental section: in a few moments, to the sound of the cadential phrase, the metric form is expanded, passing from 4- to 8-beats; the *pat ma* begins to play, supported by the rest of the ensemble. On the rarefied metric cycle, *pat waing* and *pat ma* create together, a rhythmic cycle based on the second form of interlocking: while the suspended drum *pat ma* plays on the beats marked by the metric cycle, the drum circle *pat waing* marks the off-beats of the cycle, filling-in the space left empty by the expansion of the metric form (Transcription 4.14.b)



Transcription 4.14 Shift in metric and interlocking forms.

In relation to the expanded metric form, the action of the *pat ma* can be symmetrical, parallel, and unsyncopated, while the *pat waing* is syncopated, symmetrically interlocking with the suspended drum and the idiophones. The *hsaing* performs with increasing speed and loudness, supporting the spirit embodiment of the dancers.

As *pat waing* and *pat ma* are tuned percussion instruments, the following transcriptions show how the two previous rhythmic models are actually realised by the ensemble.

¹⁰³ In this particular performance, at some point, only the barrel drums *sito* keep playing. Those musicians who can, take a short rest. Their action is not necessary to the performance, as the drums are not protagonists here.

Musical transcription 4.15 shows the realization of the background rhythmic cycle. The instruments are:

- si* (bell)
- wa* (clapper)
- pat waing* (drum circle)
- pat ma* (susp. drum)

The notation uses stems, dots, crosses, and horizontal lines to indicate specific rhythmic patterns and hand placement for the drums.

Transcription 4.15 Realisation of the background rhythmic cycle. In the pat ma transcription, 'RH' and 'LH' stand for right and left hand; 'HD', 'MD' and 'LD' indicate the higher, middle and lower unpitched sito drums.

The first rhythmic pattern is strictly intertwined with the vocal part. As I previously explained (see Section 4.2.1 and Transcription 4.5), the vocal part begins by reiterating the name of the spirit – 'Ko Gyi Kyaw, Ko Gyi Kyaw' – on the cyclical melodic segment – C-E-G, in cipher notation: 3-5-1. The same melodic segment is reproduced by the drum circle (Transcription 4.15).

As the vocal part concludes, the drums introduce a new drum circle, characterised by a strict interlocking between *pat waing* and *pat ma*. This cycle is known as *Nan Gyi Tabaung*:

Musical transcription 4.16 shows the realization of the second rhythmic cycle, *Nan Gyi Tabaung*. The instruments are:

- si* (bell)
- wa* (clapper)
- pat waing* (drum circle)
- pat ma* (susp. drum)
- linkwin* (cymbals)
- sito* (barrel drums)

The notation uses stems, dots, crosses, and horizontal lines to indicate specific rhythmic patterns and hand placement for the drums.

Transcription 4.16 Realisation of the second rhythmic cycle, Nan Gyi Tabaung.

The performance of this cycle is connected to the manifestation of the *nat* Ko Gyi Kyaw. This cycle dominates the instrumental section: its interlocking form allows the ensemble to increase in speed and loudness. This, together with the expansion of the metric cycle, makes this pattern determinant for the support of the possession dances, as I will explain in Section 6.2.2.

At the end of the instrumental section, the cadential phrase played by the drum circle signals the return to the previous section, dominated by the vocal part. The metric cycle re-contacts once again,

the drums slow down and return in the background, performing the first rhythmic cycle. Given the melodic and rhythmic nature of the *hsaing* drums, it is possible to recognise the action of the tuned drums as some sort of melodic filling-in. However, as I explained, the expansion and re-contraction did not affect the other melodic instruments (gong circle and shawm): in the expanded part, they continued to perform following the same basic melody, but faster and with more ornamentations.

4.3. Conclusions

In the book *Burmese Culture*, the Burmese scholar Khin Zaw described, among other things, the instruments of the *hsaing waing* ensemble, scale and tuning system, and “improvisation” techniques. In a suggestive attempt to summarise the main features of Burmese music, Khin Zaw wrote:

If it were possible to sum up Burmese music in two words they would be ‘Freedom’ and ‘Gusto.’

Burmese music has freedom to improvise, freedom from being note-bound, freedom of variations, to mention only three. Outside the strait jacket of harmonic music, it grows free like a hedgerow plant. (Khin Zaw 1981:70)

Despite being quite suggestive, Khin Zaw’s perspective – which was heavily influenced by his education in Western art music – is valid only in part. Burmese musicians are never completely free: ‘improvisation’ and ‘variation’ take place within specific musical boundaries. In performance, these can be flexed and adapted to the context, but they are hardly subverted. To describe the boundaries and the characteristics of *hsaing waing* musical practice was the focus of this chapter. While keeping *nat hsaing* musical practice in mind, this chapter wanted to provide a basis to comprehend the fundamental elements of Burmese *hsaing waing* music. The analysis of one *nat chin* is but a first step into filling a huge gap in the scholarship: I am confident that by looking at the emblematic song *Do Ko Gyi Kyaw* I have been able to provide the necessary basis for further research and discussions on Burmese music.

The musicological aspects I discuss in this chapter come alive in the sounds performed by the *nat hsaing* ensemble during a ceremony: musicians have to follow to the ritual progression, adapting their musical performance to the ritual action (Moore and Sayre 2006). Cathy Tun (2013:94) explains it quite clearly: *nat hsaing* musicians need to be well versed in the way of spirit worship, and to know the spirits’ histories in order to effectively support spirit possession dances. Writes Tun:

[*Nat hsaing* musicians need to have the] ability to quickly identify the spirit which is possessing the votaress; to uplift the dancing votaress’ mind to a level of great emotion by his performance; and [the] ability to enticingly play so well that the audience nearby can barely control an urge to join the votaresses [the spirit mediums] in the act. (Tun 2013:102)

In *nat kana pwe* ceremonies, songs (*nat chin*) are not just songs: they are sounds (*nat than*), and complex musical signs imbued with power and ritual meanings. Together with the sonic environment of the ceremony, they contribute in bringing the *nats* into-presence. The real efficacy that specific sounds have in facilitating, supporting, and controlling spirit possession is demonstrated by the response of the dancers, who embody the spirits through specific gestures. Sounds/music, movements/dance and spirit persons depend on each other. How sounds and movements become ritually effective is the focus of the following chapter.

5. Performing beyond meaning

The rhythm of the music changed and the natkadaw began to dance, hopping and shuffling, first on one foot, then the other, left arm extended forward with palm turned out and the right flung back, turning as she danced, swaying and whirling to the music.

Kenneth Sein and Joseph A. Withey, *The Great Po Sein*
(1965:65)

It is a late August day, and the long-awaited Taungbyone *nat* festival, a few kilometres north of Mandalay, has finally started. I am sitting cross-legged on the bamboo floor of U Kyaw Soe Moe's pavilion. The *kana si* sits in front of me, and he seems happy to see me again for the first time since I left Yangon for Mandalay, a few months before. The sound of a *nat hsaing* reaches us from one of the many spirit palaces that intersect the village's streets. Hundreds of *nat kadaws* have come to attend the festival. They dance all day, almost without interruption. The air of the small village is filled with the sound of drums, gongs, shawms, and singing voices which burst out from the massive speakers. While I light one of the Burmese cigars that U Kyaw Soe Moe has offered me, he starts to pay attention to the *hsaing* music. Then, maybe with the intention to test my knowledge, he asks me: 'Which spirit is this?', and points towards the not too distant *nat* palace. I instinctively move my head in the direction of the palace, trying to catch a glance of the *nat kadaw*'s performance in the hope that it might help me identify the spirit dance. But we are too far away, and the semi-distorted and reverbed sounds are the only information I can rely only on. After a few seconds, I put on a brave face and I reply, 'I think it's a *naga* spirit'. U Kyaw Soe Moe smiles with satisfaction and says: 'Yes, it's Shwenabe, a *naga* spirit!'. He raises his arms, overlaps his hands above his head, and starts to move them sinuously back and forth, waving his body, mimicking the dance movements characterising the great *naga* serpents. 'This is *way lar* sound' – he continues – 'we always play *way lar* for *naga*'.¹⁰⁴

In the *nat* cult practice, musical sounds and dance movements are strictly interrelated. They are both imbued with meanings necessary for the correct embodiment of the spirit called to join the celebration. Burmese musicians and dancers are aware of which sounds (rhythms and melodies) and movements are necessary for the embodiment of the specific spirits. When they perform, they perform together: specific sounds and movements equally contribute to the manifestation of the spirit person,

¹⁰⁴ I will analyse this and other significant *nat hsaing* sounds in Chapter 6.

creating a network of meaningful references. *Hsaing* musicians' ability to recognise which spirit is dancing, without looking at costumes and dance movements, or without listening to the lyrics, is something that struck me since I started to investigate *nat hsaing* music. In 2013, during my first fieldwork, interviews with musicians and dancers confirmed to me the importance of this network of references and meanings in the construction and experience of the spirit persons. However, while some aspects of the *nat kana* sound and movement operating signs became clear to me, others still escaped my comprehension, because I just could not hear them yet.

When I started my research in 2013, I was fascinated by the *nat hsaing*'s sonic impact, but also by its apparent disorder and chaos. Over the years, initially confusing melodies started to become more defined – taking form, and elucidating the individual musical elements; I could predict the musicians' action when performing solid interlocked rhythmic cycles; and as my comprehension of Burmese language improved, vocal parts and lyrics became clearer. I became aware of how specific rhythms and melodies were constantly performed when a specific spirit danced in the *nat kana*; I started to recognise Burmese court songs and popular songs embedded in spirit songs, and the sounds associated with the Shan, Karen and Mon ethnic minorities, to the Burmese boxing matches, and to Buddhism; slowly, I was able to link all these elements to the dance of the various spirit persons. Sounds and movements of the *nat kana* practice, initially so obscure, became something I could understand, and enjoy, more and more, noticing different musicians' and dancers' interpretations, and participants' reactions to music, songs, and spirits.

This chapter is devoted to disentangling the networks of meaning that connect sounds, gestures, movements, and spirit embodiment in the *nat kana pwe* practice. I first outline ethnomusicological theories analysing the relationship between sounds/music and movements/dance in spirit possession rituals (Rouget 1985; Pugh-Kitingam 2017), and their social meanings (Marett 2009). The volume *Sounding the Dance, Moving the Music*, edited by Mohd Anis Md Nor and Stepputat (2017), provides a theoretical framework that considers sounds and movements as parts of one performance. In order to explain the functions that meaningful sounds and dances have in Burmese *nat kana pwes* ceremonies (Garfias 1975a; Ye Dway 2013), I argue that the combination of sounds and gestures create a performance that makes the *nat* come-into-presence. Then, drawing on the concept of mimesis (Taussig 1993), I depart from the idea of 'figurative music and dance' (Rouget 1985; Norton 2009), instead extending the concept of 'mimetic performance' (Sum 2013) to sounds/music and movements/dance, and I link the idea of mimesis to that of performing emotions through movements and sounds. To explain how sounds and gestures are related to the different spirit persons, and how the spirits come-into-presence, I consider the *nat kana pwe* performance as a semiotic system. Finally, I draw on Peircean semiotic theories applied to ritual studies (Kreinath 2006) and ethnomusicology (Turino 1999, 2014) to develop my own semiotic understanding of these ceremonies. My aim is to demonstrate how, even

when involving different musical genres and spirit persons, the *nat hsaing* sounds and *nat* dance movements create a multi-level network of meanings that construct a mimetic performance.

5.1. A network of meanings: sounds and movements

During a *nat kana pwe* ceremony, spirit sounds (*nat than*) and dances (*nat ka*) are the direct expression of the incorporation of the spirits (*nat*) into the bodies of the dancers (either professional *nat kadaws*, or common devotees). Even the performance of singular musical traits – rhythms, melodies, and sound qualities – accompanies specific dance gestures, and is associated with specific spirit persons. Sometimes, groups of spirit persons sharing similar qualities (e.g. the sovereignty over a territory occupied by the same ethnic group, a similar royal status, or personal characteristics), or spirits linked by family ties according to the legends, also share similar musics and dances. Sounds and movements become extremely important in creating and conveying a network of meanings, which represent, incarnate, and support the embodiment of different spirit persons.

The investigation on the links between sounds, movements, and meanings resonates with more than one study conducted on music and spirit possession. In *Music and Trance*, Rouget (1985) investigated the meanings of possession musics and dances. Rouget explained that specific deities are associated with specific musical or verbal mottoes, ‘a sign whose “signified” is the god’ (ivi:101). Sounds, movements and lyrics are strictly connected:

When they are specific to a particular deity, melodies played on an instrument have the same function as sung mottoes: they are call-signs. [...] these tunes are used for dancing, and the resulting dance constitutes the motto's choreographic aspect; it expresses the deity's personality just the same, but in movement rather than words. (Rouget 1985:99)

While I do not subscribe to the use of the word “motto” and the Saussurean dichotomy “signifier-signified”, I think that Rouget is right in underlining how music and dance can collaboratively express the personality of the spirit/deity associated to them.

In the *nat kana pwe*, humans become, for a short while, the spirit (see Section 2.2). Guided by the *nat hsaing* sound, humans incorporate spirit persons into their bodies and manifest them through dance movements: when possessed by a spirit, the human acts, speaks and dances as the spirit. The people around recognise this temporary changed status by addressing the possessed one(s) as the possessing *nat* and behaving accordingly. The *hsaing* music both triggers and controls (especially with unexperienced dancers), or supports (with an experienced *nat kadaw*), the different phases of the coming-into-presence of the spirit, manifested through specific dance gestures and movements. In *nat*

kana pwe performance context, sounds, movements, and the spirits' manifestation are more than just strictly interrelated – they depend on each other.

In Southeast Asian music cultures, several authors (among others: Becker 2004; Norton 2009) have proposed a variety of different approaches to, and definitions of, possession music. However, only a few directly address the existing links between spirits, musical sounds, and dance movements. Pugh-Kitingam (2017) focuses on the ritual performances of maritime communities in Sabah, Malaysian Borneo. Also drawing on Roseman's work on the Temiar (1991), Pugh-Kitingam explains that 'music musicks the action of the dancers' (Pugh-Kitingam 2017:126), symbolically mediating between human and spiritual worlds:

Dance has a more profound meaning as symbolic action in Sabah, when it is performed by ritual specialists in ritual contexts. In these contexts, gong ensemble music not only gives overall form to ritual processes, but as structured sound is believed to be the actual medium through which the seen physical world of humans and the unseen spiritual realms interact and merge. [...] In these contexts, ritual dancing is more than abstract visual kinesthetic expression. It articulates exchanges and alliances mediated with the spirit world, either through movement and gesture or through spirit possession of dancing spirit mediums. (Pugh-Kitingam 2017:125)

Pugh-Kitingam's contribution strongly resonates with the case of Burmese *nat kana pwe*. *Hsaing* sounds construct the ritual processes, contributing to the merging of the two worlds, which can then interact with each other (see Chapter 3). The connection between musics, dances, and *nat* spirits was already noted by Garfias (1975a:7), who writes that: 'Each of the spirits has a particular song type and rhythm with which he is associated'. Garfias considers the *nat hsaing* musical style as separate from other *hsaing* performance contexts in Burma – to the point that he speaks of an 'entirely different and exclusive' repertoire. He is in part correct. *Nat hsaing* performance style presents certain characteristics that distinguish spirit songs (*nat chin*) (see Section 4.1) and dances (*nat aka*). Is it possible that, at the time of Garfias' research, the *nat hsaing* practices were more distinct from other theatrical forms involving *hsaing* performance, and that the interrelationship between these forms is only a recent development?

I am not of this opinion. That a musical practice stays completely detached from the rest of the performing arts world, within one culture over the centuries, is improbable. I believe that *nat hsaing* musics and dances have always been in contact with Burmese court music, theatrical forms of *pwes*, and popular music, bound in a close exchange of reciprocal borrowings and influences (Section 7.2). *Nat hsaing* practice (and the dances associated with *nat* rituals) share several features with the other performance contexts. In describing the musics of Burmese puppet theatre (*yokthay*) and live-actors theatre (*zat*), Garfias (1975a:8) calls these features 'special theatrical tunes', necessary to create a certain dramatic atmosphere. For example, he mentions how the sound of the old royal music *sidaw*

‘adds an atmosphere of serenity, nobility, and associates it with the old days of the court’, or how the performance of *myin gin* music, once used to prepare the horses for battle, is today ‘introduced in the course of a drama when the horse motif needs reinforcement.’ In discussing the *hsaing* music for the *yokhtay pwe* (puppet theatre), Ye Dway (2013) recognises the use of ‘appropriate musical compositions [...] for various dramatic situation[s] or different scenes of action’, and describes the affects (i.e. emotions) of the Burmese audiences in response to them:

These dramatic (musical) conventions have been embedded into our consciousness since childhood so much so that we just enjoyed a scene of pathos when the hero (*mintha*) or the heroine (*minthamee*) started singing *ngo-chins* (wailing songs) in vibrant strain and at the end the orchestra crashed in crescendo with the big *pat-ma* (big drum) beating vigorously in fortissimo most probably in synchronization with the heart-beats of the tear-jerker loving theatre-goers. (Ye Dway 2013:89-90)

While referring to different performance contexts, Garfias and Ye Dway’s discourses represent two faces of the same coin. During a *nat kana* ceremony, *nats* of royal lineage would dance to the sound of the royal music, and knight *nats* would dance, jumping to the sound of horse patrolling music. The *kana si* U Win Hlaing once proudly told me, ‘I am a great singer! Whenever I sing a *ngo chin* (lamenting song), people always start to cry’: his performance moves the hearts of the ritual participants in the manner just described by Ye Dway in the example of the audience of Burmese puppet theatre.

The effect on the two audiences is similar because some of the sounds and movements that one finds in *nat kana pwes* are not exclusive to these rituals. In the landscape of Burmese performing arts, the same sounds, with similar functions, can be found in several performance contexts. Rhythms, melodies, and dance movements also feature in other non-ritual contexts, *zat* and *yokhtay* performances included. This aspect might lead someone to consider *nat kana pwes* as purely dramatic performances. One must be aware that while spirit possession ceremonies usually present a dramatic element, they are not merely that. The ritual meaning and effectiveness expressed through music (and dance) referentiality goes deeper than in purely dramatic performances.

Disentangling this web of meanings is necessary to identify those elements of the performance directly connected to the spirit person, and to understand how the ritual participants experience the coming-into-presence of different spirits, according to their own personal history. During my fieldwork, I have witnessed devotees responding to those spirits with whom they believed they had a direct connection in a past life, or in this life, because of their family tradition, or their ethnicity; some get possessed by the *nat* from whom they were strongly requesting favour; others get possessed by that *nat* in that specific moment because that is what the community expects of them. The meanings of art performances are always socially situated: musical structures can reflect ‘cultural models’ and social

structures (Widdess 2006). These elements have been clearly outlined in the study by Marett (2009) on the performance of Wannga songs in North Australia. Here, music and dance performances generate several levels of meanings:

Because songs about the activities of a single ancestor or group of ancestors have the same melody, and because Dreamings are associated both with people and with sites, melody has enormous power to signify relationships between people, their Dreaming, and their country.
(Marett 2009:80)

Analysing Wannga songs, Marett (2009:152) finds multi-layered levels of semiosis condensed in very short performances. Meanings fully emerge only when one is aware of the social context that generates their performance (Widdess 2012:90), and if meanings are the expression of culture and society, and if musics have meanings, it is not surprising to hear the echo of Merriam (2000 [1964]) and Blacking (2000 [1973]) when Timothy Rice says, discussing music's symbolic reference, that meaning 'is not simply there in the music', and that 'musical signification is always constructed' (Rice 2001:29). However, as spirits are considered part of the *nat kana* community (see Sections 2.1 and 3.1), then these beings also take part in the social construction of musical (and dance) meanings.

5.2. Looking for meanings

While still at the early stages of my research, it was my intention to focus exclusively on functions and meanings of *hsaing* music(s) in *nat kana* rituals. Although I had already spent several months in the field in 2013 and had continued to expand my knowledge of Burmese music since then, I still underestimated the importance of dance in *nat* ceremonies. When I started my 2017-18 fieldwork, I aimed to recognise those elements that make *nat chins* meaningful for the embodiment of different spirits. As the months in the field went by, it became more and more clear to me that discussing the meanings of *nat hsaing* sounds would be impossible without considering the *nat* dances. During interviews, the questions that did not have a musicological answer, were usually related to Burmese dance. I started to realise that concepts that do not exist within *hsaing* music are expressed with concepts describing the dance (and vice versa). Music and dance form a close, interrelated system. Slowly, I started to look at these ceremonies not only from a (ethno)musicological, but also a choreological point of view. This approach has been defined as a choreomusicological perspective by Mohd Anis Md Nor and Kendra Stepputat (2017). In describing Southeast Asian performance contexts, the authors explain how dance and music overlap, merging together in a single act: in performing arts, 'movement and sound complement each other, form[ing] an inseparable entity' (ivi:xv). In the *nat kana* performance context, it is the combination of *hsaing* sounds and dance movements that allow the spirit to come-into-presence. Together, sounds and movements create a mimetic performance of the spirit person.

5.2.1 A mimetic performance

26 August 2017. The Taungbyone national festival has come to an end, as has my fieldwork. I have spent the past few days in the excited crowds of pilgrims, filming the ritual dances at the main spirit palaces, and interviewing *hsaing* musicians. I am exhausted, and I am just glad to ride back to Mandalay. I need to regain some energy before heading back to Yangon, and finally to London, in a few days. Only one thing is missing: saying goodbye. Some of my closest friends came to attend and perform at the festival, and while we have met in the previous few days, it is now time to part from them properly. I start once again the tour of the village's road, visiting my friends' places, sitting with them, having a last cup of Burmese tea, or a last bite of pickled tea leaves (*lahpet*). The afternoon passes quickly, and when I finally get to the place of Sithu Thet, whom I saved for last, the young *nat kadaw* is embodying the *nat* Amay Gyan, the Rude Mother. Sithu does not see me coming in: he sits with his back to the entrance, facing a devotee while performing fortune-telling. I do not want to interrupt, I sit down and wait for my turn to speak to him, hoping that it will be quick. When the fortune-telling is complete, a half-hour later, I am tired and impatient to go. Sithu turns around, he spots me and invites me to drink and eat something. Unfortunately, this time I have to deny the offer: I talk to him in English (which he understands perfectly), and addressing him as Sithu, I explain that I am in a rush, that I am leaving, and that I thank him for all the time we spent together. The *nat kadaw* looks at me for just one second, and then shouts in my face, in English: 'I am not Sithu, I am Amay Gyan!', leaving me completely stunned. People around laugh, recognising the "style" of the Rude Mother. Sithu/Amay Gyan is laughing too: before I go, s/he puts a hand on my head and recites a blessing for my trip. While leaving, I consider the implications of what has just happened with a smile: how can Amay Gyan speak English?

The ability of performances to signify meaning and bring the spirit into-presence can be considered as part of a mimetic process. Mimetic sounds and movements *construct, perform, and are* the spirit person they are associated with. In investigating the idea of mimesis, Michael Taussig (1993) describes mimesis as a human faculty that goes beyond the idea of representation and/or imitation. In mimesis, the copy 'shares in or acquires the properties of the represented' (ivi:47-48). The distinction between the self and other becomes porous and flexible: mimesis is the active experience of 'yielding the perceiver into the perceived' (ivi:61), creating 'a palpable, sensuous connection' between their bodies (1993:21) (see Section 2.2). Mimesis is not merely 'similarity' or a 'passive copy' of an *object* (in this case, the *nat*), but rather a process that transcends reality. *Nat hsaing*'s songs are mimetic in the sense that specific texts, musical patterns (melodic and rhythmic), and sound qualities (tempo and dynamics) constitute the *nat than*, a 'spirit sound' imbued with power, directly resonating with one or more spirit persons. As I anticipated in Section 4.1, *nat thans* should not be considered just as "sonic

objects”, but rather as active sonic signs mimicking (i.e. making present) the spirit. The performance and experience of these mimetic sounds makes the *nat* come-into-presence. Taussig explains that, when spirit music is involved:

the chanter is singing a copy of the spirit-form, and by virtue of what I call the magic of mimesis, is bringing the spirit into the physical world. (Taussig 1993:105)

And he continues:

the chanter chants himself into the scene. He exists not just as a subject but also as a mimeticised Other. In this way, as both chanter and person chanted about, as demonstrator and demonstrated, he creates the bridge between original and copy that brings a new force, the third force of magical power, to intervene in the human world. (Taussig 1993:106)

By sounding a mimetic copy of the spirit, the *nat hsaing* ensemble brings the *nat* into the human world through the means of sounds, ‘mimetically gain[ing] control over the mirror-image of physical reality that [sounds] represent’ (Taussig 1993:105). In this sense, *nats* represent the Other, an Alter with whom the Burmese must come to terms. The mimetic sounds performed by the *nat hsaing* contribute to make them manifest in a physical reality: in this form, people can interact and communicate with them, thus bringing their potentially harmful Otherness under control.¹⁰⁵ This resonates with the concept of spirit sounds emerging from the work of Nathan Porath (2019b) on the Orang Sakai of Riau, Indonesia. Porath (ivi:149) explains that spirit-songs are a ‘mimesis of spirits in the spirit world’ rather than ‘reflective or mimetic of the physical world around them’. Porath argues that spirit songs ‘are an ensounded¹⁰⁶ copy of the environment – but not of the physical environment’. In *dakei* healing rituals, the shaman mimics the spirit he tries engage with through the performance of shamanic songs (*lagu dakei*): ‘The song calls upon the spirit the word-sound portray, and by doing so it actualizes and indexes the numinous being’s presence’ (ivi:149). Adopting this perspective, we could say that the sounds performed by the *nat hsaing* ensemble ensound the *nat*, making the spirit person manifest in the body of the dancer.

Spirit embodiment and dance are manifestation of the *nat* in the physical reality: the embodying human starts acting, speaking (and dancing) *as an other* (Kramer 1993). Possessed devotees and *nat kadaws* follow a defined sequence of the dance’s various movements, performing the *nat* person, or the

¹⁰⁵ On the relationship between humans and non-humans mediated by music, see Brabec de Mori (2013). In ethnomusicology, the idea of musical mimesis is generally associated with the concept of iconicity, and the direct imitation of natural sounds in the creation of musical systems. Among others, see Feld (2012 [1982]), Levin (2006), Mora (2005).

¹⁰⁶ This term has been introduced by Ingold (2007; see also Ingold 2011a:266ff and 2011b:136ff.) to describe sound as something *into* which our body experiences perception, as part of a total engagement in and with the world. Porath (2019a:8-17) embraces the idea of a multi-sensorial experience of sound derived from Ingold’s theories.

qualities linked to the spirit. Rouget called this an imitative process, and defined these dances, and the music that supports them, ‘figurative’:

Depending on whether it involves a warrior (sword dance), a loving woman, a wild animal symbolizing power (tiger or panther) or fertility (snake), the dance will naturally differ in character, and with it the music that sustains it. And in this case one is also dealing with more or less directly figurative music. (Rouget 1985:100)

According to Rouget (1985:114), a figurative dance has the function to ‘manifest the possession state’, as opposed to nonfigurative dance, which has the function to ‘trigger trance’. In possession, both the figurative and nonfigurative are present, either simultaneously or alternately: possession dance oscillates between the two aspects. However, at least one of the two aspects will predominate (ivi:117). Following Rouget, Norton (2009) analyses the relationship between gesture and rhythm in Vietnamese *len dong* ceremonies. Norton explains that *chau van* music ‘animates possession’ and ‘incites dance’ (ivi:115). Because ‘the dance performed by the medium depends on the spirit incarnated’ (ivi:116), it possesses a figurative character, supported by different rhythms.

Rouget suggested that a figurative dance corresponds to a figurative music. However, the use of the word ‘figurative’ for the dances and music can be misleading, as it suggests a mere act of representation. ‘Mimesis’, on the other hand, seems to link more directly the *hsaing* sounds to the coming-into-being of the spirits, and can be applied to describe the possession dances.¹⁰⁷

However, as I have already explained, one should think of music and dance as one. The mimetic process that brings a *nat* into-presence is a performance of sounds and movements. Rather than talk of single mimetic dances or mimetic music, the term mimetic performance better applies to describe the process(es) which contribute to the manifestation of the spirit person. This idea emerges from the work of Maisie Sum (2013). She explains that, in Moroccan Gnawa rituals, the melodies played on the *guembri lute, combined with the vocal section and figurative dances*, create a ‘mimetic performance’ that leads to the adept *becoming* the summoned entity: ‘musical codes’ and ‘mimetic dance gestures’ identify these entities, to the presence of whom the adepts ‘respond through physical and emotional submission’ (ivi:176). Instead of figurative dance, Sum prefers the idea of a ‘mimetic dance’ marking ‘a strong and positive affiliation with the supernatural entity’ (ivi:172). In contrast to ‘mimetic dances’ characterising ‘mastered trance’, ‘abstract dances’ are performed on the spot, characterise ‘generic trance’, and feature at an earlier stage of this possession process (ivi:152).

¹⁰⁷ However, Rouget (1985:114) briefly mentioned that figurative dances could be indicated as ‘mimes’.

In Burmese *nat kana pwes*, it is possible to recognise two main typologies of mimetic performance:

1. multiple mimetic acts are concentrated into one performer;
2. the mimetic performance is shared among multiple performers, thus being the result of a collective performative effort.

As I will explain in Sections 6.2.5 and 6.3.2, the first typology corresponds to the case of the *do* drum dance for Ko Gyi Kyaw, where the prescribed dance movements involve the mimetic gesture of “playing the *do* drum”, while supported by the sound of the *hsaing* ensemble. The performer acts as the dancer, but at the same time the dance mimics the act of playing a musical instrument. The second typology corresponds to the case of the *pya zat* for Nankarine Medaw: while the dancer mimics the gesturality of the dramatic piece, the singer expresses it by singing the vocal part, and *hsaing* musicians perform it on their instrument. In *nat kana pwes*, the two dimensions of ‘sound/music’ and ‘movement/dance’ are mimetically intertwined, expressing multiple layers of meanings. In order to understand how this all relates to Burmese spirit performances, it is necessary to outline the implications of ‘sound’ and ‘dance’.

5.2.2 Sounds and dances for the spirits

In the course of my research visits to Burma, when talking with musicians, I would frequently employ the Burmese word *athan*, ‘sound’, to refer to modal categories. ‘*Da ba athan lay?*’ – ‘Which mode is this [song in]?’ I would ask. To my surprise, musicians would reply to my question by giving me the title of the song. After I gave them one or two names of Burmese modal categories, they would reply, with a strong tong click: ‘Oh, *tuning!*’. What was I doing wrong? As I would soon understand, Burmese musicians use the word *athan* to indicate a *nat* song interchangeably with *nat chin*, but sometimes also to refer to the parts constituting the song itself. The spoken invocation (*nat pint*), vocal part (*ahso*), the melody (*tay thwa*) played in the instrumental part, and the dismissing of the spirit (*nat po-*) would all be considered part of the general *nat than*, the ‘sound of, or for, one spirit’, and not just as a *nat chin*, ‘spirit song’. In Section 4.1 I addressed the musical functions that the sections of a *nat than* have in a performance. However, the implications of this term in the ritual context need to be explained.

When they resound in the ritual space of the *nat kana*, spirit songs and the elements that compose them become something more than just sounds. Specific rhythmic cycles and melodic patterns embody the essence of one specific spirit person. The performance mimics the spirit person’s story and character, bringing him/her into-presence through a mimetic performance of musics and dances: a royal

sound and dance for a *nat* of royal birth; an intense and fast sound for fighters and horsemen; a poignant sound to accompany the final cry of a heart-broken lover. More than one spirit medium I spoke to about this explained the link between sounds and spirit person, saying that ‘this spirit enjoys this sound’.¹⁰⁸ Besides the ontological implications that such a statement has, these words made me realise that spirit sounds and spirit persons are directly connected. It is important to grasp this nuance because sound(s) have a central role in defining the *nat kana* ritual space-time (Section 3.1), in manifesting the spirit persons, and in facilitating the spirit embodiment (Section 2.2). Spirit persons resonate to their sound(s), which should not be considered as ‘sonic objects’. *Nat thans* are determinant in calling the spirit (*nat hkaw-*), making them become manifest, and enabling them to dance (*nat ka-*).

Sounds are directly connected to spirits persons just as dance movements are. In Burma, dance is considered the direct expression of the experience of spirit embodiment. In the initial moment of embodiment, the spirit’s *entering* the body of the human is underlined by an intense shaking of the whole dancer’s body, and especially of the palms which are brought together on the forehead, producing the sound ‘resembling the flutter of a butterfly’s wings as it flies off’ (Brac de la Perrière 2016:6). This moment could be considered as part of a process towards a mimetic dance that starts with an abstract/nonfigurative dance. After this initial moment, the spirits manifest themselves. The human host *becomes* the possessing spirit and s/he manifests this identity through the performance of mimetic dance gestures. It is in these moments that the spirit has finally come-into-presence.

In Burmese dance, the dancers’ bodies arch in positions that at first appears impossible to master: during a dance performance, all the limbs of the body continuously bend, continuously and rapidly flowing with the music. In the course of my research, I started to recognise different styles of dance performance, identifying the refined style of an *anyeint minthamee*, the mechanical-like movements of human-puppet dancers, and the intense jumps of spirit dancers. In my conversations with Burmese dancers, two different modes of dancing emerged: *ka gyo* and *poun san*. The *Dictionary of Myanmar Performing Arts* (Ministry of Culture 2001) describes a *ka gyo* as ‘music for a specific dance’ and links it to *ka gwet* (‘dance figure’), ‘dance phrase’.¹⁰⁹ *Ka gyos* represent specific choreographies, to be performed as a set of movements associated to equally specific musical phrases. These ‘regular forms’ are constituted of a set of movements, whose performance involves the whole body of the dancer – including *kyay* (feet), *hkar* (back), *gaung* (head), and *let* (hand) – from the beginning to the end. The movements constituting a *ka gyo* are generally articulated according to a chiasmic model, which are

¹⁰⁸ Spirit mediums also explain in these terms why a certain spirit enjoys one specific kind of meal, or colour, or dance.

¹⁰⁹ The term *ka gyo* belongs to a theoretical language about dance, and not all performers are aware of it. Some of them confuse /*ka gyo*/ and /*ka cho*/ (‘dance bending’), a term in everyday language indicating a specific hand or feet position.

linked to different parts of the body (e.g. *bet kyay-nya let*, left feet-right hand). The performance of these movements follow the metric structure outlined by the metric instruments, the *si* (bell) and the *wa* (clapper) (Section 4.2.3): simple dance movements are based on the *wa lat si* cycle, while the *nayi si* and *soun si* cycles are reserved for expert dancers, according to the progression of their skills.¹¹⁰ The ability to improvise according to this rule is regarded as the highest form of dance in Burma. It is related to the old royal dances, and follows the *thamazin* ('tradition', Section 7.1). In today's dance competitions, young *minthas* (main actor, 'prince') and *minthamees* (main actress, 'princess') are challenged to prove their skills on stage, improvising fast *ka gyos* in response to the musical indications given by an expert *hsaing saya* and his ensemble. Some of these young dancers become outstanding artists, joining nationally famous *zat pwe* troupes.

The second mode of dancing is called *poun san*, literally meaning 'form' or 'image'. A *poun san* represents what could be called a 'general form', or a 'free form'. Compared to *ka gyo*, the *poun san*'s formal language is less strict: the dancer receives indications of what movements should be performed, but there is no rule outlining the moving process in detail. S/he is more or less free to move, following the supporting music. For this reason, the performance of *poun san* seems to be more strictly connected to the display of emotion. In Burmese court theatre, *poun sans* characterises those theatrical performances where the dancer is supposed to express feelings: for example, *poun san* follow the performance of *ngo chins* (lamenting songs), transmitting a sense of grief through the vocal part, the dancer's movements and facial expressions, and the instrumental musical background. Because of this relative freedom, the *poun san* mode is not always referred to as a 'real dance' by Burmese performers. Only someone who has trained for many years on *ka gyo* can call him/herself a dancer.

Nat embodiment dances (*nat ka-*) are generally considered part of this second category. The dancing gestures are associated to specific sounds, but the performance process of the movements is not strictly codified. U Than Saw, a dance teacher at the Yangon Pantara school,¹¹¹ explains that both *nat* dances and court dances share the same basic movements.¹¹² These movements, different for the *mintha* and *minthamee*:

The basics are not different. They come from the same thing. [All the dances] come from one basic starting position system, [called] *gwin*. As for the *nat*, you raise your arms and dance very actively, when you dance as a *nat*. This is the only difference. Some of the royal dances are

¹¹⁰ Htike Yadana, personal communication, 2019.

¹¹¹ The Pantara schools provide degrees in Secondary Education (High School) in the performing arts.

¹¹² A court dancer apprenticeship starts with the *kebyar lut*: it consists of a standardised set of movements (*ka gyo*), different for male and female, which are considered the basic for any dance art form in Burma (Singer 1995:74ff.).

more delicate but they never abandon the basics. [They] display and dance [with] arabesque forms/movements [of the] hands.¹¹³

However, according to U Than Saw, a difference exists between the spirit dances performed in *nat kana pwen* even by professional spirit mediums, and the *nat* dances taught and performed in government schools: ‘spirit possession always existed’ – he states – ‘the spirit enters and dances. But this is not a proper kind of dance. [...] You have to dance according to the system [*sisahnit*, ‘discipline’], when you combine all [the movements] including head, torso, feet, hands, the dancing becomes beautiful.’

I am convinced that the relative freedom that *nat* dances enjoy is the key to understanding spirit embodiment. All dances based on the *poun san* mode are connected with a dancer’s experience and display of feelings. In Section 2.2.2 I explained how emotions link all the performers together. A state of inspiration (*Lamain kat-*) describes the experience of a dancer’s spirit embodiment to the musical performance, triggering the response of the participants. Dancers have to set themselves into the feeling of the *nat* who has been called in order to be possessed (*nat winpu-*), and dance (*nat ka-*). In one interview, the *kana si* Kyaw Win Naing explained that the feelings change according to the spirit: male *nats*, such as Ko Gyi Kyaw, transmits a sense of power as soon as the ensemble begins to play their sounds. Some female spirits manifest through multiple phases – initially through heart-breaking, sad emotions, to reveal their powerful *nat* nature only at the end. The dance of Nankarine Medaw, which I will analyse in Section 6.3.2, might include the performance of a *ngo chin* (lamenting song) supporting a *pya zat* (dramatic performance), where the spirit dancer acts (i.e. perform *poun sans*) as the crying Buffalo Mother, who is about to give away her life for the sake of her son. When the Mother loses her life, she finally becomes a *nat*. In reference to this passage, Kyaw Win Naing explains:

It changes. At the time when you become a *nat* there are no sad feelings [anymore], just strength and freedom, I become powerful [*thet than thwa*, lit. ‘I become eager’]. The powers get high. Also, the *hsaing* playing changes. The main thing is [that you feel] powerful [*han*, lit. ‘proud’], at that time you really feel powerful.¹¹⁴

From the Burmese point of view, it is only at this point that possession dance (*nat ka-*) takes place. The initial phase does not constitute a spirit dance: as Kyaw Win Naing explains, ‘I just dance with my human mind’. In the second phase, the dancer is invested by the emotions associated with the transformation into *nat*, and s/he fully becomes the Other. Both phases are performed with *poun san*: this relatively free dancing mode helps the dancer enter ‘into the mood’ of the mimetic performance, and eventually experience the *nat* embodiment.

¹¹³ U Than Saw, Yangon, 22 July 2019.

¹¹⁴ Kyaw Win Naing, Yangon, 20 July 2019.

From an ethnomusicological angle, a spirit's mimetic performance is the result of the combination of socially constructed *nat hsaing* sounds and *nat* dance gestures. However, one must not forget that, from the Burmese point of view, this sociality includes the unseen cosmos of the *nats* (see Section 3.1). The effectiveness of mimetic performances depends both on the social context and the mimetic performance itself.¹¹⁵ In this sense, *nat chin*'s mimetic sounds (*nat than*) and dance movements (*poun san*) do not only *construct* and *perform* a spirit person (Norton 2000b) – they also *are* the spirit person. To the Burmese the *nats* exist: they bodily manifest themselves through the *nat kana pwe* dances, supported by *nat hsaing* music (see Section 2.2). These sounds and movements do not only convey meanings: they perform them for a group of participants that consider them to be something more than just information. Imbued with feelings and emotions, the mimetic performance drags the participants into another world: sounds and movements fill the air of the ritual pavilion with the stories of the spirits, making the participants cry in grief, or exult in triumph with them.

I am interested in showing how the meanings of *nat kana pwe* mimetic music and dance performances are constructed – but also to understand the dynamic processes through which meanings are performed, perceived, and experienced. In order to provide a tangible model to better conceptualise the ritual efficacy of musical sounds and dance movements, I rely on the semiotic theories developed by Charles Sanders Peirce, and on their recent application to the analysis of rituals and music performances.

5.3. A semiotic approach to spirit possession

12 October 2013. After several weeks of waiting, the day of the group workshop with the musicians of the Kyi Lin Bo ensemble is finally here. My friend and translator Ko Htun and I are in the house of the *kana si* U Win Hlaing, chatting while the musicians finish to assemble their instruments. When the musicians are ready, U Win Hlaing lights up a candle for the Lamain *nat*, to propitiate the interview-performance, and then leaves. From within the *pat waing*, Kyi Lin Bo asks me what exactly they are expected to do. I explain that, in the past weeks, several questions I asked them remained unanswered: some musical concepts cannot be explained without playing the music, and to play the music the whole ensemble must be involved. Kyi Lin Bo nods in approval: he suggests to me that they perform the music for a *nat kana pwe*; at the end of each section, they will explain what they just played. The plan is made, the sounded-only *nat kana* begins. Kyi Lin Bo and his musicians explain the connection between the sounds and the spirits: this spirit is a king, so we play royal music; this spirit is

¹¹⁵ Discussing Venda possession music, Blacking (1985:66) argued that 'the effectiveness of musical symbols depends much on human agency and social context, as on the structure of the symbols themselves.'

a Mon princess, so we play Mon sound; this other spirit is the daughter of the previous Mon princess, so we have to play the Mon sound here too. As the list of spirits go by, I begin to realise that there is a network of meanings connecting sounds to spirit persons, ritual offerings and costumes, and dances. One day is too short a time to address all the implications of this complex system, and I do not know enough to fully grasp them. At the end of the day I am sure that it will take years for me to understand what I have encountered today.

Burmese performers are very aware of the fact that different elements of the ritual performance are meaningful and interconnected. In trying to disentangle this tangle of threads, I focus on how the incarnation of the spirits depends on the performance of sounds and dance movements in the *nat kana pwe*. I consider the *nat kana pwe* as a semiotic process, where the performance of specific elements (signs) conveys multiple and dynamic meanings, aiming at the manifestation and coming-into-presence of the spirit persons. In this sense, the single ritual elements can be compared to signs conveying meanings and can be analysed through a semiotic approach.

Semiotics is the study of signs and their production, transmission, interpretations and significations. This science is generally associated with the study of significations in language (usually considered the ultimate sign system) and with the dyadic system developed by Saussure – the well-known dichotomy signifier-signified (Chandler 2007:14-28). However, another dominant model in the field of semiotics is rooted in logic and philosophy. Charles S. Peirce intended semiotics as a general ‘doctrine of signs’, not limited to the study of linguistics, the sign being ‘something which stands to somebody for something in some respect’ (Peirce 1955:99).¹¹⁶ Contrary to Saussure dyadic system, Peirce’s model of signification is triadic, involving three different kinds of signs: a *sign*, or *representamen* (similar to Saussure’s *signifier*) in relation with an *object* (a referent, absent in Saussure) determining an *interpretant* (the effect, also considered as a sign, created in the mind of a perceiver, roughly analogous to Saussure’s *signified*). Each sign is further divisible into three interdependent trichotomies according to different ‘categories of experiences’, or ‘modes of being’ – Firstness (Quality), Secondness (Actuality), or Thirdness (Potentiality, Probability, or Necessity), respectively corresponding to first, second and third Trichotomy. (Peirce 1955:74-97; Merrell 2001).

Peirce’s most influential signs classification is represented by his second Trichotomy, where signs are termed either *icon*, *index*, or *symbol* according to their relationship with their objects (direct relationship between two elements, Secondness). An *icon* is a sign that ‘represent[s] its object mainly by its similarity’ (Peirce 1955:105), and so belongs to the category of Firstness; paintings, photos, diagrams are icons, as they resemble or imitate the object. An *index* is a sign which is in actual and

¹¹⁶ This definition has been criticised by Marrell (2001:37).

‘dynamical [...] connection both with the individual object [...] and with the senses or memory of the person for whom it serves as a sign’ (ivi:107): an index is ‘physically connected to its object’ (ivi:114), and so belongs to the category of Secondness; a weathervane veering with the wind (object) is an index, as it is directly connected to the object, in a non-arbitrary way. A *symbol* is a sign connected to its object only indirectly: it denotes its object ‘by virtue of a law’ (ivi:102) established arbitrarily by social convention, and so belongs to the category of Thirdness; all words, sentences, and other conventional signs are symbols, as they do not resemble the object in any way, and are connected to it just by convention.¹¹⁷

In Peirce’s triadic model, sign, object, and interpretant are interrelated and interdependent. His phenomenological and pragmatic approach considers semiosis as a pure act of communication which involves potentially unlimited processes (Eco 1993[1975]:101). Peircean triads can be applied to phenomena without a human emitter, provided that there is a human receiver (ivi:27). The relations of sign-object can be multiple (ivi:101), and continuously re-organised, transforming each interpretant into a sign related to an object, thus generating streams of signs (Marrell 2001:30). The Peircean system is based on a highly dynamic process of interpretation that is substantially absent in Saussure (Chandler 2007:32). Moreover, Peirce’s model features a third term, the *object*, which is not confined to physical things, and can include abstract concepts (Peirce 1955:99; Chandler 2007:33): this allows his theory to differentiate between the referent of the sign and its actual occurrence, or performance.

The focus on the performativity, as well as on the dynamical and dialogical aspects of semiosis, characterises Peircean theories as a social reflection. These elements intrigued poststructuralist theorists, including anthropologists and ethnomusicologists. Ritual studies have long been interrelated with semiotics (Kreinath 2006). In particular, ritual studies benefited from the concepts of performativity and indexicality present in Peircean semiotics, using them as important tools in the study of dynamics and efficacy of ritual actions and utterances. Partly inscribing his contribution in the paradigm of ‘performativity and indexicality of ritual symbols’ (Tambiah 1985; Rappaport R. 1979, 1980), Kreinath opposes the idea of ‘culture as a text’ (Geertz 1973) and the scholarship that specifies rituals using a linguistic concept of sign (Kreinath 2005, 2006). Instead, he approaches the study of ritual performances as forms of social actions, with a primary focus on the pragmatics of rituals as a sign process (Kreinath 2006). In place of the concept of *symbol*, associated with the idea of text and

¹¹⁷ Less popular are the remaining classifications of the first and third Trichotomy. The first Trichotomy describes ‘the sign in itself’ (Firstness), differentiating into *qualisign* (‘a quality that is a sign’, Firstness), *sinsign* (‘an actual existent thing or event which is a sign’, Secondness), and *legisign* (a general sign, Thirdness). The ‘sign in relation to its interpretant’ (Thirdness) is described in the third and last Trichotomy: signs are distinguished into *rHEME* (a sign of ‘qualitative Possibility’ for its interpretant, Firstness), *dICENT* (‘a Sign of actual existence’ interpreted as actually being affected by its object, Secondness), and *argUMENT* (‘sign of law [...] understood to represent its object in its characters’, Thirdness). (Peirce 1955:101-103)

linguistics, Kreinath favours the Peircean concept of *index* to address the pragmatic dimensions (i.e. the effects) of ritual actions. Following Peirce, he describes indexicality as a ‘direct reference of a sign to its respective object through its material imprint’: in indexicality, ‘the object determines the sign through a causal relation, like the visible traces of footprints in the snow indicating the immediate, but past, physical presence of a human being’ (ivi:468). The analytical use of indexicality, he writes,

gives a clear depiction of the uniqueness of every ritual performance and focuses on what participants are actually doing when they perform their ritual actions (and utterances). [...] With the concept of the index, it is possible to specify the details in the performing of ritual actions and to explore how rituals efficaciously work in establishing and transforming social relations.

(Kreinath 2006: 468)

Understanding the dynamics and efficacy of ritual actions in their context is extremely relevant to the study of *nat kana pwe* ritual sounds and movements. The semiotic relationship between the *nat* and the music/dance considered proper for him/her is indexical – i.e. the *nat* person (object) directly influences the performance of a specific *hsaing* sound or dance gesture (sign). Through the concept of indexicality it is possible to understand how sounds and movements regulate the ritual, at the same time creating their own frame of reference in one performance and referring to other performances; looking at *nat kana* sounds and movements as semiotic indices can contribute to accounting for the interactions among participants, and for the transformation of the relationships among them and the spirits.

In ethnomusicology, the potentiality of the icons and indices in the study of music has been recognised, among others, by Thomas Turino. The ethnomusicologist appropriates Peircean theories, employing semiotics as a tool to investigate the relationship between music, experience, and emotions (Turino 1999; 2014), and applies this paradigm to the study of social identity and nationalism (Turino 2000). According to Turino (1999:228), ‘musical sounds that function as signs operate at iconic and indexical levels’ rather than symbolically. Consequently, musical signs are more likely to produce emotional or energetic interpretants – i.e., respectively, a ‘direct, unreflected-upon feeling’ or a ‘physical reaction’ caused by a sign (ivi:224). Symbols, on the other hand, are less direct signs (‘signs about other things’) because they are mediated by language, and thus cannot create an emotional or energetic response as icon and indices:

the power of music to create emotional responses and to realize personal and social identities is based in the fact that musical signs are typically of the direct, less-mediated type. Music involves signs *of* feeling and experience rather than the types of mediational signs that are *about* something else. (Turino 1999:224)

Icons and indices ‘operate together in expressive cultural practices’ (Turino 1999:234-5). Turino focuses on indexicality as the means through which musical signs ‘produce emotional response and

social identification' (ivi:235). He defines the index as 'a sign that is related to its object through co-occurrence in actual experience' (ivi:227). He writes that musical indices 'are grounded on personal experience [and] in one's personal and social life' (ivi:235). Because of this, indexical signs 'are able to condense great quantities and varieties of meaning – even contradictory meanings – within a single sign' (ibid.). In his example, the "Star Spangled Banner" may serve several indexical purposes, 'depending on the experience of the perceiver' (ivi:227).

In discussing the validity of Peircean semiotics for ethnomusicology, Turino (2014) underlines how Peircean pragmatic and phenomenological approaches focus on the individuals, their social selves, and their experiences. This approach is relevant for understanding how *nat kana pwe* ritual participants experience the performance of musics and dances not just as meaningful, but as the direct signs (indexicality) of the presence of the *nat* (object). Icon and indices are the primary signs utilised in rituals (ivi:201): the *nat hsaing* musical and *nat kadaw*'s dance iconic/indexical signs operate at the levels of Firstness and Secondness, generating emotional/energetic interpretants – i.e. spirit possession. Turino's approach to spirit possession is reflected in the work of other authors. Friedson does not fail to underline how experience is linked to interpretation (Friedson 1996:5); Turino underlines that experience and interpretation are linked in the Peircean interpretation, and that all experience is initiated by the perception of signs' (Turino 2014:202). Becker (2004:28) describes trance as a moment when the 'inner language' stops; Turino associates 'inner language' to the symbolic level (Thirdness), silenced through iconic and indexical acts (Firstness and Secondness) (Turino 2014:210). In his words:

Persons who are spirit mediums are in a state of Firstness during possession because they typically indicate that they were not present while the spirit inhabited them—later asking what had been said and done during the ceremony. (Turino 2014:206)

When I examined the phenomenology of spirit embodiment among *nat kadaws*, devotees, and *hsaing* musicians (Section 2.2), I explained how the state of 'heightened concentration' that seems to characterise some expressions of spirit possession in Burma is only rarely described as a state of non-presence – what Turino calls Firstness. A state of 'aware possession' (Norton 2000a), or 'flow' (Turino 2008:4) is generally more common. However, Peircean semiotics seems to be a useful tool to analyse the meanings conveyed by musical (and dance) signs, their performance, and their effect on the bodies and minds of the ritual participants.

5.3.1 A semiotic theory for *nat kana pwe* performances

I have explained how sounds and dance movements represent meaningful elements: deeply interrelated, *nat hsaing* and *nat* dance create a mimetic performance that make a specific spirit person come-into-presence. I introduced Peircean semiotics as a potentially useful approach to the study of

ritual performances: now, I will apply these theories to my case study. Several examples will be provided in Chapter 6.

Following Peircean semiotics, I consider spirit *hsaing* sounds (*nat than*) and dance movements (*nat aka*) as *signs* related to a spirit person (the *object*). Most of the *nat* sounds and dances work as *dicent-indexical-sinsigns*. This indicates that the direct experience (*index*) of sounds/movements actually performed (*sinsign*) for a specific *nat* (the *object*) are considered to be in a causal relationship (*dicent*). Drawing on Turino, I represented Peirce's triad in the shape of a double semiotic triangle, including both dance and sound as signs (Figure 5.1):

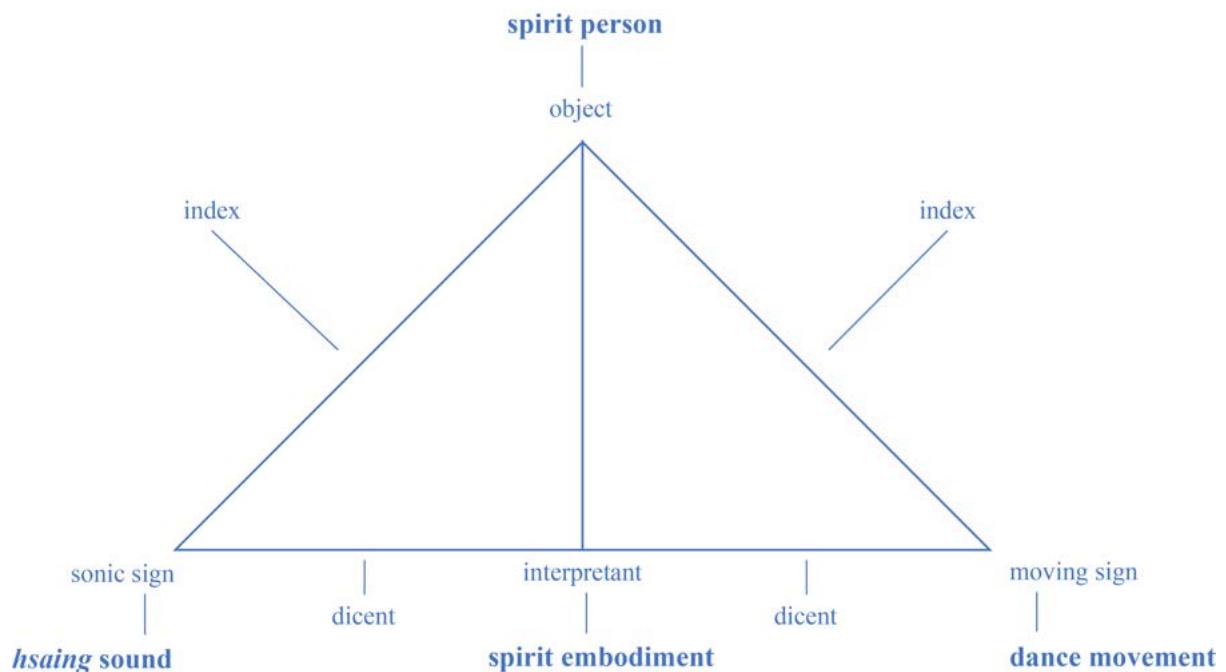


Figure 5.1 Semiotics of spirit embodiment.

The diagram represents an elaboration of the Peircean semiotic triad. The *object* is represented by the spirit person – an identified, specific *nat*. Dance movements and *hsaing* sounds figure as the sign(s). They must be considered *sinsign*: sounds and movements are specific instances of a sign experienced in actuality. It is only when the *hsaing* sounds and dance movements are performed (and experienced) in a *nat kana pwe* that the spirit person comes-into-presence.¹¹⁸ The relationship between the *object*

¹¹⁸ Peirce referred to this kind of sign as a *token*, in opposition to a *type*. *Types*, or *legisigns*, represent a general class of phenomena, while *tokens* or *sinsigns*, represent the actual realisation of one of these general types. In relation to words in a text, types represent different words used, while tokens would be a certain type of word (Chandler 2007:263). Outside the context of *nat kana pwe*, a sound employed to call a spirit may belong to a specific court repertoire (a general class of sound signs, a *type*), and as such can be found in many compositions. However, when performed in the *nat kana* context (*token*, or *sinsign*), it assumes a specific function connected to the manifestation of the spirit person.

(spirit person) and the *sign(s)* is *indexical*: it is because the spirits are ontologically real that their presence can be manifested through specific *hsaing* sound/dance movement signs. The connection is direct, and not arbitrary.¹¹⁹

The experience of the relationship between spirit sounds/movements (*sign*) and spirit person (*object*) is the *interpretant*. It represents the effect that the sign-object relationship has on the people who experience it. In Peircean terms, the interpretant can be *emotional* and/or *energetic*: in the first case, there is the experience of an unreflect feeling; in the latter, a physical reaction. I interpret this physical reaction as the spirit embodiment, or spirit possession: the experience of a spirit through the music and dance that characterise him/her can be engaging to the point that the spirit takes shape in the dancing bodies of the possessed ones. The *sign-interpretant* relationship is a *dicent*: the *sign* is *interpreted* as actually being affected by its object. A weathervane is without question believed to indicate the wind direction, because we know that the wind is moving it; in a *nat kana pwe*, a song is believed to make the possessed devotees move with specific dance movements, because the Burmese know that that sound and that movement are directly associated with that spirit.

I limited my explanation to the musical and dance indexical signs directly related to the *nat*. We can consider this level of (intra)referentiality as the primary one, as the focus of this work is on *nat kana pwe* performances. However, a secondary level of (inter)referentiality is also present: *nat hsaing* sounds and *nat* dance gestures are not exclusive of the *nat kana pwe* context. Sounds and gestures belonging to other Burmese performing arts are used in *nat kana pwe* to make a spirit come-into-presence – as I previously explained in Section 5.1. Spirit cults, different forms of Burmese theatrical performances (*zat pwe*, *yokhtay pwe*), instrumental performances (*bala hsaing*), TV/radio broadcasting, film music – all draw from sources that partially overlap with each other.

The connection between different contexts makes sense to the Burmese because they are generally aware of their meanings. To provide a short example, dancers and musicians explained this concept to me in these terms: ‘We use the royal music *sidaw* because this *nat* [Min Sithu] was a king’. At the time of the monarchy, the performance of *sidaw* music was situated with the royal couple. The average Burmese might not be aware of the meaning of this sound at a historical/scholarly level. The association of the *sidaw* music with royalty is socially constructed: in Turino’s terms, it becomes natural after continuous exposition to other cultural products – including theatrical performances, films, TV/radio broadcasting, and records. When the same sound is performed in the ritual context of the *nat*

¹¹⁹ In Turino’s conception, the sign-object relationship would be indexical because of co-occurrence: the constant exploitation and experience of a sound or movement for the performance of a specific spirit person entails an immediate identification between the two.

kana, it immediately conveys the meanings layered in Burmese culture. At this point, the equation is easy: in the *nat kana pwe*, when the royal music *sidaw* is performed, the *nat* who has been called must be one of royal blood.

From a semiotic standpoint, when this happens the sign(s) simultaneously refer to two objects: one, belonging to the *nat kana pwe* context, is the *nat*; the other belongs to a performing arts context external to that of the spirit cult. In performance, these two contexts are not separate: both objects are performed and experienced at the same time. It is simultaneity that makes the connection possible: through simultaneity, the two semiotic objects overlap, and are perceived as one. They reinforce each other, to the point that the primary object (the *nat*) comes into-presence. At every performance, with the physical manifestation of the spirit, the sign-object(s) relationship is re-established and re-affirmed.

Especially in the case of the most famous spirit, the performance of a spirit person usually presents not just one, but several secondary objects: as the sound of the *hsaing* progresses, supporting the dance, new and different references are unveiled. There can be a secondary layer, and then tertiary, and so on. All these semiotic elements of the performance are concatenated: together, they create a network that makes the layered person of a spirit real.

This is the case, for example, of the *nat* Ko Gyi Kyaw, whose coming-into-presence brings together several layers of meaning. Figure 5.2 represents the sonic signs (sounds) connected to the drunkard *nat*.

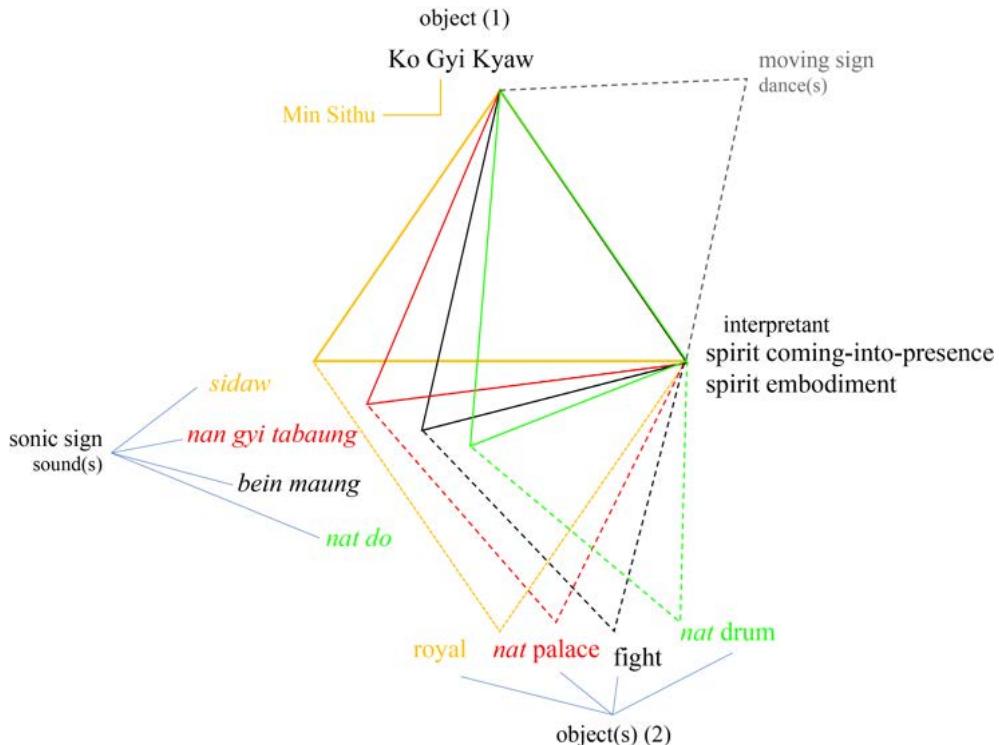


Figure 5.2 Main semiotic layers of the sounds for the nat Ko Gyi Kyaw.

The figure refers to sounds (sonic signs) that I will describe further Section 6.2. For now, it suffices to understand that the upper part of the triangle should be read as a development of the semiotic relationship represented in the previous semiotic scheme (Figure 5.1). Compared to this, the second scheme (Figure 5.2) describes more than just one sonic sign, each marked with a different colour. All sounds but one¹²⁰ are distinctive of the *nat* Ko Gyi Kyaw (the primary object). The lower part of the scheme traces the correspondences to several secondary semiotic object(s). When performed in the context of a *nat kana pwe*, the original meanings assigned to these secondary objects can be in part reshaped, in order to accommodate the necessities of the spirit person they are connected with. It is the case with the sound *bein maung*, which might stand for physical prowess, or indicate the episode of a fight.

The overlapping of these different level of semiosis contribute to create a mimetic performance that brings the spirit into-presence (interpretant). In the performance, the semiosis process is made more effective by the presence of other signs triggering other senses than just hearing. Each of these sounds must be imagined as being linked to a distinctive dancing gesture – moving signs – which for the sake of clarity are not included in this scheme. The semiotic analysis would be even more complete if, in the present scheme, dresses, colours, smells, and types of offerings would be included. The semiotic layering of a *nat* person must be considered as a complete experience of perception.

5.4. Conclusions

What can the theories I discussed in this chapter tell us, that we cannot understand from an ethnographic account? How do the concepts of mimetic performance and indexicality help us in shedding light on the data? Since I started to read *nat kana* performances through the lens of Peircean semiotics, the contradiction implied in these questions have preoccupied me. Through ethnographic data we can understand *what* is happening. However, the question that this chapter tries to answer is not *what* is the meaning of a certain sign, but rather *how* the different actors of the ritual (dancers, musicians, devotees, and spirit persons) contribute together, to the creation of multiple meanings, *how* these meanings are experienced, and *how* they are ritually effective. In analysing *nat kana pwe* through the lens of Peircean semiotics, I do not aim at creating a rigid taxonomical classification of the performance signs present in these ceremonies. My aim lies in explaining the dynamics of the mimetic performance, and in showing how performed sounds and dance movements create a multi-layered network of ritual meanings.

¹²⁰ As I will explain in Section 6.2.1, the royal music *sidaw* supports the dance of Min Sithu, a *nat* related to Ko Gyi Kyaw, and whose dance is never dissociated from that of the drunkard *nat*.

The concept of mimetic performance takes us away from the idea of a simple representation, or imitation of a spirit person – the ‘figurative’ elements in Rouget’s (1985) paradigm – bringing in a deeper experiential phenomenological implication. During the performance, the possessed dancer becomes something (someone) else: s/he moves (is moved) as the embodied spirit person, re-sounding to specific ritual musics and sounds. A dancer’s experience of becoming the Other is confirmed by the behaviour of the other people around them, who address and behave towards the possessed dancer in a manner that they would otherwise never do. In a mimetic performance, the ‘affiliation with the supernatural entity’ – to use Sum’s (2013) words – is made manifest through sounds and movements.

The combination of a certain sound with a certain movement is successful in bringing a spirit person into-presence because there exists a direct connection between the spirit and these mimetic signs. Reading Burmese spirit possession ceremonies through the lenses of Peircean semiotics allows us to provide an explanation for ritual efficacy (Kreinath 2006). The semiotic concept of indexicality provides the necessary framework to understand that such signs represent more than just conventionally assigned sounds and movements – as a symbolic relationship would entail. The emotions with which *nat than* sounds and *poun san* dances are imbued make the performers ‘feel powerful’, shaping their emotional experience. To say that all the layers of meanings necessary to bring a spirit in the world are symbolic would be reductive, and would not account for their ritual effectiveness. In the context of a *nat kana* ceremony, sounds and movements (along with other ritual signs) become powerful indices, charged with multiple layers of ritually effective meanings: their performance can create an emotional and energetic response in those who experience it (Turino 1999, 2014), and manifest it through spirit possession.

In the next chapter I provide several examples of mimetic performances and indexicality, encompassing different musical genres and dance styles, each meaningfully associated with different spirit persons.

6. Sounding and dancing the spirits

When I dance as Ma Ma Oo, I feel like I am a beautiful lady.

Htoo Zaw, personal communication, 2018

This chapter provides examples taken from my fieldwork experience in Burma. My analysis aims at showing how different sound (music) and movement (dance) signs construct a complex network of meanings that make the spirit person come-into-presence. The elaboration on the ethnographic data presented here aims to demonstrate a concrete application of the theoretical framework presented in the previous chapter.

I focus on three main spirit figures present in *nat kana pwe* ceremonies – Ko Gyi Kyaw, the drunkard prince; Nankarine Medaw, the Mother Buffalo of the city of Pegu; and Naga Medaw, a *thaik* Serpent/Dragon Mother. Each of these spirit figures belongs to a different category of spiritual beings: Ko Gyi Kyaw is rightfully part of the official pantheon of the Thirty-seven Nat Lords (*Thounze-hkunna Min Atwin*), where he figures under the name of Min Kyawswa; Nankarine Medaw belongs to the secondary list of the Thirty-seven (*Thounze-hkunna Min Apyin*), and her cult has been growing over the past few decades; unlike these two *nat* spirits, Naga Medaw is a *thaik*, a spirit linked to the protection of religious compounds, and as such is closer to the Buddhist cosmogony.

There are two main reasons for the inclusions of these figures. Firstly, all these spirits enjoy a great deal of popularity among *nat* devotees: in this sense, their performance tends to be more articulated and complex if compared with other spirit persons. Secondly, their different position in the Burmese cosmogony shows how the performance and semiotic theories presented in Chapter 5 can be transversally applied to different categories of spiritual beings: in this sense, I hope to show how those theories are functional to the analysis of a diversity of spirit figures, and that can potential be applied outside the boundaries of Burmese spirit cults.

In the following examples, I present the main semiotic elements that delineate each spirit person. *Hsaing* sounds are represented through different types of musical transcriptions: these include cipher notation, modified staff notation for the representation of metric and rhythmic cycles, and melodic patterns (see Section 4.2). In some cases, the use of a spectrogram, obtained through several types of music software (Sonic Visualiser, Tony), was necessary for the analysis and representation of tempo, dynamics and melodic profiles. I represent dance movements by adopting the method used in

Burmese dance manuals that I have collected from several dance teachers.¹²¹ They show dance movements through a combination of pictures and drawings, supported by arrows indicating the direction of the limbs' movements. In such manuals, the images are usually accompanied by a description of the gesture, and sometimes by a short musical transcription in Western staff notation. Despite its simplicity, this method has the advantage of making the unfamiliar reader immediately understand how the process of the movements is constructed. When possible, I present song lyrics.

For each of these semiotic elements, I outline their inter- and extra-referentiality, explaining how different contexts of Burmese performing arts overlap during the *nat kana* ritual performance. Looking at one specific aspect of each spirit person's mimetic performance, I provide a semiotic analysis of the effects that the experience of this network of meanings has on the human dancers.

6.1. A semiotic analysis of *nat kana pwe*: sounds and gestures

Due to the limits of this dissertation, the following examples represent a selection of those sounds and movements that I find relevant. I select these examples based on my personal experience as a witness/participant of *nat kana pwe* ceremonies, and on my discussions with Burmese performers (*nat* dancers and *hsaing* musicians) in Yangon and Mandalay.

As I explained in Section 4.1, all sounds produced by the *hsaing* ensemble (melodies, rhythms, and sound qualities) are considered *athan* ('sound'). Except for one case (the Mon dance for Nankarine Medaw), all *nat* dance movements listed here can be considered *poun san* ('free forms'). The examples I provide are summed up in the following chart (Table 6.1):

¹²¹ These materials are usually self-published by dance teachers and circulated among students in the form of photocopies. The pages hardly circulate freely: professional performers jealously try to keep competing masters unaware of their personal dancing techniques and teaching programmes, in order to maintain their own unique style.

	Mimetic performance:	
Spirit person	<i>Athan</i> (sound)	<i>poun san</i> (movement)
Ko Gyi Kyaw (Drunkard prince)	<i>Sidaw</i>	Horse-head
	<i>Nan Gyi Tabaung</i>	Drunkard dance
	<i>Bein maung</i>	<i>Kyet laung</i>
	<i>Shweguni Do</i>	<i>Do</i> drum dance
Nankarine Medaw (Mother Buffalo of Pegu)	<i>Mon athan</i>	<i>Mon</i> dance
	<i>Pyat zat</i>	<i>Zat</i> performance
	<i>Nat do</i>	<i>Nat do</i> dance
Naga Medaw (Naga Mother)	<i>Yay hkin</i>	<i>Naga pat</i>
	<i>Way lar</i>	
	<i>Myin hkin</i>	
	<i>Bein maung</i>	
	<i>Sidaw</i>	

Table 6.1 Selection of sounds and movements.

Each analysis is accompanied by an ethnographic description and relies on the ethnographic videos.

6.2. Sounds and dances for the prince of the *nat kana pwe*: Ko Gyi Kyaw

I am walking the dusty, crowded, and intricate streets of the village of Taunbgyone with Kyauk Sein, my former master in Yangon, and U Kyaw Nyunt. U Kyaw Nyunt is the *hsaing saya* and leader of the Taungbyone Great Palace's *hsaing*. His family has been playing for the two *nat* brothers of Taungbyone for generations, and even in the confusion of the festival, he knows his ways around in the village. As we approach the main street, the sounds of several *hsaing* ensembles become more present and begin to take shape. Kyauk Sein turns towards me and asks with a sardonic smile if I can recognise the *nat* from the sound. I am in trouble: the *hsaing* sounds are loud, but they come from too far away. Moreover, sounds coming from different ensembles create what for me, is an impenetrable mixture of unrecognisable and overlapped layers of sounds. In all this confusion, listening and recognising the *nat* is impossible for me. I confess this difficulty to Kyauk Sein and U Kyaw Nyunt, and the two *sayas* burst out laughing. ‘It’s Ko Gyi Kyaw’ – says U Kyaw Nyunt – ‘This is the Shweguni *do* drum sound’. The old *hsaing saya* starts to move his hands on an invisible double headed *do* drum, demonstrating the movements of the rhythmic cycle that supports the dance of the *nat* Ko Gyi Kyaw, vocalising the sounds of the different drums when he “hits” them. Kyauk Sein turns to me with his right thumb up, a sign of victory representing Ko Gyi Kyaw, and with a smile he says, ‘Can you hear it?’.

Ko Gyi Kyaw¹²² represents probably the most prominent figure in *nat kana pwe* celebrations. A powerful and potentially harmful spirit, the legends describe him as a prince, a drunkard and a womaniser, fond of gambling and music (Figure 6.1 and Figure 6.2).



Figure 6.1 Min Kyawswa/Ko Gyi Kyaw nat as represented in Temple (1991).

¹²² As for many other spirits, Ko Gyi Kyaw has a multi-layered identity, deriving from the overlapping, during the centuries, of many different figures. Among other names, the spirit is known also as, Min Kyawswa, U Min Kyaw, Pakhan Kyaw, Paypay Kyaw.



Figure 6.2 A nat kadaw dancing the drunkard nat prince in Mandalay, May 2018.

Ko Gyi Kyaw is generally regarded the Prince of *nat* ceremonies. During a celebration, he visits the ritual space several times each day; however, his presence can be heard in the performance of other *nats* connected to his person. The following chart (Table 6.2) summarises the *nat*'s main and secondary appearances:

Nat	Connection to Ko Gyi Kyaw
Apyo Daw/Lamain <i>nat</i> (The Royal Maiden)	Sovereignty/protection over the performance/ <i>hsaing</i> ensemble
<i>Nat Gyi Kauk</i> (the Twelve Great Nats)	Ko Gyi Kyaw, as one of the 12 Great Nats
Min Sithu	Ko Gyi Kyaw's brother
Ko Gyi Kyaw	Ko Gyi Kyaw: main appearance
(<i>chawt pwe</i>)	(dance of the participants for the Twelve Great Nats, including Ko Gyi Kyaw)
Shwe Gaing Medaw	Spirit person: Ko Gyi Kyaw's mother
U Ba Nyo	Spirit person: Ko Gyi Kyaw's pupil
Ko Gyi Kyaw: <i>pyan po</i>	Sending back Ko Gyi Kyaw to Pakhan

Table 6.2 Appearances of the nat Ko Gyi Kyaw, and related spirit persons, in a regular nat kana celebration.

In his primary appearance, Ko Gyi Kyaw *nat* dominates the pavilion from 40 minutes to an hour. In this time, very quiet moments (during which the possessed *nat kadaw* makes predictions to the devotees) alternate with very excited moments, when the ensemble plays loud and fast music to support the dance of the medium. The relation Ko Gyi Kyaw maintains with any *nat* celebration becomes particularly evident: the musicians and the *nat kadaw* are requested to perform a consistent number of

songs to entertain him and the other participants. This effort is accompanied with a larger distribution of offerings – fried prawns and chicken, beers and whiskey, and money – which the possessed *nat kadaw* shares with the musicians.

This main appearance is one of the longest awaited and most intense moments of the whole ceremony. It is articulated into several distinct phases, each characterised by specific mimetic sounds and dance gestures (Table 6.3).

	Sound (athan)	Reference (external indexicality)	Meaning in <i>nat kana pwe</i> (internal indexicality)	Dance (poun san)
1.	<i>Sidaw</i>	Royal music	High status/Min Sithu's <i>nat</i> person	Horse head
2.	<i>Nan Gyi Tabaung</i>	KGK village <i>nat pwe</i>	Ko Gyi Kyaw's <i>nat</i> person	Drunkard dance
3.	<i>Bein Maung</i>	Sport competition	Prowess	<i>Kyet laung</i>
4.	<i>Do</i>	KGK village <i>nat pwe</i>	Ko Gyi Kyaw's <i>nat</i> person	<i>Dopat aka</i>

Table 6.3 Main phases of the mimetic performance of the nat Ko Gyi Kyaw.

I have tried to respect the sequence of sounds and gestures of a typical Ko Gyi Kyaw mimetic performance. The royal *sidaw* always opens the coming-into-presence of this spirit; the *do* (see Section 7.2.2) generally concludes it: this sound/gesture is particularly distinctive, and it is also used for those *nat* related to Ko Gyi Kyaw. *Bein maung/kyet laung* can happen anytime during the main performance, depending on the will of the dancer.¹²³ *Nan Gyi Tabaung*, also a quite distinctive sound, can be quite mobile, and features in many different songs played during the performance. Between all these phases, the possessed medium usually performs fortune-telling and harangues the crowd of participants, interrupting the music and dance performance repeatedly.

6.2.1 The royal sidaw

The name *sidaw* is related to a pair of huge double-headed drums that once resonated in the audience hall of the Royal Palace (Min Le Yi 2014:71ff.). The mention of these drums in an early inscription (1190 AD) suggests that they were already in use at the time of the Burmese kingdom of Bagan (Keeler 1998:375-76). According to Noel Singer (1995:17-18), in the late 19th century the drums were known as the Appearance and the Withdrawal Drums: they performed a specific music repertoire to announce the approach of the royal couple, and accompanied the king and queen's mounting and dismounting to and from the throne. In Singer's description, the *sidaw* seems to identify these drums and repertoire only. However, Robert Garfias (1985a) writes that the two drums were supported by a

¹²³ This sound has been described in Section 3.3.2 as an example of interaction between *hsaing* musicians and *nat* dancer.

hne gyi (large shawm), a gong-chime, and cymbals. In the past, the *sidaw* ensemble would have sufficed for most of the functions later accomplished by the *hsaing waing*:

During the last days of the monarchy, this ensemble [*sidaw*] was used to mark the procession of the king in and out of the main gates of the capital with special compositions to mark the nature of his arrival or departure. Thus, there were certain compositions [...] to indicate going to battle, [...] to signify a glorious return from war. There were also special compositions [...] to be played when the king returns from a visit to a pagoda or [...], when he went to the rice fields to symbolically participate in the ploughing. Another of the important functions of this ensemble was to mark the hours [...]. (Garfias 1985a:4)

Today, Burmese musicians identify *sidaw* both as the drums and the repertoire performed by the ensemble indicated by Garfias. The sound of the royal drums is replicated by the *sito* set; some *hne* masters still employ the large *hne gyi*, characterised by a deeper and darker sound (Okell 1971b) (Figure 6.3).



Figure 6.3 Nat hsaing musicians performing sidaw music. The shawm player is using the *hne gyi* (large shawm). Yangon, December 2017.

The sound of *sidaw* is strictly associated with royalty, as the name suggests (*si*, ‘drum’ and *daw*, ‘royal’). When performed in *nat kana pwes*, it supports the coming-into-presence of princely and kingly spirits (such as Min Mahagiri, the Lord of the Great Mountain, and Popa Medaw, the Mother of Popa) and other high-status figures. *Sidaw* opens the coming-into-presence of Ko Gyi Kyaw ([Video 6.1](#), after [01:27]). However, it does not refer directly to the drunkard *nat*: instead, it indicates Ko Gyi Kyaw’s Brother, Mani Sithu, or Min Sithu, himself one of the Thirty-seven Lords. The dance

manifestation of Min Sithu is usually very short: the dancer bows in front of the image of Ko Gyi Kyaw, then slowly starts moving backwards making circular movements with their arms. The hands are held in the position shown in Figure 6.4. This *poun san* has no specific name. According to some spirit dancers, it iconically represents a horse head: as the steed is generally associated with knights and/or kings' mounts, I can hypothesise that the gesture indicates the royal status of Min Sithu *nat*.

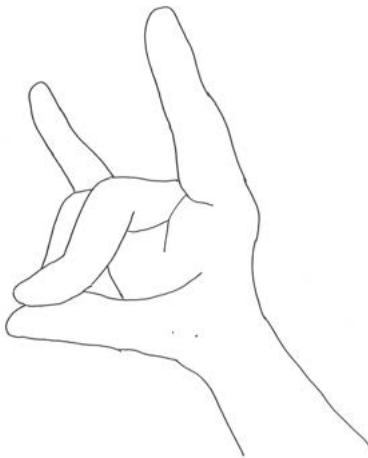


Figure 6.4 Iconic horse-head hand gesture for the dance of the royal nat Min Sithu.

The combined performance of the *sidaw* sound and the horse-head gesture create a performance indicating the royal character of the spirit(s) that they are incarnating. Min Sithu and Ko Gyi Kyaw are always performed in succession. Together, the two *nat* figures reciprocally reinforce each other, forming an inseparable entity. Min Sithu is a hierarchically superior but idle figure: with his presence, he contributes to underline the royal status of Ko Gyi Kyaw.¹²⁴

6.2.2 Nan Gyi Tabaung sound and the drunkard dance

February 2018. I left Mandalay a few hours ago, heading southward to the national festival for Ko Gyi Kyaw, Lord of Pakhan.¹²⁵ The *nat* guards Shweguni, an island at the confluence of Ayeyarwady and Chindwin rivers, just in front of the town of Pakhan (Brac de la Perrière 1989:37-39). The prince is believed to have drowned in these waters, and subsequently have become a *nat*. Riding my bike on dusty highways and smaller roads, I pass several urban centres until I finally see the Pakokku bridge. The bridge takes me to the West side of the Ayeyarwady, in the city of Pakokku. A quick check of my

¹²⁴ A similar process seems to be present in the manifestation of the two Taungbyone Lords: the manifestation dance of Min Gyi (the older Lord) is rather short and static; on the other hand, the coming-into-presence and dance of Min Lay (the minor Brother) is quite active and lasts longer.

¹²⁵ The festival happens annually in Shweguni, around February-March.

map, and then I head north, following the main road. After only 30 minutes, a sign announces that I have entered the town of Pakhan. I need a break from driving, and I need some information. I stop by a tea shop on the way, order something to drink, and engage in conversation with the owner. I am not far away from my destination! The owner points me in the right direction, and after finishing my tea I am on my way again. Soon enough I can see the dock, swarming with people. To get to the island of Shweguni, the pilgrims must take a boat and cross the Chindwin river. The ticket costs only a few hundred *kyats*, and the controller allows me to bring my motorbike with me. The rest of the pilgrims are bringing chickens, *nat* statues, gifts, and a lot of whiskey bottles, to offer them to the drunkard *nat*. The boat docks at the island, and after a short drive I reach the Nan Gyi, the Great Palace of the *nat*, where the spirit is believed to reside, and where the *pwe* is about to take place. Spirit mediums from all over the country come to pay homage to the Pakhan prince dancing to the sound of the *do waing*, a smaller ensemble than *hsaing waing* (Figure 6.5).



Figure 6.5 The drums of the *do waing* ensemble at Ko Gyi Kyaw's palace: on the right, the sacred drum *do*.
Shweguni, February 2018.

This ensemble is in use specifically for Ko Gyi Kyaw. It consists of a double-headed drum (*do*), a set of four tuned drums (*lay loun pat*), cymbals (*linkwin*), bell and clapper (*si* and *wa*). The melody was performed by a singer and a shawm player (*hne*). During the dance, the spirit mediums alternate, the musicians constantly perform the same succession of sounds to call the spirit. I recognise one of these sounds as the *Nan Gyi Tabaung* (see Section 4.2.4). Urban *hsaing* musicians explained to me that

it indicates the sound of the Prince's Great Palace (*Nan Gyi*). Its performance is strictly related to the celebration of the Shweguni festival, where no other sounds or ceremonies but that of the Great Palace are allowed – thus ensuring the monopoly of the main palace (Brac de la Perrière 2005:76). [Video 6.2](#) shows the Shweguni ensemble performing this rhythmic cycle, embedded into a *nat chin*.

The same sound must be performed to call and please Ko Gyi Kyaw at every private celebration in the urban centres. Because of the prevalence of percussion instruments, the sound of the *do waing* ensemble is more associated with rhythms than melodies. *Nat kana pwe* urban musicians adapt the music of the *do waing*, where the drum circle *pat waing* is not in use, to the *hsaing waing*. According to the musicians, this leads the *pat waing* to play with more restrictions but ensures the re-creation of the “real” sound of Ko Gyi Kyaw. In *nat kana pwes*, the sound of *Nan Gyi Tabaung* announces the coming-into-presence of Ko Gyi Kyaw because the rhythm indicates and recreates the prince's Shweguni festival atmosphere.

The following example shows possible realisations of *Nan Gyi Tabaung* sound performed by the *nat hsaing* ensemble. Transcription 6.1 is based on [Video 6.3](#): Kyi Lin Bo, the drum circle player, performs several variations on the basic model of the rhythmic cycle.

The transcription illustrates the rhythmic cycle for the *Nan Gyi Tabaung*. It features five staves:

- si (bell)**: Represented by two diamond symbols above the staff.
- wa (clapper)**: Represented by two cross symbols above the staff.
- pat waing (drum circle)**: Represented by a bass clef staff with black notes. Red dashed lines indicate interlocking patterns between this staff and the *pat ma* staff.
- pat ma (susp. drum)**: Represented by a staff with RH and LH hands. Red dashed lines indicate interlocking patterns between this staff and the *pat waing* staff.
- linkwin (cymbals)**: Represented by a staff with black notes.
- sito (barrel drums)**: Represented by a staff with three dynamic levels: HD, MD, and LD.

Two variations are shown for the *pat waing* and *pat ma* staves:

- Var. I**: The *pat waing* staff shows a pattern where the second note is higher than the first. The *pat ma* staff shows a pattern where the second note is lower than the first.
- Var. II**: The *pat waing* staff shows a pattern where the second note is lower than the first. The *pat ma* staff shows a pattern where the second note is higher than the first.

Transcription 6.1 Model and realisations of the Nan Gyi Tabaung rhythmic cycle.

All the drums play in a 4-beat meter defined by *si* (bell, on beats 1 and 3) and *wa* (clapper, on beats 2 and 4) alternating. The cycle is characterised by a strict interlocking between drum circle and suspended drum (red trait): the *pat waing* interjects on the off beats, the *pat ma* on the beat. In its basic realisation, the drum circle player strikes the scale degrees C and G twice, ideally dividing the cycle into two halves; in the first variation (Var. I), these two sounds are reinforced by G at the upper octave; in Var. II, the grace notes in the first half. The *pat ma* (suspended drum) marks the beats, alternating the left and right hand; the main final beat is underlined by a double stroke on both the drum's heads. The cycle is made more dynamic by the *linkwin*: these large cymbals play on the off-beats and underline the secondary

beats of the *si* with longer sounds; in some realisations the *linkwin* only mark the off-beats. The *sito* (barrel drums) reinforces the last three beats of the cycle. In transporting the rhythmic cycle from the *do waing* ensemble to the *nat hsaing*, the role of the *do drum* (the ensemble leader) is taken by suspended drum *pat ma*. The drum circle *pat waing* reproduces the action of the tuned drum-chime *lay lon pat*.

In *nat kana pwes*, the performance of *Nan Gyi Tabaung* supports the dance commonly known as the Ko Gyi Kyaw dance, or the drunkard dance. As soon as the rhythmic cycle begins, the dancer starts to move, swaying and stumbling as if s/he was drunk. Alcohol is one of the attributes of Ko Gyi Kyaw: devotees offer the possessed dancer whiskey and beers. The dancer's hands make the “thumb up” gesture: it iconically stands for a bottle of alcohol, but today it is sometimes associated with the Western “ok” (see Section 7.3).



Figure 6.6 The drunkard dance of the nat Ko Gyi Kyaw. Yangon, December 2017.

The performance of this mimetic sound and dance is a sign that the Drunkard *nat* has finally joined the celebration. It represents a particularly long-awaited moment if a group of devotees, and not the *nat kadaw*, is dancing (*chawt pwe*), surrounded by friends and family. In these cases, the coming-into-presence of Ko Gyi Kyaw becomes particularly evident. His spirit person's manifestation is both triggered and controlled by the *nat hsaing* ensemble.

In order to complete the musical analysis of the *nat chin* that I started in Section 4.2, I will now consider the rhythmic and sound quality aspects of the performance of the song *Do Ko Gyi Kyaw*. The

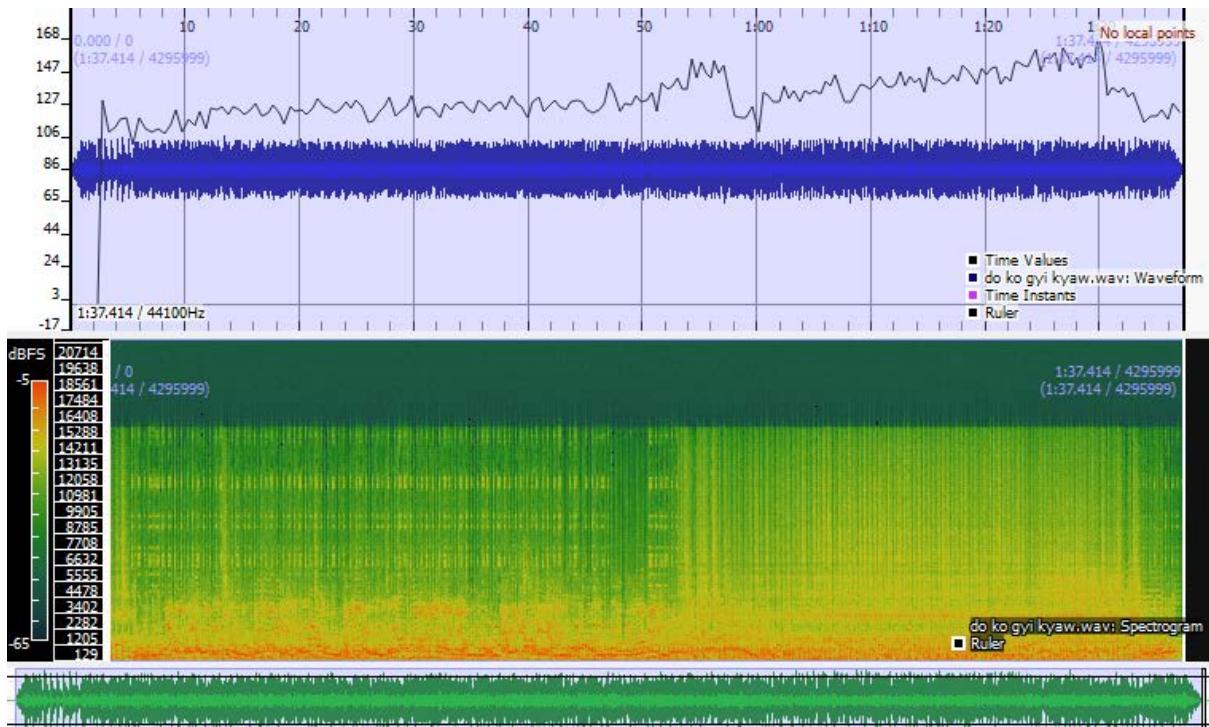
sound *Nan Gyi Tabaung* plays a determinant role in this song: in fact, it is after the transition to this rhythmic cycle that mimetic performance makes the spirit person of the drunkard spirit become manifest.

6.2.3 Analysis of a mimetic performance: rhythms and sound qualities

In Section 4.2 I considered melodic and structural aspects of the modern *nat chin Do Ko Gyi Kyaw* ([Video 4.3](#)). I showed the correlations between vocal and instrumental parts, highlighting the basic melody and its elaborations in different melodic parts; I explained how the formal structure of the song is shaped in two phases, first vocal and then instrumental, by the alternation of singers and instrumentalists. It is only in the second phase, when the drums perform the rhythmic cycle *Nan Gyi Tabaung*, that the spirit embodiment takes place. The *hsaing* performs the transition from the first to the second phase, operating a shift in the metric structure and the rhythmic cycle. Together with the already discussed melodic aspects, the new metric, rhythmic, and sound features of the second phase are responsible for the coming-into-presence of the drunkard *nat*.

Transcription 6.2 shows a computer analysis generated using the software Sonic Visualizer. In the figure, the duration graph and spectrogram show the differences in the sound qualities (tempo and dynamics) between the two phases.

The duration graph (in the upper pane) shows the ensemble switching from an initially slower and steadier pace, to an increasingly faster tempo after an adjustment in the transition phase [00:51-00:59]. The spectrogram (lower pane) shows a significant change in the dynamics: the snowstorm part is due to the harmonics produced by the renewed effort of the drum chimes and the introduction of the large cymbals *linkwin* – previously completely silent. It is evident that the *hsaing* releases much more energy in the second phase, playing increasingly faster and louder.



Transcription 6.2 Sonic Visualiser: duration graph and spectrogram. The upper pane indicates changes in duration (the vertical axis represents metronome values); in the lower pane, the spectrogram shows changes in the musicians' dynamics.

After the transition to the second phase the *hsaing* starts to perform the sound *Nan Gyi Tabaung*. The characteristic of this rhythmic pattern is the interaction between the drum circle *pat waing* and the suspended drum *pat ma*: the drums work together, playing a solid and increasingly faster interlocking and syncopated cycle, supported by the clashing sound of the cymbals *linkwin* on the up-beats, and the deep sound of the *sito* barrel drums on the main beats. In this case, the ensemble performs Var. I in Transcription 6.1. Together, the two interlocking drum parts imprint dynamism on the performance.

The action of the two drums intervene, filling in a space now left “empty” by a rarefaction, or expansion, of the metric cycle (see Figure 4.5). As I describe in Section 4.2.3, during the transition, the small bell *si* become silent, to leave room for the wood clapper *wa*. The wood clapper initially marks the beats 2 and 4, in the following form: *si* [o] and *wa* [+]: 1 2 3 4. After the transition, the cycle expands. The metric instruments leave some beats empty, doubling the form: (*si* [o] (optional) and *wa* [+]): 1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4). At the same time, after having operated the transition, the *pat waing* begins, with the rest of the rhythmic section, to play the *Nan Gyi Tabaung* rhythmic cycle. Compared to the density characterising the first form of the metric cycle, the expanded form appears to be metrically doubled.¹²⁶

¹²⁶ However, no expansion of the melodic structure has taken place: the melodic instruments do not perform according to the typical filling-in technique that characterises other Mainland and Insular Southeast Asian ensembles (see Section 4.2.2).

The rhythmic section performs a filling-in on this newly expanded cycle: the combined action of the drum circle and suspended drum, playing respectively on the off-beats and beats of the expanded metric cycle, has a direct effect on the possessed dancers.

The response of the dancing guests changes dramatically between the two phases. In the first phase with the vocal part, two dancers (out of four) are just moving freely around in the dance area: one of them carries a bottle of whiskey, an offering to the Drunkard *nat*. Their synchronization with the sound of the ensemble is just partial. The dancers exploit this phase to partly regain some energy and breath, in preparation for the second phase, when all the energy of the *nat hsaing* drums bursts out. This phase can then be considered preparatory for a consequent mimetic phase of the possession dance which I have discussed in Section 5.2.1. In the second phase, the possession dances definitely become more active: looking at the [Video 4.3](#), at [00:49], one of the dancers can be seen raising his folded hands to his forehead, and starting to energetically shake: it is the sign that the Drunkard *nat* is in the process of “entering” (*nat win pu-*) the body of the dancer, who with difficulty, copes with the presence of the powerful spirit. The dancer keeps shaking his hands, swinging around the dancing area, performing the drunkard dance: only the support of the people around him prevents him from falling to the ground. At [01:17] – after 28 intense seconds! – the spirit has finally and completely entered the human host. His dancing movements and gestures become more regular and in synchrony with the sound of the ensemble. Comparatively, the movements and gestures of the second dancer are much more controlled: he holds a bottle a whiskey in his left hand, and he raises it up for everyone to see it in conjunction with the repetition of the name of the *nat* at [00:48]; he performs a swinging movement with it – bottom to top at [00:51], right at the end of the vocal part, and then another time at [00:56], in synchrony with one of the singer’s encouraging shouts; after that, he returns the bottle to the people sitting around, and starts to dance following the sound of the *hsaing*, performing large circular movements with his arms – a very common gesture associated with the drunkard dance.

The dancers’ movements are governed by the *hsaing* sounds (Figure 6.7). The beats of the bell *si* (not present in this performance) and wood clapper *wa* correspond respectively to the dancers’ raising and lowering of their feet – the bell raising the tension, and the clapper releasing it – a basic feature of Burmese dance, also present in other forms of performance. The metric section is not only a reference for the other musicians; it is also guiding the movements of the dancers. The expansion of the main metric beat, after the middle cadential phrase, allows the dancers to perform at this pace with a much larger pattern. Without the expansion, the *si* and *wa* cycle would be too fast for unexperienced dancers to synchronize with, and the dance manifesting the coming-into-presence of the spirit would consequently not be successful. Two apparently insignificant instruments are responsible for the success of spirit possession.

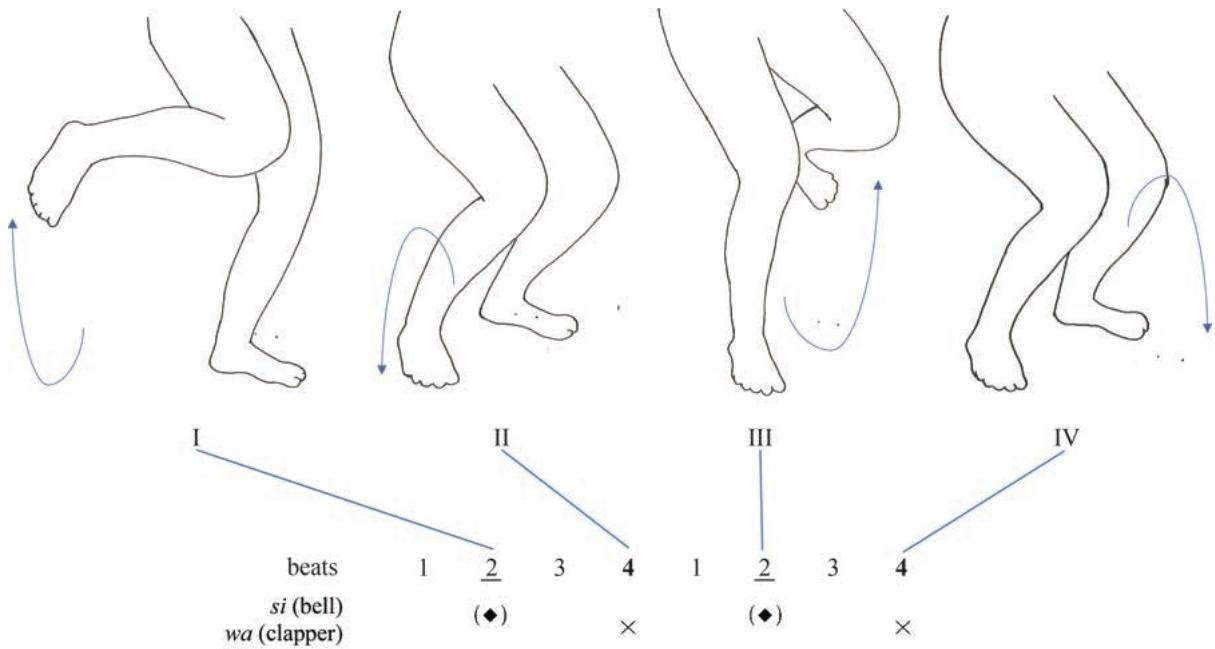


Figure 6.7 Dancers' feet movements on the expanded metric cycle.

The drums, not only the metric section, also contribute strongly to the spirit's coming-into-presence. While the lower part of the dancers' bodies is tightly entrenched in the regular metric pattern, the upper part of their bodies is free to move following the drums, which perform the rhythmic cycle *Nan Gyi Tabaung* with new dynamism. The new rhythm makes the presence of the spirit actual and real. The mimetic element of the music is quite evident here: the rhythmic cycle is directly connected with the drunkard *nat* and manifests all the Prince's power. Consequently, it is not surprising to see the dancers being affected by the presence of the *nat*. The two dancers express it through the drunkard dance, synchronized with the sound of the *hsaing*.

While the released energy of the rhythmic section *triggers* a more evident manifestation of the spirit, compelling the dancers to move faster and with more intensity, the metric instruments *control* the possession, restraining and synchronising the dance movements. The expansion of the metric cycle seems to correspond to an opening of the dancers' selves, which immediately get "filled" by the sound of the *Nan Gyi Tabaung*. The mimetic characteristics of this rhythmic cycle establish a direct connection to the drunkard *nat* – which could be described semiotically as an indexical relationship between sign (the rhythmic cycle) and its object (the *nat*). Friedson efficaciously describes this process when he writes:

The phenomenon of spirit possession is an opening of interior space: the resulting possession is a being-in-it. [...] this space is projected through musical means. (Friedson 1996:22)

In the case of the *nat hsaing*, the process described by Friedson is made manifest musically. The rarefaction/expansion of the metric cycle is accompanied by the introduction of the intense drum cycle,

which “fills-in” the beats now left empty; similarly, the dancers welcome the *nat* into their bodies and experience his presence by (temporarily) becoming him.

The song would not be performed in the same fashion if the dancers were not there. During my fieldwork I have witnessed many performances of this popular *nat chin*, and in most cases, without the dancers, the ensemble just shifted to the instrumental part without any change in the metric cycle; in a few cases, though, some ensembles did not operate any change even in the presence of the dancers – but in these cases, the dances were definitely less mimetic and effective. I am convinced that what makes this song particularly popular and suitable, in the context of the *nat* ritual dances, is the alternation in the agency of the different parts (vocal, melodic, and rhythmic) of the *hsaing* ensemble. All the elements of the mimetic performance are guiding, triggering and supporting the manifestation of the spirit.

6.2.4 *Gambling on the cockfight: bein maung and kyet laung*

The performance of the gambling on the cockfight (*kyet laung*) is one of the most popular moments of the entire *nat kana* ceremony. Performed only by experienced spirit mediums,¹²⁷ *kyet laung* consists of making a silver bowl (*hpala*) rotate in one’s open palm, together with a metal representation of a cockerel (*kyet*) (see Section 3.3.2). The performance can be divided into three actions (Figure 6.8): in the first phase, the *nat kadaw* takes the ‘lower position’, balancing the bowl on the open palm; the second phase represents a transition, during which the bowl starts to raise and the hand to rotate; in the third and final phase, the dancer takes the ‘upper position’: the hand rotation is complete, and the bowl stays upside-down, sometimes detached from the open palm. Then the dancer returns to the lower position to start the whole action again. This process can be repeated several times.

¹²⁷ The bowl is connected to a ritual that confers one the status of *kana si* (a senior spirit medium). The *kana si*-to-be must sponsor a *nat kana pwe* in order to let his/her master introduce a *nat* soul (*leikpya*) into two important *nat kadaw*’s regalia – Ko Gyi Kyaw’s bowl (*hpala*) and Ko Myo Shin’s swords (*dar*). The ceremony is called *da-hpala-at pwe*. After the ceremony, the master *kana si* performs *kyet laung* three times, followed by the pupil. The performance of *kyet laung* with the animated bowl (*hpala*) confers one the status of *kana si*, which has to be confirmed through the organisation of the new-*kana si*’s own *nat kana pwe* (Htoo Zaw, Taungbyone, 17 August 2018).



Phase I:
lower position

Phase II:
transition

Phase III:
upper position

Figure 6.8 Phases of the *kyet laung* dance performance (dancer: Kyaw Win Naing, Yangon).

The bowl contains money donated by the community of participants. This money represents the bets, while the metal statue hold in the left hand represents the fighting cock. The bowl is filled with whiskey: if the *nat kadaw* is able to make it swing in the air without spilling a drop of it, s/he wins the gamble, and can keep the bet money.

The performance brings-into-presence one of Ko Gyi Kyaw's favourite activities. The performance is *for* Ko Gyi Kyaw: in that moment, the private *nat kana* becomes the Prince's royal palace; the community of participants, his court. The *nat kadaw* provides entertainment for the Prince of *nat kana* by challenging their abilities. If s/he succeeds, s/he gets the prize in money. The performance of *kyet laung* represents not only one of the most notorious prowess of the *nat kadaw* – it is usually taken as a proof that the medium is able to control the power of Ko Gyi Kyaw *nat*. The correct swinging of the bowl, supported by the intense *nat hsaing* sounds, is the proof that the Prince of the *nat kana* has joined the celebration, and that he favours the spirit medium.

Kyet laung is always performed in three rounds. The money collected in the first two rounds are usually kept by the performing spirit medium. The money contained in the final bowl is intended for the *hsaing saya*. It represents an extra to the already agreed salary, which the drum circle master has deserved for his musical services (see Section 1.1.2). This extra donation also underlines the unique relationship between Ko Gyi Kyaw and the ensemble.

The drunkard spirit is, in fact, the *nat* responsible for the managing of the *hsaing* ensemble. The legend describes him as a lascivious prince, fond of music and dancing. His figure is associated with *Lamain nat*, the spirit propitiated at the beginning of any art performance through the dance of Apyo

Daw, the royal maiden (see Section 2.2.2). Some musicians hypothesise that Apyo Daw's dance represents the handmaids who danced in Ko Gyi Kyaw's palace. While it is difficult to verify the reasons behind this connection, it is clear that Ko Gyi Kyaw enjoys a special relationship with the *hsaing*: all music and dance performers pay him particular respect. The performance of *kyet laung* is the result of a strict performative collaboration between the dancer and *hsaing* musicians. As a support to the medium's dance, the *hsaing* performs the *bein maung* sound.

The sound has to be fast and intense: it accompanies violent *lethwei* matches (Burmese boxing); in the theatrical arts it supports fighting scenes, or scenes dramatically intense. In *nat kana pwes*, *bein maung* supports a large array of dramatic moments. It accompanies the fight to death of the two brothers Maung Pyu and Maung Nyo, and the fast riding of a knight *nat* on his steed; it dramatically highlights the beheading of Nankarine Medaw, and the fall from the top of the mountain to death of Mangwe Daung. In these and other moments, the sound qualities of *bein maung* iconically convey the idea of muscular power directed towards an opponent. This aspect is underlined by the presence of what the Burmese call the 'enemy sound' (*yan than*): it consists of a music interval of a 6th, produced by the two-hands instruments – such as drum circle *pat waing* and gong circle *kyi waing*, the only ones able to produce two tones simultaneously. When I enquired about the nature of this sound, my *pattala saya* Kyaw Myo Naing explained that the combination of two tones in the *yan than* interval sounds strident and dissonant to Burmese ears.¹²⁸ On the *yan than* interval, *hsaing* musicians construct a short melodic cycle, and a clashing and rhythmically vibrant cycle. The combination and reiteration of these two cycles constitute the *bein maung* sound. In the following Transcription 6.3, I represented these two cycles with cipher notation, and transported it into staff notation, representing the whole action of the ensemble. The transcription does not refer to a recording in particular: it is based on my discussion with musicians, and on my listening experience. (However, it is present in many videos I already presented, including [Video 3.3](#).)

¹²⁸ Kyaw Myo Naing, Mandalay, 18 March 2018.

cipher notation

5	7	i	7
7	3	4	3

7	7	7	7
3	3	3	3

kyi waing
(gong circle)

wa
(clapper)

pat waing
(drum circle)

linkwin
(cymbals)

pat ma
(susp. drum)

sito
(barrel drums)

Transcription 6.3 Bein maung sound, part 1 and 2. The red boxes in the kyi waing (gong circle) and pat waing (drum circle) parts highlight the ‘enemy sound’ (*yan than*), outlined in the cipher notation above.

The reiterated performance of the *yan than* interval, combined with the sound intensity that the ensemble reaches, make the sound of *bein maung* a powerful musical icon. However, the form of this mimetic sound remains quite open to the interpretation of the musicians. Sometimes, after having performed *yan than* for just a short while, the musicians start to heterophonically elaborate on the interval, filling the air of the *nat kana* with a cascade of intense sounds. It is my opinion that, as long as the sound intensity is assured, and the melodic elaboration is made in respect of the *yan than* interval, the musicians are free to deviate considerably from the *bein maung* model I have presented.

6.2.5 The do drum sound and dance

Together with *Nan Gyi Tabaung*, the *do* drum sound and dance constitute probably the most characteristic performance associated with the *nat* Ko Gyi Kyaw. The meaning of this performance is linked to the *nat*’s legend. Ko Gyi Kyaw was estranged from the royal court as a punishment for his bad behaviour and sent to oversee the realisation of water canals around one of the minor palaces. One night, he heard the music of his Indian workers and commanded to bring the musicians inside the palace to perform for him. The musicians played with the *do* (double-headed drum), a shawm and small percussions – an ensemble different from the Burmese *hsaing*. The prince enjoyed that music so much that today the *nat* is annually called back to join the celebration of his festival in Shweguni through the sound of the *do* (Brac de la Perrière 1989:130n9).

The Shweguni *nat* palace's ensemble (*do waing*) is named after the *do* drum (Figure 6.5). During the year, the Shweguni's *do* remains hanging in the *nat* palace, to be taken down and played only for the celebration of the *nat*'s national festival. The drum and its sound are considered spiritually powerful. The belief in the spiritual power of music instruments is quite common in Southeast Asia. Depending on the context, musical and spiritual potency and sacredness are associated to gongs or bronze instruments, and less commonly to drums.¹²⁹

The double-headed drum in Shweguni is believed to be inhabited by the *nat* Ko Gyi Kyaw: at the time of the festival, when the drum gets struck, the spirit comes out of the drum and dances to the sound of his favourite music. As in the case of the *Nan Gyi Tabaung* sound, an adapted *nat hsaing* version of this sound is in use for urban *nat kana* ceremonies. In the following Transcription 6.4 (based on [Video 7.1](#)) of the realisation of the *do* sound in the urban *nat hsaing*, the suspended drum (*pat ma*) and drum circle (*pat waing*) replicate the musical action of the *do* drum and four tuned drums (*lay loun pat*) respectively.

si (bell)
wa (clapper)

pat waing
(drum circle)

linkwin
(cymbals)

pat ma
(susp. drum)

Var. I

Var. II

Var. III

with *chauk lon pat*
six tuned drums (right hand)

Transcription 6.4 Variations of the *do* drum rhythmic cycle (urban *nat hsaing*).

In this cycle, the *si* (bell) plays insistently on the off-beats, while the *wa* (clapper) marks all the regular beats of the cycle (1, 2, 3, 4). The drum circle *pat waing* plays the characteristic *do* drum pattern: the rhythmic cell corresponding to the last two beats of the *wa* clapper (in the red box) is the distinctive structural element of the cycle, and it defines a 4-pulse phrase with a stroke on the lower drum, accompanied by a double strike on the large suspended drum *pat ma*. When present, the cymbals *linkwin* play in correspondence with the off beats, reinforcing the bell *si*. The most evident variation of this

¹²⁹ For example, on the sacredness of gongs in Bali and Java, see McGraw (2019) and Becker (1988). The Thai barrel drum *taphōn* is considered quasi-sacred, and it must be kept in a high place. (Miller 1998:255); the Makassarese *genrang* is considered powerful aesthetically and spiritually (Sutton 2002:134-136).

pattern presents a triplet rhythmic cell: this can be performed by *pat waing* (var. I), or by the *chauk lon pat* (six tuned drums), performed by the same musician who plays the *pat ma* (var. III). The drum circle can also play more accents, sometimes on different octaves (var. II).

The sound of Shweguni *do* drum is accompanied by the *do pat* dance (Figure 6.9). The dance is characterised by a specific mimetic gesture (*poun san*): the dancer stands, raises the arms to the waist; s/he alternatingly moves the left and right hand keeping the palms open, making semi-circular movements. In the *nat kana* performance context, the lower part of the body does not seem to be important: the attention is all focused on arms and hands. The hand gesture iconically represents the act of striking the *do* drum, as if the dancer had the drum hanging from their neck.

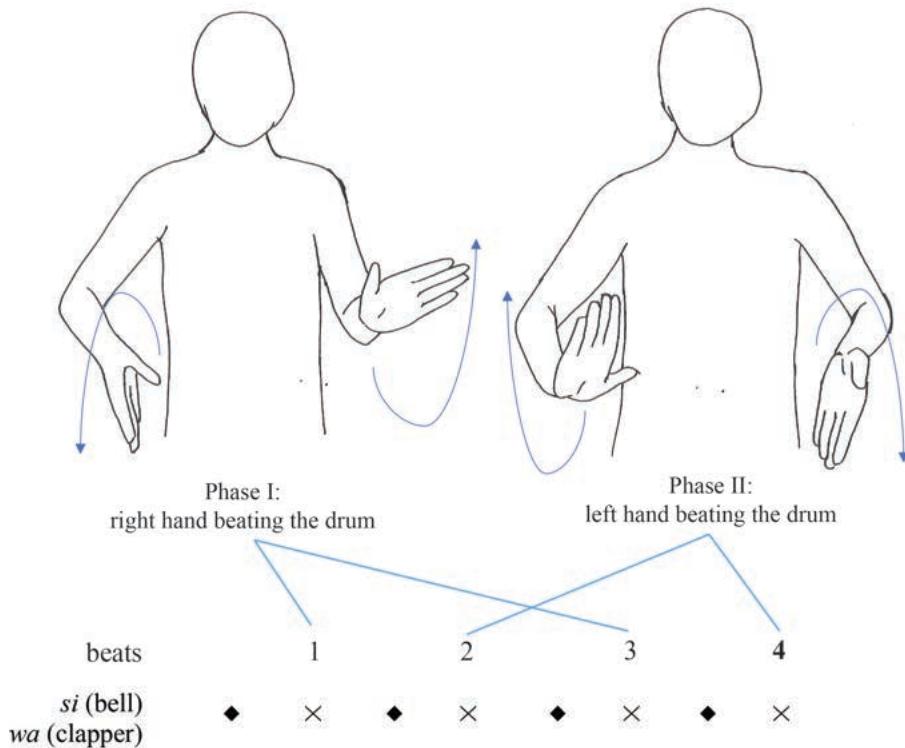


Figure 6.9 Do pat dance gesture: the dancer alternates left and right hand in mimicking a do drum player.

However, in Shweguni, the *do* drum is never hanging from the player's neck; instead, it rests in front of him, while he sits cross-legged on the floor. The dance gesture might possibly be the result of an overlap between the Shweguni *do* drum dance and the *do pat* drum dance: in the latter, the dancer performs with a *do* drum hanging from their neck, striking the two heads with both their subsequently free hands (Min Le Yi 2014:83ff.). This *do pat* dance represents a common entertainment during pagoda *pwe* and other stage celebrations. To the audience and the dancers, this sound is lively and exciting.

In *nat kana pwe*, the performance of the *do* drum sound and dance has a specific value: in this mimetic performance, the separation between dance gesture and musical gesture is minimal. The

possessed dancer imitates the musical gesture of a player, mimicking the striking of the *do* drum. The movements of the two hands are usually synchronised with the main beats of the rhythmic cycle performed by the *nat hsaing*. As I anticipated in Section 5.2.1, in the *do* drum performance, sound, movement, and spirit are one: the dancer simultaneously becomes the *nat*, the dancer, and the musician entertaining the *nat*.

6.3. Sounding and dancing ethnicity: Nankarine Medaw, the Mother Buffalo of Pegu

Nankarine Medaw is an example of how ethnicity is performed through spirit figures in *nat kana pwes*. The Mother Buffalo is a Mon (in Burmese, Talaing) *nat*: she has sovereignty over the people and region around the city of Pegu, the ancient capital of the Mon Kingdom, situated a few kilometres North-East of Yangon. She is also known as Pegu Medaw, the Mother of Pegu, and Talaing Medaw, the Mon Mother. The music and dance for the coming-into-presence of this *nat* perform her Mon-ness.



Figure 6.10 Nat image of Nankarine Medaw on the spirit altar. Yangon, October 2013.

Despite her popularity, Nankarine Medaw belongs to the secondary list of the Thirty-seven Lords. Many versions of her legend exist, differing from each other by a few minor details, or sometimes by a greater amount. However, the main elements of the story remain the same: Athakouma is abandoned inside the buffalo pen (or in the forest), so that the animals would trample him to death. One of the buffalos saves the royal baby's life by covering him with her massive body, becoming Athakouma's adoptive mother. Once grown up, the Prince is requested to obtain the horns of a buffalo by detaching the animal's head before ascending to the throne. The buffalo in question is Athakouma's own adoptive mother. The Mother Buffalo eventually offers her life for the sake of her son.

The legend of Nankarine Medaw is part of the founding cycle of the Mon capital Pegu, and recalls the buffalo sacrifice rituals (Brac de la Perrière 1995a), still quite diffused in Southeast Asia (Rappaport D. 2009; Sprenger 2005). The buffalo is an animal used for farming, and then associated with the household and wealth. It is possibly for this reason, that Nankarine Medaw is today associated with the protection of one's family and economic success.¹³⁰ In *nat kana pwes*, these associations are expressed with the performance of the 'Mon marriage ceremony' (where the Mother blesses the union of a couple in the family), and the 'fish sacrifice ceremony' (where two catfish are set free in a nearby stream). The cult is transmitted through the 'family lineage' (*Mi hsain hpa hsain*) from the mother's side to the women of the household. Historically, Lower Burma has seen a wider presence and diffusion of the Mon people: for this reason, the cult of Nankarine Medaw is particularly rooted here. In Yangon, most of the women pay homage to her according to their matrilineal descentance.

According to Brac de la Perrière (1995a:291), the peculiarities of the cult of Nankarine Medaw can be considered as a consequence of the Burmanisation of the Irrawaddy Delta, and as a transformation of an older Mon sacrificial ritual. Contrary to the Thirty-seven, no Burmese king took part in the Mother Buffalo's transformation into *nat*, and no Burmese king can be associated with the institutionalisation of her cult; the Mother Buffalo does not have her own palace (*nat nan*), and no annual *nat* festival (*pwedaw*) takes place. The buffalo sacrificial practice survived as the 'lineage cult' of Nankarhine Medaw, transmitted by the women of a household, adapting to the new society through the replacement of the Mon marriage and sacrificial ceremonies with a dramatic representation (*pya zat*), transposed into the ritual language of the Thirty-seven, but without being characterised by the possession dance (Brac de la Perrière 1995a:294). The *mise en scène* of the marriage and the consequent sacrifice, as well as the storytelling performance of one of the foundation myths of the city of Pegu, are important for the representation of Mon identity.

¹³⁰ Kyaw Win Naing, Yangon, 26 January 2018.

In Mandalay, the performance of Nankarine Medaw is generally shorter and not particularly spectacular. On the other hand, in Yangon the appearance of the Mother Buffalo can be longer and more intense. The mimetic performance can be divided into the following sections:

	Sound (athan)	Reference (external indexicality)	Meaning in <i>nat kana pwe</i> (internal indexicality)	Dance (ka gyo)
1.	<i>Mon</i>	Mon ethnicity	Mon ethnicity	<i>Mon</i> dance
2.	<i>Ngo chin</i>	Lamenting song	Lamenting song	<i>Pya zat</i>
3.	<i>Nat do</i>	Spirit cult/Mon	Spirit cult/Mon	<i>Nat do</i> dance

Table 6.4 Main phases of the mimetic performance of the nat Nankarine Medaw.

The first section is mandatory: Mon sounds and dance movements (*ka gyo*) welcome the *nat* in the ritual area, substantiating her Mon-ness. During fieldwork I had the luck to witness and film the performance of the dramatic representation (*pya zat*, Section 6.3.2): the performance constitutes a *ngo chin* (lamenting songs) accompanying the heart-breaking acts of the two *nat kadaws* performing the legend of the spirit. The *pya zat* ends with the death of the Mother Buffalo and her transformation into a *nat*: in the final section, the possession dances resume, supported by the sound of the *nat do* – a sound supporting the embodiment of several spirit persons.

6.3.1 *Mon sound and dance*

The atmosphere is feverish. The Buffalo Mother is about to make her entrance. The spirit medium is waiting at the margin of the *nat kana*, waiting to step into the dance area. The *hne saya* starts playing the *lay pyay* melody, which introduces only the most important and powerful *nats* (see Section 4.1.1). To the notes of this opening tune, the *nat kadaw* finally takes his place between the ensemble and the image of the Mother. His attire is imposing (Figure 6.11): he wears the distinctive buffalo-like headgear. The long horns make him look taller. They are black, as is the rest of the wonderful costume: black is the colour of Mon people. As the ensemble starts to perform the Mon sound, the *nat kadaw* welcomes the Mother Buffalo. She starts to walk around the ritual space holding two bunches of *thabyay* leaves, performing the movements (*ka gyo*) that characterise the Mon dance. The Mother moves around followed by the Mon Prince Athakouma, embodied in a second *nat kadaw*, dressed in royal garments and carrying a long sword.



Figure 6.11 The kana si U Win Hlaing ritually dressed for the nat dance of Mother Buffalo of Pegu. Popa Village, September 2017.

The Mother Buffalo of Pegu is a Mon *nat*. Her sound presents mimetic elements indicating this ethnicity. A quiet Mon melody accompanies the first phase of the embodiment dance, coordinated on the Mon rhythmic cycle performed by the *hsaing* rhythmic section. Transcription 6.5 is based on [Video 4.1](#). It features a *kyi waing* (gong circle) and a *hne gyi* (large shawm): the two melodic instruments perform the same Mon melody, which remains quite recognisable despite some heterophonic variations.

The melodic line represents the prelude to *Mon thachin*, a song genre that is part of the *Thachin Gyi*, or Mahagita – the Great songs once performed in the royal palace (Inoue 2014a:18; Becker 1969:270). Mon songs were included as part of the Mahagita by Myawadi-Wungyi U Sa (1766-1853), composer and editor of the Mahagita anthology under the Konbaung dynasty (Williamson 1979a). Inoue (2014a:145-46) explains that U Sa composed *Talaing-than* (Mon sounds/songs), translating Talaing/Mon language into Burmese and employing an already-established Mon ethnic tune. The melody I transcribed corresponds to the one present in Inoue (2014a:86), and can be heard in the recordings edited by Brunet (1979, track a1) made among the Mon people of Thailand. The supporting rhythmic cycle accompanying the melody has also been identified by the musicians as a Mon sound.

than yoe: hna pauk

♩ = 60

hmay
(shawm)

kyi waing
(gong circle)

si (bell)
wa (clapper)

pat waing
(drum circle)

linkwin
(cymbals)

pat ma
(susp. drum)

sito
(barrel drums)

Transcription 6.5 Mon athan for the Mother Buffalo of Pegu.

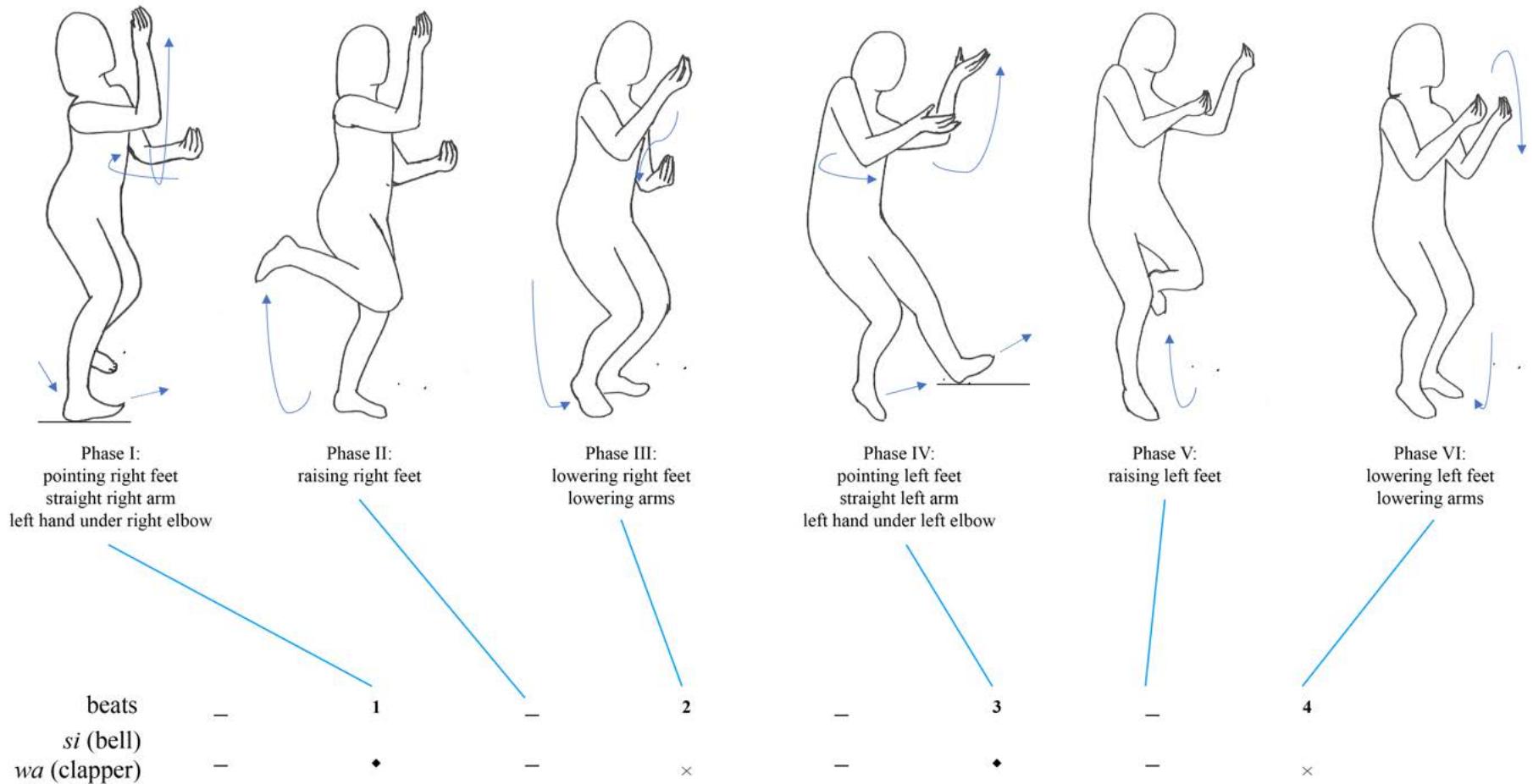


Figure 6.12 Phases indicating the movements (ka gyo) of the Mon dance.

The quiet performance of the *Mon athan* is iconically associated with the movements of the Mother Buffalo *nat*. The lilting rhythmic cycle mimics the slow and solid movements of a water buffalo. Following the metric cycle outlined by the *si* (bell) and *wa* (clapper), the *nat kadaw* embodying the Mother of Pegu performs the *Mon ka gyo*, a dance movement of the Burmese court tradition (Figure 6.12).

In the *nat kana pwe* performance practice, this *ka gyo* is performed by the possessed *nat kadaw* holding two bunches of *thabyay* in their hands. The limited space usually available in the ritual pavilion do not always allow the complete process: phase I and IV, for example, are usually avoided.

Not only her *nat* song, but also some unique features of Nankarine Medaw's possession dance underline her Mon-ness: occasionally, an officiation of the Mon ritual of sacrificing the buffalo takes place. The sacrifice can be articulated in two different ways – through the celebration of a Mon marriage ceremony, and/or through the performance of an elaborated dramatic play. In both cases, the possession dances are temporarily suspended, replaced with a representational act.

6.3.2 A performative narration: the *pya zat* for Nankarine Medaw

Depending on the will of the sponsors and the disposition of the *nat kadaw*, the full version of a theatrical adaptation of the legend¹³¹ of the Buffalo Mother can be performed. The dramatic storytelling (*pya zat*)¹³² performance can last several minutes. It represents a real challenge to those emerging *nat kadaws* who are trying to get make their names among the urban *nat* followers. The piece is in fact performed primarily to entertain the participants. As Singer explained, 'a combination of dance, music, murder, and the supernatural never fails to hold the interest of the public' (Singer 1995:81). The *pya zat* entails the use of the finest acting skills a *nat kadaw* has gained throughout years of practice. The piece narrates the final moment of the story, when Athakouma is obliged to take his adoptive mother's head. Devotees and passers-by participate in the *pya zat* in silence, listening to the final words of the Mother Buffalo, and witnessing her transformation into a *nat*.

In December 2017, I was able to film Nankarine Medaw's *pya zat* performance in its entirety. The Yangon *kana si* Kyaw Win Naing performed as the Buffalo Mother, while one of his pupils impersonated the young prince Athakouma. On that occasion, the *pya zat* lasted about 20 minutes: the female singer, supported by the ensemble, alternated *nat chins* with *ngo chins* (lamenting songs) telling

¹³¹ The theatrical adaptation differs in many parts from the legend, which is known and transmitted in many versions. Some of these versions are also shaped by the theatrical adaptation.

¹³² *Pya zat* (lit. 'dramatic representation') are all-night performances that include traditional and modern dances, *hsaing* and Western music, and acting. The performance is led by popular *minthas* and *minthamees* ('prince' and 'princess') (Singer 1995:75). Today, these modern plays are not as popular as in the past.

the story of the *nat*. [Video 6.4](#) shows the final moment of this performance. The acting is poignant: the Buffalo Mother is talking to her son Athakouma, trying to convince him to take her head; he raises his sword, but he is unable to kill his own mother, so he puts the deadly weapon down and hugs her. After three confrontations, the sword does its duty, and the *nat kadaw* embodying the Mother Buffalo removes the headgear, carried around by Athakouma as a trophy.

The performance involves a strict collaboration between the *hsaing* ensemble and the singer. It is the latter who acts as storyteller, supported by musicians. The performative narration is based on the *ngo chin* (lamenting song). This genre of song is quite popular in theatrical performances (*zat pwe*): heroines (*minthamee*) perform these songs in a high-pitched voice to express grief, sorrow and longing (Young and Ne Myo Aung 2015).

In the *ngo chin* performed for Nankarine Medaw, the singer re-evokes the words of the Buffalo Mother before the transformation into *nat*. With a vocal style between singing and speech, the singer gives voice to the desperate final dialogue between the two characters. The words are quite cryptic: in order to “beautify” the language, the singer makes great use of poetic images, adding additional words, thereby creating longer and more intricate sentences. There is also a significant use of repetition: as shown in the following Table 6.5, Nankarine Medaw’s words directly address her son Athakouma (*thar*, bolded in the text), usually as an exclamation at the beginning or conclusion of a verse.

The text is characterised by formularity: words and verses are employed as stock expressions (underlined in the text). Formularity, as Lord (2004[1960]) explained, does not mean that these expressions remain static and unchanged: instead, they are quite dynamic and capable of change. In interview, Kyaw Win Naing¹³³ explained to me that no *pya zat* for Nankarine Medaw is the same. Within the framework provided by using formulaic elements, the text can change and adapt to the acting of the *nat kadaw*, or to the sound of the musicians.

¹³³ Kyaw Win Naing, Yangon, 20 July 2019.

Amay chit te than... Amay lay ma pyay naing dot bar buu thar yay	My lovely son! I cannot run anymore, oh son!
ma pyay naing dot bar buu	I cannot run anymore
Amay thar lay , amay nauk ko thar lite nay ya dar <u>amay ma kyi yet dot buu</u> , thar yay	<u>I can't see you running after me anymore,oh son!</u>
Thar yae <u>sate ka ma par buu so dar amay thi nay bar dae</u> [inaudible]	<u>I know this is not what you want</u> [inaudible]
Amay thar lay ko thi nay yar par dae thar yay ahman dot	I know you, oh son! That is the truth
Thar , may may pyaw tae sagar lay ko thar lay nar htaung lite san par dot	Son! Hear my words
Oh, taung saung lay twae dae ma lar, thar	Oh! Can you see the hill? Son!
Eh di taung saung lay anaunt hma nay htewt lar dae akhar hmar	When the sun will appear behind that hill ¹³⁴
Amay thar lay ta yauk tae	Come alone, son
Thar lar amay thar taung lite pay dot	Come and wish this for me
May may yae oo gaung akyaw twe pyat par say tha dae lot, ashin Phayarr panyar say thaw	May the nerves of my head be cut! Oh Lord Buddha, be my witness!
Kunyi nyar lo pay lot par Phayarr	Oh Lord, please help me!
Thar yay , amay ho bet yauk yin thar lite khae, naw, <u>amay pyay pyi thar yay</u>	Oh son! When I get over there you can follow me! Are you ready? <u>I am running now, son!</u>

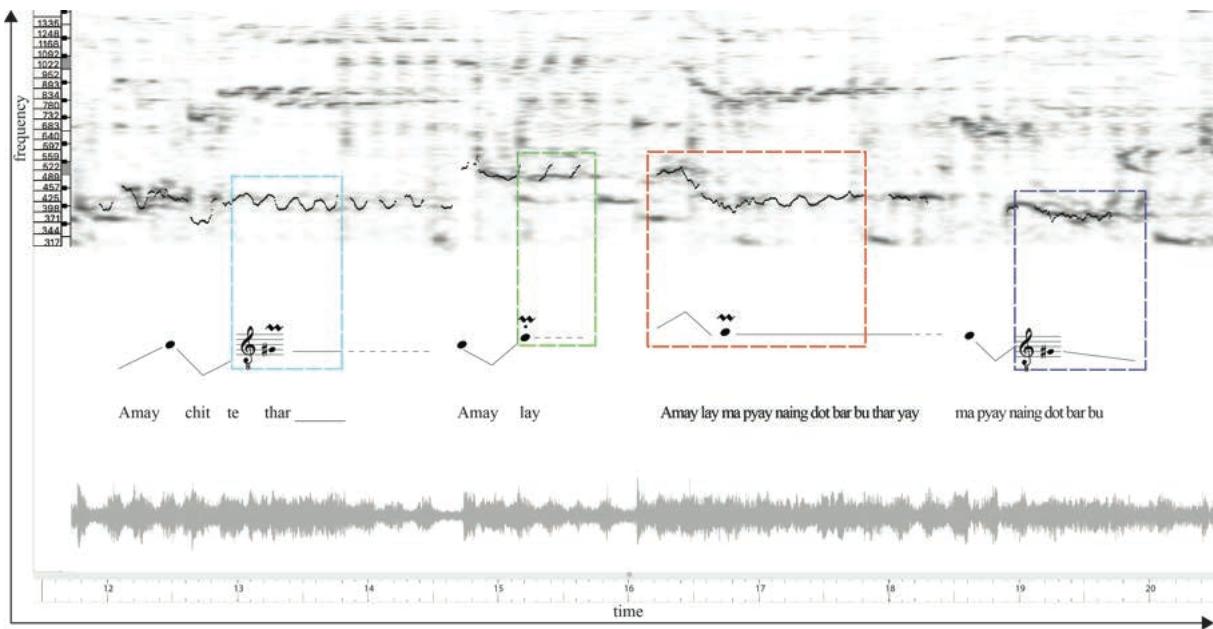
Table 6.5 Text excerpt from the final part of the pya zat for the nat Nankarine Medaw.

¹³⁴ When the *nat kadaw* Kyaw Win Naing (Yangon, 21 December 2017) told me this story he explained that it is not the sword that severs the head of Nankarine Medaw, but a ray of sun. The idea of a (self)sacrifice performed without direct violence and without spilling a drop of blood is closer to Buddhist values.

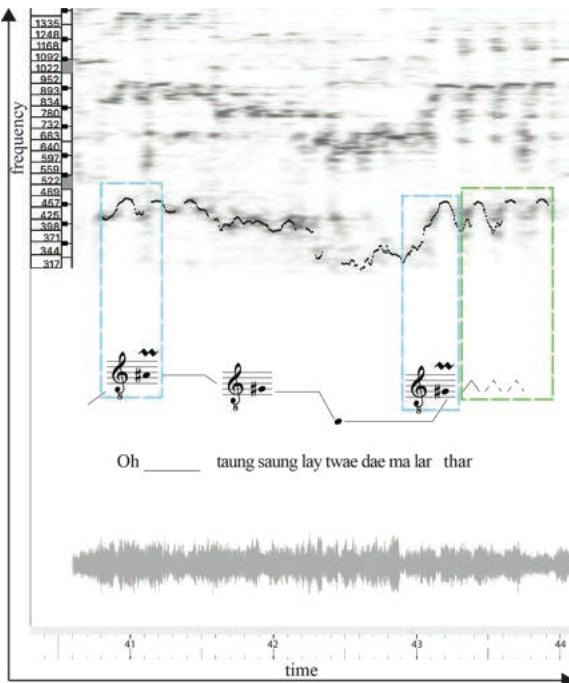
The whole *ngo chin* performance – vocal part, instrumental sounds, and the *nat kadaws'* action – constitutes a performative narration with many inter-related levels of mimesis. As I anticipated in Section 5.2.1, in the *pya zat*, the person of the Buffalo *nat* is shared among the performers: her words are pronounced by the singer; her actions are mimicked by the spirit medium. The *hsaing* ensemble provides the sounds indicating her ethnicity and the sadness of the dramatic action. The joint action of multiple performers (singer, dancer, and musicians) are necessary in this mimetic performance: in this sense, this performance represents the converse of the *do* drum dance for Ko Gyi Kyaw earlier discussed (6.2.5), where a single performer combines different roles.

However, the performance revolves around the vocal part. One of the main features that gives this part its “wailing” character is the different use of the voice. The singer performs her part *as if she is really crying*. Her high-pitched sobs and laments can be heard clearly. The sorrowful atmosphere is conveyed through long glissandi and sliding pitches, usually on a single final syllable, and a large use of vibrato (see Transcription 6.6, Transcription 6.7 and Transcription 6.8). The singer shifts easily from spoken style to a more clearly chanted style. During the storytelling, “crying” effects and sung/quasi-spoken vocal articulations work as icons of embodied effect (Fox 2004:280), conveying a specific semantic meaning which reinforces that carried by the text itself (Seeger 2004:31). The following transcription shows the beginning, central and final part of this *ngo chin* performance. I obtained the melodic line and the spectrogram using Tony, a software for pitch analysis.¹³⁵ The melodic line must be read in tandem with my musical transcription, in the lower pane: here, the continuous lines indicate produced vocal sound, while the dotted lines indicate reverb; the [~] indicates vibrato, the upper [.] in combination with [‘] indicate a sharp and short vocal exclamation; exact musical notes are indicated only when clearly distinguishable. The light blue box highlights large vibratos and “crying” effects; the green box highlights the reverb effect; the red box highlights rapid passages from spoken to sung style and exclamations; the dark blue box highlights falling tones.

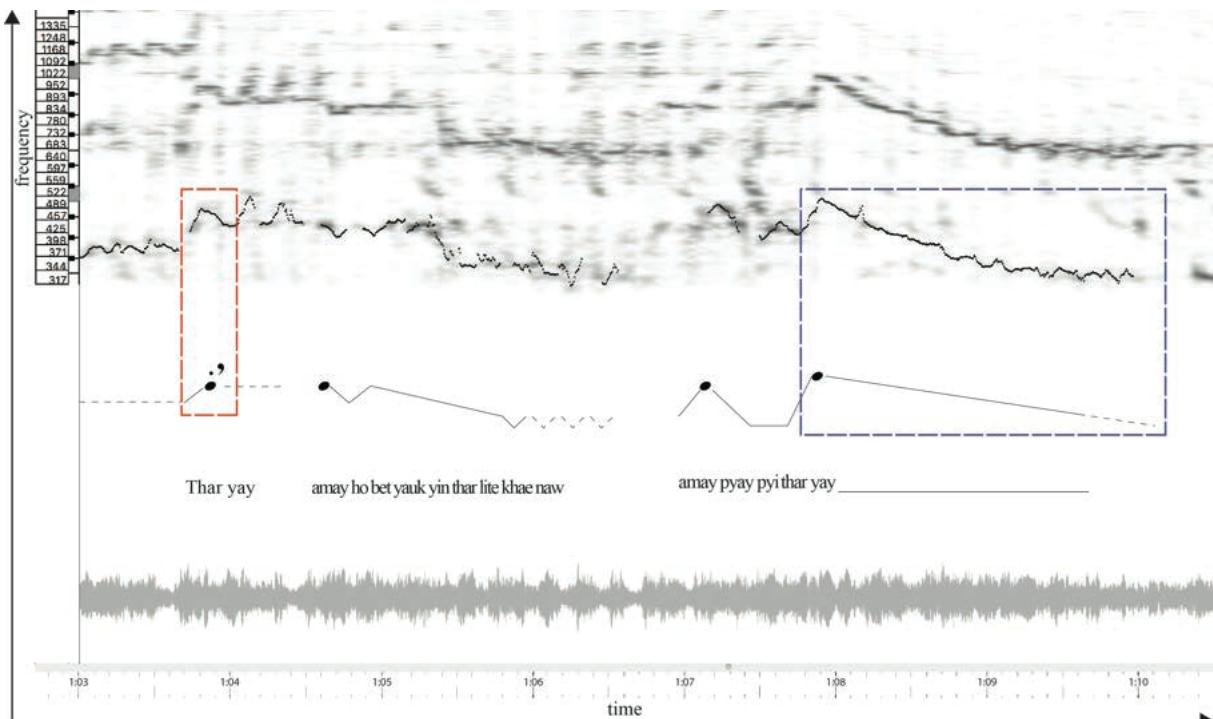
¹³⁵ I tried to make the recording as clear as possible for the analysis, cutting out all the bass frequencies from the original audio file. However, background sounds remain, making it arduous to recognise an exact melodic profile, especially using software. An analysis based on a recording session in a controlled environment is necessary to obtain more precise information about a *ngo chin* vocal style.



Transcription 6.6 Excerpt from the vocal part of the ngo chin: beginning.



Transcription 6.7 Excerpt from the vocal part of the ngo chin: central part.



Transcription 6.8 Excerpt from the vocal part of the ngo chin: finale.

The mimetic performance carried out by the singer is reflected in the acting of the *nat kadaw*. During the *pya zat*, the two dancers do not pronounce a word. The singer is voicing the monologue of the Mother Buffalo. The spirit medium impersonating the *nat* is acting in accordance with the meanings and emotions suggested through the combined action of words and iconic sounds of the vocal part. His lips are in sync with those of the singer (*han hsaung hso-*, lit. ‘to make the act of singing’). The two mediums use their body to mimic Nankarine Medaw and Athakouma’s emotions: their body movements follow the lyrics.¹³⁶ For example, the Mother Buffalo shows with physical signs that she is tired of running: she shakes her head and hand in denial [00:17]; when the singer mentions the sun rising from behind the hill, the *nat* points her finger to indicate an imaginary far away point; Athakouma nods in agreement, and bursts out crying [00:52].¹³⁷

The mimetic performance of singer and spirit mediums is supported by the instrumental sound of the *nat hsaing*. The video opens with the Burmese ensemble playing an instrumental sound that accompanies the transition to the final section of the *pya zat*. Similar instrumental transitions can also

¹³⁶ The lips-syncing and body gestures following the vocal part is a common feature of the *nat* dances. Only a few mediums feel confident enough to sing by themselves; the others generally prefer to perform with support of the singer. Brac de la Perrière (personal communication, 2018) believes that the presence of actively singing spirit mediums represents a recent transformation, characterising mostly urban *nat kadaws*.

¹³⁷ In analysing the funerary lamentations in Lucania (Southern Italy), de Martino (2008b[1958]) underlined the existence of stereotyped literary, gestural and melodic modules, necessary for the proper performance of the lamentation (‘si piange così’, ‘that’s the way to cry’), which presents a strong mimic content.

be found in *zat pwe* theatrical performances. After the transition, the vocal part resumes. The drums perform a quiet Mon rhythmic cycle; their action is only supportive. The ensemble is led by the shawm *hne*: the musician accompanies the singer with long and slow melodic sounds – which iconically underline the sadness of the situation. It is the character and performance style of the *hne*, rather than a specific melody, that contributes to creating the *ngo chin*. A standardised *ngo chin* melody employed to indicate sadness and grief does not exist – as my *pattala* (xylophone) master Kyaw Myo Naing once clearly stated:

This is a sad song [*ngo chin*, performs on the *pattala*] – you only play this when the sad song [singing part] is concluded [*ngo chin cha*, lit. ‘the song falls’]. There is no specific melody [to accompany] the conclusion of the song. When the singer [*minthamee*] sings, we follow and play [with her]. [When] she [starts] crying “Amalaaay” [“Oh my goodness”] we play like this. There are different kinds of sad songs, there are so many [...] There was once a standard for it. As far as I know, today an instrumental sad song does not exist in Myanmar – mostly, we look at the lyrics.¹³⁸

After the long dramatic scene, during which the musicians have constrained the energy of their instruments, the ensemble is finally allowed to free all of its energies. The musicians play fast, performing a driving interlocked pattern, supporting and triggering the intense dance of the possessed *nat kadaw*.

6.3.3 Nat do: *A Mon substrate for spirit cult?*

Once the acting is over, the possession dances resume ([Video 6.4](#), [01:30]): prince Athakouma wields his sword, carrying the severed head of his Mother; the headless Buffalo *nat* dances energetically in front of the ensemble, absorbing the sound of the *hsaing*. The ensemble accompanies the dramatic intensity of the final chasing and beheading with the *bein maung* sound starting from [01:10]; then, at [01:29], the musicians perform with increased speed and loudness a rhythmic cycle characterised by fast interlocking on a polyrhythmic 2+3+3 metre (Transcription 6.9):

¹³⁸ Kyaw Myo Naing, Mandalay, 23 April 2018. Similarly, Nay Win Htun (personal communication, 2017) explained to me that it is not possible to recognise the emotion of a Mahagita court song just by listening to its melodic part: it is necessary to pay attention to the vocal part, and to understand its poetic text.

The transcription shows five instruments: *si* (bell), *wa* (clapper), *pat waing* (drum circle), *linkwin* (cymbals), and *pat ma* (susp. drum). The music is divided into two measures by vertical dashed lines. Red numbers 2 and 3 are placed above the first and second measures respectively, likely indicating specific beats or counts. A blue arrow points from the *linkwin* (cymbals) staff to a detailed rhythmic example below, which consists of two measures of music on bass staves.

Transcription 6.9 Variations of the nat do/Mon rhythmic cycle.

The dance this sound supports consists in open and energetic movements: the dancer flexes and stretches the arms in front of him/her; while stretching them, the hands open, to return to closed when the arms are flexed back to the chest (Figure 6.13). This gesture is not necessarily performed in synchrony with the ensemble. The extreme dynamism characterising it is sometimes translated into a violent shaking, where the hands remain closed (sometimes holding bunches of *thabyay* leaves) and the arms raised over the head – as in [Video 6.4](#), [02:05].

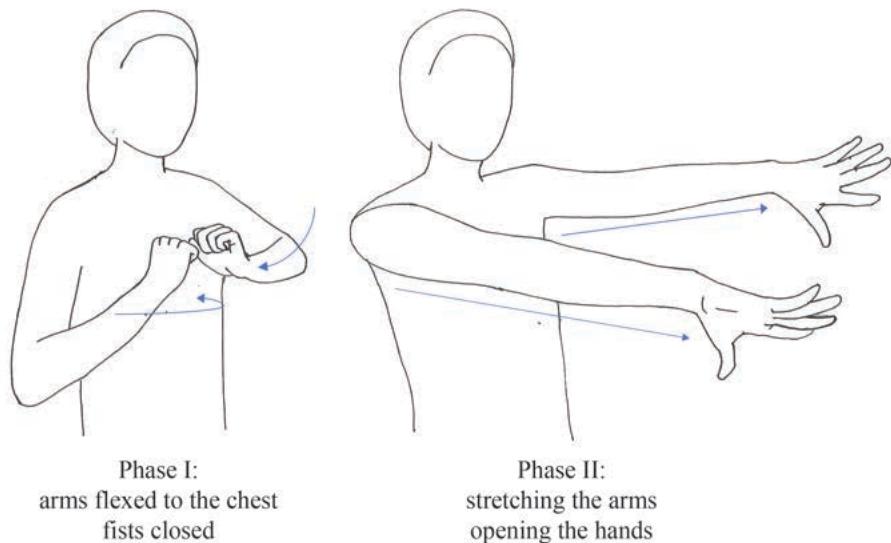


Figure 6.13 Nat do/Mon dance movements.

The combination of this mimetic sound and dance are not exclusive to Nankarine Medaw *nat*. They characterise the mimetic performances of several other spirits, not necessarily related to each other by legendary ties. For example, slightly varied versions of this sound support in part, the coming-into-presence of Ko Gyi Kyaw, Popa Medaw (the Mother of Popa), Lan Zin (one of the Thirty-seven Lords), Min Mahagiri (head of the Thirty-seven Lords) and Taung Gyi Shin (Min Mahagiri's sister). Some

musicians indicate this sound and dance as Mon. Others are not convinced by this definition: because too many different spirits are associated with it, they just call it *nat do*. This name indicates sounds and dances associated with the performance of *nat* dances in general. It does not refer to a specific spirit, but rather indicates the whole spectrum of *nat* performances.

However, the possibility that a Mon sound (and the related dance) became synonymous of *nat* performances in general cannot be excluded. When I first listened to Brunet's (1977, Ocora) recordings of the Mon people's music in Thailand, I was struck by the similarities between the first two tracks – 'Tapin Taing Kakyo: Musique De Danse' and obviously 'Nut Kana: Musique pour les Génies' – and the sounds of Burmese *nat kana pwes*. Mon celebrate their spirits through possession dance rituals called *kalok*, a Mon equivalent of the *nat kana pwe*. Halliday (2000[1917]) described the performance of such *kalok* rituals: reading the ethnographic descriptions, several similarities between Mon and Burmese spirit cults can be noted. Shorto (1963, 1967) believed that the origin of the Burmese cult of the Thirty-seven Lords is based on the Mon *kalok*, spirits associated with several districts of lower Burma. As I have mentioned in Section 6.3.1, songs "in the manner of" Mon style have been included in the Burmese Mahagita canon only up to the 19th century (Inoue 2014a:145-46). Is it possible that a substrate of Mon sounds remained present, orally/aurally transmitted, in the performance of Burmese spirit cults?¹³⁹

6.4. A group spirit possession: the *pwe* for the *thaik* Naga Medaw

The cult of *naga* (mythical serpents) spirits, once possibly independent from Buddhism,¹⁴⁰ has long been intertwined with the Burmese religious system. Although that of *naga* is a powerful and respected figure, Amay Shwe Nabe, wife of U Tin Dae, Lord of the Great Mountain and king of the Thirty-seven, is the only *naga nat* to be summoned in *nat kana pwes*. *Nagas* feature in *nat kana pwe* mostly as *thaik* – spirits guarding religious compounds. *Thaiks* belong to a different class of spirit from the *nats*: their appearance in the ritual is optional and depends on the will of the donors or the *kana si*.

¹³⁹ Archaeological evidence prove the influence that Mon kingdoms and culture had in the development of the first Burmese kingdom of Bagan (Stadtner 2008). After the conquest the Mon capital Thaton (11th century), Mon language, religion and beliefs, arts, musical instruments and repertoires travelled to Bagan and were assimilated in the culture of the conquerors (Luce and Pe Maung Tin 2008[1923]:78). As other in Southeast Asian cultures, Burmese culture is deeply indebted to that of the Mon. Mon people and culture are at the centre of complex acculturation phenomena in Southeast Asia (Coedes 1962; Foster 1973); in relation to the music, see among others Daniélou (1957), Morton (1976), Williamson (2000) and Wong (1998).

¹⁴⁰ Htin Aung (1962:109ff.) hypothesised that the cult of *naga* might be autochthonous: eventually, with the establishment of Buddhism, the *naga* figure was adapted and assimilated into the myths of the new religion to the point that 'up to the present day the Naga is the most popular motif in Burmese art, both religious and secular'. Similarly, the worship of snakes in India is associated with Buddhism, Hinduism and animist practices, suggesting a pre-Buddhist origin.

Originally, *thaiks* (alongside other similar figures, such as the Bobogyis)¹⁴¹ were just generic figures, not even represented in the religious compounds. During the infrastructure development of the 1990s, their iconographic representations proliferated, and some of them then started to be seen more in *nat kana pwe* practice. Today, their images can be found in every pagoda: urban spirit mediums tend to include these figures, considered closer to Buddhist values, in an attempt to make their practice more acceptable to the urban public (Brac de la Perrière 2011:171-173). For all these reasons, the embodiment of *nagas* is extremely popular among the *nat kana pwe* attendees in Yangon and Mandalay. Most of the devotees I have encountered believe they have a connection with *nagas* in one of their past lives. During the spirit possession dance, the devotees succumb to the spiritual power of these mythical serpents, and literally fall on the floor, performing movements that mimic those of a *naga*.

Because of their serpent-like nature, *nagas* are associated with the colour green. A spirit medium about to embody a *naga* usually wears a green dress and headgear shaped like the head of a mythical serpent. Devotees are provided with something green to wear – usually a green band (*pawa*) wrapped around their chests.

Figure 6.14 Amay Shwe Nabe nat as represented in Temple (1991). Her naga attributes are evident in the serpent-like headgear and dress details. Similar costumes are in use amongst urban nat kadaws.



¹⁴¹ On Bobogyis, see Sadan (2005); Brac de la Perrière and Munier-Gaillard (2019).

One of the most invoked *thaik* is Naga Medaw, the Naga Mother. Her figure is usually associated with Mya Nan Nwe, an extremely popular “Buddhist saint” revered at the Botathaung, a famous pagoda near the Yangon River. The figure of Mya Nan Nwe is halfway between history and legend. She is believed to have been a pious woman who devoted her life to Buddhism. According to the legend, the spirit of a woman in green appeared at the Botathaung, donating jewels to contribute to the reconstruction of the religious site after the War. Because of that, people associate the figure of the *naga thaik* protecting the Botathaung with Mya Nan Nwe, creating an interesting overlap between the *naga thaik* spirit and the woman (Brac de la Perrière 2011:173). In *nat kana pwe*, the invocation and embodiment of Myan Nan Nwe is accompanied by the sounds and dances that characterise the coming-into-presence of the Naga Mother.



Figure 6.15 The kana si Hnin Ko Hein embodying the thaik Naga Medaw. Mandalay, March 2018.

Contrary to the *nats*, who are characterised by their *nat chins*, *thaik* spirits do not have a specific song repertoire associated with them. Kyi Lin Bo and his musicians¹⁴² specify that the sounds supporting *thaik* spirits are borrowed from other musical contexts – also an indication of how the insertion of non-*nat* spirits is a recent development of the ritual practice. In the case of Naga Medaw, her *naga* character is outlined through a combination of several sounds, performed in sequence. Each sound refers to a different performance context, and only one seems to be directly referring to the *naga* beings. During a

¹⁴² Kyi Lin Bo, Yangon, 12 October 2013.

nat kana pwe, each one of these mimetic sounds takes a specific and meaningful value. This sequence accompanies one main movement:

	Sound (athan)	Reference (external indexicality)	Meaning in <i>nat kana pwe</i> (internal indexicality)	Dance (poun san)
1.	<i>Yay hkin</i>	Palace boat patrol	aquatic element	<i>Naga pat</i>
2.	<i>Way lar</i>	Water	<i>Naga</i> mythical creature	
3.	<i>Myin hkin</i>	Horse riding	(mythical) creature's movement	
4.	<i>Bein maung</i>	Sport competitions	prowess	
5.	<i>Sidaw</i>	Royal music	high status	

Table 6.6 Main phases of the mimetic performance of the thaik *Naga Medaw*.

6.4.1 Aquatic element: *yay hkin* and *way lar* sounds

The aquatic nature of the *naga thaik* spirits is underlined by the performance of *yay hkin* and *way lar* sounds. *Yehkin* was originally employed by the boats patrolling (*kin*, ‘guarding’)¹⁴³ the waters of the Mandalay palace’s large moat (*ye*, ‘water’). According to the *Dictionary of Myanmar Performing and Plastic Arts* (Ministry of Culture 2001), the instrumental ensemble included a drum (*boun*), a large suspended gong (*maung gyi*), and cymbals (*linkwin*); to this ensemble, a large shawm (*hne gyi*) and a gong circle (*kyi waing*) were later added – the latter probably substituted with a metal xylophone. The expanded ensemble is today known as *nayee si*: it still performs twice a day (4 a.m. and 4 p.m.) in a small pavilion at the Mahamuni Pagoda in Mandalay ([Video 6.5](#)). Although the ensemble has been expanded and its functions changed, the melody and rhythm the *nayee si* ensemble performs are still known as *yay hkin*. Today, the sound is described as peaceful. Because of its connections with the aquatic elements, it is used to indicate the mythical sea serpents *naga*.

¹⁴³ The original meaning of the word *kin* (Burm. /kin:/) associated with this sound seems to be almost forgotten. Probably associated with *lay hkin* (sound to accompany the display of archery skills), Burmese people mistakenly refer to it as /ye-hkin:/ instead of /ye-kin:/. A similar fate might have befallen the horse-patrolling sound, today also referred to as /myin-hkin/ (*myin* means ‘horse’) instead of /myin-kin/.



Figure 6.16 The nayee si ensemble performing at the Mahamuni Pagoda. Mandalay, August 2018.

si (bell)
wa (clapper)

pat waing
(drum circle)

linkwin (cymbals)
maung kwe (flat gong)

chauk lon pat
(six tuned drums)
(right hand)

pat ma
(suspended drum)
(left hand)

sito
(barrel drums)

Transcription 6.10 Model of the basic rhythmic cycle identifying the yay hkin sound.

Several of the elements present in Transcription 6.10 are maintained by the sound performed by the *nayee si* ensemble: the *linkwin* cymbals replicate the action of the smaller bell *si*; the final *pat ma* strike substitutes for the large gong *maung*; the barrel drums *sito* act as the *boun* drum. In the *nat hsaing* version, the core element is represented by the rhythmic line of the *sito* (in the red box). In the first part of the cycle, the player performs a repeated rhythmic cell with a swinging character on the *sito*'s smallest drum – which I have tried to render using semiquavers and accents. This gives the rhythmic line of the *sito* a syncopated and polyrhythmic character. The cycle ends with a short descending rhythmic phrase, before the final beat. This is underlined by the suspended drum *pat ma* (in the red box), and in some

ensembles, this is reinforced by the sound of a *maung gyi* (large suspended gong). I transcribed these musical elements based on observation of [Video 6.6](#): the video shows a Mandalay *nat hsaing* ensemble performing variations on the basic rhythmic model during the dance of the *thaik* Naga Medaw. On this rhythmic cycle, many different melodies, also identified as *yay hkin*, can be performed.

Opinions on the origin and meaning of the *way lar* sound seem to be varied. In his recording *The Historical Sketch of Myanmar Traditional and Classical Music* (1993), the *hsaing saya* Sein Moot Tar explains that the famous *hsaing saya* Sein Beda (1848-1941) successfully mixed the powerful sound of the suspended drum *pat ma* with instrumental compositions about the rain (*moe bwe*). Due to word association in Burmese, the resulting sound of the *pat ma* combined with *moe bwe* compositions started to be known as *way lar*. In Sein Moot Tar's explanation, the aquatic element is underlined by the presence of the 'rain music', and the sound of the *pat ma* is sometimes described as so powerful that it creates rough seas with huge waves. On the other hand, Min Le Yin explains that the *way lar* sound is associated with the alternating rolling patterns of the royal boat: the sound moves as the water does, 'like the flow of water currents in stream that move steadily and continuously' (Min Le Yi 2014:133). More generally, the sound indicates the undertaking of a journey, implicitly by boat (Ministry of Culture 2001). For this connection to the aquatic element, the sound *way lar* indicates the *naga* mythical creatures.

The transcription consists of five staves. The top staff is labeled 'si (bell)' and 'wa (clapper)', showing single dots and crosses respectively. The second staff is labeled 'pat waing (drum circle)', showing a rhythmic pattern of two eighth notes followed by a sixteenth note. The third staff is labeled 'linkwin (cymbals)', showing a triplet pattern. The bottom staff is labeled 'pat ma (susp. drum)', showing a descending melody. To the right, there are two variations: 'Var. I' shows a sixteenth-note pattern, and 'Var. II' shows a sixteenth-note pattern with an anticipation and prolongation of the first note.

Transcription 6.11 Variations of the way lar rhythmic cycle.

Transcription 6.11 is based on [Video 6.7](#), showing the sounds for the dance of the *nat* Shwe Nabe. Based on a slow meter, the core element of this cycle is represented by the *pat waing* line: in the first part, the drum circle reiterates the same rhythmic-melodic cell three times; this can be constituted by a simple alternation between the first and fifth degree of the scale (C and G), or by a short descending melody also contained within the range of a fifth (var. I). Sometimes, the *pat waing* line takes a swung character through the anticipation and prolonging of the first semiquaver of the rhythmic cell (var. II); this character is already hinted at by the triplet performed by the large cymbals. The last part of the cycle is performed by the left hand, which reaches the lower register of the drum circle, playing in correspondence with the beats marked by the metric instruments. The suspended drum *pat ma* plays in

parallel, supporting the action of the drum circle. As in the previous example, the rhythmic cycle is what identifies the *way lar* sound, which can be accompanied by several different melodies, which therefore are not here included.

6.4.2 Prowess of the naga: myin hkin and bein maung sounds

With its musical accents resembling galloping, *myin hkin* ('display of horse-riding') iconically represents horse riding, and indicates riders or knights. It is performed for *naga* due to the association between the horse's strength/movements and this mythical creature. However, when performed for *naga*, *myin hkin* is not characterised by all the musical accents that make this sound an icon for the galloping horse. Instead, the melodic line (played loudly by the shawm player) remains steadier: the sounds of the multiple-reed instruments are long and continuous, plainly following the metric and rhythmic cycles performed by the rest of the ensemble. This can be seen at about [01:45] of [Video 6.7](#), for the *nat* Shwe Nabe. The following Transcription 6.12 is based on the dance for the rider *nat* Myin Byu Shin (the Lord of the White Horse).

Transcription 6.12 Myin hkin sound for the dance of the rider nat Myin Byu Shin. Fondazione Cini, Venice, 17 November 2017.¹⁴⁴

As shown in the previous transcription, the drums perform a polyrhythmic cycle characterised by musical accents indicating the galloping of a horse, on which the shawm *hne* performs fast melodic

¹⁴⁴ Link: <https://youtu.be/jyE94jtznFw> (retrieved 25/05/2018). This video is an extract of the event *Music and Rite: Nat pwe. Music and dance in spirit worship in Yangon*, that I organised with the IISMC Fondazione Giorgio Cini Onlus in Venice, on 17 November 2017. The dance group was coordinated by the *kana si* U Win Hlaing, and the music ensemble by the *hsaing saya* Myanmar Pyi Kyauk Sein.

evolutions. The sound progressively increases in speed, until the ensemble switch to the fast *bein maung* music.

The performance of *myin hkin* introduces *bein maung* – the exciting and driving sound that I have previously discussed in Sections 3.3.2 and 6.2.4. In this case, *bein maung* is performed to underline the strength and spiritual power associated with *naga* creatures. To dismiss the *thaik* spirit, the *hsaing* ensemble performs the *sidaw* music. As sometimes in the *zat pwe*, the *sidaw* signals the conclusion of the dance performance; however, in this case it indicates the higher status of the mythical serpents.¹⁴⁵

6.4.3 Moving naga: a semiotic analysis of a group spirit possession

The dance of a *naga* spirit is characterised by iconic movements. The dancer stretches their arms and hands over their heads, overlapping the two hands, and then starts to sway the arms, mimicking the bending movements of a snake (Figure 6.17).

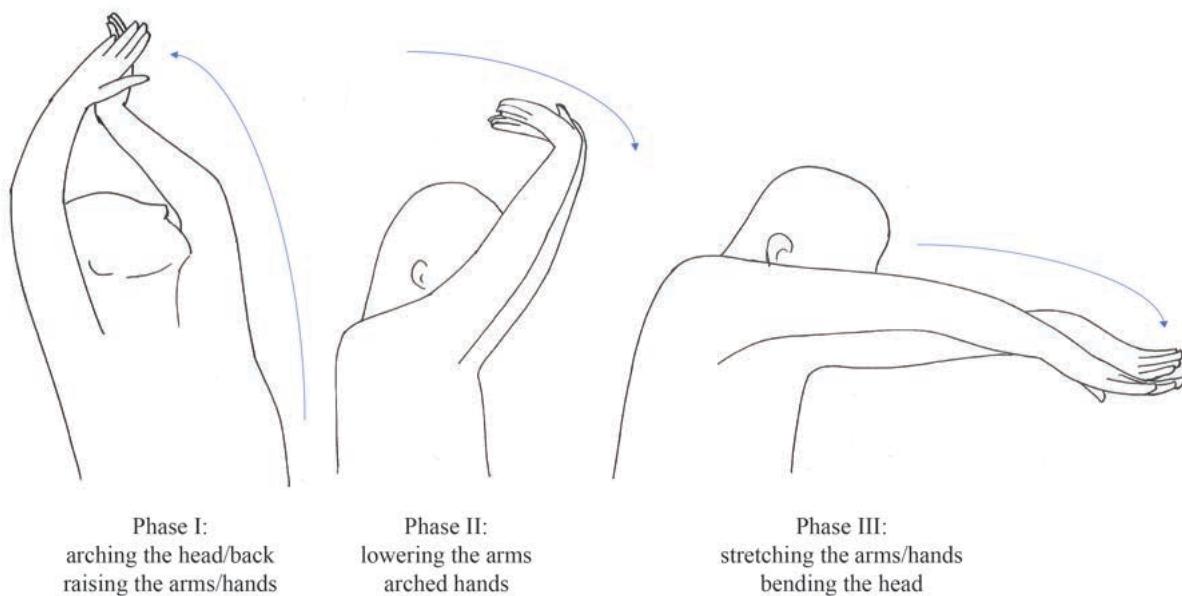


Figure 6.17 Phases of the naga pat dance.

This dance movement is referred to as *naga pat* – ‘hand movement like a coiled serpent’ (Ministry of Culture 2001:60). Because the movements are not standardised, it is *poun san*. The gesture iconically mimics the movements associated with the mythical serpents.

¹⁴⁵ However, the performance of *sidaw* as a conclusion for *naga thaik* spirits does not seem to be a constant, and depends on the performance style of different *hsaing* groups.

Probably due to this relative freedom in the mimetic dance, it is not uncommon to witness strong emotional responses in the participants: the power of these spirits is such that the devotees are literally overwhelmed by it. On more than one occasion I witnessed the music reaching its peak with *bein maung*, and the possessed devotee(s) dropping to the floor, apparently unconscious, keeping their arms stretched, rolling in imitation of a *naga*, their movements seemingly completely reflexive. *Hsaing* music plays a pivotal role in supporting *naga* possession among the devotees. It is the *nat hsaing* sound that determines when the strong spirit possession experience is over.

The attached [Video 6.8](#) shows a group of women dancing and embodying Naga Medaw. I took the video in March 2018 in Pathein Gyi, a locality 10 kms east of Mandalay. The *pwe* unorthodoxly took place in a monastery compound: no meat or alcohol were used as *kadaw pwe*, the offering for the spirits; the abbot of the monastery was present (while monks in general are prevented from attending any form of performance). The *nat kadaws* referred to it as an “*ahlu nat kana pwe*” – a *nat kana pwe* with a Buddhist donation (*ahlu*) connotation. Probably for this reason, the coming-into-presence of spirits considered closer to Buddhism (as the *naga thaik*) had more extreme consequences than usual.

The powerful *thaik* spirit comes-into-presence when the *nat kadaw* takes the *naga pat* position at [00:05]. At this point, the *hsaing* ensemble starts playing the sound *way lar*: on the *way lar* rhythmic cycle, the singer and melodic section perform *Aung Hkyin Shit Par*, a song about the Buddha’s eight glorious victories. Following these sounds, all the dancing participants take the typical *naga pat* dance position.¹⁴⁶ They keep moving around the ritual area with their eyes closed, assisted by their family. At [01:16] the ensemble starts performing *myin hkin*. As the intensity of the music grows, more and more women get possessed. Some of them collapse on the ground, and start rolling as the mythical serpent, keeping their arms outstretched. At [01:35] the ensemble slowly switches to *bein maung*: sound and speed increase considerably, as does the effect on the dancers. At [01:55] one of the possessed dancers spat some milk (an offering for the *naga thaik*) into the palm of a devotee: the woman immediately starts to swing, showing signs of possession, and joins the rest of the group rolling on the floor. The singer intensifies the event, making a long cry, and then shouting to the spirit: ‘Myu ba Paya, myu ba Paya!’ – ‘Please enjoy, enjoy, oh Venerable!’. Compared to these dancers, the *nat kadaw* is controlled and aware. However, he does not seem to be in control of the whole situation. At [02:20] he crosses the dancing

¹⁴⁶ One of the women, however, keeps dancing the Shan (one of the main ethnic minorities in Burma) *ozi* dance associated with Soun Moun Hla – a spirit of a Shan Buddhist saint lady invoked right before the *naga thaik*. The cult of Soun Moun Hla is particularly vibrant in Upper Myanmar. Her figure is somehow similar to Myan Nan Nwe: for this reason, Soun Moun Hla is sometimes performed in succession with Myan Nan Nwe and Naga Medaw, for whom *naga* sound and dance are required. However, the coming-into-presence of Soun Moun Hla includes the performance of Shan *ozi* (a kind of long drum typical of Shan ethnic groups) dance and music, as for any other Shan spirits. The fact that some devotees associate it with a *naga* is a clear sign of how even defined figures can become confused and blurred.

area and reaches for the tray that holds the offering milk: he takes some in his mouth and then spits the milk over the group of possessed devotees – to encourage an even stronger spirit manifestation. At [03:03] the *hsaing saya* gives the signal to change to the *sidaw* sound. As soon as the ensemble stops playing the *bein maung* sound and starts dismissing the spirit, the devotees' dance slows down. While the music progressively comes to a halt, the singer exclaims: 'Kye net daw mu ba Paya' – 'Please, be satisfied, oh Venerable', an invitation to the *naga thaik* to leave the bodies of the devotees. As the music stops completely, the dancers begin to regain consciousness: those around help them to recover from the intense experience by bringing them water and fanning them.

The peculiarity of this example lies in the large number of dancers involved and in the modalities of spirit embodiment. Initially, only three dancers show evident signs of spirit possession. As the performance progresses, as the intensity of the sound and dance grows, their number doubles. The moment when one of the possessed dancers spits milk on one of the seated devotee's palms, dragging her into the possession dances, indicates a modality of "transmitting" the presence of the spirit. In this group of devotees, spirit embodiment happens as a chain reaction. The mimetic sound of the *hsaing* and the dance of the *nat kadaw* initially trigger the coming-into-presence of Naga Medaw; once the process starts, it cannot be stopped while the music continues, and the spirit jumps from body to body. Each new spirit embodiment becomes itself a signal to the other participants: it reinforces the idea that the *naga thaik* spirit has come to join the ceremony with all her power.

These events can be explained as a development of a semiotic process. The experience of the initial indexical signs (*nat kadaw* dance and *hsaing* sound) linked to Naga Medaw (the semiotic object) makes the *thaik* spirit come-into-presence (in semiotic terms, the interpretant). The *naga* spirit person manifests herself through the dancing bodies of the devotees, who perform the *naga pat* gesture. In this way, the coming-into-presence of Naga Medaw becomes itself an additional indexical dance sign. This is experienced by other participants, who in turn embody the *naga* spirit, becoming themselves, signs. This process is potentially infinite. It can be associated with the idea of an infinite chain of semiosis (Eco 1993:101). Turino describes this process as a semiotic 'chaining', or 'train of thought':

Semiosis involves a type of chaining process through time in which the interpretant at one temporal stage becomes the sign for a new object at the next stage of semiosis, creating a new interpretant which becomes the next sign in the next instant, ad infinitum until that "train of thought" is interrupted by another chain of thought, or by arriving at a belief or conclusion.
(Turino 1999:223)

The following diagram (Figure 6.18) conveys this process.

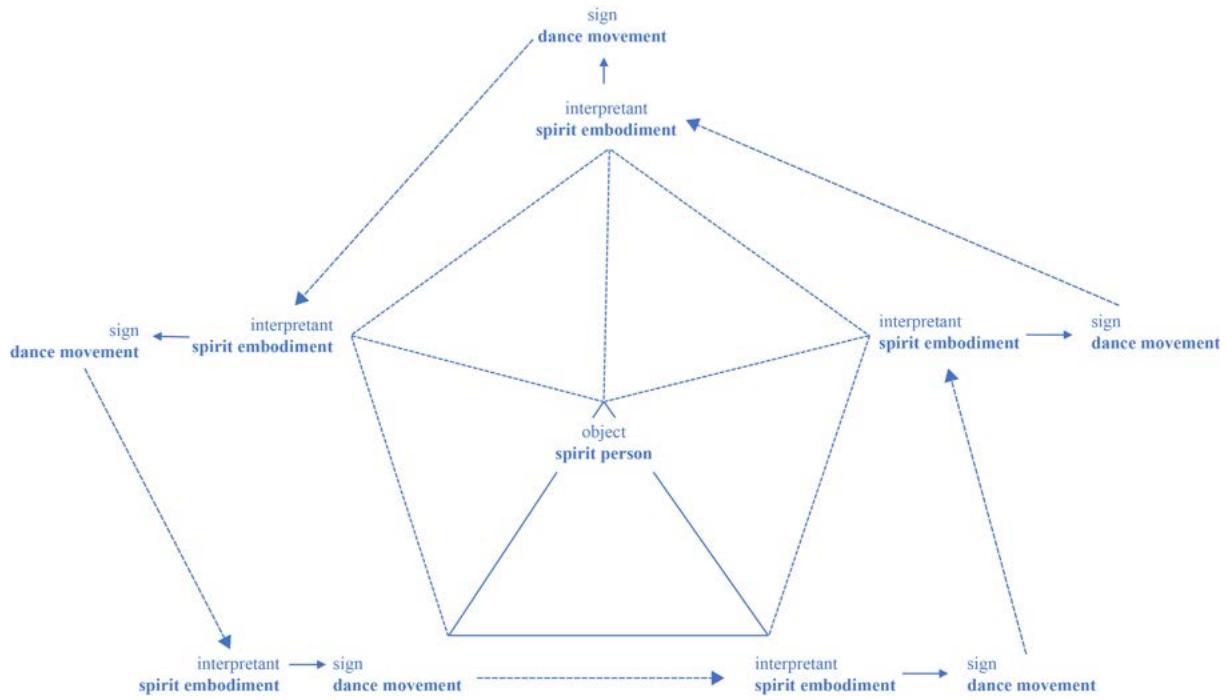


Figure 6.18 Infinite semiotic chain in group spirit embodiment.

The process is facilitated by the performance of other ritually effective signs, which could be defined as “reinforcements”. When the possessed woman (a dancing sign for Naga Medaw) spits the milk (another sign indicating the *thaik* spirit) into the hand of the seated devotee, the latter cannot resist the combination of the various elements of the mimetic performance: emotionally overwhelmed, she loses consciousness and joins the possession dances. This resonates with what Judith Becker describes as ‘sensual overload’, or ‘overdrive’ of the Autonomic Nervous System:

Unlike meditation, [...] trancing in religious contexts draws on emotion, depends on emotion, and stimulates emotion through sensual overload: visual, tactile and aural. In trancing contexts, the ANS seems in overdrive. (Becker 2004:66)

An investigation of “trance” from a cognitive standpoint is beyond the scope of this work. The process I presented in my analysis can be quite useful in understanding those experiences of spirit possession/trance dance involving more than one performer. The idea of an infinite and continuously self-renewing set of semiotic products can explain and help analyse the behaviour of a group of possessed dancers – for example, the Balinese *bebute* (Becker 2004:82-86), or the performance of Javanese *jaranan* (Groenendaal 2008).

6.5. Conclusions

I began this chapter with a quote from my friend and research participant Htoo Zaw. When he said these words to me, we were sitting with other friends in a restaurant, not too long after the *pwedaw* for the *nat* Ma Ma Oo was over. Htoo Zaw had danced there (Figure 1.5), but instead of washing off his makeup right after, he decided to keep it on for a while. For the rest of the day, he kept acting ‘more girlish than usual’ (his own words). On that day of March 2018, I started to think about the power of mimesis in *nat* performances: how the combination of bodily movement and instrumental sound ‘manifests divine beings and powers in the human world’ (Wong 2001:5), and how its effects on the bodies of the performers can sometimes last beyond the time and space limits of the ceremony.

My experience with Htoo Zaw raised a number of issues in regard to spirit possession. Despite his young age, he is rapidly accumulating knowledge of the *nat kadaws* life and skills. As a professional spirit dancer, Htoo Zaw is fully aware of the meanings behind the dance movements and musical sounds. On the other hand, the same knowledge and awareness is not necessary for a *nat* devotee. But if the participants are not necessarily aware of the *nat kana pwe*’s networks of meanings, how can mimetic performances be effective – sometimes to the point of facilitating a *real* spirit possession? The ritual meanings behind musics, dances, and ritual actions remain quite obscure even to those who actively participate in the *pwe*. The performance of ritual acts is usually guided by the *nat kadaw*: s/he instructs the participants in what has to be done, and how. One day I witnessed disoriented devotees presenting a *kadaw pwe* (offering tray) with the wrong offerings to the embodied *nat*: the spirit would turn them away with amused contempt and indicate to them the offering they were supposed to present. Ritual acts seem to be effective not because people *know why*, or even *how to perform them*, but because *they perform them* – possibly repeating actions they have been seeing performed by their parents (family tradition), or presently imitating the spirit medium. The notion of indexicality that Kreinath (2006) borrows from Peirce is exactly about this.

On more than one occasion I have witnessed mediums guiding inexpert dancing devotees, demonstrating which mimetic gesture they should be performing: after a while, even clumsy dancers would experience the presence of spirits in their bodies. It appears that one need not be completely aware of the meanings of mimesis to experience its power. Considering the agency of the spirits, a *nat* or a *thaik* will enter and manifest him/herself through the body of a human when s/he decides to do so, even though the human is not aware of who s/he is, and how to perform. However, this situation seems to happen quite rarely in *nat kana pwes* (see Section 2.2). But therefore, how can we distinguish between real and non-real spirit possession? From a semiotic point of view, real or fake performances do not constitute a problem. The presence of truths or lies in a semiotic process does not change the behavioural response: as Eco (1993:89) explained, ‘the semiotic functioning of [the liar’s] behaviour can be analysed

irrespective of the fact that he is actually lying'. In this sense, a semiotic approach to spirit possession also provides an answer to the vexing dilemma: Is a person really possessed, or is s/he just faking it?

The meanings expressed through mimetic performances are not written in stone. They do not necessarily remain fixed in time and space, but transform according to the needs of the community. In *nat kana pwes*, figures and histories of spirits are sometimes overlapping and contradictory; sounds and gestures might vary according to the musicians or the spirit mediums, who try to meet the requests of the devotees. How, and to what degree these idiosyncrasies and changes happen will be the object of Section 7.2. "Tradition" should be considered not as monolithic, but rather as a continuously changing process. Does the semiotic approach that I have outlined in the present chapter fit with such dynamic ideas of change and transformation? In ethnomusicology, semiotics has usually been considered a linguistic approach to music analysis, and has been accused of looking at music as a static product rather than performative and a process (Stone 2008:84-85). However, as Turino (2014:186) explains, one of the characteristics of Peircean theories is that semiotic processes are embedded in the life of individual and social selves. Peircean approach privileges the experience of the world and the idiosyncratic effects that such experiences have on the selves (Section 5.3). For these reasons, I believe that an analysis grounded on a Peircean semiotic approach can account for the changes happening; in the world of Burmese performers and devotees, to Burmese performing arts practices – and to the network of meanings to which these are linked.

7. ‘The bag of the fool’: continuities and changes in *nat kana pwe* performances.

Nat hsaing playing depends on the *nat kadaw* or on the donor, I have to play everything. *Nat hsaing* playing is like a ‘bag of the fool’.

Yelin Bo, Yangon, 16 December 2017

2013, early morning of an October day. I am at the famous *kana si* U Win Hlaing’s house. I am sitting and chatting with the musicians of Kyi Lin Bo’s ensemble, waiting for the ceremony to start. *Saya* U Ohn Htay, with whom I have been studying the basics of the *hne* (Burmese shawm), wants to show the others my progresses. He hands me his instrument and encourages me to play the song *Than tayar tay shin* (also known as *sinewa*), from the court *kyo* repertoire. Our classes normally take place in my apartment, far away from prying eyes. I do not feel ready to perform in front of an audience. Trying to overcome my shyness, I perform the parts of the song U Ohn Htay has been teaching me, but rather badly. When I am done, the musicians laugh and jest with me. They joke with my *hne saya*: ‘Now we’ve got him, you can go!’, laughing loudly. The ceremony starting saves me from more embarrassing moments: the musicians begin to play, and soon after, the *nat kadaws* begin to dance. Filming from behind my camera, I feel safe. The ceremony proceeds as expected.

During the dance of the *nat* Popa Medaw, I lift my head from the notes I have been taking. I recognise the notes of the song *Than thayar* ringing out from the melody performed by the *kyi waing* (gong circle) and *hne*. U Ohn Htay and the rest of the musicians are looking at me with smiles on their faces. The performance of the court song does not seem to disturb the ritual dances. Embodying the ogress of Popa, the *nat kadaw* keeps dancing as if nothing has happened. When the song is complete, the musicians switch back to the regular *nat* sounds repertoire.

As he would explain to me later, U Ohn Htay wanted to show me a more elaborate version of the court song he was teaching me: when he began to play it, he was immediately followed by the gong circle. This episode is significant: it demonstrates the fluidity characterising the repertoires performed by the *nat hsaing*. Even *Than thayar*, a piece belonging to the court repertoire and essential learning for all students, can be adeptly included in the sounds of a spirit ceremony, without distorting the ritual meanings. The song was performed by the two melodic instruments only, without vocal part, in a moment of the ritual dances when the contribution of the rhythmic section is minimum. The fact that U Ohn Htay decided to insert the song at that specific moment is not accidental. The dance of Popa Medaw already requires the performance of the court song *Nawarat ko thwe*: the musicians simply switched the

piece that they would normally play, with another one. Despite being more or less fixed, the sound architecture of a *nat kana pwe* can be flexed, sometimes including musical pieces belonging to extremely different repertoires.

Conversation with Burmese performers and further observations of ritual performances have confirmed this idea: a *nat kana pwe* celebration is not characterized by just one musical genre or repertoire. *Nat hsaing* music is not unvarying and monolithic: in a celebration, the ensemble must play those songs necessary for the proper invitation and satisfaction of the *nats*, but at the same time the music must entertain the participants and the spirits. To do so, Burmese court songs and modern Burmese popular songs can be re-used and re-shaped, side by side with the ritual repertoires. In performance, the borders between these repertoires are not really defined. This resonates with the Khmer *coul roup* spirit ceremonies. Considering the fluid exchange of repertoires among genres in Cambodia, Billeri has recently noted that:

Some songs are required by the spirits on behalf of the medium to amuse themselves after the interrogation phase. These songs can even be borrowed from other repertoires [...]. (Billeri 2019:137)

Similarly, Cathy Tun (2013:13) underlines the role of audiences in the transformations of Burmese *hsaing waing* practices: she explains that, while performances (should) follow the tradition, changes and inventions are added to fulfil the audience's requests. Looking at these processes in the context of the *nat hsaing* can provide us with an account of how *nat kana* practices are undergoing transformation. Despite the concept of tradition often being that of an immovable snapshot of cultural practice, in practice, as demonstrated here, tradition is not immutable. It evolves according to the time, place, and the requirements of the community, sometimes creating dissent between older and younger generations, but eventually always remodelling itself. The idea of a continuously changing tradition is outlined in the seminal studies of Shils (1983[1981]) and Handler and Linnekin (1984) in the social sciences, and is reflected in several ethnomusicological theories (see Bakan 2007; MacLachlan 2008; Nettl (2005[1983]; Spiller 2004; Wong 2001). As this chapter explains, the case of Burmese *nat kana pwe* and *nat hsaing* represent a good example of such a dynamic and fluid idea of tradition.

This chapter is divided into three parts. First, I address the two Burmese concepts associated with the Western idea of tradition, *thamazin* and *nat lanzin*. Based on my encounters and discussions with *hsaing* masters and *nat* dancers, I describe the implications of the Burmese idea of the master-pupil relationship. The second part consists of a musicological analysis of the different repertoires performed in the rituals of the *kana si* U Win Hlaing. Based on my discussions with musicians, I distinguish between traditional and new spirit songs, and describe the incorporation of court and popular songs into the *nat hsaing* ritual practice. Finally, I describe the journey that one famous spirit song has made from

its ritual setting in the 1970s, to its transformation into a popular song in Burma's urban electronic music and rap scene.

7.1. A fluid tradition: *thamazin* and *nat lanzin*

The Burmese concept of *thamazin* could be referred to as 'a live body of transmitted knowledge or wisdom, handed down from teacher to pupil, generation to generation'.¹⁴⁷ In Burmese music, it indicates the performance style (*mu*) of one specific master, including melodic variations and ornamentations that have become his distinctive sign, compositional choices, and stagecraft. The most typical form of musical transmission in Burma is represented by the master-pupil relationship, present in many musical cultures¹⁴⁸ as an oral/aural tradition approach. (Nettl 2005:294ff.) Knowledge is handed down orally from masters (*saya*) to pupils (*tabeih*): individually, different masters belong to different *thamazins* – which could be understood as "schools", or "different masters' lines", each with a different style; moreover, all masters' 'lines' belong to a more general idea of *thamazin* – which in this sense could be synonymous with what is generally understood as "tradition". However, one master's *thamazin* does not come from his position in a lineage of authoritative *sayas*, as a musician can learn from multiple *sayas* at the same time. The Burmese concept of *thamazin* presents a complexity that moves both synchronically and diachronically, including knowledge transmitted from old and new masters, each characterised by a different style, each considered equally "traditional". From these learning experiences with different masters, a musician eventually creates his own *thamazin*. As explained by my *hsaing* master Kyaik Sein:

Thamazin means only one [musical] line, but it can have [a] different style in ornamentation, details, every detail can be different to each other. [He demonstrates with the *pattala*, playing different versions of the same tune] [These are all] *thamazins*. [...] *Thamazin* means that a beginner can play [this part like this], but an expert can play [like this]. They have different ideas, but all those variations are *thamazin*. Every teacher has his own ideas. [...] [The variations] are [made] according to the teachers. After that you can add your own ideas.¹⁴⁹

In this sense, *thamazin* represents the culmination of a single musician's knowledge, built through constant confrontations and exchanges with other musicians. This multi-vocality and fluidity seems to

¹⁴⁷ From /thama:/ as in *sayathama*, 'knowledgeable master', and /azin/ as in *azinahset*, 'unbroken line' (John Okell, personal communication, 2018). However, the term seems to be generally understood by the Burmese more in the sense of a fixed sequence, especially in regard to the theatrical performing arts.

¹⁴⁸ The most famous case is probably represented by Indian discipleship, where 'the master becomes the complete role model for the disciple not only in terms of the transmission of musical understanding and the technical means to perform it, but also in terms of moral and ethical integrity, self-realization, vision, and personal depth.' (Kippen 2008:127) See also Bakan (1999:281ff.) for a discussion about discipleship and transmission in Bali.

¹⁴⁹ Kyaik Sein, Yangon, 22 January 2018.

be distinctive of the Burmese case. Wong (2001) explains that the Southeast Asian paradigm of the “all-knowing teacher” and “submissive disciple” originated in classical India: in Thailand, ‘The bond between *khruu* [master, from the Sanskrit word ‘guru’] and their *luuk sit* [disciple, from the Sanskrit word ‘shishya’] is deep and often life-long.’ (ivi:63). In Cambodia, a similar relationship with the master is formalised through a ceremony called *sampeah kru*. Giuriati (2003:74) writes that ‘alla fine di questa cerimonia il maestro annoda un filo di cotone bianco al polso dell’allievo, accettando il proprio ruolo di *guru*'.¹⁵⁰ Compared to these examples, Burmese learners are pupils, but not disciples. As a pupil, one is bound to more than one teacher, and one pays respect to all of them (*saya kadaw pwe*). To quote *saya* Kyauk Sein again:

I pay respect to the teachers, whenever I pray to the Buddha, and whenever I go inside the *hsaing waing*, I think about my teachers, because thanks to them I can play like this!¹⁵¹

Once becoming a master, the learner retains all the knowledge accumulated over years of experience, and can easily shift from style to style, from *thamazin* to *thamazin*, when needed. Similarly, reporting the words of Locéng, his *gendér wayang* master in Bali, Indonesia, Gray explains that, to become able to improvise and compose, ‘you must have many experiences’ (Gray 2011:229). He also explains that, in the teaching-learning experience, ‘both teacher and pupil are essential’ (ivi:230): the pupil asks the teacher to transmit his knowledge, and the pupil gives his knowledge to the teacher, ‘making the teacher clever’. This interdependence between pupils and masters is also present in Burma. When I asked Kyauk Sein if one master’s *thamazin* was more important than another to him, and if he felt he belonged to the line of one master only, he replied:

if you know many styles it is better. All this is my *mu*, it can be [derived of] four or five *mus*, it's better. [...] I must know whose [master's] this or that style is. I just keep everything. [...] Depending on the place, I play in one style or another. For example, I studied with Sein Kyi Mya, and he taught the same song to me and another student. Sein Kyi Mya knows my ability, and teaches me a difficult version, because [he knows] I can take it. To the other one, he gives the easy version. The same teacher gives two versions – an easy one and a difficult one.¹⁵²

Compared to musicians, transmission of knowledge among spirit mediums appears to be more rigid. The master-pupil relationship resembles more clearly the already mentioned Indian/Southeast Asian paradigm. Brac de la Perrière (2009c) speaks of “schools” of possession, expressed in terms of *nat damázin* [*thamazin*], intended as ‘the obligation to perpetuate [a] master’s way and a particular set of knowledge’. She writes:

¹⁵⁰ [At the end of this ceremony the master ties a cotton thread to the pupil’s wrist, accepting his role of *guru*]

¹⁵¹ Kyauk Sein, Yangon, 22 January 2018.

¹⁵² Kyauk Sein, Yangon, 22 January 2018.

belonging to the following of a particular master involves a characteristic style of spirit possession and of dealing with what is involved in a ceremony to the thirty-seven, as well as a particular corpus of knowledge and practices concerning the *nats*. [...] it is often said that a young medium should not switch from one master to another and should not engage in practices that are not those of his master. He should perpetuate those of his master. (Brac de la Perrière 2009c:288)

In my ethnographic experience, mediums referred to this concept as *nat lanzin* (lit. ‘the path [*lan*] of the spirit’), and only rarely as *nat thamazin*. As a young *nat kadaw* still in the process of learning, Htoo Zaw explained to me that while his main master remains U Win Hlaing, he also learns from other senior *nat kadaws* – and only some of them belong to U Win Hlaing’s *nat lanzin*. However, whenever he saw something inappropriate in the dances of another “school” of *nat kadaws*, he would comment, with a perplexed face, ‘this is not correct, it is not *nat lanzin*’. On another occasion, I was invited to dance the *chawt pwe* in Yangon, in the *nat kana* ceremony of a group of mediums I was not really familiar with. While I was getting dressed, one of the *kana si*’s assistants came to me, explaining that I will dance for the Nine spirits, and lists them in the order. As I was not familiar with this practice, I ask her why these nine spirits in particular. ‘This is our *nat lanzin*’ – she replies, then adding in English – ‘Tradition’. *Nat kadaws* seems to have a strict obligation to perpetuate a master’s *nat lanzin* – as noted by Brac de la Perrière. However, the learning process also involves the observation and assimilation of practices belonging to different schools – but not necessarily perpetuated.

A good *nat hsaing saya* has a wider knowledge of the *nat* music and can thus adapt easily to groups of *nat kadaws* with a different *nat lanzin* (1.1). However, *nat hsaing* musicians are limited in their performance by the *nat lanzin*: they must follow the indications and the ritual prescriptions of the group of mediums they are playing for. However, the mediums also adapt to the style of the *hsaing* group they are performing with. Neither *nat hsaing* musicians nor *nat* dancers are fully competent in each other’s field. In August 2018, when I was in Taungbyone conducting my final interviews, I was waiting for the *hsaing saya* Yelin Bo to meet me at the place of the *kana si* U Kyaw Soe Moe. As Yelin Bo was late, I begin to ask the *kana si* and his attendants some questions – mostly, the title of the popular songs they played in a ceremony a few months before. U Kyaw Soe Moe, in evident distress for not knowing the answers to the questions I was asking him about music, replied ‘I am the *nat saya*, Yelin Bo is the *thachin saya*!’. During my fieldwork, I have met only one *hsaing* musician who was also a *nat* dancer. The roles of *nat kadaws* and *nat hsaing* musicians are complementary: they need each other to create an effective performance that satisfy the requests of the donors. This includes the performance of repertoires and genres coming from contexts different to that of the *nat kana pwe*.

7.2. Continuity and change in *nat hsaing* music repertoires

In one of our encounters, the *hsaing saya* Yelin Bo and I discussed how the *nat hsaing* practice is constituted by a mix of different genres and repertoires. Using a Burmese metaphor, he explained that the *nat hsaing* practice can be compared to the ‘bag of the fool’ (*ayu lwe eiq*) – a bag from which literally anything can come out. Performing *nat hsaing*, he explains, means that the musicians are not free to play whatever they want: they have to be aware of which *nat lanzin* that specific group of *nat kadaws* belong to, and play accordingly to support the spirit dances; moreover, the musicians must be ready to respond immediately to the requests of the *nat kadaw*. According to Yelin Bo, this represents today the most difficult aspect of the *nat hsaing*: to be able to ‘play every single piece immediately in front of the audience, immediately we have to do that, like a flash’. Yelin Bo is aware that for all these reasons, changes have taken place in the *nat hsaing* practice over the years. He explains that:

these kinds of traditions are changing. But the *nat lanzin*, the tradition is still there, they change [just] sometimes [in some parts]. For example, you know the *nat* U Ba Nyo Gyi, when he comes, we sing a pop song! This is quite far removed, we sing it because the *nat kadaw* want to sing that, or maybe it depends on the donors. We sing songs which are very far removed, or not related [to the *nat*], pop songs. So, it’s changing like this. But I want to stick to the tradition, to the culture of these *nat lanzin* and not going away from it. But sometimes I have to follow them and play these kind of pop songs.¹⁵³

A good *nat kana* ceremony consists in a ritual performance where humans and spirits can enjoy their time together, as part of the same community (Section 3.2) and sharing the benefits of their friendship and relation (2.2). For this reason, not only ritual sounds, but also popular songs are part in the ritual performance, without because of this distorting the ritual meanings (5.1).

In order to discuss such aspects of the *nat hsaing* performances, I focus on the performance of the Yangon *kana si* U Win Hlaing’s ceremonies. The ritual performances of these group of dancers and musicians are particularly suited to discuss changes and transformations in the *nat kana* ritual practice. Several urban spirit mediums today include not only *nats* in their ceremonies, but also figures more closely associated with Buddhist values, in an attempt to escape the widespread prejudices associated with the *nat* cult, and to attract urban middle-class crowds (1.2). The case of U Win Hlaing is emblematic. As Brac de la Perrière writes:

A brilliant dancer, [U Win Hlaing] has developed a way to perform ceremonies that is more like a show than a ritual. Building on the fact that the same practices are involved in performances involving the thirty-seven *nats* (*nat kana bwe*) and other performing arts (the aforementioned *zat*

¹⁵³ Yelin Bo, Yangon, 16 December 2017.

pwe), he tends to highlight the aesthetic aspects of performance rather than the lively ritual exchanges between devotees and spirits that can make spirit possession ceremonies unpredictable. This aesthetic dimension of his practice is very much in favour among the current urban public [...]. (Brac de la Perrière 2011:175-76)

As the ritual practice adapts to fulfil the expectations and values of the urban public, so does the music supporting it. The *nat hsaing* ensemble lead by the *hsaing saya* Kyi Lin Bo regularly performs at U Win Hlaing's ceremonies. I first met this group in 2013, in Yangon, during my first fieldwork trip: since then, I have developed a friendly relationship with some of the musicians of the ensemble (especially with *saya* U Ohn Htay, who taught me *hne* for a few months), which also resulted in discussions related to their performance.

During my talks with the musicians, it emerged that the *nat chin* (spirit song) repertoire is intended as the main support for the possession dance of the medium: this repertoire presents mandatory aspects strictly connected to the ritual performance. Such mandatory aspects are represented mostly by rhythmic cycles: the rhythmic part seems to be less subject to change than the melodic part (Section 4.2). Following this idea, the songs identified as *nat chin* are distinguished in *yoya nat chin* – ‘traditional spirit songs’, where both rhythmic and melodic lines are those considered “traditional” – and modern *nat chin* (*hkit paw nat chin*) which present a hybrid character, usually a “traditional” rhythmic line supporting a new melodic line. Both these *nat chin* sub-genres are performed in the current ritual practice. Additionally, court songs and popular songs might also be included for the dance of some spirits, re-shaped to fit with the *nat hsaing* musical practice (Table 7.1).

	Repertoire	
1	Traditional <i>nat</i> songs (<i>yoya nat chin</i>)	Traditional rhythmic cycle Traditional melody and vocal part
2	Modern <i>nat</i> songs (<i>hkit paw nat chin</i>)	Traditional rhythmic cycle New melody and vocal part
3	Court songs	Rhythmic cycle of the <i>nat</i> sound Melody and vocal part of the song
4	Modern / urban songs (popular)	Modern rhythmic cycle Melody and vocal part of the song

Table 7.1 Repertoires of the *nat hsaing* musical practice.

Regarding the indications given by Burmese *nat hsaing* musicians, I frame my analysis in the seminal theories of Shils (1983) and of Handler and Linnekin (1984). These authors discuss what constitutes a tradition and how it is interpreted and transmitted. Shils explained that tradition is:

[...] the *traditum*, that which has been and is being handed down or transmitted. It is something which was created, was performed or believed in the past, or which is believed to have existed or to have been performed or believed in the past. (Shils 1983:13)

According to Shils (1983:13-14), “tradition” is not static. He specifies how traditions are likely to undergo some changes – in what he calls ‘a short chain of transmission’ – due to the ‘combination with other elements which change’ of a tradition’s ‘essential elements’ and their interpretation. Shils seems somehow to admit the existence of a sort of ‘immutable core’, transmitted more or less identically. Because of these ‘essential elements’, Handler and Linnekin (1984:274) critiqued Shils’ theories: ‘Since Shils recognizes that tradition changes incessantly, they argue, ‘it is surprising to find that his understanding of tradition depends nonetheless upon the notion of an unchanging, essential core. [...] He thereby perpetuates the naturalistic paradigm, which defines objects by specifying their temporal, spatial, and/or qualitative boundaries.’ Speaking against the ‘naturalistic paradigm’, Handler and Linnekin want to suggest that ‘tradition is always defined in the present’. According to this, ‘all spurious traditions are genuine’, the terms ‘spurious’ and ‘genuine’ being both inappropriate (ivi:288). More recently, and from an ethnomusicological perspective, Bakan (2007:27) has considered tradition as ‘a process of creative transformation whose most remarkable feature is the continuity it nurtures and sustains.’; similarly, Spiller (2004:xix) explains that traditional music is not ‘stuck in the past’, but it is something that ‘grows and changes’.

I believe that this concept of “continuously changing tradition” can be associated with the Burmese idea of *thamazin*. The concept of *thamazin* creates a flexible obligation for pupils to perpetuate the master’s way, and allows them to introduce their own interpretations, thus creating a new “line” that still belongs to what might be called a ‘general Burmese tradition’.¹⁵⁴ I subscribe to the concept of ‘continuously changing tradition’ and I describe the implications for *thamazin* that could be articulated in *nat kana pwe* performance practice, in an attempt to investigate those changes taking place today in the *nat hsaing* music.

In order to do so, I decided to rely on Shils’ concept of ‘endogenous factors’ producing changes in a tradition. According to Shils’ (1983:213) theory, endogenous changes can be defined as: ‘[...] changes which originate within the tradition and are carried out by persons who have accepted it.’ In the Burmese scenario, the source of changes in *nat hsaing* repertoires are the *nat hsaing* musicians and mediums themselves, who introduce changes so as to meet the expectations of the participants. After having discussed traditional *nat hsaing* repertoires, I focus on changes within tradition, looking at a modern *nat chin*: I consider the introduction of a modern spirit song in U Win Hlaing’s celebrations and the reasons behind the audience’s acceptance of it. Finally, I consider the incorporation of a song coming from a different repertoire (Burmese popular music) into the ritual context of the *nat pwe*.

¹⁵⁴ As Wong (2001:185-186) explains, regarding the Thai music performance context: ‘The only musicians who can innovate are [...] those most steeped in the tradition, who can manipulate repertoire in a masterful way – and their innovations become the new paradigm of tradition.’

However, this categorization is purely theoretical.¹⁵⁵ A Burmese musician would hardly consider Shils' 'endogenous factors', as he is immersed in that tradition's context. In the cases presented in this chapter, the dichotomy of traditional/modern represents only a speculative categorisation, as a continuous mutual penetration between musics of different genres and traditional and modern songs is already taking place. As Garfias writes:

There are in Burma today a number of traditional music styles, and even the line of demarcation between the traditional styles and modern popular music seems to merge into a kind of grey area in which these different traditions are mixed. (Garfias 1975a:4)

Despite being written more than forty years ago, Garfias' words still resonate today. In this extremely varied scenario of tunes, repertoires, spirits and rituals, *nat kana pwe* practice is keeping pace with the times, adapting and transforming, together with Burmese society.

7.2.1 “Traditional” nat hsaing repertoires: yoya nat chin

Elements of what Burmese consider *yoya nat chin* represent a mandatory part of the music played in a *nat kana pwe*. These songs incorporate specific melodies and rhythms, ritually linked to the spirit person who was incarnated during the ritual dances. *Yoya nat chins* have a primary role in the manifestation of a *nat* in the body of a spirit dancer – i.e. during spirit possession. These sounds take on a particular ritual importance during the invitation and the dismissal of a spirit: through sound, a *nat* comes-into-presence and joins the celebration, dancing with, and through, the spirit medium.

Nat chins constitute a sonic support to the distinctive elements of a dancing *nat*. Musical elements of each song work as indexical sounds of a spirit person: they make the spirit come-into-presence in the ritual space; also, the combination of different mimetic/indexical sounds indicates the relationship between different spirits, and link different figures to each other, by referring to their histories. The performance of this repertoire is strictly connected to the spirit person: through the music, the *nat hsaing* outlines the spirit person, also made manifest through the mimetic dance of the medium and other operating ritual indices (Section 5.3.1). One would expect ritual operators (mediums and musicians) to be aware of the performance's meanings and of the transformations that might affect them. However, this is not always the case.

I refer to single musical elements (rhythmic, melodic) of traditional songs because it is very rare to experience a full performance of *yoya nat chin* in today's *nat hsaing* practice. During interviews with the musicians and mediums, it emerged that there was a lot of confusion about what should be considered

¹⁵⁵ One should not forget that, as Nettl (2005:278) outlines, all societies experience different types of musical change to varying degrees.

“traditional” and what should not. Old official song anthologies are generally considered the most reliable sources of traditional Burmese music. According to Inoue (2014a:30ff.), at least two palm leaf manuscripts edited in the 19th Century include the lyrics of the Thirty-seven Nats’ songs;¹⁵⁶ different song anthologies do not include these songs, probably because the use of these songs was limited to *nat* ceremonies and rituals. However, current *nat chin* practice diverges from the literary sources of these song anthologies. Today, *nat* songs are still transmitted orally according to a master’s *thamazin*: in one encounter, the *nat kadaw* Kyaw Win Naing¹⁵⁷ and I discussed the spirit songs’ lyrics contained in one of the anthologies that I had brought with me. To his surprise, comparing these texts with the spirit songs’ lyrics performed in *nat kana pwes*, Kyaw Win Naing found that many parts are mixed; sometimes, an entire song intended for a spirit has been exchanged for another. Over the years, orally transmitted “old-fashioned” traditional spirit songs were replaced by more modern songs, which became very popular. *Hsaing* musicians cannot tell who composed them anymore: sometimes, these pieces are regarded as *yoya* (traditional). When I addressed these matters with the musicians, some explained that it is not necessary to play the full “traditional” spirit song during a *nat kana pwe*, and that usually only the rhythmic part remains closer to the *yoya* ritual part.

Some musicians specified that the original sounds can be found only at the celebration of national festivals (*nat pwedaw*). Bringing up an example, they referred to the music performed for the festival of Shweguni for the *nat* Ko Gyi Kyaw by the *do waing* ensemble (Section 6.2.2). According to the musicians, the music played by this ensemble *must* remain traditional. In particular, the *do* drum part cannot be changed at all, otherwise the spirit of Ko Gyi Kyaw will not come out of his drum to dance: only when the drum resonates with his favourite sound will the spirit join the celebration. The sound of the *do*, and the drum itself, are powerful indices for the *nat* Ko Gyi Kyaw. Consequently, the *nat hsaing* music performed for Ko Gyi Kyaw at urban ceremonies tries to mimic and replicate the sound of the Shweguni festival: the *nat hsaing* drums part, then, is regarded as the original, traditional sound of the *nat*. Despite what the musicians say, I am convinced that this national festival’s performance context could not remain untouched by change. The presence of the *chauk lon pat*, for example, probably represents a recent addition. As I specified at the beginning of this chapter, the model of tradition I am thinking of here is everchanging and continuously re-negotiated.

Similar rhythmic cycles can be found in the music supporting the danced manifestation of other *nats* too. Burmese musicians indicate these cycles as the most “traditional” part of a spirit song – but they need to be constantly adapted and re-modelled for the necessities of a live performance, and

¹⁵⁶ *Thachin Gaunzin Pouk-yei Hmat-su-daw* (1870) and *Maha Gita Meidani Kyan* (1881). The editing of song anthologies might be a reaction to the changing 19th Century historical context, when ‘a growing awareness of the world outside Burma inspired the effort to consolidate Burmese national music’ (Inoue 2014a:178).

¹⁵⁷ Kyaw Win Naing, Yangon, 21 December 2017.

according to the different performance idioms of individual musicians. To try to establish which form is the original one can be quite challenging, and not necessarily useful for understanding the ritual better. In fact, neo-traditional *nat chin* can be performed to support the possession dances just as much as supposed “traditional” spirit songs and maintain the same indexical function.

7.2.2 *Changes within the tradition: Shwe Do, Ngwe Do and the modern nat chins*

Although *yoya nat chins* present features which cannot be avoided, over the years, changes have, and still are, taking place. The vivid tradition of *nat kana pwe* has compelled famous *hsaing waing* players to compose modern *nat chins*. These new compositions are so well integrated in *nat hsaing* repertoire that musicians themselves cannot, in some cases, tell the difference between them and the traditional spirit songs repertoire. During my first fieldwork trip, when I started to understand that some songs were not exactly *yoya* (traditional), it took some effort to make the *hsaing* master Kyi Lin Bo understand what information I was after.

Modern *nat chin* are difficult to identify. The *hsaing* perform the songs seamlessly, so that the line between a *yoya* and a new composition is often impossible to recognize. Rhythmic cycles and melodies on which new songs are based are usually very close to the older ones – and if a famous composer is behind one of them, it is quite hard to tell the difference. In one interview¹⁵⁸ *saya* Sein Moot Tar told me that he is the creator of the modern *nat chin Do Ko Gyi Kyaw* because he wrote new lyrics and composed a new melodic line, based on what he thought was the ‘traditional *nat* sound’. However, soon after it found national fame in the 1970s, the *hsaing saya* found out that the song (i.e. lyrics and vocal part) which had inspired him was not “traditional” but had an author/composer – Sein Khin Maung. Since then, the *hsaing saya* have donated part of their income to the author’s heirs, as a form of acknowledgment of, and compensation for, copyright and royalties.

Modern spirit songs are so widespread that even expert musicians mistake them for traditional *nat* songs. According to the musicians I worked with, what distinguishes modern *nat chins* from traditional ones is the melodic line and the lyrics. In the *nat hsaing* (and in Burmese music in general) vocal and melodic parts are intrinsically linked to each other (Section 4.2.2). The shawm *hne* and the gong circle *kyi waing* usually follow the vocal part, although elaborating upon it, and improvising. When the *hsaing* performs a modern *nat chin*, it means that the singer, shawm and gong circle perform it; the rest of the ensemble (the drums) keep the rhythmic cycle characterising that *nat chin* and spirit. As for

¹⁵⁸ Sein Moot Tar, Mandalay, 12 June 2018.

the case of *yoya nat chins*, these new songs must have a ritual efficacy, and support the possession dance of the mediums.

[Video 7.1](#) shows the song for Ko Gyi Kyaw *Shwe Do, Ngwe Do* ('Golden Do, Silver Do') performed by the Kyi Lin Bo *hsaing*. In the very beginning of the video, U Win Hlaing, dancing as the *nat* Ko Gyi Kyaw, requests the song; the *hsaing saya* Kyi Lin Bo consequently operates a change in the rhythmic part, starting to play the *do* rhythmic cycle (Section 6.2.5).

The song occurs at the beginning of the final section of the Ko Gyi Kyaw *nat* dance. In the video, the introduction presents a metronomic nature: the big *pat ma* (suspended drum) and the drum circle strictly follow the beat marked by the *wa* clapper. When the melodic section instruments – gong circle and shawm – line up with the vocal part, the drum section clearly perform the *do* drum cycle including a triplet ([00:30], Transcription 6.4). Eventually, the drums return to the initial metronomic character. Despite these variations, the rhythmic part of the song is based on an adaptation of the traditional rhythmic cycle for the drunkard *nat*. My focus will now shift to the vocal part and the accompanying melodic line.

At about [00:25] the singer steps in, supported by the two melodic instruments. The gong circle *kyi waing* simply follows the melody of the vocal part. The player supports the singer by playing in octaves, respecting the pauses of the sung line and demonstrating very little deviation from the main melody, as showed in the following Transcription 7.1.

The lyrics of the new song (Table 7.2) make a direct reference to Shweguni village, providing the devotees a link to the celebration of the *nat* festival and singing the praises of the *nat*.

<i>Shwe do, ngwe do, do hso hma do</i>	Golden <i>do</i> drum, silver <i>do</i> drum, the <i>Do</i> is the thing for us
<i>Shwe Pakhan Gyi ka do</i>	The drum from the Golden [village of] Pakhan Gyi
<i>Shwe Pakhan Nge ka do</i>	The drum from the Golden [village of] Pakhan Nge
<i>Shweguni pwe oo do</i>	The <i>Do</i> that opens the Shweguni Festival
<i>Shwe do ngwe do [x2] hkaw</i>	Bring on the Silver <i>Do</i> , the Golden <i>Do</i>
<i>Do u hswe, pwe taing kyaw, Guni Nan ka toe lo pyaw</i>	[We] begin to play the <i>do</i> drum, [Ko Gyi Kyaw is] famous in every [<i>nat</i>] festival, [he] is the happiest when he comes to the Guni Palace
<i>Shwe kyaung takadaw htu teh Ko Gyi Kyaw [x2]</i>	Ko Gyi Kyaw the wonderful, the Donor of the Golden Monastery
<i>Guni Nan hma pyaw</i>	[He is] happy at Guni Palace
<i>Do oo hswe lo, do oo hswe lo pyaw</i>	[He is] happy [when] the drum is playing [x2]

Table 7.2 *Lyrics of the modern nat chin Shwe Do, Ngwe Do.*

To be effectively used during the celebration, the lyrics and melody of the new song must both adhere to the indexicality of the mimetic performance, presenting enough similarities with traditional *nat chins*. The use of existing melodies – a Burmese compositional technique called *alaik* (Inoue 2014a:96) – associated to new but meaningful lyrics, is clear in the first line of the song: the melodic pattern of *Shwe Do, Ngwe Do* (in the red box, Transcription 7.1) recalls a famous modern *nat chin* for the Taungbyone Brothers spirits,¹⁵⁹ *Shwe Byone, Ngwe Byone* ([Video 3.1](#), Section 3.2.1). Not only rhythmic cycles, but also melodic patterns draw on older songs.

¹⁵⁹ During my fieldwork, I could not verify the origin of this song. Some musicians ascribe it to Sein Moot Tar, but in interview (Mandalay, 12 June 2018) the *hsaing saya* did not claim authorship of this specific song.

The image shows musical notation for a piece titled "Shwe Do, Ngwe Do". The notation includes three staves: a vocal part, a "si (bell) wa (clapper)" part, and a "kyi waing (gong circle)" part. The tempo is marked as quarter note = 115. The vocal part starts at [00:18] and continues through several measures. The "si (bell) wa (clapper)" part consists of vertical strokes on a staff. The "kyi waing (gong circle)" part consists of horizontal strokes on a staff. There are red boxes highlighting specific sections of the vocal line and the gong circle part. The lyrics are written below the staffs. Measure [00:25] has a bracket under it labeled "3". Measure [00:35] has a red box around the vocal line. Measure [00:45] has a red box around the gong circle line. Measure [00:55] has a red box around the vocal line. Measure [00:65] has a red box around the gong circle line. Measure [00:75] has a red box around the vocal line. Measure [00:85] has a red box around the gong circle line. Measure [00:95] has a red box around the vocal line. Measure [00:105] has a red box around the gong circle line. Measure [00:115] has a red box around the vocal line. Measure [00:125] has a red box around the gong circle line. Measure [00:135] has a red box around the vocal line. Measure [00:145] has a red box around the gong circle line. Measure [00:155] has a red box around the vocal line. Measure [00:165] has a red box around the gong circle line. Measure [00:175] has a red box around the vocal line. Measure [00:185] has a red box around the gong circle line. Measure [00:195] has a red box around the vocal line. Measure [00:205] has a red box around the gong circle line. Measure [00:215] has a red box around the vocal line. Measure [00:225] has a red box around the gong circle line. Measure [00:235] has a red box around the vocal line. Measure [00:245] has a red box around the gong circle line. Measure [00:255] has a red box around the vocal line. Measure [00:265] has a red box around the gong circle line. Measure [00:275] has a red box around the vocal line. Measure [00:285] has a red box around the gong circle line. Measure [00:295] has a red box around the vocal line. Measure [00:305] has a red box around the gong circle line. Measure [00:315] has a red box around the vocal line. Measure [00:325] has a red box around the gong circle line. Measure [00:335] has a red box around the vocal line. Measure [00:345] has a red box around the gong circle line. Measure [00:355] has a red box around the vocal line. Measure [00:365] has a red box around the gong circle line. Measure [00:375] has a red box around the vocal line. Measure [00:385] has a red box around the gong circle line. Measure [00:395] has a red box around the vocal line. Measure [00:405] has a red box around the gong circle line. Measure [00:415] has a red box around the vocal line. Measure [00:425] has a red box around the gong circle line. Measure [00:435] has a red box around the vocal line. Measure [00:445] has a red box around the gong circle line. Measure [00:455] has a red box around the vocal line. Measure [00:465] has a red box around the gong circle line. Measure [00:475] has a red box around the vocal line. Measure [00:485] has a red box around the gong circle line. Measure [00:495] has a red box around the vocal line. Measure [00:505] has a red box around the gong circle line. Measure [00:515] has a red box around the vocal line. Measure [00:525] has a red box around the gong circle line. Measure [00:535] has a red box around the vocal line. Measure [00:545] has a red box around the gong circle line. Measure [00:555] has a red box around the vocal line. Measure [00:565] has a red box around the gong circle line. Measure [00:575] has a red box around the vocal line. Measure [00:585] has a red box around the gong circle line. Measure [00:595] has a red box around the vocal line. Measure [00:605] has a red box around the gong circle line. Measure [00:615] has a red box around the vocal line. Measure [00:625] has a red box around the gong circle line. Measure [00:635] has a red box around the vocal line. Measure [00:645] has a red box around the gong circle line. Measure [00:655] has a red box around the vocal line. Measure [00:665] has a red box around the gong circle line. Measure [00:675] has a red box around the vocal line. Measure [00:685] has a red box around the gong circle line. Measure [00:695] has a red box around the vocal line. Measure [00:705] has a red box around the gong circle line. Measure [00:715] has a red box around the vocal line. Measure [00:725] has a red box around the gong circle line. Measure [00:735] has a red box around the vocal line. Measure [00:745] has a red box around the gong circle line. Measure [00:755] has a red box around the vocal line. Measure [00:765] has a red box around the gong circle line. Measure [00:775] has a red box around the vocal line. Measure [00:785] has a red box around the gong circle line. Measure [00:795] has a red box around the vocal line. Measure [00:805] has a red box around the gong circle line. Measure [00:815] has a red box around the vocal line. Measure [00:825] has a red box around the gong circle line. Measure [00:835] has a red box around the vocal line. Measure [00:845] has a red box around the gong circle line.

Transcription 7.1 Transcription based on Video 7.1 of Shwe Do, Ngwe Do nat chin: vocal, metric, and gong circle parts.

Although U Win Hlaing commissioned a songwriter¹⁶⁰ to create the song for him, he still refers to *Shwe Do, Ngwe Do* as ‘my song’. This question of authorship is probably the reason why the gong circle (together with the shawm) plays in a simpler idiom if compared to the wider range of technical possibilities of the instrument: avoiding the usual elaborated melodic textures, and literally duplicating the main melody, the two melodic instruments bring the attention of the listeners to the vocal part and the lyrics – often sung by U Win Hlaing himself. The presence of the *do* drum cycle in the rhythmic part legitimises the new song. The *do* drum cycle is strictly connected with the drunkard *nat* (Section 6.2.5): every Ko Gyi Kyaw’s appearance on the stage, even the shortest, would feature this rhythm, because it is considered essential to this spirit manifestation. The innovative features of the song (vocal and melodic part) are brought back to an equilibrium using a clear reference to a well-known indexical element (the *do* drum rhythmic cycle), allowing the song to be considered as entirely and completely functional to the ritual. U Win Hlaing’s performance of Ko Gyi Kyaw *nat* without this song is inconceivable: performing *Shwe Do, Ngwe Do* he demonstrates his mastery of vocal skills, and he can claim to be directly contributing to the *nats’* tradition; recorded, broadcasted and sold on CDs and DVDs, the *kana si*’s voice reaches beyond the limits of his physical presence, travelling fast and far across the whole Burma, ensuring a larger audience and greater fame.

7.2.3 Performing court songs

Burmese court songs (*Thachin Gyi*, ‘Great Songs’) belonging to the classical canon of the Mahagita represent a repertoire largely performed by the *nat hsaing* ensemble. In *nat kana pwes*, *Thachin Gyi* are functional to the entertainment of the ritual participants: they take place any time after the *nat*’s invitation and dance are completed, and are generally performed on request of the dancing spirit medium and/or of the ceremony donor.

In some cases, however, a *Thachin Gyi* melody can be embedded into a *nat chin*, overlapping the rhythmic layer of the spirit song. The singer might decide to perform the song on the spur of the moment, immediately followed by the rest of the melodic section of the ensemble. The singer’s decision, however, is not arbitrary: the logic that drives the interpolation of *Thachin Gyi* into *nat chin* still belongs to the ritual logic of the ceremony. I have already provided an ethnographic example at the beginning of this chapter, however an additional example gives clarification.

¹⁶⁰ Mya Yaun Mye U Tin Win, who wrote the song around 2012. When I first asked U Win Hlaing about the genesis of the song however, he never mentioned the song-writer to me; instead, he gave me a VCD containing a remixed version of the song ([Video 7.6](#)) featuring him as the singer.

Ogre spirits (especially the ogress *thaik* Yekkha Medaw¹⁶¹ and the *nat* Popa Medaw) are a constant presence in urban *nat kana* ceremonies. Ogre beings are sounded by the *karaung*, a cycle characterised by the intense action of the barrel drums *sito*. During the *karaung*, the ogre walks around the dance area with great strides, heavily stomping his/her feet; his/her eyes are wide open, his/her arms are raised over their heads. The combination of sounds and movements transmits a sense of fearsome power.

Popa Medaw is a powerful yet refined ogress *nat*. Her appearance in the *nat kana* is accompanied by the performance of sounds belonging to the *Thachin Gyi* repertoire and the theatrical tradition. Her gentle and princely nature is first introduced by the court melody of the *pat pyo Thachin Gyi* song *Nawarat ko thwe*. Eventually, when her fearful ogress nature become manifest, the musicians shift to the intense *karaung* sound. [Video 7.2](#) shows the dance of the Mother of Popa. *Nat hsaing* musicians and the spirit dancer perform *Nawarat ko thwe*. At [01:50], also in response to an unexpected power-cut, they start shifting between different performance styles characterising the dance of a *minthamee*, the main female dancer in theatrical performances. The spirit dancer alternates between puppet dance (*yokhtay aka*) and variety show dance (*anyeint aka*) movements, following the musical cues given by the *hne saya*, temporarily guiding the ensemble. At [04:45] the ensemble begins to perform *karaung*. The Mother Popa reveals her real feral nature: she grabs her two peacock feather bundles, indicating her wildness. The devotees close in around her, feeding the vegetarian ogress offerings of fruits.

Nat hsaing performers consider only the second section of Popa Medaw's dance as part of the *nat chin* repertoire. They justify the performance of the court song *Nawarat ko thwe* due to the personality of the spirit: the song is good for this *nat* because it indicates the gentle nature of the Mother of Popa. They make an indexical association (Section 5.3.1) between the refined character of the music and that of the spirit princess' dance. From this, to the refined dancing style of the *minthamee*, is but a short step.

Nawarat ko thwe and *karaung* are accompanied by the *nayi si* and *soun si* metric forms respectively (Section 4.2.3). These forms broadly characterise specific court repertoires:¹⁶² they are

¹⁶¹ Burmese confusedly refer to ogre beings as *balu* or *yekkha*. This issue was already noted by Temple (1991:45), who wrote: ‘The modern Burmese *balú* seems to be a confused reference to the Indian Brahmanical and then Buddhist ogre (Sanskrit *rákshasa*, Pali *rakkhasa*, Burmese *yekkaik*), the malignant Buddhist superhuman being *yakkha* (Sanskrit *yaksha*) and some local pre-Buddhist sprite of the people’. See also Daniélou (1964:137, 309–310).

¹⁶² However, one should be careful when associating metrical forms with specific repertoires, as Inoue (2008, 2014a) underlines.

commonly found in the *yodaya* and *pat pyo* songs.¹⁶³ For this reason, it is not unreasonable to introduce the melody of a *yodaya* court song onto the *karaung* rhythmic cycle: the association is reinforced by the fact that both sounds share similar metric forms. [Video 7.3](#) shows one of these moments: after the invocation of an ogre spirit, the *nat hsaing* starts to perform *karaung*. The sound is initially performed by all the instrumental sections of the ensemble: it is recognisable in the rhythmic action of the large barrel drums *sito* and in the characteristic melody performed by gong circle and shawm; the two idiophones *si* and *wa* play in parallel, in the *soun si* metric form. At [00:21] the singer begins, singing the first line of the *yodaya* song *Myan man giri*.¹⁶⁴ The gong circle *kyi waing* promptly responds to the vocal cue, following the melody of the vocal part; the shawm *hne* also comes in on the same tune on the second repetition of the verse. In this case, the indexical association is doubled: as *Myan man giri* belongs to the *yodaya* repertoire, it makes perfect sense to perform it alongside a rhythmic sound (*karaung*) and a dance (the ogre of the *Yama Zatdaw*, the Burmese Ramayana) also connected with the style of the Siamese city of Ayutthaya. From a musical point of view, the song *Myan man giri* can be performed optionally in the *nayi si* and *soun si* metric cycle – in conjunction with *Nawarat ko thwe* and *karaung* sounds. The interpolation of different repertoires is based on the ritual logic of the ceremony, as well as on musical aesthetics. The choice is not random at all.

7.2.4 ‘Because we like that song!’: incorporating pop songs into nat kana pwe celebrations

The performance of possession dances does not represent the only occasions when the *nat hsaing* can play: after the *nat* leaves the body of a medium, the spirit is believed to take a seat among the devotees and enjoy the show that humans make in his/her honour. During this entertainment phase (*nat chawt-*, ‘to please the spirit’), people share and consume liquor, cigarettes and food that the spirit medium and the donors offer them. The ensemble plays songs for the dance of the *nat kadaw*, who demonstrates his/her skills; sometimes, the *nat kadaw* takes the microphone, and sings. In this context the *nat hsaing* can perform any kind of music. It is usually the participants who request that musicians play a particular famous song. Court songs and modern *nat chins* are frequently requested, alongside popular songs.

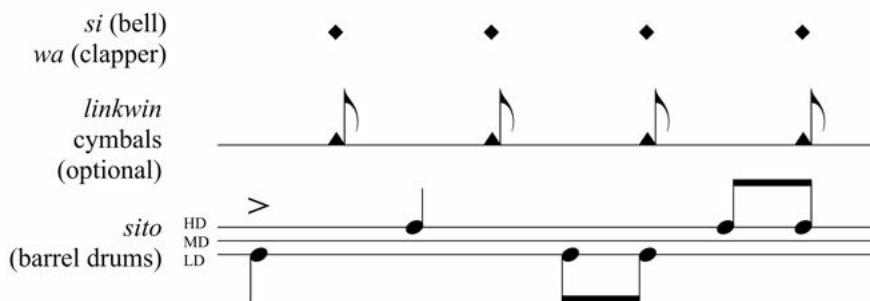
Hsaing waing adaptations of *kalabaw* or *mono* songs (a fusion of local and Western traditions) and American big band jazz-like songs are common. MacLachlan (2011:7) informs us that jazz big bands were a regular sight in the numerous jazz night-clubs until the 1970s, when all the clubs were shut

¹⁶³ In the video, both the spirit dancer Maha Myain Aba Lay and the singer shout ‘Yodaya, Yodaya’. Some performers refer to the *pat pyo* song *Nawarath ko thwe* as *yodaya-pat pyo*. See Inoue (2008, 2014a) about the overlapping between different court repertoires.

¹⁶⁴ For an analysis of this song, see Cox (1988).

down. On the other hand, *stereo* songs are more rarely performed in the *nat hsaing*. *Stereo* songs, or Burmese pop music performed with electrified or amplified instruments, mostly the American rock guitar, started to develop during the 1960s: soon, *copy thachins*, American and British melodies reinterpreted with Burmese lyrics, were spreading the decadence of Western music, against the will of the oppressive military Junta (MacLachlan 2011; Ferguson J. 2013).¹⁶⁵

When these songs are performed by a *nat hsaing*, the only trace of the original song is often represented by the lyrics and vocal part. Consequently, the *hsaing* melodic section (gong circle and shawm) follows and elaborates on the vocal melody. The rhythmic section is not the protagonist. The only instrument which seems to be needed for the performance of these songs is the *sito*. These large barrel drums support the melodic section with a 4/4-meter rhythmic cycle (Transcription 7.2) that some musicians define as ‘English dance music’ (*Inglei’ aka gitā*).



Transcription 7.2 English dance music cycle.

This rhythmic cycle and its possible variations do not recall any specific cycle already present in the original song. On the contrary, it represents a cycle which can be adapted to any popular song, and it is performed on the large *sito* drums to support the performance of popular songs only. The first beat (struck on the lower register of the barrel drums) works clearly as the main beat. The ambiguity characterising Burmese cyclical patterns (see Section 4.2.3) is completely avoided: the cycle is adapted to a song conceived with Western characteristics: I have tried to render this in the previous transcription by marking the accent on the first beat.

I first heard this cycle on 2 August 2013, for the celebration of a *nat kana pwe* at U Win Hlaing’s house, in Yangon. It was the first time I had attended a *nat kana pwe*, and at that time my comprehension of Burmese *nat* sounds and dances was limited. When the Kyi Lin Bo *hsaing* switched the tunes to accompany the dance of the Indian *nat* Ami Lay Thahkinma (Figure 7.1),¹⁶⁶ both sounds and dances

¹⁶⁵ For an account of the recent transformations in the context of Burmese popular music, see MacLachlan (2019).

¹⁶⁶ This *nat* is part of the family of the Shwepyin Brothers of Taungbyone and the ogress Popa Medaw, very popular spirits connected to the cycle of King Anawratha (Temple 1991:51ff.; Rodrigue 1992:29ff.; Brac de la Perrière 1989:176). In U Win Hlaing’s ceremonies, a group of six *nat kadaws* dance, embodying the whole family

immediately caught my attention. In U Win Hlaing's celebrations, Ami Lay Thahkinma comes on stage after her whole family of spirits have danced: her dance is supported by an Indian (*kala*) sound. The *hsaing* had, indeed, begun to play the typical *kala* song; however, a popular song soon took over. The following example shows Kyi Lin Bo's *nat hsaing* performing the music for Ami Lay Thahkinma *nat* on that day: the ensemble first introduces the spirit, playing the *kala* melody, then progressively switching to the modern pop song sound. The salient passages are represented in an animation ([Video 7.4](#)). The singer leads the ensemble: the melodic section (shawm and gong circle) and the drums (*sito*) wait for the singer, following her cues and beginning their part a few seconds after she started a new section.

The Burmese popular song the *hsaing* played, after a few seconds of the prescriptive *kala* music, is *Maung lu chaw* (lit. ‘The comely lad’). The song was popular in the 1960s, performed by the famous Burmese singer Takatho Lay Lay. To satisfy my curiosity, I went looking for the original song, only to find it in one of the many retail music shops around the Sule Pagoda, in downtown Yangon. In its original form, the song sounds like a typical American big band jazz song with a Burmese vocal part ([Video 7.5](#)). The original version is totally different from the *nat hsaing* version I recorded by Kyi Lin Bo's ensemble. Only the vocal part and the lyrics (Table 7.3) make the identification possible:

<i>Ma hla bu pyaw yin ngo lite mae</i>	If you say I am not beautiful I'll cry
<i>Ma chit bu pyaw yin sate soe dae</i>	If you say you don't love me I'll get angry
<i>Hman htae kyi yin ma lone le takaebi akyi tan nay lar</i>	When I look in the mirror I feel uncertain, am I really so ugly?
<i>Thanthaya sate tway win hke mi dae kwe</i>	Doubts assails my mind
<i>Sa nay nae twae mae thu chain dae</i>	Let's meet on Saturday, he set the date
<i>Takaetandaw hmyaw thu maw dae</i>	Waiting makes you worry
<i>Thu neh twae chin kar hma shaun tane hke nay dae lo</i>	I want to meet with him, he kept away from me
<i>Sate daw tha po ngo hke mi dae kwa</i>	Anger fills my mind, I start to weep

Table 7.3 Lyrics of the song *Maung lu chaw* by Takatho Lay Lay.

(up to two generations), presenting each *nat* in the order of seniority. The Indian origin of the senior members is clearly underlined by several visual and aural indices, including the Indian-like fashion of their garments.



Figure 7.1 Lin Lin, one of U Win Hlaing's pupils, embodying the Indian nat Ami Lay Thahkinma during the song Maung lu chaw. Yangon, October 2013.

After that first experience, I had the opportunity to listen to this song many other times, in U Win Hlaing's *pwes*. Kyi Lin Bo's ensemble always performs *Maung lu chaw* to support the dance of Ami Lay Thahkinma. When I asked why they decided to insert that specific song in the ritual celebration, Kyaw Win Naing explained:

Because we like that song, that's all! There is no particular reason... we also perform other songs, but that one in particular is quite popular, so we play it every time. [...] We can choose whatever we want, but Indian songs are energetic and active, that's why people like them... we choose a modern song with similar features.¹⁶⁷

The choice to perform that specific song to support that dance is justified aesthetically. To Burmese ears, Takatho Lay Lay's song shares a similar “energy” with the *kala* sound, thus making it possible to exchange them. The “active” character assigned to the *kala* sound, however, is justified from an ethnical point of view: Indian music is perceived as “active”, so an Indian *nat* such as Ami Lay Thahkinma dances to the sound of active music. In performance, ethnicity, musical aesthetics, and ritual meanings become one. The passage from one repertoire (the supposed “traditional” *kala* sound, strictly connected to spirit possession) to the modern popular song (which denotes the passage with an entertainment dimension) is performed naturally and fluidly, with just a short transition to introduce it. The entertainment phase is functional to the ritual: although popular songs are not directly connected to spirit

¹⁶⁷ Kyaw Win Naing, Yangon, 10 December 2013.

possession, their performance in a *nat kana pwe* can carry out a certain ritual (indexical) meaning, and their presence is justified by specific aesthetic requirements.

7.3. Re-mixing the spirits

The previous examples are all deeply involved in the ritual context of *nat pwe*: traditional, neo-traditional or popular, the sounds the *nat hsaing* plays are functional to the celebration, supporting the possession dances and performance. However, *nat chin* are not relegated to just the celebrative contexts: cassettes, CDs and DVDs are regularly sold on stalls, especially at big festivals. People buy them to play at home, just to enjoy the music, singing along in a karaoke-like fashion. In these cases, “*nat chin*” remains merely as an indication: people are probably fully aware of the ritual meaning of the songs, but they don’t make ritual use of them. In these cases, *nat hsaing* music is ‘consumed’, in the sense given by Carpitella (1992): the music is separated from its original context, and the ritual function to call the spirits is lost. A salient example of this transformation is again related to the drunkard *nat* Ko Gyi Kyaw.



Figure 7.2 Cover of the VCD featuring the kana si U Win Hlaing as a singer.

I already anticipated how U Win Hlaing made me the VCD¹⁶⁸ containing the remixed version of his *Shwe Do, Ngwe Do* song. The clip accompanying this song ([Video 7.6](#)) shows U Win Hlaing dancing as the drunkard *nat* in one of his many *nat kana* ceremonies: he is covered with garlands of money, donated by his supporters; he carries around the insignia of Ko Gyi Kyaw – the small golden image of a cockerel and a bottle of whiskey, indicating the *nat*'s fondness for cockfights and alcohol. An electronic synth introduction recalls the main melody of the song, while a massive use of *pat waing* samples support U Win Hlaing's singing. The dance beat is realised with *si* and *wa* idiophone samples, together with a constant kick drum playing a simple 4/4 meter. The typical Southeast Asian metrical ambiguity is avoided, and once again the first beat clearly becomes the main one. The shawm *hne* is pulled in just for a while; sometimes, a midi-piano sounds in the background, strictly following the vocal part – probably a way to replace the gong circle, whose sound can be heard only sporadically. The connection to *nat hsaing* is evident. The context is that of a real *nat kadaw* and real *nat hsaing* troupe. By U Win Hlaing's admission, the video was made in order to 'attract the new generations to the *nat pwe*', so that he could 'reach more people'.¹⁶⁹ The video circulated among the medium's supporters, and beyond: I recognised its sound more than once walking among the crowded festivals' music stalls.

The second example is quite different. Just back from fieldwork, in 2013, I was searching YouTube for videos of Burmese music.¹⁷⁰ I wanted to find the remixed songs I had heard bursting out of gigantic loudspeakers dispersed along the route to the Taungbyone festival. While I was scrolling down the search results, one video caught my attention. It was a remixed version of the popular *Do Ko Gyi Kyaw*, the spirit song composed by Sein Moot Tar in the 1970s (see Section 4.2). At first, the music did not seem to have much in common with the *nat hsaing* – except for the lyrics and the main synth melodic line: listening carefully, it was possible to spot a tuned drum sample, or a gong resonating over a dance kick drum musical base. What is left of the ritual meanings?

During my recent fieldwork (2017-2018) I managed to trace down the author of the song – Thxa Soe, a famous name in the Burmese Electronic Dance and Rap Music scene. In interview he told me how, after an experience as a rap MC in Yangon and close encounters with the London underground club scene which lasted a few years, in 2005 he started to fuel his fame, producing remixed version of *nat chin* and other "traditional" sounds. In 2006, the album *Yaw Tha Ma Mhwe* ('The Mix') was a

¹⁶⁸ VCD (Video CD) was a home video format quite popular in Burma until the new DVD format surpassed it in the mid 2000s.

¹⁶⁹ Yangon, 29 November 2013.

¹⁷⁰ An account of the roles of social media among performers will take us away from the aims of this work. On the circulation of digital musical formats, see MacLachlan (2011); for a recent study about media in Myanmar, see Brooten et al. (2019); on the use of Facebook, see Thant Sin Oo (2019). Social media and mainstream media have recently been considered responsible for the proliferation of hate speech, causing international concern. In regard to this, see Brooten (2016); Dowling (2019); Nisa (2019).

triumph: it gave the Burmese urban youth exactly what they craved, a new sound for expression that combined traditionality and modernity (Lu 2009:268-269). Thxa Soe explained that his compositional process starts with research and strict collaboration with a “traditional” *hsaing saya*, whose sound he eventually re-processes electronically; over the years, he has faced censorship, because his (re)creations do not always meet the praise of Burma’s “tradition bearers”, who accuse him of being a ‘tradition (*thamazin*) breaker’:

I never break the *thamazin*. [...] I never break [it], I always follow the *thamazin*. I never break it. Because of the *hsaing waing*, you know, [master] Ywa Sa Sein Hla Ngwe, he’s a traditional [musician], he never breaks the law [the custom]. I just follow him, and I chop [his sound], and I put it into the mixer, and add some electronic base. I told them, my music is Myanmar [Burmese]. The look is different, but [it is] still the same... original Myanmar. You get this in my music, like traditional *hsaing waing* style, plus the [kick] drumbeat, but with the *hsaing waing* is like, how can I say... more catchy, it is more powerful with the *hsaing waing*. The normal drum is like ‘boom’, but [with] *hsaing waing* it [becomes] another style.¹⁷¹

In his live shows ([Video 7.7](#)), Thxa Soe uses traditional Burmese costumes, dancers, instruments, and musicians. The link to the *thamazin* is evident, as well as the innovation. On YouTube, it is easy to find many versions of Thxa Soe’s *Do Ko Gyi Kyaw*, some of which are not authorised. While this can be read as a clear sign of the notoriety Thxa Soe (and his song) has reached, on the other hand, the rapper distances himself from this phenomenon – mostly due to problems linked to censorship. In one of these unauthorised videos, a dancer moves, following Ko Gyi Kyaw’s ritual movements; a Windows Media Player screensaver is in the background; excerpts and scenes taken from American music pop-music clips (50 Cent, Eminem, Shakira, to name but a few) are mixed with Burmese *anyeint pwe* (court dances) (Figure 7.3). In the video, hypermasculine men stand juxtaposed against heavily sexualised women.

¹⁷¹ Thxa Soe, Yangon, 27 May 2018.



Figure 7.3 A random series of snapshots extracted from the unofficial video of Thxa Soe's KGK.

Eventually, I was able to find a DVD titled *Yaw Thapyoun/DJ remix*, containing this and other songs. Not all of them are *nat chin*, and not all represent remixed versions of Thxa Soe's sounds – although these are prevalent. All the videos consistently contain parts taken from old MTV clips, a few Thai popstars, sometimes mixed with videos of Burmese performers. This demonstrates how Western (i.e. Anglo-American) culture continues to penetrate in modern Burma (Keeler 2009), sometimes passing through neighbouring Southeast Asian countries. These processes, of which we found some examples of study in other areas of Southeast Asia (Giuriati [forthcoming]; Wallach 2008; Lau and Yano 2018), do not only represent the instances of new generations of Burmese straddled between “the old” and “the modernity”. As in the case of the *copy thachin* phenomenon explored by MacLachlan (2011), these processes also account for these generations’ agency and awareness in relation to Anglo-American culture. Thxa Soe’s unauthorised *KGK* remix video can be considered as just a low-quality patchwork of Western clips. It demonstrates the association between a Myanmar rapper, the drunkard and gambler Prince of the *nat kana pwe*, Yangon’s clubbing night-life, and the idea of “naughty” Western pop-icons: wild behaviour, disregard for rules, and abuse of substances are all elements which, I believe, fit well with Ko Gyi Kyaw. It is not a surprise that this *nat* is particularly dear to Burmese youngsters, and as Douglas (2010:129) suggested, it is not surprising that such processes are taking place in the urban centres rather than in rural areas.

7.4. Conclusion

Discussing the performance style of *hsaing waing*, Garfias explains why he believes that the *nat hsaing* style remained more conservative:

The performance style used in connection with the propitiation and possession ceremonies for the *nat* spirits, [...] being more conservative by requirement as part of a ritual ceremonial rather than being theatrical, has preserved much of the older *hsaing* performance style. In the *nat-hsaing*

style, the pat-waing continues to function as leader but plays in a simpler and more direct style playing the main melody in its simple form while maintaining the fundamental pattern of the rhythm for the composition. Much less use is made of the higher pitched drums of the pat-waing circle than is common among the modern hsaing musicians. The most recent commercial Burmese recordings of the nat-hsaing, however, are already showing the influence of the more virtuosic hsaing-waing style. (Garfias 1985a:10)

While I agree with Garfias when he mentions the ‘simpler and more direct style’ of the drum circle, in this chapter I have tried to demonstrate how the quest for an ‘older *hsaing* performance style,’ i.e. a more traditional one, can be quite complex. Simplicity does not indicate tradition.

In analysing the *yoya nat hsaing* repertoires I explained that musicians usually regard lyrics and melody to be more easily interchangeable, and consider the rhythmic part of a song as more adherent to a supposed “tradition” (as it is mostly through the drums that they control the possession dances). Considering the rhythmic cycles necessary for the dance of Ko Gyi Kyaw, I looked at those changes happening ‘within the tradition’: the modern spirit song *Shwe Do, Ngwe Do* (which the *nat kadaw* U Win Hlaing claims as his own) uses elements from existing melodies (*alaik* technique), integrated with the *yoya do* drum cycle typically associated with the drunkard *nat*. Because of this, the new spirit song acquires the dignity of an authentic *nat chin*: U Win Hlaing’s song has been accepted as “authentic” as it presents enough ritually effective (indexical) music features.

It is also possible to incorporate and adapt repertoires that originated outside the *nat* ritual context and musical practice. Taking the popular song *Maung lu chaw* by the Burmese singer Takatho Lay Lay as an example, I explained how Kyi Lin Bo’s troupe rearranged the song in the *nat hsaing* practice. In Kyi Lin Bo’s performance, the ‘English dance song’ cycle supports the melodic and vocal part, here, the protagonists. *Maung lu chaw* supports the dance of an Indian *nat*: it is performed after a hint of the Indian tune which makes this spirit come into presence. This operation is not problematic for the participants: authenticity is guaranteed not by the music itself, but by the “active character” the popular song transmits, experienced as similar to other songs considered to have, to Burmese ears, a “Indian” sound.

Quoting Douglas (2010:160), Burma, ‘despite its image as a hermit country and the xenophobic tendencies of its generals, it also is clearly part of global economic, political and media flows.’ Burma is today, more than ever, facing changes. The case of the two remixed *nat chin* effectively represent how urban Burmese society is confronting, and co-opting elements of Western culture. The remixed renditions of *Do Ko Gyi Kyaw* and *Shwe Do, Ngwe Do* still maintain a connection with the ritual meanings. The two videos can be interpreted as a response to the demands of the Burmese generations, who are today dealing with electronic music-making, communication technologies, and closer ties with Euro-American cultural influences.

U Win Hlaing's performances are a perfect example of transformations. Active in the chaotic metropolitan scenario of Yangon, the famous *nat kadaw* has found a way to keep pace with modern times, while at the same time meeting his followers' expectations. Adaptations and changes in the ritual and performative context are instances of which Burmese are aware of, and willingly choose. While changes are occurring within the ritual practice, the same is happening to ritual sounds. In *nat hsaing* practice, tradition emerges as a current which connects past and present seamlessly, while simultaneously incorporating the ritual indications of the mediums, and the demands of the audience for songs which are 'good to listen to'. With this in mind, tradition must be considered as continuously changing (Handler and Linnekin 1984), or as a process (Bakan 2007:27), interpreting the necessities which may occur over time – a concept that I associate with the Burmese idea of *thamazin*. As Spiller explains:

what qualifies music as traditional is not how old it is, but rather how well it teaches, reinforces, and creates the social values of its producers and consumers. Traditional music is not something that is stuck in the past; it grows and changes, just as the people who make and listen to it grow and change, just as the values they share with those close to them change (albeit a bit more slowly). Truly traditional music, then, exploits new resources, acknowledges new requirements, and responds to new situations. Traditional music provides a place for people to try out new approaches to their existing values, experiment with new ideas, and to synthesize the new with the old. (Spiller 2004:xix)

For the same reason, though useful as analytic tools, the boundaries I created based on Shils' (1983) theories to make a distinction between genres, must not be considered as totally defined: to *nat hsaing* musicians, this classification looks blurry, since the speculative processes used to identify those categories do not belong to them. As part of a continuous flow of "tradition", "authenticity", "modernity" and "changes", *nat hsaing* musicians keep playing the music necessary to support the dance of the possessed mediums. As long as the ritual function is not compromised, and the participants are satisfied, any repertoire can be used. To quote MacLachlan:

Traditions are usually thought of as being unchanging rituals handed down from previous generations that gain their power from their connection to the past. It is clear, however, that traditions continue because they are not set in stone. Their very malleability allows them to adapt to changing circumstances, and thus to survive. (MacLachlan 2008:182)

The cult of the Thirty-seven and the corpus of musics connected to its celebration appears thus, to be a moving phenomenon, continually transforming itself into something else. Only through further and continuous research can we hope to refine the analysis, and reach further insight into this everchanging ritual musical practice.

Conclusions

Sounds and movements are the central pillars of Burmese *nat kana pwes*. Over the course of a ceremony, music and dance support and depend on each other, actively contributing to the development of the ritual process.

In this dissertation, I have argued that, through mimetic processes and the performance of a multi-layered network of meanings, music and dance let the spirits manifest in the human world. The combined performance of ritually effective sounds and movements not only make the spirits come-into-presence: it also facilitates the humans' experience of the spirits' presence, thus making the devotees feel part of a community whose limits transcend the human world. To elucidate this perspective, this study has focused on three main aspects:

1. Spirit possession as a bodily and emotional experience, through which the ritual actors establish a relationship with the *nats* and other spirits;
2. Sounds/movements as a medium to create a sense of community, and to facilitate the establishment of this relationship;
3. The ritual efficacy of a network of performed meanings, articulated through specific sounds/movements, facilitating the embodiment and experience of the different spirit persons.

While these aspects were described as different elements of Burmese spirit possession rituals, they are not mutually exclusive. During a *nat kana pwe*, with the support of loud *nat hsaing* sounds, *nat kadaws* call and dance for the spirits on behalf of the devotees; the latter actively participate in the ceremony, dancing to the sound of the *hsaing*, and experiencing the presence of the *nats* first-hand; this experience is shaped by specific dance movements and sounds, necessary for their ritual effect. An invisible thread entangles all these (and other) ritual aspects into one complex bundle, making it very difficult for the researcher to clearly distinguish where one begins and the other ends. All the elements of a ritual contribute to the ritual's effectiveness: in this dissertation, I have focused on the performative aspects – prioritising the investigation of the functions and meanings of musics/dances, and in general, the musical practice of the *nat hsaing* ensemble.

All the ideas and concepts that I have presented in this work have originated from discussions with the people that I have encountered on the field: they have shared with me their thoughts, experiences, and feelings. I have tried to include my masters' and friends' voices in the investigative process as much as possible. Issues naturally emerged in the course of the fieldwork, during the observation of (and the participation in) *nat kana pwe* ceremonies, which constituted the greater part of

my ethnographic experience in Burma. It has been well established that there is no such a thing as “pure” ethnography. In *Shadows in the Field*, Barz and Cooley (2008:4) proposed a shift away from *representation* (text) towards *experience*, the latter ‘encapsulat[ing] the essence of fieldwork’. Each ethnographic experience in the field is shaped by the researcher’s personality, choices, and relationships with other people. In this sense, starting from my personal experience, I developed my own ideas and critiques of other scholarship, sometimes developing an etic extrapolation of the explanations that I had been offered. Eventually, during the writing process, the reviewing of the ethnographic material nourished the etic investigative process. Even when I had completed my fieldwork, and, sitting in a small room in the SOAS Music Department had begun the writing up process, new hypotheses continued to develop. The feeling of being far removed from fieldwork was sometimes eased by social networks through which I keep contact with Burma, and by valuable Burmese friends and Burma-enthusiasts in London. During these months, I happily acknowledged that elements of my fieldwork experience had followed me back to a cold and rainy London.

Because I had already conducted fieldwork in Burma during 2013, when I started my research trips in 2017-18 I was not really expecting to gain anything new from the experience. I was already familiar with the field, I knew how to speak the language a bit, and I already had a lot of contacts. I also had more than a general idea of what I had to do, and how to do it: to investigate functions and meanings of *nat hsaing* music in *nat kana pwe* rituals, using a strong analytical approach that would reveal the fundamentals of this musical (and spiritual) practice. The task, almost entirely musicological, was ambitious; however, I did not take into account the many ways in which fieldwork can shape one’s research. This second fieldwork experience enriched my perspective and had a huge impact on the research process. A series of issues which I had not initially considered emerged: when I started to investigate the ritual effectiveness of musical sounds and dance movements, and to consider the point of view of the Burmese actors, I had to take into account, among other things, the notion of sound, the experience of spirit possession, and structures of power characterising these rituals and their actors. Slowly, over the course of more than sixteen months of almost uninterrupted fieldwork, I have tried to absorb the Burmese conception, and to adopt a different point of view.

During the writing process, I began to look for possible ways to merge the two main aspects of the research process – the point of view of the Burmese, more or less identifiable with the ethnography, and the analytical approach of the researcher, exemplified by the writing process after fieldwork. In particular, I needed a theoretical framework to explain the ritual efficacy of the sounds’ and dances’ entangled network of meanings – something more concrete and distinct than the explanations offered by the Burmese, but that at the same time would not be juxtaposed against their perspective. I wanted to go beyond the mere acknowledgment of the existence of the spirits in the local ontologies, and find a paradigm which would allow me to include/consider these beings as part of the agentive network of

music making. I wanted to explain why a certain rhythmic cycle, or a melody was used there, in that specific moment, associated to the dance of that spirit person, without resorting to theories that consider those sounds as just music, and those spirit dances as a performance. Starting from the Burmese concepts of *nat than* (spirit sounds) and *poun san* (dance forms), I began to consider the *nat hsaing* sounds and spirit dance movements as powerful performative signs that actually shape the ritual process, sounding and moving both the human and spirit world.

The concept of mimesis and semiotics represents the core theoretical framework of this dissertation, as I have outlined in Chapter 5 and 6. Mimesis allowed me to think of the ritual as a dynamic process in which specific actions (in my case, musical sounds and dance movements) produce a direct effect on the world – i.e., making the spirits come-into-presence in the ritual space, to socially interact with the humans. The concept of Peircean indexicality was useful at this point, to describe in more detail which elements constituted a mimetic performance. Peircean semiotics allowed me to analyse functions and meanings of ritual sounds and movements, without relegating them to the status of mere “objects”, but rather as active and performative signs, enshrined in the bodily and emotive experience of the ritual actors. Semiotics also allowed me to consider the role of spirit persons, including them as one of the poles of the Peircean ‘semiotic triangle’ – alongside the sounds produced by the musicians and the effects on the ritual actors. In the process of writing, I felt that the combination of these two paradigms allowed me to surpass the limits of two epistemologies: one, phenomenological, in which the spirits represent an ontological reality and have their agency in the matters of the human world (Friedson 1996); another, cognitive, in which the experience of spiritual beings is considered a projection of processes happening in the human brain (Becker 2004). In the field, the distance between the Burmese explanation of spirit possession phenomenon and the “rational” academic discourse was made easier by playing music with others – a privileged position for ethnomusicologists. Attempting to develop bi-musicality, and learning to perform with Burmese musicians (Hood 1960; Baily 2001) provided a common ground from which to observe and participate in spirit possession rituals and music performances, granting access to cultural knowledge through a ‘genuine and shared interest in music’, to use Jankowsky’s (2007:193) words.

In the middle of the writing process, while I was still trying to understand how to productively put into use my ethnographic materials and experiences, I realised that the theoretical tools of mimesis and semiotics were pushing my investigation towards aspects that initially I had not considered, but that now I needed to specify in order for my work to be clear. If the *nats* are invited to the *nat kana* to socially interact with humans, what is the nature of this interaction? How is the relationship between a human and a spirit being articulated and performed? To answer these questions, I had to highlight the experience of spirit possession, describing its performative aspects and emotive effects from the Burmese point of view, and analyse them through ethnographic examples (Chapter 2). I started by considering the human

bodies of the devotees as an offer to the spirits, put in circulation with other material and immaterial goods (Brac de la Perrière 2015) in the ritual circuit of exchange (Århem and Sprenger 2015). Direct ethnographic examples described the way in which the Burmese describe and conceptualise their emotive/embodied experience with spirit possession. I had to specify the dynamics of interactions constituting the ritual community and describe the role that sounds and movements have in constituting the ritual process (Chapter 3). Once embodied within the human participants, spirit persons can join and interact with the rest of the human community. All the ritual sounds contribute to make the community move, dance, and interact with, and for the spirits: loud sounds spread beyond the physical limit of the ritual pavilion (the *nat kana*), calling human and spiritual beings to attend the ceremony, putting different worlds into contact (Stoller 1997). This discourse would not have made sense without a focus on the life experiences of the *nat kana pwe* performers (dancers, musicians, and devotees), and an analysis of their position in the strongly hierarchical Burmese society (Chapter 1). The investigation into their lives confirmed the existence of strong hierarchical relationships (Keeler 2017) inside the community of the *nat* cult, and between the *nat* cult and Burmese society. It also explained that, through actively contributing to the *nat* cult, urban *nat hsaing* musicians and *nat kadaw* dancers have found their niche: performing in *nat kana pwes* is not only a way to earn a living, but to also re-affirm their role and agency in respect of supposedly “higher” forms of performing arts.

On the other hand, I wanted to link the discussion on the anthropological aspects of the spirit possession performances to the musicological investigation of the ritual repertoires. What are the musical elements constituting the sounds performed by *nat hsaing* musicians? What are the structural elements of a *nat chin* (spirit song) performance? *Nat than* sounds are powerful ritual signs, but how do they change over time? These questions brought my investigation towards the analysis of the *nat chin* repertoire and the performance of the *nat hsaing* ensemble. I had to specify how my perception of *nat hsaing* sounds and music changed over time, influencing my listening and my understanding of this music (Tenzer 2006a). To analyse the constitutive elements of the *nat chin* repertoire, I had to contextualise the *nat hsaing* performance practice within Burmese music, and the cultural landscape of Southeast Asian music traditions (Chapter 4). To understand if, and how these ritual repertoires changed, I had to widen my perspective to include Burmese court traditions and popular genres, describing the dialogue between different repertoires in the context of the continuously changing tradition (Bakan 2007) of *nat kana pwe* ceremonies (Chapter 7).

This multi-disciplinary approach makes this study resonate, not only with those ethnomusicologists interested in the vicissitudes of Burmese music and dance, but also with those scholars interested in studying the relationship between music, performance and meanings, and more generally, in ritual and spirit possession practices. However, Burma remains the main focus of this research: this study wanted to shed light on the ritual practice of Burmese/urban *nat kana pwe* from the

point of view of performing arts, and on Burmese performing arts in general. It represents one of the few studies in which Burmese *hsaing waing* music is transcribed and analysed, and in which the single elements of the performance (rhythmic cycles, vocal and instrumental melodies, sound qualities, and dance movements) are reconducted to the ritual functions and to the larger cultural complex. Despite the invaluable contribution of a few scholars, the investigation of Burmese performing arts has long been ignored in international ethnomusicological scholarship. The dictatorship that ruled in Burma from 1962 to 2015 made it extremely difficult for scholars to carry out research in the country. As a result, compared to the neighbouring Southeast Asian cultures, the study of Burmese music(s) and its cultural contexts remains largely unexplored at present. Fortunately, things are slowly improving, taking Burma out of its isolationism: since 2013, when I started my research on the music of urban spirit possession cults, I have seen a growing interest developing in the academic community – especially after the democratic turnover in 2015, which put an end to over fifty years of dictatorial rule. Needless to say, the research on Burmese performing arts has barely begun.

This work wanted to contribute to the scholarship by providing a starting point from which to develop further investigation on Burmese music. Further research could interest many aspects of Burmese performing arts panorama. An investigation on the interrelation between the practice of the spirit cult and other forms of theatrical and musical performances would reveal even more connections between *nat kana pwe*, *zat pwe*, and *anyeint pwe* than those already highlighted in this dissertation. Such a study would also reveal different interactive and improvisational processes between musicians, dancers, and their audiences, and reveal important information about the aesthetics of Burmese *hsaing waing* music.

Further musicological investigation could be conducted on the *hsaing waing* musical practice of spirit songs. Research on the *nat chin* repertoire, based on the musical aspects discussed in this thesis, would highlight salient elements of the *hsaing waing* musical practice. In particular, a focus on the *nat hsaing* singers' vocal performances would help us understand essential aspects of Burmese vocal music, thus highlighting the idiosyncrasies of Burmese performance practice. Through an analytical perspective, this study could look at the relationship between Burmese language, poetic texts, and music, revealing how improvisational processes work in vocal/instrumental parts. A comparison between the contemporary practice and historical sources, such as the texts of spirit songs listed in the *Mahagita Medani Kyan* (Burmese court song canon), would reveal how the *nat chin* repertoire evolved over centuries, to take its current form. A similar study could be enlarged to include other music repertoires or, alternatively, focus exclusively on them.

In addition, extending the research on *nat* cult music to the celebration of national festivals, would reveal important connections between urban practice, discussed in this dissertation, and the

celebration of spirit national festivals in villages. By investigating the main *pwedaw* (national festivals), this study would focus on the experience of *nat* devotees, who return annually to these national religious celebrations to renew their covenant with the spirits. Starting with an investigation into the use of sound technology (e.g. microphones and P.A. systems) and aural environment, this study would highlight how different festivals' sound hierarchies affect the inter-sensorial religious experiences of Burmese pilgrims, putting them in contact with the spirits.

Finally, I would like to stress the importance of including the voices of Burmese scholars in future academic works, and of building a dialogue with the Burmese community of scholars, both abroad and in Burma. My experience with the University of Mandalay and the Yangon National University of Fine Arts showed me that the scars of over fifty years of isolationism still need time to properly heal; it also presented me a community of scholars who are keen to confront, contribute to, and learn from the rest of the academic world. This, united with the promotion of Burmese culture to wider audiences, will contribute to making international research and scholarship grow, bringing dialogue with the Burmese beyond the limits of a researcher's fieldwork experience, and outside the limits of academia.

Appendix 1: Burmese texts and lyrics

Table 4.2 Lyrics of the nat pint (spirit invocation) for Nankarine Medaw.

မွန်ရဲ့ မြေတလိုင်းကို မြေမှာ ဆိုင်းမှ [တိုင်] တည်သော
ဆိုင်ရာ ပိုင်းလို့ အစဉ်အလာမှာ
တင်ရာရှိမြိမ့်ပူ။ [unintelligible]
ကျွေးအမေကို တင်ကြပါတော့ မနေး၊ တင်ကြပါတော့ မနေး။
အမျိုးမြတ်ပါတဲ့ ပဲခူးနတ်ပါဘူရား။

Table 4.7 Original text of the spirit song Do Ko Gyi Kyaw, by Sein Moot Tar.

ကိုကြီးကျော်
ဒုံးကိုကြီးကျော်
ဒိုဖေဖေကျော်
ထူးလဲထူးတယ် မြူးလဲမြူးတယ်
ဒုံးကိုကြီးကျော်
အရက်သမားမှန်ရင်တော်များ / ယှဉ်ကတိုက်လိုက်ချင်တယ်
ကြက်သမားမှန်ရင်တော်များ / ယှဉ်ကတိုက်လိုက်ချင်တယ်
အိမ်တိုင်မှာကွဲယ် ကိုကြီးကျော်ကို ပသပါတယ်
မောင်းမများနဲ့ ကတဲ့ဖေဖေကျော်
ပျော် ပျော် ပျော် ပျော်
ပုလင်းအဖုံး ကိုင်ဆွဲ သောက်မယ့် ကိုကြီးကျော်

Table 6.5 Text excerpt from the final part of the pya zat for the nat Nankarine Medaw.

အမေချစ်တဲ့သား၊ အမေလေ မပြီးနိုင်တော့ပါဘူး သားရယ်။
မပြီးနိုင်တော့ပါဘူး။
အမေသားလေး အမေနောက်ကို သား လိုက်နေရတာ အမေမကြည့်ရက်တော့ဘူး သားရယ်။
သားရဲ့စိတ်က မပါဘူးဆိုတာ အမေ သိနေပါတယ် [inaudible]
အမေသားလေးကို သိနေရပါတယ် သားရယ် အမှန်တော့
သား၊ မေမေပြောတဲ့ စကားလေးကိုသားလေးနား ထောင်လိုက်စမ်းပါတော့။
ဟိုး၊ တောင်စောင်းလေးတွေ့တယ်မလား၊ သား။
အဒီတောင်စောင်းလေး အနောက်မှ နေထွက် လာတဲ့ အခါမှာ။

အမေသားလေး တစ်ယောက်တည်း
 သားလာအမှုသာ တောင်းလိုက်ပေတွေ့
 မေမေရဲ့ဦးခေါင်း အကြောတွေ ပြတ်ပါစေသတည်းလို့။ အရှင်ဘူရား ဟညာ စေသော်။
 ကူးညီညာလို့ ပေးလေ့ပါဘူရား။
သားရော့။ အမေ ဟိုဘက်ရောက်ရင် သားလိုက်ခဲ့၊ နော်၊ **အမေပြုဗြိသားရော့။**

Table 7.2 Lyrics of the modern nat chin Shwe Do, Ngwe Do.

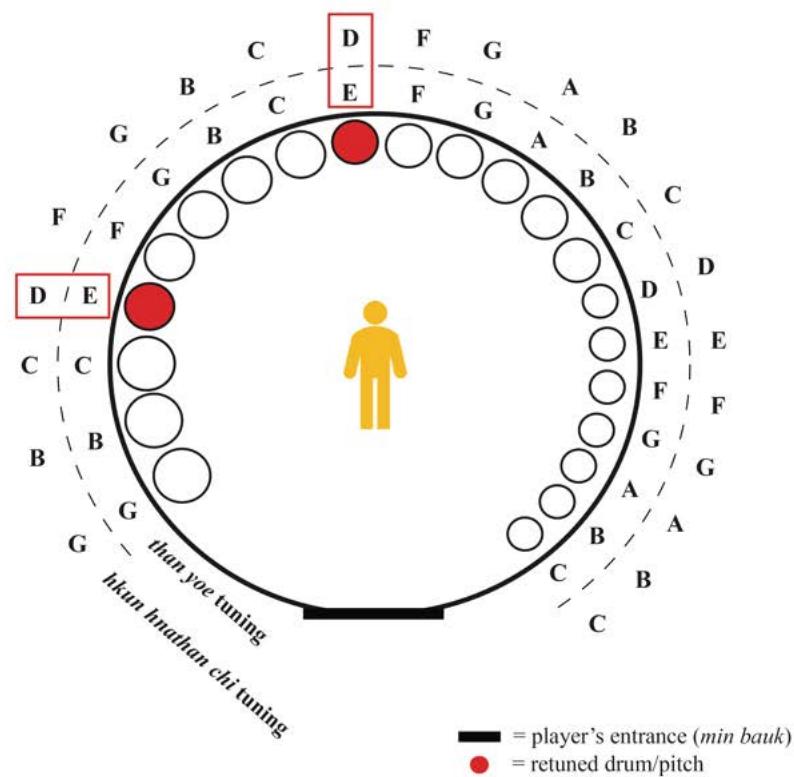
ရွှေးဦး၊ ငွေးဦး၊ ဒီးဆိုးမှုဦး
 ရွှေပခန်းကြီးကုံး
 ရွှေပခန်းငယ်ကုံး
 ရွှေကူနိုင်းဦးဦး
 ရွှေးငွေးငွေး၊ ရွှေးငွေးငွေး၊ ခေါ်
 ဒိုးဦးဆွဲ၊ ပွဲတိုင်းကော်၊ ကူနိုင်းကတိုးလို့ပျော်
 ရွှေကော်ငါးတကာတော် ထူးတဲ့ကိုကြီးကော်
 ကူနိုင်းမှာပျော်
 ဒိုးဦးဆွဲလို့ ဒိုးဦးဆွဲလို့ ပျော်

Table 7.3 Lyrics of the song Maung lu chaw by Takatho Lay Lay.

မလှဘူးပြောရင် ဗိုလိုက်မယ်
 မချစ်ဘူးပြောရင် စိတ်ဆိုးတယ်
 မှန်ထဲကြည့်ရင် မလုံလဲ တကယ်ပဲ အကျည်းတန်နေလား
 သံသယ စိတ်တွေဝင်ခဲ့ မိတယ်ကွယ်
 စနေနေ့တွေ့မယ် သူချိန်းတယ်
 တကယ်တမ်းတော့ မူးပျော်သူမောတယ်
 သူနဲ့တွေ့ချင်ကာမှ ရှောင်တိမ်းခဲ့နေတယ်လို့
 စိတ်ဒေါသပို ဗိုလိုမိတယ်ကွယ်

Appendix 2: Instruments and tunings

pat waing (drum circle)

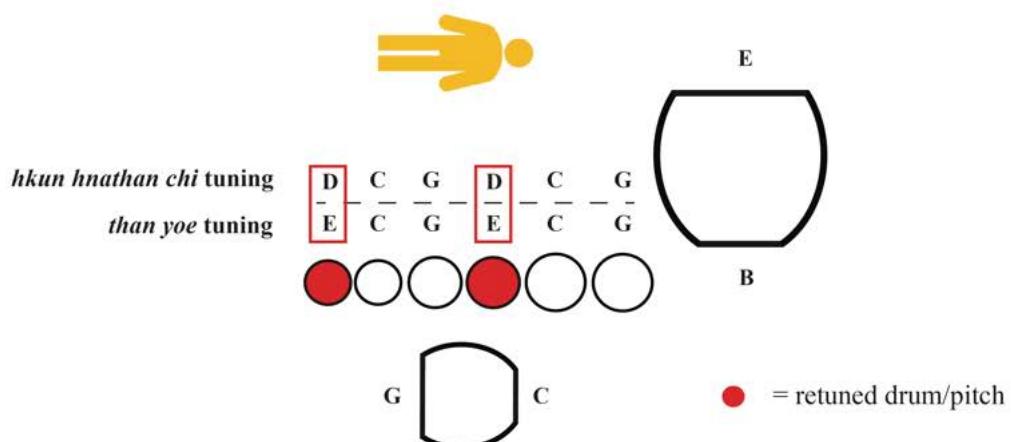


than yoe tuning
 $\text{than hman} = \text{C}$

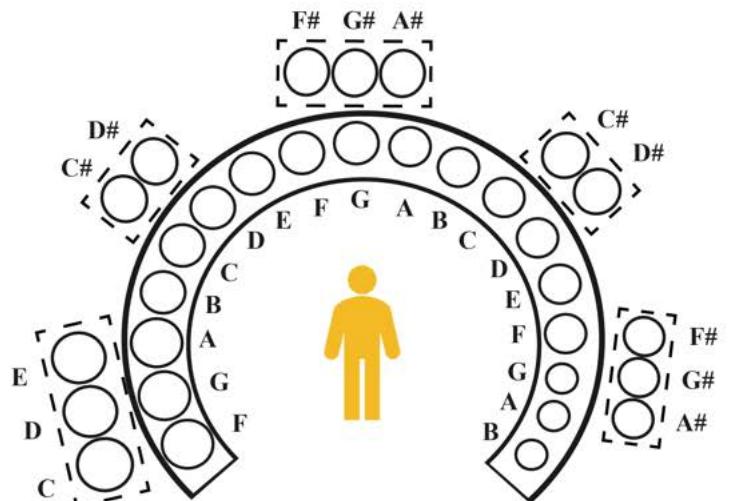
hkun hnathan chi tuning
 $\text{than hman} = \text{G}$

Musical notation is provided for both tunings, showing pitch sequences on treble and bass staves. Red boxes highlight specific notes, and blue brackets below the staves indicate note groups. The first bracket for 'than yoe tuning' covers notes 1, 3, 4, 5, and 7. The second bracket for 'hkun hnathan chi tuning' covers notes 1, 3, 4, 5, and 7.

pat ma (suspended drum)
chauk lon pat (six tuned drums)
sahkunt (small drum)



kyi waing (gong circle)



[] = optional parts

Appendix 3: Burmese glossary

Roman transliteration	Burmese	
Aba	အော	Honorific title for old and respected men, commonly used for <i>weikzas</i>
Achauk/achaukma	အခြာက်/ အခြာက်မ	Trans-gender, male homosexual (pejorative), faggot
Adeit than	အမိန္ဒန်	Vow, promise made to a spirit
Adeit than pwe	အမိန္ဒန်ပွဲ	Celebration in fulfilment of a vow to the spirit(s)
Ahlu	အလူ	Donation
Ahlu pwe	အလူပွဲ	Donation ceremony
Ahlu shin/shinma	အလူရင် / အလူရင်မ	Ceremony host, donor (lit. ‘donation lord/lady’)
Ahsuo	အဆို	Vocal part of a song
Ahsodaw	အဆိုတော်	Singer
Ahpwe	အဖွဲ့	Group, troupe
Aka	အကာ	Dance
Apyo Daw	အပိုဂျီတော်	Royal Maiden/Votaress, dancing at the beginning of a ceremony to bless the performance
Athet thwin-	အသက် သွင်း-	To introduce life into the spirit’s image/statue
Achet pya dae	အချက်ပြုတယ်	to give the signal (cue)
Anadae	အားနာတယ်	to feel socially embarrassed or awkward
Anyeint pwe	အပြုံ့ပွဲ	Variety show performance including music, dance, and comedy
Anyeint hsaing	အပြုံ့ဆိုင်း	<i>Hsaing</i> ensemble performing for <i>anyeint pwe</i>
Athan	အသံ	Sound; depending on the context, the word can indicate a pitch, a modal category, a tuning, a song, or a music style
Athan kya-	အသံကျု-	Cadential phrase

Athan pyaun	အသံပြောင်း	Progression of tunings articulating a <i>zat hsaing</i> night performance (lit. ‘moving sound’)
Badi	ပုတ္တီး	String of beads for counting prayers, Buddhist rosary
Bala hsaing	ပလာဆိုင်း	Performance with music only (lit. ‘plain <i>hsaing</i> ’)
Balu	ဘီလူး	Mythical ogre (see also <i>yekkha</i>)
Baung	ဟောင်း	<i>Nat kadaw</i> with the role of Minister at the Taungbyone festival
Baung daw	ဟောင်းတော်	Ritual headgear of a nat dancer, consisting of a simple band
Baung hsaung	ဟောင်းဆောင်း	Ritual headgear indicating a higher-rank <i>nat kadaw</i> , miter
Bedin	ဟေဒင်	Astrology
Bedin saya/ma	ဟေဒင်ဆရာ/မ	Astrologer (male/female)
Bein maung	ပိန်းမောင်း	Sound loudly accompanying intense moments of a spirit dance
Bobogyi	ဘိုးဘိုးကြိုး	Guardian spirit, lit. ‘Respected Grandfather’
Chauk Lon Pat	ခြောက်လုံးပတ်	Six tuned drums, instrument of the <i>hsaing</i> ensemble
Chawt pwe	ချော့ပွဲ	Possession dance of the devotees during a <i>nat kana pwe</i> to please the spirit
Cho	ချိုး	Melodic segment
Dana (also daana/dāna)	ဒါန်	Charitable giving, for acquiring Buddhist merit
Dago	တန်ခိုး	Power, charisma
Dah	ဓါး	Ritual swords used in the dance of some spirits
Dat	ဓါတ်	Spiritual power usually associated with <i>weikza</i>
Dat pwe	ဓါတ်ပွဲ	Ceremony celebrating <i>weikzas</i>
Dhamma	ဓမ္မ	Teaching of the Buddha
(Shweguni) Do	ဋ္ဌး	Drum and rhythmic cycle associated with the <i>nat</i> Ko Gyi Kyaw

Do waing	ဒုံးဝင်း	Do drum ensemble performing at the Shweguni festival for the <i>nat</i> Ko Gyi Kyaw
Ein shin	အိမ်ရှင်	Host of a ceremony, lit. 'House lord/lady'
Han hsaung hso-	ဟန်ဆောင်ဆို-	Lips sync, usually of a dancer mimicking the singing of a singer (lit. 'to pretend to sing')
Hkaung laung	ခေါင်းလောင်း	Bells used for ritual donation
Hkit paw nat chin	ခေတ်ပေါ်နတ်ချင်း	Modern spirit songs, in opposition to <i>yoya nat chin</i> (traditional spirit songs)
Hkun hnathan chi	ခုနှစ်သံချို့	Modal category in G, prevalent in the <i>nat hsaing</i> practice
Hmyauk-	မြောက်-	To raise an offering, to offer a <i>kadaw pwe</i>
Hne	နှံ	Multiple-reed shawm, instrument of the <i>hsaing</i> ensemble
Hne saya	နှံဆရာ	Shawm master/player
Hpala	ဖလား	Silver bowl used to collect the bets on the cock fight for the <i>nat</i> Ko Gyi Kyaw
hpoun	ဘုန်း	Innate male power
Hsaing waing	ဆိုင်းဝင်း	Outdoor music ensemble
Hsaing saya	ဆိုင်းဆရာ	Hsaing master, leader of hsaing, usually the pat waing player
Hsebawleiq	ဆေးပြေါလိုင်	Burmese cigar
Ka-	က-	To dance
Ka gwet	ကကွက်	Dance phrase
Ka gyo	ကကြိုး	Choreographed sets of movement for a dance form
Kadaw	ကန်တော့	Pay obeisance/present a gift in respect and gratitude
Kadaw pwe	ကန်တော့ပဲ	Ritual offering of coconut and bananas
Kadaw pwe pay dae poun san aka	ကန်တော့ပဲပေးတယ် ပုံစံအက	Dance form of presenting the offering, typical of the Apyo Daw for the Lamain spirit
Kala	ကုလား	Term referring to Indian culture or people, and generally indicating foreigners. In some contexts, it is used in a derogatory way

Kana	ကန္ဒား / ကနား	Temporary pavilion made of bamboo, built to host a ceremony
Kana si	ကန္ဒားစီး	Senior <i>nat kadaw</i> , ceremony organiser
Kana shin/shin ma	ကန္ဒားရှင် / ကန္ဒားရှင်မ	Ceremony host, donor (lit. ‘pavilion lord/lady’)
Karaung	ကရောင်း	Music indicating ogres, probably of Siamese origin
Kebyar lut	ကဗျာလွှတ်	Basic elements of male/female dance used for training
Kokwe-	ကိုးကွယ်-	To worship the spirits, the Buddha (lit. ‘to follow’)
Kun ya	ကွမ်းယာ	Wad, quid for chewing, containing betel nut and flavourings
Kutho	ကုသိုလ်	Buddhist merit
Kutho amya	ကုသိုလ် အမူ	The act of sharing one’s earned Buddhist merit with a multitude of beings
Kyat	ကျပ်	Unit of Burmese currency
Kyet laung	ကြက်လောင်း	Music and <i>nat kadaw</i> ’s acrobatics with a bowl and a cockerel, representing the cockfight bets for the <i>nat</i> Ko Gyi Kyaw
Kyi ti	ခြေားတိုး	Gong-circle player
Kyi waing	ခြေားဝိုင်း	Gong circle, instrument of the <i>hsaing waing</i> ensemble
Kyi zi	ခြေားစည်	Percussion plaques used for ritual donations
Kywe	ခြော့	Cowrie-shell used for fortune-telling
Lamain kat deh	လမိုင်းကပ်တယ်	To be inspired (lit. “the Lamain spirit attaches”)
Lay pyay	လေပြု	Instrumental introduction
Leikpya	လိပ်ဖြာ	Vital principle, soul (lit. ‘butterfly’)
Leikpya theik-	လိပ်ဖြာသိုပ်-	To introduce the spirit into a human or a spirit’s image/statue
Lethwei	လက်ဝေ့	Burmese boxing
Linkwin (also lagwin / yakwin)	လင်းကွင်း (also လကွင်း / ရကွင်း)	Large cymbals, instrument of the <i>hsaing</i> ensemble
Longyi	လုချည်	Burmese sarong

Lu si dae	လူစည်တယ်	To be crowded, full of people
Mahagita	မဟာဂိတာ	Collections of texts of classical songs
Maung gyi	မောင်းကြီး	Large suspended gong, instrument of the <i>hsaing</i> ensemble
Maung kwe / linban kwe	မောင်းကဲ့ / လင်ပန်းကဲ့	small flat gong played with a stick, reinforcing the beat of the <i>wa</i>
Maung saing	မောင်းခိုင်း	Rectangular gong chime, instrument of the <i>hsaing</i> ensemble
Medaw	မယ်တော်	Honorific title for respected women, usually used for spirits and <i>weikza</i>
Meinmasha	မိန်းမလျှော်	Trans-gender, generally indicating male homosexual
Min bauk		Small entrance to the <i>pat waing</i> (lit. ‘the passage of the prince’)
Mingala Hsaing	မဂ္ဂလာဆိုင်း	Ensemble playing at auspicious ceremonies (e.g. <i>nat kana pwes</i> , marriages)
Mi hsain hpa hsain	မိခိုင်ဖဆိုင်	Spirit belief transmitted as a family tradition or lineage (lit. ‘from mother side and father side’)
Mintha	မင်းသား	Main actor (lit. ‘Prince’)
Minthamee	မင်းသာမီး	Main actress (lit. ‘Princess’)
Moe bwe	မှိုးဘွဲ့	Songs associated with the rain
Mon athan	မွန် အသံ	Mon sound (melody and rhythm) performed for spirits of Mon ethnicity
Mye waing	မြေဝိုင်း	Dancing area between the <i>hsaing</i> ensemble and the <i>nat</i> altar (lit. ‘ground circle’)
Myin hkin	မြင်းခင်း	Sound associated with horse riding
Mu	မူ	Style of a master/performer
Naga	နဂါး	Mythical serpents/dragons
Naga pat	နဂါးပတ်	Dance gesture mimicking the coiled movements of a serpent
Nan / Nan Gyi	နှုန်း / နှုန်းကြီး	Palace/Great Palace where the nats reside

Nan Gyi Tabaung	နန်းကြီးတစ်ပေါင်	Sound for the <i>nat</i> Ko Gyi Kyaw, linked to the celebration of the <i>nat</i> Great Palace
Nan htein	နန်းထိန်း	Palace trustee
Nat	နတ်	Spirit
Nat chawt-	နတ် ချော့-	To please the spirit
Nat chawt chin / nat pyawt chin	နတ် ချော့ ချင်း / ပျော့ချင်း	Song to entertain the spirit (lit. ‘soothe’/‘please’)
Nat chin	နတ်ချင်း	Spirit song
Nat do	နတ်ဒို့	Melodic-rhythmic phrase introducing certain spirits. Depending on the context, the word can indicate the <i>nat hsain</i> musical style and spirit dances
Nat gaung swe	နတ်ခေါင်းစွဲ	Spirit with whom a spirit medium entertains a special relationship (lit. ‘spirit gripping to the head’)
Nat haw-	နတ် ဟော-	To make predictions, tell fortunes, during the possession dance
Nat hkaw-	နတ်ခေါ်-	To call the spirit
Nat hsain	နတ်ဆိုင်း	Music ensemble playing at spirit ceremonies
Nat pint	နတ်ပင့်	Spirit invocation
Nat saya	နတ်ဆရာ	Spirit master
Nat ka-	နတ်က-	To dance a spirit dance (spirit possession)
Nat kadaw	နတ်ကတော်	Spirit medium (lit. ‘spirit spouse’)
Nat kat-	နတ်ကပ်-	The spirit attaches (spirit possession, inspiration)
Nat kywa-	နတ်ကြွား-	The spirit steps in (spirit possession)
Nat kywe haw-	နတ်ကြွားဟော-	Fortune-telling with cowrie-shells imbued with spiritual power
Nat lanzin	နတ်လမ်းစဉ်	The school of a <i>nat kadaw</i> (lit. ‘the path of the spirit’)
Nat Nandaw / Nangyi	နတ် နန်းတော်/နန်းကြီး	Palace/Great Palace of a spirit
Nat ouk	နတ်အောင်	Master of the <i>Nats</i> , hereditary role at the Taungbyone festival
Nat po-	နတ်ပို့-	To dismiss the spirit

Nat pu-	နတ်ပူး-	To be joined with a spirit (spirit possession)
Nat pwe / nat pwedaw	နတ်ပွဲ / နတ်ပွဲတော်	National spirit festival
Nat si-	နတ်စီး-	To be mounted by a spirit (spirit possession)
Nat sin	နတ်စင်	Spirit altar or shrine
Nat sunt sa	နတ်စွန်စာ	Food and drink offered to the spirits returned to the devotees
Nat than	နတ်သံ	‘Spirit sound’ including all the parts of the music for a spirit (including among others: <i>nat pint</i> , spirit invocation; <i>nat chin</i> , spirit song; <i>nat po-</i> , spirit dismissal)
Nat thathami	နတ်သားသမီး	Followers of a <i>nat kadaw</i> , semi-initiated (lit. ‘spirit’s son(s)/daughter(s)’)
Nat win-	နတ် ဝင်-	The spirit enters (spirit possession)
Nat yauk-	နတ် ရောက်-	The <i>nat</i> has arrived [inside the body of the dancer]
Nat yauk thwa-	နတ်ရောက်သွား-	To receive the <i>nat</i> (lit. ‘to make the <i>nat</i> arrive’)
Nat kana	နတ်ကန္တား	Spirit pavilion
Nat kana pwe	နတ်ကန္တားပွဲ	Private spirit ceremonies
Nayee si	နရည်းစည်	Small ensemble performing <i>yay hkin</i> at the Mahamuni pagoda every day at 4 a.m. and 4 p.m. (lit. ‘time drum’)
Nayi si	နရိစည်း	Metric form outlined by the <i>hsaing</i> idiophones
Ngo chin	ဂိချင်း	Lamenting song in use in <i>pya zat</i> performances
Neibban	နိုဘန်	Liberation, Nirvana
Pahso	ပုဆိုး	Burmese male sarong
Paik	ပိုဒ်	Verse of a song, composed of several <i>chos</i> (segments)
Pat ma	ပတ်မ	Large, suspended drum, instrument of the <i>hsaing waing</i> ensemble
Pat ma ti	ပတ်မတီး	<i>Pat ma</i> player
Pattala	ပတ္တလား	Wooden xylophone

Pat pyo	ပတ်ပြိုး	Genre of court Great Songs in the Mahagita
Pat sa	ပတ်စာ	Paste, once made of bamboo ashes and cooked rice, and today made of industrial materials, applied on drums to tune them (lit. ‘drum food’)
Pat waing	ပတ်ခိုင်း	Drum circle, instrument of the hsaing ensemble
Pawa	ပဝါ	Band or scarf wrapped on the upper part of a dancer’s body
Paya	ဘုရား	Term referring to The Buddha, pagodas, Buddhist monks and royalty
Paya hswandaw suntdae	ဘုရား ဆွမ်းတော် စွန့်တယ်	Food and water offerings presented to the Buddha and returned after noon
Paya pwe	ဘုရားပွဲ	Festival for a pagoda
Pouk	ပွဲၢ	Complete song, composed of several <i>paiks</i> (verses)
Poun san	ပံ့စံ	In music, a song ‘structure’; in dance, a movement performed with free interpretation, as opposed to <i>ka gyo</i> (lit. ‘model, form’)
(Nat) poundaw	(နတ်) ပံ့တော်	Sacred figures, (spirit) images or statues
Pwe	ပွဲ	Ceremony, show, offering plate
Pwe shin	ပွဲရှင်	Ceremony host, donor (lit. ‘ceremony lord’)
Pwe u	ပွဲဦး	Beginning of the dance, first part of a ceremony
Pya zat	ပြုဇာတ်	A play, theatrical performance or text (lit. ‘dramatic representation’)
Pyinsa rupa	ပဉာဏ်ရှုပါ	Mythological animal composed of five different elements
Sakhunt	စခန်း	Small drum, instrument of the hsaing ensemble
Sandaya	စန္ဒရား	Burmese piano
Sangha	သံသာ	Community of monks and nuns
Saung gauk	စောင်းကောက်	Burmese harp
Saya	ဆရာ	Master, specialist

Si	စည်း	Small bell, instrument of the hsaing ensemble
Sidaw	စည်တော်	Royal drums ensemble and sound
Sito	စည်တို့	Large barrel drums, instrument of the hsaing ensemble
Soun si (also zoun si)	စုံစည်း / အံစည်း	Form of colotomic cycle
Swe-	စွဲ-	Obsession, affliction, seduction (from a spirit)
Taung shay	တောင်ရှည်	Long and richly decorated longyi, in ancient time worn only by royalty
Tabeh	တပည်	Pupil
Tawa	တစ်ဝါး	Metric cycle marked by the idiophone <i>wa</i>
Tay thwa	တေးသွား	Instrumental or vocal melody, tune of a song
Tet pwe	တက်ဗုံး	Ritual dance of <i>nat kadaw</i> in a <i>nat</i> palace
Thabin	သဘင်	Theatrical performing arts
Thabin Asiyoun	သဘင်(ပညာရှင်များ)အစည်းအရုံး	Theatrical art association
Thabyay	သပြော	Eugenia leaves, used for propitiatory rituals
Thabyay hkan	သပြောခံ	Melodic-rhythmic phrase introducing certain spirits
Thachin	သီချင်း	Song
Thachin Gyi	သီချင်းကြီး	'Great Songs' of the court tradition
Thaik	သိုက်	Spirit guardian of a religious compound
Thaik pwe	သိုက်ဗုံး	Ceremony celebrating <i>thaik</i> spirits
Thamazin	သမားစဉ်/သမစဉ်	Tradition (lit. 'line of specialists')
Than hman	သံမှန်	The main degree of a musical scale (lit. 'correct sound')
Than yoe	သံရှိုး	Modal category in C, prevalent in the <i>nat hsaing</i> practice
Tho	သိုး	<i>Nat kadaw</i> with the role of Queen at the Taungbyone festival
Thounze-hkunna Min Apyin	သုံးဆယ်ခုနှစ်မင်း အပြင်	The secondary list of the Thirty-seven Lords (lit. Thirty-seven Lords 'outside')

Thounze-hkunna Min Atwin	သိုးဆယ်ခုနှစ်မင်း အတွင်း	The main list of the Thirty-seven Lords, official pantheon of the <i>nats</i> (lit. Thirty-seven Lords ‘inside’)
Wa	ဝါး	Wood clapper, instrument of the <i>hsaing</i> ensemble
Wa lat si	ဝါးလတ်စည်း	Metric form outlined by the <i>hsaing</i> idiophones
Waletkhouq	ဝါးလက်ခုပ်	Large bamboo clapper, instrument of the <i>hsaing</i> ensemble
Way lar	ဝေလာ	Hsaing sound linked to boat travel and rowing
Weikza	ဝိဇ္ဇ	Practitioner of occult and mystic arts
Yekkha/Yekkhaik	ယက္ခာ/ရက္ခာ့သိ	Ogre (see also <i>balu</i>)
Yakwet	ရပ်ကွက်	Area, neighbourhood
Yan than	ရန်သံ	Music interval indicating non-concordant relationship between two sounds
Yauk kya asit	ယောက်ရားအစ်	Straight man (lit. ‘real man’, ‘pure man’)
Yawgi	ယောဂီ	<i>Weikza</i> -path practitioner, <i>yogi</i>
Yay hkin	ရေခင်း	Boat-patrolling sound, associated with water
Yoe than sin	ရှိုးသံစဉ်	Basic melody (lit. ‘bone melody’)
Yokthay	ရုပ်သေး	Marionette, stringed puppet
Yokthay pwe	ရုပ်သေးပွဲ	Marionette show
Youn-	ယုံ-	To believe (in spirits)
Youn kyi hmu	ယုံကြည်မှု	belief
(Nat) yokhtu	(နတ်) ရုပ်ထူ	(Spirit) statues
Yoya	ရှိုးရာ	Tradition
Yoya natchin	ရှိုးရာ နတ်ချင်း	Traditional spirit songs
Yoya pwe	ရှိုးရာပွဲ	Celebration to honour nat of the family tradition
Zat pwe	ဇာတ်ပွဲ	Dramatic performance on stage
Zat hsaing	ဇာတ်ဆိုင်း	Hsaing ensemble performing in <i>zat pwe</i>

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