MUSIC FOR SPIRIT POSSESSION CULTS IN BURMA, MYANMAR

LORENZO CHIAROFONTE

Istituto Interculturale di Studi Musicali Comparati
fondazione Giorgio Cini onlus

WORLD MUSIC LISTENING GUIDES

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Editor
Lorenzo Chiarofonte

Editorial Staff
Chiara Picardi and Costantino Vecchi

Graphic design
Multiplo

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Cover image
A musician playing a set of tuned drums.
Kyi Lin Bo ensemble, Yangon, 2017. Photo by the author.

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The **World Music Listening Guides. Intercultural Music Education Courses** aim to provide critical tools for understanding musical diversity. By analysing the dance and music characteristics of pieces belonging to different world music traditions, the guides explore the close relationship between music, culture and society, integrating textual descriptions, images, and multimedia animations created from audiovisual materials held in the IISMC archive. The multimedia animations form the core of the guides and represent their most innovative feature. Designed to function independently of the text, they aim to make the distinctive elements of the musical traditions under study immediately accessible. Each Guide concludes with a set of simple exercises intended to assess the knowledge acquired through the texts and animations, which can easily be used as teaching resources by educators.

Starting from significant pieces of a given musical tradition, the guides explore the general aspects of the performance, such as the cultural context, performance practices, instrumental ensemble, song texts, and symbolic elements. The guides also offer the analytical elements needed to understand the formal and syntactic procedures peculiar to each music tradition: metric-rhythmic structures, processes of melodic variation in instrumental and vocal parts, the relationship between music and sung verse, tuning systems, methods of combining parts, and the interaction between music and dance movements. Organised according to progressive levels of complexity, the educational materials presented in the various guides are intended to provide students and teachers with a support for intercultural music education, and address wide audience, including those with no prior expertise.

This first listening guide, *Music for Spirit Possession Cults in Burma (Myanmar)*, is devoted to the Burmese *hsaing waing* ensemble and the role it plays in the spirit possession ceremonies of the *nat* cult. The contents presented here derive from audiovisual materials collected during the event *Nat pwe. Music and dance in spirit worship in Yangon (Myanmar),* organised by the IISMC in 2017 as part of the series *Music and rites,* here reworked and presented in a series of multimedia animations that constitute the core of the guide.

To convey the meaning that music assumes within these possession rituals, the contents are arranged to provide a general overview of the cult and its ceremonies before progressively focusing on performative

aspects and the sound dimension. The interwoven, driving rhythms of the *hsaing waing* – an ensemble made up of gongs, tuned drums, oboes and voices, described here through fieldwork images collected by the author – generate the energy that sustains the possession dances of the *nat kadaw* (mediums), facilitating communication with the spirits. The interaction between the action of the instruments, the movements of the medium, and the participation of the audience is illustrated in an animation that reconstructs the unfolding of the different phases of the possession of the famous Brothers of Taungbyone, highlighting the ritual sequence of invocation, dance, entertainment, and the spirits' dismissal. A specific section is devoted to the song 'Shwe Byone Maung', part of the repertoire of *nat thachin* ('songs for the spirits'), in which a video animation highlights the various sections and musical structure of the piece. Finally, particular attention is given to the rhythmic interplay between the two main drums of the ensemble: the *pat waing*, a circle of drums that leads the performance, and the *pat ma*, a large suspended drum. Their interaction, one of the most distinctive features of this tradition, is analysed through a combination of diagrams, musical transcriptions, and video animations that demonstrate in detail how the dialogue between the two instruments shapes and energises the performance.

A series of four multiple-choice quizzes, each corresponding to a different section of the guide, enables readers to consolidate what they have learned and provides ideas for using these materials in educational contexts.

Lorenzo Chiarofonte

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1. *Nat pwe*, spirit ceremonies

In Burma (Myanmar), the local form of Theravada Buddhism includes the worship of local spirits, the *nat*, mythical figures of exceptional human beings who encountered a violent death and became spirits. Some of these spirits have been organised into a pantheon of 37 figures since the beginning of the Burmese monarchy (11th century), as part of a state cult: the Thirty-seven Lords, or *Thounze-hkunna Min* in Burmese. Devotees today turn to the *nat* to obtain help and advice; for this purpose, they organise a *nat pwe* ceremony.

The ceremony

A *nat pwe* (or *nat kana pwe*) is a private ceremony in which devotees pray and invoke the local spirits to obtain health and wealth. The word *pwe* translates the inherent ambivalence of this celebration: a *nat pwe* is both an 'offering to the spirits' and a genuine 'celebration'. The ceremony is held in the private home of a devotee. A temporary bamboo pavilion, called a *kana*, is erected for this occasion and usually extends onto the public street. One side of the pavilion hosts the sacred images of the spirits (*poun daw*), which are believed to be alive, and are surrounded by various offerings of flowers and food. The scents of the offerings, incense and perfumes, together with the sound of the music accompanying the spirit possession dances, help create the ceremony's special sensorial dimension (Fig. 1.1).

Fig. 1.1. A detail of the private altar of the *nat kadaw* U Kyaw Soe Moe. Fruit, flower and drink offerings (and in this case, musical instruments) are arranged in front of the spirit images, to be used during the ceremony. Yangon, 2017.

A celebration can last several days, during which different spirits are successively invited, so that the devotees can interact with them by presenting them different offerings. This is made possible by the presence of ritual specialists, the *nat kadaw*, or 'spirit brides' (Fig. 1.2), a historically female role but one that in urban centres is now often played by homosexual or transgender individuals. During the ceremony, the *nat kadaw* act as spirit mediums, calling up the spirits in a precise order and offering their bodies as a vessel for the *nat*. At particular moments of the ceremony, the devotees themselves take part in the possession dances, celebrating the spirits with family and friends (Fig. 1.3).

Fig. 1.2. The *nat kadaw* Kyaw Win Naing dances for the spirits, performing a typical hand gesture indicating the royal descendance of the *nat* invited to join the celebration. The devotees seated around the dancer, inside the ritual area; passers-by and onlookers remain outside. Yangon, 2017.

Fig. 1.3. Dance of the devotees during a ceremony. The sudden spirit possession of one of the devotees draws the attention of the other participants, who rush in to provide their support. Yangon, 2013.

During a *pwe*, the devotees ask the *nat kadaw* to act as their intermediary. The ceremony organisers are expected to present different types of offerings – food, cigarettes, drinks – to the different spirits embodied in the *nat kadaw*. The offerings vary according to the identity of the spirit embodied; indeed, the devotees must be careful to present the right kind of offerings to the right spirit so as not to offend it and to receive the requested help.

Music and dances

The *nat kadaw* dances are accompanied by the sound of the *hsaing waing* ensemble (Fig. 1.4). As in other South East Asian music cultures, the ensemble is composed mostly of tuned percussion instruments, in particular drums and gong-chimes. Unlike other music ensembles in South East Asia, however, the Burmese *hsaing waing* ensemble is characterised by the presence of tuned drums and particularly by the *pat waing* drum circle, which is one of the symbols of Burmese music culture and leads the rest of the ensemble. It is accompanied by other tuned drums, several gong-chimes, bamboo idiophones, crotales, cymbals, shawms and one or more singers.

Fig. 1.4. The *nat hsaing* ensemble of master Kyi Lin Bo prior to the beginning of a ritual performance. While Kyi Lin Bo, the drum circle player, is tuning the instrument, the two singers are sitting in front of the ensemble, resting. Yangon, 2017.

The *hsaing waing* ensemble

Inside the ritual pavilion the ensemble (see §2) is normally placed in front of the altar with the *nat* images, occupying one entire side of the pavilion. Its presence is both visually and sonically imposing: refined gilded and coloured stuccoes decorate the wooden structures of the larger instruments, and the sound of the *hsaing waing* instruments can be heard from afar. Nowadays the use of microphones and amplifiers makes the sound of the ensemble reverberate at often unsupportable volumes, producing a saturation effect.

The main repertoire consists of the *nat chin*, the 'spirit songs'. These have rhythmic, melodic and textual elements that are closely associated to one *nat* or to a group of *nat* with legendary links to one another. The joint performance of music and dance highlights the characteristics of the spirits and ritualises the main elements of their mythological story. In this way, the *nat* become physically present in the bodies of the spirit mediums, dancing in the ritual area and interacting with the devotees. Songs, melodies, rhythms and dances are deeply involved in the celebration. The music and dance performance is fundamental to the ritual practice of this spirit possession cult, punctuating the different phases of a ceremony. The 'traditional' *nat* songs (*yoya nat chin*) are today accompanied by more modern *nat chin*, usually composed by famous figures in the Burmese music world. However, modern *nat* songs have elements of continuity (rhythms, melodies and textual references) with the more traditional songs.

The two Taungbyone Brothers

In the pantheon of the Thirty-seven, some spirit figures enjoy greater popularity than others. These include the two Muslim brothers Min Gyi and Min Lay (the Great and the Little prince), the two Lords of Taungbyone, a village a few kilometres north of Mandalay (Fig. 1.5).

Fig. 1.5. Detail of the private altar of the *nat kadaw* U Win Hlaing in Yangon. The two Taungbyone Brothers, Min Gyi and Min Lay, hold a sword and are sitting beside their mother, Popa Medaw. Yangon, 2013.

The legend of the two Taungbyone brothers is complex and presents several episodes. They were born from the union of U Byatta, a messenger of the king and an Indian Muslim, and May Wunna, a flower-eating ogress residing on Mount Popa. The two brothers grew up in the service of King Anawratha of Pagan (11th century), the first great Burmese king and promoter of the Buddhist faith. The brothers accumulated experience as warriors and were endowed with magical powers. According to the legend, they were executed by king Anawratha for having disobeyed his direct order: they did not contribute to the construction of the Buddhist pagoda that the monarch wanted built in the village of Taungbyone; it is still possible today to see that two bricks are missing from the structure of the pagoda. After their execution, the two brothers became *nat*. In order to escape the two spirits' wrath, the king instituted their cult and had them settled in the palace of Taungbyone, giving them authority over the surrounding region.

Devotees of the Brothers today abstain from the consumption of alcohol and pork, a sign of respect for their Muslim faith, especially in the period around participation in the famous Taungbyone festival, the most important national festival of the Thirty-seven Lords.

Music and dances for the Taungbyone

The possession dances that bring the Taungbyone to the ritual area present dance and musical elements that narrate their deeds and characteristics. These may be recognised in the performance of music and dances for the two brothers presented in the Video 1.1 (with subtitles).

Min Lay, the younger one of the two, is usually more active in the dances. In this video, the famous *nat kadaw* U Win Hlaing dances as Min Lay, extending his index fingers to signify the spirit's great power in that sole finger. The power of the two spirits is also underlined by the lyrics of the songs performed in the video:

Dazzling and shining [like] diamonds and gold
They are better than anyone else

Similarly, the lyrics of the song performed in the video emphasis the benefits obtained by the devotees through the positive influence of the two *nat*:

[Like] the tide, your riches will increase by thousands of millions
The two Brothers will lift you up / The colours [of your] glory, power [and] pride will increase

In Video 1.1, the lyrics expressed in the subtitles emphasise how the spiritual power of the two *nat* is closely linked to spiritual benefits, but also to financial and economic success. The devotees benefit from all this by celebrating the spirits with the ritual music and dance performance of the *hsaing waing* ensemble and of the *nat kadaw*.

1.1 TAUNGBYONE MIN NYI NAUNG
https://youtu.be/aGpFrHO0p7s?si=PDK0mPh4q7jEqCIP

2. The *hsaing waing* ensemble

In Burma (Myanmar), the traditional *hsaing waing* ensemble has a fundamental role in the celebration of private and public ceremonies. Featuring from six to ten musicians, as in other South East Asian cultures the ensemble is characterised by tuned-percussion instruments (drums and gong chimes), accompanied by idiophones (cymbals and bamboo), aerophones (shawm) and singers.

The sound of the *hsaing waing* accompanies different kinds of performance: entertainment, as dance and theatre shows (*zat pwe* and *anyeint pwe*), or religious, like those related to Buddhist ceremonies (*ahlu pwe*) and the spirit cult (*nat pwe*). A *hsaing waing* ensemble performing theatre music is called *zat hsaing*; *ahlu hsaing* if it performs in a Buddhist donation ceremony and *nat hsaing* in a spirit possession ceremony.

In all these contexts, the instruments are essentially the same. Conversely, the *hsaing* style and repertoire change according to the performance context. For example, the *ahlu hsaing* and *zat hsaing* are characterised by a highly ornamented style – especially with regard to the *pat waing* drum circle – and a cultured repertoire. On the other hand, the *nat hsaing* ensemble has a less ornamented performing style and fast tempos. This is the result of strict metric and rhythmic interlocking techniques used particularly by the drums, which play a prominent role.

Drum-chime instruments are a unique feature of Burmese musical culture. The drums are tuned by applying the right amount of a tuning paste (once made of ashes and rice or wax, today substituted by industrial products) called *pat sa* (literally 'drum food'). The musician tunes the instrument by spreading the correct amount of paste on each drum skin. A larger quantity of *pat sa* will make the drum sound deeper (Fig. 2.1). A similar paste is used to tune gongs and xylophones in other South East Asian countries.

Fig. 2.1. Detail of the *pat sa*, the paste applied to the drum skin to correctly tune it. Yangon, 2013.

In the *hsaing waing* ensemble, metre, rhythm and melody are one. The idiophones guide the performance of the whole ensemble, providing the others with important musical references. The shawm and the gong circle perform complex and intricate melodies, sometimes supported by the drum circle. In the *nat hsaing*, the loud sound of the drums provides the energy needed to support the mediums' spirit possession dances. Although their role remains primarily rhythmic, the percussion instruments are tuned: so their role is never disconnected from the melody.

Si and *wa* (idiophones)

The *si* (small cymbals) and *wa* (woodblocks) idiophones are considered as one instrument (*sinewa*). In Burmese their names indicate the materials they are made of – bronze and bamboo (Fig. 2.2).

Fig. 2.2. A musician playing the *si* (small cymbals) and *wa* (wooden bar) idiophones. Taungbyone village, 2018.

The *si* consists of two small cymbals: the lower one is often fixed to a woodblock, allowing the musician to play it with one hand; with the other he plays the *wa,* a bamboo stick used to strike a pierced wooden lath. Occasionally the *wa* is substituted by a *walethkout*. This is a piece of bamboo cane cut longitudinally for most of its length (about one meter) (Fig. 2.3). The musician holds the instrument with both hands, clapping the two halves of the bamboo together. Rubber bands are usually mounted on the lower part of the bamboo where it is held: this allows the musician to play it with one hand, though less accurately. The clapping sound of the *walethkout* is intense, making it particularly suitable for accompanying dances.

Fig. 2.3. The *walethkout*, an idiophone made from a bamboo cane, sometimes substitutes the *wa* woodblock. Kyi Lin Bo ensemble, Popa Village, 2017.

Linkwin (large cymbals)

The *linkwin* (also *yakwin*) large cymbals are played by one musician, who holds one cymbal in each hand by an upper grip; using different techniques, the musician makes the two cymbals clash to produce different kinds of sound (Fig. 2.4).

In general, the sound of the *linkwin* is very intense. The role of these cymbals is ambivalent in *nat hsaing* music. Playing to the beat marked by the drums, the sound of the cymbals stands out from the lower frequencies of the larger drums, making the performance more incisive. When the *linkwin* play on the secondary beats, they provide an up-tempo that helps confer dynamism to the ensemble performance; this last case is particularly suitable for supporting spirit possession dances.

Fig. 2.4. The *linkwin* large cymbals give a particularly intense sound to the music performance. Yangon, 2017.

Pat waing (drum circle)

The *pat waing* drum circle (from *pat*, drum, and *waing,* circle) is composed of 21 tuned drums arranged in series from the largest to the smallest. The drums are suspended from a circular wooden frame, richly decorated with gilded stuccoes and coloured glass. The player sits inside the frame, completely surrounded and partly hidden by it; only the upper part of the torso is visible from outside (Fig. 2.5).

Fig. 2.5. Placed in the middle of the ensemble, the *pat waing* drum circle leads the other musicians during the performance of music and dances. Kyi Lin Bo ensemble, Popa Village, 2017.

The drum skins are tuned using the right amount of *pat sa*. The player beats the larger drums with the palms of his hands and the smaller one with his fingers, and must twist his torso 180-degrees to play them.

To enter the wooden frame, the musician must lower his head and go through a small door, called the 'king's entrance' (*min bauk*). This gesture is highly symbolical, as by going through the door the musician was forced to bow in front of the members of the royal court before starting to play. Before the collapse of the Burmese monarchy due to the British conquest (in the late 19th century), the *pat waing* and the *hsaing* ensemble provided the typical musical entertainment in the Burmese royal palace. In the court repertoires, the musical idiom of this instrument is characterised by a highly virtuoso style. This is almost completely absent in the *nat hsaing* style, where the drum circle supports the possession dances. The musician plays the drums in the medium and lower register, performing and constructing metric-rhythmic cycles with the rest of the ensemble. These cycles identify and call on different spirits, allowing them to manifest themselves in the bodies of the mediums.

The drum circle is the main instrument of the *hsaing waing* ensemble. It leads the rest of the ensemble during the performance, indicating

song section changes with a series of musical signals. For this reason, the drum circle player must pay particular attention to the development of the ritual.

Pat ma (suspended drum) and *chauk lon pat* (tuned drums)

The *pat ma* and the *chauk lon pat* are one set of tuned drums, played by one musician (sometimes, a third short drum, the *sahkunt*, is also included) (Fig. 2.6).

Fig. 2.6. A musician playing the drum set composed of the *sahkunt* (left), the six drum *chauk lon pat* (centre) and the large suspended drum *pat ma* (right). Kyi Lin Bo ensemble, Yangon, 2017.

The *pat ma* is a double-skin barrel drum and the largest in the ensemble. It is suspended with ropes from a richly decorated structure representing a mythical animal (the *pyinsa rupa*); however, it is not unusual to see it supported by a wooden or bamboo frame. The musician beats the drum skins with both hands. The tuning is adjusted by applying the right amount of *pat sa*, like the other drums of the ensemble. The left drum skin is normally larger and produces a lower sound; the right one is smaller and gives a higher sound. Given its deep, powerful sound, the *pat ma* can usually be seen interacting with the dancers: these, sometimes in a state of possession, can create visual or even

physical contact with the *pat ma*; in communicating with the musician, they ask for greater sonic intensity.

The *chauk lon pat* consists of six small drums, tuned by spreading *pat sa* on the upper skin. They are positioned to the right of the *pat ma* drum, from low to high register. In order to reach and comfortably play the instrument, the musician must twist his torso 45 degrees to the right. It is not uncommon to see the musician play the *pat ma* and the *chauk lon pat* with two different hands. Sometimes the *sahkunt* short drum is positioned longwise above the *chauk lon pat* on a wooden support. The introduction of this set seems to be a relatively recent acquisition in the *hsaing waing*: the *chauk lon pat* became popular only in the 1920s-30s. Use of the *chauk lon pat* is fairly limited in the *nat hsaing* practice. The instrument provides support to the *pat waing* drum circle, playing in correspondence with it and reinforcing its sonic impact. The *chauk lon pat* also gives the musician the chance to perform melodic variations within the metric-rhythmic cycles.

Sito (barrel drums)

The *sito* is a drum set consisting of two, three or four barrel drums. The drums are arranged from the larger to the smaller from left to right; they sit vertically on the ground and are hit on one side only with drumsticks. This playing technique is unique in the *hsaing waing* ensemble and provides an intense sound. The *sito* is thus a crucial instrument in the *nat hsaing* ensemble (Fig. 2.7).

Fig. 2.7. A musician playing the *sito* large barrel drums, hitting the skins with drum sticks. Kyi Lin Bo ensemble, Yangon, 2017.

Unlike the other drums of the ensemble, the *sito*'s drum skins are not tuned. A lower or higher register sound depends on the size of the drum itself. Because of this, the *sito* plays only a rhythmic supporting and reinforcing role: it usually plays in time with the beats marked by the *si* and *wa* idiophones – thus also by the *pat ma* drum. The lower sounding drum usually plays to the primary beat marked by the *wa* at the end of a metric-rhythmic cycle.

Kyi waing and *maung hsaing* (gong circle and gong-chime)

The *kyi waing* and *maung hsaing* are the only melodic and percussive instruments in the ensemble (excluding the drum circle). They are placed next to the other, usually to the right of the drum circle. These gong instruments play fast, complex and ornamented melodic variations together (Fig. 2.8).

Fig. 2.8. The *kyi waing* gong circle. The vertically suspended gongs are a relatively recent innovation; they allow the musician to perform more melodic variations. Taungbyone village, 2013.

The *kyi waing* (from *kyi*, 'bronze' and *waing,* 'circle') is a circle of 21 bossed, tuned gongs. Each gong is suspended from the frame by strings tied through special holes. The wooden frame is sometimes decorated like the *pat waing* frame with paint; or may be just a simple iron structure. The musician sits in the middle of the frame, hitting the gongs with mallets with a wooden grip and padded end. As for the drum circle, the musician must twist his torso almost 180-degrees to reach all the gongs during the performance. Unlike the drums of the ensemble, the *kyi waing* gong circle's tuning is fixed, so it is today used as a reference for tuning the other drums before the beginning of each performance.

The *maung hsaing* (from *maung*, 'gong' and *hsaing,* 'suspended') is a square gong-chime made up of a variable number of bossed gongs (about 18) that are normally tuned to a lower register than the *kyi waing* gong circle (Fig. 2.9).

Fig. 2.9. The *maung hsaing* gong-chime provides melodic support to the gong circle; like the latter, it is played with two mallets. Bo Naing ensemble, Mandalay, 2018.

The instrument is not always included in the ensemble – particularly in the case of the *nat hsaing* ensemble, for which it is not considered strictly necessary. Indeed, the *maung hsaing* usually repeats the melody of the *kyi waing* gong circle with minimal variations.

Hne (shawm)

The *hne* is the only wind instrument in the *hsaing waing* ensemble. There are two types: the *hne gyi* (large *hne*) and the *hne lay* (small *hne*), which usually alternate throughout the performance, depending on the piece. The deep, dark sound of the large *hne* is particularly suited to accompanying slow, solemn pieces; the agile structure of the small *hne* allows the musician to perform fast and complex melodies, making it the preferred choice in the *nat hsaing* (Fig. 2.10).

Fig. 2.10. The shawm master U Ohn Htay playing fast and complex melodies. Kyi Lin Bo ensemble, Yangon, 2013.

Fig. 2.11. Detail of the *hne* shawm multiple-reed.

The *hne* is a multiple-reed aerophone (Fig. 2.11). The reed is made by skilfully folding and cutting a sheet of bamboo fibre several times. The reed is made to vibrate using a circular-breathing technique, which allows the musician to obtain long and constant sounds without the need to catch his breath. The musician keeps the reed between his lips and, by adjusting the degree of pressure and air emission, is able to produce fast melodic changes, also obtaining micro-tonal variations (i.e., sounds that are inserted between the various degrees of a musical scale). Combined with the circular-breathing technique, this characteristic allows the musician to employ several performing techniques. A style characterised by long slurred notes can immediately and seamlessly be changed into one with fast, staccato notes and fast register changes.

Singers

The vocal part usually plays an important role in the *nat hsaing* ensemble. Although the role of the singer (*ahsodaw*) is generally considered a female one, it is not rare to see men or even the mediums themselves taking on one or more vocal parts. However, as the mediums are engaged in the dance, they often restrict themselves to invoking the spirits, which takes place before the performance of a song. The vocal part of the song itself is performed by professional singers and occasionally by the musicians (Fig. 2.12).

During the instrumental section of a song, the vocal part presents only shouts of incitement; these highlight the most intense moments of the dancing or the musical performance.

Fig. 2.12. The singers take position in front of the ensemble, alternating throughout the performance. In the picture, holding the microphone, the singer Ma Than Dar. Kyi Lin Bo ensemble, Popa village, 2013.

3. Analysis of the ritual action

The coming into presence of a specific *nat* in the ritual pavilion is signalled by several elements in the performance: music, dance, song lyrics, costumes, offerings. Depending on which spirits entered the body of the dancer, the *hsaing waing* ensemble will perform a specific type of music: refined court songs support the dance of legendary princesses; intense martial rhythms underline the prowess of princes and military commanders. Melodic and rhythmic modules identify specific spirits; they are necessary to make the spirits manifest. These musical modules are accompanied by specific dance and gestural modules, performed by the dancer. The lyrics commemorate the spirits' legendary stories, celebrating their spiritual powers and underlining the benefits devotees can obtain by worshipping them. Finally, specific elements of ritual costumes and the presentation of offerings help manifest the spirits belonging to the pantheon of the Thirty-seven *nats*.

The possession dance performance is divided into several dance and musical phases. Video 3.1 shows those characterising the dance of the Min Lay *nat*, the younger Taungbyone Lord.

3.1 ANALYSIS OF THE RITUAL ACTION
https://youtu.be/odu-MlJvghw?si=_Np2VJLIxLe-sK0a

Sung invocation [00'11"-00'30"]

In calling up the spirit of Min Lay, the *nat kadaw* U Win Hlaing turns towards the *nat* statue on the altar in a praying position. Inspired by the *nat*'s image, the spirit medium improvises a short text on a standard melodic line, supported by the *hsaing waing* ensemble.

Spoken invocation [00'30"-00'41"]

The spirit medium pronounces a short spoken invocation, not always performed, calling the *nat* by his name and title.

Spirit embodiment and possession dance [00'41"-02'13"]

The beginning of the possession dances is signalled by the explosive sound of the ensemble and by the shaking hands of the spirit medium, who welcomes the spirit of Min Lay into his body. From now on, the *nat* is considered to be materially present: the possession dance, which in the case of spirit mediums is always controlled, it is a sign of the spirit's manifestation. In this phase of the ritual, three distinct and overlapping moments can be identified:

Performance of music and dance patterns [00'41"-02'13"]: The ensemble of master Kyauk Sein supports the possession dances by playing the identifying music of the spirit invoked. The metric-rhythmic-melodic patterns performed on the tuned drums take a leading role. Similarly, specific gestural and dance patterns performed by the dancer show that the *nat* is present. In the case of Min Lay, these consist of dancing with the index fingers uplifted, to signify the great power the *nat* holds only in this finger. These elements of music and dance performance constantly recur throughout the possession dance.

Sound-movement interactions [01'50"-02'13"]: During the possession dance, the *hsaing waing* ensemble and the dancer depend on each other and interact via verbal, visual or musical signals. For example, in this video we can see the possessed dancer 'requesting' the ensemble to increase the tempo and dynamics by simply getting closer to the drums, or by exchanging a meaningful look with one or more of the musicians. At that point the music will coordinate the dance movement of the possessed dancer.

Distribution of the offerings [01'02"-01'47"]: The devotees share specific ritual offerings with the *nat*. These help emphasise the spirit's personality: for example, Min Lay's ethnic and religious identity (a Muslim Indian, although unspecified) is highlighted by the offerings of cigarettes, biryani rice and non-alcoholic drinks. The *nat* repays the offerings giving them his blessing. Once received and consumed, the offerings are immediately re-distributed among the other participants. The sharing and re-distributing of the offerings is an important moment for establishing a mutual relationship between the community of devotees and the spirits.

Entertainment phase [02'13"-05'05"]

The *hsaing waing* ensemble can perform several songs to entertain the listeners – ideally, the *nat*s invited to the ceremony and the physically present devotees. Songs from the most diverse repertoires can be heard during the entertainment phase: Burmese court songs, modern popular songs or even specific spirit songs (*nat chin*). Many spirit mediums operating in urban environments today make the most of these moments to show off their vocal skills by performing the vocal part of a song in place of the singers. The audience of devotees is often called on to take part. In the video, the dancer encourages the audience to support the performance by clapping their hands in time with the music.

Departure of the spirit [05'05"-end]

At the end of the entertainment phase, the spirit is dismissed. The spirit medium U Win Hlaing signals [05'00"] to the drum circle player that he intends to conclude the spirit possession dance. The musician leads the ensemble towards the conclusive musical phase. This is character-

ised by a short resumption of the metric-rhythmic-melodic modules that characterised the initial phase of the spirit possession dance. At the same time, the spirit medium performs the spirit's distinctive dance and gestural modules again; he then places himself in front of the altar and joins hands in the gesture of prayer. This indicates that the spirit has departed, abandoning his body.

4. The song 'Shwe Byone Maung' by Sein Moot Tar

Throughout his long and prolific musical career, the great master (*hsaing saya*) Sein Moot Tar from Mandalay was the author of several spirit songs (*nat chin*). Mostly composed during the 1970s, many of these gained national success; today they are regularly performed in spirit possession ceremonies (*nat pwe*). Over the years some of his songs have taken the place of more traditional *nat* songs (*yoya nat chin*), thus establishing a new standard. In writing these new songs, Sein Moot Tar drew inspiration from traditional songs. The result is the creation of a song repertoire characterised by a mix of old and new, of innovation based on tradition.

'Shwe Byone Maung', in Video 4.1, is one of these songs. It celebrates the two Muslim brothers of Taungbyone. The title instantly recalls the importance of the village of Taungbyone for the spirit cult: Taungbyone is called 'golden' (*shwe*), a royal attribute referring to the display of power still evident today during the celebration of the annual festival for the two spirits. The references to the greatness and power of the two *nat* continue in the sung lyrics:

A:
Dazzling and shining [like] diamonds and gold
They are better than anyone else
[Like] the tide, your riches will increase by thousands of millions
The two Brothers will lift you up / The colours [of your] glory, power [and] pride will increase

B:
The [two] Brothers [from the] Golden [village of] Byone who provide luck and prizes
The [two] Brothers [from the] Golden [village of] Byone who fulfil anything you wish
All your wishes are fulfilled, the Brothers take care...
The [two from] the Golden Taungbyone, the Golden Byone Brothers!

The lyrics are characterised by poetic formulas (Dazzling and shining [like] diamonds and gold) that emphasise the royal origin of the two spirits and their village, and figures of speech that more directly point out the benefits obtained through the two *nat* ([Like] the tide, your riches will increase by thousands of millions / The two Brothers will lift you up). The lyrics sung during the ritual do not always correspond to those written by Sein Moot Tar though. During the ceremony the singers interpret the song's verses with variations that keep more or less to the original version, following the inspiration of the moment or their memory.

4.1 ANALYSIS OF THE FORMAL STRUCTURE
https://youtu.be/k3niVBgrtq4?si=WnaoluywhKoktlbU

Analysis of the musical form

As for other songs of Burmese music culture, the song 'Shwe Byone Maung' is constructed by alternating sung and instrumental sections. The singer performs one or more sections, supported by the ensemble; then the instruments play the same sections without the singer, elaborating on the melody according to the nature of their instrument. This organisation of the musical material can also be found in repertoires dating back to the Burmese royal court.

Alongside these more 'traditional' features, the modernity of the 'Shwe Byone Maung' immediately becomes clear when observing the aesthetic nature and formal organisation of the piece.

Firstly, the lyrics are based on a simple but effective melodic line. This is typical of other modern spirit songs composed by Sein Moot Tar, and can probably be ascribed to a major influence of the Western popular song form. Traditional songs usually develop more elaborate melodic lines, aesthetically closer to the Burmese court musical culture.

This similarity to the popular song form is even more evident in the formal organisation. The alternation of the two sections A and B corresponds to the typical song form alternation of verse and chorus. The succession and repetition of sections A (verse) and B (chorus), first sung and then played only by the *hsaing waing* instruments, does not occur in traditional spirit songs (*yoya nat chin*). These usually follow an alternating sequence of sung and instrumental sections, without the characteristic presence of a modern 'chorus'. Although such formal structure may be partly altered during the ritual performance, in this case it is clearly defined.

5. *Pat waing* and *pat ma*: analysis of the metric-rhythmic interlocking

The *nat hsaing* musical style is characterised by rhythms and melodies usually performed at a high speed. This is made possible by the use of a strict metric-rhythmic interlocking among the musicians of the ensemble – a feature also typical of other South East Asian ensembles.

In the *nat hsaing*, the metric-rhythmic weave becomes evident in the combined action of the *pat waing* drum circle and the *pat ma* suspended drum. The two main drums of the ensemble interact according to the time marked by the two small idiophones – the *si* (small cymbals) and the *wa/walethkout* (bamboo clapper) – constructing the metric-rhythmic cycles together.

Video 5.1 presents an analysis of this weaving technique. Starting from the metric-rhythmic cycle characterising the first instrumental section A of the song 'Shwe Byone Maung', the analysis shows some typical elements of the metric-rhythmic interlocking between *pat waing* (drum circle), *pat ma* (suspended drum) and *walethkout* (bamboo clapper).

5.1 ANALYSIS OF THE METRIC-RHYTHMIC INTERLOCKING
https://youtu.be/XWe3f55izt4?si=ELNtTNHX8BBSAQcH

Metrical forms [00'47"-02'22"]

The alternating action of the *si* and *wa/walethkout* idiophones is arranged according to specific metrical forms, which can be more or less associated to specific repertoires. In general, in all the traditional Burmese music repertoires, the sound of the *si* marks the secondary beats; the sound of the *wa/walethkout* marks the primary beats. In this way, these idiophones provide the metric reference to the rest of the ensemble and, if present, to the dancers; their role is thus paramount.

As in other South East Asian music cultures, the final beat marked by the *wa/walethkout* is perceived as the one around which the perception of the musical phrase is constructed and oriented; it represents the main primary beat.

In the *nat hsaing*, the most common metric cycle is the *wa lat si*. This is binary and presents a 'squared' character, as it is constructed on the regular alternation of *si* and *wa*. In some music notation, the *si* (italics) corresponds to the sign 'o', while the **wa** (bold) to the sign '+', as exemplified in the following scheme:

1 **2** *3* **4**
o + o +

This metrical form allows the rest of the ensemble to reach higher tempos; for this reason, it is particularly suited to accompanying the intense spirit possession dances of the *nat kadaw*.

In moments of particularly fast tempos and sound intensity, the *walethkout* bamboo clapper substitutes the *wa* woodblock; the sound of the *si* cymbals is omitted entirely. The musician holds the *walethkout* with both hands, marking only the primary beats of the metric cycle.

Metric-rhythmic interlocking [02"22'-end]

In the *nat hsaing*, the combined action of the *pat waing* drum circle and of the *pat ma* suspended drum is constructed on the metric cycle defined by the two idiophones. The scheme (Fig. 5.1) sums up the metric-rhythmic action of the two instruments in the performance of the metric cycle of section A in the song 'Shwe Byone Maung'.

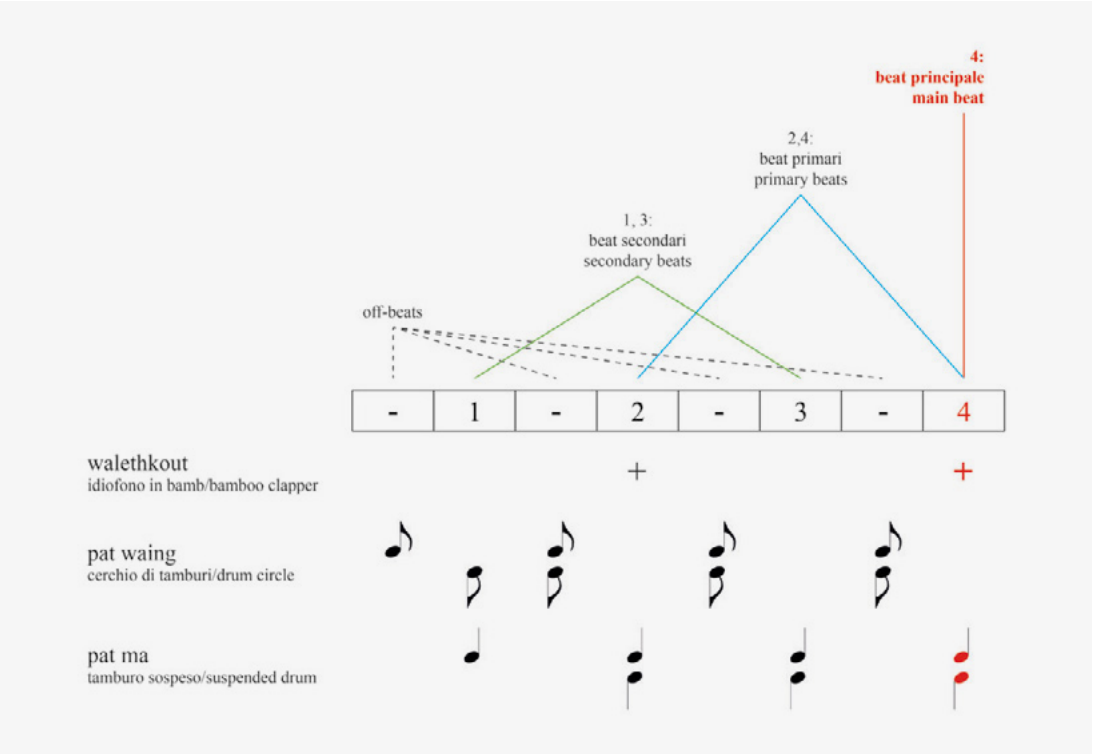

Fig. 5.1. Rendition of the metric-rhythmic cycle in the song 'Shwe Byone Maung' (lower pane), based on the *wa lat si* metrical form (upper pane).

The *pat waing* drum circle concentrates on the off-beats – not marked by the *si* and *wa* idiophones. As a result, it is in rhythmic contrast with the other drums in the ensemble, especially the large *pat ma* drum. The *pat ma* usually sounds on the main beats marked by the *si* and *wa* idiophones, rhythmically interacting with the drum circle. The two instruments are usually positioned next to each other in the ensemble. Metrically alternating with the drum circle, the *pat ma* usually marks the end of the metric-rhythmic cycle with a deeper sound – corresponding to the action of the *wa/walethkout* idiophone. This interlocking style allows the ensemble to reach fast tempos without sacrificing any sonic impact or volume; it also helps control the dance movements during the spirit possession dances.

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In Burma (Myanmar), the local form of Theravada Buddhism includes the worship of local spirits, the *nat*, mythical figures of exceptional human beings who encountered a violent death and became spirits. Some of these spirits have been organised into a pantheon of 37 figures, as part of a state cult: the Thirty-seven Lords, or *Thounze-hkunna Min* in Burmese. Devotees today turn to the *nat* to obtain help and advice; in turn, they organise a *nat pwe* ceremony, in which music plays a fundamental role. The rapid, interlocking rhythms of the *hsaing waing*, the traditional Burmese ensemble, drive and sustain the spirit-possession dances of the mediums, actively enabling communication with the *nat*.

Lorenzo Chiarofonte – Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna
Lorenzo.chiarofonte@unibo.it

Lorenzo Chiarofonte is a lecturer in Ethnomusicology at the Alma Mater Studiorum University of Bologna. He received his PhD from SOAS University of London in 2020, researching the functions, meanings and ritual efficacy of music and dance in spirit possession ceremonies in central Burma/Myanmar. He is Research Editor for the academic journal *Analytical Approaches to World Music* and collaborates with the Italian ethnomusicology journal *Etnografie sonore/Sound Ethnographies*. His first monograph *Nat hsaing: Etnografia e analisi musicale di un rituale per gli spiriti in Birmania* (Roma, NeoClassica, 2023) has recently been published. His research interests currently include performance analysis, South East Asian court musical and theatrical genres, religious and ritual soundscapes, popular music and media practices.