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## **Taungbyone Nat Festival and the Response of the Church**

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### **Introduction**

The Tuangbyone Nat Festival is one of the most popular animistic festivals in Myanmar. When Anawrahta, the great king of the ancient city of Bagan, unified all of Burma into one kingdom in the eleventh century, he made Theravada Buddhism the state religion. However, there were several animistic religions already in existence at that time. The proponents of these animistic religions worshiped spirit beings called *nats*.<sup>1</sup> Anawrahta tried to abolish *nat* worship but he was unsuccessful; the people continued to worship them. The Taungbyone Nat Festival, the topic of this paper, was started during the reign of this king. The festival is still held at the end of August in Taungbyone village each year, and honors the two *nat* brothers, Shwepyingyi, and Shwepyinlay, known popularly as the Taungbyone brothers.<sup>2</sup>

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this paper is to explore the background, historical context, practices, belief systems, and worldviews of animism in Myanmar based on the Taungbyone Nat Festival and to describe how the church should respond.

### **Scope and Limitation**

It should be noted that this study will not cover all thirty-seven *nats* and all the belief systems of animism in Myanmar. The only *nats* that will be examined are the Taungbyone *nats*: Shwepyingyi and Shwepyinlay.

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<sup>1</sup>Maung Htin Aung, *Folk Elements in Burmese Buddhism* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972), 1.

<sup>2</sup>Melford E. Spiro, *Burmese Supernaturalism* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1967), 113.

### The Meaning of *Nat* and *Natkadaw*

The term “*nat*” comes from the Sanskrit word *natha*, signifying a protector or lord. People believe *nats* are spirits that dominate a group of people or a group of objects,<sup>3</sup> and that they have dominion over a particular village or district. The domination of a *nat* is both territorial and personal. The worship of *nats* is entirely indigenous in origin developed from a form of animism that is still popular among some of Myanmar’s mountainous peoples.<sup>4</sup>

Believers think that the *nat* guardian of a village has authority over all those born in the village or born into a family in the village, no matter where they are located now. They also believe the *nat* has authority over all who come to his village while they are there. Supposedly the *nat* will not harm them, but he will protect those who recognize his dominion. This recognition of *nat* dominion can be expressed by an offering of rice or fruit, a few supplications, or a gesture.<sup>5</sup>

Originally, *nats* were perceived as impersonal, and local, such as: “the god of the banyan tree,” “the hill,” “the lake just outside the village,” and “the *nat* who protects the village.” Later on, thirty-seven individual and national *nats* were identified, and are still revered throughout the country.<sup>6</sup>

Since Anawrahta could not abolish *nat* worship in the country,<sup>7</sup> he eventually accepted the *nats* into the Buddhist faith assigning them the position of subordinates. The images of the thirty-seven *nats* were placed in the temples on the same pedestal as the Buddha and depicted as worshipping the Buddha. This established the pattern of Burmese Buddhism in which gods and spirits are powers that are glorified and appeased in the right context but are always subordinated to the transcendent power and value of the Buddha.<sup>8</sup>

The word *nat* means “spirit” and *kadaw* means “wife;” therefore, *natkadaw* means the “wife of a *nat*” or “a spirit medium.” Nyunt says, “Nat-believers can encounter *nats* through possessed *natkadaws* (spirit mediums), an oracle, a medium, a diviner or a cult officiant, as they

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<sup>3</sup>Russell H. Bowers Jr., ed., *Folk Buddhism in Southeast Asia* (Cambodia: Training of Timothys, 2003), 22.

<sup>4</sup>Aung, 2.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 4.

<sup>8</sup>Winston L. King, “Burma,” in *Buddhist Spirituality: Indian, Southeast Asian, Tibetan, Early Chinese*, ed. Takeuchi Yoshinori (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1993), 103.

take a mediator's role in the relationship between the *nats* and their followers."<sup>9</sup> Benedict Brac de la Perriere says, "Spirit mediums are supposed to have been personally called by a *nat*, and seduced by him, that is to say, to have been chosen by him to become spirit mediums-as expressed in Burmese as *natkadaw*, or *nat* wives."<sup>10</sup> The consecration of a new *natkadaw* is seen as a marriage to a specific *nat* within the pantheon, transforming the *natkadaw* into a medium through a process of being called upon by a specific *nat*.<sup>11</sup>

The *natkadaw* is also called a shaman. A shaman is not just a mediator between the *nat* and the cult members, but is also considered a *nat's* wife, although not all *natkadaws* are women. Her responsibility is to appease her husband (as well as other *nats*) by dancing.<sup>12</sup> Steyne notes, "Shamans are thought to be in direct contact with the spirits. They act as mediums by going into trances, or use others as mediums to channel messages."<sup>13</sup>

### Taungbyone Village

Taungbyone village where the festival is held is about twenty kilometers north of Mandalay, the last capital of the Burmese monarchy, located in central Myanmar. It is typically a hot, dry, and dusty place. During the festival period, all the space in the village is occupied by temporary infrastructures. The festival includes a section of the audience that is replaced each day as well as other participants, such as fairground people and mediums, who arrive with their group of clients, and settle into temporary bamboo camps before the festival begins.<sup>14</sup>

There is also a large, temporary market. It consists of all kinds of stalls selling food, fruits, flowers, wares, toys, clothes, tools, handicrafts, and

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<sup>9</sup>Peter Thein Nyunt, "Christian Response to Burmese Nat Worship in Myanmar," in *Seeking the Unseen: Spiritual Realities in the Buddhist World*, ed. Paul H. De Neui (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2016), 260.

<sup>10</sup>Benedicte Brac de la Perriere, "Nats' Wives or 'Children of Nats': from Spirit Possession to Transmission among the Ritual Specialists of the Cult of the Thirty-seven Lords," *Asian Ethnology* 68, no. 2 (2009): 285, <https://web.p.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=4&sid=a1c564f4-bd88-46f9-acb8-258fed0eb887%40redis>.

<sup>11</sup>Benedicte Brac dela Perriere, Perriere, "Being a Spirit Medium in Contemporary Burma," in *Engaging the Spirit World: Popular Beliefs and Practices in Modern Southeast Asia*, eds. Kirsten W. Endres and Andrea Lauser (New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2011), 165.

<sup>12</sup>Spiro, 205-206.

<sup>13</sup>Philip M. Steyne, *Gods of Power: A Study of the Beliefs and Practices of Animists* (Columbia, SC: Impact International Foundation, 1996), 154.

<sup>14</sup>Benedicte Brac de la Perriere, "The Taungbyone Festival: Locality and Nation-Confronting in the Cult of the 37 Lords," in *Burma at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Monique Skidmore (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), 65-71.

jewelry as well as restaurants, side shows, traditional Burmese drama, or *Anyeint* (*Anyeint* is a traditional Burmese entertainment form that combines dance with instrumental music, song, and comedy routines, in theatrical performances). There are crowds of people shopping, dining, dancing, partying, and having fun on the premises.<sup>15</sup>

### Historical Background

As aforementioned, the Taungbyone Nat Festival has its roots in ancient Burmese animistic practices that predate the arrival of Buddhism. The festival's origin is tied to the legend of Shewbyingyi and Shewbyinlay who are two famous brothers born to a Muslim father and an ogress mother who lived during the Bagan period.<sup>16</sup> Byatta, the father of Shwepyingyi and Shwepyinlay, was given the job of flower officer by Anawrahta, the king. The king assigned him the daily task of collecting flowers from Mount Popa and bringing them to Bagan. Unfortunately, Byatta delayed going back to Bagan because he loved his wife Mekuwn and his kids so much. This irritated the king.<sup>17</sup> When he failed for a third time to fulfill his duty of providing the king with daily flowers, he was executed.<sup>18</sup>

Byatta's wife died of a broken heart and became a *nat* called Popa Medaw. Anawrahta took Byatta's two sons, Shwepyingyi and Shwepyinlay, under royal patronage. They became heroes and served him.<sup>19</sup> After a few years, Anawrahta wished to possess the tooth of the Buddha, which was held in China. To obtain the Buddha's tooth, the two brothers went to China with Anawrahta's troops. After taking it, Anawrahta placed the tooth in a case carried by a white elephant. On the return journey, when they arrived at Taungbyone village, the elephant stopped and knelt there. The king constructed a pagoda on the spot.<sup>20</sup>

While the Pagoda was being built, Anawrahta ordered all his soldiers to share in its construction by contributing one brick each. The Taungbyone brothers chose not to partake in this activity since they were more interested in playing marbles. The monarch commanded them to

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 71-74.

<sup>16</sup>Daw Khin Moe Moe Kyu, "Taungbyone Pwe: Motivating of the Ritual in Myanmar," *Academia* (Aug 10, 2023), 5, [https://www.academia.edu/10381446/Taungbyone\\_Pwe\\_motivating\\_of\\_the\\_ritual\\_in\\_Myanmar](https://www.academia.edu/10381446/Taungbyone_Pwe_motivating_of_the_ritual_in_Myanmar).

<sup>17</sup>Spiro, 113-114.

<sup>18</sup>Wilhelm Klein, *Insight Guides: Myanmar Burma*, 1st ed. (Singapore: Apa Publications, 1992) 210.

<sup>19</sup>Aung, 73.

<sup>20</sup>Spiro, 114-115.

be punished by being struck with a short cane. The brothers managed to get away, but they were eventually apprehended near Taungbyone. There, the brothers were beaten with bamboo sticks with the assistance of the locals, but due to their superhuman strength, the beatings had no impact on them. However, in the end, their testicles were crushed. Thus, they passed away and evolved into *nats*, also known as the Taungbyone Brother Lords.<sup>21</sup>

On the king's return journey to Bagan, his boat abruptly stopped. The two *nat* brothers appeared posthumously when the king used a stick to beat the waves of the river. They reportedly threatened to stop him unless he provided them with a place to reside. The king ordered that a temple be erected for them in Taungbyone.<sup>22</sup>

Later, people started worshiping the two *nat* brothers and other *nats* through offerings and dancing at Taungbyone village. People called this practice the Taungbyone Nat Festival and still celebrate it every year to appease the two *nat* brothers. The brothers are numbered among the thirty-seven great *nats* and revered for their powers. The Burmese believe that these two *nats* are their ancestors who can bless, heal, and protect them. They also believe that they can contact them through *natkadaws* during the Taungbyone Festival.

## Practices

### Worship (Propitiation to the *Nats*)

Tens of thousands of people attend the Taungbyone Festival each year. Since the ancient land of these brother *nats* is quite large, a big portion of the participants come because of inherited responsibilities to appease them. Others show up on their own initiative regardless of whether the two brothers are their supposed ancestral spirits.<sup>23</sup> It should be noted that the Burmese people worship *nats* to attain success in their earthly lives, not for salvation. There are different types of propitiation: offerings provided by laypeople, and dancing and other ceremonial actions carried out by *natkadaws*.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 115.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 116.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 119.

### Bringing Offerings to the Shrine

The Taungbyone brothers' shrine is undoubtedly the most spectacular *nat* shrine in all of Myanmar. The usual shrine is a miniature house-like structure attached to a tree or resting on a pole. However, this Taungbyone brothers' shrine is an ornate ark built at one end of a very large open-walled meeting hall called the Nat Palace (*nat nun*). The *nat* images are preserved inside the ark, which is only opened on rare occasions but is left open throughout the festival. Offerings are deposited on an "altar" in front of the ark, and a *nat* dance is performed both on an elevated stage and in the large hall below the ark.<sup>25</sup>

Since *nat* propitiation is a private issue, occupying only a few minutes, it is similar to Buddhist worship in that it is composed mostly of individual offerings and brief prayers.<sup>26</sup> The *nat* votaries can deliver their gifts to the shrine on any day of the festival. The usual donations include coconuts, bananas, clothes, cash, alcohol, bouquets, and ferns. After pressing the ferns against the images of the brothers, *natkadaws* return them to the person who offered them. It is thought that the power (*mana*) from the images, which has been transferred to the ferns, would bring the owner luck and rewards in the form of money.<sup>27</sup>

Tradition prescribes the nature of the *nat*-human interaction as well as the type and quantity of contributions that various households must make. Some families choose to display their contribution rather than deliver it to the *nats*, in actuality keeping it for themselves. Some families obtain an exchange offer from the *nats* after presenting their original offering.<sup>28</sup>

### Dances

After setting flowers on the altar, many worshippers join the vast groups of people who are already dancing before the *nats*. Shouting and chanting accompany the dancing, which can occasionally result in spirit possession.<sup>29</sup> In Myanmar, the "chief shaman" (*Nat-Ouk*), who is chosen by a custodian (the custodian is administrator for the keeper of the images of *nats*), is in charge of all *natkadaws*. Four prominent female *natkadaw* known as the "Queens" (*Mibaya*) serve as his underlings. They are the

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 117.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 118.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 119-120.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 120.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

key dancers in the dances that represent the significant moments in the brothers' lives and which are performed at the ceremony. In addition, the custodian names four male *natkadaws* known as "royal ministers" (*Wungyi*), who preside over the rituals as the main male officiants.<sup>30</sup>

During the festival booths of the different *natkadaws* surround the palace on all four sides. Each booth features the image of the *nat* to whom the *natkadaw* is "married," and some booths have pictures of the traditional thirty-seven great *nats*. These *natkadaws* perform in the palace, and they are accessible as mediums for any issue said to fall under the purview of the *nats*—business, illness, marriage, divorce, and so forth—for a fee.<sup>31</sup>

The *natkadaws* dance, each in turn, in front of a great audience seated in the palace every evening. The dances are solitary and are done in front of the *nat* shrine.<sup>32</sup> Since these two *nats* died violently, it is said that dancing soothes and calms their thoughts. By donning a *nat*'s outfit and playing out scenes from his narrative, the dancer is personifying the *nat* rather than just praising him. Thus, the dance serves as both a *nat* performance and a symbolic depiction of the *nat*.<sup>33</sup> The dance has yet a third connotation; while the *nat* is both a spectator of and symbolically portrayed in the dance it also takes possession of the *natkadaw* while she is dancing. Although it is the *natkadaw*'s body that appears to be dancing, the dance is actually perceived as being performed by the *nat*. The dancing *natkadaw* is both the one making propitiation and the one receiving propitiation.<sup>34</sup>

Before each dance, a *natkadaw* who serves as the "announcer" sings the ode (*Nat Than*), which begins in the first person and recounts the life of the *nat* who is about to be impersonated and ends with an invocation to the *nat* to possess the dancer. The orchestra begins to play the *nat* song after this incantation (*Kadaw Gan*), and the *natkadaw* starts to dance. Only a few dancers are really in trances or states that resemble trances. However, each of them maintains that their *nats*, not they, are the ones dancing. Some claim they are not conscious of entering the dance and that they are only conscious of their surroundings once the music stops and they stop dancing.<sup>35</sup> They claim they are in an altered state of consciousness. When this occurs, another *natkadaw* sprays water on the dancer and rubs her head and back and occasionally fans her until she

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<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 117.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 117-118.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 120.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 120-121.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 121.



awakens. It should be noted that towards the conclusion of the dancing, all dancers, whether in a trance or not, tremble and are fanned by another *natkadaw*.<sup>36</sup>

During the performance, the *natkadaws* undoubtedly give off the impression of being in a trance. The dancers look to be unconscious of their surroundings and act like they are controlled by someone other than themselves. This image is reinforced by the fact that the dancers continue to shake wildly with glassy eyes and blurred focus as the orchestral music reaches its last crescendo, signaling the conclusion of the dance.<sup>37</sup>

Two *natkadaws* who dance while holding swords (the brothers, it will be remembered, were warriors) perform the Taungbyone brothers' dance. The dancers carefully circle two piles of bananas that are set on the ground and gently poke them with their swords to represent hunting rabbits that were prepared as food for the brothers.<sup>38</sup> The audience watches the *natkadaws* dance sitting calmly on the palace floor, paying attention to the action with a serious yet passive curiosity.<sup>39</sup>

### The Shower Ritual

The shower ritual consists of bathing the Taungbyone *nats*' images. The images are pulled behind a barge in small boats and carried on royal palanquins. The "ministers" and "queens," supported by the orchestra, dance in front of the images on the barge itself. The procession doesn't return to shore until mid-afternoon because the festival takes place in August when the plains are up to a mile deep in water on each side of the river.<sup>40</sup>

### The Rabbit-offering Ceremony

The ritual for offering a rabbit takes place on the fifth day of the festival. A hamlet close to Taungbyone village is where the Taungbyone brothers had their first supper of wild rabbit meat. Every year the men of the village go out hunting and kill one male and one female rabbit on the fourth day of the celebration. They transport these sacrificed rabbits into Taungbyone village the next day to be presented to the *nat* brothers' images. After the rabbits are cooked, they are brought inside the palace.

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<sup>36</sup>Ibid. 122.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 121-122.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 122-123.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 123.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid.

The *natkadaws* subsequently consume them, which purports to give them magical power.<sup>41</sup>

### Tree-cutting Ceremony

The tree-cutting ceremony takes place on the morning of the festival's last day. This rite entails the ritual cutting of two branches (one for each brother) from the *Leinbin* tree, which is planted on the day of the ritual. The *Leinbin* tree is a large hardwood tree bearing winged fruit pods (*Nauclea parviflora*). According to *nat* devotees, the ceremonial cutting down of the tree is a form of symbolic revenge against the *nats*. The chief queen suddenly grabs the top branch and uses her sword to chop off a chunk. The festival comes to an end with the destruction of the tree.<sup>42</sup>

### Why the Burmese Perform the Taungbyone Festival

There are many reasons why the Burmese people annually perform Taungbyone Festival.

#### To Honor and Venerate Taungbyon Brothers *Nats*

The Burmese people annually celebrate the Taungbyone Nats Festival to honor and venerate the Taungbyone *nats* brothers. They believe that dancing before these *nats* appeases them.

#### To Seek Blessing, Fame, Healing, and Protection

Pilgrims from various parts of Myanmar gather at the festival grounds near Taungbyone village to pay homage to the *nats* and seek their blessing. As previously stated, *nats* are believed to influence various aspects of human life, from health and prosperity to misfortune and disease. People worship *nats* to receive blessings.

#### To Maintain Ancestral Heritage

The Taungbyone Nat Festival holds deep cultural and religious significance for the Burmese people. It serves as a bridge between ancient animistic beliefs and the country's Buddhist traditions. The festival provides a platform for people to express their spirituality, maintain

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<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 124.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid.

connections with their ancestral heritage, and strengthen community bonds. Steyne notes, “Animists believe that death is a new birth into a spiritual body, without any change in character. They also believe that the living continue in dialogue with the dead and that the dead have the capacity to communicate with the living, either directly or through mediums.”<sup>43</sup> Burmese people believe that during this festival, mediums can give them contact with their ancestors, the Taungbyone brothers.

### Business

Local vendors and artisans set up stalls at the festival, selling traditional crafts, food, and other items. This contributes to the local economy and provides opportunities for income generation, particularly in rural areas. The festival gives *nat* practitioners and other business people an opportunity for commercial development at the festivals. The event features two different types of commerce: 1) shamanic enterprise, 2) festival-related products and guest houses.

Kyu notes, “The shamanic business is aimed at *Shwetait Sayin Win*. This means to attend and dance at the great temple. After attending the temple, most votaries believe that the *natkadaw* becomes more powerful than in the past.”<sup>44</sup> Therefore, to become *Shwetait Sayin Win*, the *natkadaws* pay to dance inside the temple.

Secondly, the festival comprises a sizable marketplace for the public. Shops that accept donated flowers and offerings, traditional food vendors, guest houses, transportation companies, and the village’s home-based weaving industry (*Yetkan Yone*) are all busy over these eight days.<sup>45</sup>

### The Church Should Respond to the Taungbyone Nat Festival

Most foreign missionaries do not know the belief system and worldview of animism in Myanmar. As a result, many foreign missionaries and evangelists fail to effectively preach the gospel to the Burmese people. Therefore, it is important to deeply understand animism and how the church should respond to it.

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<sup>43</sup>Steyne, 184.

<sup>44</sup>Kyu, 8.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 7-8.

## The Taungbyone Festival Celebrates Beliefs Which Directly Contradict the Theology of the Church

### *Anthropocentric*

*Nat* worship is anthropocentric. People worship the Taungbyone *nat* brothers to bargain for blessing, healing, fame, and protection. This is a human effort to succeed in life; it focuses on self-centeredness and self-possession, which the Bible rejects. “The gospel calls humans to submit themselves to God, and to live not by control but by faith in His plan (Isa 8:19-22; Jer 27:9-10; Gal 5:20; Rev 21:8).”<sup>46</sup>

### *Idolatry*

The physical representations and shrines dedicated to *nats* in the festival raise concerns about idolatry. The Second Commandment in the Bible explicitly warns against making graven images or idols to worship (Exod 20:3-6). Hence, the practices of worshipping *nats* or propitiating *nats* cannot be accepted by the Church. Believers must not turn to *nats* for anything because the source they are turning to is not from God but from Satan.

### *Spiritual Intermediaries*

*Nat* mediums claim to serve as intermediaries between the human world and the *nats*. They claim to be possessed by the spirits while delivering messages and blessings to the devotees. According to Steyne, “These practitioners were called astrologers, mediums, diviners, magicians, soothsayers, sorcerers, spiritists, and false prophets. Any type of spiritistic practice was severely denounced and condemned in the Bible.”<sup>47</sup> Steyne continues, “Priests are believed to know how to communicate with the spirit world, using words, rituals, correct posture, and clairvoyance. The priest is more efficacious than the layperson in his prayers and ritual performances.”<sup>48</sup>

People believe that spirit mediums are spiritual intermediaries and they can bless people with spiritual power. God warned people not to

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<sup>46</sup>Paul G. Hiebert, R. Daniel Shaw, and Tite Tienou, *Understanding Folk Religion: A Christian Response to Popular Beliefs and Practices* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 371.

<sup>47</sup>Steyne, 186.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*, 151.

become involved in these practices (Deut 18:10-12), and, as referenced before, God even commanded those practitioners to be killed (Lev 20:27). “Shamanism and seeking the help of any religious specialist who consorts with spirit beings are condemned and forbidden by Scripture.”<sup>49</sup> I Tim 2:5 states that there is only one spiritual mediator, Jesus Christ, and he mediates before God—the one who is the Supreme Lord of the spirit realm.

### *Spirit Possession vs the Holy Spirit*

Van Rheenens notes, “Possession is the intrusion of a personal spiritual being into a human body. The person possessed, called a medium, provides the spirit with “a voice, a body, and a physical apparatus to express himself.”<sup>50</sup> From my observation, some Burmese people believe that demon possession is good because the possessed person can heal the sick and bless and give guidance to people. However, others believe that demon possession is bad because it causes a person to lose consciousness and awareness of what goes on around them and to act differently; sometimes, the person involved becomes physically or mentally dysfunctional because of the demons.

In Christian theology, spirit possession is associated with demonic forces rather than benevolent spirits. The Bible records instances of demonic possession and the exorcism of evil spirits by Jesus and his disciples (Matt 9:32-33; Mark 5:1-20). In the gospels, the demons identified Jesus as the Son of God Most High. Dave Johnson says, “In every case, the absolute authority of Jesus Christ over demons is demonstrated by his ability to cast them out of people. When he spoke, Hell obeyed.”<sup>51</sup> Satan is called a “strong man” because of his wide-ranging power and authority. He is the ruler over an entire army of evil spirits (Mark 3:22), and he possesses a measure of authority over all the kingdoms of the world (Matt 4:8-9; Luke 4:6).<sup>52</sup> Even though Satan has such a great power over the world, Jesus Christ defeated Satan through his death and resurrection (Heb 2:14; Col 2:15).

The Son of God came to destroy the devil’s work (1 John 3:8b). All who have faith in Christ can participate in his victory over Satan and the

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<sup>49</sup>Ibid., 186.

<sup>50</sup>Gailyn Van Rheenens, *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991), 189.

<sup>51</sup>Dave Johnson. *Theology in Context: A Case Study in the Philippines* (Baguio City, Philippines: APTS Press, 2013), 160.

<sup>52</sup>Clinton E. Arnold, *Powers of Darkness: Principalities and Powers in Paul’s Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 80.

powers of darkness.<sup>53</sup> The armor of God is essential for a believer to face the power of darkness. The armor of God is the strength of believers that allows them to withstand the evil powers of darkness.<sup>54</sup> Believers need to arm themselves with spiritual weapons such as truth, the righteousness of God, the gospel, faith, and prayer. “Paul also shows us the mighty weapons for attack—the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God, and prayer in the Spirit.”<sup>55</sup>

Burmese people understand the idea of spirit possession because of their animistic worldview, but they may think of the Holy Spirit as one of several spirits. They may struggle to understand the fundamental differences between the Holy Spirit and the other spirits, especially if they are new believers. One of the important things is that they need to understand that the source of spirit possession in the animistic worldview and the source of the baptism in the Holy Spirit are different. Johnson notes, “The power that possesses the spiritists is from Satan, while the power of God is the source of the Holy Spirit baptism.”<sup>56</sup> Another is that demon possession is anthropocentric and being filled with the Holy Spirit is theocentric. The Holy Spirit always glorifies God and seeks to draw people to Christ, whereas demon possession establishes a connection with Satan (John 16:13-14; 15:26; Mark 5:1-20).

According to Burnett, demon “possession contradicts the very dignity of humankind as created by God, and robs the people concerned of their integrity and true self-respect. Possession, and allied rituals, must therefore be condemned by Christians.”<sup>57</sup> God didn’t create humankind to be possessed by demons but to be baptized or filled by the Holy Spirit and to have fellowship with him. Demon possession breaks the relationship between God and humans. Therefore, “the church must be willing not only to acknowledge the reality of spirit possession in

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<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 83.

<sup>54</sup>Clinton E. Arnold, *Ephesians: Power and Magic* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992), 110.

<sup>55</sup>Patrick Johnstone, “Biblical Intercession: Spiritual Power to Change our World,” in *Spiritual Power and Missions: Raising the Issues*, Evangelical Missiological Society Series Number 3, ed. Edward Rommen (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1995), 157.

<sup>56</sup>Dave Johnson, “Baptism in the Holy Spirit vs Spirit Possession in the Lowland Philippines: Some Considerations for Discipleship,” in *A Theology of the Spirit in Doctrine and Demonstration: Essays in Honor of Wonsuk and Julie Ma*, ed. Teresa Chai (Baguio City, Philippines: APTS Press, 2014), 223.

<sup>57</sup>David Burnett, *Unearthly Powers: A Christian Perspective on Primal and Folk Religion* (Eastbourne, UK: MARC, 1988), 173.

its various forms but should be able to minister to those afflicted in this way.”<sup>58</sup>

### Critical Contextualization

#### *Offerings*

During the Taungbyone Nat Festival, people bring offerings such as coconuts, bananas, clothing, cash, and alcohol to the shrine. They believe that making these offerings is honoring and worshipping *nats*, hoping to receive blessings, glory, healing, and protection from them. It is a common custom in Myanmar to bring offerings to *nat* shrines. Churches can also accept offerings such as coconuts, bananas, clothing, and cash for the altar of God, because the Bible encourages us to honor God with our wealth and the first fruits of all our produce (Prov 3:9-10; Lev 23:10; Mal 3:10). Moreover, we are to give God our best (2 Tim 2:15; Col 3:23-24).

However, believers who were animists before conversion should not give offerings to *nat* shrines, as pagans make offerings and sacrifices to demons rather than God. Moses and Paul warned us against cooperating with demons (Deut 32:17; 1 Cor 10:20). A Christian cannot partake in both the Lord’s table and the table of demons (1 Cor 10:21). Therefore, the church should prohibit its members from giving offerings or sacrifices to other gods and also eating and drinking from the table of demons.

#### *Dancing and Playing Traditional Music Instruments*

Many devotees dance with *natkadaws* in front of the *nat* statues. As people dance and sing, musicians play traditional instruments such as *Ci Wain* (gong circle), *Saung* (harp), and *Oozi* (pot drum). The church can allow Burmese people to dance and play traditional instruments in worship services because they can praise and worship God through dancing and playing these instruments. The psalmist invites us to take up our instruments and dance and praise God. (Ps 150:3-5; Ps 33:3; see also Jas 5:13).

According to Segler, “The purpose of music in worship is to create an awareness of God and a mood for worship, enhance the inner life of man, unite the congregation for a worship experience, and express the convictions of the congregation.”<sup>59</sup> Churches can allow the use of any

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<sup>58</sup>Ibid.

<sup>59</sup>Franklin M. Segler, *Christian Worship: Its Theology and Practice* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1967), 98-99.

traditional musical instruments in worship to create an atmosphere of the presence of God and worship. When the hearts of the worshipers are in harmony with God, God accepts their worship and praise, no matter what instrument they play. God looks at the heart, not the outward appearance (1 Sam 16:7).

### *Animal Sacrifice*

On the fifth day of the festival, people slaughter two rabbits, cook them, and take them to the palace to offer to the *nats*. Burmese animists always sacrifice animals when celebrating the *nat* festivals. In the Old Testament, God required animal sacrifices to please him and atone for sins. However, in the New Testament, the Lord Jesus Christ had already died on the cross and paid the price for the sins of everyone on earth (Rom 3:24; 1 Pet 2:24). Therefore, there is no more need for animal sacrifices after the death of Jesus on the cross.

### *Maintaining the Ancestral Heritage*

Celebrating the Taungbyone Festival is preserving the heritage of the ancestors. During this festival, people try to contact their ancestors, the Taungbyone brothers, through the mediums. Steyne says, "Although many seek to justify this practice, and some Third World theologians include it in their ethnotheologies, the Bible strongly denounces it."<sup>60</sup> According to Steyne, "Ancestors become a substitute for God, thus making reconciliation with God, relationship to God, and worship of God redundant."<sup>61</sup> Hence, God, a jealous God, demands complete loyalty from his followers, as obedience to him leads to total welfare.

### *Selling Traditional Crafts, Food, and Other Items*

Local merchants and artisans set up stalls at the festival, selling traditional crafts, food, and other items. This contributes to the local economy and provides income, especially in rural areas. The church can allow its people to sell traditional crafts, food, and other items. However, some traditional items such as amulets and talismans are used for protection against evil spirits or, to bring good luck, business, and success. God is against these magic charms (Ezek 13:20). As these items are connected to the power of darkness, the church must forbid the sale

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<sup>60</sup>Steyne, 184.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid.



of such things. However, Christians can still trade with other traditional crafts and food.

### Conclusion

This essay discusses the background, historical context, practices, belief systems, and worldviews of animism in Myanmar, focusing on the Taungbyone Nat Festival, and how the church should respond to them. This festival is a problem for the church because it is anthropocentric and idolatrous. Moreover, people believe that *natkadaws* are spiritual intermediaries who are condemned and forbidden by God.

All significant acts of this festival are critically contextualized in the light of God's Word. The church should accept making offerings to God, dancing before the Lord, using traditional instruments in worship, and selling traditional items in business. However, the church should prohibit making offerings to *nats*, participation in the devil's table, animal sacrifices, maintaining ancestral heritage, and selling magical amulets.

There are many other *nat* festivals in Myanmar which are held across the country every year. This essay should help missionaries, evangelists, ministers, and pastors in Myanmar to critically understand the traditional practices of Burmese animists and to critically contextualize these practices in the light of God's Word.

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