



“*Nats*’ Wives” or “Children of *Nats*”

From Spirit Possession to Transmission Among the Ritual Specialists of the Cult of the Thirty-Seven Lords

Transmission processes in the Burmese cult known as the cult of the Thirty-Seven Lords are examined here through the analysis of three succession cases among the ritual specialists of this cult. I seek to understand how transmission works in a cult whose main ritual manifestation is spirit possession that involves the logic of inspiration and vocation, rather than the logic of reproduction and succession. A careful examination of contrasted cases reveals that succession among spirit mediums, rather than obeying fixed rules, actually involves the differentiated transmission of assets made of ritual property, functions, positions, and knowledge. Various combinations—of spirit possession and affiliation or fictive kinship, of inspiration and tradition—appear to operate at different levels of the cult, with inversions of values sustaining both its dynamics and its reproduction.

KEYWORDS: spirit possession—ritual specialists—transmission—succession—tradition

TRANSMISSION is of special interest to social and cultural anthropologists since it determines the reproduction of social forms and the handing down of cultural contents—that is to say, it is the very object of anthropological inquiry. Although the function of transmission processes is to allow the continuation of the sociological and cultural content they are concerned with, this does not necessarily occur through identical reproduction. Indeed these processes often involve transformations and they are also part of the construction of the social system.

This essay looks at the transmission processes in the Burmese cult known as the cult of the Thirty-Seven Lords. The existence of this cult in a Buddhist society is perceived by some Burmese to be based on mere superstition, an ideological position that in fact expresses the hierarchy in which the different levels of Burmese symbolic configuration are organized.¹ The cult actually contributes to the current sociological processes in which it is grounded. Moreover, the main ritual manifestation of the cult is spirit possession, whose logic of inspiration and vocation are, as we shall see, in contradiction with the principles involved in transmission. Transmission in the cult will be dealt with here through the analysis of three succession cases among spirit mediums. In this way, we will try to partially explain the enduring and continually developing existence of the cult, perpetually adapting to the changing social context, through this very tension between spirit possession and transmission.²

THE BURMESE CULT OF THE THIRTY-SEVEN LORDS

The existence of the cult of the Thirty-Seven Lords³ depends on the reproduction of a complex sociological structure, as well as on the transmission of a whole set of beliefs. Here, I deal mainly with the first aspect, although both are obviously linked. The cult involves a group of thirty-seven beings organized in a pantheon and known as *nats*.⁴ These *nats* are the spirits of people who died a violent death and whose potential malevolence was subsequently pacified through settlement in a domain as tutelary spirits.

The cult comprises different kinds of rituals of which the main ones are rituals addressed to the thirty-seven *nats* as a whole (*natkanà pwè*)⁵ and a second category which I have called local rituals, or festivals (*pwèdaw*).⁶ The first rituals are

performed according to the request of clients by spirit mediums who are specialists of the Burmese cult to the pantheon of the thirty-seven *nats* as a whole. These rituals shape the communities of the cult in the form of ritual specialists and their followers. They are mainly governed by the principle of spirit possession that is the expression of what is considered to be the “*nats*’ will.” In contrast, the second rituals are performed annually and they are addressed to one spirit only—or a group of spirits who are supposed to be related as kin. On the one hand, they involve the local population of the spirit’s domain on a compulsory basis, and on the other involve spirit mediums coming from all over Burma. The explicit legitimization of these rituals is tradition, or “what has always been done.” Although this presentation of the contrast between the ceremonies to the thirty-seven and the local rituals reflects the general framework of the cult, there are some blurred areas or transitions between the two main levels.

The local rituals, for instance, are not only local and concern only the population of the region where the *nat* has its domain, but they also involve the spirit mediums of the general cult, who have ritual functions as well as interests in them.⁷ Over the last few years, these local rituals have undergone massive transformations, which are the result of both segmentations of rituals and the tendency towards standardization. Close examination of what is involved in these transformations clearly reveals that they occur through interactions between the local populations and the professional spirit mediums. Tradition—the normally prevalent principle of authority—is then counterbalanced by the principle of inspiration or possession, that is, “what a *nat* has told me he wants here and now.”

Thus, if at the ideological level the local rituals and the rituals to the thirty-seven are governed by two seemingly incompatible principles of authority—those of tradition and of possession respectively—both principles are actually interacting in the transformations that occur in the local rituals. In this article, I examine how these two legitimating principles are also at work in the current dynamics of the rituals addressed to the thirty-seven by spirit mediums, through transmission processes that allow the perpetuation of this profession as well as that of the cult of the Thirty-Seven Lords.

HIERARCHY AMONG SPIRIT MEDIUMS

Among spirit mediums, the will of the *nats* is thus the dominant principle of their authority. Spirit mediums are supposed to have been personally “called” by a *nat* (*khaw*), and “seduced” by him (*nat hswè*), that is to say, to have been chosen by him to become spirit mediums—as expressed in Burmese as *natkadam*, or *nat* “wives.” The election of a new recruit by a *nat* is recognized by a senior spirit medium while performing possession dances during which all of the *nats* are successively embodied during the three-day rituals to the thirty-seven (*natkanà pwè*). The election is then consecrated through the first initiation ritual called the *leípya seik* or “introducing the butterfly spirit,” which consists of linking the new recruit to the seducing *nat* or *hkaùng hswè*.⁸ This begins a process of training through the



FIGURE 1. A spirit medium performing the ritual of marriage with a spirit for his disciple. Yangon, March 1986. All photos in this article are copyright of Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière. All photos supplied by author.

participation in ceremonies to the thirty-seven, usually in those organized by the same senior spirit medium who has recognized the election, and in which the latter acts as a master. This process, however, is not conceived of as an apprenticeship, but rather as a time when the new recruit becomes familiar with spirit possession, generally by the act of his seducing *nat*. It may last from a period of weeks to a period of years and is eventually sanctioned through the main initiation that is performed as a ritual of marriage in which the bridegroom is usually the seducing *nat*. The recruits then become new spirit mediums who are able to control their possession by the spirit having first “called” them. They will still need further training under the supervision of their master before being considered able to incarnate any of the thirty-seven *nats* and to fully direct spirit possession. Then they become *kanà s’* or professional spirit mediums able to organize rituals to the thirty-seven on their own for their clients. Only then will they have become fully-fledged specialists of spirit possession and legitimately qualified to practice as masters of the ceremonies to the thirty-seven.

As spirit mediums, they belong to a profession that is defined on the global level by their participation in local rituals, the festivals evoked earlier. None of them participate in all of the main festivals but most of them go to several, which implies large migrations of spirit mediums throughout Central Burma three times a year, during Tabaung, Wagaung, and Natdaw (approximately in March, August, and December). During these periods, the whole profession of ritual specialists vis-

ibly materializes and is organized in a hierarchy of ritual functions of “ministers,” “queens,” and other positions, mimicking the historic royal order and present in particular at Taungbyon, the main festival.¹⁰ Without going into all the details here, it should be noted that this hierarchy is related to spatial locations in the encampments and to the chronological order in the rituals of the festivals.

These honorary functions and positions are said to depend on the will of the *nats*: to be a “minister” without being worthy of it is commonly said to lead to a fatal curse being cast by the *nats*, and numerous instances are given of deaths imputed to *nats* on these grounds. These functions are further linked to the rights to encamp in locations which, if not occupied, will be lost. To participate once in a festival implies that it will then become compulsory for the spirit medium and his following, as is expressed in the saying *yòya pyet*, “it creates a ritual obligation,” using the term *yòya* which, in the cult context, means the ritual obligations that are inherited by succession.¹¹ The ritual functions of a spirit medium allow him to accumulate symbolic prestige which he will use in his professional practice as a specialist in the rituals to the thirty-seven: in this way they become part of his “patrimony” that can be transmitted to his following, as we shall see in detail.

The profession of spirit medium is further ranked according to seniority—a concern which is as prevalent among them as among monks¹²—and by teaching relationships, both concepts involving specific deferential behavior, the *kadáv*, which implies paying formal respect through appropriate salutations and offerings. Interestingly enough, *kadáv* also designates, on the one hand, the tribute paid to the *nats*, and on the other, the homage due to a master in any context of the transmission of knowledge. This introduces us to the specificity of the *kadáv* kind of relationship among spirit mediums that is made more complex than a simple transmission of knowledge because each spirit medium is himself linked to the *nats* through possession. The *kadáv* kind of interactions can be best observed during the festivals where, although all assembled in the same place, spirit mediums continue to interact only with those to whom they owe *kadáv*. However, these interactions are actually determined by the organization of professional practice at the level of the celebration of rituals to the thirty-seven (*natkanà pwè*).

SPIRIT MEDIUMS AS MASTERS OF SCHOOLS OF POSSESSION

The rituals to the thirty-seven, performed according to the requests of clients, are conceived to entertain the public (usually about forty people) during three days, as well as to propitiate all of the thirty-seven by embodying them. These rituals require what can be called a “company” of spirit mediums brought together under the leadership of a *kanà sì*, who acts as master of ceremonies. The way these groups function during the rituals can be compared to that of a company of actors, with each member having to play his or her part. They can also be likened to an enterprise, each ritual being considered a capital venture of which the benefits will be attributed to the *nats*.¹³

However, the most important aspect from the point of view of the cult and its perpetuation is that such groups form different schools of possession. Members of the group are usually linked to the leader by having been initiated to possession by him—the Burmese say “married” to a *nat*—and they will learn to incarnate their seducing spirit (*hkàung hswè*) and the other *nats* through participation in the rituals organized by their masters. They will eventually become independent *kanà sè*, when, having had enough experience and having managed to attract their own clients, they will receive the final initiation, the “handing over of sword and bowl” (*dà hpàlà at*).¹⁴ However, they will continue to be invited to participate in their former master’s ceremonies as they owe him *kadáv*.

The links built up through belonging to such groups are thus enduring, although they evolve gradually over time. These groups gather members of very different ritual statuses and their relationships may vary somewhat. A striking fact, however, is that kinship terms are used between members: a master will speak to his followers as “sons” and “daughters,” and these in return will address him or her as “father” or “mother,” whatever their respective ages. Spirit mediums having frequented ceremonies under the leadership of the same master will address each other as “sisters” and “brothers.” Not only do they use kinship terms, but they also demonstrate caring behavior, showing attention and affection to each other as in family relationships, particularly during the rituals of possession.

Moreover, 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*. In this sense, one can really talk of “schools” of possession. The disciples will most often frequent the same festivals as their master, for example, and develop a particular knowledge of the *nats* involved in these festivals. This imposes a certain limit on the activities of the spirit mediums trained by a master: 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. Indeed, regarding the issue of knowledge of the cult, all of this implies that no spirit medium possesses a complete command of the cult to the thirty-seven, and that it is the sum of these partially inconsistent practices and beliefs that constitutes the cult as a whole.¹⁵

This obligation to perpetuate his master’s way and a particular set of knowledge is expressed in terms of *nat damázin*. *Damázin* is a concept in Burmese that means “a body of transmitted knowledge or wisdom.”¹⁶ It is worth looking at this term since here, in the context of the cult, it contrasts the practice of spirit mediums’ claiming legitimacy through spirit possession, as well as the concept of *nat yòya* which denotes inherited ritual obligations to the *nats*, as stated earlier. In actual use, however, the expression *nat yòya* is more ubiquitous. It may refer, on a general level of discourse, to the traditional way of paying homage to the *nats* for people who are not linked to the *nats* through spirit possession, using *yòya* in its most encompassing dimension of tradition. But it may also be used more specifi-

cally to designate a particular level of the practice of the cult, that of the tutelary spirit of the region from which a person originates when the cult is transmitted through the family beyond the original local geographical context.¹⁷ As for *nat damázin*, we see that it denotes the specific expertise of spirit mediums transmitted to their successors and that this concept interacts with the principles of *yòya* and spirit possession in the issues of transmission.

Another element which bonds the members of a school of spirit mediums is the collection of images of spirits which their master owns: to be a master of ceremonies one needs to own at least fourteen images that are kept in one’s home and brought to the ceremonial pavilion (*kanà*) when needed for the ceremonies. These wooden and often gilded statues are consecrated for their owner through the ritual of *leípya seik* (introducing the butterfly) or *A thet thwìn* (introducing life)—rituals of animation or bringing to life: what is actually embodied in the images through this ritual, as bringing it life, is the particular power of a master to call the *nats*, or in other words, his particular relationship to the *nats*.¹⁸ During the rituals to the thirty-seven, it is through these images that the *nats* are summoned to the ceremonial pavilion and enter into the spirit medium, whether the master of ceremonies or one of his disciples. This explains the strong bonds which generally develop between the disciples of a master and his statues and ritual objects.

The collection of statues of a spirit medium thus represents the most valuable asset left behind at his death. To the symbolic value one must add the material value of these ritual objects (whether newly produced or antiques, the value of the latter being perhaps a recent development): the images are the main part of a *natkadaw*’s ritual property left behind after his death, all the more valuable in that they are associated with the house where they are kept. However, as animated ritual objects, they cannot theoretically be sold or given to other people. Upon the death of their owner, a specific cleansing ritual must be performed and they must be reconsecrated to their new owner, an owner who should be trained enough in the cult to perpetuate it. This means that he has to be a spirit medium himself, if not a fully-fledged professional then at least ritually married to a *nat* (*natkadaw*). This explains why this part of the heritage of a spirit medium is not necessarily transmitted to the children or spouse as the legal heirs. This is because spirit possession is not supposed to be inherited: as has been explained earlier, its legitimacy relies on vocation or the calling of the *nat*. The collection of images is supposed to be taken over by the moral inheritor, one of the disciples, ideally the senior disciple. However, as a matter of fact, following the death of a master, the collection of his images is often the object of great discussion, if not outright contention. This reveals what is at stake: the transmission of the power of the medium and all that accompanies the succession.

Among the various elements which constitute the influence of a spirit medium, the sociological elements consist of a combination of the ritual functions and positions occupied in festivals and of the network of clients and dependents involved in professional practice, either by financing him through offerings or constituting the

work force of assistants during rituals to the thirty-seven. It should be emphasized that according to the Burmese conception, the influence of a spirit medium is linked to his personal ability to deal with the *nats*, and this is expressed in terms of “power” or *dagò*. His *dagò* is evaluated according to the audience he is able to attract to his rituals—both in size and in social status—and is also supposed to be embodied in his ritual objects, particularly in his images.¹⁹

At the time of his death, the professional inheritance of a spirit medium is thus made up of a number of ritual functions and positions, a clientele, or practice, and a collection of ritual objects whose value is estimated according to his *dagò*. As we will see through the analysis of the following three cases, the succession to ritual functions and positions and the transmission of the practice of ritual property and of knowledge do not all necessarily occur at once, but involve more complex processes.

THE SUCCESSION OF HSAYA AUNG THEIN:
SEPARATION OF MATERIAL AND SPIRITUAL INHERITANCES

Hsaya Aung Thein was a senior spirit medium widely respected among his peers although he did not occupy a position of particular importance in any festival. This even prevented his most promising disciples from seeking such positions, since by not having any himself he was not able to train them to assume these functions. Nevertheless, he managed to gather a large clientele and a number of well-established disciples in Yangon suburbs such as North Okkalapa and Insein, as well as in Thmain Lanzon, the township where he lived and practiced as one of the most influential ritual specialists.

He was known under the nickname of Amay Thein (Mother Thein), suggesting that he was at least effeminate. Not having married, he adopted children, all living with their own families in their adoptive father’s house where the *nats’* shrines stood, adorned with a beautiful collection of images. None of his children became involved in ritual specialization during their father’s lifetime. Upon his death in 1997, the problem was raised of what to do with the statues. At first, the children had intended to sell at least some of them, but the disciples, all of whom had already been installed in their own practices by this time, told them not to do this because “the *nats’* line must not be broken (*nat ayò ma péi ya bù*).... If they must sell them they should be sold to the disciples of their father,” they further insisted. Apparently, no agreement could be reached and the children had to keep the statues in their home. The disciples had agreed to share the burden of the rituals immediately following his death, but then it was up to the children living in the house where the images remained to continue the cult—and one of them would have to go through the initiation rituals and become a spirit medium in order to fulfil this obligation.

A daughter-in-law with two children, who had been abandoned by her husband but who was still living in the family house, ended up marrying the *nat* U Min Kyaw four years later. This took place with the blessing and the support of

the majority of the former disciples of her father-in-law, acting together. This initiation ritual was celebrated during a ceremony to the thirty-seven, as is the rule. However, this did not take place at Hsaya Aung Thein’s home, in the presence of the images, which the initiate would be in charge of, as should have been the case, since she would not have been able to pay for such a ceremony. Instead, it was performed in North Okkalapa at a ceremony financed by a client of the senior disciple of Hsaya Aung Thein. This was commented upon as being highly irregular if the daughter-in-law was to continue the practice of her father-in-law.

Nevertheless, as well as the adopted children of Hsaya Aung Thein, the main disciples were all present at the ceremony as *nats*’ “brothers and sisters.” The ritual of marriage to the *nat* was a highly emotional moment. It ended with the rite of merit-sharing, of which the benefits were dedicated to the late Hsaya Aung Thein. To perform this Buddhist rite in a ceremony dedicated to the *nats* may seem somewhat odd and it is certainly uncommon (it was the only occurrence I have ever happened to witness). However, one of the women had received inspiration from a *nat* that the “merit” of the ritual of marriage to the *nat* should be shared in this way in order to placate the soul of the deceased. In fact, this idiosyncrasy strongly confirmed the suspicion that this initiation ritual was linked to the settlement of Hsaya Aung Thein’s succession four years after his death, and was indeed a solution that was not completely to the advantage of the newly-married spirit medium, as we shall see.

Furthermore, it is necessary to point out that full ceremonies to the thirty-seven are no longer performed with the ritual images of Hsaya Aung Thein since his children cannot afford such a ritual on their own, and the daughter-in-law has not yet achieved the status of *kanà sè*, and so is unable to organize ceremonies for her own clients. Although the images necessary for professional practice are in her possession, she does not have the experience required, and what is more, will receive no further help from the other spirit mediums in order to organize her own ceremonies. It could also be said that tensions between the children sharing the house and the divorced daughter-in-law getting involved in a semi-professional practice are a factor. The children replied to my questions that the floor of the old wooden house was no longer strong enough to allow the dances in a ceremony to the thirty-seven, an explanation which sounded like a rather feeble excuse. I have since heard the daughter-in-law of Hsaya Aung Thein complaining about the images as being a burden to her, as if she was expecting something more from them. Through the power credited to these ritual objects, she received support from her father-in-law’s disciples, who married her to a *nat* and allowed her to take over the ritual service to the images. But they did not allow her to take over the professional practice of her father-in-law, and the images now stand idle since they can no longer be used for performing ceremonies to the thirty-seven.

The newly married *natkadaw*, however, has continued to be invited to participate in the ceremonies of one of the most brilliant disciples of her father-in-law, Kyaw So Mon. Acting as a *kanà sè*, he is thus giving her a chance to become

trained in the professional practice so that she will eventually be able to go through the final initiation of the “handing over of sword and bowl,” which bestows the status of professional independence. Kyaw So Mon is an experienced spirit medium, although he is still young and, significantly, he was not the senior disciple of Hsaya Aung Thein. As a *kanà sà*, he uses a collection of images from his own father’s house. His father, a retired schoolmaster and himself well-trained in spirit possession, has never developed a professional practice of his own. According to his son, he is not able “to get along with other spirit mediums” and to direct a company of spirit mediums. The son lives in his father’s house, looking after him. At the ceremonies to the thirty-seven that he conducts, his father is included as a quasi co-master of ceremonies.

I do not know exactly when Kyaw So Mon began to act as a *kanà sà* but he now organizes ceremonies with the same troupe as that formerly directed by Hsaya Aung Thein, his former master. His disciples include not only Hsaya Aung Thein’s daughter-in-law, but also the daughter of his senior disciple, who plans to take over the practice of her paralyzed mother. This makes Kyaw So Mon the acting heir to his master’s professional practice. Furthermore, gifted as he is, he is also one of the few spirit mediums who thinks about his profession and speaks with authority about the cult to the *nats*. He is keen to follow the “right” way (*nat damázin*) as practised by his master, resisting all the innovations and changes which he considers to be decadent—and he takes every opportunity to expound on this theme. He acts as a true disciple, continuing Hsaya Aung Thein’s heritage. All of these factors designate him as the authentic heir to Hsaya Aung Thein’s spiritual tradition as well as that of his professional practice, despite the fact that he has not inherited his images. However, he does expose the portrait of Hsaya Aung Thein on the shrines of his *kanà*, and pays homage to him at the beginning and the high point of the ceremonies. To put the portrait of the master on the shrines of the ceremonies to the thirty-seven is uncommon, although such portraits may be exposed on private shrines. In Kyaw So Mon’s case, this portrait of his former master can be interpreted as a substitute of the images that in other cases would allow a spirit medium to identify himself with a line of masters.²⁰

The reason that Kyaw So Mon became the inheritor of Hsaya Aung Thein’s practice, rather than any of the other disciples, may be that although experienced and talented, he was the only one not already fully installed as *kanà sà* at the time of his master’s death. He was still working closely with his master, and did not have a house and shrines of his own, sharing these with his father. Looking now at the succession of Hsaya Aung Thein, one can say that it has not been monolithic. Whereas his images have been kept by his family, his position in the global cult seems to have shifted to one of his disciples, although not to the senior one. On the whole, the *nat* brothers and sisters of Hsaya Aung Thein’s family have maintained close relationships after their master’s death: they have become part of a network with its specific culture and practice of the cult. From this point of view, in Hsaya Aung Thein’s school, transmission has been fairly successful.

THE SUCCESSION OF U HTUN AYE:

A COMBINATION OF LINEAR DESCENT AND OF SPIRIT POSSESSION

U Htun Aye was the successor of U Hpo Maung, one of the outstanding personalities of the spirit medium scene during the nineteen-eighties. He had achieved the status of “home minister” at Taungbyon festival (*eindwìn baung saung*), a prestigious ritual position he had received through his master, U Maung Maung. This entitled him to accommodation, together with his followers, in a large wooden house close to the “palace” or main temple. Furthermore, during ceremonies in Yangon he also performed specific rites, which seemed to be unique to his ceremonies, although it is difficult to know if these came, as he claimed, from some ancient sources which he alone remembered, or if they were ad hoc creations of his own. He also managed to gather a very loyal clientele, which used to meet once a week on Sunday, at his home, for a one-day ritual to the thirty-seven, a custom that was also exceptional and appeared to be very convenient for his public of well-off urbanites.

When U Hpo Maung died in a car accident in 1989 (I was often told that this was a punishment by the *nats* for his philandering), his professional practice was completely transmitted to U Htun Aye, an obscure disciple of his who had the same seducing spirit (*hkaung hswè*) as the female *nat* Ma Hnelay. This was an important factor in order to be able to carry on the function of “minister” in the residential part of the palace domain at Taungbyon festival. In addition, U Htun Aye inherited U Hpo Maung’s collection of images, together with his ritual functions in festivals. This would not have been possible if the clientele of U Hpo Maung had not agreed and supported him as the successor. As it happened, most of the clientele of U Hpo Maung shifted to U Htun Aye, and they continued to sponsor the ceremonies and meet regularly, if not every Sunday, at the house of their new spirit medium, where the collection of images had been installed. This succession was not completely straightforward as it meant that the ritual objects had to be moved from U Hpo Maung’s house, which had been inherited by his family: U Hpo Maung had been married and had two children. However, neither his wife nor his children wanted to be in any way involved with the cult to the *nats* and, after giving up all rights to the property of the images, they completely stopped having anything to do with his clients and followers. However, his wife did eventually decide to become a Buddhist nun (*thiláshin*) instead.²¹

Thanks to the support of his clientele, U Htun Aye assumed his functions, continuing U Hpo Maung’s tradition up to 1998, although suffering from bad health himself. Married and a father with numerous children, he did not manage to train disciples of his own, being entirely dependent on the clientele he had inherited from his master. Upon his death, the question of succession was again raised and it was once again the clients who found the solution. Ko Myo, the oldest son of U Htun Aye, was chosen. This was contrary to all expectations, since he had not previously been involved in *nat* possession, unlike his younger brother, who used to dance during their father’s ceremonies. But among the clients, one *natkadaw*



FIGURE 2. Ko Myo, son of a spirit-medium, performing for his father's clients. Yangon, June 2002.

had an inspiration and declared that Ko Myo “had a *nat* in him” (*nat kyì de*) and everybody in the group agreed with her.

This was in March, the time of the Shweguni festival, at the Chindwin confluence where his father, and his father's master before, had celebrated U Min Kyaw with their clientele every year, along with most of the spirit mediums of Burma. Ko Myo had to travel there to assume the position of his father, without ever having previously experienced possession by a spirit. Prior to the performance, discussions took place between influential members of the clientele, temple custodians, and prominent spirit mediums. The clients had wanted Ko Myo to be trained by a “queen of Taungbyon” (*thò saung mípayà*), but there were objections to this on the grounds that a “queen” could not train a candidate to the position of “minister” and, furthermore, that he could not dance before having undergone the first initiation ritual, “introducing the butterfly” (*leípya seik*). Nevertheless, they all agreed to allow the clientele to continue with him and so to allow U Hpo Maung's school to be preserved. When it was Ko Myo's father's turn to dance, the “chief of the *nats*” (*nat ok*)—the highest ranking ritual specialist of the festivals and, incidentally, the only hereditary position—together with Ko Myo, came to the “palace” to take their turn: both of them appeared in full ritual dress and the

"chief of the *nats*" allowed the young man a short dance under his control. People were immediately convinced that he was indeed possessed by the *nat*.

Ko Myo has thus taken over the practice of his father and of his father's master and, although very inexperienced, he has become the spirit medium for U Hpo Maung's clientele and for his collection of images. Until now, as a ritual practitioner, he has mainly performed small domestic rituals and ceremonies to the thirty-seven that some members of the group have continued to finance at his home from time to time, on Sundays as before. They also sponsor his presence at the main festivals where the group usually go and where he performs dances in his father's place. But he has not been granted the ritual position of "minister" at these festivals. This means that he does not have the right to wear the headdress called *baung* that he has inherited from his father and which goes with the ritual function of "minister." The main economic advantage of the position of "minister" or "queen" is that, by introducing the other spirit mediums in the rotation of dances during the festivals, these titled spirit mediums enjoy the right to a share in the offerings which have been made.²² Ko Myo has not been granted this right yet, nor has he acquired the ritual position of "minister." However, he has insisted on being initiated by a spirit medium linked to the same female *nat* Ma Hnelay, as his father and his father's master were, rather than by any other "minister" as was first recommended to him, in order to be in a position to eventually attain the same ceremonial position as his father.

The main reason why he is not yet a "minister" is his lack of seniority. He claims that he has no real knowledge of the cult, and maintains that he does not want this inheritance and is even afraid of it. But in observing his ritual performances, one is struck by their quality, and the way he manages to incorporate some elements of the ritual characteristic of U Hpo Maung's school to create his own personal style. It is often the case that children of spirit mediums who become involved in spirit possession, in spite of the principle that possession cannot be inherited but depends on the will of the *nats*, insist more than usual on their reluctance to become involved. This may be a way of proving that they are actually obeying the *nats'* will. This could also explain why Ko Myo's clients, who were previously those of U Hpo Maung and of his father, believe in him and continue to support him, even though, until now, they think that their new spirit medium does not possess all the knowledge normally required and cannot perform as well as his predecessors.

Ko Myo insists also on the fact that *nats* send him dreams and that he actually "has *nats*," pointing to the collection of images inherited through his father from one of the most powerful line of spirit mediums. What he is saying is that he really is possessed by the *nats* and that this possession is linked to the presence of the *nats* in their ritual objects. He also justifies his situation by saying that although he lacks seniority, he has *nat damázin* instead. What this statement conveys is that, being possessed by *nats* as they are embodied in such images, Ko Myo is also imbued with the knowledge or wisdom concerning the *nats* of all the precedent owners of the statues, which is not a knowledge that could be learned, but

a knowledge coming through possession. He openly defends his position as having *damázin* against the position of spirit mediums who claim legitimacy only in spirit possession, without being backed by a line of masters. Nor can his practice be reduced to a merely inherited ritual obligation since he has convincingly demonstrated to the Burmese that he is indeed possessed by the *nats*. According to his explanations, spirit possession appears to be a condition that is necessary, but not sufficient, to legitimize the position of a ritual specialist of the cult to the *nats*; and the spirit medium must also be able to refer to a line of predecessors linked together by the transmission of a specific body of knowledge. Once again, this bond connecting a master to his disciple is characteristically revealed in the kinship terms used to address each other (father and son, mother and daughter) that associate the line of predecessors with a line of ancestors, that is to say by linear descent, albeit of a spiritual nature. In this respect *nat damázin* inscribes spirit possession in the idiom of linearity, while the experience of spirit possession exists in a paradigmatic relationship to inspiration and invention.

In Ko Myo's mind, his *nat damázin* should be given prevalence over seniority and he should be granted the right to wear his father's *baung*. A few years ago, in the period of expansion that occurred in the economy of the *nats*' rituals, he would probably have been granted this honour. But Taungbyon's custodians had previously been so lavish in handing out "minister" positions, selling them to the highest bidder and creating a kind of inflation, that they finally had to call a halt to these practices. This probably explains why Ko Myo has not yet been awarded the position to which he aspires. Nevertheless, if he inherited his father's practice, it is thanks to the support of his predecessor's clientele, which, together with his collection of images and ritual practices, constitute a kind of cult patrimony, and also thanks to the consent of the main authorities in the profession who allowed him to perform in the festivals.

The succession of U Htun Aye was thus very different from that of Hsaya Aung Thein, mainly because of the specific nature of his practice: among his followers of well-off city dwellers, becoming a ritual specialist implied such a decline in social status that it dissuaded most of them from making a claim to his succession. In this case, contrary to the others, the "school" is not constituted of a continuum of clients and disciples, but there is a clear-cut distinction between the clients and the ritual specialists subordinated to them. In spite of this important difference, the "school" of U Hpo Maung, like that of Hsaya Aung Thein, has been able to continue, in one instance by combining linear descent with the principle of spirit possession, and in the other, by separating a material inheritance from a spiritual one.

THE SUCCESSION OF DAW HKWAY MA:
FROM SPIRIT POSSESSION TO RITUAL OBLIGATION

The final case of succession is probably the most complicated as it arose from a family conflict, which extends over three generations. It concerns Daw

Hkway Ma, who died in 1997 at the age of more than one hundred years old. As a female spirit medium, she also came from one of the most powerful lines of ritual specialists, being the main disciple of U Kyauk Lon, a spirit medium belonging to the family of the "chiefs of *nat*." As explained previously, this highest ritual function at Taungbyon and in the whole hierarchy of spirit mediums is transmitted through the masculine line, contrary to the ritual functions granted according to spirit possession. Daw Hkway Ma attained her position as "queen" of Taungbyon (*thò saùng mípaγà*) rather late in life, but she lived for such a long time that she enjoyed seniority in the hierarchy for many years. From her master, Daw Hkway Ma had previously been endowed with many other ritual functions in different festivals as well as with custodial functions of one of the Yadanagu temples and of the temple known as Mandalay Wall Temple, which was destroyed in a fire in 1987 (*Myò yò nàñ*, "palace of the city wall," although it was not actually situated in the wall).

The mother of ten children, Daw Hkway Ma managed to give custodial functions of the Mandalay Wall Temple to her eldest daughter. She was then living in Yangon when not traveling for festivals. She apparently would have liked her eldest daughter to take over her practice, which is the impression I had of an incident I happened to witness in 1986 in the Mandalay Wall Temple. On this occasion, Daw Hkway Ma was performing a ceremony to the thirty-seven for her daughter, who was then in her fifties, during which time she tried to have her daughter become possessed by a *nat*. The daughter was reluctant, as is usual for nonspecialists in their first contact with spirit possession and which may in fact be a part of the ritual in order to reinforce the impression of the power of the *nat* when the initiate nevertheless ends up being possessed. This time, when Daw Hkway Ma had incarnated the *nat* and tried with all her might to draw her daughter into the dance, just as senior spirit mediums usually do to bring about the spirit possession, the daughter nevertheless continued to resist becoming possessed, to the obvious displeasure of her mother, on this occasion and forever after. This is the only case I know of in which a follower completely resisted becoming possessed. Although assuming the profitable function of temple custodian, the eldest daughter of Daw Hkway Ma successfully held out against her mother's wishes, as expressed ritually through the *nat*'s will, and never became a spirit medium.

However, Daw Yon, the youngest daughter of Daw Hkway Ma, managed to become a spirit medium without her mother's support or approval. She had become acquainted with many ritual specialists by following her mother to the festivals and also by living with her own family in her mother's house in Dala, the suburb of Yangon where the latter had started out as a spirit medium many years before. When Daw Hkway Ma moved to Yangon, a more convenient address than Dala for her growing practice, her daughter Daw Yon replaced her as the local ritual specialist. She also managed to be appointed for some specific ritual functions in festivals, such as the performance of the "cock fight" at Shweguni festival or the first round in the dances at Sameikkon, and she obtained her own place at most of the festival encampments. Although she was as experienced as many established *kanà sè*, she



FIGURE 3. Daw Yon embodying female *nat* Ma Hnelay at Sameikkon festival, March 1986.

never built up a real practice of her own, working rather as a partner with *kanà si* who were less experienced but had managed to build up a clientele. That meant that, despite having contacts with most of the spirit mediums of Burma, she did not have a real school of her own, having practised within the framework of her mother's, as is suggested by the fact that she called her mother's disciples "brothers" and "sisters."

Daw Hkway Ma came back to live in her house in Dala for the last ten years of her life. Daw Yon managed to accommodate her mother's images side by side with her own and both of them still went regularly to the festivals. When Daw Hkway Ma passed away in Dala, her inheritance immediately became a bone of contention between the eldest and the youngest daughters. I will not go into the details since the circumstances are too complicated and since a judicial enquiry formally opened and closed without any legal settlement being found. What is of interest to us here is the succession to her ritual functions. Among the disciples of Daw Hkway Ma, no one was in a position to assume these functions. But, because the eldest daughter of Daw Hkway Ma had clearly rejected the idea of becoming a spirit medium, it fell to her daughter, Ma Nway Li, Daw Hkway Ma's granddaughter, to become possessed and initiated through the ritual marriage to a *nat*. After Daw Hkway Ma's death, both Ma Nway Li and Daw Yon claimed her "queen" function and her place in the encampment of Taungbyon festival. Neither of them were granted the title of "queen" with the right to wear the *thò*, the headdress of the "queens," and Daw Yon was even criticized for having tried to perform her mother's dance at the festival of Shweguni without having the required status.

Although well acquainted with established spirit mediums, Daw Yon did not receive their support for her claims to the ritual functions of her mother. As usual concerning the cult to the *nats*, it was through spirit possession that she tried to appeal to her fellow spirit mediums: at the festival of Shweguni, after her mother's death, she experienced a very violent possession by U Min Kyaw, the local *nat*, and called on her "brother," a famous spirit medium accommodated next to her in the encampment, for help. Several witnesses pointed out that this spirit possession was unusually violent and dramatic, far from the formal ritual dances of the "palace," the official stage of spirit possession, and that it occurred in the encampment, where interaction with *nats* is normally limited to an oracle delivered by spirit mediums sitting and answering particular questions from clients. The interpretation was that it was the spirit of Daw Yon's recently deceased mother who had possessed her, at the same time as U Min Kyaw, in order to call on her disciples' help. However, despite this desperate attempt mediated through spirit possession, Daw Yon's connections with the other spirit mediums were not of a kind that could bring her their support to obtain her mother's position.

Two years later Daw Yon died of cancer. The conflict between the two daughters of Daw Hkway Ma was then passed on to her two granddaughters, Ma Nway Li and Ma Tin Tin Mo, Daw Yon's daughter. The latter was a divorced and remarried woman, with three children of her own, living in her mother's house; she had not yet been initiated into spirit possession. But somebody was needed to take care of both the house and the shrines. As the family was without resources, Daw Yon's "brothers and sisters," through the *nat* (the same spirit mediums to whom she had asked for support two years earlier), gathered 2.5 *thein* (equivalent to around US\$500 on the black market at that time) to celebrate the required cleansing ritual of the shrines that Daw Yon had apparently not been able to celebrate after her mother's death (which was said to be the reason for her fatal disease). Ma Tin Tin Mo was initiated by a ritual of marriage to the *nat* during this ceremony. But she was also reluctant to take over her mother's position, being ashamed of being possessed by *nats*, or so she told me. Daw Hkway Ma's images were sold to one of her later disciples, which was a move that was much criticized among spirit mediums. People said that "the *nats* were no longer in the house" (*nat ma shí do bù*) and that explained later difficulties Ma Tin Tin Mo had to face.

However, Ma Tin Tin Mo kept the images that belonged to her mother, Daw Yon, and she has now taken over her local practice at Dala, performing small domestic rituals and what is called *htain kanà*, offerings to the thirty-seven *nats* without the dances. She also goes to the Taungbyon festival but only to make the compulsory offerings. She has given up her mother's place in the encampment because she is not experienced enough in spirit possession, and she has not acquired the ritual status for it, as it would be too dangerous for her, or so she explained to me.

As for Daw Yon's ritual position of "fighting cock" at Shweguni festival (to be possessed by the spirit of the fighting cock of the local *nat*, U Min Kyaw), and to perform the "cock fighting" against another "cock," this function was offered to both Ma Tin Tin Mo and Ma Nway Li. The spirit medium in charge of the organization of "cock fighting" said that "he had bred two chickens that should have come to compete with each other, but that neither of them came," meaning that neither the daughter nor the niece who could have succeeded Daw Yon in this function ever came to assume it. A replacement "cock" had to be rented two years consecutively and a new one has been recruited now. It could be that this ritual is too idiosyncratic to the Shweguni festival and that its crudeness, so much in contradiction with Buddhist values, is too frightening and "shameful" for these inexperienced spirit mediums and urbanite ladies.

At first, Daw Yon's place in the dance ritual at Sameikkon was taken over by her niece, Ma Nway Li, and Ma Tin Tin Mo did not come to the festival after her mother's death in order to challenge it. The decision to award the position to Ma Nway Li was made by the custodians of Sameikkon temple and she assumed it. But her performances in this ritual function have not been to the satisfaction of the public. Rumor has it that the position should have been awarded to a fully initiated spirit medium (*natkadaw*). Actually, Ma Nway Li only acts in ritual functions at festivals where she has acceded to the position through the succession of Daw Hkway Ma and Daw Yon, that is to say at Sameikkon, Yadenagu, and Poppa. She says that she would be ashamed to dance as a *natkadaw* at *natkanà pwè* and that when she dances for the *nats* at the festivals, it is out of *yòya* rather than out of spirit possession.

Yòya here means a familial ritual obligation. As stated earlier, it should be contrasted both with spirit possession and with *damázin*, as this word is used in this context—the knowledge of the rituals which spirit mediums receive together with power from their master. This means that, if Ma Nway Li has taken over some ritual functions of her predecessors—and because once performed the rituals become compulsory—she has not inherited their particular relationship nor ability to deal with the *nats* through possession. A cynical way of putting it is to say that she is too tied up in the *nat* business not to perform these rituals, but is acting more as a custodian rather than as a spirit medium. Indeed, when Ma Nway Li refers to *yòya* in her case, it is a way of rejecting the status of *natkadaw* for herself and of discrediting spirit possession in general.

On the whole, one can say that in the case of Daw Hkway Ma's school, transmission has not worked out very well. She was so old that her disciples were already scattered, and her main disciple died very young as an alcoholic. She was so famous that almost everybody owed her *kadám*, and in a sense, no one was in a position to succeed her. Contrary to what usually happens when there is no disciple to succeed the master, the links of filiation were not metamorphosed into spirit possession to legitimize ritual functions: spirit possession was denied and transformed into *yòya* or filial obligations.

CONCLUSION

These cases highlight the fact that succession is very often problematic among spirit mediums. This can be explained because spirit possession—that is to say the ritual legitimization principle of the spirit mediums’ profession—competes with filiation as the guiding principle in succession. Both principles are more often at work as in the three cases presented here: ritual objects such as images may be shared out more or less easily than the ritual functions between real children and *nats*’ “children,” that is to say, disciples; or filiation may be metamorphosed into spirit possession to preserve the unity of a professional practice; or spirit possession may even be transformed into familial ritual obligation.

Although the case of a senior disciple succeeding his master is said to be the ideal succession, statistically, it is not the most prevalent. The observation of real cases shows us that there is actually no fixed rule among spirit mediums; rather, succession is disputed amongst followers and descendants according to the particular history of the school, through the interplay of spirit possession and of filiation. In itself, the lack of a fixed rule of succession is not specific to spirit mediums’ circles: it was a well-known feature of the succession to the throne, for instance, in the time of the Burmese Kings, and was linked to the presence of different competing principles of legitimization and to the complexity of the patron-client network upon which power relied.

What is involved in the cases of succession among spirit mediums is not the mere reproduction of particular clientele networks but also the transmission of a whole body of knowledge and practices concerning the *nats*, thereby perpetuating not only the profession but also the cult. It is probably the *damázin* concept that best describes it. *Nat damázin* could be defined as the expertise of rituals to the *nats* as transmitted in a school, a set of regulations conceived of as imposed by the *nats* themselves, acquired through spirit possession and proper initiation rituals, which are embodied in ritual objects. There are as many *damázin* as schools of spirit mediums and, all together, the *damázin* constitute the cultural content of the cult of the Thirty-Seven Lords.

If spirit possession appears to be antagonistic to inherited ritual obligations in the ideology of the cult, the analysis of the cases of succession among spirit mediums reveals a combination of principles of fictive kinship and inspiration as materialized in ritual objects through *nat damázin*. On a more general level, descent is actually intertwined with possession in the logic of cults. On the one hand, descent—although not unilinear—creates a legitimization of the cult as tradition or *yòya*, mainly for local rituals, although their development also involves spirit possession. On the other hand, spirit possession has more to do with the power of the *nats* and the ability of the ritual specialists to deal with them. It mainly legitimizes the professional practice of spirit mediums working at the level of the general cult. But the process at work in transmission does indeed involve the interaction of a form of descent either through fictive kinship or through the metamorphosis of kinship links into spirit possession.

Thus we have seen that transmission among spirit mediums occurs through a combination of fictive kinship and inspiration as materialized in ritual objects and expressed in the concept of *nat damázin*. This inscribes it within the more general processes of transmission of Burmese society: comparable, for instance, to the transmission of Dhamma along the lines of “sons of Buddha.” The fact is that although kinship does not play such a fundamental role in the definition of the sociological units and relationships in Burmese society, kinship is still the idiom in which they are expressed.

Finally, the description of the general framework of the cult leads us to oppose inspiration with tradition at the different levels of cult practice (general and local) as the legitimating principles of rituals. However, after closer analysis, these principles appear to constitute a range of values available in different contexts and interact in the cult dynamics in a way that varies according to the level of practice: at the local level, it is inspiration that is validated by tradition, while at the general level, linear descent or a form of descent is ratified by spirit possession. This inversion of values is actually part of the hierarchical structure of the cult in which local traditions are encompassed in the general spirit possession cult. The dynamics of the cult are not governed by one value, but by a set of values standing in apparent antagonism but actually functioning in dialectical opposition, thus allowing the hierarchies to interact between the different levels of the cult.

NOTES

1. For an analysis of this symbolic configuration, see BRAC DE LA PERRIÈRE 1996.
2. In this article, the concept of transmission actually encompasses two meanings: a larger meaning of the passing on of values and knowledge on which the social order is based; and a more restricted one that involves the inheritance of goods, either material or immaterial, between individuals. Referring to the devolution of material or immaterial goods in this latter sense, “transmission” is distinguished from the word “succession” that I use here to express the taking over of ritual functions and positions, as recommended by Lenclud, among others (LENCLUD 1991).
3. “Lord” is the usual translation, in the cult context, of the Burmese *mìn*, which is a title commonly given to the spirits (Brm. *nat*) belonging to this pantheon of thirty-seven figures that is actually a collection of local cult figures. The seminal texts on this cult, in the occidental languages, are TEMPLE 1906, MENDELSON 1963, NASH 1966, SPIRO 1967, and BRAC DE LA PERRIÈRE 1989.
4. The category *nat* is highly inclusive in Burmese, encompassing various beings such as Hindu divinities (*deiwá*) or mere nature spirits. However, the *nats* belonging to the pantheon of the thirty-seven are neither *deiwá* nor nature spirits; rather, they are of a human origin. Moreover, as opposed *deiwá* or nature spirits, these figures are the focus of an institutionalized cult on a regular basis, in Central Buddhist Burma, or a “positive cult” according to DURKHEIM’s definition (1968).
5. *Natkanà pwè* is named after the ceremonial pavilion (*kanà*) built specially to house this kind of ritual, usually lasting three days. It is often appended to the house of the main donor.
6. *Pwèdaw*, used for the main festivals, could be translated as “royal festival” as the suffix *daw* indicates that the local cult was sponsored by the court during the Burmese kingship

time. Festivals are more precisely designated according to the place where they are located (for example, the Taungbyon *pwè*).

7. Analyses of the festivals and of the processes involved in their transformations are in BRAC DE LA PERRIÈRE (1998a, 1998b, and 2005a).

8. *Hkaung hswè* literally means “the one who seized the head” (BRAC DE LA PERRIÈRE 1989, 100).

9. *Kanà sè* literally means “the one who rides the *kanà*.” It should be translated as “master of ceremonies,” the idea of the ride involving the control that the spirit medium has over what is happening under the *kanà*, that is to say, during the spirit possession ceremony.

10. See BRAC DE LA PERRIÈRE (1992 and 2005a) in particular. The “ministers” and “queens” are known respectively as *baung saung wungyi* and *thò saung mipaya* (minister wearing the *baung* and queen wearing the *thò*), according to the headdresses that are the attributes of these ritual functions.

11. The use of the word *yòya* actually goes beyond the mere cult context. It is pervasively used to refer to any transmitted habit or custom. In many contexts it can be translated as “tradition,” especially when combined with *dàlay*. Being based on the word “bone” (*A yò*), it may include an idea of linearity.

12. As is the case for monks, the seniority of spirit mediums is calculated according to the number of years spent having the status, and is expressed in terms of *wa*, that is to say, in terms of the number of seasons spent in seclusion. This is one of the defining characteristics of the religious status of monks.

13. For the economic implications and workings of the spirit possession ceremonies, see BRAC DE LA PERRIÈRE (1989, 201–205).

14. On the successive rituals that consecrate the different steps of the specialization in spirit possession, see BRAC DE LA PERRIÈRE (1989, 100–11). Some spirit mediums refer to a set of rules concerning a lapse of time that should be respected between each of these rituals and the precise duties of the disciples during these periods, always commenting that these rules are no longer—or not well—respected. However, observation of the main rules is necessary for a spirit medium to be considered legitimate.

15. The exclusive character of belonging to a school of possession implies that if I had been inclined, which I was not, to experiment in spirit possession through becoming the disciple of a particular spirit medium, my research would have been limited to this particular school of possession and I would have had great difficulty in pursuing further research beyond this school. Although I did not belong to a particular school of spirit possession during my research, I did have closer links to some spirit mediums and, significantly, this association was assimilated by other spirit mediums to being a disciple since that type of association was their only sociological reference in this context.

16. *Damàzin* comes from the Pāli *sampajhāna*, to be mindful or attentive (I am grateful to Frank Lehman for this precision).

17. This level of practice is particularly difficult to define since the basis of the practice may shift from a residential unit, in the region from which the spirit originates, to a kinship one, when forefathers have left their region of origin to settle elsewhere. Significantly, however, *nat yòya* in this sense are particularly prevalent in Yangon and in the delta, whereas in Central Burma, where tutelary spirits are mainly located, the cult to the regional *nat* is rather designated as *mihsaing hpáhsaing* (see SPIRO, 1967, for instance). But one can also find that there is a combination of cults to the tutelary spirit of the region (*mihsaing hpáhsaing*) and to a spirit of a different origin (*nat yòya*) as a local configuration, for example, in the Myittu festival, analyzed in BRAC DE LA PERRIÈRE (1998a). Another level of complexity comes from the fact that when the ritual obligation is transmitted on the basis of linear descent only, there is no fixed rule of transmission. In the delta, where this form of practice is more pervasive—an

explanation of this resides in the lack of tutelary spirits there and in the fact that the delta has known huge migrations from Central Burma since the nineteenth century—it seems that the cult to male figures is passed from father to son, while that of female figures is passed from mother to daughter: this explains why the most common familial cult associates the Lord of the White Horse on the male side, and the Lady of Pégou on the female side of the family. However, this kind of transmission is only a tendency, not a rule. These matters definitely deserve more systematic enquiries.

18. On the rituals of the installation of Buddha and *nat* images, see BRAC DE LA PERRIÈRE 2005b.

19. This use of the concept of *dagò* by the spirit mediums to express the power that is attributed to the *nats*, as well as to the ritual specialists and the ritual objects allowing interactions with the *nats*, demonstrates that the meaning of *dagò* is not limited to a power associated with Buddha, as has been stated by some scholars.

20. I am particularly grateful to Frank Lehman to have brought this fact to my attention. However, if the portrait of the master apparently stands as the reminder of a line of masters, in this case, I do not think that it is considered to be imbued with the master's power (*dagò*) as his ritual statues are.

21. Although U Hpo Maung's wife did not say it explicitly, her decision may well have been inspired by the fear of eventual revenge on the parts of the spirits, since "going into religion" is said to be the best protection against their influence.

22. On the rounds of ritual dances in festivals, see BRAC DE LA PERRIÈRE (1992, 1998b, and 2005b).

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