



## An Overview of the Field of Religion in Burmese Studies

This overview looks at the field of religion in Burmese studies from the perspective of practices that are relatively neglected, such as spirit cults. It argues that the overwhelming bias toward analysis of the Theravādin tradition tends to obscure the fact that in Burma, different kinds of religiosity actually interact in the shaping of the religious field and society. First, an analysis and selective review of past and present scholarly approaches to Burmese religion over the past forty years is presented. Then the Burmese spirit cult, the Thirty-Seven Lords, is introduced in this context as a component of a complex religious system dominated by the Theravādin tradition. This examination calls for a subaltern point of view capable of unveiling the hegemonic nature of Buddhism and of understanding the process through which the religious field is actually constituted in Burma through the incessant delineation of “pure” Buddhism.

KEYWORDS: Burmese studies—religious studies—anthropology—Theravādin tradition—religious system—spirit cults

SINCE THE advent of Burmese studies at the end of the Second World War, Western scholars have done extensive research on the main religious tradition in Burma (Myanmar), the Theravāda branch of Buddhism. Yet this wealth of research on religion has resulted in little overall analysis of Burma's religious system as a whole, meaning a Buddhist religious system comprised of elements that may be considered by some Burmese or scholars as not strictly pertaining to the Theravādin tradition.<sup>1</sup>

Historical circumstances played a major role in contributing to this state of affairs. Until just recently, it was virtually impossible for foreigners to conduct in-depth research on contemporary religious practices in Burmese society. Since the 1960s until the beginning of the 1990s, access to sites has been sharply limited, and, as a result, the field of Burmese studies has lain almost dormant for several decades. However, researchers have increasingly found ways to investigate the varied aspects of Burmese mainstream religion. This recent interest has unleashed a flood of new fieldwork on previously unexplored subjects and stimulating analyses of previously neglected questions. In any case, these analyses have been mainly concerned with Burmese Buddhism, thus fitting well the pervasive conception of Burmese identity as essentially Buddhist.<sup>2</sup>

The Theravāda branch of Buddhism is, after all, the main religious tradition in Burma, and to foreign observers and the Burmese themselves, Burma figures as an overwhelmingly Buddhist nation. However, this seemingly self-evident discourse on Burmese identity serves to reinforce the dominance of the Burmese over minorities.<sup>3</sup> In effect, the cultural and political hegemony of the Burmese is grounded in their adherence to Theravāda Buddhism. As oversimplified as this definition of Burmese identity may appear, it is very suggestive of the privileged status of Buddhism in Burmese society today.

But this delineation of Burmese identity and religion as fundamentally Buddhist also conceals complexities and contradictions that exist within the overarching framework of Burmese Buddhism. In Burma, as in other Southeast Asian societies in which Theravāda Buddhism is the dominant religion, there is a debate among Buddhists about the degree to which practices do or do not conform to the Theravādin canon. Moreover, one finds religious practices that large swaths of the population would cast out as being “non Buddhist.” This is particularly true

when it comes to practices that could be conveniently qualified as related to spirit cults, and in Burma's case, the cult of the Thirty-Seven Lords (*thònze khùhñit mìn*), otherwise known as the "cult of the *nats*."<sup>4</sup>

In scholarly circles, the problem of dealing with the complexities of religion in Burma is best summed up by Frank Lehman as the question of whether Burma has one or two religions (LEHMAN 1987). Should, for example, spirit cults, in this case the cult of the Thirty-Seven Lords, whose devotees are Buddhists, be considered part of an overarching religion along with Theravāda Buddhism? Or should they be considered a separate religion? Few contemporary scholars have bothered to address Lehman's question. Among those studying Burmese Buddhism, it is not even an issue.<sup>5</sup> In the scholarly literature, there is little discussion of the spirit cult in its own right when dealing with Burmese Buddhism, even though cult devotees are Buddhist and cult practices are historically linked to and legitimized by Buddhism.

Recent analyses of Burmese Buddhism have indeed adopted different approaches, the most notable difference being between that of religious studies, which tends to focus more on religious traditions or faiths, and that of anthropology, which tends to view religion as inscribed in a social system.

In Burmese, two main words, both having their origin in the Pāli language, translate aspects of the occidental notion of religion and partly reflect these different views: *batha* and *thathana*. *Batha* emerged as a Burmese concept during the nineteenth century in response to the encounter with Westerners' conceptions of religion, as has been brilliantly documented by Gustaaf HOUTMAN (1990a). However, *batha* does have broader identity implications than the purely religious, as *batha*'s first meaning is "language." As a concept for religion, it refers to identified religions like Buddhism, that is, "faith" or religious traditions that are considered independent of the societies in which they are transmitted. Indeed, it evokes Occidental notions linked to the conception of individually professed world religions. By itself, the Burmese spirit cult does not fit this concept of religion.

The other Burmese word that translates some aspects of the occidental notion of religion is *thathana*, which I would render as "the institution of religion," and this has the connotation of embeddedness in a specific society.<sup>6</sup> That is why in some contexts, the cult of the Thirty-Seven Lords is considered to be a part of the Burmese *thathana*.<sup>7</sup> In this respect, the Burmese cult of the *nats* is not a "religion" because it does not cover all the practices and beliefs of the Burmese. Nor does it exist in and of itself; rather, it is part of the larger Burmese religious sphere. That is why I have labeled it a "cult" that approximates the designation used by the Burmese: *kògwe mî*.

The challenge of reaching an understanding of the sphere of Burmese religion as a whole could be the reconciliation of the different approaches that have been identified, one in which religion is considered independent of the society in which it is inscribed, a legitimate approach for religious studies scholars, and the other in which religion is considered embedded in society. These broad differences in approach actually crisscross an opposition between two main forms of religiosity

that have been successively shaped in the specialized literature by a series of binary criteria: great tradition versus little tradition, world religion versus ethnic religion, and doctrinal orientation versus imagistic orientation.

Because both kinds of religiosity actually interact in the shaping of Burmese society, my designation of “Burmese religion” takes the perspective of religion as a complex field that comprises different segments or aspects but that nevertheless constitutes a whole. Moreover, we cannot begin to understand how this interaction takes place until we ask why Buddhism enjoys a privileged status in Burmese society in the definition of Burmese identity, and why Buddhism’s privileged status remains unchallenged, accepted as a given, by both scholars and the Burmese themselves. Why does it appear as a natural fact, rather than a social construct?

To address these questions, I will first present an analysis and selective review of past and present scholarly approaches to, and interpretations of, Burmese religion over the past forty years.<sup>8</sup> In my analysis, I will reveal the extent to which recent Burmese studies scholars, starting in the 1980s, have simply avoided dealing with the question of the spirit cult.<sup>9</sup> This practice of turning a (mostly) blind eye, I argue, conveniently dovetails with the Burmese discourse about Burmese identity in which Burma’s religion is a “pure” form of Theravādin Buddhism. Secondly, I will present a case study of the cult of the Thirty-Seven Lords to demonstrate how scholarly discourse has become biased. The cult of the Thirty-Seven Lords, I argue, deserves consideration in its own right because it is observed by Buddhists and is very much a part of the overarching framework of Burmese Buddhism.

By questioning Buddhism’s privileged status in Burmese society and in Burmese studies, I am not following the position already staked out in the domain of Buddhist studies by British historian Philip ALMOND’s stimulating work (1988). I do not set out to outline the framework used by Western scholars to construct Burmese religion through their own paradigms. An Edward Said-inspired critique of Orientalism, although valid and potentially revealing, is not my aim here.<sup>10</sup>

My objective, rather, is to show not only that the scholarly construction of Burmese religion diverges from the current trend of anthropological studies of Buddhist societies, but also that it coincides with the dominant Burmese discourse on identity and religion. In this way, my aim is close to the interpretation adopted in the articles collected by Donald LOPEZ in 1995, where Buddhist studies are seen as a case of intercultural mimesis by stating that Buddhist cultures have had an impact on the construction of Buddhism as a religion (see especially HALLISEY 1995). Thus, I explore possible reasons for the confluence of scholarly interpretations of Burmese religion and Burmese cultural and political hegemony. To what extent can we apply to the field of Burmese studies the hypothesis pioneered by BRECKENRIDGE and VAN DER VEER (1993) that societies scrutinized by scholars may have a kind of agency in the analysis produced?

In Burma’s case, the nature of this agency merits greater scrutiny since it cannot be traced to specific identifiable Burmese sources.<sup>11</sup> This article will begin to explore the possible influence of Burmese-dominant discourse itself on scholarship

about Burmese religion, within which certain religious practices are deemed “non-Buddhist” or are rejected by Buddhists for not being Buddhist enough. By raising these questions, I do not imply that scholars knowingly comply with the Burmese hegemonic position. Instead, I argue that the omissions in scholarly interpretations of Burmese religion, specifically their avoidance of the role of the spirit cult, could be viewed as an earmark of the particular way in which hegemonic conceptions of Burmese identity are built into the religion.

In raising these questions, my intention is not to downplay the importance of Buddhism in Burma, but to improve our understanding of the influence of Buddhism on the workings of Burmese society and of the sociological processes involved in the naturalization of the privileged status of Burmese Buddhism. Far from supplanting the study of Buddhism in Burma, the goal here is to complement it and to locate it according to a novel perspective, analyzing Buddhism’s privileged status as a social construct that determines the Burmese social structure. As stated by LOPEZ, “The question is not one of the ethics of scholarship but of the logic of representation” (1995, II).

#### BURMESE STUDIES AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF BUDDHISM IN THE 1960S

To put contemporary approaches to Burmese religion in context, we shall first go back to the inception of the social anthropology of Theravādin Buddhist societies in the early 1960s. It was during this era that anthropologists working in Southeast Asia first began seriously engaging the question of how to characterize the relationship between the different aspects of religion in Buddhist societies.

The first significant treatment of this question appeared in the field of Sinhalese studies. In his 1978 article on Theravāda Buddhism, Heinz BECHERT reviewed the approaches adopted by Sri Lanka specialists to explain the coexistence of Buddhism with religious practices considered “non-Buddhist,” such as spirit cults. He noted that in studies predating the mid-nineteenth century, both aspects of Sri Lanka’s religion were described in an “astonishingly unprejudiced” way. However, during the second half of the nineteenth century this understanding of the Sinhalese religion was overwhelmed by a Buddhological approach that focused on the Pāli canonical tradition as the authoritative source of religion and dismissed all the other facts perceived as not belonging to this tradition.

The question of how to reconcile the different aspects of one religion was only taken up again by social anthropologists in the 1960s, not only in Sinhalese studies but also in the study of other Southeast Asian societies. Bechert showed that, in Sri Lanka’s case, the diversity of scholarly interpretations of Sri Lanka’s religion reflected the complexity and internal subdivisions of its so-called “non-Buddhist” elements. His own position was that the relationship between Buddhist and so-called non-Buddhist religious aspects was characterized by a “sharp delimitation,” an opposition between holy and secular characters

evocative of the Buddhist opposition between a supra-worldly (Pāli: *lokuttara*; Brm. *lāwkottara*) versus an in-worldly (Pāli: *lokiya*; Brm. *lāwki*) orientation.

The change in focus in the study of Theravāda Buddhism in the 1960s is largely due to a shift in approach from that of Orientalism to that of social anthropology. According to Kevin TRAINOR (1997), this new interest on the part of anthropologists in the study of the religion of Buddhist societies “rematerialized” specific Buddhist traditions in opposition to the status quo Orientalist, textualist approach to Buddhism. Thus, during this period, anthropological studies on Theravāda societies developed with the idea that the complexity of religion must be confronted within a social context.<sup>12</sup>

Such was also the case in Burmese studies at the time. Prior to the Second World War, little credible anthropological research had been done on the Burmese.<sup>13</sup> This began to change in the 1960s, and the seminal publication *Anthropological Studies in Theravada Buddhism*, published in 1966 under the direction of Manning NASH, included contributions from three American anthropologists expressing their views on Burmese religion regarding the relationship between Buddhism and spirit cults that were as diverse as those of their colleagues working in Sri Lanka. On the one hand, David PFANNER, who had studied village religion in Lower Burma, argued that in this context, the role of the Buddhist monk was pivotal, while that of the cult of the *nats*, that is, the Burmese spirit cult, was only marginal. On the other hand, June NASH and Manning NASH, who had done their field research in Upper Burma, insisted that the process of belonging to local society was actually organized through the spirit cult.

June Nash examined the structure of the cult of the *nats*, documenting for the first time, to my knowledge, its relationship to the structural units of society and the prevalence of ritual obligation to the familial *nat*. In contrast to Pfanner, Nash noted that “animistic faith ties the Burman more strongly to his village than does the village monastery.” Note that the contrast between the findings of these two scholars may reflect their different points of view as well as actual differences in the contexts of their field at the time. However, both built arguments on the basis of their village-level field experience; neither was in a position to assess broad regional contrasts. Finally, Nash took the position that “the social aspect of religion negated in the Buddhist ideal of the monastic life survives in the *nat* cult.” This statement locates her stance very close to the then-prevalent mainstream interpretation that the delimitation between the two aspects of the religion separated out-worldly orientations from in-worldly ones. This position led to a somewhat caricatured take on Buddhism as an “incomplete religion” concerned only with salvation.

As for Manning NASH (1966), he was only one of two anthropologists (the other being Melford Spiro) ever to have conducted a full village-level study in Burma on the Burmese. In his analysis of the ritual cycle,<sup>14</sup> Nash found that there was an analytical dichotomy between “communal rites in the hands of specialists oriented towards ultimate ends and individual rites in the hands of non-specialists

for immediate ends,” the latter being considered “non-Buddhist” (NASH 1966, 112). However, he did stress that these practices were in constant interplay in daily life and formed a complex of rituals. Nash also wrote: “Obligatory Buddhist ceremonies tend to transcend local organization when *nat* rites regionalize the community,” again speaking from the point of view of a village study (NASH 1966, 112). Finally, he concluded that “The dialectic of this world and the other world is played out between these two religious elements and the interplay of these elements makes up the religious system,” thus opening a more structural approach that would later develop in anthropological studies of Theravāda societies (NASH 1966, 113).

Another scholar, Michael MENDELSON, staked out a different position on the relationship between different segments of Burmese religion, namely the cult of the *nats*, occult practices, and Buddhism, in two articles published in 1963. Taking a broader view, he presented the fruitful historical and sociological hypothesis that authority in Burma is grounded in the relative definitions of orthodoxy and heterodoxy. Although not based on intensive ethnographic fieldwork as was the case with Spiro and Manning Nash, Mendelson’s hypothesis managed to do two things simultaneously. It took into account the claim by Burmese Buddhists that their religion is defined by its link to the Buddhist canon as the source of religious authority, and it also opened the way for a sociological approach capable of depicting various religious practices, including the spirit cult, as linked together in a Buddhist society. Moreover, this hypothesis made it possible to explain discontinuities between religious practices as produced by an internal process of sociological differentiation, a point that will be discussed later in this article.

Thus, for a brief period in the 1960s, the development of Burmese studies very much kept pace with that of anthropological studies on Theravāda societies. Researchers working in Burma at the time were fully engaged in the challenge of dealing with the complexity of the religious field in Theravāda societies and posited very diverse interpretations reflecting not only the complexity of their subject, but also the variety of their analytical positions.<sup>15</sup> But this alignment was short-lived. From this point on, the development of Burmese studies diverged strikingly from the mainstream anthropological studies of Theravāda Buddhism. After its heyday in the 1960s, the field of anthropology in Burmese studies vanished.

In contrast, anthropologists working in neighboring Southeast Asian societies would go much further in seeking a more integrative understanding of the relationships between Buddhism, spirit cults, and other religious practices. The kind of research that became prevalent brought spirit cults into the analysis and considered the sphere of religious practices as a whole instead of looking at each element as a separate system. These anthropologists also sought to describe the relationships between various religious components while demonstrating the dominance of Buddhism. Famous examples of such works include Stanley TAMBIAH (1970) for Thailand, and Richard GOMBRICH (1971) and Gananath OBEYSEKERE (1966) for Sri Lanka. In particular, Obeyesekere’s work demonstrated that the Sinhalese

pantheon cannot be divided into Buddhist or “non-Buddhist” elements since it is grounded in an overarching system of the distribution of power and authority called *varan* that is ultimately linked to the Buddha at the top. Hence, the once-common designation of “non-Buddhist popular religions” became obsolete not only because some of the practices involved were not “popular,” and were linked to the royal tradition as pointed out by BECHERT (1978), but also because they were fully integrated in a Buddhist framework described by OBEYESEKERE (1966) as a “salvation idiom.”

#### MELFORD SPIRO’S LEGACY

The divergence of Burmese studies from the mainstream anthropological studies of Theravāda Buddhism is due to two facts. The first was the emergence of the work of Melford Spiro, an American anthropologist who completed his fieldwork on religion in Burma in the early 1960s, at about the same time as the Nashes, Mendelson, and Pfanner, and published three books successively from his data, including two that dealt directly with the religious sphere. While he was by no means the only social scientist who produced scholarly interpretations of Burmese religion during the 1970s and 1980s, Spiro’s work was the most outstanding, the most ambitious in scope, and the best known outside of Burmese studies circles. Spiro is particularly well-regarded within the field of religious studies for having formulated one of the two most widely accepted general definitions of religion.<sup>16</sup> Within his own field, he is a stout defender of American cultural anthropology (see SPIRO 1992) and, along with Manning Nash, one of the only anthropologists to conduct a comprehensive village study on the Burmese.

Spiro’s point of departure was the idea that suffering is the main problem addressed by religion,<sup>17</sup> and he adopted a concept of religion that was grounded in a psychological approach that shows his tribute to American cultural anthropology. In his book, *Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and its Burmese Vicissitudes*, Spiro proposed an interpretation that subdivides Burmese Buddhism into three distinct subsystems—“nibbanic,” “kammatic,” and “apotropaic”—according to different responses to Buddhist precepts and dogma, or in other words, according to the proximity to canonical Buddhism (SPIRO 1982). Among the three subsystems, he considered only the “nibbanic” subcategory to be canonical. Moreover, Spiro considered the Burmese Buddhist tradition and the spirit cult—that together with other practices he labeled “Burmese supernaturalism”—as two distinct components of Burmese religion, devoting a separate book to each. In the preface of the expanded edition of his book, *Burmese Supernaturalism*, in which he responds to critiques of his “two religions” interpretation, Spiro insists on viewing Buddhism and what he calls the *nat* religion as “two separate religious systems,” not only because their concepts and modes of dealing with suffering are different, but also because they are incompatible and because the Burmese themselves view them as such (SPIRO 1967, XXXIX).

As LEHMAN noted (1972, 377), Spiro overlooked the interrelationships between these two religious aspects, namely Burma's spirit cult—the cult of the *nats*—and Burmese Buddhism, viewing them as two separate systems.<sup>18</sup> He failed to see how these different aspects are ultimately inscribed in an overarching Buddhist framework of the kind Obeyesekere envisioned in the Sinhalese case. Spiro's position contrasted sharply with the kind of anthropological research that had been developing in neighboring societies. Nevertheless, the picture Spiro drew of Burmese religion as made up of two separate systems, one supernatural and the other Buddhist (that he further subdivided into three subsystems reifying canonical Buddhism) had an enduring impact if only because of the fame of his work. To date, the ambitiousness of Spiro's analysis of Burmese culture is unparalleled among social anthropologists and his body of work about Burma remains, without a doubt, the best known outside of Burmese studies circles at the disciplinary level of general anthropology and religious studies. At the area studies level of Burmese studies, however, Spiro's work—although acknowledged—is not fully taken into consideration,<sup>19</sup> and yet, it remains unchallenged.<sup>20</sup>

#### BUDDHIST STUDIES IN THE POST-NE WIN ERA

The second fact to consider is that, contrary to what happened in Sri Lanka and Thailand, the anthropological field research on Southeast Asian peasant societies that was launched in the years following the Second World War came to an abrupt halt in Burma in 1962, when General Ne Win seized power. The generation of anthropologists working on the Burmese, comprised of Spiro, Pfanner, Mendelson, Manning Nash and June Nash, plus Lucien Bernot and Lehman, who worked on the minorities, was brutally separated from the field. A gap of more than a generation followed, during which no field research could really take place, precluding the advancement of the kind of approaches that anthropologists were developing in neighboring countries. Although social scientists have slowly begun going back to Burma since the eighties, long-term ethnographic field research in rural areas has not been permitted since 1962, with the sole exception of Naoko Kumada in the late 1990s. In the study of Burmese peasant society, social anthropology has simply not been allowed to develop. The type of research that has managed to continue has been limited mainly to historical and religious studies.

Despite these limitations, this recent era of research has produced some important contributions to our understanding of Burmese Buddhism. John Ferguson, a historian of monastic sectarianism, and Mendelson, came up with an analysis of the system of the four-bonded symbolic dimensions, shedding light on the complexity of Burmese Buddhism. The four dimensions, forest/village, meditation/learning, Upper Burma/Lower Burma, and Burma/Sri Lanka, determine the rupture lines along which dynamic change within monastic institutions takes place (see, for example, FERGUSON 1978). Another line of research, represented by Lehman and

Juliane S. Schober, is the examination of the organization of Burmese Buddhist society according to “fields” of power, a sociological transposition of the Buddhist concept of “field of merit,” which refers to the Sangha as the receiver of religious gifts.<sup>21</sup> Combined with Mendelson, these studies have paved the way for more recent research, much of it in the form of doctoral dissertations, that analyzes the internal rupture lines in the Theravāda tradition as they are localized within Burmese society, for example, between the *wīpatthana* (Pāli: *vipassanā*) (mental culture) and *thamahtà* (Pāli: *samatha*) (concentration) schools of meditation (HOUTMAN 1990b, JORDT 2001), between nuns and monks (KAWANAMI 1990), among ordination lineages (CARBINE 2004, PRANKE 2004), between virtuoso and ordinary monks (ROZENBERG 2005, TOSA in this issue), and so on. Although only a few of these newer studies have been published, they all bring a wealth of new data and erudition about Burmese Buddhism and society to the field.

Indeed, this new generation of anthropologists and religious studies scholars, including those in this book, are developing knowledge by investigating the complexity of and internal differentiation within Burmese Buddhism. But, for the most part, they stop at the point where Buddhism seems to stop. That is to say, they stop short of addressing Buddhism within the context of Burmese religion. This reluctance to go beyond what is considered to be at the core of Buddhism translates, for example, into neglect of a major and manifest aspect of mainstream religion in Burma, the cult of the Thirty-Seven Lords.<sup>22</sup> None of the studies I mentioned above addresses the question of the role of this spirit cult in Burmese religion, and few others have tackled the issue in depth.

Up until the 1980s, when I began field research, the ethnography of the contemporary cult of the *nats* remained largely unknown. Spiro’s contribution, more than thirty-five years ago, was the singular exception. Even so, his overall analysis of the cultic framework was based on observations at the village level, not on a systematic investigation of the full extent of the ritual system, that is, the spirit possession cult addressed to the national pantheon of the Thirty-Seven Lords and its accompanying ritual system whose articulations parallel Burmese social organization. After Spiro, two essays of note, one by the historian Henry SHORTO on the Mon cult (1967), and the other by MENDELSON on the Burmese cult (1963b), were published in the 1960s, both proposing interesting hypotheses. Finally, LEHMAN (2003) deserves mention as an important contribution at a general Southeast Asian comparative level. However, like Spiro’s work, none were based on systematic fieldwork on the contemporary cult and its practices. The few other articles that appeared after Spiro’s book on “supernaturalism,” such as Sarah BEKKER’s cursory articles (1988a and 1988b) or the former French diplomat Yves RODRIGUE’s descriptive book about festivals (1995), remain marginal.

As a scholar specializing in the cult of the *nats*, I am struck by the extent to which recent analyses of Burmese religion are practically silent on the spirit cult, as if it did not belong to it. Although some recent works on Burmese Buddhism make passing reference to the cult, or to some of the figures in the pantheon of

the Thirty-Seven Lords, they seem to ignore the fact that the Burmese Buddhists with whom they are concerned are also the devotees, if not the practitioners, of the Burmese spirit-possession cult. Certainly, no concerted attempt to understand its place in Burmese religion has been undertaken.

While examining the complexities of Buddhism without considering what is stigmatized as “non-Buddhist” may be legitimate from the point of view of Buddhism’s specialists, that is to say scholars in religious studies, it is more surprising in the case of anthropologists interested in religion. However, these anthropologists have not really researched the spirit cult or included it in their analyses. This is true, for instance, of those looking specifically at how Buddhism is localized in Burma, notably Juliane S. Schober and Naoko Kumada.

SCHOBBER, however, does refer to the spirit cult in her 1989 dissertation. She completed intensive fieldwork in the early 1980s in an urban context in Mandalay, the last of the royal cities, and carefully examined actual religious practices there in an interesting attempt, which was successful in many ways, to understand the localization of Theravāda Buddhism in Upper Burma, particularly the articulation between the textual tradition and social organization. Notably, Schober took on the question of mysticism and reconceptualized it as a domain motivated by Theravāda, albeit “non-orthodox,” beliefs. Although this analysis sheds light on the ways in which fields of power are constituted in Burma, it excludes spirit cult practices from anything deeper than an occasional mention.<sup>23</sup>

In the late 1990s Kumada conducted the first extensive, long-term field research in the Burmese countryside since the 1960s. The villages where she worked are situated in the heart of Central Burma within close proximity to three of Burma’s important *nat* festivals. Despite this fact and the likelihood that the inhabitants of these and surrounding villages pay tribute to at least one of the festivals every year, Kumada is silent on the spirit cult’s practices: her aim was to examine the relevance of Buddhist concepts in Burmese peasant society. Yet Kumada did not take into account the fact that the conformity of cult practices to the Theravādin canon might actually be a topic of debate among those in her target population.

What can explain this marked avoidance of the spirit cult? Why are so few anthropologists, not to mention religious studies scholars or Burma specialists, taking the spirit cult seriously? Objectively speaking, there are good reasons why contemporary social scientists have tended to avoid incorporating the spirit cult into their analyses of Burmese religion. Most importantly, as was mentioned earlier, the difficulties of doing field research in Burma have hampered the anthropological study of the actual religious practices of the lay people and, conversely, have favored religious studies focused on canonical authority.<sup>24</sup> The spirit cult exists primarily in practice whereas Buddhism relies mainly on the transmission of a textual corpus for which the religious specialists (monks) are held responsible. In addition, anthropological studies that are based on in-depth fieldwork and take a holistic approach are exceedingly rare. Nash was the only one to produce a monograph based on a village study. Nowadays, the general trend in anthropology is to

denounce this kind of monographic writing about “the other.” But the closure of Burma to field research occurred long before the inception of this trend, before any substantial monographic production had time to get underway, leaving a gap in the knowledge of Burmese society. Since the 1960s, little attempt has been made to approach Burmese society as a whole or Burmese Buddhism within Burmese religion as a whole.

This context has set the stage for a weakness in the dominant approach to understanding religion in Burma. The literature, with the exceptions that have been pointed out, largely focuses on Buddhist constructions of Burmese society and leaves out whatever insight an analysis of other cultural components, such as the spirit cult, could bring to a better understanding of the society at large. Houtman, for example, as an anthropologist, has examined the influence of Buddhist institutions on Burmese social hierarchies, like Schober in her own way. But it seems to me that by failing to address the question of Buddhism’s privileged status in Burma’s religion, both have missed something about what this status means in Burmese society at large and, indeed, about the way Burmese society works.

Houtman has written an interesting thesis about the meanings of the practices of meditation in Burmese society, positing an opposition between two kinds of practice, namely the *wīpatthana* and the *thamahtà*, grounded on the more fundamental opposition between two orientations of social life, the first one building closed worlds while the second one tends to open the world (HOUTMAN 1990b). Elaborating on his thesis, he has produced a decisive study about contemporary cultural debates underlying the political conflict in Burma (HOUTMAN 1999). While his view of the political positions as expressed and informed by the Buddhist idiom is illuminating, his interpretation is in many ways a Buddhism-centric one: he not only states that the arguments of the political debate are made from Buddhist concepts—and more precisely, that political conflict rests on incompatible interpretations of Buddhist concepts—but also that among the two positions, one is more truly “Buddhist” than the other, thus failing to see how the use of Buddhist idioms do in any case serve the processes of domination in Burma.

In short, most scholars studying religion in Burma adopt a Buddhism-centric view. The sidelining of the spirit cult is nothing but an earmark of this bias, either as a part of Buddhism and therefore not worthy of consideration in its own right, or as “non-Buddhist” and entirely distinct from Buddhism and therefore less relevant. This bias coincides with the Burmese constructions of identity and religion, as I will show in the following section, and raises questions about the influence of Burmese values on the interpretations adopted in scholarship.

Whatever the reasons, the result is clear. With the spirit cult banished to the margins, if it is acknowledged at all, the Burmese field of religion appears as coextensive with the Theravādin tradition. At the same time, well-documented research on the inner complexities and localization of the Theravādin tradition in Burma inevitably exclude from their scope what is perceived as not pertaining to, or being outside of, this tradition—the cult of the *nats*. No one since Spiro has undertaken

the ambitious task of painting an overall picture of Burmese culture. In this critical vacuum, the picture given in current scholarship of an undefiled Burmese Buddhism implies by omission that the spirit cult is “non-Buddhist.” It thus seems to follow, albeit unintentionally, Spiro’s conception of two separate religious systems, justified by the rationale “because the Burmese themselves view them as such” (SPIRO 1967). In Burma’s case, the unresolved question of whether or not to consider the religious sphere within Burmese society as a whole precludes asking what I believe is the real issue: What does the Theravādin tradition’s superior status in Burmese religion tell us about how Burmese society works?

#### THE BURMESE SPIRIT CULT AS PART OF THE OVERARCHING BUDDHIST SYSTEM OF LEGITIMATION

A way to address this question is to consider the relationship between the Burmese spirit cult, or cult of the *nats*, and Buddhism. In this section I will show that, far from being an entirely separate religious system, the Burmese spirit cult, not unlike the spirit cults in neighboring Southeast Asian societies, is actually entangled in the overarching Buddhist idiom.<sup>25</sup>

The cult in honor of the Thirty-Seven Lords is a spirit possession cult. This institutionalized cult is addressed to guardian spirits, or *nats*, of particular domains in Upper Burma that once formed the core of the classical Burmese Buddhist kingdom. At the societal level, it is organized around the pantheon of the Thirty-Seven Lords, who are honored in annual public festivals and with whom individuals engage in privately-organized spirit possession ceremonies.

Buddhism played a central role in the establishment of the cult that was a process of conversion and civilization of the non-Buddhist elements. In Burmese historiography,<sup>26</sup> King Anawratha is credited with unifying the Irrawaddy valley under Burmese Buddhist rule in the eleventh century, recognizing the local cult figures that later formed the pantheon and placing them under the authority of Sakka, Burma’s guardian of Theravāda Buddhism. Legendary accounts, however, place most of the spirits later enlisted as the Thirty-Seven at a much later date and present them as the malevolent spirits of rebels or heroes who resisted the king’s rule and subsequently died violently at the hands of his men. According to the accounts, Buddhist kings, acting on behalf of Sakka, were able to subdue these evil spirits and turn them into benevolent *nats* worthy of a local cult. In short, the *nats* are subversive local powers who were captured by the central kingdom and enshrined in the Buddhist system of values. This “official” version presents the emergence of the Thirty-Seven Lords as the result of the religious policy of the Buddhist Burmese kings, a policy aimed at unifying local or autochthonous cults into a centralized pantheon. The result was the consolidation of territory under Burma’s Buddhist kings, that is, the unification of Buddhist Burma.

According to Spiro’s “two religions” theory, the cult of the Thirty-Seven Lords is “non-Buddhist.” Yet, like other Theravādin societies in Southeast Asia, the spirit

cult in Burma cannot be credibly considered as a separate religious system from Buddhism. Similar to the situation in Sri Lanka, Burma's spirit cult exists unambiguously within an overarching system of power and authority ultimately linked at the top to Buddhist legitimacy. In Sri Lanka's *varan* system, "Buddha is the ultimate repository of power and authority" who delegates power to various local gods, thus rallying them (OBEYESEKERE 1963, 145). In Burma, however, power and authority were granted to the tutelary spirits by the Buddhist kingship and legitimated by Sakka, the guardian of the Theravāda religion in the Burmese kingdom; the spirit cult is a construct of the kingship that comprises the contributions of local communities.

In addition, contrary to Spiro's analysis, the spirit cult is infused with representations and conceptions of the world similar to those found in Buddhism. A comparison of *nat* worship, as opposed to Buddhist offerings and representations of the body and self, for example, reveals oppositions as well as overlaps that can inform us about the process of differentiation. Without going into too much detail, let us consider the way in which devotees commonly rationalize cult practices. Making offerings to the Thirty-Seven, they would say, is a way to transfer Buddhist religious merit (*kūtho*; Pāli: *kusala*) to the Lords to better their *kan* (Pāli: *kamma*); as the spirits of people whose lives were cut short by violent death or suicide, these *nats* are trapped in a cycle of rebirths and are unable to strive toward the way out by themselves. In short, they depend on humans, their devotees, to acquire Buddhist religious merit. A more detailed analysis of the infusion of Buddhist concepts in the spirit cult can be found in this issue in my article on transmission among religious specialists of the spirit cult.<sup>27</sup>

On another level, the embeddedness of the spirit cult in the overarching Buddhist idiom has been recently exemplified by the practices of certain spirit mediums, whose practice depends largely on performing private spirit possession ceremonies for an urban clientele. In response to sociological changes in their client networks, particularly to their increasing wealth, and to the public discourse that tends to discredit the mediums, the latter are prone to call on spirits that are not part of the Thirty-Seven Lords but that are considered closer to Buddhist values. In this way, a series of *bòbòkyi*<sup>28</sup> and *thaik* ladies, who are basically pagoda guardians, have recently come to be summoned to dance under the ritual pavilions. Although in number they remain constant, the composition of the Thirty-Seven Lords is fluid and dynamic over time, and subject to social influences such as the privileging of Buddhist values.

It is precisely because of this overlap that I do not consider the spirit cult a religion unto itself, but as part of Burmese religion. As stated earlier, I view Burma's mainstream religion as a religious system that incorporates within the Buddhist framework practices of seemingly different horizons such as the spirit cult or the *weikza*<sup>29</sup> cult. Although spatially, sociologically, and conceptually differentiated through such expressions as "*nat* line" or "*dat* line,"<sup>30</sup> these practices actually overlap with Buddhist practices. Indeed, devotees of these cults are professed Buddhists.

## THE RITUAL SETTING OF THE CULT

Even though the cult of the Thirty-Seven Lords exists within the overarching Buddhist idiom, as is the case among similar spirit cults in neighboring Theravādin societies, its ritual institutions appear to be physically separated and differentiated from those of Buddhism, maybe more neatly than they are in neighboring Buddhist societies. As a rule, ceremonies honoring the Thirty-Seven Lords and involving spirit possession—one of the spirit cult's two main ritual categories, as we shall see—cannot be performed in a monastery compound or in a pagoda.<sup>31</sup> As for community shrines to the tutelary spirits, they are regularly located close to a monastery but outside of a monastery compound.

This spatial separation is best exemplified by the ritual performed when boys enter the monastery for their novitiate, an obligation for any young Burmese Buddhist male. The boys, who are at first celebrated as princes, are presented to the tutelary spirit to ask permission to leave the community. In Burma, the passage from the secular world to the religious world takes place in front of the tutelary spirit's shrine.

Burmese spatial separation contrasts with the situation in northern Thailand, where spirit possession ceremonies can be performed in a monastery compound, or in Cambodia, where rituals are performed for the spirit located in the Buddha image (Khmer. *boramei*) kept inside a pagoda. The physical separation of the spirit cult and Buddhist practices and institutions is, thus, comparatively significant. Whereas there is a kaleidoscope of practices in Thailand, for example—including what has been rightly or not analyzed as “Brahmanism,”<sup>32</sup> Burma's mainstream religion is more polarized. The distinction between Buddhism and the spirit cult is accentuated by the striking integration of practices within the cult of the Thirty-Seven Lords at every level, from individual and familial to local and regional. It is important to emphasize that the physical separation between spirit cult and Buddhist practices serves to differentiate the two domains within the religion as a whole. This construction has a very specific function: to maintain the hierarchy by keeping Buddhism separate, pure, and superior.

The sociological and ritual setting of the cult, allowing its continuous integration, will now be explored. Within the cult of the Thirty-Seven Lords, there are two main types of rituals: firstly, at the general level of practice, private ceremonies are addressed to the entire pantheon of the Thirty Seven (*natkanà pwè*); and secondly, on an annual basis local public rituals or “royal festivals” (*pwèdaw*) are addressed to an individual spirit belonging to this pantheon in the locality of which he is guardian. Under the kingship, some of these festivals were supported by the crown and officiated by specialists of the royal cult, who were dedicated to the pantheon of the Thirty-Seven Lords at the court and dependent upon royal patronage. In this way, local rituals were connected to the general practice of the cult. In the second half of the nineteenth century, however, a new policy of local rituals was implemented that led to more standardization and to the creation of an independent profession of ritual specialists, the spirit mediums or *natkadaw*. Following the collapse of Burmese royalty, this development enabled the national

cult to continue and even to flourish. It is probably in this context that the practice of spirit possession evolved into its present form.

Nowadays, performing private ceremonies in honor of the Thirty-Seven constitutes the bulk of the professional practice of the spirit mediums. These ceremonies are the main context for spirit possession, which allows devotees to have access to the spirits and to tap their potency. By necessity, spirit mediums also participate in the main local rituals or “royal festivals” as ritual specialists. Their participation at the local level is both instrumental to local rituals and necessary for the enrichment of their own professional practices. It is during the local public festivals that spirit mediums renew their relationship to their *nat*, a relationship that authorizes them to embody the *nat* during private ceremonies. Finally, the spirit mediums travel during the festival periods, three times a year, going from one festival to another. These journeys can vary from one specialist to another, depending on which spirit is his or her master, but they generally follow a trajectory determined by the succession of the festivals in space and time, in an annual circumambulation around Central Burma. In this way, the festivals, or local public rituals, constitute a ritual cycle linked at a more general level to the cult as a whole.

The core of the festivals’ ritual programs is the commemoration of the submission of the former local heroes and malevolent spirits to the Buddhist royal order—events that led to the formation of the cult—through enactments of their subversive dimension. In these ritual commemorations of the installation of a *nat*, the spirit mediums, organized in a hierarchy of “ministers” and “queens,” play the role of the Buddhist royal order while the malevolent spirit and subversive local forces are personified by the locals. In this sense, although rituals to the *nats* offer the possibility of expressing the localities’ potential threat to the Burmese Buddhist order, they actually serve to integrate localities into Buddhist society. Moreover, it is through their very encompassment that local practices are also stigmatized as “customary” or “hereditary” (*yòya*). Thus, if only at a symbolic level, the ritual framework of the festivals allows local or marginal values to be expressed and, at the same time, be encompassed within the Buddhist system of values.

But the integrative ritual organization of the festivals also provides a unique context for social interactions between practice at the local and at the general, urbanized national level. Today, the relationship between local rituals and the cult as a whole is articulated through the participation of the spirit mediums. Local ritual institutions have undergone and continue to undergo significant transformations that vary according to specific contexts. The general trend, however, is toward further integration. As the spirit medium profession has gained in importance in the cult as a whole, it has become the means through which local rituals are standardized. At the same time, through their participation in local festivals, spirit mediums, who are mostly based in Mandalay or Rangoon, both draw from and transform local practices.

This standardization process through which local public rituals are encompassed in the cult at large both erases their idiosyncratic aspects and enriches the cultural content of the cult overall. In the margins of contemporary Burmese society, some

scholars, such as Alexandra DE MERSAN, have very recently begun to observe and investigate similar processes and to analyze it as “Burmanization.” Mandy SADAN (2005) has also documented that such a process occurred in a Kachin context during the nineteenth century. But these processes of standardization of local public rituals may also be analyzed in terms of internal “Burmanization” processes in Burma proper.

One remarkable example of this continuous process of standardization is the revival of the festival dedicated to A Mé Kyan, a female spirit belonging to the pantheon of the Thirty-Seven Lords, at Ayekyigon, close to the ancient royal city of Ava. When Ava was the kingdom’s capital from the fourteenth to the eighteenth century, the festival probably enjoyed the support of the royal court. Later on, however, even though it was one of the main festivals celebrating the Thirty-Seven Lords, this particular festival was abandoned by most spirit mediums because the festival site was not accessible. Then the whole context changed when Burmese authorities decided to build the new Mandalay airport on the site at Ayekyigon. Without going into the details of the transformations involved, the new accessibility of the site combined with sociological opportunities created by the construction of the airport brought the mediums back to the festival. It was previously an impressive manifestation of true locality, far from the current mainstream *nat* festivals. Now the festival is experiencing a rapid mutation due to the participation of new spirit mediums who are promoting novel ritual institutions more suited to their own needs in this context. It is now on its way to being standardized again, according to the norms of the general cult.

Since the collapse of the monarchy (1885), the reproduction of the entire cult of the Thirty-Seven Lords has rested on the interplay between the cult’s two main categories of rituals, mediated in large part by increasingly influential spirit mediums. This interplay between local public festivals and private rituals has given rise to a process in which local idiosyncrasies are encompassed by Burmese Buddhist society through their integration into the spirit possession cult. The dynamics of the cult are determined by continual interaction between local communities and spirit mediums who have now replaced royalty as the central authoritative acting reference. In other words, it is the ritual setting of the cult of the Thirty-Seven Lords that enables the endless integration of localities into the “mainstream Burmese” spirit possession cult.

Ironically, even as the cult of the Thirty-Seven Lords is portrayed in both the Burmese and academic discourses on Burmese identity and religion as outside of—or separate from—Buddhism, in fact the cult is legitimized by its encompassment within the Buddhist system of values. By the same token, the cult has enabled local religious practices and identities to be integrated into the Burmese center. The Burmese spirit possession cult, and its very distinctiveness from Buddhist practices, is the result of a two-way process of “Burmanization” of localities and the localization of Buddhism.<sup>33</sup>

WHERE THE SCHOLARLY AVOIDANCE OF  
THE SPIRIT CULT MEETS THE BURMESE DISCOURSE ON IDENTITY

By being encompassed in the Burmese Buddhist order, specific or local cult practices involving tutelary spirits are stigmatized as “traditions.” It is through this process that these practices are really made “local” and tend to fall under the wider discourse of “superstition.” As a result, under the Burmese academic gaze, the spirit cult is folklorized and viewed at a distance. The tendency of Western specialists studying Burmese religion to avoid the spirit cult potentially has a similar effect. Yet, clearly, this discourse of “superstition” stands in contradistinction to the highly sophisticated and dynamic structure of the cult’s ritual system, and one might ask why it has not been jettisoned. Notwithstanding Lehman’s notion of “paradoxes within canonical Buddhism itself,” this discourse is actually grounded in that of Burmese Buddhism in which Burmese identity is constructed through its differentiation from practices that are deemed non-Buddhist (LEHMAN 1987, 575).

It is here that the avoidance of the question of the Burmese spirit cult in contemporary religious studies, Spiro’s discourse of two separate religions, and the emic discourse of “superstition” intersect. Each one reflects the Burmese discourse on identity and masks what is truly at stake: the endless integration of localities through their particular religious practices into the central Burmese Buddhist order.

For these reasons, the omission of the spirit cult from the academic discourse on Burmese Buddhism only strengthens the image of Burmese identity as ontologically Buddhist, obscuring the dynamic aspects of its construction through the casting away and integration of specificities and localities. In contrast, an examination of the ways in which Burmese identity is differentiated through the spirit cult could reveal a subaltern point of view capable of unveiling the hegemonic nature of the seemingly innocuous truism, “To be Burmese is to be Buddhist.”

CONCLUSION

The hegemonic discourse on Burmese identity derives its authority from the notion that legitimacy is grounded either in conformity to scriptural Buddhism or, as Mendelson put it, in a dialectic of relative orthodoxy. An opposition between out-worldly- and in-worldly-oriented positions, this dialectic must be understood, in this context, as a dynamic sociological process allowing differentiation within Burmese society. Simultaneously, this continuous process of differentiation delineates the discontinuities between religious domains, calling into question the unity of the Burmese religion.

The reification of the Burmese Theravādin tradition that emerges from some of the best-informed studies of Burmese Buddhism delineates pure Burmese Buddhism and leaves aside what is perceived as not pertaining to this tradition, thereby reproducing the process of differentiation that anchors the Burmese hegemonic position. The resemblance of views on this point that emerge from the contemporary production of Burmese studies and from Burmese public discourse

correspond to the well-known collusion of knowledge and power FOUCAULT (1969) warned us about. To conclude, the important point is not how truly Buddhist Burmese Buddhism is, but to understand how the religious field is constituted in Burma through the incessant delineation of pure Buddhism against a diversity of practices and conceptions, or why and how the Burmese need to refer to the foundational authority of Buddhism to build their position in their social world.<sup>34</sup>

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#### NOTES

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1. Other religious traditions represented in Burma, such as Islam and Hinduism, traditions found among Burmese of Indian origin and Christian denominations, and ethnic religions among Burma's ethnic minorities, are not taken into account in this article.

2. See, for instance, LEHMAN: "Any Burman will tell you that this traditional religion is Theravāda Buddhism" (1987, 575). The emic discourse on identity, in which to be Burmese is to be a Buddhist, is diffuse throughout a wide range of conceptions and opinions in Burmese society, although most Burmese would not necessarily express it in this way. Thus, when I once asked an informant who is a Burmese national of mixed ethnic origin, "What is your ethnic origin?" using the word *lumyò*, he replied, "I am a pure Buddhist," meaning that because he is a Buddhist, he is a true Burmese. Identifying with Buddhism was a way for him to assert his Burmese identity and to shield it from being questioned.

3. The population of Burma is complex, being made up of a dominant majority and of many diverse ethnic groups located mainly in the highlands. In specialized literature predating the change in official denominations, Burmese nationality is often opposed to Burman as delineating the ethnic identity of the dominant majority (the reverse is also found in the writings of FURNIVALL 1948). Beyond the discrepancies in its use, it does not seem to me that this distinction makes sense, as both national and ethnic components actually conflate in the two Burmese words for Burmese (*Bama/Myanma*), and this conflation is shaping the hegemonic dimension of this dominant identity (See BRAC DE LA PERRIÈRE 2008).

4. *Nat* is the Burmese word for spirit. According to Theravādin societies, the qualification of "spirit cult" is more or less appropriate. In Sri Lanka, the nature of the entities that are the objects of a cult are deities from the Hindu pantheon as localized on the island rather than spirits. However, I will retain the generic appellation of "spirit cult" that conveniently applies to the Burmese case and allows us to avoid the use of such categories as "animism" that do not correspond at all to local practices and beliefs.

5. The main author on the cult of the spirits is Melford SPIRO (1967) whose analysis is considered later in this article. See also MENDELSON (1963a and 1963b), SHORTO (1967), BEKKER (1988a and 1988b), and RODRIGUE (1995) on the cult of the Thirty-Seven Lords. SCHOBBER (2004) has also written an encyclopedia entry on the Burmese cult of the spirits.

6. This is a working definition to be used in this article. The word *thatana* and its different uses in history deserves further study and comments.

7. From a different perspective, former Prime Minister Nu's article on the *nats* also exemplifies this point as he exposes a conception of spirits as fully belonging to Buddhist cosmogony (NU 1989).

8. Had I been in a position to read SCHOBBER's comprehensive overview of the literature about religion in Burma (2008) before writing this piece, I would have taken it as a starting

point. This was not the case. At this stage, I may only pay my tribute to Schober's contribution and defend my own view for what it stands for, a view from a different perspective.

9. To note, my review of Burmese studies on religion is not exhaustive. There are two limitations: firstly, I only have access to literature in French and English (and Burmese) and have unfortunately to skip Japanese research from my scope; and secondly, I have looked mainly at anthropological and religious studies, leaving aside almost all recent historical analysis, some dealing obviously with religion, such as Jacques LEIDER's article in this special issue.

10. For critics showing how these approaches have been silencing the voices of Asian Buddhists, see BRECKENRIDGE and VAN DER VEER (1993) and KING (1999).

11. As synthesized by Craig REYNOLDS, the notion of "agency" that emerged from the debate about the respective status of structure and subject in structural anthropology has crisscrossed Southeast Asian cultural studies with the question of the autonomy of this thought-world, or in other words, the question of the pertinence of this cultural area (1995, 432).

12. Interestingly enough, the pertinence of the question and its prevalence at that time appeared in BECHERT (1978) and was echoed in KIRSCH (1977). See also GELLNER 1990.

13. Concerning the Burmese, besides the well documented but quasi-folkloristic work of SHWAY Yoe (1963), it is mainly gazetteers that exist. For the Occidentals, anthropological knowledge of the then-called Hill Tribes was of more concern.

14. NASH's article of 1966 is summarized in chapter 5 of his book (1965), in which he deals with the spirit cult and the curing system. His interesting schema of the annual ritual cycle in the village is a precursor to TAMBIAH's (1970) description.

15. AMES attributed this fact to the "methodological hocus-pocus of anthropologists" (1966, 47).

16. This was stated by TWEED in his article on definitions of religion (2005). To note SPIRO's definition, he is referring to "an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings," (1966); this is not the same that he used in his book on Burmese Buddhism (1982).

17. This definition of religion is coincidentally very close to the main dogma of Buddhism which maintains that everything in this world is suffering (*dokkha*; Pāli: *dukkha*).

18. See TAMBIAH (1984, 315) for another famous critique of Spiro's splitting of the Burmese religion into different systems and SPIRO's answer in his "Preface to the Second Edition" of *Buddhism and Society* (1982).

19. KUMADA's (2001) dissertation, which aims to demonstrate how the Buddhist concepts are actually fully operative in Burmese peasant society, could stand as the exception.

20. I would like to point out that academic discourse in anthropology at the disciplinary level carries greater authority than that at the area studies level. Spiro's position at the level of general anthropology gives his voice an unequalled authority. Unfortunately, he did not engage in discursive exchanges with the younger generation of anthropologists working in Burma, and his ideas have not been fully discussed in Burmese studies discourse. In this regard, the influence of Spiro could be paralleled with the work of Edmund Leach on the Kachin that has been of decisive importance in the general anthropological community and has only recently sparked discussions within Burmese studies circles, especially among a younger generation of anthropologists who are beginning to do research in the highland communities of Burma. Frank Lehman, who straddles the general discipline of anthropology and Burmese area studies, is an exception.

21. See LEHMAN 1981 and SCHOBBER 1989 (particularly chapter 3). The latter also refers to KOENIG on this approach in terms of fields of power or domain (1990).

22. The cult of the Thirty-Seven Lords belongs to the mainstream religion of the Burmese. *Nat* has also come to designate the various spirits of the religions of the ethnic minorities,

seemingly in their own languages. It would be interesting to understand how and when these minorities adopted this Burmese word to designate their own beliefs. For the time being, I would like to highlight that *nat* has the connotation of an “ethnic religion,” which resonates with its clichéd connotations in the Burmese context, when it designates the cult of the Thirty-Seven Lords as “superstition” or folklorized/traditional customs.

23. Note, however, that SCHÖBER (2004) reviewed the existing literature and did justice to the importance of understanding the cult. Furthermore, she did take into account the literature on this topic in her recent overview on “study of religion in Burma” (2008).

24. This may also be due to the fact that during the postwar period, religious studies developed within US academia to become a dominant field of research.

25. On these questions, I am summarizing the analysis made in BRAC DE LA PERRIÈRE 1996, a special issue of *Diogenes* edited by Bernard Formoso.

26. I am mainly referring here to the *Royal Chronicles*, such as the well-known one that has been partly translated by PE MAUNG TING and LUCE 1960.

27. See also the analysis made about violent death compared to a “good death” in BRAC DE LA PERRIÈRE 2000a and the examination of the consecration ritual of Buddha’s images and *nats*’ images in Burma in BRAC DE LA PERRIÈRE 2005b.

28. On the recent evolution of the *bòbòkyi* figures, see SADAN 2005 and BRAC DE LA PERRIÈRE (forthcoming).

29. *Weikza* are beings pertaining to the mystic domain of Burmese Buddhism. They result from people who, through intensive practice of asceticism and occultism, go out of the karmic process of life without dying but stay in this world to attend to the appearance of the coming Buddha. In the time between they are supposed to guide followers who devote a cult to them.

30. In these expressions, the English word “line” is used by the Burmese to designate domains of practices such as the cult of the Thirty-Seven Lords (*nat* line) or the cult of the *weikza* (*dat* line, from *dat* meaning a special kind of energy that is developed through esoteric and ascetic practices).

31. It does happen on occasion, but it is perceived as abnormal, exceptional, and in need of justification.

32. See TAMBIAH for a famous diagram that attempts to systematize the variety of aspects of the religion in northeast Thailand (1970).

33. Wolters, who introduced the concept of “localization” in Southeast Asian studies, defines it as a “local statement of cultural interest but not necessarily in written form, into which foreign elements have retreated” (WOLTERS 1999, 55).

34. I am indebted to the conceptualization of Brian Smith regarding the relationship of the Hindus to the authoritative corpus of the Veda for this formulation (SMITH 1987).

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