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Anthropological Other or Burmese Brother?

Burmese Supernaturalism

Culture and Human Nature

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Burmese Supernaturalism

Expanded Edition

Melford E. Spiro

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CHAPTER FOUR

Nats

THE BELIEF SYSTEMS: A TYPOLOGY

Introduction

Although nats, witches, ghosts, and demons are substantively different, they are all included in this volume because, as I have already pointed out, they share one functional attribute: they cause pain and suffering. Nats differ from witches in that the latter are humans while the former are spirits; they differ from ghosts (who are also, according to some informants, spirits) in that the latter are terrestrial while the former reside in a nonhuman abode. More importantly, however, the nats—unlike these other beings—are the objects of an elaborate cultus which, from the point of view of comparative religion, can only be viewed as part of an organized *religious system*. Resting on a complex mythological charter, the nat cultus consists of an elaborated ritual system under the supervision of socially recognized cult leaders and practitioners. Although, from the Burmese point of view, the nat cultus does not constitute a religion, the fact remains that it rivals Buddhism in its elaborate cognitive, ceremonial, and organizational systematization. The nats with which we shall primarily be concerned are the so-called Thirty-Seven Nats. Since, however, the term "nat" is used to designate other types of supernatural beings as well, these

types must be distinguished before we can turn to the Thirty-Seven, the nats *par excellence*.

Generically, "nat" refers to a class of supernatural beings who are more powerful than man and who, therefore, can affect him either for good or for evil. That power is a salient component of the meaning of "nat" is suggested by a variety of contexts in which the term, presumably by extension, is used metaphorically. Thus, the senior male in the household (i.e., the husband-father) is referred to as the *ein ya in u nat*, the nat who lives in the front of the house. In the formal structure of the Burmese family, the husband-father has power over his wife and children. Similarly, the king is called the *loka thamudi nat*, the nat in the language of convention; the Buddha himself is designated as the *withoudi nat*, the pure nat. The Burmese king, of course, had absolute power over his subjects, and the Buddha possessed the greatest power of all—the power to attain nirvana and Buddhahood.

Since "nat" is used to refer to different types of supernatural beings, it is necessary, before describing these types, to make two observations concerning the derivation of the typology. In the first place, although the average Burman can distinguish three types of nats, it would be false to imply that his conception of each of these types—or, for that matter, his notion of the meaning of "nat" in general—is clearly delineated. On the contrary, the Burmese conceptions of the nats (like many of their other conceptions) are marked by inconsistency, contradiction, and by what might be called cognitive looseness. It is not at all unusual, for example, for a man to deny—and to adduce evidence for his denial—that the nats exist, or, at the least, to deny that they have power, and then to recount some incident which presupposes both their existence and their power. This cognitive looseness is reflected in many ways, but perhaps one more instance will suffice. The following reasons are usually given as alternative explanations for the characterization of the Thirty-Seven nats as *meihsa*, or evil.[1] They are "evil" because they are malevolent; because they died violent deaths; because they died suddenly, without an opportunity to think about the Buddha prior to their deaths. (Unexpected deaths, for which preparation cannot be made, are known in Burma as "green deaths.") In a discussion of the nats with *the* village nat expert, the latter profferred the first explanation: the Thirty-Seven nats are "evil" because they are malevolent. But then why, I asked him, should the village nat, who protects the village from harm, be thought of as malevolent? To this he replied that although the village nat is characterized as malevolent, he does not perform malevolent acts. Indeed, "He is really a good nat; he is only *called* an evil

[1]Meihsa is a Pali loan word, meaning heterodox or heretical. My Burmese informants, however, render it as "evil," and I shall follow their usage. F. K. Lehman reminds me that all nats not converted by the Buddha and, therefore, not bound by the Law are *meihsa*.

nat." The impresario of the famous Taungbyon nat festival answered the question in a slightly different fashion: although the Taungbyon nats are called *meihsa* "by the people," this is not to be taken seriously since "the people are ignorant."

The second point to be emphasized in connection with the nat typology is that the Burmese, like the members of any other society, differ considerably both in interest and in knowledge concerning their own culture. Thus, for example, in an intensive study of the nat beliefs of fifteen villagers, three could recount the myth of their own "hereditary" nat in detail, seven did not know it at all, and the others knew only the barest outline. It follows, then, that the typology to be presented here is derived from informants who are both more knowledgeable and more analytic than their fellows. This is not to say that the others would not recognize it. On the contrary, although the typology is not one which every Burman would volunteer, its constituent types represent emic rather than etic categories. The typology, in short, is one which the average Burman would most certainly recognize, and to which he would undoubtedly subscribe: its terms and concepts are part of his lexicon, and he himself employs them on the appropriate occasions in ordinary discourse. Nevertheless, for the average Burman the types are not as sharply differentiated as the typology would suggest, and the resultant classification of the various beings called "nats" is in fact somewhat more ambiguous than the typological criteria delineated below would imply.

With these provisos, then, we may say that the average Burman recognizes three types of nats. First, there is a type which comprises nature spirits of various kinds—spirits with differing degrees of power, of jurisdiction, of character, and of prominence, all of whom, however, are associated with such natural phenomena as trees, waterfalls, hills, paddy fields, and so forth. A second type, referred to collectively as *devas*, resides in various of the Buddhist heavens and is characterized as the guardian or protector of the Buddhist religion (the *sāsana*). A third type, each of whose members possesses a historically (or mythologically) identifiable biography, is known as "the Thirty-Seven" nats. They, like the nature nats, are called *meihsa* nats. In addition to these three fairly well delineated types of nats, there is a mixed type which is treated separately at the end of this chapter.[2]

Although the average Burman is unable to identify all the members of these three types, and although in some cases he would be hard put to decide to which type a given nat "belongs," or, having decided, would have difficulty justifying his decision, the types themselves are for him phenomenologically real. The nats of each type are characterized by a number of distinctive (substantive, functional, jurisdictional, characterological, and even historico-genetic) attributes which are, for him, cognitively salient. If the boundaries between these types are fluid, the permeability is between the first and third, both of which comprise the *meihsa*, or "evil" nats. They are to be contrasted with the second type whose members (the *devas*) are uniformly conceived to be "good." Indeed, the *devas* are really not nats at all; although they share a common label with the other "nats"—they are designated as *upapati nats*—the *devas* are clearly distinguished by the Burmese from the other beings designated by that label. For the Burmese, the *devas* are conceptually a part of Buddhism, and Buddhism, in turn, is sharply distinguished by them from nat propitiation. More importantly, the *devas* are omnibenevolent, while the other nats are, at best, neutral; the *devas* alleviate suffering, the other nats cause suffering, the *devas* are moral, the other nats, at best, are amoral. Hence, although referred to as "nats," the *devas* comprise a type, *sui generis*—a type which is excluded from the nat cultus to be described below. Nevertheless, some brief attention must be paid to the *devas* because they throw the other types, the genuine nats, into sharp relief, and because Western observers have all too frequently failed to distinguish them from these other types when describing Burmese "animism."[3]

[2]Theravada Ceylon distinguishes, too, between *devas* and a class of spirits known as *yakas*, who, functionally speaking, are almost identical with the other types of Burmese nats. (cf., Ames 1964; Yalman 1964).

Devas

The word *deva* is the Sanskrit term for deity. In the Burmese context, *devas* are "good" nats; they protect the people from harm and accede to their requests for assistance. In Buddhist cosmology there are twenty-six *deva* abodes ("heavens"), ranging along a continuum from materiality to immateriality. In my research I encountered very few monks and no laymen who could even name these abodes, let alone describe their distinguishing features. The average Burman, monk and layman alike, distinguishes two types of devas: *thamma devas* and *byahma devas*. Although the latter are believed to occupy a more exalted position in the hierarchy of devas,[4] they play almost no role in Burmese religious thought or practice. The *devas* which most Burmese aspire to become, and who serve as

[3]Although qualifying his statement with the proviso that ". . . sometimes [*deva*] suggests the more blessed of heavenly spirits," Winston King, in a contemporary work, perpetuates this older view when he writes: "In Burmese Buddhism they [the *devas*] have been generally merged with the nats, nature spirits and spirits of dead persons . . ." (King 1964:66).

[4]In Buddhist cosmology there are thirty-one planes of existence, divided into three spheres or worlds (*lokas*). The first sphere, known as *kama-loka*, includes the hells, and the animal, ghost, demon, and human worlds, as well as the six lower *deva* abodes. The remaining twenty planes of existence, inhabited by the *brahma* (Burmese *byahma*) *devas*, are divided into two spheres: sixteen planes of *rupa-loka*, in which the *brahmas* retain a tenuous corporeality, and four planes of *arupa-loka*, in which there is no corporeality at all. The Burmese refer to the inhabitants of the six lower *deva* abodes as the *thamma devas*. For a more extended summary of Buddhist teachings concerning the *devas*, see La Vallée Poussin (1911a, 1911b, 1917) and Thomas (1920).

objects of religious ritual, are the *thamma devas*. It is they who are the subject of this section.[5]

The *thamma devas* do not comprise a uniform type of supernatural beings. Some of them are "gods," in the Western sense of superhuman beings, who possess power over at least certain segments of both the physical and the animal worlds, including man, and who have existed as gods for interminable periods. These *devas*, of course, are the Hindu-derived deities who, demoted in power, function, and prestige, comprise the named deities of the Buddhist pantheon. These are to be distinguished from a large, undifferentiated group of unnamed *devas* who inhabit the same abodes and enjoy the same blissful existence, but who are without the powers and functions associated with the first type. To be sure, according to Buddhist belief both types had once been humans who, because of their highly favorable karma, were reborn in one of the Buddhist heavens (*deva* abodes); and both will be reborn again and again until they eventually pass out of the wheel of *saṁsāra*, or cycle of rebirths. Pragmatically, however, a distinction is made between *devas* who function as gods—the named deities of a (Hindu-derived) pantheon, brought into Burma with Buddhism—and *devas* who are merely the denizens of Paradise.[6]

In a random sample of thirty households of Yeigyi, 85 per cent were fairly consistent in their conceptions of the *devas*. They are conceived to be spirits of pious people who live in one of the Buddhist heavens, who

[5]This discussion, including the distinction between these two types of *devas*, is based on village interviews; it represents what villagers (and most other Burmese Buddhists) believe. That their beliefs are frequently distortions of canonical doctrine is not surprising. The Burmese *thamma deva* is a corruption of the Pali *samma deva*, or "free of error deity," which refers to all benevolent *devas*. In (Pali) Buddhist cosmology, then, the *brahma devas* are a subclass of the generic *samma devas*, who occupy the twenty highest planes of existence (the *rupa* and *arupa* spheres). In Burmese thought, however, the *brahma* and *samma devas* are distinct classes. The latter are active *devas*, intervening in human affairs, while the former have no concern with the mundane world.

[6]The cognoscenti include the four World Guardians among the *samma devas*. These Guardians, inhabitants of Mt. Meru, watch over the cardinal points of the compass, and control various types of evil beings with which Buddhism, appropriating them from Hinduism, populates the world. The Guardians themselves are, of course, four of the eight Hindu Protectors-of-the-World or *Lokapālas*. (Cf. Daniélou 1964: 129–32.) According to some informants, the chief of these Guardians, Daterata, who guards the eastern side of Mt. Meru, controls the evil nats; Wirulaka, on the southern side, controls the monsters (*gounban*); Wirupeka, on the western side, controls the mythical garuda birds (*galoun*) and the mythical serpents (*naga*); Kuweira, on the north, controls the ogres (*bilu*). These four *devas* are almost invariably invoked during exorcistic ceremonies.

Although technically *ariyas*, mention should also be made here of the four Burmese Buddhist saints whose favors, like those of the *devas*, can be solicited by means of spells (*gahtas*). These are Shin Upagok, Shin Thiwali, Shin Angulimala, and Shin Peindola. Duroiselle (1922–23) reports the existence of shrines in their honor and of images, in the form of monks, which represent them. I have seen neither. According to Sarah Bekker (personal communication) Shin Thiwali is often associated with Ananda (one of the early disciples of the Buddha Gautama), whose tiny image is carried by travelers for protection.

guard the Buddhist doctrine (*sāsana*), and who are always benevolent. The *devas* need not be feared. Unlike the other nats, they need not be propitiated because of some apprehension that, inadvertently, they may have been offended, or that, having neglected to make an offering to them, they will cause illness, loss of livelihood, or other forms of suffering. If prayers are recited or offerings are rendered to the *devas*, it is to express one's gratitude for their protection, or to solicit their continuing protection, or to seek their assistance in time of trouble or distress.[7] One frequently hears stories of shipwrecks, plane crashes, insurgency attacks, and other calamities, in which all concerned were killed, maimed, or harmed, except for those who had sought and received the protection of the *devas*.

In addition to the use of prayer, the assistance of the *devas* is invoked by ritual offering of food, usually as part of some ceremony. The offering (*kadaw pwe*) may consist of a coconut and three bunches of bananas, or it may consist of objects of lesser value, such as rice, vegetables, fruit, sweets, or mineral water.[8] Because, as Hindu-derived gods, they are vegetarian, *devas* are never offered meat; and since, unlike the situation in Buddhist Ceylon, there are in Burma no temples or shrines for the *devas*,[9] these offerings may be made in any ritually clean place.

Deva images are frequently to be seen on pagoda platforms or in monastic compounds, and many casual (and sometimes not so casual) observers of Burma, seeing the proliferation of these "nat" images on, for example, the famous Shwedagon pagoda platform in Rangoon, have concluded that the pre-Buddhist nat cultus persists in, and is part of, Buddhist worship. In fact, however, nats and small nat shrines are only rarely and inconspicuously found in pagoda compounds. With one important exception,[10] the only conspicuous "nats" to be found in any Buddhist holy place

[7]Various prayers and charms are widely used. Thus, for example, for continuous protection the recitation of the *Mangala Sutta* and of the "Virtues" (*guṇam*, Pali; *goundaw*, Burmese) of the Buddha are believed to be efficacious, but for critical situations a famous prayer, known as *Thamboutei*, is believed to be especially efficacious.

[8]The combined offering of coconut and bananas constitutes the essential core of Burmese religious offerings. In Buddhist ceremonies it consists of one coconut and three bunches of bananas, and in nat ceremonies it consists of one coconut and two bunches of bananas. Although any offering is literally a *kadaw pwe* (*kadaw* = to do homage; *pwe* = oblation) this term is most usually used to refer to the core offering—the coconut and bananas—exclusively.

[9]Buddhist worship in Theravada countries, such as Ceylon or Thailand, generally occurs in a temple. (Except for those in Pagan, Burma has no temples, and worship takes place at pagodas.) In Ceylon almost every Buddhist temple (*Vihara*) is associated with a temple for the *devas* (*Devale*), the faithful invariably proceeding from one to the other.

[10]The exception is in the famous Shwezigon pagoda in the ancient capital of Pagan. When he began construction of this pagoda in 1059, King Anawrahta, who introduced Theravada Buddhism to the Burmese, had the images of the original Thirty-Seven nats moved to the new pagoda. "Men will not come for the sake of the new faith," he is alleged to have said. "Let them come for their old gods and gradually they will be won over" (Harvey 1925:33).

or holy structure in Burma are the *devas*, the orthodox Buddhist nats. Probably the most popular of these *deva* images is that of the female *deva*, Wathoundaye (alternatively, Withoudaya; in Pali, Vasundhara), the heroine of a famous Buddhist myth. When the embryo Buddha was about to be ousted from his place under the Bo tree by Mara, the Buddhist Satan, Withoudaya, the earth goddess, put the Evil One and his hosts to flight in the flood of water which she wrung from her hair, wet with libations commemorating the meritorious deeds performed by the future Buddha.[11] In contemporary Burma some people interpret the Buddhist water libation ceremony (*yeizetkya*) as calling the attention of Withoudaya to the worshiper's sharing of his merit with all creatures—including, incidentally, the *devas* and other nats.

That the belief in the intercession of *devas* is inconsistent with the Buddhist notion of karma (all events are a consequence of merit and demerit) is explicitly recognized by the more sophisticated villagers. Attempts to resolve the inconsistency usually employ one or both of the following arguments. Although the *devas* are the protectors of Buddhism and Buddhists, they will not automatically protect any Buddhist, even if he should seek their assistance. They will only protect those who are pious and who live in accordance with the five Buddhist precepts. In a variant of this attempted resolution, others argue that if one's karma is bad, neither ritual nor prayer can be of any assistance—the *devas* will not help. If, on the other hand, one's karma is good, the *devas* will assist without the need for ritual or prayer. None of the villagers, however, showed any awareness of the basic inconsistency: if one's life fate is determined by an impersonal karma, then the *devas* can have no effect on one's existence—whether his karma is good or bad, whether he is pious or impious.

Nature Nats

This type includes a variety of spirits, who can be classified in many ways and who are uncertainly and ambiguously conceived by the Burmans themselves. After interviewing in forty-five households—almost 40 per cent of the households in Yeigyi—it became clear that beliefs concerning these nats are not only vague and amorphous, but that they exhibit wide differences. An unnamed spirit for one informant is named for another; a proper name of a nat for one informant is a generic name for another; a category of nats for one informant is only one nat for another. Thus, depending upon the informant, it might be the case that each tree has its own tree spirit (unnamed), that each forest has its own tree spirit, that all trees in all forests have the same tree spirit. Different informants use

[11]This myth, according to Duroiselle (1921–22) is not found in any written form in Burma, although it is recorded in Thailand and Cambodia. Curiously, too, although little known in Indian Buddhism, this deva is widespread in Indo-China.

Youkhazou[12] either as the proper noun or as a generic term for one or for all of these different categories. Others do not know this name, and speak rather of a "tree nat" or a "forest nat."

However vague their knowledge or conception of these nats, informants are unambiguous concerning their character and behavior. The natural world, as seen through Burmese eyes, is a potentially dangerous world. A stream may flood and drown the people along its bank; a tree may fall and kill the person walking in its path. The forest is trackless, and it is easy to lose one's way and die of privation; wild beasts are unpredictable and may attack a harmless victim. None of these events occurs by chance. Sometimes, of course, they are the result of one's karma; at other times, however, they are instigated by one of many nats (of the forest, the field, the hill, the stream, etc.), offended by trespass on his domain or by neglect in making him an offering. The nature nat, then, is a jealous suzerain of his domain, harming those who do not properly acknowledge his suzerainty. At the same time, however, he protects those—sometimes the protection is only from his own easily aroused anger—who recognize his suzerainty by proper propitiation. Hence, although petty and irascible, capable of great pain and harm—and therefore termed "evil" (*meihsa*)—these nats are also viewed as protectors or guardians. Thus the various nature nats are termed, for example, *taw-saun nat*, the guardian nat of the forest (*saun* = to protect, to guard; *taw* = forest); *le-saun nat*, the guardian nat of the wet fields (= *le*); *taung-saun nat*, the guardian nat of the hill (= *taung*); and so forth. There is little question, however, that it is their potentially dangerous quality, and the attendant fear of the harm which they may perpetrate, which provide the motivational basis for their propitiation.

In Yeigyi the important nature nats are those of the trees, the hills, and the fields. The forest nat (Youkhazou), for example, is propitiated whenever a villager ventures into the woods, and especially when a tree is about to be felled. During our stay in Yeigyi an entire family in a near-by village was "killed" by Youkhazou for cutting a tamarind tree without first propitiating this nat. Typically, after offering him a small quantity of betel, pickled tea leaves, or cooked rice, the nat is then requested to protect the petitioner (as well as his cattle, if they are grazing in the forest) from "harm," from "thorns" ("thorns" is to be taken both literally and figuratively), from wild beasts, and from going astray. This propitiation, as implied above, is double-edged. It is intended to protect the person from the nat who, if not propitiated, might send wild beasts, cause one to become lost, and so on; and it is intended to solicit the assistance of the nat if, due to other causes, these events should transpire.

[12]Professor U Ko Ko of Mandalay University informs me that Youkhazou is a Burmese-Pali name, *sou* (Burmese) meaning "to rule" and *rukkha* (Pali) meaning "tree."

In addition to offerings and to petitions, other precautionary measures may be taken when in the forest. Some villagers will not urinate on a tree while others refrain from the use of obscenity lest, in either instance, the nat be offended and cause harm. But there are numerous other ways by which the forest nat (and other nats) may be offended, and offense, as Spear has observed, need not be intentional. "Vengeance is just as sure to come upon the guilty person if, unknowingly, he harms or offends the nat" (Spear 1928:41). Hence, offerings to the nats are intended to placate them for any unknowing or unwitting offense that might be committed.

In addition to individual propitiation of the tree nat(s) in the forest, in the village there is an annual public propitiation (*nat pwe*) for Youkhazou (now taken to be the proper name of a single nat, the Nat of all the trees, who lives in huge trees—especially bo trees). Following the calendrical ceremony for the village nat (described in Chapter 7), the assembled group proceeds to a bo tree about fifty yards from the shrine of the village nat, where two women, charged with this responsibility, place a banana and coconut offering (*kadaw-pwe*) on a mat before the tree and offer it to the nat. Lighted candles are also placed before the tree, accompanied by popular music played by the village orchestra. No prayers are recited. The participants, a large percentage of the village population, are entirely casual in their demeanor, showing neither respect nor fear. The musicians are lively and gay, looking for all the world as if they were performing at a dance, rather than propitiating a potentially harmful spirit.[13]

Hills as well as forests are inhabited by nats. Indeed, unlike the forests which, at least in the minds of some, are under the jurisdiction of one forest nat, each hill has its own nat. The most important hill adjacent to Yeigyi is a Buddhist pilgrimage center, to which the devout come from a large area to worship at the pagodas and Buddha images found in its many caves. This hill, however, also has its nat, a female spirit known as *Yeidigoun taung Thakinma*, the Lady of Yeidigoun hill. This hill is the haunt of tigers, snakes, and other wild beasts, and unless this nat is properly propitiated—the procedure is the same as for the forest nat—she will order these animals to harm those who venture onto it.[14] In addition to

[13]As is true for other non-Buddhist beliefs, the more pious Buddhists, when they don't reject the cultus of the nature nats entirely, attempt to invest it with Buddhist sanction. Thus, U Cit Ti, a villager who later became a monk, hastened to inform me at the conclusion of the ceremony that Youkhazou is really a *samma deva*, that he is "pious," and that both his existence and his arboreal habitation were "taught by the Buddha." When asked why, then, it was necessary to propitiate him—since the *devas*, as we have seen, are benevolent—he lapsed into the typical explanation for nature nats: if offended, Youkhazou might cause harm.

[14]The juxtaposition (but physical separation) of Buddhism and nat worship is seen nowhere more clearly than on hills. There is almost no hill in Burma which does not have its pagoda and which, at the same time, is not the abode of some nat. One might speculate that pagodas were erected on hills not only because of the nearly universal association of religion and high places, but also as an explicit attempt to replace the nat cultus with Buddhist devotion and, as Lehman suggests, to conquer the nat.

individual propitiation of this nat, there is in Yeigyi at least one annual public ceremony (*nat pwe*) in her honor. The ceremony I observed, which was held in an afternoon in January, was a paltry affair. In addition to the members of the orchestra, the participants consisted merely of four old women, nine young girls, and a handful of young boys. After two women placed lighted candles in a tree on the side of the canal, the usual coconut and bananas were offered to the nat. I do not know what prayers, if any, were recited.

Nats have jurisdiction over cultivated fields, as well as over forests and hills. The paddy field nat in Yeigyi is a female spirit called *Tabindain Thakinma* ("Our Solitary Lady") or, alternatively, *Aungpinle Thakinma* ("Our Lady of Aungpinle," a dry lake near Yeigyi). Because she sends snakes (among other types of punishment) when angered, she is propitiated in the paddy field during the transplanting season when snakes are most prevalent. In addition to food offerings (pickled tea, cooked rice, jaggery, and plantains), she is offered face powder, a mirror, a ribbon, and a comb. After the offering she is asked to protect the laborers from snakes, skin rash, and all forms of illness acquired by working in the fields, and to expedite their labor.[15]

Protection is also required from the nat of the non-irrigated land, on which primarily sesamum and peas are grown. It is difficult to say whether this nat, also female, is also the nat of the irrigated paddy land. Unfortunately, I learned about her existence only near the end of my study, and had no opportunity to make inquiries beyond the information given by one informant. He called her the *nedoshin* (= "Lord of the field") *nat*

[15]There are light moments connected with nat propitiation. After food offerings are made to the nats, they are typically consumed by or distributed among the participants. In this case there are usually many fewer objects comprising the offering than there are laborers in the field, and the offering is therefore distributed by casting lots. Pieces of paper are placed in a container, some of them having the name of one of the offered objects, others containing some witty saying. Each worker draws a slip from the container; the ones who draw slips with the name of an offering acquire it. The sayings written on the losing slips usually express mock frustration at being unlucky in the lottery. The following sayings, found on the losing slips for one day, are typical: It is a shame for one who wants something, but who cannot get anything.—One cries because one cannot get a mirror by drawing lots.—I couldn't get anything in the past, and I cannot get anything now. I feel ashamed of it.—I don't want to draw lots. I feel ashamed of doing so.—I like to apply powder on my face, but I can't get it by drawing lots.—I am not happy in receiving it because nobody's going to use it or look at it.—I will buy something for you although you cannot get anything by drawing lots.—It is useless to feel sorry for you.—My man: Your karma is not good.—Hello there! Don't think highly of yourself.—Feeling sorry for you; you cannot get what you want.—It is nothing although you have received something after drawing lots.—You all take great delight by drawing lots. Ha! Ha! Ha!—Dear friend! Don't feel angry.—Your karma is bad. You don't need to feel ashamed.—Oh! What a miserable world.—It is not good because I cannot get it.—It is nothing to be "wide." It is only you who think so.

—alternatively, *pedoshin* (*ne* = *pe*) *nat*—and insisted that she was to be distinguished from the paddy field, or *le-saun*, nat. Like the latter, she is asked to provide protection from snakes, and she receives the same food offerings. She is especially offended by human excrement and by abusive language, and when offerings are made to her she is asked to forgive anyone who may have inadvertently committed either offense in her fields.

Neither of these field nats is to be confused with still another female nat, called Bounmagyi, who is also associated with agriculture. Bounmagyi is propitiated at the harvest (usually in the month of Tabaung), either on the threshing floor or in the granary. At that time she is offered sticky rice, fried peas, and pickled tea leaves, with the expectation that she will continue in the future to grant a good harvest. If she is not pacified, the harvest will be poor. Although she is a spirit like all nats, images of Bounmagyi in clay are often found in the fields during the harvest. These images are elongated, rounded lumps of clay, built as nests by a certain wasplike insect. With sufficient imaginative projection, they can be perceived, as the Burmese do in fact perceive them, as humanlike figurines. Surrounded by paddy plants, the figurine is brought to the house where it is carefully protected until the paddy is stored in the granary, at which time it is placed on top of the paddy. It is believed that the quantity of paddy will be thereby increased. When the image is placed on the paddy, the following curious prayer is recited. "Please eat here; please reside here; please urinate and defecate here." When asked why she is requested to excrete in the granary, informants respond with the usual refrain for questions to which they have no answer: "This is the custom in Burma."[16]

One old man from Yeigyi told me that in the past, before the construction of the Mandalay canal, Bounmagyi would signal the beginning of the plowing season by possessing a villager and informing him of the date of the impending rains. With the construction of the canal, and the consequent assured water supply, her intervention was no longer necessary.[17]

[16]Bounmagyi very likely is the Burmese variant of the Southeast Asian rice mother. Hatt (1951) describes the Indonesian practice of using a sacred sheaf of rice (the rice mother) to "attract and preserve the soul-stuff of the rice field." It, too, is placed in the granary. In Thailand peasants perform rituals invoking the Rice Goddess to "dwell in the fields and to be very fertile, to return to the threshing floor after harvest without taking offense at the brutal dismemberment of stalk, . . . and to remain in the storage bin until the next year's planting" (Pfanner and Ingersoll 1962:354).

For Lower Burma, Temple (1906b:25), quoting an unnamed source, describes an almost identical practice among the Mons and the Burmans of the Delta, in which the figure of a woman, fashioned out of straw, is placed in the granary. Pfanner (1962:378) and Htin Aung (1962:122) also report the same named nat and her propitiation in Lower Burma. According to the latter author she is depicted as "a goddess with big breasts and a huge belly." Only Furnivall (J.S.F. 1911a), however, reports Upper Burma beliefs and practices associated with a spirit called Bounmagyi and similar to those reported here from Yeigyi. E. M. Mendelson (personal communication) discovered in Central Burma figures made of dough and representing carts, bulls, agricultural tools, and so on, which were placed in the barn for Bounmagyi.

Although obviously non-Buddhist, the belief in Bounmagyi, like the belief in Youkhazou, is related to Buddhism by those who need to provide a Buddhist "charter," however tenuous, for all beliefs and rites. The following tale, provided by one old informant, is tenuous indeed. At the time of the Buddha there was a wealthy man who took two sisters for his wives. The elder sister was sterile, while the younger conceived but died during her pregnancy. Her death, it was assumed by all, was (magically) caused by her sister because of jealousy. While on her deathbed, the younger sister vowed that in her next birth she would have her revenge. In their next births, the elder sister, who was born as a deer, was killed and eaten by the younger sister, who was born as a tigress. After a series of rebirths, the elder sister was reborn as a human and became the mother of two children. Her sister, who was reborn as an ogress, killed and ate the elder of the children. When, shortly after, she attempted to seize the second child as well, the woman fled with her child to the Buddha asking for his help. The Buddha prevailed upon both of them to live together amicably. They returned to the home of the woman, where the ogress, transforming herself into a wasp, lived for a long time. Eventually she became a spirit and moved from the house, first to the edge of the village, and then to the paddy fields, where, as Bounmagyi, she continues to dwell among the paddy stalks.[18]

In addition to these nature nats which most villagers either propitiate or, when queried, know of, there are others which only a few villagers know of, and which are not propitiated. Boummazou, thought to be the nat of the earth, and Akaḍazou, believed to be the nat of the sky, are among those mentioned.

The Thirty-Seven Nats

By the Thirty-Seven nats (*thounze khunna min nat*, literally, "the thirty-seven chiefs nats"), I mean those spirits who, unlike the *devas*, are potentially punitive, and who, unlike the nature nats, are conceived to be the spirits of deceased human beings who, because of their violent deaths, became nats.[19] Each of the Thirty-Seven nats is named, although the names

[17]I did not observe any harvest ritual similar to that described by Vossion (1891:4). "Before harvesting the Burmese cultivators have regularly a Nat-feast, marked by a procession around the fields, and large offerings to the Nat of the district, in order to get a good harvest."

[18]Dr. Htin Aung informs me that this is a distorted version of a tale originally found in the Dhammapada Commentary.

[19]The belief that those who meet violent deaths become evil spirits is found in India as well as in Burma. Thus Monier-Williams (1891:239) writes: "If any man is killed by a tiger or the bite of a snake, or has died a sudden violent death of any kind, away from his relations and out of reach of proper funeral ceremonies, he forthwith becomes an unquiet spirit, roaming about with malevolent proclivities."

of only a small number are known by the average villager; each has his myth, although very few villagers know the myth of more than one or two. Descriptions of the individual nats comprising this class, and accounts of their associated myths, can be found in a number of sources (cf. Temple 1906b; Htin Aung 1962, Chaps. 6–7; Ridgeway 1915:228–61; Scott 1918). Our concern here is with the structural and functional properties of the class, not with its individual members.

It should be emphasized from the very outset that "thirty-seven" is not to be taken in its literal, numerical sense. Indeed, only thirty-three nats comprised the original royal list of nats, whose images King Anawrahta placed in the Shwezigon pagoda of Pagan in 1059. These included a group of thirty-two nats, plus the Hindu-derived Buddhist *deva*, Sakka. Authorities differ over the expansion of the original thirty-three to thirty-seven nats. Taw Sein Ko (1893) derived this number from the thirty-seven odes—some of these nats had more than one ode—which became associated with them. Shorto (1963) believes that the four Hindu-derived World Guardians (*lokapālas*), reinterpreted as nats, were added to the original list to make thirty-seven. Whatever may be the true explanation, many nats of the original list seem to have disappeared—they are never mentioned, they have no shamans, they have no cultus—while others, not in the original list, have been added to the list and have acquired wide prominence. As some nats became defunct and others became prominent the Burmese Court issued new lists of the Thirty-Seven. The last list, compiled at the court of Bodawpaya (1782–1819), includes a nat which was added as late as the seventeenth century (Htin Aung 1962, Chap. 7).

Although few Burmans can enumerate even the classical thirty-seven nats, there are probably three or four times that number that comprise the class of the Thirty-Seven nats. The Burmese are not at all troubled by this fact because they take "thirty-seven" to be a category, rather than an enumeration, of nats. Given that "thirty-seven" refers to a category, a further distinction must be made between the "inside" (*atwin*) and the "outside" (*apyin*) Thirty-Seven nats. Although almost all villagers use these concepts, and although some can even classify specific nats within one or the other category, few can explain the difference between them. These few have a ready explanation. The Inside Thirty-Seven consist of those nats who are included in one of the royal lists of nats, and whose cultus, therefore, was ordained by the kings. The Outside Thirty-Seven—all informants admit that "thirty-seven" was adopted purely for symmetry—consist of nats not included on any royal list. Some informants add another difference. Although both Inside and Outside nats died violently, the latter did not die by murder; some drowned, some fell from trees, others met death by other types of accidents.[20]

[20]F. K. Lehman (personal communication) suggests that not only were the Outside Thirty-Seven not included on any of the royal lists but also that, unlike the Inside Thirty-Seven, they were not killed by royal authority. He suggests, too, that unlike the latter nats who had challenged the throne, the former had challenged some local authority.

Whatever their number, all nats comprising the category of the Thirty-Seven are characterized as *meihsa*, "evil." Essentially irascible, and quick to take offense when slighted, it is best to ignore them and have nothing to do with them. Since, however, they cannot be ignored—they live in the house, the village, etc.—and since they are very powerful, discretion dictates that they be placated. When properly propitiated, especially with food, they will use their power to protect those who propitiate them—the house nat will guard the house, the village nat will protect the village, etc. If, however, they are not properly propitiated—i.e., if they are not fed—or if in any way they are offended, they will turn their power against the members of the house or the village, causing various types of harm, ranging from accidents to death. Thus one man lost thirty cows which he had taken to pasture because he had offended the village nat by urinating in front of his shrine. When, upon the advice of a shaman, he pacified the nat with a food offering, the cows were found on the very next day.[21]

Spear's characterization of the prevailing attitude to these nats (1928: 41) is as true today as it was when he wrote almost forty years ago:

> It might be said that the Burmese people pay little attention to the few benevolent nats [*Devas*]. They are concerned chiefly with those which are likely to harm them. These nats are capricious, vicious, unruly, undependable, strong, and jealous. I should say that power and quickness to resent injury or slight are their most prominent characteristics. . . . In his nat worship . . . [the Burman] wants to be free from all physical disease and harm; he wants his family and village to be free from all epidemics, storms, violence at the hands of others, and all the disaster an offended nat may send. . . . The less he has to do with them, the better he is pleased. In almost all instances he wants to be let severely alone by all of them.[22]

This attitude reflects the Burmese conception of these nats as *meihsa*, or "evil." When asked why they are *meihsa*, the Burmese, as we have seen above, offer a variety of explanations: because they do not know how to worship the Buddha; because they died violent deaths; because they were

[21]The similarities between these Burmese and similar Mon nat beliefs are too numerous to be accidental. Cf. O'Riley 1850.

[22]Sarah Bekker (personal communication) believes that I have unduly emphasized the negative features of the nats in this account. In her experience, "There are many relationships with the nats which are positive and protective, and which contribute to the spirit of optimism which often seems to us completely uncalled for. A Burman who would freely remark on the unreliability of nats in general may have his own personally chosen nat whom he feels as a constant companion. I do not believe your account takes these positive elements into consideration." Since Mrs. Bekker worked in Rangoon, this difference between her findings and mine may be accounted for in a number of ways. They may reflect differences between Lower and Upper Burma, or between urban and rural, or modern and traditional settings.

sinners; because they perpetrate evil; because they died without the opportunity to think about Buddhism prior to their death. The latter explanation requires brief comment. It is a common practice for a monk to recite scriptural verses to a dying man because it is believed that, by focusing his mind on Buddhism, he will achieve inner peace and consolation which, in turn, will assure him rebirth in a good abode. Should a person die suddenly before he has a chance to acquire inner peace, and should he die, moreover, from violence, his mind is agitated and filled with evil thoughts, so that it is impossible for him to have a good rebirth. As the spirits of men who died with evil thoughts, the nats continue to harbor such thoughts.

The Thirty-Seven nats are classified by the Burmese into at least three subtypes. Although these will be examined in detail (see Chapter 6), it may be useful to at least mention them here. Each house in Burma is "guarded" by the household nat. Throughout the whole of Burma the house nat is Min Mahagiri, Lord of the Great Mountain. Although his special abode is in his national shrine on Mt. Popa, he is also believed to reside in the coconut which hangs in his honor in every house in Burma.[23]

Just as each house is protected by the household nat, so each village (and town) is protected by a nat. Although there is only one house nat for all of Burma, there are a number of village nats. A group of villages within a defined district, however, share the same village nat. Each village has a shrine (*nat sin*), usually near the village gate, for its village nat. Here his cultus is performed and here he resides.

The third type of Thirty-Seven nats is the hereditary nat—"mother's side-father's side" nat. Any of the Thirty-Seven nats, with the exception of Sakka, or Thagya Min (who is really a *deva*), may serve as a nat of this type. Such a nat, as we shall see below, exercises dominion over an extensive region taken, as it were, to be his fief. All those who are descended from the original inhabitants of his fief, wherever they may reside, acquire a hereditary obligation to pay annual tribute to him.

Although not all the Thirty-Seven nats can be classified according to these three types, it is these types which are named, and whose cultus is recognized throughout Burma. Other nats excluded from these named subtypes, are also included, however, among the Thirty-Seven. Many of these can be grouped together and classified as a fourth subtype, unrecognized and unnamed by the Burmese, which, for reasons to be explained below, I shall call "public works" nats.

Personal Nats

In addition to *devas*, nature nats, and Thirty-Seven nats, there is an additional, "mixed" type, representing an admixture of two of these three.

[23]This apparent inconsistency is not dissimilar from that found in the twin Catholic beliefs that patron saints dwell in heaven as well as in their numerous, widely scattered shrines.

Unlike the three main types, about which almost every villager has some information, there is little knowledge concerning, and no cultus devoted to, the latter type, known as the personal guardian, or *kousaun* (*kou* = body, *saun* = protect) nat. In twenty households, subjected to an intensive study of nats, two respondents had never heard of, four had only the vaguest conception of, and four denied the existence of this type.

The personal guardian nat, according to more knowledgeable informants, is in reality not one but a collectivity of twelve nats, consisting of six good nats (*devas*) and six evil nats. (No one is quite sure whether the latter are nature nats or Thirty-Seven nats.)[24] There is one *kousaun* nat (i.e., a unique collection of twelve nats) for each person. His six evil nats, according to some informants, entice him to do evil; according to other informants, rather than enticing him to do evil, they punish him for doing it. All informants agree that the six good nats (*devas*) encourage him to "do good," i.e., to live according to Buddhist precepts. They also protect him, especially when he is sleeping, by standing watch near his head and waking him if any danger should threaten. Since they remain with him until he washes his face in the morning, they are annoyed if he sleeps late and causes them to be tardy for the daily meeting which is held in the *samma deva* heavens. They may even curse him for sleeping late.

Miscellaneous Nats

In addition to the types of supernatural beings discussed in this and in previous chapters, there are a number of other harmful spirits—quasi-demons, quasi-ghosts, quasi-nats—which are not readily classified, but which are designated by the Burmese as "nats." Among these many quasi-nats, the most important—at least in the area in which I conducted field work—are those known as *ouktazauns*. These are spirits who, because of greed for treasure as human beings, are assigned to guard the treasures of the Buddha. Further description of these spirits and the evil they can do is deferred until Chapter 10.

THE QUALITY OF BELIEF

Since it is the "evil" nats, rather than the *devas*, with whom this study is concerned, the comments in this section will be devoted to them exclusively, and to the Thirty-Seven nats primarily. This section is much more detailed than the corresponding section on ghosts and witches, not merely because the Burmese are more concerned with nats than with the latter beings, but because my data on nats are much richer. It is not unlikely,

[24]According to Shway Yoe (1896:233), six of the *devas* are male and six female. Brown claims (1921:85) that the fact that the Burmese never strip to the nude, even in private, stems from fear of offending the six good nats.

though I have no proof for this conjecture, that the following comments on the nats apply with little modification to ghosts and witches as well.

In the sample which was subjected to intensive interviewing, I was somewhat startled to discover that almost half the males—but none of the females!—stated that they did not believe in the Thirty-Seven nats. That some degree of religious skepticism is to be found in any community can, I think, be taken for granted, but that the skepticism in this case should have been so extensive, and that it should have had so little influence on behavior—only one of these skeptics does not participate in the nat cultus—was more than a little surprising. My surprise was reduced, however, when after further probing and additional research, it became clear that the statement, "I do not believe in nats," has a number of meanings, of which the denial of their existence is the least prominent. Indeed, for only two persons in the sample did "disbelief" in the nats mean that nats do not exist.

When the interview materials are combined with other data, it is apparent that skepticism takes at least four forms: 1) disbelief in the existence or the power of the nats; 2) disbelief in their power to do good, but belief in their power to do evil; 3) disbelief in their power to do evil to those who have good karma or who are good Buddhists; 4) verbal denial of, but actual belief in, their existence and their power. Let us examine each of these seriatim.

1. Although a number of men expressed some skepticism concerning the existence and/or the power of specific nats, only two men categorically denied the existence of all nats; for them the nats, as a class of beings, are nonexistent. Kou Thwin, a man in his late thirties, denies their existence on empirical grounds. As a child he had been told about the nats, and their myths had been recounted to him, but he ceased to believe when he grew up. He will not believe in anything he cannot see with his own eyes. Nor is he willing to infer their existence from putative effects of their behavior, such as illness. For him, illness is not caused by nats; it is caused either by natural events or by contagion. To test the limits of his skepticism, I asked Kou Thwin why it was that U Nu, the incumbent prime minister whom he so greatly admired, had only recently given orders for the construction of a new national shrine for Min Mahagiri. He could not speak, he replied, for U Nu, but if he were the prime minister, he would have built a Buddhist chapel (*damayoun*), rather than a nat shrine.

Kou Maung Kou, a young man in his twenties, insisted that he is a thorough naturalist. Sickness is caused not by nats, but by karma, weather, food, and imagination. Other vicissitudes of life, both good and bad, are the results of karma, which could not be effected by the nats even if the latter could be said to exist. Basically, his skepticism is based on Buddhist doctrine. According to Buddhism no one is permanent, everyone must die; "even the Buddha had to die." Hence, he argued, though the nats may

have existed in the past, they must have long ago been reborn in some other abode or some other form.

An older villager, U Shun, although obviously ambivalent about the existence of nats, offered a surprisingly modern psychological interpretation for the prevalent belief in their existence. The nats, he explained, "exist only in the mind." The believer is like a person who does not feel good and attributes his illness to a lizard that has entered his stomach. He consults a native doctor and informs him of his difficulties and of the presumed etiology. If the doctor is wise he does not try to disabuse the patient of his (erroneous) beliefs. Instead, he gives him a purgative, and at the time that it takes effect, he releases a lizard which he has in readiness for this purpose. The patient, believing that the lizard has emerged with his feces, feels cured. "So it is with the nats. Believing in their existence, people feel safer for having propitiated them."

2. If disbelief in the existence of nats has the smallest number of adherents, disbelief in their *power* to do good claims the largest number. In some cases, skepticism rests on empirical grounds: the protective power of the nats is not in evidence. Thus U Chit Ti, a practitioner of Burmese medicine and an exorcist, denies that Min Mahagiri, for example, has any protective power because, if he had such power, "why is it that there are so many dacoities [robberies] inside the house?"

Still others base their disbelief on Buddhist grounds. It is karma, rather than nats, that is responsible for good fortune. U Shun recounted the following (Jātaka) story as "proof" for this position. Maung Pein was a very poor man, so poor that he wore leaves for clothing. One day, on his way to seek advice from the Buddha, he came to a stream where he encountered a deaf and dumb girl, two fighting cocks, an alligator unable to enter the stream, and five hundred carts all stuck in the mud. When he arrived at his destination he asked the Buddha to explain these strange phenomena. As for the mute, the Buddha said that she would speak if Maung Pein asked her to do so. When Maung Pein asked her to speak, she spoke to him; and so she became his wife. When he asked the Buddha why the cocks were fighting, the Buddha said it was because there was a diamond in the head of one and an emerald in the head of the other. Maung Pein removed the jewels, which he was permitted to keep, and the cocks stopped their fighting. He then asked the Buddha why the alligator could not enter the water, and the Buddha said it was because he had a diamond in his head. Maung Pein removed the diamond, which he was also permitted to keep, and the alligator entered the water. As for the cartmen, U Shun did not remember how they were extricated from the mud, but extricated they were, and the drivers helped Maung Pein to transport his new valuables to his home. Overnight, then, Maung Pein became a wealthy man, not through the intervention of nats, but because of his karma. So it is in general—it is karma, not nats, that determines one's fate. And so it is in his, U Shun's

case. He has wanted all his life to live in a pukka house, but he has never succeeded in owning one because of his bad karma, which no nat has the power to change.

3. It might have been thought, if karma is the primary determinant of good fortune, that it would also be taken to be the primary determinant of bad fortune. This, however, is not the case. Although a large percentage of the skeptics disbelieve in the power of the nats to do good, only a small number disbelieve in their power to do evil. Indeed, with the exception of the two skeptics who explicitly denied the existence of the nats, none of the other disbelievers denied the punitive power of the nats; they merely denied that the nats had the power to harm pious Buddhists or those whose karma is good. Thus U Shun denied that the nats could harm him because, being pious—he recites his rosary and worships the Buddha—he is immune from their harm. Surely, he argued, the nats "are not more powerful than the Buddha!" Similarly, U Chit Ti denies that the nats can harm him, because he is a pious Buddhist and an exorcist. "Instead of worshiping them, all the nats must worship me." He recites the ritual formula recounting the Buddha's "Virtues" (*guṇas*), and "anyone who recites the *guṇas* is like a pagoda" (i.e., nothing can harm it). Moreover, he observes the Buddhist precepts, and for this even the *devas* must watch over him.

Just as they cannot harm pious Buddhists, so the nats cannot harm those whose karma is good. Thus Ma San, a girl of seventeen, was taken ill while working in the fields and fell into a coma. Her illness was caused by the nat, Aungpinle Thakinma, because no offering had been made to her when the laborers had entered her fields. The nat had attacked Ma San, rather than the field's owner, who was responsible for the negligence, because Ma San's karma was bad while that of the owner was good.

4. Despite the varying degrees of disbelief summarized thus far, all but one of the skeptics have a coconut for the house nat in their homes and they participate, either personally or by means of a financial contribution, in the cultus of the other important nats. This seeming inconsistency is explained on a number of grounds. Some say that since it is customary to propitiate the nats, to refuse to participate would result in public criticism. Others say they participate in order to please their "superstitious" wives. Still others say that if someone in the household were to fall ill, they would be held responsible for having failed to propitiate the nats. These explanations are, I think, genuine for many of the professed skeptics. There are others, however—certainly as many as half—for whom these explanations are patent rationalizations. While claiming to be skeptics, they are obviously believers. A few examples will suffice.

In discussing the nats, U Chit Ti insisted that they were powerless and scoffed at those who believed in them. That same afternoon, in another context, he told me that sometime in the past his wife had become ill

because of his negligence in propitiating the house nat. After offering a coconut to the nat, his wife's health was restored.

Similarly, U Sa Mya, a former monk, consistently denied the power of the nats when responding to the items on the interview schedule. A few days later, as he was returning from a funeral for a friend, I asked him the cause of the friend's death. He explained that with this death, an entire family had been extinguished within one year, for they had cut down a banyan tree without making an offering to the tree nats.

It is notable that although half the males in Yeigyi expressed some degree of skepticism—if only verbal—concerning nats, none of the females expressed any kind of skepticism. This is not accidental. Regardless of their degree of Buddhist piety, it is the women—and men and women alike agree on this point—who are the more deeply involved in nat propitiation. It is they who most fear the nats and who are most concerned with their cultus. Village nat shrines are almost always in the charge of women caretakers (*nandein*), and village nat ceremonies are attended almost exclusively by women.

Formal cultic behavior also shows sex differences. Although nats are not objects of "worship," some women may bow to them, hands pressed (in the traditional sign of respect) to their foreheads, when propitiating the nats; except for male shamans, few men do so. To any query about this formal sex difference, one receives a stock response: human males are nobler than human females. Since males already occupy a higher position than the nats within the thirty-one abodes of existence, it would be improper for them to show this mark of respect for beings who are lower than they. But females, being less noble than males, commit no impropriety in doing so.

Fearing the nats, the women not only expressed no skepticism concerning them, but also strongly dissented from the male expressions of skepticism which they heard. In most cases, they importuned the men to discontinue their skeptical comments lest the nats be offended and cause them harm. The comments of Kou Thwin's wife were typical. Kou Thwin, she said, is educated and, moreover, he is a male. It is alright for him to reject the nats. As for herself, she is not educated and she is a female. More importantly, she lives with, and is responsible for, their children. If the nats become angry, they will cause her children to fall ill. All she asks is that they not harm her children; so let him (her husband) keep his peace.

Despite the claims of many scholars, both Western and Burmese, that nat belief is confined to the untutored villager, there is abundant evidence that it is found with undiminished intensity in the more sophisticated and educated population as well. Indeed, with respect to rural-urban differences—not including the handful of Burmese intellectuals—there is reason to believe that in many instances the nat cultus is more important in urban

centers, such as Rangoon or Mandalay, than in the villages. To be sure, many sophisticated Burmans disclaim any belief in nats, but for most of them these disclaimers represent the same stance I encountered among male villagers, *viz.*, verbal expressions of disbelief combined with overt indications of belief.

That supernaturalism, including spirit propitiation, does not decrease with urbanization should occasion no surprise unless urbanization is associated with an increase both in scientific knowledge and in control—including prediction—over one's environment. In Burma, and in most societies with prescientific cultures, urbanization is accompanied, on the one hand, by little increase in scientific knowledge and, on the other, by a decrease in environmental control. Except in special circumstances—drought, flood, etc.—the peasant's life is fairly predictable. Governed by the rhythm of the seasons and by traditional agricultural lore and technology, his life has an almost inevitable flow. At any given period in his life, he knows where he will be living at some future period, what he will be doing, and the general status he will occupy. The urban proletarian, his future dependent on an impersonal market, lives in a much less structured, much less predictable world. And on this dimension, the wealthier classes are not much better off. "All the rich people," exclaimed a friend in Mandalay, "believe in nats. They must, since they never know when they will meet trouble." Since, he went on to explain, the wealthy do not know when and under what circumstances they might lose their wealth, it is only through nat propitiation and consultation of shamans that they can achieve any assurance of control and predictability. In short, it is here, where chance, luck, and uncertainty reign, that we find what we would expect to find—the most attention to nats and their cultus.

Let us then briefly examine the urban concern with nats. At the highest level, for example, U Nu's devotion to the nats is well known. Indeed, one of his last official acts before the military *coup* of 1962 was to order the construction of two national nat shrines, one for Upper and one for Lower Burma, at a cost of K100,000, or more than $20,000 (*The Nation,* August 15, 1961). A week later, it was announced (*The Nation*, August 22, 1961) that the government had decided, instead, to build only one shrine, on Mt. Popa, because the funds allocated for the project were "too small to erect a grand shrine" in two places.

His decision to construct these nat shrines at government expense was not U Nu's first attempt to involve the government in the nat cultus. A defector from his first cabinet charged at a press conference that U Nu's decision to plant vast coconut plantations was not based, as he had claimed, on a desire to save foreign exchange by the domestic production of oil. It was based, rather, as U Nu had allegedly explained at a mass rally of his party, on the belief that the Mahagiri nats are fond of coconuts, and by thus incurring the favor of the nats, the party would be successful

in future elections. During his incumbency in office, moreover, the government, in a ceremony attended by the president, the prime minister, and the cabinet, made an annual offering to the nats near the famous Kaba-Aye pagoda in a suburb of Rangoon.

U Nu was concerned with the nats as a private citizen, as well as a government official. During the one year which I spent in Burma, he not only contributed two new statues of Min Mahagiri and his sister to their shrine on Mt. Popa, but he regularly retired to this mountain, the ancient center of the nat cultus, for long periods of retreat and meditation.

Although the most famous, U Nu is not an atypical case of nat belief in a sophisticated, urban Buddhist. Nor are Christians any more immune to traditional nat beliefs—indeed, why should they be?—than Buddhists. A native of Moulmein and a graduate of the University of Rangoon, the township officer for the Yeigyi area is a Christian and a collector of Bibles. While touring the township he was informed by the residents of Sedaw village that they had been threatened by tigers for the past month. Both he and the villagers believed that the tigers—whose roars he heard the night he slept in the village—were sent by the nat, Sedaw Thakinma. The next day he ordered posted on the village gate an ultimatum, written in his own hand and addressed to the nat. He informed her that she resided in his township at his sufferance, that he, as the representative of the government, was more powerful than she, and that if she continued to harass the villagers, he would expel her from his township. When I queried him about this order, he said that nothing is more powerful than the government, and that the nat would have to obey his order.[25] When I met him again, about a month later, he told me triumphantly that following his ultimatum the tigers had disappeared from the Sedaw area.

Perhaps one more example, as revealing as this one, will suffice. When a young man in Yeigyi was possessed by a nat, I was asked to bring a certain exorcist to the village. Arriving at the home of this exorcist, I was told that he could be found at the home of his friend, the township officer. The latter, informed of the case, volunteered to drive the exorcist in his car. His mother, a devout Christian and the sister of a professor in a Christian seminary, begged her son not to go. This nat, she said, was especially vicious and would try to prevent the car from reaching the village. When, nevertheless, he insisted on going, she dropped to her knees, invoking the protection of Christ for her son. At the same time, in another

[25]The belief that government officials have the power to expel nats has its roots in traditional Burmese political theory (cf. Htin Aung 1933a; for a similar belief in Laos, see Halpern 1964:124). That the government is more powerful than the nats is not, however, a universally held belief. This same township officer, indignant at the troubles which a nat had caused a friend, told a group of villagers that he was "fed up" with all the nats and that he would expel them all from his township. The village elders, when queried privately, were amused by his warning. The nats, they insisted, are more powerful than any government.

corner of the room, the exorcist was invoking the assistance of the *samma devas*.

Like some peasants, many urbanites, especially the better educated, profess to be skeptical of the nats, but, like many "skeptical" peasants, their verbally expressed attitudes are belied by their behavior. Educated in a Christian high school in Mandalay, my interpreter, for example, persistently denied that the nats could affect anyone's life, although he did not deny that they existed. When, however, he shared a house with my wife and me at the Taungbyon Festival, he asked us not to sleep together near the coconut which hangs for the house nat, lest we suffer some harm. Somewhat later, when visiting his house and noticing a suspended coconut, I asked him why he, a professed skeptic, observed this ritual. Embarrassed, he explained that because he recited his beads daily, he had no fear of the nats, but because his daughter did not recite her beads, it was necessary to hang the coconut, lest she be harmed by Min Mahagiri, the house nat.

Again, U Maung Maung, a wealthy Mandalay merchant and a graduate of a Christian high school, emphasized that he, unlike the villagers, was not "superstitious." He, for example, had no belief in nats. Shortly after, however, he told me that "strange things" occur in Burma. Thus, accompanied by eight other people, a few years ago he had traveled to Maymyo by car and twice—both going and coming—he had a flat tire. Although not "superstitious," was it not strangely coincidental that the accidents happened while violating the taboo imposed by the nat Koumyoumin, which prohibits nine people from riding together when in his domain? Since then, being ever careful to comply with the taboo, he has never had a flat tire on that road.

The persistence of nat belief in the face of education, urbanization, Buddhism, and Christianity does not mean that there is no opposition to the nat cultus among sophisticated Burmans. On the contrary, skepticism and disbelief are to be found in urban areas, especially among the intellectual and military elite, just as they are found (as we have seen) in the villages. Indeed, the army, concerned with modernization and economic development, is actively opposed to the nat cultus, both for the "magical" habits of thinking that it encourages and for its draining of capital into nonproductive channels. One of the very first acts of the present military regime, for example, was to cancel U Nu's plans for the construction of a nat shrine on Mt. Popa. A year and a half later, this same government announced that the funds which had been allocated for the nat shrine were to be used, instead, "for the welfare of the peasants and workers" (*The Nation*, December 21, 1963). But this government has gone even further. Only a few months after seizing power, it issued a decree prohibiting the production of any films depicting nats, ghosts, witches, etc. This decree ". . . is part of the Revolutionary Government's efforts to remove the obscurantist influence of superstitious beliefs on the people" (*The Nation*,

August 3, 1962). In the same vein, addressing the University Training Corps, an army colonel attacked the nat cultus, complaining of the "backwardness" of Burma, ". . . where people are still worshiping nats while the rockets have been orbiting the earth more than four or five circles" (*The Union Express*, April 25, 1962).

It is not only the army that attacks the nat cultus; opposition is found among some—but by no means all—intellectuals, as well. Their attack is based, on the one hand, on their generic opposition to magic and superstition, and, on the other hand, on their perceived conflict between nat beliefs and Buddhism, a topic which we shall discuss in detail (Chapter 14). The former objection to the nat cultus is exemplified in an editorial in *The Guardian* (May 23, 1961). Commenting on the government's decision to construct two new nat shrines, the editorial states that the "majority of our readers" are opposed to this decision, not only because nat propitiation cannot be reconciled with Buddhism, but because:

> they hold that Nat worship is primitive, stemming from the unreasoning belief of the primitive people who were ignorant of the laws of nature and phenomena of life, and therefore invoked the help of the spiritual beings to dispel the dangers which beset human beings in earth.

The accompanying cartoon from the same newspaper illustrates its attitude toward nat propitiation. (The figure at the left is making an offering to the nats.)

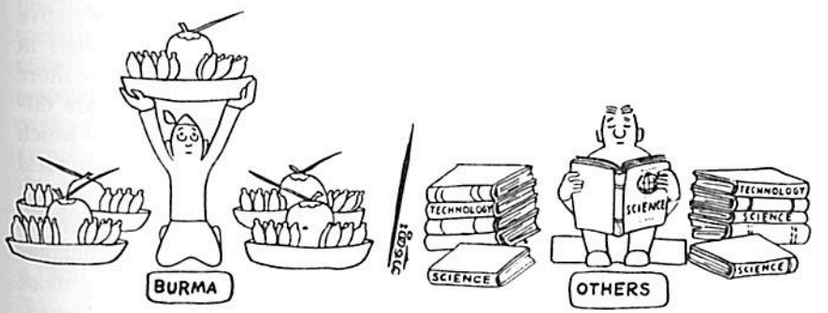

FIGURE 2. *Cartoon from The Guardian, September 1, 1961*