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Chapter 5

HPYO'S CHOICE: ACTIVISM OR MEDIUMSHIP?

A Gay Person's Dilemma in Contemporary Myanmar

Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière

Saturday 8th November of 2014, around 11 pm: my friend and I finally find our way to a local spirit shrine sheltered in a back street of the Insein township in Yangon, where Kyaw So Mo is running a three-day long spirit possession séance. The place has not been easy to find; it is a semi-private shrine secluded from the main lane behind the Buddhist communal hall.¹ Back in Yangon for long-term research, I had only been informed of the event and its approximate location that very morning, when I arrived on a visit to Kyaw So Mo, at the house where he had settled a year before, in the quiet surroundings of the Thamaing township. When I arrived I was told that he had left to perform a spirit possession ceremony at a local spirit shrine unknown to me in Insein Ywama neighbourhood, a few miles towards the north.

Kyaw So Mo is an established specialist of the Burmese pantheon of possession spirits (*nat*) called the Thirty-seven Lords. I had first met him 30 years ago when, with Yon, the woman who introduced me to the ritual practice and circles of spirit possession in Burma, I toured, for the first time, around the main spirit festivals. Yon was the biological daughter of Khway Ma, one of the main mediums of that time and an initiating spiritual master of Kyaw So Mo. When Khway Ma and Yon passed away in 2000 and 2002, respectively, Kyaw So Mo decided to

¹ *Dhammayon*. The Buddhist communal hall is neither a monastery (*kyaung*) nor a Buddhist sanctuary (*stupa*) but a place for collective Buddhist ceremonies in surroundings where such religious venues are lacking, particularly in urban settings.

take me under his wing, and welcomed me into his rituals as one of his followers – as one who ‘knows’ about the spirit world.²

I am thus paying a ritual visit to him, and nothing could be more appropriate than that our reunion should take place on the occasion of a spirit possession performance. In Burma, things are changing after 50 years of military rule: a new constitution has been adopted (2008); general elections have been held (2010), even if they have been decried; a new quasi-civilian government has been installed (2011); Aung San Suu Kyi, the icon of the democratic opposition, has been released from house arrest (2011) and has gained a seat in Parliament at the 2012 by-elections; and censorship has been reduced. Rising expectations and the novel freedom of speech are widely shared in every quarter.³

The ritual site I visit also reflects the current excitement – even more than usual, in fact, if that is possible at this kind of event. As soon as I arrive, I pay my respects to Kyaw So Mo, who is busy organising the last details. The ceremony has not yet started. It does not take long before I notice that the reason for the striking level of animation is mainly the presence of a group of young men, not known to me, who are hanging around and giving a hand. Their gentleness and good looks contrast with Kyaw So Mo’s usual entourage of middle-aged women and single men of various ages from various backgrounds. They all display, more or less explicitly, homosexual or transgender inclinations. The presence of newcomers, brought in as

² To ‘know’ (*thi-*), for Kyaw So Mo, means to have a kind of apprehension of the world that differs from the one experienced through spirit possession. I have told this story and analysed its implications from the perspective of transmission in the spirit possession cult in Brac de la Perrière 2009 and 2014.

³ Since that time, Burma has known further political change, with the accession to power of democratic opposition following their 2015 electoral victory. The National League for Democracy (NLD) gained again a landslide victory in november 2020, but the chief of army, Min Aung Hlaing, denied the result from the polls and took over the power in February 2021, starting a major political crisis in the country.

new disciples by Kyaw So Mo's main disciple, Sithu, adds an atmosphere of novelty to the event, one that everyone seems to enjoy.

As a specialist of the Thirty-seven Lords possession cult, Kyaw So Mo has had a somewhat uncertain career.⁴ He became an independent spirit medium rather late, having been linked to different masters besides Thein, from whom he inherited clientele and ritual sites in 1997 and whose memory he still cherishes. Kyaw So Mo hesitated for many years between depending on different followers, living in their houses one after the other as a quasi-private specialist as well as leading his own ritual practice at his biological father's home. He had first run ceremonies together with his father, himself a lonely old medium who did not have a clientele of his own. Only recently, after his father's death, had an affluent uncle and devotee finally allowed his nephew to settle in a house he owned in the urban ward of Yangon, which is where Kyaw So Mo is now operating. Only then did he get his own private shrine with the collection of images representing the Thirty-seven Lords pantheon that is iconic of the spirit medium role. He would have arranged for a temporary spirit-channelling pavilion (*nat kanna*) to be erected in his home compound rather than within the Insein Ywama local shrine if the local authorities had not been opposed to the organisation of full spirit possession ceremonies in the neighbourhood, arguing that the ritual occasioned noisy disturbance.

When I arrive, he is sitting on a mat in front of the altar shelves, which are set up beautifully with his collection of spirit images and the bountiful offerings dedicated to them laid out in an ordered fashion. He is looking at the room slowly filling up with devotees and followers, with his back turned to the space under the shelves where his main disciples are dressing and doing their make-up before their performance. As usual, I am invited to sit with my friend, behind

⁴ See Brac de la Perrière 2009: 290 and following for this specific story of transmission.

the imposing stature of Kyaw So Mo. He was once a fantastic dancer, but has lately gained weight, to the point of impeding his mobility. It is not long before Sithu, his main disciple, and the young men not known to me begin to include us in their conversation: a mixture of jokes and news – very welcome for the ethnographer. Sithu, who teaches English at a free monastic school, and as a private teacher, to support his dependent parents, is explaining with good humour that he has even lectured his students on human rights recently, although monks previously used to ban any politics from lessons. Furthermore, he has also been able to openly discuss his homosexuality at school, while he had previously covered up his ‘gay’ inclinations because gay men have not been allowed to teach at the monastic school.

Never before had I heard an open discussion about discrimination against homosexuals at a ritual event, although gay- and transgender-looking people are unmistakably very present in this ritual context.⁵ One of the young men whom I did not know, who was especially good-looking and well-mannered, asked me if I knew about an event organised by the Yangon French Institute in the coming week: the first ever LGBT movie festival in Yangon. He assured me that he would be there. All of a sudden, LGBT rights seemed to have made their

⁵ While it is commonly said in relation to Burma that gay and transgender people are found in large numbers among spirit mediums, there are no statistics to document the matter. My observations of the spirit possession scene on a long-term basis indicate that the participation of cross-dressing people in rituals has increased significantly since the 1990s, although they have always been there according to informants such as Kyaw So Mo. See Ward Keeler (2016) for an explanation of their presence in the spirit possession field based on the homology between the role of spirit mediums and of transgender persons that lies in the ability to cross boundaries in both cases. Also, while female-to-male trans are also found in these contexts, they are far less numerous than male-to-female trans among spirit mediums. In Mandalay, Keeler observed a recent move of trans women to working in the beauty business, which he understands through the lens of a quest for better social standing (2016). However, the presence of cross-dressing people, particularly male-to-female, is still a striking feature of spirit festivals such as that at Taungbyon, the most prominent of these events, which is celebrated annually in August a few miles north of Mandalay. In fact, the Taungbyon festival works like a magnet for gay and trans people, to such an extent that spirit possession is unavoidably associated with them in Mandalay.

entry openly into the spirit possession circle, and although Kyaw So Mo had not moved, and still had his back to us, I could feel that he was listening to every word of the conversation.⁶

On 15th of November 2014, the following Saturday, I went to the film festival at the French Institute. The young man was at the entrance to welcome the audience on behalf of Colors Rainbow, one of the partners of the event. Colors Rainbow was the first-ever association for LGBT rights set up in Yangon, by the activist Tin Ko Ko in 2010. Asking me if I recognised him, the young man introduced himself as Hpyo⁷ and invited me to Colors Rainbow's next event. That is how I met Hpyo, who appeared at that point to be situated between LGBT rights activism and the world of spirit possession.

The situation was amazingly new. I decided to attend the organisation's next event, which was the fourth anniversary celebration of Colors Rainbow. It took place in their office next to Kamayot station, a single-room apartment on the second floor of an ordinary-looking building that signalled nothing out of the ordinary in the crowded surroundings of Yangon. Hpyo welcomed me there. The meeting was in fact just a party to which LGBT people came with

⁶ Vocabulary makes a difference in these developments. The use of the English acronym LGBT by the newcomers in the ceremony was a novelty. As a teacher of English, Sithu instead used the English word 'gay', while gay male and trans women alike are commonly called *meinmasha* in Burmese, or *achauk*, a slightly more derogatory term. For Sithu, 'gay' covers both male homosexuality proper and male-to-female cross-dressing, as does *meinmasha* in Burmese. David Gilbert (2013) has emphasised this terminological indeterminacy in an analysis of the more specific Burmese vocabulary of 'open' and 'hider', used in queer Yangon along with the local binary criteria of image and 'mind/heart', illustrating the difficulty of ascribing gay people in this gender-liminal space. The situation recalls what has been reported in Thailand, where the term *kathoei* describes 'those who deviate from biological sex norms as well as behavioral gender norms' (Jackson 1999:229). As Keeler noted, trans women in Burma express their gender status mainly by cross-dressing, as they very seldom undertake gender reassignment surgery. Medical operations for removal of sexual organs are illegal according to section 320 (a) of Myanmar Penal Code. Trans women may, however, take hormones to feminise their physical appearance (Keeler 2016: n.1).

⁷To respect his self-presentation to me, I will use the name Hpyo in this chapter, although in spirit medium circles he is known by a feminine English nickname.

their partners and all were treated with fried rice and ice cream. They were served with care by the activists in a manner that looked very similar to that used in the context of religious donations on Buddhist ceremonial occasions. Junior members were busy actively inviting newcomers to sit on mats in the tiny space, asking if they had been served something, diligently getting some dessert or some tea and gracefully displaying the proper behaviour when welcoming guests in a Burmese home. The atmosphere was light and happy, with everybody teasing each other about their sexual identity and caring for their companions.

However, I noticed no other people from the spirit medium circles at the event other than Hpyo. To my query about this absence of other gay spirit mediums, Hpyo answered somewhat strangely that dancing in a spirit possession séance was ‘only for a while’. He further explained that he only went to the spirit ceremonies because he liked dancing and also because it brought him some money, through the offerings he received, which left him with time to volunteer to do Colors Rainbow social work.⁸ One could also understand his first cryptic statement to mean that the alternative gender presentation allowed through the performance of spirit possession had to be surrendered at the end of the ritual, while the claim to LGBT rights had to do with a more enduring assertion of self.

It is also possible that in this context my question about the lack of engagement on the part of spirit mediums in the fight for LGBT rights was embarrassing, if not painful, for him – as though the two spheres of action did not, after all, fit together well. No meeting ground had been sought at the time, or has yet been sought, even now, where spirit mediums and LGBT circles in Yangon could come together. Hpyo seemed to represent one single case of this

⁸As a rule, young followers taking part in the proceedings of a spirit possession séance do not receive any wages, but they receive their part of the circulation of devotees’ cash offerings to spirits. These sums are considered as having been “given” by the spirits.

coming-together of two queer worlds – and it seemed that he felt, at this point, as if he actually had to choose where to lay his trust.⁹

This chapter is about Hpyo's choice between spirit possession and LGBT activism, which I was to find out about through my participation in Kyaw So Mo's rituals and through Hpyo's own explanations. I gathered information through my interactions with Kyaw So Mo's circle of followers during the period between my first meeting with Hpyo and his final initiation into spirit mediumship through the appropriate ritual wedding with a female spirit. I interviewed him about his engagement in spirit mediumship just after his initiation, in his familial home, far from any spirit medium gaze.¹⁰

Thus, Hpyo finally chose to join the 'spirit life' (*nat lawka*), that is, a life of service to the spirits belonging to the pantheon of possession spirits, rather than to pursue the LGBT activist path, no matter how promising the latter looked at that time in Yangon. As he explained to me, Colors Rainbow could not facilitate his social life in the social milieu in which he lived, while spirits from the Burmese Thirty-seven Lords pantheon would 'protect' him better. In other words, for Hpyo, activism was not the solution to the lack of acceptance of gay and transgender people in Burma.

How did Hpyo discover that he belongs to the 'spirit world'?

⁹I have heard of no other LGBT activists than Hpyo who have left activism for spirit mediumship, but Hpyo actually told me later on that some spirit mediums had conversely left spirit mediumship for LGBT activism.

¹⁰These observations were conducted during a long field stay in Yangon, from September 2014 to August 2016, as a member of the French *Institut de Recherche sur l'Asie du Sud-Est Continentale* (IRASEC) based in Bangkok.

I do not know of any developments in the Colors Rainbow organisation that could have further motivated Hpyo's withdrawal from LGBT activism. But, as he explained to me when I interviewed him on 2nd of March 2016, his decision was driven by a desire to ensure that his life as a male homosexual would be respected in his surroundings. Hpyo received me in his family home, where he was observing the period of ritual seclusion mandatory after initiation into the 'spirit life' (*nat lawka*). We were sitting in the front room of the simple wooden house, in front of the domestic Buddhist shrine, under which he had put his first two tiny consecrated spirit images, brought back from the initiation ceremony a week previously. Hpyo was, according to custom, sitting on the folded red fabric that had served to delineate the consecrated place of his ritual wedding with the female spirit. He was required to keep sitting on this fabric during the seven days of ritual seclusion, in order to keep himself safe from any trouble with spirits.

The house was located far away, in the northern Yangon middle-class suburb of Shwe Paukhan, where military men and civil servants of the Ne Win administration had been settled during the 1970s. His grandfather, a skinny old man with a strict appearance, remained sitting on the entrance stairway during the whole conversation, displaying manners as good as Hpyo's. The old man was the owner of the house, which he had got a long time ago when he was in charge of the local office of the Immigration Department. He had raised Hpyo there since his early childhood, after his parents – both of them school teachers – had left for job assignments in a provincial town.

Hpyo explained to me how, even as a child, he had already preferred boys. As a teenager, his family tried to change him, and asked him repeatedly to renounce this same-sex attraction. He

tried several times but could not keep his word for long. Finally, he explained to his parents that he could not change his sexual preference: his karma had made him gay. They finally accepted it and he tried his best to satisfy them on other points, particularly by studying mechanics at Yangon Technology University, because they thought that it would be easier for him to find a job in this field. He worked hard to pass his exams, which he succeeded in doing despite the fact that all his friends were architects and he would have loved to have become one. Finally, he found a good, fulfilling job as an interior decorator. Hpyo's presentation of himself as a homosexual balanced the inescapability of what he saw as his karmically determined sexual orientation with his profound desire to comply with his parents' wishes and also to be accepted in his milieu.¹¹

However, Hpyo had also experienced episodes that could be understood in the Burmese cultural context as a mark of the fact that spirits were influencing his life. When he was 18 years old, he told me, a serpent happened to slither onto his lap, before it then disappeared. This occurred several times when he was praying in front of the Buddha's shrine. He was not afraid, but went to ask a monk about it. The monk answered that 'it' was the treasure-trove guardian spirit of Yay Hle pagoda, a Buddhist sanctuary located some 20 miles across the Yangon River at Kyaukthan and 'Surrounded by Water' (*Yay Hle*). Guardian spirits of pagoda treasure-troves are described as being serpent-like beings (*naga*) that occasionally take the appearance of beautiful young ladies, *thaik-naga*, as they are called in Burmese. *Ottazaung* is another term used for these beings, which are believed to be trapped in their karmic cycle as

¹¹While the karmic explanation is an available cultural rationalisation of sexual orientation in the Burmese Buddhist context, it is also used as a tool of repression by some preaching monks who use textual evidence to threaten homosexuals that they will be reborn as monkeys in their next life if they indulge in such sexual behaviour. Pamphlets making these observations and referring to Buddhist canonical texts were circulated in Yangon at the time of my research, when, in parallel with political liberalisation, a wave of Buddhist nationalism was in train with moral reform of the society being an important part of the agenda.

spiritual guardians of pagoda relic-chambers and are known to lure people to also assume their fate as guardians buried in the pagodas.¹² *Thaik-naga* ladies have recently been upgraded in their ritual and religious status, and are now seen as guardians of the Buddhist material dispensation (Burmese: *thathana*, Pali: *sāsana*), which has made them one of the most frequently encountered spirits in contemporary religious settings.¹³ In this cultural context, the monk's interpretation of the serpent who visited Hpyo as being a pagoda guardian spirit or *thaik-naga* was predictable.

Hpyo was not afraid, he told me, but the monk recommended that he undertake *leippya hkwe*, a protective ritual which would 'separate his soul' (*leippya*) from that of the *thaik-naga*. The ritual consisted in the offering of a tray called *kadaw bwe*, filled with a coconut, bananas, leaves and decorations, in order to ensure a promise from the serpent-like female spirit that she would not visit Hpyo anymore.¹⁴ This offering was made and the serpent never came back again. But 'that was the start', said Hpyo, meaning the start of the spirits' influence on his life. His family used to honour their 'traditional' spirits (*yoya*) three times a year. Traditional spirits are a sample of tutelary spirits (*nat*) that belong to the Thirty-seven Lords, the Burmese pantheon of possession spirits. Hpyo's family cult was addressed to the female spirit Pegu *medaw* on his mother's side, Ko Myo Shin on his father's side and Myin Byu Shin as the tutelary spirit of the town where his parents were living.¹⁵ A very old female spirit medium,

¹² Cf. Spiro 1967: 165–167, about such a case in the 1960s Burmese rural context.

¹³ For more on these developments, see in particular Brac de la Perrière 2011 and forthcoming, and Foxeus 2017.

¹⁴ A *kadaw bwe* is the basic offering to any spiritual being in Burma. Hpyo only told me about the offering of *kadaw bwe* for this 'soul separating' performance, though this kind of ritual could be more sophisticated (See Brac de la Perrière 1989: 92).

¹⁵ Pegu *medaw* is the female buffalo who in the founding legend of Pegu, formerly a royal city of Lower Burma, raised the prince Athakuma and was sacrificed by the latter. This sacrificed buffalo became the tutelary spirit of Pegu and was subsequently integrated into the spirit possession pantheon of the Thirty-seven Lords. Ko Myo Shin, the Lord of the Nine Cities, is a Shan prince who died together with his sister in the course of the Burmese

whom he called ‘grandmother’, was hired to perform the ritual. She was actually his great-grandmother and a member of a distinct lineage of spirit mediums attached to the tradition of Thaton, a southern city that had been the centre of an ancient Mon kingdom. Hpyo associated his family’s connection to a very specific tradition of spirit possession with the revelation that spirits were influencing his life. This association was, in the logic he was following, complementary to the karmic determination of his sexuality. The influence of a spirit would ‘naturally’ orient him to spirit possession, and would solve his problem of how to be accepted as gay in his social milieu. The visits of the serpent-like being had simply been one sign revealing to him that his homosexuality was in fact related to his belonging to the ‘spirit world’ (*nat lawka*).

Up to this point, the story told by Hpyo to satisfy my curiosity about the circumstances that had determined his entry into spirit mediumship sounded similar to many other life stories I had heard from gay (*meinmasha*) spirit mediums since the 1980s. He remembered his childhood and his teenage years in the same way as had other spirit mediums to whom I had spoken, as a time when he felt torn between the feeling of being different and the desire to respond to conventional parental requests. Hpyo did not enter into any detailed episodes of his life, such as violent conflicts with his father (which are typical of the experiences of *meinmasha* spirit mediums) but the quandary he was in was very obvious from the way in which he took me through his life trajectory. Particularly common in accounts from *meinmasha* spirit mediums is the painful experience of being cleaved apart by the inability to

conquest of Shan states. Myin Byu Shin, the Lord of the White Horse, is a common tutelary spirit of villages in the Burmese-dominated space of the country. Pegu *medaw* on his mother’s side, Ko Myo Shin on his father’s side and Myin Byu Shin as the spirit of the locality constitute a conventional cultic configuration in Yangon and surroundings, reflecting the demographic history of the region in the second half of 19th century, when the Irrawaddy delta region saw a strong immigration of male workers from Central Burma who subsequently married locally.

show the respect that is due to ones' parents, a key value to the Burmese that is expressed in the Buddhist idiom of *kyayzu shin*, which refers to the obligation to repay the debt of life to one's parents by meritorious activity performed in their name.¹⁶ Hpyo only worked out gradually, through experience, the compromises he needed to make between sexual preference and social conformity, by making sense of his life through the cultural idioms at hand: that is, karmic determination, on the one hand, and spiritual agency driving him toward the 'spirit life', on the other hand. He finally discovered that he belonged to the 'spirit world'.

Ma Ngway Taung: the female spirit of choice for gay men

After this episode, Hpyo had gone on the internet to consult a spirit specialist (*nat hsaya*) from Mandalay, who confirmed that he 'had a female spirit' (*nattemi shi-*), meaning that he had a bond with a female spirit who was one of the Thirty-seven Lords. He had then gone to his grandmother to ask her to conduct the first rituals formally instituting the link of a human being to a spirit, the 'drinking of the pure water' (*yay sin thauk-*) and the presentation of three offering basins (*kadaw bwe*). But his grandmother was too old¹⁷ to come all the way from Thaton to act as a master for him and she transferred the responsibility to Kyaw So Mo's main disciple, Sithu, who lived in the same area, in Shwe Paukhan. At this time, Hpyo did not know Sithu, although they lived close to each other, and one of his cousins was taking English lessons from him. Sithu was approached and he accepted Hpyo as a disciple and performed

¹⁶ For men, to enter into the monastic life through the ritual of *upâsampadâ* (P) ordination – often only for a short temporary period – is the main option to repay the life debt to one's parents, this ritual being considered highly rewarding in terms of the merit generated. Being homosexual is a formal impediment to being accepted into the Buddhist Sangha so that this way to gain merit in the name of one's parents is theoretically unavailable. However, I know of gay spirit mediums who have ignored this rule. See Keeler (2016:799) in relation to the statement that no effeminate male could ordain as monk.

¹⁷ His grandmother was 94 years old in 2016 but she nonetheless made the journey in February of that year to be present at Hpyo's ritual initiation with the female spirit.

the specific ritual for the transfer of disciples between two masters, the ‘changing of head’ (*hkaung hlwe-*). He then proceeded to the ritual interrogation (*nat yway-*) to decide who the female spirit (*nattemi*) was who was attached to Hpyo.

*Nat yway-*¹⁸ is a process of interrogation addressed to a number of spirits from the Burmese pantheon of possession spirits, the Thirty-seven Lords, to find out who is the one responsible for drawing a neophyte into spirit mediumship.¹⁹ This main agency of a neophyte’s participation in the spirit world is called *hkaung swe*, the ‘head-dragging one’. The process of irresistible attraction exercised by a spirit, male or female, on a human being is conceived of as a seduction and the *hkaung swe* eventually becomes the spirit to whom the new medium will be ritually ‘married’ at the end of the initiation process.²⁰ The spirit interrogation usually takes place in the context of a full spirit possession ceremony, which is the framework in which all the spirits belonging to the pantheon are ritually invited to the dedicated place, a temporary ceremonial pavilion (*nat kanna*), where they are embodied. In this case, Sithu was the performing spirit medium. The five female spirits (*nattemi*) who were ‘asked’ were the main feminine figures of the pantheon of Thirty-seven Lords, who are regarded as being agencies that drag men towards institutional spirit possession: Amay Yay Yin and Popa

¹⁸ In Burmese the agent of an action is often ambiguous. *Nat yway-* may be translated as ‘to choose the spirit’ or as ‘the choice of the spirits’. However, an exegesis of the ritual makes it clear that the spirits are asked about who among them is the figure pulling the human being towards the spirit world. In other words, the ritual is taken to be a device to interrogate the spirits, who are supposed to express their will on the matter. Comments are also often made about the initial resistance of people to spirits ‘dragging’ them to become their mediums.

¹⁹ About this ritual, see Brac de la Perrière 1989: 100–101.

²⁰ In Burmese, spirit mediums are called *nat kadaw*, which means ‘spirit’s female spouse’, revealing the fact that the main relationship between the spirit and its medium is imagined as a marital one and that ideally the spirit is the male spouse and the medium the female spouse. However, a number of spirit mediums are not women and a number of spirits that seduce humans to use their body as a vehicle for their incarnation are female. While a marriage is not the only link through which the initiating relationship with humans may be established, it is ideologically dominant, as expressed by the terminology (*nat kadaw*) and the ‘wedding’ form of the initiation ritual (Brac de la Perrière 1998, 2007).

medaw, who are usually attached to their mediums as a mother is to her children; Thon Pan Hla and Ma Hne Lay, who are conceived of as sisters; and Ma Ngway Taung, the only one among the female spirits who is regarded as being able to ritually ‘marry’ a man. Ma Ngway Taung’s mediums are generally understood to be ‘gay’ (*meinmasha*). Unsurprisingly, Ma Ngway Taung was the name that came out of the interrogation ritual, and it is to this female spirit that Hpyo was ritually married on the 26th of February 2016.

Ma Ngway Taung is an interesting spiritual figure. She is conceived of as a pretty young lady whose love to U Min Kyaw, a dominant male spirit of the Thirty-seven Lords, was thwarted in such a way that she committed suicide by throwing herself from a cliff. Because of this tragedy, she is believed to draw her male mediums into homosexuality. As a matter of fact, for a man to be a medium of Ma Ngway Taung is commonly interpreted by the Burmese as a sign of being a *meinmasha*, in other words either a homosexual man or a transgender woman. Of course, all the spirits interrogated in order to discover which ‘female spirit’ (*nattemi*) was attached to Hpyo were ladies, with a very strong womanly demeanour. For a man to be chosen by one of them to serve as her embodiment, either as a son or a husband, would already imply a predisposition to feminine behaviour, that is, to crossgender presentation. The initiation is conceived of as a wedding although, as we shall see, the neophyte actually performs the role of the female spirit, often by overdressing and overplaying the feminine specificities of the spirit character. Subsequent spirit possession séances are then occasions to dress and dance in this over-feminised role, opportunities looked forward to by most of these young (and not-so-young) gay spirit mediums. In other words, spirit possession performances provide opportunities for men like Hpyo who do not dress as women or act like women in everyday life to safely indulge in overplaying a girlish role. Spirit possession performances are occasions to play out crossgender presentations of themselves for spirit mediums of both

genders, and also for male homosexuals, blurring the distinction between homosexuality and transgenderism. Given Hpyo's character and aspirations, Ma Ngway Taung, who is the specific female spirit for gay men, was expected to be the female spirit that would possess him. She would be able to 'protect' him from the impediments linked to his sexual orientation.

For a man, the very fact of being diagnosed as 'having a female spirit' (*nattemi shi-*) is already an outward expression of a feminine mindset (*meinma seit pauk-*), if not of an attraction to playing a female role, in addition to having a spirit-linked homosexual orientation. This would suggest that 'having a female spirit' is an expression of male homosexuality that makes this sexual orientation socially more acceptable, by feminising the man in such a way as to locate his sexuality and gender within a more heteronormative frame, albeit via a spirit-human relationship.

'Having a spirit' of the opposite gender has a different significance for male and female mediums, respectively, and the wedding-like initiation has a different form and meaning. For a female spirit medium, 'having a male spirit' (*nat shi-*) does not necessarily imply a spirit-linked homosexual orientation. More often it is a sign of spirit-linked matrimonial difficulties and, if she is married, it suggests that she has a tendency to 'wear the trousers' in the household.²¹ Wedding-like initiation with the male spirit that is luring her would certainly provide opportunities for a woman to perform unruly masculine roles, and particularly to drink, smoke, gamble and swear like a man. It would not necessarily imply a non-normative sexual orientation in everyday life, as is the case for male spirit mediums. It could actually be followed by experiences of spiritual sexual encounters with the seducing male spirit. It is

²¹ The Burmese-American anthropologist Frank Lehman (1924–2016) liked to relate how his friends in Mandalay jokingly referred to spirit-medium women as 'wearing-trousers-wives'.

certainly the case that recently spiritually wedded female spirit mediums tell of dreams about the nocturnal visits of their possessing male spirit spouse. In sum, the gender implications of the wedding-like initiation ritual with a ‘dragging’ spirit of the opposite sex are not strictly symmetrical. This has the effect of reinforcing the local conceptualisation of spirit mediumship as ideally a feminine vocation, something that is embedded in the term *nat kadaw* (‘male spirit’s female spouse’) for a medium.

The ‘wedding’ to Ma Ngway Taung

Despite the different significance of the wedding-like ritual for men and for women, the ritual represents for both of them the emotional climax of the initiation process through which the initiate enters into the ‘spirit life’ (*nat lawka*), which is, as we have seen, a life of service to the spirits belonging to the pantheon as well as to her/his initiating master. The ‘wedding’ is the ritual of initiation into the role of spirit medium and, as such, it is a life-transforming as much as it is a status-transforming event.²² The initiation marks the change from being a mere neophyte to the full status of a spirit medium who is able to embody spirits at will for ritual purposes. In addition, it also celebrates entry into a web of ritual obligations towards spirits and masters, both conceived of as *kyayzu shin*, ‘masters of the debt of life’, and marked through the gesture of respect called *kadaw*, which equates the relationship between medium and spirits or masters to the relationship of moral indebtedness one has with one’s parents, teachers or patrons. As a matter of fact, the new spirit medium enters into a new ‘spirit family’ (*nat mithasu*) whose leader is his/her spiritual master, who acts as a surrogate father or mother and who is often referred to as such. One striking feature of everyday life in spirit medium circles is the affective nature of the interactions and the care displayed towards

²²See Brac de la Perrière 2017a for a comparison of initiation rituals in different domains of the Burmese religious field.

everyone, despite a tendency to harsh criticism for which these circles are (in)famous. All disciples are considered as ‘children of the spirits’ (*nat thatemi*) and as a rule are addressed using kinship terms. This particular dimension of the ‘spirit life’ may be of a special importance for young male homosexuals facing ostracism in their original home milieu and often expressing deep sorrow about their inability to display respectful behaviour and care towards their biological parents. In any case, surrogate family support is a striking feature of interactions in Kyaw So Mo’s circle, and since he has had a home of his own this has become a meeting point for Sunday lunches, for which he makes careful preparations and where his young disciples – most of whom display homosexual inclinations – are happy to gather.

Insert Figure 5.1 here

As for Hpyo, his ‘wedding’ to Ma Ngway Taung was performed by his master, Sithu, on the 26th of February 2016, which was on the first day of Kyaw So Mo’s regular ceremony to the Thirty-seven Lords preceding the March series of spirit festivals on the western side of the Irrawaddy River.²³ Full spirit possession ceremonies last for three days and are costly ventures that need to be carefully planned. On the one hand, Hpyo could not have financed such a séance on his own in order to have his wedding to the female spirit celebrated. On the other hand, Kyaw So Mo needed to fund the Yangon séance that started the March ritual pilgrimage in that year. Therefore he proposed that the young man have his initiation during

²³ Spirit festivals are one of the two main categories of rituals that form part of the Thirty-seven Lords cult. In contrast to the Thirty-seven Lords spirit possession séances, they are dedicated to one spiritual figure, or a linked group of figures, in their original place in central Burma and they attract offerings (*kadaw*) both from the local population and from spirit mediums coming from all over Burma to dance in front of the original statue. These festivals are spread out throughout the year and across the Burmese landscape in such a way as to form three main ritual periods during which spirit mediums circumambulate central Burma.

the séance and that he cover the expenses for the first day.²⁴ This was the first time that his elder disciple, Sithu, would perform the ‘wedding’ ritual for one of his own disciples, so Kyaw So Mo would be in the role of ‘grandfather’ to Hpyo, as he told me jokingly. The performance would benefit from Kyaw So Mo’s expertise and from his longstanding networks with other spirit mediums, because the ritual requires the participation of experienced attendants (*ahteindaw*) in the context of the mock ‘nuptial chamber’ that gives its name to the ritual (*san hkan win-*).²⁵

The ceremony was held at Insein-Ywama, in the same location where I had first met Hpyo. It started with a round of spirit-embodied dances, paving the way for Ma Ngway Taung’s arrival at the ritual site. Nobody from Hpyo’s family was present, except for his boyfriend, who came with a fine bride’s bouquet that found a place on the offering shelves,²⁶ and his great-grandmother, who arrived from Thaton with two young girls to take care of her, to serve as one of the attendants. It was around 11 o’clock in the morning when the ‘nuptial chamber’ was set up by experienced mediums, inside the spirit possession space, with the required objects, which had previously been gathered together, on a table next to the altars. The mats in front of the shrines were covered with white and red fabric and represented the nuptial bed. They were bounded by hanks of white cotton thread, which encircled seven ‘auspicious’ homage bowls (*mingala kadaw bwe*). The attendants sat around the line of white thread, one for each offering. They watched over it, in order to guarantee the purity of the space, and they

²⁴ The ceremony was also facilitated by the presence of a Thai reporter, ‘Mister Kim’, who was eager to film the wedding ritual and agreed to pay for part of it. Mister Kim had met Kyaw So Mo and his disciples at the previous Taungbyon festival and had kept in touch after that. The co-financing of regular ceremonies by a master entourage or ‘family’, on various grounds, is a common fact of their involvement in the maintenance of the ‘spirit life’.

²⁵ About this ritual, see Spiro, 1967: 213–217 and Brac de la Perrière 1989: 104–111.

²⁶ Hpyo had met his boyfriend on the internet. He did not stay for long and did not take any part in the ritual.

skillfully manipulated the thread so as to allow only the master and his disciple/spirit medium-to-be to enter the space it enclosed.

Insert Figures 5.2 and 5.3 here

Hpyo was wearing a three-strand pearl necklace, was artfully made up and wore the light yellow attire of a princess, as magnificent as that worn by ladies of the late Konbaung dynasty at the Burmese royal court and similar to a bride's attire in high-society weddings today. He first knelt outside of the space bounded by white thread, facing the shrines and flanked by Sithu, who was dressed in similar attire, and Kyaw So Mo. The atmosphere had become tense with expectation by the time that the tune to call Ma Ngway Taung was played by the orchestra. An extremely controlled Hpyo started to embody Ma Ngway Taung through hand gestures, still kneeling, with tears welling in his eyes, and Kyaw So Mo proceeded to the female spirit interrogation: 'Was she to provide for Hpyo's needs through divination (*nat ho-*) or spirit possession (*nat kadaw*)?' 'Through spirit possession' was the answer of the spirit, who was then made to enter the nuptial chamber, followed by Sithu and Kyaw So Mo. There, Sithu proceeded to a series of ritual gestures on the initiate, emphasised by performative injunctions and executed on a specific beat of the orchestra, to make the spirit's soul enter into the would-be-medium. A number of means were employed: strokes on Hpyo's body, starting from the top of the head, using bunches of rose-apple leaves, the 'leaves of victory' (*aung tabyay*), reflected in a mirror; 'opening' (*pwin*) of Hpyo's senses; combing his hair; tying white cotton 'soul thread' (*leippya kyo*) to his wrists and the ankles; passing the *salwe salaung* ornament around his neck and crossing it in front of his chest; having him swallow small amounts of 'pure' water with added garlic and glutinous rice; and finally offering him various

food items.²⁷ All these ritual means are similar to those used to ‘bring to life’ spirit statues (*athek thwin-*) or to ‘introduce the soul’ of the spirit (*leippya theip-*), meaning that they add an enlivening element to the marriage. They turn the human body into the spirit’s receptacle, which means that in addition to becoming the spirit’s spouse (*nat kadaw*), the candidate, who is the bride in the ritual, also undergoes a kind of rebirth as the female spirit.

Kyaw So Mo asked the newly initiated medium if he was ready to send his homage to his masters three times a year. Then the nuptial chamber was unmade, to allow a space for Ma Ngway Taung to dance, through her new medium, Hpyo. The whole sequence was watched with intense concern by the audience, who now turned to present their offerings to the Lady interacting with them. Hpyo finished the Ma Ngway Taung dance sequence and the ceremony resumed its standard progress. He gave back the pearl necklace to the affluent follower of Kyaw So Mo from whom he had borrowed it and entered immediately into ritual seclusion by sitting quietly, under the shelves, on the folded red fabric of his ‘nuptial chamber’.²⁸

At this point, from the observer’s point of view, Hpyo had started to act as a spirit medium inasmuch as he was performing a crossgendered role in the ritual context. Indeed, in the case of a male homosexual married to Ma Ngway Taung, the ritual initiation to spirit mediumship takes on the extra dimension of unveiling, through cross-dressing – at least for those present during the ritual – the internal ‘feminine mindset’ (*meinma seit*) of the male homosexual, who is otherwise not marked as female. It is through this that the ritual acts as a performance of

²⁷ See Brac de la Perrière 1989: 104–111 for a full description of the ‘wedding’ ritual of a female spirit medium to a male spirit with a very similar liturgy.

²⁸ Hpyo spent the rest of the day sitting alone on his red fabric under the shelves, where he was served food from the spirit offerings. He then moved to his family home, where he continued the seven-day ritual seclusion. This was an adaptation of tradition to contemporary conditions: that is, spending time alone in a ritual place, without doing anything but being served by ritual attendants. There is more discussion of Hpyo’s ritual seclusion below.

transgenderism in the specific milieu of spirit medium circles. However, nothing is more revealing in this regard than the renaming of the newly initiated mediums with feminine nicknames, exclusively used in these circles, as Kyaw So Mo reminded me on the next occasion I asked him of news of Hpyo. Deliberately forgetting who this ‘Hpyo’ was that I was talking about, he told me with some insistence that, for ‘them’, he was Ricky Jane, a ‘daughter’ of his who was Ma Ngway Taung’s medium.

Hpyo’s modern take on spirit mediumship

All of Kyaw So Mo’s entourage²⁹ was needed to achieve the entry of the new spirit medium into the ‘spirit life’ through the ‘wedding’ initiation. In all the cases I have observed, this moment is an intensely-charged one, emotionally, in the lives of ‘spirit families’. The ritual marked Hpyo’s definitive entry into his ‘spirit family’. He duly started to take his part in all the regular ritual work, making the journey to all the main festivals and paying homage to his initiating masters, Kyaw So Mo and Sithu.

Back in his family home, in the context of the ritual seclusion following the initiation – most certainly a time of reflection – Hpyo, sitting in his everyday, conventional, male dress on the folded fabric of his ‘nuptial chamber’, told me how he had felt overwhelmed with emotion at the moment of his entry into the ‘nuptial chamber’, not knowing any longer if he was sad or happy. But since then, he quickly added, he had had no uncanny encounters (*htu kya hmu*) with Ma Ngway Taung, in contrast to the stories of sexual experiences with their male

²⁹ By entourage, I mean all of those who participate in the ceremonies of a master, that is his devotee-clients or followers and his disciples who aim to become professional spirit mediums. This also includes established spirit mediums to whom he is linked through ritual obligations, particularly those who have been disciples of the same masters, and who are ‘*nat* brothers and sisters’. Kyaw So Mon’s entourage probably numbers 40 to 50 people.

dragging-spirit that women initiates often relate.³⁰ Without a more in-depth inquiry into the spiritual experience of male homosexual initiates,³¹ it is difficult to assess whether the stress that Hpyo placed on this absence of encounters is particular to him or if it is a regular feature of male homosexual spirit mediumship. What is certain is that, although he is very compliant to the demands placed upon him within Kyaw So Mo's 'spirit family' and to its rituals, Hpyo also demonstrates a rather marked distance from the traditional ways and ideas that are prevalent in spirit medium circles (although it should be recognised that these are far from uniform).

After commenting on the emotion he felt during his transformation into a medium for Ma Ngway Taung and telling me his lack of subsequent uncanny experiences (*htu kya hmu*) of the spirit, Hpyo told me about his visit to the Shwedagon, the main pagoda in Yangon, on the Sunday following his initiation, with his boyfriend. According to spirit medium convention, he should not have gone out of his 'nuptial chamber'. When they heard that he had gone to the Shwedagon, his 'spirit masters' (*nat hsaya*, here Kyaw So Mo and Sithu) became upset. His masters thought that the new initiate should stay in the 'nuptial chamber' on his own, staying safely away from any bad influences during this vulnerable phase, and Hpyo knew this very well. But there was nothing wrong, he argued, in going to the pagoda, paying homage to the Buddha and sharing the ensuing merit with the spirits. This is because sharing the merit earned through Buddhist devotional acts with the spirits makes them happy, he insisted, making clear his personal views on the spirit cult: that one can expect 'protection' from the

³⁰ Spirit mediums and their followers often speak of 'strange things' (*htu kya hmu*) that happen to them as the mark of a spirit's presence among them. New female spirit mediums have dreams of their male spouse spirit visiting them on regular dates, the birthday of the spirit for instance, for which they prepare themselves specially. These nocturnal visits in their dreams are lived as sexual experiences. That Hpyo did not experience any 'strange thing' means that he did not experience such an encounter with Ma Ngway Taung.

³¹Of course, such an inquiry could only give access to what initiates may have to say about their own lived experience.

spirits in return for giving them something (i.e. the merit gained through the visit to the Shwedagon). There is no such reciprocity, he said, when one worships the Buddha (*kokwe -*), in contrast with the cult of the spirits (*puzaw-*), because in worshipping the Buddha nothing can be expected in return from the Enlightened One. The Buddha is only worshipped (*kokwe-*) because of one's 'beliefs' (*yondji hmu*). Hpyo gave the view that this must be distinguished from offering to the spirits (*puzaw-*) and sharing merit with them to seek their 'protection'. In Buddhism, he pointed out, you only obtain benefits based on what you have done.³²

While justifying his escapade to the Shwedagon Pagoda, countering the view of his masters in relation to ritual seclusion, Hpyo made a very contemporary, if not modernist, use of notions linked to ritual practice and religious devotion. The distinction between Buddhist devotion and spirit worship ritual practice through the use of the term *kokwe* for the former and the term *puzaw* for the latter only dates back to criticisms that certain monks made of the spirit cult and its mediums in the last decade or so. The terms *kokwe* and *puzaw* were both previously used only in relation to spirit worship, *kokwe* being the Burmese term used for devotion to the spirits, while *puzaw* (Sk./P. *pujâ*) was used to refer to the presentation of offerings to them. This discursive shift and the link established between Buddhist 'worship' (now referred to as *kokwe hmu*) and Buddhist 'belief' (referred to as *yondji hmu*) signal changes in religious conceptualisations in Burma, where the term *yondji hmu* used to refer to participation in the spirit world rather than to Buddhist practice.³³ The criticisms of spirit cults

³² It is worth noting the way in which Hpyo distinguishes between returns received from offerings to spirits (*puzaw*), which he does according to whether these returns have been asked for or whether they derive from sharing merit with the spirits. If the former applies, wealth and prosperity are the boons more usually expected while if the latter applies an unspecified 'protection' is what may be expected.

³³ For more on these recent changes in Burmese religious conceptualisations, see Brac de la Perrière 2017b. It is worth noting that these changes are linked, in particular, to the growing penetration of the Western understanding of religion as an individually professed faith and as

made by monks were harsh enough to upset Kyaw So Mo when he heard them, some years ago, prompting him to use unusually vehement language against these religious men, who he believed were harming his spirit world. However, some spirit mediums have recently enforced the distinction made by monastics among their own clientele, urging them, in the voices of the spirits themselves, not to call their spirit-related practices *kokwe hmu* but *puzaw*, in order to escape moralistic criticisms from monks.

By using this vocabulary, Hpyo presents himself as having a modernist vision of religion and rituals, which matches his social background. By so doing, he indicates the limits to his participation in spirit medium circles. Indeed, while explaining to me his choice and his life plan, Hpyo was eager to distinguish himself from more traditional spirit mediums. In fact, he said, his intention was not to become a professional specialist within the cult of the spirits. Rather, he would continue with his job as an interior decorator, in order to be able to send money to his family and settle down with his boyfriend. His boyfriend had, at first, resisted the idea that Hpyo become a spirit medium, and had only accepted it after some discussion. It was decided between them that Hpyo would take part in spirit possession performances, since he is fond of spirit dancing, but that he would only do so in his free time. As he had promised the spirits, he would make offerings to show ‘generosity’ (*saytana*) and he would pay homage to his initiation masters three times a year. He would never live as a spirit medium and when he would settled down to live with his boyfriend he would not keep his spirit images and ritual objects, but would leave them with his master, Sithu. He said that this was because his boyfriend did not like ‘extremism’ (*asoun*).

universalism (*batha*), replacing the conception of religion as the Buddha’s teachings and as socially instituted (*thathana*, P. *sasana*).

This unexpectedly brings the global idiom of ‘extremism’ into discussion of spirit mediumship. Carrying very negative connotations, this idiom has made its entry into Burmese religious discourse together with the anti-Islamic stance of renewed Buddhist nationalism popularised by the Mabatha movement born in the wake of the political transition through which the country has gone.³⁴ Hpyo used the word *asoun* negatively twice, once to describe the way of life of professional spirit mediums, contrasting them with the life he envisioned for himself and his boyfriend, and once to describe the behaviour, and the activism, of LGBT people, which prevented them from obtaining social recognition, despite fighting for equal rights. In other words, Hpyo was equally dismissive of what he viewed as the excessive stances of spirit mediumship on the one hand and LGBT activism on the other, which he contrasted with the Buddhist ethics of moderation. As a contrast to what he described as the excessive demands for cash offerings by spirit-embodiment mediums during possession séances, leading to the accusations of extortion that are often voiced in public, he said that he would present offerings to spirits out of *saytana*, which refers to generosity framed in Buddhist terms. In addition, he said that he would share the merit resulting from these good deeds with the spirits, who would then, he believes, feel inclined to grant him their ‘protection’. In other words, Hpyo presented a Buddhist interpretation of interactions with the spirits, one that he classifies as meritorious. Far from asking spirits for favours in return for his service, as most other spirit mediums are often said to do, he only seeks their ‘protection’.

³⁴ Mabatha, the acronym for *Amyo Batha Thathana Saung Shauk Yay Ahpwe*, variously translated as ‘Association for the Protection of Nationality and Religion’ and ‘Patriotic Association of Myanmar’, is a Buddhist nationalist movement formed in June 2013 in a wave of anti-Muslim violence. Its leaders, some of them prominent monks, claim a need to defend Buddhism in Burma because the national religion is under threat from other religions, particularly Islam. In 2014–15, they managed to promote and to have passed a set of four laws for this purpose. These laws regulate conversion, interfaith marriage, birth in particular communities and polygamy. The association was banned in July 2017 by the newly-elected democratic government but it has been re-formed as the *Dhamma Parahita Foundation* and is still very active in public life.

Hpyo went so far as to voice criticism of the greed of the spirit mediums of today, which in his eyes makes them fake.

This condemnation, coming from a new initiate, seems harsh. In his interview with me, as the Western ethnographer, Hpyo presented what may be regarded as modernist Buddhist rationalisations of spirit worship that are quite distanced from the interpretations of spirit mediumship by most spirit mediums. But he also displayed his familiarity with the world of spirit mediums, knowing its history and logic, and expressing his genuine enthusiasm for spirit dancing. His stance did not prevent him from having appropriately respectful, warm relationships with his initiating masters, Kyaw So Mo and Sithu. Without a doubt, Hpyo is a sophisticated person, able to navigate through many worlds. His case demonstrates the discrepancies between articulated discourse and actual engagement that follow from these navigations.

Finally, Hpyo's final decision to become a spirit medium (*nat kadaw*) for Ma Ngway Taung was principally motivated by his confidence that she would bring him the 'protection' he thinks is not available through involvement in activism through LGBT organisations. His use of the idiom of 'protection' (*saung shauk-*) was striking. This is a term that became pervasive in transitional Burma, in line with the ideology of 'rights' popularised with political liberalisation. However, he seeks this 'protection' in the spiritual realm, where he thinks he can get it because, notwithstanding his modernist criticisms, he still believes that Ma Ngway Taung has the power to protect him. The conflation of a spiritual shelter with the protection of

rights is particularly striking, as ‘protection’ is, as a rule, less likely to be sought through spirit possession than are wealth and prosperity.³⁵

It is notable that the powers of spirits are not *démodé* or old-fashioned for Hpyo, as they are to Mandalay beautician *meinmasha*, according to Keeler in a paper on the recent move of *meinmasha* from spirit possession to beauty work in Mandalay (2016: 803, 812). On the contrary, Hpyo trusts these powers more than those of LGBT activism to ensure his ‘protection’. This demonstrates that if the binary opposition between spiritual and modern works at a discursive level, it does not prevent persons who identify with modern ideas and values from engaging in the spiritual world, as Hpyo has done.³⁶

The politics of sexual and gender presentation in spirit medium circles

The reference to the idiom of ‘protection’ in the context of spirit mediumship needs to be further contextualised in relation to the politics of gender presentation prevalent in spirit medium circles, given the general affinity one observes between male spirit mediumship on the one hand and homosexuality and transgenderism on the other one.³⁷ As we have seen, cross-dressing seems more and more pervasive in the entourages of spirit mediums. Also, the life dynamics of spirit mediums mean that their gender presentation is likely to show a marked fluidity.

³⁵ This marks out spirit possession practices as different from Buddhist esotericism (*weikza lan*) in Burmese religion. Devotion to *weikza* figures tends to follow from a search for an overall protection, while devotion to figures belonging to the spirit possession pantheon is generally motivated by an aspiration for wealth and prosperity.

³⁶ See Peter van der Veer (2014) in relation to the articulation of the spiritual and modernity in Asia.

³⁷ See footnote 5 above in relation to this general affinity, which I have deduced from longterm observation, but which is not, to my knowledge, documented by any quantitative studies in relation to overall numbers.

During the ceremony where I first met Hpyo, Kyaw So Mo did not react or participate in the discussion on discrimination against homosexuals, but he was soon to let me know his standpoint. In his camp at the next Shweguni festival, where he hosted me in March 2015, he jumped at the first occasion to comment on two particularly exuberantly cross-dressed (male) youngsters who were passing by. He suddenly stated that *meinmasha* have always been there in the spirit medium world, but that when he was young his generation of spirit mediums were trained by their masters not to behave outwardly according to their sexual orientation. Coming out is now part of ‘human rights’ (*lu ahkwin ayay*), he said. ‘Human rights’ are a good thing, he added, but sexuality should not be revealed.

Formerly, Kyaw So Mo would not have made such a declaration in relation to the politics of gender and sexual presentation in spirit medium circles. It was the new juxtaposition of LGBT right activism and male spirit mediumship that made Kyaw So Mo feel so uncomfortable.

This acted as a spotlight trained on the sexual preferences of male spirit mediums. It particularly highlighted the contrast between the common representation of the spirit possession scene as packed with cross-dressing people and the reluctance of most established male spirit mediums to be explicitly identified with homosexuality. As a matter of fact, the same-sex orientation of a significant number of mediums is a well-known feature of their milieu – an open secret – but they are still sensitive about its public display. As a rule, most of these established male spirit mediums would never cross-dress in everyday life, although they do cross-dress when they perform a female spirit as a ritual role. Kyaw So Mo’s scornful comments about the youngsters at the festival being outrageously cross-dressed was actually a comment about the liberty he perceived them to be taking with gender presentation outside of a ritual context. I commented to Kyaw So Mo that at least one famous spirit medium, old and

respected and now passed away, had crossdressed on a daily basis until her passing, he answered that in her case it was different, because she was a ‘true woman’ (*meinma gyi*). In other words, his criticism of the young men was based on the fact that they were crossdressing in a playful way, without being ‘true’ trans women.

What Kyaw So Mo makes evident through his clarification is that the politics of gender presentation in spirit medium circles is a matter of training by established performers who teach how to privatise sexuality and to only indulge in public crossgender public presentation in the ritual context. This suggests a situation comparable to that observed in Thailand, where ‘public discourses about sex and sexuality are more intense sites of contestation and anxiety than private practices’ (Cook and Jackson 1999:10). As in Thailand, male homosexuals in Burma are in a position in which, ‘so long as a gay man does not express his sexuality, whether by talking about it or making it visible, he is unlikely to be subjected to criticism’ (Jackson 1999: 237). That is why Kyaw So Mo instructs his closest disciples to restrict their sexual life to the private sphere, and this includes avoiding cross-dressing. Male-to-female cross-dressing outside of the ritual context would be read as a sign of homosexuality.

However, the actual phenomenon one is confronted with in spirit festivals or spirit possession ceremonies is far from the restricted behaviour advocated by Kyaw So Mo and his counterparts. Rather, it is one of remarkable license in gender presentation and sexual behaviour. Festivals are particularly famous for having a large number of cross-dressed young people parading around in small groups and for bands of often drunk young male villagers roaming around in a particularly unruly way, amidst the festival crowd.³⁸ This seems at odds with the Kyaw So Mo’s position on disciplined behaviour, and supports the idea that male

³⁸ This behaviour suggests that sexual liaisons may take place between the young male villagers and the cross-dressing youths. However, I have no clear information on this. Furthermore, it also has to be kept in mind that, as a rule, sexual intercourse is restricted in the temples and ritualised spaces of the camps of the spirit mediums during festivals.

spirit mediumship is equated with transgenderism. Only when one looks more closely at who does what and where in spirit festivals does one get a different, more nuanced, picture of the politics of sexuality and gender presentation in male spirit medium circles.

Certainly, established spirit mediums must be distinguished from the numerous *meinmasha* travelling in their entourages, who may or may not have already been initiated into spirit mediumship. Kyaw So Mo is not the only established spirit medium who dresses in an exclusively male fashion on a day-to-day basis and reserves cross-dressing for the ritual embodiment of female spirits. He does not self-identify as *nat kadaw* ('female spouse of a male spirit') but as *nat hsaya* ('spirit master'). It is probably common for male homosexuals who are established spirit mediums to cover their sexual preference under their reputation as ritual specialist.

While I was talking to Hpyo about his striking choice, the young man commented once again on the fact that established male mediums avoid LGBT organisations such as Colors Rainbow, despite the fact that many are homosexual. According to Hpyo, established spirit mediums such as Kyaw So Mo feel they get enough social recognition through the devotion offered by affluent people who frequent their ritual performances. That is why they are not interested in fighting for the rights of homosexuals.

Hpyo may be right in saying that established spirit mediums feel they receive sufficient respect from their sometimes impressive followings to mean that they do not need to seek basic recognition of their homosexuality. But one could see their success as the result of their skillful positioning at the crossroads of the Burmese sex/gender order and of the hierarchies prevailing in the spirit possession world. It is worth noting that their relative concealment of

their sexual preference is both a necessity of their transactions with well-to-do clients who are concerned about respectability and of the ritual regulations governing the main temple at the Taungbyon festival.³⁹ At that festival, spirit mediums who take on the main ritual roles, those of Taungbyon ‘ministers’, are explicitly required to be straight male mediums. Although male spirit mediumship is commonly associated with homosexuality and transgenderism by the general public, it needs to be remembered that there are also male spirit mediums who are straight men. The roles of Taungbyon ‘ministers’ are the most prestigious and the most lucrative in the ritual hierarchy – together with those of ‘queens’ – and it is surprising to see that otherwise influential and ambitious homosexual spirit mediums do not try to compete for them, as if they were applying a kind of self-censorship to themselves.⁴⁰ Instances of male spirit mediums who are Taungbyon ‘ministers’ and are suspected of having violated the rule concerning the restrictions on sexual behaviour are known and such mediums are sharply criticised; some have even experienced an untimely death, interpreted as the result of their transgression. Whether it is self-imposed or trespassed, this rule is in its very existence a sign that prejudice towards male homosexuality continues to exist in the context of spirit mediumship, which explains why established ritual specialists prefer not to reveal their sexual preference.

³⁹ The Taungbyon main temple is managed by a local family of temple custodians who are not supposed to be engaged in mediumship as part of their function. Spirit mediums who gather in Taungbyon at festival times take turns playing roles in the ritual programme at the main temple according to a set of fixed written rules, which are enforced by these custodians.

⁴⁰ Access to the role is a mixture of transmission of the ritual positions from a master to his main disciples and of election or confirmation by the spirits, the process being controlled by the family who are the Taungbyon temple guardians. The role of ‘minister’ is central because it consists of leading the series of homage dances performed in turn by spirit mediums at the temple, following an established sequence. It is coupled with the role of ‘queen’, selected from among female spirit mediums. The number of ‘queens’ and ‘ministers’ has grown over time from four ‘queens’ and four ‘ministers’ to many more in the 1990s, as an effect of the growing population of spirit mediums and of the pressure on these ritual positions. This corresponds with the more general growth of spirit possession rituals in Burma in recent decades. However, most of the male homosexual spirit mediums I know have not competed for the position of ‘minister’, without acknowledging that the requirement to be a straight man to assume this role may have played in their avoidance.

However, there is a widespread association in the general public between transgenderism, homosexuality and male spirit mediumship. Festivals are often packed with gays and cross-dressing people, which sharply contrasts with the reluctance of established male spirit mediums to display their sexual preferences. The explanation for this discrepancy may lie in the fact that the reserved, less open stance itself is a construct of male spirit mediums as they progress along their career as ritual specialists. As they gain in social recognition as ritual specialists, they seem to erase their homosexuality from their outward appearance. In this regard, spirit mediumship cannot be regarded as a context in which basic acceptance of male homosexuals, which Hpyo was first looking for in LGBT activism, is to be expected. In any case, the ‘protection’ sought by Hpyo through spirit mediumship does not fit the standard of social acceptance which LGBT activist organisations have started to call for in Burma. Indeed, the expectation that he should achieve social recognition as a male homosexual, which Hpyo expressed during his interview, is very far from what most established spirit mediums, such as Kyaw So Mo, would aim to achieve.

Finally, one finds that before becoming recognised ritual specialists, many young male homosexual spirit mediums turn to cross-dressing, especially in the context of festivals, which allows them to avoid the ostracism attached to public expressions of male homosexuality. Hpyo himself, although always dressed in the conventional Burmese male fashion in his professional and family life, turned to more ambiguous outfits, unisex jeans, a square shirt open over a T-shirt, and long hair, when he went to the Taungbyon festival, as do the other young spirit mediums in Sithu’s entourage in his personal camp, which is separate from that of Kyaw So Mo. It seems that if they are inclined to homosexuality, young subordinate male spirit mediums easily turn to cross-dressing when they arrive at the festival.

The gender presentation of male homosexuals in the spirit possession scene needs to be the focus of more attention, as something that is dynamic and contextual and that is influenced by the hierarchies that are in play. Established spirit mediums, some of them leaders with impressive followings, wear conventional Burmese male dress and hide their sexual practices with their ritual status. Young subordinate spirit mediums would rather cross-dress, which grants them relative sexual license. Neither of these two categories of spirit mediums get 'protection' through any basic recognition of their rights as homosexuals – they get protection either from social prestige or from assuming a feminised status.

What this exploration of the spirit possession scene shows is its importance as a context in which the sex/gender order operating in Burma is manifested. As a gendered liminal space offering the possibility of cross-dressing under the shelter of spirits, it is a context where men are able to assume a feminised status – which is why *meinmasha* are so common here.

As with the *kathoe*y figure in the Thai case, *meinmasha* stands for an alternative to the Western gay model. Jackson discusses the situation in Thailand in the late 20th century, writing that 'the Thai sex/gender order is maintained so long as a male upholds his status through the performance of masculinity or, conversely, if he abandons his masculinity and assumes the feminised status of a *kathoe*y ... The gay man is out of place within the traditional discursive schema, neither truly a 'normal man' nor fully a *kathoe*y.' (Jackson 1999: 239)

In this regard, it is possible to see the new discourse around LGBT rights breaking into the Burmese spirit possession scene, as discussed in this chapter, as a moment in time parallel to the emergence of masculine gay men in 1960s Thailand, which ‘elicited an unprecedented severe condemnation’ (ibid.: 233). Kyaw So Mo’s comments make one realise the disruptive effect that the discourse around LGBT rights is likely to represent for the sex/gender order in spirit possession circles, an order that does not differ from the conventional one in Burma except that it is a context in which men who wish to assume a feminised status are able to do so.

In Vietnam, as in Burma, spirit possession is a context where men are able to assume a feminised status. The Vietnamese word describing men who assume a feminised status, *dong co*, resembles *meinmasha* in Burmese and *kathoe* in Thai. It is also the term for a male medium channelling a female princess spirit in the Four Palaces spirit possession cult.⁴¹ Thus it would appear that there are comparable notions of men with feminised status across mainland Southeast Asia, and spirit possession serves as a context in which feminised status for such men is permissible. These notions serve as an alternative to the Western model of the gay man.

The specificity of the Burmese sex/gender order as manifested in the spirit possession scene relies on the importance of ritualised initiation into the role of spirit medium. ‘Having a female spirit’ may work as an explanation of male homosexuality that is able to make it more acceptable because it reproduces heteronormativity. Initiation is then processed as an institutionalisation of a matrimonial relationship with a spirit of the opposite sex. As we have seen in Hpyo’s case, the embodiment of a female spirit during the ritual ‘wedding’ equates to

⁴¹ I thank Paul Sorrentino for this information.

ritual cross-dressing and may operate to reveal the potential of an alternative gender presentation, and hence to resolve the problem of same-sex social acceptance. More generally, ritual cross-dressing in spirit possession séances and festivals allows male homosexual spirit mediums to momentarily transcend their socially-ascribed gender status, as if gender were principally constructed through dress. This offers male spirit mediums the possibility of assuming a feminised status, either in the delimited context of rituals or on a more stable basis. In this regard, spirit possession works for male homosexuals, as for others considered to be 'deviant', such as drunkards, as a place where they may behave according to their preference under the umbrella of a spirit's influence.

For Hpyo, with his background working in LGBT circles advocating for queer people's rights, this gender-liminal space offers the possibility of a reconciliation with the conventional Burmese sex/gender order. However, if the possibility of cross-dressing under the protection of Ma Ngway Taung truly permits him a kind of liminality that is a middle way within the Burmese sex/gender order, it nonetheless does prevent him from claiming full rights for male homosexuals, as he would be able to do through LGBT activism. Hpyo's modernist stance on spirit mediumship does not preclude his full engagement in the spirit life. However, Hpyo's future in this scene remains open. Will he, despite his declaration that he does not intend to do so, develop a career as a ritual specialist and evolve as do most established spirit mediums today, or will he maintain his critical position, going in and out of the ritual scene? For the time being, no-one can foresee what his future will be.

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