



Shin Byu – religiosity, community ties and economic matters in a Burmese ceremony

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December 16, 2016

Anthropologists have been fascinated with religious rituals and life cycle events since the emergence of our discipline. Such ceremonies were the focus of many early contributions (Arnold Van Gennep, Victor Turner and others), and up to today students are being reminded not to miss these important events under any circumstances while they are on field work. Following this tradition, I will briefly examine, through an anthropological lens, the most important religious event in the childhood of most male Burmese, their novitiation ceremony (*Shin Byu*).

According to Buddhist beliefs in Myanmar, every man should spend some period of his life in the Sangha, the community of Buddhist monks. Ideally, this should happen for the first time when the man is still a child. However, under the age of twenty, a male person will only be initiated into the Sangha with the status of a novice, which is why the respective ceremony is called a novitiation ceremony; as opposed to the full ordination that only applies to men over twenty. But whether a novitiation can happen or not depends, after all, on the economic situation of the household, because such a ceremony comes with high expenses: Donations have to be given to monks and monasteries; and relatives, friends and neighbors, as well as the Buddhist monks who perform the rituals, have to be fed. Poor families thus often have to rely on community support and the generosity of donors from outside of their kin-group, and some cannot manage to organize a *Shin Byu* for their sons at all. In contrast, many wealthier families host several of these ceremonies throughout the years of their sons' childhood.

Based on Buddha's life: The procedure

The majority of *Shin Byu* ceremonies take place in the months of April, around the Buddhist New Year, or in July, when the start of the monsoon season marks the beginning of Buddhist lent. A *Shin Byu* ceremony always follows a certain procedure. After a child's parents and the abbot of a monastery have picked a date (sometimes with the help of astrologers), this date will be announced publicly and everyone in the neighborhood is invited and expected to come.

On the day of the event itself, the visitors gather at a monastery or at the family's home in the morning. Usually, not only one but several boys will enter the Sangha as novices on this specific day. They are either siblings of one family, or children from the same neighborhood whose families combined their efforts to arrange the event. Often, also adult men will participate to fully ordain as monks, side by side with the new novices.

The novitiation ceremony is based on the life story of Buddha, who was presumably born as Siddhartha Gautama, around 563 years BCE, into a wealthy and influential Indian family. At the age of twenty-nine he left his palace and relatives, and on his journey he was confronted with the burdens of aging, suffering, sickness and death, subjects that had been kept away from him up to this point. Affected by his discoveries, Siddhartha renounced worldly pleasures, practiced meditation and finally reached Enlightenment. Then, he formed the Sangha and developed his teachings.

Following those stages, the boys who experience their *Shin Byu* (aged at least eight in most cases, often they are teenagers) will be dressed like princes in the morning, with precious white silk clothes, jewelry, a crown and make up. Sometimes, the boys' sisters will also be dressed up as princesses. The girls might go to a nunnery for a few days, or have a traditional ear-piercing ceremony that does not have a religious implication. In some cases they only get dressed as princesses so that they "won't get jealous" as one of my informants said. Dressed up, and as the center of attention, the children will go on a procession with their visitors. Traditionally, the boys were seated on horses. This still happens in many cases, but the horses can also get replaced by ox-carts, cars or other vehicles. The procession will pass through the city or village, often stopping for moments of worship at important pagodas and spirit shrines. Observing such a procession can give an idea about the wealth of the family. One of the processions I have witnessed in Pathein had at least two-hundred participants, at a *Shin Byu* for only two brothers. Many of the participants were dressed in costumes as heavenly beings, elephants, and other creatures from the religious realm. Everyone else in the procession was dressed up in their finest exemplar of the traditional Bamar dress, containing a blouse and a skirt (*longyi*). After the procession reached its destination, many participants immediately took off their costumes and left the event. I was told that the people in costumes and those who carried Buddhist flags were hired for this processions to demonstrate the ceremony's strong religious significance.





A small part of the procession.

While the hosting family prepared lunch for the countless visitors who stayed, the names of donors were read out through a loudspeaker; and as this announcement disclosed, donors included several people working in banks and bigger companies.

Families who are less wealthy and influential would have smaller processions, composed only of a few pick-up cars and no costumes except the ones for the soon-to-be novices.

In any case, after the procession there is usually a time when invited monks read out Buddhist sermons. The boys, their families and the visitors would sit and pray with the monks. This period lasts from several minutes to around one hour. At the end of the prayers the monks will hand over the robes to the children, which have been bought by their family beforehand. What follows is a feast, where monks as well as visitors are served food by the host family. The food contains rice and curry, and sometimes snacks such as chocolate bars, and cans of juice. Like the procession, also the dimension of the feast can be an indicator for the family's economic situation. Usually, people eat quickly as there is often more visitors than tables and one needs to make space for the next person.

After lunch, the boys will have to change clothes. Their valuable prince-outfit will be exchanged for the simple maroon-colored Buddhist robe, one of the very few things that monks and novices are allowed to possess. This symbolizes the renouncement of material wealth and the transition to novicehood, with focusing on meditation and teachings, as the Buddha also did. The invited monks will shave the heads of the new novices with a blade, while family members will hold a towel under the child's head to collect his hair. Later, the hair is buried in the soil. The children are Buddhist novices now, they will leave their home to stay in the monastery and study Buddhist teachings for a while, often for around one week.

On the day after the *Shin Byu* ceremony the novices follow the monks for the alms-collecting round early in the morning, and family members and neighbors honor them and hand out food, snacks, money and other necessities like toothpaste.

From an anthropological perspective a *Shin Byu* ceremony is interesting in different regards. With reference to our projects I want to have a quick look at religious, economic and social aspects and the links between them.

What there is to gain: Merit from children to parents; tribute from parents to children

Firstly, the ceremony is meaningful in a religious sense, in fact mainly for the novice's parents. Sending a son to the monastery is viewed as one of the most important ways to accumulate

merit which translates into good Karma, important for future lives, especially those of the child's mother. In that sense, the son functions as a provider of spiritual capital. "My mother believes, if she organizes some [*Shin Byu*] ceremonies for me, the door to hell is closed for her"¹ one teenager told me. Given that such a ceremony can happen several times and at different ages of a child, it cannot be understood as a one-time *rite de passage* from one phase of life to the next, but it is much more regarded as a milestone on the religious path of the child and his parents.



Shaving the head.

It is also, in a way, a temporary change, almost an inversion of child-parent hierarchies. Different grown-up men told me that, while they were not very enthusiastic about the monastic rules they had to follow as a novice (getting up at 5.00 am, no food after 11.00 am, many hours of teaching and meditating, sleeping far away from their home), they were amazed by the respect and honoring they received from their parents during this period, like, that their parents would kneel down in front of them, and bow, with their foreheads touching the ground. The son, for a while, turns from a subordinate family member into a member of the Sangha, and thereby his role and function as someone who enables laypeople to gain merit, superposes his worldly relation to the parents.

The economic aspect

Secondly, the *Shin Byu* ceremony is relevant in economic terms. In many cases it poses quite a financial burden to the family. One of the families I know, that owns several houses in Pathein, sold one of these houses for the *Shin Byu* ceremony of their sons and several other children from the neighborhood. Often one family member functions as the main donor. In this case, it was the novices' uncle. The teenager would say "My uncle sold a house for my *Shin Byu*". The house was sold for 100 Lakh (ca. 7700 USD) of which 40 Lakh (ca. 3000 USD) were spent on the ceremony. This specific ceremony was of a rather pompous kind, but even more modest versions cost a lot of money for families. In a different case, a woman who had worked in Singapore for many years came back to organize a *Shin Byu* for her nephews. She suffered from health problems and felt it was time to make a religious investment. Being regarded as financially most capable to arrange the festival, due to her higher salary in Singapore, she also

saw it as social duty toward her kin to pay for most of the expenses.

The expenses include costs for costumes and robes, food for all participants and donations to the local monastery and to the monks who performed the rituals. For boys from very poor backgrounds or orphans, wealthier non-kin persons can sponsor such a ceremony. This is usually done by couples who do not have a son of their own, and it enables them to gain merit for themselves. In certain cases it is also possible that children join a monastery without a *Shin Byu* ceremony, in cases like Buddhist-run orphanages or schools that are attached to monasteries. However, normally the ceremony is seen as a desirable event for any family.



Shin Byu Meal.

***Shin Byu* as a collective undertaking**

Thirdly, as already became clear when looking at the economic aspects, the *Shin Byu* has a social component. Melford Spiro, fifty years ago, pointed out how spending money on religious festivals in Myanmar is a “rational” choice in many ways, as those occasions not only help to gain good Karma but also provide a lot of worldly pleasure and strengthen community ties (Spiro 1966). The *Shin Byu* ceremony is an excellent example for that. With everyone who lives close to the place being invited, it is an opportunity for neighbors and family members to meet, exchange news, pray and eat together. A good relationship to the surrounding community is crucial in a situation where the state does not provide economic support for most people. Neighbors build informal economic networks in the form of saving- and insurance groups, they lend money to each other and might support each other to find employment. Usually, people will therefore take social occasions very seriously, as they cannot afford risking to fall out of these neighborhood support circles. While in Buddhism generally the right intention of making a gift counts more than the amount that is given, and lay Buddhists emphasize this part a lot, the systems of donations clearly include an aspect of social pressure. Donations are public acts: During the daily alms-collecting rounds neighbors can see who donates food to the monks; when it comes to monetary donations, lists and loudspeaker will announce who gave how much money; and parts of monastery buildings, like banks, roofs, doors and so on, usually carry the names of the donors of this particular piece. While I was told that this is done for transparency reasons, the visibility of donated amounts does intensify expectations of

spending money for religious purposes for lay people. In summary, the social component inherent in the ritualized ceremony has several layers: The communal pressure to organize a *Shin Byu*, the strengthening of community ties during a *Shin Byu*, and the minimizing of the financial burden through collective efforts.

References

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Note

¹ According to Theravada Buddhism there are 31 planes of existence into which one can be reborn. The lowest of these planes is the realm of what can be translated to “hells”. Depending on sources, there are many, sometimes thousands, of different hells. It is believed that a person who has accumulated very bad karma has to spend some time here, before experiencing another rebirth.