

Religious Syncretism as Outer Civilization: Comparative Study in Burma, Vietnam and Japan

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I. Introduction

Southeast Asia has been influenced by outer civilizations in various aspects. One of elements from the outside, and that of the most important ones, is religion. In Southeast Asia there exist almost all of the major religions of the world. After Hinduism, perhaps the oldest civilization, Buddhism from India and the mixed religion of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism from China have come. Then Islam has prevailed and in the modern period Christianity has arrived.

These foreign religions encountered and are mixed with native belief, which has led to a situation of syncretism. Native belief is also called as folk-belief or substratum of belief. It includes elements of animism, those of shamanism, notions of guardian spirits, cult of the dead and so on.

In this essay, I will discuss three points as follows; (1) varieties of spirits, especially those of the dead in native belief, (2) influences from foreign religions, as well as political factors, for formation of the pantheon in spirit-beliefs, (3) variation of situations of the syncretism.

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II. Burmese Belief

Buddhism and *nat* (spirit) –belief are the two major forms of belief in Burma, though for Burmese Buddhist the former is in the category of religion and the latter is not.

Burmese people have so many varieties of spirits and other supernatural beings.¹⁾

My tentative classification of *nat* is as follows;

- (1) spirits in the heavenly world in the Buddhist cosmology, which are of Hindu origin and usually called *deiwa*.
- (2) spirits dwelling in various things:
 - a) spirits in natural things and natural phenomena, such as tree, forest, river, pond, rain, cloud, storm etc.
 - b) spirits in things concerned with human activities, such as field, rice, house, well, barrage and person him-/herself.
 - c) spirits which rule or guard physical or socio-cultural territories, such as household, village, kin-circle, district and state.
- (3) spirits of the dead, which are developed into the elaborate pantheon of Thirty-seven *Nat*.



<Picture 1>
Buddha shrine in
the east of house,
in Burma

¹⁾ As for *nat*-belief, see Temple 1907, Htin Aung 1962, Spiro 1967, Poe Kyar 1973, Tamura 1987, 1989 and others.

<Picture 2>
Small shrine for spirit dwelling
in the tree, in Burma



<Picture 3>
Coconut hanged in the pillar of
east-north or east-south corner
of house, in Burma



<Picture 4>
Shrine for village-guardian-spirit,
in Burma



Spirits of the first variety are not much concerned with life of Burmese, especially in village life. These spirits are recognized generally as guardian spirits of Buddhism. They are called upper-spirits

(*athet-nat*). On the other hand, spirits of the second and the third varieties (2 & 3) are called lower-spirits (*auk-nat*) and are indigenous ones, not mentioned in Buddhist texts. These lower-spirits interfere with life of Burmese.

Nat-belief has been taken as a kind of animism, grounded on existences of spirits dwelling in various things (2-a & b). The term of animism, however, has ambiguous meanings. In almost every kind of things there exists spirit, but *nat* does not dwell in every individual thing. Whether *nat* dwells in each thing or not depends whether man recognize its existence by paying homages to it, observing taboos around it, and so on. In the strict sense, animism is a function of cognitive process of human beings. But the idea of dwelling spirits involves notions of soul, vital principle, invisible power and so on. It also is related to the notion of lordship or guardianship, around which have been developed *nat* of the category 2-c.

Nat of the third variety are more individualistic, that is, they have own names, human characters, own images and legends connected with places of their lives. They are often followed by believers, some of whom are shamanistic specialists. These spirits have supernatural powers, which are regarded as potentially dangerous and malevolent, though believers use these powers to fulfill their wishes. Also when they are hurt by improper attitudes, or sometimes capriciously, they send diseases or other misfortunes. *Nat* of the second variety has such powers in the lesser degree. And the Thirty-seven *Nat* are sometimes mixed with spirits dwelling in things, especially territorial spirits (2-c). Typical example is *Min Mahagiri* mixed with household *nat*. *Myinbyu-shin* merges into village-guardian *nat*. Some of the Thirty-seven *Nat* have their domain by nature, so rule or guard the district.

Striking feature of the Thirty-seven *Nat* is that they died by “unnatural death” and became *nat*. Most of them are of royal family,

ministers and other officers during their life time. Some are executed under suspicion of rebellion or because of mere misunderstanding. After becoming *nat* they hold domain or fief and are addressed as lord (*min*). It indicates that their cults are prescribed and institutionalized by kings.²⁾



<Picture 6>

<Picture 5>

Images of 37 Nat institutionalized by King, in Shwezigon Pagoda in Pagan, in Burma

<Picture 7>
Shamanistic medium (= nat-kadaw = wife of nat) in Burma. 'She' is not lady. Some mediums are transvestite and also are homo-sexual.



<Picture 8>

A medium clean a new car by dancing to get off accident and other misfortunes in Burma.

²⁾ During Pagan period(AD9~13C) kings climbed to Mt. Popa near the capital to hold ritual of the spirit dwelling in the mountain at the time of his enthronement(Pe Maung Tin and Luce 1973).



<Picture 9>
Dance of nat-kadaw and believers
in a Burmese village. Men do
not approach to such ritual



<Picture 10>
A Burmese girl drinking liquor,
which is prohibited by Buddhism,
especially for women.



<Picture 11>
In Burma, nat-kadaw
(shamanistic medium)

III. Aspects of Japanese Belief

In Japan there are so many kinds of spirits or *kami*.³⁾ I will describe them comparing to the classification of Burmese *nat*.

(1) *Deiwa* were brought on into Japan with the introduction of Buddhism and are called *ten*, which means heaven. But they did not

³⁾ Usually *kami* (*gami*, *shin* or *jinn*) is translated as god, because of its being personified. However, *kami* is not the sole God. Some may be translated as spirits, and the others may be as deities. This is the same for *nat*. For example, we had better translate the Thirty-seven *Nat* as deities. But for the convenience of discussion, I use spirit signifying these supernatural beings.

take root into Japanese life.

(2) Spirits dwelling in various things are abundant. We can easily perceive animistic world from classical mythology, for example, those recorded in *Kojiki*, literature in the 8th century, as well from still surviving folklore.

In traditional Japanese life the most important spirit is *uji-gami*, a kind of territorial spirit. *Uji* means blood stock (or clan, lineage, family), so *uji-gami* implies spirit of blood stock. But virtually it means spirit of localized community, usually of village. It is supposed that founding ancestor(s) or tuteerly spirits held by kinsfolk, who had settled firstly in the locality or were predominant in the community, were turned into guardian spirits of the whole community. This reminds us that in Burmese village they enshrine founding ancestor as village guardian-spirit, called *Bou-bou-ji*.

Uji-gami is held to supervise and guard the whole community. Its members go to shrine of the spirit on occasions of rites of passages, except funeral rite. As well in Burma dwellers do offering to village-*nat* on occasions of rites of passage, except funeral rite.⁴⁾

Yashiki-gami (*yashiki* means house-compound in Japanese) would be compared to small shrines attended by kinsfolk in Burmese village. In Japanese house there is a shelf dedicated to spirit, while hanging coconut, being offered to and symbolizing for household *nat* in Burmese house. Further, in Japan there have existed ideas of guardian spirits of domain and state as well as in Burma.

By the way, personal tuteerly spirit in Japan is not prominent and usually is mixed with *Ujigami*.

⁴⁾ I add some points. In Japan, when a hundred days have passed after birth, baby would be brought to pay homage to shrine of *uji-gami*. Although nowadays most wedding ceremonies are held in hotel or wedding hall, the ritual is taken place before altar of *kami*, regarded as a branch of shrine. In rural area, new couples have to go to pay homage to *uji-gami* shrine on New Year or on the day of annual festival of the shrine. In Burma, on occasions of *kinmunta-hte* (ritual of washing head of new-born child), *shinbyu* (ordination ceremony) and ear-boring ceremony, and wedding, offering is made to village-*nat*, as well as house-guardian-*nat*. One purpose of such customs is to announce joining of new members to the community or changing status of its members to guardian spirit.

(3) *Tatari-gami* is spirit, contrary to *uji-gami* and others mentioned in the category 2, not domesticated and alien to the community. *Tataru* originally means appearance of supernatural beings. *Tatari-gami* shows its presence by its fearful power, that is, sending diseases and calamities. Belief in *tatari-gami* was developed into and was institutionalized as cult of *goryo*, which was rife in Heian period (AD 794-1192). The first reliable record of *goryo* was a list of five (or six) *goryo* mentioned in a historical record in the 9th century. Two characteristics are common to these five spirits. Firstly, they were charged with political crimes and the charges were suspicion of rebellion. Secondly, they were exiled out of the capital city and they died in the strange land. Their death was regarded as “unnatural death” and because of their grudges they were held responsible for calamities (Inoue: 1980).

The most popular and typical example of *goryo* is that of Michizane Sugahara, the cult of which was institutionalized in the 10th century, combined with that of thunder-god and called *tenjin* cult.⁵⁾ According to legend of *tenjin*(Kishi 1967: 184-237), an orphan was adopted by an aristocrat. The boy was excellent both in literature and in martial arts. He was held to have supernatural powers. He became prominent in the royal court and promoted to a minister. But another minister made a false charge and under suspicion of disloyalty to the king (*Tenno*) he was exiled from the capital city to Kyushu. He died in exile and became *tenjin*. He took his revenge on his political rivals and their families, and brought calamities by thunder on Kyoto, the capital. The king conferred a posthumous court rank on him and so he retrieved his honour and became quiet. Now the *tenjin* cult is popular in Japan, especially for the purpose of promoting scholarly abilities.

In this legend we observe the theme that an outsider achieved

⁵⁾ *Tenjin* means heavenly (=ten) deity (=jin).

some political power and after his downfall, he died in unfortunate circumstances. The theme is similar to legends of some of the Thirty-seven *Nat*, especially that of *Taungbyon Nat*.

In case of *Taung by on nat*,⁶⁾ during the reign of King Anawayatha in Pagan period in 11th century, two orphan brothers were nursed by a minister to grow up into powerful soldiers. They were sons between an Indian drifter and a mountain ogress. They followed expedition for China led by the king and established brilliant achievements. On the way back to the capital, the procession of expeditions topped over in *Taung by on* village, on the east bank of *Ayeyarwaddy River*, where the king ordered staffs to bring one piece of brick for each to build a pagoda. But two brothers ignored this order, for they were indulged in playing game. So two brothers were executed by the king and were turned into *nat*. Then the king's procession could not move because the *nat* was holding it by their power. King Anawayatha enshrined them in *Taungbyon* village and gave them the domain surrounding it, so he could return to Pagan (Bagan). Now the cult of *Taungbyon* brothers is very popular in Burma, for the power is strong to fulfill wishes of believers.

IV. Belief in Vietnam

In Vietnam, religious practices are complicated and mixed no less than in other societies of Southeast Asia. Ancestor worship is practiced for a shelf in the inside of house, where put incense burners dedicated to and symbolizing for ancestors. Shrine for ancestors is sometimes found in the outside. In house's shelf, along with burners for ancestors, there is another one dedicated for spirits as a whole, as well as the third one for spirits of Vietnamese Taoism. Beliefs of

⁶⁾ As for legend of *Taungbyon Nat*, see note.1. For the analysis of it, see Tamura 1989.

these spirits also contain elements of animism, those of shamanism, cult of the dead, as in Burma and Japan.

On the other hand, in each community has a *dinh*, a kind of communal house, where guardian spirit for the community is enshrined. This spirit is either founding ancestor, historical hero, or saint of Confucianism. Indigenous spirit or that of Vietnamese Taoism is also turned into the guardian one. Moreover, there are Buddhist temple, Taoist temple, and shrines for indigenous spirits. Such religious structures sometimes contain plural elements of religious beliefs. As it is said that “saints are in the foreside and Buddha is in the backside”, saints and spirits of Taoism or of native belief are enshrined in the front and to the back of them images of Buddha, Bodhisattva and Buddhist deities are put in order.

Then, compared to the case of Burmese belief, as to that of Japanese one, cult of spirits in natural things has been developed into the more sophisticated pantheon in Vietnamese Taoism. The universe is divided into three domains or into four, called as “Three Thrones” or “Four Worship Palace”. The notion of three domains, that is heaven, earth and water, originated from Taoism in China, but in Vietnam the fourth domain, that of forest or mountain has been added and “Mother-Goddess” has become to govern each domain and spirits dwelling in it. As followers of each goddess, there are spirits of orphans of both sexes in premature death as well as many princes (deities). Shamatic mediums attend in these goddesses to use their power to fulfill wishes of believers or of themselves.

Like *nat* of the third variety in Burma, we find the cult of historical figures. While some of them are real ones, the most famous of whom is Tran-Hung-Dao, others are legendary ones. But they are often positioned in Vietnamese history.



<Picture 12>
Image of 'mother-goddess',
in Vietnam



<Picture 13>
Shamanistic medium is offering to 'Mother-Goddess'
in Vietnam

One of them is Ba-Chua-Kho, whose shrine is situated in the east of Hanoi.⁷⁾ The number of believers to visit to pray there is increasing recently, for the cult is famous for being efficient to earn money. Ba-Chua-Kho was a daughter or wife of the 3rd Emperor of Li dynasty (AD1010-1225). She led Vietnamese army to fight against Chinese, which made an invasion upon Vietnam. When her army retreated from field, she fired the storehouse not to hand



<Picture 14> Shamanistic medium who is man, wears woman's garment, in Vietnam

over food and weapons to the enemy, and was burned to death. After her death, shrine for her was erected in 1077 in a village near the battle field. As she sacrificed herself to guard wealth of the storehouse, she is told to bring prosperity. She is also related with agriculture, for she cultivated rice fields or scattered seeds in her life time.

Ba-Chua-Kho, which means female deity of owner of storehouse, would be originated from the notion of mother-goddess, of which cult has prevailed in Vietnam from the olden days, as one of basis of

⁷⁾ As for the cult of Ba-Chua-Kho, see Tamura 1998 and 2005.

the pantheon of Vietnamese Taoism. I will point out that in Vietnam cult of the dead, especially one in “violent death”, is crucial to the belief for spirits of prominent power. By the way, it is said that nobody knows the real name of Ba-Chua-Kho. According to versions of the legend, Ba-Chua-Kho is a daughter in a family of poor peasant. The king found her on the way of his royal tour and brought her to his court. So she could be said to be solitary, that is, a sort of orphan.



<Picture 15>
At the time of festival, many believers gather with offering in the shrine of Ba-Chua-Kho, in Vietnam.



<Picture 16>
The image of Ba-Chua-Kho, in Vietnam



<Picture 17>
Gift of return from Ba-Chua-Kho, including many treasures, as well as note of US dollars, not that of Vietnamese currency.

V. Conclusion

The following are points at issue;

(1) We can find similarities among *nat*-belief, especially that of the Thirty-seven *Nat* in Burma, *goryo* in Japan and the cult of mother-goddess in Vietnam. These spirits or deities are powerful to fulfill wishes of believers, though they are sometimes fearful existence held responsible for diseases and misfortunes. In their legends, we can point out the common theme, that is, a solitary existence or an outsider, political implications and unnatural or violent death. Especially, these beliefs would be related to the notions of sacrifice. The elder brother of father of Taungbyon *nat*, coming from India, was caught by the lord of Thaton in the southern part of Burma and was dismembered. Pieces of his body were buried at four corner of the throne room and his blood was scattered over rampart of the town. Then he became guardian-spirit of the town. When Mandalay, the royal capital of the last dynasty in Burma, was built in the nineteenth century, several persons were buried at corners of the wall. It is not sure whether this event was historical fact or not, but many legends tell that persons were sacrificed at the construction of castle, town, pond, or barrage and they become its guardian-spirit. Burmese have fears for the dead of unnatural death and have beliefs in their supernatural powers. These dead are called as *nat-sein*, that is, “raw” *nat*.

As well, in Vietnam, among incense burners for ancestors, there includes that for the dead of premature death. They are said to have miraculous powers. Also “mother-goddess” are followed by spirits of orphans in premature death, as mentioned before. These beliefs would be related to the concept of ambivalent or ambiguous existence, related with the notion of pollution and the sentiment of awe-inspiring, which is the subject of structural anthropology.

Here I would point out that belief in the dead of unnatural death is the substratum of native belief in Southeast Asia, as well perhaps in Japan. Then I will add one thing. In Burma and Vietnam, these cult are accompanied by shamanistic rituals, colored by noisy and cheerful music as well as by dancing with showy costumes. Also the cults of *goryo* in Japan are often colored by showy festivities.

(2) In Burma, in Vietnam and in Japan, the world of spirits are made up into the pantheon. In Burma, its upper part is occupied by *deiwa*, Buddhist deities. In Japan, upper part of the pantheon is for heavenly spirits which are held to be ancestors of the ruling family (that is, *Tenno* family), while its lower part is for earthly spirits (those of localized community). The formation of pantheon is related with political overlordship.

In Burma, cult of the Thirty-Seven Nat is institutionalized by King Anawayatha. Moreover, cults of some *nat* had been cherished by rulers and became popular to the extent of nation. But the kingship was not legitimized by the cult of *nat*, but by Buddhism. So *deiwa-nat*, the guardians of Buddhism, always take seats in the upper part, while in the lower part spirits could not be hierarchically organized as a whole. And again, according to the Burmese idea, souls of the dead kings go to heaven and become *deiwa*, but they have no immediate relations with existent rulers.

In Vietnam, the Taoist pantheon was introduced from China, which modeled after the political and bureaucratic hierarchy in this world. But, along with it, the pantheon of Vietnamese Taoism was formed, which is not hierarchical and is female dominant. Contrary to it, the Chinese pantheon is male dominant, as it is governed by the Emperor-god.

So I would say that the pantheon of Southeast Asia as, in Burma and in Vietnam, is not hierarchical,⁸⁾ while that of East Asia, as in

Japan and China, is hierarchical and centralized. Needless to say, the pantheon in Burma and Vietnam, was formed under influences of the outer religion, that is, Buddhism and Chinese religious beliefs.

(3) In Vietnam, ancestor worship, the core of Vietnamese belief is ideologically male dominant, being originated from Confucianism. Also *dinh*, the official center of a community, is occupied by men, and women are excluded from it, but shrine, where women are dominant, is often situated adjacent to *dihn*. Moreover, in Vietnamese folk religion there are relatively many female deities and in Vietnamese history or legend heroines often appear like Ba-Chua-Kho. Also in Buddhist temples, which contains many elements of other beliefs as described above, religious practice are mainly borne by women. On the other hand, in Burma Buddhism is ideologically borne by men, though women are more ardent in practices. Spirit-belief, which is juxtaposed with, or is put under the Buddhism, is mostly borne by women and most men do not approach to the realm of spirit-belief. In Southeast Asia, religious syncretism is segmented by gender. In case of Japan, Buddhism including elements of ancestor worship, is mixed or combined with spirit (*kami*)-belief more closely. The syncretism there is not directly related to the gender. As thus, each of Southeast Asian societies has been influenced by the outer civilizations, but it has fought back against them. In other words, it has taken them in and has reconstructed them in the inside of the context of each culture.

Key Words : religious syncretism, spirit belief, cult of the dead, legend, pantheon

⁸⁾ Cf. Brown 1927, Mendelson 1963, and Tamura 1987 and 1997.

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<Abstract>

외부문명에서 유입된 종교 혼합주의: 미얀마, 베트남, 일본의 비교연구

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본 연구에서는 미얀마, 베트남, 일본에서 외부문명의 영향을 받은 것으로 여겨지는 정령숭배의 특징에 대하여 논하고자 한다. 우선, 각 국가의 전승을 비교해볼 때 정령숭배에 있어서 충격적인 상황 속에서 사망한 이들에 대한 신앙이 중요하다는 점을 지적하였다. 다음으로 정령의 형성에 있어서 정치적 역할이 개입되었다는 사실을 논하였다. 마지막으로 종교 혼합주의는 성(性, gender)과 관련되어 있음을 주장하였다.

주제어 : 종교 혼합주의, 정령 숭배, 죽음 숭배, 전설, 신전

