

Being Inspired, Being Possessed: Performative Techniques for the Embodiment of the Spirits in Burmese Urban Ceremonies

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Dance is regarded as the expression of spirit possession in Burma. In *nat kana pwe* (private urban ceremonies), the *nat kadaw* (spirit medium) dances, embodying consecutively the Thirty-Seven *nats*, a defined pantheon of spirits whom devotees propitiate in order to gain health and wealth. In embodying these as well as other spirits, the medium moves fluidly between human and animal, masculine and feminine, young and old, refined and harsh spirit characters. The ritual performance is supported and controlled by the clashing sound of the *hsaing waing*, the Burmese tuned drums and gongs ensemble. Together, the movements of the *nat kadaw* and sound of the *hsaing* ensemble make the spirits come into presence in the ritual space, so that humans can interact with them. This paper investigates the affects and effects of spirit embodiment from the perspective of sound and movement analysis. Addressing the Burmese conceptions about spirits and spirit possession, the paper highlights the exchanges of embodied feelings that link musicians, dancers and spirits during a ceremony. Drawing on fieldwork videos and ethnographic descriptions, the paper considers the coming-into-presence of the *nat Nankarine Medaw*, the Buffalo Mother of Bago, and analyses the different performative techniques (dramatic representation, spirit dance) and mimetic processes through which this spirit person is danced and sounded, thus allowing her concrete and bodily manifestation.

“I just show one kind of story” says Kyaw Win Naing, “I just dance with my human mind.” My friend Kyaw Win Naing and I are sitting in his house in Yangon, enjoying some spicy Burmese delicacies that he and his family kindly provided. Kyaw Win Naing is a *nat kadaw*, a “spouse of the spirit,” although one of the few non-transgender spirit mediums that I have met during my research. He performs as a spirit dancer in *nat kana pwe*s, private spirit ceremonies that *nat* devotees “donate” (sponsor) in order to receive guidance, mostly in matters of wealth and economic investments, and to pay homage to the *nats*. The spirit cult of the Thirty-Seven Lords – the official pantheon of tutelary spirits (*nat*) of Central Burma – represents a ritualised and institutionalised spirit possession cult, integrated within the framework of Burmese Theravada Buddhism (Brac de la Perrière 1989, 2016). During a *nat kana pwe* ceremony, human and spirit persons are invited to gather and amuse themselves: a *nat kadaw* embodies consecutively each of the *nats* belonging to the official pantheon, plus a number of secondary spiritual beings. Through the *nat kadaw*, the devotees donate a variety of offerings to the spirits: sometimes, they offer themselves as vessels for the spirits through dance and music.¹

¹ For a wonderfully vivid representation of both *nat kana pwe* practitioners and sponsors, see Lindsay Merrison’s documentary film *Friends in High Places: The Art of Survival in Modern-Day Burma* (2001).

I am showing Kyaw Win Naing a video of one of his past performances, the dance for the Buffalo Mother, Nankarine Medaw, which I filmed over a year ago. I always enjoy my friend's company, and I know I can count on him when it comes to satisfying my curiosity. In the video, Kyaw Win Naing is acting as the Buffalo Mother during the performance of her *pya zat*, a dramatic representation combining instrumental music, singing, and acting, narrating the spirit's violent death, and the consequent transformation into a powerful *nat*, when the possession dance eventually takes place. Kyaw Win Naing attentively watches the performance, grinning when the final climax moment arrives and the Buffalo Mother sacrifices her life for the sake of her son, Athakouma. "When the buffalo head is cut," he explains, "I become the *nat*. In the beginning there is the Buffalo [Mother]. The whole [story] happens with her son – [her] prayer is answered. Then the buffalo head is cut, and I begin to be a *nat*. The time when the *nat* enters and dances is *that* time." He underlines the importance of the music, and states: "If the singer from behind speaks and sings properly, I can fully get the feeling of sadness." He stops and looks at the screen: "The song that singer sings is very good!" he says, "so even while I'm dancing the tears come out" (Kyaw Win Naing, Yangon, 20 July 2019).²

Kyaw Win Naing's words highlight how the ritual performance is the result of a combination of embodied feelings and experienced emotions, created and reproduced through the collaborative effort of dancers and musicians. The contribution of the *hsaing waing* is vital: the Burmese outdoor ensemble is composed of several drum and gong-chime instruments along with one or more shawms, all joined by a singer.³ The *nat hsaing* accompanies the consecutive embodiment of the spirits, performing *nat chins* (spirit songs) and other ritually efficacious sounds, musically calling and dismissing the spirits, providing the proper musical support to the possession dances, and entertaining the ritual participants. How can the relationship between *hsaing* sounds, the *nat kadaw's* movements and the *nat* coming into presence be explained? How do the Burmese discuss and conceptualise this relationship from a performative point of view? Several ethnomusicological studies (Roseman 1991; Wong 2001; Norton 2009; Pugh-Kitingan 2017) have dealt with similar issues, always underlining how sounds and movements contribute to the successful outcome of the ritual performance, putting into contact human and spirit actors.

To shed light on these questions, this paper analyses the phenomenology of spirit embodiment in Burmese *nat kana pwe* ceremonies starting from the voices of the ritual participants – dancer and musicians. With the aim of complementing Brac de la Perrière's extensive work on spirit possession among Burmese spirit mediums, this paper offers a new analytic take on the phenomenon of *nat kana pwe* by considering the point of view of *hsaing waing* musicians, who exchange with the dancers the energies received in a state of "inspiration."

Drawing on the idea of exchange between human and spirit beings (Århem and Sprenger 2015), I describe *nat* embodiment as a form of exchange of bodies between humans and *nats*, and I consider the role of cross-gendered *nat kadaws* in Yangon and Mandalay, the main urban centres (Ho 2009; Keeler 2016). The notion of exchange becomes determinant to describe spirit possession as a shared embodied experience affecting all the ritual participants and resulting from their collective effort (Bird-David 1999; Endres and Lauser 2011). Departing from Rouget's ([1981] 1985) musicians/musicants/musicated logic, I explain how a state of embodied inspira-

2 Unless otherwise specified, the interviews presented in this work were conducted in Burmese with Nay Win Htun, a Burmese music teacher and musician; they were thoroughly transcribed and translated in collaboration with Htike Yadana, a Burmese native speaker and dance performer. When necessary, the original Burmese terminology is included alongside the translation.

3 Scholarly works on the Burmese *hsaing waing* are to this day extremely rare. Among others, see Garfias (1985), Keeler (1998), Douglas (2010), and Tun (2013).

tion, conceptualised as a form of spirit possession by the Burmese, connects musicians to dancers and spirits, thus ensuring the success of the ceremony. Drawing on the concept of mimesis (Tausig 1993), I describe spirit possession as a complex performative practice resulting from multiple and simultaneous performative processes where sound, movement, and emotions are involved. Using audio-visual examples and music transcriptions, I analyse the elements (*hsaing* sounds and dance movements) and the shifts through different phases (from dramatic representation to possession dance) of a mimetic performance for the embodiment of the *nat* Nankarine Medaw, the Buffalo Mother.

Exchanging Bodies, Experiencing Spirits

Interaction and exchange are at the heart of *nat kana pwe* ceremonies. Through the circulation of material and immaterial items and services – ritual offerings (*kadaw pwe*), songs and bodies – all the actors of the ceremony participate in the same experience as part of the same social group. Family, friends, and spirits share a communitarian encounter where exchange becomes a joyful activity.

To exchange means to establish and express a relationship with a social cosmos inhabited by humans and non-humans (Århem and Sprenger 2015). In the case of a *nat kana pwe* performance, exchange creates bonds and obligations between the members of the ritual community (Brac de la Perrière 2015), humans, and spirit persons. Through exchange, ritual participants engage with each other: humans share and relate with the spirits, addressing them in a direct and friendly manner using kinship terms; humans and spirits become one unique “we-ness” (Bird-David 1999). All the material and immaterial items that circulate through exchange in *nat kana pwe*s assume a specific ritual importance.

Exchange is not limited to material (food, alcohol) or immaterial (music, entertainment) offerings to the spirits. Human bodies are also part of the circuit of donation: *nat kadaws* offer their bodies to the spirits so they can inhabit them (or just a part of them); at particular moments of the *nat kana* ceremony, the host, family, and friends are expected to offer themselves to the spirits and dance with/for them in front of the community. The offering of bodies is passive only in appearance. In fact, spirit mediums and devotees voluntarily submit to spirits’ presence emanating from images representing the *nats* (*poun daw*), arranged in particular formation on the altar, and they dance with the support of the *hsaing* sound – a self-offering, in the sense that it is a spontaneous proffering of one’s own body. Spirit mediums and human participants choose to be caught between two forces, that of the ensemble and that of the spirit images: when they surrender to them, the spirits come into presence (Brac de la Perrière 1994: 180–1; Lambek 2010). The voluntary exchange of bodies is the real manifestation of an interrelationship between human individuals and community, and spirits: the embodiment of the spirit in one’s body, in front of the community, is recognised as a sign of the spirit’s favour; the spirit needs the human body to come into presence. Self-offering to a spirit represents a direct expression of the offering subject’s agency. Keller (2002) has defined this agency as “instrumental”: allowing the possessed body to be used gives the apparently only passive spirit medium ritual authority in front of the community. However, the idea of a body being “used” as an “instrument” suggests too passive an agency. In place of instrumental agency, Endres and Lauser (2011) have introduced the idea of a “relational agency,” “distributed” among “the spirit or deity who needs the human body in order to come into presence, the possessed body that is worked on by a supernatural power, and the ritual community for whom the spirits have an ontological reality” (ibid.: 10). In this paradigm, agency is not only a human property, but rather it is distributed among all the ritual actors – spirits included – forming an agentive network. Invited and then embodied, the spirits materially come

into presence among the human devotees: in this way, they can be directly involved in the *nat kana* community's circuit of exchange and directly participate in the social life of the Burmese, engaging in particular and continuous social relationships under community control. Burmese *nats* are considered real (*nat shi dae*, lit. "the spirits exist" or "the spirits are there") (Brac de la Perrière 2009), and they actively participate in the exchanges taking place during a ceremony: in this sense, a *nat* should be considered a *spirit person*, characterised by a form of agency and by a presence that is felt bodily, rather than a *spirit persona*, a character expressed through dance movements and musical sounds.

The embodiment of a *nat* does not necessarily involve the whole body of the spirit medium. As one research participant once told me, "sometimes the spirits enter only our mouths and speak through us ... sometimes [the *nat*] only enters our head" (Htoo Zaw [in English], personal communication, 2018). When this happens, the mediums remain perfectly in control of the rest of their body, intellectually alert and interactive with the devotees. The person and the body are not regarded as a unique, impermeable unity, but rather as a discrete and fragmentable permutation of singular parts. Just as spirits can introduce themselves into just a part of the body of a medium, the simultaneous embodiment of the same spirit through different human bodies is also possible.

In Burma, the concepts of self, personhood, and identity are fluid and discrete.⁴ The idea of a permeable and mutable self dominates in the *Jatakas*, stories of the past lives of the Buddha: the stories "blur the identity of a discrete bodied individual and relay a self that travels through a multitude of different forms" (Douglas 2019: 253). In the performance of the *zawgyi yokhte* (the string-puppet of a Burmese alchemist), the boundaries between puppet, puppet manipulator, and puppet's voice become blurred. Douglas explains:

The illusion of puppet agency is a combined product of the puppeteer, the puppet-singer, and the musicians. The sounding (voicing, singing, growling, purring, etc.) of a puppet is not articulated by the puppeteer but, rather, by a behind-the-curtain vocalist working in close conjunction with the *hsaing* orchestra and the puppeteer. Here an identity conceived as singular – the marionette character – is brought to life through the composition, or merging, of different forces; the voice, the puppeteer and the musicians. (Douglas 2019: 254)

As I will discuss later in this paper, similar processes also take place during the performance of the spirit dances in *nat kana pwes*. Despite being considered real, even when formally invited to a ceremony, spirits are not able to directly join a *pwe*. The spiritual substance of which they are believed to comprise seems to prevent it. To join the celebration, spirits need the support of human bodies. A spirit dancer explained it to me quite clearly:

We say *kywa hlan pyaw ba paya*. It means "Please come in and enjoy, oh Venerable [ones]." They are spirits, they can come but they cannot join, when they want to join they have to use our body. It means they share our body. (Htoo Zaw [in English], Taungbyone, 16 August 2018)

In *nat kana* rituals, the spirit person comes into presence through, and in the network of, ritual exchange. Manifested in the bodies of the dancers, the spirits become real and tangible, and active subjects in the circulation of material and immaterial goods.

4 Several ethnographic works analysing the interactions between humans and non-humans underline how the concept of personhood can be fluid, permeable, multivalent and partible (Freeman 1999; Mayaram 1999; Smith 2006; Ishii 2013; Sprenger 2015). Personhood is not reducible to the Self-Other binarism, and it is constructed through performance (Roseman 1991; Sax 2002).

In Burmese language, the embodiment of a spiritual being (spirit possession) is conceptualised with different words depending on the degree and subject of the embodiment. The verbs *win dae* (“to enter”) and *pu dae* (“to be joined”) are general terms indicating the initial moment when a spirit makes contact with the human (usually indicated by a trembling of the ritual specialist’s hands): the two words are interchangeable and are sometimes used in combination (*nat winpu dae*). The verb *ka dae* (“to dance”) indicates the subsequent manifestation of the spirit through dances performed with the indispensable support of specific *nat* sounds (Brac de la Perrière 1998: 170). The verb *si dae* (“to mount” or “to ride”) is also used to indicate spirit possession. In the course of my research, people used the word interchangeably with *win dae* and *pu dae*, alongside other expressions.

Embodying spirits is a technique that *nat kadaws* learn throughout their apprenticeship, and with years of practice. Unlike for the dance of the devotees, who can barely keep the power of the spirits under control, they remain partly in command and intellectually alert, or “aware” (Norton 2009). As I will now explain, in urban centres, the particular talent shown by some *nat kadaws* of being in-between spirits and humans is sometimes justified with their cross-dressing and displaying of ambiguous gender identities.

Performing Gender

In urban centres, most of the spirit mediums are *meinmasha* (trans-women). The social stigma surrounding spirit mediums performing is strong and widespread: people refer to them with the pejorative *achauk* or *achaukma* (“gay”);⁵ an object of mockery and ridicule, they are believed not to be living according the Buddhist Five Precepts.⁶ Trans-genderism is justified from a religious point a view: being *achauk* is often viewed as a karmic consequence for a fault in a past life (Ho 2009: 294) and it is generally associated with karmic inferiority (Keeler 2016: 800).

Following an initial submission to the power of the spirits, after a few years of apprenticeship with a senior *nat kadaw*, the *nat kadaw*-to-be regains agency and authority over, and the power to control, the *nats* – but without becoming a “master of the spirits” (Brac de la Perrière 1998). During and after this process, their social status improves somewhat: *meinmasha*, who in the eyes of Burmese lack power and social respect, go into a professional/social role, guaranteeing a certain respectability (Chiarofonte 2022).

In interceding to the spirits on the account of a devotee, a *nat kadaw* performs fortune telling and dance – abilities acquired through practice during the apprenticeship but also in some way assisted by their male/female, and eventually human/spirit, in-betweenness (Keeler 2016). From a purely performative point of view, some mediums believe that cross-genderism positively influences the possession dance. The embodiment of male and female spirits is facilitated for those *nat kadaws* whose gender identity is not tied to Burmese canonical gender roles. As one *nat kadaw* explained to me:

5 As Keeler (2017) points out, the word *achauk* implies not only cross-dressing, but also to be “attracted sexually to masculine-gendered males, while themselves choosing to take the passive (anal-receptive) role in sex” (ibid.: 171). According to Ho (2009), “*Achauk* seems to have become synonymous with *nat kadaw* and the older Burmese term *meinmasha* when Ne Win and the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) criminalized the supernatural, forcing its articulation underground. These government restrictions apparently opened a professional vacuum that became increasingly occupied by a stigmatized minority called *meinmasha* or *achauk*, near synonyms which could be loosely understood as ‘transgendered/effeminate homosexual men’” (ibid.: 286–7).

6 Particularly, excessive in the consumption of alcohol (and finding good excuses for that during the spirit ceremonies) and having illicit and indecent sexual intercourse.

How could a male *nat kadaw* dance *Amay Gyan*, or another female *nat*? They have a strong [mannish] body. And female *nat kadaws*, they have breasts, how could they dance *Ko Gyi Kyaw*? But the *achauk* can dance as “real men” [*yauk kya asit*, heterosexual men] or women. There is no difference in the meaning, only in the performance. (U Win Hlaing, Yangon, 29 November 2013)

Performing in a *nat kana pwe*, the Burmese spirit mediums embrace fluid gender identities, transcending their sexed bodies: they must embody many different spirits, moving fluidly between masculine and feminine, young and old, refined and harsh spirit characters. Gender transformation is linked to the “process of coming closer to the sacred” (Tedlock 2003: 304). Through performance, the *nat kadaw* actually becomes a (spirit) woman or man.

Despite the success and improvement in social status that *meinmasha* encounter as spirit mediums, the role of *nat kadaw* is not an exclusively cross-gendered one. As a rule, the male, female and cross-gendered can all move towards spirit mediumship; moreover, in Burmese belief, it is the *nat* who takes the initiative to engage in a relationship with a human: one cannot really choose to become a *nat kadaw*. A historically female role, the term “*nat kadaw*” has often been translated as “spirit’s spouse”; the *nat kadaw* has been interpreted as the figure of a ritual specialist with a feminine dimension, maintaining an elected relationship of the marital kind with the spirit who initially “seduced” her (*nat gaung swe*) (Ho 2009: 274). However, the *nat kadaws* I have encountered are said to maintain a family relationship with their *nat gaung swe* – older/younger brother (*ako/maung*), older or younger sister (*ama/nyima*), or mother (*amay*).⁷ The ritual introduction of the *nat’s leipkya* (soul, lit. “butterfly”) into the human definitively stipulates the family relationship between *nat* and the *nat kadaw* (Brac de la Perrière 1998). Cross-gender individuals and women alike are believed to have “weaker souls” (*leipkya nge dae*, or *leipkya nu dae*, lit. “small” or “soft soul”), and so they are more likely to be subjugated by the power of a spirit. In this, Brac de la Perrière (2007, 2016) recognises the general structures of power already present in Burmese culture.

Some “real man” (*yauk kya asit*) *nat kadaws* have expressed to me harsh critiques of the whole category of *meinmasha nat kadaws*: they are accused of having become spirit mediums just for the sake of being beautiful, to show off in their ceremonies with unorthodox costumes and expensive jewels, and in so doing, taking serious and real traditions frivolously. Experienced *nat hsaing* musicians told me that they “believe in *nats*, but do not trust the *meinmasha nat kadaw*” because their dance (*nat aka*) is not a real manifestation of the presence of the spirit (*nat winpu dae*), but just a performance. However, the boundaries of these two dimensions are often ambiguous, as I will now explain.

Being Inspired: Performing with the Spirits, Performing for the Spirits

Rouget ([1981] 1985) wrote extensively about the state of ritual music makers during the performance of trance ceremonies. He distinguished “musicated” persons, those submitted to the will of the gods/spirits and to the effect of the music (ibid.: 111), from “musicians,” who are professionals appointed to make music, and “musicants” (*musicquants*), who make music only episodically – for example, through performing invocations, hand clapping, and other secondary music-making activities. These figures differ in their relation to trance experiences: in fact, as Rouget suggested, musicians do not go into trance, as it would be “incompatible with their function” of being “con-

⁷ Not all the *nats* are eligible for this: only those whose cult is quite recent and active can become someone’s *gaung swe*. Ancient *nat* or spirits believed to be not powerful enough are excluded. Non-specialist spirit mediums, devotees and followers become *nat thathami*, lit. “spirit’s son(s)/daughter(s)” – another indication of the ritually established family ties.

stantly available and at the service of the ritual” (ibid.: 103–4). Similarly, concerning *nat hsaing* performers, Brac de la Perrière (1994: 186) makes an analogy between the words /pu-/ (low tone), “to be hot”, and /pu:-/ (high tone), “to be possessed.”⁸ She writes that while the experience of the dancing *nat kadaw* is characterised by a certain “hot-ness” deriving from the presence of the spirits, *nat hsaing* musicians, on the other hand, remain “cold.”

While a difference between the experience of Burmese spirit mediums (professional musicians, never completely musicated), devotees (musicians, sometimes musicated) and musicians does exist, the latter do not remain indifferent or completely juxtaposed, as the word “cold” seems to suggest. In performance, musicians experience a state of excitement they refer to as “*Lamain kat dae*,” from the name of the patron *nat* Lamain. Lamain is a *nat* unique in the genre: all groups of performers are considered to fall under the protection of this spirit. To pay homage to Lamain, musicians and dancers perform Apyo Daw, the Royal Maiden, who dances for the *nat* Ko Gyi Kyaw, the drunkard *nat* and one of the main spirits, associated with entertainment and celebrations (Chiarofonte 2021). The boundaries between these three figures (Lamain, Apyo Daw, and Ko Gyi Kyaw) are blurred, but they are conjunct in their function of ensuring the success of every art performance – from pagoda festivals to marionette theatre (Ye Dway 2013). In the *nat kana pwe*, the invitation and performance of Apyo Daw/Lamain *nat* represents the opening of the *nat* embodiment dances: when the dance for Lamain is undertaken effectively, musicians and dancers perform with a particular energy for the rest of the ceremony (Brac de la Perrière 1994: 180; Tun 2013: 95).

In everyday language, the expression *Lamain kat dae* indicates a state of creative inspiration that positively affects the activity of the inspired one. This feeling does not really correspond to a state of spirit possession, but rather to the attachment (*kat-*) of a positive influence. Different musicians have reported to me such inspired feelings or states. The *hsaing saya* U Soe Win and the singer Ma Lay Lay, two of my main research participants and leaders of what is considered the best *nat hsaing* ensemble in Mandalay, explained their experiences of Lamain. When I asked if they become possessed while playing, U Soe Win replied:

Yes, [Lamain] mounts! [*si-*] ... The person dances in front [of the ensemble]. Whatever s/he dances, the player knows if the *nat* has arrived [*yauk-*] or not [inside them]. We get goose bumps!

When I enquired about the effects of the presence of Lamain on the performance, they replied:

MLL: Of course, [the performance] gets better! Lamain mounts [*si-*] and attaches [*kat-*] [onto us]!

USW: Sometimes, the *nat kadaw* is tired because of the number of festivals. In case s/he is not dancing very well, if I personally give energy [*lout pe laik-*] from the *hsaing*, s/he receives it. [Like], “Eh!” when I play energetically and strike the drums, the *nat* reaches [the dancer] [*nat yauk thwa-*].

...

MLL: Eh! It gets better! Because if the Lamain *nat* comes, others of the Thirty-Seven Lords will come. ... When Lamain mounts [*si-*], I can automatically sing and play without [making] any mistake. ... Yes, of course, [Lamain] stays. That starting point with Lamain is the most important. Even if [the dance of] the Great Apyo Daw is finished, Lamain *nat* remains. Among the Thirty-Seven Lords, Lamain is the very first one ... When Lamain mounts...

⁸ Burmese is a tonal language and recognises four different tones (high, low, creaky and killed).

USW: ... the whole of the rest of the celebration will be good.

MLL: ... the rest of the celebration goes on without mistakes.

(U Soe Win and Ma Lay Lay, Mandalay, 5 April 2018)

To *nat hsaing* musicians, the feeling of the presence of Lamain *nat* staying with them (*Lamain kat dae*) is experienced through “goose bumps,” and it ensures the success of the entire performance. The presence of Lamain is experienced by musicians and dancers alike. The Yangon spirit dancer Kyaw Win Naing described the Lamain as the *nat* who brings together the feelings of dancers, musicians, and the other participants, guaranteeing the success of the ceremony:

At the time of dancing, the main thing is to fulfil [the wishes of] the donor [of the ceremony], to make her happy. I also have to enjoy it when I dance. The main thing is Lamain – to get the Lamain *nat* attached [i.e. “to be inspired”]. When you dance you have to get in the mood. Sometimes, in some pwes, when the Lamain doesn’t attach [i.e. “if you are not inspired”], dancing doesn’t come out well. It depends on the donor, and on me. As for those who work for the *hsaing* ensemble, sometimes the Lamain doesn’t attach to me and to them. At that time, when the Lamain attaches, dancing is good and enjoyable. Of course, the main thing is that the *nat* is riding [*si-*]. When the *nat* rides, the person is happy, and dancing is good. (Kyaw Win Naing, Yangon, 20 July 2019)

With the *nat* Lamain by their side, musicians and dancers believe not only that their performance will proceed smoothly, but also that it will be particularly effective. Through the feeling of Lamain, the musicians experience the presence of the other *nats* invited to the ceremony and dancing in/through the body of the *nat kadaw*. According to the words of the two musicians, once the *hsaing* master has “received” the Lamain and feels inspired, he is able to “send” this feeling towards the dancers, who in turn become inspired: the feeling of Lamain is handed to the dancers through the performance of sounds, which become faster, louder, and more intense, and through the performance of body movements becoming more pronounced. The experience of Lamain thus represents the first step into the successful spirit embodiment process: conceptualised as a form of “inspiration,” the bodily experience of Lamain during the ritual represents a change in the emotional status of the performers. Expressed through sounds and movements, the Lamain *nat* represents the link that makes musicians and dancers interact with each other and perform as one to create a collaborative endeavour involving human and spirit participants, making them feel part of the community.

A Mimetic Performance: Becoming the Spirits

Dance is considered the expression of spirit embodiment. The dance of the mediums usually remains quite controlled, and the experience of the *nat* presence can be reduced to a fleeting instant (Brac de la Perrière 1989: 97). Experienced *nat kadaws* can dance with skilful and controlled movements, while the dance of young and inexperienced apprentices can be extremely energetic and less controlled. The controlled dance movements of the *nat kadaw* resemble more a “fake” performance than a “real” spirit embodiment. To my surprise, I found that many Burmese people enjoyed discussing whether a dancer was really “dancing with a *nat*” or not, when I showed them my *nat kana pwe* videos. While that the urge to distinguish between “real” manifestation of the spirit and “mere performance” is often dictated by the bias of Western perspective, it is a distinction that some Burmese locals also make.⁹ Incarnation and performance represent

9 Turner (2003) explained that to pretend that spirits are a metaphor, a symbol, or psychological reality means to perpetrate a “positivists’ denial” (ibid.: 146). While the Burmese believe in the existence of *nats* and other spiritual beings, they can be sceptical about their actual presence in the ritual ceremony (Mendelson 1963; Rozenberg 2015).

two sides of the same coin. The performance of the spirit person is considered *nat ka dae*, “the spirit dances,” a full manifestation of the spirit. According to Brac de la Perrière, the *nat kadaw*

is a virtuoso in his/her relations to the nats, knowing how to give the latter space as s/he suspends his/her *leikpya* [soul]. This mastery of relations with the *nats*, however, does not mean that the medium is in control of the spirits. On the contrary, throughout the possession dance, the medium disappears behind the persona of the spirit, all of whose excesses s/he must bear. (Brac de la Perrière 2016: 6)

During my fieldwork, I asked several *nat kadaws* what the experience of *nat winpu dae* meant to them. Many spirit mediums describe the embodiment of the spirits as an intense experience for the mind and the body. By talking with spirit dancers, it emerged that the moment of spirit embodiment corresponds to a change of emotional status, after which the *nat* comes into presence. To “disappear behind the persona of a spirit,” as Brac de la Perrière says, represents an experience that sees the dancer become the spirit person invited to the ceremony.

Spirit embodiment and dance are manifestation of the *nat* in the physical reality: the embodying human starts acting, speaking (and dancing) *as an Other*. Possessed devotees and *nat kadaws* follow a defined sequence of the dance’s various movements (*poun san*, lit. “form”), performing the *nat* person, or the qualities linked to the spirit, supported by just as defined spirit sounds (*nat than*). Rouget ([1981] 1985) called this an imitative process, and defined these dances, and the music that supports them, as “figurative” (ibid.: 100). A figurative dance has the function to “manifest the possession state,” as opposed to nonfigurative dance, which has the function to “trigger trance” (ibid.: 114). In possession, both the figurative and nonfigurative are present, either simultaneously or alternately: possession dance oscillates between the two aspects – although at least one of the two aspects will predominate (ibid.: 117).

The use of the word “figurative” for the dances and music can be misleading, as it suggests a mere act of representation. “Mimesis,” on the other hand, seems to link more directly the *hsaing* sounds to the coming-into-presence of the spirit persons, and it can be applied to the possession dances – as other relevant ethnomusicological works also suggest (Brabec de Mori 2013; Sum 2013; Porath 2019). Mimesis represents a performative process that brings the spirit into presence.

Taussig (1993) describes mimesis as a human faculty that goes beyond the idea of representation and/or imitation. In mimesis, the copy “shares in or acquires the properties of the represented” (ibid.: 47–8). The distinction between the self and other becomes porous and flexible: mimesis is the active experience of “yielding the perceiver into the perceived” (ibid.: 61), creating “a palpable, sensuous connection” between their bodies (ibid.: 21). Mimesis is not merely “similarity” or a “passive copy” of an *object* (in this case, the *nat*), but rather a process that transcends reality. *Nat hsaing*’s songs are mimetic in the sense that specific texts, musical patterns (melodic and rhythmic), and sound qualities (tempo and dynamics) constitute what the Burmese call the *nat than*, a “spirit sound,” imbued with power, directly resonating with one or more spirit persons. *Nat than* should not be considered just “sonic objects,” but rather they are active sonic signs mimicking the spirit (i.e. making it present). The performance and experience of these mimetic sounds makes the *nat* come into presence. Taussig has suggested that “the chanter is singing a copy of the spirit-form, and by virtue of what I call the magic of mimesis, is bringing the spirit into the physical world” (ibid.: 105). The Burmese *nats* do not occupy a different plane of existence but share the same world with humans. By sounding a copy of the spirit person, the *nat hsaing* ensemble makes the *nat* manifest through means of sound, “mimetically gain[ing] control over the mirror-image of physical reality that [sounds] represent” (ibid.: 105). The mimetic

sounds performed by the *nat hsaing* contribute to making them manifest in a physical reality: in this form, people can interact and communicate with them, thus bringing their potentially harmful Otherness under control.

The mimetic process that brings a *nat* into presence is a performance of specific spirit sounds (*nat than*) and dance movements (*poun san*). Rather than talk of single mimetic dances or mimetic music, the phrase mimetic performance better applies to the multiple processes which contribute to the manifestation of the spirit person, and the changes in the emotional status of dancers and musicians. The conjunction of sounds/music and movements/dance creates a mimetic performance of a specific spirit person and brings the spirit person into presence. In *nat kana pwes*, mimetic processes can be found:

1. in all the elements (sounds) constituting a spirit song: rhythmic cycles, melodies, lyrics, tempo, dynamics, and musical style are associated with a certain spirit person
2. in the movements of the spirit dance: dance movements and acting gestures, and the spirit medium's behaviour, indicate the presence of this or that spirit in particular.

These mimetic sounds and movements *construct, perform, and are* the spirit person they are associated with.

To explain how the performers' initial feeling of "being inspired" fuels not only the dancer's acting movements, but also the singing and the *hsaing* instrumental music, leading to the manifestation of the spirit person, I will now analyse the elements of a mimetic performance in the context of a *nat kana pwe* ceremony.

The Dance of the Buffalo Mother of Bago

Yangon, 10 December 2017. After many months of waiting, today I am finally able to film the dramatic representation (*pya zat*) of the death and consequent transformation into a *nat* of Nankarine Medaw, the Buffalo Mother of Bago. The performance takes place during the regular *nat kana pwe* dances. Two mediums, my friend Kyaw Win Naing (in charge of all the *pwe*'s activities) and one of his attendants perform in the *mye waing* (ground circle), the ritual space between the *hsaing* ensemble and the spirit altar, which is covered with offerings and populated by the images representing the *nats* (*poun daw*). Introduced by the *hsaing* sound, the two mediums bow towards the Buffalo *nat*'s golden image. After the necessary musical introduction, the representation begins. Kyaw Win Naing's attire is imposing: he is dressed in black and wearing huge buffalo headgear; he dances as Nankarine Medaw, the Buffalo Mother of the Mon capital of Bago – a city 100 km north-east of Yangon. His attendant, a young *nat kadaw*, is Prince Athakouma. According to the legend,¹⁰ Athakouma is abandoned inside the buffalo pen (or in the forest) for the animals to trample him to death. One of the buffalos saves the royal baby's life by covering him with her massive body, and so becomes Athakouma's adoptive mother. Once grown up, and before he can ascend to the throne, the prince is requested to obtain the horns of a buffalo by detaching the animal's head. The buffalo in question is Athakouma's own adoptive mother. The Buffalo Mother eventually offers her life for the sake of her son.

I take position with my camera in front of the ensemble, and I prepare to film the entire performance. The *pya zat* lasts about twenty minutes, during which time the two *nat kadaws* act the final encounter between the Buffalo Mother and her adoptive son. The audience is enrapt-

¹⁰ The theatrical adaptation differs in many places from the legend, which is known and transmitted in various versions. Some of these versions are also shaped by the theatrical adaptation.

tured: the singer, supported by the sound of the *hsaing* ensemble, alternates spirit songs with a *ngo chin* (lamenting song) narrating the story and giving voice to the Buffalo Mother. The sound of her voice bursts out semi-distorted and digitally reverberated from massive loudspeakers. In the final moment, the acting is poignant: the Buffalo Mother is talking to her son Athakouma, trying to convince him to take her head; he raises his sword, but he is unable to kill his own mother, so he puts the deadly weapon down and hugs her. After three confrontations, the sword does its duty, and Kyaw Win Naing removes the headgear, carried around by Athakouma as a trophy.

As the *pya zat* ends, the *hsaing* music suddenly changes: the sound of the ensemble, so far confined to the background, explodes into performing an intense, fast and vital rhythmic cycle. The drums, guided by the drum circle *pat waing*, are also amplified: the volume and the intensity are strong enough to make your chest shake. Kyaw Win Naing's dance also changes: his eyes are wide open, his body is shaking. He is not performing the controlled and delicate movements that characterised the dramatic representation: he has become Nankarine Medaw, the powerful Buffalo Mother *nat*, who manifests her power through an intense dance, which lasts for several minutes.

At a sign from the possessed *nat kadaw*, the *hsaing* music slowly begins to come to an arrest. Kyaw Win Naing joins his hands over his head, paying homage to the *nat* and allowing her to depart from his body. His attendant, still holding the buffalo headgear, swiftly imitates him. The embodiment of Nankarine Medaw is complete, and the *nat kana* celebration can proceed to the next spirit.

The following analysis considers the two moments of the mimetic performance described in this vignette. Using music transcriptions and an audio and video example, the analysis aims to highlight the process of spirit embodiment and the reactions of the performers (musicians and dancer) before and after the coming-into-presence of the Buffalo Mother *nat*.

Part 1: Pya zat (Dramatic Representation)

The full version of a theatrical adaptation of the legend of the Buffalo Mother can be performed depending on the will of the sponsors and the disposition of the *nat kadaw*. To perform a *pya zat* represents a real challenge to emerging *nat kadaws* who are trying to make their names among urban *nat* followers. The piece is in fact performed primarily to entertain the participants. As Singer (1995) pointed out, “a combination of dance, music, murder, and the supernatural never fails to hold the interest of the public” (ibid.: 81). The *pya zat* entails the use of the finest acting skills a *nat kadaw* has gained throughout years of practice. Devotees and passers-by participate in the *pya zat* in silence, listening to the final words of the Buffalo Mother, and witnessing her transformation into a *nat*.

The *pya zat* performance involves a strict collaboration between the *hsaing* ensemble, the singer, and the dancer's acting movements. The mimetic performance is decentralised, shared among multiple performers, thus it is the result of a collective performative effort: while the dancer mimics the gesturality of the dramatic piece, the singer expresses it by singing the vocal part, and *hsaing* musicians perform it on their instruments. In this sense, this performance functions similarly to Douglas' account of the Burmese puppet dance which I mentioned previously.

The singer acts as storyteller, supported by the musicians. The performative narration is based on the *ngo chin* (lamenting song). This genre of song is quite popular in theatrical performances (*zat pwe*): heroines (*minthamee*) perform these songs in a high-pitched voice to express grief, sorrow, and longing. In the *ngo chin* performed for Nankarine Medaw, the singer re-evokes

the words of the Buffalo Mother before the transformation into a *nat*. With a vocal style between singing and speech, the singer gives voice to the desperate final monologue of the Buffalo Mother, before her ultimate sacrifice and the consequent transformation into a *nat*. The following is my translation of the final part of this monologue (Audio Example 2.1 (click here)):

...

[*hsaing* music]

My lovely son! I cannot run anymore, oh son! I cannot run anymore.

I can't see you running after me anymore, oh son!

I know this is not what you want [inaudible]

I know you, oh son! That is the truth

Son! Hear my words

Oh! Can you see the hill? Son!

When the sun appears behind that hill, come alone, son.

Come and wish this for me:

May the nerves of my head be cut! Oh Lord Buddha, be my witness!

Oh Lord, please help me!

Oh son! When I get over there you can follow me! Are you ready? I am running now, son!

[*hsaing* music]

In Burmese, some of the lines sound cryptic: to “beautify” the language, the singer makes extensive use of poetic images, adding words and creating longer and more intricate sentences. There is also significant use of repetition: Nankarine Medaw’s words directly address Athakouma, calling him “son,” usually in exclamations at the beginning or conclusion of a verse. The text is characterised by formularity: words and verses are employed as stock expressions. This does not mean, however, that these expressions remain static and unchanged: instead, they are dynamic and capable of change (Lord [1960] 2004). No *pya zat* for Nankarine Medaw is the same. Within the framework provided by use of formulaic elements, the text can change and adapt to the acting of the *nat kadaw*, or to the sound of the musicians.

The whole *ngo chin* performance – the vocal part, instrumental sounds and action of the *nat kadaws* – constitutes a performative narration with many interrelated levels of mimesis. As I anticipated, in the *pya zat*, the person of the Buffalo *nat* is shared among the performers: her words are pronounced by the singer and her actions are mimicked by the spirit medium. The *hsaing* ensemble provides the sounds indicating her ethnicity and the sadness of the dramatic action. The joint action of multiple performers (singer, dancer, and musicians) is necessary in this mimetic performance.

However, the performance does clearly revolve around the vocal part. The singer performs as if she really were crying, with high-pitched sobs and laments giving the part its “wailing” character. The sorrowful atmosphere is conveyed through long sliding pitches, usually on a single final syllable, and an extensive use of vibrato. The singer shifts seamlessly from a spoken to a more clearly chanted style. During the storytelling, “crying” effects and sung/quasi-spoken vocal

articulations work as icons of embodied affect (Fox 2004: 280), conveying a specific semantic meaning which reinforces that carried by the text itself (Seeger [1987] 2004: 31). Transcription 1 shows the first verse of the final part of this particular *ngo chin* performance, with the upper part picking out the melodic line in the spectrogram and the equivalent rendered in musical notation with the text below it.¹¹ The melodic line must be read in tandem with my music transcription: here, the continuous lines indicate produced vocal sound, while the dotted lines indicate digital reverb; the [~] indicates vibrato, the upper [.] indicates a sharp and short vocal exclamation; exact musical notes are indicated only when clearly distinguishable. The light blue box highlights wide vibratos and “crying”; the red box highlights blurred boundaries between spoken and sung styles, and exclamations; the dark blue box highlights falling tones.

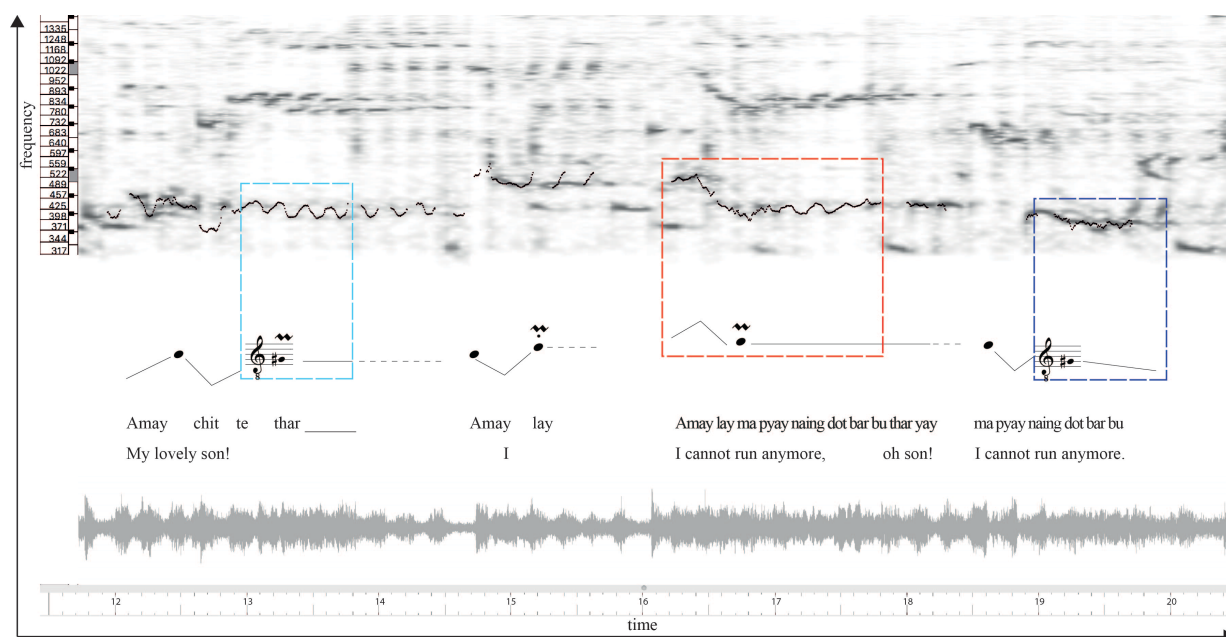


Figure 1. Transcription 1. Excerpt from the vocal part of the *ngo chin*: beginning.

The mimetic performance carried out by the singer is reflected in the acting of the *nat kadaw*. During the *pya zat*, the two dancers do not pronounce a word. The singer is voicing the monologue of the Buffalo Mother. The spirit medium impersonating the *nat* is acting in accordance with the meanings and emotions suggested through the combination of words and iconic sounds in the vocal part. His lips are in sync with those of the singer (*han hsaung hso dae*, lit. “to pretend to sing”). The two mediums use their body to mimic Nankarine Medaw and Athakouma’s emotions: their body movements follow the lyrics, and they burst out crying when the verses become intense (Figure 1).

¹¹ I obtained the melodic line and the spectrogram using Tony, a piece of software for pitch analysis. I made the audio recording as clear as possible for the analysis by cutting out all the bass frequencies from the original audio file. However, background sounds remain, making it arduous to recognise an exact melodic profile, especially using software. An analysis based on a recording session in a controlled environment would be necessary to obtain more precise information about a *ngo chin* vocal style.



Figure 2. The two *nat kadaws* embody the emotions of the dramatic scene.

The mimetic performance of singer and spirit mediums is supported by the instrumental sound of the *nat hsaing*. During the vocal part, the drums perform a quiet Mon rhythmic cycle: this indicates the ethnicity of the *nat* and provides the listeners with a reference to the geographical setting of the legendary action.¹² Their role is only supportive. The ensemble is led by the shawm *hne*: the musician accompanies the singer with long and slow melodic sounds – which iconically underline the sadness of the situation. It is the character and performance style of the *hne*, rather than a specific melody, that contributes to creating the *ngo chin*. A standardised *ngo chin* melody indicating sadness and grief does not exist, and the performance is the result of a collaborative effort.

After the long dramatic scene, during which the musicians have constrained the energy of their instruments, the ensemble is finally allowed to free all of its energies. The musicians play fast, performing a driving interlocked pattern, supporting and triggering the intense dance of the now possessed *nat kadaw*.

Part 2: Nat aka (Spirit Dance)

Once the acting is over, the possession dances resume: Prince Athakouma wields his sword, carrying the severed head of his mother; the headless Buffalo *nat* dances energetically in front of the ensemble, absorbing the sound of the *hsaing*. The ensemble accompanies the dramatic intensity of the final chasing and beheading by playing *bein maung* (a rhythmic cycle indicating muscular or spiritual strength, in this case used in a metaphorical dramatic sense; at 01:08 in the Audio Example). Then, the musicians perform with increased speed and loudness the *nat do* rhythmic

¹² Nankarine Medaw is an example of how ethnicity is performed through spirit figures in *nat kana pwes*. The Buffalo Mother is a Mon (in Burmese, Talaing) *nat*: she has sovereignty over the people and region around the city of Bago, the ancient capital of the Mon Kingdom. She is also known as Bago Medaw, the Mother of Bago, and Talaing Medaw, the Mon Mother. The music and dance for the coming-into-presence of this *nat* perform her Mon-ness. As can be inferred from the dances of other *nats*, it seems that a substrate of Mon sounds remained present, orally/aurally transmitted, in the performance of the Burmese cult of the Thirty-Seven Lords (Halliday [1917] 2000; Shorto 1963, 1967).

cycle, characterised by fast interlocking on a polyrhythmic metre, alternating fast rhythmic variations (shown in Transcription 2, based on the Video Example 2.1 (click here)).

Figure 3. Transcription 2. “Jumping of the buffalo,” dancer-musicians interaction.

The dance this sound supports consists of open and energetic movements: the dancer flexes and stretches his arms in front of him; while stretching, he opens his hands, returning them to a closed position when the arms are flexed back to the chest. This gesture is not necessarily performed in synchrony with the ensemble. The extreme dynamism characterising it is translated into a violent shaking, as in the Video Example. In reference to this new status, the spirit dancer Kyaw Win Naing explains:

It changes. At the time when you become a *nat* there are no sad feelings [anymore], just strength and freedom, I become powerful [lit. “eager”]. The powers get high. Also, the *hsaing* playing changes. The main thing is [that you feel] powerful [lit. “proud”], at that time you really feel powerful. (Kyaw Win Naing, Yangon, 20 July 2019)

The video shows the interaction between the possessed dancer and the inspired musicians, presented in Transcription 2. After the vocal cues, the ensemble switches from the *nat do* polyrhythmic cycle to a fast and interlocked variation; this precludes the metrically expanded section during which the ensemble supports the jumping performance of the dancer. Approaching the *hsaing* ensemble, the Buffalo Mother leans with the upper part of her body on the wooden frame of the instrument and starts to jump, raising her lower legs. This gesture is interpreted as a water buffalo jumping in the ponds. The dancer, who has become the spirit, jumps *like* a buffalo. This mimetic act is constructed together with the *hsaing* musicians (especially with the rhythmic section of the ensemble). The jumps happen more or less in synchrony with the accents performed by the drum circle, which together with the double stroke on the suspended drum musically mimics the heavy and mighty movements of the buffalo. The inspiration-driven status of the musicians is evident in the actions of the ensemble’s leader, the drum circle player: his hands strongly strike the drum skins, his arms show signs of muscular tension, and his head moves in time to the music. His whole body is involved in the performance of the rhythmic accents. In this case, the synchronisation was only partly successful, but still of great dramatic effect.

After four jumps, the ensemble performs a second variation then returns to the *nat do* rhythmic cycle. After this, the possession dance continues; shortly after, the dancer signals the departure of the Buffalo Mother from his body by raising his hands over his head: the musicians play the melodic phrase to dismiss the *nat*, bringing the spirit embodiment to an end.

Conclusions

This paper contributes to understanding the experience of spirit possession by bringing into the conversation theories on embodiment, agency, affect, and gender. Taking a performative standpoint, I build on the voices of *nat kana pwe* protagonists to investigate how sounds and movements contribute to a shared performance experience that connects human and spirit bodies.

Compared to other highly choreographed dance forms present in the Burmese performing arts, *nat* dances enjoy a relative freedom of movement. I take this aspect to be the key to understanding the process that leads to spirit embodiment. All Burmese dance forms based on the *poun san* mode are connected with a dancer's experience and display of feelings.¹³ In this paper, I explained how emotions link all the performers together: a state of inspiration (*Lamain kat dae*) describes the experience of a dancer's spirit embodiment in the musical performance, and it triggers the response of the participants. Just as any other ritual actors do, the *nat hsaing* musicians take an active part in the network of exchanges through their bodies. In contrast to the dancers, musicians conceptualise the experience of being inhabited by the *Lamain nat*, the spirit who oversees the performing arts, as "being inspired." After the initial invitation of the *Lamain nat*, for the rest of the ritual performance, musicians exchange the energies received by this spirit with the dancers.

Inspired by the *Lamain nat*, dancers get themselves into the feeling of the *nat* who has been called, become possessed (*nat winpu dae*), and dance (*nat ka dae*). During the dance of Nankarine Medaw *nat* (the Buffalo Mother), the performance of a *ngo chin* (lamenting song) supports a *pya zat* (dramatic performance). Here, the spirit dancer acts (i.e. performs *poun sans*) as the crying Buffalo Mother. When the Mother loses her life, she finally becomes a *nat*. It is only at this point that possession dance (*nat ka dae*) takes place. The music and dance performance makes the multiple nature of the Buffalo *nat* manifest: loving mother and powerful *nat*. The collaborative mimetic process that makes the *nat* come into presence goes through different steps: the initial phase does not constitute a spirit dance; in the second phase, the dancer is invested by the emotions associated with the transformation into a *nat*. While the process also characterises other female spirit persons invited to dance in the *nat kana* (for example, the Mother of Popa, the Ogress siblings of the Royal Lake of Pyay), it does not seem to be present in the dance of any male spirit: in Yangon and Mandalay urban ceremonies, the performance of the dramatic storytelling seems to be exclusively (or at least, more frequently) associated with female *nats*.¹⁴

Both phases are performed with *poun san* movements: collaboratively with the sounds and energy expressed by the *nat hsaing* musicians, this dance mode helps the dancer enter "into the mood," and eventually to experience *nat* embodiment. Through the mimetic performance, the spirit dancers transcend their personhood, fluidly shifting from a human male to animal-female spirit, and thus becoming "powerful." Musical sounds and dance movements construct, perform, and manifest the spirit person of the Mother Buffalo, so that humans can experience her presence and interact with her.

13 Similar processes seem to characterise the performance of the *Yama zatdaw*, the Burmese Ramayana.

14 A *pya zat* performance is for the coming-into-presence of the (male) *nat* U Shin Gyi. Although particularly popular in lower Burma, U Shin Gyi is seldom celebrated in Yangon urban ceremonies, and I have never encountered him during my fieldwork. See Riedel (2021).

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