

THE BURMESE MARIONETTE THEATER

AXEL BRUNS

INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR, BERLIN

PREFACE

Little is known about the puppet theater in Burma (or Myanmar) outside that country, which has been largely isolated in recent decades. In Burma itself articles and books on this subject are published quite frequently, but nearly all are in Burmese. Translations from English into Burmese usually are no problem, but vice versa it is a little difficult. For a very special subject like puppetry it seems to be nearly impossible to find qualified interpreters.

Of course the Burmese marionette stage is mentioned in various books on Asian puppetry as a whole or on Burmese drama in general. But due to limited access to information on this subject the respective authors tend to summarize and generalize. Nevertheless, even this limited information is often based on assumptions and guesswork. As some authors prefer to adopt their predecessor's opinion instead of doing research of their own, some errors remain for decades.

OUTLINE OF HISTORY

It is neither known exactly where Burmese puppetry originated nor how long ago it came into existence. Burma is of course situated in Southeast Asia, an area in which the respective countries have adopted a great deal of their culture from China and India, the influence of the latter being predominant in Burma. Both have a long history of marionette theater and therefore an Indian or a Chinese influence cannot be ruled out. The Indian influence was mainly spread by traders via the sea routes and as the center of Burman culture for most of that people's history lay on the upper Irrawaddy River, they might not have experienced the Indian influence as much as the Mon, who settled in the coastal regions. On the other hand, Burma is separated from China by mountains that are not easily traversed.

Another point worth mentioning is the fact that the Burmese marionette theater is unique among its sisters in Southeast Asia. While in Thailand, Malaya, Indonesia and Cambodia the shadow theater was the predominant form of entertainment, it has never been known to the Burmans, as Dr. Htin Aung points out (1937,

148). The *Ramayana*, so popular for centuries in those countries, came to Burma only in the eighteenth century.

These facts may be the reason for the claim by some authors that the marionette stage of Burma is a "truly Burmese invention" which emerged without any foreign "intervention" (e. g. Ba Cho in Khin Zaw 1981, 14). These authors base their opinion on a decree issued in 1821 by U Thaw, the "Minister of the Royal Stage," taking it for the birth certificate of the Burmese marionette stage. Others take the view that it existed before 1821, but only in a rudimentary form. U Thaw added the more important parts, thus creating the marionette show in its classical form (Htin Aung 1937, 147). Ba Cho's theory has become untenable during the last decades. It is still not known whether the Burmese marionette theater is an imitation of the Indian or Chinese forms or if it developed independently. Nowadays Burmese scholars widely express the opinion that it developed independently, but experienced influences from neighboring countries to a greater or lesser extent.

Those foreign influences so far remain speculation, but we have written evidence for at least 500 years:

1. The "Glass Palace Chronicle," compiled under the last Burman dynasty, mentions that King Alaungsithu (1112–1167) saw a group of stone musicians during a pilgrimage to India and revived them, thus "inventing" the Burmese marionettes (p. 114).
2. A stone inscription on the *Htupayon* Pagoda in Sagaing (built in A.D. 1444) mentions a group of pagoda slaves who were donated to the pagoda to celebrate the inauguration. Among them were some persons called *ayup thi*—puppeteers.
3. Ratthasara (1468–1530), one of the most learned and venerated monks of Burma, well known for his poetry, mentions puppets in three of his poems, including the *thanwara pyo*.
4. The *Maha yazawin gyi* (1724) gives a depiction of a mission to the court of King Anaukpetlun by a delegation from India in 1618, whose members were entertained by various musical troupes, dancers and marionettes.
5. U Thaw's decree from 1821 (see above) is quoted by nearly all scholars. It is probably the most comprehensive and infor-

mative description of traditional Burmese puppetry. It comprises several rules regarding the construction of the puppet stage, the sequence of appearance of the various puppets, the salary of puppeteers, etc.

Early European travellers to Burma also mentioned the puppet stage. While the Burmese sources are very often equivocal, referring only to "big and small figures" (Kala) or "diverse figures" (U Toe), the Europeans definitely refer to marionettes.

The first of them was probably Michael Symes ("Account of an embassy to the kingdom of Ava in the year 1795"). He witnessed a puppet show organized by the mayor of Pegu. His report proves that Ba Cho and Tilakasiri are wrong in appointing U Thaw as the inventor of Burmese puppetry.

Another early European traveller was Capt. R. B. Pemberton ("Journey from Munipoor to Ava, and thence across the Yooma mountains to Arracan"). He makes mention of a puppet that was displayed by a few Burmans in a village. These Burmans furthermore told him that they had a bigger, life size puppet, which was unfortunately out of order. This indicates that there must have been two different kinds of marionettes, large ones and small ones. The large puppets might have proved too difficult to handle so this kind of puppetry was finally abandoned.

Burmese puppetry doubtlessly had its heyday in the late eighteenth and during most of the nineteenth century. Under the Konbaung dynasty (1752–1885) the art of puppetry was patronized by the royal family and the courtiers. The creation of a "Ministry of the Royal Stage" is only one indication of the importance attached to puppetry by the royal court, which had as many as four puppet stages. The members of the "Great Royal Stage" were personally selected by the king, those of the "Lesser Royal Stage" by the queen or crown prince, and the puppeteers for the "Crown Princess's Stage" were selected by the crown princess. Finally there was the "Royal Court Stage," which played for the courtiers.

The privileges of the particular troupes were defined quite specifically. Only the "Great Royal Stage" was allowed to be accompanied by two orchestras, placed to the left and to the right side of the stage front. There were a number of decorations like "kya yat" (lily fans) and plantains which indicated the status of the stage. Another important distinction was made by "thaings" (scepters), which symbolized the authority granted by the royal patrons to the stage principal. He was empowered to drive troublemakers such as drunkards, etc. from the stage, even by force if necessary. The first three stages had four or five of these "thaings," while the "Royal Court Stage" did not have that privilege. The "Great Royal Stage" was not allowed to perform outside the palace walls, and the "Lesser Royal Stage" and the "Crown Princess's Stage" only with the king's permission. The "Royal Court Stage" was not subject to these restrictions.

The members of the courtly troupes were not paid by their royal patrons. Instead of payment they got precious gifts. The most highly esteemed puppeteer Tha Byaw even was appointed "Minister of the Royal Stage" for a performance held at the Fifth Buddhist Synod. In his performance he praised the kings' merits, gained by propagation and support of the faith. Also

others who deserved well of puppetry were rewarded by the king. U Htoke, the "Deputy Minister of the Royal Stage," was invested with seven villages in 1776 and U Thaw held the title of "Lord of Shwedaung."

The courtly troupes were also important as a link between the royal court and the common people. Sometimes they used a play to make the poor man's plight known to the king. Once when a soldier died, his wife was forced by the commander of his troupe to serve in his place and to accompany the troupe wherever it had to go. The name of the unfortunate widow was made known to the king by means of a pun. The king inquired about the matter and ordered that the woman be sent home immediately.

The king's subjects shared the royal passion and engaged puppet troupes for all kinds of festivities. As Burma is quite rich in festivities, there was a great demand for performances. Consequently there were numerous puppet troupes that toured all over the country. The "Ministry of the Royal Stage" took a close look at their activities to make sure that rules such as the prohibition of indecent remarks were observed.

The third Anglo-Burmese war sealed the fate of the Burmese monarchy. The last king, Thibaw, was dethroned and exiled. The British conquest resulted in an ever-increasing alienation of the Burmese from many of their traditional values, which fell into disregard. Htin Aung noted "The annexation by the British in 1886 was disastrous for the puppet-show, for, unlike the living actors, the puppets were almost totally dependent on court patronage" (1937, 146).

But the puppeteers did not give up easily: they made gallant attempts to keep their art flourishing, and for a time it seemed that the puppet stages, freed from all restrictions imposed on them by the royal court, would be able to develop further and hold the field against the upcoming competitors. New puppets were introduced and the repertoire was complemented by modern dramas which were played alongside the classical ones. Ba Cho (in Khin Zaw 1981, 14) gives a humorous description of the "modernized" puppet shows.

Despite all the efforts made by the puppeteers, the "zat pwe" stage with living actors, who had adapted many of the achievements of Western stages and turned from a humble ground level performance to a full-blown theater, surpassed the puppet stage in popularity. The puppet actors, especially the singers, deserted in flocks to find a better living (and payment!) with the "zat pwe" troupes. The puppet troupes had to reduce the number of actors, and finally even women—who had not been allowed on stage before—joined the puppet troupes in their struggle for survival, but puppetry remained on a downhill path and never recovered. The advance of modern entertainment like cinemas, television and lately even video made survival more and more difficult.

Nowadays only a handful of puppet troupes remain in the country and give performances only occasionally. The traditional orchestra proved to be too costly and has been replaced by cassette players. The Burmese government has tried repeatedly to revive traditional puppetry. Puppets even appear on TV from time to time. The government called forth the puppeteers to

introduce new sequences into their show—for example, "minority dances"—as a means to promote understanding and "union spirit" between the Burman majority and the numerous minorities.

But it seems that the old unity of "three bodies with one head," which describes the interplay of puppeteers, singers and musicians, is lost irretrievably. Burmese puppetry is on the brink of oblivion and it appears that, short of a miracle, it will suffer the same fate as many other puppet shows around the world.

THE MARIONETTES

Burmese marionettes can be divided into two groups:

1. Humans and spirits, or gods of human appearance.
2. Animals and fabulous creatures.

The first group comprises the greater number of characters; moreover, the members of this group play the leading parts. Accordingly, this paper deals mainly with that group.

The first group may be further divided into subgroups: dancing puppets (*aka yup*) and non-dancing puppets (*ayup kyan*, meaning the "rough puppets;" the same name is applied to the animal puppets), even though all the puppets perform a kind of dance during their appearance. The dancing puppets have to perform more difficult movements than their colleagues and consequently have more strings. Furthermore their bodies consist of more movable parts. A prince (*min tha*) might have separate hip joints, enabling him to spread his legs sideways, while usually a puppet's legs can only be moved forward and backward. The torso of the dancing puppets is mostly divided along the waist into upper and lower parts, which increases the puppet's versatility. The most important dancing puppets are the prince and princess (*min tha mi*); others are the alchemist (*zaw gyi*), the medium (*nat ga daw*) and the royal maid of honor (*apyo daw*). These puppets demand puppeteers of the greatest skill and thus are performed by the master puppeteers of the marionette troupe. The non-dancing puppets can be operated by less experienced puppeteers.

One of the most striking differences between Burmese puppets and their Southeast Asian sisters is the very limited degree of abstraction. While, for example, Indonesian shadow puppets (*wayang kulit*) hardly resemble humans, Burmese marionette carvers make the greatest efforts to achieve absolute likeness—down even to the private parts! (The reasons will be discussed later on.)

The height of Burmese marionettes (excluding the strings) can vary considerably. As a rule of thumb it can be assumed that the marionette's height measures between 45 and 70 cm. Bigger ones can be found occasionally; smaller ones are rare. All the marionettes are made from wood, *Gmelina arborea* (*ya ma ne*) traditionally being considered the best, but there are quite a few other kinds of wood in use, as *ya ma ne* is quite costly and is not found everywhere in Burma. Also, the wood of *Bignonia crispa* (*than that*), *Cedrela toona* (*thit myit zu*) and *Bombax malabaricum*

(*let pan*) are used traditionally. Those woods are light, easy to carve and yet are resistant to insects. Teak wood, on the other hand, is regarded as too heavy by the puppeteers. Only recently puppet carvers started to use teak wood to make marionettes for the souvenir trade. Nevertheless, almost any souvenir dealer will claim the superior quality of his teak wood marionettes compared to others, thus displaying his ignorance.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE MARIONETTES

According to the requirements of the puppeteers, Burmese marionettes have different numbers of parts of the body. Figs. 1 and 2 show the construction of a prince (*min tha*), belonging to the group of *aka yup*.

The head is connected to the upper body by a cord that runs through a special neckpiece with a hole in the center. The upper body reaches down to the waist and is connected to the lower body by a few strings. Special hip joints at each side with an ingenious construction give the puppet a high degree of flexibility. The legs consist of three parts: thigh, shank and foot, the former connected with strings, the latter by a carved joint, which allows a limited degree of movement for the foot. The arms are made after the same system. Hands and feet are detachable, thus enabling the puppeteer to change them. This can be quite important, for example, if a prince in one scene is shown dancing with his hands in a graceful posture while in the next scene he might be shown fighting, with a sword in his hand. The strings connecting the separate parts of the limbs are often wrapped with a piece of cloth to give the joints a more lifelike appearance. The puppet shown in fig. 1 is of course a very good piece of work and cannot be compared with the average puppet, especially those made for the souvenir trade. Nowadays we find puppets with a one-piece torso, some even lacking the special neckpiece. Lower leg and foot are often made in one piece, as well as arm and hand. The strings sometimes are not wrapped with cloth.

After the separate parts of the puppet are carved and connected to each other, the puppet is painted. Good puppets show paint all over the body; cheaper ones are only painted on the visible parts (i. e. face, neck, hands and feet). The standard color is white. The facial features are painted in black (eyes, eyebrows, etc.) and red (lips, nostrils, etc.). Colors are not as important as, for example, in Indonesia, where the different complexions are an indicator of the character. Bad characters sometimes have reddish complexions (e. g. the "red-faced prince," the opponent of the hero). The supernatural ogres (*bi lu*) and some other supernatural beings have a green or sometimes golden face, as do Rama and his brother Laksmana in the *Ramayana*. The quality of the painting can vary considerably. Good quality puppets have the facial features carved in with a fine knife before painting. Traditionally only natural colors were used, but nowadays chemical colors can also be found. Nearly all of the marionettes, even the cheaper ones, have real hair implanted into their wooden skulls.

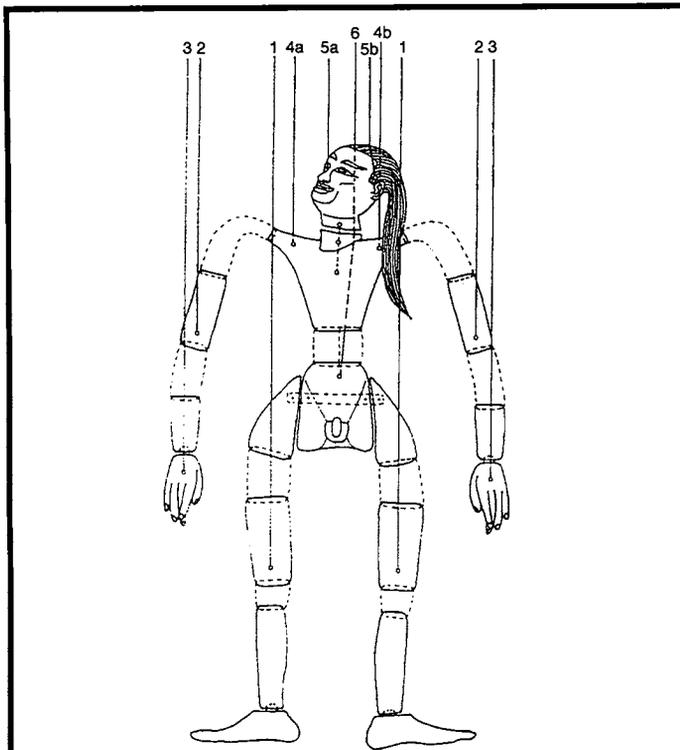


Fig. 1. Structure of a Burmese marionette with function and arrangement of the strings

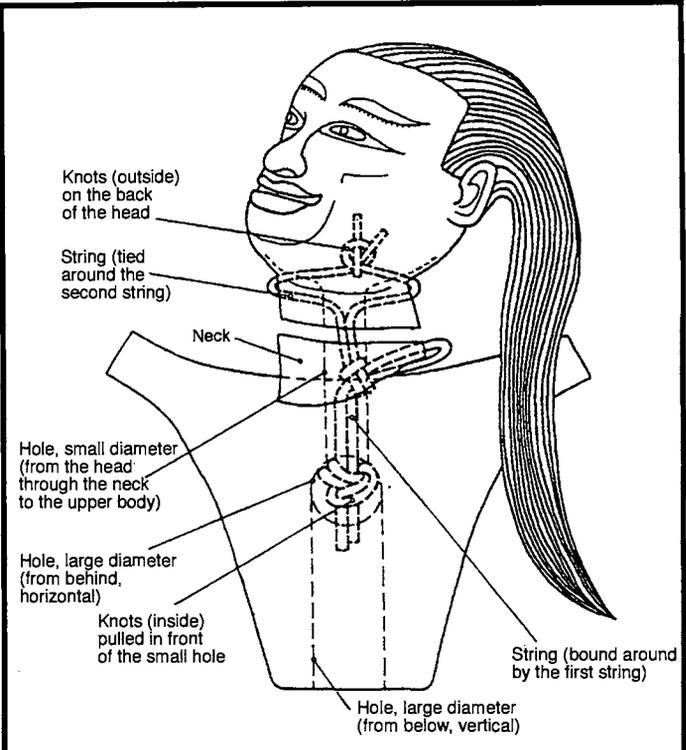


Fig. 2. Connecting the head and upper body with string

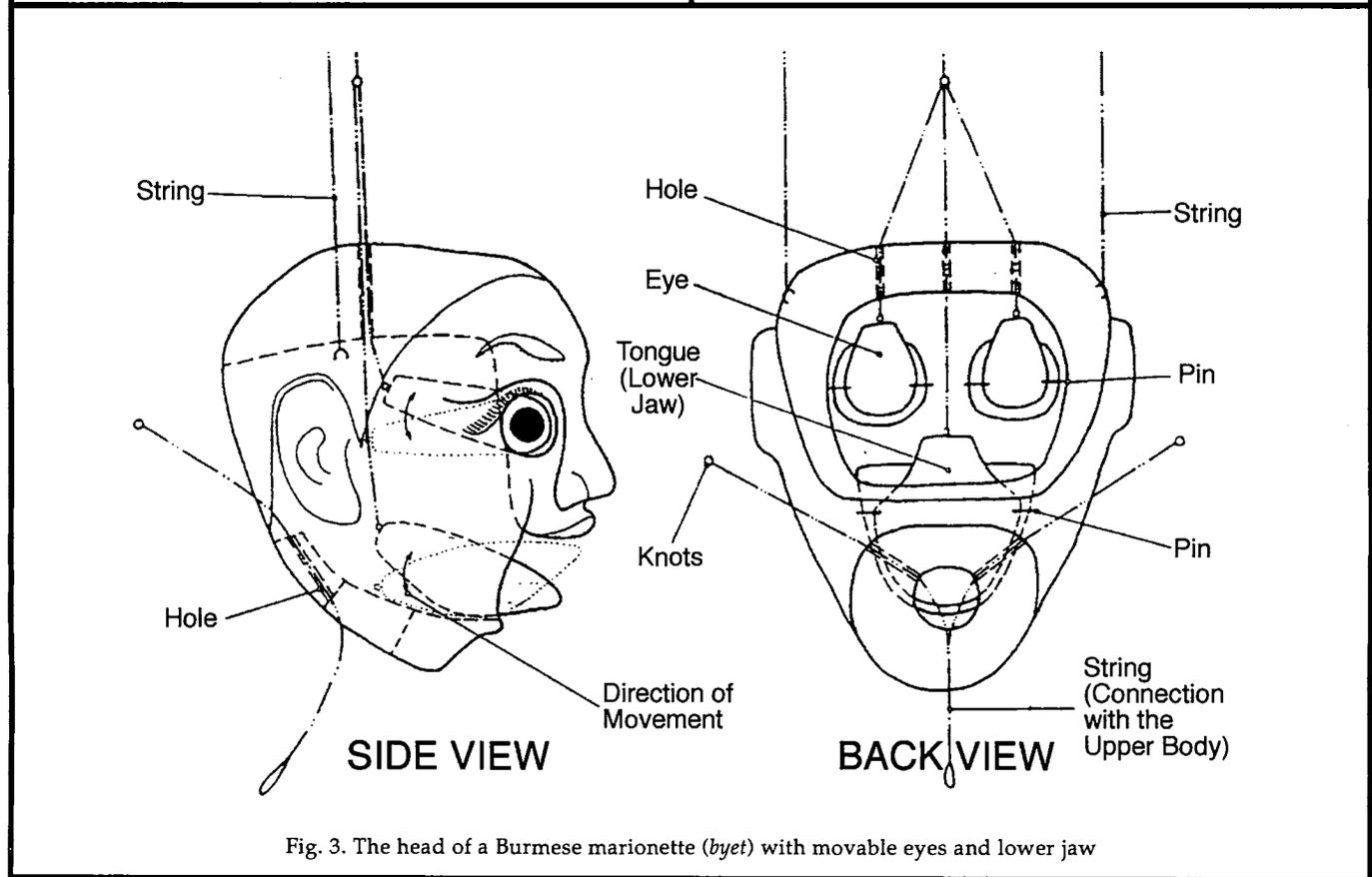


Fig. 3. The head of a Burmese marionette (*byet*) with movable eyes and lower jaw

Most of the puppets wear beautifully decorated costumes, resembling those of the Burmese court. Even if the hero and heroine of a play are commoners, they wear royal dress, but of course there are also some commoners who wear their usual dress, like clowns, soldiers, etc.

The marionettes are moved with the help of a handle. It is connected to the puppet by strings. The number of strings varies according to the requirements; *aka yup* again have the greatest number of strings. There are two types of strings. Fixed strings connect the puppet with the handle. They are fixed at each temple and at each shoulder and there is an additional one fixed above the buttocks. Long loose strings connect the extremities at both hands and thighs. Thus the minimum number of strings seems to be eight, even though there are some economical manufacturers who try to save one string or another. It should be noted that every string consists of three parts: two twisted loops, fixed either to the handle or to the respective extremities, connected to each other by a simple long string with knots at each end. This system enables the Burmese puppeteers to change the puppet's dress easily or to disentangle the strings should they get mixed up in the heat of a fight.

Traditional Burmese marionettes rarely have movable mouths or eyes. These were mainly restricted to clowns and sometimes ladies-in-waiting. Fig. 3 shows an example of such a puppet. Nowadays most of the puppets made for sale to tourists have such gimmicks; even hands that can be clasped are not uncommon. Many ignorant shopkeepers try to make their unsuspecting customers believe that a puppet's quality depends on the number of parts that can be moved. It is remarkable that those puppets are very often of the poorest quality, but they still show these complicated mechanisms.

Burmese marionettes were traditionally made either by special puppet carvers or by the puppeteers themselves. The carvers took the greatest care to make the puppet look as lifelike as possible. It seems that the reason for this almost human appearance lies in restrictions the living actors were subject to in the olden days. Khin Zaw (1981, 15) mentions that even nowadays a man and a woman, unless married, are not supposed to be seen walking along the street together. Thus it would have been totally unacceptable to see living actors kissing on stage, but the little wooden actors were pardoned for that; Khin Zaw points out that romantic scenes were especially attractive for the audience. Another reason may have been the fear that the powerful spirits or gods might regard a human impersonating them on stage as an insult, but not so for the marionettes.

Shows are usually staged on a bamboo structure, sometimes as wide as twelve meters. The stage is trapezoid-shaped, its overall depth up to six meters. About one meter from the stage front is a dividing bamboo beam, serving as handrail, from which the backdrop hangs down. That means the actual play is confined to a space of only one meter in depth, which explains the extraordinary length of the stage—remember, it's a puppet stage! The stage had to be erected by the organizer of the play. It was traditionally illuminated by oil lamps and there was *no* curtain. The shadows of the puppets cast upon the white backdrop by the flickering lights gave the play a mystic atmosphere.

Properties were limited to the minimum required: a throne and a couch for the royal couple, a hermitage for the "yathe" (hermit), maybe a palace gate. The backdrop traditionally was a plain white piece of cloth; a bamboo branch indicated the forest. Later the white piece of cloth was replaced by several backdrops depicting a forest, a palace, an audience hall, sometimes a city wall or whatever was required for the play.

THE MEMBERS OF THE PUPPET TROUPE

The traditional full company could embrace more than ten persons. There were three types of performers in the troupe:

1. Those who only sing
2. Those who only manipulate the marionettes
3. Those who sing as well as manipulate

The singers were regarded as the most important members of the troupe—the stars, so to speak. A good deal of their importance was based on the parsimonious decoration of the traditional stage. As the spectators only saw a white backdrop, a bamboo branch and a few props, it was the singers' task to stimulate their imagination enough to make them see a deep forest, a beautiful city or the like. Next to the singers came the puppeteers who manipulate the main characters. It was the separation of singing and manipulating that brought Burmese puppetry to perfection, as it would have proved too difficult for one person to perform the exhausting task of manipulating, say, the prince's dance and also sing the complicated melodies of his songs. Traditionally the puppet itself was not as important as the songs, but rather only a help, as most of what was going on was left to the imagination. The other characters (such as the minister, for example, who doesn't require complicated movements and merely sings or speaks) could be manipulated and sung (or better, spoken) by one person, usually beginners or less talented players.

The marionette stage was a travelling theater, touring over great distances. Troupes from Mandalay, for example, got engagements as far away as Rangoon, travelling by boat and oxcart, later by train. On their way the troupes staged free shows in villages and were granted board and lodging by the villagers as an acknowledgment.

The whole company was hidden behind the backdrops, invisible to the spectators. The orchestra was placed between the stage front and the spectators. Up to seven musicians made up the traditional orchestra (*hsaing waing*), consisting of *pat waing* (a kind of drum-harmonium, as Henry Yule described it (1855, 13); the *kyi waing*, similar to the *pat waing* but with bronze gongs instead of drums; and a set of drums, the biggest of them being the *pat ma* hanging down from a support in the shape of a mythical dragon. Those instruments were accompanied by an oboe (*imay*), brass cymbals (*si*), a bamboo clapper (*wa let hkup*) and a set of brass gongs (*maung hsaing*). There could be other instruments as well, hand-bells (*ya gwin*) or the beating block (*byauk*).

Together with at least one stagehand a touring marionette troupe thus had nearly twenty members. It was not very difficult to find talented artists. Shway Yoe mentions

There is no nation on the face of the earth so fond of theatrical representations as the Burmese. There is not a man, otherwise than a cripple, in the country, who has not at some period of his life been himself an actor, either in the drama or in the marionette show, if not in either of these, certainly in a chorus dance. (1896, 286)

The artists were given fixed shares as their salary. The amount depended on the popularity of the troupe and the distance it had to travel. In the old days the puppeteers were paid quite well, even outdoing the theater with living actors (*zat pwe*) as Shway Yoe mentions (1896, 290). The marionettes were so popular that the *zat pwe* stage borrowed a number of dances from the puppet stage. Even today movements in some of the human dances resemble those of marionettes. It is said that the talent of a dancer is judged by his ability to imitate a marionette.

THE PUPPET SHOW

The Burmese did not have to look too long for occasions to hold a theatrical performance. Shway Yoe again gives a description which is much to the point:

It would be wrong to say there is no other amusement in the country, but it is indisputable that every other amusement ends up with a dramatic performance. When a Burman is born, there is a *pwe*; when he is named there is a *pwe*; when a girl's ears are bored; when the youth enters the monastery; when he comes out again; when he marries; when he divorces; when he makes a lucky speculation; when he sets up a water-pot; builds a bridge; ... whenever in fact anything at all is done, there is a theatrical representation. Finally, there is a *pwe*, as grand as his friends can make it, when the Burman dies. (1896, 286)

This certainly does not apply any more to life nowadays, as modern times have changed the traditional life-style in Burma. But even today *pwes* can be seen in the streets frequently, usually in the daytime. In contrast to this, puppet shows (*yup thay pwe*) are not easy to find. Traditionally plays took the whole night, sometimes even three nights. They started after dusk and ended at dawn. Nowadays the rare puppet shows may be staged at any time during the day, lasting not much more than an hour.

A thread runs through the traditional Burmese marionette show starting from the beginning of the world, inhabited by spirits, continuing with the creation of the animal kingdom and mankind, and finally ending in the foundation of the kingdom. The speculation behind it is that first there has to be a world, populated by spirits, animals and humans who have

founded a kingdom, before any drama can be staged in that kingdom.

The continuous creation and subsequent destruction of the world, caused by human greed, hatred and ignorance, is represented by a musical overture. Its climax is the beating of cymbals, gongs and the big drum, symbolizing the different kinds of destruction: by fire, water and wind. With the final beat the world is considered created.

The number of marionettes in a show has been a subject of discussion for many authors. U Thaw's decree from 1821 mentions thirty-six marionettes, but unfortunately does not name all of them. Khin Zaw (1981, 36) and Tilakasiri (1968, 37) claim twenty-seven marionettes. It seems that there is no fixed number of marionettes in a play. Of course there are some marionettes that can be found in every puppeteer's box: prince and princess, magician, lady-in-waiting, etc. Others will be found only occasionally. It seems that the number of marionettes differs from troupe to troupe. It can even differ in one group from time to time, depending on the requirements of the plays. What follows is the lineup of a hypothetical play, including the most commonly used marionettes; but, again, that does not mean that all these marionettes will be presented at every show nor does it mean that there cannot be any additional marionettes in a show.

After the musical overture the female spirit medium (*nat ga daw*) appears and pays her respects to the numerous spirits who will ensure the success of the show. The dance of the spirit medium may be regarded as the earliest form of theatrical activity in Burma. Until this very day every theatrical performance in Burma starts with the dance of the spirit medium (*sin taing gan*). The puppet used in this scene is dressed like a lady-in-waiting, except for a special headband. It should be noted that all marionettes traditionally have their own special way of entering the dance: some come from the right, some from the left, some jump down from the handrail. Others enter the stage through an exit in the backdrop (*min pauk*).

Next comes a scene called *himawunta* (Pāli *himavanta*, a synonym for Himalaya), showing the different animals and superhuman beings dancing in the dense forest of *himawunta*. Each animal has its own dance style. *Himawunta* starts with the appearance of the white horse, followed by the solo dance of the somersaulting monkey, who is chased from the scene by two powerful ogres (*bi lu*). They are dressed in green, wielding swords or clubs. The color of their skin is green as well, sometimes gold. A high headgear towers above their abominable distorted faces with bulging fangs. There are few things *bi lus* are afraid of: one of them is their own shadow. Chasing each other, sometimes even jumping upon their opponents' shoulder, they stage a wild dance. After the disappearance of the *bi lus* the elephant enters the stage. Because of his sheer mass his "dance" is merely a swaying to and fro. His arch rival, the tiger, is the next one on the scene, dancing artistically. After spotting the elephant, he starts a fight, cheered on by the audience. The elephant usually wins that fight. The last entrance is the magician (*zaw gyi*), dressed in a red overcoat, trousers down to his knees, wearing a red cap and holding a magic wand in his

hands. A long imposing chin beard rounds off this impressive figure. He is gifted with superhuman abilities, enabling him to fly through the skies as well as through the earth at lightning speed. A *zaw gyi* can get very old (a million years) and transform fruits into beautiful girls, to name just a few of his remarkable abilities. Therefore he may be also termed sorcerer, superman, etc. The dances of the *zaw gyi* and the *nat ga daw* are some of the most difficult on the puppet stage and therefore these puppets have to be played by the best puppeteer of the troupe. After performing his dance, including a handstand on his magic wand and finally even hanging level in the air, only supported by his magic wand, he leaves the stage, closing the *himawunta* scene.

The next scene is called "establishing the kingdom" (*taing pye te gan*). Here the king is shown with his ministers, discussing the most important matters of the kingdom. After the ministers have praised the king's blessed rule that leads the country upon the path of eternal happiness and so on, the background of the ensuing drama is unfolded to the audience. The royal page boy (*she daw pye*) usually opens the scene, dancing barefoot and preparing the audience hall for the king and his ministers. He is dressed in a short jacket, usually worn open, showing the tattoos on his chest. Short trousers or a tucked-up loincloth complete his dress. His hair is tied into two tufts on the top of his head, giving him a childish look. Following him are the four ministers (*wun gyi le ba*), entering the stage one by one, walking about in a grotesque manner. They represent different ranks at the royal court but their titles and functions do not correspond exactly with the actual traditional ranks at the Burmese court. The four ministers can be easily recognized by their dress. They wear long red or green overcoats and their heads are crowned by a high headgear or *gaung baung*, typical Burmese "hats." When all the ministers have taken their position the king finally appears and opens the audience. He has the right to choose from a wide variety of garments. He may wear a simple shirt (*ein gyi*) and a sarong (*lun gyi*), sometimes decorated by a double sash (*sa lwe*), but he might be dressed in full array as well, wearing a golden robe and a spire-like headgear, thus making him very similar to *Thagyamin*, the king of the *nats*. He might be accompanied by his queen, but not necessarily. This scene was especially dear to the educated connoisseurs of puppetry because of the refined dialogues in courtly parlance. Unfortunately it was later regarded as boring because of the lack of action and consequently neglected by the puppeteers.

The next scene is the duet of prince and princess (*thit sa hta*). This may be regarded as the highlight of every puppet show in Burma. The two are usually shown dancing in a forest, accompanied by two or four clowns, their attendants. The setting in the forest applies to a popular story that may be part of the drama itself as well: the prince (*min tha*) has been sent to a university, very often the one at Taxila (*Tekkatho*), the most prestigious of all. After studying for some years the prince goes back home, bringing with him his new wife, a princess (*min tha mi*) he met there. The duet scene shows the two on their way home. Very often the ministers in the preceding scene refer to their home-

coming. Therefore this scene should be shown after the establishment of the kingdom, either in a special sequence or as part of the drama itself. Unfortunately puppeteers for a long time past did not care too much about this succession and played the scene wherever they deemed it necessary, sometimes even in the very beginning, preceding the scene of the *nat ga daw*. It is indisputable that this is the most attractive scene of all and therefore it will be played whenever the puppeteers have the feeling that the audience, especially children, is becoming restless. Prince and princess are dressed in beautiful garments (see above). The attendants wear simple *lun gyis* and jackets. Their hair is tied in one or two tufts, regarded as amusing by the audience because of the childlike appearance. The clowns' faces are different from those of other marionettes. While most marionettes have a gentle smile on their well-proportioned faces, the clowns' faces are often ugly with bulging eyes (often movable, see fig. 3), sometimes slanted faces and broad mouths, resembling a fish. Very often they are given amusing names like "Mr. Frog" or the like. It is one of the most demanding tasks for a carver to make clowns' heads, as they require excellent workmanship.

The final scene of a puppet show is the drama itself, called *zat lan* in Burmese. There are four categories of drama:

1. *Yazawinzat*: Historical dramas from the *Yazawin* chronicle, depicting the life of famous kings and heroes.
2. *Hpaya tha maing*: Religious stories and fables, especially pagoda tales.
3. *Hto zat*: Modern drama.
4. *Jātakas* and *Mahāvamsa*: Birth-stories of the Buddha and stories from the chronicle of Sri Lanka.

The fourth group is probably the most important, especially the *Mahājātakas*, which are very popular to this day. The selection of the drama to be staged is left to the leader, very often the first singer. He usually selects dramas that fit his style of singing, but the organizer of the festival also has quite a say in the matter.

Marionettes in the drama can be plentiful; the most important are listed below:

The hermit (*yathe*) is dressed in a robe similar to that of a monk but of a brownish color, completed with a high headgear. He is a positive character, helping people who have lost their way in the forest, where he dwells, and giving good advice to the king. Similar to him is a marionette called *bo daw*; his dress is slightly lighter than that of the *yathe*. He wears a flat hat or a *gaung baung*.

The Brahmin (*punna*), on the other hand, engages in intrigue, trying to mislead the king with his insinuations and doing all he can to make the hero suffer. In the end, of course, he cannot prevail. As he is an Indian he wears the typical white Indian dress completed by a *gaung baung*. The audience truly hates him, sometimes even attacking the puppet.

Another villain is the elder red-faced prince, the opponent of the hero, usually shown with a weapon in his hand and sporting an impressive moustache. In fact his face is not red but pinkish.

His relative, the white-faced prince, even though very similar to him, on the contrary is a positive character. The term "elder prince" (*min tha gyi*) might be misleading, as both are not necessarily brothers of the hero. They may as well be the king's brothers or uncles. The singers of the *min tha gyi* were very often retired *min tha* singers, who could not master their difficult tasks any more and thus shifted to this role that required less singing and more dialogue.

Some of the most important characters in a play are the numerous *nats*; the term is usually translated as "spirit." There are numerous *nats* all over Burma. Those of the puppet stage usually dwell in forests, on mountains or in rivers. They are often shown with a conflicting character, acting positively as well as negatively, depending on the deeds of the humans. Thus they punish offenders and reward the righteous, i. e. the heroes. The benevolence of the *nats* can be gained by offerings. As *nats* are still very important in Burma, a *nat*-shrine can be found in most Burmese houses. On the puppet stage the *nat* is usually a short fat man, with a tucked-up *lun gyi* and a short jacket, wearing a hat and very often tattooed.

Thagyamin is the king of the *nats*, a dignified character. He is much more powerful than the ordinary *nat* and is able to give the story a decisive turn from bad to good, thus acting as a *deus ex machina*. His appearance is similar to that of the king, described above. Even more powerful is *Brahma*, wearing a white robe. The two can be further distinguished by their high spire-like headgear. As *Thagyamin* dwells in the seventh abode of Mount Meru, his headgear is seven-tiered. *Brahma* dwells in the ninth abode and consequently wears a nine-tiered headgear.

As mentioned above, there may be more marionettes in the drama, such as the soldier (*Bandula*), snake (*naga*) and dragon (*galon*) in the *himawunta* scene, to name just a few. For dramas like the *Ramayana* there may be special figures.

INNOVATIONS

This paper has shown that the Burmese marionette stage has gone through significant changes since the downfall of the Burmese empire. One of them was the abolition of the traditional separation between singing and manipulating. A traditional ensemble with singers, special manipulators and a complete orchestra can now be seen only very rarely in Burma. It has been mentioned as well that women were given access to the stage. The traditional austere stage was changed to a richly decorated one. The plain white backdrop of the olden days was decorated with colored scenes, the traditional oil lamps were replaced by gas lamps, and finally electric bulbs made their debut. Gone were the mystic shadows, and imagination became less important. Modern stages might even have a curtain, thus separating one scene from another. The introduction of amplifiers and loudspeakers gave less loud-voiced singers a chance to perform.

The *Mahājātakas*, traditionally dominant, lost ground to the modern *hto zat* and the puppeteers invented numerous new puppets (even European ladies with lap-dogs) to be shown. In

fact, the puppet stage tried to beat the competitors (especially cinemas) at their own game, thus giving up the very essence of puppetry. The traditional *himawunta* scene with all its importance was degraded to an ordinary show of animals.

In 1965 the Burmese government, concerned about the decline of this traditional art that was so typical of Burma, invited two ladies from Czechoslovakia to find ways out of this deadlock. The ladies held classes for puppeteers and introduced rod puppets and glove puppets to Burma. A thorough inventory of what was still left was made and old puppeteers were interviewed about their trade, resulting in the compilation of a number of biographies. For a time even new puppet troupes came into existence, but it seems that it was too late. Most of the newly founded troupes were later disbanded: they were successful in every aspect except for the financial one, as one of the puppeteers pointed out. One traditional stage in Pagan has remained, playing almost exclusively for foreign tourists. In Mandalay, the cradle of Burmese culture, it is nearly impossible to see a puppet show and things are not much better in Rangoon. Some puppet stages have abandoned the traditional Burmese puppetry and have introduced a new kind of puppetry, but that has nothing to do with the traditional puppetry of Burma. Nowadays it seems that all hope is gone, and in a few years only the marionettes will bear witness to this great tradition.

REFERENCES

BA CHO

1981 In Khin Zaw 1981.

BRUNS, AXEL (ED.) AND HLA THAMEIN

1990 *Birmanisches Marionettentheater* (in German). Berlin.

HLA THAMEIN

1972 *Myanma yup-the tha-bin* (in Burmese). Rangoon.

HTIN AUNG, MAUNG

1937 *Burmese drama*. Calcutta: Oxford University Press.

KHIN ZAW, U

1981 *Burmese culture*. Rangoon: Sarpay Beikman Press.

PEMBERTON, R. B., CAPT.

1830 (1960) Journey from Munipoor to Ava, and thence across the Yooma Mountains to Arracan, 1830. Ed. D. G. E. Hall. *Journal of the Burmese Research Society* (Rangoon) 63: 1-96.

SHWAY YOE

1896 *The Burman: His life and notions*. London and New York: Macmillan.

TILAKASIRI, J.

1968 *The puppet theatre of Asia*. Colombo.

YULE, HENRY

1968 (1855) *A narrative of the mission sent by the Governor-General of India to the Court of Ava in 1855*. London: Oxford University Press.