

*Do Ko Gyi Kyaw: Analyzing the Interactions between Rhythms, Melodies, and Sonic Structures of a Burmese Spirit Song Performance*¹

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THE belief in local spirits in Burma is articulated through a ritualized and institutionalized spirit possession cult, integrated within the framework of Theravada Buddhism. The cult revolves around the official Pantheon of the Thirty-Seven Lords (*Thounze-hkunna Min*)—figures who, according to the legends, suffered violent, unjust deaths, usually by the hand of a king, and consequently transformed into harmful *nats*. Officially instituted and controlled by the Buddhist kings of Burma, this spirit cult is still today deeply intertwined with Burmese Theravada Buddhism and can be considered part of the same religious system (Brac de la Perrière 2009).

In the urban centers of Yangon and Mandalay, the music of the *nat hsaing* ensemble sets the stage for the celebration of *nat kana pwes*, spirit possession ceremonies hosted by private donors. The ensemble is composed of tuned percussion instruments (drums and gong-chimes, also typical of other Southeast Asian music cultures), various idiophones, at least one shawm, and one or more singers.² Stepping into a *nat kana*, a temporary bamboo pavilion usually erected on a public road as an extension of the private house, one would be struck immediately by the clashing rhythms and fast melodies performed by the ensemble. A deafening vocal line blares out of massive speakers, accompanying the instrumental sounds and supporting the dance of one or more spirit mediums. The music of the *nat hsaing* represents more than just an accompaniment to possession dances of mediums and devotees: it calls and returns the spirits to and from the ritual space, making their presence sonically tangible. It is through combination of *nat hsaing* sounds and the spirit dancer's movements that the *nats* come into presence, manifesting themselves in the body of the spirit mediums, and interacting with their devotees.

The devotees direct their prayers to the Thirty-Seven Lords through the help of a *nat kadaw* (spirit medium, dancer, and fortune-teller), in order to receive their blessing and guidance. During the ceremony, the *nat kadaw* acts as a dancer, sequentially embodying the *nats*, so that the humans can interact with them. Spirits and humans alike are invited to join

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2. *Hsaing waing* is the general name for the Burmese outdoor music ensemble. The name literally means “suspended” and “in circle,” directly referring to the most representative instrument: the drum circle *pat waing*. A *hsaing* ensemble performing at a spirit possession ceremony is called *nat hsaing (waing)*, and it is characterized by unique stylistic features that distinguish it from other *hsaing* performance contexts in Burma (see Keeler 1998; Becker, Garfias, and Williamson 2001).

the *nat kana pwe*: friends and family of the main donor take part in the ceremony, paying homage to the *nats*, and amusing them with offerings, including fragrant flowers, fresh food, soft and alcoholic drinks, music and dance. In specific moments of the ceremony, referred to as *nat chawt pwe* (“to soothe the spirits”), the devotees “share their bodies with the spirits”—to borrow an expression used by a *nat kadaw* during my field research (Htoo Zaw, Taungbyon, August 16, 2018). Through dancing and getting possessed by several *nats*, the devotees renew their covenant with them and underline the favor the spirits have granted them in front of their community of friends and family. For these reasons, the *chawt pwe* represents a central and long-awaited moment of the entire *nat kana pwe*.

This paper focuses on the analysis of a particular song, performed during a *chawt pwe*, for Ko Gyi Kyaw, one of the major figures belonging to the official Burmese Pantheon of the Thirty-Seven Lords. In particular, this paper investigates the musical processes constituting the performance of the spirit song (*nat chin*, spirit song, or *nat than*, spirit sound) *Do Ko Gyi Kyaw*, and its correlation with the possession dances. My interest lies in understanding how the different elements (lyrics, melodies, rhythms, textures, and tempos) of a spirit song are treated during the ritual performance, and how these elements are linked to the spirit dances. Moreover, this paper aims to provide useful information concerning *hsaing waing* music and Burmese music more generally, so as to stimulate an (ethno)musicological discourse around it.

To my knowledge, only two studies (Brac de la Perrière 1994; Tun 2013) have addressed the music of *nat kana pwe* ceremonies. This is not surprising, as to this day “traditional” Burmese music remains largely unexplored. The historical vicissitudes that brought the country into a long dictatorship³ generally prevented foreign scholars from regular, extended visits and investigations, and made it impossible for local scholars to take part in academic discourse. The few in-depth musicological studies available focus on the Burmese harp and the court repertory (Becker 1969; Williamson 2000; Inoue 2014). By comparison, studies on the *hsaing* ensemble have remained, with few exceptions, at a more superficial level (Garfias 1975, 1985; Khin Zaw 1940, 1981; Okell 1971; Otake 1980). None of these studies informs us about the musical processes that take place during a *hsaing waing* music performance, and the context of the animist ceremonies is mentioned only briefly.

Since the fundamental contribution of Rouget (1985), it has been recognized that music contributes to facilitate spirit possession/trance at an individual and collective level. In recent years, the need for a methodological approach to analyze the relation between music and

3. Burma (Myanmar) has been under the rule of a reckless dictatorship since 1962, when the military junta seized power. In 2015, with the recognized victory of Burma’s democratic party (NLD, National League for Democracy, led by Aung San Suu Kyi), the country has known a slow and difficult process of opening to the rest of the world. A second landslide victory by the NLD in the November 2020 elections was not recognized by the military; on February 1, 2021, just a few hours before the convening of the new parliament, the leaders of the NLD were arrested. In defiance of the military, many people joined a quickly growing civil disobedience movement, marching in the streets; the protests have been brutally repressed by the military in an escalation of violence in both the urban and rural areas that continues today.

spirit possession has gravitated toward one of two extremes, represented at one end by Friedson's (1996) phenomenological approach, focused on shifting perception, and at the other by Becker's (1994, 2004) universalistic/neuroscientific explanation. In Southeast Asia, several authors have contributed to the delineation of the roles and functions of music and performing arts in animistic rituals and trance performances (among others, see Foley 1985; Groenendaal 2008; Kartomi 1973; Norton 2009; Pugh-Kitingan 2017; Shahriari 2006).

Primary data for this paper were compiled from an ethnographic video ([Example 1](#)) I took in Yangon, during one of the first ceremonies I attended in 2013. On that particular occasion, the *nat kana pwe* was hosted by the famous *nat kadaw* U Win Hlaing and supported by the Maha Yangon Kyi Lin Bo Mingala Hsaing ensemble. During the dance of a group of devotees (*chawt pwe*), the ensemble performed the spirit song *Do Ko Gyi Kyaw*. The song immediately interested me because of the strong response from the dancers: I started to recognize the tune every time I attended a ceremony, and eventually I could hear it in taxis, stereos, speakers, and festivals, in different versions rendered by different performers. I realized that what I had encountered was not just an extremely popular tune which everyone recognized, but also a song that embodied the concept of *nat* music (and dance, and celebration).

During a period of years, I kept on returning to this song, and with the maturation of my *hsaing waing* listening experience, I was able to recognize more particular features. I began to develop a music transcription that could describe what I had witnessed that day, and a theoretical framework that could explain it. My interpretations are informed by the analysis of the entire ritual performance, as well as by the observation of and comparison with other ceremonies and *hsaing* groups that I have observed during fieldwork in 2013 and 2017–18. Informal discussions with musicians before and after the ritual performance were also important. Interviews and recording sessions with spirit mediums and musicians provided important information about the meaning of the music. Music lessons and discussions with local masters and encounters with other performers contributed to a deeper understanding of Burmese *hsaing* music in general. When relevant, I will include in the course of this study the voices of research participants and share aspects of my personal ethnographic experience.

STRUCTURE OF THE WORK AND AIM OF THE ANALYSIS

This study begins with a general description of the musical processes and instruments characterizing the Burmese *hsaing waing*. It will become clearer from breaking down the analysis of this specific performance that the music of the Burmese ensemble shares more than one feature with other Southeast Asian musical cultures. In order to highlight these connections, I will alternate between two vistas: one which frames the *hsaing* musical processes within the broader Southeast Asian context; and a second, which focuses on the particular features of the Burmese music practice. To facilitate the discourse on the musical processes of the *nat hsaing* performance, I divide the analysis into three different levels,

roughly organized according to a distinction between vocal parts and melodic, rhythmic, and metric instruments. However, one should consider that percussion instruments in Burma (as in other Southeast Asian contexts) are tuned: therefore, what I describe, for analytical purposes, as a rhythmic instrument (e.g., the drum circle) is in fact considered a melodic one by the Burmese.

Before starting with the details of the musical analysis, I will provide more information in regard to the song *Do Ko Gyi Kyaw*—in particular, its general character and the ritual meaning attributed to it when performed during a *nat kana* ceremony. In order to better understand the ritual efficacy of the *nat chin* (spirit song) repertoire, I describe the correlations between ritual sounds and dances. Drawing on the existing literature on music and spirit possession, I describe the *nat* sounds and dances as parts of a mimetic process (Taussig 1993) that makes the presence of the spirit(s) real and tangible in the ritual space. This approach partly departs from that of Rouget, who called spirit possession dances, and the music supporting them, “figurative” (1985, 117). The merit of Rouget’s approach is the emphasis on the performative aspect of spirit cults, although sometimes at the expense of the native people’s point of view. To the Burmese, spirit dances are not (only) a representation, but a *de facto* manifestation of the *nats*.

I do not recognize only musical elements (such as rhythmic cycles or melodic patterns) as mimetic, but also sound in general; the sounds produced by the *nat hsaing* ensemble are accountable for the creation of a sonically charged ritual atmosphere. This is produced through several ritual media: the spirit statues; the offerings of flowers, food, and incense, and the smells they produce; the colors of the ritual decorations and of the mediums’ costumes; the bodily presence of a crowd of devotees, and the sounds they make when talking and moving in the ritual space. When I asked why a specific color or food was used as an offering to a *nat*, more than one *nat kadaw* explained that the spirit “likes this color” or “enjoys this type of food.” I had similar answers from *hsaing* musicians, when I asked why a particular melody was associated to a *nat*: “the spirit likes this sound.” Sometimes, however, the musicians and dancers would underline how a particular type of music identified specific characteristics belonging to the *nat* person. For example, Kyi Lin Bo and his group (Yangon, October 12, 2013) explained to me how the dances of royal spirits are accompanied by Burmese royal music; of strong and powerful spirits by the intense music that accompanies Burmese boxing matches; and how spirits belonging to the ethnic minority groups are supported by these minorities’ sounds. In many informal discussions in 2017–18, the *nat kadaw* U Kyaw Soe Moe enjoyed testing my ability to recognize the spirit dance just from listening to recordings of sounds or mp3s from his phone.

The spirits become manifest through the sounds that identify them and dance to the songs that they most enjoy. In other words, the *nat*’s presence and person are *sounded*, and through sound they are manifested in the bodies of the dancers. Spirit sounds and dance movements constitute powerful ritual signs. In the course of a ceremony, the participants are immersed in and experience a dense network of meanings (Turino 1999, 2014), which makes

them feel the presence of the spirits while contributing to the development of the ritual process.

Keeping this in mind, the following analysis aims to discuss the different aspects of a *nat hsaing* performance, thus outlining the general characteristics of Burmese *hsaing waing* music⁴ and its correlations with other Southeast Asian music cultures. To achieve this, I rely on several transcription methods (including cipher notation and modified Western staff notation) and analytical approaches; however, the cyclical and repetitive character of the *nat hsaing* drumming and the regular recurrence of formulas in the melodic and vocal textures are generally framed within Tenzer's "periodicity"—i.e., the "repetition or restatement, literal or transformed, of . . . beats, rhythms, motives, melodies, structures, timbres" (Tenzer 2006a, 22). I briefly introduce the general character and formal structure of the song *Do Ko Gyi Kyaw*, comparing a studio version (Example 2) with the ethnographic recording I made in the field during a ceremony (Example 1). I explain how the song is articulated into two different sections: the first, dominated by the vocal part, and the second, where the drums become the protagonists and the spirit embodiment takes place. The alternation between the sections dominated respectively by the vocal and the instrumental parts seems to be a constant in Burmese music (Lu 2009).

At first, the analysis looks at the elements constituting the melody and its treatment during the performance. I begin the analysis of the piece by discussing the scales and modal categories in use in the Burmese musical system in general (Garfias 1975; Douglas 2010). After having identified the modal characteristics of *Do Ko Gyi Kyaw*, I identify the basic melody of the song. This melody shapes the structure of the piece and guides the performance of the melodic instruments, a process recognized in other Southeast Asian music cultures as well (Perlman 2004; Silkstone 1993; Sumarsam 1975). I explain how the melody is constituted by a combination of melodic segments, patterns and verses (Becker 1969), differentiating them on the basis of their textual parts. Utilizing the most common notation system in use among Burmese musicians, I adopt cipher notation to represent and analyze the basic melody. After discussing how the basic melody shapes the main structure of the piece, I outline the strategies used by performers to partly deviate from it (Sutton and Vetter 2006; Weiss 2011). As the analysis demonstrates, the actual performance deviates from the given structure of the song; with the constant support of the rest of the ensemble, singers can improvise, adding new elements to the existing structure without subverting it, rendering heterophonic elaborations of the basic melody (Giuriati 1996). Using examples, I show the relationship between the melodic elaboration of the singer(s) and the melodic instruments and analyze the degree of deviation from the basic tune. These examples are provided in modified Western staff notation.

4. In terms of musical conceptualization, chamber music (for the harp *saung gauk* and the xylophone *pattala*) is characterized by different terminology than outdoor music (for the *hsaing waing*); the musical concepts, however, remain the same. In the following work, I will be using the *hsaing waing* terminology only.

The second level of the analysis is concerned with metric forms and rhythmic cycles. I describe the metric form generally characterizing the repertoire of spirit songs. Looking at the metric form of the song *Do Ko Gyi Kyaw*, I explain how the process of metric expansion/rarefaction (Becker 1980) marks the passage from the first part (vocal-dominated) to the second part (instrument-dominated) of the song. Continuing on from this, I focus on the analysis of the rhythmic section. Besides the variations/elaborations characterizing the performance (Tenzer 2011), the *hsaing*'s constant reiteration of rhythmic cycles presents a strong periodic character (Becker 1968; Tenzer 2006a). Through a modified Western staff notation, I highlight the two main rhythmic cycles constructing the *nat* song *Do Ko Gyi Kyaw*. The alternation between these two different rhythmic cycles corresponds to the two different phases of the song's structure. Focusing on the ritual meanings embedded into these cycles, I underline the link between the lyrics–melody–rhythmic cycle, which characterizes the first phase, and the mimetic character connecting the second cycle, *Nan Gyi Tabaung*, with the *nat* *Ko Gyi Kyaw*. A full transcription, in modified Western staff notation, including vocal, melodic, rhythmic and metric parts, is available as an animated score ([Example 3](#), realized with the software iAnalyze). The animated score can be compared with the actual ethnographic video of the *chawt pwe* performance ([Example 1](#)).

The third and final level of analysis concerns the shift in tempo and dynamics operated by the musicians between these two phases. Using a duration graph and a spectrogram, I consider the context of the *nat kana pwe* performance in itself as an object of analysis (Cook 2013). Aware or not of the meanings the *hsaing* sounds transmit, all the participants are nonetheless emotionally affected by them (Becker 2004). Starting from an aural analysis of the performance, I explain the effect that the previously outlined musical processes have on a group of dancing participants (Friedson 1996). The analysis outlines the means through which the *hsaing* music triggers the entering of the *nat* in the body of those in a trance and controls the dances. It also explains how the choices of the musicians are influenced by the presence of a group of dancers, thus supporting the idea of an interactive and collaborative network (Brinner 1995; Norton 2009) between the ritual actors of a *nat kana pwe*.

THE BURMESE *NAT HSAING* ENSEMBLE

The *nat hsaing* ensemble is composed of six to eight musicians, divided into three different sections—metric: *si* (bell) and *wa* (wood clapper); rhythmic: *pat waing* (drum circle), *chawk lon pat* (six tuned drums) and *pat ma* (large suspended drum), *sito* (barrel drums), *linkwin* (large cymbals); and melodic: *hne* (shawm), *kyi waing* (gong-chime circle)—plus one or more singers (Garfias 1985; Khin Zaw 1981). Throughout my fieldwork, several *nat hsaing* practitioners underlined the collaborative dimensions of the different sections of the music ensemble. During a private recording session with the *hsaing saya* Yelin Bo and the singer Daw Thin Zar Moe (Yangon, July 11, 2018), the musicians explained that not all spirit songs are suitable for being deconstructed in sections or parts, performed by a single melodic instrument (in that case, the Burmese xylophone *pattala*). Thus, at the end of each piece, Yelin

Bo explained that I had to imagine the action of the drums in this or that part in order to have a complete idea of how the song goes. Similarly, the *hsaing saya* Kyi Lin Bo and his musicians explained that the performance of a *nat hsaing* ensemble (and a *hsaing waing* in general) cannot function properly without the melody: most of the ensemble's drums are in fact tuned, and despite their function in the *nat hsaing* being mostly rhythmic, they are usually considered melodic instruments by Burmese performers; moreover, the contribution of the melodic instruments (gong circle and shawm) is functional, and is vital for the correct development of the performance. They referred to the constant dialogue between different instruments as *maung nin*. "Different kinds of instruments compose the ensemble, just like the *pyinsa rupa*," they continued, and "they are all important" (group interview, Yangon, October 12, 2013).⁵ On another occasion, I was chatting with the *kana si* Kyaw Win Naing about whether one particular instrument of the *nat hsaing* could be considered to have an essential supporting role to possession dances, when suddenly Kyaw Win Naing's mother stepped into the conversation. The old woman stated that:

if I have to say . . . if it's just one [instrument], the sound would just be "taung-taung-taung." The *si*, the *wa*—all these [instruments] must work together [*nyida*, lit. "unite"], only in that case is it good to listen to. (Yangon, July 20, 2019)

As in the case of other Southeast Asian musical cultures (Brinner 1995; Norton 2009), the *hsaing* is a collaborative art form. Melodic and rhythmic interlocking between the different sections of an ensemble, the punctuation of the smaller idiophones, and the essential contribution of the vocal and melodic parts are determinants in constructing an effective performance.

What are *nat hsaing*'s original characteristics, and how can this musical practice be compared to that of other Southeast Asian ensembles and orchestras? The *hsaing* is composed of tuned drum- and gong-chime instruments, which make it rightly part of the so-called "gong-chime culture" (Hood 1980; see also Sutton 2001; Nicolas 2009). As these percussion instruments are tuned, it would be more correct to talk of the melodic-and-rhythmic activity of the *hsaing* ensemble. In the *nat hsaing*, the tuned drums (*pat waing*, *pat ma*, *chawk lon pat*) interlock, usually reiterating the same rhythmic phrase in the form of pre-composed rhythmic cycles. Repetition and periodicity (Tenzer 2006a) represent the main character of *nat hsaing* style and can be linked to deeper cultural and religious meanings (Becker 1979, 1981). Despite their limited melodic role in the *nat hsaing*, performers consider the tuned drums to be melodic instruments; the drums' contribution to the melody is as important as that of the gong circle and the shawm. Heterophonic variations (Giuriati 1996) of the same melody, which usually remains unplayed (Perlman 2004; Swangviboonpong 2003), characterize the performance practice of the Burmese ensemble, and Burmese music in general.

5. The *pyinsa rupa* (a word derived from Sanskrit) is a mythological animal composed of five (*pyinsa*) different shapes (*rupa*) of animals: fish/dragon body and tail, horse/goat hooves, bird/goose wings, lion head, and elephant trunk and tusks. The carved image, usually richly gilded, decorates the support of the suspended drum *pat ma*.

The tuned drums also contribute to the construction of metric cycles. As in other Southeast Asian music cultures, the *nat hsaing* (and Burmese music in general) is characterized by square metrical patterns of 2-beat or 4-beat units that emphasize specific beats, constructing hierarchical metric cycles (Becker 1968). As I will explain, these hierarchical metric cycles can be particularly long and complex metrical forms in maritime Southeast Asia but are shorter and simpler on the mainland. These forms are constructed by the two idiophones *si* and *wa*, usually in combination with the melodic–rhythmic instruments (the tuned drums): the main beat of a metric cycle, for example, is usually emphasized by the suspended drum *pat ma* by a strike on both of the drum’s heads.

Consequently, the distinction I make in this paper between metric, rhythmic, and melodic instrumental sections and functions of the ensemble is purely artificial, but it is necessary so as to provide a general background on Burmese music and an analysis of the *nat hsaing* and to draw parallels to similar Southeast Asian musical practices.

Although it would be impossible for any *hsaing* ensemble to perform without melodies, the sound of the drums and the performance of repetitive rhythmic cycles dominate the performance practice of *nat hsaing*. Possessed dancers usually interact more directly with the drummers (especially the *pat waing* and *pat ma* players), sometimes to the point of physical contact (leaning on the instruments, pouring ritual alcohol on the drums, or giving offerings to the musicians). U Chit Win, the gong circle player in Kyi Lin Bo’s ensemble, explained that these instruments take a more forward position in the ritual space (Yangon, November 16, 2013). U Kyaw Nyunt, *hsaing* master of the main *nat* palace in Taungbyon, underlined the stronger sonic impact of the drums in his ensemble, especially of the *pat ma* (Taungbyon, August 17, 2018). During a ceremony, it is very common to see people possessed getting closer to the drums, sometimes lowering their heads as if they were absorbing the sonic energy released by the instruments or encouraging the musicians to play louder and faster. This is particularly evident during the dances of powerful and popular spirits, such as Ko Gyi Kyaw.

OUR KO GYI KYAW

Ko Gyi Kyaw,⁶ the lord of Pakhan,⁷ is one of the main figures in the pantheon of the Thirty-Seven Lords. Although he does not occupy the top of the Thirty-Seven’s hierarchy, Ko Gyi Kyaw is one of the main protagonists of urban *nat* ceremonies. Fond of alcohol, cockfighting and music, this troublesome *nat* enjoys a particular connection with *nat kana pwe* celebrations and their music.

6. Like many other spirits, Ko Gyi Kyaw has a multi-layered identity, deriving from the overlapping of many different figures across the centuries. The spirit is also known as, among others, U Min Kyaw, Min Kyawswa, Pakhan Gyi Kyaw, and Hpe Hpe Kyaw.

7. Pakhan is a town situated at the confluence of the Chindwin and Ayeyarwady rivers. *Nats* are territorial spirits, who have domain over a specific part of the Burmese region, in which stands their shrine (*nat nan*, “spirit palace”; Brac de la Perrière 1996). National festivals (*nat pwedaw*) are celebrated yearly at these palaces, usually attracting large crowds of devotees.

The relation Ko Gyi Kyaw maintains with the *pwe* becomes particularly evident during his appearance in the ritual space: the musicians and the *nat kadaw* are requested to perform a consistent number of *nat chins* (spirit songs) to please him and the other participants. This effort is accompanied with a larger distribution of offerings (in particular fried chicken, whiskey, and money) which the possessed *nat kadaw* shares with the musicians and the devotees (Brac de la Perrière 1989). When the spirit dance begins, the *hsaing* ensemble performs with exceptional speed and intensity; the involvement of the musicians and dancers in the ritual performance is enhanced, and the active participation of the audience (who are never completely passive) is triggered.

The fame of this *nat* extends beyond the world of the *nat kana* celebrations. Contrary to other secondary figures present in the pantheon, Ko Gyi Kyaw is well known also to Burmese people who do not directly participate in the *nat* cult. Burmese comedians refer to him in their shows on national TV; young and old beer shop regulars jokingly compare his drinking habits to their own.

Out of the many spirit songs composed for Ko Gyi Kyaw, *Do Ko Gyi Kyaw* (“Our Big Brother Kyaw”) is the most famous one, and one of the most popular *nat chin* in Burma. Most people would be able to recognize it and sing along to its catchy melody; different renditions of the song, including several remix versions, can be heard at Buddhist donation pavilions, KTVs, music concerts, clubs, and also on radio and television broadcasts.⁸ The lyrics paint the *nat* as a drunkard and a gambler (“If you are a real drunkard / If you are a real gambler, let’s compete and fight!”), a womanizer (“Daddy Kyaw who is the partner of many girls”), but also highlight the *nat*’s power and influence all across the country (“We worship Big Brother Kyaw in every city”; see Figure 1).

Despite its many incarnations, the song is not very old. In one interview, the *hsaing saya* Sein Moot Tar (Mandalay, June 12, 2018) explained that he composed *Do Ko Gyi Kyaw* and other “modern *nat* songs” (*hkit paw*, “modern”) during the 1970s.⁹ He created new lyrics, based on the legend and personality of the *nat*, and created new melodies inspired by older “traditional songs” (*yoya nat chin*) for the *nat*. This “borrowing” (*alaik*) of compositional techniques is not uncommon in Burma (Inoue 2014, 96). Both melodies and instrumental techniques have been transmitted orally, using the lyrics as a memory aid, alongside other oral techniques (Inoue 2019). Melodies and lyrics are then strictly related; to write new lyrics without changing the music significantly is usually enough to consider the lyric writer as the author of the song. Sein Moot Tar clearly told me that he is the author of the song *Do Ko Gyi Kyaw* mostly because he wrote the new lyrics, and then a new main melodic line based on the

8. The song spread even more after the producer and singer Thxa Soe created an electronic dance music remix, sometimes referring to it as *DKGK* (see Chiarofonte, forthcoming; Lu 2009).

9. Sein Moot Tar’s compositions include *Shwe Byon Maung* (“The Two Golden Brothers”) for the two Brothers of the Taungbyon Village, and *Shwe Myo Daw Shin* (“Lord of the Royal Golden City”) for the Lord of the Nine Cities, Ko Myo Shin *nat*.



Figure 1. A *nat kadaw* forces a *hsaing* player to drink while embodying the drunkard *nat* Ko Gyi Kyaw in Mandalay in 2018.

“traditional *nat* sound.” However, soon after the song found national fame in the 1970s, the *hsaing saya* found out that the song (i.e., lyrics and vocal part) which had inspired him was not “traditional” but had an author/composer: Sein Khin Maung. Since then, the *hsaing saya* has donated part of his income to the author’s heirs, as a form of acknowledgment of, and compensation for, copyright and royalties. In recent years, however, Sein Moot Tar has entered into a lengthy trial with the heir and family of Sein Khin Maung. These events, still far from being resolved, show how the question of authorship in Burma represents a complex issue, a matter that I leave to further investigations.

What is important to underline here is that the *nat* song *Do Ko Gyi Kyaw* is employed ritually during *nat kana pwe* ceremonies. As a support to the possession dances, the performance of this song and the experience of it by the ritual participants make the drunkard spirit manifest. Despite its relatively recent origin, the song and its musical elements are rooted in effective ritual musical elements (rhythms, melodies, lyrics) that also characterize older *hsaing* songs connected to Ko Gyi Kyaw, and to other spirits as well.

SPIRIT SONGS, SOUNDS AND DANCES

How spiritual entities summoned to a ceremony are made manifest by music has been a long-investigated topic in ethnomusicological scholarship. In Southeast Asian music cultures, several authors have, in the course of time, proposed a variety of different approaches and definitions. Among others, Kartomi describes Javanese trance music as characterized by a “magic motto-like repetitiveness of the melodic phrases” (1973, 166); Becker, describing the alternation of various characters in the Balinese *Rangda-Barong* ritual, employs “leitmotiv” (2004, 84); considering Javanese *Jaranan* trance dances, Groenendael underlines that “[the

spirit] identity is suggested by the music that is distinctive of it” (2008, 155); in the Vietnamese *Len Dong* rituals, Norton speaks of “songscares” as “a continually changing sonic environment in which spirits are immersed and their presence is articulated” (2009, 79); describing spirit possession séances among maritime communities in Sabah, Pugh-Kitingan explains that “the music musicks the actions of the dancers” (2017, 126), mediating between the human and spiritual worlds. While all these definitions and theories are useful to understand in which waters we are navigating, the case of the Burmese *nat hsaing* allows us to further these studies.

In a *nat kana pwe*, specific sounds (melodies, rhythmic cycles, and sound qualities) are usually associated with specific dance gestures, considered to be the sign of the presence of the spirits. Possession in Burma is regarded as a positive event and is manifested through dances (Brac de la Perrière 2011, 164–65). When a *nat* incarnates into the body of the human medium/dancer, all the elements of the possession dance re-enact the *nat*’s person and/or legend, bringing the spirit into presence in the *nat kana* area, dancing in front of the devotees.

As I have learned in conversations with *hsaing* musicians and spirit dancers, *athan* (lit. “sound”) can infer a large array of different musical concepts. Used as a substitute for words such as *than sin*, “melody,” or *thachin*, “song,” the meaning of *athan* is understood differently by Burmese speakers depending on the context.¹⁰ The semantic evolution of the word *athan* in the context of spirit possession ceremonies is interesting; *nat than*, in the sense of “spirit sounds,” are both instrumental (which in turn could be divided into other subsections) and vocal (*ahso*) melodies (*tay thwa*). They are performed to call the spirits (*nat hkaw dae*), dismiss them (*nat po dae*) and make them dance (*nat ka dae*). Spirit songs themselves are considered *athan*. However, they present a multi-layered character: melodies, rhythms, or lyrics not exclusively associated with the *nat* cult can be embedded within a *nat* song. In this sense, *nat* songs can be constituted of several *athan*, coming from different sources, sometimes performed in non-ritual occasions. Rather than just “spirit songs” (*nat chin*), the sounds performed by the *nat hsaing* ensemble are imbued with powerful meanings; *nat thans* make the spirits come into presence and trigger the human dancers’ experience of them. *Nat thans* are a determinant in manifesting the spirits and constitute the main element of spirit songs. Songs (*thachin*) are performed after the invocation and the embodiment, to soothe (*nat chawt chin*) or please (*nat pyawt chin*) the spirits.

The performance of *nat chin/nat than* is deeply intertwined with the performance of various ritual media: the *nat* images (*poundaw*), the dances, the dresses, the mediums’ words, the smell of offerings (*kadaw pwe*), and the bodily presence of the crowd of devotees all contribute to the spirits’ manifestation and embodiment. Performed outside the context of the *nat* cult, and deprived of its surrounding ritual atmosphere, those *athan* included or constituting spirit songs do trigger an emotional response in the listeners, but do not manifest the spirits. Describing the *athan* performed during a *yokhtay pwe* (marionette show), the

10. The term *athan* can also indicate the modal category of a song, and single pitches. To complicate things further, I occasionally heard some young musicians using the word *athan* to refer to the melody of a song.

Burmese author Ye Dway writes of the dramatic effect that these sounds have on the audience:

The orchestra plays appropriate musical compositions excerpted from the Maha Gita (Great Book of Songs) for various dramatic situations or different scenes of action. . . . These dramatic (musical) conventions have been embedded into our consciousness since childhood so much so that we just enjoyed a scene of pathos when the hero (*mintha*) or the heroine (*minthamee*) started singing *ngo-chins* (wailing songs) in vibrant strain and at the end the orchestra crashed in crescendo with the big *pat-ma* (big drum) beating vigorously in fortissimo most probably in synchronization with the heart-beats of the tear-jerker loving theatre-goers. (2013, 89–90)

This resonates with the “topic classes” described by Tenzer in regard to the Balinese gamelan *kebyar*, where very similar music and meaning processes seem to be going on:

Historical events, characters, genres, and composition are more tangible entities than the coded and polysemous symbolism of topics, but they are the cultural basis for interpreting them. Awareness of the various types and modalities of topic gives a significant perspective on the kinds of meaning *kebyar* provides for Balinese listeners. Because they use and transform structural and stylistic conventions to create a persuasive musical utterance, topics may be seen as the music’s rhetoric. (2000, 163)

Another comparison, and possibly a historical source for both Burma and Bali, would be with the vocal *dhruvā* songs and instrumental accompaniment of ancient Indian drama, which Rowell describes as “functional music”:

The category of incidental music includes the many types of functional music performed during the play: interpolated songs and dances, signal music (similar to Shakespeare’s alarums and flourishes), instrumental interludes, music for entrances and exits, music to evoke a particular mood or milieu, music to underscore dialogue or dramatic action, and the like. (1992, 108)

When performed by the *nat hsaing* in the ritual context, these musical sounds embody the *nat*. *Athans* are not merely the attribution of a spirit’s character or persona, and their performance does not only aim to construct a “dramatic situation” or “scenes of action” functional for the development of a “play.” In the *nat hsaing* performance, the performance of *athans* embody a spirit *person*, making the *nat* come into presence. Through the sound of the ensemble, the human for a short while becomes the spirit, incorporating the *nat* into their bodies; when possessed by a spirit (*nat win pu dae*, “the spirit enters”), the human host acts, speaks, and dances as if they were the spirit. The people around recognize this temporary changed status by addressing the possessed one(s) as the possessing *nat* and behave accordingly. The *hsaing* music both triggers/controls (especially with unexperienced dancers) and supports (with an experienced *nat kadaw*) the different phases of the coming-into-presence of the spirit, manifested through specific dance gestures and movements.

Possessed devotees and *nat kadaws* follow a defined sequence of the dance's various movements, performing the *nat* person, or the qualities linked to the spirit. Rouget called this an imitative process, and defined these dances, and the music that supports them, as “figurative”:

Depending on whether it involves a warrior (sword dance), a loving woman, a wild animal symbolizing power (tiger or panther) or fertility (snake), the dance will naturally differ in character, and with it the music that sustains it. And in this case one is also dealing with more or less directly figurative music. (1985, 100)

According to Rouget (1985, 114), a figurative dance has the function to “manifest the possession state,” as opposed to non-figurative dance, which has the function to “trigger trance.” In possession, both the figurative and non-figurative are present, either simultaneously or alternately: possession dance oscillates between the two aspects. However, at least one of the two aspects will predominate (117). Following Rouget, Norton (2009) analyses the relationship between gesture and rhythm in Vietnamese *len dong* ceremonies. Norton explains that *chau van* music “animates possession” and “incites dance” (2009, 115). Because “the dance performed by the medium depends on the spirit incarnated” (116), it possesses a figurative character, supported by different rhythms.

Rouget suggests that a figurative dance corresponds to figurative music. However, the use of the word “figurative” for the dances and music can be misleading, as it suggests a mere act of representation. In Burmese spirit cults, a distinction between different “levels” and kinds of spirit possession exists. In the course of my fieldwork, I have seen young *nat kadaws* and uninitiated devotees dancing in a more energetic and less controlled way, somehow overcome by the presence and power of the *nat*. On the other hand, experienced *nat kadaws* can dance with skillful and controlled movements, performing refined “figurative” gestures while being possessed, a state that Norton (2009, 73–76) defines as “aware possession” rather than trance. The performance of the spirit person is considered *nat ka dae*, “the spirit dances,” a full manifestation of the *nat*. According to Brac de la Perrière, the *nat kadaw* is a “virtuoso in his/her relations to the *nats*” (2016, 6). Burmese spirit mediums, she continues, are not masters of the spirits and do not completely control them; during the possession dance, the medium “disappears behind the persona of the spirit, all of whose excesses s/he must bear” (6). During my fieldwork, I asked several *nat kadaws* what the experience of possession meant to them. The spirit dancer U Kyaw Soe Moe (Yangon, September 24, 2017) described the embodiment of the spirits as an intense experience for the mind and the body. Other spirit mediums, including Maha Myaing Aba Lay (Mandalay, March 16, 2018) explained that, when the “*hsaing* is not good,” they are not “affected by the music” and do not feel the presence of the spirit; yet they perform the *nat aka* (possession dance). The controlled dance movements of the *nat kadaw* resemble a more “fake” performance than a “real” spirit embodiment. To my surprise, I found out that many devotees and *nat hsaing* musicians enjoyed discussing if a dancer was really “dancing with a *nat*” or not—just among themselves, or when I showed them my *nat kana pwe* videos. While I believe 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.

MIMETIC SOUNDS AND DANCES

I believe that incarnation and performance represent two sides of the same coin. In order to reconcile these two perspectives, I move away from Rouget’s approach and terminology, substituting the term “figurative” with “mimetic.” This definition has already emerged in other ethnomusicological studies about spirit possession (Brabec de Mori 2013; Sum 2013; Porath 2019). Mimesis seems to be a more appropriate concept to link directly the *hsaing* sounds to the coming-into-presence of the spirit persons, considered by the Burmese to really exist-in-the-world. Mimesis can be applied to describe the possession dances of both professional mediums and untrained devotees, without questioning the actual presence of the spirits.

The ability of performances to signify meaning and bring the spirit into presence can be considered as part of a mimetic process. Mimetic sounds and movements construct, perform, and are the spirit person they are associated with. In investigating the idea of mimesis, Michael 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” (1993, 47–48). The distinction between the self and other becomes porous and flexible: mimesis is the active experience of “yielding the perceiver into the perceived” (61), creating “a palpable, sensuous connection” between their bodies (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* songs are mimetic in the sense that specific texts, musical patterns (melodic and rhythmic), and sound qualities (tempo and dynamics) constitute the *nat than*, a “spirit sound” imbued with power, directly resonating with one or more spirit persons. By sounding a mimetic copy of the spirit, the *nat hsaing* ensemble brings the *nat* into the human experiential world through the means of sounds, “mimetically gain[ing] control over the mirror-image of physical reality that [sounds] represent” (105). The mimetic sounds performed by the *nat hsaing* contribute to make the *nats* manifest in a physical reality: in this form, people can interact and communicate with them, thus bringing their potentially harmful Otherness under control.

The meanings attributed to mimetic sounds and dances are not static, but rather processual and dynamic, and linked to embodied affects (Turino 1999; 2014). Over the years, a constant negotiation between the culture bearers (i.e., *hsaing* musicians and mediums), the ritual participants (the devotees) and the spirit entities has led to the modification, or replacement, of previous *nats*’ mimetic sounds with new ones (Chiarofonte, forthcoming). The personal inclination of a spirit medium for a certain song instead of another changes with the trends of *hsaing* performance practices, and more generally an evolution in the people’s musical taste continuously compelling the musicians to adapt already meaningful old sounds

to the new taste.¹¹ The *hsaing* master Kyi Lin Bo (Yangon, November 12, 2013) explained to me that, when he performs *nat hsaing*, he is constrained by the ritual's necessities and by the mediums' and the devotees' requests for popular songs. Similar points have been raised by other *hsaing* masters as well. Master Yelin Bo (Yangon, December 15, 2017), for example, explained that in the *nat hsaing* performance, the limited agency of the *hsaing* master, who in other performative contexts maintains an absolute control over the musical event, represents one of the reasons why the musical practice of the *nat hsaing* is looked down on by other *hsaing* professionals.

Because of these constant negotiations between performers and audiences, new spirit sounds and songs (such as the song *Do Ko Gyi Kyaw*) slowly become meaningful, and consequently, mimetic. The constant use of a sound for the dance of a specific spirit entails an immediate identification between the two. New sounds can be just as meaningful as older, more "traditional" sounds, and still produce an emotional (possession) and/or energetic physical (dance) response in the listeners (Becker 2004).

As spirit songs/sounds present a multi-layered character, mimesis is also present in different elements of the performance of a spirit song, and to different degrees. In the following analysis of the song *Do Ko Gyi Kyaw*, I will highlight how these mimetic elements represent fundamental aspects of the *nat hsaing* performance and of the possession dances the *hsaing* supports.

ANALYZING THE *NAT HSAING*

The following analysis is based on repetitive listening, and discussions with Burmese performers throughout my research visits. Primary data for the analysis are based on one live performance of the song which I filmed in Yangon in August 2013, at the house of the *kana si* U Win Hlaing. In the video ([Example 1](#)), Kyi Lin Bo's ensemble, together with the singers Ma Than Dar and Daw San Htay, perform the song to support a group of (amateur) dancing devotees.

The song is constructed on the alternation of vocal and instrumental parts, framed by an intermediate cadential phrase. As depicted in Table 1, after an initial Cadential Phrase (CP, labeled a), the song starts with the verse (*paik*, labeled b). Here the vocal section is dominant, with the two female singers alternating; the melodic section (gong circle *kyi waing* and shawm *hne*) and *hsaing* drums remain in the background in a supporting role; and the metric section plays the regular *wa lat si* cycle. The cadential phrase (a1) marks the end of the vocal part and the beginning of the instrumental part (b1): the *hsaing* drums become the protagonist, accelerating the tempo and playing louder; the melodic instruments perform the same

11. Rather dramatically, the *hsaing* master U Pit Taing Htaun (Mandalay, August 7, 2018) explained that, before microphones and loudspeakers came widely into use in the 1970s, people paid more attention to the musicians' performance skills, and *hsaing waing* music thrived; nowadays, if the *hsaing* does not perform using loud volumes and sound effects, it is impossible to catch the audience's attention.

Label	Part	Vocal section (2 female singers)	Melodic section (gong circle + shawm)	Rhythmic section (<i>hsaing</i> drums)	Metric section (<i>si+ wa</i>)
a	CP				
b	<i>paik</i> (vocal)	Singing	Supporting	Background/support	<i>Wa lat si</i> (regular)
a1	CP	Supporting	Acceleration		
b1	<i>paik</i> (instrumental)	Supporting (shouting)	Elaboration (tempo+dynamics)	<i>Nan Gyi Tabaung</i> (speed+dynamics)	<i>Wa lat si</i> (expanded)
a2	CP		Deceleration		
b2	<i>paik</i> (vocal)	Singing	Supporting	Background/support	<i>Wa lat si</i> (regular)

Table 1. Formal structure of the *nat* song *Do Ko Gyi Kyaw*.

melody as the vocal part, but with more ornamentation and variation; the metric cycle expands; and the vocals act only to support the dancers and the musicians. The next cadential phrase (a2) marks the end of the instrumental section, and a return to a new vocal part (b2).

The central cadential phrase (a1) represents the fulcrum of the song. It marks the transition where tempo, dynamics, and the roles of the individual sections change, causing spirit embodiment to occur. When listening to different ensembles perform this song, I realized that this formal structure is essentially always respected.

Standardization is the result of different *hsaing* musicians being reciprocally exposed to each other's music performances (for example attending spirit festivals or fellow musicians' performances). Moreover, some of these songs circulate among musicians in digital format (mp3s) through various digital media (including CDs, DVDs, and file sharing). During my fieldwork I obtained many *hsaing* recordings, usually of poor quality, from *hsaing* musicians who wanted to share with me the music they had on their phones. I obtained a recording of the song *Do Ko Gyi Kyaw* (Example 2) from U Htwe, the manager of the puppet troupe Htwe Oo Myanmar. This family of puppeteers perform in their living room in Yangon, a tiny space that would never fit a *hsaing* ensemble. They use this and other mp3s in their Burmese marionette shows. I was not able to establish who the performers in this recording are, but the lyrics of the song correspond to those hummed to me by Sein Moot Tar himself during our encounter. The sound of this recording is very clear, as it was clearly realized outside of the ritual context.

A full comparison between the two versions is not the aim of this work. However, comparing the studio version with mine, recorded in the field in a ritual context and in the presence of possessed dancers, several differences between the two performance contexts become immediately clear. The musical style of the studio version is in fact different from the live version by Kyi Lin Bo that I filmed: the *pat waing* part is more elaborated and the drum

circle supports the vocal part with an articulated heterophonic texture, while the rest of the ensemble remains almost silent. The tempo during the vocal part is extremely slow and the singing more elaborated, and the (male) singer does not shout as Ma Than Dar and Daw San Htay do in the *nat kana pwe*. Interestingly, in the studio version, the *hsaing* performs the same shift in tempo and dynamics characterizing the song performed in its ritual context, although not as decisively as Kyi Lin Bo's ensemble does. A similar expansion/rarefaction of the metric cycle is also present in the second part, when the drum part changes.

In the following analysis, I will describe the musical changes taking place in each *hsaing* section, as summarized in Table 1. While the sections—vocal, melodic, rhythmic, and metric—will be investigated separately, it is worth reminding the reader that this categorization is necessary for analytical purposes only.

VOCAL AND MELODIC PART: IDENTIFYING THE BASIC MELODY AND SONG STRUCTURE

Like other songs for the drunkard *nat*, the song *Do Ko Gyi Kyaw* is constructed on the modal category *hkun hnathan chi*. This is characterized by *than hman* (“correct sound,” the tonic) on G, according to the scalar progression G-B-C-D-F. To Burmese ears, this modal category (indicated by Burmese musicians as *tuning*, in English, or *athan*, “sound”) is experienced as being exciting: it communicates vivid energy, which makes the song very enjoyable and easy to dance to.¹² It represents the perfect accompaniment for the dance of the exuberant Ko Gyi Kyaw.

Other tunings can also be used for other spirits, or to perform songs upon request. However, this depends strictly on singers' knowledge of the songs and their ability. *Nat hsain* musicians explain that the modal category *than yoe* (in C-E-F-G-B, an interval of a fifth from *hkun hnathan chi*) is more frequently used, as it is easier for most singers to perform.¹³ Burmese modal categories are pentatonic, obtained by selecting five tones out of a heptatonic scale (Khin Zaw 1940; Okell 1971).¹⁴ The five primary tones of a tuning constitute the main elements of the basic melody, while the remaining two are secondary and can be used as embellishment in the melodic elaboration (Garfias 1975). *Nat hsain* musicians indicate the vocal part as the main reference for the melodic part and elaboration; it is in the vocal part that the basic melody can be recognized.

12. The *hsain* master Kyauk Sein (Yangon, January 22, 2018) explained to me that each tuning is associated with a specific mood or feeling. Today, tuning shifts (*athan pyaun dae*) have almost disappeared from all-night theatrical performances on stage (*zat pwe*), substituted with what Kyauk Sein defined “modern chromatic song.” Several *nat hsain* musicians underlined that tuning shifts do not have any role in structuring the *nat kana* ritual time.

13. Garfias (1975) presented a large number of *hsain waing* modal categories. Today, Douglas (2010) underlines how only a few are in use. This has been confirmed during my discussions with the musicians of Kyi Lin Bo's ensemble (group interview, Yangon, October 12, 2013), among others.

14. The traditional scale presents some analogies with a Western diatonic C major; however, the presence of tones pitched somewhere between Western natural and flattened notes (a sharpened 4th and a flattened 7th) may give the “overall impression of ‘neutral’ intervals” (Garfias 1975, 40). In the absence of a standard diapason, *nat hsain* ensembles are tuned between the Western C and D. In the following analysis, I have transcribed them in C.

Lyrics and vocal parts generally represent one of the fundamental elements of Burmese music. Words and melodic profiles are strictly interrelated (Cox 1985; Williamson 1981), and transmission and memorization take place through “mouth music” (*pazat hsaing*; Inoue 2019): experienced Burmese musicians need to listen to just a few lines and can immediately recognize the tune of a song and start playing or singing along. Burmese *hsaing*, and musicians in general, are able to recognize the basic melody everywhere, but it is to the vocal part that they point in order to refer to it. As became evident to me through interviews and informal discussions, *nat hsaing* musicians perform the melody by relying on the lyrics and the vocal part. In the absence of a singer, each musician just refers to an abstract vocal part, which they have previously memorized; in these cases, an instrument might seem to be assuming the role of leader (in the *nat hsaing* practice, usually the shawm *hne*) and performing the main melodic part in a more elaborate way. Williamson (1979, 168–69) informs us that, despite all the more-or-less intertwined strains, “the tune always remains the same,” supporting the idea of a “conceptual *basic tune*” which is “carried by the syllables of the song text.” This melody, including rests and pauses, identifies the song, and it is normally hummed or sung even by those Burmese who are not professional musicians. Lu defines it as a “core melody . . . drawn from a body of [musical] themes associated with the song texts” (2009, 261), which Burmese musicians call the “backbone.” Similarly, the musicians I spoke with defined the basic melody *ayoe* (“bone”), or *yoe than sin* (“bone melody”; Kyaw Myo Naing, Mandalay, March 4, 2018).

Despite its name, *yoe than sin* cannot be considered to be associated with the structural points of a song: it does not correspond to a skeleton, or framework, of the piece—the long-discussed central Javanese *balungan*, a “fixed melody” or “nuclear theme” (Hood 1954). Giuriati’s “abstracted melody,” based on the pitch on *chap* beats between which “the [Khmer] musicians improvise by filling in their idiomatic melodies” (1989, 242) is not appropriate, as the *yoe than sin* does not correspond to the beats regularly marked by the idiophones *si* and *wa*. As it is recognized in the vocal part, I have some reservations about associating the *yoe than sin* with Sumarsam’s concept of Javanese “inner melody,” “a melody that is sung by musicians in their hearts” (1975, 7) and which therefore “is not performed” (Sumrongthong and Sorrell 2000, 69). In absence of “manifold . . . implicit-melody concepts,” Perlman’s (2004, 14) concept of “un-played melodies” is not completely applicable. The *yoe than sin* seems to be closer to the Thai *pinpeat*’s fluid *khooon* (gong circle) melody, “the most ‘basic’ (*lag*) performed melody of a *phleen* [composition]” (Silkstone 1993, 60).

As a general fact, Burmese musicians do not read music while performing; they just play the part they have previously memorized. If they are not familiar with the tune of one piece, they try to follow the other instruments and to come up with their part. However, in some performances I have seen Burmese musicians following a written part which showed the basic melody of a piece. In 2017, during one rare *hsaing* rehearsal,¹⁵ the *hsaing* master Sein Min Naing quickly put on paper, using cipher notation, the main melody of a *nat* song he wasn’t familiar

15. Normally, *nat hsaing* ensembles do not rehearse: inexperienced musicians learn to play the repertoire necessary to support the ritual dances directly by taking part in the ceremonies and performing at their instrument.

with, so that he would be able to perform it on the drum circle.¹⁶ Sein Min Naing wrote it down after a fellow musician hummed the melody to him, including the lyrics. To my surprise, Sein Min Naing's notation did not show the *wa* beats, and the melodic line was not regular and simple; in some parts, the musician included pauses and quick melodic configurations, which to me resembled principles of embellishments, but that to him must have been essential. Similar notations are sometimes also used by U Chit Win, Kyi Lin Bo's gong circle player. An astonishing performer, U Chit Win carries with him several notebooks containing hundreds of transcriptions of Burmese tunes that he has personally transcribed. He explained me (Yangon, November 16, 2013) that because it would be impossible for him to remember all the songs that devotees might ask the *hsaing* to perform, when a song he is not familiar with is requested, he can quickly grab his notebook, put it on his lap, and look at the notation while playing. As in the case of Sein Min Naing, U Chit Win's main melody transcriptions include basic forms of embellishment and do not show any metric structure. When I took a picture of U Chit Win's notebooks (see Figure 2; unfortunately, none of his transcriptions included the song *Do Ko Gyi Kyaw*), my *hne* (shawm) master U Ohn Htay, also a member of Kyi Lin Bo's ensemble, welcomed my interest enthusiastically. By following the transcribed melodic lines I would be able to learn new songs and keep practicing the *hne* even without him. The Burmese *yoe than zin* represents the basic form of the melody; however, rather than a pure, inner abstraction of the main melody, it seems to be closer to the actual melody performed by the *hsaing* instruments.

I extracted an approximation of the basic melody of the song *Do Ko Gyi Kyaw* by grouping sounds on the basis of the text. Looking at the lyrics (see Table 2), I identified complete sentences and recognized the melodic formulas associated with each of them; I then cleared the vocal melody of all the singer's idiomatic elaborate interpretations. The resultant melody is one characterized by the most rarefied melodic density, where the syllables of each verse tend to correspond to a specific note of the melody. I applied the same method to several renditions of the song (including Example 2) and compared the results. I discussed my transcriptions with several local musicians (including the composer, Sein Moot Tar, Mandalay, June 12, 2018) and other performers (Widdess 1994).

In order to remove any doubts regarding the potential presence of personalizing elements belonging to a performer's style in the basic melody, I follow Williamson's (1979) methodology to extract an approximation of the basic tune. Figure 3 compares the three vocal parts performed in two versions of the song *Do Ko Gyi Kyaw*: the studio version (Example 2) and Ma Than Dar's and Daw San Htay's combined performance (Example 1). At the bottom of each part, the resulting basic tune is presented in cipher notation. Figure 3 anticipates some of the issues that I am going to discuss later: the textual parts (see Table 2 and Table 3) differ

16. The use of cipher notation is widespread in Southeast Asian music cultures. It associates numbers to the degrees of the heptatonic scale: 1 to the first, 2 to the second, and so on. Points below and above indicate the octave's range; a short line above halves the relative durational value of the note.

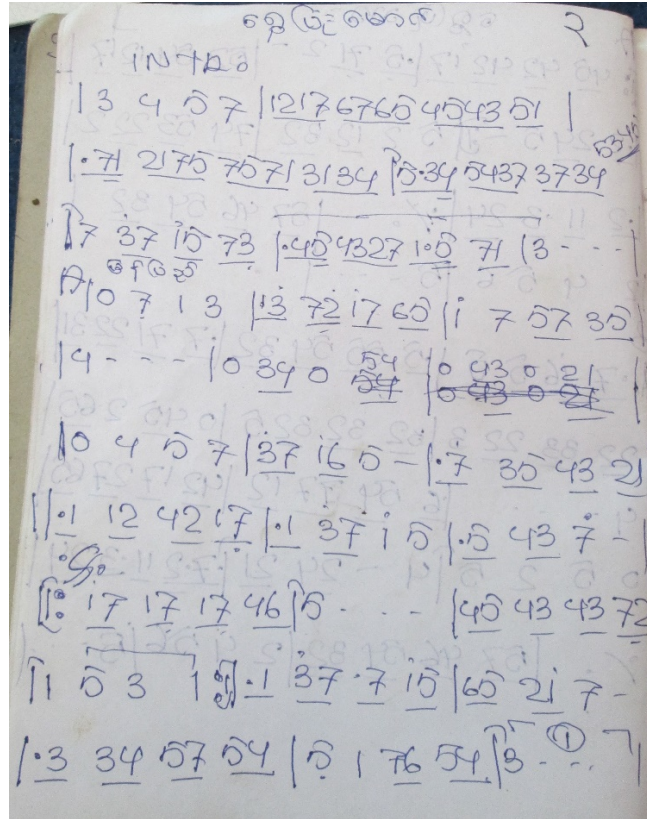


Figure 2. First part of U Chit Win’s transcription of the nat song *Shwe Byon Maung*.

<i>Ko Gyi Kyaw</i>	Big Brother Kyaw
<i>Do Ko Gyi Kyaw</i>	Our Big Brother Kyaw
<i>Do Hpe Hpe Kyaw</i>	Our Daddy Kyaw
<i>Htulae htudae mulae mudae</i>	He’s awesome and he’s drunk
<i>Do Ko Gyi Kyaw</i>	Our Big Brother Kyaw
<i>Ayet tha ma hman yin tawbya / shin pyain ka taik laik chin dae</i>	If you are a real drunkard / let’s compete and fight
<i>Kyet tha ma hman yin tawbya / shin pyain ka taik laik chin dae</i>	If you are a real gambler / let’s compete and fight
<i>Eindain hma kwe Ko Gyi Kyaw ko pa tha ba dae</i>	We worship Big Brother Kyaw in every house
<i>Maungma mya ne ka te Hpe Hpe Kyaw</i>	Daddy Kyaw who dances with many girls
<i>Kyaw Kyaw Kyaw Kyaw</i>	Kyaw, Kyaw, Kyaw, Kyaw
<i>Palinahpoun kainhswe htaukme Ko Gyi Kyaw</i>	Uncork the bottle and bottoms up, Ko Gyi Kyaw

Table 2. Original text of the spirit song *Do Ko Gyi Kyaw*, by Sein Moot Tar.

modal category:
hkan nathan chi

The figure displays a musical score for the piece "Do Ko Gyi Kyaw". It includes a modal category, a studio version vocal part, and three renditions by different singers: Ma Than Dar (main singer), Daw San Htay (supporting singer), and a studio version. Each rendition is accompanied by basic melody segments represented by numbered notation (1-7) in boxes, labeled A, B, and C. The lyrics are written below the notes, and some parts are marked as improvised.

1 3 4 5 7

Studio version
vocal part

Ko Gyi Kyaw Ko Gyi Kyaw Do Ko Gyi Kyaw Do Hpe Hpe Kyaw

Ma Than Dar
main singer

Ko Gyi Kyaw Ko Gyi Kyaw Ko Gyi Kyaw Do Ko Gyi Kyaw Do Ko Gyi Kyaw (shout)

Daw San Htay
supporting singer

Ko Gyi Kyaw Do Ko Gyi Kyaw Do Ko Gyi Kyaw

basic melody segments

A B

Studio

Htu-lae htu-dae mu-lae mu-dae Do Ko Gyi Kyaw Htu-lae htu-dae mu-lae mu-dae Do Ko Gyi Kyaw

M.T.D.

Htu- le htu- dae myu- le myu-dae Do Ko Gyi Kyaw A-

D.S.H.

Ke- le ke- dae chwe- le chwe- dae Do Ko Gyi Kyaw

basic melody segments

C B C B

Studio

[Improvised part - not present in the studio version]

M.T.D.

hma- le hma- dae hto- le htu- dae Do Ko Gyi _____ Kyaw

D.S.H.

Ke- le ke- dae chwe- le chwe- dae Do Ko Gyi Kyaw

basic melody segments

C B C B

Figure 3. Approximation of the basic melody made by comparing different renditions of the vocal part.

The figure displays three musical examples, each consisting of three staves (Studio, M.T.D., and D.S.H.) and a basic melody segment. The lyrics are written below the Studio staff.

Example 1:
 Studio: Ayet tha ma hman yin taw- bya shin pyain ka taik laik chin dae Kyet tha ma hman yin taw- bya shin pyain ka taik laik chin dae
 M.T.D.: Myo-dain- hma- kwe Ko Gyi Kyaw-ko pa- tha- ba- dae Neh-dain- hma- kwe Ko Gyi Kyaw ko pa tha ba dae
 D.S.H.:
 basic melody: $\boxed{. \dot{1} \dot{3} 7 . \dot{1} \dot{2} . \dot{2} \dot{1} 7 \dot{1} 6 5 7}$ $\boxed{. 5 7 3 . 4 5 . 5 4 3 4 2 1 3}$
 segments: \boxed{D} \boxed{E}

Example 2:
 Studio: Ayet tha ma hman yin taw- bya shin pyain ka taik laik chin dae Ein-dain hma kwe Ko Gyi Kyaw ko pa tha ba dae
 M.T.D.:
 D.S.H.: Myo-dain- hma- kwe Ko Gyi Kyaw-ko pa- tha- ba- dae Neh- dain- hma- kwe Ko Gyi Kyaw ko pa tha ba dae
 basic melody: $\boxed{. \dot{1} \dot{3} 7 . \dot{1} \dot{2} . \dot{2} \dot{1} 7 \dot{1} 6 5 7}$ $\boxed{. 5 7 3 . 4 5 . 5 4 3 4 2 1 3}$
 segments: \boxed{D} \boxed{E}

Example 3:
 Studio: Maung-ma mya ne ka te Hpe Hpe Kyaw Kyaw Kyaw Kyaw Pa-lin-ahpoun kainh-swe htauk-me Ko Gyi Kyaw
 M.T.D.: Maung-ma mya ye achit hpaw Hpe Hpe Kyaw Kyaw Kyaw Kyaw [unintelligible] Ko Gyi Kyaw
 D.S.H.:
 basic melody: $\boxed{. 5 3 . 4 1 2 1 2 . 4 .}$ $\boxed{4 5 6 7 \dot{2} \dot{1} 7 \dot{1} 7 5 4 5 3 .}$
 segments: \boxed{F} \boxed{G}

Figure 3 continued.

from each other, and some lines, improvised during the ritual performance, are not present in the studio version.

This analytical methodology is in part inspired by the “hierarchical system” described by Becker (1969), with the difference that I started from the text to identify melodic formulas, as suggested by Williamson (1979). This allowed me to find the most basic elements of the

melody, i.e., units of (melodic and textual) meaning which, to Burmese ears, have no meaning or sound incomplete if separated. Following Becker, I call these basic units *segments*, “since the word ‘unit’ implies a single item. The segments are not single clusters, but a combination and sequence of two, three, or more tones” (1969, 272). Burmese musicians refer to the segments as *cho*. A *cho* is considered to be the most basic element of the melody. *Chos*/segments can be combined to create patterns, as Becker explains: “Segments are organized into larger units which are called patterns. Most of the patterns are themselves repeated at some point in the corpus” (272). The concept of patterns can sometimes correspond to concluded metrical cycles (*tawa*). In *nat hsaing*, though, the melody does not always correspond to the beginning and end of a metric cycle. For this reason, there is not a direct correspondence in Burmese for what I indicate as patterns.

Segments and patterns combined together create a *paik*. The word can indicate alternatively a sung verse/line or an entire sung stanza, depending on which repertoire the song belongs to. The latter is the case of the song *Do Ko Gyi Kyaw*: the *paik* is constituted by the entire vocal part, i.e., all the segments and patterns. The elements so far described, combined together, create the song (*pouk*):

The segments, combined into patterns, combined into verses, combined into songs make Burmese music a multileveled hierarchical system. . . . The Burmese musician manipulates the various levels of the hierarchy to create a song. (Becker 1969, 272)

Becker’s study is strongly influenced by linguistics, and specifically by the structural analysis of the several levels (from the phonetic to the contextual) used to describe a linguistic sentence and considered to be in a hierarchical relationship with one another. Drawing on this, Becker focuses on the generation of musical meanings in melodic formulas, small melodic segments (but not units, as in structural linguistics) that combine with each other, creating more and more complex patterns according to melodic elaborations based on a recursive logic. Although correct, Becker’s valuable contribution is centered on the instrumental part and does not consider the vocal part.

In the song *Do Ko Gyi Kyaw*, the processes described by Becker become more evident in specific parts of the melody. In order to explain how this system works, Figure 4 exemplifies the processes of the re-combination of the melodic material of segment C into a larger pattern, constituted by segments D and E. In segments C, D, and E, the lyrics and melody get developed. Segment C constitutes what Burmese musicians call *cho* (segment) because the lyrics associated with the melody are complete by themselves. In order to maintain it, the single melodic parts cannot be dissociated from the lyrics. The same can be said of segments D and E.

From an analytical point of view, the melodic material contained in these segments can be divided into smaller elements and organized into larger patterns. Segment C can be considered as constituting two half-segments, C_x and C_y, in Figure 4: the melodic

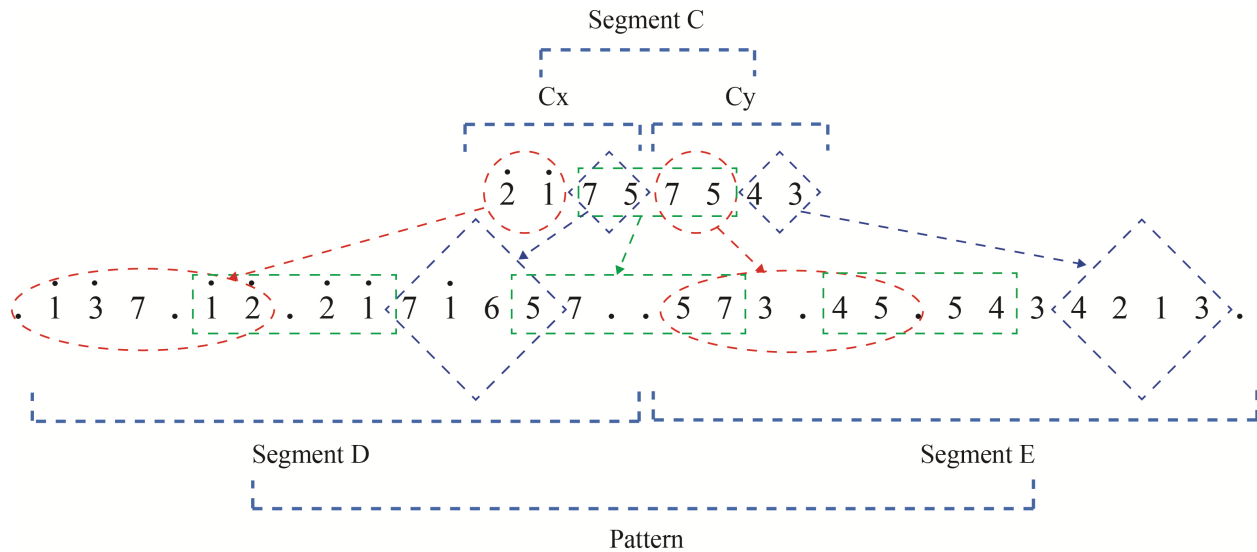


Figure 4. Melodic processes of Segments C, D, and E.

formula they compose would be incomplete if one of the two were missing. Together, the two half-segments show a descending melodic profile, with a partial overlap on the central edges (marked by the green box in Figure 4) revolving around scale degree 5. The following segments D and E consist of an expansion/elaboration of the melodic material presented in the two previous half-segments, Cx and Cy. In continuity with segment C, the two melodic segments D and E present the same descending melodic profile, derived from the overlap. In each single segment and at the junction of the two segments (green boxes), segments D and E also show similar melodic elaborations around scale degrees 1–2 and 5–7 at the beginning (red boxes), and a similar conclusion on scale degrees 7–5 and 4–3 (blue box). Segments D and E could be considered as two expanded half-segments, and not as separate melodic units. In Burmese language, though, both segments are textually concluded, and make sense on their own; only the melodic line remains somehow suspended, to be concluded in the following segment E. Looking at the original lyrics of the song (Figure 3), segment E is repeated twice, with a different textual line, and can be thus considered independent. For this reason, segment D and E constitute a larger pattern.¹⁷ Combined together, patterns like this one and other segments form the verse (*paik*). In the next section, we examine how this structure is actually realized in a performance.

FLEXING THE STRUCTURE

In the analysis of Central Javanese *gamelan* performance, Sutton and Vetter (2006) have illustrated how Javanese musicians are able to “flex the frame” of a piece without subverting it. In performance, through the “interplay between melodic instruments, contrasts in

17. A discussion on the nature of the textual line development in songs is not the aim of the present study and will necessitate further research.

drumming style and . . . various changes in tempo and treatment,” musicians create an exciting performance. The integrity of the formal structure, however, is always maintained, and the musicians “roam wild within it”:

Symmetry is never sacrificed; rather, it is radically offset by changes in tempo, melodic shape, and a whole range of factors that at times may seem intended to obscure or even obliterate the formal frame. What these techniques in fact do is intensify the power of the music by stretching the cognitive capacities of its performers and listeners, creating a magnificent, hardwon experiential realm. (271)

That Central Javanese musicians subvert the often-celebrated formal balance and cyclicity of Javanese *gamelan* emerges even more clearly from Weiss’s (2011) analysis of the Javanese *grimingan*, a solo music repertoire performed on the *gender* (a thirteen-/fourteen-key metallophone with pitched resonators) during shadow puppet theater performances (*wayang kulit*). Weiss has underlined that *grimingan* is “better understood as a process than any kind of form” (2011, 34). During the performance, the player realizes contractions and expansions of the core melodic material, thus performing a formless piece characterized by the absence of the typical Central Javanese cyclical forms.

Following their example, in the following analysis I focus on the techniques used by *nat hsaing* musicians to flex the structure of the *nat* song *Do Ko Gyi Kyaw*. In Kyi Lin Bo’s *hsaing* ensemble performance (Example 1), the vocal part realized by the singers Ma Than Dar and Daw San Htay does not correspond exactly to the structure of the performance in Example 2 (see Figure 3 above). Although the sequence of segments and patterns and their combination is generally respected, the alternation of the two singers and their extemporaneous interpretative choices flex the original structure, generating repetitions and elaboration of melodic segments and patterns (Figure 5) and variation in the lyrics (Table 3).¹⁸ In Table 3 and Figure 5, the additional segments/patterns are highlighted in bold.

Figure 5 shows the melodic structure of the first *paik* of the song as performed by Kyi Lin Bo’s ensemble. The diagram is divided in two parts: The first, on the upper level, corresponds to the first *paik* of the song; it represents the different segments constituting the vocal part(s), and the corresponding support of the instruments. The lower level represents the repetition of the first *paik*, this time instrumental only; the segments are organized according to a sequence that respects only in part that outlined by the vocal part(s).

As shown in Figure 5, the presence of two singers is evident in the performance of the *paik* characterized by the vocal part. In the original version, the singer and *hsaing* instruments

18. Transcribing the actual lyrics performed by the singers was no easy task and required a certain amount of informed guessing. From a ritual point of view, devotees are not always supposed to comprehend the lyrics, the language of songs being old, cryptic, and poetic and the sonic environment being purposely loud. Discussing this with some *nat chin* singers, I found this to be true for them as well; the language is sometimes too difficult for them to fully understand what they are singing, and it appears to be addressing both humans and spirits (see Brac de la Perrière 1994).

A	<i>Ko Gyi Kyaw</i>	Big Brother Kyaw
B	<i>Do Ko Gyi Kyaw</i>	Our Big Brother Kyaw
C	<i>Htule htudae myule myudae</i>	He is awesome and exciting
B	<i>Do Ko Gyi Kyaw</i>	Our Big Brother Kyaw
C	<i>Kele kedae chwele chwedae</i>	He goes beyond the limits and flatters everyone
B	<i>Do Ko Gyi Kyaw</i>	our Big Brother Kyaw
C	<i>(A)hmale hmadae htole htudae</i>	He gets things wrong, he flings punches, and he's awesome
B	<i>Do Ko Gyi Kyaw</i>	our Big Brother Kyaw
C	<i>Kele kedae chwele chwedae</i>	[He] also loves to have fun and to be flattered
B	<i>Do Ko Gyi Kyaw</i>	Our Big Brother Kyaw
D	<i>Myodainhmakwe Ko Gyi Kyawko pathabadae</i>	We worship our Big Brother Kyaw in every city
E	<i>Nehdainhmakwe Ko Gyi Kyaw ko pathabadae</i>	We worship our Big Brother Kyaw in every region
F	<i>Maungma mya ye achit hpaw Hpe Hpe Kyaw</i>	Daddy Kyaw who is the partner of many girls
G	<i>Kyaw, Kyaw, Kyaw, Kyaw</i> [unintelligible] <i>Ko Gyi Kyaw</i>	Kyaw, Kyaw, Kyaw, Kyaw [unintelligible] Big Brother Kyaw

Table 3. Lyrics performed by the singers Ma Than Dar and Daw San Htay, in Kyin Lin Bo’s ensemble. The bold parts indicate additional improvised lyrics. Horizontal lines indicate pattern boundaries.

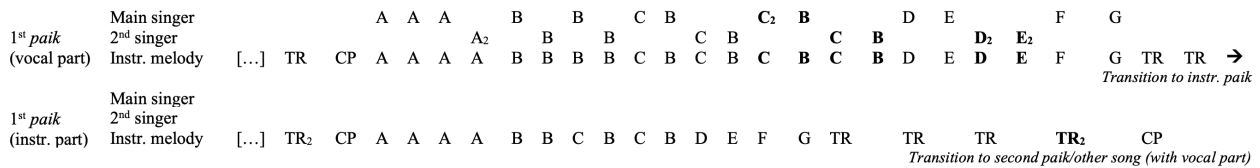


Figure 5. Formal structure of the first verse (*paik*) of the song. The subscript numbers indicate consistent variations in the realization of a melodic segment; bold letters indicate additional segments. “TR” indicates the transitions.

alternate, performing segments A and B; in this performance, the melodic instruments are replaced by the action of the second singer. The alternation between the two singers continues for most of the rest of the vocal part. Comparing the instrumental repetition with the vocal part (Figure 5), it is possible to notice an extension in the song’s structure; the singers add a double repetition of the pattern C+B and a repetition of segments D and E (in bold). The introduction of these extra parts was fully instigated by the singers’ impromptu, the instruments having no other option but to second the singers’ choice. These elements are not present in the instrumental repetition of the verse; also, it is not surprising to find here consistent lyrical improvisation (see Table 3). When the vocal part is not present, though, the musicians considerably reduce the song structure and perform the *paik* almost without additional repetitions (except for a slight prolongment of the TR).

The alternation of the two singers generates structural repetitions, thus altering the structure of the *nat* song. Consequently, these changes have repercussions on the single melodic parts and elaborations, both of the singers and the instrumentalists.

MELODIC PARTS AND ELABORATIONS

Knowing how the main melody proceeds also allows one to recognize the melodic elaborations. These are performed by the melodic section, composed of the gong circle *kyi waing*, one or more *hne* shawms,¹⁹ and sometimes a square gong-chime called *maung hsaing*. While each of these instruments perform variations in its own idiom, they do so according to the same basic tune, which identifies the song. In regard to the performance style of the Burmese shawm *hne*, John Okell explains that

every song has, in a sense, a basic, skeleton tune, in performance there is much variety of figuration to be found both between one player and another, and one player's renderings of the same phrase at different times. Part of the player's skill lies in his ability to invent new and more rapidly or appropriately figured versions of the phrase he has to play. (1971, 29)

Okell's definition is quite precise. Burmese musicians perform variations on the very same basic melody. Their inventiveness, however, is restricted to an "appropriately figured version of the phrase" and by the instrument's idiomatic characteristics. Variation, "sonic discrepancies" (Tokumaru 1980, 70), or "playfulness" (Lu 2009, 263) rather than rendition, better describes the heterophonic processes through which Burmese musicians differently interpret the same melody. In one interview, the *hsaing saya* Kyauk Sein explained these variations as the result of a master's *thamazin*. Normally translated as "tradition," the concept implies a certain idea of fluidity, and identifies a musician's personal style as originating from the confluence of several other masters' styles. Kyauk Sein explained:

Thamazin means only one [musical] line, but it can have [a] different style in ornamentation, details, every detail can be different to each other. [He demonstrates with the *pattala*, playing different versions of the same tune] [These are all] *thamazins*. . . . *Thamazin* means that a beginner can play [this part like this], but an expert can play [like this]. They have different ideas, but all those variations are *thamazin*. Every teacher has his own ideas. (Yangon, January 22, 2018)

In other Southeast Asian ensembles, the practice of heterophony produces "polyphonic stratifications" (Hood 1975), a term that has been used to describe melodic "layers" of different rhythmic density simultaneously occurring in large ensembles and that was coined to describe the heterophonic processes of Javanese gamelan orchestras. However, maritime Southeast Asian orchestras are more stratified than the mainland ensembles are. Here, a stratification is present, but usually remains limited to a restricted number of instruments and does not take the polyphonic character typical of the maritime orchestras. A *hsaing* does not present the complex melodic stratifications typical of Javanese *gamelan*, but its timbral

19. *Hsaing* ensembles including two *hne* players are common in upper Burma (both in Mandalay private ceremonies and in the village festivals), but they are not common in the lower Yangon area.

stratification can be compared to that of the Thai *pinpeat* ensemble (Silkstone 1993, 14).

Giuriati (1996) distinguishes between degrees of heterophonic variations of a common melodic process in Southeast Asia. In the “intentional” model, the main melody works as a structural reference for melodic parts, which deliberately and simultaneously vary the melody. In the “non-intentional” variation model, Giuriati includes Cambodian ensembles, in which, despite the presence of embellishments, the main melody remains clearly recognizable.

Giuriati explains that each Cambodian musician plays the same melodic line simultaneously (identifiable through the analysis of the tones performed on the main accents of the metric cycle; see Giuriati 1995) but develops his own melodic line through embellishments and micro-variations, hence the term “non-intentional.” Looking at the analysis and music transcriptions of the court song *Gandamar taung* made by Williamson (1979), it is possible to recognize the “non-intentional” melodic variations of vocal and instrumental parts (on the harp *saung gauk*), based on the same basic melody, a model which seems to resemble the heterophonic processes characterizing the Chinese *jangnan sizhu* ensembles (Thrasher 1985, 1993).

In Burmese music, melodies are always highly ornamented and embellished (Lu 2009, 263); melodic variations are always performed but are not considered as ornamentation by the performers. During my *pattala* classes, my *saya* Kyaw Myo Naing and I would perform the same song simultaneously, in order for me to get “in the flow” with the music. In such cases, Kyaw Myo Naing would sometimes play a slightly different version of my tune, probably because the one I was performing was too simple for him. When I asked him about this and similar processes, he clearly explained that “there is only one melody,” and everyone plays just that. As I am now going to explain, similar processes also apply to the *nat hsaing* performance style.

As I anticipated, during the performance of the *nat* song *Do Ko Gyi Kyaw*, the presence of two singers and the consequent changes in the song’s structure make it possible (and necessary) to have more melodic variations. Since each singer interprets the basic melody according to her personal style and vocal skills, consistent variations and elaborations on the basic melody are not surprising. The melodic instruments of a *nat hsaing* ensemble (shawm, gong circle) depend on and follow the choices of the singer, supporting his/her performance with a more elaborate version of the same basic melody.

Figure 6 shows segments D and E, performed by the two singers ([Example 3](#), 00:29–00:44). The transcription shows the degree of variation of the singers on the basic melody. The areas in the red boxes highlight the similarities between the basic melody, the vocal part(s) and the gong circle part.

The figure shows a musical score for 'Do Ko Gyi Kyaw'. At the top, two boxes labeled 'D' and 'E' indicate melodic segments. Below, the 'basic melody' is written as a sequence of scale degrees: 1 3 7 1 2 | 2 1 7 6 5 7 | 5 7 3 4 5 | 5 4 3 4 2 1 3. The score includes two vocal parts: 'vocal part main singer' and 'vocal part supporting singer'. The main singer's part follows the basic melody closely, while the supporting singer's part uses more glissando. The score also includes parts for 'si (bell) wa (clapper)' and 'kyi waing (gong circle)'. Red dashed boxes highlight specific melodic segments in the vocal parts and the basic melody. The background is color-coded: green for segment D and yellow for segment E.

Figure 6. Realizations of the basic melody in segments D and E.

The two vocalists vary the same segments using a quite different style. Ma Than Dar, the main singer, adheres more closely to the basic melody, and she clearly outlines the two melodic segments (Example 3, 00:30–00:38). Daw San Htay, the supporting singer, makes greater use of glissando, almost shouting the improvised new lyrics. In her variation, the two segments D and E are joined tightly together by a high glissando (Example 3, 00:38–00:44). Although different, both variations can be related to the basic melody. Similarly, U Chit Win, the *kyi waing* player, elaborates on the basic melody according to the instrument's idiom and his personal playing style; he adds shorter note figurations and plays with an accented style, loosely following the vocal part, and thus giving a certain dynamism to the performance.

When the vocal section is concluded, in the instrumental *paik* the melodic instruments are the only ones that outline the melody (see Figure 5 above). After the transition (Example 3, 00:52–00:56), the shawm *hne* makes its entrance. Alongside the gong circle, the *hne saya* U Ohn Htay improvises on the basic melody. Together they produce a more elaborate version of the basic melody, following different but partly parallel heterophonic paths (Figure 7; Example 3, 01:11–01:19).

Segment D shown in Figure 7 is almost unrecognizable. I was able to detect it only because of its position—after segment B, and before segment E, clearly outlined by the *hne* melody (in the red boxes). The realization of segment D does not resemble the basic melody at times. This might be interpreted as a moment in which the musicians were temporarily “lost” and then rapidly caught up with the rest of the ensemble, but if that were the case, we would not see such a close resemblance, especially rhythmic, between the two parts.

The figure displays three musical staves. The top staff, labeled 'basic melody', contains a sequence of numbers: 2 7 2 1, 1 3 7 1 2, 2 1 7 6, 5, 7, 5 7 3, 4 5, 5 4 3 4 2 1 3. The middle staff, labeled 'hne (shamw)', shows a melodic line in treble clef with notes and rests. The bottom staff, labeled 'wa (clapper)', shows a rhythmic pattern of 'x' marks. Three segments are highlighted with colored backgrounds: a green segment labeled 'B', a yellow segment labeled 'D', and an orange segment labeled 'E'. Dashed red boxes enclose specific notes in the hne staff corresponding to these segments.

Figure 7. Instrumental elaboration of segments B, D, and E.

METRIC CYCLES

In Burmese music, metric cycles are determined by the two idiophones *si* (bell, characterized by a tinkling sound) and *wa* (clapper, “bamboo,” making a single, percussive sound). These two instruments constitute the metric section of the ensemble, together with the *walethkout*, a large bamboo clapper, supporting or replacing the *wa*, and, occasionally, the *maung kwe* (or *linban kwe*), a small flat gong played with a beater, reinforcing the beat of the *wa*.²⁰ The sound of *si* and *wa*, which particularly stands out in the chamber music repertoire for harp (*saung gauk*) and xylophone (*pattala*), represents an essential part of the performance. *Si* and *wa* provide a guide to the rest of the ensemble, articulating the metric form of a musical phrase on primary and secondary beats (Keeler 1998, 371; Maung Thu Hlaing 1993, 63).²¹ Similar phenomena are found in many Southeast Asian ensembles, and have been described by scholars as indicating the quasi-hierarchical occurrence of accents by punctuating instruments. In maritime Southeast Asia, colotomic forms are generally outlined by larger gong instruments; on the mainland, a smaller set of hand cymbals and/or clappers are usually employed (see Douglas 2010). Large gongs are not common in mainland Southeast Asian ensembles. Regarding Thai court music, Morton explains that

in Thailand a set of three large gongs, no longer used, is said to have been a part of the ensembles in the old days. That it played a structure somewhat similar to that of the Javanese and Balinese instruments is at least possible. (1975, 14)

In Burma, a set of large, pitched suspended bossed gongs (*maung gyi*) can be present. Due to their cost, only important ensembles can afford them: others usually replace them with a keyboard.²² These gongs, however, do not play any role in the construction of colotomic forms; rather, they function as melodic embellishment.

20. I found this instrument to be in use only among *hsaing* ensembles in Mandalay. The gong might have possibly been adapted from Chinese music, whose influence might be stronger in the northern Burmese city.

21. In other mainland Southeast Asian countries, primary and secondary beats are underlined by a different sound, corresponding to different playing techniques, of an idiophone similar to the Burmese bell *si* (see Giuriati 2003, 42–43; Morton 1976, 64–65 for Cambodia and Thailand respectively).

22. This situation is rapidly changing; between 2013 and 2017–18, I have seen an increased number of ensembles adopting at least the basic set of three large *maungs*.

In discussing the rhythmic emphasis of such metric forms, Becker (1968, 177) writes that the final beat is usually perceived as the one towards which the tension is constructed and resolved, representing the main primary beat. With regard to Burmese music, Williamson agrees with Becker: the strong beat “is generally felt to be the terminal beat toward which the tension builds”; however, “this does not preclude the use of the clapper as the initial beat of the voice part” (Williamson 2000, 62). In fact, Khin Zaw (1981, 93) refers to the beat of the *wa* as “our accent at the beginning of each bar,” and not at the end. During my research stay, several musicians referred to the final beat of the *wa* either as the first or the last of the metric cycle—always perceived as the strongest. It seems, then, that both a Western and a Burmese style of counting the beats is in use. Referring to the Indian *tāla* cycle, where the first beat is both the beginning of the cycle and the end, Otake hypothesizes Burmese music’s idiosyncrasies to be the result of “Burma’s geographical position between India and Southeast Asia” (1980, 62). When I addressed this matter, some Burmese musicians underlined the ambiguity of the Burmese metric cycle; my friend Nay Win Htun, a music teacher at Gitameit Music Institute and a Burmese classical singer, once emphasized that counting the beats in Burmese music does not make any sense; one should just listen to the melody and follow the *wa* (Yangon, 2018).

The cyclic recurrence of melodic/temporal units marked by different instruments represents a common feature of many Southeast Asian music cultures. Studying the cyclical structure of Javanese *gendhing* (court pieces), Becker (1979, 1981; see also Becker and Becker 1981) argues that the cyclical structure of Javanese pieces reflects a Hindu-Buddhist conception of time, a circular logic which remains even after the diffusion of Islam on the Indonesian island.²³ The structure emerging from *si* and *wa* cycles (sometimes called *tawa*) may reflect a similar logic; in Burmese Buddhism, cycles of re-births span over universal cycles of creation and destruction, a time dimension of incredible duration. Taking inspiration from Becker’s intuition, and to avoid any ambiguity, I have represented *wa lat si*, the metric cycle characterizing *Do Ko Gyi Kyaw*, in a circular diagram (Figure 8).

Musicians and dancers describe *wa lat si* as the form which allows them to easily reach fast tempos. For this reason, in the *nat chin* (spirit songs) repertoire, the *wa lat si* form is prevalent, providing the proper support to the intense spirit dance and embodiment. It is important to specify that metric forms should not be strictly associated with specific repertoires, as Inoue (2008, 2014) underlines. In fact, Williamson (2000, 62) reminds us that, during the performance of a song, these cycles can undergo substantial variation. Especially during dance and dramatic shows, the *hsaing* ensemble can suddenly speed up or slow down, keeping or varying the same metric cycle, alternating between them, inventing a new form or performing an incomplete one, according to the situation. These shifts respond to the musical

23. Tenzer (2006b, 206) has objected that line/progression vs. circle/stasis is a false dichotomy; even static musics, built on circle-like patterns, progressively move forward in time through repetitions, in what he calls “discursive isoperiodicity” (Tenzer 2006a).

necessity of the supporting dancer(s) on stage, to an aesthetic dimension, and to the necessities of the ritual performance.

While I generally agree with Williamson, I must caution against mistaking the *si* and *wa* metric forms for *levels*. Processes of expansion/rarefaction and re-contraction of the metric forms are common in other Southeast Asian contexts (Becker 1980). These processes produce metrical levels where the metric structure expands (the tempo is “slower”) while the instruments “fill in” the melody to create a higher (“faster”) density of equal notes. In Java, the drummer governs the gamelan ensemble, making the other musicians change levels of *irama*—expanding the metric structure marked by gongs and the main melody (*balungan*) to progressively larger densities, thus allowing a more agile playing by the embellishing instruments, then re-contracting it (Brinner 2007, 25ff.; Keeler 1987, 225); this phenomenon is found in Khmer (Giuriati 1995) and Thai (Morton 1976, 40ff.; Silkstone 1993, 25ff.; Swangviboonpong 2003, 5–6) music cultures, but not in the Balinese (Tenzer 2000, 258n). As a general rule, the phenomenon is absent in the Burmese musical practice. However, exceptions exist, and as I will now explain, one is found in the practice of *nat hsaing*.

As represented in Figure 8, during the performance of some *nat* songs, the *wa lat si* can expand, doubling its beats (*si* [o] and *wa* [+]) from $\underline{1} \ 2 \ 3 \ 4$ to $\underline{1} \ 2 \ 3 \ 4 \ \underline{1} \ 2 \ 3 \ 4$ and leaving some beats “empty” (shown as a straight line [-]). In the performance of the Kyi Lin Bo *hsaing* ensemble, the expansion takes place in correspondence with the cadential phrase (CP). In this particular performance, the small bell *si* stops playing, leaving space for the clapper *wa*. The wooden idiophone originally marks the main beats of each cycle (2 and 4); after a short transition, corresponding to the cadential phrase CP, the *wa* begins to mark the fourth and final beat only (metric cycle: *wa* [+], $\underline{1} \ 2 \ 3 \ 4 \ \underline{1} \ 2 \ 3 \ 4$) of the segment A (Figure 9; Example 3, 00:57–01:00).

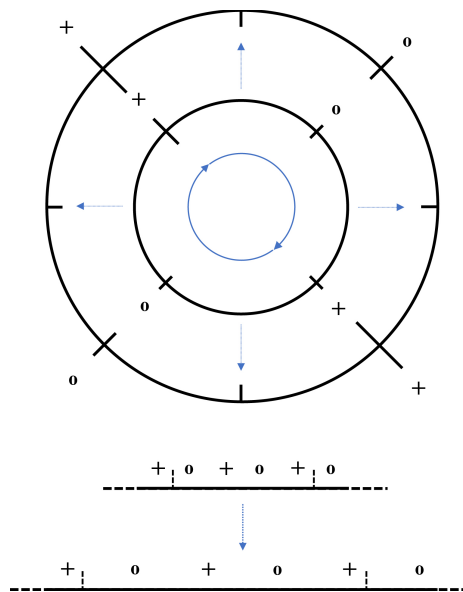


Figure 8. Expansion/rarefaction of the metric cycle *wa lat si*.

The image shows a musical score for three instruments: *kyi waing* (gong circle), *si (bell) wa (clapper)*, and *pat waing* (drum circle). The score is divided into three sections: TR (green), CP (yellow), and A (orange). A red dashed box highlights a specific rhythmic expansion in the *si wa* staff during the CP section.

Figure 9. Expansion of the metric cycle (in the red box).

I noticed this process in the performance of the spirit song *Do Ko Gyi Kyaw* (for the *nat* Ko Gyi Kyaw) and *Shwe Byon Ngwe Byon* (for the two *nat* Brothers of Taungbyon). When I found out that these processes were taking place in the Burmese *hsaing*, I was exultant; not only instruments, but also Burmese musical processes could be considered Southeast Asian in their own right. However, it was not long before I realized that the variation in density of metric forms represented an exception; in fact, the musicians I have spoken to do not recognize expansions and contractions of metric forms in Burmese music. There is no Burmese word or concept for this phenomenon, the musicians speaking only of a *wa lat si* cycle performed slower or faster. Moreover, in the *nat chin* *Do Ko Gyi Kyaw* and *Shwe Byon Ngwe Byon*, the expansion/contraction of the metric structure does not correspond to an expansion/contraction of the melodic material (as happens in Java and Thailand). As I explained, the melody performed by the gong circle and shawm remains substantially unvaried, although it presents more ornamentations. What radically changes is the drum part.

RHYTHMIC CYCLES AND INTERLOCKING

Throughout my research trips, many *hsaing* musicians underlined the importance that drums have in the *nat hsain* ensemble. They describe the sound of the *pat ma*, the large suspended drum which can be heard over long distances, as deep and powerful. Working together with the *pat waing*, the drum circle, this instrument is capable of exciting the participants, making them dance, filling the air of the *nat kana* with the presence of the spirits. In performance, the rest of the rhythmic instruments—the large barrel drums *sito*, the large cymbals *linkwin*, and the six tuned drums *chawk lon pat*—generally support, reinforce, or embellish the two main drums' parts. Together, *pat ma* and *pat waing* constitute the backbone of the *nat hsain* rhythmic section; the rhythmic part is the result of an interlocking between these two drums. Burmese musicians have described this process to me as *apay-ayu* (lit. “give and take”), *bayhti* (from the words used to indicate the right hand's action in the *pat waing*, *bay*, and of the left hand's action in the *pat ma*, *hti*), or *akyar* (“in between”; Yelin Bo, Yangon, 2018).

Compared to other *hsaing* performance contexts, the *nat hsaing* ensemble performs “in a simpler and more direct style” (Garfias 1985, 10). The strength of the ensemble does not reside in the embellished style of the drum circle player, but in the fast, intense, and loud sound that the drums can achieve, working as a whole unit through thick interlocked parts.

In the *nat hsaing* musical practice, interlocking forms give rise to pre-composed rhythmic cycles which consist of powerful musical signs, capable of bringing the *nat* into presence. In performance, the drums tend to repeat the same cycle, creating a sense of recurrence and stability “in dynamic dialog with change” (Tenzer 2006a, 22ff.); extemporaneous micro-adjustments and variations (mostly of the “tone color” and partly of “duration,” but never of “envelope” and “punctuation”; see Tenzer 2011) are present—though they do not undermine the identity of this cycle. From this point of view, *nat hsaing* music could be considered an example of *sectional periodicity*—i.e., “isoperiodicity in dialogue with the demands made by a variety of forces” (Tenzer 2006a, 29), in this case, the progression of the ritual. In fact, each *nat chin* presents structural shifts between pre-composed rhythmic cycles, generally signaled by the leading drum circle *pat waing*, determining and determined by the flow of the ritual time. This resonates with what Moore and Sayre (2006) describe in Afro-Cuban *batá* drumming. They explain that “drumming, song, and dance are crucial for facilitating possession” (122); among other things, drummers must “be sensitive to constant musical cues offered throughout the ceremony from the lead singer and other drummers, and to respond appropriately with metrical shifts, improvisations, or elaborations of the basic pulse” (123).²⁴

In the song *Do Ko Gyi Kyaw*, the expansion of the metric form *wa lat si* that I previously discussed is accompanied by an evident change in the rhythmic section. The drums of the ensemble suddenly awaken, shifting from being a sleepy background support to the vocal and melodic part, to an intense protagonist role. This is underlined by the introduction of a completely different drumming style.

In the first part of the song, the *pat ma* plays only occasionally;²⁵ the *pat waing* plays symmetrically and in parallel with the last three beats outlined by the 4-beat metric form *wa lat si*, in an unsyncopated fashion (Figure 10a). At the end of the vocal part (Example 3, 00:57), the drum circle signals the beginning of the instrumental section. In a few moments, to the sound of the cadential phrase, the metric form is expanded, passing from 4 to 8 beats; the *pat ma* begins to play, supported by the rest of the ensemble. On the rarefied metric cycle, *pat waing* and *pat ma* create together a rhythmic cycle based on the second form of interlocking. While the suspended drum *pat ma* plays on the beats marked by the metric cycle, the drum circle *pat waing* marks the off-beats of the cycle, filling in the space left empty by the expansion of the metric form (Figure 10b).

24. This corresponds to what Tenzer (2006a) defines as “sectional periodicity”: the reiteration of a single musical time cycle is in dialogue with other musical forces, in this case, a ritual’s progression.

25. In this particular performance, at some point, only the barrel drums *sito* keep playing. Those musicians who can, take a short rest. Their action is not necessary to the performance, as the drums are not protagonists here.

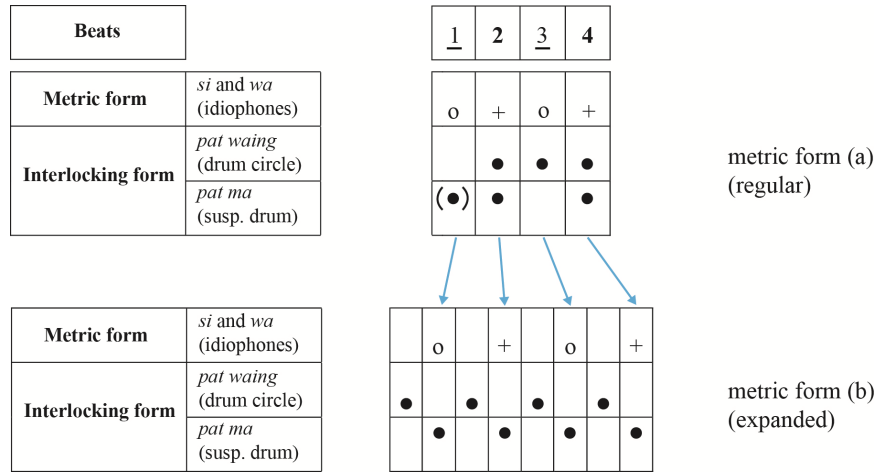


Figure 10. Shift in metric and interlocking forms.

In relation to the expanded metric form, the action of the *pat ma* is symmetrical, parallel, and un-syncopated, while the *pat waing* is syncopated, symmetrically interlocking with the suspended drum and the idiophones. The *hsaing* performs with increasing speed and loudness, supporting the spirit embodiment of the dancers.

As *pat waing* and *pat ma* are tuned percussion instruments, the following transcriptions show how the two previous rhythmic models are actually realized by the ensemble (Figure 11; Example 3, 00:00–00:44). The first rhythmic pattern is strictly intertwined with the vocal part. The vocal part begins by reiterating the name of the spirit (“Ko Gyi Kyaw, Ko Gyi Kyaw”) on the cyclical melodic segment: B-D-G, in cipher notation 3-5-1 (*hkun hnathan chi*). The same rhythmic segment is reproduced by the gong circle, as I have explained. On the other hand, the drum circle *pat waing* follows the same rhythmic pattern but plays different notes, in what appears to be a heterophonic process: C-E-G, in cipher notation 1-3-5 (*than yoe*).

Figure 11. Realization of the background rhythmic cycle. In the *pat ma* transcription, “RH” and “LH” stand for right and left hand; “HD,” “MD,” and “LD” indicate the higher, middle, and lower unpitched *sito* drums.

I have repeatedly asked several Burmese musicians about this, and while some of them identify the segment as E-G-C (3-5-1),²⁶ none of the musicians I spoke with seemed to be bothered by the fact that the *pat waing* melody and the singer/*kyi waing* melodies diverge. Besides heterophony, another possible reason might be that two modal categories are in use: while singers and melodic instruments are performing in the prescribed modal category *hkun hnathan chi* (main sound G), the drum circle is not. It is not always convenient for the drum circle player to shift to a new “tuning” during a performance. Except for specific phases of the ritual when an actual change of tuning is unavoidable, the drum circle player tends to keep the *than yoe* (main sound C) tuning, as in this case, and to play along with the rest of the melodic instruments avoiding those tones that might sound too strident in the current modal category.

Burmese musicians do not assign any specific name to this cycle. It does not characterize *nat* music, as it can be heard in other *nat chins* and pop songs too. Some performers think it spread out as one of the new elements of Burmese music in the 1960s–1970s, and most agreed that it was introduced by *saya* Sein Moot Tar.

As the vocal part concludes, the drums introduce a new drum cycle, characterized by a strict interlocking between *pat waing* and *pat ma*. This cycle is known as *Nan Gyi Tabaung* (Figure 12; Example 3, 00:58–01:29). In this cycle, all the drums play in a 4-beat meter defined by *si* (bell, on beats 1 and 3) and *wa* (clapper, on beats 2 and 4) alternating. The cycle is characterized by a strict interlocking between drum circle and suspended drum; the *pat waing* interjects on the offbeats, the *pat ma* on the beat. In this realization, the drum circle player strikes the pitches C and G twice (each reinforced by G at the upper octave), ideally dividing the cycle into two halves. The *pat ma* (suspended drum) marks the beats, alternating the left

The figure displays the rhythmic realization of the *Nan Gyi Tabaung* cycle across five staves. The top staff indicates the alternating pattern of *si* (bell) and *wa* (clapper) with diamond and cross symbols. The second staff shows the *pat waing* (drum circle) melody in bass clef. The third staff shows the *pat ma* (suspended drum) with RH and LH parts. The fourth staff shows *linkwin* (cymbals). The fifth staff shows *sito* (barrel drums) with HD, MD, and LD parts.

Figure 12. Realization of the second rhythmic cycle, *Nan Gyi Tabaung*.

26. Some musicians recognize this melodic segment as a common element characterizing the “modern” Burmese popular songs, widespread in the past decades.

and right hand; the main final beat is underlined by a double stroke on both the drum's heads. The large cymbals *linkwin*, so far silent, step into the performance with their clashing sound, marking the upbeat alongside the *pat waing*. The *sito* (barrel drums) reinforces in particular the last three beats of the cycle.

The performance of this cycle is connected to the manifestation of the *nat* Ko Gyi Kyaw. This cycle dominates the instrumental section; its interlocking form allows the ensemble to increase in speed and loudness.

CHANGE IN TEMPO AND DYNAMICS

After the transition to the second phase, the *hsaing* starts to perform the sound *Nan Gyi Tabaung*. As I explained, the defining characteristic of this rhythmic pattern is the interaction between the drum circle *pat waing* and the suspended drum *pat ma* (see Figure 12 above). Together, the two interlocking drum parts imprint dynamism onto the performance.

The new dynamism is also facilitated by the main singer Ma Than Dar. Although in the second phase the vocal part disappears, the singer intervenes in the transition phase and at the very beginning of the instrumental part, shouting repeatedly into the microphone (Example 3, 00:53–01:03). The shouting prompts a reaction in the musicians and the dancing devotees, and excites the other participants.

Figure 13 shows a computer analysis generated using the software Sonic Visualiser (Cannam, Landone, and Sandler 2010). In the figure, the duration graph and spectrogram show the differences in the sound qualities (tempo and dynamics) between the two phases. The duration graph (in the upper pane) shows the ensemble switching from an initially slower and steadier pace to an increasingly faster tempo after an adjustment in the transition (in the red box; Example 3, 00:51–00:59). The spectrogram (lower pane) shows a significant change in the dynamics; toward the end, the stronger noise in high frequencies is due to the high-frequency partials produced by the renewed effort of the drum chimes and the introduction of the large cymbals *linkwin*—previously completely silent. It is evident that the *hsaing* releases much more energy in the second phase, playing increasingly faster and louder.

After the transition, the whole performance becomes livelier. Kyi Lin Bo and his musicians perform the fast and interlocking rhythmic cycle *Nan Gyi Tabaung*, supported by the long shouting of the main singer Ma Than Dar. Their co-action results in an increased dynamism of the music performance. This marks the beginning of a second phase where the possessed dancers experience the coming-into-presence of the drunkard *nat* into their bodies.

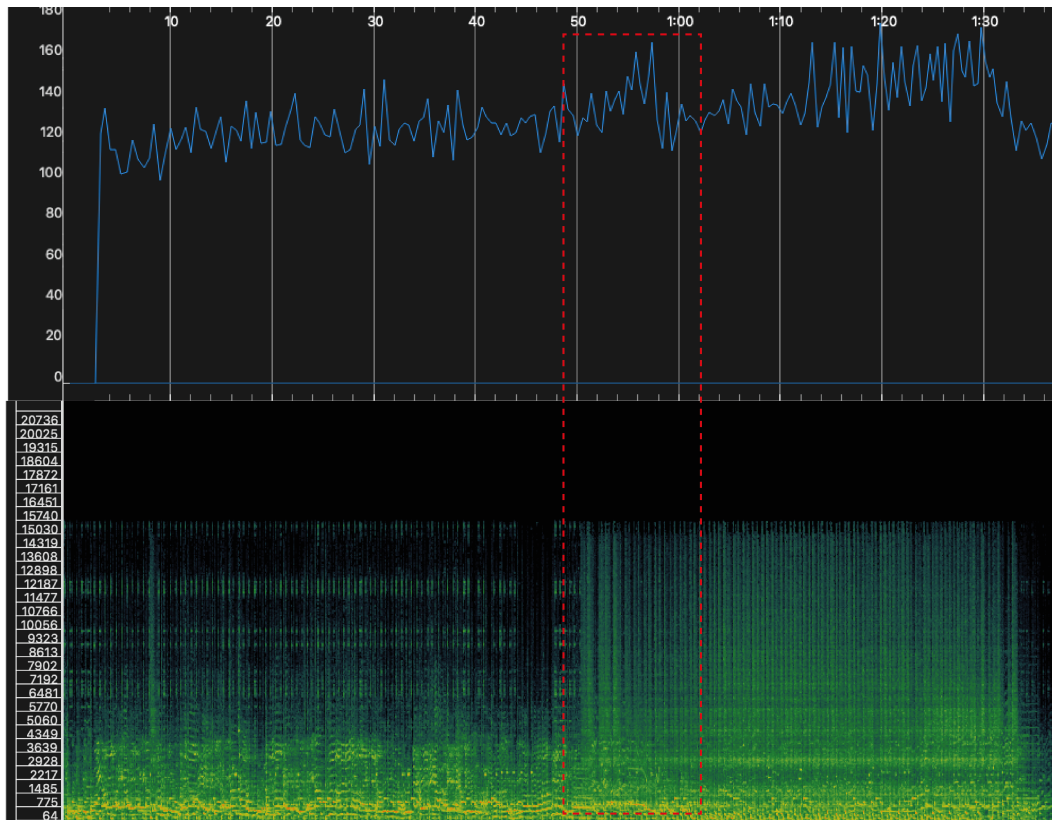


Figure 13. Duration graph and spectrogram of the performance by Kyi Lin Bo's ensemble. The upper pane indicates changes in duration (the vertical axis represents metronome values); in the lower pane, the spectrogram shows changes in the musicians' dynamics. The red dashed rectangle highlights the transition between the two phases.

TRIGGERING AND CONTROLLING THE POSSESSION DANCE

How are the dancers affected by the musical elements I have been so far addressing? What is the response of the rest of the participants? How are the musicians affected by the presence of the dancers? Would the performance have been the same if none were present in the ritual dancing area—in front of the instruments and in presence of the spirits?

Looking at the video (Example 1), the singers Ma Than Dar (left) and Daw San Htay (right) are following the main beat marked by the idiophone *wa*. While singing, both of them are in time with the beat, weaving their free hand, which remains closed with the thumb up, a gesture of victory associated with Ko Gyi Kyaw. The gesture kinetically encourages the musicians, and it demonstrates how the group of performers are bonded together. After the cadential phrase, when the whole ensemble accelerates, Ma Than Dar takes a few seconds, after some moments of uncertainty (Example 1, 00:59–01:01), to adjust her gesture to the expanded metric cycle. In the second phase, now that their hands are free, the “victory gesture” is replaced with handclapping, always in time with the *wa*.

The devotees sit on the ground, surrounding the dancing area and participating in the performance by shouting in appreciation whenever a particular song is performed or when encouraging the dancers. They offer their support by following the *hsaing* sounds: many manifest their happiness by smiling and singing along with the singers; some support the performance with the clap of their hands in time with the main beats marked by the idiophone *wa*. When the ensemble expands the metric cycle, some of the devotees respond accordingly, while others keep clapping their hands in the previous metric cycle. The presence of other people is a determinant for a successful *pwe*: the more people join the celebration, the better.

The response of the dancing guests changes dramatically between the two phases. In the first phase with the vocal part, two dancers (out of four) are just moving freely around in the dance area. One of them carries a bottle of whiskey, an offering to the drunkard *nat*. Their synchronization with the sound of the ensemble is only partial. The dancers exploit this phase to partially regain some energy and breath, in preparation for the second phase, when all the energy of the *nat hsaing* drums bursts out. This phase can then be considered preparatory for the consequent mimetic phase of the possession dance. After the transition, the possession dances definitely become more active: looking at Example 1, at 00:49 one of the dancers can be seen raising his folded hands to his forehead and starting to shake energetically; it is the sign that the drunkard *nat* is in the process of “entering” (*nat win pu dae*) the body of the dancer, who with difficulty copes with the presence of the powerful spirit. The dancer keeps shaking his hands, swinging around the dancing area, performing the drunkard dance, only the support of the people around him prevents him from falling to the ground. At 01:17—after 28 intense seconds—the spirit has finally and completely entered the human host. His dancing movements and gestures become more regular and in synchrony with the sound of the ensemble. Comparatively, the movements and gestures of the second dancer are much more controlled. He holds a bottle of whiskey in his left hand, and he raises it up for everyone to see it in conjunction with the repetition of the name of the *nat* at 00:48; he performs a swinging movement with it—bottom to top at 00:51, right at the end of the vocal part, and then another time at 00:56, in synchrony with one of the singer’s encouraging shouts. After that, he returns the bottle to the people sitting around, and starts to dance following the sound of the *hsaing*, performing large circular movements with his arms—a very common gesture associated with the drunkard dance.

The dancers’ movements are governed by the *hsaing* sounds. The beats of the bell *si* (not present in this performance) and wood clapper *wa* correspond respectively to the dancers’ raising and lowering of their feet—the bell raising the tension, and the clapper releasing it—a basic feature of Burmese dance, also present in other forms of performance. The metric section is not only a reference for the other musicians, it is also guiding the movements of the dancers. The expansion of the main metric beat, after the middle cadential phrase, allows the dancers to perform at this pace with a much larger pattern. Without the expansion, the *si* and *wa* cycle would be too fast for inexperienced dancers to synchronize with, and the dance

manifesting the coming-into-presence of the spirit would consequently not be successful. Two apparently insignificant instruments are responsible for the success of spirit possession.

The drums also contribute strongly to the spirit's coming-into-presence. While the lower part of the dancers' bodies is tightly entrenched in the regular metric pattern, the upper part of their bodies is free to move, following the drums, which perform the rhythmic cycle *Nan Gyi Tabaung* with new dynamism. The new rhythm makes the presence of the spirit actual and real. The mimetic element of the music is quite evident here; the rhythmic cycle is directly connected with the drunkard *nat* and manifests all the spirit's power. Consequently, it is not surprising to see the dancers being affected by the presence of the *nat*. The two dancers express it through the drunkard dance, synchronized with the sound of the *hsaing*.

While the released energy of the rhythmic section triggers a more evident manifestation of the spirit, compelling the dancers to move faster and with more intensity, the metric instruments control the possession, restraining and synchronizing the dance movements. The expansion of the metric cycle seems to correspond to an opening of the dancers' selves, which immediately get "filled" by the sound of the *Nan Gyi Tabaung*. The mimetic characteristics of this rhythmic cycle establish a direct connection to the drunkard *nat*—a powerful musical sign that makes the spirit come-into-presence in the body of the dancers. This process has been described by Friedson:

The phenomenon of spirit possession is an opening of interior space: the resulting possession is a being-in-it. . . . This space is projected through musical means. (1996, 22)

In the case of the *nat hsaing*, the process described by Friedson is made manifest musically. The rarefaction/expansion of the metric cycle is accompanied by the introduction of the intense drum cycle, which "fills in" the beats now left empty; similarly, the dancers welcome the *nat* into their bodies and experience his presence.

The song would not be performed in the same fashion if the dancers were not there. During my fieldwork I have witnessed many performances of this popular *nat chin*. When the dancers were not present, the ensemble just shifted to the instrumental part without any change in the metric cycle. In a few cases, though, some ensembles did not operate any change even in the presence of the dancers; however, in these cases the possession dance was less effective, and the spirit manifestation less evident.

I am convinced that, in the song *Do Ko Gyi Kyaw*, the alternation in the agency of the different *hsaing* parts (vocal, melodic, and rhythmic) results in a particularly efficient musical device; when performed in a ritual context, and supporting a group of dancing devotees, this catchy *nat chin* represents a means through which *hsaing* musicians are easily able to trigger and control the manifestation of the drunkard *nat*.

CONCLUSIONS

This work reveals how the successful performance of a *nat chin* (spirit song), or *nat than* (spirit sound), strictly depends on the interactions between musicians, dancers, human and spirit participants. Rhythms and melodies, tempo and dynamics constitute the sounds which, together with specific gestures and dances, contribute to creating the ritually charged atmosphere of a *nat kana pwe* in which the spirits come into presence: a mimetic performance. To voluntarily offer one's body to the spirits for them to dance with (*chawt pwe*) is a positive experience that the dancers share with friends and family.

All the ritual actors experience and contribute to create the performance together. The sound of the *hsaing* ensemble triggers and controls the coming-into-presence of the spirits through mimetic sounds. This process is mediated by the singer(s), whose bodily interaction with the dancers and the rest of the participants contributes to guiding and animating the performance. The dancers embody the spirit, performing specific mimetic actions that are mirrored by the sound of the ensemble; the rest of the listeners actively join the celebration, encouraging the dancers and following the musical performance. Music is not disjunct at all from the dance or the response of the participants: these categories, only theoretically separated, are usually overlapped and in close connection with one another (Mohd and Steputat 2017). As Clayton has explained:

I came to conceive of all participants in the session as being somehow locked into the same experience—focused on the same events in the same space and time, at some level synchronized together. The music, I speculated, was somehow facilitating this synchrony, in what might be termed a process of *entrainment*. (2001, 3)

While I am aware that multiple ritual media are involved in conveying layers of meaning facilitating this entrainment process during a ceremony, in this paper I have kept a special eye on music and sound. By analyzing the different layers of meanings embedded in different levels of the popular spirit song *Do Ko Gyi Kyaw*, I introduced the concept of mimetic sounds to explain how the music ensemble “facilitates the process of entrainment,” to use Clayton's words, between human and spirit persons.

Taking an analytical perspective and employing different modes of transcription (cipher notation, staff notation, computer analysis, and score animation) I have shown the role of the different musical characters constituting the spirit song. Looking at the vocal part and the basic melody (Williamson 1979), I have identified segments, patterns, and verses (Becker 1969). Looking at the actions of the performers, I described the flexibility of the song's structure, and I explained how the various sections of the ensemble (melodic, rhythmic, and metric) work together with the singer(s) to create an effective ritual performance. Not only the melody (the vocal and instrumental parts) and the constant repetition (Tenzer 2006a) of rhythmic elements (the two mimetic cycles), but also changes in tempo, dynamics and timbral values

contribute to identifying the Ko Gyi Kyaw's *nat* person and to making the spirit manifest through the dances of the human participants.

The analysis demonstrated how the expansion of the metric structure and the filling-in of the second mimetic rhythmic cycle could be considered as a musical means triggering and controlling the manifestation of the spirit. I suggested the musical expansion/filling-in corresponds to an opening of the dancers' selves, filled with the presence of the *nat* (Friedson 1996).

In this paper, I have tried to engage comprehensively with the main elements of Burmese music. I have tried to enlarge the framework, drawing when possible connections with other Southeast Asian music cultures. However, this paper focused on one performance—the song of one spirit, by a single *hsaing* group mostly operating within the city of Yangon in Burma. Further research is necessary to shed light on the many facets of Burmese performing arts. As the scholarship on Burmese performing arts develops, many more questions shall arise. To this day, Burmese performing arts remain an almost unexplored field, and the recent political and social developments will without doubt have an impact on further research. Hopefully, this paper will contribute to a stimulation of scholarly discourses on Burmese performing arts.

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