

The Burmese Pwè: British Newspaper Accounts (1899-1921)¹⁾

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Early newspapers published in Burma by the British record the official view of the typically Burmese social entertainment, the pwè. As the principal occasion for gatherings of large numbers of Burmans in the towns and cities, the pwè provided a singular opportunity for its observers to comment upon the public then subject to British rule in the latter years of the nineteenth and early years of the twentieth centuries. Such reports shed some light on British comprehension of Burmese culture.

The pwè is a show which may take many forms but generally focuses on some sort of performance involving various mixtures of drama, dance, music and song. Even when there is a story to tell spontaneity and improvisation remain characteristic features. Given this flexibility of content, together with the wide availability of performers, both professional and amateur, and the low production cost — often only a circular ground area or a simple platform — sponsors could easily arrange for performances on short notice at a minimal expense for a variety of occasions. Shway Yoe (Sir James George Scott), who published his book, *THE BURMAN*, initially in 1882, lists twenty such occasions, including birth, name-giving, marriage, pagoda dedication, festival days, cremation, and others.²⁾ In the days before the establishment of the large commercial troupes of entertainers, sponsored by local entrepreneurs, the public was invited without charge. Under such circumstances one can understand the pervasiveness of the pwè throughout Burma. Almost every night during the dry season in the cities and towns there was a pwè within walking distance, or bullock cart distance, if one could find it. Little wonder the British, who generally made a habit of ignoring the local culture, noticed the pwè, not only as an unavoidable encounter but as a social event of such importance to the society that its significance extended well beyond the usual meaning of entertainment.

Cremation ceremonies for prominent Buddhist monks (pongyi byans), pagoda festivals, and seasonal religious festivals provided occasions when pwès clearly attracted the attention

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1) British newspapers used as sources included *The Times of Burma*, *The Burma Echo*, *The Rangoon Times*, and *The Weekly Rangoon Times and Overland Summary* (referred to in the text as *The Weekly Rangoon Times*). All were published in Rangoon, Burma.

2) Scott, Sir James George (Shway Yoe), *THE BURMAN: HIS LIFE AND NOTIONS* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1963), p. 286.

of British reporters. Preceding the cremation of a high-ranking monk, pwès might be held weekly for several months on the monastery grounds, while the body lay embalmed. On September 21, 1907 *The Burma Echo* noted

On Sunday from 8 A. M. till midnight there will be a series of performances by two rival troupes of Burmese actors and actresses in the compound. . . in the Godwin Road, the occasion being the preliminaries to two cremation ceremonies to take place in the first week of January next at Kemmendine. (p. 11)

Lesser members of the clergy merited shorter celebrations. Under "Local News" *The Weekly Rangoon Times* of March 1, 1919 reported that

From March 12th to 15th Ngadatkyi Pagoda will be the scene of great festivities on account of two pongyibyans. There will be pwès. . . huge dolls (marionette performances), and white elephants, and even thirty different attractions. The cremation ceremony will take place at 2 P. M. on the last day (15th). The names of the deceased hpongyis were U Asaya and U Mandaya. (p. 34D)

Such celebrations at the death of a prominent member of the community, be he monk or layman, were common. They were in fact celebrations of the man's life, of his having trod carefully along the Noble Eightfold Path of Buddhism. The entertainments themselves were thought appropriate because they centered on dramatizations of stories taken from THE JATAKA, based on the various incarnations of Gautama Buddha.

The association of pwè performances with Buddhism continued in the annual pagoda festivals, though here both the mood of the audience and the content of the drama tended to be more secular. Entire families attended, with the elders anxious to renew old acquaintances, the youth interested in flirtations, and the children enthralled by the unaccustomed sights and sounds. On the whole it was a joyous rather than a solemn occasion. Consequently one found there not only dramatizations of the JATAKA tales but also the "anyein pwè," a form akin to American vaudeville, where two clownish men and a pretty girl exchanged banter in song and dialogue. On November 27, 1915 *The Rangoon Times* reported in its "Man of the World" column

Last Saturday was a great night at the Pagoda. There was plenty to eat, to see, and to hear, but my knowledge of Burmese is not colloquial enough to understand all that was said. The little lady of the pwè who cross-talked with the two clowns became much more amusing after His Honour (a British official?) had left; her sallies tickled the crowd immensely. (p. 10)

Since the clowns were often unrestrained in their jibes at the foreign presence, perhaps "The Man of the World" was saved some embarrassment by his lack of understanding.

On March 22, 1919 *The Weekly Rangoon Times* reported of the Shwedagon Pagoda Festival

. . . A new feature was an anyein pwè on the platform just west of the pagoda proper. The fun of the fair, however, was to be found on the vacant lot to the east. . .

Passing down the eastern steps one came to innumerable booths, food-stalls, roundabouts, pwès of all descriptions. . . (p. 41)

Of some interest is the reporter's evident likening of the variety offered by a pagoda festival to the activities of a British "fun fair", though nothing resembling the stage performances could be found at the latter event.

Organized by the custodians of a pagoda to provide a special offering ceremony in honor of Gautama Buddha and the monks, the pagoda festival provided one occasion among many during the monthly seasonal festivals when pwès provided the principal entertainment. Seasonal festivals, such as Tabaung (February-March), also have religious associations, in this instance, as recorded in *The Rangoon Times* of February 27, 1915, celebrating the journey of Gautama Buddha to his home in Kapilavastu.

The Tabaung Festival: On the Eastern slopes were all kinds of booths providing different entertainments, and a yokthe pwè (marionette show) was in progress all night. Tomorrow night . . . there will be an anyein pwè. (p. 12)

Special occasions provided additional opportunities for the presentation of pwès, and, perhaps because the British press could better understand the association of entertainment with more secular purposes, these occasions were generally reported in more detail. On March 29 in a 1919 issue of *The Weekly Rangoon Times*, under "Shwebo Notes" we find

The Y. M. B. A. (Young Men's Buddhist Association) Zat (dramatic performance) in which U Ku . . . is the Mintha (featured male performer) came over here and performed on the 14th and 15th . . . The other members of it, except the Minthami (featured female performer), a professional actress, are clerks and advocates from Monywa. The proceeds of the sale of tickets . . . will not be less than Rupees 5000. Our new deputy commissioner came to the pwè on both nights as invited. We all congratulate U Ku on his successful attempt to raise a fund for the construction of a Y. M. B. A. School in Monywa. This is the first time that a member of the Subordinate Civil Service (U Ku was an amateur performer) has ever attempted to raise a fund for a public purpose by playing the role of a zat-mintha. It is said that the zat is better than many other regular zats. (p. 40)

And in the December 21, 1907 issue of *The Burma Echo* a correspondent filed the following report from Bassein.

The other night, the On-da-yat (*sic*) company, drawing a considerable crowd from nearly every part of town, played the choicest piece of the notorious thief, Tekka, in front of the Extra Assistant Commissioner U Pe's wife, Ma Hla May, who lately arrived from Prome to attend the funeral of her stepmother, Ma Tok.

The people of Bassein rejoiced heartily to hear one of the performers, while taking the part of the princess, say that our . . . Ma Hla May received a telegram from her husband that evening telling her that he (U Pe) had been promoted to a more exalted position.

After due respect had been paid . . . by the performers, there was given one very bright sovereign from the hand of . . . (Ma Hla May) to the performers as a "buck-

sheesh ” for playing the piece so well. (p. 9)

Few special occasion performances of pwès are reported in the British press, so we should note that the Y. M. B. A. benefit took place at the instigation of a Burmese in the employ of the government, while the second occasion celebrated the promotion of a Burman in government service. Both reports are highly personalized when compared with others where Burmans in the employ of the British were not involved. Perhaps the reporter meant to suggest that association with the British does not preclude participation in the customary preoccupations of the society at large.

The prevalence of pwès in colonial Burma made the press take notice in the form of straightforward reporting of the various occasions on which pwès were held. These accounts gave the English reading public, other than Burmans, some familiarity with the terminology of the pwè makers, much as they do for us. Some of the reporting, however, was coupled with critical comment on the merits of the performances. On December 14, 1907 *The Burma Echo* reported on a pwè performed on the grounds of the former Royal Palace in Mandalay attended by the then British Viceroy and Lady Minto.

... The scene to the East of the palace was brilliant in the extreme. Favoured by a dark night, the illuminations presented a series of dazzling effects... of the numerous torches that lined the three routes converging and meeting due East of the King's Throne Room.

... Their Excellencies proceeded to the pandal in which the pwè was to be performed. A raised dais had been arranged facing the stage, but at the back of the arena.... This was an excellent piece of organization in many ways.... (p. 11)

In part the reporter's approval of this setting could have been founded on his knowledge that a similar arrangement was provided for the Burmese kings prior to 1885, when they brought pwès to the palace grounds. Continuing from the same source

The opening act was a performance with marionettes, and the fantastic leaps of the carnivora, together with the cumbersome evolutions of the pachyderm caused considerable amusement to the audience. The next act was a woodland scene, and the dancing was extremely pleasing, the costumes being admired by one and all... (p. 11)

Since the performance would continue until dawn, as was the custom, the reporter wrote that "after witnessing the Burmese drama for some time the Viceregal guests rose to go" (p. 11).

Frequent references to marionette performances and to the dance in newspaper accounts, and lack of comment on the drama, can be explained partly by the language limitations of the reporters. However, it is also true that in the first decade of the century the marionettes enjoyed more popularity with audiences than did the live performers. *The Rangoon Times* reported on February 27, 1909 under "Local News"

Every night a puppet show is held at Poozoondung on the reclaimed side of the turtle tanks. The dolls are made to dance and pose very skillfully to the accompani-

ment of Burmese music punctuated with bamboo clappers. Several good shows are got up, and thousands of Burmese visited them and derive pleasure and entertainment from the attractions. (p. 10)

The most extravagant praise recorded in these early newspaper accounts was reserved for the performances staged by the actor-producer, Po Sein, later dubbed The Great Po Sein and acknowledged by the Burmese to be the most talented performer in the history of their theatre.³⁾ *The Weekly Rangoon Times* of February 22, 1919 reports the appearance of his company at the Kyaiksan Pagoda Festival.

At the Pagoda festival Mg. Po Sein T. P. S. (Taingkyo Pyikyo Saung, a title conferred by the British, meaning "man who works for the sake of his country."), Burma's famous actor, staged his play on Saturday before a large crowd. From the beginning to the end applause and laughter were the order of the night. Mg. Po Sein and Sein Ou gave splendid performances, their acting, singing and dancing being much admired by those present. The clowns acting in the interval provoked great laughter. The troupe is a splendid organisation and every one of the actors did their part beautifully and artistically. The Burmese songs were very pleasant even to those who do not understand the language. The songs about the termination of the war and the singing of the Armistice air, coupled with dances by Mg. Po Sein and Sein Ou were deservedly applauded. (p. 46c)

Anachronisms in the form of contemporary comment in the midst of historical and mythological content were commonly observed in the pwè. Later, when feelings of nationalism became strong, Po Sein's continued support of the British made him less popular with a segment of his audience, as this report headed "Mg. Po Sein and the Schoolboy Strikers" in the January 1, 1921 *Weekly Rangoon Times* shows.

The latest notice in connection with the boycott movement is a placard to be found on a tree outside the gate of the Government High School which has on it "Boycott Po Sein's Pwè." (p. 47)

Some reporters commented unfavorably on the performances. "The Man of the World" column in the November 27, 1915 *Rangoon Times* says of one of the solo female dancers

There was very little of the Margaret Cooper daintiness about her. . . . I prefer to see a dozen or more moving together than a single performer; all the oddities of strained gestures are too conspicuous in a solo dance. (p. 10)

However, "The Man of the World" also engages in more balanced judgments, giving some thought to apparent contradictions in Western and Burmese values, as in the April 3, 1915 issue of the *Times*.

The splendour of the festivities . . . showed beyond all doubt that even with paddy (*rice*) at Rupees 85 or thereabouts, the Burman can still cheerfully waste money on the purely spectacular. "Waste" is perhaps too strong a word for, whatever these

3) See Kenneth Sein and J. A. Withey, *THE GREAT PO SEIN: A CHRONICLE OF THE BURMESE THEATER*, 1965 (rpt. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1976).

shows do, they certainly put new life in their patrons, to judge by their enraptured faces. The trouble is that we Westerners have been brought up on the famous “Life is real, life is earnest. Life is not an empty dream.” We never pause to think that there may be some peoples who look upon life as an absurdity to be dealt with equally absurdly. The arms of Burma ought to be: a *pwè* passant with two *lubyets* (clowns) supportant and the motto “Laughter not hereafter.” (p. 12)

Indeed most of the contemporary sallies came from the clowns, who worked in pairs much in the manner of American vaudeville comics, and aimed remarks directly at the audience. This practice continued at least until 1962, when the new military government may have imposed some constraints. A. L. Becker writes of performances he observed in 1961 that

... traditional Burmese performances acknowledge the presence of spectators: they affect the drama directly. As participants, they shout out comments on the play, and the performers respond.⁴⁾

The juxtaposition of contemporary comment and traditional content in the early dramas provided the opportunity for audiences to react to the historical tales, most of which were associated with the court life of the Burmese kings, in a nationalistic vein. The audience were on their own ground, often sacred if it were a pagoda festival, reinforced by their traditional social milieu, and buttressed by their numbers, one or two thousand often attending. Encouraged by the form of the *pwè* and by their social environment Burmans indulged in a freedom of speech and action not possible where the British presence was felt. Such freedom often resulted in what the British press labelled “disorder”; it is the potential for disorder and disorderly conduct at *pwès* which is most remarked by reporters in the period we are considering. An early British newspaper reporting disorder at *pwès* was *The Times of Burma*, published weekly in 1899 and 1900. The kinds of disorders described in these early accounts are reported repeatedly in later years. On January 21, 1899 under “Police News” we find

Pwès or Burmese Dances... the order of the day in Moulmein. Indirectly have considerably to do with people being robbed. Draw careless people away from their homes while thieves profit by the opportunity. (p. 6)

A week later under the heading “Festive Time in Mandalay” there are

Crowds from all directions to take part in *pwès* (dances), flirtations, elopements, thefts and fights for which such large gatherings are celebrated. Occasion is the hoisting of the *hte* (umbrella shaped finial) to the apex of the *Pavgyi* pagoda. (p. 5)

At Salin and Sinbyugyun on March 4, 1899 *The Times* regretted the health hazard caused by the gathering of large numbers of Burmans.

The *pwè* was held on the dry bed of the Salin choung (brook) west of Sinbyugyun.

4) A. L. Becker, “Journey Through the Night: Notes on Burmese Traditional Theatre,” *The Drama Review*, 15, No. 3 (1971), p. 84.

There were no conservancy arrangements for the concourse of thousands of people. By and bye, the choung will be full of water, the people will use the water, and an epidemic will be the result. (p. 9)

On August 26 under "Local News" *The Times* reports

Burmese holding night pwès on Godwin Road, Rangoon, offered prizes to those who bought tickets, but the police have stopped their further sale. (p. 9)

Gambling led to disorder.

At the time British found support for their early attitude towards pwès among the Buddhist monks of a more ascetic nature, particularly before the monks became committed to the nationalist movement. *The Burma Echo* of November 30, 1907 reports such an instance at Moulmein.

... the Head Phongyi (monk) from Rangoon, U Yee Paya, delivered a lecture to the people. At the Monastery over 2,000 were present who listened to the lecture; it is said about 1,000 signed or pledged their word not to drink or witness pwès in future. The pwè has been an institution with the Burmese for ages past; it is encouraging to note the attitude of the priesthood in denouncing it, and the ready acquiescence of the people. (p. 9)

Fifty per cent were acquiescent. The remaining one thousand may have looked for the nearest pwè that night.

A note in *The Weekly Rangoon Times* of February 8, 1919 illustrates not only the change in attitude of the Buddhist clergy but also the change in the British perception of that clergy as the nationalist movement strengthened. Under "Mandalay Notes" we find

... if one half of what is said regarding Mandalay hpongyis as a body is true, then it is self-evident that they require some restraining hand to save them from bringing the thingan (a festival) into entire disrepute. Recent police cases in Mandalay point to the fact that they not only harbour and give sanctuary to rogues and criminals, but that they are in some instances deserving of being classed in the same category themselves. At pwès and other public entertainments they abound, and if a disturbance occurs at any time after midnight at one of these shows a hpongyi is as likely as not to be implicated therein. (p. 28)

By this time Buddhism had become the rallying ground for nationalism, the Young Men's Buddhist Association and the Buddhist Propaganda Society were well-established, and the monks had become public figures through their espousal of nationalism in public meetings. Pagoda festivals provided an opportunity for such meetings and for the kinds of reactions to the content of the pwès and the jibes of the clowns mentioned earlier. The prohibition on attendance at pwès advocated by some members of the clergy was overridden by their general advocacy of more independence from British rule.

Enforcement of law and order at the pwès may, in fact, have been lax. There is some evidence that local police themselves succumbed to the pleasures of the pwè. A report from Prome, published in the September 28, 1907 *Burma Echo* laments

If only the Superintendent of Police sees that his subordinates, especially some, are more hard-working and not so fond of drink and pwè, the state of affairs would surely improve. (p. 11)

Perhaps because of their own delinquencies the police were disposed to be more lenient toward other offenders. Among these were young city toughs called “bad hats,” who mixed with the milling crowds of a festival to browbeat, rob, and otherwise work out their frustrations. The reporter for *The Burma Echo* in Bassein wrote on December 21, 1927

As usual, many bad hats were to be seen about the pwè with sticks, rulers, hunting crops and bottles in their hands. Though the pwè was quite close to the Talainggaung Police Station, there was a row about midnight, but it was soon over, the Police actually putting in an appearance. (p. 9)

The multiplicity of occasions which called for the performance of pwè—life cycle ceremonies, entertainment of officials, pagoda festivals, monthly religious festivals, benefits and other special occasions—provided many incentives for Burmans to attend pwè of different kinds, with the zatr, anyeins, and yokthè predominating. The British perceptions of these social entertainments, as recorded in their press, were often superficial, sometimes appreciative, but most often cautionary. The pwè brought into focus Burmese culture in microcosm, with its concern for the traditional history and mythology illuminating the problems and events of contemporary Burma through direct contact between performer and audience. Only the occasional Englishman, such as J. G. Scott (Shway Yoe), could appreciate the importance of the pwè to Burmese society. Reports in the several newspapers of the Rangoon press from 1899 to 1921 show the British stationed on the periphery of the Burmese cultural experience.