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## *Pwe Dramatic Performance in Mandalay*<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*Pwe* in Burmese language has two meanings: first meaning, the “merit” or “merit festival;” the second meaning, public entertainment or public festival. The word “*pwe*” was derived from “*bun*” in *Pali*, as similar to *bun* (บุญ) in Thai language or “*poy*” in Northern Thai language. In this case it means public or dramatic performances. This qualitative study aimed at: 1) examining the *pwe*’s components and its performing process; and 2) analyzing the music accompaniment for each type of *pwe*. The field data were obtained through interviews and observations with the key-informants and the performers, as well as the audience, from the live performances in Mandalay and vicinities between 10-18, February 2015.

The results of the study showed that there are three types of *pwe*: *anyeint pwe*, *zat pwe*, and *nat pwe*. *Anyeint* features a small troupe in which the female *anyeint* dancer alternates her song and dance with the comic routines of the male comedians. The *zat pwe* is the all-night performance at the pagoda festival, featuring *pya zat* and *zat kyī*, the modern drama and classical drama. The *nat pwe* is a special ceremonial occasion performed at full-moon festival by mediums, both women and men, who become representations of the thirty-seven or more *nats*---the local deities- or *nat* wives. The music used for all types of *pwe* performances are *hsaing waing* ensemble, except the music for the *anyeint* is the combination of *hsaing waing* and pop ensembles.

**Keywords:** *Pwe*, Dramatic Performance, Mandalay, Component, Performance Process, Music Accompaniment

## 1. Introduction

There are numbers of document explaining the meanings of *pwe*: 1) U Ba Nyunt, *pwe* has many meanings---a festival, a communal event, a mass celebration, a public entertainment, a fair, or a show opened to all. (Myanmar-English Dict. 2010: 293) 2) Withy, for general understanding, *pwe* means “ a show which may take many forms but generally focuses on some sort of performance involving various mixtures of drama, dance, music and song”. (Withy.1978: 573) 3) Khin Myo Chit, *pwes*: A word used to describe any form of entertainment--- a suffix after any word to convey the idea of a celebration or a spectacular event. *Pwe*, by itself, means any form of entertainment, music or dances or drama or special occasions like wedding. It is used as a sort of a spectacular event.(Khin Myo Chit. 2011: 37) 4) According to Shway Yoe, the *pwe*, a dramatic performance, was performed to mark the individual rites of passages, such as, birth, naming, ear boring, ordination, wedding, merit making, new house building, and death. (Shway Yoe. 1963: 286)

Most *pwes* performed at the pagoda festivals, as described by Shway Yoe below:

A pagoda feast in Burma is one of the most frequent and the most picturesque sights in the country. Each shrine has its own special sacred day; and the annual celebration of it is made the occasion of a general picnic, the congregation of people, from all parts of the surrounding districts, being bent no less on pleasure than on pious observances.

The pagoda festival s retains the characters of ostensible religious assemblies. Young people look forward to them as seasons of mirth and flirtation: long nights at the opened –air theatre, feasting and perpetual amusements, the pleasanter because lasting more than a couple of days. Elderly people meet their old friends, and receive and recount the gossip of half a dozen districts and a succession of new acquaintances. It is a joyous holiday. At nightfall there is a general gathering in the cleared space where the stage for the puppet-play is erected near the pagoda. The puppet plays Wethandaya Wuttu, one of the ten great birth- stories. There is also a performance of a *zat-pwe* which is also well patronized. (Shway Yoe. 1963: 211-215)

Another live witness of the pagoda festival wrote that one feature in Myanmar life is the pagoda festivals. Pilgrimages to pagodas far and near are popular both in rural and urban areas. The pagoda festivals are held for the benefit of the pilgrims. Pilgrims bring their farm produce or wares from their home-industries, workshops, such as hand-woven textiles, lacquer ware, cane, and bamboo baskets, glazed pottery and wood work. There are all kinds of *pwes* at the pagoda festivals---marionette shows, dance and music dramas. Many of them are open air shows, free of charge, troupes are hired by the pagoda trustees and they are a welcome treat to the pilgrims. Good shows attract people and it means good business at the market stalls and more revenue. (Khin Myo Chit. 2011: 42)

In the past, there used to be *Phaya-pwes* (Pagoda Festival), *Nat-pwes* (Spirit Festival), *Yoke-thay pwes* (puppet shows), *Zat-pwes* (Live-dramatic shows), and *Saing-pwe* (Orchestral performances). But nowadays three kinds of *pwe* exist: the *anyeint pwe*, the *nat pwe*, and the *zat pwe*. The *anyeint pwe*, a small troupe in which the female *anyeint* dancer alternates her song and dance with the comic routines of comedians. These are popular, often state-sponsored and privately funded entertainment.

The *nat pwe*, however, is a special ceremonial occasion performed at full-moon festival at Taungbyon by mediums, both women and men, who become representations of the thirty-seven *nats*---the local deities- or *nat* wives. The *zat pwe* is the all-night affair at the pagoda festival, featuring *pya zat* and *zat kyī*, the modern drama and classical drama. The *zat pwe* has found ways of incorporating aspects of the *anyeint pwe* into its format, and it is not uncommon for it to include a *nat* play which re-enact the life story of one of the *nats*, though without the *nat pwe* trance- inducing rituals.

The *pwe* troupe consists of sixty to one hundred members, and function like a large family, under the direction of the *mintha*---literally meaning ‘prince’, the protagonist in the classical drama, but who is now also the leading performer and impresario. As well as proprietor and producer, he is dramatist, dancer, actor, and singer. (Diamond, 2000: 227-248).

By tradition, it is a common practice for a puppet or live dramatic troupe as well as the orchestra to offer two bowls of *kadawpwes* of offerings as a gesture of supplication to the *Lamaing Nat* before a performance is to be staged at a completely new place. A bowl of *kadawpwe* comprises a green coconut, two hands of bananas and a ceremonial fee of about five *kyats*. *Kadawpwe* means an offering of supplication and respect, it is an important item in any celebration, both in family circle and in public. One of the *kadawpwes* is offered in invocation to *Lamaing* usually by the *Minthagyi* or veteran artist or puppeteers, or actors, where as the remaining one is offered to the leader of the *saing-waing* orchestra, on behalf of the persons below the stage such as the musicians. The *kadawpwe* are provided by the sponsors, or persons who hired the troupes. (Ye Dway. 2014: 70-71)

Regarding the meaning of *hsaing waing* ensemble, it is very confusing of the term “*hsaing waing*” and “*pat waing*”. Here are some explanations: 1) *Saing waing* or *Pat waing* means a drum circle. The word *Saing* means an ensemble of musical instruments with the drum circle as the leader. The word *saing* means to suspend. As the drums are suspended round the inside of a circular frame, the verb was adopted to name the thing and became the noun *Saing* denoting not only the drum circle but the whole ensemble comprising from seven to ten performers. The key members are: the drum circle player, the gong circle player, the base drum player, the oboist, the assistant to the base drum player, the time-bell and bamboo clapper players. (U Khin Zaw. 2006: 102) 2) The Myanmar *saing* or *saing waing* orchestra came into existence in Inwa Dynasty period, between 1364-1516. During this period the *saing waing* orchestra was known as *saing*, *pat*, *pat-waing*, *pat-saing* and *pat-thar*. In the *saing-waing* orchestra, the string instruments and also the xylophone are absent, their use being confined to concert performances. (Ye Dway. 2014: 14-15)

The components of a *hsaing waing* ensemble included: first and foremost of the *saing* orchestra is the drum circle (*patwaing*) consisting of a group of twenty-one drums graduating in size arranged in a circular order which makes the tune, the brass gong circle (*kyee naung waing*, sharp-toned), and the bronze gong circle

(*maung waing*, mellow toned). Actually, the left-hand and right-hand combinations and permutation of the players of the three instruments are almost identical. *Saing* also means “suspending” because the drum- circle, the brass-gong circle and bronze-gong circle are all suspended by means of strings within the circular and rectangular frames. The tympani corner consists of the big drum (*pat-ma-gyi*), the medium- sized support drum (*sa-khunt*), the six smaller bass drum (*chawk-lon- pat*) and stick-struck drum (*si-doh*). Its companions are two pairs of big and small cymbals (*lin-kwin*), the small tempo keeping cymbals (*than-lwin*, the hollowed out wooden block and the bamboo clappers (*war-lek koke*). Ye Dway. 2004: 16)

On the development of Burmese *hsaing waing* ensemble, Garfias wrote: In the eleventh century, during the Bagan period, there might be two different kinds of music in the court: indoor music or chamber music which may have been used for dance and the ceremonial music or outdoor music. The instruments of the indoor ensemble might include: the harp (*saung gauk*), the xylophone (*pattala*), the crocodile shape zither (*mi-jaung*), the mouth organ (*hnyin*), the end-blown flute (*palwe*), a sandeya, and a bowed fiddle (*tayaw*). The old ceremonial outdoor ensemble which later came to be known as *si-daw* or *si-daw gyi* ensemble. Eventually, a new ensemble gradually becoming the main ensemble for all outdoor performances; this is *hsaing* or *hsaing waing*. *Hsaing waing* ensemble is the standard accompaniment for the dance and the theatre, festivities, as well as for *nat pwe* (spirit possession ceremonies. Garfias viewed that the exact origins of the *hsaing* or *hsaing waing* ensemble in Burma are not precise. (Garfias.1985:1-28)

But a twenty one -drum set of modern *pat waing*, as well as the whole *hsaing waing* ensemble, must be developed from a nine drums as found in Ye Dway’s book. The musical instruments for the *ahnyeint* accompaniment included: a drum circle, consisting of only nine treble small drums instead of the usual twenty one, a *sa khunt*-drum, and small tempo-keeping cymbals which produced bell-like sounds. Lastly an iron xylophone and oboe were the last additions. (Ye Dway.2014 : 30); or from a 7 drum of Mon *pat waing* found among Mon communities in Thailand (Khao Pluem. 2013: 30)

## 2. Objectives

- 1) To examine the *pwe*'s components and its performing process; and
- 2) To analyze the music accompaniment for each type of *pwe*.

## 3. Research Methodology

The research sites were temples, house, and private theatres in Mandalay. It was a qualitative research, written document were gather and the field data were collected through interviews and observation with one *zat pwe* troupe, one *anyeint* troupe, two *nat pwe troupes*, and one *yoke-thay* troupe. On the arrival in Mandalay in the 10<sup>th</sup> of February afternoon, our team were informed that this night there will be two performances---*zat pwe* and *anyeint*. The following night we went to see the *nat pwe* ceremony at a private house; in the next day afternoon we went to see the *nat pwe* ceremony at the temple in other district outside Mandalay. The last *pwe* we went to attend was a *yoke-thay* puppet performance.

## 4. Result

On the components and the performance process of *Pwe*, and its music accompaniment, each *pwe* has its own components and performance process, its music accompaniment.

*Zat pwe*, the long story show.

- 1) The components of *Zat pwe* included: 1) offering objects;
- 2) *pat waing* drum circle; 3) *gyi waing* gong circle; 4) *hne* oboe;
- 5) a set of drums; 6) audience, as shown with the pictures below: (All pictures were taken by the author)



**Figure 1 :** *Kadaw pwe* (offering objects)---a coconut and 2 hands of banana



**Figure 2:** *Pat waing* (drum circle)



**Figure 3:** *Kyi waing* (gong circle)



**Figure 4:** *Hne* (oboe)



**Figure 5:** *Sakun*, *chauk lon pat*, and *pat ma* drums



**Figure 6:** *audience*



**Figure 7:** *audience*



**Figure 8:** *Male and female singers*



**Figure 9:** *Male lead and friends*



**Figure 10:** *dancers*



**Figure 11:** *dancers*

The *zat pwe* performance started with pop music from 8.30 pm. – midnight; the *zat pwe* started from midnight until dawn. In the old days the last ten *Jataka* stories were the most popular ones. But nowadays the *zat pwe* has to combine with more pop elements, especially pop songs and dances. The music accompanied both singing and dancing; sometimes the music exchanged short motifs of singing and talking in imitation or questioning and answering style.

2) The *hsaing waing* music accompanied both singing and dancing, as well as exchanging a short passages of talking, sometimes using the whole ensemble, sometimes using a solo instrument.

### *Anyeint Pwe* (Variety shows or Comedians)

1) The components of *anyeint pwe* included: 1) stage; 2) *kadaw pwe* (offering objects); 3) curtain; female singer and dancer; 4) comedians; 5) *pat waing*; 6) *maung saing*; 6) *hne* oboe; 7) a set of drums; 8) bell and cymbals; 9) a Western pop band; and 10) audience, as shown with the pictures below:



**Figure 12:** *Kadaw pwe*  
(offering objects)



**Figure 13:** A stage curtain



**Figure 14:** A lead female singer  
and dancer



**Figure 15:** A comedian talk show



**Figure 16:** Pat waing drum circle



**Figure 17:** Maung saing frame gongs



**Figure 18:** Hne oboe



**Figure 19:** A set of drums: skun, chauklonpat, patma



**Figure 20:** Bell, and cymbals



**Figure 21:** Western pop band



**Figure 22:** audience



**Figure 23:** audience

The *anyaint* variety show started the performance from 8.30 pm., and ended at around midnight. It included female singing and dancing; pop songs; story telling; and talk show. The beautiful voices and charming dancing girls attracted all audience---young and old alike.

2) The music accompaniments were very exciting, sometimes accompanying by *hsaing waing*, sometimes by the Western pop band.

The *nat pwe* (spirit possession ceremony).

1) The components of a *nat pwe* included: 1) *kadaw pwe* (offering objects); 2) *nat* statues; 3) *pat waing* drum circle (some *hsaing waing* may not use); 4) *kyi waing* gong circle (some ensemble may use *maung saing* instead); 5) *hne* oboe (some ensemble may drop the oboe); 6) a set of traditional drums; 7) a singer; 8) *nat kadaw* (medium(s) ---dancer or dancers; and 9) audience

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At the temple



**Figure 24:** Kadaw pwe (offering objects) in front of the nat spirits

At the private house



**Figure 25:** Kadaw pwe (offering objects) in front of the nat spirits

(No *pat waing* drum circle)



**Figure 26:** Pat waing drum circle



**Figure 27:** No kyi waing, only maung saing frame gongs



**Figure 28:** Kyi waing gong circle with additional gongs

(No hne oboe)



**Figure 29:** Two hne oboes, big and small.



**Figure 30:** A set of drums (front) and singer (center)



**Figure 31:** A set of drum (front) and pat waing (center)



**Figure 32:** The singer, sitting at the center



**Figure 33:** The singer



**Figure 34:** Natkadaw (medium) on sword dance



**Figure 35:** A duet of male and female buffalo dance



**Figure 36:** A natkadaw dancer (front) with audience (back)



**Figure 37:** The watching audience

The *nat pwe* started with *hsaing waing* ensemble music, paying homage to the spirits; then followed by singing and dancing. The dances could be ordinary dance, sword dance, buffalo dance, or any kind of dances.

2) The music accompanying, instrumentally and vocally, the *nat pwe*, sometimes convey either sadness, frightening, triumphant, or joyous. The music was played along with singing and dancing.

#### *Yoke-thay Pwe* (stringed puppet).

1) The component of *yoke-thay pwe* (puppet show) included: 1) offering objects (*kadaw pwe*, not shown); 2) *saung gauk* harp; 3) string puppets; 4) puppeteers; 5) *pat waing* drum circle; 6) *kyi waing* gong circle; 7) *hne* oboe; 8) a set of traditional drums; 9) singers; and 10) audience, as shown with the pictures below:



**Figure 38:** Saung gauk harp solo



**Figure 39:** Stringed puppets



**Figure 40:** Puppeteers



**Figure 41:** Puppeteer Master



**Figure 42:** Pat waing drum circle



**Figure 43:** Kyi waing gong circle`



**Figure 44:** Hne oboe



**Figure 45:** Chauklonpat and skun drums

The *yoke-thay* stringed puppet started with *suang gauk* harp solo, followed by human dance. The puppet show consisted of variety of excerpts from many origin, such as Ramayana, folk tales, Jatakas, and legends. In the old days the *yoke-thay* puppet show started from eight or nine pm, and ended at dawn; but nowadays the puppet show is just performed for foreign tourists, it lasted only about one hour.

2) The music used for accompanying each *yoke-thay* string puppet scene has to convey the mood or feelings--- happy, sad, love, or nature of the story.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

All kinds of *pwes* are still practiced in Myanmar, except *yoke-thay pwe* puppet show; however it still serves the foreign tourists. All *pwes* are accompanied by *hsaing waing* ensemble; numbers of the instruments were varied depending on the need of each certain performances. The performances started from 8- 9 O'clock PM, and ended by dawn, except the *anyeint pwe*, ended at midnight, and the *nat pwe* ended according to the agreement between the host and *hsaing waing* ensemble.. Among ASEAN countries, Myanmar is one of the most attractive countries in terms of culture, especially, music and performing arts. The string puppet is now in the process of being introduced to the young children in schools as well as promotion internationally.

## 6. Suggestion from Research

Music and performing arts in Myanmar will be popularized through Myanmar monthly festivals as well as through individual rites of passage and the tourism promotion among ASEAN countries. When the infrastructure---roads, hotels, and communication services of Myanmar are improved, music and performing arts of Myanmar will certainly become more lively than ever. These are opened for all kinds and all aspects of culture research especially research on music and performing arts.

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