

CHAPTER 14

STAGING KARMA

Cultural Techniques of Transformation in Burmese Musical Drama

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မတီးမမြည်

It does not sound if it's not played.¹

—Burmese saying

ACCORDING to the Theravada Buddhist doctrine of *samsara*, when a being ceases to exist, another one will step into existence, each being giving rise to another. Death is not the end of life but an existential transformation. Upon death, a human may become an animal, an enlightened being, a kind of deity, or another human—rich or poor, gifted or incapable, depending on the karma acquired in previous existences—only to cease again and to shift into yet another different being. Ultimately, the “true transformation” is to overcome karma, to escape the cycle of living-dying (Abe 1987). Karmic cycles may also sometimes take tragic turns. And these tragic turns are the subject matter of several late nineteenth-century pieces of Burmese musical drama (*pyazat* ပြဇာတ်, literally “displayed-story”), also dubbed *nat hpyit pyazat* (နတ်ဖြစ်ပြဇာတ်, “drama about a deity, a *nat*, coming into existence”).² The plot of these plays—some of which are still performed today—always follows the same formula: as the result of a calamitous course of events, the human protagonist is savagely killed (often by their own family or companions), upon which they become a deity (*nat* နတ် or *deva* ဒေဝ).³

Performed on stage, however, these transformations are not mere fictional narratives; they unsettle the very difference between fiction and reality. As can be seen in performances by professional companies who still preserve the stage techniques of the late nineteenth century, the scene of transformation extends beyond the



FIGURE 14.1: Mobile stage set up for a night of performances, Dawei.

(Dramatic company: Thaethesa Zat Thabin တက်သစ်ဇာတ်ဇာတ်သဘင်, 2015)

imaginary world of the stage (Figure 14.1).⁴ This can be observed in the well-known musical play about a skilled (human) harpist who foolishly played his harp (*saung gauk* ခောင်းကောက်) in the wilderness and who fatefully transformed into the deity known by the name U Shin Gyi, a tutelary guardian who is venerated in littoral lands as the Lord of Brackish Waters. When the play reaches the scene of transformation, the performance changes in mode. It no longer simply recounts and represents the uncanny moment of transformation in which the deity came into existence in some mythical past. It repeats it. The transformation presented on stage is not diegetic. It is no longer fictional. Instead, it is the human actor (and not just the character he plays) who is said to become U Shin Gyi.⁵ When the curtain rises to reveal the being into which the harpist has transformed, the amplified voice of a narrator reverberates into the dawning day, “ladies and gentlemen, here he comes, U Shin Gyi, Lord of Brackish Waters,”⁶ as a mesmerized audience rises to pay obeisance to their guardian and to receive his blessing for another year to come.

This transformation is also enacted outside the dramatic context of the theater stage.⁷ In cities and villages of coastal Myanmar where U Shin Gyi is venerated, an annual festival is held in his honor lasting several days and nights. Preceded by Buddhist sermons, the festival opens with an exuberant ritual (*natpwe* နတ်ပွဲ) held in the daytime in front of U Shin Gyi’s shrine. Accompanied by professional musicians while also holding a harp himself, a lay person—always a man—will abandon himself and transform into the deity U Shin Gyi (Figure 14.2). This is followed by several nights (from nine in the evening to six in the morning) of *zatzpwe*, a variety show on an elaborate makeshift stage which features the *pyazat* that tells and reenacts the story of the gifted harpist’s transformation.⁸



FIGURE 14.2: Nat Pwe in Pandin-In village, Dawei, 2015.

Transformations are a basic axiom of Theravada Buddhist culture and philosophy. Thinkers in the Buddhist tradition hold that transformation is no harmless venture. Where transformation occurs, death seems inevitable. As Japanese philosopher Masao Abe points out, “transformation in Buddhism centers around the realization of death” (1987, 5). If anything, the moral of the musical play about the harpist is the realization—both in the sense of personal insight and of performance—that death may occur, and that music may play a part in it. And so, witnessing it, we too might be transformed. Reader, take heed, for I will recount for you the story of transformation in more detail in what follows.

Karma can be treated as an eschatological and ethical principle of Buddhist philosophies and their varied orthopraxy.⁹ But if dramatic performances of death and transformation help us to realize that everything is impermanent, then karmic transformation is as much a matter of aesthetic operations and technical procedures of musical drama or ritual as it is of philosophical or religious reasoning. Karma is thus not a mere concept that imposes meaning on the world. Rather, much like a character, karma shows up on the *pyazat* stage. It not only informs the performance or situates the dramatic narrative within a “worldview” but also is itself processed by theatrical operations that render the discontinuity of existence observable.

Considering transformation as an aesthetic phenomenon that has to do with appearance and showing, however, does not rid it from religious meanings. Because transformations enact a threshold, they evade and constantly pollute any neat distinction between cultural spheres of art and religion, musical drama (*pyazat*) and musical ritual (*natpwe*), acting and becoming, body and sign, the imaginary and the real. Transformations therefore are semiotically convoluted and continuously yield confusion.

Instead of undoing ambiguity by way of mapping the relationship between performance and meaning according to a given register (namely, art or religion), this chapter attends to the “cultural techniques” (Siegert 2007) of staging and performing transformations, ones that precede any normative distinctions between ritual and drama. It starts from the observation that, in order to *show up*, even the most sublime and existential transformations require medial operations: techniques of disappearance and appearance, operations of framing and staging, musical procedures of presenting and meaning making, or dramatic techniques of narrating. This justifies and necessitates a rigorous analysis of the workings of Burmese musical drama in its historical and cultural specificity and of the dramatic and ritual operations that pertain to the figure of U Shin Gyi. As we will see, the opera about the harpist Maung Shin who became the deity U Shin Gyi features a specific device of transformation: a musical instrument, the saung gauk (harp, စောင့်ခေတ္တ), that the harpist carries with him in all scenes. What engenders transformation and rings in a new being is, however, not some kind of subversive potency of musical sound. Instead, the posture of playing and holding the instrument, techniques of tuning and plucking, material relations of signifying, and acousmatic modes of sounding operate the primordial difference that transformation in Burmese nat hpyit pyazat and natpwe is all about—that between human and deity. This chapter, then, is also a query into the mediations of stage instruments.

A PHENOMENOLOGY OF TRANSFORMATION

But what sort of phenomena are transformations of someone into someone else? Briefly put, transformations imbue an entity with discontinuity. They introduce a difference where we expect identity. Someone or something is no longer the same as they were before. Put another way, a transformation becomes evident from the *differences* that distinguish an entity from its previous appearance. In turn, transformations invoke an aesthetic of before-and-after that is highly affective. This is seen in the photographic technique, common in Burmese Buddhist households, where images of the same person are juxtaposed to show them before and after the change that comes with (an often temporary) monastic ordination: a shaved head and a saffron (male) or pink (female) robe. Differences spawned by transformation jump out at us; they intrigue us.

Transformations are, however, not mere shifts in appearance. They operate as periods in an ostensibly seamless continuity of an entity’s existence. They defy any definition of “existing” as “permanence in being.” But they do not simply amount to the individualist gospel that we are always able to *be* someone else, to transform into someone better. Conversions such as these are only a particular type of transformation, one premised on the fantasy of a blank slate. Instead, what transformations draw attention to is the relation between *appearing* and *being*. Watching their neighbor, father, or friend in transformation as U Shin Gyi, people ask: Does he only *sound* and *look* different? Is he only feigning, or has he truly become a deity? Is he possessed? Is the change permanent? Is

he aware of his transformation? Am I still the same to him? “Hello, can you hear me?”—as if, if we only raised our voice, the person “inside” or “behind” the alien appearance would “come out.” Transformations are, then, not so much about the continuities and discontinuities of a person before and after a change than about the ambiguity between *being* another person and *appearing* as another person.

Although transformations cannot be reduced to appearance, they not only frequently look like a show, but they are also shown and are given stages. Did you see that? Did you film that? She just changed into a deity. We point fingers and recording devices at them. The musical pomp and visual splendor of Burmese natpwes abundantly evince how procedures of transformation are escalated by dramatic techniques of showing (Nu Yi 2008; Tun 2013).

Furthermore, in contrast to the linear temporality of metamorphoses, transformations of a person into someone or something else seem to defy any temporalization. They occur in the proverbial blink of an eye, in a trice, and have been associated with the perceived instantaneousness of the sound of a trumpet.¹⁰ Often they have no timescale at all and “happen all of a sudden, like a death” (Malabou 2012, 59). On the stages in Myanmar, they are indeed equivalent to death or are the last resort to escape from death. This also means that the very procedures by which a transformation is achieved tend to escape us since they take neither time nor place. The moment of transformation in the play about the harpist is staged as a blackout: not only is it unseen on stage but it occurs outside of seeing. In Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* the transformation has already happened before the story even begins; it not only precedes the text but also lies outside narration. The actual event of transformation notoriously retreats from view and audition, however closely we zoom in. This is why some scholars relegate transformations to the realm of imagination (Hla Pe 1952, 10), while others align transformation with “the metaphysical,” that is, with the agency of a being from another plane of existence (Maung Htin Aung 1962).

Transformations rarely (perhaps never) yield something unprecedented. Although an entirely new being may show up in place of the prior entity, one that feels and looks and is altogether different, their novelty is instituted qua similarity. No longer themselves, a transformed person appears *as* someone else. Techniques of transformation therefore often appear as mimicry. “I don’t think the actor really becomes U Shin Gyi,” Sein Pho Naing, the master musician of Thaethesa Theatre Company Dawei, insists. And then he laughs. “Most of the performers just pretend”; they just imitate U Shin Gyi. Apparently, what excites our attention and arouses contention is not so much *what* appears in transformation but *how* it appears. Are we fooled? Is the transformation real? How did he do this? What happened? Did you see that? In performance, transformations turn out to be sequences of medial operations that make someone, all of a sudden, appear as someone else. Transformation is then not so much a question of “techniques of acting” or “performance consciousness” (Schechner 1985, 4–14) as performance theory had argued, but of dramatic media—including stage architecture, curtains, prop, sound, music, light, posture, dress—all of which negotiate and ambiguate the relation between appearing and being.

In the first part of this chapter, I will summarize the dramatic events by which the harpist Maung Shin became the deity U Shin Gyi as told in the musical drama *U Shin*

Gyi, Lord of the Brackish Waters. The story reveals a particular logic of transformation, one that becomes distorted when grasped through a phenomenology of perception. The second part of this chapter dives into a detailed analysis of the transformation scene of this musical play as performed today by touring companies and lay theater associations in the Irrawaddy Delta and in the greater costal region of Dawei.

A Scene from the Libretto

The earliest documentation of the musical play about the harpist who became a deity, is a libretto written by prolific librettist Ko Maung Gyi and published in 1908 in two volumes of eighty pages each (Figure 14.3).¹¹ In the third act we encounter the transformation scene of the harpist by which the deity U Shin Gyi comes into existence.

Maung Shin, a destitute teenage boy from Bago, is known for his great skill on the harp (saung-gauk စောင်းကောင်). To earn money, he follows his cousin Ko Aung to sea, taking a job as a cook for a seafaring crew that heads for uninhabited islands in the Irrawaddy Delta to harvest timber and bamboo. Setting off into the wild forest, the crew leaves Maung Shin behind at the shore with the task of preparing food for them, warning him to refrain from playing his harp, as this would bring calamity upon him. Yet, “to cure his boredom,” Maung Shin strings his instrument, then tunes and tests the strings by striking up a song. He sits in the boat, which has been anchored at the shore, and his mellow music pours out into the uncharted world between land and sea. Alas, he is not alone. Two female deities (nat-thami နတ်သမီး) overhear his playing: “Among all the men who have come to the island for many years now, we have never seen anyone like Maung Shin Gyi, anyone who plays such delightful music on a harp,” one enthuses. “It is so pleasant!” her sister concurs (Ko Maung Gyi 1908, 56). As they enter the scene, a string of the harp slips and the harpist has to repair the string and retune his instrument in anticipation of singing another song. But the nats intervene. “Now that he has finished repairing the string, awaken his feelings [mind] and inspire the sound of the harp to make him keep playing like that,” said one of the nat-thami. The last song he will sing is a love song that expresses ardent longing for a princess, the intended, a bride he has not yet met and who lives in the “palace of the nat” and from whom he is separated by a vast mountainous landscape. Driven by the pleasure of listening, the two nat-thami hatch a plan to abduct the harpist, and with him the delightful sound of his harp.

At last the rest of the crew returns, loads the harvested wood onto the boat, and weighs the anchor. But despite strong currents and every effort to row away, the boat will not move an inch. It is as if invisible hands are holding it back. The captain decrees that a member of the crew must be chosen by lot to be offered as a sacrifice in order to save his companions. Three times the lot falls on the harpist Maung Shin, who, in utter terror, sees the two nat-thami meddling with the lots, though his fellow boatmen cannot see them. The scene on the boat escalates. The roaring sounds of wind and water combine with shouting voices calling for the harpist and with the wailing of Ko Aung, who is so desperate to save his cousin that he begs the captain to be allowed to die in Maung Shin’s stead. But there can be no surrogate death in karmic cycles of existence. “I accept this as the result of unwholesome actions in my past lives,” Maung Shin mourns, “from an undefiled human I will become a nat and I will carry a harp.” As the captain pushes him overboard, the two female nat take hold of him and carry him to the



FIGURE 14.3: Title page of the libretto by Ko Maung Gyi, 1908, Part 2. (With permission from the British Library)

shore. In the stage directions, dramatist Ko Maung Gyi concludes: “He has become half-human, half-nat, standing upright at the shore.” The harpist has escaped death but has transformed into another person. He has become “U Shin Gyi, Heavenly Deva, Owner of the Brown Island and Master of the Golden Harp, Lord of Brackish Waters ဒေဝသင် ကျွန်းညိုရှင်ရွှေစောင်းတော်သင် ရေငန်ပိုင်ဦးရှင်ကြီး။”

Two Kinds of Transformation

Literary treatments of transformation abound. From Zhuangzi's *Butterfly Dream* through Ovid's *Metamorphoses* to Kafka's *Die Verwandlung*, transformations have been imagined as events replete with drama and distress. Often, however, as French philosopher Catherine Malabou observes in reference to Ovid's and Kafka's tales of change, it is "only the external form of being that changes, never its nature. Within change, being remains itself" (2012, 7). Although monstrously transformed, Kafka's Gregor Samsa essentially retains his identity when he finds himself one morning in a new and nonhuman body. And Ovid tells us that Daphne is in fact rescued and preserved when her body changes into a tree in a moment of flight.

But the transformation that the harpist faces seems to be of a different kind. Raising anchor to leave the enchanted island, the crew find themselves in a deadlock: they are unable to leave, as the boat is held back by invisible hands. But they are also unable to remain, for a storm is closing in. All that is left is violence: identifying the harpist as the "unlucky one" by lot, tying him up and pushing him overboard into a roaring sea. But his destiny is not death. The female deities, his hungry audience, catch him in the water and carry him to the shore. Alas, the person that emerges from the water is not the human boy anymore. Although described in the libretto as half-human, half-deity and although still holding a harp, the person that is seen "standing upright" on the beach is not the same as the one that had been pushed out of the boat. In place of the harpist Maung Shin, a new being has come to exist, with a new name, a new appearance, a new body, a new attire, a new duty, and a new abode. He is U Shin Gyi, guardian of the brackish waters. In contrast to Gregor Samsa, who "finds himself transformed," the harpist does not witness his change. Although he anticipates it in elongated sung laments, he does not himself go through the transformation, does not experience his own becoming-other. He neither shape-shifts into an other (form changes and being remains) nor is he possessed by an other (being changes and form remains). Instead, change overtakes his whole existence, a moment emphatically referred to in Burmese as *nat hpyit the* (a nat has come into existence).

Malabou has described transformations such as these as events of *destructive plasticity*: "a real and total deviation of being," the imposition of "a new form on their old form, without mediation" (2012, 6–7). But what strikes her as rare and obscure within conventional Western conceptions of change is a familiar conundrum within Theravada Buddhist philosophy. Theories of karma and rebirth regularly reckon with the difficulty of conceiving of transformation without assuming a continuity of identity across different lives. The *kan taya* (ကံ တရား), the karmic law, holds that no "consciousness or any other leftover component of the self" is reborn; "at death, beings are supposed to disappear completely to allow rebirth" (Brac de la Perrière 2015, 62). Following the Theravada doctrine of no-self (*anatta*), according to which the self is an illusion, neither form nor substance ever outlives change.¹² "There is no soul that spills over from incarnation to incarnation" (Obeyesekere 2002, 282). The transformation that occurs in death, or

that indeed may supersede death, is instead driven by a karmic logic of ethical-material causation, moral “stuff” that autonomously issues forth from one moment to another, where it gives rise to something new that has no identity with any previous being or body (Obeyesekere 2002, 81).¹³ Maung Shin, the harpist, relates this central doctrine of *samsara* (the cycle of existence) when he mourns, “I accept this [transformation into a deity] as the result of unwholesome actions in my past lives.”

The change that befalls the harpist must thus be distinguished from those transformations that reinforce being and that are situated *within* the body. Librettist Ko Maung Gyi throws these two kinds of transformations into sharp relief. He depicts the harpist as someone who is on the verge of an ordinary becoming. The encounter with the female deities (*nat-thami* နတ်သမီး) instills in him the desire for love of a woman other than his mother. This sexual awakening marks an anthropogenic transition from child to adult, thus reinforcing his identity. But death comes prematurely; his fate is to die a virgin. “As a young man, yet to be married” (Ko Maung Gyi 1908, 61), he mourns as he faces the end of his human existence. In today’s productions of the opera, the prospect of religious righteousness replaces the promise of romantic love. The deities pledge to provide for the boy’s novitiation ceremony; earning money for his novitiation had been the very reason he had undertaken the boat journey in the first place. But the pledge was a con. Instead of becoming a novice, he becomes a deity. Instead of novitiation or sexual awakening, changes that would have each buttressed his (human) being, the harpist turns into a new being altogether.

In attempting to understand a transformation such as this, one might be tempted to turn to the performing body itself, the entity that undergoes a transformation. Phenomenologists have proposed to speak of the body as *Leib* to emphasize that anything that happens to the body is a matter of experience, of feeling, of affective involvement. Arguably one of the most central notions in both German and French phenomenology, *Leib* has been theorized as a site of flux and fragmentation, one that is always prone to change. In distinction to the objective materiality of the physical body (*Körper*) that ends at the limits of the skin, so Edmund Husserl had argued, the *Leib*—or what Merleau-Ponty adopted in French as *corps propre*—is imbued with an I, self, or person that *is* that body. When my body feels, resonates, perceives, then *I* feel, *I* sound, *I* hear. *I am* this body that feels. Although this incarnate body presumes a first-person perspective, it does not enclose the self in a box. On the contrary, for Merleau-Ponty, the body is unbounded and firmly entangled with others in an elemental “intercorporeity” (see Kapchan, this volume). Similarly, Hermann Schmitz situates the body (*Leib*) in collective feelings and atmospheric currents (see Fisher, this volume).

Such a view opens up important insights, but it has its own limitations when it comes to phenomena of transformation, since the concept of the felt body (*Leib*) implies a self in that experience. As Rahaim observes, the phenomenological bodies that have been fashioned in music and sound studies “are all dispositions of the self in various situations” (Rahaim 2012, 8). Even where scholars have studied transformations in the context of ritual performance, the embodied and ecstatic self they postulate is one that must necessarily persist throughout the process of transformation, since it is the very

locus of experience and perception that phenomenologies of the body are all about (Kapchan 2009; Leistle 2014; Meneses 2016). Because it involves an inevitable first-person perspective, the Leib can only account for becomings and shifts of an original self, the very entity that *experiences* a transformation. As Catherine Malabou puts it, the incarnate body of phenomenology stays “anchored in an identity which can evolve but which nevertheless remains what it is” (Malabou 2015, 17). But it is precisely identity, being, the self that is interrupted and annihilated by transformation in the Burmese story. Karmic transformation thus compels us to shift our attention away from the body as the site of change toward the entire milieu in which transformations show up—or, as early phenomenology had put it, where something “shows itself.” We thus have to turn to the relations and operations, the technical procedures, in short, to the manifold mediations that interconnect the beings that are respectively situated before and after a transformation.

Cultural Techniques of Transformation

Over the past thirty years, German media theory has adopted and advanced the nineteenth-century notion of *Kulturtechnik* (cultural technique) as a concept to study the logics and histories of procedures and practices that allow for the possibility of culture (Siegert 2007). “Culture” should not be understood here in the plural as referring to collectives of humans and/or things that “share” a culture.¹⁴ *Kulturtechnik* might in fact better be translated as “cultivation technique” since it is concerned with the procedures and operations that bring something into existence, such as cultivating a field or cultivating a particular timbre on an instrument. But—and this is the important point—these techniques are not about the transformation of nature into culture nor about addressing how, for instance, performers meet culturally contingent ideals. Instead, basic operations, technical processes, or aesthetic procedures in their historical and cultural specificity are given “priority over both the specific order of phenomena they produce and the concepts that emerge from them,” as Katrin Trüsted poignantly puts it (2020, 296). Lorenz Engell and Bernhard Siegert have usefully boiled this central claim of cultural techniques down to the single concept of *operative ontologies*. As they put it, cultural techniques are concerned precisely with those “operations that call something into being; that set up and maintain existence,” and with the media “by which and in which these operations take place” (Engell and Siegert 2019, 6). This justifies and necessitates a rigorous analysis of practices and techniques that make up aesthetic milieus, and it avoids a line of reasoning that starts from universal claims about music, sound, or listening.

It seems necessary here—in particular given the context of an anglophone ethnomusicology (and anthropology) that globally dominates in the circulation of theory—to further distinguish a “cultural techniques” approach from the so-called ontological turn. Proponents of this theoretical current have insisted that ethnographic phenomena are to be read as ontological facts, that is, as evidence of distinct realities or diverse

worlds which in turn cohere in communities of practice and thought. The theory of cultural techniques that I draw on here (which has its own distinct intellectual genealogy within German media theory) is, in contrast, concerned with the operations by which the real and the imaginary are distinguished in the first place. Instead of charting different ontological systems, research into cultural techniques asks *how* conceptual and ontological entities emerge from within material relations and aesthetic procedures. After all, even ontological presumptions rely on tools and means. Even the most sublime and existential transformations must be brought about by operations and technical procedures in order to *show up*. Grand ontological distinctions do not simply exist “in cultures.” All distinctions are first *made*. And it is to this making and processing of karmic transformations, the procedures of reproducing an existential discontinuity in the mediatic milieu of Burmese musical drama, that I will attend to in the following.

INSTRUMENTS OF TRANSFORMATION

Let's turn to today's U Shin Gyi festivals that feature the musical drama about the boy who became a deity. It is almost 3 a.m. and the stage of Htei Tan Zat Thabin (a celebrated theatrical troupe based in Dawei but touring the greater region of Tanintharyi) is lit with ambient light. Having slept for a couple of hours while the pop band was playing, the musicians of the *hsaing waing* orchestra¹⁵ awake again to take part in the last act: the *naubein zat* (နေ့တိုင်းဇာတ်) (literally “last act”), the *opera*, as it is put in Burmese where the English loanword is used. Almost all scenes of the theater, whether sung or spoken, come with musical accompaniment that is provided by the orchestra from behind a curtain off to stage left.¹⁶ The musicians deliver the expected musical phrases in line with the actions taking place on stage: they sound movements, gestures, and slapstick jokes by musically imitating them with the lag of a second; they provide the fast and energetic music for the dances; they accompany arias consisting of piteous and effusive laments; they demarcate the beginning and end of scenes and fill the transition between acts with interludes; and they shroud performers and the scenery in an affective atmosphere by endowing them with a musical presence. The sound is amplified and projected with massive loudspeakers from the corners of the stage into the wider surroundings. The audience sits, stands, squats, or lies a round on mats under starry skies, wrapped up in scarfs and blankets. Some are awake, some asleep, as the morning dew falls.

While the orchestra is loosely hidden behind a curtain and in the shadow of the stage, one instrument is visible on stage throughout the entire play: the harp that the lead character Maung Shin carries with him. Decorated with red and white cloth that clearly marks the instrument's affinity to the nats (deities), the harp is present throughout the entire performance. But most importantly, it persists throughout the transformation. When orchestra and curtain reveal the nat U Shin Gyi in the final scene, the harp is still there in his hands.

I argued before that the transformation of the harpist in the Irrawaddy Delta and the transformation of Franz Kafka's Gregor Samsa are different in kind. But is that true? Malabou notes that Gregor only changes in form. He does not fully become an other but retains his identity as an inner voice, a voice that appears to be the seat of his being. This voice-being stays astonishingly unaffected¹⁷ by the radical change that his body undergoes as it turns, overnight, into a "monstrous vermin." Gregor's voice teams up with the reader in observing a transformation that only confirms his original identity rather than supersedes it. Similarly, something is retained in the transformation from the human harpist Maung Shin into the nat U Shin Gyi: not his voice, but his musical instrument, the saung gauk (the curved harp). In fact, U Shin Gyi is instantly recognizable as the former human boy Maung Shin because of the harp he holds. Ultimately, just as in his human existence, he is still a person with a musical instrument. And while a common subtitle of the opera is "nat hpyit pyazat," "a play about a nat coming-into-being," performers and audiences often dub it as "*saung zat tou*," "a harp story." In short, the harp seems to establish an identity between human boy and nat, as if it were the musical "self" that persists throughout the transformation.

But this argument already interprets the (*being* of the) musical instrument in its different occurrences as a sign. In fact, it posits the harp not as a musical instrument, a *tool* for sound production, at all, but as an idealized and representational object that signifies something, namely identity. To simply consider the harp as a "symbol" that references the harpist in both his human and nonhuman existence, however, misses an important point. It was the musical *sound* of the harp that brought calamity upon the harpist. To understand the transformation of the human harpist into the deity U Shin Gyi we must then ask, *how does the musical instrument transform from a device of sound production into a sign?*

Holding a Harp—or, How to Transform an Instrument into a Sign

As devices of sound production, musical instruments are poietic (Souza 2017, 24). Instruments are tool-beings; they are imbued with the function "in order to" (*umzu*) sound music (Harman 2002).¹⁸ But nothing is a tool in and of itself; or, as organologist Laurence Libin puts it, *anything* could be a musical instrument (Libin 2018). The being of an instrument is instead defined by procedures. The harp is brought into being as a tool (of sound production) through operational chains of picking up and readying, tuning and testing, plucking, pressing, striking. Put another way, the ontological structure of the harp as a tool-being emerges from a whole variety of techniques.

In his 1908 libretto, Ko Maung Gyi puts particular emphasis on the tool character of the harp as we witness the protagonist of his opera setting up the instrument, adjusting the strings, and tuning and re-tuning throughout his playing. But this can also be observed on today's stages where the harpist sits down with his harp and first tests the strings before

he launches into playing. Through operations of testing and tuning, culturally contingent differences are processed and established: between noise and music, sound and silence, (aural) pleasure and displeasure, tuned and untuned sound. But what are the techniques that transform the harp's mode of being from a poietic device into a sign?

We may turn to the countless shrines that honor the deity U Shin Gyi in the urban boroughs and rural villages of Myanmar's coastal regions. Almost all shrines feature the harp as a central iconic element, unambiguously identifying the wooden figurine as U Shin Gyi (Figure 14.4).¹⁹ But is the harp held by the figurine still a tool-being ready to sound? Of course, stone and wood images cannot pluck strings. But the figurine in the shrine is unable to play the harp not due to its material condition but due to its *posture*. In order to play the saung gauk (harp), the player has to assume a specific position. The male player must sit "right down on one's seat with legs folded" and the female player sits "with feet tucked under, knees together" (U Khin Zaw 1981, 72). The harp then rests in the lap, with the rear of the harp's body under one arm. When playing, the player hugs the harp, proverbially "nursing" the instrument "like an infant" (Hla Pe 1985, 150). The right arm reaches around the strings to pluck them from the outside, while the thumb of the left hand stops the strings from the other side to raise the pitch of a string and thus obtain all notes of a scale. The left thumb plucks additional bass tones to the melody which is played with the right hand (Figure 14.5). In so doing, three tones may be plucked simultaneously, which, according to U Khin Zaw, endows the harp with "superiority over the technique of other percussion instruments" (U Khin Zaw 1981, 72) whose polyphonic potential is limited to a simultaneous striking of two tones with two hands. Since the fingers of both hands are used to pluck and stop the strings, the harp cannot be held up and played at the same time (just as it is impossible to stand, hold, and play a cello that has no endpin).



FIGURE 14.4: U Shin Gyi shrine in Hsinsei Jwa, Dawei, 2015.



FIGURE 14.5: A painting of the harpist Maung Shin playing his harp. Behind him is U Shin Gyi holding the harp with the nat-thami by his side.

(Picture taken in Hsin Hpyu Hpyin Village, 2016)

In order to play the saung gauk (harp), it must rest somewhere else, namely in the lap. In consequence, the technical structure of the instrument compels a specific posture of the player's body: a seated position on the floor. Because there is no neck-strap for the saung gauk nor any other accessory that might allow it to rest elsewhere, the player does not sit *as* she plays; she must sit *in order to* play.

Naturally, in those scenes of the opera where the boy Maung Shin plays the harp, he is always seated. On the theater stage, he sits when busking with his harp in front of a pagoda, and he sits in the anchored boat at the shore when playing his harp in solitude for his own pleasure. Although sitting upstage on the floor makes the performer and his harp invisible to the part of the audience crowded right in front of the stage, he never stands up. To avoid vanishing from sight, the performer may sometimes sit on a large wooden box in the middle of the stage—a remnant, I would suggest, from the nineteenth-century theatrical practices of *mye waing* (literally “ground circle”), performances that were held in the circle on the ground with a wooden box as a piece of stage scenery. On a stereoscope image from 1904 taken in colonial Rangoon, we see six men carrying a gigantic figure of the harpist (Figure 14.6). It is not only evident from his hairstyle—tied into a knot with no headband wrapped around his head—that the figure represents the human harpist and not the deity U Shin Gyi, but it is also clear from his seated posture with the harp resting in the lap that this is not the deity but the human boy Maung Shin.²⁰ And when you walk along a promenade path on the island Patet just off the shore of Myeik you will come upon a life-sized figurine that shows the harpist seated as a devout Buddhist, signified by the brown sash he wears, with his hands clearly plucking the harp in his lap (Figure 14.7).

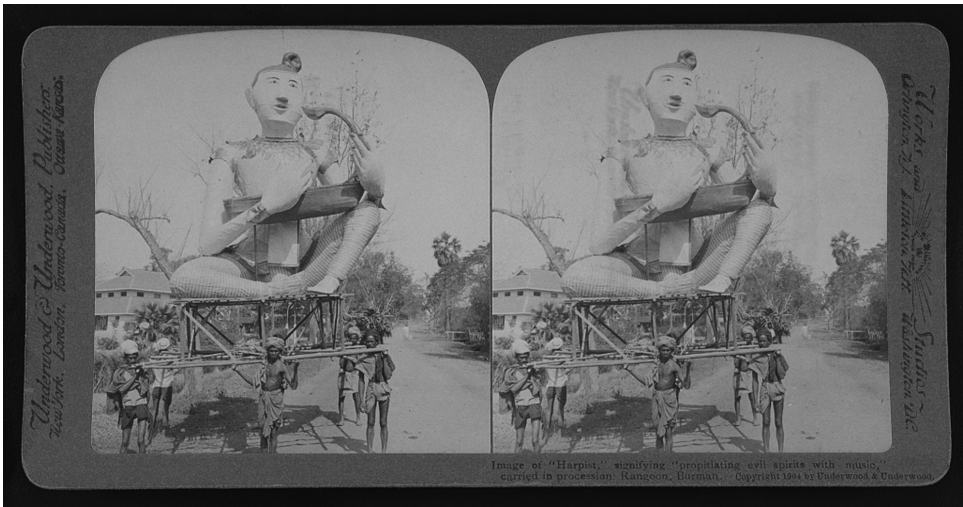


FIGURE 14.6: Stereoscope image of harpist, 1904.



FIGURE 14.7: Figure of the harpist Maung Shin, Island of Patet, Myeik.



FIGURE 14.8: *Tableau vivant* of U Shin Gyi in the final scene of the musical drama.

(Dramatic company: Theythan Zat Thabin ထိပ်တန်းဇာတ်ဇာတ်သဘင်, Dawei)

But the deity that succeeds the human boy no longer sits. Having sacrificed Maung Shin to the sea, the nat-being that reemerges at the shore is seen standing with his harp in his arm in Ko Maung Gyi's 1908 libretto.²¹ And the curtain that is raised to reveal the nat after the transformation in the climactic final scene of today's performances invariably shows the nat U Shin Gyi standing upright on the wooden box on the stage with the harp in his hands (Figure 14.8). U Shin Gyi perpetually stands in countless shrines and has always been standing on depictions that date back to the turn of the century, always holding a harp in front of his chest or under his arm.

Ultimately, it is this erect posture that prevents the nat from playing the instrument, because it is impossible to simultaneously hold and play the harp.²² Supporting the harp in his hands, the figure is unable to use his hands to play it. And even though a panchromatic film version of the U Shin Gyi pyazat from about 1950 by U Loun Phay underscores this scene with harp music, the nat U Shin Gyi whom we see in a special effect floating down from the heavens does not pluck the harp but holds it close to his chest.²³

The change in posture has permanently upset the cultivated and organic synergy of hands, harp, and body. The ludic relationship between body and instrument, a relation on which Maung Shin's very human existence rested since he had economically depended on his musical performance, is extinguished. A new assemblage-being emerges that exists in a mode altogether different from that of a human musician. Despite holding a harp, the nat is no longer a musician. Despite being held by hands, the harp no longer emits musical sound.

But there is another inversion that occurs in the karmic transformation. The musical instrument compelled a particular posture of the human body while also enabling the boy to pursue an existence as a musician. But now it is the nat, in his upright posture, that transforms the harp from an instrument into a mere object. In the hands of the nat, the harp is no longer a tool-being with the essential phenomenal structure to *sound music*. The harp has shifted into a different ontological domain and has become an object-being that is merely present and literally *at hand* (*zuhanden*). The transformation from human to nat is an inversion of the technical hierarchy of body and harp.

The discontinuity of the human harpist and the deity in their relation to the musical instrument is not only visible on the opera stage and in the shrine but also made explicit in the 1908 libretto. Before Maung Shin is pushed into the water, the boy announces his own transformation by relating his destiny to his cousin and thus to the audience. “From an undefiled human I will become a nat. And I will carry a harp” (Ko Maung Gyi 1908, 66).²⁴ The choice of words in Ko Maung Gyi’s libretto is significant here. As a nat he will no longer be the one who *plays* his harp—the one who indeed plays with such abandon that he has to be warned against playing everywhere, all the time. Instead, from now on, he is the one *holding* or *carrying* a harp “close to his bosom,” as the word ‘*pai ၀ိုတ်*’ (carry) indicates. This shift from playing to holding, from sounding to signifying, is also explicit in the ritual (*natpwe*) that precedes the opera performance. U Tin Thein, a doyen of the cultural scene and master of the *naubein zat* (နောက်ပိုင်း, opera), explains that the deity U Shin Gyi is “invited [to the ritual] by *holding* the harp close to the bosom.” The deity is not summoned by the sound of the harp but by a harp that has already transformed into a symbol for the deity. Pointing at the very instrument that is used in annual performances and that is exhibited on a shrine in his house, U Than Shwey from Phaung Gyi explains, “we can’t play [this instrument]. This harp is just for holding. . . . When U Shin Gyi comes, he can hold it. He usually climbs onto the bamboo Nat shrine holding the harp in his arms.”

But let’s return to the 1908 libretto once again, for it features a scene that is not included in today’s performances. The librettist Ko Maung Gyi foreshadows the transformation of the harp from a tool-being into an object-being. At the very moment that the nat-thami enter the scene to delight in the music that Maung Shin plays in solitude, a string of the harp snaps. Both an ill omen and even a punishable offence at the Burmese court, where a second instrument was always brought along when performing for the king so as to skip the act of re-tuning by substituting the entire instrument (Singer 1995, 21), the audible event of the snapping string ultimately causes the music to end and curtails the harp as an auditory presence. The instrument shifts into another mode of being and becomes present-at-hand. It is no longer a device ready to produce musical sound but a broken object. The accidental transformation of the harp, however, does not (yet) mark the end of the boy’s human existence. Magically enticed by the listening women, Maung Shin is still able to reverse the change by repairing and re-tuning the instrument. By way of the technical operations of reinstating musical sound, of restoring the being of the harp as an instrument, he is also able to maintain his own existence as the adept musician that he is known to be. After all, being able to tune a harp is “a skill

acquired only after much training” (U Khin Zaw 1981, 72). But when the boy ceases to exist and U Shin Gyi comes into being, the sound of the harp vanishes for good.

The cultural history of the saung gauk demonstrates that this transformation of the harp occurred beyond the stage as well. In 1993, Tekkatho Maung Thu Hlaing writes,

today, harps are being used not merely as musical instruments: they are also used as artifacts to decorate the [entrance] room of dwellings. This is being done by way of honouring a musical instrument that has played an important role in [the] development of Myanmar culture. More sophisticated musical gadgets will emerge as time passes but the harp will ever remain as a heritage of Myanmar musical traditions.

(Tekkatho Maung Thu Hlaing 1993, 8)

Just as the harp is placed in the arms of U Shin Gyi in ritual, shrine, or opera, so the harp is placed onto a shelf in the entrance room thus becoming a cultural signifier and an object of national pride. By divesting the harp of its ontological structure as tool-being and transforming it into a signifier, both nation-state and national history emerge as unified entities that can be signified.²⁵

Sounding Instruments—or, How to Turn a Mock Harp into a Harp

In the previous section, we saw that the sonic potency of the harp rests not only in the organological technicity and materiality of the instrument but also in the relation of instrument and body. Holding the harp while standing, the instrument no longer shows up as a tool-being but as a symbol. But these are only visible cues of transformation. How did the harp *sound* in the hands of the human boy, and what do we *hear* when the deity no longer plays but holds the instrument? Is the vector of the annihilating transformation one that runs from music to non-music? Is the harp as symbol silent? Let's jump to the key scene where the boy Maung Shin plays his instrument in solitude, sitting in the boat anchored at the shore of the enchanted island. The female deities (nat-thami) enter the scene to relish the music by dancing to it (Figure 14.9).

Everyone has left the stage and the actor performing as the harpist sits elevated on the wooden box that is now hidden behind a piece of painted cloth stretched horizontally across the stage to represent the boat. But the harp that rests in his lap is not a playable instrument. It is usually a mock harp such as are sold to nostalgics and tourists, or a discarded harp with a broken body, or a harp long out of tune with loose strings and pegs that no longer hold. Furthermore, the harp is sometimes richly decorated with flowers tucked between the strings preventing any plucking and playing. In short, the harp that sits in his lap has no imminent capacity for musical sound. It cannot be played at all. Even though the entire plot revolves around the playing and sounding of the harp, the harp on stage does not emit any sound. Its purpose on stage is clearly not to *sound* like a harp but to *look* like a harp. But the harp on stage is not merely a symbol either. A



FIGURE 14.9: Maung Shin sitting on the boat and playing his harp. Two female deities come and dance.

(Dramatic company: Theythan Zat Thabin ထိပ်တန်းဇာတ်ဇာတ်သတင်း, Dawei)

careful observation of the theatrical procedures reveals how the mock harp in the hands of the actor transforms into an instrument of sound production through chains of musical operations.

First, the voiceless harp is imbued with a virtual sound. Instead of plucking its strings, the actor moves his hands and fingers through the air in order to simulate playing the idle instrument. In so doing, the unusable harp acquires technical potency, if only virtually, and appears as a tool-being on stage. The fundamental distinction that musical instruments process—namely, between sound and silence—is virtualized through gestures of playing. These gestures allow the mock instrument to transcend its material constraints and to show up as an instrument of (virtual) sound production. Furthermore, the harp is imbued with the capacity not merely to make sound but to make *musical sound*. When the deities enter the scene and gracefully dance, their movement transforms the virtual sound into music. The deities' diegetic listening manifests as dance movements, which virtualize another fundamental distinction—that between musical and unmusical sound. What the beautiful goddesses hear is not any sound but one that compels dance. As on-stage audience, they hear music.

Second, the virtual sound of the harp sonically actualizes the mock instrument; the voiceless harp becomes audible. This is achieved not by another harp but by another instrument altogether, one that engages in yet another medial operation: imitation. Ye Min Twei, a widely acclaimed twenty-six-year-old performer from Yangon who has

repeatedly starred in the role of Maung Shin, explains: “I only provide the gestures [of plucking the strings of the harp], while the orchestra supports my gestures from behind the curtain.” Seated below the level of the stage—either off to the side, where it is hidden by a curtain, or in front, where it is hidden in the shadow—the *pat waing* (diatonically tuned drum circle) plays a *kyo* song (ကြိုးသီချင်း; literally a “(harp-)string” song) as the actor on stage moves his hands along the loose strings of the mock instrument. The acoustic attack times of the tuned drums (the time it takes for the sound of a drum to go from silence to its loudest point) (Figure 14.10) and plucked strings (Figure 14.11) are equally short. Both harp strings and drum skins are dampened so as to articulate distinct and clearly pitched sounds, which drip like drops of water. Using only the high-pitched drums, the *pat waing* does not merely *represent* the sound of plucked strings; it uses the *kyo* song to invoke those strings, both musically and acoustically, employing a mimetic mode of playing that sounds the drums as strings. Thus, through techniques of acoustic mimicry, one instrument fashions the sound of another. According to Ye Min Twei, some ensembles also “use the piano to produce the sound of the harp” thus “singing (so) the sound of the harp on the piano.” In turn, although the orchestra is hidden from stage, the music in the harp-playing scene is not simply acousmatic. The voiceless, mock harp shows up as a resonant body via the drum circle. But the inverse is

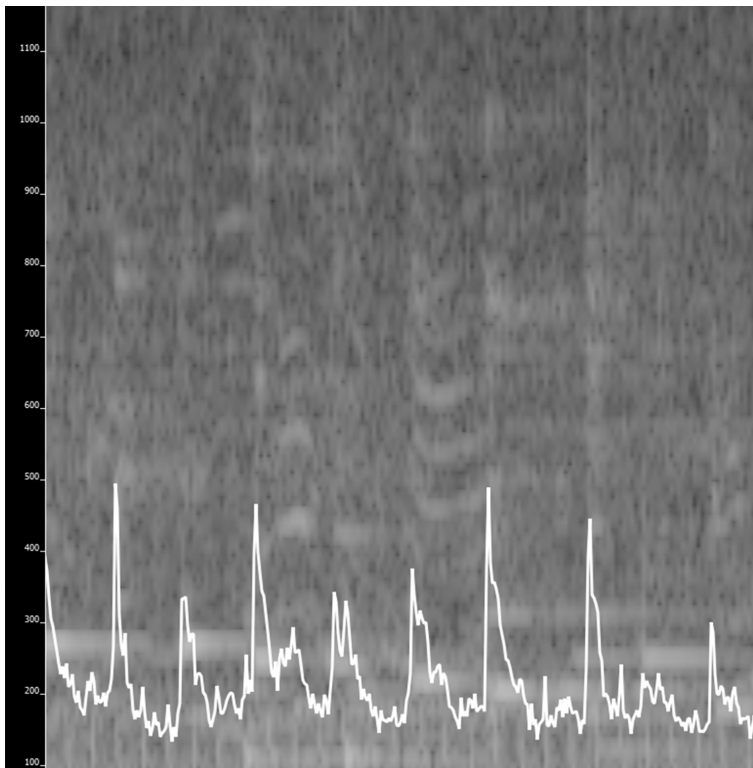


FIGURE 14.10: Acoustic attack time of *pat waing* (tuned drums).

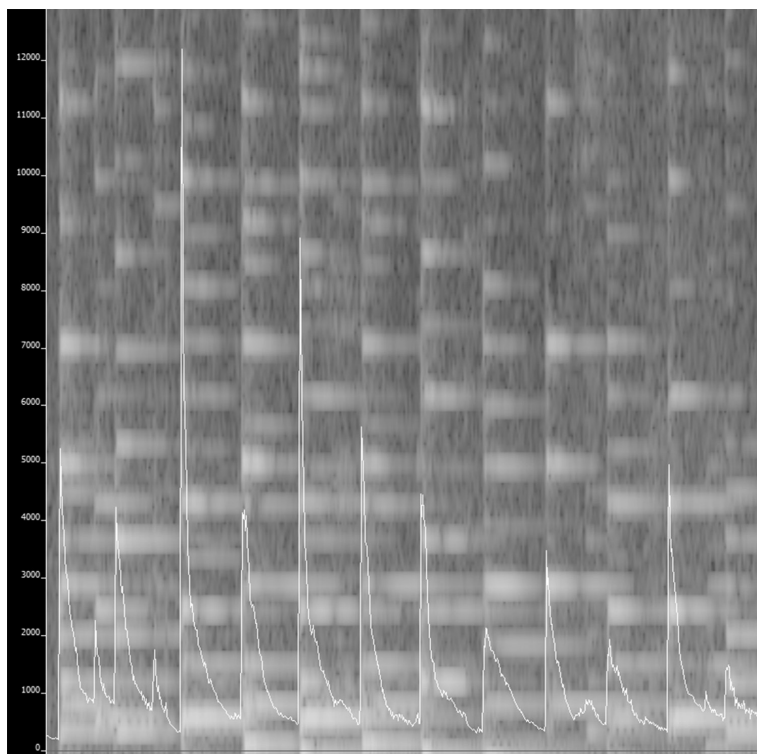


FIGURE 14.11: Acoustic attack time of saung gauk (harp).

also the case. The sound of the pat waing shows up as harp sound via gestures of playing and dancing visible on stage.

These different procedures coalesce into a unified audio-visual event for two related perceptual reasons: one has to do with listening, and the other with the way that motion is experienced across sonic and visual domains. First, because listening is partly driven by source orientation—the urge to constantly identify the source of a sound (Clarke 2005, 126)—the audience is willing to engage in a self-deception: the acousmatic sound of the pat waing mingles with the imagined sounds of the visibly air-plucked mock instrument on stage until the latter is accepted as the source of the sound. It is a timbral mimesis that encourages this substitution of perceived source for physical source: the pat waing fashions drumbeats in a style that imitates the plucked tones of the harp strings. Ultimately the harp-sound thus created is “not so much an *illusion* as a *collusion* between audience, performer, and instrument” (Fales 2002, 81; italics added). Second, the movement of the harpist’s hands, his manner of sitting and holding the instrument as if playing, but also the graceful dancing of the *nat-thami*, all bring about what Michel Chion terms “syncretism,” an experience by which sound is soldered to that which is seen (2015, 116).²⁶ The movements of the air-plucking hands and of the dancing bodies synchronize with the music.

Plucking his harp, the performer on stage begins to sing. His mellow song “Kyune kyune bein tha kyo” (Island world song) speaks of the unfamiliar wilderness that surrounds him. Hsein Phone Naing, a senior master musician, explains:

it is a tradition, already observed by our ancestors, to play gently and softly [for the harp-playing scene]. Kyo music is provided (*thi bei the*). Such has been the tradition since ancient times, and it has been passed on by musical masters from one generation to the next.

But what happens to the virtual-actual harp sound after Maung Shin has become U Shin Gyi, when change has taken place and the human musician transforms into the nat? The moment the harpist is sacrificed into the sea the stage turns black, the curtain falls. When it rises again, the curtain reveals U Shin Gyi standing upright, with a harp in his arms. But the deity no longer plucks the strings like the harpist before him. Being held by the deity, the harp has lost both its real and virtual capacity to sound. It has transformed from an instrument ready to sound into an image. At last, the difference between the actual unplayable harp-instrument on stage and the staged harp as a device of (virtual) sound production has collapsed. The imaginary harp now coincides with the real material harp. Both have become mere representations of playable instruments.

Stepping from the Imaginary into the Real

But music still sounds. It solemnly emanates from behind the curtain and is amplified by loudspeakers. Playing in the *yey kin* (water music) style that is also familiar from other operas, where it is employed for scenes involving the royal barge, the orchestra shrouds the new being that emerges on the stage in an enthralling majestic aura. The pauper's boy is no more. A royal personage has entered the stage: nat hpyit the. The musical event is now dominated by the *hne* (shawm), while the bright sound of crashing cymbals and the low and dull tone of the bass drum powerfully reverberate into the dawning day. All the mimesis between stage action and musical action, which had been so crucial for the illusion, is gone. Music is no longer diegetic but expressly atmospheric.

The nat that the final curtain reveals pushes into the real through a chain of operations that upset the entire theatrical arrangement. The rising curtain shows a *tableau vivant* in which the deity appears as a simulacrum of his own shrine image: elevated on the wooden box, he stands motionlessly glaring into the distance while cradling the harp in his arms (Figure 14.8). The four nat-thami (the female deities) by his side no longer dance but now stand in obeisance with palms folded together. All five appear from behind the low-hanging, painted cloth that had represented the boat. No longer a boat, the cloth now demarcates the bottom edge of this *tableau vivant*, cutting off the feet of the five figures and thus framing them as an image.

But the appearance of the nat as an image is only a temporary illusion. U Shin Gyi steps out of the image by crossing the portside-cum-forestage-cum-frame; this time,

however, not to fall (from the boat) to his death into a watery abyss but to come alive, a *trompe-l'œil vivant*. In the preceding act the boat had served the harpist Maung Shin as a stage within the stage. Sitting on this stage within the stage, the human harpist had never really played for *us*, the real audience, but for another diegetic audience on stage. His listeners were the female deities, and we were mere witnesses to a scene of musical listening. When U Shin Gyi solemnly steps out of the frame-cum-boat he also steps off the stage-within-the-stage. At last, he appears for us as we become his audience.

But he does not halt there. In slow restrained steps, without moving his upper body, sometimes not moving at all but “riding” (*si*) upright on the back of (a person on all fours performing as) a tiger, he advances toward the front edge of the stage, crossing the proscenium frame, and steps, at last, into the nonrepresentative. The edge of the stage, which had, up to this point, stabilized the difference between play and reality, historical past and lived present, now collapses. U Shin Gyi enters the audience, an audience which has itself now arisen from the ground and from sleep, brimming with both pity and affection, to revere him as their guardian (Figure 14.12). The continuous acousmatic sound of the orchestra blazes his way, musically enforcing his presence as he steps onto a bamboo pole (*kyone sin* ကွန်းစင်) erected for him in the midst of the audience. The actor Ye Min Thwei describes this affectively charged moment in evocative terms: “The orchestra plays in the mode of *yey kin* in a very slow and gentle manner which gives rise to sublime feelings (ကြံ *kywa the*). If [the orchestra] plays in this way [the audience] will get goose bumps (*kye thi*).”

This transformation of a human boy into a nat, retold and repeated year after year in musical drama performance, is presented as the end of imagination. There is no more



FIGURE 14.12: U Shin Gyi in the midst of the audience just after sunrise.

(Dramatic company: Shwe Min Zat Thabin ရွှေမင်းဇာတ်ဇာတ်သဘင်, Dawei)

as if. Even though the harpist's cousin had offered himself, amid tears, as a surrogate to die in Maung Shin's stead, substitution was not a possible way out of the fix. The predicament, precipitated by the innocent harp playing, heralds the end of surrogacy, the end of acting, the end of staging. As the difference between real harp and represented harp dissipates, so the difference between role and actor collapses. Transformation has caught up with both form and being. Swept up in the karmic transformation of his stage persona, the actor shows up as the deity himself: motionless, voiceless, with frozen features on his strangely petrified face, and with a red band around his head as worn by all deities across Myanmar. Nat hpyit the, a nat has come into being. But what also "shows up" in the dawning day is musical drama as a machine of appearance capable of operating the relation between being and appearing and of processing the distinction between different realities—real and imaginary ones.

STAGING KARMA

Karmic transformations, according to Buddhist philosophy, annihilate both being and form. But if one entity simply ends and another begins, if there is no longer an "I" that remembers themselves, if one can no longer say *of* someone that "*he* has transformed" but a new person shows up in his stead, does it still make sense to speak of transformation at all? Buddhist philosophy has pondered this theoretical conundrum. But in performance, whether dramatic or ritual, it is also of practical concern. I suggested at the beginning that transformations become manifest in the differences that we can observe. We might now turn this around: karmic transformations presuppose an observer, a "we," a third party, an audience, a witness, a narrator, someone who distinguishes the differences, someone who *makes* the distinction. This entity is not expendable but a *sine qua non* for annihilating transformations to show up as such. Malabou's philosophy of destructive plasticity is so dazzled by the spectacle of extraordinary transformations that it fails to notice its own condition of possibility. For her, destructive plasticity eludes mediation (2012, 6). Yet, what reveals transformations as disjunctive events in the first place is her stance as observer—"I have witnessed these types of transformation" (13)—and her own narrative voice that holds the gaping halves of existential discontinuity together.²⁷ In this, mediation abounds. No matter how destructive, disruptive, or profound a transformation may be, it never simply "shows up," but it must be shown, staged, exhibited, or narrated since it requires techniques that "render observable the unity of the things distinguished" (Siegert 2015, 193). The mediatic milieu of musical, dramatic, and ritual procedures surrounding the tragic transformation of the harpist into the deity U Shin Gyi does precisely that: it assembles a whole set of fundamental techniques of showing and appearing capable of weaving together different beings and different realities—for us to witness. Narrating and staging are not ancillary to karmic theory but the very place of gaining insight and understanding, of doing philosophy.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to explicitly highlight the staggering asymmetries and inequities of privilege between me and my colleagues in Myanmar and the impact this has upon knowledge production relating to the performing arts in Myanmar. Speaking Burmese only as a fourth language, I possess a knowledge of Burmese sources and an understanding of cultural layers of meaning that remain wanting, to say the least. Nevertheless, it is I who have had privileged access to education and funding in ways that many scholars in Myanmar can't even imagine, and it is I and not them who has the necessary scholarly and cultural agency to conduct research and now publish on this important Burmese performing arts tradition. Moreover, I am acutely aware that I do so in the very language of those who colonized the country (although English is a foreign language to me as well). My hope is that this work will highlight existing Burmese scholarship and inspire more global scholarship and equitable collaboration where possible.

I would like to thank Daw Htwe Htwe Mon for her support in conducting some of the ethnographic interviews referenced in this chapter and Daw Nu Nu Aung, Kyaw Thu, Henry Ashworth, and Ye Kyaw Swa for their patient work and assistance in translating materials used here. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for their insightful and encouraging remarks. I have benefited immensely from attentive comments on earlier drafts by Christiane Voss, Ruard Absaroka, Peter McMurray, Matt Rahaim, Anna Stirr, David VanderHamm, and Harris Berger.

NOTES

1. This Burmese saying is used in situations where action must be taken in order to achieve something.
2. *Pyazat*—also referred to by the loanword *opera*—had initially flourished in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as an elite art form under the patronage of the Konbaung kings, a Burmese dynasty that ended violently in 1885 at the hands of the British Crown. But even outside the royal court, *pyazat* enjoyed wide popularity through the activities of touring companies (*zat thabin*) that employed professional dancers, actors, and musicians and that communities or individuals hired to present a variety of entertainments in nightlong performances. For an introduction see Maung Htin Aung (1937) and Hla Pe (1952).
3. Scholars, in particular those from the West, have insisted on the difference between *nat* and *deva*. In virtually all performance contexts that I have witnessed, however, deities are addressed by both terms interchangeably.
4. While scholars have analyzed “Burmese drama” as a historical and textual tradition (Maung Htin Aung 1937; Hla Pe 1952; Ye Dway 2014), to this day there exists no research into the performance practices of particular musical plays. Since any documentation of historical performances is rare and cursory, today's performances are also sources that contain important historical information.
5. To prepare himself for the final scene of the play, the lead actor will have fasted and meditated for several days in advance in order to purify himself for a transformation that ultimately will transcend him.
6. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the Burmese are my own.
7. Scholarship on the nats in Myanmar has so far overlooked the important continuities between musical drama (*pyazat*) and ritual (*natpwe*) and has studied the latter exclusively as

- a “religious cult” that centers upon the activities of “spirit mediums” who undertake “spirit possession rituals” (Brac de la Perrière 1989).
8. These shows include highly stylized dances, racy comedy, and popular songs. The *zatpwe* is staged by a company (*zat thabin*) of professional actors and musicians that has been hired for the duration of the annual festival. As the last part of the nightlong performances, a musical drama is presented. Often two dramas or two parts of one narrative are shown: one before midnight, the other in the early morning hours. That of U Shin Gyi, however, is always presented last.
 9. On how “Burmese conceptualize souls” or if, and how, “they” believe in the law of karma and principles of rebirth see Brac de la Perrière (2015). My concern here is not with doctrines and belief but with performance.
 10. “We shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump” (1. Cor. 15, 51–52 KJB). See also Rahaim (this volume) on the fetishized and equally unmediated presence of the voice that occurs, according to Husserl (and Derrida), “in the blink of an eye.”
 11. The full pen name of the dramatist is Dabein Yein Hseya Ko Maung Gyi. Unfortunately, not much information about this writer exists, but about forty libretti published around the turn of the twentieth century were authored by him. This particular libretto went through at least two editions (1908 and 1910). I thank Ye Kyaw Zaw and Henry Ashworth for assisting in translating the libretto from the original Burmese (and Pali) into English.
 12. Brac de la Perrière has argued that in practice Buddhists in Myanmar diverge from the tenets of doctrinal Buddhism to instead hold an understanding of the self that is similar to conceptions found within monotheistic religions.
 13. In contrast to the causal logic of karma, Malabou imagines a transformation that is itself bereft of logic. While the stories of transformations that Kafka or Ovid tell assume a being who witnesses and remembers their own change, Buddhists must cultivate meditation techniques and purify their minds over a long period of time to gain some faint knowledge of the beings that preceded them.
 14. This differs slightly from Siegert, who maintained that “to speak of cultural techniques presupposes a notion of plural cultures” and who had aligned cultural techniques with Descola’s “dispositives of being” (Siegert 2015, 11).
 15. The orchestra consists of the *pat waing* (ပတ်ပိုင်ခဲး), a tuned drum circle comprising a heptatonic series spanning four octaves, two similarly tuned gong circles, *kyi waing* (ကြေးပိုင်ခဲး) and *maung* (မောင်းခဲး), a double reed aerophone *hne* (နဲး), clappers and cymbals (ဝါး, စည်းတို, လင်းကွင်း), powerful bass drums (*pat ma* ပတ်မကြီး and *chauk lon pat* ခြောက်လုံးပတ်), and sometimes a flute *belwe* (ပလွေ).
 16. Traditionally, the orchestra was seated in front of the stage. This setup is still used in the Irrawaddy Delta. If seated offstage to the side (usually stage right), it faces the “pop” band also offstage across the other side (stage left).
 17. Even the vermin that Gregor has become is, in contrast to vermin as we know them, still in possession of a voice, albeit a distorted one.
 18. These conceptual ideas trace back to German philosopher Martin Heidegger. For an urgent critical assessment of Heidegger’s antisemitism and white supremacist views see Knowles (2019). Heidegger claims that the being of a tool is defined by a totality of tools that “surround” it. Considered through the lens of cultural techniques, however, this may be revised. What turns a thing into a tool are operations.

19. Note that there are also other nat in Myanmar who are depicted with a harp, such as Minye Aungdin Nat or Mintha Maung Shin Nat.
20. Apparently ignorant of the story, the image is subtitled “image of ‘harpist,’ signifying ‘propitiating evil spirits with music,’ carried in procession.”
21. Note that in an English-language version of the story by Maung Pye, U Shin Gyi is described as sitting and even playing his harp after having transformed into a nat (Maung Pye [1948] 1952, 98). This, however, I have never seen in any performance.
22. Even when one hand of the effigy still seems to reach the strings of the harp, as can be seen in some shrines, playing without the second hand to stop the strings (if possible at all) would significantly reduce the tonal material of the instrument and render any skillful manipulation of the strings impossible. The alleged “superiority” of the instrument would be lost. The artistic skill by which the human boy was known would at best become dull amateurism in the hands of the nat.
23. Maung Than Hswey maintains that U Shin Gyi is “playing his harp” in this very film scene, but he clearly only holds the instrument (Maung Than Hswey 2016, 114).
24. The original sentence reads: “လူစင်စင်ကန်တိဖြစ်မယ်စောင်းတော်ပိုက်ပါလို့.”
25. For a detailed analysis of U Shin Gyi as an agent in the incremental burmanization of southern Myanmar, see Boutry and Brac de la Perrière (2013).
26. Syncretism is a neologism by Michel Chion made up of “synchronism” and “synthesis.”
27. I am grateful to Christiane Voss for pointing this out to me.

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