

THE ULTIMATE ORIGIN OF THE WORLD, OR THE MULĀ MUH, AND OTHER MON BELIEFS*

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Can we credit the Mons with possessing a world view, a mental universe, a landscape of feelings and emotions, which we can deduce from their myths, beliefs and rites, and which thus is uniquely their own? Since we are by no means dealing with a human isolate (if indeed such a thing has ever existed), we will inevitably encounter a network of foreign influences. But such influences often are modified by the genius of a language and a people. Does there still survive, then, some explanation of the world that can be considered uniquely characteristic of the Mons?

Mulā Muh

There does exist, in fact, a cosmology of which we have every reason to consider, no matter what may have been written on this subject, that even if it is not actually Mon in origin, the Mons have taken it over to such a degree that it has become part and parcel of their culture. Depending on the version, it is known variously as *mula muloi*, *mula muli*, or *mulā muh*. I will use the last term, which occurs most often in the manuscripts and means "The Ultimate Origin." Only summaries of it have been translated and these are often dissimilar. A number of terms used in this long text, especially in the Pali version, coincide more closely with Mon traditions than with those of the Burmese (for example, the Earth Goddess is called *Sundari* rather than *Patavi*; *Indra* — *In* — is preferred to *Sakka*, etc). Manuscripts of this work could be found even recently in nearly all Mon monasteries.

Here is the substance of it:

"Before this earthly universe existed there were no *brahmas*, no *devas*, no humans, no animals, no earth, no fire, no air, no trees, no plants — nothing. Everything was a void.

The first things that came into being were the seasons, hot and cold. They both appeared at once and were followed by a wind that never ceased blowing. The air expanded until it became an enormous mass. Then the water appeared and expanded also. A mist began to rise up from the water and then fell as rain. The dry season evaporated the water and the land appeared. The land was able to produce stones and minerals, and silver, gold, iron, tin and copper soon appeared as well as the various precious stones. Then the first kinds of vegetation appeared on the gold ore as a kind of moss, followed by grass and all the other plants of the vegetable kingdom.

"The four elements had the propensity to produce living beings. The first of these were earthworms and maggots, born of the element Earth. The air gave birth to all kinds of insects, the fire to fireflies, and the water to innumerable water insects. These creatures were alive but possessed neither understanding nor a spirit.

"They continued to be born and die for millions of *kalpa*. Then they began to increase a bit in intelligence, and after an equal number of *kalpa*, animals with bones began to appear...They were still very small; the largest were no bigger than the grubs that eat areca nuts. Their bones were no thicker than a thin blade of grass, and they hardly had any blood at all. They continued to be born and die for another million *kalpa*.

"At the end of this period the element Earth, missing the presence of a feminine shape, gave birth to a Female Being whose name was *Itangaya Sangasi*. She fed on the fragrance of flowers. At that time the earth was covered so thickly with trees, bamboo and plants that it was difficult to lie down or even to sit. Then the Female Being said to herself, 'There are too many trees and plants. It's certainly very difficult for me to move around. It would be good if I created some kinds of life that would eat up the trees and plants.' So she took some clay and shaped it into different kinds of animals in two forms, one male and one female. Then she placed in the heart of

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these forms a tendency to life or nature, and a kind of grub or caterpillar appeared in each of them, and they became living beings. She gave names to these animals, and these names made up the language that existed before the first of the Buddhas. When they appeared, every one of them, from first to last, spoke this language. But soon they swarmed and swarmed until there were too many of them. And since they kept on eating up the plants and trees and never died, the earth became almost completely bare of vegetation and the Female Being was hard put to it to find enough food to eat. Then she wished that the animals would die so that they could be reborn. She thought about this problem for a long, long time.

"Then a Male Being came to life from the element Fire. His name was *Posangeya Sangasi*. When he saw the different kinds of animals coming and going on the earth and taking pleasure in each other as they wished, he wondered if there might not be some kind of being that was like himself. He went off to look for it and came upon the Female Being. She asked him why he had come, to which he replied that he would like her to be his companion. She accepted, on the condition that he would solve a problem: 'These forms born of the four elements are predisposed to life by their very nature. Can you arrange it so they might die and then come back to life again, and not just live forever?'

"The man thought this problem over for quite a while, and when he finally understood what it was that the Female Being had asked him, he said, 'If we could create a male human being, a female and a neuter from the three sexual natures and the four elements, humans would grow in wisdom generation after generation and would be able to conquer the whole animal kingdom.' The woman said nothing but this solution made her very happy. They stayed together for a while and then the man went off and came back with the four embryonic elements for the woman, who mixed them with clay and made three human forms, one neuter, another female, and the last one male. She put the element Earth into them to give them stability, the element Fire to give them strength, the element Water to give them beauty, the element Air to make them joyful, the ability to see so they could discern shapes, and the ability to understand so that they could experience feelings. Finally she gave them a disposition or natural inclination towards having a spirit, which took the form of a grub or caterpillar in their abdomen, and in eighteen months made them into living human beings, male, female and neuter.

"Very soon these three humans fell ill. The Two Creators considered the matter and decided that the cause of their decline was that all the seasons came at the same time. So they separated them and allocated its own appropriate time to each. This made the humans feel better, but they continued to be puny so they created rice for them.

"After this the Creators realized that they had no way to mark the passage of time. 'Let us work something out,' they said, 'so the human beings can tell night from day.' So they created an enormous elephant that was 49,000 *yojana* tall. Its

body was black as a black man, its feet and legs bright as silver, its tusks red as a ruby, its head yellow as gold, and its trunk the color of a sapphire. It fed on air and water. They set Mt. *Meru* on its back and they placed it in the middle of the ocean (...). Then they made the twelve signs [of the zodiac], the moon, and the twenty-seven stars. Next they created the sun and made it revolve around Mt. *Meru* to give light, and they made a silver palace for the moon. They placed the first heavens of the devas halfway up Mt. *Meru* and set *Tāvātimsa* on the summit.

"Then the human beings grew up and had three children. The woman was deeply in love with the male being and took great care of him, but she had no regard at all for the neuter, who became envious of the happiness of the man and the woman and killed the man. When the woman found out that her companion was dead she grieved over him and took the body and laid it in a secluded and lonely place and brought it food every day until it had completely decomposed.

"Then she put up a wooden post as a monument at the place where the body lay, and she brought it food every day. Then the neuter died. She laid its body near the post but did not bring it any food. And when the children asked her, 'Why don't you bring any food to one of our fathers?', she replied, 'I only loved one of them, not the other.' When she finally died herself, her children treated her as she had treated her husband.

"These three children had children of their own, six girls and seven boys, since the neuter had not had any offspring. When these children saw the different kinds of animals they uttered various exclamations; these became the first human language, and it is said that it was the language of *Magadha*. But very soon they fell ill. Then the Founding Couple said, 'These children of the world are sick and dying and there is no one to help them. It would be good to make some planets to keep them from completely disappearing.' So they created the eight planets, and with the four elements demarcated the twelve seasons.

"In those days everyone lived in peace as one big family. They ate, drank and worked in perfect harmony. But they also began to kill the animals, on land and in the water, and no one was able to make them realize that they were doing wrong.

"So the Founding Couple became alarmed, because they saw that the humans had been conceived in the bodies of brutish beasts. Then by means of the four elements they gave intellectual capabilities to various kinds of fruit trees, and the people who ate the fruit of these trees brought forth children who possessed these various intellectual capabilities. As a result the humans lost their harmony; they quarrelled and drew apart from one another. Some of them had the hearts of demons; others were good. But the majority were bad and could not tell right from wrong and went to hell. Actually the children had not been created by the Founding Couple, but the humans had grown them themselves. The fire of an angry person produces the fire of hell and will consume its

originator. When anyone does wrong he creates his own hell and will suffer in it. An evil thought brings about deeds which one performs through the six senses: sight, hearing, taste, touch and thought clash with each other and so produce hell at all times and in all places.

"Thus it came about that there no longer were any good people. One young man, however, who was an orphan, was rejected by everyone. Sitting under a lone tree he used to weep because he had no friends. Finally he repented of his misdeeds and became a hermit; he came to understand himself. When he died he became the first *deva*, the guardian spirit of trees. A few other people also acquired enough merit to become tree *devas* themselves, but the great bulk of humanity went to hell.

"So the Two Creators said, 'This *kalpa* has certainly lasted a long time, yet no one has appeared who has had enough moral strength to bring things to a good end, although we were hoping that they would. Let us destroy the world by fire, and after everyone is dead, the next humans to come along will be greater in virtue and wisdom.' Then they created the sixteen celestial dwellings of *Brahma* and the good people took refuge there.

"The couple made an enormous elephant. When it held its breath there was no longer any rain or dew and the whole earth dried up as if it had been burned. The people were terrified and began to take pity on one another.

"But the fire thrust into the palace of the moon, and the burning sun set fire to the planets so that the entire universe became a tremendous blaze, and everything under the heavens of the *Brahmas* was burned. Then the elephant let out his breath and the rain came down and put out the fire. When the world became habitable again, everyone came back; that is, they died in the world of *Brahma* and were reborn in this world."

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The rest of this work consists of short edifying episodes which tell of the progressive development of meritorious deeds and the acquisition of moral conscience up to the point where enough has been accumulated for a Buddha to appear. These stories vary considerably from one version to another. Here are some of the most characteristic ones.

Indra

"...After that there were countless worlds. The first person to become a *deva* went through several rebirths before being born in the *kalpa* of *Brahma*.

"He was reborn on earth as a boy. In the cold season he would look for firewood for his parents and would draw water for them so that they might drink and bathe. In the rainy season he built houses for them and erected little raised paths where it was difficult to walk through the water. Thus when he died he became *Indra* in the *Tāvātimsa* heaven and had four wives."

The Couple

"After countless *kalpa* there came one in which the people spoke as we speak now, but they were not always able to tell right from wrong. A man went to live in the forest; he understood the five Precepts and was reborn in the world of *Brahma*. His name was *Mahawirasaddhabruim*. After many *kalpa* he was reborn as a very handsome young man, and *Devadhika* was reborn in the aspect of a very beautiful young woman. They fell in love and had two children. Then they left their children and went into the forest; there they lived apart as hermits. Since the forty *kamattāna* were not yet known they were only able to strive to control their passions and desires. When they died they both entered into the domain of *Brahma*."

The Infant Prodigy and the Crab Husband

"Much later still, the first *deva* was reborn as a wonderful child who was able to talk to his parents from the moment he was born. When he was seven he renounced the world and went into the forest, where he meditated for thirteen years. Then he became a *Pacceka* Buddha. One day when he was bathing a thief made off with his robe. He was on his way to look for another when he remembered that a woman named *Muladhita* had been his wife in a previous existence, so he went off to find her. But she was weeping and did not see him. When he asked her why she was weeping, she replied that she was bewailing the death of her husband, which had occurred just a short while before. 'Do not weep,' he said. 'He has become a crab and lives in a muddy buffalo wallow where he has a wife and child.' 'Show him to me,' she demanded. So the *Pacceka* Buddha brought her to the wallow and showed her her husband, who had become a crab. 'What are you doing here?' the woman cried; 'Come back with me!' and she seized the crab. But the crab retorted, 'I have a new wife now whom I love more than you. I will not come,' and pinched her finger. Then the *Pacceka* Buddha ordered her to go away. *Muladhita* left the crab, and after she had asked the *Pacceka* Buddha about this matter, she came to understand the law of impermanence and that she herself could become an animal. In the course of meditating upon this, she too became a *Pacceka* Buddha (...). Later on her children had a vision, and she had them transported to the land of bliss."

The King Who Renounced the World

"*Wudhibuhute Kumma*, who in a previous existence had looked upon life with indifference, was at that time a king's son, and enjoyed all the privileges of royalty: he had innumerable wives and a minister for every instant of his existence. But he desired to abandon everything to attain to a superior morality. He explained to his court that he was doing this to benefit from it in future existences. So the queens and the ministers observed the principles of morality also, and all attained the land of the spirits."

The Ascetic Baby

"In a subsequent *kalpa* he was born as the son of a Brahmin. He refused his mother's milk because it defiled him and obscured his way to *Nirvana*. So the *deva* brought him milk from heaven. At the age of sixteen he renounced the world and went into the forest to lead the life of an ascetic. He attained his goal of wisdom but was unable to become a Buddha."

The Child Who Was a Healer

"In another *kalpa*, when human life had already existed for 100,000 years, he came back to earth as the son of a rich man. In those days there still existed various kinds of illnesses. Every sick person who took the child in his arms was cured. So his parents called him *Niroga Jana Kumma*. When he grew up he wanted to be an ascetic, but he had to abandon this idea because all the people who were sick and infirm entreated him to stay with them. Thus he was only able to observe the Five Precepts."

The Enlightened Prince

"He became a prince again, and since at that time the beasts and the trees could speak the language of humans, he was called *Tikkha Kumma*. He grew in age and strength, and when he was 4,000 years old he renounced family life and became a sage.

"So he lived the life of an ascetic under twenty-five different trees for five thousand years, and finally attained Enlightenment.

"Men and gods came to marvel at this wonder and asked him to preach. But he was afraid that some of the most profound laws of religion would be beyond their comprehension, and he thought at first that he might discuss the origin of things. But even that was beyond what they could understand. So he decided that the first thing that he would teach them would be the alphabet. He urged people who knew 101 languages to take up their slates and pencils and to write down what he dictated according to their own ideas of what characters they should draw. The letters formed the *Tripitika* and mankind learned the truth, and some people became sages."

The Return of the Original Couple

"Then the Two Creators once more became man and wife in this world. They beheld the glory of the Buddha and paid homage to him. They asked him to tell them about their previous existence, and he told them that they had been the First Couple, because the Male Being had been able to solve the riddle put to him by the Female Being. 'The two of you created the world.' Then the wife said to her husband, 'I have loved you long and well,' and they went away, their hearts at ease."

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With the exception of the second part, the inspiration for

which has obviously been drawn from the *Jatakas*, the Previous Lives of the Buddha, canonical or apocryphal (although here again certain passages may be original), this myth of the continuous creation of the world bears no resemblance, in so far as I am aware, to any other creation myth in this part of the world. It would take too long, and be irrelevant besides, to make a thematic and structural study of it here; nevertheless, let me touch on some of the main points.

This narration is a kind of vast "natural history of good and evil" in which disorder is the superabundance of plants and later of animals, and in which the regulation of this disorder is owed to the advent of sexuality and then of death. In the beginning there were no gods, but everything — mankind, the twelve seasons, the intellectual capabilities of man — was born from the four elements. The element Earth, which brings stability to mankind, serves successively as the origin of minerals, then of vegetation, of earthworms, and later of the Female Being; the Air, which brings joy to mankind, creates the insects; and finally Water brings beauty to human beings.

To be sure, there are certain points of similarity between this creation myth and some others of Southeast Asia: for example, the misunderstanding which soon arises among humans and their consequent dispersion (the cause of which, however, was the appearance of intellectual capabilities in some of them); and also punishment by means of some natural catastrophe which actually is slow enough in coming.

Nevertheless, many other features seem to be original: the appearance of the twelve animals (different from the Cambodian cycle, for example), and, at the same time, of a primal language; the creation in addition to man and woman of a "neuter" human being, sexless and unloved; the first cult of the dead, resulting from the first murder (i.e., of the first father); the origin of the seasons, which were found to be necessary because of the physical weakness of the first humans; the first of the great evils comes from the killing of animals, etc.

Besides, the fact that the first being was female can be compared to the cult of the goddess *Sri*, who is featured in Mon texts throughout their history.

And it does not seem (at least the tradition of it is lost) that this is the creation myth of a given ethnic group, as is the case nearly everywhere else.

Moreover, as the last part demonstrates quite clearly, the myth is strongly tinged with Buddhism.

This characteristic — a way of thinking that bears the unmistakable imprint of Buddhism — is found at every level of the systems of belief of this people. Indeed, it is only to be expected that a civilization which had been the vector of this religion for so long would be impregnated with it. But from the standpoint of methodology it might be a mistake to persist in looking for a substratum, or at least vestiges, of pre-Buddhist thought and belief. Indeed, I feel that in this type of culture (and this is probably just as true for the Khmers,

the Burmese, the Thais, etc.) the system of belief is not really a system, but a composite of various categories of fears and beliefs that may appear to us as hardly compatible with each other if not in fact contradictory, and yet we must try to consider them together in a complementary and perhaps harmonious whole, even if it is not a Cartesian one.

The last point to present a problem in this curious myth is the fact that it has been transmitted through a literate society without having produced a system of rituals whose aim is to perpetuate it (or else they have been forgotten). In sum, it is a myth that is purely intellectual.

The Lokavidu

The Mons have another cosmology, but one that is much less original. This is the *Lokavidu*, which describes the universe. It has Mt. *Meru* (called *Tma Sinnarat* in Mon) at the center, the four great continental islands at the cardinal points (ours is *Jambudipa*), the seven concentric mountains, and the six heavens (*svav tarau*), including those of *Indra*, *Tāvātimsa*, etc. This cosmology, of Indian origin, is common to all the Buddhist cultures in the area.

A Combination of Beliefs

The concept of *kalok* holds an important place in the beliefs of the Mons that are not directly Buddhist. This concept, which could be translated by *demon* in its dominant and most ancient meaning (i.e., "a supernatural being, sometimes good, sometimes bad, that controls the fate of a person or a community"), is applied in its religious sense, among others, to certain creatures such as owls or butterflies, and also to the dangers of the sea.

But when it is combined with the word *ray* or *cray* it also signifies spirits of the soil, which cause disease. The same applies to *kalok tay* and *kalok brāy*. These beings, which are a bit abstruse, also suggest the ambiguous cults of the *nāga*, the mythical serpent which is propitiated on certain occasions (and which has been the subject of numerous studies relating to Southeast Asia). While these *kalok tay* or *brāy* are not exactly *nāga*, they nevertheless share the same mythical background — that of chthonic spirits, the source of extremely ancient beliefs. These beliefs were deliberately suppressed by the Buddhists when they were not purely and simply assimilated into the cosmologies or fanciful tales of the Buddhist religion.

Indeed, with the Mons as with all the Buddhized peoples of Southeast Asia, the religious system is, as I have noted, a complex synthesis. It consists of three commingled categories: the Buddhist religion, inspired in part by the *Theravada*; the belief in various spirits or demons which populate the physical and social landscapes; and the world of omens, which attempts to secure an accommodation with the immediate or distant future. In addition, the Mons assert that they possess their own distinctive concept of relations between individuals which rounds out their view of the world.

Elements of Buddhism Among the Mons

The great business of life for pious Mon laymen as well as for their coreligionists among neighbouring peoples is to make merit — *punya* (written *puin* in Middle and Modern Mon) — so as to have a better *karma*. This theme occurs over and over again in a great number of inscriptions, from the most ancient, in the 5th century A.D., to the most recent. This quest for *puin* encompasses good deeds of every kind: first of all, the observance of the Five Precepts, but also all acts of benevolence and every profane deed that is considered to be positive or has been encouraged by the monks (who are sometimes called *ti puin*, which means "the master — *tirla* — of merit"). One of the surest ways to acquire *puin* is to give monks their four necessities: monastic robes, and alms in the form of food, shelter and medicine.

But in about the 15th century there appeared another term to designate merit: *kusuiw* (from the Sanskrit *kusala*). This kind of merit is acquired mainly by sponsoring the building of stupas, Buddha images, etc. And, if we believe the inscriptions and the assertions of pious Mons today, *kusuiw* is merit of a higher order than *puin*.

However, we must point out that in reality the goal sought most often is to become a rich and powerful person in another existence! Besides, the word *puin* in Mon also means "possessions, wealth," in their most perfectly profane sense.

The word *sambhar* (*sambhā* in Modern Mon) is in an entirely different category. It signifies the exceptional merit that must be acquired as a prerequisite to attaining Enlightenment. Only kings dared to assert that they had acquired such merit. It was pointed out to me once in the course of a brief enquiry into this subject that even saintly monks who were said to have acquired it never talked about it. However, the Mon king of Lamphun, *Sabbadhisiddhi*, had the following carved on a stela at the beginning of the 13th century: "Here inscribed on stone are all the *sambhar* acquired by my family."

If the quest for Enlightenment is a matter for an elite, and particularly for an elite of monks, popular Buddhism (insofar as it can be dissociated from the former) is profoundly imbued with spirits in terms of transmigration, rebirth (connected with *puin* and *kusuiw*), and *karma*, lived rather as governing one's fate in the here and now. Similarly, the mental world of each individual is characterized by horrifying tales of hell which come immediately to mind if serious faults are alluded to, such as, for example, daring to be familiar with one's masters or parents.

Similarly the *devata* (Mon *devatau*) — the divinities derived from the Brahmanic pantheon which were "salvaged" by Buddhism — are also mentioned in their tales and stories; moreover, although they are invisible, their presence is none the less quite real, since they must be given an offering when, say, a new house is built. *Sri*, or *Laksmi*, the goddess of good fortune, is often associated with these *devatau*; in Mon she is

also called *Devatau Kyak Sri*.

Finally, popular Buddhism is associated with seasonal festivities when one goes to visit pagodas, and to pilgrimages which are themselves seasonal affairs, as for instance that to the *Kyaik-tiyo* pagoda northeast of Rangoon. Nowadays the favorite places for pilgrimage by the Mon are the nine pagodas of Moulmein, the *Shwedagon* in Rangoon, the *Kyaik Khout* at Syriam, the *Kyaikthow* near Kyaktiya, Amherst and the *Kyakmarow*, and Thaton. But there are also a great many whose renown is more local. On all these occasions the pilgrims set up a Buddha image. In order to purify themselves individually they meditate, recite prayers that they know, and so on.

But sometimes there are more surprising practices. One evening at Moulmein in 1970 during the festival of lights, I happened to stumble upon a most curious ritual at the *Kyaik Thanlan* pagoda. It was pitch dark and not a sound could be heard. Then the crowd began to shout and gongs to crash, and amid the abrupt flashing of electric lights of every conceivable color a Buddha image was suddenly winched down on a cable at high speed from the top of the stupa to the circumambulatory platform. At once it became dark again, and amid the whispering of the spectators I was able to make out by the noise of the pulleys that they were winching the image back up to the top of the pagoda. This impressive ritual was supposed to "describe" the descent of the Buddha from the *Tāvātimsa* heaven back to earth; it was repeated three times hand running. Of course I have never seen a single mention of this custom in the literature.

A whole series of other indications shows that the Mon Buddhist tradition is distinctive. I will mention here only two categories of these: the miraculous lineage of *Gavampati* and the recent *Vinaya*. I recently undertook a study of the Mon cult of *Gavampati*, the mythical companion of the Buddha, who they say came to bring them the Eightfold Truth almost two millennia ago. Some 12th-century inscriptions describe how the kings paid homage to him. I am not aware of anything like this in any of the neighboring cultures.

In addition, certain religious works written in Mon and Pali at the beginning of the century, notably those of the *Silavantha Thera*, draw a distinction between rules of conduct for monks which come from the canonical tradition and those which are unique to the Mons.

Demons and Spirits

Among the Mons as with their neighbors there exists an entire universe of demons and spirits which demand specific practices and rituals and which every individual and every group must strictly take into account.

I have referred earlier to the *kalok*. We must bear in mind that there are two *kalok* which have to do with family relationships and which one must not offend: the *kalok mi me*, which is the *kalok* of a person's immediate parents, and the *kalok bau kalok mi*, which is that of the grandmother and mother,

i.e. the maternal line.

The *bau*, pronounced /pea/, is the spirit of both the ancestors and the village. At the entrance of each village there stands a little house set up on posts in front of which various kinds of offerings are placed at all times — coconuts, flowers, little bowls of water, pieces of cloth. This altar literally orients all the villagers, and if something troublesome happens to the community, some kind of present must be offered at once to the house of the *bau*. This spirit is also called the *bau ju* (pronounced /pea cu/) which means "spirit of the place" and also "spirit of the great-grandmother." In his discussion of the *bau ju* Halliday illustrates the confidence that the people have in this spirit by the following anecdote: A man had lost one of his oxen and could not find it anywhere. So he made the appropriate offering to the *bau ju* of his village, and, sure enough, he found the ox as soon as he left the shrine. He also tells of the widespread legend of the *bau ju* who prevented a tiger from devouring a man who had gone off and fallen asleep in the jungle, because the man had made his offering beforehand.

There is an annual ceremony in honor of the *bau ju*, held just before the rainy season in April, featuring dancing and trances. If anyone happens to be possessed by the *bau ju*, he or she is traditionally asked questions of general interest to the community, such as whether the rains are coming, if there will be a good harvest, whether or not there is danger of an epidemic, and so on.

But the *bau ju* may be asked questions even when there is no special ceremony by transmitting them through a medium, or *doni* (Vietnamese has the same word), who after being paid a suitable sum will go into a trance and come up with a good answer.

Still in a territorial context, the spirit of a district is called the *okkaya*. It must be venerated whenever a person goes on a trip and leaves a district or enters a new one.

The *dhun* (pronounced /thoŋ/), on the other hand, is the spirit of the fields and controls the rain, which is to say fertility. It is often associated with the *bau ju* and thus forms a composite being, the *bau dhun* (/pea thoŋ/), which looks after the ancestors, village and harvest all together.

As for the harvest, there is also a cult of the Rice Mother, personified by a figure made of straw which is set up on an oxcart and is dressed like a woman. Bowls of sticky rice are stacked up around the image and the cart is paraded around the fields of ripened rice at the head of a procession so as to propitiate the earth, *Bhumi*, and the Grain Spirit.

But this still leaves the vast host of spirits who live in the air, under the houses, at the crossroads, at the confluence of rivers, etc.: the *phut* and the *prat*, ghosts set loose by violent deaths, the *apla*, dangerous demons, the *byi* and the *mayi*, and so on. Among the many tree spirits a distinction is made between those of the treetops, the *akaso*; those of the trunk, the *chekaso*; and those of the roots, the *bhumaso*.

Sometimes a man or woman can be seen near the vil-lages praying in front of a little pile of offerings that has nothing to do with any special sanctity of the place itself. This is called *tho thamin*, exorcizing the *thamin*, the curse that makes a person fall ill for no apparent reason.

For the human body has its own array of spirits or "souls" situated in various parts of the body. Their number varies according to tradition and locality and sometimes goes as high as 32, and they bring along with them a whole series of obligations. A century ago Shway Yoe noted that in the little Mon villages "of Pegu"—i.e., of Lower Burma—they explained that the reason why the ceremony of washing the head took place only every month — it could not be performed more often — was the risk that they ran of disturbing and irritating the Soul of the Head.

And in the great prayer addressed to the Earth Goddess *Sundhari*, the "Offering of Food to the Goddess *Sundhari*," the person reciting the prayer appeals to the Five Gods to come dwell in his body:

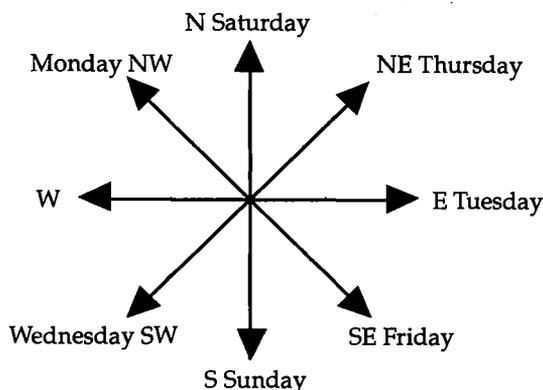
"May Śiva live on my head! May *Sūrassati* live in my mouth ! May *Candi* live in my two eyebrows! May *Laksmi* live in my two ears! May *Nindradevi* live in my breast! I invite all the five devas of my fortune to come and accept my offerings made with golden candles and flowers. And may the result of my offerings be that all my wishes may be granted!"

Omens and the Directions

These beliefs in invisible forces which are usually personalized but are hardly ever represented concretely by images, are combined with a belief in certain omens, usually evil: a dog climbing onto the roof of the house, a mushroom coming up out of season, a vulture landing on the ground for no apparent reason, a termite coming into the house, etc.

Even more important, on the subject of omens: an entire web of taboos and obligations has been woven around the days of the week. The advice and recommendations that go along with these quite complicated taboos are set forth in a little book called *Lokasiddhi*.

For each day of the week there is a favorable direction in which one should go, as shown by the following diagram:



Note that it is never good to go west, a direction that bears a curse.

Here are the details:

On Sunday, if you have had the bad luck to go to the northwest, you probably will be frightened by a dog, which will bring about *Thamin*. To prevent this you have to go to the north in the afternoon and make the following offering: make two baskets [of banana leaves or the like] and put three portions of rice and curry in each, as well as five arrangements of leaves, flowers and fruit. Make a diagram of the *kalok* and put it down to the north, along with one of baskets; then put the other basket to the northwest. In two days the evil fright will be gone.

On Monday, if you have set out towards the east you will come across a demon guarding the stump of a big tree, or, if you are headed southwest, you will see a female demon. Make two baskets and put two bunches of leaves and flowers in them. Put two kinds of rice in each basket with some butter and two pieces of raw meat. Put the basket with the handle to the east and the one without a handle to the northwest, and in two days your illness will be cured.

On Tuesday, if you go to the northeast or southwest you will become very seriously ill. This is caused by a female demon. Take some fruit and flowers in five parts, some raw meat, three kinds of cooked rice, and something to present to the sick person. Put this in the two baskets, the one with a handle to the southeast and the one without a handle to the northwest.

On Wednesday, if you go east or north, you will have *Thanim* and be sick. Take three bunches of flowers and leaves and tie them with a piece of red and white cloth. Put two kinds of boiled rice in this bouquet with something to represent the patient's soul. Cook some fish and three pieces of meat. Put the basket with a handle to the north and the one without a handle to the east. This way you will be master of all the directions and will be cured in two days.

On Thursday, if you go north or south a *deva* will bother you. Take five bunches of flowers and leaves, some rice and bananas, sugar cane, fish and cooked meat. Make two baskets and put the one with a handle to the southeast and the one without a handle to the south. You will be well again in no more than three days.

On Friday, if you go south you will get sick and you will have the *Thamin tai brai* (the *Thamin* of the *Tāy Brāy*, the maleficent magic evil spirit). Quickly make two baskets, and being careful not to make any mistake, put seven bunches of fruit and flowers in each along with some fish and meat, a candle, boiled rice and cakes, rice parched with sesame, bananas and sugarcane. Make two images of a demon, put them in the baskets, take the baskets and put one to the north and the other to the west. You will be cured before three days have gone by.

On Saturday, if you go west or southeast, you will have

thamin because a demon will catch you. You will think about butter or fish or raw meat, or you will eat some fruit, and when you come back home you will get sick. Put some flowers, leaves and fruit in baskets, and five servings of good nutritious food. Do the same with some oil, a ringlet of hair and a comb, some turmeric, meat and fish, bananas, sugar-cane, palm sugar and parched rice, and something to represent the demon. Put one basket to the west and one to the southeast. Arrange them appropriately and shake them in front of the patient; the illness will be gone in three days.

This "food for the gods" is made up of special ingredients for each day and each direction, and is always sent or arranged in two directions. But this system is arranged in accordance with the disposition of the planets and the week, which constitutes the basis of astrology. As with the neighboring peoples, each day of the week has its own planet, plus the "black planet," *Rahu*. The group of planets is called *gruuh decam* in Mon (from the Sanskrit *graha*). Each planet is mounted on an animal and a certain number of *devatau* are assigned to each of them as their mount, as shown in the following table:

DAY OF THE WEEK	MON NAME (FROM SANSKRIT)	MOUNT	NUMBER OF DEVATAU
Sunday	<i>Aduit</i>	Garuda	6
Monday	<i>Can</i>	Tiger	15
Tuesday	<i>Anā</i>	Lion	8
Wednesday	<i>Buddhavā</i>	Elephant	17
Thursday	<i>Braubati</i>	Rat	19
Friday	<i>Suik</i>	Mole	21
Saturday	<i>Snisat</i> + <i>Rahu</i>	N ga --	10 12

If the astrologer knows the day of the week on which the person was born, plus his age, with the help of a chart he can calculate which planets the person has passed through during his life and what their influence is.

But there is another ceremony, also described in the *Lokasiddhi*, by which a person can propitiate his particular planet. Here is what is prescribed for the Sunday planet:

"Hollow out a round cup in the trunk of a banana tree, as long across as your hand. Take six ticals of white rice and divide into two parts. Cook one of these parts. Color the rice with turmeric and lime and put it into the cup. Take the other part of the rice and make flour out of it, mix it with turmeric and lime juice, and roll out the dough to make two figures, one a *garuda* and the other the person propitiating his planet, and put them in the cup.

"Also color six parasols and six streamers with turmeric and lime. On top of everything put some bananas, sugar-cane, sweets, jam and betel. Light six candles six fingers long

and set up some lighted tapers perfumed with sandalwood. Dress the suppliant in red, put a diamond ring on his finger, and give him six flowers to carry; then have him recite the formula six times. Each time he should put one of the flowers on the cup. This is the spell: '*Aduit gruuh*, riding a garuda, surrounded by your many attendants, come receive my offerings.'

"After he recites the formula, put the offerings down to the northeast, and he will be freed from the evil influence of *Aduit*."

Possession by an Evil Spirit

As in most cultures, Mon tradition includes the possibility that a person may be possessed by the spirit of another. The person possessed seems distraught and is not considered responsible for his actions. The Mons believe that a baleful supernatural light will appear when the male or female *ganny* comes (the sorcerer or possessing spirit). The *aca* (from the Sanskrit *acarya*), the expert in such matters, winds a cotton thread around the subject's neck, orders the spirit to get out of his body, and threatens it with a stick. The spirit replies that it certainly will not get out; it has just come to visit a friend. Then the *aca* recites a spell and blows on the subject's head. Next he takes a piece of fresh ginger, peels it, cuts it to a point, and runs it over the subject's body. At first the patient smiles; then he cries out as if in great pain. Then the *aca* orders the spirit to sit down and the subject does so. The *aca* beats the spirit several times with the stick and at this point it usually agrees to leave. When it looks as if the spirit is really going to go, the lady of the house fills a cup with offerings that the spirit is supposed to like and takes it outside so the spirit will go out of the house.

The Cat and the Rain

The Mons have another strange rite which, according to the Thais, is unique to them, and which would seem to be the vestiges of a sacrificial religion. To combat the drought, especially at the start of the monsoon, the Mons catch a black cat. Here is what Schmidt said about it in 1904:

"...Another bit of foolishness is their black cat. When drought sets in after the rice has been planted they ask the *talapoins* (the monks) to go out into the fields and pray. If this act of devotion has no effect, the most ardent believers catch a black cat and put it in a cage. They parade it around the village, stopping at every house; there they make an offering of various kinds of sweets and then pour a goodly number of buckets of water over the poor cat, which jumps around and starts to caterwaul, not having the slightest idea what is going on. At the end of the ceremony they let the cat go and the people pass the sweets around and eat them. Afterwards everyone waits impatiently for the rain."

I was told that this rainmaking ritual was still being practiced in the '50s in the Mon villages of Lower Burma, but it was explained that the cat had to visit every house to bring good luck. The origin of such a custom is totally unknown.

Besides the various beliefs which vary from area to area, there are one or two other aspects of their culture which Mons themselves consider to be uniquely their own. They hold that there exists among them, especially among the men, a certain kind of loyalty, of sworn faith that we would call a "sense of honor," that sets them apart from their neighbors and the cultures that have influenced them.

Finally, they lay special claim to their totem, the *hamsa*, or Brahman goose. This bird gave its name to a Mon Kingdom of the 15th century, adorns the entrance to most of the Mon monasteries in Thailand and Burma, and is especially renowned for the legendary role it played in the founding of Pegu.