

BOOK REVIEWS¹

Ashin Kunsal Kassapa (trans). *Wonders of Mebegon Village*. Nagamasa Centre, Thailand & www.upagote.net. 2005 xiv + 144pp + Glossary 12. Colour photographs. ISBN 974-93652-8-3

The narrative of this book begins in the Minbu area of central Burma in 1952. Spiritual guides, long since passed from the present life, arrived to speak and teach mindfulness through the medium of living people. These particular *wizzars*, “accomplished masters,” were location specific, coming from Nagama Mountain, a place accessible only to the adept, west of Minbu. A key focus of this “dhatsii-ing,” channelling, was Htun Yin, described as a simple, penniless man. Hoping to get a cure for a stomach ailment, he had met a monk and a person in white robes, *wizzars* as it turned out, who offered him a cure if he would agree to help propagate the teachings of Buddha by letting them use him as a medium. Some “fragrant and tasty” medicine restored him to health. Several days later at his home village of Mebegon, a few kilometres north of Minbu, he delivered his first talk, in which the *wizzar* explained to the assembled villagers “Htun Yin is like a radio and I am like a broadcasting station.” At subsequent gatherings rosary beads floated in the air, fruit and statues appeared from nowhere. The *wizzars* at times appeared in person under circumstances that mystified all present.

Htun Yin reportedly went for several years eating nothing but “fruit and an occasional cup of coffee” provided by the *wizzars*. In 1973 he left his family and was ordained a monk with the religious name U Tillaw Keinda. His devotees built him a monastery. In 1975, and again in 1989, complex “transformation by fire” ceremonies were held in “man-made caves of victory” at the Mebegon monastery to further prolong the lives of two of the visiting *wizzars*, U Pandita, a monk born in AD 1256, who had already prolonged his life by alchemy, and U Uttamakyaw, born in AD 1453, who had prolonged his life by a knowledge of magical diagrams. The monastery continues to draw devotees and pilgrims.

¹ Views, opinions, and other content of the book reviews are those of the individual reviewers only and do not necessarily reflect those of the editor, the editorial board, or the international advisory board of the *SOAS Bulletin of Burma Research* or of the School of Oriental and African Studies.

This account in English of a contemporary *wiz̃zar* cult has been translated from Burmese and edited by a Spanish-born Buddhist monk. It is a sometimes loosely-linked compilation, comprising hagiographies of three *wiz̃zars*, a biography of the medium through whom they speak, testimonials from devotees and a glossary. Its value is increased by the amount of detail provided: lists of participants in ceremonies, the prayers recited, the quantities of ingredients and offerings, the timing of rituals. We learn that much of the activity, including mysterious appearances and disappearances of *wiz̃zars* and sometimes of their medium, takes place at night. We are told that the medium, U Tillaw Keinda, has in the past exhibited eccentric behaviour, attracted attempts at exorcism, and been jailed, as recently as 2004, following “nonsensical accusations.” The book tellingly emphasises that the *wiz̃zars* never talk about politics or criticise the government.

At times the detail approaches the superfluous, or the narrative loses focus. Someone arrives uninvited at a ceremony in a Nissan car: we search in vain for the consequences and significance of this. But the description of the cult, the presentation of practices that are admitted to be outside the beliefs of “some orthodox Theravada practitioners,” is generally coherent in itself. *Wonders of Mebegon Village* is particularly significant as an anthropological and religious source because it provides material for comparison with the better-known cult activities centred around Bo Mingaung at the *wiz̃zar* shrine complexes at Amarapura and Mount Popa, which E. Michael Mendelson introduced to English readers in the 1960s.

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Terance W. Bigalke. *Tana Toraja: a Social History of an Indonesian People*. Singapore: Singapore University Press. 2005. xxviii +395 pp. Maps, Illustrations, Notes, Index. ISBN 9971-69-313-5.

For a student of Burmese history, the value of this book is comparative, as it focuses on an upland people in tension with dominant lowlanders. Actively encouraged by Dutch policies of 'divide and rule,' the Toraja of

the highlands of South Sulawesi largely went over to Protestant Christianity from the era of high colonialism, although minorities clung to Animism, or converted to the Islam of the Bugis lowlands, or plumped for Roman Catholicism. Japanese invaders in 1942-45 tried to play both the Christian and the Muslim card. While Indonesian political and social movements were active in the Toraja highlands, separatist tendencies unsurprisingly emerged after independence. Replacing Islam with Theravada Buddhism, the parallels with Burmese situations are clear. There remain major differences, however, for example the remarkable prevalence of slavery and slave exports among the pre-colonial Toraja. Furthermore, although tensions between uplands and lowlands occasionally boiled over into violence after independence, they did not give rise to the long-running guerrilla campaigns characteristic of Burma.

The book derives from a 1981 University of Wisconsin thesis, which has been widely influential and much cited (including by the present reviewer), and chapters 2 and 5 have already been substantially published elsewhere. Despite additional fieldwork in 1986, and some revision of the text, there is a dated feel to this text. It emerges from ideas, current in the 1970s, about 'trade and politics,' religious conversion, and education. To take just one example, Bigalke provides rich material on the growth of coffee as a cash crop, but hardly considers the extent of local consumption of coffee, its possible cultural meanings in relation to religious conversion, and its potential ability to replace betel-chewing. The first mention of local coffee production is buried deep in a footnote on page 339. Bigalke has also relied heavily, and at times rather uncritically, on oral traditions and testimony, in ways that might not be as widely accepted today. Finally, there is no proper conclusion to the volume. That said, it is very useful to have this thesis finally published after so many years. This is a service to the international scholarly community for which Singapore University Press should be congratulated.

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