

# Opinion

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## Sprinkling of water using sprigs of Thabyey (Eugenia)

Tha Sein

**T**ODAY called a-kya nei is when Thingyan truly arrives as Thagyamin, King of Tavatimsa Deva Loka (realm of devas) makes his descent from his celestial abode to earth. Traditionally, Thingyan involved the sprinkling of scented water in a silver bowl using sprigs of Thabyey (Eugenia), a practice that continues to be prevalent in rural areas. The sprinkling of water was intended to metaphorically wash away one's sins of the previous year. It is the hottest time of the year and a good dousing is welcomed by most and, revelers, young and old, participate in this tradition by splashing water on each other.

On this specific occasion, performing water pouring on Buddha statues and images is considered an iconic ritual for this holiday. It represents purification and the washing away of one's sins and bad luck. It is a time for some boys and girls to enter the religious Order and spend a short time in a monastery immersed in the teachings of the Buddha. The boys become novice monks and the girls become nuns for a fixed period of time. Releasing fish is another time-honored tradition in this day. Paying reverence to ancestors is also an important part of the Thingyan tradition.

The Thingyan celebration is rich with symbolic traditions. Morning begins with merit-making. Visiting local temples and offering food to the Buddhist monks is commonly practiced. As a way to show respect, younger people often visit the elders and pay respects with traditional offering of water in a earthen pot and shampoo. As a festival of unity, people who have moved away usually return home to their loved ones and elders.

While Myanmar retains a more elaborate culture of Thingyan, it is necessary for the revelers to show rich Myanmar traditions and culture during the festival by paying mutual respects, exercising patience and taking care of negative emotions rather than being hostile and quarreling, which tarnish the fine tradition of Thingyan. To avert any bad luck that might fall on oneself, one has to do meritorious deeds to his or her utmost through the performance of giving (Dhana), observance of morality (Sila) and practice of meditation (Bhavana; Samahta and Vipassana) if one is a Buddhist. And only then, will Thingyan have meaning for Myanmar people and be revered by others, for it is more than a mere festive occasion. It is a time for reflection and make plans for the new year.

**T**HE first month of Myanmar calendar year is pronounced as Da Gu La in spoken language, however if we strictly adhere to the literal pronunciation (according to its spelling) it should be pronounced as Tan Khu La as it writes တန်ခူးလ. In many cases in Myanmar Language pronunciation does not follow the general rule "To pronounce as it writes" This is a lovely peculiarity of Myanmar language.

Tan Khu La is the time when Myanmar pick the fruit from toddy palm. Fruit of toddy palm bears the name "Htan" in Myanmar. Pick is represented by Myanmar word "Khu." So, "Htan Khu" may be the origin and corrupted to "Tan Khu" in later time. "La" is "month" in English. According to one source it was noted "Tar Ku" was used in Ava Period bearing the meaning the "change from old to new year"

When we say Da Gu La, every Myanmar people know new year is coming with immediate preceding of water festival (Thingyan in Myanmar language) for three or four days in which all the citizens regardless of race and religion participate and enjoy.

When we say Da Gu La, it invokes every Myanmar to remember distinctive natural features such as flowers, season and Zodiac of the month. Full bloom of Padauk (pterocarpus) and Ngu Shwe War (cassia) flowers signify the month of Da Gu and its festival, Thingyan. Padauk and Thingyan are the twin for Myanmar citizens. Aesthetic writers or poets metaphorically cited the Da Gu La as the most beautiful month of the year with trees crowned with full blossoms enticing the bees and butterflies around and that beauty is embellished with the sweet songs of birdies which are mostly predominated by songs of koel (Eudynamis scolopacea) very commonly composed in Myanmar romantic songs, poems and novels. Da Gu lavished with pleasant natural beauty can make the separated lovers feel more yearning to see

each other. In some literatures the attraction of natural beauties of Da Gu La is described a little bit in exaggeration to be able to make the saintly persons with high spiritual power lose its power and degraded to secular laymen.

### Rakhine Traditional Water Festival (Thingyan)

Almost all indigenous ethnic groups celebrate the Thingyan in Da Gu La, but with trace of their own tradition and social mores. Rakhine people also have their own new year water festival (Thingyan) which is the most noteworthy of all traditional festivals of Rakhine. Traditional activities of Rakhine Thingyan are marked by making the paste of scented wood like Thanakha (Limonia acidissima) or Sandal wood, sacred bathing of the images of Buddha, washing hair of old women by young ladies, keeping Sabbath, doing charity deeds, paying homage to the elderly persons and participating in water dousing celebration. In some places some of the above mentioned activities become less pronounced and in some places they have disappeared.

Before sacred bathing the Buddha Images, young men and ladies gather at an appropriate place of village or ward and grind the sandal woods on the specially designed stone slabs with smooth surface. Rakhine traditional music troupe comprising Rakhine youngsters are playing the music with Rakhine Thingyan songs and antiphonal chants in loud chorus encouraging and entertaining the ladies at their labor in grinding the sandal wood. People around are also participating in the joyful event. The paste of sandal wood is collected in silver bowls and kept at a monastery or a religious congregation hall. The sandal wood paste is used in the collective sacred bathing of Buddha Images, stupas and shrines next day. Only after the completion of sacred bathing events, people are dousing each other with the spirit of washing the sin and sinister influence out of the



Rakhine ethnic women throw water on revellers as they celebrate the water festival traditionally. PHOTO: NYI ZAW MOE

## Da Gu La and Rakhine Traditional Water Festival

Laywadi Tun Saw Khine

body before the new year comes.

Tha tradition of sacred bathing Buddha images was known to have started since the era of 3rd Danyawaddy. During 3rd Danyawaddy era at BC580 Sandar Thuria took the throne and at BC 554, 12 years after his coronation he came to know that Gottama had attained enlightenment and became Buddha in Myitizima land in the west (now Nepal). He strongly desired to see Buddha and according to the advice of his counselors he vowed and implored Buddha in his spiritually resolute mind to do him a favour of visiting Danyawaddy. The Buddha complying with the king's request came to Danyawaddy together with 500 Sangha

retines and delivered sermons on Buddhism. Before Buddha and his entourage left for home the king Sandar Thuria had his men cast a Bronze image of Buddha on full moon of Kason La 123 Myanmar Year and finished on 1st waning moon of Kason La. The king named the bronze image Maha Muni. The king had it consecrated by Buddha himself and let the people pour the scented water on the image. Then, people poured the scented water on each other. Thus came the tradition of water pouring festival in Rakhine, and Rakhine people celebrate the water festival only after the sacred bathing of Buddha Images.

There are two ways of celebrat-

ing water festival in Rakhine State, one is going round the village or wards to douse water other people and another way is to douse water from pandals. In the former type young men who are necessarily single go in groups carrying scented water to the houses where the ladies are residing. Then requesting the permission to pour water on the lady he wants to douse from her parents. Then lad and lady exchanged pouring scented water and then they enjoy full-fledged water throwing on each other. The other way is to set up the pandals at an appropriate place in the village or ward and lads and ladies gather at the pandal, and throw water. The significant differ-

ence between Rakhine Thingyan and those of other parts of Myanmar is, in Rakhine Thingyan a wooden long boat with full of water is placed in the pandals. The belles of the village or ward come to the pandal under the guardianship of a medium-aged woman who has to take care of the ladies on behalf of their parents. The number of guardians depend on the size of the pandal. Lads have to take permission from the guardian to pour water on the lady he wants. After getting permission lads can take water from the boat and pour it to lady who is on other side of the boat. It is so amusing to see the pairs on each side of the boat dousing each other smiling

or laughing merrily. Lad used to call the lady he pours "Ma Yee."

Another peculiar type of merry-making in Rakhine Thingyan is that a group of ladies or women bid their time to catch a boy or young man and if they can do it, they paint his face in a humorous design and force him go round the village or ward and ask him to do something like monkey dancing, ogre dancing or prince dancing and collect the money from the onlookers. Then the collected money is donated to a monastery or pagoda or etc. This is creating a fun of Rakhine Thingyan to raise fund for donation. In Rakhine language it is called "Thingyan Chaing Pwe"

When we go to the religious aspect of Rakhine Thingyan, most of the elderly persons usually go to monasteries to keep Sabbath, to listen the sermon of monks and doing meritorious deeds. Some young men also are found to do the same. The pagodas and monasteries are crowded during the water festival. The last day of water festival in Rakhine is marked by washing hair with scented water bearing some kinds of tender leaf or flower astrologically selected to be relevant with the day on which one was born with a view to have virtual effect on one's life.

Tradition says that the last day of Thingyan is called "Atat Nay" that signifies the day the Indra (King of Deva or Nat) ascends to his celestial abode after descending the world of human being on Thingyan "Akya Nay", the first day of Thingyan recording the names of bad individuals and good individuals in his two different books during the three days of Thingyan event. The "Thingyan Bulletin" prepared by experienced astrologers says that the people born on the day that coincide with the day of "Thingyan Atat Nay" are in the realm of ill fate and they have to do meritorious deeds such as keeping Sabbath and donating food to the monasteries and to the neighbours as well to preclude the effect of ill fate. Then he has to donate the water pots to the pagodas or monasteries in the evening and he has to wash his hair with scented water at the time prescribed in the "Thingyan Bulle-

tin" to do away with the ill fate.

Next day to "Thingyan Atat" is the first day of the New Year by Myanmar calendar. Paying homage to elderly people is celebrated extensively through out the Rakhine State on Myanmar New Year Day. Generally people are doing good things on the first day of new year. There is belief if some one spends money for something on the first day of new year the money will flow out from your pocket all the year round.

### To be cautious the national culture not to get overwhelmed

Nowadays, Water Festival (Thingyan) are losing more and more of the national character and culture. Rakhine is no exception. Traditional long boat to contain water starts to be replaced by modern water tank. Bowls used to pour or throw water is supplanted by hose and pipes. Traditional attire is also substituted by western-styled modern dress. Those changes are the harbinger of vanishing of the identity of traditional Rakhine Thingyan. People, especially youngsters take the Thingyan as an occasion for excessive drinking, wild dancing, showing of excessive mischievous acts, exchanging abusive and lewd words, seeking sex mate and everything out of control. Everybody accepts merry-making is the trade mark of Thingyan, but not meant for everything that tarnishes or blemishes the good tradition of new year water festival or Thingyan.

Rakhine communities are widespread throughout in Myanmar. They are celebrating their traditional Rakhine Thingyan. It is very important to uphold our own tradition and also to respect the tradition of other indigenous people. We, all the people in Myanmar regardless of race and religion should avoid activities and behaviors that blight the Thingyan of auspicious Myanmar New Year. All the ethnic people should embellish Da Gu La by Thingyan Festivals with national identity tinted with their own traditions and culture. Please be cautious to not make the Thingyan an ugly occasion. (Translated by Khin Maung Win)

## Our Beloved & Holy Thingyan

Amara (Yupa)

**T**RADITIONAL Myanmar Thingyan is meant for changing of "Taninganway Gyomin တန်ခူးလ ငြိမ်းငြိမ်း" from one season to another, especially from "Mein ဝိနိ" to "Meittha ဝိသော." It is regarded to be a Holy Day for Myanmar nationals. တန်ခူးလ Thingyan means washing hair or change or transition. It is said to be included in 12 auspicious deeds for Myanmar people.

In recognition of leaving spiritual defilements in the Old Year and moving forward in the New Year with good will, neo minds and vigorous strength,

offering ablutions to Buddha images, having the old shampooed, finger nails and toe nails cut, keeping Sabbath and washing hair are usually performed.

In the past, we used to throw water on water festival revelers, or rather pat the revelers with tender Thabyay Khet soaked with water. With changing times, ways of throwing water altered so much so that it became over-modernized. At such a time, students, staff and employees want to enjoy themselves and to be free from mental stress as an emotional outlet. Those who had been overseas for study or employment feel homesick for their native lands if they had no access to go home back at the time when their Thingyan festival

arrives.

Some always return to their home land just at this time. Even some tourists set out their so-called water festival tour to Myanmar at such a time on purpose, so as to go sight-seeing for fulfilling their itching desires. In Thailand as well, water festival is held annually but it is less over-crowded compared to that in Myanmar. Though there were sparse visitors in beach resorts of Chinmai & Pattaya at such a time, they are now attracting tourists by copying Myanmar's ways and means of tourist industry in recent years.

We have been celebrating traditional water festivals without discontinuity in our country, having potential

tourist income, provided that we can make influx of globetrotters visit us. Youths tend to drink alcohol on the wrong pretext of feeling too cold due to being drenched with water all day long. And, these days there are ubiquitous bars and beer stations across the town. Previously, there were shops selling alcoholic beverage ethanol that were run by the then governments. Only alcoholics went to those shops, but there was a scarcity of beer and bar stations so people seldom went there. Contrariwise, there has been abundance of these kinds of shops, even on roadsides. Thus, people have an easy access to the places, being easily intoxicated and destroying the image of Myanmar traditional Thingyan.

Although people are not celebrating water festivals out of itching desire to drink, they happen to drink while reveling in Thingyan festivals. Hence, in my opinion I think that authorities

concerned should make necessary arrangements not only for crimes not to increase but also for our traditions not to be harmed. If so, it will be pleasing for us for not needing any longer, to have our heels cut short due to our small slippers. In other words, a stitch in time saves nine. Uses of fire-extinguisher water pipes and pressure hoses can be forbidden through educative talks.

To resume the previous topic, "Thingyan" we should not forget a legend of Hindu-Brahmas. As per the legend, once there was a verbal dispute between the king of gods and a Brahma concerning Veda. "An ancient holy text of Hinduism." Ultimately the dispute reached the climax, leading to the decision of the wise man named "Kawarlamine." The stake has been to have the loser decapitated. The wise man decided in favor of the king of gods, who beheaded the Brahma.

Thenceforth the problem occurred to the king of gods. The head of the Brahma cannot be dropped anywhere, as known by all. Therefore, the king of gods made his four queens hold it in turn. It takes a queen one year to hand over the head to another queen. It has been said that Thingyan falls on the day when the head of the Brahma has been turned to another.

"တန်ခူးလ Horoscopic Statement" is said to be important for Myanmar people for the year ahead. The old used to say that the king of gods would climb down the human abode with which kinds of weapons in his hand, with great interest. They used to believe that the country's destiny depends upon "the Horoscope," whereas children used to have been more interested in the "Ouija Boards" made of gold, silver, bronze and dog's skin, that the king of gods would bring about with him.

Whenever Thingyan festival is

drawing near, children tend to live in peace, without disturbances to their parents, for fear of having their names written in the Ouija board made of dog skin. There seems to be an element of hyperbole in such a claim that people are relieved of worries and anxiety in this month.

During the period, people usually perform meritorious deeds—releasing live fish into lakes, ponds and rivers, washing and shampooing the aged people, cutting toenails and finger nails, offering scented thanakha cream, giving food stuffed with spicy things for fun, besmirching other's face with soot, for young people with water bowls in their hands to ask for permission to throw water on girls.

Oh! Our Myanmar traditional Thingyan which is like our hearts has been, is and will be an unforgettable festival for sure. (Translated by Khin Maung Oo)