

Mae Yway

The Beginning of a New Tradition

Throughout the 12 months of a year in Burma, each month has its own festival. But not all festivals are celebrated these days. Some popular festivals that we continue to celebrate yearly include the water festival, Thingyan in April, the lighting festival, Thidingyut in October, and another lighting festival, Tasaungdine in November. Today I'm going to tell you about a festival that is not included in the Burma calendar as a special festival but is very popular throughout the country. The "Taungbyon Festival."

"Taungbyon" is the name of a small village located in the middle part of Burma. Long long ago, in the eleventh century, during the era of Bagan, King Anawrahta built a pagoda at the Taungbyon village. By his order, all members of his court nobles had to bring one brick each to help construct this Wish-Fulfilling Pagoda. When the appointed day came, the two brothers failed to contribute their share. The two rowdy womanizers got executed on charges of disobedience and negligence of duty. Then one day, as the king was about to depart from the place, the spirits of the two brothers appeared before the king to ask for rewards for the services they had rendered him. So, the king built a big shrine near his pagoda to honor the two brothers. The "Taungbyon Festival" honors them by celebrating and worshipping the spirits of the two brothers. We call them "Nats."

Nats are spirits that can help with finances, love, etc., and 80% of the population believe in them. Most Nats, as the tradition goes, met a violent death. So, when they revisit the earth, they must be kept happy. And apparently, what keeps the two brothers happy is smoking, dancing, and drinking their favorite tipple.

Nat Kadaw, or the wives of the spirit, work as professional ritualists, shamans, and entertainers, translating the realms of the supernatural and human, usually for a fee. Most Nat Kadaws are transgender, gay men. Earlier, it used to be women who worked as Nat Kadaws, but these days the number of Nat Kadaws in the transgender community is increasing. You can call them "drag queens" as they are with a pretty, full make-up face, amazing color pattern dress, and they also have names suspiciously similar to the "drag queens." During the festival, they each set up a shrine, and worship and work as a shaman.

Now, I want to talk about the relationship between this Spirit Festival, Taungbyon, and Gays. Why do gay people love this festival and label it as "gay pride?" Because it is a chance to meet gays from across the country. And also, a chance to wear whatever you want. You don't have to pretend to be a masculine, strong man as you usually behave in your family and society. You can be yourself in "Taungbyon." This is their getaway from life once a year.

"Taungbyon" is heaven for transgender people, but not for the younger generation, especially from urban areas, who do not believe in spiritual things. So, how do they celebrate their pride?

Since 2014, a new tradition has begun in Yangon, the former capital of Burma. There was an art and culture event called "&Proud," held yearly in Yangon. "&Proud" takes place over two weekends at the end of January. The festival includes queer film festivals along with film workshops, panel discussions,

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Sarah Blau (Israel); Diana del Ángel (Mexico); Mae Yway (Myanmar); Alexandra K* (Greece)

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film competitions, and film screenings with debates. Other events include photo exhibitions in a competition, drag queen shows and performances, and the recently added River Pride Boat Parade in 2019. Starting from 2018, they got permission from the government to celebrate the festival at the public park downtown in Yangon. And in the following year, in 2019, they changed their name to become Yangon Pride.

As the events have started taking place in the public spaces, all the people—queer or straight, young or old, now join the festival together. Everyone loves to celebrate it even if they don't understand what we are celebrating. I once heard that when the drag show had started in the park, everyone was amazed by the performances of the participants and were cheering them up. At that time, a man and a child were standing behind me. And what the father told the child was, "Son, look at that Achout.* He's so fabulous. Isn't he?"

*Achout is a slang word used to address a transgender or gay man in a discriminatory way. In Burmese Achout means something that is dry and not wet, that is, something against the norm. It also means "sissy" or "fag" or "fairy" in English slang.

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