

The Explorers Museum

Inaugural Pennant Expedition Pennant #2 Burma Kayah and Shan States,
observance of tribal animist rituals.
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Under pennant #2 the expedition traveled to remote regions of Burma to areas previously not open to individuals outside of the area. The expedition concentrated primarily in Kayah State. The group was confirmed as the first outside group to witness certain of the animist rituals conducted by the tribal regions.

Kayah State which was formerly known as Karenni State is a state of the country of Burma also known as Myanmar. It is situated in eastern Myanmar, bounded on the north by Shan State, on the east by Thailand's Mae Hong Son Province, and on the south and west by Kayah State. It is a mountainous region, where the Dawna Mountain Range and the Karen Hills are separated by the Salween River, which flows through the State. It lies approximately between 18° 30' and 19° 55' north latitude and between 94°40' and 97° 93' east longitude. The area is 11,670 km² (4,510 square mi). Its capital is Loikaw. The estimated population in 1998 was approximately 207,357, according to UNICEF. It is inhabited primarily by the Karenni ethnic group, also known as Red Karen or Kayah, a Sino-Tibetan people.

The region lies to the west of the former British Burma. The British government recognized and guaranteed the independence of the then called Karenni States in an 1875 treaty with Burmese King Mindon Min, by which both parties recognized the area as belonging neither to Konbaung Burma nor to Great Britain. Consequently, the Karenni States were never fully incorporated into British Burma and have remained a very autonomous and independent tribal region.

Animist worship prior to the introduction of Buddhism and other religions, was widely practiced within the country. Animism continues to yield significant influence over the Burmese people, and has especially flourished in the Kayah region as it has remained largely in isolation particularly outside of the greater metropolitan areas. Even though many consider that the sway of animistic beliefs in decision-making processes has been tempered, its affect and continued influence remains evident even in urban settings. Superstitions and mythologies run rampant throughout Burma's culture, and many who have espoused Buddhist doctrine concurrently retain animistic roots. Although there remains considerable discourse as to the origin and exact categorization of animistic beliefs, in particular relative to

Burmese Buddhism, there is ample evidence of animist ceremony long preceding the arrival of Buddhism to the country.

Animism among Burma's populace has taken the form of worshipping spirit beings referred to as nats, this was form of worship was especially evident in Kayah State. Historically, nat worship has included animal sacrifices and other offerings to obtain favor from stipulated spirit beings tasked with specific assignments as means to placate and achieve favor for particular requests. This was witnessed by the expedition team at several ceremonies in rural regions among ethnic minorities in Kayah State. In these areas nat reverence was widespread and ritualized. It was clear that many villagers still believe that specific nats are tasked with administering their regions, thereby not recognizing or potentially overriding official governmental channels in favor of the spirit beings. Although in many parts of Burma the acceptance of Buddhist doctrine has abetted in mitigating any propensity toward animal offerings, as under Buddhism humans and other species are considered to be interrelated, requiring that living creatures be accorded respect, animal offerings are still widespread in Kayah State.

The Kayah tribal regions remain enwrapped within a densely intricate web of animist superstition, interdicts, and creeds, inextricably woven for centuries. Nats, despite their ascription as spiritual beings, share with humans a number of mortal failings considered egregiously degenerate in respect to the doctrines of Buddhist belief.

Buddhism, however, did not preclude the culling of belief in animistic spirits. Whereas Buddha's teachings outline a path toward future enlightenment negotiated through noble truths and deeds, for those who may occasionally falter in their present life a nat provides a more practical avenue of help toward regaining equilibrium, solving issues, or in attaining less spiritual goals. As an added precaution, superstition precluded most from dropping belief in nats altogether out of fear of retribution from certain nats considered volatile and possibly vindictive.

The rural regions of Kayah lend toward a predominance of protector nats assigned to monitor and guard appointed aspects of nature. These protector spirits and overseers of the natural world may watch over any instance or designated aspect of the environment. A particular nat may have jurisdiction over a mountain region, forest, winds, or water. It is believed that beyond these there are spirits whose domain is more concentrated, ones charged with safeguarding each component of the natural world, including every stone, body of water, individual foothill, or tree. All manifestations of nature may harbor an allocated nat who dutifully shields its entrusted element. It is the nats that harbor the earth's flora and fauna that have most directly impact village tribal considerations as well as have had as a consequence a fortuitous influence on environmental conservation and preservation.

Forest spirits and specific tree spirits need to be addressed before the felling of any

trees. The initiator of such an act must first query as well as find ways to appease an individual tree's nat resident; in part, this usually requires reserving the best of the wood from any given tree to build a shrine or nat house for the spirit to reside in once the tree has been felled. Oftentimes, a new seedling is planted as a further means to assuage any nats involved and to replenish nature's gift. As a result, the widespread clearing of trees has been traditionally eschewed by the Burmese so as not to raise the ire of forest or tree nats and as such has historically helped to prohibit significant environmental destruction. Similarly, such beliefs, so as not to exacerbate and fall afoul of the mountain nats, have assisted in the preservation of natural landscapes.

Considerations for nats have a significant influence on planning, at the village level in particular; however, they can also have impact for structures in larger metropolises. How each category of nat is accommodated impacts a village arrangement and can effect individual residences and other structures. Included within the architectural plan of each village is a repository known as a "nat sin," that essentially functions as a shrine to the designated village-protector nat, whose function includes overseeing and safeguarding the community nats may also be called upon to protect the entrance to a village, town, or city. Village homes will incorporate an area most often in the form of a repository or effigy suspended along the principle southeast post as a place to provide offerings to the house nat. Individual residences may pay homage to more than one nat, oftentimes a reflection of family members of differing originations whose local nats have journeyed with them to the new destination. Generally each family member also pays heed to a particular designated nat that serves as a personal guardian.

The tree felling ceremony that the expedition team witnessed involved a Shaman and a number of followers who had petitioned the nat spirits to cut down a tree to ensure harmony with nature, ensuring bountiful harvest, health for the peoples and animals of the village. To consult the spirits a number of animals had been sacrificed over the course of many months. The indicators the result of these sacrifices, had prophesied when and where to cut down a tree. As the location deemed most favorable fell within the parameters of a neighboring village, a whole new set of spirits had been consulted and assuaged to ensure that the tree sacrifice would not incur their wrath. This was done over the course of several months. Once it had been ascertained that the spirits would condone the cutting of the tree in a specific territory within a specific period, the Shaman consulted each night a set of chicken bones until the arrangement of these indicated that the time was auspicious. The team was notified only hours before to meet the Shaman and his followers at 4 AM at a specific place. The tree had to be cut down while it remained dark. The expedition team arrived at 4AM to find that the Shaman had left earlier due to another interpretation of the chicken bones.

The expedition team managed to rouse some villagers who helped to make their

way through the dark and unfamiliar terrain to the remote region where the Shaman and others were chopping away at the very large tree that had been chosen again due to the signs given the Shaman. Candles had been lit around the area and drummers were keeping a rhythmic, ominous, low sounding beat which reverberated through the dense forest. A number of crouched figures barely discernable under the feint flare of the candles were rocking and chanting. Only some of the TEM team members arrived to see the chopping and felling of the tree however those that were still negotiating the slippery and unknown terrain could clearly hear the sounds of the ritual as it progressed. The huge tree when it fell took down a number of surrounding trees. The Shaman then measured the tree that had been sacrificed, indicated that it was large enough and a number of the Shaman team began to remove the bark and branches. Offerings of candles, money and food were made to the tree and another chicken was sacrificed and gutted to again read the bones. The bones after several Shaman members' considerations indicated that the offerings would be accepted although somewhat meager. The Shaman had been warned to offer greater appeasement to the tree felled for the next ceremony.

Once the tree had been felled the women in the TEM team were asked not to approach the tree too closely as they could taint the tree. The entire bark was skimmed and when this was finished was carried to the village. This had to be done only through the difficult terrain of the forest as the tree trunk was not allowed to pass any structure on the way to the village. There the villagers had been working for hours to prepare a feast for those that had cut and carried the tree.