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## Min Theinhka –An Astrologer’s Career through the Lens of Biography

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On 16 January 2005, a friend and I visited Mayantelin camp, north of Hmawbi. The friend had told me that Min Theinhka, the famous astrologer (*baydin hsaya*) who recently established this camp, was offering free food to any visitor, every Sunday. The area was increasingly popular amongst “religious” or “spiritual” specialists, who settled in this jungle due to the low land price and the accessibility of the spot. Monks of various types were living next to astrologers, and religious and ritual specialists, in a seemingly indiscriminate fashion. However, as soon as you entered Mayantelin, signs immediately warned that no astrological forecasting (*baydin ho*) could be expected from Min Theinhka, despite his reknown as an astrologer (*baydin hsaya*). Instead, he would dictate ritual procedures to resolve charms for free, a practice known as *yadeya*.<sup>1</sup>

Amidst the astrology businesses booming all around the camp, Min Theinhka’s statement indicates a possible tension between the received image of the astrologer in today’s Burma as an astrology-versed forecaster, and the image Min Theinhka constructed for himself as a specialist that did not offer predictions, but rather healed and solved problems through astrologically determined ritual means.<sup>2</sup> The intriguing feature of the place was that it was organized to accommodate flocks of visitors, most receiving a free light lunch, while those who sought consultations were channeled to the appropriate place. Those in charge were Min Theinhka’s astrology students, recognizable by their deep red Shan trousers and their hectic activity, which made my friend comment: “They are serving food as if they are wrestling”! It

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<sup>1</sup> About *yadeya*, from Pali *yantra* (technical device) or *yâtrâ*, (journey, expedition or pilgrimage) according to concurrent etymologies, see Aurore Candier, in this issue. A workable definition of *yadeya* could be: potent ritual means whose main purveyors are astrologers.

<sup>2</sup> Comments on the involved Burmese notions: *baydin ho/twek* versus *yadeya kyay*, will come in order later on.

seemed as though serving as many meals as possible was all that mattered. But why would an astrologer serve food to as many visitors as possible if not for drawing in clients for a payable service? Did Min Theinhka need to feed the masses to assert his status as an astrologer?<sup>3</sup> In the complex “religious” and “spiritual” Burmese Buddhist environment, Min Theinhka was difficult to locate. As an astrologer (*baydin hsaya*), was he considered a mere ritual specialist? Or did he, similarly to monks (*hpongyi*), belong to the religious field? Or to the “spiritual” one like *weikza* path practitioners?

Although I visited Mayantelin for the first time in 2005 and then twice after his death, in 2010 and 2020, I never met or interviewed Min Theinhka. Therefore, in order to explore how Min Theinhka’s reknown and career have been constructed, this paper will examine his life according to *Min Theinhka’s Biography (Min Theinhka attuppatti)*, authored by his main disciple, Min Theim Hkaing.<sup>4</sup> It was published in 2015, seven years after Min Theinhka passed away. At the time of his death, a collection of papers had already been gathered in homage to the astrologer, assembling anecdotes, testimonies and outlining the chronology of his life.<sup>5</sup> It is through these two texts that this paper will examine how his reputation as a great astrologer grew during his lifetime as well as the kinds of categorization problems it raises in the Burmese conceptual world.

Why did Min Theim Hkaing write a biography of his master? Although the best Burmese astrologers are knowledgeable people, and many have written astrology treatises and

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<sup>3</sup> Feed a large number of curious visitors immediately brings to contemporary Burmese minds the outstanding monastic figure of Thamanya Hsayadaw. During the nineties, his fame as a Buddhist saint had partially been built through his power to feed large crowds. Although not a monk, Min Theinhka’s capacity to feed the multitude may be understood as an index of and a way to build his reputation as an astrologer, similar to Thamanya’s miraculous ability, as highlighted in Rozenberg (2005).

<sup>4</sup> Note that the biographer’s astrologer-pen name is similar to that of his master; the master-disciple link will be discussed later.

<sup>5</sup> *Hmat hmat ya ya Min Theinhka* (Memorable Min Theinhka, Yangon: Lab Mo Sway Sabay, 2008). The volume gathers 78 short essays from writers, astrologers or friends of Min Theinhka and 12 short novels of Min Theinhka himself.

novels<sup>6</sup>, they tend not to write autobiographies, nor are they chosen as objects of the Burmese biographical genre (*attuppatti*).<sup>7</sup> Famous astrologers' lives -- such as those of U Ponnya or U Po<sup>8</sup> -- are known by their writings and the historical relation of their dramatic deaths under the despotic rule of late 19<sup>th</sup> century Burmese kings. They are not related through any well-developed *attuppatti* such as Min Theinhka's biography. For these reasons, while *Min Theinhka's Biography* is an interesting source to learn about the career of an astrologer, as with any biography, and particularly as a rare example of an astrologer's biography, it needs to be taken with some caution. It needs to be read within the conventions of the *attuppatti* genre in Burmese literature. It should also be contrasted with the life stories of other Burmese specialists to highlight the specificity of the life trajectories of astrologers and of this astrologer in particular. Furthermore, this paper is not an exercise in "biographical method," but an attempt to analyze a biography as a social fact: the product of an historical, sociological and cultural context.<sup>9</sup>

Besides the biographer's own agenda, was he seeking to explain and participate in Min Theinhka's reputation as an astrologer or to ascertain some sort of spiritual achievements? What does it say of astrologers' personae? How does this story reveal intrinsic and complex links between the astrologer's life and the contemporary dynamics of Burmese public life? Finally, what does it reveal of Min Theinhka's involvement in the specific field of knowledge and practice that is astrology, particularly in relation to close fields of esoteric (*weikza*) and Buddhist knowledge and practices – or more tellingly in relation to the "spiritual" and the "religious" fields inside the Burmese Buddhist religious landscape?

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<sup>6</sup> Min Theinhka was himself a writer of some importance. Gyane Gyaw Mamalay is another example, among others, of a notorious novelist being also a famous astrologer. See her *Hsay pinnya hsaung ba paung chop*, Collection of Medical Novels, (Yangon: 2015).

<sup>7</sup> About *attuppatti* (*at-htok-pat-ti*) as the Burmese literary genre of biography, see Gustaaf Houtman (1997).

<sup>8</sup> About U Po, see Tay Hlaing, *Collection of U Po Astrological Treatises*, 1972.

<sup>9</sup> For a well-known critique of the "biographical method", see Pierre Bourdieu (1994 [1986]). About Bourdieu's critique, see also : François Dosse (2005) and Nathalie Heinich (2010).

In Burma today, astrology (*baydin* from the Sanskrit Veda) is a specific field of knowledge and practice that blends techniques of astronomy, horoscopy and divination borrowed from Greco-Indian texts. It has been the result of a long, unfinished process of differentiation from religious and scientific fields. The turning point of this development was King Bodawphaya's religious reforms at the end of the 18th century which aimed to distinguish religious from profane literature (further discussed in this issue by Aurore Candier). In particular, the differentiation of healing practice from astrology is still not achieved as demonstrated by Celine Coderey (also this issue).<sup>10</sup>

*Weikza* (from Pali *vijjâ*) is shorthand for the practitioners of the Burmese Buddhist esoteric path. This path combines religious observances – the strict respect of a number of Buddhist precepts – with meditation and a command on specific worldly “knowledge.” Astrology, magical squares, traditional medicine and alchemy are among the main *weikza* disciplines. Virtuosos from the extremely diverse *weikza* path may be granted special powers (such as ubiquity, flying in the air, or unusually long lives) and they may also be granted a degree of “spiritual” perfection, or karmic achievement, according to Buddhist understanding. This supposedly allows them to get out of the karmic cycle while staying available to help humanity from their own abode, as spiritual – non-visible – beings (*htwek ya pauk*).<sup>11</sup> They may then become the focus of dedicated cult groups.

For clarity's sake, *weikza* practitioners may be roughly characterized as “spiritual” specialists, in contrast to monks (*hpongyi*) who are “religious” specialists.<sup>12</sup> The vernacular

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<sup>10</sup> See for instance Tay Hlaing's comment on the condemnation to death penalty of the astrologer U Po, about the lack of differentiation between astrology, religion and healing practice : « Indeed, it was not because of medical knowledge (*hsay pinmya*) that the great master had passed away, but because of religion (*batha yay*) » Tay Hlaing, *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> See G. Rozenberg, *ibid.* and Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière, Guillaume Rozenberg and Alicia Turner, *Champions of Buddhism. Weikza Cults in Contemporary Burma*, (Singapore: NUS Press, 2014).

<sup>12</sup> See Peter van der Veer's use of the concept 'spiritual' in his comparative approach of the development of Chinese and Indian modern nation-states : *The Modern Spirit of Asia. The Spiritual and the Secular in China and India*. Princeton University Press, 2014.

contrast (*weikza/hpongyi*) is useful to delineate the interstitial space in which astrologers' identities and trajectories are construed. While astrology is one of the disciplines comprised in the *weikza* path, the question of whether astrologers can reach the spiritual achievement granted post-mortem to *weikza* or *htwek ya pauk* beings is an open one. Northern Hmawbi was the locus of a highly fascinating and rapidly evolving milieu, with *weikza* practitioners living next to independent monks (*hpongyi*) and more profane specialists of astrology (*baydin hsaya*).

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*Min Theinhka's Biography* is a cheap book, costing the equivalent of a cup of tea (500 kyat) and counting 231 pages. Its yellow cover has a plain drawing, perfectly matching today's astrologer image in Burma: a man with long hair and a beard, similar to a yogi (*yawgi*). Fuzzy black and white pictures inserted in the chapters illustrate Sunday-born Aye Nyunt's transformation into the seasoned astrologer Min Theinhka.

### **Min Theinhka's "un-mature" life**

Aye Nyunt was born on 25 June 1939 in Kyaungmyaung, a populous district of Tamwe (Yangon). He was the eldest of six children in a poor family. Later on, Min Theinhka contributed to build a familial house, which was still inhabited by his brother and his sister when he passed away in 2008. This was where he developed his astrologer career before settling in Mayantelin.

Aye Nyunt was born on a Sunday. The day of birth is a decisive factor in Burmese astrology and in persons' identification in any ritual context. It is associated to one of the eight "planets" (*gyo*) that form the panel of available planetary signs corresponding to eight weekdays: this is linked to the nine planet-cult, adapted from India, and represented in Burmese astrology on nine slots squares. The so-called *weekday-sign* determines a series of

related features, and among them a numeral that is crucial to astrological practice.<sup>13</sup> The horoscope (*zada*) – *i.e.* the record on palm leaves of the astral conjunction at day and hour of birth, carefully kept out of sight all life long –, is calculated by an astrologer soon after birth or at the time to enter school.<sup>14</sup> Initial consonants chosen for personal names correspond to the birth weekday and its associated planet.<sup>15</sup> The unmarked glottal stop at the initial of Aye Nyunt signifies that the boy was born on a Sunday, thus under the astral influence of the Sun (one of the eight “planets”). As found by Sean Dowdy in his study in Assam, personal names both unite with the person’s body and express their destiny.<sup>16</sup> However, one’s name can be changed later in life to alter the astral influence and thus act upon the individual’s life.

François Chenet (1985) has unpacked the long and complex Indian history of astrological determination of a person’s identity and life. It was introduced in India at the turn of present era when Greek horoscopic theory was incorporated into Sanskrit astral science and has progressively become nuanced by the *karma* theory of transmigration (Chenet 1985:117). The question he addresses in his erudite paper is how, in Indian philosophy, karmic theory-- through which destiny is considered as a person’s own deeds retribution (moral determination)-- has been articulated with the astrological practice of birth horoscopes and the choice of auspicious dates according to cosmic features. According to Chenet, this is grounded in the postulate that birth horoscopes have evolved to shed light on an individual’s karmic determination (Chenet 1985:126). Karmic theory is actually subsumed into astrology as an expression of destiny, as found by Caterina Guenzi in contemporary Indian astrological

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<sup>13</sup> Burmese astrology relies on various techniques: numerology (*baydin twek*) based on numerals (*genan*) associated to the planetary signs (*gyo*) and inscribed on a 9 slots square (*in*), and palm reading (*lethkena hpat*) are the main ones.

<sup>14</sup> See Shway Yoe (1963:12) for an instance of such horoscopes that were used as “certificate of birth” at the time the author was writing in 1882.

<sup>15</sup> Burmese names are personal, composed for each individual according to the day of birth and the planetary sign. There is no associated patronymic. The personal name can be changed to act upon one’s fate; see: Brac de la Perrière (1999) and Robinne (1998).

<sup>16</sup> See Sean Dowdy, “Reflections on a Shared Name: Taboo and Destiny in Mayon (Assam)” in *On Names in South Asia*, ed. Veena Das and Jacob Copeman, in *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* 12(2015).

practice, where both theories are recognized as (equally) orthodox although based on conflicting conceptual grounds: moral determination versus cosmic determination (Guenzi 2012:41-42). The Buddhist establishment in Burma, despite Indian astrological knowledge having been introduced long ago<sup>17</sup> may **not consider it** to have the same standing as karmic theory. However, that does not prevent the cosmic explanation of destiny to be all pervasive and for astrologers to be very much in demand.

Min Theinhka experienced life transformations which are emphasized by a parallel series of name changes. However, his last astrologer name does not signal his birth weekday planetary sign in the same way as do his other personal or pen names. Indeed, if we posit a link between name institution and identity reification implied in any biography, as Bourdieu did in his 1986 paper, we have to admit that Min Theinhka's name change shows not only a flexibility in his identity and destiny, but also a general movement away from an astrologically determined identity.<sup>18</sup>

As a child, Aye Nyunt went to various schools, where he was known as Aung Thun (with the same unmarked glottal stop that stands for "Sunday born"). The biographer describes how the boy announced his new name when his father took him to school for the first time, thus showing how the future Min Theinhka already acted as an astrologer by deciding on his own school name.<sup>19</sup> From school life, Min Theinhka recalled his love for calculus, a useful gift considering Burmese astrologers' lavish use of numerology. He also told of an episode in which an impatient teacher failed to answer his question. This led him to

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<sup>17</sup> See Bernot (1967) and Candier (this issue).

<sup>18</sup> Bourdieu's critic of the biographical method is grounded on the analysis of the name as the main social institution of identity ascription (*ibid.*: 84). However, following Saul Kripke's *Naming and Necessity*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980) Bourdieu deals with "*nom propre*", which does not function as the personal name in use in Burma.

<sup>19</sup> Robinne signals in « La notion de 'reste' » (91-105) that the astrologer is the only individual who calculates and chooses his own name.

make the vow that, as for himself, he would become a fulfilling master, able to help any eager-to-learn trainee.

His father was a signboard painter. His siblings also worked as astrologers, writers and cartoonists. At the age of 15, Aung Thun started to write short novels and published under the pen name Aung Soe. He continued to write throughout his life, achieving relative success as a novelist under various pen names, until he became the astrologer Min Theinhka. His activity as a writer seems to have been a needed counterpoint to his activity as an astrologer, each sustaining the other at times.

According to his biographer, Min Theinhka used to encapsulate his life as a young adult, his “un-mature life” (*bawa sein*), under “3 to 2” un-auspicious numerological signs: he married three times, but with only two women. At the age of 18, he fell in love and married Aye Aye Shway, but her family rejected him because he was too poor; they divorced the same year. He then joined the army and ended up at Chauk where he married a second time. He got his only son in 1961, but divorced again. Finally, in 1980, after he became known as Min Theinhka, he remarried his first love, Aye Aye Shway. The couple settled in downtown Yangon while he practiced astrology in the family house of Kyaungmyaung.

### **Min Theinhka’s turns towards political action and astrology**

Back in Yangon, in 1961, after his second divorce and quitting the army, the young man engaged in various petty jobs. Two years after Ne Win’s 1962 military coup, he joined the communist rebellion and went underground as Red Comrade (*Yeni*) Aung Thun. It is during this underground life that he started to study astrology. He read astrological books from a monastery library close to Shwenaban pagoda (Thingandjon, Yangon). Starting with manuscripts dealing with calculations of astrological squares (*in*, often translated “magical squares”) because of his love for mathematics, he soon turned to treaties on astrology

(*baydin*), palm reading (*lethkena*), Buddha's lives (*zat*) and other Buddhist readings. While these writings were not identified by the biographer, their presence in a monastic library raises the question of the status of *baydin* knowledge in Buddhist clerical education; it had supposedly been expelled from the latter by 19<sup>th</sup> century curriculum reforms (Dhammasami 2004).

Yeni Aung Thun was arrested in 1965, convicted, and was a political prisoner for 7 years. In Insein jail, he met political opponents who taught him English. When he was finally released in 1970, he used his new English skills to translate Western novels for literary journals.

Returning to civilian life, the Min Theinhka-to-be had already lived many lives and accumulated much wisdom (*pinnya*), according to his biographer. But he had to start his life over from scratch, travelling in rags to various pagodas in order to fulfill the religious vows made while in jail; vows he believed would free him from imprisonment. At Shwesandaw pagoda (Taunggu), he met a confirmed astrologer, *hsaya* Myint Soe Aung, who noticed his knowledge of astrology. It was then, in front of Myint Soe Aung, that he was inspired to become a famous astrologer under the name of Min Theinhka.<sup>20</sup> Myint Soe Aung received this announcement by paying him homage and promising that he would become Min Theinhka's first student. This episode amounts to a reversal of prevailing student-teacher relationships in where the astrologer-to-be is to pay homage to the already confirmed astrologer. It is an amazing feature of Min Theinhka's career highlighted in his biography.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> The biographer does not give any clue on the reason why Min Theinhka chose this name in particular. 'Theinhka' sounds like a Pali word but does not figure in Pali-Myanmar dictionaries while *min* is a title linked to any kind of sovereignty.

<sup>21</sup> This reversal may be compared, for instance, to Asoka making his infant nephew sit on his throne in recognition of the latter's spiritual status.

Aung Thun is thus pictured as reinventing himself as the astrologer Min Theinhka, a self-made astrologer who was never to be affiliated with any school of astrology.<sup>22</sup>

In 1974 however, he underwent training in traditional medicine. He also joined a group of eight astrologers at Shwebonpwin pagoda (Tamway, Yangon) that offered free consultations during the Tazaungmon full moon (November) every year under the name of Ayekantha Byakarana,<sup>23</sup> a practice he continued until he founded his camp in Hmawbi. Tazaungmon full moon is an important date for specialists dealing with the spiritual world, particularly *weikza* path specialists, because it offers an astral conjunction which makes cosmic energy (*dat*)- the force which allows *weikza* to act upon the world- more readily available.<sup>24</sup> In other words, *weikza*'s efficiency depends on astral configuration, and astrologers benefit from the energy generated by the spiritual perfection of *weikza* beings. This shows astrology's proximity with the *weikza* field, not only as one of its sub-disciplines, but also as a practice of power determined by spiritual achievement.

Two years later, Aung Thun was still in a precarious situation. His ageing parents had been evicted from their home while his younger siblings still had to get an education. Always in his rags, he decided to leave and make a living as astrologer Min Theinhka in Taunggyi, Southern Shan State. Why he chose Taunggyi is not clear. Was he expecting less competition there? Or was trying to avoid the harshness of Ne Win's rule? Whatever the case, he made a living through astrology during his three years in Taunggyi. He also wrote his most popular novel *Brahman Bakun* (*Ponna Bakun*). By 1978, he was an established astrologer and writer, and he returned to Yangon.

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<sup>22</sup> For auto-nomination as a practice of self-re-invention, see Bruce's (2015) paper on pen names in Urdu literature.

<sup>23</sup> The biographer does not comment about the group's name. *Ayekantha* means "reliability" and *Byakarana* refers to a "book on rituals" titled *Byakarain* (Judson's Dictionary) that corresponds to Sanskrit *vyakarana* that is "grammar" as one of the six vedic sciences (I thank Caterina Guenzi for this information).

<sup>24</sup> About Tazaungmon full moon importance for followers of *weikza* line, see Brac de la Perrière (2013).

According to his biographer, this period was also one of “mental” (*manaw*) maturation. Min Theinhka accrued greater karmic status through interacting with “religiously” or “spiritually” elevated people and studying religion (Buddhism). In Taunggyi, he met a master of the Shweyngyaw exorcist brotherhood – another sub-discipline of the *weikza* field – and he settled with Ba Me, an old esoteric master, in his family house in Kyaungmyaung. There he studied the writings of Ledi Hsayadaw, the reformist monk who popularized *wipathana* meditation (known as Vipassana) among lay people at the turn of the twentieth century. He also met personalities involved in Buddhist dispensation at the Shwedagon pagoda and read Herman Hesse’s *Siddhartha*. As his astrology practice led to spiritual maturation, his life and religious ideas changed for the better, commented his biographer. Through listing Min Theinhka’s various new undertakings, Theim Hkain draws the boundaries of a diverse field where *weikza* practice overlaps with Ledi Hsayadaw’s modernist Buddhism and more conventional lay Buddhist involvement as well, an eclectic field that does not fit any Burmese category but stands somewhere in between religious and spiritual practice. Indeed, the departure from his prior commitment to communism is striking, all the more so, given that communism is commonly associated with atheism.

### **Switching from spiritual life to political commitment and reverse**

Infuriated by 26 years of Ne Win’s ‘one party system’ and privation of liberties, in 1988 Burmese people rose up and started to protest in mass, led by students. At first, Min Theinhka, who had been part of the 1960’s communist underground rebellion, did not get involved, knowing too well, according to his biographer, that nothing good could come out of antigovernmental political action. However, his mother was moved by the dangers that students were facing; police had started to exert disproportionate violence. Min Theinhka then decided to take action. This move implied to leave the spiritual realm ritually: he took the vow (*adeittan yu*) in front of his Buddha image to fight against the one-party system. He joined a

political rally in front of the general hospital to address the public. He was granted the floor and all of a sudden “preached” (*taya ho-*) for democracy and human rights.<sup>25</sup> This act is striking not only for his decision to rejoin political life after his first aborted involvement in communism, but also because his decision was embedded in religious concepts (“taking a vow”, “preaching” democracy). This is presented in his biography as a rupture with his life as an astrologer.

All the rallies were recorded and widely circulated. Myat Hkaing, a journalist, interviewed Min Theinhka, asking if he, as an astrologer, could predict and prevent imprisonment. This sounded like a provocative trial of the astrologer’s efficiency. Min Theinhka answered that he knew that he would end up in jail and that no appropriate ritual means (*yadeya*) could impede this. This answer mirrors other historical situations of famous astrologers who have not been able to use their potent rituals to avoid imprisonment or death condemnation, like U Po and U Ponya in the nineteenth century.<sup>26</sup> More recently, in 2002 and 2004, two powerful astrologers – linked respectively to Ne Win’s grandsons and to Khin Nyunt, then Prime Minister of the government – were imprisoned when their patrons fell out of grace.<sup>27</sup> Up to this day, it is widely believed that ritual specialists have the ability both to bring and maintain politicians in power through ritual devices. However, this capacity only lasts as long as their patrons stay in power. Thus, it is striking that Min Theinhka’s political activism is both independent from any political patronage as well as separate from his astrology practice.

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<sup>25</sup> Beyond the odd use of religious vocabulary for political activism, one is also stricken by anachronistic use of “human rights” (*lu akwin ayay*) notion that was not yet circulating in 1988. Here we see clearly the 2015 writing biographer’s idiom.

<sup>26</sup> This has to be contrasted with stories that circulate about famous historical *weikza* beings, Bo Bo Aung and Bo Ming Gaung, who did use successfully their powers against unfair rule.

<sup>27</sup> These astrologers were respectively Sakya Aung Bwin Gaung operating at Yanmyoang pagoda (Thingandjon-Yangon) and convicted in 2002 for black magic in Ne Win grand-sons’ conspiracy case, and Than Hla who was linked to PM Khin Nyunt and was put in house of arrest in 2004 when his patron was accused of corruption.

Min Theinhka was arrested for a second time on the 13<sup>th</sup> of November 1989. He was convicted to life imprisonment. However, after he had made use of a self-serving *yadeya* to hinder number 13's bad omen, and promised not to "preach" politics anymore, he was released in 1992 and resumed his astrologer life.

From this narrative, we read that the use of astrologically determined potent rituals (*baydin yadeya*) was deemed impractical for political activism by Min Theinhka. However, it was through such rituals that he managed to escape from political life and imprisonment. Min Theinhka's alternative use of ritual efficiency for himself and for people in need, together with his dismissal of ritual practice when opposing unfair rule are intriguing. They are particularly interesting when seen against the backdrop of the rumored wild use of astrologically determined rituals (*yadeya*) by various members of the junta which, according to some, allowed them to maintain their positions of power. While *yadeya* use is generally stigmatized as superstition, that does not prevent its common use by individuals seeking to lessen misfortune; Min Theinhka was himself a famous provider of these ritual means. However, in politics, it seems that he shunned *yadeya* as if their potency was only available for those who yield power, not for their opposition. To my knowledge, while big names in the government have often been associated with infamous astrologers, this has never been the case for the main opponents to military dictatorial rule or for the NLD politicians who joined the civilian government in the last few years. However, this strict separation of astrological ritual action and political activism in Min Theinhka's practice may point to the unsaid tenet that astrology cannot be used against other beings unless one turns to black magic (*auklan*). Thus, it could be that Min Theinhka could not use astrology against dictatorial power because it went against his basic ethics as an astrologer. In this regard, *yadeya* would only be stigmatized as "superstition" when used by the "others" in power in deemed unethical ways.

After his second imprisonment, Min Theinhka never returned openly to political action. He restrained himself from any public criticism of the government, arguing that his health was too bad now to return to jail. However, his writings and the circulation of his image were censored between 1997 and 2001. In a new place he bought in Thuwana, East of Yangon, he resumed his life of astrologer, but limited himself to solving people's difficulties with rituals means (*yadeya*), not reading any more horoscopes. He continued teaching astrology, and writing and publishing astrology journals. He quickly gained renewed recognition, as prison had made his name greater still.

### **Leaving on a spiritual journey, becoming a great master**

This is when he decided to leave on a “spiritual” journey (*gambari hkeyi*) for three years, which is an identified practice of the *weikza* path. On the 25 March 1997, in what his biographer describes as a surprising development, he took a vow to practice meditation to get a specific spiritual power: the “third eye”. He thus abandoned his businesses, giving them over to his main disciples. He went to pay homage to his ageing mother, and drove away with two assistants “to tour a number of powerful pagodas and practice religion there.”

One can suspect that this leave was also a way to go into hiding, as 1997 was precisely when his writings and picture got censored, after the 1996 new youth uprising. Furthermore, we know that he ended up in the monastery of Hsangalay abbot, on the fringe of the Pegu hill range. Hsangalay was, back then, an influential monk whose preachings, despite being delivered in such a remote place, attracted so wide an audience that he aroused the suspicion of governmental authorities, who deprived him of his religious titles and functions. Min Theinhka then fled again to take refuge in the North of the Hmawbi jungle on a piece of land belonging to his friends. It was there he established Mayantelin. He stayed there in isolation until 25 March 2000, according to his vow, and then resumed his astrologer life in the camp,

which he developed continually until his death. In 2001, he returned to his literary life as a writer and a publisher of successful journals of astrology. The biographer highlights that before Min Theinhka returned to publishing, there were around 20 visitors to the camp each day. Later, daily visitors rose to hundreds, confirming the complementary functions of publishing and practicing astrology in cultivating Min Theinhka's success.

The free services offered in Mayantelin included: *yadeya* administration, children's name composition, and astrology teaching. Starting in 2003, and until his death on 1 August 2008, Min Theinhka vowed to feed every visitor. The camp worked as an autonomous community based on helping those in need and training them in Burmese forms of morality and knowledge, similarly to a number of other camps that developed during the 2000s.<sup>28</sup> Mayantelin was grounded in Min Theinhka's charisma, and financed by its flourishing publishing enterprises and donations from affluent followers.

Mayantelin was also a cultic complex populated with a rich iconography that evolved with time. Around 1998, Min Theinhka had written down and started to teach astrology principles established in the fellow specialists' group he had formed in his early practice, in Shwebonpwin pagoda. This group had taken the name of Ayekantha Byakarana, from the ritual book called *Byakarain*, which may be a version of Sanskrit grammar *Vyakarana*. However, it is difficult to ascertain whether the astrological principles taught by Min Theinhka were drawn from this ritual book. What seems probable from the description of his first astrological training as random reading of sources available in the Shwenaban monastic library is that his knowledge must have been quite eclectic, a characteristic that could not

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<sup>28</sup> For other examples of such autonomous establishments led by successful monks, see Brac de la Perrière (2015). One particularly interesting case is the camp established by Tabawa Dhamma Yeiktha abbot in Syriam. See also McCarthy (2020) about the development of religious social action since 88 events, meant to compensate for the lack of governmental social service and being understood as acts of opposition to military rule.

have been completely erased in the formalization process that was undertaken a decade later among his peers of the Ayekantha Byakarana group.

Min Theinhka had these astrological principles inscribed on 37 stone slabs set in Mayantelin to insure their perpetuation. The number 37 can refer to cultic collectives such as the 37 Lords of the spirit possession pantheon. The inscribed teachings evoke the *dhamma* scripture inscribed on stone slabs settled by King Mindon to the North of his palace in Mandalay, in Kuthodaw pagoda, around 1870. All these undertakings reveal that the astrological practice that Min Theinhka learnt from books, without masters, and that he then developed among a group of peers, was meant to become a new teaching, deserving of a cult, which had to be passed down from master to disciple. Min Theinhka seems to have built his reputation as a great master through the creation of a new lineage in astrology.

However, Min Theinhka's health declined and he was hospitalized various times. On one occasion, he was miraculously cured by making use of *yadeya*. He went to Bangkok to be examined, but refused arterial surgery; he passed away on 1 August 2008. The biographer insists on the formulation that he “went out of the terrestrial world” (*myay kamba hma pyan le htwek hkwa*) rather than the usual expressions of *kwe lun* (to pass away) or *bawa ku pyaung* (to change of life). Min Theinhka's body was not cremated but placed in a tomb in Yayhle cemetery (North Yangon). The tomb was equipped with a small hole as had been done for the *weikza* Bo Min Gaung in Poppa, as to allow to “way out” (*htwek ya pauk*) of his karmic cycle. Without blatantly claiming a *weikza* status for Min Theinhka, the biographer obviously implies that there is a possibility that the astrologer “passing away” was a *weikza* karmic cycle “way out”.

### **The post-mortem destiny of bodily remains**

2020, 6<sup>th</sup> January. With my friend, I take the bus to Hmawbi to check what has become of Mayantelin. I visited in 2010 only to find the place in a decrepit state after Min Theinhka's disappearance, consistent with Rozenberg's comment that achievements of a Buddhist saint during his life – his material dispensation (*thathana*) – do not survive his passing away (Rozenberg 2007).

Since 2010, things have changed around Hmawbi. Now, the camp's surroundings have been cleared of astrologers' shacks. There are establishments offering meditation facilities to foreign yogis and luxurious estates. Mayantelin is still there. Although operating at a slow pace, it continues to deliver free instruction to apprentice astrologers linked to Min Theinhka's school. A couple of ritual specialists are in charge of the cultic complex with some five students; hardly enough to maintain the establishment.

The couple now in charge of the camp are not direct disciples of Min Theinhka. The woman explained to me how five years earlier – in 2015, the year *Min Theinhka's Biography* was published – while she was practicing as a ritual specialist (*medaw*) in Myauk Dagon (Yangon), Min Theinhka gave her a dream. According to this dream, she had to undertake the construction of a particular Buddhist sanctuary at Mayantelin: a pavilion featured with three monumental reliquaries (*zaydi*) respectively shaped as a pot, a gourd and a bottle.<sup>29</sup> She raised enough funds for the construction, and encouraged by this success, has since settled there. The establishment has been reorganized to fit the use that she has of it, with her companion, mainly receiving people consulting for health or destiny problems that they cure through particular rituals.

While continuing their practice at Mayantelin, the *medaw* and her astrologer companion seemed on their way to transforming the camp into a memorial for Min Theinhka.

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<sup>29</sup> The *medaw* did not comment about the meaning of the shape of these three reliquaries. Instead, her discourse was focused on the fact that if her dream had become true, it was a proof of her spiritual link to Min Theinhka.

Min Theinhka's memory is everywhere there. He is represented by many statues, together with some statues of Bomingaung, the more revered *weikza* in Burma today. The *medaw* further added that she often dreamt of Min Theinhka. His tomb however was still in Yayhle, the main cemetery North of Yangon, but "we (the *medaw*, the astrologer and probably other devotees supporting them) are waiting for Min Theinhka's family's authorization to bring back the tomb here, because we take him to have achieved *weikzahood*", the *medaw* plainly stated. In other words, people in charge of the camp are capitalizing on Min Theinhka's success as an astrologer to grant him a *weikza* status and to transform Mayantelin into a cultic place that could become a ritual asset.

***Min Theinhka's Biography in regard to attuppatti as a Burmese genre and to life stories of other specialists***

It is significant that the new people in charge of Mayantelin settled there in 2015, when *Min Theinhka's Biography* was published by Min Theim Hkaing: they actually may have replaced him at the head of the camp. Both developments seem to be part of the same project to recollect and celebrate the astrologer's life as a *weikza*-to-be. Although the biographer did not openly claim so in his writing, in contrast with the *medaw's* plain statement, the fact that he wrote his piece in form of an *attuppatti* is an indication of it.

*Attuppatti* is a Burmese biographical genre originally honoring Buddhist saints, outstanding monastics or religious virtuosos (*yahanda, thera, weikza*) but can also be used for particular objects or institutions. It may be considered hagiographical and paradigmatically framed by Buddhist "biographical imagination". A striking feature of this biographical imagination as identified by J.S. Walter is the need to deal with the sacred person's previous lives in order to uncover the salvation path to common people (Walter 1997). Retribution of actions performed in previous lives would explain this life's particularities, according to

karmic determination. As put by Gustaaf Houtman, traditional Burmese Buddhist biography displays a marked “fuzziness” with respect to distinction between history and biography and relates individual life as dispersed into the context of a lineage history (Houtman 1997).

In Buddhist biographical imagination, knowledge of previous lives depends on one’s spiritual achievements. This paradoxically goes with the predicament that the spiritual achievements the biography seeks to highlight cannot be self-asserted during one’s life time and are only legible by one’s followers through bodily remains’ post mortem destiny. This explains this hagiographical genre’s extension to body relics and the elaboration of reliquary monuments such as *stupa* as Buddha’s cosmic biographies (Mus 1935). Autobiography does not fit this literary genre (Rozenberg 2005). Buddhist hagiographies are necessarily posthumous artefacts made out of signs of spiritual perfection as recollected by followers who believe in and construct the post mortem destiny of the perfected person.<sup>30</sup>

Pierre Bourdieu’s well-known critique of biographical method questions the attribution of preconceived meaning to lives -- that is their predetermination (Bourdieu 1986). This applies to the *attuppatti* genre inasmuch as it is framed as karmically determined. As commented by François Dosse, Bourdieu critiques biographical method for its tendency to depict life events as following a pre-defined path, or a consistent vision, while these are in fact the product of biographers’ intentions (Dosse 2005). According to Nathalie Heinich, Bourdieu’s provoking comment came out at the wrong time, in Michel Pollack’s 1986 special issue of *Archives de la Recherche en Science Sociale* dedicated to Shoah survivors’ testimonies (Heinich 2010). She analyses that it was Bourdieu’s response to the recent development of “micro-history” and studies of “life stories” that may have caused him to perceive the biographical method as an antithesis of his *habitus* theory. As put by Jean-Claude

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<sup>30</sup> *Attuppatti* may be considered against the backdrop of *jataka* that is an Indian biographical genre based on the belief that the planets are indicative of karma (Chenet, *ibid.*: 114). In Burma, *jataka* are only known as the series of previous lives of the historical Buddha.

Passeron, biographical material is just as good as any other historical data to consider (Passeron 1990). For Bourdieu himself, the awareness of the biographer's intention should not ignore "social mechanisms that foster or authorize ordinary experience of life as a unity or a whole" (Bourdieu 1986: 83).

In our case, the intention resides in the biographer's project to write down the astrologer's life in the shape of an *attuppatti*. In the process of telling how Min Theinhka developed his astrology school, Min Theim Hkaing also explains how he became his main disciple. He came to Mayantelin as a lost youngster named Aung Myo Htun – sounding similar to Aung Thun, the astrologer's school name – and asked Min Theinhka to accept him as his student. The astrologer agreed, renaming him Min Theim Hkaing, "the 21st century Min Theinhka"! Parallel changes of names between master and disciple, both signaling an equal rupture in their lives, forecast a similar writer-astrologer career for the young man. Again, one can see how names express the destiny as governed by astral influence while serving as tools to act upon it. To tell this story was probably a way for the biographer to claim inheritance of his master practice, a contested claim as demonstrated by the evolving situation found in Mayantelin in 2020.

However, to write Min Theinhka's life story in the shape of an *attuppatti* also speaks of a desire to assert his spiritual status and of the project to follow his steps on this path. As it claims to belong to *attuppatti* genre, the piece could be expected to be framed by the Buddhist biographical imagination. However, it deviates from the *attuppatti* paradigm by lack of any reference to Min Theinhka's previous lives. There is no mention of his karma except at the very end, when he is said to refuse arterial surgery "to keep the body he got from karma", while he had spent his career to apply *yadeya* technology to better his destiny. In this regard, *Min Theinhka attuppatti* does not quite fit the standard of a Buddhist hagiography.

If we compare Min Theinhka's astrologer vocation with the life stories told by other specialists such as spirit mediums or specialists of *weikza* cults, we realize that there is not a single allusion to any spiritual being's intervention.<sup>31</sup> On the contrary, Min Theinhka appears as a self-made astrologer, naturally gifted for mathematics and learning, who got his knowledge of astrology through his own study of books. In this sense, his trajectory is depicted as profane; voluntarist rather than spiritually oriented.

Although *attuppatti* as Buddhist biography includes lay people, particularly famous literati and outstanding figures of the national imagination,<sup>32</sup> it does not seem to fit particularly well for the lives of experts in presumed mundane forms of knowledge and practice such as astrology. Not a hagiography, nor framed according to spiritual calling, Min Theinhka's life recorded as an *attuppatti* points towards a tension between his lay career in astrology and his unusual "spiritual" status of a *weikza*-to-be coalescing around his departed figure.

### **The self-made astrologer, rescued from political commitment through spiritual achievements**

Through inscribing the astrologer's life story in *attuppatti* genre, his biographer, Min Theim Hkaing, contributes to build his *weikza* status. But still, Min Theinhka's life events remain, calling us to look at how his career of astrologer has developed out of his successive moves from one field of action to another one. Looked at from this angle, his destiny seems to have shifted away from the astral determination of his birth on Sunday, in a poor family. It was his own will to twice engage in political action. Both times, his action was barred by powers-that-be and he had to overcome his disempowered situation through turning to

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<sup>31</sup> For an analysis of such transmission cases, see Brac de la Perrière (2009).

<sup>32</sup> See Houtman (1997). « The Biography of Modern Burmese Buddhist Meditation Master U Ba Khin » for a lay person biography's study.

astrology and potent rituals. Both times, renouncing political action pushed him towards a more religiously inclined quest of spiritual progress while managing his life in the world through his astrologer practice. In this biography, political action stands in opposition to religious and spiritual ones, and astrology is the device allowing to shift from one side to the other.

*Min Theinhka's Biography* highlights the fact that his astrologer career was governed by his own decisions, even though they were made in the form of “religious” vows (*adeittan*: made in front of a Buddha image)<sup>33</sup>. Particularly remarkable is the story of how he formed the project to become an astrologer after his difficult start in life: he was recognized by an established astrologer as an astrologer-to-be before he even started any practice. The decision is presented as immediate and imposed on him a total engagement. He invented himself as an astrologer and this allowed him to change his life for the better, a rupture signaled and performed by his change of name: astrology was a way to overcome his fate. Through self-determination, the astrologer Min Theinhka became an individual acting upon his world. This contrasts with spirit mediums whose vocation follows from the calling of spirits, and with *weikza* who claim karmic links to other spiritual beings which give them dreams, visions or hearings.

Clearly, the means of Min Theinhka's manipulations of his world are astrological. His biography is entirely built in numerology, the main technique of Burmese astrology, linked to week days that function as *weekday-signs*, *i.e.* planetary signs correlated to numerals among other features. This allows to read past and future (*baydin twek*) and also to act upon ones' life through *yadeya* use *i.e.* potent ritual means such as the ones forged by Min Theinhka when in jail to undo the number 13 curse. Min Theinhka appears as a specialist of *yadeya*, naming his

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<sup>33</sup> About this Buddhist notion, see Rozenberg, *ibid.*

camp in Hmawbi a “land of *yadeya*”, and offering there a systematized service of *yadeya* in order to answer to various demands of people.<sup>34</sup>

When back from his second stay in jail and particularly after his “spiritual” journey, when he settled in Hmawbi, he dismissed mere astrological prediction (*baydin ho*) and turned towards free administration of ritual means (*yadeya kyay*). Two aspects of this distinctive move in his practice may be considered. First, to distance himself in this way from forecasting makes him more of a healer: this already equates to a displacement in the astrological field.<sup>35</sup> Second, he has turned to the free administration of *yadeya*, which must be understood against other astrologers’ practice for large remunerations, particularly through their connection with people in power. Instead, Min Theinhka’s practice sought to rescue people in need. This program, still reinforced by the Sunday free feeding practices, sounds very similar to *weikza* ideals.<sup>36</sup> It also stands in line with the contemporary development of social action in civil society, both to palliate the lack of governmental social services and to mark an opposition to the government, when political opposition is impracticable. Min Theinhka’s new practice was a significant move in both the *weikza* and political spheres while retaining astrological technology. However, his distance with astrological forecasting (*baydin ho-*) still needs to be understood in the context of contemporary debates about astrology as superstition.

As with most people in Burma, Min Theinhka’s life was impacted by the two major political crises that occurred in the beginning of the sixties and at the turn of the nineties. On both occasions, Min Theinhka involved himself in political action, in the opposition to the

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<sup>34</sup> Min Theinhka’s system of *yadeya* administration at Mayantelin is worth noticing, as it represents a true rationalization of ordinary consultations meant to accommodate his numerous clientele. After a preliminary evaluation of the cases, patients who were similarly affected were grouped together according to their trouble in order to administer collectively *yadeya* to cohort of patients.

<sup>35</sup> The implicit critic of « prediction » (*baydin ho*) implied by this displacement would deserve further investigations to document if it occurred in the context of specific debates; or of local conflicts such as those that may have occurred at this time in Mayantelin surroundings where monk-astrologers were renown for giving lottery numbers. See Rozenberg (2005).

<sup>36</sup> See Foxeus (2011) about the *weikza* ideal of rescuing Buddhist humanity.

military in power, and ended up in jail. Engagement in astrology practice is presented as the solution he imagined for himself to the privation of liberty and agency that was experienced by many at these times, and as an alternative to political commitment.

As a matter of fact, 1962 and 1988 were turning points alike in the lives of many ritual specialists, leading to their shifting from political opposition to the quest for some sort of spiritual power. For Min Theinhka, the practice of astrology was a way to recover command on his life after the dire disempowerment of political opposition under Ne Win and the post-88 military juntas. The contrasting use of *yadeya* by Min Theinhka and by astrologers linked to men in power is also worth noticing again: the latter are known to have used these potent rituals to maintain their power while Min Theinhka declared that no *yadeya* could be used for political opposition. More significantly, Min Theinhka seems to have lived astrological and political involvement as two conflicting ways to act upon the world, taking religious leave of his astrological vows before engaging in politics, and resuming his astrologer life through a specific *yadeya*. However, his program of free *yadeya* administration in Mayantelin may have been for him a way to resolve this quandary. It looks like a clear departure from an ordinary astrologer practice towards the rescuing ideals of *weikza* practitioners preventing any charge of black magic (*aukklan*) against him.

Min Thein Hka's life and career can be compared to other forms of life stories, such as those of nineteenth century astrologers, U Po and U Ponya, whose fates are known through historical relations; or those of other astrologers and ritual specialists such as spirit mediums whose vocations are told in oral histories passed down from master to disciples together with ritual objects (Brac de la Perrière 2009). In the case of spirit mediums, these mainly oral stories are meant to assert specialists' lineage ritual authority. Astrological treatises also ground their authority on listing the lineage of their authors, as we can see from the introduction of U Tay

Hlaing's compilation of U Po's writings.<sup>37</sup> In this regard, the specificity of Min Theinhka's life trajectory is also revealed as that of a self-made astrologer whose astrological credentials were progressively acquired through eclectic readings, mathematic abilities and collegial sharing.

Finally, the career of Min Theinhka is marked by a number of travels, most notably: his stay in Taunggyi where he started the practice of astrology; and his sudden departure for a "spiritual" journey as part of the *weikza* practice, abandoning his writer-astrologer enterprises. Itinerance is a common feature of various religious and spiritual specialists to gain practical experience.

Astrology is one of the disciplines belonging to the *weikza* field and many practices of astrologers demonstrate the proximity with this field. Not all astrologers are seen as *weikza* path followers. Min Theinhka's departure for a spiritual travel (*gambari hkeyi*) looks like a move towards this path. This travel marks the beginning of his most outstanding enterprise: foundation of Mayantelin, an establishment of rescuing and training in Burmese forms of morality and knowledge.

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Min Theinhka's biography presents particularities that prevent us from generalizing about the astrologer persona. As a social product, this biography displays features that could be used to comment on astrology and its place in the Burmese cultural world. The tensions and tropes revealed through its examination are inherent to the field of astrology in Burma, particularly, the ambiguous relationship of astrology with both politics and religion. Looking at the successive displacements operated by Min Theinhka during his lifetime, one observes that he makes cumulative use of alternative types of cultural capital available to him, to build

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<sup>37</sup> Tay Hlaing, *ibid.*

a power of a sort and overcome his destiny, no matter if one considers it determined karmically, astrologically or politically. Political opponent, successful writer or famous astrologer, all these positions concurred at different times to build his identity. At the end, it seems that the career of Min Theinhka as an astrologer led him to a spiritual accomplishment that raises the question of his *weikza* status eligible to an *attupatti*.

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