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Dr. Sarah Bekker

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Tributes to Artists and a Scholar

It's my pleasure in this issue to take note of two recent events of interest to Burmanists: two performances of Burmese music and dance plus a workshop at the Asia Society in New York City last December; and a panel to honor Sarah Bekker's contributions to Burma studies held at the Asian Studies Meetings in San Diego this past March. Although one occasion was in the nature of entertainment and the other of scholarship, the fact is that both were at once entertaining, instructive, and fun.

Rather than make readers of this Bulletin take my word for how enjoyable the Burmese performers in New York were, I happily yield to two writers from the *New York Times*, whose articles I have obtained permission to reprint below. And for the event honoring Sarah Bekker, readers can share in some of the pleasure because Melford Spiro, Monique Skidmore, Catherine Raymond and Sylvia Lu have all been good enough to send along materials they prepared for the event. —*The Editor*

Burmese Music and Dance Make a Splash in Manhattan

Rachel Cooper and her colleagues at the Asia Society in New York accomplished the amazing feat of bringing a group of musicians and a dancer from Rangoon to New York in December to take part in two performances on succeeding evenings, plus an afternoon workshop on Burmese music. The astonishing part is not the travel (dumbstruck though our ancestors would

have been at how easy the trip has become) but rather the bureaucratic triumph of getting two governments (American and Burmese) to let this happen. Hats off to Rachel, then, and to unnamed associates in New York and Rangoon for sticking with a process that had its fair share of hair-raising moments.

The Burmese artists were joined by others, associated with the Lotus Foundation, resident in the New York area. Both performances were packed and were received rapturously. It would be nice to think that this was the start of a surge of interest in Burmese music and dance in the U.S. It's too soon to tell, I suppose—and the stars are perhaps not yet perfectly aligned for such a development. But the fact that the *Times* carried two articles about the performances, one a few days in advance, the second a review shortly after, attests to the interest they aroused. And Pareles's review strikes me as remarkably discerning for someone who is unfamiliar with Burmese performing arts. Here follow the two articles. —*The Editor*

Like Father, Like Son: Burmese Sounds in New York

Kyaw Kyaw Naing stood in front of his orchestra yesterday morning, its musicians just in from Myanmar, and prepared to begin a rehearsal. The players fell silent, and Mr. Naing raised his hands as if to speak but instead burst into tears.

"My heart is overwhelmed, I'm so happy," he said through an interpreter. "I've been trying so hard to bring this music to the world stage, and these are all my father's

friends, and my teachers. I wish my father was here to see it."

Mr. Naing, who has lived in the United States for about four years, is one of the world's leading practitioners of Burmese music, a style so little known in the West that few recordings exist of it here. Experts say a performance by a full ensemble from Myanmar, the Southeast Asian country formerly known as Burma, has not taken place in New York in almost 30 years.

But tomorrow and Saturday at the Asia Society in Manhattan, Mr. Naing will lead a 19-piece music and dance group, including nine performers who arrived from Myanmar on Tuesday. The last time a Burmese orchestra played in New York was in 1975 at the Asia Society, the organization says, and it was led by Mr. Naing's father, U Sein Chit Tee. Two of the players this weekend performed with Mr. Naing's father at that concert.

Rachel Cooper, who directs the performing arts program at the Asia Society, said she had worked for more than two years to set up the concert, dealing with the bureaucracies of Yangon and Washington and carefully establishing trust with the musicians. She traveled to Myanmar twice and nearly brought the group here in April, but passport problems got in the way.

"When governments cannot talk to each other," she said to the musicians at yesterday's rehearsal, "music and dance speak to humanity."

Cut off from the West by a military dictatorship and trade restrictions, Myanmar has remained relatively unexplored by scholars and world-music aficionados.

"Everybody is listening to everything from everywhere now," said Evan Ziporyn, a music professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who plays with Bang on a Can and has performed with Mr. Naing, "but Burmese music is one of the last frontiers of world music."

Mr. Naing, 39, who now lives in Sunnyside, Queens, is a master of the pat waing, a traditional Burmese drum-circle instrument, where the player sits in the middle of a horseshoe-shaped shell made of elaborately carved wood decorated with gold leaf. He will lead the ensemble—which is to include 12 musicians and 7 dancers—in a sampling of Burmese music, including excerpts from a zat pwe, an all-night variety show that includes music, dance, comedy and drama. Many of the instruments and sets, which have been shipped in from Myanmar, belong to Mr. Naing's family and were used at the 1975 concert by Mr. Naing's father.

Mr. Naing has slowly been building a career as a Burmese musician in America. Mr. Ziporyn said he first encountered him at a concert at a church in Brookline, Mass., several years ago, and invited him to a workshop at M.I.T., where he arrived with his pat waing on the back of a pickup truck. Since then Mr. Naing has performed with Bang on a Can and toured with a group from U.C.L.A.

But Burmese music has remained a mystery to most listeners. The Nonesuch Explorer series, an exhaustive set of world-music albums issued from the 1960's to the 80's, bypassed the country altogether. But things have begun to change. In the last six years Shanachie, Auvidis/Unesco and Smithsonian Folkways have all released albums of Burmese music, which have been received enthusiastically by critics and a small but devoted group of fans.

Percussive, melodic and dizzyingly fast, Burmese music has been likened to both the music for Balinese gamelans and jazz. The Burmese have also adapted certain Western instruments for performance in traditional ensembles. In addition to the pat waing and saing waing—a large percussion ensemble led by the pat waing player—the concerts this weekend will feature the Burmese piano and slide guitar.

The piano first entered the country's music after it was given to a Burmese court in the mid-19th century as a gift from the Italian ambassador, according to an essay commissioned by the Asia Society, which is presenting the performance with Lotus Music and Dance.

Mr. Naing said that like jazz musicians, Burmese players "look at one another and listen to the tune and play accordingly."

"And even though they might play the same piece of music, the next time they play it differently," he said.

But does it sound anything like jazz?

"No," Mr. Naing said with a laugh, "it's totally different.

Ben Sisario
New York Times, December 11, 2003.

From Myanmar, Sounds That Surprise

The music glittered before it began when the Asia Society presented an ensemble of musicians and dancers from Myanmar led by Kyaw Kyaw Naing on Friday night.

The ensemble was an all-star band, assembling many of the most respected virtuosos from Myanmar, formerly Burma. Their instruments—including Mr. Naing's circle of tuned drums (pat waing) and racks of gongs of many sizes—were housed in a gilded, filigreed bandstand that looked like a royal barge, complete with a golden-winged mythical beast poised above a drummer's head. The metallic gleam and ornate decoration carried over to the music. But the formality did not.

The concert began with elegant solos and duos: a serene singer's melody underlined by xylophone (patala), a shimmering solo for silk-stringed harp (saung gauk), a fantasia for piano (an instrument introduced to Burma in the mid-19th century) that borrowed European Romantic flourishes but used the pianist's forefingers like xylophone mallets, and a piece for slide guitar (introduced to Burma during World War II) that sometimes hinted at the blues amid the Burmese modes.

Yet when the full ensemble, called Hsaing Waing, got together, its music was unmistakably merry. Burmese music is kin to Indonesian gamelan music, which also features gongs and drums, but it has its own nearly manic timing. The compositions were boundlessly melodic romps with hne (oboe), pat waing and gongs chasing one another through the tunes while drums and cymbals crashed and the musicians shouted jovial banter.

To a Western ear, Burmese music is an exhilarating tease, defying expectations of symmetry or steady tempo. A phrase might be repeated like a big-band riff or never heard again; a terse line is followed by one that just keeps on going. Tunes that start out as stately as fanfares wind up scampering at top speed, while melodic lines may be

staggered between instruments, bounced around like question-answer exchanges or suddenly played in precise unison, accelerating as they go. Instead of marking the beginning of a phrase, as Western percussion often does, the Burmese percussionists often kicked in at the end of a melody.

The pieces had passages of improvisation, including a solo by Mr. Naing that worked arpeggios around his *pat waing* so quickly he could have been strumming a harp.

The dancers, directed by U Win Maung, were decked out as elaborately as the stage, with flowered headdresses, pearl chokers, floral garlands and long pink skirts with gleaming threads. Those were the two men. Three women wore long dresses and made poised wrist movements as they balanced a candle in each hand in a dance to welcome the return of the Buddha to Earth. The men danced with precisely angled limbs and had more comic moments; Maung Maung Myint Swe imitated the movements of a marionette, collapsing at the end as if his strings had gone slack.

In the last part of the concert the men sang and danced in a style popularized in the late 1960's and 70's that is still part of all-night village celebrations. The dances became slightly more acrobatic, with kneeling dips and twirls. And the songs had a steady, hand-clapping beat and shorter tunes, a shade closer to Western pop, until the ensemble took over and sent them scurrying and clanging again. It was popular entertainment that could please any crowd.

Jon Pareles
New York Times, December 15, 2003.

Strange Yet Familiar: Foreign Musical Instruments in Myanmar/Burma

Kit Young has long been an enthusiast of Burmese music. Rachel Cooper asked her to contribute comments on Burma's unusual reception of Western instruments since the end of the last century for the web page that the Asia Society put up in connection with the performances there in December. Kit and Rachel have been kind enough to permit me to reproduce those comments here. –The Editor

Burmese musicians' use of foreign instruments in the last one hundred and fifty years or so has both enchanted and perplexed the ear of many newcomers to the music of lowland Burma/Myanmar.

Foreign listeners recognize familiar timbres--those of the piano, violin, mandolin, Hawaiian slack key guitar, concertina, euphonium, banjo, trombone--and delight in a totally new character of sound introduced by necessity: the adaptation of these instruments to complement and merge with the Burmese *hsain wain* (percussion/gong chime ensemble which includes the 21-drum circle known as the *pa' wain*), *patela* (xylophone), *saun gauk* (arched harp) and *hne* (oboe).

Each newcomer instrument went through an evolutionary re-adjustment to match the soundscapes of musicians in the Burmese royal court (mid-1800s), such as *za' pwe* (outdoor theatre), *na' pwe* (accompanying na' spirit worship), *you'thei pwe* (marionette theatre) from the late 1800s and both silent and sound movies from the 1920s to the present day.

U Khin Zaw, the great pioneering and lively writer on Burmese music, described seeing in the early 1950's a za' pwe performance which combined a hsain wain group on stage-left answered by a piano, violin, clarinet, brass band and trap set on stage-right.

Would the two mix well? It depended on the discretion with which the mixture was arranged. Tone, resonance, timbre, capacities and limitations of Western instruments are quite different from Burmese instruments. The former might have precision, the latter might have grace. Would there be a sensitive understanding of the nature of the different instruments to exploit their use with discretion? Well, I listened to the overture attentively and enjoyed it from beginning to end.

And he adds,

The voluminous statement of the brass was retaliated by the eloquence of the hnai (large oboe). The accents of the piano were echoed by the impact of the drums with gusto. The traps were overwhelmed by the bamboo clappers. If this judicious mixture could be extended to the traditional marionette and modern stage, all would be well.

This practice is still in use today at za' pwe, with the updated addition of amplification for younger generation rock bands and the introduction of Burmese hip hop and rap singers occasionally accompanied by the rock band *and* the hsain.

Sandaya: The Piano in Burma/Myanmar

The pa' wain and patala players in the court of King Mindon at Mandalay (1850s to 1870s) took immediately to the piano when it showed up at court as a present from the Italian ambassador. Apparently King Mindon had desired a piano and instructed one of his ministers to take notes on the construction of a piano while on a trip to England to report on various technological advances. (Desai)

Sandaya Hla Tut and Sandaya Sagaing La Shwe pointed to the *santir* (Persian dulcimer) as the source of the word, *sandaya*. Present day composer Sandaya U Thein Maung of the Myoma Amateur Musicians' Association suggests two speculative derivations for the word. The first sees the word as resulting from an elision of two words in Burmese, one meaning machine and the second, *yandaya*, meaning 'complicated parts.' Another suggested etymology was offered as *san de wa wa* or 'feeling around with one's hands like a blind person,' which was what the court musicians reputedly did in Mandalay and Ava when the piano first arrived.

Nevertheless, the musicians at King Mindon's court quickly regained their "sight" as the white keys of the piano became equivalents for the keys of the patala and the substitute pitches for the drums of the pa' wain. One finger of each hand approximated the mallet strikes on a patala or strokes on the pa' wain. Musicians experimented with retuning the white keys to approximate their own familiar raised 4th and lowered 7th scale degrees, making it easier to modulate among the Burmese modes.

A completely unique technique of interlocked fingering with both hands extending in a single melodic line allowed for agogic embellishment, fleeting grace notes in syncopated spirals around a steady underlying beat, found in the *si* and *wa* (bell and clapper). Rarely, in the early days of sandaya, was keyboard geography divided into the bass left- and treble right-hand configurations which we find in Western piano music.

Immediately heard--as a result of this kinesthetic and aural adaptation--were the characteristic textures of quickly-released keys, abrupt entrances, sudden accents and decrescendos of sound, delighting Burmese audiences with echos of the *patala*, *pa' wain* and *saun gauk*. Percussive strikes on the keys matched the sound of dampened mallets on the *patala* or dampened palm on the head of a drum. All of these textures imitated the expressive techniques (*han*) of Burmese singing.

At the core of Burmese traditional music is the Mahagita or 'Great Music,' a collection of verses and memorized song forms passed through generations for the last three hundred years. The various genres of these songs form a pedagogic tool introducing techniques of embellishment and arrangement of melodic patterns in improvised *ti kwe'*. The musical lines tend to be monophonic with occasional supporting intervals (9th, 7th, 4th, 5th, being the predominant) at pivotal phrase points. Melodic phrases weave between lower and higher registers of the octave. As more Western instruments appeared in a Burmese context, their Burmese properties were discovered and quickly developed. The melodic textures of traditional music were included in popular song as accompaniments by the new instruments.

Silent Movies and Home-grown Accompaniments: Cornets, Violins, Pianos, Banjos, Guitars, Trombones and More!

While we can only speculate on the approximate arrival points of western instruments into Burma/Myanmar, it is the Burmanization of these instruments, which we hear on old recordings and imagine through anecdotal history, that becomes a point of fascination for the unaccustomed listener.

The first English silent movie was introduced to audiences in Rangoon around 1915. Burmese studied film techniques and began making silent films with local themes which were shown to the live accompaniment of cornet and drum. Burmese musician Ko Oo Kah was a *hsain saya* who played an upright piano at Rangoon's first movie theatre: the Cinema de Paris. It stood on the grounds of Bogkyoke Market in present-day Yangon. Ko Oo Kah accompanied the first extended silent film in 1920: *Myittha Hnit Thuyei* or 'Love and Liquor.'

As the film industry developed in the 1930s and 1940s, more instruments were added to the music ensembles. In the days of the late silent films, *tayaw* (violin) and sandaya were used with a combo of saxophone, trombones, trumpet, slack-key guitar, banjo, and trumpet--playing along with the *hsain wain*. When film reels were changed, the ensembles would play interludes with variable numbers of players and flexible improvisation.

More than a few pairs of ears, however, couldn't adapt to a mix of Burmese and Western instruments. At the Cinema de Paris, all Western films were accompanied by two pianists who demanded that the

piano be kept at a Western tempered tuning. When the Burmese films were shown in alternating two week spans, Ko Oo Kah would return the white keys of the piano to Burmese hne pitches and not use the black keys. The Anglo-Indian pianist, Mr. Robin, would arrive later in the week and bitterly complain about how impossibly out-of-tune the instrument was. The piano was so frequently tuned and “out-of-tuned” that the piano action’s rapid decay escalated into an unfixable crisis for lack of spare parts. Ko Oo Kah eventually won out by borrowing the hammer shanks and screws of the black keys and attaching them to the white keys for his sessions accompanying the movies.

As for the sound of the sandaya, regardless of the style in which it was played, some musicians objected to the various musical evolutions surrounding them. Sandaya Sagaing Hla Shwe quotes the famous Burmese singer, Daw San Mya Aye Kyi:

The sound from the sandaya is totally different from the patala and saun gauk which I have preferred since childhood. The sandaya is accented, sharp, hard, just like a foreigner trying too hard to sound like a typical Burmese. I have no heart to sing along with the sandaya.

The Burmese violinists (including the horn violinists), having unfretted fingerboards and slides, easily adjusted their fingering and ears to whichever style--Western or Burmese--was required.

Slide Guitar (Hawaiian Slack-Key Guitar)

The slack-key guitar was introduced into Burma/Myanmar during World War II around 1943. The string tunings were changed to two sets of g-c-f and a plucking, rather than a strumming, technique was

emphasized, echoing the plucking of the saun gauk. The slack-key guitar was recently featured as a competitive instrument in the Myanmar Government-sponsored *Hsou-Ka-Yei-Ti*, the ‘Singing, Dancing, Song-writing and Instrumental Performance’ competition. Almost all contestants in the 2003 competition were over fifty years of age, which suggests its loss of popularity or relevance for younger generations. The slack-key guitar techniques were used for both playing with the hsain wain and as accompaniment for *hki’ haun thehcin* or popular songs of the 40is and 50is.

Continuum

Burmese musicians continue to experiment with new possibilities of scale and sound. Well-known pa’ wain player U Kyau’ Sein likes to try out chromatic passages and modulating chords when he improvises, constantly tuning his set of 21 drums. He is well-known for his version of Joplin’s “Maple Leaf Rag,” temporarily un-Burmanizing his instrument.

Rap and hip hop have afforded some interesting possibilities in changing the articulation of Burmese words, working with new vocabulary and opening up ears to new rhythmic intentions which may yet see fruition among the improvising of younger players.

Kit Young

Yangon, November, 2003

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Sarah Bekker honored at Asian Studies Meetings in San Diego

As Monique Skidmore notes in her comments below, no one who develops an interest in Burma studies can long remain unaware of the great contributions Sarah Bekker has made to our field. So Mary Callahan did all of us a service by organizing a round table discussion in appreciation of those contributions at the recent Asian Studies Meetings in San Diego. David Steinberg, Melford Spiro, Kris Lehman, and Catherine Raymond all made remarks in Sarah's honor, while Mary Callahan read a brief statement that Monique, unable to attend for health reasons, had sent along. Sylvia Lu, a long-time friend of Sarah, was also unable to attend, but she provided a biography and list of Sarah's accomplishments and scholarly contributions, which I include below. Happily, Sarah Bekker was present at the event and in fine fettle to receive these demonstrations of our collective respect and gratitude.

David Steinberg started things off by recalling the time when he was a young employee of the Asia Foundation in Rangoon and the Bekkers were attached to the U.S. Embassy. He noted that of all the people at the embassy at the time, Konrad and Sarah Bekker were uniquely interested in the intellectual and cultural life of Burma. Whereas other embassy personnel, like officials from the U.S.S.R. and the People's Republic of China, sought to bring their nations' ideas to Burma, the Bekkers showed a real interest in finding out what could be learned from Burma. This quality of cultural curiosity (still far too rare among American diplomatic personnel) must explain much about Sarah's achievements as an analyst of Burmese psychology and society, as well as her expertise in Burmese art and iconography. In any case, David Steinberg took the opportunity to point out that he and others working at the Asia Foundation were able to provide support to Burmese scholars by entering into a delicate gavotte with the Burmese authorities, whereby they identified someone worthy of support, and then suggested to the Burmese government their interest in supporting someone—unnamed and unspecified—of particular qualifications, who would turn out to be the person they had originally identified. The benefit that flowed from this procedure was that it accomplished the Asia Foundation's ends without compromising Burmese sensibilities about their government's sovereignty. David also pointed out that many agreements between the Burmese Government and various foreign nongovernmental organizations were never abrogated and so, in principal, could be revived without need for elaborate negotiations. —*The Editor*

A Biography of Dr. Sarah Bekker

Sylvia Lu, a long-time friend of Sarah's, was kind enough to put together this brief biography and list of Sarah's academic contributions. –The Editor

Dr. Bekker, who was born in Kentucky, received a B.A. in Psychology from the University of Kentucky in 1944, followed two years later by an M.A. from the University of Minnesota. Her marriage to Konrad Bekker, an Economics Officer with the U.S. Department of State, led to postings in India, Burma, Switzerland and Thailand that awakened in her a life-long passion for Asian Studies. This interest resulted in a dissertation on *The Burmese Concept of 'Anade:' Its Function and Meaning in Interpersonal Relations*, a pioneering study on the ramifications of duties, obligations and the question of 'face' in Burmese Society, for which she was awarded a Ph.D. in Psychology from George Washington University in 1964.

A most rewarding career was to follow as an author, lecturer, consultant and study tour leader in the field of Asian Studies. Dr Bekker has lectured to a wide variety of audiences on various aspects of Southeast Asian religion and culture for the Institute of Asian Studies, the American Museum of Natural History in New York City, the Elvehjem Museum, University of Wisconsin and the Center for Burma Studies, Northern Illinois University. She is also author of a number of seminal scholarly papers on na' spirit culture in Burma and has served as a participant on many panels pertaining to that subject. Her articles for *Sawaddi* magazine (Bangkok), written between 1967-1971, on

Thai customs, art, folklore, religion and history have done much to make Thai culture intelligible to resident foreigners. In her assessment of scholarly works for the *Journal of Asian Studies*, the *Burma Bulletin* and the *Asian Folklore Studies Group Newsletter*, authors have found Dr Bekker to be a perceptive and fair-minded reviewer. Participants of her museum, university alumni and Smithsonian sponsored study tours of Southeast Asia have always returned to the USA with a greater empathy and respect for foreign cultures after courses with Dr. Bekker, who has a special talent for presenting complex materials simply and yet in an interesting way. Her knowledge of mainland Southeast Asia also led to consulting work with the U.S. Office of Education in 1979 reviewing NDEA Title VI Fellowships and Center Applications for Southeast Asia. Over the years she has also faithfully assisted John Thierry in the identification of slides for the Southeast Asian Art Foundation, now housed at the University of Michigan.

Dr Bekker's service to the profession includes a term as Director of the East Coast Region of Independent Scholars of Southeast Asia 1986-1994. She has been a member of the Thailand, Laos and Cambodia Studies Group and the Burma Studies Group since their inception and is currently serving as a Trustee of the Burma Studies Foundation. In this role she has been a most generous donor of magnificent Burmese and Thai works of art to a number of stateside museums, the most notable being The Konrad and Sarah Bekker Collection of Burmese Art which forms the backbone of an excellent Burmese art collection at Northern Illinois University, De Kalb, Illinois. She has also donated some 450 scholarly books in German to Georgetown University Library.

Over the years Dr Bekker has been also most generous in her encouragement and sponsorship of younger scholars. She has been very supportive of institutions such as the Cetana Foundation, which offers scholarships to students from Burma, and she has also made it possible for one Burmese lady to achieve her dream of coming to America to study art history. This roundtable honors not only an eminent scholar in the field of Burma studies, but an outstanding person with an abundance of *metta* and goodwill to all.

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- * 'Talent for Trance: Dancing for the Spirits of Burma', *New Observations*, July/August, 1988:59.
- * 'Royal Gifts from Thailand' *Oriental Art*, April, 1983, London.
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- * Sound Film Strips:
'Burma: The Golden Land', 2 parts, Current Affairs, 1974.
'Thailand: The Land of Smiles', 2 parts Current Affairs, 1974.
'The Opening Lotus: The Birth of Thai Art', 4 parts.
'The Maturing Thai Art', 4 parts AVNA, 1976.
- * Chapter on Ayutthaya and Sukhothai in *Beyond Bangkok*, Thailand, 1969.
- * Articles on Thai customs, art, folklore, religion and history, published from 1967-1971 in *Sawaddi* magazine. Many of these have been reprinted in *A Cultural Guide to Thailand*, 1976, Bangkok.
- * Association for Asian Studies, Annual Meeting, 1988: 'Continuity and Change in Burmese Buddhism Since Independence'.
- * Burma Studies Group, Association for Asian Studies, Elmira College, October 15-17, 1982: 'Transformation of the Nats: A Comparison of Ancient & Modern Images'.
- * Foreign Service Institute, Washington D.C., May 5, 1982: 'Buddhism in Burma & Thailand'.
- * Association for Asian Studies Meeting, 1982: 'Burmese Views of the Supernatural: Past & Present Accounts.'
- * Cornell University, Aug. 10, 1982: 'Supernaturalism and Society'.
- * Association for Asian Studies, Annual Meeting, 1981, Panel on "Theravada Art of Burma, Sri Lanka and Thailand: Research Needs in Burma and Thailand'.
- * Association for Asian Studies, Annual Meeting, 1981: 'Non Buddhist Strands in the Religious Fabric of Burmese Life'.
- * Association for Asian Studies, Burma Studies Group, Denison University, Nov. 6-8, 1980: 'Flawed Empathy: Social Attitudes of Majority & Minority Groups in Burma'.
- * Association for Asian Studies, Asian Folklore Studies Group, 1979, 'The Naga: Many Faces, Many Forms'.

* Opening Lecture of an Asian Society Series on Trance, Dance and Spirit Ritual, January 25, 1979: 'Spirit Ritual in Burma'.

* Association for Asian Studies, Burma Studies Group, Denison University, Oct. 13-15, 1978: 'Burma's Ancient Culture: Contacts as Revealed in Nat Stories and Ceremonies'.

* 'Perspectives on Burma', Symposium, University of Michigan, April 14-15, 1978: The Individual and the Supernatural in Burmese Society'.

* Association for Asian Studies, Burma Studies Group, 1978: 'The Buffalo Nat Ceremonies'.

* Association for Asian Studies. Annual Meeting, 1978: 'The Role of the Shaman in Asian Society: The Natkadaw'.

Melford Spiro's Remarks

I was surprised to learn that it is thanks to the Bekkers that we now have the benefit of Melford Spiro's many major works on Burmese religion and society, rather than what might have been equally valuable but to us less immediately germane books about Ceylon. Here follow Mel's acknowledgements of what the Bekkers' friendship has meant to him, from their first meeting in Rangoon in 1959. —The Editor

With apologies to Sarah, my remarks will be somewhat personal because for me Sarah is not only a fellow Burma scholar, she has been a special friend from the time we first met in the summer of 1959 in Rangoon; and therein lies a story which, given the emphasis on narrative and subjectivity in

contemporary scholarship, I feel justified in sharing with you.

The story begins with my desire in middle age to conduct fieldwork in a Theravada Buddhist society. Conversations with Cora Dubois—a Southeast Asian specialist and an anthropological colleague—convinced me that given my theoretical interests, Ceylon—as Sri Lanka was then called—would be the best site for my intended research on the relationship between Buddhism and society. At the time—the academic year 1958-59—we both were Fellows at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences. Accordingly, I devoted much of my fellowship year at the Center to acquainting myself with the historical and social science literature on Ceylon, and I persuaded Ralph Tyler, the then-director of the Center, to allow me to spend part of my fellowship in the summer of 1959 in Ceylon as preparation for projected long-term fieldwork in that country.

Although three weeks in Ceylon provided abundant evidence that it was everything that Cora had promised, nevertheless interviews with two monks at the International Buddhist Meditation Center in Colombo, both of whom had been ordained in Rangoon, gave me pause, because Burma, they independently argued, would be the better venue for my project. Moreover, Cora herself had suggested Burma as a second preference—second, only because she felt that the politicization of the Burmese sangha during the independence struggle made Burma less desirable than Ceylon for my purpose. On both accounts I decided to visit Burma on my return trip to the United States.

And this is where Sarah enters this story. For on the chance that I might wish to spend part of the summer in Burma, Cora had

strongly recommended that I look up her good friend Konrad Bekker, at the time a foreign service officer in the American Embassy in Rangoon, to whom she gave me a letter of introduction. Taking her up on that recommendation, after arriving in Burma and registering at the Embassy, I went to see Konrad who not only received me with his well-known graciousness, but in addition invited me to stay with him and his wife before departing on my planned trip upcountry. Since, when I subsequently arrived at their home, Sarah seconded Konrad's extraordinary invitation, I gladly accepted.

As it turned out, the Bekkers were much more than hospitable hosts. During my stay with them, they not only shared their comprehensive knowledge of Burmese society and politics with me—this was the time of Ne Win's caretaker government—they also infected me with their enthusiasm for the Burmese people and Burmese culture, and that was what determined my eventual decision to work in Burma rather than Ceylon.

Two years later, when I returned to Burma with a grant to study village life in the Mandalay area, Sarah and Konrad again hosted my stay in Rangoon. But this time their hospitality was extended not only to me, but also to my wife and two young sons, none of whom had they ever met. Moreover, Sarah's concern for the Spiro family's welfare was not confined to the short term in Rangoon; it included the long term in Mandalay, as well.

Thus, because our sons required schooling during our year in Burma, my wife—Audrey—and I had agreed that although I, of course, would reside in the village in which I would conduct fieldwork, she and they would reside in Mandalay; and with

that in mind, Sarah arranged for a man, his widowed daughter, and her two young children, to accompany us to Mandalay where the adults would be employed as servants in our Mandalay residence. As usual, Sarah had planned well, for all four proved to be invaluable members of our household.

But Sarah and Konrad, I should add, opened their home to us not only when we arrived in Burma, but also—and for a more extended period—when we departed. Those of you who have known the Bekkers will know that the Spiros were hardly the only waifs and strays to have been the beneficiaries of their generous hospitality. Indeed, it has been experienced by numerous others strays who have appeared on their doorstep, whether in Rangoon, Bangkok, or New York, and more recently, when hosted by Sarah alone, in Washington.

During our year in Burma, Sarah visited us in Mandalay more than once, and since she was, and is, greatly knowledgeable about, and deeply interested in, the nat cult, she also accompanied us to that great Burmese spectacle, the Taungbyon nat festival. You will doubtless agree that it is not your typical embassy wife—but then Sarah was hardly a typical embassy wife—who would live for a week in a basha hut, in an oppressively hot and steamy village, and in the midst of massive, and often rowdy, crowds, in order to observe the dramatic dancing of the nat kedaws in possession trance.

That was the first, but hardly the only, occasion that I recognized that while Sarah is a psychologist by training—her PhD is in psychology—she is an anthropologist at heart. Moreover, having observed her interviewing some of the participants in the Taungbyon festival, it was evident that she

was also an anthropologist in knowledge and skill.

I might add that when I completed the first draft of my monograph on the nat cult, Sarah's expert reading of the manuscript, including the section on Taungbyoun, contributed valuable historical information and important theoretical insights to the final product, as well as saving it from embarrassing factual errors.

Sarah and Konrad made invaluable contributions to my Burmese research not only when they lived in Burma, but also some years later when they lived in Thailand. Thus, in the late 1960's, when it became apparent that the military rulers of Burma were not about to go away—and hence my hopes for resuming research in Burma would not soon be realized—I decided to fill in the ethnographic gaps in my material by working with Burmese living in Thailand following the coup in Burma, some legally, others illegally. Again, it was the Bekkers who came to my assistance by introducing me to legal Burmese residing in Bangkok, some of whom became valuable informants regarding urban kinship and religion—most especially as these institutions were practiced in Rangoon—concerning which I, as a village type, knew very little.

More than that, through the social networks of the legal Burmese, I was able to make contact with illegal ones, many of them leaders of the armed insurgency against the military government. For obvious reasons my interviews with them, both in Bangkok and in their camp on the Thai-Burmese border, have never been published, but they importantly informed my understanding of post-independence Burmese politics, in both its ethnographic and historical dimensions. That Sarah and Konrad, though aware that I

was in contact with the insurgents, accepted me as an intermittent visitor in their home—though it was tacitly understood that I could not share my information with them—is but one measure of the depth of their feeling for the Burmese people. For our government, you will remember, officially recognized the Ne Win regime.

During their stay in Thailand, Sarah and Konrad evinced the same intense motivation to learn about the Thai people and their culture as they had previously displayed in regard to the Burmese and their culture. Indeed, some of my fondest memories of my first summer's research in Thailand—the Bekkers were gone during the second summer—was accompanying them on day excursions to historical and archeological sites, though my energies, it must be confessed, were not always up to their indefatigable curiosity. Frequently, just when I thought we were about to return to Bangkok from such an excursion, when I was secretly yearning for a shower and a drink, either Sarah or Konrad—sometimes both—would spy yet another pagoda or another Buddha which, of course, had to be inspected before we departed.

Which brings me to another of Sarah's multifaceted interests and knowledge. For in addition to her aforementioned expertise as psychologist and anthropologist, Sarah is also—and, if anything, even more so—an expert on, and a connoisseur of, Southeast Asian art. Indeed, I know of no one better. Consequently, to accompany her to a museum or an antique shop was, and is, a special treat, not only because of her specialist's knowledge of the objects d'art on display, but also because of her uncanny talent for spotting an object of historical or artistic value that usually would escape my eye.

My earliest recollection, and a prototypical example, of that talent takes me back to 1961, when Audrey and I brought Sarah to “Molly’s”, that well-known arts and crafts shop in Mandalay, across from the old clock tower. (Incidentally, though the tower is still standing, “Molly’s”, unhappily, is no more—yet another casualty of the military government).

While “Molly’s” proprietor, U Mya Maung, was showing us his wares, focusing on the contemporary objects elegantly exhibited at eye level on shelves and in display cases, I noticed that Sarah, though always the polite Kentucky lady, was at the same time scanning the older objects, some of them antiques, piled helter skelter on a top shelf. Suddenly, she asked U Mya Maung if he would retrieve a small Buddha figure which, in that unorganized assemblage, was barely visible. After a seemingly cursory examination of the said Buddha, Sarah said “I’ll take it.”

Seeing that I had discerned very little difference between that particular Buddha and numerous others I had observed during our stay in Burma, when we returned home I asked Sarah why she had wanted that particular one. After her demonstration of its special features, I realized that I had just received a remarkable lesson in the finer points of Buddhist iconography, one that I have been privileged to experience on numerous other occasions in Burma, Thailand, and the United States.

I would conclude by saying that here indeed is a special human being, whom I have been fortunate in having as a friend, and that Burma has been fortunate in having as a student of its culture. I am sure you all join me in the wish that she go from strength to strength.

Melford Spiro
University of California San Diego

Sarah Bekker's Contributions

Monique Skidmore notes the ongoing relevance of Sarah Bekker's work for all of us interested in the tenor of Burmese social interaction. I would add that anyone who works in Southeast Asia must think deeply about the concept of anade or its cognates in other regional languages, and Sarah's work on the topic is a vital contribution to the field. –The Editor

For researchers, especially graduate students beginning a career in Burma studies, the work of Sarah Bekker is soon discovered. In part this is because she is one of the only academics who was able to conduct research in Burma during the 1980s. Her real legacy to Burma researchers, however, lies in her interest in documenting aspects of social change and interpersonal life.

At a time when so little was known about conditions within Burma, Bekker turned to those familiar religious institutions – Theravada Buddhism and the Cult of the 37 na’ – to show us how we might analyze contemporary political and economic events in a way that was meaningful to Burmese people living through that turbulent and isolating period. Her descriptions of the increased ornateness of supernatural imagery at times of crisis, of the appropriation of figures that possessed magical power for new uses, and the resymbolizing of familiar elements of the Burmese religious and natural landscape, enable us to understand the significance, and precariousness, of everyday urban life at this time.

Sarah Bekker was not just interested in how such elements of the Burmese landscape and psyche were continually invested and reinvested with meaning over time in response to political and historical events; she was also interested in the way that this process operated at the level of intra- and interpersonal relationships. Although we may not all agree with some of her psychological inferences, her studies of Burmese intimacy were the first of their kind, and almost nothing of an analytical nature has been published since. Her work is thus of import to medical and psychological anthropologists, psychologists, ethno-psychiatrists, and for all of us who are interested in everyday life in Burma. Like her studies of social change in the 80's, Bekker has given us a roadmap to launch ourselves into the study of intimacy, anomy and alienation, rage, and *anade*. I have found her work to be very useful in approaching ethnography at the Rangoon psychiatric hospital, at the Rangoon drug rehabilitation unit, and in rural villages around Rangoon, where each of these concepts is central to an understanding of madness, wellness, and interpersonal trust and relationships.

Monique Skidmore
Australian National University

**The Konrad and Sarah Bekker Collection
of Burmese Art at
Northern Illinois University**

Catherine Raymond rounded out the formal presentations at the session with the following account of the treasures of the Konrad and Sarah Bekker Collection at Northern Illinois University. –The Editor

In 1986, Northern Illinois University (NIU) was selected by the Burma Studies Group of the Association for Asian Studies to be the site for the national Center for Burma Studies. Simultaneously, the Burma Studies Group established the Burma Studies Foundation, of which the mission, in part, was to foster the activities of the only academic facility outside Burma itself dedicated exclusively to the study of that country. These responsibilities included gathering all available materials essential to the study of Burma at a single site within the United States, where those previously scattered resources would receive due care and conservation, while being made available for scholarship and artistic appreciation. From the outset, Dr. Sarah Bekker, a founding member of the Burma Studies Group, played a vital role in the implementation of these exceptional plans. Her initial involvement was an offer to donate her collection of Burmese art, then located in Switzerland, to an academic institution that would establish a Center for Burma Studies according to the guidelines suggested by the Burma Studies Group.

Dr. Bekker honored her earlier commitment in 1986, when Northern Illinois University was designated as the site for the Center for Burma Studies, and sixty-nine art objects arrived in time to be placed on exhibit for the dedication ceremonies. Sarah donated these initial pieces in memory of her late husband, Konrad; these pieces, known as the "Konrad and Sarah Bekker Collection", formed the core of the Burmese Art Collection now displayed in the NIU Art Museum. This primary collection admirably served Sarah's original objective of gathering Burmese art in one place where it may be studied, admired, and appreciated, and, as a result, over the past twenty-five years, the Burmese art collection has grown

over ten-fold, attracting a wide array of items from many additional donors, such as the late Jerry Bennett, John Musgrave, John Lacey, and Richard M. Cooler, among others.

Forming the Collection

Both Sarah and Konrad were reared in families deeply involved with the arts: Konrad's father, Paul Bekker, was an important concert master and music critic in Germany. Thus it was unsurprising that when the couple moved to Southeast Asia, they became deeply interested in Asian art. Konrad Bekker, who held a doctorate in economics from the University of Basel, Switzerland, first served as Economic Officer at the United States Embassy in Rangoon, Burma (1958-1961), then in Basel (1961-1964), and later in Bangkok (1964-1972). It was during their residency in Rangoon that many of the Burmese objects in the collection were purchased, and when Konrad was later transferred to Switzerland, the pieces were shipped there as well. But with the move to Thailand, the Bekkers considered it unnecessary to bring the whole collection back there with them. Accordingly, a part of their collection was loaned to the Museum für Volkerkunde, Basel, where it remained until the collection was transferred in 1986 to the Center for Burma Studies. Additional Burmese objects, including all the Buddha images, were purchased while the couple was living in Bangkok at a time when Burmese artifacts of all kinds were readily available on the Thai market following Ne Win's coming to power and the widely felt need to cash in antiques.

After the Bekkers' arrival in Burma in 1958 (only ten years after Burma's independence from the British), Sarah started learning Burmese and began her field work on the

quintessentially Burmese concept of *anade* which led to her own Ph.D. in Social Psychology. At that time, the Bekkers discovered that there were no art or antique shops of any kind in Rangoon but instead they could purchase artifacts from individuals, usually non-Burmese, who peddled antiques from their vehicles, a practice known to some foreigners as the "jeep trade".

During their second year in the country, the Bekkers visited Upper Burma where they were introduced, in Mandalay, to Bo Bo Martin, the son a French Advisor to King Thibaw, the last king of Burma. His house had been visited 30 years previously by another American, Sue Upfill, who had recorded in her diaries conversations with Bo Bo Martin's father; specifically the negotiations over the purchase of a Buddha image, revealing the emergence of a market for antiquities even then.

Sarah remembered clearly that Buddha images were generally not offered for sale in those days, as the local Burmese feared that this would result in bad karma. Most of the large pieces in her collection were purchased from Bo Bo Martin, who then occupied a large house where the ballroom had been converted into a work area for weaving terrycloth towels. The items up for sale were located in a balcony away from the work floor where they were covered with thick clumps of cotton lint that had to be cleared away before an item could actually be viewed.

That day, Sarah discovered a small image of the Burmese earth goddess, Wathundaye but was told that it was not for sale, being part of a larger piece that was kept in an upstairs chamber where visitors had previously not been allowed.

After successful negotiations, the whole piece was finally assembled and to Sarah's delight, she saw that the earth goddess was intended to be placed at the foot of a miniature Tagaundaing, a lacquered pillar symbolizing the Victory against the Enemy, Mara, surmounted by the figure of a *hamsa*. Along with that pillar, Sarah obtained several other pieces from Bo Bo Martin's collection, including various benevolent figures which would have been placed at the foot of a Buddhist altar or a royal throne, e.g., the images of *bilu*, *naga*, *kinnari-kinnara*, the *kabasaung na'*; chests for the storage of sacred books (*sadaik*); ornate food covers for ritual offerings to Buddhist monks made of gilded lacquer moulded to represent scenes from the life of Gautama Buddha and from the last ten Jataka; and several secular pieces from the former royal palace, including trunks and mirrors with elaborate stands.

Sarah's encounters with Bo Bo Martin played a key role in the evolution of her collection because so many of the pieces acquired from him had been associated with the Royal Palace or with dignitaries living at the court, for whom Bo Bo Martin's father was a rare source of ready cash.

The Collection

Those one hundred or so objects comprising the core of the Konrad and Sarah Bekker Collection document various aspects of the spiritual as well as daily life of the Burmans in the central regions of Burma prior to the twentieth century. The devotional images in the collection are predominantly from Burmese or Shan areas and in their style and iconography reveal the variations within Buddhist practice across those areas. Among the Buddha images, whether in gilded wood, lacquer, bronze, ivory or stone, there are several rare and exceptional pieces: e.g., the

Buddha seated on five elephants; the Healing Buddha; the Jambupati Buddha, the Buddha as a Burmese *wungyi*; or the Twenty-eight Buddhas of the Past, spiraled around a pair of ivory tusks. Each of these is a visual expression of different Buddhist practices having a certain following in Burma. These images were all purchased in Thailand between 1964 and 1972.

As a result of Sarah's discerning eye and curiosity, images of relatively minor figures were included in the collection: images of *Moggallana* and *Saripputta*, the Buddha's principal disciples; and small images of donors such as kings, princesses, or ministers who may have been associated with the Buddhist altar within a particular temple or private home.

A strength of the Bekker Collection is the inclusion of various objects ordinarily used to surround and protect the Buddha images, whether in temples, monasteries, or palatial dwellings: objects such as *tagundaing*, *kinnari* and *kinnara*, *bilus*, *nagas* and *chinthas*.

All such figures are central to our understanding of Burmese art, culture, beliefs, and religious practices and since their donation to the Center, they have been repeatedly used for classroom instruction at the university and school levels as well as for public exhibition. This was due in part to the guidance and stewardship of Professor Richard M. Cooler, an art historian specializing in the arts of Southeast Asia and former director of the Center for Burma Studies (1986 through 2002). During his tenure pieces from The Konrad and Sarah Bekker Collection were on permanent display at NIU, and indeed, major pieces were also exhibited off-campus on more than a dozen occasions. Such continuing exposure assured that the collection was

readily available for academic study and for classroom instruction.

In many ways the Konrad and Sarah Bekker Collection typifies what may be described as the “third generation” of Asian art collections. The earliest Burmese items appearing in the West were typically brought back by travelers, adventurers, or soldiers in an unplanned way as curiosities or souvenirs, a process by which many collections of Burmese artifacts were assembled during the nineteenth century when Burma was a British colony. The second type of almost inadvertent collection occurred when missionaries to Burma returned home with a variety of items, such as parting gifts from close friends or Burmese items which they had personally used while in the country. The third category includes those collections formed by scholars and diplomats who often collected in an organized and discerning way so as to obtain the best example possible of a particular type of object.

The Bekker Collection is clearly of this last type: it was assembled by a couple who were both scholars and diplomats, who happened to have a certain background in the arts, and whose interest in Burmese culture was deep. The Konrad and Sarah Bekker Collection is a living testament to their intelligence, to their aesthetic sensibilities, and to their generosity, thanks to which many generations of scholars will reap great benefit.

The Burma Art Collection, inaugurated by the Bekkers’ gift and foresight, has grown today to well over one thousand pieces. This is a genuine treasure not only for the appreciation of Burmese art but also for the teaching of Asian art, while emphasizing the specifically Burmese contribution to world art. By the fall of 2004, the Burma Art

Collection will be accessible not only through the Museum exhibition, but also through the use of the internet, where the Konrad and Sarah Bekker Collection will be mounted digitally, as a virtual museum available online to anyone anywhere.

The Center for Burma Studies welcomes the donation of additional Burmese art objects which would further the remarkable undertaking begun by Konrad and Sarah Bekker.

Catherine Raymond
Northern Illinois University

Upcoming Conferences of Interest to Burmanists

Two conferences scheduled for later this year should both prove of great interest to Burmanists. The first is a conference on Theravada Buddhism organized by none other than our own Assistant Editor, Jake Carbine, together with Guillaume Rozenberg (whom many of us had the good fortune to meet at the Gothenburg conference eighteen months ago). The second is the NIU Burma Studies Conference. Details follow. Our September issue will provide more information about the NIU Conference. –The Editor

Exploring Theravada Studies: Intellectual Trends And The Future Of A Field Of Study

12-14 August 2004

Organized by the Asia Research Institute at
the National University of Singapore

Keynote Speakers:

John Holt, Professor, Bowdoin College,
Opening Keynote, "Theravada 'Now and
Then'"

Frank Reynolds, Emeritus, University of
Chicago, Closing Keynote, title t.b.a.

Purpose and Scope:

The conference proposes to offer a focused context for collective scholarly reflection on the methods, theories, and subjects of inquiry in the study of Theravada Buddhism. The goal of the conference is to bring together an interdisciplinary and international body of scholars to present genealogical and other reflections on the field of Theravada Studies, broadly conceived.

Papers that address intellectual trends in the study of Theravada Buddhism, as well as papers that offer original case studies which suggest innovative paths for current and future research on Theravada Buddhism, are welcome.

Paper proposals should raise, but not necessarily be limited to answering, the following kinds of questions: Who have been the inspiring figures in this field, and what has been the legacy (positive or negative) of their contribution? How has the academic study and representation of Theravada Buddhism evolved? What directions have proved the most significant for the study of Theravada Buddhism, and why? What directions remain untapped or underutilized? In what ways can scholars "de-Theravadize" the study of "Theravada" Buddhism, and what would be the advantages and disadvantages of this kind of approach?

For more information, please contact:
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Guillaume Rozenberg (arigr@nus.edu.sg)

Or consult: <http://www.ari.nus.edu.sg/conf2004/theravada.htm>

NIU Burma Studies Conference

The NIU Burma Studies Conference will take place on October 22-24, 2004. The web page with information about the conference should be up and running by the end of May. That address is as follows: <http://www.grad.niu.edu/burma/conference2004.htm>

TENTATIVE LIST OF PANELS

Topics are provisionally divided into the following broad categories:

History
Literature and Linguistics
Archaeology
Art
Music
Economic
Politics
Crossing Burmese Boundaries
Law
Cultural Interfaces
Buddhism and Environment

In addition, we are planning a special
homage to May Kyi Win