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The Tradition of Drinking *Siy (Se)* and the Buddhist perception of *Surāmeraya* restriction in the Bagan period

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ABSTRACT

Surāmeraya, to abstain from fermented drink, is one of the five precepts, the basic code of conduct practiced by upāsaka and upāsikā (lay followers) of Buddhism. Alcohol consumption had existed long before the tradition of drinking Siy (fermented) and eating meat became a documented social practice in the 13th century. In some stone inscriptions of the later Bagan period, the celebration of drinking Siy (fermented drink) and eating meat after successfully conducting a meritorious deed, for example, donating land to a monastery was shared by both the donors and the monks. Nowadays drinking alcoholic beverage by a monk is unacceptable from the point of view of the code of conduct for Buddhist monks. Moreover, celebrating with fermented drink or alcohol after the Buddhist meritorious deed is unusual for the layman. This custom was likely influenced by the indigenous practice of worshipping Nat with alcohol and meat. However, the culture of drinking Siy appears to have been prominent in the Bagan period. It is proposed that this was a common occurrence as the name of a person who did not drink and chew betel nuts was exceptionally mentioned in inscriptions. This drinking practice seems to stop when the Buddhist codes of conduct were stronger again in the 16th century with the king's support, and it was substituted with the eating of pickled tea (la phet).

Keywords: Alcohol, Buddhism, Fermented Drink, Siy, Surāmeraya, Toddy Juice.

Introduction

Buddhists believe that he who abstains from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, telling lies and drinking alcohol or taking intoxicants would receive the reward of a place in heaven after death, and can eventually gain nirvana. In *Vera Sutta* (AN 10.92)¹, the Buddha preached fivefold set of vows including *surāmeraya* restriction to *Anāthapindika* the householder. Along with the five precepts for layperson, the alcohol consumption is also restricted in the eightfold set of the 1-day fasting vows, the ten vows of the novice as well as the vows for the monks and nuns². For Myanmar Buddhists, it has been a long held belief that it is unacceptable for a monk to indulge in drinking fermented drinks. However, this paper argues it was a common practice for monks and layman to drink alcohol in the later Bagan period. This tradition quite contradicts the fact what the Buddha said.

The compound word *surāmerayamjja* is often used for alcoholic drinks in Buddhist canonical texts. It contains three proper nouns and refers to different types of drinks covering “the whole range of alcoholic drinks from beer-like beverages produced by fermentation like *surā*, wine-like drinks or spirits like *majja*, and distilled

¹ Woodward 2003: 124-125; Bhikkhu 2013

² Jamgön 2003: 99-103; 122-123

drinks produced from sugar of fruit like *meraya*".¹ In general, all drinks which cause heedlessness and cloud the mind can be considered as alcohol. Drinking this kind of beverage whether one knows it as alcohol or not can be considered as transgression of vows.

Despite the great variety of Buddhist traditions in different countries, Buddhism has generally not allowed alcohol intake since earliest times. The production and consumption of alcohol was known in the regions in which Buddhism arose long before the time of the Buddha. According to the archaeological evidence, alcohol was used during the pre-Vedic Indus civilization (ca. 2300 BCE)². Buddhism dominated Bagan's cultural life since the 11th century AD evidenced by its historical monuments, inscriptions and etc. While we have strong physical evidence of Buddhism we have little detailed knowledge of Buddhist practices. There is evidence however, to suggest that drinking alcohol was an accepted, and alcoholic drinks were manufactured and consumed in Bagan.

The paper will examine what the role of drinking alcohol during the Bagan period was. In particular, it will focus on inscriptional evidence which suggests that practices associated with drinking alcohol were particularly prominent in the 13th century. Moreover, I will investigate whether it was linked to spiritual practices or specific Buddhist sects at Bagan, and whether alcohol consumption was an indigenous or foreign tradition will also be discussed. Why were the 13th century forest monastery monks allowed to drink and why did they also consume alcohol? The study examines existing literature, chronicles, inscriptions, and visual art.

Nats-worship and drinking alcohol

In popular Burmese folk history, the Ari heretics at Bagan were notorious for their false Buddhist practices and doctrines. According to the Glass Palace Chronicle, King Saw Rahan (r.931-964 AD), after consulting with the heretical Ari built five pagodas without decorating them with Nats or the Buddha figures and offered them with rice, curry and fermented drink to the pagodas once in the morning and at night³. In Myanmar tradition, people have always propitiated the Nats with food and drinks. Nats in the Bagan period were usually appeased with liquor, and meat

¹ Sarao and Long 2017: 69

² Sharma et al. 2010: 9

³ Glass Palace Chronicle 2008: 129; Luce 1919: 54

(buffalo, ox, chicken and bird). This custom continued until the 16th century when was prohibited by the royal order¹. Intoxicating drinks and any kind of animal sacrifice must not be offered to Nats as it is completely contrary to what the Buddha taught - due to the Buddha's imprecation to respect all forms of life and sentience, that alcohol should not be consumed.

According to Burmese tradition, Kyawswa, one of the popular 37 Nats, was the youngest son of the minister of Alaungsithu (r.1113-1167 AD). He was a 'bad boy' who married a daughter of a toddy-juice producer from Popa village. He spent most of his time in cock-fighting and drinking, and eventually died of alcohol. The ritual song connected with Kyawswa Nat is:

"Do you not know me, the god with the wine bottle, the famous Lord Kyawswa? If you don't like me, avoid me. I admit I am a drunkard"².

This song and folklore reveals the manufacture of alcohol, consumption and alcohol as an offering in the early times. The tradition of alcohol used to appease deity can date back to pre-Buddhist society in Bagan. It is assumed that alcohol had been consumed long before the Bagan period, and the then people knew to make it very well. The verse also alludes to the negative consequences of alcohol consumption.

Forest monastery monks and tradition of drinking *Siy*

In the *Konbaung* period (1752-1885 AD), after a successful negotiation in front of a judge the two parties traditionally eat *La-phe*³. Like this tradition in the Bagan period, there was the celebration of successful negotiation after land selling and donating to a monk. In many of the inscriptions of the later Bagan period (the 13th Century AD), participants in the process had sat feasting on *Siy* (liquor) and meat for a recognition of changing ownership after selling a land to be donated to a Buddhist monk. It is noted that this tradition of drinking *Siy* after the transfer of ownership or land donation was evident in the 13th Century and likely was practiced earlier but have no extant inscriptions.

¹ Glass Palace Chronicle 2008: 475; Htwe Han 1991: 49-50

² Htin Aung 1956: 91-92

³ Than Tun 2006: 35; Toe Hla 2004: 63

An inscription of 1248 AD¹ found in Bagan, considered original, contains the earliest known reference to the word “Arak”, which is the word used for alcohol today in Burmese. Arak is only acquired through systematic distillation process and has more alcohol percentage than the naturally fermented drinks like toddy juice. It is unknown whether *siy* was a distilled or fermented drink, but it could be the term using for any intoxicating drink including probably toddy juice in the Bagan period.

During the Bagan period, when two parties agreed, the buyer – who was sometimes monk has to pay the price of land including *siy phuiw sã phuiw*² (the price of liquor and meat). It was usually mentioned with weight (viss) or kkyat; *siy phuiw sã phuiw 5 piy sa* – five viss of [probably silver] for liquor and meat³ and *siy phuiw sã phuiw le 54 klyap* – 54 kkyat for liquor and meat⁴. Sometimes the banquet was stated in *nwã 1 khu se khunhac lummm* which means a feast of one ox and seven pots of liquor for a feast⁵. In 1249 AD, one ox and 10 pots of liquor were feasted for about 6 people who probably negotiated in purchasing land⁶. Although this amount seems to be a big feast in the 13th century, *nwã 8 khu wak 5 khu chit 10 se 30*⁷ - 8 oxen, 5 pigs, 10 goats and 30 liquors became typical after purchasing land in comparison with the feast in 1429 AD, about 200 years later⁸.

Not only laymen purchased land for donation. *Taw klon* (forest monastery) monks, sometimes called *Arañ (Arī)* in inscriptions, also purchased landholdings to extend their properties when they wanted more⁹. It was in the post Bagan period that some inscriptions of the 14th century AD mentioned *kloñ tau ū nhuik skhiñ myã tuiw le cã pe è tryã le nã è*¹⁰ – on the monastery, the monks or lords also ate and listened to a sermon and *kulã kloñ ū thak lhyañ cã sok pe so sanghã thī*¹¹ – the elder of the monks who ate and drank in the brick monastery. These inscriptions indicate that monks also participated in this grand feast to mark off the successful transaction of land in the Bagan period. Although monks drinking alcohol is unacceptable in today’s

¹ List 277, L 19

² The inscriptions are romanized according to the system in Than Tun 2003:99-100.

³ IOB 1956: Plate 224, L 10-11; Nyein 1983: Vol.3, 52, 1263 AD

⁴ IOB 1956: Plate 268, L 8-9; Nyein 1983: Vol.3, 136, 1281 AD

⁵ IOB 1956: Plate 380, L 3-7, 1249 AD

⁶ IOB 1956: Plate 395, L 17-18; Nyein 1983: Vol.3, 207

⁷ Than Tun 1959: 103

⁸ IOB: List 729, Line 48

⁹ Than Tun 1959: 99-101

¹⁰ IOB 1956: Plate 504, L 16, 1353 AD

¹¹ IOB 1956: Plate 536, L 23, 1361 AD

Buddhist society, these inscriptions suggest it was common that monks and laymen ate and drank alcohol in a monastery was customary to mark an occasion for donation in the Bagan period. This tradition was likely inherited from the practice of alcohol and meat offerings to the Nats in the pre-Buddhist time. In the post Bagan period, this tradition became more and more elaborated. It seems that this custom of monks and laymen drinking alcohol was not related with the religious affair, but for the social purpose as the custom of drinking alcohol for religious practice has existed in other Buddhist sects, for example, Tantric Buddhism. In Tantrism Buddhism, the impure substances used in rituals is generally considered to attain certain meditative experiences. Alcohol is incorporated as one of the five vital elements when celebrating *ganacakra*-gathering, for example. Buddhist *tantras* still sometimes drink small amount of ritual purified alcohol¹.

The Thit Seint Gyi inscription (1285 AD) records an interesting fact that the donors had put a curse concerned with drinking alcohol on those who destroy their merit despite the tradition of drinking *siy* to the contrary.

“The inscription was inscribed by Nga Naing Ngan Thin and his son including Sin Htein (Master of elephant forces), Athe (local headmen), Thanbyin (royal court officers), Kalan’ (Heads of ethnic groups) in 1285 C.E (sakaraj 647 B.E), during the reign of king Narasihapate (Tayoke Pyae Min). In the inscription, it mentioned about the donation of paddy lands, cotton etc. At the end of inscription, they shared the merit of donation to the King (Min), Ministers (Amattra), Military forces (Bo-par), and to all Sin Htein and Myin Htein (masters of Horse forces). Then they made a serious curse to those who would destroy the lands which were donated to Sasana such as – he who destroy our merits, may never reborn as a human being: may be great sufferings and great pains: if he were being a wealthy person, he might be lost his parents and would be destroyed to his life as a heavy drinker (Siy Sek): may go to the worst hell (Awici) and never come back

¹ Sarao and Long 2017: 70

again as a human and: may stay forever (non-earth) (Aka Kabba) at the hell”¹.

According to this inscription, the donors likely followed the *Surāmeraya* restriction of Buddhism and would have known the consequences of drinking alcohol. Moreover, they might know the Buddhist literature very well as the stories of wealthy man destroyed their life by alcohol are written in many Jataka stories. The curse in this inscription is also important for the Buddhist perception of *Surāmeray* restriction in the Bagan period as it was belonged to the 13th century which was contemporary with the forest monastery inscription. In the line no.3 of the inscription (Fig-1), there is the donation of land to Umin Kyaung (Umin monastery)². Monks who lived in Umin Kyaung may have been a different sect from the forest monastery monks because the name of forest monks were mostly used as *taw klon* (တပ်ရွာင်) or *taw mlat kri* (တပ်မ္လတ်ကြီး) in the inscriptions.

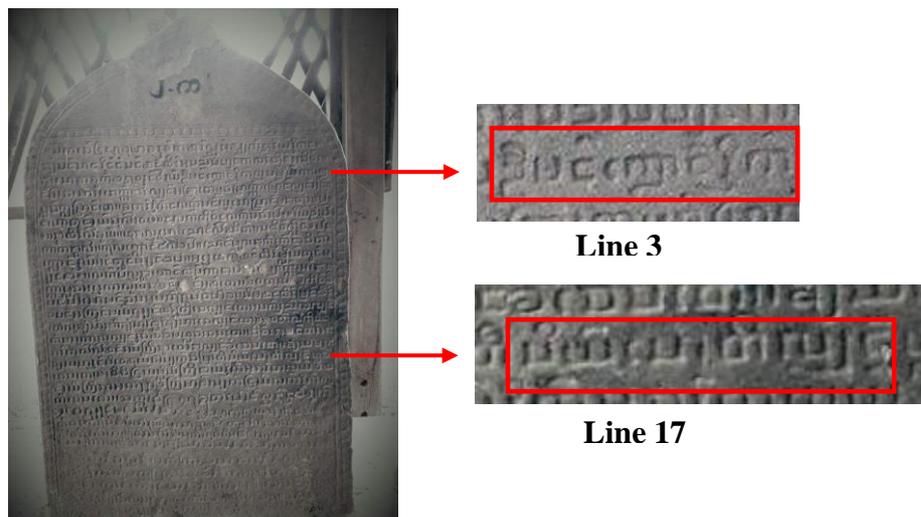


Figure 1. Thit Seint Gyi Inscription 1285 AD. Photo Courtesy of U Min Han.

According to the Glass Palace Chronicle, Theravada Buddhism in Bagan split into four different sects during the reign of Narapatisithu (1174-1231 AD) because of the controversy on public donation to monasteries and whether monks should accept

¹ Thit Seint Gyi inscription: line no.17, courtesy of U Min Han and his translation of the inscription.

² Umin sometimes means cave. Umin Kyaung is quite common word used for the name of monastery in Myanmar as well.

all donations or not from the laymen¹. The Kalayani inscription from Bago tells about the occasion of the Saṅgha reform at Bagan in 1181 AD². Buddhism at Bagan in the 13th century seemed to be unstable and it is probable that different sects of Buddhism were living peacefully with different ideologies. Whilst the forest monastery monks were allowed to drink alcohol, monks from other Buddhist sects were not allowed to drink alcohol.

Jātakas concerning drinking alcohol

In the Bagan period the Jātaka stories of the Buddha's former births were represented with different styles of plastic art i.e. terracotta or glazed plaques, and murals in the Bagan period. Every single depiction of Jātaka stories, sometimes with caption at the underneath, was a guide to how to live well for the then Buddhist people. Among 550 Jātaka stories, there are many stories³ related to drinking alcohol, and most of these stories are mainly concerned with the adverse consequences of drinking alcohol.

Jātaka scenes associated with drinking alcohol are found in both terracotta and glazed plaques from the 11th century AD to 13th century AD. The general design of a pot to store alcohol that they used in the Bagan period can also be seen in these scenes, suggesting the artisans were well familiar with the local custom of drinking alcohol. Therefore, these bas-reliefs indicate that the tradition of drinking alcohol probably existed before the 11th century AD in Bagan.

The Vārūni-Jatāka (47)⁴ is a story demonstrating that every effort to do good, while being ignorant and foolish, could only result in a bad outcome. In this Jātaka, the Bodhisattva was a treasurer and had a tavern-keeper. When the tavern-keeper went off to bathe, his apprentice mixed salt with the liquor and it was spoiled. The scene was illustrated with the Bodhisattva in a house having conversation with tavern-keeper in worshipping position and the foolish apprentice stirring the liquor in pot (Fig-2). The precise detail of pot to store alcohol is illustrated very well here.

¹ Glass Palace Chronicle 2008: 198-199.

² Frasch 1996: 49 (as the book I cited is unpublished, the cited page may be different with the published one.)

³ The following Jātakas are associated with drinking alcohol: Vārūni-Jatāka (47), Punnapāti-Jātaka (53), Andabhūta-Jātaka (62), Illīsa-Jātaka (78), Surāpāna-Jātaka (81), Sigāla-Jātaka (113), Dubbaca-Jātaka (116), Sigāla-Jātaka (142), Gūtha-Pāna-Jātaka (227), Nāna-Cchanda-Jātaka (289), Bhadra-Ghata-Jātaka (291), Kumbha-Jātaka (512)

⁴ Chalmers 1895: 120-121

Punnapāti-Jātaka (53)¹ is the story of the Bodhisattva, again a treasurer, who denied to drink liquor, and the tipplers. As the tipplers wanted rings and clothes of the Bodhisattva treasurer of Benares, they added a stupefying drug to liquor in order to cloud his senses. As he knew the dishonest behavior of tipplers, he exposed their cunning and denied to them drink. The scene in the glazed plaque at Mingalar Zedi (Fig-3) depicts with the Bodhisattva and his follower on the right side, and two tipplers in worshipping posture in front of a liquor pot. The design of a pot here is almost identical to the one in Vārūni Jātaka. This might be the standard form of container for storing alcohol in the Bagan period².



Figure 2. Vārūni-Jātaka (47), Mingalar Zedi

One interesting thing is that the trees in Vārūni Jātaka and Punnapāti Jātaka look like a frond of the palm tree and toddy fruit, which may probably be an indicator of the essential component used to distill into alcohol. The tree is not directly associated with the theme of Jātaka. The craftsman could probably imagine and have a visual experience of alcohol production while creating this plaque. So he added palm tree figure, which was the raw material for making alcohol, to make the Jātaka story more meaningful locally. Luce suggested that *yammaka aphyaw*, a sweet liquor with an Indian name, was probably fermented from toddy juice according to an inscription of 1376³. Distilling alcohol from the toddy juice is a well-

¹ Chalmers 1895: 134-135

² Ceramic analysis, while a viable research subject, is beyond the scope of this paper.

³ Luce 1975: 296; Plate 233, L 13

known practice at Bagan and and today toddy juice can be purchased from toddy bars beside Kyaukpadaung-Bagan road near Nyaung Oo township.



Figure 3. Punnapāti-Jātaka (53), Mingalar Zedi

Dubbaca-Jātaka¹ is the story of Bodhisattva, the follower of a javelin dance master who dies because of drinking alcohol. When they performing javelin dance in a village, the apprentice Bodhisattva said to his master - you cannot perform with five javelins, if you do you will die. The drunken master did not listen what he said and danced through five javelins, then he died when performing with five javelins. In the plaque at Mingalar Zedi (Fig-4), there is Bodhisattva figure in standing and talking to his master who died upon the javelins on the left side of plaque.

Bhadra-Ghata-Jātaka (291)² in a short, the Bodhisattva when he came into life again as Sakka gave a 'Wishing Cup' to his poor and miserable son who squandered all his four hundred millions. One day, he was drunk and played the cup by throwing into the air. It fell out of his hand and smashed up on the ground. Then he got back his poor life and finally died on a street. This Jātaka³ (Fig-5) is depicted with two main characters of Sakka and poor son with a 'Wishing Cup'⁴ in the upper row. Then the second plot consists of a drunken man holing probably a 'Wishing Cup' and a man kneeling down for begging when he got poor again.

¹ Chalmers 1895: 259

² Rouse 1895: 293

³ The depiction of Bhadra-Ghata Jātaka (Aung Kyaing 2002: 46) can still be found on the 3rd terrace of Shwezigon (remaining glazed Jātaka plaques are listed in Aung Kyaing 2002: 9-50)

⁴ A 'Wishing Cup' is called *Lotaya* pot. So it is not illustrated like a cup in the plaque, but like a pot.

These two plaques of Dubbaca and Bhadra-Ghata Jātakas deliver the comprehensible information to the viewers. Moreover, these two Jātakas tell stories of the bad consequences of drinking alcohol. The viewers can clearly understand the sin of drinking alcohol by seeing these plaques. From the early 11th century plaques to the 13th century, the Buddhist society at Bagan was basically educated in the Surāmeraya restriction which denounces alcohol, through these Jātaka depictions.



Figure 4. Dubbaca-Jātaka (116), Mingalar Zedi



Figure 5. Bhadra-Ghata-Jātaka (291), West Phet Leik

Donation of Palmyra palm and drinking *Than Yañ* (Toddy Juice)

In the Bagan inscriptions, donors noted *than ryak* (palm leaves), palmyra jaggery offerings at a pagoda and the donation of *than* (palmyra palm) to a monastery¹. *Than* also could be one of the main sources to distill liquor in the Bagan period. The technique of making liquor from *than yañ* can be found toddy bars near Bagan today.

¹ Luce 1975: 296

There are two kinds of *Than Ye* (toddy juice): sweet and bitter toddy which is like alcohol. The sweet toddy is naturally fermented and becomes bitter one. The toddy climber has to smash the spadix of male or female palmyra palm and cut the tip to collect *than yañ*¹. It grows everywhere in the central plain of Myanmar, especially in the drier region.

According to the Glass Palace Chronicle of Myanmar, it is said that there was a super hero called *Nga Htweyu* “who could go up and down a thousand palm trees in a given time, cutting their fruit”² during the king *Anawrahta* reign (1044-77 AD). In the 13th Thingan Yone temple, there is a mural depicting a man climbing a toddy tree (Fig-6). With the geographical setting of Bagan areas, the toddy tree had been planted long before Bagan era. Moreover, the people could have known the technique how to extract the toddy juice for drinking and making jaggery.



Figure 6. Toddy climber, Thingan Yone Phaya (712/356 ka), 1244 AD. Photo courtesy of U Ye Win



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Figure 7. Women collecting *htan yañ*, Kyanzitha Umin

The evidence of extracting toddy juice with small pots and collecting with big jars, which is exactly same with today technique¹, can be seen on the murals at *Kyanzitha Umin* (Fig-7). Although the *Kyanzitha Umin* itself is the 11th century AD, this painting seems to be the 13th century AD as the pigments and outlines are similar with those of the 13th century Mongolian images. How these pictures were associated with the Buddhism and social life in the Bagan period needs further research.

Donation of the toddy trees together with lands and other offerings to the Buddhist monastery was the common practice for making merit in Bagan². It is evidently by the post Bagan period inscription that toddy trees were donated to the monks for drinking. In this inscription, it is recorded that

“ဤသိုလ် လူမှုရှယ်ရသတ်စိမ့်မွယ် ကိုဝ် ထန်စိုက်ရှယ် ယခင်တွင် တွောင်ပွဲရှယ်အာ လူခ၏။ ဤထန် ကိုဝ် ငတ္တောင်ကာ နှစ်ဆ၊ ယကင်တွင် သွိုင် အပေါင်ကာတဆ၊ သောက်ပါစေသတေ။”

“After planting toddy palm at the *Cecim* land which is acquired through a royal dedication, (the land) is given to the monastery which is being established at *Yakhañ*. May all the lords of *Yakhañ* drinks one-fold and (those of) my monastery two fold this toddy (juice)”³.

Monks, therefore, drank toddy juice and did not consider they were breaking the five precepts of Buddhism. It also contains in one of the types of alcoholic drinks. As the toddy juice is a naturally fermented drink and can be drunk without any extra preparation, perhaps it was not considered the same as drinking man-made alcohol.

Conclusion

This investigation of the tradition of drinking alcohol in the Bagan period reveals much about religion and the social life at the time. The practice of drinking alcohol was not only for personal pleasure but also to strengthen social relationships

¹ Encyclopedia of Myanmar 1961: 223-225

² IOB 1956: Plate 411, Line 3 (1230 AD); P.207, L.2 (1244 AD); P.195b, L.7 (1260 AD); P.213b, L.3 (1265 AD); P.215b, L.13 (1266 AD); P.228a, L.10-11 (1268 AD); P.236b, L.7 (1272 AD); P.242, L.21 (1273 AD); P.253b, L.6 (1275 AD); P.254a, L.5 (1276AD); P.261, L.28 (1279 AD); P.262, L.33 (1279 AD).

³ Than Tun 2007: 195; List 670, Line 8 (1373 AD)

and for ritual purposes. Alcohol was, no doubt, consumed by kings, elite, middle class, serf and etc., in the pre-Buddhist time in Bagan for their own pleasure. Moreover, offerings of alcohol appeased the existing Nat spirits and deities. This is supported by the the chronicles and traditional folklore. It seems likely that the tradition of drinking alcohol was firmly rooted when Buddhism became stronger in Bagan. From the 11th century AD as evidenced by the Jātaka stories, for indoctrinating the people into abstaining from alcohol, the Buddhist society probably tried to persuade people to follow the Buddhist precepts of refraining from drinking alcohol.

The practice of worshipping Nats with the offerings of alcohol and meat could have probably influenced the tradition of drinking *Siy*. It became popular again in the 13th century. However, the cultural phenomenon changed from having a religious purpose to a more social affair. In contrast with the ritual purpose of drinking alcohol in Tantric Buddhism, the drinking tradition at Bagan was mainly concerned with social welfare although it was performed after religious donation. Some of the 13th century inscriptions imply the integration of social and religious aspects by the people at that time. Evidence of this integration is also seen in the murals at *Kyanzittha Umin* monastery with depiction of social and monastic life together.

Some Buddhist views on alcohol consumption is that it is allowed in moderation, so long as it does not induce heedlessness. In that case, the necessary amount which needs to be drunk in order to be regarded as a transgression can vary. According to the Buddhist literature, that the alcohol can cloud the mind and cause heedlessness is the main reason for abstaining from it. Buddhists also consider drinking alcohol leads to a negative rebirth in that one will be reborn into one of the three lower realms or as a human being in a state of madness. From that point of view, the Buddhist monks and layman who participate in drinking alcohol did not concern themselves with the Buddhist restriction of *Surāmeraya*, and did not think they broke the five precepts. This is indicative that Buddhism, close relationship to social life, even in the later Bagan period was still diverse incorporating various interpretations of Buddhist teachings in relation to the consumption of alcohol by lay people and monks. Alcohol consumption was not necessarily seen in strictly canonical terms.

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