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U Ba Kyi's Neo-Traditionalist Comics Style: At the Crossroads of Myanmar's Buddhism, Arts and Colonial History

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During the second part of the 20th century, U Ba Kyi has produced a prolific and unique body of comics narratives which remains ubiquitous in Myanmar to this day. If he is widely celebrated as one of Myanmar's finest painters and as the champion of the Neo-traditionalist art movement, his comics work has not received any critical attention. Building from appreciations of his seminal 1951 *The Illustrated History of Buddhism* which marked a shift in U Ba Kyi's production as he explored the local wall painting heritage in the wake of the country's independence, this paper aims to identify the sources of the signature—yet constantly versatile—style which permeated his comics narratives. Exploring Pagan traditional art, the early days of cartooning in Rangoon and the rise of traditionalist and esoteric Buddhist practices in post-colonial Myanmar, it offers context to U Ba Kyi's lush and vibrant early comics art which places itself at the service of an unbridled cosmological lore and nation-building myths.

Introduction

Myanmar[1] fell under British colonial rule during an invasion spanning over sixty years and debuting with the first Anglo-Burmese War in 1823 at the Burma-India borderlands (Lockard 2009:108). Lower Burma was annexed in 1852 and Upper Burma in 1886, marking the end of the third Anglo-Burmese War and of Burma's sovereignty and monarchic rule with the capture of the royal capital of Mandalay and the deposition and exile of King Thibaw. During these successive and devastating wars, many Burmese feared the disappearance of local culture, with scholar Miyawaddy and the court trying to salvage Burmese cultural traditions by collecting folk songs and writing village-set plays or historical chronicles such as the *Hmannan Yazawin* [*The Glass Palace Chronicle*]. In parallel, King Mindon [r. 1853–1878] had launched a modernisation programme for the country and desired good relations with the British, but the latter were not like-minded. Lockard (2009:109) states that the "British [...] constantly tried to humiliate Mindon and his government. And when they incorporated their Burmese territories into British India, it was a statement that Burma was so backward it did not even deserve its separate existence. In the territories they controlled, the British tried to destroy Burmese culture." They did so by weakening Buddhist institutions and school system and by imposing British schools through which they tarnished Burmese authority figures and traditions. Juliane Schober (2011:4) adds that "[invading] British forces desecrated Buddhist spaces and turned them into military garrisons, such as Shwedagon Pagoda in Rangoon and, later, the palace in Mandalay. Their actions constituted grave affronts to the cultural and religious sensibilities of the Burmese, who soon came to experience that in this new colonial reality, political power had been stripped of its religious foundations."

In 1951, or three years after the independence of Myanmar, influential artist U Ba Kyi [1912–2000] produced illustrations for a defining work in local graphic arts, *The Illustrated History of Buddhism* published by the Young Men's Buddhist Association (or Y.M.B.A.). The artist painted 65 illustrations—53 dedicated to the life of Buddha and 12 to the further development of Buddhism in Asia and Myanmar—to accompany Ashin Janakābhivaṁsa's text. *The Illustrated History of Buddhism* is referred to as U Ba Kyi's "most well-known work" (Shan Herald Agency for News 2011) and "his greatest legacy" (Stadtner 2011:332) with paintings based directly on U Ba Kyi's *Illustrated History of Buddhism* being ubiquitous in Myanmar to this day. These watercolour

[1] As the international appellation of Burma has become the 'Union of Myanmar' since 1989, this paper tends to use the appellation 'Myanmar' for consistency despite the usage of 'Burma' in most of the cited sources produced before 1989.

illustrations are remarkable as they mark a shift in U Ba Kyi's production as the artist delved into the Traditional heritage. After having studied under British-trained artists U Ba Zaw and U Ba Nyan and after studying himself Western painting in France, U Ba Kyi had "established his foundation in naturalist and realist techniques [with his] most recognizable works [merging] Western painterly styles with traditional Myanmar subject matter and aesthetics" (Sotheby's 2018). With *The Illustrated History of Buddhism* and its exploration of ancient Burmese art, he made a critical step towards acquiring his title of "champion of the Neo-traditionalist art movement in Myanmar" (Sotheby's 2018).

U Ba Kyi's signature —yet constantly versatile— style also permeated his extensive comics production which spans from graphic adaptations of national chronicles in the early 1950s to his most famous comics work, the adaptations of the *Mahānipāta Jatakas* all serialised in the mid-1970s and retelling the last ten reincarnations of the Bodhisattva (or Buddha-to-be) during which the latter perfected the Ten Virtues necessary to be born as Gautama Buddha and reach enlightenment. His skills as an illustrator in books and magazines, including cover art and comics,[2] "were widely admired and made him famous in the literary world" (Hla Tin Thun 2006:55). His late comics production in the youth magazine *Shwe Thway* was highly appreciated by children who affectionately called him *Hpo Hpo Shwe Thway* or 'Grandpa Shwe Thway' (Nyo Hnin Shin, 2022:290). Drawing from the Pagan wall painting heritage with vivid contrasts of flat colours, figures with bold black outlines, a free sense of line, minimal shading, and lively round-faced characters, U Ba Kyi's lush and vibrant comics art places itself at the service of an unbridled cosmological and mythical lore with deities working miracles or wet-nurse *kinnarīs* [half-women half-bird spirit-deities] and local and esoteric Buddhist beliefs and practices (see **Figure 1**). The development of a Neo-traditionalist movement, in Burmese arts and Buddhist practices and ultimately in U Ba Kyi's comics production, is to be understood in reaction and opposition to the demeaning British rule and in line with the development of religious and nationalist expressions before and after the independence of Myanmar in 1948. Current research focuses on contextualizing the development of U Ba Kyi's style over his early comics production, providing a critical framework necessary for further analysis of his 1970s Buddhist graphic narratives and of Myanmar comics' specificities compared to neighbouring Thailand.

[2] Hla Tin Thun uses the word "cartoons", as do most Myanmar and Thai authors, to define both stand-alone drawings usually intended for caricature, satire, or humour, and comics narratives. As U Ba Kyi was mostly producing comics and rarely editorial or gag cartoons, the word is here to be understood as referring to comics art.

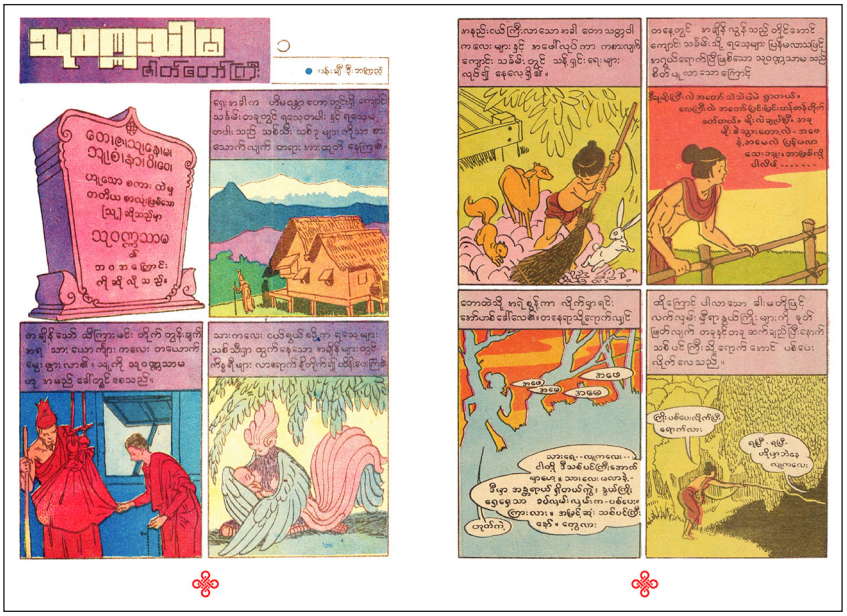

Figure 1: First page (U Ba Kyi 1975a) and seventh page (U Ba Kyi 1975b) from *The Birth Story of Thuwanna Tharma*. Used with permission of U Ba Kyi's heirs.

U Ba Kyi's Style and *the Illustrated History of Buddhism*

During the course of the twentieth century, comics production thrived in both Thailand and Myanmar (Lent 2015; Verstappen 2021). The neighbouring Theravāda Buddhist countries, however, underwent different fates which affected their cultural productions and their local comics expressions. While losing part of its territories to British and French colonising powers, Thailand—when still known as Siam—avoided overt colonisation. Thai artisans were introduced to Western artists through the invitation of the latter by the Siamese court at the turn of the twentieth century with the objective of modernizing court arts to counter the civilizational claims of the colonial powers. Myanmar [or Burma], as a province of British India, was not subject to the same dynamic. The heavy Western art influence that took hold in Burma began in the first decade of the 1900s, when artists from the United Kingdom came to visit, or settle in, the colonial territory. Andrew Ranard (2009:57) states that, in the following decade, "Burmese art history is one of trial and error, of Burmese painters picking up skills on a catch-as-catch-can basis, from illustrations in books, Western painters who made short trips to Burma, and in case of one adventuresome Burmese painter, a trip to England on his own."

With its objective of promoting Western-style drawing, painting and cartooning in Burma through art classes (Lent 2015:175), the formal establishment of the Burma Art Club in Rangoon in 1918 by British civil servants and educators was of considerable

importance (Ranard 2009:91). Ba Gyan, Hein Sunn, Saya Mya, Ba Zaw, and Ohn Lwin—who all became prominent national artists—learned to draw and paint from British educators (Aung Zaw 2020). Encompassing a wide array of methods painstakingly explored, the club was dubbed the "Labyrinth of Technique" (Minn Tin Aung 2006:7). In the early 1920s, British railway official and Burma Art Club chairman Martin Jones played a significant role in the development of Burmese cartooning (ibid.; Nyo Hnin Shin, 2022:30). He "became renowned for his realistic depictions of Burmese figures" (Aung Zaw 2020) and "planted the seed of cartoons in the minds of Myanmar" (Ngwe Kyi 1996:27) when his first cartoon was published in 1914 in the *Nartarlu Special Collection of Literary Works* of Rangoon Division[3] and continued in the pages of the Christmas editions of the newspaper *Rangoon Times* until 1930 (Nyo Hnin Shin, 2022:30). Soon enough Burmese artists produced their own cartoons with 22-year-old and Burma Art Club member Ba Gale [Shwe Ta Lay; c. 1893–1945] debuting in 1915 in a Rangoon college magazine and, later the same year, in the *Rangoon Times* (Aung Zaw 2020). His professional career took off in 1917 when he was invited by influential Burmese literary figure Thakin Kodaw Hmaing to draw cartoons for the *Thuriya* [The Sun] newspaper (Guillard 1990:44). Ba Gale was a subscriber to the British satirical cartoon magazine *Punch*, an influence he shares with Sem Sumanan, a prominent Siamese cartoonist during the 1920s (Verstappen 2021:23).

While satirical cartooning had been imported and promoted in Siam by King Vajiravudh [Rama VI; r. 1910–1925] and later turned against the local absolutist regime and ruling elites, the British-fostered editorial cartooning in Burma soon turned against the colonising forces. According to Aung Soe Min and Courtney T. Wittekind (2014: n.p.), cartoons soon came to offer "the best means by which intellectuals could criticize the social and political ills of the country." Jennifer Leehey (1997:152) states that "[through] the 1920s and 1930s, Burmese language cartoons by [Ba Gale] Shwe Ta Lay, Ba Gyan and others helped to articulate popular aspirations for independence." Ngwe Kyi (1996:27) adds that "[since] Myanmar was a colony of Great Britain, the cartoons had traces of anti-colonial sentiment. This political situation forms the solid background upon which cartoons of this nation were founded." A prime example is Ba Gale's 1917 famous political cartoon related to the 'footwearing' controversy. Ba Gale graphically criticized Burmese pagoda trustees for letting British officials wear their shoes on the platforms of Buddhist sacred buildings. The artist drew the colonisers wearing shoes while being carried on the backs of Burmese trustees when facing a 'Footwearing Prohibited' sign

[3] The publication of the first cartoon in Myanmar is subject to discussion. The date of 1912 is sometimes mentioned for a cartoon published in Rangoon Times and signed 'Myauk', which could be a pen name used of Martin Jones (Aung Zaw, 2020; Lent 2015:175; see also Selth 2016).

(Leehey 1997:154–5 note 2; Lent 2015:176; Thaung 1995:7–8). Originally published in *Thuriya* [The Sun] (Schober 2011:73–74), a newspaper run by young nationalists linked to the Young Men's Buddhist Association (Aung Zaw 2020; Schober 2011:71), the cartoon "contributed to the first stirrings of a Burmese nationalist consciousness" (Leehey 1997:152). The issue of Europeans wearing shoes on the platforms of pagodas was also addressed in the first resolutions proposed by the Young Men's Buddhist Association officially established in 1908, at "a period in Burmese history associated with the country's political awakening and the emergence of *wunthanu* [...], 'patriots' or 'protectors' of national interest" (Ikeya 2008:1287–8). Other cartoons, such as ones accusing the women who wore Westernized dress of betraying *wunthanu*, also began to be published in *Thuriya* in 1917 (ibid., p. 1288).

Aung Zaw (2020) notes that "[before] caricatures became popular among the population, it wasn't easy for Burmese cartoonists to convince conservative Burmese to accept the sketches. Many people unfamiliar with the genre thought the figures looked too much liked goblins [or ghouls], which further detracted from their appeal." Extensive captions were therefore composed and added by editors to Ba Gale's cartoons in order to facilitate their reception. After this period of acclimatation, cartoon production thrived in Myanmar along with publications such as *The Burma Boy* magazine launched in 1924 by British officer E.G.N. Kinch and the Boy Scouts Association with illustrations by Kinch (Nyo Hnin Shin, 2022:28). The art of cartooning and *Punch*'s 1920s caricatures with a freer sense of line might have appealed to Burmese artists because of the 'Burmese sense of line' and the strong taste for caricature in the depiction of fantastic creatures found in local [Pagan] mural paintings from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. Ranard (2009:92–93) states that cartooning students at the Burma Art Club possibly "felt some affinity with the new genre because it possessed elements of exaggeration with which they were already familiar in Traditional painting. And it does not seem to be an accident that many painters who found themselves attracted to cartoon art over the years—[such as U] Ba Kyi [...]—were also interested in Traditional painting."

British painters had brought Western techniques of representation and perception with a sense of movement, emotional realism and individuality that opposed the more static and devotional nature of Burmese traditional religious icons (Ranard 2009:22). Vanishing point perspective, atmospheric effects, shadowing and shading were integrated, through various degrees and some back-and-forths, by Burmese painters (ibid.; Minn Tin Aung 2006:6). If the Traditional school declined in favour of the Western school, both schools were blended smoothly in paintings of artists such as Saya Aye [1872–1930] who adopted Western shading, perspective, anatomical and emotional realism but fused with a sense of line, floral design, traditional and bold earthy colour

values, and *gravitas* informed by traditional mural paintings (Ko Ko Maing, G. Hla Maung and Ranard in: Ranard 2009:73–74). 'Mind perspective'—a traditional technique used in Burmese mural paintings in which the size of a subject is disproportionate to show its importance—is also integrated in some Burmese paintings from the Western school (Ranard 2009:83). In the 1920s, several Burmese artists travelled to Europe and trained in England, like prominent Western School painters U Ba Zaw [1891–1942] and U Ba Nyan [1897–1945] who both attended the Burma Art Club and studied in London before returning to Burma. Student of the former artist and apprentice of the latter for four years in the 1930s, U Ba Kyi challenged the Western-influenced techniques of his masters as he circled back to Burmese traditional arts. In the context of the independence of Myanmar from British rule achieved in 1948, "[U] Ba Kyi [...] realized that if he was going to escape the purgatory of the second-generation artists who accepted the Rangoon School style [which sprang out of the British-established Burma Art Club] as a given, it was necessary to rebel" (Ranard 2009:200).

U Ba Kyi studied at Rangoon University where he published cartoons for university publications (Ranard 2009:200) and later passed the Teacher Certificate Examination (Hla Oo 2013).[4] In 1939, he was an art instructor at the State School of Art and Music in Rangoon, then a lecturer at the Institute of Art before becoming a teacher at the Rangoon Institute of Education in 1946 (Ranard 2009:201–2). One year after independence, U Ba Kyi won a scholarship offered by the French Government and attended the National School of Fine Arts (École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts) in Paris (ibid., p. 202; Hla Oo 2013). At his return from France, U Ba Kyi was invited by the Young Men's Buddhist Association to produce 65 illustrations for *The Illustrated History of Buddhism* with text by Ashin Janakābhivaṁsa, a well-known scholar of Burmese and Pāli works (Schober 2011:170). The book's publication date is disputed.[5] In a 2019 Burmese-English reprint of the book, the original introduction is reproduced and dated from the "13th November 1951" (Y.M.B.A. 2019: n.p.). The same 1951 publication date is mentioned in Routledge's *Encyclopedia of Buddhism* (Keown and Prebish 2010:876), in the bibliographical information of the library of the State Pariyatti Sasana University of Rangoon (S.P.S.U. n.d.) and in various artworks' captions (Hla Tin Thun 2006:62; Nyo Hnin Shin, 2022:289). Andrew Ranard (2009:201) and Donald M. Stadtner (2011:332) provide a different publication date; 1953. If the publication date is most likely 1951

[4] Translation from Burmese to English by Hla Oo (2013) of U Ba Kyi's biography which is available at the start of U Ba Kyi's Ten Great Birth Stories (*Zadtawgyizèbwè*) recent collected editions.

[5] The debate around the publication date is of interest as it takes place either right before or after U Ba Kyi's 1952 visit to China as a representative of culture during which time he studied Chinese fine arts (Hla Tin Thun 2006:53–55). A Chinese art influence was however not firmly established by any commentator.

based on the introduction's date, there is no doubt about the publication's impact. *The Illustrated History of Buddhism* is referred to as U Ba Kyi's "greatest legacy" (Stadtner 2011:332) and "most well-known work" (Shan Herald Agency for News 2011), with editor of Shan Herald Agency for News Khuensai Jaiyen stating: "I found copies of the book in many homes in Burma, when I was young. [...] Especially in Shan homes, it was usual to find it on the shelf of the home shrine" (ibid.). U Ba Kyi's watercolour illustrations are remarkable as they mark a shift in the artist's production. Ranard (2009:207) writes that in "these works Ba Kyi swathed himself in the Traditional heritage, in bold, flat contrasts of colours and the black Pagan-like outlines on figures, with minimal shading and no *sfumato*." U Ba Kyi's biographer Hla Tin Htun (2006:55) hails the illustrations as depicting "traditional figures in a modern way." This shift stems from U Ba Kyi's "research on Myanmar traditional techniques of painting [which he promoted] to the general public" (Hla Oo 2013) in the early 1950s. It is therefore important to examine these traditional techniques further.

In the Mandalay region, Pagan [or Bagan] had been the centre of the country's religious life and home to Burmese kings between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries before it lost its role of capital to the city of Ava in the fourteenth century (Stadtner 2013:8). From the late seventeenth to early nineteenth centuries, Pagan served again as regional centre and saw a strong increase in religious activity, with new stupas and temples being built, and with the revival and efflorescence of wall painting production (Green 2018:31). The inner walls of the temples adorned in that period are completely covered with mural paintings, providing the feeling to be "surrounded by a riot of color and imagery" (ibid., p. 1). The *jataka* tales and Buddha's biography predominate as the main narrative elements depicted in hierarchically-levelled strips with a linear narrative progression supplemented by more distant symbolic connections (Green 2018:15). If all 550 *jataka* tales were originally depicted in standard monoscenic images, the Ten Great Birth Stories [*Mahānipāta Jatakas*] took prominence in eighteenth-century murals through sequential narrative strips (ibid., p. 36). The *Vessantara Jataka*, or the Buddha's penultimate earthly life, grows in importance in wall paintings of the nineteenth century due to its increasing popularity in various media, such as performances, and its focus on Perfect Generosity and merit-making (Green 2018:8).

Like the Buddha's pictured biography and the images of twenty-eight previous Buddhas, the presence of *Mahānipāta Jatakas* offers itself as "a formula for enlightenment, with their theme being the perfection of the virtues [...]" (Green 2018:64), as strategies for action that devotees could use (ibid., p. 27), and as "exemplary models for Burmese social and political behavior and interactions" (Green 2018:17). The painted strips focus on moral or exciting and dramatic moments of the Buddhist tales with particular events

being included or omitted and depicted through a series of actions with an economical continuity (ibid., p. 62, 68, 76). The selection of representative episodes and the "use of specific gestures for particular scenes or certain events of a story made the identification of the visual tale easy among the repetitive illustrations" (Green 2018:40–41). In the visual adaptations of the *jataka* tales, only events of the 'stories of the past' are depicted while framing 'stories of the present' and concluding 'commentaries' are discarded. The painted strips surround a central and presiding image of the Buddha who officiates as the implied narrator of the storied previous births (see Cate 2003:73).

The style of Pagan's wall paintings evolved over 150 years, but the main stylistic features are as follows. Up until the second half of eighteenth century, linear perspective is not used but depth is suggested through overlapping figures, or through figures placed at a higher position to suggest distance (Ranard 2009:6). 'Mind perspective' is applied with characters of higher importance being depicted with larger bodies. Scenes and actions are separated in cells by wavy line dividers. They stem from the *kanut* feature of Burmese painting, a "decorative art for curving designs of flowers and vegetation, geometric arabesque, [and] elaborate abstract flourishes" (ibid., p. 11). Stylized two-dimensional figures are drawn with flat colours and a bold black outline which makes them stand out from the background (see **Figure 2**). In the early style, except "for images of Buddhas, which are portrayed frontally, people are mostly illustrated in three-quarter profile with broad faces, large eyes, wide noses, thick lips [and] large ears [...]" (Green 2018:46). In a later style, men "have largely lost the bulge in the cheek, though a broadness of face, especially around the cheek area silhouetted against

Figure 2: Detail of a mural painting, Anaint, Myanmar, 18th century (from Handlin 2020: Figure 7).

the background, is sometimes evident" (ibid., p. 48). The colour palette is bright with an extensive use of red for the background and of deep green, and with introduction of dark blues and turquoise in the late eighteenth century. Among this riot of bright reds and greens flourishes "an imagery [ranging] from guardian figures, protective diagrams, and scenes of hell" (ibid., p. 3) along with large-scale deities and ogres, *kinnarīs*, floral-geometric motifs and Indian trade textile patterns (see also Munier-Gaillard 2018:174–6). The kinetic, rich and mesmerizing works are rendered in what Andrew Ranard (2009:16, 19) is tempted to call a "*stream-of-consciousness style*". In his illustrations of *The Illustrated History of Buddhism*, U Ba Kyi brought back to the surface numerous aesthetic features of Burmese Traditional Art that had been amalgamated or discarded by the British-fostered Burmese Western School.

The nineteenth illustration of *The Illustrated History of Buddhism* depicts the "Buddha sending out a mission of sixty arahats [or Buddha's enlightened followers]" (Y.M.B.A. 2019, n.p.) (see **Figure 3** right). The Buddha, standing at centre stage with halo around his head, is provided with a sense of movement which opposes the more static representations in traditional painting. Facial expressions, such as the radiant smile of an *arahat*, are at times discernible. Emotional realism and the sense of a personal and relatable experience point toward a Western influence. Rendered through the traditional 'mind perspective', the Buddha is however provided with a larger size, being taller than all the other characters. Remarkable swirling lines are shaping some *arahats*' shoulders and wrists as well as the Buddha's ankles, wrists and elbows. Every element is depicted through smooth curved lines which might stem from the *kanut* feature of traditional Burmese painting. If he adds some discrete shading, U Ba Kyi reintroduces here the bold black outlines from wall paintings as well as the flat colours, with bright red, deep green and earth tones. Like in Pagan, the contoured characters stand out from the flat masses of colours—often rendered without outlines—figuring

Figure 3: Fifteenth [left] and nineteenth [right] illustrations of *The Illustrated History of Buddhism* (U Ba Kyi 1951). Used with permission of U Ba Kyi's heirs.

the background, almost reminiscent of Henri Matisse's 1909 Fauvist painting *Dance*. U Ba Kyi's stylisation informed by Traditional art might also be informed by stylisation in Western arts. Andrew Ranard (2009:205) argues that "Ba Kyi's overarching technique in his mixed-effect works is *stylization* of European or Burmese elements. In this work, the accentuation of either tends to create the Traditional effect." Ranard (ibid., p. 208) further adds that "[with] his studies under Ba Nyan and Western painting abroad, and his observations of Traditional Burmese painting, Ba Kyi came to understand the components of each, which part could be borrowed, discarded, exaggerated, or transformed, to create new effects." One of these remarkable effects is present in the illustration currently analysed. The *arahats* on the right are positioned in what Belgian cartoonist Hergé (1972/2003:201) called "a shortcut through space and time." A series of movements is here broken down and distributed among the several *arahats*, with one *arahat* fully prostrated with face to the ground in reverence to the Buddha, a second prostrated *arahat* is only partly bowed, a third one is on his knees but straightens up to put the strap of his alms bowl around his shoulder, a fourth one walks away with his alms bowl following a fifth and lively *arahat* in full motion. The allocation of the various postures from static prostration to energetic walk over the disciples gives a smooth, economic and kinetic flow to the illustration and encapsulates the group dynamic and the mission to bring the Buddha's teachings (prostration) to the world (walk). Let's note that a similar technique was used in a panel from the comics adaptation of *Raden Lundai* by Siamese cartoonist Jamnong Rodari circa 1933 and—more notably—in a panel from Hergé's 1940–1 comic book *The Adventures of Tintin: The Crab with the Golden Claws*. The sense of movement provided by this technique in U Ba Kyi's illustration ultimately echoes the bold swirling outlines applied to the characters' articulations.

Titled "Cakes being offered to the Buddha by the brothers Tapissa and Bhallika", the fifteenth illustration of U Ba Kyi's *The Illustrated History of Buddhism* stands out in the series (see **Figure 3** left). One can note the peculiar and playful presence of a painted postage stamp at the top right. It feels as if the stamp is stuck on the Buddhist scene. The effect reveals the 'iconicity' of the scene at two levels. At a formal level, it highlights the representational nature of the artwork as the stamp makes both surface's and illustration's two-dimensionality more apparent. It is an 'icon', but it is not any icon. The postage stamp holds an illustration of the most sacred pagoda in Myanmar; the Shwedagon Pagoda. The latter houses various relics including eight strands of hair from the head of the Buddha. The gift of the strands of hair to the brothers Tapissa and Bhallika is, foreseeably, depicted in the larger illustration which shows how "[the] Blessed One rubbed his head with his head and gave the two brothers whatever hairs came off and stuck to his hand" (Y.M.B.A. 2019, n.p.). At a conceptual level, the Buddhist

scene and the modern postal stamp bridge time and space, through the implied long journey of the relics from the time of the Buddha to contemporary Rangoon. This feature was also present in Pagan wall paintings; within the painted strips retelling the Buddha's life and previous births, the imagery depicted material culture—such as clothing and hairstyles—as contemporaneous with the temple's construction (Green 2018:102). For Alexandra Green (ibid.), these features "transform the stories from an abstract moment in the past into the present, merging contemporary devotees and their communities with the Buddha's milieu." The same observation applies here, as the time of the Buddha and contemporary time overlap, exactly as the modern postal stamp 'overlaps' the image of the Buddha's biography. Concurrently, it highlights the site holding the relics of the Buddha in the (then) capital city, and therefore underlines the particular place held by Buddhism in the country at a time when a traditionalist Buddhism—with worship of *Nats*, relics and pagodas—is at the centre of the government's nation-building programme after independence.

In line with the state's agenda, the final illustrations of *The Illustrated History of Buddhism*—dedicated to the further development of Buddhism after the Buddha's death—present the distribution of the sacred relics by the brahmin Dona in illustration 53, the military campaign of King Dottagāmani Abhaya described as a "staunch supporter and defender of the [Theravāda] Buddhist religion" in illustration 58, the edification of the Shwedagon Pagoda that "successive Mon kings and Myanmar kings vied with one another in maintaining and improving" in illustration 62, or the carving of 729 marble slabs inscribed with the *Tripitaka* under King Mindon in illustration 64. The sixty-fifth and final illustration depicts a "happy crowd in celebration of a charity, during the days of Myanmar kings" (Y.M.B.A. 2019: n.p.) with the spire of a pagoda discreetly showing in the background. The caption reads:

> In the days of the Myanmar Kings, the rulers were just administrators [...]. Textiles, consumer goods and fancy goods were not imported into this country from foreign places in these days as at present. Consequently there was no drainage of the country's resources to foreign lands. Paddy, rice and oil were produced in profusion and there was more than enough for local consumption. Scarcity of thefts and robberies kept the people happy and contented. They celebrated pagoda festivals and other charitable functions [...].

A mythical, protectionist and nationalist narrative is constructed; a golden age before British colonisation ended the monarchic rule and when prosperity, independence from foreigners and moral order were closely associated to kings—considered to be Bodhisattvas—and to Buddhist practices of merit-making and pagoda celebrations.

The 1951 introduction of the book by the Y.M.B.A. (2019: n.p.) is unequivocal on the matter: "May the publication of this 'Illustrated History of Buddhism' enable the light of Buddha's Doctrine to shed brighter rays everywhere and help the Independent Union of Burma to retain it's [*sic*] independence forever as a peaceful, pleasant and prosperous country." A Buddhist-oriented nationalist discourse is set.

Relying on anthropologist Michael Mendelson, Juliane Schober (2011:65) writes: "Burmese nationalist sentiments emerged in reaction to British colonial presence [and a] Buddhist identity provided a focal point for rather disparate groups engaged in resisting colonial power." On the matter, Donald Eugene Smith (1965:83) quotes a 1922 piece from the *Burma Observer* which reads: "The Burmese people cannot think of nationality apart from the religion that they hold, for it is Buddhism which has welded the Burmese together and the idea of nationhood owes its inception to Buddhism." Smith (ibid., p. 86) further argues that Buddhism "provided an essential component in the nationalist self-concept which helped to differentiate the Burmese from the foreigners." The aforementioned 'footwearing' controversy and the Young Men's Buddhist Association's implication set themselves as exemplary in that regard. The latter group was "the first civil organization to raise awareness about national identity" (Schober 2007:53); it "was nurtured [during its founding years] by, and simultaneously reacted to, British colonialism, the crisis of Buddhist authority, and modernity in Lower Burma [...]" (Schober 2011:66). The Y.M.B.A. members, composed mostly of young British-educated elites, were indeed the product of a modern education system and promoted modern Buddhist practices. They "felt estranged from their traditional cultural roots and sought to ease their discomfort by constructing a rationalized Buddhism stripped of cosmological mythologies" (ibid.). To some extent and within the educated elites, faith in the Buddhist cosmology and prescientific traditional lore had been weakened by Western schooling (Smith 1965:39). However, states Schober (2011:72), "[within] a decade, secularists as well as Buddhist maximalists, those with a traditional Buddhist or messianic orientation, had overwhelmed the YMBA's original agenda." A revisionist traditionalism took hold during the 1930s (Schober 2011:75) in the wake of the Saya San rebellion of 1930–31 aimed to overthrow the British rule.

On 28 October 1930, nationalist leader Saya San was proclaimed a Burmese king with his authority "validated by traditional religio-magical coronation ceremonies (Brahman, Buddhist, and animist) and by the possession of royal regalia which in themselves conferred legitimacy. It was precisely in this traditionalist element that the great power of the rebellion lay" (Smith 1965:107). Rebel soldiers placed hope of military success in amulets, charms, and the aid of guardian *Nats*. The latter are spirits originated from the pre-Buddhist local animist religion. In the eleventh century, King Anawrahta of

Pagan attempted to suppress the *Nat* worship in favour of Buddhism, but the cult was too firmly rooted (Smith 1965:13–14). The original thirty-six *Nats* were therefore integrated to Burmese Buddhism with the addition of Thagyamin as its guardian protector and head of the *Nat* pantheon. On his coronation day in 1930, Saya San (quoted in: Smith 1965:108) declared: "Guardian spirits of Gotama Buddha's religion, together with the inside 37 *nats*, outside 37 *nats* and Weik-za, I entreat you to help my soldiers to victory and to protect them from any harm". Despite the plea to the *Nats* and to *weikzas* or indigenous masters of esoteric arts endowed with extraordinary magical powers (Brac de la Perrière, Rozenberg, and Turner 2014:12) often referred to as 'Burmese Buddhist wizards', the rebellion was subdued by the colonial regime in 18 months yet captured the popular imagination. After the independence of Myanmar in 1948 and up to the 1962 military coup, the elected government of Myanmar tapped into the same traditionalist, regalian and religio-magical substrate in order to mobilize the nation.

Three-time Prime Minister during the 1948–1962 period, U Nu was vocal about his cosmological beliefs and practices. While bearing in mind Smith's secularist and rationalist stance (Cady 1966; Leach 1967), the American author (Smith 1965:145) states that U Nu's religious faith is "traditionalist and uncritical and hence contains important elements of popular superstition and animism." The veneration of relics, "surely regarded as one the non-rational elements of traditional Buddhism" (ibid., p. 169), the edification of pagodas based on the belief that the monuments would avert impending dangers looming over the nation (ibid., p. 171), or the offerings to guardian *Nats* were also emphasized in official speeches and events. Smith (1965:144) argues that "U Nu personally found value in all of these heterogenous elements of religious tradition, and the government accordingly promoted them all." The supernatural beliefs and animistic practices of popular Burmese religion were encouraged by the government along with the establishment of meditation centers (ibid., p. 166). If the promotion of Buddhism was partly initiated to counter the communist expansion and to further construct a unique and tangible national identity—and popular fervour—which couldn't only rely anymore on an anti-colonialist sentiment, U Nu's traditionalist revival "was intended to secure world peace and progress, ensure the expansion of the state into tribal areas, bring stability, and institute Buddhism as Burma's state religion" (Schober 2011:79). "In associating Buddhism with the political system," adds Smith (1965:309), "Premier Nu sought to acquire legitimacy through tradition in a double sense. Buddhism itself was the sacred tradition which conferred legitimacy, and the official promotion of Buddhism was part of the historical tradition of Burmese kingship which helped to confirm legitimacy." The government therefore took the role of defender and promoter of the Buddhist faith, bridging it to narratives

of Burmese monarchs as guarantor of the nation's unity and preservation. It sheds a light on the importance given to Burmese kings in *The Illustrated History of Buddhism* and why the Y.M.B.A. claims that the publication of the book, participating in the dissemination of the Buddha's doctrine, may help the Independent Union of Burma to retain its independence forever. The importance accorded in the book's illustrations to relics, the Shwedagon Pagoda and other sacred monuments is in tune with the time. It is here worth noting that U Ba Kyi, in preparation of the composition of the 65 illustrations, "approached the learned Sayadaw monks under whose guidance he performed a series of religious deeds such as praying, telling beads, meditation and other meritorious works until he attained a mental frame of peace, loving kindness and spiritual inspiration" (Hla Oo 2013). If religious devotion and fervour were part of the book's message, they were also part of the book's making. Furthermore, U Ba Kyi was also pleased that his illustrations and style served as a model and were copied by younger artists as it actively participated in generating and adding [religious] merit to his original undertaking (Hla Tin Htun 2012:140).

This contextual overview allows a better understanding of the presence of miraculous, fantastic and cosmological elements in a Buddhist publication aimed at adults and children in Myanmar which diametrically differs from the concurrent Thai production—led by influential illustrator Hem Vejakorn [1903–1969]—where supernaturalism is either toned down or discarded following the state-sponsored promotion of a rationalised Buddhism. In *The Illustrated History of Buddhism*, one can note the presence of Māra trying to persuade Prince Siddhartha to turn back in illustration 8, of Māra mounting an elephant along with an army of distorted creatures in illustration 13, of the god Sakka assuming the form of a huge demon in illustration 31, of the king of dragons Nadopananda in illustration 35, and of the demon god Ālavaka in illustration 44. All are colourful and drawn with apparent traditional iconographies. When preaching to the band of five disciples in illustration 16, the Buddha is surrounded by a dozen of monochromic deities outlined with white. The composition and the deities' design were used again by U Ba Kyi in another painting titled *Buddha Preaching to the Hermits and Nats* (Ranard 2009:208). This painting, states Andrew Ranard (ibid.), "again shows U Ba Kyi's playful humor, and is similar to the watercolors he did for *The Illustrated History of Buddhism*, except for one dramatic and radical point: here he added the 'wild card' of Burmese culture and painting. Ghostly *nats* in the background are attending the Buddha's sermon." Supernatural and esoteric figures, such as *Nats*, *zawgyi* (alchemists), ghost maidens and nymphs, were part of his painting subjects. "This sense of the fantastic—the Burmese Ego—", argues Ranard (ibid., p. 213), had been "severely quashed by the British during the colonial subjugation. U Ba Kyi's art,

which emerged in the Independence Era, should be viewed in this context. In much of his painting, Ba Kyi gave the Burmese back their fables, myths, and fantasies—their *zeitgeist*." These fables, myths, and fantasies—"encouraged by the fanciful allegories of the Jataka tales and superstitions from occult folklore" (ibid.)—were also given back to the Burmese children through U Ba Kyi's comics adaptation of Burmese chronicles and of the *Mahānipāta Jatakas.*

U Ba Kyi's Early (Documented) Comics

The print industry developed substantially in Burma in the 1930s, with more than 200 newspapers and periodicals in circulation by the end of the decade (Ikeya 2008:1282). The role of political and editorial cartoons grew accordingly as "cartoonists also joined their fellow citizens in the fight [for independence]" (Ngwe Kyi 1996:27). If Ba Gale used short sequences of panels in his satirical production, pioneer cartoonist and Burma Art Club alumnus U Hein Soong [1902–1987] launched a four-panel comic strip series *Akyan paing dhaw Nga Khwe* (Clever Nga Khwe) in the pages of *Myanmar Alin* in 1939 (ibid., p. 29). After World War II, the leading magazine *Shumawa* [founded in 1947] published cartoons penned by leftist artists who criticized the Tatmadaw, or Myanmar's Armed Forces (Callahan 2003:183). The magazine also introduced one-or-two-panels gag cartoons in its pages; it helped to popularise the genre and other magazines followed suit (Ngwe Kyi 1996:29). Up to 1951, cartoons had been published on a weekly or monthly frequency in newspapers. In 1951, the *Hanthawaddy* newspaper started to publish cartoons weekly on a Western model and, in September of that year, launched the comics serial *Pyidhu Kyemon* [The People's Mirror] by cartoonist U Pe Thein [1924–2009] (ibid.). John A. Lent (2015:177) states that "some cartoonists adapted to forms other than political cartoons and strips, as cartoon books and comic books grabbed their attention." A new generation of cartoonists thrived and gained recognition, including U Pe Thein and U Ba Kyi (Ngwe Kyi 1996:29). U Ba Kyi's cartoons produced for the Rangoon University Student Union's publication *Oway* when a university student are partially documented (Hla Tin Htun 2012:138–141) but the date of his debut in comics [sequential] art remains unknown.

His first documented comics series was published in the pages of the *Myawaddy* magazine which was launched in November 1952. Established by the Tatmadaw's Propaganda and Psychological Warfare Unit to counter anti-military leftist publications (The Irrawaddy 2013) and as an "instrument of psychological warfare to voice the interest of the military" (Aung Myoe 2009:174), the monthly magazine—along with *Shumawa* and *Thway Thauk*—consistently outsold their competitors and provided its readership with general articles, cartoons, short stories, poems and essays (Bee,

Brown, Manas Chitkasem and Herbert 1989:15; Zon Pann Pwint 2018). In some of these essays, states Bo Bo (2010:184), *Myawaddy*'s writers "presented a perspective on modern Burmese culture that showed it having been polluted by the West and in need of purification through a return to the Burman's own original culture. Even more, adding newer chronicles written by Burman patriots during the anticolonial movements diminished the politico–social status of the ethnic groups from highland Burma who had once been allies of the British." Bo Bo (2010:184–5) further argues that "fostering the spirit of unity by developing a historical perspective was mostly carried out by pre-war nationalist writers and scholars [but also] a famous cartoonist, U Ba Kyi, through his comic strips on Burmese history, which portrayed the success of the Burman dynasties and explained the conflicts among different tribes in the past as merely a form of feudalistic power play [...]." U Ba Kyi's two-page short comics are most likely adapted from the *Hmannan Yazawin* [*The Glass Palace Chronicle*] and retell the mythical and historical foundation of Myanmar in the time of the Pyu and Pagan dynasties. In the November 1952 first issue, the series of graphic tales is introduced by the editor as a prescribed textbook aimed to help children remember the chronicles more easily (Myawady 1952: n.p.). In the same issue, U Ba Kyi illustrates a first chronicle—the blind twin brothers of Tagaung—over two pages and eight colourful panels with captions. In this tale, king Thado Maharaja's sons Sulathambawa and Mahathambawa are cured from blindness by the ogress Sandamokhki (Pe Maung Tin and Luce 1923:9–12). The art is naturalist and semi-realist with lively and interesting frame compositions and with a sense of depth. The characters are surrounded by a thin black outline. In the December 1952 issue, U Ba Kyi adapts the chronicles of Pyusawhti, a legendary king of Pagan (see **Figure 4** top), born from an egg resulting from the union of the Sun spirit's son with a female Naga (Pe Maung Tin and Luce 1923:38). The eight-panel comic narrative focuses on his mythical deeds, being the slaying of the great bird, the great tiger, the great boar, and the flying squirrel thanks to his archery skills. The fantastic creatures are visually impressive. The full-page opening illustration is of interest as it shows Pyusawhti drawn as a child vanquishing a tiger toy.

Starting from the third issue of *Myawaddy* published in January 1953 (see **Figure 4** bottom), U Ba Kyi remarkably applied the same stylised child design—with short body and large head with broad forehead and prominent cheeks—to all the adult characters of his graphic narratives. The artist takes a step away from the naturalism of the first two comics tales published in 1952. Like Ranard (2009:207–8) noted for *The Illustrated History of Buddhism*, here too U Ba Kyi seems to swathe himself in the Traditional heritage and to express his playful humor. In this story, the black outlines are bolder, the stylised design amplifies the deep red and green colours, the backgrounds are provided

Figure 4: [Top] Pages from the adaptation of *The Chronicle of Pyusawhti* (U Ba Kyi 1952). [Bottom] Pages of the adaptation of the chronicle *Shin Bayin Fik Taw Taung Thu Kyi A Kyaung* (U Ba Kyi 1953). Used with permission of U Ba Kyi's heirs.

with less depth and shading, figures stand out on large areas using plain flat colours provided by clouds or black masses shaped by silhouetted soldiers. Being presented with a selection of U Ba Kyi's comic pages by the author of this paper, Alexandra Green (pers. comm. 2022) noted that these features nicely connect with wall painting art. However, she doesn't establish a link between the 'babyish' appearance of the figures with Pagan mural paintings. The broad forehead and prominent cheeks might be influenced by other sources like Platinum-Age American comic strips series with Jerry Flannigan (in Walter Hoban's *Jerry on the Job*), Skeezix (in Frank King's *Gasoline Alley*) or Henry (in

Carl Thomas Anderson's eponymous series) showing similar traits. It is worth noting that—in the December 1952 opening illustration of Pyusawhti as a child—the eyes of the latter are drawn as 'pie-eyed', with a missing 'slice' or chip. The feature was commonly used during the Rubber Hose (or Inkblot Cartoon) animation era and most notably associated with the 1930s design of Mickey Mouse in both animated films and Floyd Gottfredson's comic strips. U Ba Kyi might also have merged both Pagan and Western stylisations as he skilfully did in his fine art paintings and illustrations. U Ba Kyi further explored this new style, with slight variations and at times with increased minimalism and cartoony stylisation, for his following adaptations of chronicles in *Myawaddy* magazine. If his style as a painter was "in constant metamorphosis" (Ranard 2009:204), the same observation applies to his comics work. One of the only constants is the regular-panel layouts with captions but without any speech balloons. U Ba Kyi's comics production between 1954 and 1964 sadly remains undocumented.

On 2 March 1962, Prime Minister U Nu's government was brought down by a coup d'état lead by general Ne Win who ruled from 1962 to 1988 with his Burma Socialist Programme Party and with severe press censorship (Leehey 1997:152; Brooten 2014:179). If the military regime "limited the role of Buddhism in the state until the 1980s" (Schober 2011:82), it "propagated a neotraditionalist and scripturalist understanding of the Buddha's teachings and again mobilized the nation through ritual networks and the construction of sacred sites" (ibid., p. 78). Andrew Ranard (2009:204) states that U Ba Kyi "remained an admired figure of [Ne Win socialist-military] government during this time, surely because of the 'Burmeseness'—the Neo-Traditional elements—of his paintings, which were in sync with post-Independence sentiments, regardless of who held power." The military government pursued its propaganda through the publication of new magazines. In 1964, the Information Ministry launched the comics magazine *Tayza* [or *Tei-za*] which became popular among children (Leehey 1997:153; Lent 1995:36). Along with prominent cartoonists U Than Kywe [1923–1984] and U Aung Shein [1928–2013] who also produced children comics for *Kalay Journal* [Children Journal] since 1955, U Ba Kyi was a regular contributor to the publication which proposed short comics with moralist and patriotic content, educational explainers, poems, and gag cartoons. The magazine is mostly printed in black and white with some colour pages usually devoted to U Ba Kyi's three-to-four-page comics. In a 1965 issue of *Tayza*, U Ba Kyi adapts the chronicle of the Four Paladins Nga Htweyu, Nga Lonlephpe, Nyaung-u Hpi and Kyanzittha, the latter soon to become a prominent king of Pagan (see Pe Maung Tin and Luce 1923:69–70). The pages are in keeping with the cartoony Pagan-inspired style of his graphic chronicles from 1953–1954 *Myawaddy* magazines but show more variations in page composition with panels of various sizes and shapes (see **Figure 5**).

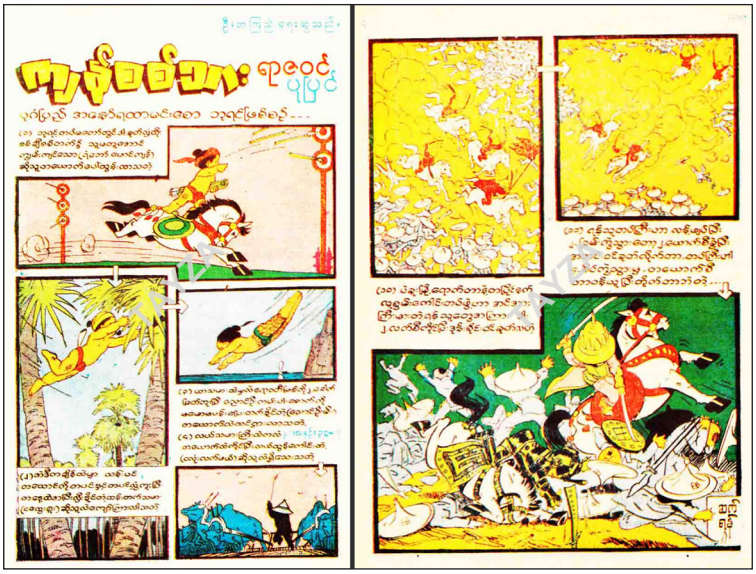

Figure 5: Two first pages of the adaptation of *The Chronicle of the Four Paladins* (U Ba Kyi 1965). Used with permission of U Ba Kyi's heirs.

The May 1968 issue of *Tayza* presents the final part of the first documented adaptation of a *jataka* tale by U Ba Kyi (see **Figure 6**). The four-page (and concluding) instalment retells the end of the 206th *jataka* tale, or *Kuruṅgamiga Jataka*, in which the Bodhisattva is born as an antelope [or deer] and befriends a woodpecker and a tortoise. It shows the first documented use of speech and thought balloons in U Ba Kyi's work.[6] Page compositions are highly creative as numerous panels have curved or oblique borders. The shape of the third panel of the penultimate page seems to echo the wavy dividers of Pagan painted strips. Plain flat colours are dominant in the background. Bright red flowers in the final panel might also evoke the use of floral motifs in traditional painting. Characters are expressive and lively; U Ba Kyi fully embraces and plays with the fable-like quality of this *jataka*. Most interesting is the character design of the hunter with over-developed lower legs and forearms. This trait is reminiscent of American comic strip character Popeye and it was also borrowed by Siamese artists Sawas Jutharop in 1932 and Wittamin in 1935 (Verstappen 2021:33–35, 38, 42). Along with the 1952 'pie-eyed' design of Pyusawhti mentioned earlier, it is the only clear influence of a Western comics-related production on the 'cartoony' style of U Ba Kyi to be established.

The influence of Western animation, and mostly of Disney movies, has been hinted at by Andrew Ranard (2009:207) who mentions that one observer remarked

[6] Speech balloons were extensively used in the English-language comic strip series *Something of Value* written by Khin Swe Hla and illustrated by U Ba Kyi in the Burmese newspaper *The Working People's Daily* which was launched by Ne Win's government in 1964. The exact publication dates of *Something of Value* remain uncertain.

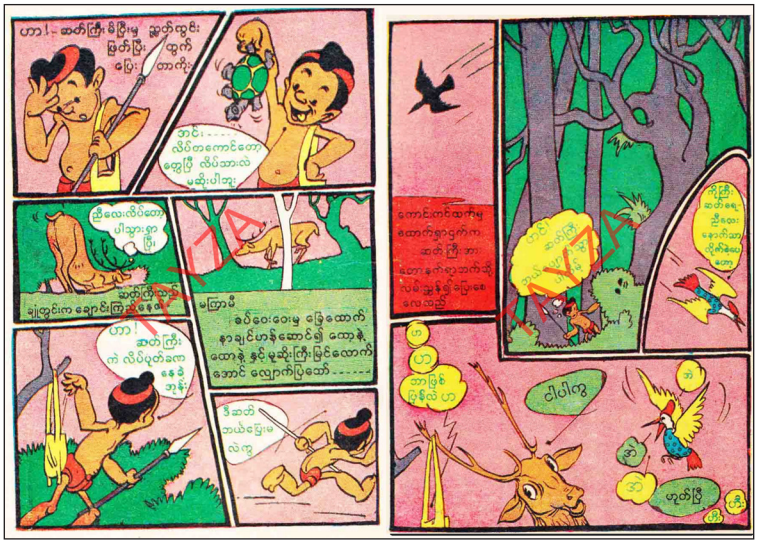

Figure 6: Pages from the adaptation of *Kuruṅgamiga Jataka* (U Ba Kyi 1968). Used with permission of U Ba Kyi's heirs.

a "Disneyesque quality" to the illustrations for *The Illustrated History of Buddhism*. References to Disney movies can be noted in a series of illustrations by U Hla Soe in a May 1955 issue of *Kalay Journal* where this artist introduces Bambi and Thumper from the 1942 *Bambi* movie in a local setting. While up to discussion, a Disney reference might also be noted in U Ba Kyi's work (see Figure 1). In the first panel of the second page of U Ba Kyi's 1975 comics adaptation of the *Sāma Jataka* [or the *Birth Story of Thuwanna Tharma* in Myanmar] for *Tayza* magazine, the young Sāma sweeps the remote hermitage's outdoors with a broom, surrounded by three animals he befriended. The squirrel, rabbit and fawn jumping in or out of the cloud of dust provoked by the sweeping might refer to the last shot of the *Whistle While You Work* scene in Disney's 1937 *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* movie. Befriended rabbits, squirrels and fawn also pass through the screen as Snow White stands at the doorstep of the isolated cottage she cleaned with their assistance. The only direct reference to Disney movies by U Ba Kyi is related to Ko Banyar's adaptation in animation of a series of illustrations of his *The Illustrated History of Buddhism* in the late 1990s. In his final years and with a declining eyesight, U Ba Kyi couldn't participate to the animation production but advised the director to consult Christopher Finch's *The Art of Walt Disney: From Mickey Mouse to the Magic Kingdoms* as well as Will Friedwald and Jerry Beck's 1997 *Warner Bros. Animation Art* (Hla Tin Htun 2012:73). U Ba Kyi also mentioned an old book on animal character motion by Walt Disney that he would have lent to the director if it hadn't gone missing from his collection (ibid., p. 72). Before his passing, U Ba Kyi stated that he was pleased with this animation project as such an adaptation had been his dream since a young man

(ibid., p. 73). Interestingly he also mentioned that he had only one regret which was the use of the term ‘animation’. U Ba Kyi believed that the term was coined from the word ‘animal’ because Walt Disney’s Mickey Mouse and other anthropomorphic characters were among the first to benefit from the technique; he felt the term ‘animation’ was therefore inappropriate when relating to the holy figure of the Buddha.

Conclusion

Myanmar artist U Ba Kyi enjoyed illustrating fantastical subjects in series of paintings where he used the ‘wild card’ of Burmese culture. In *The Illustrated History of Buddhism* and the adaptations of *jatakas* teeming with supernatural elements, U Ba Kyi fully embraces the ‘Burmese’ sense of the fantastic also present in the supernatural beliefs and animistic practices of popular Burmese Buddhism. He is aligned with the traditionalist Buddhism revival promoted by the government after the independence achieved in 1948. The elected government tapped into a regalian and religio-magical substrate, being a fertile soil after the British affronts to Buddhist practices, Burmese sensibilities and monarchy, and a ground from which a nation-building programme could be grown to gain legitimacy and unity after the colonial era. U Ba Kyi’s lush and vibrant art could fully thrive in that context and be at the service of an unbridled cosmological and mythical lore with *Nats*, deities working miracles, gigantic *nāgas* or even wet-nurse *kinnarīs*. With the end of the British rule and the distancing from British-fostered Western painting, U Ba Kyi explored Burmese traditional arts to develop a neo-traditional style which constantly remained versatile, deciding which Western and traditional features could be combined to provide new and appropriate effects. In his comics production, he playfully shifts from semi-realist to cartoony art, from detailed backgrounds to minimal settings, to serve the needs of each sequence. The Pagan wall painting heritage dominates with flat contrasts of colours, figures with bold black outlines, minimal shading, and lively round-faced characters. In the wake of pioneering Burmese cartoonists, traditional and Western stylisations—from Pagan, *Punch*, *Popeye* or Disney movies—seem to be synthesised to provide a free—and deeply Burmese—sense of line.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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This reference list follows the local bibliographic convention of presenting Thai and Burmese names in alphabetical order based on the author's first name; non-Thai and non-Burmese authors are listed alphabetically under their last names. Honorific Burmese titles (e.g. *U*, *Maung*, etc.) were placed in italic after the authors' names and do not affect alphabetization. Thus U Ba Kyi appears under "Ba Kyi, *U*".

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