Reflections on *Nat Pwe* at Household No. 143: Changes of "Body Techniques" and Domestic Spaces within the Spiritual Cult of Myanmar

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Abstract

This article explores the changes in body techniques of *shikho*, a five-point prostration, which is a fundamental practice during acts of devotion within the spiritual cult of Myanmar, and domestic spaces, particularly during *nat pwe*, a spirit possession festival at contemporary household No.143. Using Marcel Mauss's "Techniques of the Body" as a theoretical framework to explore the evolving traditions and beliefs of the people in a spiritual cult, this research aims to understand how the *shikho* have changed due to colonization and its relation to sacred spaces within the domestic contexts in contemporary Myanmar.

In "Techniques of the Body", Mauss argues that body techniques can be passed on from one generation to the next. Habits are read as traditions, and body techniques are learned behaviors, rather than instincts. Mauss emphasizes that each society develops its own unique forms of body techniques, shaped by social, educational, cultural, and environmental factors. While previous scholars have analyzed the changes within Myanmar's spiritual cult due to the historical shifts, the relationship between body techniques and domestic spaces remains underexplored. This research addresses this gap. Using Mauss's theoretical framework with architectural analysis, this research offers a new lens to examine the changes in habits and sacred spaces in residential buildings.

Traditional and post-independence practices of *shikho* are compared and analyzed. A contemporary case study of *nat pwe* in a contemporary Buddhist household is conducted to analyze the bodily techniques practiced by *nat kadaw,* spirit medium and non-worshippers, revealing how rituals have adapted and changed to the beliefs of the inhabitants and the urbanized landscape of modern Myanmar. By emphasizing contemporary shifts and tracing these traditions, this research aims to understand the relationship between anthropology, bodily practices, and architectural spaces. The finding suggests that domestic spaces are organized by the beliefs and habits of the inhabitants, and the spaces influence bodily practices and vice versa. As bodily practices changed and some endure, this study contributes to ongoing discussions on cultural identity, tradition, and the built environment.

Keywords: *shikho, nat pwe, techniques of the body, domestic spaces, Myanmar*

Introduction

This research article examines the changes in body techniques of *shikho*, prostration in relation to domestic spaces, within the context of the spiritual cult in Myanmar. In this article, the spiritual cult refers to Buddhism and the *nat* cult, which have long coexisted in Myanmar, sharing embodied techniques. *Nats,* spirits are venerated to receive good luck and prevent misfortune. Over the past 140 years, from the fall of the monarchy in 1885 through the British colonization and post-independence Myanmar, traditions and cultural practices have continuously changed, including the bodily techniques and architectural spaces. By exploring and tracing these changes, this research aims to understand how the changes in bodily practices have influenced the spatial organization of households within the spiritual cult of contemporary Myanmar.

Marcel Mauss's "Techniques of the Body (1973)" serves as the theoretical framework for this study. Mauss argues that bodily movements are not purely instinctual but are learned behaviors shaped by cultural, social, and environmental forces. For a technique to persist, it must be passed through generations, embedded within society. Mauss also emphasizes that the bodily techniques performed in spiritual practices, such as chanting, breathing, and movements, are believed to facilitate communication with the divine or spiritual realms (Mauss, 1973: 86-87).

While previous scholars have examined the changes within the spiritual cult of Myanmar in response to historical shifts, the interrelation between bodily techniques and domestic spaces has remained underexplored. This research aims to bridge that gap by integrating Mauss's theoretical framework with architectural analysis, offering a new perspective on the interplay between bodily practices and sacred architectural settings in contemporary households in Myanmar. With this objective in mind, changes in bodily techniques of *shikho* in relation to architectural spaces from the colonial period to contemporary Myanmar are traced and analyzed. This comparative analysis sheds light on how bodily practices have changed in response to historical shifts. Personal observations of practices and spatial organization in domestic household No. 143 are documented, providing a detailed examination of how rituals have adapted to the urbanized and modernized landscape of Myanmar.

Marcel Mauss: Techniques of the Body (1973)

Marcel Mauss' Techniques of the Body (1973) explores how bodily techniques and practices, such as walking, sitting, swimming, or other actions, are not solely instinctual or biological, but are learned behaviors influenced by social, educational, and environmental forces. According to Mauss, each society has developed its own special habits and forms.

> "These 'habits' do not just vary with individuals and their imitations, they vary especially between societies, educations, properties and fashions, prestige. In them, we should see the techniques and work of collective and individual practical reason rather than, in the ordinary way merely the soul and its repetitive faculties" (Mauss, 1973: 73).

Habitus (Mauss, 1973: 73), the key concept and term introduced by Mauss, emphasized that habits are not simply a result of personal choices or imitations, but depend on the cultural norms or the society the individual grew

up in or the education they received, social-economic class, and what is considered fashionable or prestigious in their context.

> "I call technique an action which is effective and traditional (and you will see that in this it is no different from a magical, religious, or symbolic action). It has to be effective and traditional. There is no technique and no transmission in the absence of tradition" (Mauss, 1973: 75).

Mauss defines techniques such as magical, religious, or symbolic actions are not simply defined by functionality but are deeply rooted in tradition. For a technique to exist, it must be passed down through generations, embedded within a cultural or social context. Mauss's exploration of the "Techniques of the Body" reveals the profound connection between bodily movements, cultural traditions, and social structures. His work emphasizes the adaptability and continuity of human behavior, showcasing the unique human capacity to transmit and refine techniques across generations. Through this lens, Mauss offers a framework for understanding how bodily actions are shaped by and contribute to broader cultural and social systems.

Research Methodology

Traditional bodily techniques and spatial organizations in *nat* worship were preserved through oral transmission, literature, and murals for generations. From the fall of the Konbaung Dynasty in 1885, through British colonization, post-independence Myanmar, and into the contemporary period, certain rituals and cultural practices were considered superstitious or incompatible with modern governance and were restricted. Despite the restrictions, rather than disappearing, these traditions have adapted to the changing society in contemporary Myanmar.

The research methodology combines a case study on contemporary household No.143, interviews with a spirit medium and the residents, and an architectural analysis to provide a comprehensive understanding of this subject. This study examines the tradition of *shikho*, the changes during the British colonization, and the contemporary practices in Myanmar. Through comparative analysis, it explores how traditions have adapted to social and architectural shifts across different periods. The case studies include personal observations of a *nat pwe*, hosted by a devout Buddhist family in the house without an altar or dedicated space for *nat* rituals, apart from the Buddha shrine room. The study further documents the changes between traditional and contemporary households, focusing on spatial adaptations for hosting *nat pwe*, as well as the bodily techniques of the *nat kadaw* and the responses of non-worshippers toward the *nat*. Through this analysis, this research explores the dynamic relationship between the body and architectural spaces, showing how each continuously reshapes the other in response to belief, traditions, social, and cultural forces.

Being a Spirit Medium in Contemporary Burma (2011), Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière

Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière's article "Being a Spirit Medium in Contemporary Burma (2011)" provides an in-depth ethnographic account of *nat kadaws* and spiritual cult in modern-day Myanmar, focusing on the evolving roles of spirit mediums and the socio-cultural contexts that shape their presence. Drawing from extensive fieldwork, Perrière explores how spirit possession practices have become increasingly individualized and professionalized in urban settings,

reflecting a shift from traditional, community-rooted beliefs to more autonomous, visible spiritual figures in the public eye.

Perrière argues that these contemporary spirit possession performances are far from being mere "superstition"; rather, they are deeply ingrained in their sociological environment and responsive to the ongoing socio-economic transformations of Burma (Brac de la Perrière, 2011: 164). Although she does not frame her study under Marcel Mauss's Techniques of the Body, her findings align with Mauss's idea that bodily techniques are shaped by the physical, psychological, and social elements formed through habit, tradition, and social history.

Perrière hypothesizes that the fall of the Burmese monarchy impacted the ritual institutions, since the cult's specialists were once royal court officers dependent on the state's patronage. During British rule, the neglect of religious institutions contributed to the displacement of traditional courtly practices. Nevertheless, the cult did not vanish. Instead, it evolved outside the royal context and began to rely increasingly on spirit mediums and elective possession for legitimacy (Brac de la Perrière, 2011: 167). This autonomy, alongside urbanization and governmental neglect, led to a transformation in which spirit possession became loosely dispersed among local cults.

Economic growth in the 1990s led to a revival and reorganization of ritual institutions (Brac de la Perrière, 2005, 2007). However, inflation and the widening economic gap affected the spirit mediums of their primary income source, *nat pwe*. She notes that governmental restrictions, requiring official approval for these festivals, impact the mediums' livelihoods. Some responded by shifting professions or modifying cult practices to appeal to wealthier clients.

> "According to Burmese Buddhist conceptions, to support a religious foundation is an outstanding way to get religious merit... This attitude explains their particular devotion and offerings to these figures, beginning with the commissioning of representations of *thaik* and *bòbògyì* in their pagodas" (Brac de la Perrière, 2011: 172).

As cults adapted, new spiritual figures like *bòbògyì* and *thaik* (pagoda guardians) were incorporated into the *nat* festivals, though not usually summoned. *bòbògyì*, meaning "grandfather," are male spirits associated with Buddhist sacred places, while *thaik* are linked to treasures and are often imagined as glamorous young women dressed in green. She highlights how well-off civilians contributed to the installation of new spirit figures in pagoda compounds during the 1990s, often as acts of merit-making (yonkyi hmú). This growing devotion, motivated by karmic belief systems, led to the spread of symbolic imagery within Buddhist urban spaces.

The interplay between bodily techniques and architectural spaces in *nat* rituals is crucial to understanding how Myanmar's spiritual traditions continue amid modern pressures. New trends find their way into the ritual sphere, yet the ritual structure of the thirty-seven *nats* remains resilient. By articulating spirit possession with local customs, the cult creates space for tradition to interact with contemporary changes. Still, while Brac de la Perrière documents emerging bodily techniques and the rise of new spiritual figures, the bodily techniques practiced by mediums and worshippers in relation to architectural spaces remain underexplored.

Politics of “Body Techniques” of *Shikho* in relation to Architectural Spaces

The fall of the Kon Baung dynasty of Burma in 1885 marked the beginning of the disruption to the socio-cultural and spiritual cult of Burmese society. The British colonial administration, as Targosz and Sławik (2016) argue, lacked an understanding of Burmese culture and customs, which hindered their ability to create a system that resonated with local realities. The British administration’s imposition of new bodily techniques and its attempts to redefine traditional practices, such as *shikho* in school, reveal how colonial rule sought to dismantle and reconfigure Burmese habitus.

Traditional Practices of *Shikho*



Figure 1: *Shikho*, Five-Point Prostration of Male and Female. Drawn by the author.

The *shikho* is a fundamental practice during acts of devotion, traditionally performed in religious contexts and sacred spaces, directed toward the Buddha, monks, and figures associated with spiritual cults and occasionally extended to elders among laypeople. This technique requires touching five parts of the body, the feet, hands, forehead, elbows, and knees, to the ground while bowing [see Figure 1]. Known as "five-point prostration," this gesture signifies complete humility before the sacred. Traditionally, this act was carried out to the monarch and religious leaders. Before colonization, religious leaders played a significant role as monastic education was the main form of schooling for both royalty and laypeople. *Shikho* act was performed in monasteries, which were both spiritual and educational centers. Archival photographs of monastic education reveal that, although the building was present, monks and disciples often chose to conduct lessons outside. As seen in Figure 2, the monk sits on an elevated platform, likely part of the building, while the students sit on the ground on a rattan carpet (*phyar*), with no roof overhead. This arrangement was likely due to the traditional pedagogy that did not require formal classroom furniture. It also reflects the monastery’s role as a flexible community center rather than a strictly institutional school.




Figure 2 [Left]: Monastic Education, 1890s. Source: Photograph by Philip Adolphe Klier. British Library, Photo 88/1(47). & Figure 3 [Right]: Early Colonial Era Girls' School in Rangoon. (Source: Universal History Archive, BBC Burmese)

However, with the arrival of colonization, the cultural system began to shift. Colonial schools replaced monasteries as the main educational institutions, weakening the role of monastic education. The British colonized the body techniques through "The 1889 Village Act", which required all Burmese nationals, except Buddhist monks, to show respect to British officers using the *shikho* (Charney, 2009: 7) and the requirement of all students to *shikho* the secular teachers daily as a form of respect in July of 1903 (Turner, 2014: 115). John Van Someren Pope, the Director of Public Instruction for Burma, believed that Buddhist boys at school were lacks of moral values. Students were now required to perform the religious act towards lay teachers and colonial officials, but not monks, and in secular schools rather than the monasteries. This forced adaptation of a sacred body technique into a hierarchical colonial space created friction. The architectural environment shifted from a flexible, open communal area to a formal, indoor institutional school furnished with standardized classroom furniture [see Figure 3]. Yet the *shikho* persisted, detached from its spiritual roots and repurposed to serve a colonial order. The Burmese students rejected this requirement, perceiving it as a degrading act disguised as tradition.

Post-Independence practices of *Shikho*

The unsuccessful attempt by colonial rulers to impose the *shikho* gesture in school was met with resistance from the students. However, during post-independence Burma, the *shikho* evolved into what is now commonly referred to as the *garava* greeting, with a respectful hand posture, similar to the Thai greetings, *wai*. *The Irrawaddy* newspaper published an article in August 1999 (Vol. 7, No. 7) titled "The True Meaning of *Garava*", which states: "*Garava*, the principle of respect for oneself and others, is a cornerstone of Burmese culture. We show *garava* to elders and to people of higher status based on prestige, morality, and knowledge. Displays of *garava* are not limited to such people, however. In some cases, it may be shown towards people of the same age or status, or even those who are younger or of lower status. Moreover, *garava* is not one-sided. It is reciprocal and mutual" (The Irrawaddy, 1999).

Garava can be expressed in three ways: mental, verbal, and physical. Body techniques of verbal garava are expressed in speaking politely and ending the sentences in conversations with *kabya* for boys and *shin* for girls. Physically, Burmese people perform *garava* in various body techniques. Bowing the head and waist while walking in

front of elders and sitting on the floor or a lower level while sitting together with monks or elders are forms of *garava* bodily practices. While sitting, Burmese people tend to tuck and hide their feet behind the body, as feet are considered the lowest part of the body and are regarded as most degraded.

Regarding the *garava* gesture and greetings, in September 2016, U Ohn Myint wrote in *Myat Mingala* Journal, in an article titled "Three Ways of *Garava* Hand Posture," that there are three distinct hand gestures, *Ahunsali Panama* (အဉ္ဇလီ ပဏာမ), where hands are joined at chest level, is used for respectful greetings among individuals and conveys courtesy rather than worship, *Ahunsali Garava* (အဉ္ဇလီ ဂါရဝ), with hands at nose level, is used for elders, teachers, and benefactors, showing deeper reverence, and *Ahunsali Vandana* (အဉ္ဇလီ ဝန္ဒန), where hands are raised above the forehead, is reserved for veneration of the Three Jewels—the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. U Ohn Myint noted that DeDote U Thar Din, founder of *Mingala Byuhar* association, introduced the *Ahunsali Panama* practice within the association, as the act of respect, not *shikho*, and it gradually became widespread in post-independence Burma. Despite initial arguments and resistance during the colonial era, this evolved bodily practice, *garava* greeting, was later adopted and performed toward laypeople, teachers (non-monastics), and even government officials.

Contemporary Case Study: The North Mother's Feast, Private *Nat Pwe* at Household No. 143

Traditionally, Myanmar houses are single-story, with the Buddha shrine placed on the east orientation of the house, near the entrance, on an altar or shelf. Based on the traditional belief that *nats* protect the home and family, spiritual figures such as *nat* statues or symbolic materials are also kept and worshipped in the same area, but placed on a lower level, emphasizing the spiritual hierarchy between the Buddha and the spirits. By tradition, a coconut was always tied to the south side of the house as an offering to the *Eaindwin nat,* guardian of the house. Strips of yellow and red ribbon were sometimes attached to the coconut, which had to be replaced before it had completely dried up (Casino, 1997: 59). The front part of the traditional houses often serves multiple functions: it may be used as a living room, dining area, or even transformed into a bedroom at night. Occasionally, residents would invite monks and nuns, transforming the area into a sacred space.

As Myanmar has urbanized, two or three-story houses have become more common. In these newer homes, the *phaya cin*, Buddha shrine shelves have changed into a *phaya khan*, shrine room, creating a new spatial organization in contemporary households. The shrine room is often relocated to the uppermost floor, ensuring that no layperson lives above it. This architectural shift reflects a negotiation between cultural identity, religious belief, and regional adaptation. The house style chosen for this case study falls into the latter category. Built in the early 2000s, designed and built by the author's parents, its design reflects the personal choices rooted in tradition, belief, and lifestyle. The paternal side of the family worships *nats* for generations, and the author's grandaunt is a *nat kadaw*, spirit medium. In the old traditional wooden house of the paternal family, along with the Buddha shrine shelves, the family mainly worshiped *Eaindwin Nat, Mi Ne Lay,* and *Pegu Medaw Nat* by installing *Nat Cins, nat* altars in the house. *Yay Ngan Paing U Shin Gyi,* and *Myout Phat Shin Ma*, The North Mother, are annually worshipped as ancestral guardians (*mi-yoe-pha-la nats*) of the family. However, upon building the new home, the author's father, who is a devout Buddhist,

stopped the generational belief and tradition by not installing any sort of *nat* altars in the house, other than the *Phaya Khan*, Buddha shrine room.

Unlike traditional Myanmar house layouts, the Buddha shrine in this contemporary house is a distinct architectural space, separated and elevated above the living room to signify spiritual hierarchy [see figure 6]. The shrine is used daily for prayers, meals, and flower offerings, and occasionally serves as a site for Buddhist events. A veranda with a sink is attached to the shrine room, providing an additional functional space with indoor amenities for the Buddha, distinct from the mixed-use areas for lay people. On this veranda, daily offerings such as flowers, water, utensils, and vases are cleaned and prepared. These architectural changes reflect contemporary adaptations, whereas in the past, such preparations and rituals might have occurred within multipurpose spaces. Modern houses restrict sacred functions through spatial design, signaling both ritual respect and changing domestic contexts.



Figure 4 & 5: “The North Mother’s Feast” hosted on February 01, 2025, 19:00 at the Author’s House. Taken by the Author.

Upon conducting the research, the author requested the grandaunt to host the North Mother’s feast in the household to document the family tradition, rituals, bodily practices, and the architectural spaces. Daw Khin Than, the grandaunt, highlighted:

> “Since the family is a devoted Buddhist, “The North Mother’s Feast” is less a ritual of worship and more a donation feast to honor the guardian spirit of the paternal side of the family” (Daw Khin Than, Spirit Medium, personal communication, January 31, 2025).

The North Mother is an ancestral guardian, though not blood-related, and this spirit is believed to provide protection and guidance to the family members. The author’s grandaunt has long held “The North Mother’s Feast” to mark important events such as legal matters, educational milestones, or career shifts. In this case study, the bodily techniques of a spirit medium, non-worshippers, and the spatial arrangements within the household to host the *nat pwe* will be observed and differentiated.

Changes of Body Techniques and Domestic Spaces

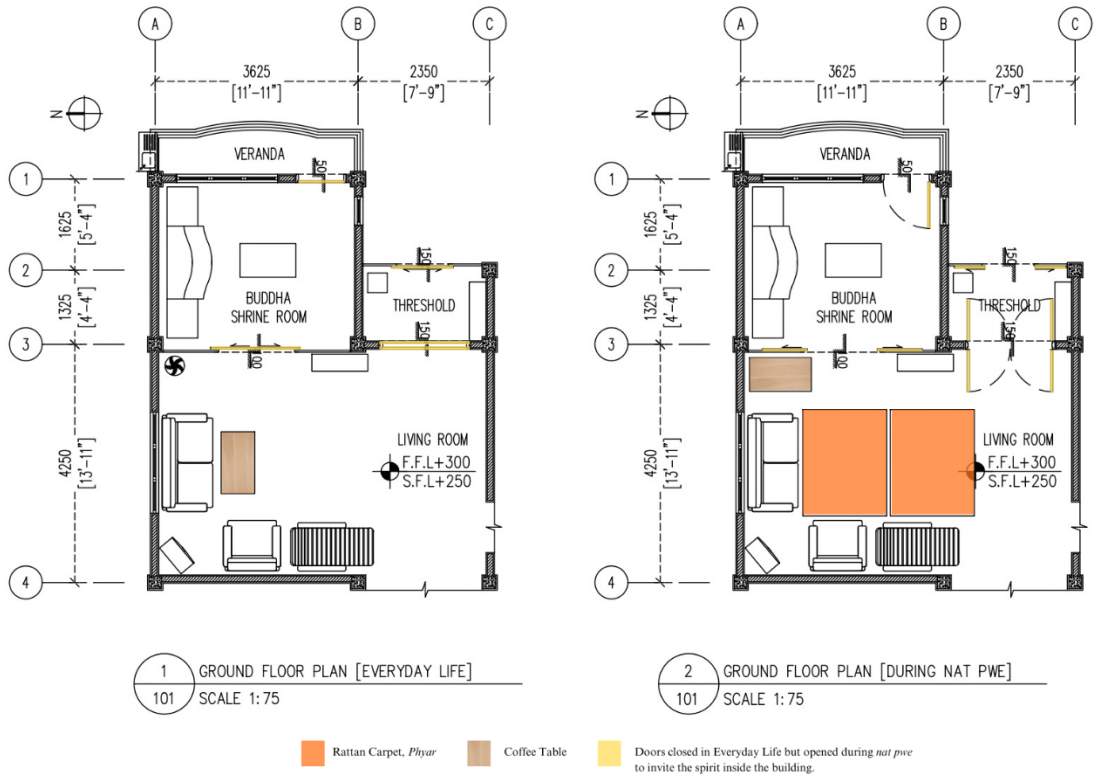


Figure 6: Furnishings of the Ground Floor Plan of the Author's House (Left) in Everyday Life, and (Right) during *Nat Pwe.* Drawn by the Author.

The grandaunt decided to host the ritual in the living room, which is next to the *phaya khan*, since the house lacks a dedicated space or altar for *nat* worship. However, since the living room is designed and functions in conventional ways for everyday use, adjustments to the interior furnishings were necessary to accommodate the event. During the ritual, certain loose furniture was added and rearranged to suit the occasion [see Figure 6]. The coffee table is set aside to create room for rituals. Two traditional rattan carpets, *phyar*, are placed at the center of the living room, with the feast offerings carefully arranged on the carpet [see Figures 4&5]. The medium sat in the center of the carpet, facing the offerings, the assistant by her side, while family members gathered behind them [see Figures 7&8]. The feast was hosted at 19:00, when dark. Fixtures such as electric lights and doors played a significant symbolic role during the feast. Once everyone was seated and before the ritual commenced, all doors facing the ritual space were opened and all electric lights turned off, symbolically welcoming the spirit into the house and the prepared space [see Figure 6].

Body Techniques of *shikho* are performed differently between the medium and the family members. The feast began with the medium performing *shikho*, towards the Buddha in the shrine room. She then proceeds to welcome the spirit into her body, raising her hands in the *garava* gesture against her forehead. Her hands began shaking rapidly, an embodied sign of spiritual possession and a distinct technique of the body from the Buddhist rituals, practiced by the mediums. Once possessed, the medium began consuming the feast offerings. After the consumption,

the family members were invited forward to engage with the spirit, requesting guidance, protection, or blessings, which involved several culturally *garava* body techniques.

If the audience in the *nat pwe* were believers and worshippers, the *shikho* techniques would not be changed. However, the audiences in this *nat pwe* are devout Buddhists, and in Buddhist tradition, it is considered sinful to perform *shikho* or the *garava* hand gesture toward *nats*. Consequently, the family adapted their bodily practices, expressing respect through alternative verbal and physical techniques, such as seated postures and communicative gestures, rather than direct prostration or the *garava* hand gesture. For instance, everyone sits with their feet tucked behind their bodies, as pointing one's feet at another person is considered highly disrespectful [see Figures 7&8]. Language was also formal and respectful. The spirit was addressed with high respect, called "grandmother," and used honorifics typically reserved for elders. Males use *kabya* while females use *shin*, and responses are framed politely, often ending with *hote kae* to maintain proper etiquette towards the *nat*.




Figures 7 & 8: *Garava* Bodily Techniques of the Non-Worshippers observed during Nat Pwe. Taken by the Author.

Through this case study, it became evident that the bodily techniques of the spirit medium and worshippers are shaped by both inherited ritual practices and the architectural spaces in which they are performed. In traditional households, *nat* altars and *phaya cin* were integrated within multipurpose spaces, without a dedicated room. In contrast, contemporary houses added *phaya khan*, a Buddha shrine room in the spatial organizations, but often lack designated spaces for *nat* worship, requiring adaptations during rituals. The bodily practices of the medium and non-worshippers influenced spatial adjustments in the household, including rearranging furnishings, removing coffee tables and indoor plants, laying rattan carpets, opening doors to invite the spirit inside, and adjusting lighting by shutting off electricity to create a darker atmosphere. These interventions represent significant temporary modifications that accommodate ritual performance. As Marcel Mauss emphasizes, while people may adapt these techniques in their own way, the basic foundation lies in educational, cultural contexts, and shared experiences within the society. The practices performed by the medium and family members are learned rather than instinctive, shaped by habit, cultural tradition, and collective memory.

Conclusion

Examining the changes of *shikho* bodily techniques in relation to architectural spaces through the lens of Marcel Mauss contributes to a broader understanding of how bodily movements, rituals, and learned behaviors shape architectural spaces. By documenting the shifts in the spiritual cult and the spatial changes that have occurred over time, this research also functions as a form of cultural preservation. As modern trends continue to shape spiritual practices, tracing how these traditions evolve within their architectural settings ensures they are not forgotten but rather acknowledged and understood within their contemporary context.

While this article focuses on the case study of a *nat pwe* hosted at a Buddhist contemporary household, *nat pwe* are usually hosted at *nat nann*, owned by the spirit mediums. In contemporary Myanmar, although *nat kunns* persist in the spatial organizations of traditional households, many households have adapted to not installing *nat kunns* in the household, due to changes in beliefs and architectural constraints. In further research articles, changes of body techniques and spatial changes of *nat kunns* in the traditional household, and different bodily practices of *nat kadaws* and worshippers at *nat nann* will be studied.

Understanding the interaction between bodily techniques and architectural space allows designers to create environments that both respect traditional practices and accommodate present-day needs. As bodily techniques continue to change, shaped by socio-political reform and the progress of developments, this study aims to offer a starting point for future research. Whether focused on embodied practices or the architectural transformations of ritual space, the insights presented here contribute to ongoing conversations about cultural identity, tradition, and the built environment. As cultural heritage author Khin Khin Htoo once said, “May we uphold and respect cultural norms and traditions, while also advancing toward growth” (Khin Khin Htoo, 2025, 1:23:23–1:23:33).

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