A Description of
a Typical Rural Shinpyu-nartha-ahlu
in Myanmar Today

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The ceremonies of ordination have been elaborated into a complex religious ceremony, now so much central to the religious and social life of Burmese Buddhists in Myanmar. They ceremonies bear different names depending on the type of ordination as well as some social aspect involved. In the case of the candidates of sāmanera-hood alone, it is called shinpyu-ahlu, “the donation of pabbajja ordination”; for candidates of sāmanera-hood and bhikkhu-hood, it is shinpyu-yahankham-ahlu, meaning, “donation of pabbajja and upasampada ordination”. If daughters are included for ear-boring, the name changes a little adding it with the prefix “nartha”, “the auspiciousness of ear-boring” as shinpyu-nartha-ahlu or “the donation for pabbajja ordination and ear-boring”. All kinds of ceremonies are usually abbreviated to Ahlu (သိမ်းချိ) meaning, “the great donation”, strongly indicating that the Burmese Buddhists see the occasion as the practice of generosity (dana) as much as renunciation (nekkhamma).

As it is believed by Myanmar Buddhists that shinpyu or shinpyu-nartha-ahlu is the most important and an inevitable religious duty to be fulfilled, they usually hold these ceremonies as grand as they can afford. On the one hand, adults tend to feel inferior and not attained of the status worth of respect until they have sponsored such a ceremony and on the other, a son is not considered to be a good Buddhist or worthy son until he has fulfilled the pabbajja. Therefore, all levels of society are compelled to fulfill to the best of their ability the Ahlu. From the time of the birth of a son, parents start thinking of that ceremony and to save for many years to meet the lavish expense of that special occasion and to be ready for Ahlu by the time their son comes of age. Their new born son inspires parents’ life with great expectation of forthcoming donation ceremony. When the son reaches the age of five or six, the Ahlu is held to the limit of what parents and family can afford for that ceremony. Wealthy families will frequently sponsor the ceremony.

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pabbajja not only for their own son but also help other boys whose parents cannot afford the expense of that ceremony. If a family does not have a son, the pabbajja ceremony of a relative’s son may be sponsored to cultivate this wholesome deed. There is also a tradition that when one family holds an Ahlp for their own sons and daughters, their relatives’ sons and daughters are also invited to be the postulants, “shinlaungs”2 (စင်ရေးကျင်း). Therefore, the number of postulants may be one or many at anyAhlp.

The Ahlu has thus becomes socially compulsory and the most important of all religious ceremonies for Myanmar Buddhists. This is because the laity understands that the merit accrued by the celebration of Ahlp is the most auspicious among the different kinds of meritorious deeds acquired through charity, “dana”. This act is also valued as the highest spiritual and ethical deed for posterity, for which both the parents and child accrue immense merit in this life and the hereafter. The parents are blessed by this supreme meritorious act which is the noblest and holiest they can ever fulfill towards their sons.3 They are cultivating the real merit of supporting theSasana, “sasananuggaha”, by offering their own son to theSasana, by doing which the parents consequently become the close relatives of theSasana. This type of offering is the noblest dana in Buddhism. Moggaliputtissa Thera’s comment to the King Asoka regarding the real benefactor of theSasana was, “Even a lavish giver of gifts like [you] is not a kinsman of the religion, [a] giver of wealth is he called, O ruler of men. But he who lets son or daughter enter the religious Order is a kinsman of the religion and [together with this] a giver of gifts”. Hence it is the great expectation of every parent in their life to give theAhlp for their son so that he may gain what is difficult to obtain, that is, sāmanera-hood, “pabbajjitabhava”. On the other hand, every son should receive the pabbajja in order that his parents may accrue the merit of religious sponsorship, sasanadayaka”. Moreover, each ceremony with its decoration, size, and invited guests, indicates the social status of the family who organizes the event.

Occasionally there are communal shinpyu-ahlus in some part of Myanmar such as a pabbajja ceremony of one hundred postulants, of one thousand postulants in mass. Such grand ceremonies are publicly sponsored and organized by a well-known abbot, or a religious leader or a powerful official. Thus Myanmar society is consolidated and unified by the spirit of the pabbajja ceremony. It also happens that a rich individual or group gives the financial support to celebrate this kind of ceremony, or some well-known and glorious sayadaws also can do so.

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2 Novice-to-be, novice-designate, boy-aspirant or applicant is called in Myanmar, စင်ရေးကျင်း.
3 The Initiation of Novice-hood and the Ordination of Monk-hood, p.18.
4 Mahavamsa,p.43.
The Ahlu is celebrated when a boy candidate comes of age in his early adolescence in general, but the ceremony can be performed at any age. The Ahlu may be held for a candidate even at the delicate age of five but only if he can chant the Three Refuges Pali phrases quite articulately. There is no upper age limit for pabbajja, so a boy can be given the pabbajja at the very late age of 15 years or more for which he will be known as an old novice, “koyingyi”. Late entrance into samanera-hood is usually because of poverty or some other inevitable matters.

A boy can be initiated as a samanera not just once in a life. A boy may remain in samanera-hood for any length of time, be it for a day or lifetime, leaving samanera-hood at any time one wishes. Also the pabbajja can be repeated more than once for a boy, if desired.

The simple affair of ordination becomes a communal affair in Myanmar with a splendid feast to celebrate the traditional Ahlu. To illustrate the more traditional cultural elements of ordination, which are still to be found in rural areas of Myanmar, a description of a typical rural shinpyu-nartha-ahlu unspoiled and in keeping with ancient traditions will be described. Such ordinations are usually held in the cold season in rural areas and during the summer schooling holidays in urban areas. However, the Ahlu can be celebrated at any time of the year. As to the rural Ahlu, around five or six months before the Ahlu, an auspicious date and time for the ceremony carefully calculated by the bhikkhus or lay astrologers needs to be selected. In this author’s experience, local abbots usually have a good knowledge of the auspicious days and dates of a year, and they can suggest a suitable time and date. As soon as the date is fixed, a number and list of bhikkhus the donor wishes to invite must be given to the abbot who must approve and in turn distribute their invitation to each nominated bhikkhu to the Ahlu.

With dates set, a whole train of systematic preparations for the Ahlu set in motion. Firstly, a troupe of traditional Myanmar orchestra is engaged. Also essential is a consecrator or anointer, a “bhisek-sayar” who performs an anointing ceremony of the postulants by formally pouring lustral water whilst reciting narrative songs and poems, which symbolizes the abhiseka, “the consecration or anointing ceremony” at the coronation of a new king. Even in the cities like Mandalay and Monywa, the pabbajja ceremony is not complete without a bhisek-sayar. Then a mandap, a “grand marquee” and its ornate prefabs marquess, “maðapa” are also hired. These three things, orchestra, bhisek-sayar

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5 Muttabhisutta in Pæî, which means “consecrating by pouring water from one’s forehead”.

6 In Myanmar, it is called “r̄yî” which derives from the Pæî “maðapa”, meaning, “a temporary shed or hall erected on special or festive occasions” (PTSD, p.516). Its
and grand marquee, are the essential requisites of any Ahlu. With these secured, the other items of preparation can be dealt with. Royal costumes are required by the public presentation of the postulants and usually rented before hand. Then a studio set, electric generator, and other fixtures and fitting are required. To serve food for the forthcoming guests, lots of foodstuffs such as rice, cooking-oil, onions, salt, pepper, dried fish, dried shrink and tea have to be purchased especially for the main feast of the Ahlu. Capable cooks in the village are recruited in advance to cater for the Ahlu. Invitations composed in formal rhymed prose are printed and circulated well in advance to all of the donor’s friends and relations.

When the ceremony is drawing near, the postulants are sent to a monastery to receive key instructions from the abbot and to memorize some important Pali. The robes and other paraphernalia of saṃneras are also made ready.

About three days before the date of the Ahlp, The main and secondary marquees are erected in the donor’s compound. The secondary marquee (au R²­), a “dining house” or “enclosure”, is intended as a temporary dining hall. Tables are shared by each home in the village and other items collectively owned by the village such as plates, cups, spoons etc. are brought from the storage to the dining hall.

In a village, all inhabitants energetically render their service to the Ahlp as it draws near. Everybody, young or old, male or female in the community extends helping hands and ardently contributes their labour to the donors so that the necessary preparations are in no way incomplete. Normally, the Ahlp may be performed by an individual family, but in reality, it develops into a communal celebration. The entire society becomes active and alive, each one playing an important role. An Ahlu provides the occasion for villagers from widely scattered areas and different social backgrounds to come together in common service. The ladies artistically make special gifts to be presented to all guests as a token of the donor’s gratitude for their moral support and participation. Huge long cheroots and cigars, small hand fans and packets of pickled tea leaves are to be made as presents. Even young children are employed with small errands. All the duties are voluntarily contributed generously by rural society. The donor supplies the basic materials and the rest is done by the volunteer villagers. Everybody is eager and happy to contribute their spiritual and physical services towards the Ahlu. The volunteers are fed by the donors for several days prior to the Ahlu days.

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ornamentation symbolizes a palace. These ornamentations are called “ma½øapsin” (r @ y ¶ i ¶).
The completed marquee resembling a palace of the ancient kings of Myanmar is adorned with its cultural furniture of paintings from the Jataka stories, colourful decorations, sheets curved in shape and many other ornaments that look beautiful to behold a symbolic palace of Siddhattha, the Buddha-to-be. Loungers in and about the marquee blare out songs, only to be interrupted by announcements of news and calls to action. In the evening prior to the Ahlu, an image of the Buddha is brought ceremoniously from the village monastery for the duration of the Ahlu, and placed in a temporary shrine made in the marquee. As a result, people take off their footwear before entering the marquee and pay respect to the shrine. Next, a tray of offerings including three hands of bananas, a coconut and a few other things are put on the roof of the marquee and dedicated to Shin Upagotta, an arahant believed to have the powers to ward off natural as well as supernatural calamities such as storms and untimely rains. Lengthy protection is needed in general, ashinpyu-ahlu lasts two days, the entry day followed by the pabbajja day.

On the entry day, the orchestral troupe arrives and starts entertaining the guests around 8:00 a.m. playing a fare of traditional music. The relatives and friends bustle about with the duties they have accepted for the Ahlu, while the guests and dignitaries keep arriving and acknowledge the Ahlu with various presents, such as money and other things. Most of the guests from all neighbouring villages and towns, who are invited, come on the entry day to encourage the donors by providing some proper presents. They do not need to meet the donors personally but leave the presents and names with the board of receivers (trustees) usually placed at the entrance of the main marquee. They are given gifts in return such as cheroots and cigars, small hand fans and packages of pickled tea and on entering the marquee, they can then enjoy the entertainment of the orchestra.

In the meantime, the dinning hall marquee goes in to full swing serving lunch of local favourites including one main dish and two or three side dishes all to the guest-hearts’ content. The dining marquee serves a free flow of the newcomers all day long and is usually crowded with people relishing their meals sitting on mats around each table to cater to the huge audience. Hundreds of people are served at a time, with one shift following another till the late evening. One and all, invited as well as uninvited ones come to enjoy the great feasts. In the village of donor and its neighbouring villages, a village crier publicly announces to come and enjoy the Ahlu around two or three days before entry day of Ahlu, it is a Myanmar saying “Meegodate” (put out the smoke) which

7 Although it is said “lunch”, it is almost the whole day feast from around 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.
implies by coming and eating at the feast on that day, they do not need to
light cooking fires at their home. Therefore, entire families resident in those
villages come to enjoy that great feast. It becomes thus the biggest feast day
of an Ahlp and it resembles the great feasts narrated in the stories of the
Buddha, such as in the instances of the donation of Vessantara Sumedha,
Kosala, and Velama, etc. who contributed a great amount of their
mahadana, the great donations to those at the celebration irrespective of
whether they were invited or not, be they low or high casts.

Postulants will be beautified all morning. They are adorned in special
princely dress, with a long white blouse, a long silk lower dress, crested
headdress (ru #), a sash (p v G #), and a double edged sword (o H su #)
which are all the regalia of a king. They now become the princes ready to
renounce the world. They are shown before the public with pomp and
splendour, the focus of public attention. Dressed in royal costume of silk,
gold and precious stones, they glitter in the sunshine. In the days of the
kings, this was the only opportunity for the average commoner to wear
such royal apparel, for its appearance was never allowed by the king, with
transgression severely punished. However, the postulants, about to enter the
Sajha, were regarded as extraordinary persons, much nobler than royalty;
so the king happily conferred this privilege onsama#era-designates. This
extension of privilege is still celebrated in the dressing style of the
traditional Ahlp.

The female postulants are dressed in grand ornamented clothes called
“mallika”, the abbreviation of “mahatapasadhana”, “one piece of lady’s
dress bedecked with matched jewelry or other ornaments” made with the
different kinds of precious jewels. It is reported that only three ladies,
Visakha, the great female supporter of the Buddha, Mallika# the chief
consort of King Pasenadi of Kosala and Sumanadeva# deserved to wear this
type of dress in this Buddha’s dispensation. Taking these women as
precedence, teenage postulant girls are usually embellished in this
beautifully ornamented dress of the occasion of the Ahlp. Girls have the
right to jointly enjoy this ceremony for the special purpose of ear-boring,
nothing more is necessary for them to do after ceremony but some girls
seek admission into Buddhist nun-hood for a few days or for life. However,
this rarely happens in Myanmar today.

Around noon time, it is the turn of the bhisek (bd d # m) to entertain.
Standing in front of the orchestra, facing the audience dressed in
brahminical cloths of knee-length-white-coat, long-silk-sarong, and a
Myanmar turban, the bhisek-sayar gathers all postulants around him.
Composed in manner, he starts with an introductory speech to audience
with backing music by the orchestra. A ahisek-sayar needs to be a good
speaker with speech to arrest the interest of audience. Before the actual
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consecration of bhisek, he congratulates the donors and postulants, by name, in a pleasant voice, sometimes interjecting his recital with narratives, stories and songs suited to the Ahlp. Then he feeds a lump of rice to each postulant and puts a band of cotton thread around the necks of the postulants praying for longevity, prosperity and advancement of wisdom. This wearing the ritual amulet made of a band of cotton thread is called “letphhekhyeemhyinsut”. Then ahisek-sayar uses suitable flowers to sprinkle ceremonial water from conch shell with on the postulants saying prayers to grace them. This is called “bhisek mhyaug”, “actual consecration”. It symbolizes the coronation or consecration of ancient Myanmar kings when water was poured on prince’s forehead to consecrate him as a king along with conferment of the other necessary insignias of a king. Sometimes, to stir the interest of public, abhisek-sayar conducts a debate with members of orchestra on some controversial points in traditional, cultural or on religion. He concludes by having the male postulants cradled a silver cup (aiGzvm; or an alms-bowl in their hands and go around the audience to receive any gifts from the onlookers who usually present them with cash, handkerchiefs, towels, soap etc. It is really striking to see them like young princes were going around. Soon after the conclusion of the bhisek, the orchestral troupe takes a sojourn till the night.

At night starting from around 7:00 p.m. the orchestral troupe resumes entertaining the audience with nonstop song and music. They regale the guests and villagers, from near and far with music and dancing until far into the night. If there is no dancing, two or three members of the orchestra entertain the audience as stand-up clowns. They relate humorous stories they have experienced or heard, tell jokes, sometimes even at a slight expense of the donor, especially if they have not been fed or treated well. It is customary for the relations and friends of the donor to present them with cash awards. If the orchestra is popular among the people, the marquee will be overcrowded that night, and even if not so popular, the audience usually fills the marquee, as the villagers seeing the live-spectacles such as this occasion. The orchestra plays to the crowd as best they can, catering to younger people with modern music and songs in early night and more classical music and tunes later in the night for the elders.

With the breaking of the next day, comes the actual pabbajja day. The orchestra (without the bhisek) strikes up soon after dawn, and keeps on playing intermittently until the shinlaungyþ, the “taking the postulants”. It is the afternoon procession that takes postulants round the village and to the monastery. On this day, all the guests and villagers are fed breakfast in the dining hall enclosure. Nearly the whole morning is taken up dining. Then, guests make cash contributions towards the Ahlp. The donor responds to their act of cetana, “good-will” by giving them cheroots, small fans,
pickled tea packages, etc. as return-gifts. Needless to say, the invited bhikkhus are sumptuously feasted that morning at the village monastery.

The most heartfelt part of an Ahñ is the afternoon procession, the “shinlaungyþ” or “shinlaung lhai”®. This is the procession of postulants, donors, relatives, friends and other well-wishers going through along the village main road to the monastery lead by continuously beating Royal Myanmar Drum, “byaw”. The procedures will depend on the presiding person of that procession.

A shinlaungyþ is a merry affair and the great event of the day for the Ahñ. The royal drum announces the time of departure and keeps the march in procession. As a rule, the royal drum leads the walking procession, starting with most elderly gentlemen who brings a flower vase, and then side by side the main male donor, carrying an alms-bowl in its carrier bag, hanging on his right shoulder, and the main female donor, carrying a tray on her head, bearing the golden robe as an offering to the Buddha. There follows the “kwuntaung”®, “a slaver of gold for the ceremony” borne by a beautiful lady whose beauty deserves public acknowledgement in that locality. Other pretty ladies of the village come after her, holding bouquets and flower baskets, and they are known as the “pandaung gaing”. Relatives of the donors come next in couples of husband and wife, the man each carrying an alms-bowl and each woman a set of robes. Next the female postulants in their royal costumes follow in single file. Then every body in the village and all guests join the great procession in single file to where the ordination ceremony will be performed. Then the turn of shinlaungs comes, starting with the sons of the donors carried by four men on royal palanquins® carried by four men. The other shinlaungs follow on royal palanquins in single file. While on the procession, the shinlaungs scatter coins, pop-rice and pop-corns out of huge silver vessels whilst children jostle with one another to pick up the coins scattered on the ground. Young men shelter each shinlaung with golden umbrellas above his head. Lastly a group of lads follow reciting composed verses, which sound very melodious and

® Here, unlike this tradition, the actual meaning of these two terms is explained by Ashin Janakabhivamsa in his Tabhavathanthayar, p.44, as, “On the first day, the shinlaung (postulant) has to go around for paying respect to elder relatives; this is called ‘shinlaung-lhai’ (lhai means to visit or go around): On the second day, ‘shinlaungyþ’ (yþ means to bring) is performed as if the shinlaung from the monastery were brought”.

® A “kwunlaung”, အောက်လောင်း is a kind of betel container studded with jewels, used only by the king, which over time became called “kwuntaung”, ကြောင်းလှိုင်. Otherwise, it may be derived from the term “kwundaung” ကြောင်းလှိုင်, meaning, “a betel receptacle”. A pantaung, ပန်းလှိုင် is a flower basket (Myanmar Court Etiquette, Than Tun, Dr., p.52).

® This palanquin is without a roof, to be carried by four men bearing a holy person, they are used for carrying a shinlaung, or a newly ordained bhikkhu nowadays. In ancient days, it seems they were only used for carrying king and princes and royal persons.
inspiring. A leader sings the first lines and the group recite the refrain. At the end of every stanza, they shout in unison “shoh-shoh-shoh” 11. This long procession is followed by a musical troupe to entertain the onlookers overwhelmed by the whole atmosphere.

This great procession marches to the village monastery going round it clockwise thrice. The procession then returns to the maðap where the journey comes to an end, and the shinlaungs are returned to the monastery for the actual pabbajjæ.

It is only the actual pabbajjæ that concerns the bhikkhus. So the bhikkhus have the shinlaungs’ head shaved according to the procedures mentioned in Chapter Seven, and the task of the pabbajjæ ordination is carried out by the bhikkhu concerned. This is the real essence of the pabbajjæ ceremony which elevates the boys to the status of the sacred lives of sama¼eras from the ordinary persons in the profane world. After the formal pabbajjæ they become not longer common average boys, but ochre robed sama¼eras recognized as being spiritually superior to all laity including their parents. Therefore, even the parents pay respect by making a³jalø to the newly ordained sama¼eras, including their won sons. This reverential act by parents is the most moving scene of the entire ceremony. It is the normal custom for children to bow down in this manner to their parents. However, this time, the robes are reversed and the sama¼eras receive their parents’ respect and a³jalø it is a deeply significant experience to encounter this. This is because the sama¼eras are no longer parents’ own sons, but the sons of the Buddha, to whom they should pay their reverence.

Then the bhikkhus are cordially invited along with the news sama¼eras and escorted by an upæsakæ, the village gentle man, to the maðap to acknowledge the donors for their tremendous genoristy. All the bhikkhus and sama¼eras in order of their vassas are placed on a huge spacious stage for the Saµgha, where the numerous offertories meant for them are placed on display and exhibited. Then the senior bhikkhu delivers a short sermon stressing the various merits to be derived from the shinpyu-ahlþ. At the end of sermon, all the members of the Saµgha recite in unison the paritta, the scared protective discourses. Finally the water libation is performed by the donors pouring the water jointly. The donors then announce that they share their merit with others. Thereupon, the audience in sympathetic joy responds in unison, “Sædhæ, sædhæ, sædhæ”, “Excellent, Excellent, Excellent!” Then the bhikkhus leave the maðap in solemn process followed by the newly ordained sama¼eras for the monastery. This is the finale of Myanmar traditional shinpyu-ahlþ ceremony.

11 oQdK; - oQdK; - oQdK
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The newly ordained sama\v{r}era is known in Myanmar as a “koyin”, a “novice”, in Pæ¹i a “sama\v{r}era”. To differentiate them, the young novice is “koyin-lay” and the old, “koyin-gyi”. From that time onwards, a sama\v{r}era is a regular listed member of the Saµgha for as long as his sama\v{r}era-hood but he cannot participate in the functional ceremonies of Saµgha which is purely the affair of fully ordained bhikkhus.

Some donors celebrate their Ahlþ associated with the upasampadæ ordination. To do so, they purchase the essential requisites of the upasampadæ candidate in advance. They usually sponsor a related sama\v{r}era or an intelligent sama\v{r}era who has reached his twenty years of age, or sometimes a candidate who ordains for an intentionally temporary period of time, a dullabha bhikkhu, or a bhikkhu who takes renewed ordination, “punopasampada”. Each of these three types of ordination will be discussed in section 8.6. If the Ahlþ involves a yahan-khan “upasampadæ-ordination”, then the Saµ gha concludes the ordination in the sämæ hall and are ready to receive the reverence of the shinlaungyþ procession when it reaches the monastery. As mentioned, ordination is the affair of the Saµ gha, so the Saµ gha alone can carry this out. When the procession arrives at the monastery, the newly ordained bhikkhu comes out of the sämæ and the donors and their relatives, the bhikkhu’s parents and relatives and other well-wishers, waiting in line near from the sämæ door, pay reverence to the new bhikkhu and offer requisites like robes, towels, soap, washing powder, handkerchiefs, etc.

This tradition of donating at the completion of ordination is based on the belief that the new bhikkhu’s precept at that time is of the highest purity, flawless and held in the highest esteem of the laity’s eyes. The new bhikkhu who has just come out of the sämæ is considered as scrupulous and holy as an arahant and by virtue of this to offer him something then may cultivate the great wholesome conditions of longevity, beauty, bliss, strength and wisdom. The merit of offering to a newly ordained bhikkhu for life is perceived superior to offering a temporary bhikkhu or repeatedly ordained bhikkhu.

Then the newly ordained bhikkhu for life is carried on a special royal palanquin borne by four strong men and heads the long procession that will return to the ma½ðap. On arrival at ma½ðap, the new bhikkhu gives a short sermon to the audience which concludes with the donors’ pouring water libation and sharing merit with others. This ceremony is filled with real excitement for the new bhikkhu, because this is usually his maiden presentation to an audience. In the meantime, the task of pabbajjæ is completed at the monastery and finally, all the invited bhikkhus come to the ma½ðap to receive the offertories, the donors perform the libation and sharing merit and the whole ceremony is successfully finalized. The
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The aforementioned roles and procedures are based on personal observations of shinpyu-ahlu in the upper part of Myanmar by this author.