MYANMAR: A RELIGIOUS LIFE

PORTRAITS BY JOHN RIZZO

A Religious Life

These photographs were taken in April, 2013 and cover religious life in Yangon, Bagan, Mandalay and Inle Lake. Myanmar, often called the "land of pagodas" is an enchanting place with a reverent culture that is opening up to the world after decades of isolation under martial law. With Buddhism at its core, there is a strong foundation of commitment to a religious lifestyle, including all lay people. With over 89% of the population practicing Buddhism, it is the most religious Buddhist country in Asia relative to the proportion of monks in the population and the proportion of income spent on religion. For a lifestyle that includes daily and frequent references to Buddha, merit-making is the most common path taken by Burmese Buddhists. This involves the accumulation of good merit through charity and good deeds in order to obtain a favorable rebirth.

Although nonpolitical, monks are revered and hold the same high position in society that politicians do. Buddhist monks led the first nationalist movement against British colonial rule that swept Burma in 1938. In 1962, a left-wing army takeover set the country on a path to socialism, nationalizing everything and crippling the economy. After a currency devaluation in 1987, riots ensued and in 1988, again with monks at the helm, General Ne Win's socialist government was ousted. Then, after decades of martial law, Thein Sein became president in 2011 of a nominally civilian government that has leaned towards transparency in an effort to modernize the country.

Through their good work and ability to function as a unit, monks have always been the voice of the people. As a testament to the power of the religious order, no government funding for the upkeep of pagodas exists, yet you will not find a single pagoda in this developing country that is not in pristine nor glorious condition.

John Rizzo

The Pagoda

Collection boxes suround the Buddha in every pagoda. Donations are made by all visitors, usually in small denominations. The cumulative effect is strong, since the government does not support nor help maintain the pagodas, and their upkeep is completely dependent on the general population. Birds, fish and tortoises can be purchased at many pagodas, which are released on one's birthday, a ritual that frees them of a personal disturbance.

Novice Monks, Kalaywa Tawaya Monastery

These novice monks on the following pages at Kalaywa Tawaya Monastery in Yangon are highly dedicated to their studies and agreed to take a few minutes to have their portraits taken. Kalaywa Tawaya Monastery is home to over 500 orphan monks who live here year-round for the opportunity it provides of receiving a good education. Novice monks must study until age 20, when a test must be passed in order to become a full-fledged monk. A novice must observe 190 religious rules and regulations while a full-fledged monk must observe 229.

Age 15

Age 17

Playing Cards

There are over 400,000 monks in Myanmar, the highest number of all Buddhist countries. Over 89 percent of the population are Buddhists, with the remaining 7 percent being Islamic and 4 percent Hindu. Here at Kalaywa Tawaya Monastery in Yangon, over 500 orphan monks live year-round. During the school year, they study a regular curriculum, while during the summer months they study Buddhism. Living at the monastery gives them access to education that would otherwise be lacking. During their free time, they play cards in one large room that serves as a dormitory for 50 boys. There are no beds, just straw mats on the floor for sleeping.

Bathing Ritual

Novice monks taking a morning bath at Kalaywa Tawaya Monastery in Yangon.

A Spartan Life

A sleeping novice monk at Kalaywa Tawaya Monastery willfully leads a spartan life, devoid of material possessions and always in search of attaining nirvana, the utmost spiritual plateau according to the teachings of Buddha. Forbidden from earning money, they are fed by the community each morning during their alms, a walk from door to door for donations of cooked rice and spices. The monasteries are self supporting, without help from the government and receive donations from the public. Inherent in Myanmar culture is the need to give in small amounts, and everyone complies. The cumulative effect is a constant infusion of cash which is used to maintain buildings. Monks are revered and although nonpolitical, hold the same high position that politicians do in society.

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Monks Only Bus

The buses leaving Kalaywa Tawaya Monastery are for monks only and allow them easy transport after collecting food during their morning alms and for other community activities. Although monks are normally somber and reserved, this photo was captured when the photographer said goodbye, having pretended to have finished shooting and took one step towards leaving the bus, then quickly swung his camera back for several more rapid-fire exposures. They thought this trickery was very amusing.

Ceremony for Novices in Mandalay

An important religious ceremony through which Buddhist boys enter the life of a monk is called a noviciation ceremony. The boys are dressed like princes and paraded through the streets during a two day celebration that includes prayers, speeches, and music. The ritual ends at a monastery where their heads are shaved and their new robes donned for the beginning of a new life that includes arduous study to become a monk.

Dressed Like a Prince

Boys who are participating in the noviciation ceremony can be as old as 17 or as young as 4 years. It is not uncommon to find a wide range of ages within the groups. The noviciation ceremony is a source of great pride for all the families, an event that has been planned for many years where no expense is spared. Make up is worn by the boys to make them more beautiful.

Young Boy Novice

Although too young to comprehend the meaning of the noviciation ceremony, participation is required. The age at which a boy joins the ceremony is decided by the family and therefore there can be a great disparity in ages. For the youngest boys, a two-day ceremony can be difficult to endure. The ceremony begins at dawn with a two mile long ride on decorated oxen-pulled carts through their village in a long procession that includes hundreds of people, with musicians playing at the very end of the line. The final stop is at a pagoda for prayers and services.

Age 16

A Ceremony in the City of Mandalay

The novice monks entered Mahamuni Pagoda in Mandalay, in preparation for the ceremony.

The Rural Ceremony

During the noviciation ceremony in Old Bagan, the novices rode through the streets on horseback for over two hours, accompanied by family and friends and watched by the entire village. Umbrellas were held by the parents to provide relief from the sun. At the end of the line was a makeshift band consisting of drummers, trumpets and a series of large speakers on wheels that were pushed along the route.

Old Bagan

Multiple oxen-drawn carts carrying the novices were decorated with flowers and red garlands, and led the procession.

The Procession

As the procession progressed through the streets, all eyes were on the novices.

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The Offerings

During the noviciation ceremony in Old Bagan, a long procession that included all the boy and girl novices, as well as family members and friends stretched for over one mile. The girls were carrying gifts for the novices and flowers to decorate the pagoda where they were heading for services.

Carrying Gifts

Other family members carried golden chalices which contained eight things that the novices will need while living at the monastery, including a razor, eating utensils and personal items.

Dances Along the Way

Four dancers joined the procession and took turns entertaining the villagers with pantomime storytelling dances and humor.

The Dancers

Shaving Heads

At the end of the day-long ceremony, the heads of both the boys and girls were shaved by senior monks. This was a moment of great anticipation for the children and pride for the families. Immediately following, they were given their new robes and remained at the monastery or nunnery to begin their journey as novices.

Wearing the Robes for the First Time

A senior monk assists a novice nun by showing her how to properly wear her new robes.

First Preayers

Wearing her new pink robes for the first time as a novice nun, a young girl begins her first prayers while being tutored by a senior monk. This is the climatic moment after many years of anticipation, a moment of great pride for the girl and her family.

Asking Questions

Within moments of putting their robes on for the first time, senior monks are available to offer spiritual guidance.

Meals in Silence

The Myawaddy Nunnery in Mandalay has over 265 girls who eat together each day at 11:00 a.m. in total silence. Much like boys, girls also participate in the noviciation ceremony and begin their lives as nuns in the same way, only being transferred to a nunnery instead of a monastery. The nuns are most contented at the spiritual level and least contented at the physical level. Since Myanmar is a developing country, the nuns survive at a bare subsitence level. However, because they are focused on salvation, they are happy with their lives.

Working Together

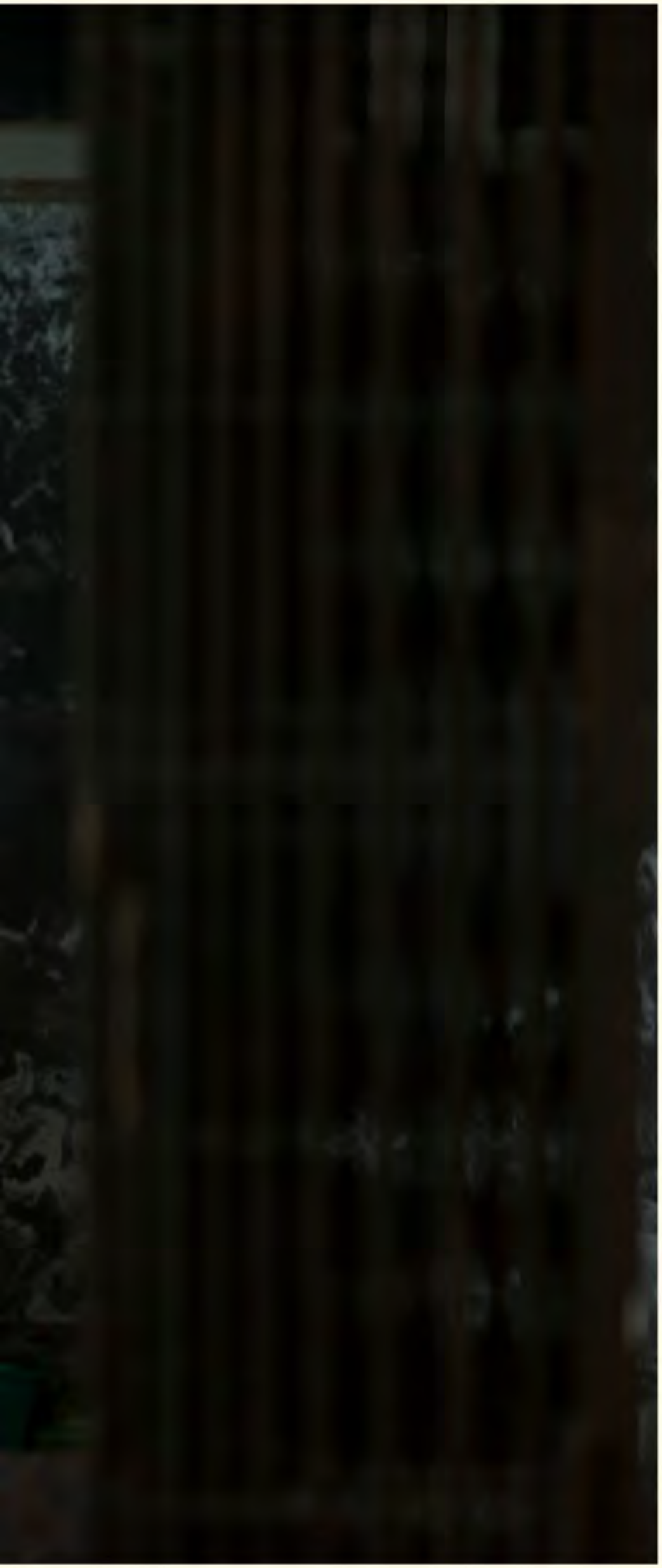
Dishes are washed as a structured group effort. Nuns spend their time working as educators of the teachings of Buddhism and as specialists at religious rituals. They have a detailed knowledge of every ceremonial procedure and thereby complement monks at Buddhist ceremonies.

Nuns do not have high expectation for themselves. At the Myawaddy Nunnery in Mandalay, their priorities, in order, are to study Buddhist scriptures, to practice meditation, to be propagators of Dhamma, the truth told by Buddha, to become teachers of Dhamma, and finally to become Mother Superiors to other nuns.

The Meal

After The Meal

At the Dhamma Wihasii Nunnery in Mandalay, home to nearly 100 nuns, dishes are washed promptly after meals, with each person being responsible for their own. A meal would often consist of white rice accompanied by up to 10 smaller dishes containing beef, chicken, eggplant, and other spicy vegetables to be eaten as toppings. Cleanliness is everywhere, with all chores being done as a group effort.



Fresh Drinking Water

Clay pots of fresh drinking water are maintained daily by the nuns. Plastic tops are placed on top of the pots and stainless steel drinking cup to prevent flies from entering. A constant schedule of chores combined with religious studies keeps the nuns busy each day, and all nunneries are therefore very clean. By tradition, they are humble, shy and shun the limelight, making them difficult to capture in a natural setting.

Tint Tint Tun, Pop Singer & Actress

This is a portrait of Daw Nanda Marlar, the new name of this nun at Thatbyinnyu Pahteodawgyi Nunnery in Yangon. She was formerly known as Tint Tint Tun, a popular Myanmar singer and actress known for her sexy stage presence who was banned from performing several times because of it. She has performed worldwide and has a huge fan club. When questioned about her dramatic change in lifestyle, her response was, "When I lived in the U.S., I didn't like it, as I was always chasing material things.".

In The Sun

These nuns in Mandalay are humble, shy and traditionally shun the limelight. In a rare and unguarded moment of returning from shopping, carrying a purse and umbrellas to shield themselves from the sun, the expressions on their faces are light and unconcerned.

Thanaka cream has been used by Burmese women for over 2000 years. It has a fragrant scent somewhat similar to sandalwood. The creamy paste is applied to the face in attractive designs, the most common form being a circular patch on each cheek. The yellowish-white cosmetic paste is made from ground bark and is also sometimes worn by both men and boys.

Making Thanaka

Thanaka cream is made by grinding the bark, wood, or roots of a thanaka tree with a small amount of water on a circular stone slab called kyauk pyi, which has a channel around the rim for the water to drain into.

My Heart

Shwedagon Pagoda

This temple is one of many adjoining structures covering 158 acres to the Shwedagon Pagoda, a gilded stupa with a height of 368 feet, whose spire is seen behind this building. According to legend, the Shwedagon Pagoda, whose name means "Golden Pagoda of the Jungle," in Yangon has existed for more than 2600 years, although historically it is believed to have been built between the 6th and 10th centuries. It is the most sacred Buddhist pagoda for the Myanmar people with relics of the past four Buddhas enshrined within. The bell shaped part of the stupa is made of genuine gold plates which cover the brick structure and are attached by traditional rivets. The Myanmar people have donated the gold to maintain it, a practice that was started in the 15th century and continues to this day.

Mandalay, The Heart of Myanmar

This is a portrait of a novice monk in Mandalay, the cultural center of Myanmar with over 1000 monasteries and 50,000 monks within a city of 1.2 million people. Many of the monasteries have been built with money that was given by wealthy donors, some from Buddhist countries outside of Myanmar. The monasteries often consist of multiple buildings that are used for housing, learning centers and worship. Monks are involved in community service and teaching the lessons of Buddhism. You cannot become a monk until age 20, and must pass rigorous exams while abiding to 229 rules of religious law.

Monks Only Bus

A "monks only" bus in Mandalay is used for easy transport from the monastery to neighborhoods where they collect their morning food from the community, called "morning alms." As this bus rounded a corner, this young novice monk spotted his friend awaiting a ride.

Shaving and Bathing

Bathing is usually done in public and in groups, without a need for much privacy. Here a monk keeps his head cleanly shaven with the help of a mirror at Mahar Gandar Yone Monastery in Mandalay.

A Group Effort

At Mahar Gandar Yone Monastery in Mandalay, it is common to see monks working in groups tackling all chores, from everyday cleaning to repairing infrastructure.

Kick Volleyball

Sepak Takraw, or kick volleyball, is an explosive mix of soccer, volleyball and kung fu, where two teams battle it out over a net with a rattan cane ball. A popular sport in Southeast Asia, players are only allowed to use their feet, knees, chest and head to touch the ball. The game provides free entertainment to these spectator monks in Mandalay.

Merit-Making

Buddhism in Myanmar is practiced by 89% of the country's population. It is the most religious Buddhist country in Asia relative to the proportion of monks in the population and the proportion of income spent on religion. For a lifestyle that includes daily and frequent references to Buddha, merit-making is the most common path taken by Burmese Buddhists. This involves the accumulation of good merit through charity and good deeds in order to obtain a favorable rebirth. It is not uncommon to see entire businesses focused on the creation and sale of images of Buddha, much like this sculptor.

Shwe Inn Thein Paya

Myanmar is often referred to as the "land of pagodas." The term pagoda can be used for any kind of Buddhist edifice, however a bell-shaped dome structure providing a place for the faithful to pray is called a 'stupa." The center of the stupa usually enshrines a holy relic, typically the ashes of Buddhist monks. This group of 1,054 stupas is located near Inle Lake in the western Shan State and have been restored. Nearby are many more crumbling structures built in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Inle Lake

At dawn, two young novices clean the grounds at a monastery located near Inle Lake.

Alms

Buddhist monks go on a daily almsround to collect food, giving laypeople the opportunity to connect to a spiritual realm to show humbleness and respect. The teachings of Buddha state that the more we give, without seeking something in return, the weatlthier we will become. Almsgiving is the respect given by a lay Buddhist to a Buddhist monk, nun or spiritually developed person. It is not charity as presumed by western culture. This photo took place at dawn near Inle Lake.

The Lake in Shan State

Inle Lake is the second largest lake in Myanmar with an estimated surface area of 44.9 square miles. Although it is not large, it contains over twenty species of snails and nine species of fish that are found nowhere else in the world.

There are 70,000 Intha people living in four cities bordering the lake, in numerous small villages along the lake's shores, and on the lake itself. Most are devout Buddhists who live in simple houses of wood and woven bamboo on stilts.

At the first light of dawn, the locals stir from their homes and fisherman head out onto the water, leg-rowing down the main highway channel that leads to Inle Lake.

There are more than 100 Buddhist shrines and monasteries on and around the lake. The influence of Buddhism on everyday life is evident as thousands of people routinely make offerings at monasteries and temples.

Note
Place names given are those by which locations were commonly known at the time of photography.

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