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RAHU IN THE BURMESE TRADITION

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D.C.Wright (**1**) has drawn attention to the fact that the Indian theory of Rahu–Ketu (**2**, **3**) was only partially transmitted to Burma. This raises the intriguing question as to when and how it happened.

The earliest reference to Rahu is in Atharva-veda, where he is a demon that eclipses the Sun (**4**). Ketu appears in the Vedic texts, not in connection with Rahu, but as a flag or banner. Elsewhere Ketu means a meteor or a comet (**4**).

The scientific explanation of eclipses was first given in India by the noted astronomer–mathematician Aryabhata, born AD 476, who borrowed the Vedic terms Rahu and Ketu to denote the ascending and descending nodes of the lunar orbit.

At some stage mythology was updated to take note of scientific developments. The demon Rahu (who even has named parents!) got his body severed off which was given a separate name Ketu so that now there were two demons to eclipse the Sun and the Moon.

Aryabhata's modernization of astronomy in India did not go unchallenged. Brahmagupta (AD 598–665), otherwise a brilliant astronomer–mathematician, in his earlier (AD 628) work resoundingly criticized Aryabhata for deviating from *smrti* (tradition) and not believing in the demonic Rahu. Brahmagupta's outburst notwithstanding, the two nodal points Rahu and Ketu treated as invisible planets were incorporated into the Hindu scheme of astronomy, which specialized in developing elaborate algorithms for computing planetary longitudes.

Turning now to the Burmese tradition, we find that Rahu there is not accompanied by Ketu. Could this mean that the myth reached Burma at a time when Rahu was no more than a Vedic demon, that is, before the 6th century? While this cannot be ruled out, it appears unlikely in view of the well-attested Indian influence on Burma, spread over AD 100–1500 (**5**).

Moreover, the Burmese Rahu's identification with an invisible planet itself suggests its arrival at a later date. Significantly, there is no Indian counterpart of the Burmese gyo-compass points (**6**); while Indians were familiar with the seven-day week, they did not use it for any esoteric purposes.

The form in which the Rahu story travelled to Burma is unclear. It could have come unaccompanied by the mathematical paraphernalia. Alternatively, one may speculate that the Rahu–Ketu theory did make its appearance but failed to take roots because of its mathematical complexity. Perhaps Rahu managed to survive because it could be easily incorporated into the already existing simple-minded system of the planetary posts (**6**).

One must turn to the experts on the Burmese tradition to tie up the loose ends: at what stage and in what form did the Rahu story make its way into

Burma? Were there ever any attempts made in Burma to take to the mathematical astronomy of the Indians?

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