

541. Nemi Jataka (or Nimiraja-Nemiriech)

Cowell No.541*

Long ago the king of Mithila, the capital of Vedheha, was named Makhadeva. When young he had spent 84,000 years in pleasure; he had served another 84,000 years as a crown prince. When he became king he was still a strong healthy man. 84,000 years later, his barber noticed some grey hairs on the king's head and king Makhadeva thought that grey hairs were an indication of the relentless passing of time and that the time had arrived for him to renounce his throne and worldly life, appoint his son king and live the life of an ascetic for another 84,000 years, monitoring his son to renounce the world as soon as grey hairs were found on his head. When he died, he was reborn in Brahma's heaven as it happened before for his father.

Once, the first of the Makhadeva looked down on earth noticing that all his successors had become ascetic, but not for the foreseeable future. He resolved to be reborn in the womb of a queen of the king of Mithila, to perpetuate the tradition he had established. On his name-day, the soothsayer affirmed that the boy was the last of his great family of ascetics. Since he was born to round off the family like a hoop of a chariot wheel, he was named Nemi (or Nemiriaeche), a name that became corrupt in Nemi. King Nemi, in his devotion to almsgiving, built five alms halls at the city's gates. He also distributed great gifts urging his citizens to be virtuous, showing them the way to Heaven. All the kingdom's people praised King Nemi and followed his wise teaching.

Sakka (Indra) saw how good a man was Nemi, how great were his merits describing them at length to the deities of his heaven. They were overjoyed to hear from him and asked to invite him to Sakka heaven. Consequently, he ordered the divine chariot, pulled by thousand steeds driven by Meteali, to be ready for a journey to heaven to visit the gods.

Meteali informed Nemi that he was asked by Sakka to escort him to his realm. Then he asked which way he had to take first, the one to heaven or the one to hell. Nemi asked to be taken first to the hells, the abode of evil-doers.

They first arrived at the great Veterani River of flames, reserved for those who use their strength to harm the weak and oppress the vulnerable. Crossing the River, fierce dogs and huge birds appeared tearing the flesh of the damned those who as misers, Brahmins and ascetics, cheated and hurt others by words or deeds.

Nemi went through various levels of hells packed with innumerable suffering beings. They are not individually named (as in the *Trai Phum*), but listed by the suffering.

-One hell with charred bodies struggling in a pit of fiery coals, for those who had borne false witness, had bribed others to lie or refused to pay debts.

1. A hell for those who had intentionally harmed virtuous ascetics; the damned were put head-first into a flaming iron cauldron.
2. A hell where the sinners were hung by the neck and cast into an iron cauldron of boiling liquids; they had caught birds and killed them by wringing their necks.
3. A hell where sinners were scorched by unbearable heat, forced to drink in a shallow river with water that transformed into chaff as soon they tried to drink; they had been merchants who had cheated the poor by mixing chaff with good grain.
4. A hell for beings being pierced and stabbed with hundreds of spears; they have stolen others' property, gold, silver and cattle.

5. A hell where beings were cut into pieces; they had been fishermen, hunters and butchers who had slaughtered animals
6. A hell with starving beings forced to drink from a foul lake full of excrements; they had betrayed and hurt trusting friends
7. A hell with beings scorched by unbearable heat, drinking from a vile lake of putrefying blood; they had killed their mothers or fathers
8. A hell with beings whose tongues were pierced by hooks each with 100 sharp barbs, dribbling and flopping with pain like fish on the shore; this hell was for greedy merchants who had cheated customers by lying and deceiving them.
9. A hell with beings buried waist-deep in mud, whose blazing bodies were smeared with blood and were stretching out their arms and wailing; they had been women who, leading lustful and unclean life had been unfaithful to their husbands.
10. In the Naraka hell, beings were being cast headlong into an abyss filled with blazing coals; they had been men who had seduced others' wives.
11. Nimi and his charioteer finally reached a hell where beings were trashed about and writhing in agony. Those who were false teachers, teaching that there was no evil in bad action and no merit in good action.

After visiting this series of horrifying hells, Nemi was taken to Tavatimsa where Sakka offered celestial pleasures, and all the *devas* asked Nemi to stay with them. After seven days, Nemi expressed the wish to return and left on the heavenly chariot, leaving behind that sort of paradise. Mateali took him directly to Mithila city and deposited the king at the same window from which he had departed. At the request of his people, Nemi narrated his adventurous trip to the hells and the Heavens.

Eventually, the barber found white hairs on King Nemi's head. He soon announced his intention to renounce the world and pass command to his son. The latter, King Kalarajanaka did not renounce the family tradition bringing the line to an end.

The allegory in this narrative lies in the chariot being the body and the charioteer (Mateali) the mind; if one controls the chariot, steady and calm he will avoid all desires (Cowell 1995: 125).

Cambodia

In Cambodia, the Nemi Jataka is named *Nimea-réach-chéadak* or *Nima-râja-jataka* which narrate an almost identical story to that of the Pali version. The description of the hells is noticeable, wrote Aymonier (1906:2 21), for its analogies with the *Trai Phum* where the description of the 8 heavens is very detailed, albeit short. In the royal audience –room of the highest paradise, the interest awakens only when Indra was talking to Nimea and preaching his devatas, but not for very long.

Also in the Cambodian version, the Jataka concludes with an exhortation of king Nimi, who returned to his land and people; cultivate virtues, alms and one will be reborn in the marvellous places that he had visited during his celestial flight.

Illustrations of the Nimi Jataka in Cambodia



Fig.1- **Kampong Tralach Leu**. Nimi entering the hells. This is probably the oldest illustration of this event in Khmer art history (early 20th century). After the viewer's eyes are settled on brown shadows, elements of the story became visible (painting 1921-25).; the wheels of the chariot were pulled by two horses and Meteali riding them. On the chariot, Nimi stands looking interested in entering hell's gate. All around are sinners trying to run away from hell.



Fig.2- **Kampong Tralach Leu**. Nimi approaches the Tavatimsa Heaven. (1921025)



Fig.3- Wat Einkosei. Nemi on the chariot driven by Meteali to Indra's Heaven after visiting the hells



Fig.4 - Preah Srei. Nemi is on his chariot flying over the hells. Yama is at the extreme left judging the sin of a sinner.



Fig.5. **Roka Koy**. Nemi flying over the hells where Yama and Cittagupta read and allocate the sentences (Modern painting),



Fig.6 – **Wat Kien Swai Krav**. Nemi arrives at the hells. This may be the oldest mural, painted in the first part of the 19th century.

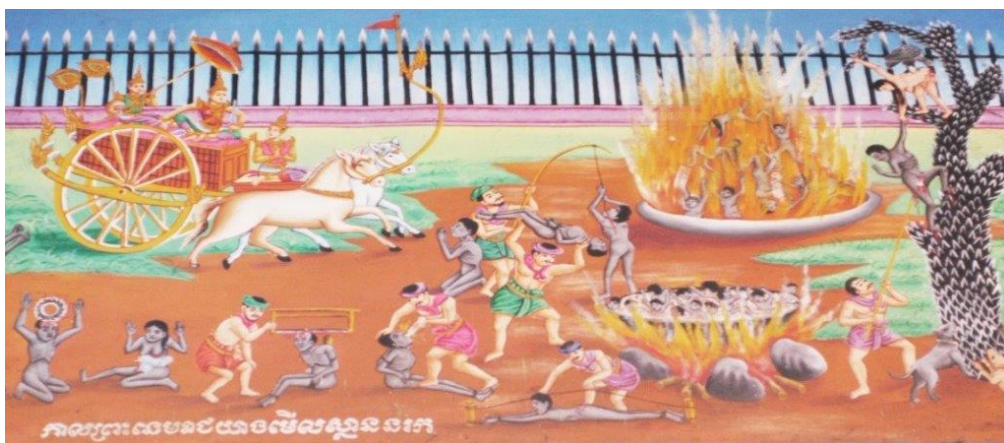


Fig.7 - **Vat Nokor**. Nemi is on his chariot looking at some scenes of hell (late 19th century).



Fig.8 – **Wat Lolei**. Nemi visiting the hells. Painted in 2005



Fig.9 - **Wat Bakong**. Panel with the main events of the Nemi Jataka.

To the left is depicted one of the most popular tortures of sinners: having to climb a spiky tree to reach his/her partner who is always at the opposite end of the tree the image at the centre is out of context because it represents Nemi holding an iron-stiff corpse that he wants to throw in the large pot with skulls. The image of the stiff corpse held by Nemi reminds connections with the event of the Temiya Jataka when the prince lifted the chariot (strangely together with horses and charioteer) through it into a cauldron of sinners. There is a corpse standing vertically, waiting to be thrown into the cauldron

The right side of the panel shows Yama inflicting punishments assisted by two executors. The entire panel is full of incongruences with Nemi's textual story.

The photo was taken in 2005 after restoration by RSF (Restaurateurs Sans Frontiers).

Fig.10 – **Sisowat Ratanaram**. Panel illustrating Nemi Jataka's story, from Nemi's visit to the hells with a variety of torture and punishments. The chariot is then ascending to Indra's heavenly castle where deities are assembled to listen to his preaching. (Details are on the next page).





Fig.11 - Detail of fig.8, illustrating beings tortured in hell on the order given by Yama to his scribes. These are probably punishments in real life.



Fig.12 –Details of frightening hell scenes witnessed by Nemi.



Fig.13- **Wat Vehea Luong** .The upper part of the mural depicts the heavens (with the Chulamani stupa in Indra's heaven) while separated by a line of clouds the lower part shows the hells, with the sinner's type identifiable by Khmer captions.



Fig.14 – **Wat Vehea Luong**; detail of the sinners above with names of the sin's type.

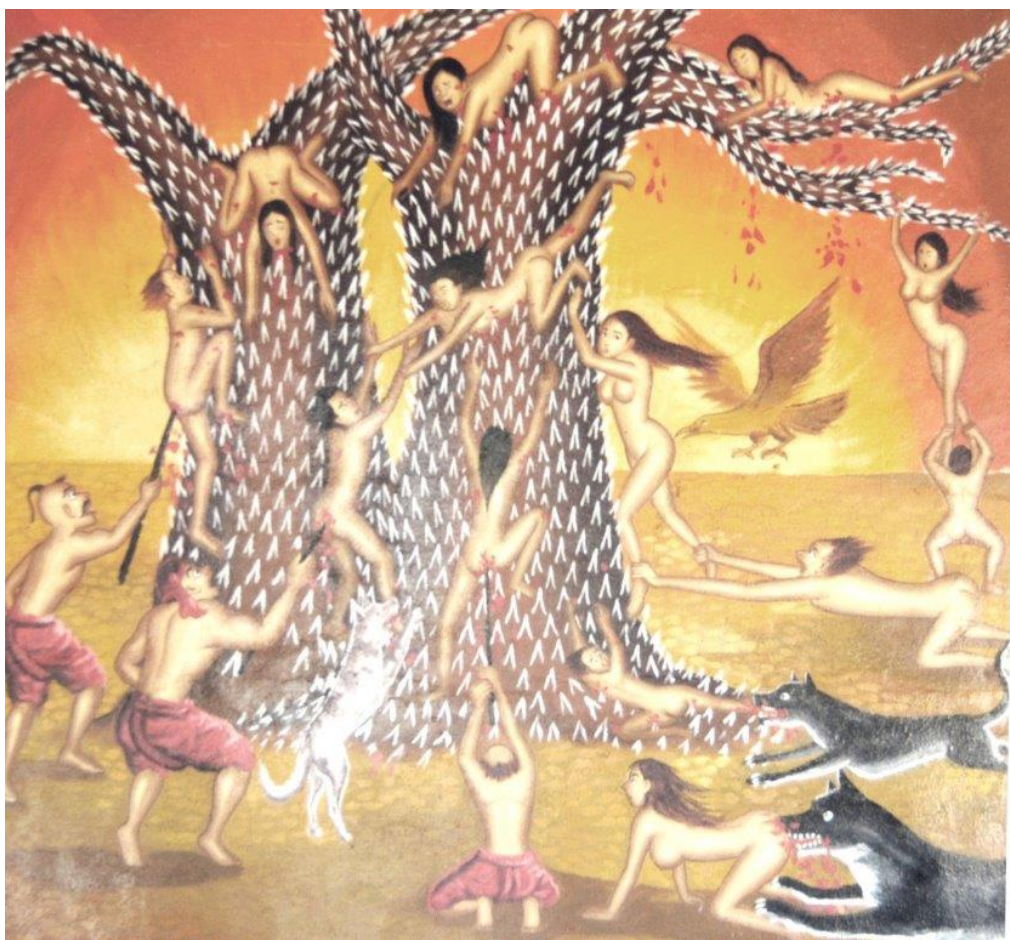


Fig.15 - **Wat Sambok** - The way sinners had to climb the spiky *Kapok* tree for the punishment of adulterers. As one sinner goes up the other lover comes down and vice-versa.



Fig.16 – **Wat Angkor Wat North**. A large tree for adulterers.



Fig.17 – Wat Prasat Andet – scenes from the hells



Fig.18 – Wat Prasat Andet – Hell's scene of Yama judging the sinners with the help of two executioners, The rectangular insert shows the sponsor's images.



Fig.19 – Wat Prsat Andet. Hell scene evidently painted by another artist than that of Fig.14. The sponsor's image is framed at the base

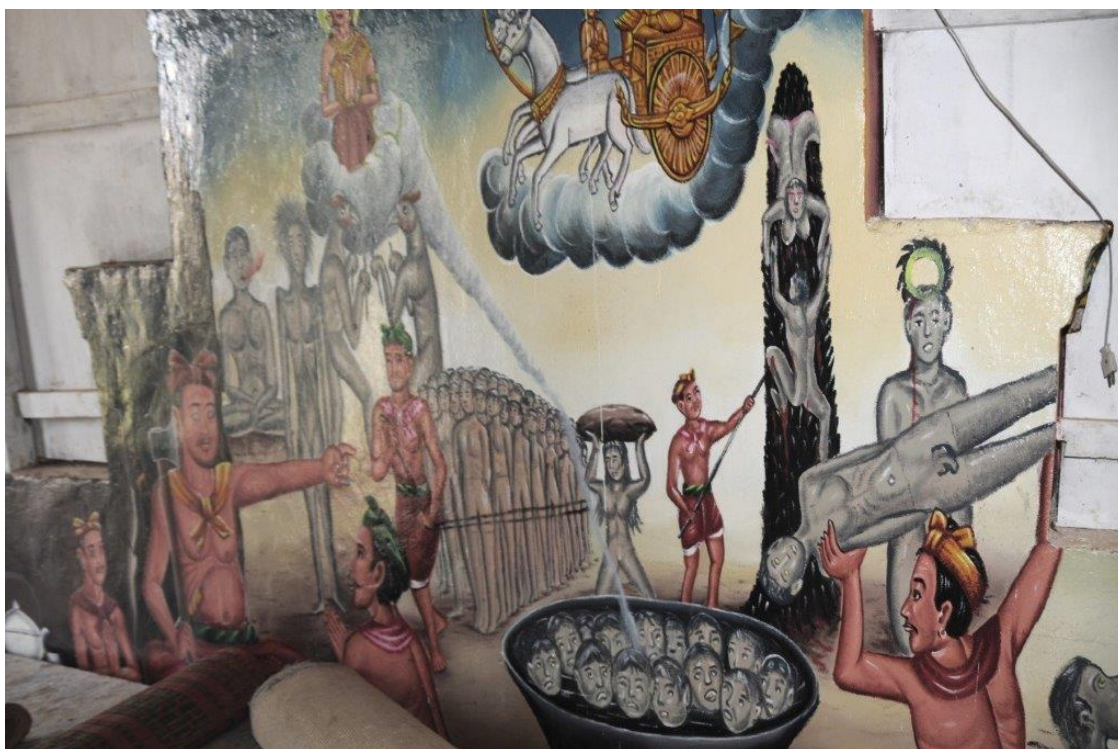


Fig.20 - Wat Koka Roy (modern). This painting lies in the artists' studio, probably unfinished, probably to show to a demanding sponsor. There are scattered schematic images for the hell's scene with the chariot of Nemi over a cloud.

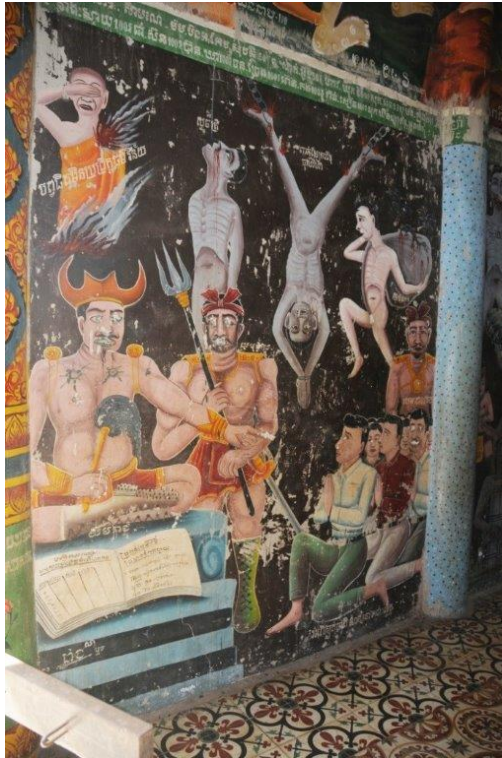


Fig.21. Wat Sopheas. Yama's judgment

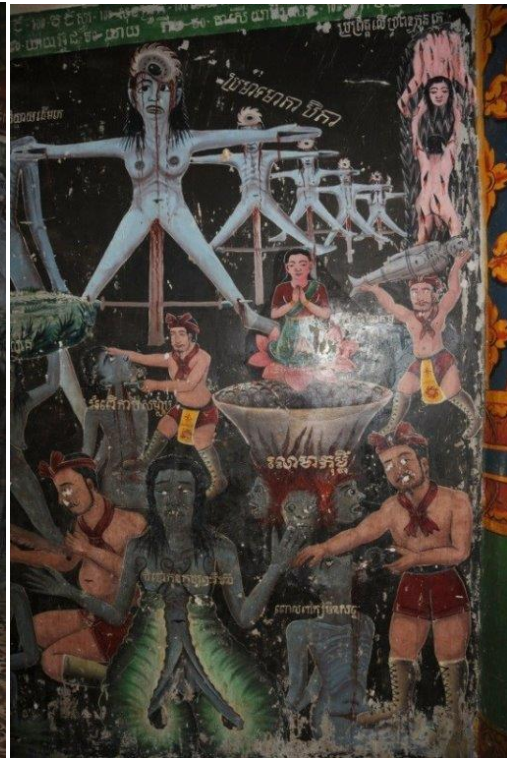


Fig.22 - Wat Sopheas. Hell's scene



Fig.23 – Wat Nokor. Hell's scene
(All painted recently)



Fig.24 – **Luong Moch**. Hell's scene is painted on the zinc sheets of the slanted roof of the *salachan* (Photo taken in June 2007). The building contains many "primitive style" paintings on a metal base (zink sheets?) that was demolished in 2011 in favour of a brand new *salachan*. I have full photographic documentation of all the paintings of which an example is shown here.



Fig.25 and 26– **Wat Stung Trend**. Nemi on his chariot and observing a punishment for thieves



Fig.27- **Prei Jea Knong**. Hell scene with the Kapok tree as an evident tool of punishment.

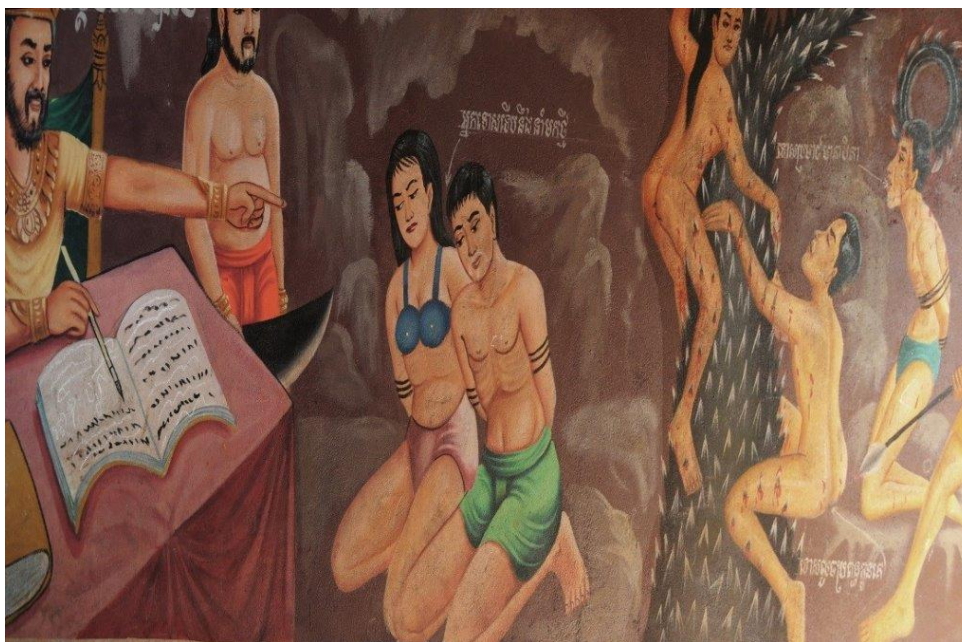


Fig.28 – **Swai Meas**. Yama inflicts punishment on adulterers.



Fig.29– Wat Ratanaran.. The explanatory hell scene focused on adulterers and the sins (snakes) of adultery.

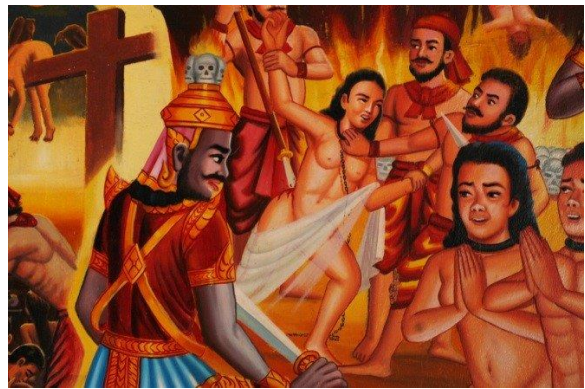
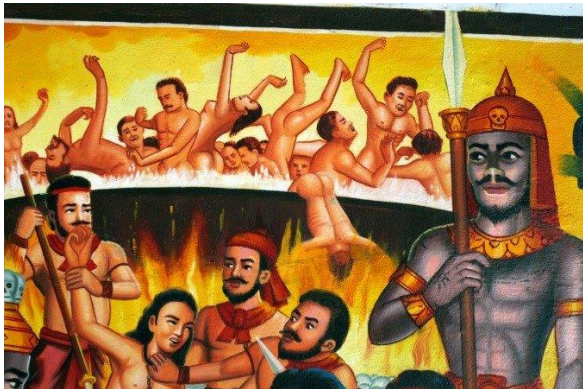
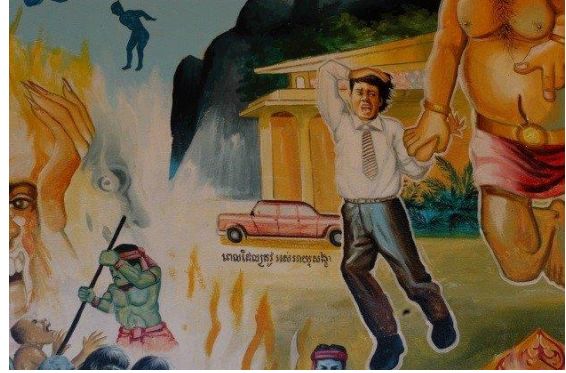


Fig.30 to 33 – **Svai Romeat** - Various details of a large hell's panel in the Venerable's house. The second from the top shows a man leaving his car (an SUV?), presumably to be carried to hell for his wrong business deals.

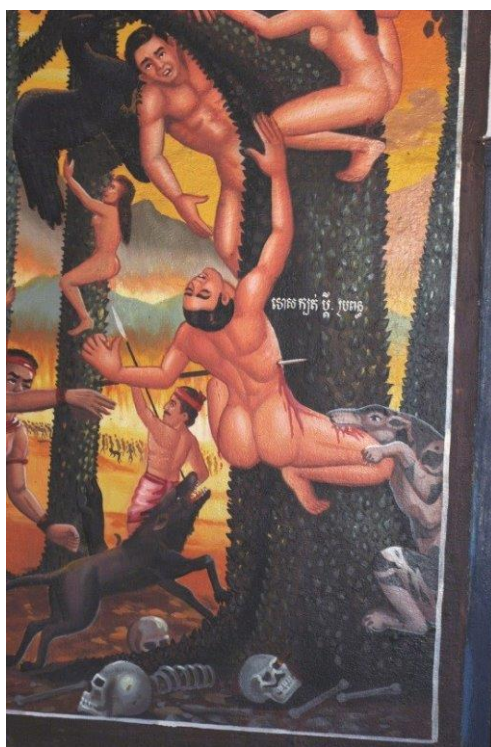
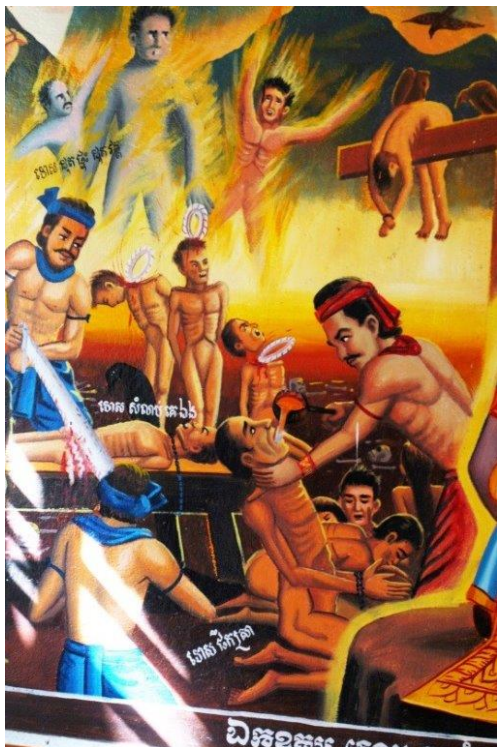


Fig.34 – **Svai Romeat**. Hell scenes are derived from postcards produced in Bangkok.



Fig.35 – Southern Kemp vihara. Detail of the punishment for butchers, becoming themselves the animal they were slaying.

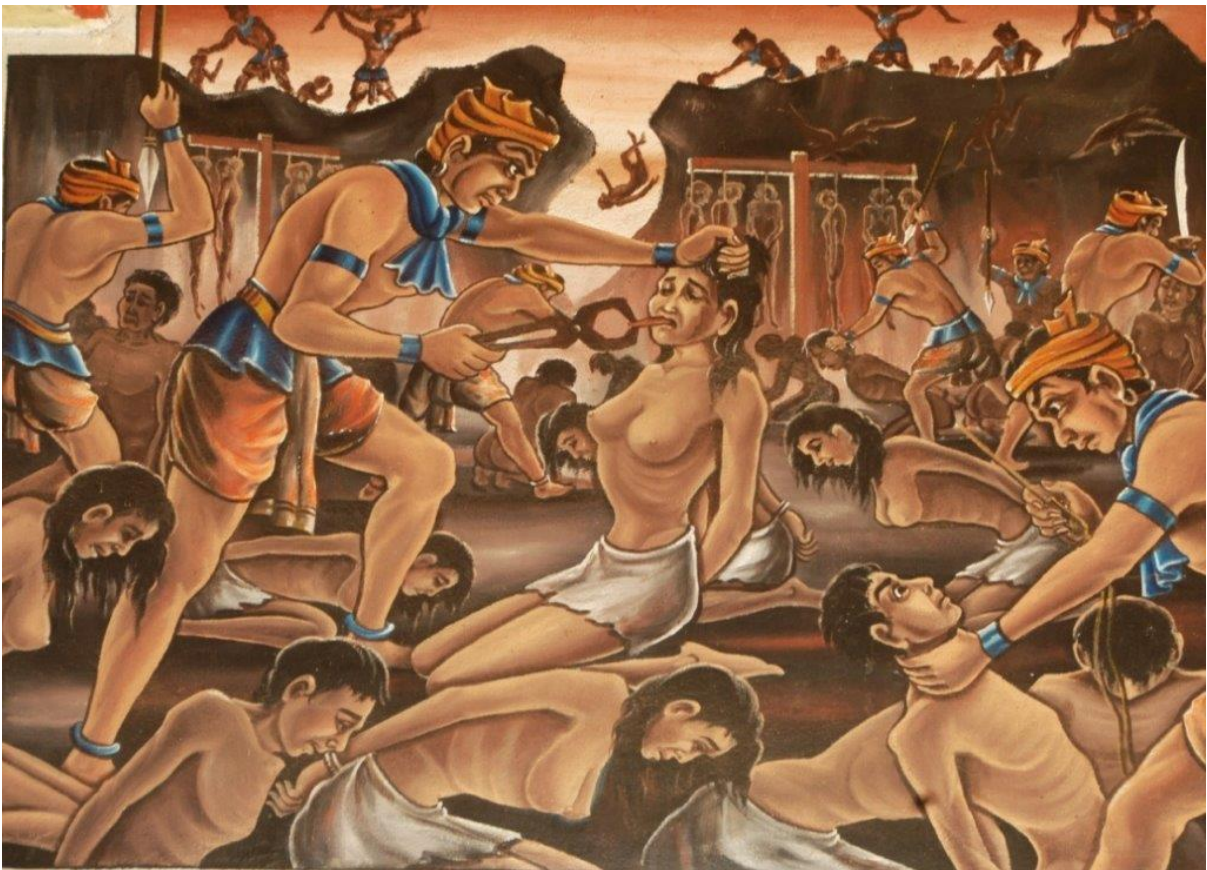


Fig.36 - Southern Kemp vihara. Hell's punishment for those who said bad words.



Fig.37 - Southern Kemp vihara. Punishments for those who shouted insults.

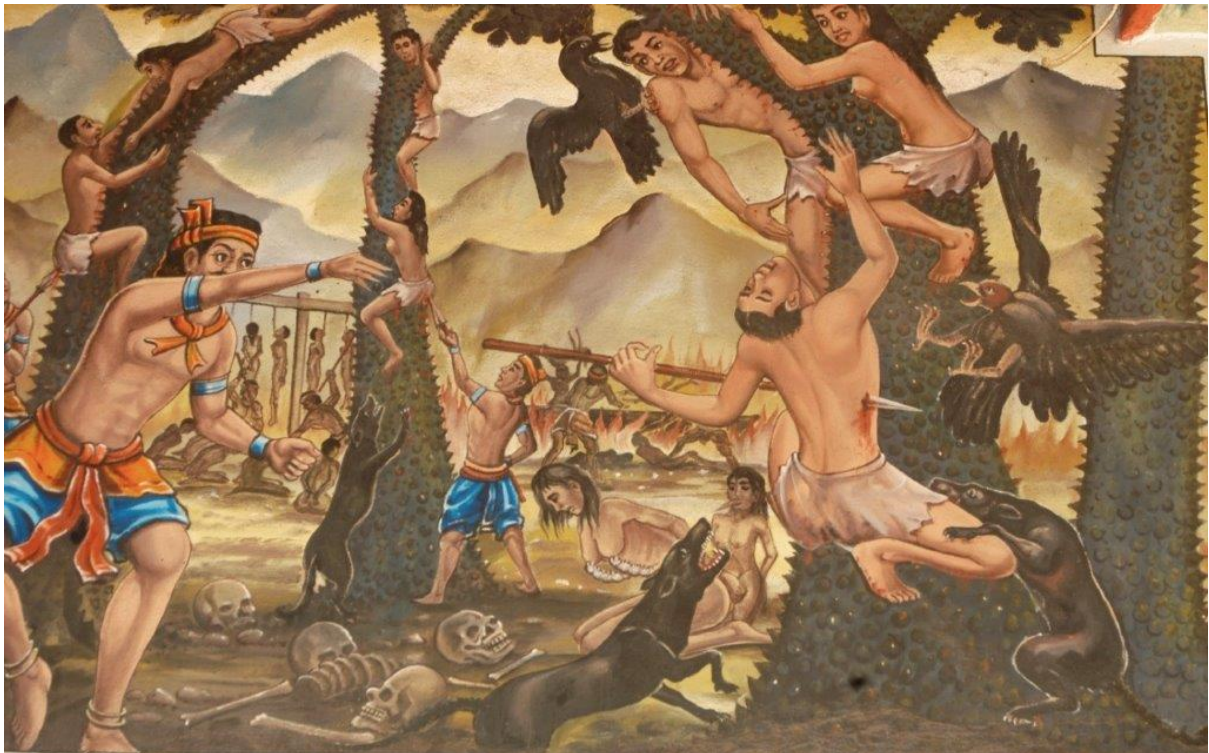


Fig.38- Southern Kemp vihara. Hell scene copied from the postcards produced in Bangkok. Note the prudery of adding garments (compare Fig.27). This man is transfixed by a spear and attached by ferocious dogs. His last gest was extending his hand to another man higher up on the *Rokar dark* tree



Fig.39– **Wat Pol Chen (K.Thom)**. An allegoric image of the Khmer Rouge-induced hells. Various tortures and a monk forced to kill another monk, breaking all fundamental Buddhist precepts.



Fig.40. **Wat Pol Chen (K.Thom)** – A conception of paradise brought in by the Khmer monarchy: people giving alms to monks, girls happily working in rice paddies, adults reading newspapers and children going to school.

These two paintings are on the doors of the inner part of the altar, leading to a space under the Buddha's altar, generally filled with Buddhist items such as bags of monks' ashes, human bones, broken vases, and bracken sacred objects but as rubbish.

Illustrations of the Nemi Jataka in Thailand



Fig.41 – Wat Suwannaram. After preaching, Nemi boards the chariot to visit the hells after having done an official sermon attended by royalty.



Fig.42 – **Wat Suwannaram**. Detail of Nemi on the chariot going to the hells.

It seems that Meteali is sitting on a narrow bench of the chariot, exciting the horses with a peculiar tool.



Fig.43 - **Wat Saket**. The Bodhisatta Nemi is giving a sermon and then descends to the hells on the chariot driven by Meteali. At the base of the panel, Nemi is shown telling people of the horrors of hell and the need to have proper conduct in life. Indra's Heaven is separated from the hells by a sea-saw line.



Fig.44 -**Wat Saket**. Nimi gave a sermon to *devas*. Below Nimi tells Meteali to be driven to the hells.

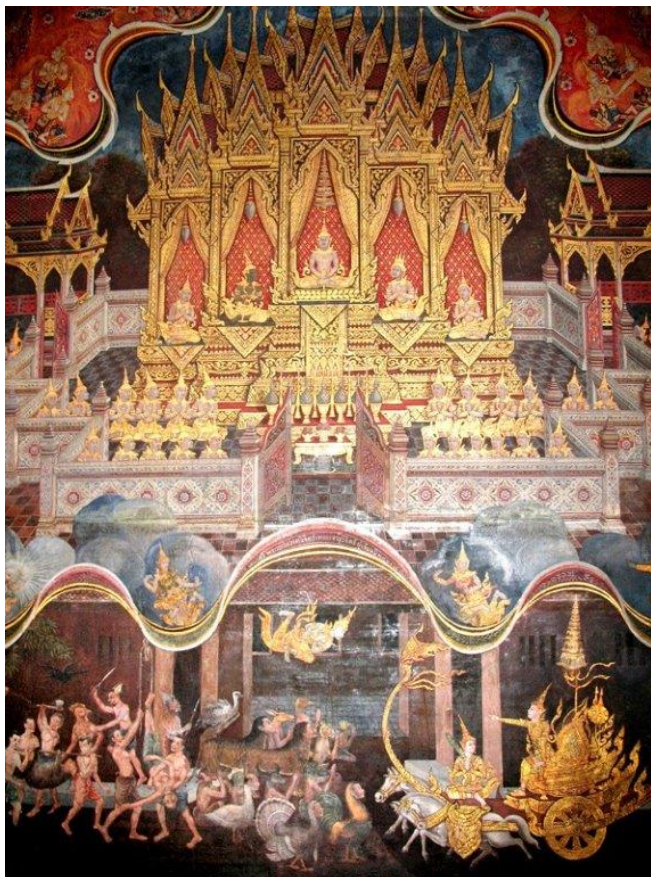


Fig.45— **Wat Kositaram**. The line separating the two scenes is here a curved, undulating line, not sea-saw as above, saw-tooth.



Fig.46– **Wat Suwannaram.** Nimi (or Pra Malay) first view of the hells.



Fig.47 – **Wat**

Nai Rong. The vision of the hells appeared for an instant when the Buddha descended on earth after three months in the Tavatimsa heaven.



Fig.48 – **Wat Saket.** Between the damned, some men carry their inflated testicles on their shoulders; others have their heads in their hands; the tree for punishing the adulterers is quite tall.

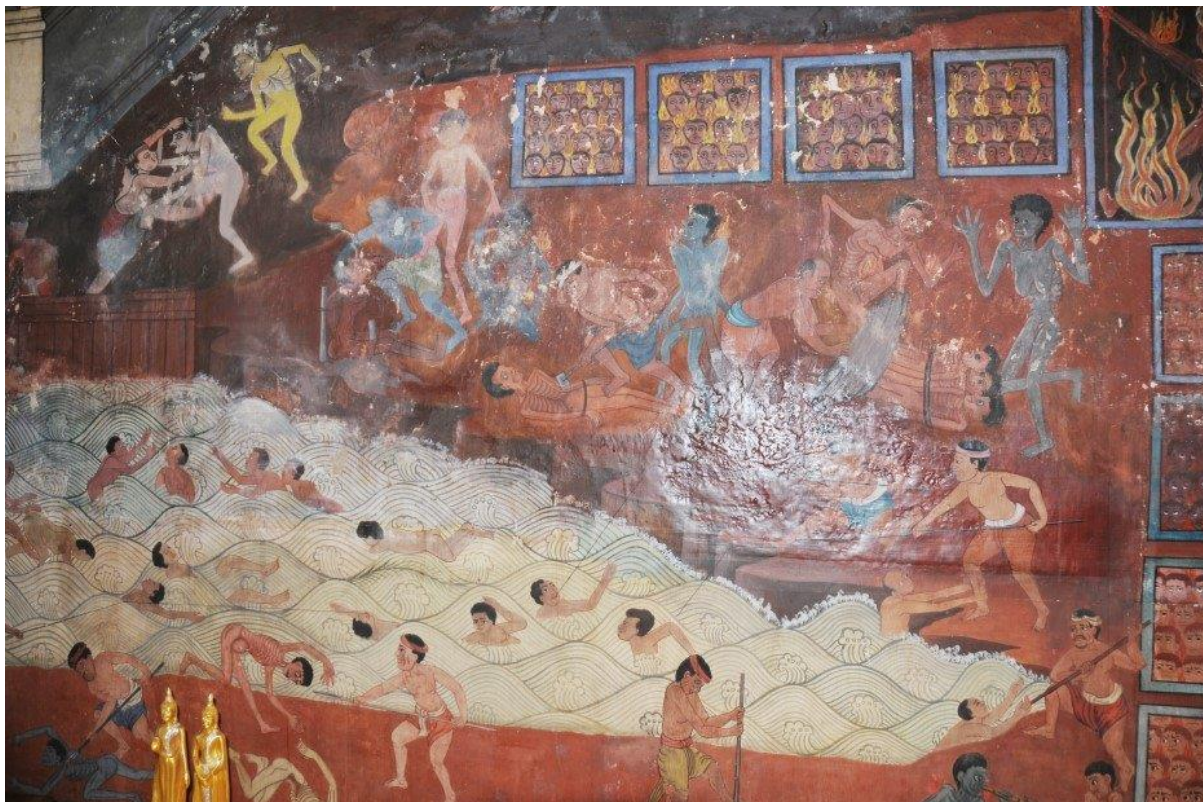


Fig.49 – **Wat Saket.** Damned drowning in the sea of putrefied liquids.

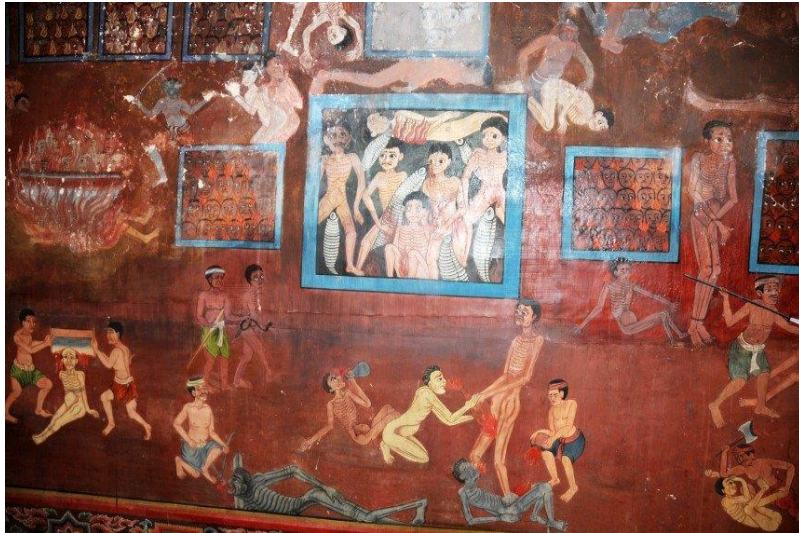


Fig.50 – Wat Saket. Square containers packed with sinners.



Fig.51 – Wat Saket. Various types of punishments.



Fig.52 – Wat Saket . Panoramic view of the hell, with walls separating the various hells.s.



Fig.53 – Wat Kositaram. Boiling damned

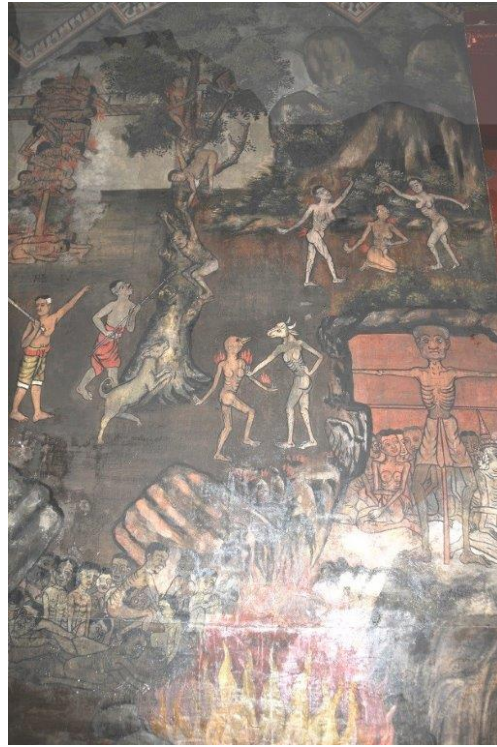


Fig.54– Wat Kositaram. Hell's scene



Fig.55 – Wat Kositaran. Entering the walls of hell, some damned are squawked and others are forced to climb the *kapok* tree for adulterers



Fig.56 – **Bangkok National Library-** Nimi on his chariot travelling to the hells.

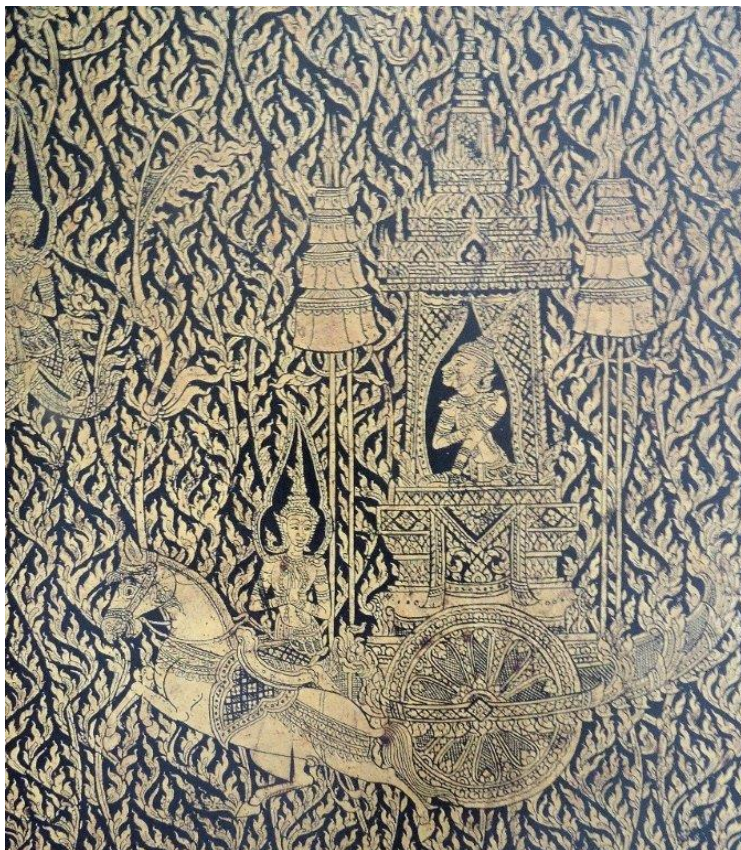


Fig.57 – **Bangkok National Library-** Nimi on his chariot going to the Hells driven by Metali, Sakka's charioteer.

Illustrations of the Nimi Jataka in Laos



Fig.58- **Wat Xieng Thong**. Nimi on the chariot starts to visit the hells made with stencil restored many times now with gold paint.

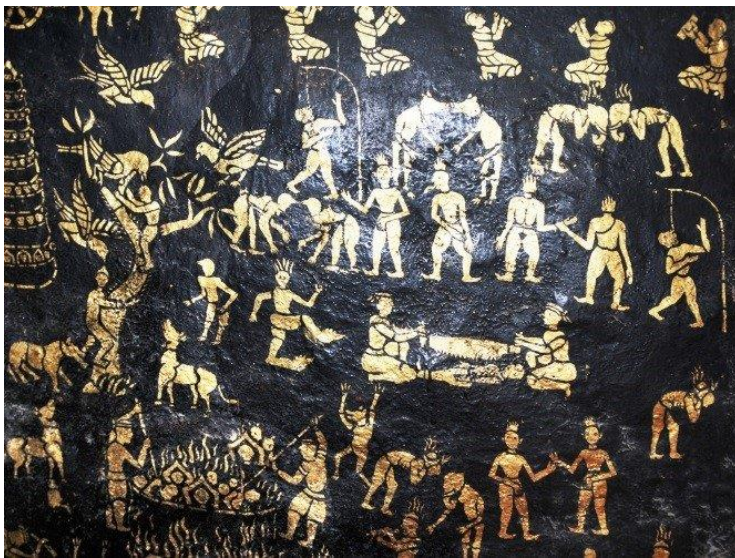


Fig.59 - visions of the hells

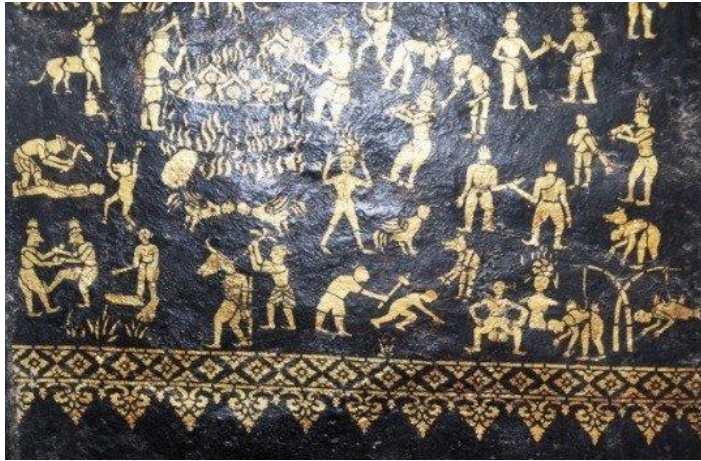


Fig.60. visions of the hells

Illustrations of the Naymi Jataka in Burma

The Burmese version is quite similar to the Pali.

Having heard of the great qualities of king Naymi, who has become a pure hermit with the power to make aerial alms, and visit the realm of the Brahmas. He was visited by the King of the celestials. The *nats* questioned him where he had been he told them of his visit to Naymi. Hearing this, they asked the king of celestials to have him conveyed to their realm. In compliance, the king sent down a flying chariot to fetch Naymi with Martali as coacher. The latter could choose to visit first the realm of the *nats* or the hells.

He opted for the hells, which are not described in great detail. Later Naymi ascended to the heavens, first to the ruby palace of the Virani Goddess who had been the servant of the Kassapa Buddha. Then he continues till reaching the Tavatimsa, the abode of the gods and later to the Thudatthana celestial city of Sakka. The narrative continues and terminates with a story of Thagya, king of the *nats*.



Fig.61 – **Mandalay, Royal Palace Monastery.** The giltwood carving shows Nimi preaching in a palace and then departing on a chariot, visiting the hells at the extreme right.

On this carved gilded panel of the Golden Palace Monastery, to the left, Indra (Sacca) is probably showing in his wonderful palace at the base of which is an empty chariot, then moving with Nimi towards the hells. Then on the right of the panel, the chariot brings Nimi to visit the hells. The most interesting feature of this panel is the illustration of Mount Meru supporting Tavatimsa and which has a huge fish curled around the base of the columnar mountain on which two small chariots have been carved (the Sun and the Moon?) revealing a knowledge of the Three World narrative.



Fig.62 – detail of the Tavatimsa Heaven on top of a columnar Mount Meru with a giant fish at the base and the two small chariots (the Sun and the Moon?) below Heaven's platform. A full view of the hells is excluded. The only sign could be the cauldron with boiling heads in front of the chariot's horse.



Fig 63– Nimi Jataka from postcards avail