

Exploring Community Catharsis and Embodied Healing in Burmese Nat Pwe: Culturally Sensitive Pathways for Modern Dramatherapy Practice

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the Burmese *Nat Pwe*—a ritual festival of spirit embodiment and communal catharsis—as a culturally grounded framework for understanding healing within dramatherapy. Drawing on autoethnographic data from fifteen Burmese drama therapy trainees at the Academy of Care (Goethe-Institut, Myanmar), the study examines how ritual performance enacts therapeutic processes of embodiment, projection, role transformation, and collective witnessing. Through thematic analysis informed by dramatherapy theory and cultural sensitivity frameworks, *Nat Pwe* is reframed as an indigenous theatrical healing ceremony—a living, relational system of psychotherapy that integrates spiritual, emotional, and social repair.

The findings reveal that trance, rhythm, and collective participation operate as embodied technologies of regulation and release, aligning with trauma-informed and decolonial principles of healing. Integrating recent evidence from trauma-informed dramatherapy training in Myanmar, the paper argues that culturally responsive dramatherapy must move beyond adaptation toward dialogical reciprocity with local ritual traditions. *Nat Pwe* demonstrates that healing arises through aesthetic, spiritual, and communal resonance, challenging Western individualist models of therapy.

This study contributes to global dramatherapy by articulating a framework of cultural humility, intercultural empathy, and embodied spirituality, positioning *Nat Pwe* as both mirror and mentor for decolonizing therapeutic practice.

Keywords: Nat Pwe, dramatherapy, cultural sensitivity, embodiment, trauma-informed practice, decolonial psychology, Myanmar

Introduction: Ritual, Healing, and Cultural Sensitivity in Performance

Across Myanmar's diverse ethnic traditions, ritualized performances such as *Nat Pwe* have long functioned as *embodied repositories of emotional knowledge and collective survival*. Rooted in pre-Buddhist animist traditions and later absorbed into Buddhist cosmology, *Nat Pwe* interlaces body, spirit, and community through ecstatic performance and shared catharsis (Spiro, 1967; Jordt, 2007). These rituals are not only cultural spectacles; they are *living theatres of affective regulation*, sustaining social equilibrium and resilience amidst political instability and trauma.

Modern dramatherapy, by contrast, often situates healing within individualist and psychodynamic frameworks developed in the Global North. Such models, though valuable, risk *epistemic reductionism*—the assumption that therapeutic processes can be universally understood through Western psychology (Fernando, 2010; Summerfield, 2008). *Nat Pwe* invites a rethinking of these assumptions.

As scholars of cultural humility and epistemic justice have argued, cultural sensitivity must move beyond professional competency to become an ethical stance of reflexivity and epistemic humility—a willingness to engage with and let other systems of meaning speak in their own languages (Fricker, 2007; Hook et al., 2013; Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998). Similarly, Ranasinha (2013) emphasizes that culturally responsive

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dramatherapy emerges not from applying Western theory to non-Western contexts, but from *listening to the indigenous dramaturgies of healing* already present in those contexts.

Yet, there remains little empirical or theoretical research examining how indigenous ritual performances in Southeast Asia—such as the Burmese Nat Pwe—embody therapeutic processes that parallel or expand dramatherapy frameworks.

Accordingly, this study explores how Nat Pwe embodies therapeutic mechanisms of embodiment, rhythm, and communal containment, and how these can inform a culturally responsive model of dramatherapy.

Recent research on trauma-informed dramatherapy training in Myanmar further supports this position, demonstrating that *culturally attuned and mindfulness-based practices* enable practitioners to integrate therapeutic methods meaningfully into local spiritual and social frameworks (Ranasinha, 2025).

By reading *Nat Pwe* through dramatherapy theory (Jennings, 1998; Jones, 2007; Landy, 1993), this study positions the ritual not as an exotic artifact but as a *culturally intelligent system of embodied psychotherapy*—one that honours collective suffering, spiritual embodiment, and community repair. It advances a central proposition: that the *future of dramatherapy depends on its capacity for intercultural reciprocity*—a movement from “therapy for” to “therapy with” cultures.

Methodology: Autoethnography and Cultural Attunement

Insider Positionality

This study employed autoethnography (Ellis et al., 2011) to position lived experience as a valid source of cultural knowledge. Conducted by fifteen drama therapy students from the Academy of Care (Goethe-Institut Myanmar), it explored *Nat Pwe* as a lived and spiritually resonant practice rather than an external ritual.

The researchers’ dual role—as participants in Burmese ritual life and as mental health professionals trained in dramatherapy—bridged embodied cultural knowing with professional reflection, aligning with Kleinman’s (1980) notion of the healer’s moral space. Guided by cultural empathy (Ranasinha, 2024), the team engaged *Nat Pwe* through embodied participation and reflexivity. Recognizing that insider belonging may invite bias, they employed reflexive journaling and peer dialogue to sustain balance between cultural intimacy and analytic distance, affirming Ranasinha’s (2025) view that insider engagement is essential for culturally attuned dramatherapy.

Data Sources

The analysis drew on three primary data sources. (1) Lived experience captured the research cohort’s direct engagement in Burmese cultural and spiritual life, including participant observation of *Nat Pwe* rituals. (2)

Existing literature spanned anthropology, cultural studies, and MHPSS research relevant to Myanmar, providing theoretical and contextual grounding. (3) Primary interviews were conducted through ethnographic observation and semi-structured discussions with two ritual specialists—a senior *Nat Kadaw* (spirit medium) and a practitioner of esoteric traditions. These dialogues, focused on possession, rhythm, and therapeutic impact, generated the core qualitative data for thematic analysis.

Analytical Approach

A thematic qualitative analysis was conducted to interpret the therapeutic dimensions of *Nat Pwe* ritual practice. Themes were identified collaboratively through group dialogue and reflexive discussion among the researcher participants to ensure cultural and interpretive validity. Three overarching themes emerged—embodied emotional expression, rhythmic entrainment, and communal containment—each comprising sub-themes that revealed distinct facets of the healing process. *Embodied emotional expression* included embodiment as a healing process and role transformation, while *rhythmic entrainment* encompassed rhythmic regulation, somatic resonance, and cultural rhythm as sources of collective attunement.

Communal containment integrated collective catharsis, ethical witnessing, and ritual safety, illustrating how shared cosmology and structure create an empowering communal field. Together, these themes reflected therapeutic mechanisms aligned with dramatherapy principles of projection and catharsis, and trauma-informed values of safety and empowerment. Viewed through this lens, *Nat Pwe* emerges as a structured and intentional system of communal healing, where rhythmic and embodied ritual actions foster emotional regulation, connection, and transformation.

Ethical Considerations

The study was guided by ethical principles of informed consent, confidentiality, and cultural reciprocity. Participation in *Nat Pwe* rituals and dialogues with the two key informants—a senior Nat Kadaw and a practitioner of esoteric traditions—was voluntary and conducted with respect for spiritual boundaries and local protocols. Researchers approached these encounters with humility and mutual learning, recognizing the sacred nature of the practices shared. Ethical approval was obtained from the Academy of Care, Goethe-Institut Myanmar.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The following analysis presents three interrelated dimensions through which *Nat Pwe* enacts its therapeutic function. The analysis revealed *Nat Pwe* as a highly organized and embodied system of communal healing, where rhythmic, performative, and relational processes converge to transform suffering into collective renewal. Three overarching themes emerged—embodied emotional expression, rhythmic entrainment, and communal containment—each representing a distinct yet interwoven dimension of the ritual’s therapeutic power. These themes form the analytical foundation for the following discussion, which explores how *Nat Pwe* enacts its therapeutic function through embodied, rhythmic, and communal processes.

Embodied Emotional Expression: The Body as a Site of Transformation

Embodiment lies at the core of *Nat Pwe*’s healing function. The *Nat Kadaw* (spirit medium) becomes the central agent through whom unseen suffering takes visible, performative form. Through trance, movement, and expressive gesture, the *Kadaw* embodies the life story of a *Nat*—often an ancestor who endured violent or unjust death, such as *Mae Wunna*’s heartbreak. By dramatizing this transformation from human pain to divine agency, the *Kadaw* materializes a communal narrative of resilience.

This process parallels dramatherapy’s mechanisms of projection and role transformation (Landy, 1993; Jones, 2007). The *Kadaw* serves as a vessel through which the community externalizes collective anguish and witnesses its ritual transmutation. What emerges is both psychological and moral healing: grief and injustice are reframed as sacred continuity rather than unresolved trauma.

The ritual also facilitates somatic release. The sustained movement, rhythmic intensity, and sensory stimulation allow participants to discharge embodied tension, releasing what van der Kolk (2014) describes as the body’s imprint of traumatic experience. In this way, *Nat Pwe* enacts a culturally grounded form of body based therapy, where emotional regulation and transformation occur through movement, rhythm, and shared presence rather than verbalization.

Thus, *embodied emotional expression* in *Nat Pwe* directly parallels dramatherapy’s core processes of embodiment and role transformation (Landy, 1993; Jennings, 1998), offering a culturally grounded enactment of catharsis through movement and trance rather than psychodramatic improvisation.

Rhythmic Entrainment and Somatic Resonance: Rhythm as Regulation and Connection

Traditional Burmese musical ensemble *Hsaing Waing* orchestra—its gongs, drums, and cymbals—provides the visceral pulse that structures and sustains the ritual. The rhythm’s escalating tempo induces rhythmic entrainment, synchronizing bodies, breath, and affect across participants. This shared rhythm among participants—via patterned sensory engagement such as rhythmic auditory stimulation—can entrain neural oscillations (Lakatos et al., 2019) and drive physiological synchrony (Stuldreher et al., 2020).

For Burmese communities, rhythm carries ancestral memory and moral resonance. It is both biological and cultural—a sonic embodiment of belonging and continuity. As participants move with the *Kadaw*’s rhythm, distinctions between healer, witness, and sufferer blur, creating a collective body bound through sound and movement.

In dramatherapy, this state reflects body awareness and cultural attunement (Ranasinha, 2025), which may be understood as a form of *embodied resonance*—a shared affective field that enables emotional attunement and co-regulation. Rather than a technique, rhythm here is a relational intelligence, an indigenous mechanism of emotional safety and synchrony. *Nat Pwe* thus demonstrates how rhythm, as both cultural practice and physiological process, naturally fulfills trauma-informed principles of safety, empowerment, and connection (SAMHSA, 2014).

In dramatherapy terms, this rhythmic synchrony mirrors the co-regulative and aesthetic distance mechanisms that support group cohesion (Jones, 2007). Here, rhythmic attunement functions as both dramatic container and relational bridge.

Communal Containment and Collective Healing: Ritual as Ethical Witnessing

Nat Pwe unfolds through a precise ritual structure—invocation, possession, release, and closure—that parallels dramatherapy's processual arc of warm-up, enactment, and integration (Emunah, 1994). Within this framework, the *Kadaw* functions as both conduit and container, mediating ancestral energies and communal emotion. Safety arises not from professional boundaries but from shared cosmology, moral order, and collective trust.

Here, catharsis is communal rather than individual. Devotees' *awzana* (sorrows or ailments) are symbolically transferred to the *Kadaw*, whose performance enacts their transformation. The audience actively participates in this process, collectively witnessing the release of suffering within an atmosphere of reverence and empathy. This process echoes dramatherapy's emphasis on witnessing and shared meaning-making (Sajnani, 2012), while extending it into the spiritual and moral dimensions embedded in Burmese cosmology.

When practitioners in Myanmar's dramatherapy training (Ranasinha, 2025) adopted a stance of witness rather than expert, participants reported deeper trust and resonance. Similarly, in *Nat Pwe*, healing emerges through ethical witnessing—a form of solidarity that honors the sacredness of others' pain without reducing it to psychological metaphor.

These dynamics echo Ranasinha's (2021, 2025) argument for culturally responsive dramatherapy and resonate with decolonial perspectives that call for attunement to the therapeutic intelligence embedded within indigenous aesthetic and spiritual traditions. *Nat Pwe*, therefore, does not simply mirror dramatherapy; it expands its epistemic boundaries, offering a culturally coherent model of trauma recovery rooted in rhythm, embodiment, and communal care.

Taken together, these themes reveal *Nat Pwe* as a sophisticated indigenous system of psycho-spiritual regulation. Embodiment provides the medium of transformation, rhythm the means of regulation, and communal containment the moral and emotional grounding for safety. Together, they illustrate that the therapeutic mechanisms often theorized in Western dramatherapy—embodiment, projection, witnessing, and catharsis—are already deeply enacted within Burmese ritual practice. In this sense, *Nat Pwe* is not merely comparable to dramatherapy; it stands as a theoretical interlocutor, challenging and enriching global understandings of embodied and culturally rooted healing.

Communal containment, in turn, fulfills the dramatic frame of witnessing and integration (Jones, 2007), translating therapeutic safety from clinical boundaries into shared cosmology and ethical witnessing.

Culturally Sensitive and Decolonized Dramatherapy

Framing *Nat Pwe* as an indigenous healing ceremony challenges the colonial hierarchy of knowledge that privileges Western epistemologies of healing. Kleinman (1980) describes healing systems as "moral worlds," culturally constituted arenas where ethics, emotion, and power are intertwined in the experience and practice of care. Within such worlds, *Nat Pwe* functions as a moral and aesthetic technology for restoring justice and dignity. Building on this understanding, this cross-cultural resonance underscores that aesthetic and ritual processes function as parallel psychotherapeutic systems — where meaning-making and affect regulation emerge through shared performance rather than verbal interpretation.

Fernando (2010) argues that disregarding indigenous and non-Western systems of healing constitutes a form of epistemic violence, as it denies cultural communities the right to define and pursue wellness on their own terms. Ranasinha (2013) extends this critique, advocating for culturally responsive dramatherapy that evolves through dialogical collaboration with local wisdom keepers.

Thus, *Nat Pwe* becomes more than a case study—it becomes a teacher of therapeutic ethics. Its dramaturgy of rhythm, reciprocity, and reverence offers a decolonial blueprint: a model of therapy that is embodied, communal, and spiritually integrated. For dramatherapy to remain globally relevant, it must shift from cultural appropriation to cultural partnership—from universalizing psychology to pluralizing healing.

These relationships can be summarized as follows:

Dramatherapy Mechanism	Nat Pwe Parallel Process	Therapeutic Function
Embodiment / Role Transformation	Spirit possession and ritual dramatization	Transformation of suffering into sacred agency
Rhythmic Regulation	<i>Hsaing Waing</i> rhythmic entrainment	Physiological and affective coregulation
Witnessing / Integration	Communal witnessing and moral containment	Ethical solidarity and closure

This alignment illustrates that Nat Pwe not only resonates with but also enriches the theoretical architecture of dramatherapy through embodied spirituality and communal ethics.

Limitations and Implications

Limitations

This study offers an in-depth exploration of *Nat Pwe* as an indigenous model of embodied healing, yet several limitations should be acknowledged. As an autoethnographic inquiry, findings are shaped by the researchers' positionalities as cultural insiders and trainee dramatherapists. While this perspective enriched cultural understanding, it may have introduced interpretive bias through over-identification or selective empathy (Ellis et al., 2011). Reflexive journaling and peer debriefing helped mitigate this risk, though complete objectivity remains neither possible nor desirable in culturally situated research.

The primary data—drawn from two ritual specialists and specific *Nat Pwe* contexts in central Myanmar—offer depth but may not reflect regional or ethnic variations. Future studies could extend this through comparative or longitudinal collaborations with *Nat Kadaw* practitioners.

Finally, linguistic and conceptual translation posed limitations. Key terms such as *awzana* (sorrow), *Hatte/Wate* (spiritual resonance/protection), and *Lamaine* (cosmic disruption) resist precise English equivalents, underscoring the challenge of conveying embodied and spiritual meanings within academic discourse. Such tensions highlight the interpretive limits inherent in decolonial research.

Implications for Practice, Theory, and Policy

Despite these limitations, the study advances a decolonial reframing of dramatherapy, demonstrating how *Nat Pwe* functions as a living model of ritual dramaturgy in which rhythm, role transformation, and communal witnessing foster emotional regulation and collective repair. Integrating such principles into training, as Ranasinha (2025) suggests, strengthens trauma-informed and culturally attuned practice, positioning embodied participation, ritual containment, and ethical witnessing as essential competencies for non-Western contexts.

The findings affirm indigenous performance traditions as legitimate sites of psychotherapeutic knowledge, broadening dramatherapy's epistemological foundations and fostering South–North dialogue. At the policy level, they support the integration of indigenous, arts-based healing within national Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) frameworks (Fernando, 2010; UNICEF, 2021), particularly in post-conflict or resource-limited settings. Cultural sensitivity thus emerges not as a peripheral value but as the ethical core of therapeutic work—guiding dramatherapy toward an intercultural future grounded in reciprocity, empathy, and the shared artistry of healing.

Conclusion and Future Research

This research positions *Nat Pwe* as a dynamic indigenous system of embodied healing that resonates deeply with contemporary dramatherapy theory and practice. Far from a cultural relic, it represents a living theatre of resilience where movement, rhythm, and collective participation enact the therapeutic processes of embodiment, projection, role transformation, and catharsis (Jennings, 1998; Landy, 1993; Jones, 2007). Healing arises not through clinical intervention but through ritual participation, shared affect, and moral imagination—situating therapy within the moral and spiritual life of the community.

These insights affirm Ranasinha's (2013) argument that culturally responsive dramatherapy must remain in dialogue with local cosmologies and ethical worldviews. Engaging *Nat Pwe* as a co-creative site of psychotherapeutic knowledge enables dramatherapy to decolonize its Eurocentric frameworks and re-ground itself in the universal human practices of ritual, play, and communal storytelling. This intercultural reciprocity

reframes dramatherapy from a model applied to communities into a practice co-created with them, embodying a process of therapeutic reciprocity.

Ultimately, *Nat Pwe* reminds us that healing is a collective art—a rhythmic dialogue between ancestors and living bodies, between suffering and transcendence. The future of dramatherapy depends on its capacity to listen to such rhythms with humility, to enter the circle rather than observe it, and to recognize that within every culture's theatre lies a philosophy of care.

Future Research Directions

Future research should continue exploring how indigenous performance traditions can inform culturally embedded, trauma-informed dramatherapy frameworks across Southeast Asia. Longitudinal and cross-cultural studies could examine how practitioner training in culturally responsive approaches (Ranasinha, 2025) shapes therapeutic outcomes and ethics. Comparative analyses between *Nat Pwe* and other regional healing rituals—such as Sri Lanka's *Thovil* or Cambodia's *Arak* ceremonies—may further illuminate the intersections of ritual performance, collective trauma recovery, and embodied transformation.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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