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Introduction

Power, Authority, and Contested Hegemony in Burmese-Myanmar Religion

The initial inspiration for this collaboration came from the experience garnered at an international conference on Burmese studies in 2002, titled "Burma-Myanmar Research and Its Future."[1] It was convened to reflect on social science and humanities-based scholarship on Myanmar in the past half century, which had started in earnest in the 1940s, and culminated in the first wave of publications based on empirical research in the 1950s and 1960s.[2] At the start of the millennium, the conference acknowledged a new era in engaging in constructive discussion amongst scholars in many areas of Burmese-Myanmar studies. Some of the articles in this special issue were originally presented as part of a panel on religion convened by the guest editors of this issue, Hiroko Kawanami and Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière, whilst others were written anew to fit the theme of power, authority, and contested hegemony in the field of Burmese-Myanmar religion. Although most approaches are generally phenomenological or anthropological, some have undertaken analysis from a historical perspective or a hermeneutical approach to enrich the discussion. What must also be highlighted here is that the scope of this issue was restricted to those concerned primarily with social phenomena that have relevance to Buddhism, it being the religion of the majority population in Myanmar. Other religions such as Islam and Hinduism that are also adhered to by Myanmar people of other ethnic origins, as well as Christianity and indigenous religions practiced by minority groups, were left out here.[3]

Since the 1960s, the political situation has made it extremely difficult for foreign researchers to spend any length of time in Myanmar and conduct fieldwork outside Yangon due to the government's isolationist policies, and although things have opened up since the 1990s, the sensitive situation has not made the life of

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researchers any easier. Meanwhile, with the ethical responsibility of working in a context defined by an unethical military regime, those who conduct lengthy research in Myanmar are placed under scrutiny from the local authorities as well as from the academic community they are affiliated with. There is no denying that international geopolitics and local political realities have presented scholars who work in Myanmar with a difficult choice, although we have taken the view that it is important to continue with research in the field. We have given primary consideration to local informants so that their positions are not jeopardized, and endeavored to conduct fieldwork as ethically as possible under sensitive and sometimes hazardous conditions. The contributors in this issue have all spent long periods conducting research in various parts of the country, and are fluent in the Myanmar language or Arakanese, and sometimes Myanmar-Pāli. They therefore are able to offer in-depth ethnographic information and a unique perspective on an elusive society that has been relatively unexplored in modern times.

Interactions with local scholars have remained minimal, however, and they are still underrepresented in publications in the English-language medium. Publications by Myanmar researchers based in Southeast Asia or in North American or Australian institutions in the last two decades have focused primarily on politics, modern Myanmar history, or economic development.[4] This issue brings together scholars from countries such as France, Luxembourg, and Japan who are interested in Myanmar religion, culture, and society, reflecting the decentralization of previously North American-based area studies, and the changing demography of those who engage empirically in the study of Myanmar society. It is hoped and expected that there will be more academic exchanges with local scholars in the future so that locally contextualized knowledge can be examined and empirically-based work can be further grounded in the study of Myanmar religion.

It is important to point out that Myanmar is not a monolithic nation-state and the population adheres to a variety of religious beliefs and practices in their different regional contexts; however, Theravāda Buddhism, established as the main religion, is still regarded as a nominal part of their national identity. Buddhism has been patronized and protected by successive Buddhist kings, providing a hegemonic foundation and political legitimacy for the Myanmar state. In this respect, Theravāda Buddhism continues to be the linchpin of Myanmar identity, and even more so since the 1990s as the state has been actively promoting its dissemination as a vehicle for legitimization.

In this issue we have attempted to contest the dominant paradigm and prevailing orthodoxy in the study of Myanmar religion; nonetheless, it has been difficult to get away from the oppositional typology imposed on Buddhism depicted as the main religion, and other non-Buddhist forms of religious practices subordinated to the former. Such opposition has also been enhanced in academia by the influential work of Spiro (1967 and 1970) in his "two religions" hypothesis, which again perpetuates the hierarchy and locates them from the viewpoint of Pāli orthodoxy. The co-guest editor of this issue, Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière, states that, "this delineation of Burmese identity and religion as fundamentally

Buddhist also conceals complexities and contradictions that exist within the overarching framework of Burmese Buddhism. In Burma, as in other Southeast Asian societies in which Theravāda Buddhism is the dominant religion, there is a debate among Buddhists about the degree to which practices do or do not conform to the Theravādin canon" (see her Overview in this issue). Articles in this issue revisit such "complexities and contradictions" by exploring competing realities, both regional and national, and examine cultural and religious articulations that cannot be neatly classified into those two.

Some of the articles examine specific roles and the standing of religious practitioners such as *arahant (*the enlightened one who is worshipped as a Buddhist saint), *weikza* (literally meaning the "higher or esoteric knowledge"), spirit mediums, monks, and nuns; other articles explore relevant or overlapping themes in Myanmar religion: the concept of charisma, transmission of authority, dissemination of knowledge, and gender as one of the variables in the religious system. Practitioners who manifest unique skills and spiritual qualities may be given specific attention, but they are also discussed in the context of social transition and the changing needs of clients and devotees in contemporary society that also affect their religious positions. Throughout the issue, an attempt is made to get to the core of religious power in its socio-cultural traditions in order to understand how the relationship of power is manifested in many different hierarchies. In addition, attention is given to the political dimension of Buddhism when state hegemony asserts its dominance over local religious traditions in border regions. Articles written from the viewpoint of Arakan state, for example, contest the seeming coherence of state-endorsed Buddhism and extricate the dynamic processes that take place between the center and periphery.

KAWANAMI questions the cross-cultural applicability of charisma in popular Myanmar Buddhism through the case studies of three charismatic monks. In order to understand the social implication of their popularity, deeply engrained in its religious and political culture, the article unravels vernacular terms that pertain to the notions of authority and power. It also describes how the controversial nature of some of the power(s) acquired by monastic practitioners have come to be apprehended by the present regime by offering honorary titles and privileges in an attempt to both appropriate and normalize their influence. Against the backdrop of an achievement-orientated monastic culture and the state policy of *Sāsana-pyú* (dissemination of state-endorsed Buddhism) that has increasingly permeated their religious identity, the article also revisits the significance of an *arahant*, a religious virtuoso par excellence who represents an orthodox ideal upheld by many. An *arahant* offers a direction to the disenchanted masses by embodying mystical powers and the awe-inspiring forces of the natural landscape, but his moral standing is ultimately beyond the confines of this-worldly desires and aspirations.

TOSA describes the process in which a simple village monk, Thamanya Sayadaw, rose to prominence and became a national cult figure in the 1990s. This coincided with a period of political instability, ethnic conflicts, and economic development in Myanmar. His reputation as both an *arahant* and a *weikza* attracted countless

pilgrims to his monastery in Karen state, and his centrifugal powers were witnessed in the physical growth of his religious compound and the development of large-scale communal projects that established the cult of Thamanya. By becoming the focus of domestic tourism, the expansion of his compound continued to provide further proof of his special "powers." Thamanya Sayadaw left a legacy as one of the most remarkable Buddhist saints in contemporary Myanmar, but his passing revealed the problem of the unsustainability of such charisma; his religious land came to be "subordinated by the secular administration" and his center experienced a rapid decline. Succession is hardly an issue here as it highlights the limits of a charismatic power that is unable to sustain its authority after the demise of an exceptional individual.

Carbonnel explores another ambiguous religious position in Myanmar Buddhism: the nuns observed to be in between the monks and the laity. She questions the issue of categorization regarding their in-between status by reverting to a transactional analysis, and observes their relationship with society through the practice of alms collection. The article demonstrates that such material transactions they engage in constitute their monastic identity: they are recipients of donations for the laity, whilst acting as donors for monks. Thus the standing of nuns is examined within the triangular relationship of nuns, monks, and the laity. Other factors are also brought into the analysis, such as their individual qualities and symbolic values attributed to reputable nunnery institutions. The question is whether it is gender or a combination of factors that decide their religious position that fluctuates between this-worldly and the other-worldly.

Brac de la Perrière examines three cases of the succession of spirit mediums affiliated with the cult of the Thirty-Seven Lords. Although spirit possession is normally imagined to take place as the result of spirits communicating their "will," the article shows how the transmission of authority is made viable otherwise. The process appears to be not only about the handing down of ritual objects and a network of clients, but it also involves the transmission of a whole set of spiritual and symbolic knowledge about the *nat* (spirits). It is stated that the difficulty lies in reconciling two competing principles: succession and vocation, and the competition that manifests between "real children" and "*nat* children," or disciples who can transmit the essence of spirit possession. Her analysis shows a combination of principles that constitute the cult. It also reveals the importance of the skills and abilities of mediums in their relationships with both *nat* and their clients. As spirit mediums tour around the country, it shows how local traditions become integrated into the overall spirit hierarchy, and tradition and inspiration, descent and possession, interact at many different levels.

De Mersan takes up the issue of a spirit cult in the state of Arakan and explores the relationship between religious authority and political power in the context of nation-building in Myanmar. Her article tells the story of the wife of a member of the Myanmar military who was posted to Arakan state. The wife established a new shrine representing an Arakanese spirit known as Mra Swan Dewi. By examining

the cult and rituals addressed to this Arakanese spirit, it is made clear how the re-installment of the spirit symbolized the Myanmar-ization of territorial guardian spirits that were historically patronized by Arakanese kings. A process is highlighted whereby a local cult is used as a way of legitimating political hegemony over a peripheral population, and by so doing, a dialogical process is explored that reveals how an infiltration of cultural and religious hegemony takes place.

Whilst de Mersan takes an empirical approach in examining the role local spirits play in the transaction between religious appropriation and the state, LEIDER focuses on the geopolitical positioning of Arakan as a previously independent regional kingdom that has come under the political and religious dominance of the central Myanmar state. He examines an apocryphal text that contains a speech of the Buddha who enlists relics linked to his former lives in Arakan, providing a unique perspective on the creation of Arakanese myth as an essential part of an appropriation and dissemination of regional authority. The Arakanese have never produced a genre of royal chronicles as we find in the Myanmar dynasties, and his article highlights its regional uniqueness as well as its disconnection from the Pāli orthodoxy. Although efforts of the political center to lay down its mark through state-endorsed Buddhism are acknowledged, the importance of such apocryphal texts is emphasized in disseminating traditional concepts, beliefs, values, and local history.

Whilst regional states struggle to maintain their autonomy and distinct identity, both Leider and de Mersan have drawn our attention to the experience of covert resistance in a peripheral region that is striving to retain its own sphere of autonomy. Kawanami and Tosa have both described how an exceptional Buddhist monk of minority origins has become a metaphor for human perfection with whom people identified their hopes and desires against the backdrop of widespread despair and frustration directed at the central power. These studies focusing on the margins of power point to the dialogical processes observed in the relationship between Myanmar and its regional states, and describe how social, political, and cultural interactions take place on many layers and at different speeds, the dynamics of which can be referred to as the "adaptability" of the religious field. The research in this issue throws new light on old debates concerning aspects of religion in Myanmar, between Buddhism and "non-Buddhist" religions, the Great and Little traditions, and this-worldly and the other-worldly aspirations. In our attempt to unravel the wealth of religious experiences of Myanmar people, it is hoped that these articles offer alternative perspectives and future possibilities for new debates on the topics of orthodoxies, diverging hierarchies, internal delineations, and new paradigms.

In this issue, we have used the term "Myanmar" in place of "Burma," taking the view that since it has always been "Myanmaa" for the people in their vernacular usage, we should use "Myanmar."[5] It is also the official name of the country adopted by the United Nations, ASEAN, and many countries in the world. "Burma" is still used by some Western countries in recognition of a foreign policy that is against the oppressive activities of the military regime. Some academics also

continue to use "Burma" to stake their political position, but the use of "Myanmar" in this issue does not represent a political statement of any kind. Today, an increasing number of academic institutions and Western journals actually use "Myanmar" for mere convenience. Some authors in this issue, such as Leider, a historian, have chosen to use "Burma" in its historical context before 1948 and "Myanmar" in its post-independence period. Other authors may use "Burma" in their chapters if they feel strongly about the usage of the term in a particular context, in which case its usage is explained in a footnote.

Myanmar names traditionally do not have surnames unless the author is of Myanmar descent, is living abroad, and is used to separating out his/her surname, or has voluntarily made the decision to publish following Western/international conventions. In this issue, rather than follow the Western/international convention that distinguishes former names and surnames, we have followed the Myanmar convention that does not separate the syllables in names. For example, "Maung Maung Aung" will stay in this order and not become "Aung, Maung Maung" in the references. We have also applied a similar rule to Thai names, applying the Thai convention that keeps the traditional order of syllables in the names. Having said that, Myanmar names are notorious for being repetitive and sometimes, for example in the case of "Maung"—which can also be a title pronoun equivalent to "Mr" for a young male commonly attached before his "real" name—it is difficult to determine whether it is a title or part of a name. For example, in the case of "Maung Maung," his "real" name could be one "Maung" or two, and if it is two "Maung(s)," then he would be addressed as "Maung Maung Maung," inclusive of the title "Maung."

Notes

1. The conference was held between 21–25 September 2002 at Gothenburg University, Sweden.

2. See Manning Nash 1966. There were many influential articles and books published in the 1960s based on empirical research in Myanmar: Brohm 1963; Pfanner 1966; Pfanner and Ingersoll 1962; Mendelson 1961a and 1961b; June Nash 1966; Manning Nash 1965; and Spiro 1967 and 1970.

3. This point was raised by Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière.

4. See Aung Thwin 2008; Maung Maung 1980; Mya Maung 1998; Myat Mon 2000; Thant Myint-U 2001; and Tin Maung Maung Than 1993.

5. "Burma" was officially renamed "Myanmar" on 18 June 1997 by the State Law and Order Restoration Council (slorc) and the term continues to be used by the present State Peace and Development Council (spdc).

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