



## On the Ambivalence of Female Monasticism in Theravāda Buddhism

### A Contribution to the Study of the Monastic System in Myanmar

How have Buddhist nuns in Myanmar engaged themselves in monastic relationships while being officially excluded from the monastic institution (the Sangha) since the female order disappeared? This article examines the term “nuns” and monastic status through the way it is embodied in everyday interactions. I begin by presenting the main characteristics of the ambivalent status of Buddhist nuns and the methodological problem this raises—an analysis of donation interactions between nuns and lay donors indicates the different paths that lead to monastic identification. I then focus on the various relationships in which nuns are engaged in Myanmar, with a description of the combination of relationships between nuns, monks, and lay donors that highlights the monastic system as a network of dynamic relationships in which monastic social identity and its processes of legitimation can take place.

KEYWORDS: Theravāda Buddhism—female monasticism—donation interactions—monastic relational system

THERAVĀDA Buddhist society is structured into two opposing and complementary groups. On the one hand, the institutionalized monastic order (Sangha; *sanghika*) has members who are tied through a tradition of ordination that originated from the Buddha. On the other hand, there are devotees or lay people who belong to the mundane world. Since historical events have led to a break in ordination, the female monastic order (*bhikkhuni* Sangha)<sup>1</sup> has disappeared.<sup>2</sup> Nowadays, only monks belong to the monastic institution. However, women do still embrace monachism and the distinction between nuns and lay people is generally accepted. Nuns in Myanmar are dependent on the religious bureaucracy of the state, and the state makes decisions concerning them. Furthermore, they live in convents that go by the same names in the Myanmar language as monasteries: *sathindaik* (a large nunnery or monastery devoted to the study and learning of texts), *kyaung* (monastery, nunnery), and *gyaung*.<sup>3</sup> Despite this monastic way of life, Buddhist Burmese nuns (*thilashin*) remain in an ambiguous position within the religious system.

The terms of reference used by some scholars reveal the difficulty in categorizing Theravāda Buddhist nuns and the differentiation between female monasticism (outside the Sangha) and male monasticism (within the Sangha). An English-language document edited in Myanmar<sup>4</sup> employs the English term “nun” while the vernacular term *hpòngyi* is used for monks. The opposite occurs in the Thai context described by English anthropologists such as P. VAN ESTERICK (1996). This distinction relies in part because the religious status of males and females differs, as stories about the beginnings of the Buddhist religious community and the young male ordination demonstrate (BRAC DE LA PERRIÈRE, forthcoming). But the absence nowadays of a female order calls into question the very category of Theravāda Buddhist nuns and also leads to variations in the translation of vernacular terms. Thus VAN ESTERICK (1996) describes Thai *maechii* as “lay devotees” and not as “nuns” because they are excluded from the Sangha. The term “lay nun” has also been proposed to describe their “in between” status, that is, they fit in somewhere between the lay and the monastic population. A lexical analysis of the ambivalent status of the *thilashin* has been carried out by KAWANAMI (1990).<sup>5</sup>

In practical terms, the passage from lay to religious status for males entering the Sangha is marked by a ritual of ordination. A second element of differentiation

between monastic and lay people lies in the degree of renunciation that monasticism requires. This implies particular relationships of mutual dependency related to the hierarchy observed among Buddhists whereby the monk, having abandoned all worldly existence, occupies a position of spiritual superiority. But he cannot attain that position without the material support of lay people since he is supported by their charity. The monk who accepts a donation is also a source of merit for lay donors, who thus ameliorate their present and future existence (the form in which they will be reincarnated depends on the amount of merit being accumulated).

Here again, the relational position of nuns within the system appears to be ambivalent. On the one hand, Buddhist nuns in Myanmar endorse one of the typical traits of monastic living in the Theravāda tradition: they live on the gifts and alms they receive from lay people. This monastic way of subsistence is not just an indication that these nuns are considered as having left the mundane world behind (another usual characterization of monastic people): it also implies a relational framework that is part of their monastic social identity. In addition to their specific mode of subsistence, given that they live in a nunnery and are part of a national monastic administration, we can locate them inside the monastic fold.

On the other hand, nuns in Myanmar appear closer to laywomen when their relationship with monks in their role as donors is considered. Indeed, the duty to guarantee the monks' daily subsistence through the giving of food is one of the fundamental sources of differentiation and complements that are observed between monks and lay people. Furthermore, it is generally women who play the most important role in this function, since they are the ones who prepare the food. Thus, this nurturing framework institutes the opposition between the male community of monks and the laity, and it also depends on the gender opposition that contributes to associating the nuns and female donors in the same category. Finally, the differences between nuns and monks appear to be greater when we take their respective religious and social roles into consideration. While monks are required to be at the heart of every religious ceremony, nuns do not officiate, and although they may actively participate, it is always in a secondary or in an undervalued role. If certain Burmese people organize ceremonies in a nunnery, they justify this simply by observing that it is cheaper compared to organizing the same event in a monastery.

Thus the status of Burmese nuns appears to be ambivalent. It would be vain to adopt a dualist analysis and attempt to settle the issue of which of the two categories (monastic or lay) they belong to. However, reconciling these two theoretically-opposed categories by applying the notion of ambivalence or "in between" hardly accounts for the way such an antinomy between categories combines with (and is incorporated into) their status as nuns. Rather, we may ask what it says about monastic identity and how it can be revealed. Since the reference to the monastic institution (the Sangha) remains insufficient to define and explain the women's monastic way of life, the question will be envisaged here from a different point of view.

The donation relationships in which the nuns are implicated will be examined here. The almsgiving relationship is one of the cornerstones of monasticism,

governing the necessary separation between those who have embraced the monastic way of life and those who have not, as well as their complementariness. Since this is one of the characteristics that monks and nuns have in common, it is an opportunity to highlight both the specificity of nuns and their integration into the same religious system as monks, and to reveal the many-sided network of the monastic system. In order to resolve the paradox that is a result of their ambivalent status, two frames of reference and description will be distinguished: the monastic frame of reference and the secular frame of reference. The latter obviously does not exclude their daily religious observances.<sup>6</sup> The distinction in terms of frames of reference points to specific sets of actions and situations rather than referring to categories of people. In this way, while it is difficult to accept that one individual can belong to two opposed and complementary categories at the same time, it is conceivable that a single individual's actions may refer to one or the other framework, which is necessary if we aim to analyze the nuns' ambivalent position. While within an analysis based on an institutional membership of the Sangha, monastic identity is a precondition (given by the Sangha) to the almsgiving relationships; the analysis of interactions during collection—as it will be developed here—reveals that this activity itself influences the attribution of a monastic identity.

The first section of this article focuses on the articulation of the monastic frame and the secular frame during the almsgiving activity. While nuns seem to have an in-between position on the religious scale of renunciation—taking the shape of a continuum from the lay world to the religious world—the analysis of the different ways *thilāshin* conduct the almsgiving relationship shows a more complex interaction and combination between the monastic and the lay frames of reference. Thus the aim is not to determine whether the nuns' activity in this regard applies to the monks or laity, but to reveal how the two frames of reference are interwoven and the way they influence the nuns' monastic identity.

The second section of the article looks more specifically at the relationship nuns maintain with monks and lay donors. The relations between monks, nuns, and lay people will be looked at as part of a single religious relational system in order to shed some light on the processes that operate diachronically, and in all possible configurations of interaction. Here again, the religious scale based on renunciation implies a more complex relationship network that includes monks, nuns, and lay people in a single system rather than a mere continuum. Thus, analyzing almsgiving relationships will allow us to deal with a number of questions raised by the nuns' ambivalent status, and will also account for various processes of monastic identification.

#### ALMSGIVING: MONASTIC SOCIAL IDENTITY IN THE NUN-LAY PEOPLE RELATIONSHIP

The monastic population's primary source of subsistence is based on giving and receiving alms. In contrast to monks, whose monastic rules command

them to collect alms every morning, nuns are only allowed to do so during the two days preceding a Buddhist holiday *úbokneí* (Pāli: *uposathadivasa*) according to the lunar calendar. Nuns are especially visible on such alms collection days, in the crowded market alleys, and in the urban and village streets close to large monastic settlements such as Sagaing Hill. Dressed in their pink robes, nuns carry large metal bowls or bamboo trays to receive the donations. They are given uncooked rice and money, whereas monks are offered only prepared and cooked food.

The rules that define the authorized days and the type of donations they are allowed to receive are not without consequence for the ways in which the almsgiving itself and the interaction with the donors take place. Giving uncooked rice and money calls for far less personal investment in time and labor compared to preparing a dish. Besides, while nuns share such a mode of subsistence with monks, they differ in that they are allowed to handle money, while in theory, monks are not. This gives nuns more autonomy, since they are free to buy what they want, whereas monks are not allowed to express either their wishes or their needs to their lay donors. In relation to nuns, the donors' control over their beneficiaries is therefore limited and the level of complementarity—which lies at the heart of an almsgiving relationship—is weaker. Moreover, the type of donations they receive obliges the nuns to go to the market to buy additional ingredients and cook their own meals and to cook the food they offer daily to monks (most notably in the nunneries situated in Sagaing Hill). Thus, while collections place the nuns in the monastic frame of reference, their activities resulting from specific rules (buying and cooking food) affiliate them with a secular framework that makes them quite different from the monks. Respecting the rules that surround the act of collecting<sup>7</sup> provides a necessary common basis for the process, but it is nevertheless insufficient as an explanation. A nun's monastic identity also bears on the configuration of interactions, that is, on the methods used by nuns in order to generate this relationship of almsgiving.

Indeed, these alms-collecting rules also have consequences on the way their collections take place. The small amount of offerings nuns receive—the average offering a person gave in 2001 was a spoonful of rice and a one-kyat note—obliges them to increase the number of donors every time they go out alms collecting, although they have relatively little time to do so. In comparison, donations from four to five households are enough for monks to insure a sufficient daily intake. This means that nuns are prevented from forming regular relationships with specific donors. Therefore, it is necessary for the nuns to increase their alms collection. They can choose either an extensive mode, which involves visiting several villages; or an intensive mode, which involves going to an area where they know that the number of potential donors is particularly high.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the nature of collection can differ according to the method employed. Two more characteristics—whether the nuns go and collect rice and money alone or in a group, and whether their actions are pre-organized or not by the nunneries—must be added to this.

## THE EXTENSIVE MODE OF COLLECTING ALMS

The nuns who live around the Sagaing Hill area (a place inhabited almost exclusively by nuns and monks) can go and collect alms in the town of Sagaing, especially when they are in need of rice. They can also go to the villages surrounding Sagaing or to Mandalay—which is about an hour from Sagaing—where they will mainly aim for the markets. Spatially speaking, the extensive mode of such mendicancy is especially apparent in the villages surrounding Sagaing.

The group of six nuns I accompanied walked for twelve hours, crossed five villages, and stopped to receive alms in front of approximately two hundred and eighty houses in one day. Walking one behind the other, the nuns let the inhabitants know their presence and purpose by chanting to inform them of their alms collection. Those who respond come out to meet them, carrying a cup full of uncooked rice or a few bank notes. A spoonful of uncooked rice is poured into every bowl, while money—a one-kyat note—is placed directly in their hands.<sup>9</sup> Depending on the amount the donor has planned to give, the alms are distributed to each nun, or only to some of them in the group; therefore the last in line are less likely to receive anything. That is probably one reason (with the configuration of villages) why nuns split up into groups of twos or threes at certain moments during their collection. Each group visits a different section of the village, or part of the group halts for a few minutes before following the steps of other nuns before them. From what they told me, there is no particular hierarchy that stipulates that one or the other must occupy a specific place in the procession. One can, nevertheless, note that the nun leading the group knows the villages well, while the youngest member is often placed at the end. She is the one to whom the other nuns hand over the money, which is redistributed once they return to the nunnery.

Carrying the collected rice requires a different sort of organization. When the bowls<sup>10</sup> are nearly full, usually on their way back, nuns go to meet one inhabitant of the village, who weighs and examines the quality of uncooked rice and then offers to pay in cash. When everyone in the group has accepted the price, the rice is exchanged for money. In this case, the nuns no longer announce the exchange by a religious recitation and their exchange is commercial since they negotiate the price of the rice. This part of the process pertains to the secular frame. The secularity of the relationship is not only given by the nature of the exchange but also by the moment when the exchange is carried out. The change from a religious to a secular frame relies on temporal and geographical discontinuity in the nuns' almsgiving itinerary: the time after lunch, before crossing a river, or just before going back home.

Considering the situation as a whole, this kind of collection presents a particular articulation between the secular and monastic frames. On the one hand, since it is prohibited for monks, receiving money during the collection makes the nuns closer to the secular world; it also means they have to buy their own food. On the other hand, receiving rice in a bowl, even if uncooked, makes them closer to the way monks receive food donations during collection. However, the uncooked

rice donation also leads the nuns to punctuate their religious activities with an exchange that belongs to the secular frame (the exchange of rice for money), while receiving money from donors allows nuns to stay in the monastic frame during the collection. In both collection situations, one frame of reference (secular or monastic) leads to the other. Thus, one can observe that such ambivalence does not merely imply locating the nuns in an intermediary position between the secular and religious. We will see that the effects of the rules of collection (for example, these rules give way to a commercial transaction) may be rectified, in particular by a more systematically organized collection.

#### THE INTENSIVE MODE OF COLLECTING ALMS

Another type of articulation between the secular and monastic appears during the second type of alms collecting, which consists of visiting a limited area, the market, where the number of potential donors is exceptionally high. There, the logic connecting the two types of activities and relationships is exactly the opposite of what we have already seen when analyzing the extensive collection in villages. Whilst the village is a space whose inhabitants are already accustomed to having daily alms collection relationships with monks, the market is an area where commercial transactions take place, and where monks do not collect food. How do nuns manage to develop an alms-collecting relationship in a space that is specific to commercial transactions?

In a marketplace, nuns, who are either alone or in small groups of two or three, wait opposite merchants and next to customers who are attending to their own business without even glancing in their direction.<sup>11</sup> They stand still for several minutes at a time, sometimes extending their bowls in their hands, until they decide to move on to the next shop. Their movements are slow, their patience never wavers, but there are few donations. They may also approach a person who is moving along the alleyway or is sitting down eating or drinking. In either case, nuns who want to initiate an alms relationship place themselves in front of the potential donor and wait for him/her to return their gaze as a sign that contact has been established, and the alms-collecting relationship is accepted. A Myanmar friend who was taking me around a marketplace justified the donation she gave to one of the nuns in the following way: “Her behavior is good, her life is difficult, so I gave to her.” This friend was also accustomed to offering to nunneries, which she explained in a similar way: “Nuns, who receive lesser alms, have a much harder time subsisting than monks.”

Collecting alms in a marketplace may, however, take on a completely different configuration, implying a different mode of relationship. The procession may include about ten nuns whose harmonious recitations resonate throughout the marketplace. In such cases, they move quickly, passing along the shops but never lingering, and the last nun may be the only one who stops to receive alms that the

merchant has ready on his counter. They do not receive alms from the merchant's customers.

These two ways of getting alms have different implications. Because they share the donations amongst themselves, a larger number of nuns going together in a row implies an increase in the amount of rice and money that must be collected. However, the nuns prefer this way of collecting alms. To understand their choice we must take into account the factor of shame: this appeared to be a preoccupation for one of the Myanmar women who accompanied me to a large nunnery school. The only question she wanted to ask the head nun was whether all the nuns were obliged to go out to collect alms, because she herself felt she would have difficulty accepting the idea of being turned down. This observation shows that when potential donors do not enter into an alms relationship, the refusal is easier to overcome when in a group. The nuns may laugh among themselves and they are less affected personally. In reality, as we shall see, large nunneries manage to forewarn and protect their nuns against this sort of emotional risk in reinforcing the monastic social identity of the nuns during the almsgiving relationship.

The second reason, connected to the first, is that group collection is a device to obtain donations and to construct a monastic identity through such interactions. When a nun is alone or with only one other nun, she is in the same position as the customer, that is, in front of a merchant. Moreover, the echo of her chanting will be less resonant compared to the recitations done by several nuns in a procession, and may fade away and melt into the noise of the market. Her position, the way she holds herself, and her appearance does not spur the potential donor into a spontaneous alms relationship. In other words, the relationship engendered in this situation does not involve two complementary categories of people (monastic and lay), but two individuals. When asked to justify his or her gesture, a donor would not spontaneously declare “when one sees [the nuns going for collection], one knows [that we should offer donations],” but would motivate their act by taking into consideration the nun's supposed moral qualities and her needy situation.

In the Theravāda Buddhist tradition, almsgiving is considered meritorious for the lay donor. Following Hénaff, it is nonetheless necessary to distinguish the ritual gift—which according to Mauss's definition is both mandatory and spontaneous—from the moral gift, which simply involves two individuals solely on the basis of their own personal judgment (HÉNAFF 2002). Observing the nuns taking the collection reveals different ways of engaging in and eliciting a ritual gift. First of all, the Buddhist chants recited by nuns can be heard by merchants and customers even before the nuns come into sight. In a sense, their chanting announces their monastic identity. It allows the merchants and their clients to anticipate the moment that their activity will be interrupted, and to ready themselves to enter into a brief alms relationship. In addition, a monastic identity is perceptible because the nuns' position is clearly distinguishable from the standpoint of the clients. This distinction comes from the processional process: the nuns do not stand facing the merchant as customers do, and they make contact not by



looking, but only by chanting, and never stop or wait. In other words, potential donors continue to be occupied in their commercial transactions, in which the nuns must interfere without causing disruption. They impose a change from a commercial relationship to a relationship that involves offering a donation. The procession, which is typical of a religious event, partakes of the construction of a monastic identity: the relationship to be created is not between two individuals, but between two complementary categories of people, thus ideally eliciting a completely spontaneous ritual gift.

#### INFLUENCING THE WAYS IN WHICH NUNS COLLECT ALMS

While collecting in procession helps in the recognition of the monastic identity of nuns, and thus of the potential of the almsgiving relationship, not all nuns are able to follow the same pattern. One reason is that such a mode of alms collection is only possible under certain conditions. First, the nuns must be able to join together in procession as a group, but many of them live in nunneries occupied by only one or two nuns at the most. Besides, creating a procession in the middle of a market means that alms will be given to only one nun in the procession, and the money will only be redistributed once back in the nunnery, either to each participant or to the head of the nunnery. This requires a certain intimacy, mutual trust, and perhaps the presence of a superior who is capable of intervening in case of disagreement. Thus, the level of organization at the nunnery influences the relational configurations that exist among the nuns as well as between the nuns and their donors.

This influence becomes quite evident when one looks at the collections organized by well-known nunnery schools (*sathindaik*), for example, the Nyanasayi Nunnery in Yangon or the Myaouedi Sathindaik Nunnery in Mandalay. These establishments possess a large pre-established network of donors who are informed by the nuns responsible (aided by the block chief) when the alms procession will be coming through their respective areas. The donors then wait in front of their houses with a large plate (or bowl) of uncooked rice to give every nun a spoonful of rice that will then be poured into the wicker basket placed on her head. The Buddhist recitation chanted by more than one hundred nuns as they advance in the procession can be heard from afar: when they come around a corner, the image is striking. Also, these nunneries have employees who transport the nuns by bus to their alms collection sites and come to fetch the rice. This allows nuns to continue the collection without having to enter the secular frame in exchanging the rice for money, especially when the weight of rice gathered during the day becomes too heavy for them to continue carrying it, or because they need to buy other food. By allowing nuns to avoid engaging in such a secular activity, large nunneries are able to reinforce their monastic identity during the collection.

Consequently, while the passersby looking to the procession simply understand it as “when one sees (the nuns), one knows (that they are collecting alms, and that

we must give them rice),” the donors waiting in front of their houses are placed in the following position: “one knows and one must get ready to give them alms, one sees them, and one gives to them.” Indeed, nuns belonging to other nunneries and who go alone rather than in a group procession do not stop at these same donors’ houses.

Instead of organizing a procession, the head nun could simply ask their donors to give money to the nunnery. In other words, while the reputation of these nunneries allows their superiors to request monetary gifts directly, the relationships that are initiated by the collection remain necessary. The configuration of this collecting procession is part of the construction of monastic identification, since the demonstration of their communal discipline—in contrast with the donors who wait for nuns alone or in pairs in front of their houses—contributes to underlining the difference between monastic and lay life during the interaction. Moreover, the well-organized nature of the procession reveals and confirms the authority of the nunnery. This is an authority founded on the network of its leaders and their ability to influence donors, on the number of nuns under their control, and their discipline.

The reputation of a nunnery depends not only on the number of monastic rules their nuns are following, which both ensures the donors that they will be meritorious and asserts the asymmetry between monks (who must submit to ten precepts and two hundred and twenty-seven rules) and nuns (who submit to eight, nine, or ten precepts). It also depends on the way in which the interaction with donors is engaged. From the donors’ point of view, although they have been informed of the arrival of a procession in advance, they spontaneously engage in the pre-organized alms relationship. This reveals the nature of the ritual donation that is both obligatory and spontaneous.

Finally, the greater or lesser ambivalence of the nuns’ position in alms collection depends on various factors, particularly in the way the rules that govern this activity are implemented according to the organizational skills of the nunnery, its size, the relative amount of autonomy accorded to its residents, and the collective organization of its activities. In sum, the ambivalence revealed in the alms collection by nuns suggests that the donation relationship they engage in constitutes their monastic identity. However, an analysis of the interactions they have with monks, especially those that concern nuns who live alone or in small groups, reveals another process of monastic identification.

#### THE NUN-MONK RELATIONSHIP WITHIN THE RELIGIOUS SYSTEM

The observations made in the area around Sagaing Hill highlight specific relationships between monks and nuns. At first, monks do not only go and collect food among lay people, but they also go to nunneries and collect from nuns. Thus, everyday, all the resident nuns prepare the rice whereas only the head nun gives out food to monks who have come for alms. Besides this donation relationship, some nuns take it upon themselves to care for an elderly monk living alone in

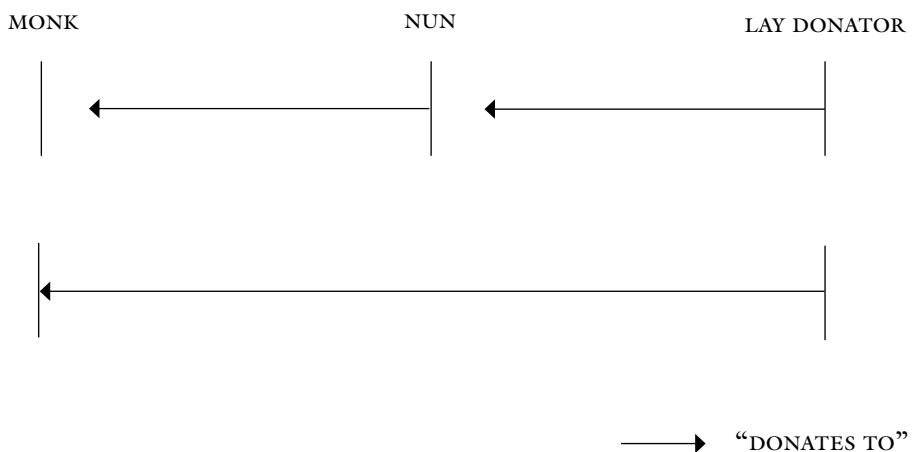
his monastery, attending to his health as well as doing daily chores for him such as cooking, cleaning, and so on. Finally, the teaching relationship between a nun and a head monk may include what a nun calls “voluntary service.” At the International Buddhist University of Sagaing where the majority of the students are monks, nuns studying there with other nuns from their nunnery will come and clean the university buildings in response to a request by the head monk in charge.

Offering food and services to monks means that the nuns’ position is associated with that of laywomen. Offering these services seems less common in urban areas since the number of monks and nuns is less important proportionally to the number of potential donors. However, nuns remain under monks’ authority: they are living on religious land that belongs to the monks, and in convent school, and only the monks are authorized to teach the upper grade of the nun’s religious education.

If nuns are able to stand in monastic positions during interactions with lay donors, they are maintained in a secular position during interactions with monks. Therefore, the religious system can be seen as a continuum between lay people, nuns, and monks. However, in the same manner that the analysis of the alms relationship has underlined a complex mechanism of articulation between the secular and monastic positions of nuns, the ambivalent position nuns occupy must be analyzed as part of the monastic relational system as a whole.

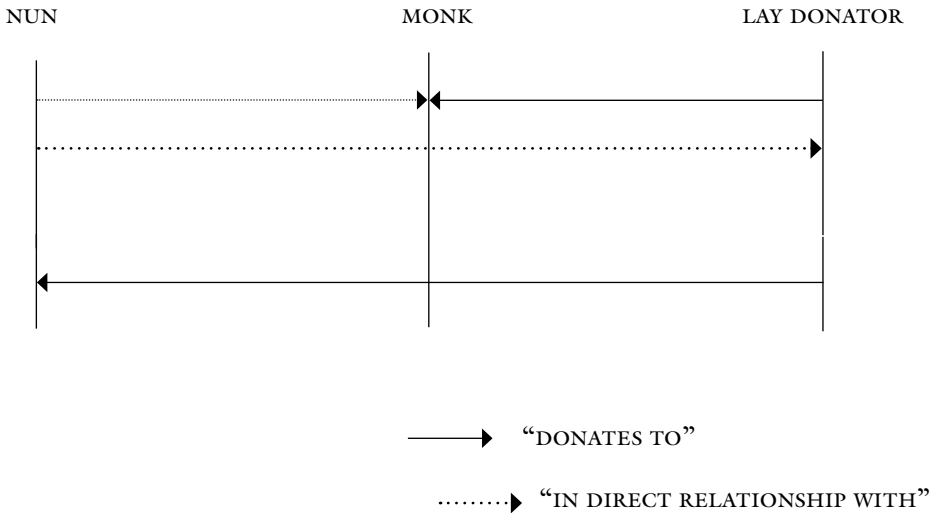
As FIGURE I shows, before becoming the donor of a monk, an action which on its own belongs to a secular frame, a nun must have been in a position to receive alms, an action which pertains to the monastic frame.

FIGURE I. The food-giving relationship.



Next, taking care of a monk implies tasks such as going to his monastery every-day and meeting his personal lay donors who come to visit him regularly (FIGURE 2). In this manner, these lay donors become possible future donors for the nun, which could result in the construction of a nunnery in which she will be able to set herself up as head nun (*sayagyi*). It could also result in her being invited to the ceremonies that the monk is invited to, and thus she further benefits from the donations that are given there. That is how the nun who looks after a monk manages to access his network of lay donors. In contrast with the normal collection situation, a secular frame of relationship (for example, caring for a monk) leads to a monastic frame of relationship, and that reinforces the nun’s social identity in a monastic context.

FIGURE 2. Real estate donations and relationships.



In addition to the above-mentioned situation of caring for a monk, the construction of a monastery or pagoda leads to a similar process. The donor who participates in the construction of a monastery may also decide to build and to donate a nunnery nearby. It gives the female donors a place for a religious retreat and most of all, it potentially gives the monks another place to go and collect food. However, in this relationship the nuns are not comparable to lay donors. Indeed, this dependence on the monks allows nuns to become owners of a nunnery and therefore confirms their monastic position. These transactions also confirm their different status with the monks since the nunneries are not the property of the

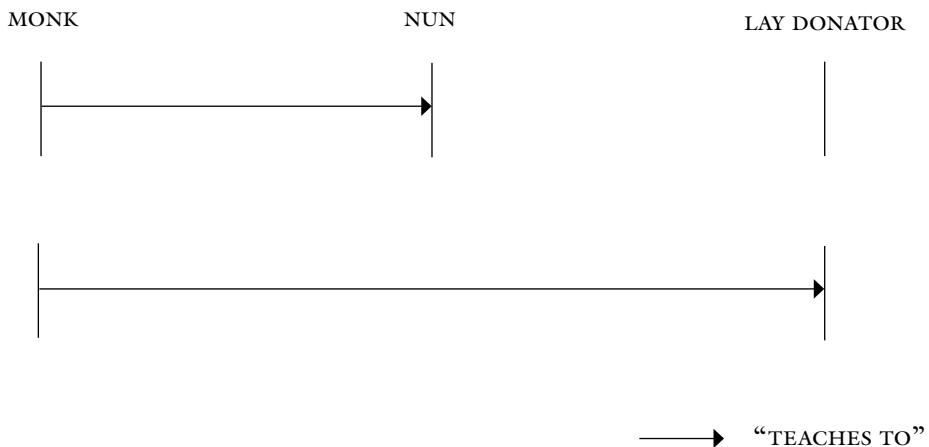
Sangha.<sup>12</sup> For the same reason, it is an oversimplification to conclude that nuns are dependent on monks because their nunnery is built in the compound of a monastery: on the contrary, such a position gives them the opportunity to create links with monks living there and to derive new benefits from their networks.

The two figures above also point to particular characteristics of nuns. They are involved in a triangular relationship (nuns, monks, and lay donors) regarding how they engage in offering and receiving donations, while the monks' system may involve only two participants: monks and lay donors. In FIGURE 2, monks have a central position in the system with all parts linked, whereas in FIGURE 1 each sequence of action is independent of the other. The nuns' ambivalent position is a consequence of this system of relationships, where they are not necessarily intermediaries for monks (which would place them in a continuum between lay people and monks) and where they are no more marginalized since they are an integral part of the monastic relational system.

However, they do not appear to share one of the monks' fundamental roles, that is, spreading the Buddha's teachings to the lay population. FIGURE 3 below illustrates how a monastic teacher-pupil relationship is one-sided: the monks alone teach both lay people and nuns. In this case, to be the pupil of a monk does not confer on nuns the possibility of publicly teaching lay people.

Education nevertheless allows the nuns to obtain a monastic and political recognition in Myanmar that makes their position similar to that of the monks. Moreover, in spite of the asymmetrical teacher-pupil relationship, certain nuns can have access to the teachings of famous monk-scholars. In this case, they find themselves in a relatively symmetrical relationship found between monastic individuals. The

FIGURE 3. The teaching relationship.



ordinary interactions between the teaching monk and the learning nun are in this case marked by mutual understanding and respect, accompanied by a deference expressed towards the teacher in formal situations.

#### FROM THE AMBIVALENCE OF STATUS TO AN INTEGRATED SYSTEM

We may wonder whether the nuns' ambivalence and particular features are due to their position that alternates between a monastic status and a lay status. This is true if one considers the whole system as being made up of several autonomous sub-entities (WATZLAWICK 1972, 122), or if one follows Dumont's idea that society is an ensemble of elements organized by a "whole" represented by an ideology that holds them together. Seen from these perspectives, the position of the nuns can therefore be understood as being relative, according to whether they are in the presence of monks or lay people, in the same way as the hierarchy in India between castes depends on which castes are present (or in the same way as a subsystem fluctuates according to whether it is confronting an inferior or superior subsystem). But analyzing the religious interactions as a relational system brings to the fore a more complex mechanism, in which the ambivalent position of the nuns is expressed in different types of articulation between monastic and secular frames. The ambivalence does not reside in an alternate position, but given that for the nuns, one frame of activity implies the other frame: the servant relationship with monks establishes the monastic position of the nun, while the monastic frame of the collection implies their secular activities. Moreover, beyond an ascribed status, an analysis of their relationships reveals the central role given to interaction in recognition of their monastic status.

Monasticism thus emerges at first from the capacity to build a community whose visibility depends on specific modes of interactions. Monastic identity, or monastic position or status, emerges or is confirmed through the configuration of these interactions, which generates proper relationship networks. The actions that result from this can be articulated with ideological considerations. Indeed, although I consider these relational modes to be essential, they do not account for all the characteristics of monasticism. A second essential dimension concerns legitimating mechanisms in relation to the Buddhist doctrine and its monastic institution, the Sangha.

#### NUNS WITHIN THE IDEOLOGICAL LEGITIMIZATION SYSTEM

The Sangha, since it has its own laws and rules concerning ownership, behavior, and relationships, appears to be a normative system that is separate from the secular (but which overlaps in places).<sup>13</sup> Besides the disappearance of the female order, if one looked at the Sangha not as an institution—that implies to be in or out, to exist or not—but as this type of system, then female monasticism is not very far removed from its principles.

Some Burmese undermine the position of nuns in monasticism, suggesting they became nuns not by vocation but due to poverty (because they lived in poverty prior to becoming nuns, for example). Of course, this could be the situation for men just as well as for women, but such discourse concerns only nuns, particularly in regard to elderly nuns. We are able to explain this situation if we examine the mechanisms of the distinctive characteristics of monasticism. Indeed, since elderly women and men are more involved in religion as *yāṃgi* (lay practitioners whose way of life is voluntarily limited by observing the eight Buddhist precepts), their absence of Sangha membership makes the rupture between the two ways of life—monastic and secular—barely discernable. But age is obviously not the only criterion that differentiates those in the monastic and secular systems. It is in this way that the configurations described in the course of analyzing the almsgiving relationships can be understood.

The difference between a secular and a monastic existence also assumes the form of a physical and moral ordeal: according to the heads of monasteries and lay people we met, not all individuals are capable of enduring the monastic life. For the parents who send their daughters to large nunnery schools, it is not the ordeal that motivates them, but the teachings of Buddhism. Yet Buddhist education can be obtained at home, albeit informally,<sup>14</sup> as well as with the monks who teach Buddhist doctrine to groups of young girls. Beyond the actual learning of the doctrine, large nunneries offer young girls the possibility of having a monastic experience other than meditation. With more elements of observation, the practice might be compared to the rite of passage for boys, *shinbyú* (the initiation rite prior to ordination), which also consists of the temporary admission of a boy to a monastery as a novice. Young girls who enter a nunnery not only receive donations as nuns, but they act as donors to monks and experience a giving and deferential relationship with the senior nuns. Thus, although the nuns in the large nunnery schools do not disseminate Buddhism in the same way as the monks do—by publicly teaching and preaching to lay people—they still contribute to it.

Lastly, even with their exclusion from the Sangha institutions, the nuns appeal to a sort of monastic ideological legitimacy similar to the one that operates for a monk when he is ordained. When parents state that their daughter, when she becomes a nun, is a source of merit—as is a monk—because they understand that she belongs to the Buddha's lineage, they are effectively placing her in an otherworldly “lineage” that is different from her social belonging. Indeed, while a head nun is quite capable of “giving” (*pay-*) the precepts by reciting them to a postulant, she and her family usually prefer to receive them from a monk. One nun who lived in the Sagaing Hill area justified that preference by referring to a doctrinal account of how the monastic community was originally founded: it was Buddha himself who gave the precepts to nuns. I am not implying that monks are considered as being on a par with the Buddha, but being ordained members they have nevertheless become affiliated within his spiritual “lineage.” The Burmese expression is the “sons of Buddha” (*hpayã thà-daw*). In this way, although the

nun's "lineage" is said to have been interrupted and their Sangha become extinct, thanks to the monks they still enter the monastic community by reference to the Buddha's "lineage."

The contribution of monks who allow women to enter the monastic community has another side to it, which is connected to the necessary network of monastic relations that nuns need in order to be accepted into a nunnery. The network of monasteries is far more extensive nationally than the network of nunneries, since each village has its own monastery, whereas nunneries are circumscribed mostly within urban areas or in specific important religious sites such as the area around Sagaing Hill. A postulant will naturally turn to a monk in her village to be introduced to senior nuns in the nunneries and that same monk, having already served as an intermediary, will normally give the precepts to the postulant.

Thus, these contingent factors are not opposed to the explanation of the monks' intervention by reference to the monastic ideology, but they form a system: the need to have a monk as a go-between to enter a nunnery allows the nuns to refer to this ideological legitimacy. The same ideology also legitimates their exclusion from the Sangha.

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#### NOTES

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1. *Bhikkhuni* and *bhikkhu* are the Pāli terms used to designate nuns and monks respectively. The terms in the Myanmar language currently used to refer to them are *thilāshin* ("one who respects the precepts") and *hpòngyi* respectively. For the Myanmar people, the attributes of a high social status are in correlation with the notion of *hpòn*, which is a quality related to personal power deriving from having performed ethical acts (*kan*) and from the perfection of one's virtues in past existences (SCHÖBER 1989b, 105).

2. The extinction of female Sangha is estimated to have taken place around the sixth century CE. However, the general consensus is that the extinction took place in eleventh-century Sri Lanka (KARMA LEKSHE TSOMO 1999, 6–7).

3. In comparison to the other terms, the usage of *gyaùng* appears to be relatively rare and is limited to the Sagaing Hill area. It is used on inscriptions that mention the names of the nunneries. Nevertheless, my informants were not aware of any difference between *gyaùng* and *kyàùng*. It is defined as a "religious retreat" in the MYANMAR-ENGLISH DICTIONARY (1993, 71).

4. Presentation of Sangha hospitals in Yangon (Sangha hospitals' brochure, 1999, 12).

5. On the Myanmar terminology of Buddhism and Buddhists, see HOUTMAN 1990.

6. The notion of frame is applied here with a somewhat different meaning from the one usually intended by GOFFMAN (1974) and BATESON (1977). It refers to a set of norms that specify monastic praxis concerning daily actions and interactions: not receiving a salary for working, not engaging in any conjugal or sexual relationships, and so on. However, it remains descriptive, that is, we are not interested here in interpreting an activity from the point of view of an individual. The notion of frame must not be confused with that of context, either, since it involves a set of activities. It is not an objective and influential quality but a type construed for analysis on the basis of given monastic norms.



7. These rules are formalized by the governing religious administration.
8. Both ways will prevent them from forming regular relationships with specific donors.
9. Money that is offered in this manner is regarded as a different type of donation from money that is placed in a cup for those monks and nuns who observe the Ten Precepts. The amount of money donated was extremely small given the low value of the currency at the time in Myanmar. What nuns receive today is affected by inflation, but it certainly remains less than what monks receive, and also less than what is given to *nat* (oral communication with Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière, 2007).
10. These nuns do not carry trays but bowls only.
11. For this description, we distinguish between customers and merchants although both of them could be labelled donors. This distinction is pertinent to understanding the way nuns move throughout the market area.
12. Thanks to Hiroko Kawanami for pointing this out.
13. For example, the female members of one family can live in the same nunnery.
14. BOPEARACHCHI (1994, 49–50) calls the education that parents give their children in Sri Lanka an informal and continuous process, which is contrary to the formal and discontinuous teaching given by monks. In addition to weekly sermons given in the Dhammayon, young girls can also regularly attend the courses given by monks in a monastery.

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