

Imagining the Buddhist Ecumene in Myanmar: How Buddhist Paradigms Dictate Belonging in
Contemporary Myanmar

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Abstract

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This paper argues that the model of an “Ecumene” will aid external interpretation of the Myanmar political process, including the beliefs of its leaders and constituents, the Bamar. Myanmar as Ecumene better articulates Bama constructions of society, including governance, in that it resituates the political process as a Buddhist enterprise, shifting “Buddhist nationalism” to an imagined “Nation of Buddhists.” It also provides the rationale for *othering* of religious minorities, such as the Muslim Rohingya or the Christian Chin. Utilizing ethnographic, historical, and textual source material, I show how the Bamar of Myanmar understand their relationship with the State, with one another, and with minority groups primarily through Buddhist modes of kingship and belonging. The right to rule is negotiated through the concept of “moral authority.” This dhamma sphere exists as a space to contest power legitimation, but requires the use of Buddhist textual and historical concepts provided in the dhammarāja or Cakkavattin model of Buddhist kingship, The Ten Virtues, the Jātakas, and the historical figures

of Aśoka and Anawrahta. In order to do this, this paper develops a rubric for interpreting what a dhammarāja does. This has not been done before and will allow the reader the ability to evaluate whether or not any given government in Myanmar is operating according to a dhammarāja tradition. Based on the rubric provided and source materials, this paper concludes that Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, presumed leader of Myanmar, imagines herself a Buddhist dhammarāja and the leader of a Buddhist Ecumene. The Bamar are concerned about the decline of dhamma and the retraction of a Buddhist land, and this concern provides a basis of support and concern for the current regime.

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ကျေးဇူးတင်ပါတယ်။

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Introduction

Bodda Batha, Myanmar Lumyo
—To be Myanmar (race) is to be Buddhist (religion)¹

The rainy season finally arrived in Yangon. Streets were flooded during the heaviest of rains, as the drainage system failed to keep up. It was not surprising, really. The streets, most of the buildings, and the drainage system were built during the height of the British colonial period, almost 100 years ago. Everything was in a state of disrepair, and if there were maintenance efforts to slow the mildew and moss reclaiming the sides of old, colonial-era buildings, they were losing. Every day it was not raining, in the comfort of an air-conditioned taxi, I passed young men, *longyis* (a male saarang) tied, made to look like shorts, thighs bare, standing waist deep in the sludge of the open drain, shoveling said sludge from the ditch onto the road in an effort to open up the passage for the rain to escape. On heavy downpour days, the streets flooded, water coming up to the doors of the taxis still ferrying their clients around. Open-air tea shops remained open, and monks continued their circuits, traveling from shop to shop, house to house, saying their blessings in the expectation of receiving alms.

I was walking to the open-air market when one of the downpours hit. The clouds had been slowly crawling their way over the city, and I knew I was in a race against the clock to make it to the pitched tents of the vegetable stands. When the rain did come, that was my cue. I hailed a taxi, resigned to the privilege of being a foreigner, as others continued with whatever

¹ Translation my own. Common phrase. Quoted by: Aung San Suu Kyi, *Freedom from Fear and Other Writings*, Ed. by Michael Aris (Revised ed. New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1995), 83.

they were doing. At least this would afford me an opportunity to talk to someone, and hopefully, gather some interview material.

After negotiating the price, I got in and asked the driver if we could talk. I explained who I was [a graduate student doing research from the US] and what I was doing [learning about Buddhism, from monks and laity]. After he joyfully agreed, I asked him a few ice-breaking questions that I was often asked myself by taxi drivers in Yangon. He was married, with two children. *I have driven a taxi for fifteen years.* He had seen some major transition. I remembered back to my first time in Yangon, back in 2010. Then, all the taxis were old. Due to foreign sanctions and government control, a 1990s Toyota Corolla could cost up to \$100,000 (USD). Cars often had holes in the floorboards, and a rider could watch the street below as he went along. Cameras and cell phones were all but forbidden. I told him about my experience.

— *Yes, there is a lot of change since then. A lot of change since last year.*

“Was it good change?”

— *At first. Anything is better than the old government.*

“And now?”

— *Broken promises...*

“Who did you vote for?”

— *Daw Suu, of course!*

There was the promise of better jobs and the promise of a better future for his children. He was voting for her, it was clear. But it was also clear he was voting for change. Anything was better than the old government. Mixed in his enthusiasm about Daw Suu, I could not discern if it was because he was supposed to be excited about her, or if he dared not indicate dissatisfaction with her. He was dissatisfied, however, in the lack of changes he expected to see:

“Have you seen improvement?”

— *No! In fact, in the last six months, I think things are getting worse!*

“Why is that?”

— *Too many immigrants in Myanmar. From all over. China, Vietnam, Korea [he pauses] ...Bengalis. The new government gives them our jobs. They get money from their government. There [he points to a new high-rise under construction], you see that? All the workers are from Vietnam. They live, eat, and work there. They don't even live and eat outside. If they did, then we could at least make some money.*

“Ah, so, what ethnicity (Burmese: *lu-myo*) are you?”

— *Boddha* (Buddhist)!

“Wait just a second,” I said teasingly. I knew what was about to come, “What religion (Burmese: *batha*) are you?”

— *Boddha!*

This was something I experienced before. Several of my interviewees identified as ethnically Buddhist and religiously Buddhist. In other cases, Burmese-speaking Muslims did the same thing. On this note, I wanted to ask him how he thought about different religions:

“What do you think about other religions?”

— *We have all kinds in Myanmar. In former days, we had sooo [emphasis his] many. All kinds of religion in Myanmar.*

“And they are all Myanma religions?” I changed my inflection to show possession. My question was clear: all these religions belong to Myanmar?

— *Hoag* (Yes)!

“Even the Christians? What about the Chin, the Kachin, or the Karen?”

— “...” [A brief pause]

The way I asked the question was coaxing, utilizing honorifics and asking humbly, which is lost in the English translation. His disposition changed noticeably. It was as though I asked him out of the blue about an ostracized brother or something taboo. He was frank:

— *They don't help Myanmar. Actually, they aren't Myanmar.*

This was a sensitive moment. I pause. I let him think. I think.

“Why?”

— *Because. They are not Buddhist.*

I changed the subject after this. I was approaching a line and I knew it.

This interview was one of many in the summer of 2016. I came to Myanmar because the transition from the old regime to the National League for Democracy (NLD) created a momentous opportunity. People were relatively free to discuss politics, Buddhism, race, and society. The people of Myanmar, whose voices had been muzzled for the last sixty years, found the air uncluttered by secret police, and they had stories to tell. Some of these stories grate against Western sensibilities. Concerns about the future of the country take the form of *othering* the non-Buddhist, or appear outright racist to a Westerner. Other scholars who desire to maintain a perceived integrity in Buddhism either lessen the import of Buddhism, or lessen the connection between Buddhism and some of the unsavory actions Buddhists take. Buddhism is often redefined in moments of transition, and this was certainly a time of transition. My taxi driver was transparent: “They,” the non-Buddhist and other ethnic minorities, “don’t help Myanmar.”

I should be clear. It was not in doctrinal Buddhism that I was interested, but rather, Buddhist nationalism, which is sometimes portrayed in Myanmar scholarship as being an

aberration of *true* Buddhism. Originally, I was sympathetic to this position. Before going back to graduate school, I worked for eight years with political refugees from Myanmar. During this time, I performed dozens of interviews and recorded story after story of exclusion and *othering*; often at the hands of “those Buddhists” or “the Bamar.” Interview after interview articulated persecution on religious and ethnic grounds. Often the interviewed, speaking through a translator, seamlessly weaved between being “Christian” and “Karen” or “Muslim” and “Rohingya,” while simultaneously using language of exclusion from the “Buddhist” who were “Bamar,” or the “Bamar” who were “Buddhist.” This effect of *othering* by “Buddhists (Bamar)” to the “Rohingya (Muslim)” or the “Chin (Christian)” had serious consequences for those that will not become Buddhist and speak Burmese properly (see ethnography S’yadaw in Chapter 6). *Othering*, is not merely a consequence of a Buddhist state, but a means – a technology – of Bamar statecraft. It is both active and passive in terms of policies implemented and modalities assumed. *Othering* is “performed” from above (the leaders) and from below (the denizens) by the Buddhist Ecumene (defined below). As I mention above, that these effects happened at the hands of a State, governing officials, and a populace that identifies, overwhelmingly, with being Buddhist was at first, baffling.

It is not the goal of this paper or my research to look into the complexities of refugee resettlement and the politics that go along with it. Nor do I look to assign blame for the *othering* that occurs in Myanmar. Instead, my research looks at ways that Buddhists are applying their beliefs in life: their relationship with government, their treatment of others, and their occupation of a Buddhist space. Were Burmese leaders and practitioners looking to certain patterns – textual or historical – that circumscribed their behavior? What were they doing with those paradigms? How were they adjusting those paradigms to fit this moment in Burmese history?

To do this, I had to research textual and historical paradigms of Buddhist governments, specifically through the Buddhist concept of a dhammarāja (a ruler who relies on the teaching of the Buddha). The dhammarāja, as a concept, has a long tradition in Myanmar, and is thought of as the ideal Buddhist ruler. Most simply, a dhammarāja has obligations to himself or herself to be Buddhist and to rule according to Buddhist sensibilities. They also are to provide a Buddhist “space” for their subjects to practice Buddhism. More on this follows below, but this was very complex, as scholastic material on the subject tends to be situated in either the textual *or* anthropological/lived traditions. In a place like Myanmar, the texts inform the lived traditions. The lived traditions, likewise, inform the text. I then wanted to look at current leadership and listen to the stories of Burmese and how they imagine their Buddhism as leaders and members of a Buddhist society.

My research has four major goals. The first goal is to consider seriously whether the actions of the government of Myanmar are consistent with Bamar conceptualizations of a Buddhist State. The reason for this is explained in more detail below, but to be brief, I want to explore the possibility that an exclusively Buddhist state and society is *true* to Bamar conceptualizations of Buddhism and their own perceptions of the texts that they use, rather than continuing scholarship that pits the Myanmar government as an aberration of “true” Buddhism, however one attempts to define what “true” Buddhism is. I want to avoid this debate of abstract definition entirely and insist that how Burmese remember history and how they use Buddhist texts contributes towards fashioning an imagining about *how* “Buddhism” normalizes and circumscribes behaviors that are viewed as Buddhist. These behaviors, then, dictate belonging in a Buddhist society. Scholarship has not developed a historical and textual model for a dhammarāja, at least, not one that fits Myanmar. To be sure, the term is used very liberally to

describe rulers in Southeast Asia, but no scholar I am aware of has synthesized textual and historical examples in order to create a paradigm through which scholars can determine *if* somebody is behaving as a dhammarāja. Nobody explains how a dhammarāja comes to be named, defined, or critiqued as a dhammarāja. Additionally, nobody explains the process of *becoming* a dhammarāja or how one behaves as a dhammarāja pretender.

A second goal of this research is to situate this principle/paradigm/motif of dhammarāja textually and historically. A third goal is to then consider how Aung San Suu Kyi (Daw Suu), the presumed leader of Myanmar, is exemplifying and expanding the dhammarāja paradigm. My final, but possibly most important, goal is to present my interviewees as saw themselves, as Buddhist practitioners. While this happens in the last chapter of my paper, it forms the motivation for the analysis that precedes the final section. This final goal presents Buddhist practitioners as complex, yet still operating with a Buddhist framework that is earnest in its Buddhistness while simultaneously not avoiding what often appears to be less savory behaviors which, on the surface, appear to be anti-Buddhist (xenophobic, power-mongering, among others explored below).

With these four goals in mind, I also hope to provide a corrective in scholarship on Myanmar. Scholarship on Burmese Buddhism and its relationship to the State in the last thirty years typically falls into two varieties: religious or political. Rarely have the two intersected meaningfully, and when they have, scholars typically argue for one framework at the expense of the other. The difficulty in finding a middle ground is likely due to several factors, not the least of which is the increasing compartmentalization of the disciplines from which scholars write. Another factor is that people and politics are complex. A nation might, with one sentence, describe philosophical commitments to universal human dignity while supporting

institutionalized discrimination against minorities. In a similar vein, writers on Myanmar are prone to rely on either a political explanation for a policy decision/popular vote, *or* a religious explanation.

The kind of scholarship that does not integrate Buddhist constructions of power with State practice of power has had two effects. One effect is that, for some scholars, Buddhism, or Buddhist technologies such as meditation and patronage (*dāna*),² are “merely” seen as tools utilized by those jockeying for power. A Burmese ruler might appeal to being a *dharmarāja* — a king-ruler who governs according to the *dhamma*³ — but only to garner the support of the masses. In an American context, this makes sense. A politician running for the presidency might, during his or her campaign, speak in a church or say a prayer invoking a higher power, but the truth of the matter may be that he or she stopped attending church years earlier.

In his article, “Do States Make Nations? The Politics of Myanmar Revisited,” Myanmar scholar Robert Taylor argues that ethnic categories have been overblown in our efforts to understand the divisions that characterize Myanmar infighting. Taylor goes on to suggest that religion is employed by nationalist forces as a rhetorical device, attributing their behavior to statism or nationalism, *not* religion. For the Burmese, he argues Buddhism was used as a

² Pali words will remain non-italicized. Burmese words will be italicized to indicate that they are Burmese and not Pali. I have Romanized all Burmese words.

³ The Pali Text Society’s definition provides page after page of translation analysis. The Digital Pali Reader (version 4.7) supplies: “*dhamma*: doctrine; nature; truth; the Norm; morality; good conduct. (m.)” Davids, *Pali-English dictionary*. “*Dhamma*” is defined more below, but in a broad sense, it refers to all of the Buddha’s teachings, which, for Theravāda, are represented in the *Tipiṭika*, also called the “Three Baskets,” or, the “Three Jewels” of the Buddha’s original teaching. “*Dhamma*” has a broad semantic range and can refer to a universal truth (not the same as “*atman*,” or, “universal reality” in Hinduism), or a specific field of specialty (one could, conceptually, have a “dentist-*dhamma*”). For our purposes, “*dhamma*” refers to the teachings of the Buddha contained in the *Tipiṭika*, as well as *Tipiṭika*-defined realms of kingship *rāja* (king)-*dhamma* (teaching of the Buddha). When referring to the political sphere, “*dhamma*” is synonymous with “moral-authority,” or the embodiment of the Buddha’s teachings with regard to rulership. As the term tends to “bleed” in the Pali canon, semantic overlap exists in my usage of the term as well.

rallying cry for a nationalist Myanmar⁴ movement, but he quickly dismisses it as a *central factor*, saying, of Buddhism, that “these arguments never came to dominate Myanmar and Bamar political thought as they did in Sri Lanka.”⁵ This has been disproven of late with the rise of ultranationalist Buddhist groups in Myanmar, many of whom travel to Sri Lanka to learn from sangha⁶ communities there. His argument further makes the mistake of assuming that “religion” as a thing *does* the same thing within groups of different faiths. For example, of the “Kayins” (Karens),⁷ he argues that all Karens are characterized by a Christian narrative, despite the fact that they only make up 20 percent of the Karen population. Christianity was “utilized” as a way to garner external support. An appeal to a Christian identity moved their ongoing conflict with the Bamar⁸ from primarily being about political representation to religious persecution, thus garnering international support for their cause.⁹ This suggests that, for Taylor, religion serves as a cover for other, presumably religion-neutral, political agendas.¹⁰ While his suggestion that ethnic groups like the Karen employed Christianity as a political narrative is also suspected by

⁴ Adjectival form of Myanmar. Used to be, “Burmese.”

⁵ Robert Taylor, “Do States Make Nations? The Politics of Identity in Myanmar Revisited,” *South East Asia Research* 13, no. 3 (2005): 274.

⁶ “Sangha” refers specifically to an order of monks who have taken ordination vows. It does not include the laity. It refers to both, the entire community of monks, and the different lineages. Monk A and Monk B might both be monks in Myanmar, but they are not necessarily members of the same sangha. However, they are both considered part of the sangha community in a given place.

⁷ A minority group in Myanmar that has historic tensions with the Bamar. “Kayin” is a Bamar rendition of Karen. I have chosen to be consistent with how Karens refer to themselves when Romanizing their ethnicity from the Karen language, even though neither the Burmese language or the Karen language have the Latin “r” letter or sound.

⁸ I do not use this term to exclusively mean those that are codified as Bamar according to census classifications, but rather the group of “Burmese” that occupy the delta region of Myanmar, speak Burmese, identify as Buddhist, and may, or may not, readily identify as “Bamar.” This has occupied much debate in Burmese studies (why “Burmese” and not Bamar historically?), and I do not intend to take on this debate here. Along with others, I view the dominant, coalescing identity in Myanmar to be a “Bamar” or “Burman” identity. For example, see James George Scott, *The Burman* [emphasis added], *His Life and Notions* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1910). What this paper indirectly argues is that the ethnicity (*lu-myō*) of being “Burmese” is more of an idea, highly correlative to being Buddhist, a more sociological construction of *lu-myō* than a racial or ethnic one and is certainly not based on phenotypical difference.

⁹ Robert Taylor, “Do States Make Nations,” 274.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 270.

other scholars,¹¹ Buddhism *has* historically played a major role in the state-making project of the Bamar. This has been demonstrated by other scholars and is a major focus of this paper.¹²

The second effect of making Buddhism merely a tool of the State makes Buddhism an instrument, assuming that it is being “used” in a way other than it is meant, or supposed to be used. Such is the concern of David Steinberg, a noted Myanmar scholar, when he writes concerning Myanmar’s militant monks: “The Western schoolbook approach which views textual Buddhism as pacifistic, meditative and non-violent misses the dynamic of Buddhism in Myanmar as a socio-political force. It is as naïve as interpreting the history of Western Europe on the basis of the Sermon on the Mount.”¹³ In this interpretation, rather than Buddhism influencing politics, Buddhism is influenced *by* politics, a victim of utility by competing parties. This assumes that the utilization of Buddhism originates from a non-Buddhist desire or goal, be it state-building or, again, some other religiously-neutral ideology. Myanmar anthropologist Ingrid Jordt argues similarly, saying that both Daw Aung San Suu Kyi¹⁴ and the military regime she criticized appealed to a patronized Mahasi Vipassana meditation for their authority.¹⁵ However, both parties used their patronage and practice of Vipassana in different ways, with Daw Suu’s way being considered legitimate by the masses. This legitimacy was visible through the amount of political and moral support Daw Suu received from the people, especially after the

¹¹ Ardeth Thawngmung, for example. Ardeth Maung Thawngmung, *The "other" Karen in Myanmar: Ethnic Minorities and the Struggle without Arms*, (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012).

¹² Notably, Julianne Schober’s, *Modern Buddhist Conjunctures in Myanmar: Cultural Narratives, Colonial Legacies, and Civil Society* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2011).

¹³ David Steinberg, “Myanmar’s Militant Monks Smash Stereotypes,” *East Asia Forum*, November 13, 2014, accessed May 10, 2017, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2014/11/13/myanmars-militant-monks-smash-stereotypes/>.

¹⁴ “Daw” is an honorific title in Burmese.

¹⁵ Ingrid Jordt, *Burma's Mass Lay Meditation Movement Buddhism and the Cultural Construction of Power*, Research in International Studies, Southeast Asia Series, (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2007), 11-12.

2007 Saffron Revolution.¹⁶ Because she had the popular support of lay Buddhists, Daw Suu has gained a presence¹⁷ of moral-authority, and therefore, a “right to rule.”¹⁸ Conversely, Government-sponsored stūpas¹⁹ were sparsely attended, and the monks whom they financially supported were boycotted by both other monastics and the masses. Lack of visible popular support for the Burmese military regime indicated a widespread belief that they did not have the moral-authority to rule.²⁰

This style of Buddhist rebranding has also characterized influential works like Walton and Hayward’s, “Contesting Buddhist Narratives.”²¹ The goal of this work is admirable, which is to situate Liberal *mores*,²² such as religious pluralism, as Buddhist moral goods. This is accomplished in the following way,

By framing them [Theravāda Buddhist counterarguments] in culturally and contextually relevant ways, these Buddhist counterarguments might best serve to challenge current Buddhist nationalist rhetoric, and to promote attitudes and

¹⁶ A great summary work on the different dynamics at play in the events of 2007 is, Hans-Bernd Zöllner’s, *Neither Saffron nor Revolution: A Commentated and Documented Chronology of the Monks’ Demonstrations in Myanmar in 2007 and Their Background*, Südostasien Working Papers; No. 36-37. (Berlin: Dept. of Southeast Asian Studies, Humboldt-University, 2009).

¹⁷ Charisma (*hpon*) is very difficult to measure. Someone’s charisma is often talked about as “existing.” One attains an amount of positive kamma from a previous existence, which influences one’s charisma. So, one’s charisma is related to a finite amount of positive kamma accumulated previously, to be spent in this current life in preparation for the next. Functionally, it works out that someone can ‘attain’ kamma if one behaves in an appropriate manner.

¹⁸ Mikael Gravers, “Spiritual Politics, Political Religion, and Religious Freedom in Burma.” *The Review of Faith and International Affairs*. Vol. 2, Iss. 2, (Summer, 2013): 47, accessed May 10, 2017, doi: 10.1080/15570274.2013.808037.

¹⁹ Burmese “pagodas” have improperly been designated as such due to Anglophile translations of French and Chinese terms for Buddhist structures. While not entirely wrong, “pagoda” indicates an interior space designed for study or meditation. “Stūpa” more accurately represents not just the architecture, but the structurally similar Indian stūpas from which they derive. I have maintained “Pagoda” in cases where the English name for a particular stūpa has normalized it, as in, “Sule Pagoda,” “Shwedagon Pagoda,” or “Shwezigon Pagoda.”

²⁰ This is especially true of the stūpas in Myanmar’s new capital, built by military generals. See: Nina Strohlic, “They Built A Capital And No One Came: Inside Burma’s Ghost City,” *Daily Beast*, May 10, 2015, accessed May 13, 2017, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/05/10/they-built-a-capital-and-no-one-came-inside-burma-s-ghost-city>.

²¹ Matthew Walton and Susan Hayward. “Contesting Buddhist Narratives: Democratization, Nationalism, and Communal Violence in Myanmar,” *Policy Studies* 71, (Honolulu: East-West Center, 2014).

²² Without wading heavily into all the liminal spaces of political philosophy, I generally mean that grouping of values traditionally associated with Classical Liberalism: pluralism, individuality, negative-rights, among others.

practices that can prevent further communal violence and develop social norms and attitudes that foster coexistence and understanding between groups.²³

By redirecting Buddhists to focus on The Four Virtues of loving-kindness (*mettā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), joy (*muditā*), and equanimity (*upekkhā*) when encountering religious conflict, they hope to redirect Buddhists' views of *others* from a threatening encounter to one of embrace. The doctrinal commitment of monastics to loving-kindness, while simultaneously engaging in *othering* or violence against religious minorities, is certainly an anomaly worthy of consideration. The 2017 Myanmar government's complicity in violence against religious minorities and its ability to be an agent of reform is an assumed vital component of Walton and Hayward's Buddhist reorientation.²⁴

What both Robert Taylor's and Walton and Hayward's positions fail to do is connect current day policies or behavior, often the real crux of the debate, with historical or textual patterns of interpretation. Thus, Buddhism's "use" as a tool of the State is something that must be attributed to some other agent, like modernity, nationalism, or a derivative of colonization. These arguments' weaknesses lie in the inability to explain Buddhism's continued appeal today in matters of governance, pre-modern narratives that yielded similar behaviors, or the fact that the "utilization of Buddhism" for political means was latched onto so quickly as a national movement, seeming to provide a voice to preexisting ideas or sentiments. Additionally, a long-established tradition of rule by the Ten Virtues of Kingship (examined below) has yielded behavior that seems antithetical to those very virtues, suggesting that there is a missing component to scholastic understanding or interpretation of Buddhist governing motifs.²⁵ Walton

²³ Walton and Hayward, "Contesting," xi.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 44-50.

²⁵ Stephen McCarthy, "The Buddhist Political Rhetoric of Aung San Suu Kyi," *Contemporary Buddhism: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, Volume 5, Issue 2 (2004): 67-81, accessed May 12, 2017, doi: 10.1080/1463994042000291556.

and Hayward's piece, for example, spends considerable time discussing historical examples of Buddhist kings who operated in a discriminatory fashion towards non-Buddhists. However, they do little to tie those narratives to the current government, arguing that all Myanmar regimes should be guided by King Aśoka's remorse over his bloodshed,²⁶ nevermind that those who view themselves in the Aśokan lineage have often led military campaigns.²⁷ How then do we engage with the current government's perceived silence in, what appears to be, a systemic oppression of Muslim Rohingya in Rakhine State today? Is this a *new* phenomenon, *or*, are there operational models of Buddhist statecraft at work that not only explain these phenomena but make such phenomena predictable?

Imagining Myanmar as a contemporary Buddhist Ecumene:

*The Buddhist ecumene was, in essence, a religious subsystem founded on shared Buddhist values and practice. There nevertheless existed a precarious balance between the moral-authority of kingship and the monastic order within each Buddhist kingdom, and between these competing autonomous kingdoms within the ecumene.*²⁸

What I would like to do is talk about Myanmar's government as one that does not oscillate between politics and religion, but rather assumes that, within Myanmar Buddhism, there is a mode of being which circumscribes the behavior of Buddhists and the Buddhist State. It is for this reason that I suggest using the idea of an Ecumene to describe the assumed Bama mode of societal being. Again, the goal is to identify statecraft as a modality of Buddhist practice, rather than Buddhism's use as a tool of statecraft. The idea of Ecumene is helpful because it incorporates a ruler, the ruled, and a geographical area as parts of a normalized Buddhist society

²⁶ Walton and Hayward, "Contesting," 6, 43-45.

²⁷ Especially true of King Anawrahta of Pagan, discussed below.

²⁸ Geok Yian Goh. *The Wheel-turner and His House: Kingship in a Buddhist Ecumene* (DeKalb, IL: NIU Press, 2015), 62.

with accompanying expectations. Ruler and ruled are assumed to know Buddhist decorum of establishing authority and power. Similarly, they would both appeal to Buddhist doctrines and histories (technologies) to either provide the basis for their ability to assert a policy (ruler) or overthrow the government (ruled). A Buddhist Ecumene assumes a government that will fulfill certain Buddhist expectations, namely, that of a dhammarāja.²⁹ Members of the Ecumene assume Myanmar to be a Buddhist nation whose existence is primarily *for* Buddhists. Consequently, it has the effect of *othering* the non-Buddhist, with accompanying expectations of assimilation.³⁰

What is an Ecumene? In basic terms, an Ecumene consists of a geographical area with a centralized power base, a ruler who derives his or her moral-authority through the Buddhist technology of a dhammarāja, and a people group (sāsana)³¹ whose identity of being Theravāda Buddhist significantly influences membership in that community. Textual Buddhism³² then supplies a means of unifying the region, ruler, and ruled through the creation of an imagined

²⁹ Some have translated “dhammarāja” as, “King of Righteousness,” however, that definition does not do the textual tradition justice and carries connotations of the Judeo-Christian tradition. As I outline later in this paper, a dhammarāja is circumscribed by the entirety of the Pali canon, including texts which exemplifies kingship, irrespective of whether the word “dhammarāja” is used in that text.

³⁰ *Other/othering* is a concept I borrow from Sinhalese scholar Roshan de Silva Wijeyeratne. In his book, *Nation, Constitutionalism and Buddhism in Sri Lanka*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2014), he notes that in pre-colonial Sri Lanka (Lanka), the consolidation of a Sinhalese Buddhist consciousness developed modes of assimilation in which the *other* was incorporated in hierarchical fashion under a Buddhist consciousness (p. 8). This fits the Burmese context in many respects. However, there is an ultimatum aspect with Burmese Buddhism not covered in his work. In instances where a thing or a group will not submit to Buddhism’s influence, ultimate *othering* occurs through the denial of citizenship, basic human rights, funding allocations, and the like.

³¹ “Nation,” or, community of the faithful. It is not the same as sangha. In Theravāda, “sangha” refers specifically to the community of ordained monks or novitiates. Sāsana, on the other hand, traditionally refers to “teaching of the Buddha,” and is exclusively used with the Buddha’s teaching. The way it has been used in Myanmar does not emphasize the Buddha’s teaching so much as it includes both the sangha and the lay practitioners as a unified “whole” of the faithful, assuming a significant sociological use of the word not really present in textual interpretation. It even includes those identifying as Buddhist, who may not have any external forms of veneration or merit-making. It has sometimes been translated as “Religion” by Burmese to English translations (Burmese: Thathana), but a better translation might be, “Religious,” or, rather, “The Faithful.” Implied in these translations is that *if* one is *religious*, he/she must be Buddhist. The term is exclusive. Textually, “sāsana” means, “the teaching of the Buddha.” That it is applied as describing the nation is significant. The Pali Text Society defines, “sāsana” as, “order, message, teaching” and as having a highly disciplined connotation. T. W. Rhys Davids and Wilhelm Stede, *Pali-English Dictionary*, (London: Pub. for the Society by Luzac, 1959).

³² With an accompanying focus on literacy and education/indoctrination.

Nation of practicing Buddhists. Under an Ecumene model, the State assumes a large degree of responsibility for the protection and spiritual betterment of its Buddhist constituents. The State is also viewed as an ecclesiastical office, ascribing to itself Buddhist moral-authority, while also being subject to challenges based on Buddhist critiques. The ruled also have responsibilities to ensure the State makes decisions that are good for the Buddhist populace. A final consideration with an Ecumene is that it assumes a spatial existence.³³ It necessarily requires a territory, a geography, in which a Buddhist ruler and a Buddhist people can practice Buddhism. Ecumene takes on a kingdom-like realm, limited to geospatial boundaries which expand or contract, contributing to the perceived moral-authority of the ruler: more if the region expands, and less if the region contracts. This is what allows kings of Myanmar to appeal to monastic lineages in Sri Lanka without militarily or economically competing with those communities.³⁴ The geospatial definition of an Ecumene allows governed society to be ordered according to those who are Buddhist and those who are *othered*, often by establishing “regions” of faithfulness, seen by the presence of mendicant monks, stūpa construction, or assimilation/conquest of those regions.

³³ A Buddhist Ecumene differs from that of a Pali imaginaire in that the imaginaire invokes the idea of a network of relationships between non-competing but similarly aligned communities, such as the long-existing relationship between Buddhist monastics and Lanka (contemporary Sri Lanka), Ayutthia, the Mon, Pyu, and c. twelfth century Pagan. The imaginaire has an additional effect of *othering* non-Buddhists through a shared sense of superiority via religious enlightenment. Steven Collins, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities: Utopias of the Pali Imaginaire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). Also, Anne Blackburn’s forthcoming work explores the idea of a Pali Cosmopolis, invoking Pollock’s Sanskrit paradigm for South and Southeast Asia in: Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

³⁴ Goh, *Wheel-turner*, 81-133. Part of the difficulty in talking about Myanmar is that, even with the consolidation of what might potentially resemble a first “Burmese” empire in Pagan under King Anawrahta, the waxing and waning of these power centers and similar utilizations of respective State (Empire) technologies makes it impossible to designate a “Burma.” The appropriation by King Anawrahta of a Mon text that shows great similarities to a Pyu text indicates that these competing kingdoms may have had significant overlap, borrowing from each other’s advances heavily. Michael Aung Thwin, *The Mists of Ramañña: The Legend That Was Lower Burma*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2005), 154-200.

The Ecumene “embraces religious ideas, not in the intellectual and theological sense, but rather as tools to understand the world, and more significantly, the wisdom derived from religious ideology representing ways to manage this-worldly practices in a righteous manner, much like that of a *cakavartin* [Skt] as a world conqueror.”³⁵ Based on the expressions of the Buddhist Ecumene in Myanmar presented in this paper, I would add that the Ecumene exists not only to understand the world but to shape it through religious technologies available in Theravāda Buddhism and to mold it (and its inhabitants) after its own imagining. These technologies include the primacy of dhamma, the “remembering” of Buddhist histories, the dhammarāja motif, patronage economies, and a Buddhist populace (*sāsana*). As with all models, it is imperfect. However, the goal of this paper is to articulate a Buddhist relationship between the land, the ruler, and the ruled, where no other model satisfactorily explains the historical appeal between modern day rulers and rulers of days gone by, or the appeals from the members of the community that idealize the memory and projection of a Buddhist society. My data considers both points of view which, when paired with spatial considerations of practice, provides the major components to be considered a Buddhist Ecumene.

Through the use of ethnographic interviews and indigenous source material, I argue that, for Bama persons, Buddhism(s)³⁶ is an assumed part of societal formation and belonging. Thus, vernaculars employed by the populace are largely Buddhist in tone or philosophy, appealing to

³⁵ Ibid., 10. A *Cakavartin* [Skt] / *Cakkavattin* [Pali], is a cosmological fulfillment of a dhammarāja. It is seen as the worldly counterpart to the Buddha, who is known as the world-renouncer. The *Cakkavattin* is so effective in his administration that the land is said to be full of dhamma, that it is peaceful, allowing all citizens (assumed to be Buddhist) to practice the *Bodhisattva* path. He is the dhammarāja par excellence.

³⁶ “Buddhisms” is used here to signal to the reader that, while Burmese Buddhism is made to appear orthodox, pure, and monolithic, nothing could be further from the truth. While one could maintain the argument that Buddhism in Myanmar is more coherent than elsewhere, there are great variations within the Buddhism that is practiced in Myanmar, even amongst the Burmese (Bamar). I will use the singular, “Buddhism” for the remainder of the paper to appeal to a tradition that is largely shared among the Burmese, even though variations abound. I have used Melford Spiro as a guide to some of these variations. Melford Spiro, *Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and Its Burmese Vicissitudes*, 2nd expanded edition, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

thoughts only made understandable through Buddhism and its Burmese traditions. The development of an Ecumene occurs through explicit and implicit *othering* of non-Buddhists (e.g. political speeches given at stūpas), the enmeshment of Buddhism in the technologies of the State (e.g. the constitution and penal codes), and through the development of social modes of being, or social-contracting, that assume Buddhist frameworks (e.g. the expectation that all boys will take temporary ordination, *shin-pyu*).

The use of interviews conducted in 2016 and media analysis is qualitative in nature. As such, the data is not as concerned with the factuality of any given statement or historicity of any presented “fact,” but rather concerns itself with curating that history into a narrative, which has the effect of reinforcing the paradigm of Myanmar as a Buddhist Ecumene.³⁷ I borrow from Geok Yian Goh’s work on the memory and reign of Anawrahta, expanding her conceptualization by creating a rubric for a dhammarāja paradigm, which is central to the existence of an Ecumene.³⁸ This has not been done before. This rubric will then allow us to evaluate ways in which the current (2017) government, or any future government, views itself as operating within the dhammarāja tradition. This, in combination with ethnographic interviews carried out in Yangon, Myanmar, in the summer of 2016, will conclude that all the major constituent parts are present so that we may consider Myanmar a modern Buddhist Ecumene, providing a needed interpretive lens for Myanmar internal and external “political” behavior.

³⁷ An Ecumene is both constituent and geographic in focus. This is an especially important concept for a Cakkavattin. Not only are they expected to purify the Buddhism that is within their sphere of influence, but they are also expected to expand that geographic sphere of influence. The British handover of Myanmar with its current geographic boundaries could be construed as a divine (kamma) entitlement to extend the *sāsana*-ecumene to these borders, when previously, the Burmese remained fairly static (non-expansionist) in their habitation of the Irrawaddy delta region.

³⁸ Goh, *Wheel-turner*, 32-41.

An interpretive lens of Myanmar as Ecumene will provide a fuller understanding of the behaviors of both Buddhism and society. This motif is not static and should be considered in addition to the traditional, non-religious metrics as it helps remedy the assumed superiorities of Western secular democracy and liberalism.³⁹ Moreover, Ecumene better articulates Bama constructions of society, including governance, that does not require it to conform to Western standardizations of statecraft. Even Mikael Gravers, who has done a great deal in defining the relative roles of Buddhism and ethnicity in Myanmar, succumbs to this Western-exalted orientation. Of Aung San Suu Kyi's explanation of democracy via Buddhist terminology, he says, "in presenting her political alternative in terms of Western democracy and liberalism, Aung San Suu Kyi must communicate her model via Buddhist concepts because large sectors of the population have been isolated from international debate and might criticize her for seeking to introduce an alien political system and of undermining the 'Burmese way'."⁴⁰ This ultimately pits Buddhist political thought against Liberal political thought. One reads this as, "If only the Burmese were not as isolated, Aung San Suu Kyi would not *have to* communicate using Buddhist terminology." "Buddhism" becomes an expedient means for explaining the democratic state.⁴¹

As a concept, Ecumene is perhaps a nuanced way of understanding power construction and sharing in Myanmar, especially as it does not fully explain moments when religious minorities share power with Buddhists. There is a tendency within Myanmar studies to either

³⁹ For example, the two major schools in International Relations theory, Realism and Liberalism, do not adequately explain Myanmar's internal behaviors and how these behaviors reflect to the outside world. Both would expect Myanmar to curtail the perceived grievances against religious minorities.

⁴⁰ Quoted in McCarthy, 2004, 68.

⁴¹ "Expedient means" pun intended. This is not to say that he intends to do this; his other works certainly indicate a scholarship which re-centers Burmese conceptualizations of ethnicity and governance in Buddhism.

study Buddhism *or* the State, with very little consideration for how one informs the other.⁴² This paper seeks to remedy this by arguing that scholars can better understand Myanmar through the perspective of an Ecumene. To prove this, this paper will outline: what a Buddhist Ecumene consists of, the influence of Buddhist memory and dhamma as the basis for imagining the Ecumene, the role of that dhamma in establishing paradigms of governance (dhammarāja), the application of textual and historical examples to the current leader of Myanmar (Aung San Suu Kyi), ethnographies that reveal a presumption on Buddhist modes of being, and then conclude that the data presented indicates the presence of an Ecumene mentality.

Time-Space Considerations

For the remainder of this paper, the use of “Myanmar” or “Burmese,” unless otherwise noted, refers to the dominant ethnic group in Myanmar designated as “Bamar” (“Bama” as an adjective) in the 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census.⁴³ This group is historically associated with the Irrawaddy delta region and has strong historical ties to the contemporary Sagaing Division in Myanmar. The Sagaing Division incorporates the historical cities of Mandalay and Pagan, and is situated in Central Myanmar. The inclusion of Mandalay and Pagan are vital for the consolidation of a Myanmar history that is dependent upon Buddhism.⁴⁴ This region also assumes historical hegemony over contemporary Yangon and historical Pegu, which is significant because this provides Burmese access to histories of trade and social networking with other Buddhist communities, such as Sri Lanka (Lanka), the Mon, and Thailand.

⁴² For example, while Robert Taylor’s work, *The State in Myanmar*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2009), is a phenomenal work, there are aspects of statecraft that are better explained, or at least more replete, if one takes into consideration Buddhist notions of power construction and moral-authority.

⁴³ Available at: Department of Population and Ministry of Immigration and Population, *The 2014 Myanmar population and Housing Census: The Union Report*. May 2015, accessed April 14, 2017, <http://myanmar.unfpa.org/en/node/15104>.

⁴⁴ Histories of “being” Buddhist were integral to the retelling of Myanmar’s history. See more under the chapter, “The Ecumene Remembers Being Buddhist.”

Historically, this region was associated with the Mon, and the fact that it is now associated with the Burmese is further evidence of Bama assimilative practices in fashioning a Buddhist and Burmese region (more on this below). It is worth noting that this network of Buddhist communities interacting and reinforcing one another is implicit in Collins portrayal of the *imaginaire*.⁴⁵

I am mostly concerned with narratives of belonging and *othering* invoked through Buddhist technologies of *saṅgha* and the State that have occurred recently. The reason is that, with the recent government transition to Aung San Suu Kyi, there has been much confusion over her leadership style, with the assumption that she would usher in a more inclusive, Western-style government. The specific focus of my argument concerns the media's portrayal of her, especially her "silence" with regard to the persecution of religious minorities in Myanmar. Furthermore, the Ecumene's engagement with religious minorities shifted after 2015, such that, for religious minorities, their inclusion and participation in Myanma society and state has deteriorated under Daw Suu's leadership. Religious and ethnic minorities had more power under the previous transitional government.⁴⁶ In 1948, minority groups underwent a significant change: they had once been people/regions that "created" natural boundaries for Burmese kingdoms, but had now become people/regions to either be assimilated into or defended against in the Ecumene. Today's treatment of religious minorities is clothed in narratives of "unity" and the need to preserve the Union of Myanmar, which did not exist until 1948. The border "gifting" of the current political borders of Myanmar to the Bama peoples, which includes region not previously under their hegemony, indicated a *kamma* blessing and a divine mandate to continue

⁴⁵ Collins, *Pali Imaginaire*, 77.

⁴⁶ Mary Callahan, "Aung San Suu Kyi's quiet, puritanical vision for Myanmar," *Nikkei Asian Review*, March 29, 2017, accessed May 15, 2017, <http://asia.nikkei.com/Features/The-lady-in-question/Aung-San-Suu-Kyi-s-quiet-puritanical-vision-for-Myanmar2>.

to expand the Ecumene, setting the stage for an inevitable conflict between those who remember being Bama Buddhist and those who have different memories of an autonomous existence.

Chapter 1.

The Ecumene Remembers Being Buddhist: *Historical Aberrations, Historical Appeals*

Part of the reason that contemporary Myanmar has struggled to adopt religious minorities into its political structures is that Burmese remember a Myanmar that is Buddhist. This Buddhist memory is not only one of constituency but of Buddhist politics as well. The memory of an Ecumene reinforces modern-day presumptions on a *Buddhist* Myanmar, even though the geo-political borders that comprise Myanmar include swathes of land that have never, historically, been considered to belong to the Burmese. This occurred when the British, in 1948, ceded administration of contemporary Myanmar to the Bamar. From a Buddhist perspective, this was a kammic entitlement, producing a divine manifest destiny to extend the boundaries of the Ecumene into these newly ceded regions. The heavy sponsorship of Buddhist missionaries and the construction of stūpas in these acquired regions indicate something of a new effort to expand Buddhism that had not happened on the same scale prior to 1948.

I am not trying to determine whether or not what my interviewees said to me was “factual,” but rather I explore how they remember history and how that memory contributes to their self-imagining as Buddhists in an Ecumene. For example, several of my qualitative interviews are factually inaccurate, especially in their recall of monarchies long past or whether some artifact of memory was in fact “Burmese” and not Mon or Pyu. Memories reinforce the Ecumene’s paradigm in that they seem to have always included a singular Buddhism and a singular ethnic history. Buddhism’s presence in “all of Myanmar” does not factually include regions where the majority are Christian, Muslim, or Animist. These regions, along with the hill-tribe areas, were historically viewed as the geo-political boundaries of an assimilating, delta-thriving kingdom. However, the repetition of inclusion, “We Buddhists,” indicates a shared memory of a *raison d’être* and why something is *this way* (always Buddhist) and not *that way*

(non-Buddhist/secular). The Buddhist parishioners “remember” a fact in a way that supports the continued existence of the Ecumene. A common historical narrative does exist but, in reality, there is little, if any, factual or archeological evidence to support that narrative.⁴⁷ These instances suggest an imagined Nation that is always coming into its own as a Buddhist country, while simultaneously *othering* histories, narratives, and groups of people that threaten such an imagining. For those not deemed Buddhist enough, as in the case of the Pwo Karen, who practice a kind of Buddhism that is not considered orthodox Theravāda by the Bamar, assumptions of reform and assimilation prevail. For those who identify as a religious and ethnic minority with no intention of assimilation, more drastic *othering* occurs: Bamar assumptions of conquest and conversion prevail. *Othering*, for those who are *othered* in contemporary and historical Myanmar has drastic consequences including, statelessness, conquest, homelessness, rape, joblessness, mobility challenges, servitude, death, among others. For both “unorthodox” Buddhists and non-Buddhists, *othering* has deleterious consequences.

“History” is likewise remembered as a Buddhist Bama past. When questioned about the application of a text or the historicity of an event, the fact that a historical event *could* be true, especially if it supports Buddhism’s presence in Myanmar, means that it *should* be true, thereby canonizing the social-memories of a people.⁴⁸ This is especially the case when questioning the common-consensus interpretation of any given text.⁴⁹ Question too much, especially if you are a

⁴⁷ Goh’s work on later Burmese chroniclers “remembering” of Anwarahta as the Cakkavattin ideal is a prime example of this.

⁴⁸ For example, the Third Buddhist conference and the text of the *Mahāvamsa* attest to missionary pilgrimages from India and Sri Lanka elsewhere. However, the places signified by the names that both use are lost to history. Therefore, it is assumed by the Ecumene that the places mentioned include modern-day Myanmar, even though there is no textual evidence that the places mentioned (*Mahāvamsa*, Chapter 5, for example) are actually Myanmar. Wilhelm Geiger, *The Mahāvamsa*, (London: Published for the Pali Text Society by Luzac, 1958).

⁴⁹ What makes them consensus memories is anyone’s guess. Somehow, these stories get standardized, likely through monastic schooling and a uniform government schooling curriculum. Alicia Turner’s *Saving Buddhism: The Impermanence of Religion in Colonial Burma*, Southeast Asia—Politics, Meaning, Memory, series, (Honolulu:

foreigner, and be in danger of blaspheming Buddhism, a federal offense. These common-consensus memories then become as authoritative as actual history and actual interpretation. One remarkable characteristic of these memories is the consistency between interviewees, indicating a wide circulation and standardization.⁵⁰ When discussing Buddhism's advent in Myanmar with laity at Botataung Pagoda and the Dhammaceti Monastery, stories of the Buddha coming to visit, King Aśoka's missionary exploits, and King Anawrahta's standardization of Buddhism from Pagan to Pegu (from upriver Irrawaddy to delta coast) became a trifecta tour de force. Buddhism's presence in Myanmar was cemented by these three figures and their unique contributions. The retelling of "How Buddhism came to be in Myanmar" was spoken of as if by mandate of the Buddha himself; Myanmar was to be a Buddhist country. Anawrahta fulfilled the last piece of a non-existent prophecy, unifying Myanmar under the umbrella of Theravāda Buddhism, removing any doubt as to Buddhism's rightful belonging in Myanmar.

"When did Buddhism come to Myanmar?"

— *Since the Buddha! After the Buddha, there were many building projects and many stūpas were built. But there were many still who did not believe. Anawrahta came to power and brought all of Burma under one [kind of] Buddhism [Theravāda].*⁵¹

This was meant to curtly answer my question. The conversation was over. Next question. Some version of this response was repeated to me on three different occasions. Other interviews revealed a notion that, not only did Buddhism rightly belong to Myanmar, but that Myanmar had, with Anawrahta's re-evangelization of Sri Lanka, saved it from Muslim invaders. Thus, Myanmar became the savior of pure, orthodox Buddhism, while also tapping into current-day fears about a Muslim takeover in Myanmar.

University of Hawai'i Press, 2014), discusses how this happened in the colonial era, but not much work has been done on contemporary pedagogical practices in the *hpongyi-caun* or the compulsory state schools.

⁵⁰ This occurred with interviewees identifying as Buddhists and with those not identifying as Buddhist.

⁵¹ Interview with a lay practitioner outside of Botataung Pagoda, August 3, 2016.

In my ethnographic interviews, a particular phrase or history would often be alluded to with great consistency:

— “*Sule Pagoda was built 2,500 years ago*” [said to me on four different occasions].

— “*Anawrahta united all of Myanmar*” [said to me on five occasions].

— “*The Buddha traveled to Myanmar and the first converts were the Burmese*” [spoken to me on three occasions.]

These statements belie the fact that the Burmese, if they associate their histories and themselves with Pagan, assimilated Buddhism from the Mon. Bamar histories tend to assimilate the histories of other kingdoms, especially if they are seen as exemplary Buddhist models. The Pyu and the Mon, both admired by the Bamar of Pagan for their writing and monastery systems, stūpa construction, and practice of Theravāda, were assimilated into the histories of the Bamar. The “Burmese” language is a prime example of this assimilative practice, being standardized sometime around the reign of Anawrahta by synthesizing elements of Pyu and Mon script forms. Thus, the Mon and Karen today, while looking at their own script, are told they use Burmese characters, even though there is widespread admiration for the Mon as a historic entity. The stūpas of Pegu, also built by the Mon, are attributed to the Burmese, even though the Mon still exist as an ethnic state and in Myanmar. This is not unusual for Southeast Asia. Assimilation was often normative and voluntary. Certainly, with Pagan’s rise and extensive administration networks, there was an incentive for community outliers to adopt an identity of being Theravāda Buddhist and Bamar. However, this past assimilation does reveal that the “memory” of historical events has conformed to Bamar Buddhist notions of cultural hegemony. Today, histories and cultures of Buddhism become appropriated to the Ecumene imagining. In an ethnography shared below (Chapter 6), I tell the story of Kyaw, a hired driver who regularly

drove me around during my 2016 research trip. His memory of the Mons was that they were “good Burmese” because of their being “100 percent Buddhist,” and he even went so far as to bemoan the impurity of the Burmese when compared to this group.

Government and monastic feedback loops control the production of knowledge in Myanmar, thus increasing the consistency of Buddhist memory among the population. This occurs through compulsory education with uniform curricula, which exalts Buddhist historical figures and tales. It is further reinforced through the societal expectation of taking temporary ordination.⁵² All twenty-one of my interviewees who identified as Buddhist, including two females, had taken temporary ordination and about half (ten) still lived within a few miles of where they grew up. This sets up a societal norm in which communities and relationships are reinforced. A future employer might be someone that comes to the stūpa or gives you alms. Moreover, one learns not to go to this street or that street because, “They don’t give you alms. They are Karen (Christian).” This creates a social network that revolves around monastic participation and reinforces Buddhist modes of being, at the expense of *othering* those who do not participate in Buddhist rites. The expectation is for every male to take part in *shin-pyu* (monastic initiation for males), a ceremony for young males who take temporary ordination around the age of twelve. After shaving their head and donning the robes of a monk, they learn to recite and read the suttas and the Jātakas, Pali, and to memorize the doctrinal core of the Four Noble Truths. After they memorize an impressive array of scripture and liturgical prayers for ceremonies, they then learn applications: what does it mean to follow the Precepts? What are the

⁵² Schober, *Modern Buddhist Conjectures*, 46-61. These two sources of information (government and sangha) should not be thought of as a dichotomy. The government-run Ma Ha Na council determines the legitimacy of all monastic communities in Myanmar, and every monk’s ability to preach is dependent upon their licensure. This has become something of a spectacle lately with Ma Ha Na’s attempts to silence someone they deem as an “ultranationalist.” In spite of censorship, “ultranationalist” monk, U Wirathu has continued to preach by playing recordings of his sermons as he sits atop his dhamma-perch with multicolored tape covering his mouth in protest.

parameters around positive and negative merit-making? The pedagogical effect is such that, should one walk by any *hpongyi-caun* (monastery school) or government school, one hears the same cadence drone. The teacher recites a text. The students repeat it. After class, the students go home and memorize what the teacher taught that day, word for word. This is directly patterned after dhamma recitation and memorization. This pedagogy is widely seen as the highest form of learning. Hence, any other learning methods, even if secular in content, have the hard job of overcoming deeply entrenched pedagogical methods assumed to be associated with the Buddha himself.⁵³ Religious minorities have similar structures of narrative feedback loops reinforcing their stories as well, but often utilize categories provided for them by the Buddhist Bama narratives of ethnicity, again revealing the centrality of Burmese identity in dictating categories of belonging.⁵⁴

In addition to the imagined histories that tell a Buddhist story, every pre-colonial era and colonial era Burmese source that exists as historical is overwhelmingly Buddhist in nature, weaving chronicles through a web of Buddhist terminology or tradition.⁵⁵ Thus, when contemporary non-Buddhist, non-Bama students study the history of Myanmar, they study a Buddhist memory of Burmese Buddhist kings and their Ecumene, never incorporating the histories of the hill-tribes or other groups, who have a rich oral history.⁵⁶

⁵³ Swe Mon Mon, "Theory and Practice of Buddhist Monastic Schools in Myanmar," (paper presented at ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) International Buddhist Conference on "Buddhist Social Work and Education in AEC," International Buddhist College, Thailand, July 26, 2015).

⁵⁴ See, for example, Ardeth Thawngmung's, *The "other" Karen in Myanmar, 2012*.

⁵⁵ The *Yazawingyaw* (1520), *Mahayazawingyi* (1720), and the *Thathanawin* (1861) for example. All translated as "Chronicles."

⁵⁶ This was especially the case after the standardized curriculum of the Ne Win regime. Education reform is woefully outdated in Myanmar, as the current educational model still utilizes Ne Win's basic curriculum, influenced by pre-1948 British curriculum. See: Han Tin, "Seminar on Education in Myanmar" (paper presented at Centre for UNESCO on "UNESCO Education Sector Study," Australian National University, Canberra, March 31, 2004), accessed May 15, 2017, <https://web.archive.org/web/20110608032539/http://www.anu.edu.au/unesco/Tin.pdf>.

Many of these chronicles were written either by monks under the king's patronage or by scribes in the king's court who learned to read and write in Buddhist monastery schools. Moreover, these chronicles are not written in vernacular Burmese but are recorded in exalted prose, often using a fusion of Burmanized Pali to tell their stories. These Buddhist chroniclers wrote with the intent to legitimize their particular ruler's reign through an assumed paradigm of dhammarāja. A king's rule is legitimized and de-legitimized through the presence of moral-authority: the degree to which one rules "according to the dhamma." Recording chronicles using Burmanized Pali does not necessarily mean that these chronicles were only available to the literati. Monks often duplicated these manuscripts in order to gain merit. Similar merit could be attained by reciting religious texts in the company of others. The Ecumene in Myanmar has a long tradition of going to the regional or local monk to hear and participate in reciting dhamma, and it is assumed that these exalted histories would have been included in this effort. The presence of ancient manuscripts in markets in the early twentieth century suggests an ongoing tradition of textual availability. Given that the manuscripts were not only recorded in Pali, but utilized a blended language with Burmese, indicates a readership and/or an oral retelling that extended beyond the elite and monastic circles, possibly circulating to larger villages that could sustain a Vihara community (monastery with more than one monk).⁵⁷

One history, the *Thathanawin*, is particularly interesting because it was written after 1861, after the second Anglo-Burmese war (1851-1852). A result of this war was the forced relocation of the Burmese kingdom to Mandalay (Ava) from Pegu by treaty with the British (1852). Assuming the royal court patronized this document in an attempt to legitimize the king's (King Pagan) authority after the dejection of yet another military loss accompanied with the loss

⁵⁷ Goh, *Wheel-turner*, 86-87.

of territory, one might expect to see a document more like those of his European conquerors. Instead, this document reaffirms the history of the *Mahāvamsa*, a Lankan document chronicling Buddhism's history through the fifth century CE, which has often been used to confirm Sri Lanka's existence as a Buddhist nation because it records their monastic heritage succession, originating with the Buddha.⁵⁸ Additionally, Lankan kings who ruled as Buddhist monarchs were responsible for the export of state-patronized Buddhist missionaries across the Bay of Bengal to Myanmar. The latter part of the *Thathanawin* picks up where the *Mahāvamsa* leaves off and articulates a Burmese Buddhist history, ostensibly with the same pedagogical purposes in mind, elaborately tracing the ordination lineages of every official saṅgha back to the Buddha. It is also careful to mention kingship patronage. The presence of a sāsana history legitimizes a Burmese claim to be a Buddhist kingdom.⁵⁹

Similarly, in *The Glass Palace Chronicle of the Kings of Burma*, arguably the closest thing in Myanmar to the European style of chronicling the various monarchy lineages, the sponsoring monarch, King Bagyidaw, declares his intent:

*By this abundant merit I desire
Here nor hereafter no angelic pomp
Of Brahmas, Suras, Maras; nor the state
And splendours of a monarch; nay, not even
To be the pupil of the Conqueror.⁶⁰
But I would build a causeway sheer athwart
The river of sāmsara, and all folk
Would speed across thereby until they reach
The Blessed City.
—King Bagyidaw of Burma, 1829⁶¹*

⁵⁸ Heinz Bechert, "The beginnings of Buddhist Historiography in Ceylon, Mahāvamsa and Political Thinking," *Religion and the Legitimation of Power in Sri Lanka*, ed. Bardwell L Smith (Chambersburg, PA: Anima Books, 1978).

⁵⁹ Victor Lieberman, "A New Look at the Sāsanavamsa" *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, University of London Vol. 39, No. 1 (1976), pp. 137-149.

⁶⁰ A reference possibly meaning either the Buddha or the Cakkavattin, who was known as the world-conqueror.

⁶¹ King Bagyidaw of Burma, *The Glass Palace Chronicle of the Kings of Burma*, Trans. by Aung Tin and G. H. Luce, (London: Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press, 1960): xi.

Chronicling history through royal sponsorship had dual appeal: the preservation of both the unity of the *sāsana*⁶² and the *dhamma*.⁶³ Both of these aims were accomplished through the historical chronicling of *Saṅgha-Rāja* patronage history, which is really a history of *Tipiṭika* preservation. King *Bagyidaw*'s merit is staked in his recounting of a Buddhist history in a way that preserves the unity of his Ecumene, “unity” being a principle value of the faithful. The king's beholden attitude to merit-making as a civil servant indicates that his moral-authority is entirely contingent upon the utility of this chronicle as a means of preserving the *dhamma*, thereby attesting that the moral-authority of a ruler's right to rule directly appeals to Buddhist categories.

Given a Buddhist paradigm of legitimacy, non-Buddhists are either expected to conform to Buddhist constructions of power, authority, and legitimacy, or consequently, are seen as willfully continuing in ignorance, a cardinal sin that prevents one from becoming a stream-enterer. The person who has heard the *dhamma* – be it state-*dhamma* (*rājadhama*) or *sanghadhamma* (*dhamma* related specifically to monk practitioners) – and rejected it will decrease in humanity. Consigned to be reborn in the animal realm, the realm of hungry ghosts, or hell, and should now be regarded as an animal. They are regressive and are not as human or as respectable as those who have seen the Truth⁶⁴ of *dhamma*.

⁶² Always thought of as coterminous with the sphere of influence of the king. Monks had a special relationship with Theravāda Kingdoms in that they could itinerate without much restriction, so long as they were preaching the *dhamma*.

⁶³ Buddhist reality as meta-truth.

⁶⁴ Capitalized to emphasize that “*dhamma*” is coterminous with absolute truth. It is the only reality that matters. Not being at least a “stream-enterer” (a neophyte to Buddhist practice) is the same as not being fully human. One wonders if killing non-Buddhists is similar to killing animals: undesirable, but sometimes necessary, thereby not breaking the Five Precepts which are seen as the basic ethical code for Buddhists.

The prevalence of a Buddhist memory as the basis of authority is not to suggest that other histories or other narratives of belonging are irrelevant. In Myanmar, they often coexist but are ultimately relegated beneath Buddhadhamma. The Burmese Path to Socialism, a government program instituted by then President U Nu, was contrived as a way to find Buddhist values within socialism while rejecting elements of communism deemed antithetical to Burmese ideals. This revealed a dual relationship between Socialism and Buddhism, as purported by U Nu.⁶⁵

Several college-educated interviewees in my research exhibited a similar dualism: on the one hand, they were perfectly able to articulate and affirm a democratic basis for religious pluralism, while on the other hand, engage with the topic in the abstract. “There’s no need for violence between them [Muslims] and us; Myanmar is quite large.” However, once the conversation turned to Buddhism and violence between the Tatmadaw⁶⁶ and religious minority groups, the democratic argument for inclusion gave way to language of assimilation and *othering*. One interviewee, a successful Western-educated man in his mid-forties, nearly reversed course when the topic of Buddhism as a way of life was discussed, finally saying that, “these [religious] minorities should really take the time to learn Burmese.” *This* was the magic pill that would go a long way in alleviating the intra-Myanmar violence. As the interviewer, what struck me was that we had only been discussing religious minority groups at the time, as I had intentionally avoided the issue of *ethnic* minorities, since there are several Buddhist minorities also fighting the government. His statement indicates a conflation with religion and language: two out of the three historical means (race, religion, language) of constructing

⁶⁵ Donald K. Swearer, *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia*, 2nd ed., SUNY Series in Religious Studies, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010): 111.

⁶⁶ Burmese Armed Forces.

Burmese ethnicity.⁶⁷ These three components of ethnicity was a major platform used by previous regimes to assert the centrality of the Bama and echoed in his statement.⁶⁸ Any student of the Burmese language can attest to how Pali and Buddhist influences permeate the Burmese language, suggesting a coterminous relationship between speaking Burmese, being Buddhist, and being Burmese.⁶⁹

As Geok Goh has pointed out with her work, the history of a thing and the memory of a thing are often disproportionate in import.⁷⁰ It is often the memory of an event, and especially the collective memory of that event, that makes for the basis of an imagined history for an imagined community, which reinforces a community's notions of belonging.⁷¹ Myanmar power structures, through the memory of history, assume a Buddhist framework including, but not limited to, a Buddhist citizenry. In other words, the Ecumene remembers being Buddhist.

⁶⁷ Especially from Than Shwe's era.

⁶⁸ Gravers, *Spiritual Politics*, 48. The three are: race, religion, and language, but more specifically, "*lu-myo, thathana* (sāsana), and *batha*." This was the basis for General Than Shwe's view of Burma, translated as, "One race, one language, one religion." The use of "sāsana" and the translation of it as, "country" does not quite do the word justice. It is a Buddhist term with connotations of submission, unity, and discipline. It never refers to non-Buddhist teachings or groups.

⁶⁹ Titles of people, necessary when addressing others, are rooted in Buddhist Pali histories. A lighter example would be the common expression for, "Oh, no!" which is "Dokkha ba be!" "Dokkha" is a Pali word taken from the Four Noble Truths, dukkha, or, "suffering." Also, the earliest extant copy of the Tipiṭika and the one used by the Pali Text Society is preserved in Burmese Pali.

⁷⁰ Goh, *Wheel-turner*, 175-196.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

Chapter 2. Ordering the Ecumene: *Dhamma Appeals for Authority*

An Ecumene needs three basic components: a ruler (dhammarāja), a people (sāsana), and a region.⁷² What binds these three components together is the presence of Dhamma. A ruler, if he or she is to be one that has a legitimate claim to power, has to have a Buddhist charismatic claim to his/her position. This can be contested by the people, but they must utilize Buddhist concepts present in the dhamma to contest the ruler's claim to authority. The Buddhist charisma of a leader is directly related to textual appeal. The region, likewise, is to be permeated with dhamma; there must be Buddhist relics and monasteries that aid the memory and promotion of dhamma, Buddhist practitioners living by dhamma, and a ruler ruling by dhamma.

Primacy of Dhamma over non-Dhamma

Benedict Anderson argues that print capitalism is mostly responsible for developing the nation-state.⁷³ It is not the nation-state (statism) that is Anderson's main concern, but rather nationalism — that force that creates a *we* versus *them* — created and reified through a common language and rite. One might think, as Anderson encourages, about one Muslim man standing next to another Muslim man whose vernacular is different. The recitation of prayers in the same language creates a religious sociological bond that quickly leads to a shared identity.⁷⁴ This can be applied to the Pali imaginaire, *mutatis mutandis*, but is perhaps better thought of as the mechanism that created a “Burma” out of disparate kingdoms and eras. This is aided by the territorialization of certain books or works of law/governance, creating a “Documentary

⁷² The region is ultimately tied in with the ruler. Because of this, I will focus on the aspect of a sāsana ruler with land gains/losses becoming an integral part of the dhammarāja motif.

⁷³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*, Rev. ed., (New York: Verso, 2006).

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 54.

interchangeability, which reinforced human interchangeability”.⁷⁵ So, shared language creates the perception of shared experience, which one is more quickly to guard and defend as one’s own based on the perception of a shared love, whether or not they have ever been to the threatened territory in question.⁷⁶ Print vernacularization, created by a glut in the market for Latin books, reifies a sense of what it means to be “German,” “French,” “American,” or, for our purposes, “Burmese,” as books and texts are distributed in those vernaculars.

Under Anawrahta’s consolidation of low-land Myanmar in the mid-eleventh century, the Burmese script became standardized and vernacularized, helping to amalgamate a Buddhist Burma in what was previously overlapping competing kingdoms. Aided by an organizational hierarchy, Anawrahta was able to appoint governors and administrators to each region, a vastly different approach than the patron-client relationship that characterized subdued kingdoms at that time. Anawrahta changed the landscape of central and low-land Myanmar, unifying a region that previously had only vassalage relationships and had never been consolidated into an administrated region under one identity. One could not have an imagined community if one could not identify with invisible members of that community elsewhere. The consolidation of low-land Myanmar under Anawrahta’s kingship, utilizing the “print capitalism” of a vernacular language distributed on palm leaves and learned in monasteries, appealed to a shared Buddhist cosmology, allowing Pagan to become the first imagined community/Ecumene of Buddhists in delta Myanmar.⁷⁷ The development of Burmese as a lingua franca was directly tied to the Buddhist monastery school, and the movement to learn Burmese was made pragmatic by the

⁷⁵ Ibid., 56.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 141.

⁷⁷ Aung-Thwin, *Mists*, 179-200.

reading and recitation of Buddhist prayers, which contributed to the kamma needed to secure a better life for a practitioner.

That there was mass education under monastery leadership has been talked about elsewhere, but it is important to affirm a few points. The first is that monastery schools (*hpongyi-caun*), were parochialized, distributed throughout the land wherever a village existed. Myanmar archeologist and scholar, Luce, in *Old Burma-Early Pagan*, records a ninth century CE Chinese source as reporting, “When they come to the age of seven, both boys and girls drop their hair and stop in a monastery where they take refuge in the Saṅgha. On reaching the age of twenty, if they have not awaked to the principles of the Buddha, they let their hair grow again and become ordinary townsfolk.”⁷⁸ For the Ecumene, a shared textual tradition created an *us* that could be distinguished from a *them*, or *other*, through the dual languages of Pali and Burmese. Moreover, this lessened Pagan’s centrality since numerically insignificant villages now often had access to rite and language through a regional monastery school. Monks became conduits of information and learning as they took up residence in different villages, serving as the village’s primary means of merit-making through almsgiving and leading in prayers. They were reliant on those communities for food, shelter, and clothing. The communities would then make merit through the local monk, not only through donation but through collective learning and recitation of the dhamma through various suttas. Due to the soteriological import of learning, memorizing, and reciting Buddhist prayers learned textually, this placed an emphasis on literacy, which, when combined with the merit-making of textual reproduction and distribution, created an Ecumene with a unifying text and religion under the Buddha’s teaching.

⁷⁸ Unknown, reported in G.H. Luce, *Old Burma-Early Pagan, Volume 1*, Supplementum; 25 (Locust Valley, NY: Artibus Asiae and the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, 1969), 319.

In a Buddhist Ecumene, dhamma is not only a unifying force, it ordainates reality. Dhamma implicitly *others* non-dhamma based reality. Not all truths are equal truths. Not all authority is equal in potency. The word, “dhamma,” has a large semantic range. Depending on the context, it can mean anything from the ultimate truth that encompasses all things to the specialized teaching of any one teacher. It can refer to the dhamma-realm of government or the separate-yet-connected dhamma-realm of Sangha.⁷⁹ Both operate in a sphere of “truth” that is respective to each sphere. It can also refer to truth in the abstract. When asked what it was that the Buddha taught, Gautama’s⁸⁰ response was that he taught “the way things are” or “dhamma.”⁸¹ Thus, the endeavor to enshrine the Buddha’s teaching in the Pali canon created an artifact that became synonymous with the entirety of the Buddha’s teaching.⁸² To speak of “dhamma” was to engage with the truths expounded in the Tipiṭika.⁸³

Even though the Tipiṭika comprises over 84,000 titles, the Buddha did not teach on all topics available to him. The Buddha only engaged with specific topics, therefore communicating that the only ‘truths’ deemed important are the truths enshrined in the Tipiṭika. Metaphysics, classical liberalism, religious pluralism, and other philosophical concepts are ultimately evaluated according to their utility to the teaching. For example, “The Parable of the Poisoned Arrow” illustrates the supremacy of the dhamma relative to things that ultimately do not matter.

⁷⁹ In this example, it theoretically conveys a codependent relationship between the two, while maintaining the idea of different modus operandi for those operating in those fields.

⁸⁰ The name of the Buddha. “Buddha” is, in fact, a title in the same way that “Cakkavattin” or “Mara” is.

⁸¹ Rupert Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 35.

⁸² Buddhism has an interesting relationship with the abiding of dhamma. There are several instances where the dhamma is prophesied to decline or even disappear. An example of this is the ordination account of Mahapajapati, the Buddha’s aunt and foster-mother. After agreeing on the going forth of women from the home-life to the homeless life (mendicant), the Buddha declares to Ananda, “Had women not asked for this, the dhamma would have remained 1000 years. Since they asked for this, it will last only 500 years” (AN 8.51). Many Buddhist conferences include a rewriting of the Tipiṭika to ensure its longevity. President U Nu called the Sixth Buddhist council (1954-1956) for this purpose as well, in addition to having the entire Tipitika rewritten on bronze tablets by monks from Myanmar, Thailand, and Sri Lanka.

⁸³ The Pali canon consists of three major works known as “baskets,” or “jewels;” the *Vinaya* (rules and commentary for monastic life), *Sutta* (the Buddha’s recorded sermons), and *Abidhamma* (commentary on the Buddha’s teaching).

In the parable, a monk, while meditating, becomes vexed by topics like the eternality of the cosmos, the relationship between body and soul, and the continuation of a Buddha after parinibbana (death). He then approaches the Buddha with these questions, insisting the importance of knowing the answers before he will be able to wholeheartedly pursue a holy life.

In answer, the Buddha outlines several metaphysical themes that he never promised to teach on:

Malunkyaputta, did I ever say to you, 'Come, Malunkyaputta, live the holy life under me, and I will declare to you that 'The cosmos is eternal,' or 'The cosmos is not eternal,' or 'The cosmos is finite,' or 'The cosmos is infinite,' or 'The soul & the body are the same,' or 'The soul is one thing and the body another,' or 'After death a Tathagata exists,' or ...

After listening for two lengthy stanzas, Malunkvaputta answers him with a terse, “No, Lord.”

The Buddha then provides the following analogy for those seeking such answers:

It's just as if a man were wounded with an arrow thickly smeared with poison. His friends & companions, kinsmen & relatives would provide him with a surgeon, and the man would say, 'I won't have this arrow removed until I know whether the man who wounded me was a noble warrior, a brahman, a merchant, or a worker.' He would say, 'I won't have this arrow removed until I know the given name & clan name of the man who wounded me... until I know whether he was tall, medium, or short... until I know whether he was dark, ruddy-brown, or golden-colored... until I know his home village, town, or city... until...

In the same way, if anyone were to say, 'I won't live the holy life under the Blessed One as long as he does not declare to me that 'The cosmos is eternal,'... or that 'After death a Tathagata neither exists nor does not exist,' the man would die and those things would still remain undeclared by the Tathagata.⁸⁴

This parable reveals Buddhism's enduring flexibility toward ideas: not denying their existence while firmly relegating them to the primacy of the Buddha's teaching. Dhamma ensures life. Non-dhamma, non-Buddhist teaching does not. Because things like the dhamma-realm of governance and the dhammarāja paradigm do prominently feature in the canon, what

⁸⁴ Thanissaro Bhikkhu, Trans., “Cula-Malunkyovada Sutta: The Shorter Instruction to Malunkya,” *MN 63, Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, 30 November 2013, accessed April 23, 2017, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.063.than.html>.

the Buddha has to say about such things is elevated beyond any critique from a non-Buddhist source. A ruler's authority and basis of rule is not only elucidated in the Pali canon, but his entire reign is dependent upon it. Meanwhile, a non-Buddhist approach to governing may produce helpful insights, but if it damages or challenges the relationship between a Buddhist community and their Buddhist ruler (i.e.- secularization), it is ultimately non-dhamma and perilous.⁸⁵

Hierarchy of Dhamma within Dhamma realms

Dhamma also ordainates reality within the Buddhist Ecumene. The cardinal responsibility of a dhammarāja is to provide an environment for the dhamma to flourish. As a result, they must sometimes incur bad kamma in order to strengthen the Ecumene and protect it from dhamma decline. This nets more positive kamma than negative. “Lesser sins” necessarily make way for the greater good. As an example of this kammic hierarchy, one might refer to the Buddhist concept of “equanimity (upekkhā)⁸⁶ towards all” in order to appeal to universal human rights.⁸⁷ However, in this example, there are two potential problems: one is that “all” may not include non-Buddhists. The list from which equanimity comes is limited to Buddhist stream-enterers on the path to enlightenment, and not everybody is on that path.⁸⁸ The second problem is that a doctrinal emphasis on living out (expending) one's kamma in order to achieve a better rebirth might make it ethical to shorten a non-Buddhist's life, especially if it involves the *protection and promotion* of the Buddhist Ecumene. Thus, while oppression of religious minorities might seem

⁸⁵ Donald Swearer, “Buddhism in Southeast Asia,” *The Religious Traditions of Asia: Religion, History, and Culture*, ed. Joseph Kitagawa, (New York, NY: Rutledge Curzon, 2002) 124.

⁸⁶ Upekkhā, as discussed in SN 46:14, is one of the seven factors inclining one to Nibbana. The others are Mindfulness (sati), Keen investigation of the dhamma (dhammavicaya), Energy (viriya), Rapture or happiness (piti), Calm (passaddhi), Concentration (samadhi), Equanimity (upekkha). See: “The Seven Factors of Enlightenment”, by Piyadassi Thera. Access to Insight (Legacy Edition), 30 November 2013, accessed April 14, 2017, <http://www.accesstoinight.org/lib/authors/piyadassi/wheel001.html>.

⁸⁷ Walton and Hayward, “Contesting,” 34-38.

⁸⁸ In contrast to Mahayana Buddhism.

antithetical to *upekkhā*, the memory of this doctrine's application as being *primarily* for stream-enterers lends itself to an interpretation that allows the subjugation and oppression of religious minorities. If this method of interpretation is coupled with the notion of the *dhammarāja* (outlined below), it becomes conceptually permissible to utilize coercion in order to purify and preserve the Ecumene. Myanmar Buddhist, Melford Spiro recounts a story recorded in *The Nation* (May 24, 1961) about then President U Nu, who unequivocally viewed himself as a *dhammarāja* candidate for the *Cakkavattin* title. When asked about human rights and the State's involvement in killing insurgents, U Nu, without delay, made use of a rhetorical appeal to the Precepts by recounting a *Jātaka* about a crab:

The 'Buddha would not like these [killing of insurgents, criminals, issuing meat processing licenses, etc.], and personally I would never be able to do it.' Still, sometimes it is necessary, he argued, to perform undesirable acts to achieve some higher end, and 'there are many instances in the *Jātaka* Tales to support this.' He [U Nu] then recounted, among others, the tale of the Embryo Buddha who, as a crab, killed a crow and a snake to prevent them from taking out the eyes of a Brahmin.⁸⁹

Given the lack of explanation in the newspaper article, the meaning must have been clear to the intended audience: the Brahmin is the Buddhist Ecumene of Myanmar. The crab is the proactive and protective hand of the government, which is also assumed to be synonymous with Embryonic Buddha. The crow and the snake represent whatever threatens that relationship. That U Nu appealed to a textual tradition to support the government's involvement in issuing meat processing licenses as well as military suppression of, so called, "insurgents" reveals the broad breadth of association that U Nu applied the text.⁹⁰

Not only does this provide an "ends justifies the means" rationale for Buddhist government, but it also severely limits civil discourse. A leader who issues an appeal that a

⁸⁹ Spiro, *Buddhism*, 21.

⁹⁰ "Freedom Fighters" would be more accurate.

particular idea is beneficial to the Ecumene invokes their claim as dhammarāja pretender, thereby putting their claim on the line and consequently making the stakes very high for disagreement. If one were to disagree, it is not simply a policy disagreement but potentially a cosmological challenge.

Preserving the Dhamma

Preservation of the Tipiṭika as a unifying document for the Ecumene is the responsibility of both monks and kings. Monks within Theravāda view nibbana as unattainable without the merit accrued through protecting and promoting dhamma, often symbolized by “protecting the precepts (*sila*).”⁹¹ Dhamma preserved in the Pali canon is viewed as complete and perfect, with later texts seen as pollutants, thus *othering* not only non-Buddhists but any Buddhist who are not Theravāda.⁹² This *othering* provides Myanmar’s Buddhist regime with a rationale for battling other Buddhist minority groups that do not conform to State-defined Theravāda. Protecting the precepts involves memorizing, preserving, and preaching the texts of the Tipiṭika to the local community, thus contributing to the merit of monk, king, and community. Textual memory is reinforced at every Buddhist ceremony and in every Buddhist profession. After one becomes a Buddhist practitioner and begins attending many liturgical ceremonies, the first canto one learns to recite is, “I go to (the) Buddha Refuge, I go to (the) Saṅgha Refuge, I go to (the) Dhamma Refuge,” which is repeated three times.⁹³ This line is repeated at the beginning of most ceremonies where parts of the Tipiṭika are recited by monks and laity.

Textual memorization is vital to progression within the monastic order. To gain status, tests are administered in which one’s knowledge of the scriptures is tested. Being able to recite

⁹¹ Spiro, *Buddhism*, 282.

⁹² Winston L. King, *A Thousand Lives Away; Buddhism in Contemporary Burma*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), 54.

⁹³ Translation my own. KN 1.1.

vast amounts of the dhamma on demand is sure to accelerate a practitioner through the ranks of the saṅgha. Conversely, in Buddhism, there are three cardinal sins: ignorance, greed, and delusion. Any one of these may prevent a person from becoming a stream-enterer. These three sins are remedied only through hearing and embracing dhamma. Should one hear the dhamma and *not* become a Buddhist, that person falls into one of two categories: maintaining ignorance as a result of bad kamma in a previous life or self-condemnation. They must be born into a lower realm in the next life. Either way, in this life or the next life, they must “live out” their bad kamma, accrued as a result of failing to accept Buddhaddhamma. In this way, any practitioner of Myanmar Buddhism is indoctrinated very early; the dhamma, most perfectly articulated in the Pali canon of the Tipiṭika, is ultimate and perfect. It is the only truth that matters.

This sociological conditioning carries practical significance in Myanmar today. For example, U Wirathu is the unofficial leader of an organization that calls itself “The Organization for the Protection of Race and Religion in Myanmar,” also known as Ma Ba Tha. Ma Ba Tha is a loose organization of monks and laity that come from all nine officially state-recognized saṅgha communities (*Nikaya*). In a vitriolic sermon condemning the Rohingya Muslims’ perceived tactics of marrying Buddhists in order to convert them, U Wirathu said, “Burmese [*lu-myo*] should marry dogs instead of marrying Muslim [*batha*] men because...dogs are as capable as Muslim men.” This statement led to calls for him to be sued for hate speech, but the courts refused to hear the cases so charges were dropped. Those who led the calls for hate speech charges have been countersued, with a stern warning that policies of inclusion will inevitably lead to a decline of dhamma.⁹⁴ This statement, and the reticence to try it, exposes an

⁹⁴ “Fight With Journalist Gets Extremist Monk Banned From Preaching,” *The Media Project*, May 5, 2017, accessed May 10, 2017, <https://themediaproject.org/news/2017/5/5/fight-with-journalist-gets-extremist-monk-banned-from-preaching->.

uncomfortable reality: Muslims who do not become Buddhist after hearing the dhamma may very well be reborn in the animal realm. How do you sue someone for a statement that rings true in the Buddhist mind? While it might be unsavory, many see U Wirathu as the contemporary iteration in a long line of “ultra” nationalist monks, tasked with reinvigorating Buddhist nationalism. Also, that this movement is spread across several of the nine *Nikaya* indicates a widespread acceptance, not confined to one particular school of thought.

The fact that monks are protectors of the dhamma means that the final arbiters of truth are not experts, scientists, historians, or even world-conquering kings, but rather a saṅgha whose interpretation of the dhamma is unassailable. Because of this, monks control the means of producing truth and authority. Kings, to the degree that they rule “according to the dhamma,” channel truth back to the monks. This was especially true in pre-colonial Myanmar, where monks often served as intermediaries between the people and the State.

Dhamma preservation also falls to the rulers. They are to provide an environment in which Buddhism can flourish and the Bodhisattva path can be pursued. However, should a ruler seek to control or assert influence over the monastic communities, he could, to a lesser extent, also manipulate the dhamma. By removing royal patronage and encouraging his subjects to follow suit, out-of-favor abbots would be left to wither away, thus obviating the need for the monarch to directly confront them.⁹⁵ Today, a state official or expert seeking to make a public policy appeal will often utilize Buddhist language, irrespective of how pertinent his announcement is to the practice of Buddhism because it still carries kammic import.⁹⁶ This creates a category of engagement with “truth” that is exclusively accessible through Buddhist vocabularies. In order to maintain the relationship between the monastic community and the

⁹⁵ I am indebted to Anne Blackburn of Cornell University for helping me make these connections.

⁹⁶ Spiro, *Buddhism*, 378-395.

government's moral-authority to rule, they must assert the validity of their policy through the filter of Buddhist doctrine. A failure to convincingly do this could lead to critique from the monastic community or lay practitioners. Contemporarily, when Aung San Suu Kyi wrote her famous manifesto, *Freedom from Fear*, she principally utilized Buddhist paradigms to criticize a government that had lost its authority, not as a secular institution, but as a Buddhist one.⁹⁷

The relationship between rulers and the monastic communities as co-preservers of dhamma is further complicated as monks centralize themselves as the guardians of moral-authority. "Ask hard questions about any subject and eventually you will find yourself talking to a monk," a Myanmar specialist told me as I was preparing for my fieldwork. Regional governors and rulers are all expected to kowtow to monks, patronize them, and learn from them. In fact, the lack of monastic patronage by the British became a lightning rod galvanizing support for the anti-colonial movement. Myanmar anthropologist, Juliane Schober indicates that, in the beginning, there had been an attitude of ambivalence in Myanmar regarding the colonial presence, causing some to muse that, had the British not been so insistent on a secular state with secular education, the Burmese Independence Army and the Dobama Association may have sided with the British and not the Japanese during World War Two. In similar fashion, General Ne Win attempted to secularize Myanmar after his successful coup of then leader U Nu, but he was met with great hostility. His ability to govern was destabilized by this reaction, forcing him to reverse course and heavily subsidize the sangha communities through means of alms giving and the construction of various stūpas, which is one of the central acts of a dhammarāja pretender.⁹⁸ Monks and rulers are both expected to preserve the dhamma and for both, their

⁹⁷ Mikael Gravers, "Questioning Autocracy in Burma," *Questioning the Secular State: the Worldwide Resurgence of Religion in Politics*, ed. by David Westerlund, (London: Hurst, 1996), 298.

⁹⁸ Schober, *Modern Buddhist Conjectures*, 46-61.

legitimacy in the eyes of the Ecumene depends upon this preservation. However, when crisis and transition occurs, it is often on the field of dhamma that authority is contested or asserted. Because the right to rule is based on the moral-authority of the saṅgha or government, accrued through rightfully interpreting the dhamma, it has the secondary effect of limiting any discussion or contest of authority to Buddhists.

Chapter 3.
The Ecumene rules by Dhamma: *Dhammarāja* as Motif

An Ecumene needs a representative leader, ruling in accordance to dhamma. Possibly the most important textual tradition for the curation of a Buddhist Ecumene is that of the *dhammarāja*. It would be a poor translation to say merely that a dhamma-rāja is a king/ruler (rāja) who rules according to the teachings of the Buddha (the dhamma), which is the most formal translation of the term. However, limiting the memory of a dhammarāja to a set of texts is also problematic. Instead, the term “dhammarāja” denotes an archetypal fulfillment of the Cakkavattin ruler, curated from the textual and historical traditions, especially in the memory of King Aśoka of India and King Anawrahta of Pagan.

A Cakkavattin is the dhammarāja par excellence, seen as the perfect embodiment of the Buddha’s secular counterpart. Because the attainment of the Cakkavattin title is difficult, it is more common for rulers to portray themselves as a dhammarāja, appealing to an archetypal fulfillment motif as the basis of their moral-authority to rule. This title means that they, the ruler, are on the path to arhatship (nibbana or salvation). If rulers are able to convince their subjects through their charisma (Burmese: *hpon*) that they are ruling as a dhammarāja pretender, their rule is cemented, overturned only in the most unusual circumstances. However, it also means that the ruler submits to the dhammarāja paradigm, and needs to pattern his or her decisions after historical or textual examples. If one rules and is not seen as protecting and promoting the *sāsana*, the monastic community may confer onto someone else the dhamma-mantle of rule. In some cases, this transfer of rule may incite a coup (as in the days of General Aung San because he was inclusive of religious minorities) or a dhamma-mandate to rule (as in the case of Aung San Suu Kyi; more below).

The dhammarāja is a paradigm: a way of ruling that is to be appealed to by the ruler in order to legitimize his or her reign by means of example. As an example of a lived memory of a dhammarāja in the future, Myanmar Buddhologist, Melford Spiro summarily characterizes the Future King who, according to a millennial belief, will be a Cakkavattin:

To be sure, he will be a pious Buddhist, turning the Wheel of the Law [Dhamma]...but more important, he will be the king of Burma, restoring law and order to that country, *driving out the foreigners* [emphasis added], and bringing prosperity and wealth to the Burmese people.⁹⁹

This provides the Ecumene with an example of an ideal leader. He or she will be one who restores law and order, drives out the non-Buddhist, and ushers in a time of great bounty for the Bamar people. This future fulfillment is based on the textual recollection of what the coming king will do.

Historical texts also provide the memory of what a dhammarāja does. The memory of these texts often does not coincide with a particular passage or sutta, but rather textual and historical examples of righteous kings that are preserved in texts influence or produce the collective memories of those kings and rulers that serve as paradigm. For example, in my interviews, several commented on the roles of Aśoka of India and Anawrahta of Pagan. They did not quote to me passages from the Cakkavattin Sutta or the Milindapañha. Within my interviewee's appeal for Buddhist rule, however, contained references to the rule of Aśoka and other monarchs, like King Milinda, which are only available through textual retelling.

The first function of a dhammarāja motif is, then, to solicit the memories of remembered texts in the Ecumene. The texts alluded to are not merely those that discuss the nature of a good king, like the *Edicts of Aśoka* or *The Book of Five*, but any and all texts that portray a

⁹⁹ Spiro, *Buddhism*, 173.

relationship between an exemplary king¹⁰⁰ and the faithful. For example, the King Milinda chronicles, while specifically teaching about a host of soteriological and metaphysical stymies, serves a dual purpose in showing an ideal relationship between the sangha head, represented by Bhikkhu (Venerable) Nagasena, and the sāsana head, represented by King Milinda. King Milinda learns at the feet of Nagasena, and his questions are received well. Milinda is well-versed in the dhamma and wise, but he is always the disciple of the Buddha.¹⁰¹ This interaction reinforces the submission of a king under the dhamma, rightly interpreted by the sangha head. This hierarchy is assumed by laity and monastics alike in Myanmar today.

A king's submission to dhamma is also reinforced in *The Book of the Fives*, a more explicit text on the nature of kingship. The Buddha reinforces a king's obligation to the dhamma:

“Bhikkhus, even a wheel-turning monarch, a righteous king who rules by Dhamma, does not turn the wheel without a king above him.”

When this was said, a certain bhikkhu said to the Blessed One: “But, Bhante, who could be the true king above a wheel-turning monarch, a righteous king who rules by the Dhamma?”

“It is the Dhamma, bhikkhu,” the Blessed One said. “Here, a wheel-turning monarch, a righteous king who rules by the Dhamma, relying just on the Dhamma, honoring, respecting, and venerating the Dhamma, taking the Dhamma as his standard, banner, and authority, provides righteous protection, shelter, and guard for the people in his court.”¹⁰²

Similarly, in *Dīgha Nikaya 26.10*, while teaching that right action leads to long life, the last phrase reinforces the right relationship between the ruler and the monkhood — this time typified by two celestial figures: the perfect, righteous king to come (Burmese: *Min Laun*) and the Buddha to come.

¹⁰⁰ Textually, the Cakkavattin, Mara, the Buddha, et al. must be male. However, queens and juntas in Myanmar have evoked the dhammarāja paradigms in their rules as well, a reimagining of textual traditions.

¹⁰¹ The *Milindapañha*, KN 18.

¹⁰² “The Book of the Fives,” A.N. III 133, 746.

atha kho, bhikkhave, saṅkha nāma rājā yo so yūpo raññā mahāpanādena kārapito.
 taṃ yūpaṃ ussāpetvā ajjhāvasitvā taṃ datvā vissajjitvā
 samaṇabrāhmaṇakapaṇaddhikavaṇibbakayācakānaṃ dānaṃ datvā metteyyassa
 bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa santike kesamassuṃ ohāretvā kāsāyāni
 vatthāni acchādetvā agāraṃ anagāriyaṃ pabbajissati.

At that time, O monks, Sankha, the name of the great king...having raised up (rebuilt) the great sacrificial hall of Mahāpanādena, having lived and dwelt in it, will give it to monks, brahmins, and wandering-monks. Having given alms, (he will) give up the homelife for homelessness (join a monastery), wear the brown/yellow robes, and shave his head, in the presence of the perfect enlightenment, arhatship, and blessedness of Metteyya [the millennial Buddha].
 —PTS: DN III 76, translation my own

Many of these passages are not known in Myanmar, but the dogmas are. People know readily what a dhammarāja is, but only in a sense, saying, “He is a Buddhist president.” This is an answer I heard quite often. Nobody I interviewed knew what a Cakkavattin was, much less the textual tradition regarding it. Additionally, about half of my interviewees could tell me nothing about Aśoka, other than he was someone to look up to and was once the king of India. Nobody knew when he ruled, but most knew it was early. However, all could readily tell me about Anawrahta and that he was a dhammarāja to be emulated.

The texts that *are* remembered are the Jātaka Tales. It is these that set civil service and government firmly in the Buddhist moral universe. In Myanmar, Jātakas learned in adolescence have the most enduring contribution to the Imagined Ecumene. They are learned in the monastery, in the home, and often serve as the reason for circumscribing behavior. Jātaka Tales are stories about how the Buddha, in his previous lifetimes, exhibited ideal Buddhist behaviors like self-sacrifice or generosity. Only about 25 percent of my Buddhist interviewees could recount a sutta or a prayer from memory.¹⁰³ All twenty could readily retell several Jātakas. As a regular feature, Jātakas have stories about the Embryonic Buddha serving as a king or prince

¹⁰³ that is five out of twenty who identified as Buddhist.

before his great awakening.¹⁰⁴ Myanmar Buddhologist Winston King suggests that Burmese Jātakas are so central to Buddhist pedagogy that, more than the memorization of any texts or suttas, they serve as the basis for the creation of Burmese Buddhist orthodoxy.¹⁰⁵ From these stories, doctrines expounded by the Buddha are identified and reinforced. Broadly, Jātakas illustrate the cardinal moral vices of greed (lobha), anger (dosa), and delusion (moha), three cardinal sins in the Buddhist framework. The Jātakas then juxtapose these vices with their respective counterparts, generosity (dāna), loving-kindness (mettā), and wisdom (paññā) as chief moral virtues. The following virtues are praised as the Ten Buddhist Perfections (Pāramī) elucidated in the final ten Jātakas:

<i>“The Ten Great Pāramī” Taught in the Last Ten Jātaka</i>	
Dāna	Generosity; specifically, charitable alms giving to monks and monasteries
Sīla	Virtue; Precept; specifically, as outlined in the Dhamma. To keep the Precepts is to keep the teaching of the Buddha.
Nekkhamma	Renunciation; specifically, becoming a monk for a season, or by becoming a Buddhist civil servant.
Pañña	Insight; specifically, realizing the nature of how the world works, dependent arising, and the impermanence of all things.
Viriya	Right effort; diligence; specifically, discipline in maintaining the Buddha’s teachings and practicing meditation.
Khanti	Patience; endurance; sometimes tolerance
Sacca	Truth; honesty
Adhitthāna	Resolve; steadfastness
Mettā	Loving-kindness
Upekkhā	Equanimity; sometimes thought of as empathy, but pathos is to be avoided.

¹⁰⁴ *King Fruitful and Queen Sivali* feature over twenty-four stories of the Embryonic Buddha either engaged with a royal court or portrayed as a king. This is a modern-day retelling of Jātaka tales.

¹⁰⁵ King, *A Thousand Lives*, 58-59.

Theravāda Buddhism recognizes a stunning 547 Jātaka Tales. Of the 547, the last ten carry special significance, recited and memorized from a young age. Eight of these ten illustrate the life of the Embryonic Buddha as a king or a prince, repetitively signaling that the great Buddha arrived at his position through civil service. This has the pedagogical effect of reinforcing civil service as a means of nibbanic (arhatship) salvation. *The Great Ten Jātaka* were standardized very early, each tale a portrayal of one of the ten virtues of Buddhism. King Anawrahta enshrined these ten in Shwezayan Pagoda after his defeat of the Mon king, Makuta, in 1054-58 CE. His successor, the self-titled Śrī Tribhuvanāditya Dhammarāja, continued the great building projects initiated by Anawrahta and preserved all 547 Jātakas, in both fresco and terra-cotta. As Myanma archeologist U Lu Pe Win records, “In the Jātakas...the Buddha Gautama has made clear for us to understand and realize what the Sammā Sambudha Bodhi is. It is described as the most difficult and desirable vehicle, to get delivered...and ultimately to attain the Mahāparinibbāna.”¹⁰⁶

One Jātaka well known in Myanmar is the story of Prince Sattya. Prince Sattya, walking along a path, happens upon a famished tigress and her hungry cubs, situated below Prince Sattya off a cliff. At first, he asks his servant to go find food for them. While the servant is away, the prince ponders the wheel of life (saṃsāra; or, the cycle of birth and rebirth), and out of great compassion, throws himself down the cliff, sacrificing himself for the tigress and her cubs. The parable illustrates the equanimity and loving-kindness of a noble king, willing to sacrifice his own welfare for the sake of even animals. This sort of story is often referenced when critiquing authorities who have lost their moral-authority. The story of Prince Sattva has a two-fold

¹⁰⁶ U Lu Pe Win, “The Jātakas in Burma,” *Artibus Asiae. Supplementum*, Vol. 23, Essays Offered to G. H. Luce by His Colleagues and Friends in Honour of His Seventy-Fifth Birthday, Volume 2: Papers on Art and Archaeology (1966): 96.

hortatory purpose: rulers are to be self-sacrificing, and they are to cultivate the Ten Perfections. As a pedagogical instrument, this Jātaka and others like it, communicates that a path to both arhatship and kammatic salvation¹⁰⁷ lies in the auspices of civil service.

The Ten Virtues expounded by the Jātakas are often used by members of the Ecumene to critique rulers who have lost the moral right to rule. Daw Suu utilized the principle of mettā, saying of the military regime, “There's so little loving-kindness and compassion in what they say, in what they write and what they do. That's totally removed from the Buddhist way ... [and removed] from the people.”¹⁰⁸ The Virtues are also grounds for significant disagreement regarding policy decisions the government makes, with critics often utilizing a non-traditional interpretation of these virtues to make their point (see more below). More specifically, Jātakas that feature the Embryonic Buddha as Royalty serve a pedagogical purpose, reinforcing the route of civil service as a means to future-life-betterment, possibly even leading to arhatship. They normalize the public sphere as a Buddhist sphere and exalt someone serving in that sphere as a possible Buddha-to-become (a Pacceka-Buddha or Cakkavattin). If someone aspires to the office of overseer, they desire a noble and spiritual office. Thus, anyone who is claiming the role or title of dhammarāja, or anyone who is critiquing someone who claims that title, is meddling in cosmological aspirations.

¹⁰⁷ As opposed to nibbanic salvation. Since the Arhat path is so strenuous in Theravāda, most resign themselves to merit-making through donation and meditation, hoping for a better rebirth. See Spiro, *Buddhism*, 31-128.

¹⁰⁸ Suu Kyi, *Freedom*, 21. Quoted in McCarthy, “Buddhist Political Rhetoric,” 77.

Chapter 4. **Dhamma Rule: *Exemplary Models***

The dhammarāja and Cakkavattin paradigms find historical role models in the persons of King Aśoka of India (c. 250 BCE) and King Anawrahta of Pagan (c. 1044 CE). The memories of both are textually informed, transmitted through lived memory.¹⁰⁹ According to my interviews, Buddhism’s entrenchment in Myanmar resulted from the influence of both these men: Aśoka for his benevolence in sending the missionaries, and Anawrahta for his ability to unite “all of Burma” and distribute the dhamma. Including the Buddha himself, these three men are idealized as those responsible for Buddhism’s spread, thereby earning great merit and moral-authority. They became role models and exemplary leaders, such that, leaders desiring to exercise moral-authority regularly appealed to the memories of Aśoka or Anawrahta. In doing so, they appealed to a memory of Buddhist kingship that sets forth a paradigm for rule. These memories are uniquely Buddhist, and should one want to engage with them or challenge them, it would require knowledge of the historical pattern and familiarity with the basis for it.¹¹⁰

The right to rule has historically been tied to a ruler’s understanding of the dhamma, the presence of charisma (*hpon*), and the ruler’s ability to carry out/enable merit-making actions (Paññakamma). The inability to make patronage, the presence of natural disasters, or the loss of territory makes a ruler’s mandate tenuous. By appealing to Buddhist terminology, his community can invoke an appeal that the ruler has lost his mandate as a dhammarāja pretender, delegitimizing one’s rule. This construction of moral-authority, and the subsequent loss of it, has the effect of requiring any given leader to fit preexisting, Buddhist notions of rule, authority, and

¹⁰⁹ Aśoka is textually preserved through the *Aśokavadana* and the *Edicts of Aśoka*. and Anawrahta through several documents and lithographs but especially through the *Yazawin* chronicles and the *Mahazawingyi*, *Yazawinlat*, and *Yazawinkhyup* chronicles recorded by U Kala.

¹¹⁰ Swearer, “Buddhism in Southeast Asia,” 126.

accountability, making political leadership inaccessible for the non-Buddhist. Critiques of the government not couched in Buddhist terms fall on deaf ears and are not seen as trenchant as the critiques levied by monks or laity quoting Buddhist dogmas.

In addition to the use of Buddhist notions to construct and challenge moral-authority, a common text further solidifies membership in the Buddhist Ecumene, enabling the ruler and ruled to share a common vision for the region in which they live: a kind of national identity reinforced through appeals to the Buddhist texts and traditions. As we will see, a Buddhist Ecumene—one that utilizes Buddhist technologies and vernaculars to construct and critique moral-authority—implicitly ostracizing the *other*, raising the entry cost for non-Buddhists while freely welcoming Buddhists, even if they are non-Bamar.

As to the memories themselves, a few patterns are manifest in Aśoka's rule in India, mimicked by Anawrahta in Pagan. Both relied heavily upon textual Buddhism as a means for consolidating their power and legitimizing their reign.¹¹¹ Aśoka's main contribution to the dhammarāja paradigm comes from edicts that he scattered throughout his kingdom and a Sanskrit chronicle widely circulated in South India. While both of these works are extra-canonical, his record is well-circulated and well-read today. It is Aśoka's example that King Anawrahta of Myanmar appealed to when he applied to himself the title Cakkavattin. An inscription at Shwezigon Pagoda indicates that the memory of Aśoka and some paradigm of dhammarāja were well-known to Anawrahta. His grandson appropriated even grander appellations, ascribing to himself the title "The Blessed Buddhist King, Sun of the Three Worlds."¹¹² Aśoka's legacy, much like Anawrahta's, remains a thing of fables and memories

¹¹¹ As evidenced by their patronage and widespread distribution of the texts, as a state-sponsored event.

¹¹² Swearer, *Buddhist World*, 94.

since not much is known about his reign.¹¹³ His legacy is so heavily influenced by *The Edicts of Aśoka*¹¹⁴ and *The Book of the Fives* that the conquests required to unify the Indian subcontinent are often glossed over.

Both of these figures remain relevant to the contemporary regime. Southeast Asian scholar Donald Swearer shows that all dhammarāja pretenders harken back to Aśoka as the supreme example.¹¹⁵ The current Burmese government can trace its heritage back to Anawrahta in Pagan. Moreover, icons of Anawrahta abound. There is a statue of Anawrahta that keeps guard in front of the Defense Services Academy, which trains all military officers in Myanmar. An additional statue of Anawrahta stands outside the National Museum of Myanmar, in Yangon, reminding the world of Anawrahta's iconic legacy in Myanmar.

Movies, dramas, short stories, and comics are made and remade about Anawrahta and other Buddhist kings fulfilling the dhammarāja paradigm. These kings go to war against “unorthodox” Buddhism¹¹⁶ and Muslim invaders.¹¹⁷ Hagiographies and glorifications in vernacular literature communicate values very clearly: the best rulers are the ones that hail in the tradition of the dhammarāja, best embodied by Anawrahta. As one layman asked me, “How else

¹¹³ John Strong, *The Legend of King Aśoka: A Study and Translation of the Aśokāvadana*, (Princeton University Press: Princeton, NJ, 1983).

¹¹⁴ Curated from a group of thirty-three pillars erected around India.

¹¹⁵ Swearer, *Buddhist World*, 72-119.

¹¹⁶ e.g., Ari Buddhism in Anawrahta's day.

¹¹⁷ Goh, *Wheel-Turner* 175-196.

Image 1.1: King Anawrahta outside the Defense Services Academy; image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.



Image 1.2: King Anawrahta outside the National Museum of Myanmar; image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.



might one explain the purity and the history of Buddhism’s presence in Burma [if not for Anawrahta’s Buddhist consolidation]?”¹¹⁸

Before evaluating modern case studies regarding the Burmese conceptualization of an Ecumene, it is helpful to note certain behavioral norms exhibited by both Aśoka and Anawrahta. By examining these norms, we determine a pattern, which will aid us in assessing the degree to which a current government or ruler fancies themselves to be a dhammarāja or whether the ruled fancy themselves as living in an Ecumene. Irrespective of one’s opinion of either Aśoka or Anawrahta, it is clear that they both represent a fulfillment of the dhammarāja model. From their similarities of rule, I will endeavor to construct a model of “dhammarāja behaviors,” which we can apply to other dhammarāja pretenders.

¹¹⁸ Unpublished field notes, at Shwedagon Pagoda, Yangon, Myanmar, June 2016.

Both establish an Ecumene by first ascribing to themselves moral-authority, or the moral “right” to rule, by putting themselves in the Dhammarāja lineage.

This happens first through a conversion narrative followed by engagement in merit-making activities. These activities revolve around learning and practicing the dhamma. Dhamma learning comprises both textual memory and meditation practice. Aśoka ascended the throne amidst great commotion, calling the gods to crown him immediately once the reigning king indicated he intended to crown someone else. The gods obeyed, and instantly, the reigning king (Bindusāra) vomited blood and died, thus conferring on Aśoka a divine mandate to rule. After a period of violent power consolidation, Aśoka converts to Buddhism, having had an insightful confrontation with a monk who foresaw that Aśoka would embrace the true dhamma. Afterwards, Aśoka, while on a hunting trip – a less than ideal practice for a Buddhist – meets a monk in the forest, who provided the second confrontation. This time, Aśoka was admonished with the need to make merit. He sets out to make merit by “prostration and other bodily acts of worship” and by seeking out the monk, Upagata, to whom he makes a vow to give up everything for the sake of the dhamma. Soon thereafter, he goes on an extended merit-making pilgrimage.¹¹⁹ This conversion and continual submission to the dhamma is what conferred on him the right to be king.¹²⁰

While in his court, Anawrahta meets with a monk who was brought in by a hunter. Seeing the monk as a holy person, King Anawrahta, asks the monk about his lineage and status. He does this by asking him to sit down in a seat befitting it. So, the monk went up to Anawrahta’s throne and sits there. Anawrahta demands to know his lineage, to which the monk, Shin Araham, responds,

“My lineage is that of the line of Samma-Sambudda (universal Buddha), fully endowed with nine intrinsic virtues beginning with the essence of the three gems, six powers beginning with that rulership, and four incomprehensible truths beginning with incomprehensible wisdom. When you asked me whose doctrine

¹¹⁹ Strong, *Legend*, 209.

¹²⁰ Swearer, “Buddhism in Southeast Asia,” 124.

do I follow? I accept the...profound teaching which...the Lord Buddha who possesses the title of Samma-sambuddha preached.”

On hearing this, Anawrahta is exhilarated and he asks Shin Araham to preach. At this point a direct analogy to Aśoka is made,

“Shin Araham also preached the religious teachings beginning with the Appamada which the novice Nigrodha had preached to King Siridhammasoka (Aśoka).”¹²¹

Anawrahta was a practitioner of Mahāyāna (Ari) Buddhism, and before his consolidation of Theravāda Buddhism later in life, Mahāyāna Buddhism was quite popular in Pagan. A traveling monk from the Mon kingdom visited Pagan and convinced Anawrahta that he was practicing an impure Buddhism, and that there were original texts the monk was versed in that contained the pure teaching of the Buddha. This served as justification for a holy war against the Mon kingdom in Thatôn, “liberating” the palm-leaf canon (supposedly, the Tipiṭaka in written form) in order to bring it to Pagan for copying and distribution. Myanmar Historian Victor Lieberman suggests a less magnanimous perspective. Ari Buddhism conferred too much authority and power on the local monks, who conscripted youth as workers in their monasteries. Anawrahta’s conversion was a means of divesting power away from these monks, forcing them to re-ordain into the new saṅgha lineage that Anawrahta sought to establish with the help of Mon monks. His “conversion” reinvigorated the dhamma, securing his right to rule as monarch. His reforms furthered his merit by purging Buddhism of errant doctrine.¹²² Moreover, Anawrahta ascribed to himself the title “Cakkavattin,” embedding it at Shwezigon Pagoda for all to see. Given the clear implication of Anawrahta's self-appropriation of this title, venerators would not have been confused when going to the stūpa and seeing the inscription. That he applied this term in this way indicates familiarity with the dhammarāja paradigm for Buddhist rulers.

¹²¹ Story and background provided in Goh, *Wheel-turner*, 107-108. Quotation from: U Kala, *Mahayazawingyi*, Volume 1: 175-176.

¹²² Victor B. Lieberman, *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, C 800-1830*, Studies in Comparative World History, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 115-116.

Both establish an Ecumene by extending the physical borders of the Buddhist faithful through military conquest.

Pagoda construction was often abetted by military administration and organization. For Aśoka, this is most evident in the edicts he distributed throughout his kingdom.¹²³ Aśoka the Fierce, a title attributed before his conversion, is credited with unifying all of the Indian subcontinent under his reign and sending missionaries to Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Macedonia. His stūpa construction was aided by military troops. He was named ruler over the four continents by Upagata, a symbolic fulfillment of his world-conquering reign. A world-conqueror, in practice, desires to push the boundaries of the faithful outward in the four cardinal directions (Digvijaya), though not necessarily reign over the world; there is simply no evidence that the ability or inability to rule over the entirety of the known region was an indication of fulfillment of the dhammarāja office. However, territory loss is considered a major indicator of a loss of kamma, potentially indicating that one's good kamma has been spent, thereby weakening one's claim as dhammarāja.

Similarly, Anawrahta went to war to expand his kingdom. Mon emissaries and monks made contact with him, and it was these monks who were the impetus for his conversion. After an appeal from the Mon to retrieve the Tipiṭka from Thatôn, in the Mon kingdom, Anawrahta went on a military conquest, subduing the region, subverting their governors, and establishing the area as a protectorate of the Pagan throne. This conquest was surely beyond the request of the mendicant Mon monks. Anawrahta's conquering of Mon state was not simply securing vassalage; this was kingdom expansion, evidenced by the removal of rulers and their

¹²³ Aśoka's inscriptions are a series of edicts and placards set up and distributed throughout the Indian subcontinent. They contain the *Edicts of Aśoka*, of which thirty-three are preserved. See: Harry Falk, *Ashokan Sites and Artefacts: A Source-Book with Bibliography*, (Philipp von Zabern, 2006).

replacement with Pagan governors. Several Burmese sources suggest that, after Anawrahta's conversion, he went down to conquer Thatôn, in order to bring clergy and books back to Pagan.¹²⁴ Once acquired, these books would be studied, memorized, copied, and distributed. After the subjugation of the Mon kingdom, Anawrahta went on an impressive colonizing mission, extending the borders of Burmese territory to include sections previously affiliated with the Mon, Shan, Pyu, and Arrakan kingdoms. Myanma historian Htin Aung opines that Anawrahta's greatness partially consisted in his "consolidation of various ethnic groups into a single nation."¹²⁵ This consolidation was not the erasure of differences, but rather the unification of the region under a consolidated religion and a consolidated text, reminiscent of Anderson's print capitalism.

Both establish an Ecumene by physical pagoda/stūpa construction.

Border expansion of dhamma reign is also reflected in stūpa construction. In the account immediately following Aśoka's conversion, the *Aśokāvadana* says, "Then King Aśoka, intending to distribute far and wide the bodily relics of the Blessed One, went together with a fourfold army to the drona stupa," which housed the Buddha's relics.¹²⁶ Aśoka broke it open and removed the relics, intending to distribute them as far as his kingdom stretched by constructing 84,000 stupas and leaving a box of relics at each one. On encountering a city of 36,000 who requested thirty-six of the relic boxes, he "could not agree to this if the relics were to be distributed far and wide." So, he told them that since he could not give them more than one box, he would execute 35,000 of them. They relented, suggesting that Aśoka's threat carried some degree of credibility.

¹²⁴ Michael Aung-Thwin, contesting Luce, argues that this was a complete fabrication, an "imagined event," arguing that, "Of more than 600 original extant inscriptions belonging to the Pagan period...Aniruddha's [Anawrahta's] conquest of Thatôn is not mentioned in a single one." Aung Thwin, 2005, 105.

¹²⁵ Htin Aung, *A History of Burma*, (New York, NY: Columbia University Press: 1967), 35.

¹²⁶ Strong, *Legend*, 219.

After this, the section in the *Aśokāvadana*, the passage concludes, “Now when King Aśoka had completed the eighty-four thousand dharmarājikās, he *became a righteous dharmarāja* [emphasis added]”.¹²⁷ This suggests that the State’s use of violence, even against other, ostensibly Buddhist, practitioners, is hailed as a moral virtue if it furthers the cause of spreading Buddhist relics, and by inference, Buddhism itself.¹²⁸

From that time before he arrived in Myanmar country, he [Anawrahta] built the Buddha’s temples and monasteries, rest houses and stops all over Myanmar country everywhere without exception and returned to the capital, Paukkarama.¹²⁹

Anawrahta’s construction projects were similarly impressive. Not only did he enshrine the 37 Nat Spirits¹³⁰ into the Buddhist religion at Shwezigon Pagoda (a great feat of normalizing regional practices in a universalizing religion), but he began construction projects that would be picked up by his successors. He built as far away as Kachin State (Shwegu) and started many of the 10,000 stupa projects completed between 1044-1287 CE in central Myanmar. These projects often served a dual function: patronizing the sangha, thus contributing to his right to rule, and consolidating the religious practices of outlying minorities. The codification of Nats into the recognized religion of the empire was a strategic move on Anawrahta’s part, formalizing the local religious practices as part of Burmese Theravāda Buddhism, something Ari Buddhism tolerated, but did not codify.

For both kings, edict placement and stūpa construction serve as tangible reminders that the community is bound together through dhamma proclamation and that the king took seriously

¹²⁷ Strong, *Legend*, 221.

¹²⁸ Goh, *Wheel turner*, 32.

¹²⁹ U Kala, *Mahayazawingyi*, Volume 1: 177, recorded and translated in Goh, *Wheel-turner*, 115.

¹³⁰ When I went, I remember 36, but all history books reference 37. There was a Nat “added” to the cohort in the middle nineteenth century, and it is unknown if the number 37 incorporates that Nat or not. If it does, my observation stands: King Anawrahta codified 36, not 37, Nats.

his obligation to make his kingdom a place where the Bodhisattva path can be practiced.¹³¹

Ensuring the Bodhisattva path was simultaneously accompanied by a major emphasis on literacy in a vernacular script, learned by the masses through time spent in a monastery.¹³²

Both established an Ecumene through the purification of the already present Buddhism, specifically through textual reproduction and “reform” of monks deemed errant.

Moral-authority in Myanmar revolves around who or what has the definitive interpretation of dhamma. While it is normally the saṅgha who have the definitive interpretation, if the ruler is able to convince the populace that the nation is in a period of moral decline, the ruler is able to initiate drastic reforms despite monastic protest. Aśoka supposedly sponsored the Third Buddhist Council, though why there is no mention of it in his inscriptions is unusual. Normally, rulers are quick to assign to themselves a meritorious action, especially one as grand as that. The Council was called only after a great amount of bloodshed. One of Aśoka’s advisors beheaded monk after monk who refused to participate in a mandatory ceremony ordered by Aśoka, in addition to other monks he deemed licentious. The advisor continued with the beheadings until he came face-to-face with Tissa, Aśoka’s only remaining brother (the rest had been killed by Aśoka in his consolidation of power). Upon seeing the extent of the heresy, and horrified at the prospect of killing Aśoka’s brother, he ran to tell Aśoka, and they convened the Third Council. In explaining the reason for calling the Third Buddhist Council, the fifth chapter of the *Mahāvamsa* records,

¹³¹ Swearer, *Buddhism in Southeast Asia*, 124.

¹³² Mi Mi Khaing shares the story of a woman tending a cotton field who engages in a catechism duel (in Pali) with a passing monk in the Pyu era, pre-Pagan era. Scholars assume that traditions like this one continued with Anawrahta’s reforms, given the asset of a literate community. These textual histories indicate that women were not merely involved in the same spheres of life as men, but they achieved relatively high status in those spheres as well. They also reveal that it was valuable for both men and women to be trained at the *hpongyi-caun* (monastery schools), whether or not they ultimately pursued the holy life. Societally, the presence of strong Burmese queens and their ability to make merit are notable Buddhist phenomena as well. Mi Mi Khaing, *The World of Burmese Women*, Third World Studies, (Totowa, N.J.: Zed Books; U.S. Distributor, Biblio Distribution Center: 1984), 5.

Out of the great number of the brotherhood of bhikkhus the therā chose a thousand learned bhikkhus, endowed with the six supernormal powers, knowing the three pitakas and versed in the special sciences, to make a compilation of the true doctrine. Together with them did he, in the Asokarama, make a compilation of the true dhamma...The great earth shook at the close of the council.¹³³

Regarding Anawrahta's reforms, the *Mahayazawingyi* records:

During King Anawrahta's reign, it was called Paukkarama. Generations of kings in that kingdom accepted the doctrine of the 30 Ayegyī [Ari monks] and their 60,000 disciples living at Thamahti, and the wrong belief was established...In this manner, they taught, beginning with incorrect and false wrongful beliefs, which they called 'dhamma.'

From then on, the sons and daughters of all starting with and including the king, ministers, generals, village administrators...at that time when preparing to get married, must be sent to the teachers [the Ari monks] at nightfall, 'to give the prime of their flower [their virginity].' It was said that at dawn, they were freed and allowed to wed. The king having matured had become virtuous, and he was disconsolate to hear and observe such wrongful practices.¹³⁴

...Shin Arahan also told those who revered the religion to become fully-ordained monks. The king also ordered the defrocking of the 30 Ari monks together with their 60,000 pupils and put [some of] them in his lance cavalry...¹³⁵

Anawrahta completely eviscerated Ari Buddhism, which was prominent in Pagan when he came to power. Impurity of behavior, especially aberrant sexual exploits, is often cited as cause for reform. Apparently, monks were engaging in a form of *prima nocta* and conscripting monks from various family lines.¹³⁶ In light of this, it is likely the case that Anawrahta's desire to bring Mon monks to Pagan was two-fold: to obtain the written *Tipiṭka* and to initiate a pure monastic line (one that leads back to the Buddha). This allowed a complete overhaul of the religious order; monks that had established seniority under Ari *saṅgha* lineages had to begin anew by joining the new Theravāda lineages. Seniority could only be attained by spending time within a specific *saṅgha* lineage. These lineages do not signify different sects, but rather

¹³³ Geiger, *The Mahāvamsa*, Chapter 5.

¹³⁴ U Kala, *Mahayazawingyi*, Volume 1: 173-174, quoted and translated in Goh, *Wheel-turner*, 110.

¹³⁵ *Ibid*, Volume 1: 178, quoted and translated in Goh, *Wheel-turner*, 117.

¹³⁶ Lieberman, *Strange Parallels*, 114-116.

different heritages, as recorded by the different disciples of the Buddha, the ones ultimately attributed with remembering and recording the dhamma as spoken by the Buddha.¹³⁷ Anawrahta continued to reform Theravāda even after its introduction, regularly culling the monastic lineages and even sending missionaries to Sri Lanka and Thailand on the pretense of reinvigorating the mission there and purifying it from Muslim influences.

Both established an Ecumene through the state patronage of the saṅgha communities.

By patronizing the Sangha communities, geographical regions were established in which the State asserted its mandalic sphere of influence and protection. State patronage of saṅgha communities also fulfilled the dhammarāja requirement to provide a safe community for Bodhisattva practitioners. Aśoka scholar Jerry Bentley says, “Ashoka [Aśoka] regarded Buddhism as a doctrine that could serve as a cultural foundation for political unity.”¹³⁸ Aśoka’s generous patronage is what led so many to pursue a monastic life: it gave them a sense of security. Providing for the saṅgha is critical to establishing a ruler’s moral-authority as a righteous king. Aśoka’s generous patronage was, no doubt, an attempt to show that he occupied an ecclesiastical role. However, it was his generosity to the monastic life that led more “worldly” people to see monasticism as a comfortable career move. Less savory practitioners no doubt took advantage of Asoka’s generosity, leading to tension within the saṅgha and eventually the Third Buddhist Council. In fact, the paramount rubric for determining a ruler’s effectiveness

¹³⁷ Ananda, Sariputta, Moggallāna, and others all remembered different portions of the Dhammapitika, and are the primogenitors of the different lineages. I am tempted to make an analogy to the different orders within Catholicism, but this is an imperfect analogy because the differences between the orders are quite stark. A Benedictine might never utter a Franciscan prayer, or attend a Franciscan service. This would be highly unusual within the Theravāda imaginaire, as monks travel between Thailand, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar from different lineages and join together to recite different Suttas, Pali being utilized as a lingua franca.

¹³⁸ Jerry Bentley, *Old World Encounters: Cross-Cultural Contacts and Exchanges in Pre-Modern Times* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 46.

is one's ability to provide a safe environment for those pursuing the Bodhisattva path to accumulate merit.¹³⁹

Anawrahta's patronage consisted of finances and labor. Lieberman points out that in Pagan, as in Angkor, there is very little evidence of slave labor having been used for the construction of large projects.¹⁴⁰ It is likely that, in both cases, the populations voluntarily built these edifices, under generous patronage.¹⁴¹ As already mentioned, discriminatory patronage served the purpose of causing specific saṅgha lineages to thrive, increasing the appeal to join, and thereby, grow those lineages. This was a passive way to rebuke monks who were inimical or critical of a ruler's reign. It also served to encourage merit-making through stūpa construction and saṅgha membership.

Conclusion

In conclusion, a dhammarāja motif is textually remembered by a Buddhist Ecumene as a righteous king who rules according to dhamma, provides a safe environment for the flourishing of dhamma, and exemplifies the Ten Buddhist Perfections. Historically, the dhammarāja pretender finds exemplars in Aśoka and Anawrahta. In these examples, the motif is expanded to create a rubric by which a dhammarāja pretender can be evaluated. In review, a pretender must be a ruler who has a Buddhist conversion narrative and ascribes moral-authority (the basis for rule) to oneself by means of merit-making. A pretender endeavors to expand the physical boundaries of the Ecumene's "faithful" and certainly does not lose "Buddhist" territory. A pretender establishes a physical Ecumene through stūpa construction. A pretender purifies the

¹³⁹ Goh, *Wheel-turner*, 32.

¹⁴⁰ Lieberman, *Strange Parallels*, 114.

¹⁴¹ This begs the question of where the king's wealth originated, if not from the people. Plunder remains another possibility, but given the size of the building projects, it would have required quite a feat in administration and accounting.

existing errant Buddhist practitioners and patronizes those he esteems. The ruler also engages in textual reproduction, seen as reinvigorating the dhamma. Finally, as the representative head of the sāsana, a dhammarāja pretender engages in veneration and patronage of the saṅgha.

The texts of Buddhism serve as the basis for the imagined community: providing the vernacular by which power can be constructed or critiqued. While all texts dealing with a royal figure are used to construct a Buddhist ruler's relationship with the Buddhist ruled, the Jātakas feature most prominently, due to their memorability. The qualities expounded in these texts are utilized by dhammarāja pretenders to construe their right to rule. However, their subjects then refer back to those same qualities in order to critique the government. The dhammarāja paradigm and Buddhist precepts are employed to determine legitimacy and moral-authority, thus creating a state of tension between ruler and ruled within the Ecumene.¹⁴² Should non-Buddhists (utilizing non-Buddhist terminology) levy critiques against the government, those critiques are *othered* — relegated as lesser, under the primacy of dhamma, even if they are factually true.

¹⁴² Swearer, *Buddhist World*, 72.

Chapter 5. **Imagining the Ecumene: *Contemporary Iterations***

As I have already shown, an Ecumene needs three basic components: a ruler in the dhammarāja line, a Buddhist sāsana, and a territory, which, for our purposes, is subsumed under the kingship rubric of land expansion. The dhammarāja paradigm is appealed to by rulers in Myanmar to legitimize their rule. Taking this into consideration, how does the current government of Myanmar view themselves? Daw Suu, the ostensible leader of Myanmar, has been careful to construe herself in a certain fashion. I argue that she possesses all the required constituent parts to be considered a dhammarāja, leading a Buddhist Ecumene. Additionally, Myanmar's preceding administrations also thought of themselves in this fashion. The population's engagement with these administrations, and with one another, reveals an assumed Ecumene matrix. These behaviors all fit a perceived interpretive model of Ecumene. With this in mind, I will examine modern examples of ways Myanmar leaders and citizens participate in a Buddhist Ecumene.

In 2008, a new constitution was drafted and signed to transition Myanmar from a military junta to a "guided" democracy. This constitution guaranteed the military regime 25 percent of the seats in Parliament and required a 75 percent plus one vote to change the constitution, thus ensuring the regime's position for the foreseeable future. Until this point, the military's influence had been absolute. Plain clothes informants were everywhere. Even on my first trip to Myanmar in 2010, everybody was afraid to talk about Aung San Suu Kyi and the government transition, most uncertain of its likelihood to occur. Speak too loudly against the military, and one would disappear.

This new constitution, in theory, guaranteed the free exercise of religion for the entire country, while simultaneously recognizing the special place of Buddhism.¹⁴³ This appeal, “the special place of Buddhism,” may seem like an innocuous phrase, merely placating the 89 percent of the population that identifies as Theravada, until one realizes that, despite all the previous rhetoric of state-sponsored Buddhism, none of the prior constitutions had recognized Buddhism at all. Also, the new constitution sets up a contrast in sections 8.19 and 8.20: calling Buddhist practitioners “citizens of the State” while considering “Christianity, Hinduism, and Animism” as merely “existing” in the State. This effectively *others* the non-Buddhist groups as not being true citizens of the State. Even with the free exercise of religion, proselytization by non-Buddhist religions is forbidden, and blaspheming the Buddha – entirely dependent upon listener interpretation – is a Federal offense. What is likely meant by “the free exercise of religion” is that those who identify ethnically as religious minorities are permitted to remain ethnically “Christian” and, to a lesser extent, “Muslim.”¹⁴⁴

Blasphemy laws are enforced according to the Federal penal code.¹⁴⁵ Section 15.295-298 specifically deals with possible offenses, under the title “Of Offenses Related to Religion:”

- 295. Injuring or defiling place of worship, with intent to insult the religion of any class.
- 295A. Deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings of any class by insulting its religion or religious beliefs.
- 296. Disturbing religious assembly.

¹⁴³ 8.8 of Myanmar’s constitution says, “The State shall, in appointing or assigning duties, not discriminate against or in favour of any citizen with qualifications set for posts or duties based on race, birth, religion, and sex. However, nothing in this section shall prevent appointment of men to the positions that are naturally suitable for men only.” 8.19 and 8.20 read: “19. The State recognizes the special position of Buddhism as the faith professed by the great majority of the citizens of the State. 20. The State also recognizes Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Animism as the religions existing in the Union on the date on which the State Constitution comes into force.” *Constitution of the Republic of Myanmar*, 2008, Art. 8(8); 8(19)-8(20).

¹⁴⁴ That these are “ethnic” designations are explored in more detail below, but there has been a long history of conflation between “*lu-myo*” (race) and “*batha*” (religion).

¹⁴⁵ *Myanmar, The Penal Code*, 1975, accessed May 8, 2017, <http://hrlibrary.umn.edu/research/myanmar/Annex%20K%20-%20Myanmar%20Penal%20Code.pdf>.

297. Trespassing on burial - places, etc.
 298. Uttering words, etc.; with deliberate intent to wound religious feelings.¹⁴⁶

In 2015, three men were held for having a picture of the Buddha wearing headphones hanging in their café. They were subsequently sentenced to two and a half years of hard, strenuous labor for their crime, despite offering sincere apologies.¹⁴⁷ Outright discrimination is apparent in the application of these laws. Instead of using the word “*thathana* (sāsana)” to define religion, thereby limiting it to Buddhist practitioners, the law uses “*batha*,” which makes it applicable to all religious convictions. However, its application in the State courts is tendentious: offenses against Buddhism are not permissible, while offenses, even by the State, against other religions *are* permissible.¹⁴⁸

For a significant number of monks in Myanmar, the constitution’s official endorsement of Buddhism did not go far enough. In 2014, the Committee for the Protection of Race and Religion in Myanmar, known as Ma Ba Tha, submitted a proposal of four new laws (known as “Race and Religion Protection Laws”) to the Myanmar Parliament. They were signed into law on August 31, 2015, by then President Thein Sein. The fact that the dissatisfaction of a group of monks can influence law-making reveals the extent of lobbying power monasticism can exert on the State government of Myanmar. The laws were largely seen as targeting Muslims in Myanmar and tapped into the historic narratives of dhamma decline due to the influence of outsiders.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ ““Blasphemy” in Myanmar: three people convicted for “insulting Buddhism,”” *AsiaNews.it*, March 17, 2015, accessed May 8, 2017, <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Blasphemy-in-Myanmar:-three-people-convicted-for-insulting-Buddhism-33738.html>.

¹⁴⁸ Michael Caster, “Myanmar’s Religious Hate Speech Law,” *The Diplomat*, May 05, 2016, accessed May 8, 2017, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/05/myanmars-religious-hate-speech-law/>.

The first law applies to all citizens of Myanmar, even if they live abroad, and all foreigners who marry a Myanmar citizen (including those who live abroad). Its scope is international. This law specifically limits marriage to one man and one woman¹⁴⁹ and prohibits extra-marital affairs.¹⁵⁰ The target was Muslim men who married several women, propagating Islam through marital conversion and childbirth. Ironically, more lawsuits for adultery have been filed against Buddhist husbands than Muslim husbands.¹⁵¹

The second law set up religious boards at the township level, requiring that anyone wishing to convert — ostensibly *from* Buddhism *to* another religion — must submit an application, be interviewed and file an application request with the local board. The person desiring to convert is required to supply the board with their name, their reasons for converting, the names of their mother and father, their parents' respective religions, etc. The board then has the power to accept or reject the application based on its “completeness,” again determined by the reviewer.¹⁵² The Library of Congress summarizes,

The Religious Conversion Law requires that a Myanmar citizen who wishes to change his/her religion must obtain approval from a newly established Registration Board for religious conversion, set up in townships. The person must also undergo an interview and engage in religious study for a period not to exceed 90 days from the date of application, but extendable to 180 days at the applicant's request. If after that period the applicant still wishes to convert, the Registration Board will issue a certificate of religious conversion.¹⁵³

¹⁴⁹ Not intended to have homophobic language, but it is heteronormative.

¹⁵⁰ *Monogamy Bill*, Unofficial Translation, August 31, 2015, accessed May 8, 2017, http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs21/2015-Monogamy_Bill.pdf.

¹⁵¹ Ros Russell, editor, “Law aimed at Muslims in Myanmar strikes Buddhist targets,” *Myanmar Now*, December 16, 2015, accessed May 21, 2017, <http://www.myanmar-now.org/news/i/?id=ffc7217f-563f-426c-8bd6-74cdab0ed76d>.

¹⁵² “Religious Conversion Law,” Unofficially Translated by the Chin Human Rights Organization, August 31, 2015, accessed May 8, 2017, http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs18/2014-Draft_Religious_Conversion_Law-en.pdf.

¹⁵³ Shameema Rahman and Wendy Zeldin, “Burma: Four “Race and Religion Protection Laws” Adopted,” *Global Legal Monitor: Library of Congress*, Sept. 14, 2015, accessed May 14, 2017, <http://www.loc.gov/law/foreign-news/article/burma-four-race-and-religion-protection-laws-adopted/>.

The third law codified on August 31, 2015, is titled “The Myanmar Buddhist Women’s Special Marriage Law.” This law specifically requires women under the age of 20 to have parental consent to marry. It specifically targets Buddhist women who want to marry non-Buddhist men, and it provides exceptions for those who marry within the Buddhist faith (Buddhist to Buddhist) or those who marry outside the Buddhist faith (Muslim to Christian, Muslim to Muslim, but not Buddhist to *other*). A marriage certificate can only be issued if, within fourteen days prior to the issuing of a certificate, the intent to marry is made public and no complaints are received. *Any* dispute postpones the marriage until a court can examine the case.¹⁵⁴

The fourth and final law for the protection of race and religion involves population control. This law is the most aggressive; it allows states and divisions¹⁵⁵ “to request a presidential order limiting reproductive rates if it is determined that population growth, accelerating birth rates, or rising infant or maternal mortality rates are negatively impacting regional development.”¹⁵⁶ This, again, has the effect of *othering* the high birthrates of Muslims, in favor of the traditionally low birthrates of the Bamar. The low birthrate phenomenon of Southeast Asia has been discussed by other Southeast Asia scholars, but if the low birthrates *are* akin to what it means to be Bamar, then this law specifically targets non-Bamar religious groups, which tend to have higher birthrates.

Nevertheless, the new constitution and the transitional government under U Thein Sein were meant to represent steps toward liberal reform in Myanmar. But, rather than exhibiting the

¹⁵⁴ “The Myanmar Women’s Special Marriage Law (Draft),” Unofficial Translation, August 31, 2015, accessed May 8, 2017, http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs21/2015-Myanmar_Buddhist_Women_Special_Marriage_Bill.pdf.

¹⁵⁵ The administrative jurisdictions of Myanmar.

¹⁵⁶ Nobel Zaw, “Population Control Bill Could ‘Stop the Bengalis’: Wirathu,” *The Irrawaddy*, 7 April 2015, accessed May 20, 2017, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/population-control-bill-could-stop-the-bengalis-wirathu.html>.

characteristics of reform, the new constitution, and the subsequent four laws for the protection of race and religion, actually increased State promotion and protection of Buddhism. What did the government see as their responsibility to Buddhism? Did they view themselves as protecting an Ecumene? Based on the examples above, yes. Did they view themselves as part of the dhammarāja lineage? The lack of a figurehead makes this a difficult question to answer, given that the transitional government was just that – transitional. Even if U Thein Sein wanted to make merit in his role, he was limited by the upcoming election, which was sure to see the National League for Democracy (NLD) win. There was some speculation that U Thein Sein was hoping that the four Race and Religion Protection Laws would get lost in the bureaucratic process and that he could defer their ratification until after the election. However, receiving pressure from U Wirathu and the Ma Ba Tha, he ultimately deferred, his allegiance more to protecting the Buddhist Ecumene than the dhamma of liberalism. Despite significant international outcry, the government passed the four laws after a short period of consideration, indicating a State approach to Buddhism that yielded to Saṅgha influences while protecting and promoting the sāsana, both of which are mandated by a government that invokes a Buddhist paradigm. However, as mentioned above, an Ecumene needs a representative dhammarāja, and State sponsorship does not fully meet the dhammarāja requirement. It is clear that the State views the protection of the sāsana from outside influences as its responsibility, but due to the nature of the transitional regime and whether it fits a dhammarāja paradigm, one must look to Aung San Suu Kyi, the assumed figurehead in Myanmar.

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was viewed as the representative figure of the NLD, who had been denied rule in 1990 after a landslide victory in a rather bizarre election. Since before 1990, she had been placed under house arrest. However, after her release in 2010 and the

announcement of the elections in 2015, she became the assumed figurehead of the NLD and was the favorite to win in the election. And win, she did. Her party won 80 percent of the contested seats, giving them a super majority in Parliament. However, for her to be considered a dhammarāja, she needed a title that conferred on her greater responsibility than simply being the spokesperson or stateswoman for the NLD. The 2008 constitution specifically forbade her from becoming president of the country, which was ostensibly her aim.¹⁵⁷ So, after three closed door meetings with key military generals, possibly to try to repeal this proscription, the meetings concluded with the generals reiterating their established position to maintain, “rule of law.”¹⁵⁸ Her desire to have the title, “President” seemed resolutely out of her grasp, until she declared in an interview, “I will be above the president.” She created the position of Statesman, which had never existed before, thereby conferring on herself the position of supreme representative figurehead for Myanmar.¹⁵⁹ This declaration went uncontested and was welcomed by the populace. The military, likewise, seemed content with this positioning.

There still remains the question of the dhammarāja rubric outlined in these pages: having ascended to the highest position in the land, do the actions of Daw Suu indicate a fulfillment of the dhammarāja paradigm? For this, we must review the dhammarāja paradigm and ask how Daw Suu fits the paradigm’s requirements.

How does Daw Suu use technologies of Buddhism (the text and/or practice) to construct or deconstruct moral-authority?

¹⁵⁷ Chapter 3, clause 59f of Myanmar’s constitution forbids anybody married to a foreigner, or with children who hold citizenship elsewhere, to become president.

¹⁵⁸ Thomas Fuller, “Aung San Suu Kyi and Myanmar General Meet, Taking Steps Toward Sharing Power,” *The New York Times*, December 2, 2015, accessed May 12, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/03/world/asia/myanmar-aung-san-suu-kyi-meets-president-army.html?_r=0.

¹⁵⁹ Aung San Suu Kyi, “Suu Kyi 'will be above president' if NLD wins Myanmar election,” *BBC News*, Recorded Interview, November 5, 2015, accessed May 15, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-34729659>.

An appeal to textual concepts to contest and create moral-authority is partially why Aung San Suu Kyi labored to situate democracy as a Buddhist-friendly movement for the governance of Burma. She had to convince her supporters that the teachings of the Buddha supported a movement away from junta style government to a democratic one, also indicating that democracy, as an idea, was a foreign concept to Buddhism, needing justification. To make her point in favor of a Buddhist “authorized” transition to democracy, Daw Suu first formulated a critique against the authoritarian regimes through the use of the Ten Virtues of Kings (see below). She accused the then military regime of not ruling according to the Buddhist principle of mettā (loving-kindness). She then appealed to the need for a transition to a democracy in order for mettā to find an outlet through government. It was clear through her reasoning that, if democracy was ever going to come to Myanmar, it must first be situated in the time-honored interpretive matrix of Buddhist dhamma, and especially the dhamma that the then regime had been using to legitimize their rule. She contested the military junta’s legitimacy utilizing the same Buddhist tools they used to assert their moral-authority. They, as a military junta, had already made an interpretive leap from the textual traditions of solitary kingship by operating in junta-like solitary fashion. The presence of a strong-man/warrior-general played into preexisting notions of dhammarāja kingship. It was strong-men and military generals like U Nu, then Ne Win, and then Than Shwe; strong-men, who secured the succession for the military. But, rule by junta was never part of the original Buddhist paradigms for rule. If junta rule was permissible through resituating the dhamma, surely a similar resituating could validate a democratic transition. Daw Suu, after the democratic transition, became something of a strong-(wo)man herself, outlined below.

Already being outside the most obvious translation of the dhammarāja model (as the government was being ruled by a collective, rather than a king), Daw Suu’s task now was to argue that the then regime had lost their moral-authority to rule, that the dhamma was in a state of decline, and that Buddhism supported a democratic transition. For all three, she applied the Ten Duties of Kings (different from the Ten Virtues), which Daw Suu articulated in her widely distributed book, *Freedom from Fear*, where she listed the duties as “almsgiving, observance of the Buddhist Precepts, liberality, rectitude, gentleness, self-restriction, control of anger, avoidance of the use of violence in his relationship with the people or avoidance of maltreatment of the people, forbearance, and “non-opposition” against the people's will.”¹⁶⁰ Non-compliance, or a failure on the part of a regime to uphold these Precepts, could result in a populace’s decision to “withdraw their mandate at any time if they lose confidence in the ability of the ruler to serve their best interests.”¹⁶¹

Having set the framework to give Buddhists the ability to initiate an oppositional movement against a government claiming Buddhist divine-right to rule, she now had the task of building up an argument for a democratic transition. By interpreting the virtue of mettā to include an active component, she established the notion that the government has a responsibility to relate to and love the people, and that this could only be accomplished by having a relationship with the people and being of the people. In her mind, this was solved by the principle of a representative democracy.

She also used the transformative elements of Vipassana meditative techniques to further instill democratic principles, specifically the idea of equality. Until the 1960s in Myanmar,

¹⁶⁰ Aung San Suu Kyi, *Freedom from Fear*, 170-173.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 173.

meditation and spiritual attainment was very hierarchical. Then, a great meditation teacher named Mahasi Sayadaw popularized and rebranded the method, taking the hierarchical elements of meditative attainment away. In theory, anybody and everybody could excel in meditation. Daw Suu had practiced this meditation style while under house arrest and applied its popular teachings to democracy, similarly “decentralizing” authority. As Mahasi Vipassana was seen as a better way to individual enlightenment, so, too, would democracy be better in cultivating Buddhist virtues and rescuing the dhamma from decline. These elements represented for Daw Suu the ability of Buddhism to support a democratic transition, presumably with her at the helm.¹⁶²

How does Daw Suu ascribe moral-authority to herself by putting herself in the dhammarāja lineage?

As outlined above, being able to ascribe moral-authority requires the presence of a conversion narrative coupled with merit-making actions. In 1989, Aung San Suu Kyi was placed under house arrest. By 2007, General Than Shwe had been in power for over 40 years and would continue to exert influence until 2011, the year of Myanmar’s supposed democratic transition. During his tenure, the government had attempted to pass legislation reforming the saṅgha multiple times, while providing very generous subsidies to monasteries willing to support government policies. However, instead of non-compliant monasteries dying out, the population patronized them, to spite governmental support. Stūpas that the government built within the Shwedagon Pagoda complex were sparsely attended by the populations, while other shrines were overflowing with worshippers.

The monks under government patronage were considered very liberal. They received alms, TVs, Rolexes, cars, and cell phones from generals and military leaders, thereby providing

¹⁶² McCarthy, “Buddhist Political Rhetoric,” 70-76.

merit for the junta in the public eye. This relationship not only frustrated Theravada purists and monk-academics, but when novitiates were initiated into the non-government-affiliated monastic community, they, empowered by their spiritual office, now had a voice that would have been suppressed as a mere lay practitioner.¹⁶³ The monastic community provided a place where a lowborn person, upon securing a sponsor, had the potential to apply himself and develop a voice and an audience. Knowing this helps provide some context for the events that unfolded in 2007.

In 2007, Buddhist monks protested in the streets of Myanmar. The events would soon receive the moniker “Saffron Revolution,” due to the colors of the monks’ robes. The spark that began the movement was the removal of a government subsidy for gasoline, causing instant inflation and driving people to look for alternate fuel sources to heat their food as natural gas prices rose.¹⁶⁴ What began as a small protest movement in the months before August soon mushroomed into a mass protest by September. Conservative estimates suggest 10,000 monks marched the streets of Mandalay and roughly 30,000 monks lined the streets of the then capital Yangon, with at least 100,000 lay practitioners joining the marches.¹⁶⁵ While the central issue was the plight of the people, causing the sangha¹⁶⁶ of Myanmar to mobilize in a way that had not

¹⁶³ The similarity to Aśoka’s reform in calling the Third Buddhist Council is striking, except these licentious monks were sponsored by the State.

¹⁶⁴ The price of petrol doubled overnight, and the price of natural gas rose over 500 percent, leading to rapid inflation on basic food stuffs. Jonathan Head, “The Hardship That Sparked Burma’s Unrest,” *BBC News, Asia-Pacific*, October 2, 2007, accessed May 19, 2017, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/7023548.stm>,

¹⁶⁵ “Monks Lead Largest Burma Protest,” *BBC News, Asia Pacific*, September 24, 2007, accessed March 5, 2016, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/7009825.stm>. The documentary *Burma VJ*, (2009), by Anders Østergaard, provides interesting smuggled video coverage, indicating the chaos and confusion of 2007’s marches.

¹⁶⁶ In reality, there are several monastic communities in Myanmar, and even more within Theravada. The State Law and Order Restoration Council (the name of the Burmese government under Ne Win from 1988-1997) in State SLORC Law No 20/90 of October 31, 1990, had recognized nine official different sangha communities. However, as Ingrid Jordt points out in *Burma’s Mass Lay Meditation Movement: Buddhist and the Cultural Construction of Power*, among the majority Bamar living in the delta region, there is some semblance of a coherent whole, visible especially during times of protest or major religious movements, with differences subdued in generalities and accentuated in particularities in the contest for a national front. As of 2017, this solidarity seems to be questionable, as there have been competing protests between the jingoist sermons of the Ma Ba Tha movement and the

been seen since the August 27, 1990, monastic protest,¹⁶⁷ it should not be overlooked that the solidification of resolve to protest occurred after the military regime beat at least three of the protesting monks, a political statement in an attempt to assert moral-authority.

This event saw a renewed turning over of the alms bowls, an action not done since the 1990 protests by the monastic community (*thabeik hmauk*). This signified a refusal on the part of the entire monastic order to take charity (dāna) from any members of the government or their families. This solitary act was enough to communicate that the reigning junta government was not worthy a recipient of rightful kammic action, preventing them from merit-making, and thus, consigning them to a lower rebirth. It was a religious coup d'état in a country where religion and state are not easily disentangled.¹⁶⁸ The refusal of such a significant number of monks to accept almsgiving unified the saṅghas, and consequently, upended the Myanmar government's source of moral-authority.

Two components of the 2007 protests are notable. The first was the large presence of laity guarding the monks as they marched. When the monks took to the street, laity and commoners interlocked arms on either side, protecting the monks from the officials' harassment. This solidarity signaled a populist tacit approval of the saṅgha's interpretation of events.¹⁶⁹ As Ingrid Jordt has pointed out, "Myanmar Buddhism in the 20th century went through a process of

counterprotests against the violence that occurred mostly in Rakhine state (2017). Ingrid Jordt, *Burma's Mass Lay Meditation Movement: Buddhist and the Cultural Construction of Power*, Research in International Studies, Southeast Asia Series (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2007).

¹⁶⁷ Over 20,000 monks are estimated to have participated. This was not a mass march as in 2007, but a protest of "pattam nikkujjana kamma," refusing to take military and government officials' donations, thus denying them dāna, or kammic action. Interestingly, in the 2007 protest, the government dropped pamphlets on the streets and gave them to the monks, demanding that they disband and reinstate the dāna for government and military officials. When the monks continued to protest, military stormed some of the monasteries. It must have been ironic to hear the demand of a military officer to be allowed to give alms to the very community at the other end of his gun.

¹⁶⁸ Seth Mydans, "Monks' Protest Is Challenging Burmese Junta," *The New York Times*, September 24, 2007, accessed March 1, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/24/world/asia/24myanmar.html>.

¹⁶⁹ Mikael Gravers, "Spiritual Politics, Political Religion, and Religious Freedom in Burma," *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 11, no. 2, (June 2013): 46–54, accessed May 20, 2017, doi:10.1080/15570274.2013.808037.

decentralization due to the tenuous relationship with the various governing authorities.”¹⁷⁰ As the monastic communities were continually restructured and reformed with defrocked monks continuing to practice, there was concern that Buddhism was waning in its influence in Myanmar. In a move to stem this perception, laity became more involved in meditative techniques that, for Vipassana, made individual goals of kammatic salvation attainable. Therefore, the solidarity between the monks and the laity in 2007 was a very profound moment in Buddhist history and has had the effect of normalizing monks in the public sphere, solidifying the people’s allegiances to the monastic community. Vipassana meditation, as a field for merit-making, became very important in the evolution of Buddhist practice. It is also important because it provided Daw Suu a means of merit-making while under house arrest after the 2007 protests.

The second notable component of the 2007 protests was the passing of a spiritual baton to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. In a turn of events that baffled the world, during the marches, the monks began to walk down University Way where Daw Suu was still under house arrest. The military ordered the removal of the barricades that blocked access to her house, in effect giving permission to the monastic community to march to her house in protest. Thus, the whole monastic group marched to greet Daw Suu, still standing behind the bars of her house. Some of the monks joined the laity, chanting for her release and touting democracy, but the majority did not.¹⁷¹ Those who did not, recited the “Metta Sutta” and allowed Daw Suu to give alms. After this event, she invited several abbots to visit her and instruct her in meditative practice. This ritual was a certain nod of acceptance and approval, without any explicit endorsement. Again,

¹⁷⁰ Ingrid Jordt. *Burma's Mass Lay Meditation Movement Buddhism and the Cultural Construction of Power*. Research in International Studies, Southeast Asia Series, (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2007), 20-26.

¹⁷¹ Zöllner, 63.

the image is not to be missed. While Daw Suu was practicing Vipassana techniques, gaining herself merit and giving alms, the military were stripping monks of their robes and imprisoning them, being denied merit.¹⁷²

Daw Suu's house arrest served a dual function in her moral right to rule. It not only made her the victim of an oppressive state, which was not ruling according to the Virtues, but it qualified her for sainthood. Renunciation is a prominent theme for a ruler: they are to spend time in isolation, make merit, and practice meditative techniques. Thus, Daw Suu's house arrest served as a metaphor, a forced state of renunciation, allowing her to assume the position of a dhammarāja.¹⁷³

One potential problem of congruence between Daw Suu and Anawrahta and Aśoka is that Daw Suu has never ascribed to herself the title of dhammarāja or Cakkavattin as they did. This is likely due to the fact that those titles, especially that of Cakkavattin, are textually reserved for men. In the Tipiṭika, Mara, Buddha, and Cakkavattin fulfillments assume a male sex. For Daw Suu, the fact that she has not ascribed to herself this title might simply be a matter of knowing how far is too far in terms of social constraints. Even though there have been historical examples of queen consorts assuming, like Daw Suu, the paradigm of dhammarāja, there has never been a female ruler who ascribed the title to herself to date. Though, as this section argues, all the constituent parts are there for such an attribution.

Today, the most palpable sense of Daw Suu's self-perception is how she portrays herself to others. When she gives talks concerning government affairs, she assumes the position of

¹⁷² Aung Zaw, "The Power Behind the Robe." *The Irrawaddy*, September 20, 2013, accessed May 19, 2017, <http://www.irrawaddy.com/from-the-irrawaddy-archive-burma/power-behind-robe.html>.

¹⁷³ Guillaume Rozenberg, *Renunciation and Power: The Quest for Sainthood in Contemporary Burma*, trans. Jessica Hackett, Southeast Asia Studies Monograph Series, Monograph 59 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 2010), 13-41; 119-147.

monks giving dhamma-talks. During my time in Myanmar, the structure of the dhamma-talk was the same throughout. Monks, usually sitting in a chair, would be surrounded by listeners, their legs folded to one side. This is markedly different from the posture of those in authority from Western nations, who usually stand. In Myanmar, dhamma-level authority is exercised by sitting, one of the acceptable meditative positions (i.e. sitting meditation). When Daw Suu gives talks on the government, for the Buddhist, there is no doubt that this is a rājadhmma talk (see image 1.3, below).



Image 1.3: Daw Aung San Suu Kyi answering a question at a peace talk. Notice her scarf, which mimics the extra folds of a monk's garb. Taken from Myanmar State Counselor's Office's public Facebook Page account at: <https://www.facebook.com/state.counsellor/>.

How does Daw Suu extend the physical borders of the Buddhist faithful through military conquest?

Western media outlets have been confused about Aung San Suu Kyi's supposed silence about the mass deportation of thousands of Rohingya from Myanmar's Rakhine State.¹⁷⁴ Yet, few Burmese are surprised. "Everybody knows what she is doing," said one Burmese heritage student to me, during a graduate conference.¹⁷⁵ This aspect of Daw Suu's rule most directly confronts her portrayal as a champion of democracy, confronting the idolatrous relationship the West has had with her for years. Daw Suu is a Buddhist. Continuing to ascribe "silence" to her is not only factually inaccurate, it belies Western sexism: that Daw Suu, because she believes as the West believes about what is right for Burma and for Buddhism, *must* want to help the Rohingya but is unable to because of the men in the military threatening to take power from her, or because she might lose the election, etc.¹⁷⁶

However, if Daw Suu's silence is placed in the model of the dhammarāja, the silence is tacit consent to reclaim the memory of Buddhist lands in the Arakan. By allowing the Rohingya to be deported, she reclaims the land where they are going to for Myanmar and Buddhism. This would be a noble legacy indeed. If the current leader of Myanmar, Aung San Suu Kyi, is viewed as a feckless bystander, unable to speak up about the rights of religious minorities in Myanmar because she is afraid of military subversion, it influences the way NGOs and media outlets

¹⁷⁴ See: Fiona MacGregor, "Why is Aung San Suu Kyi silent on abuses against the Rohingya in Myanmar?" *The National*, February 23, 2017, accessed May 19, 2017, <http://www.thenational.ae/arts-life/the-review/why-is-aung-san-suu-kyi-silent-on-abuses-against-the-rohingya-in-myanmar>. Mehdi Hasan, "Aung San Suu Kyi's shameful silence on the Rohingya," *Aljazeera*, December 3, 2016, accessed May 20, 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/upfront/2016/12/aung-san-suu-kyi-shameful-silence-rohingya-161202091601640.html>.

¹⁷⁵ Anonymously spoken when I offered up examples of how Burmese women exercise Buddhist power and authority in Myanmar. March 11, 2017.

¹⁷⁶ Sara Perria, "Why is Aung San Suu Kyi silent on the plight of the Rohingya people?" *The Guardian*, May 19, 2015, accessed May 8, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/19/why-is-aung-san-suu-kyi-silent-on-the-plight-of-the-rohingya-people>.

portray her, while reinforcing sexist stereotypes about the capacity of women to influence men. If, however, she is interpreted through the well-established historical pattern of a ruler legitimizing her rule through the implementation of Buddhist tools of statecraft, she becomes a woman with power and agency. Her silence becomes projective, rather than submissive. Daw Suu is extending the Ecumene.

Additionally, Daw Suu has been anything but silent. “There must be rule of law” has been a common refrain of hers when asked about this situation, and similar instances of active war between the Tatmadaw and religious minority regions.¹⁷⁷ Her response has been played up by Western media to mean rule by legislation, which is then interpreted to include human rights laws and the like.¹⁷⁸ However, these statements do not take into account a double entendre likely intended by “rule of law” statements. “Law” (*U bah de*) normally requires an antecedent. Thus, “rule of law” could just as easily be construed to mean “rule by dhamma-law” as it could “rule of civil-law” or “international-law.” Daw Suu has been masterfully playing to her audience. To her Burmese listeners, one hears “rule by dhamma must prevail,” a signifier to the kings of old and an appeal to the dhammarāja. To her international audience, one hears “rule by international/democratic law.” “Dhamma-law” provides the best possible explanation for Daw Suu’s position. Dhamma and Myanma law are often viewed to have a symbiotic relationship. As already shown above, dhamma ordines reality. Myanmar’s laws can only support what the dhamma teaches. The combination of historical tradition, met with the responsibility of the dhammarāja, requires that lost Buddhist lands be returned to Buddhists, lest the ruler’s claim risk nullification. As in the case of U Nu’s answer regarding the government’s handling of

¹⁷⁷ Aung San Suu Kyi, “Aung San Suu Kyi: ‘There is no rule of law’,” *Aljazeera*, December 28, 2013, accessed May 19, 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/talktojazeera/2013/12/aung-san-suu-kyi-there-no-rule-law-20131225133951643936.html>.

¹⁷⁸ Walton and Hayward, “Contesting,” 48.

insurgents, here, the Brahman has already been taken over by the snake and the crow. The crab must reclaim the initiative so the Brahman has a chance to survive.

Contrary to the views of Walton and Hayward, an impartial legal system would not be in Myanmar's self-interest as an Ecumene.¹⁷⁹ This perspective should be highlighted when the international community engages diplomatically with the current, or any subsequent, regime. It would require the acknowledgement of land lost in a great Buddhist kingdom, forever gone to Muslim "invaders." This is a narrative the dhammarāja cannot allow. Burmese Buddhism not only allows for the purging of non-Buddhists, but it requires it in cases of religious encroachment on historically Buddhist lands. Moreover, Walton and Hayward cite an example from Aśoka's inscriptions saying, "He has felt profound sorrow and regret because the conquest of a people

¹⁷⁹ Ibid, 48-49.

previously unconquered involves slaughter, death, and deportation’¹⁸⁰ ...[a]ccording to the Buddhist chronicles, the rest of his reign was marked by religious tolerance and peace.”¹⁸¹



Image 1.4: U Wirathu in the bright orange, labeled as an “ultra” nationalist monk by his opponents, visited Rakhine state in May of 2017, the site of massive displacement of Rohingya Muslims from the Buddhist lands of Arakan. Here, he is greeted by a local government representative and a regional military commander. Photo courtesy of The Irrawaddy.

They then go on to point out that another of Aśoka’s inscriptions argues for the acceptance of persons of other religions.¹⁸² However, this fails to take into account the historical setting and interpretive memory of Aśoka: unite the territory under one Buddhism, and there will be peace. The rest of his reign was marked by peace only because by the time the inscriptions went up, his wars were over. The popular memory of Aśoka, lived on through Anawrahta, yields anything but peace to religious outsiders.¹⁸³ Anawrahta’s military prowess is a central feature of his memory in Myanmar, often portrayed in movies, comics, and other popular modes of entertainment. This prowess is utilized to preserve the unity of the kingdom (the *sāsana*) against

¹⁸⁰ An edict on one of the inscriptions erected by Aśoka.

¹⁸¹ Ibid, 43.

¹⁸² Ibid, 44.

¹⁸³ Goh, *Wheel-turner*, 175-196.

the foreign *other*, at times originating from close proximity to (if not, within) the boundaries of the faithful. Other religions can exist, but only if Theravada reigns supreme. Hence, the preceding portrayal of Aśoka as an example for Myanmar is counterproductive: it encourages the very thing Walton and Hayward strive to undo.

How does Daw Suu's government support physical stūpa (pagoda) construction?

Unlike General Than Shwe's building of the Uppatasanti stūpa to legitimize the capital's movement from Yangon to Naypyidaw, Daw Suu has not directly sponsored any stūpa building. Instead, she has used government funds to refurbish and rebuild stūpas. On August 24, 2016, a 6.8 magnitude earthquake devastated several stūpas in Anawrahta's capital of Pagan. The



Image 1.3: President U Htin Kyaw inspects debris the day after an earthquake occurred near Pagan, damaging several stūpas there. Photo by Aung Thant Khaing, The Global New Light of Myanmar, August 25, 2016, accessed May 21, 2017, <http://www.globalnewlightofmyanmar.com/president-assesses-damage-in-bagan/>.

president of Myanmar, U Htin Kyaw, Daw Suu's proxy, arrived the very next day in a public display of surveying the damage and discussing what needed to be done for repairs. This was important state business (see image 1.3, above), and fulfills a function of the dhammarāja as stūpa building through rehabilitation and sponsorship. In this way, Daw Suu still appeals to the memory that she, or her government, needs to take ownership of the stūpas in Myanmar, while not physically constructing them. Since Daw Suu has positioned herself as someone who is reinvigorating the dhamma, appealing to the narrative that the previous regimes ushered in a time of dhamma decline, stūpa construction only need be minimal. The real task for Daw Suu's regime is rehabilitation and reclamation.

Daw Suu appeals to stūpa-construction memory in other ways. Previously, on Martyrs Day of 2016 (July 19), to much fanfare, Aung San Suu Kyi visited Shwedagon Pagoda to lay a wreath by the Buddha who represented her father's birthday. This was accompanied with merit-making and financial contributions. Under her rule, the minister's building (the site of General Aung San's and his advisors' murders) was also opened to outsiders for the first time in decades.¹⁸⁴ Derelict and abandoned, her government has approved the restoration of the building. Both are merit-making activities, and attribute charisma to Daw Suu as she, visibly, takes on the mantle of leadership from her martyred father. However, these are less than satisfactory examples of Daw Suu's patronage of stūpa building.

A more creative approach to understanding how the government, under the leadership of Daw Suu, accomplishes stūpa construction and preservation shows institutional efforts, for which Daw Suu is the head, to reconstruct stūpa history. This accomplishes the same goal of ascribing to oneself dhammarāja credibility. The memory of stūpa history and construction in

¹⁸⁴ Personal observations.

non-Buddhist territories certainly requires governmental support and approval. Pagoda construction has long been seen in Myanmar as a way to physically demarcate the Ecumene. Ecumene encroachment upon a religious minority is marked by stūpa construction. State-funded Buddhist missions expanded into the Chin state, which involved demolishing Christian crosses on hilltops and replacing them with stūpas.¹⁸⁵ In Karen state, another region that claims a Christian identity, there is similar construction, replacing Christian churches or church grounds with stūpas.¹⁸⁶ These activities certainly satisfy the requirement for Daw Suu to expand the Ecumene through stūpa construction. Also, the modern reclamation of Rakhine state, as properly belonging to the Buddhist Ecumene, can be articulated by appealing to Arakan Buddhism and the fact that the region had already been “claimed” due to the existence of ancient stūpas that predate the Muslim population. Thus, land reclamations can be legitimized using stūpas to demarcate the land as “Buddhist” before any Muslim arrives there. Daw Suu’s land reclamation of the Arakan is vital to reclaim lost stūpas from the perceived Muslim threat to their existence.

The memory of any given stūpa’s presence is also expanded through time. Not only does modern stūpa construction extend into regions previously deemed non-Burmese, but modern-day recollections of a stūpa’s age and presence are also stretched through history. The year of construction for any given stūpa is ancient. Sometimes, too ancient. Sule Pagoda, in the heart of Yangon, is a fabled 2,500 years old, locating it just a century past the Buddha himself. Botataung Pagoda, also in Yangon, is fabled to be 2,500 years old. Shwedagon Pagoda is

¹⁸⁵ Van Biak Thang, “Christian Cross Destroyed To Be Replaced With Pagoda,” *Chinland Guardian*, September 20, 2009, accessed May 19, 2017, <http://www.chinlandguardian.com/index.php/articles/editorial/item/1760-christian-cross-destroyed-to-be-replaced-with-pagoda>.

¹⁸⁶ Tin Aung Khine, Khet Mar, and Wai Mar Tun, “Myanmar Buddhist Monk Erects Another Pagoda on Disputed Land,” *Radio Free Asia*, trans. Khet Mar, May 4, 2016, accessed May 20, 2017, <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/myanmar-buddhist-monk-erects-another-pagoda-on-disputed-land-05042016154223.html>.

supposedly 2,600 years old. These ages likely take into account ancient veneration sites for Nat worship or other animistic practices, but those nuances were never articulated during my inquiries. The narrative articulated to me was that the Buddha physically traveled to Myanmar to bring Buddhism,¹⁸⁷ never mind that no textual tradition or historical tradition exists suggesting this or that the “official” narratives actually suggest that mendicants traveled to visit the Buddha themselves and then returned to Myanmar to build the veneration sites. In fact, if the Buddha did visit every stūpa fabled to have been commissioned by his very presence, he could not have lived in Northern India very long at all.

These age narratives are supplemented with sifting the memory of historical events as well. Botataung Pagoda was bombed by the Japanese during World War Two, and during the reconstruction, a reliquary containing a ravel of Siddhartha’s hair was reportedly found, which, supposedly, had been distributed to Myanmar by King Aśoka himself and mystically preserved. Given the damage sustained and the size of the relic, how this relic could be found must have been miraculous. This “discovery” was the reason cited for Botataung Pagoda’s reconstruction – not the bombing. The mythical discovery of said reliquary replaces the bombing by the Japanese as the reason for rebuilding, with laity completely eliding bombing’s role as the cause for reconstruction. Another example of a “historical stretch” is the dating of Shwedagon Pagoda. Historians say that Shwedagon Pagoda could not be older than 1,500 years, yet legend insists on its being 2,600 years, commissioned by the Buddha himself.¹⁸⁸ To be 2,600 years old presents a

¹⁸⁷ As relayed to me by multiple lay people and monks during various visits to these stūpas in February of 2012, June of 2014, and July of 2016.

¹⁸⁸ Pe Maung Tin (1934). "The Shwe Dagon Pagoda". *Journal of the Burma Research Society*: 1–91.

number highly problematic when compared to recent research on the Buddha's life.¹⁸⁹ A dating of 2,600 years old places the stūpa beyond the Buddha's birth.

The governmental curating of the historical narratives surrounding stūpas in Myanmar also reveals something about how the Burmese assimilate histories in order to bolster their Buddhist-identity claims. These stūpas were originally constructed by the Mon, who are ostensibly the first Buddhist Ecumene in Myanmar. Yet, the stūpas remain definitively Burmese by attribution. Reclamation of "Burmese" Pagodas in the Arakan belies the fact that the Arakan kingdom was distinct from the Pagan-Burmese kingdom. However, Arakan kingdom becomes designated as a "Burmese" one. As another example of Burmese appropriation of *other* kingdom's Buddhist artifacts, when the capital was moved from Yangon to Naypyidaw, an exact replica of Mon-attributed Shwedagon Pagoda was commissioned, exactly one foot (30cm) shorter and built under the supervision of General Than Shwe, constructed in order to legitimize the movement of the capital, appropriating it as the Burmese capital stūpa.

This government curating takes advantage of the incredible difficulty in utilizing archeological methods to determine the age of a stūpa. Due to the palimpsestic construction techniques in stūpa upkeep and maintenance, it is impossible to ascertain the true age of these stūpas. Shell upon shell of new construction overlays the old. Only the oral memories of laity remain. Structural integrity and opulence are the primary signifiers of a stūpa's upkeep, thus the ancient is often disposed of rather quickly and replaced with the new. Such practices are evident when one sees neon lights surrounding a Buddha's image at one of these stūpas. Flashy and distracting, these applications improve the stūpa as a site for veneration, thus creating a license for construction that often requires damaging the original, no matter how ancient. There is

¹⁸⁹ K.R. Norman, "A Philosophical Approach to Buddhism," *The Buddhist Forum, Volume V*, The Bukkyō Dendō Kyōkai Lectures 1994 (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1997), p. 33.

dhamma logic in this method, as it reflects the impermanence that permeates all things (anicca). Attachment to the old, especially if it prevents the dependent arising of the new, is something to be eschewed. Historical stretching back to a tradition that is impossible to verify (and attempts to verify could be interpreted as a challenge to Buddhism, a Federal crime) suggests a desire to locate the Buddhism that is in Myanmar as a pristine Buddhism, thus establishing Myanmar Buddhism as authoritatively orthodox, tantamount to dhamma itself. This, most certainly, validates the territory as the realm of the dhammarāja.

While Daw Suu's physical construction of stūpas is minimal (but present), her main job as a dhammarāja pretender is to reinvigorate the dhamma and restore it from decline. This occurs through State sponsored stūpa rehabilitation and through the reclamation of Buddhist lands and their preexisting stūpas. Governmental curating of stūpa history through date "stretching," stūpa reattribution from Arakan or Mon kingdoms to being "Burmese," and memory sifting (not denial) all represent forms of stūpa expansion. This appropriation contributes to the imagining of the Ecumene with Daw Suu at the helm.

How does Daw Suu purify extant Buddhism, specifically through textual reproduction and "reform" of monks deemed errant? Does she seek any kind of reform while simultaneously affirming a specific monastic lineage?

Consolidating the dhamma through textual reproduction and reforming the monastic community often takes the form of calling a Buddhist conference as President U Nu did from 1954-1956, or something similar. The State Saṅgha Maha Nayaka Committee (SSMNC, or, Ma Ha Na) has been in existence since its inception in 1980, potentially removing the need for a new agency to invoke reform. The structure is already in place. Daw Suu does not have to be directly involved in the purification process, but wield influence through the government and monastic members that serve on the Council. This agency has had a very active role in revealing

the government's position relative to monastic activism, through its selective application of various *Vinaya* rules have led to a degree of discredit within the organization. For example, during the monastic uprising (the "Saffron Revolution"), this organization issued several edicts condemning monastic participation in secular affairs.¹⁹⁰ Of course, this took place when the government had directly intervened in religious affairs, shooting monks and raiding their sacred monasteries. One can sympathize on the surface: monks should not be involved in secular affairs, but based on the textual and historical evidence already supplied in this paper, the government is a dhamma realm – an ecclesiastic office – subjecting it to the condemnation or the commendation of the highest law of the land: the dhamma as interpreted by the saṅgha. The Ma Ha Na's edicts were futile, as it was clear that the monks had the overwhelming support of the masses. Thus, the Ma Ha Na Council lost some credibility.

However, as a bureaucracy, the Ma Ha Na Council has retained much of their credibility despite this incident. Ordinations are registered through the council. Nine saṅgha lineage communities are legitimized by the Ma Ha Na Council. There are other unregistered saṅghas operating in Myanmar, but they are *othered* and must keep a low profile. Buddhist Monastic heritages associated with foreigners, however, are ignored by the Ma Ha Na (Thai or Chinese expats, for example).

Recently, the Council condemned U Wirathu's sermons as potential hate speech, a definite gamble on their part.¹⁹¹ To be sure, his sermons would qualify as such in most liberal societies, but in Myanmar, U Wirathu is voicing what many people believe: that the Muslim

¹⁹⁰ "State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee has duty to reinforce and observe basic principles and rules and regulations and implement religious matters," *The New Light of Myanmar*, Volume XV, Number 162, September 25, 2007, accessed May 19, 2017, <http://www.ibiblio.org/obl/docs4/NLM2007-09-25.pdf>.

¹⁹¹ Zue Zue, "Ma Ha Na Asked to Judge on Wirathu Sermons," *The Irrawaddy*, May 9, 2017, accessed May 9, 2017, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/ma-ha-na-asked-judge-wirathu-sermons.html>.

Rohingya pose a serious threat to the *sāsana*. This, again, panders to Buddhist concerns about a waning dhamma. U Wirathu enjoys widespread support from the monks, who purchase his nationalist materials en masse. This is significant because all printed material in Myanmar must be approved by the Press Scrutiny and Registration Division, under the Ministry of Information, also under Daw Suu's influence. Until August of 2012, all materials had to be submitted to this office for pre-approval to print. Now, all materials are only scrutinized after publication, unless it is a previously ruled upon work. So, while the Bible and Quran remain illegal to reproduce in-country, ultranationalist rhetoric is given the State stamp of approval. This seems to reveal either a tension within Myanmar regarding U Wirathu's methods or a pandering on the part of the government: condemnation from the official state arm regulating Buddhism, hopefully placating outside observers and internal citizens, while underhandedly cultivating U Wirathu as a mobilizer that can get the masses moving against the Rohingya.

How does Daw Suu mobilize State patronage of the Saṅgha communities?

Daw Suu has regular photoshoots of herself paying homage at different monasteries, and it is common for her to use a stūpa as a gathering point when she gives political speeches. Interpreting this as a media stunt would be entirely legitimate. Additionally, there is no longer state-wide sponsorship of so-called "spy monks" (at least none has been reported). However, Daw Suu often makes political speeches from stūpas, which are historical rally points for the masses. This has an *othering* effect upon non-Buddhists, as it requires the proper decorum to enter. Indeed, a Muslim wearing a prayer shawl at a Friday speech would not be welcome inside a pagoda. Daw Suu personally patronages several different stūpas and S'yadaws (abbot monks). This is hardly behavior exclusive to a dhammarāja pretender, but it is necessary to maintain the approval of the saṅgha communities.

Conclusion

In addition to these five components formulated using Aśoka and Anawrahta's examples, the textual question is whether or not Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is providing a physical place where the Bodhisattva path can be followed.¹⁹² If we take all of these into consideration, there is a preponderance of evidence to certainly say that Daw Aung San Suu Kyi fulfills most of the historical and textual requirements of a dhammarāja. In fact, the only textual requirement that Daw Suu cannot fulfill is being male, but given the societal accounts, this requirement is unimportant for Daw Suu's pursuit of kammatic salvation through the dhammarāja paradigm. Self-ascribing the title "State Counselor," which is a position "higher than the President" can be viewed as a code-switch. Just as important, the populace has accepted her and her charismatic mandate to this office. As will be explored below, most of the populace's doubt of Daw Suu is limited to certain behaviors on her part that are seen as hindrances to her faithful administration of the dhammarāja's responsibilities. Most of those behaviors have to do with Daw Suu's placement of ethnic and religious minorities within her administration. Regardless, they have mostly accepted her mandate, but are moved to suspicion when she appears sympathetic to the non-Buddhist. Her behavior towards potential opponents, though, is certainly similar to the strong-man leadership one expects from a dhammarāja pretender. Andrew Selth, a long-time Myanmar expert, has examined Daw Suu's behavior over the last few years and is asking if Daw Suu has become authoritarian in her rule and demeanor. Similarly, U Wirathu sees Daw Suu as

¹⁹² Estimates suggest that there are more monks in Myanmar than military personnel, though it is difficult to determine the veracity of this claim due to the nature of temporary ordination. Around 500,000 monks as opposed to about 400,000 military members. I have been hard-pressed to find an official source for these numbers, but they are circulated widely, for example: Denis Gray, "For Monks in Myanmar, an Uphill Battle," *NBC News*, September 27, 2007, accessed May 9, 2017, <http://www.nbcnews.com/id/21020964/#.WRKTjILMyRs>.

acting with absolute power – a striking statement from an ultranationalist monk.¹⁹³ If so, we can say that Daw Suu sees herself as a dhammarāja pretender, prone to the visions of grandeur that accompanied her predecessors.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹³ Annie Gown, “‘Muslims are dangerous’: Myanmar Buddhist monks threaten democracy with support for anti-Muslim laws,” *The National Post*, November 7, 2015, accessed May 10, 2017, <http://news.nationalpost.com/news/world/muslims-are-dangerous-myanmar-buddhist-monks-threaten-democracy-with-support-for-anti-muslim-laws>.

¹⁹⁴ Andrew Selth, “The Lady and Authoritarianism in Myanmar,” *Nikkei Asian Review*, March 29, 2016, accessed May 9, 2017, <http://asia.nikkei.com/Viewpoints-archive/Viewpoints/Andrew-Selth-The-Lady-and-authoritarianism-in-Myanmar>.

Chapter 6.
The Ecumene Projection: *A Buddhist Membership with Burmese Speakers*

We now turn our attention to the members of the Ecumene. I believe Bamar citizens view participation in the geo-political nation-state of Myanmar as a Buddhist Ecumene. This is difficult to demonstrably conclude as there are so many variations and complexities within people's stories. It is impossible to assign motive for *this* statement or *that* one, and the interviews I share here reveal an unsettled picture of ethnic and religious conflation, Buddhist modes of being, and *othering* of non-Buddhists. For the non-Buddhists interviewed, answers reveal a strong opinion of being *othered*, some attributing it to religion, some to ethnicity, and some both. Other answers are revealing in terms of how ethnicity is observed. Is it religious? Racial? Linguistic? What categories are utilized to create a *we* versus *them*? Do these categories shift? I think so. Being able to speak "Burmese properly" helps minorities blend into the majority Bamar population. But language assimilation really obscures a more significant category of societal membership: Buddhism. Given patterns of conflation between racial terms (*lu-myo*) and religious terms (*batha*), religious designations were always dominant. "Buddhism" designated the kind of person one was (*lu-myo*) and the religion they practiced (*batha*). "Bamar" never sufficed for both. Moreover, Buddhist practice established social capital. If one served as a Buddhist monk, or served as laity, one was on their way.

What I present below is the result of field research conducted during the summer of 2016. Over this time, I interviewed thirty different individuals. While my goal was a standardized set of questions, in reality, the questions began the same but took on a shape of their own as conversation flowed. If someone identified as Buddhist in some form or fashion, I would ask what their practice of Buddhism was. If they had some answer, I would explore that more. For several of my interviewees, although they had little knowledge about textual Buddhism, their

doctrinal knowledge was very impressive. They readily identified as Buddhist and intended to raise their children that way. Several interviewees also did not “practice” merit-making as regularly as one would expect. Other interviewees did not identify as Buddhist, but some other religious or ethnic category, in which case, I asked them about their own respective practices. Unlike those identifying as Bamar and Buddhist, I would also ask these religious minorities if it was difficult to live in a Buddhist country, or how their lives would be different if they were Buddhist. This produced insightful answers, with many giving an understanding that life would be easier, providing a sense that they were Christian/Muslim at a cost, and often a sense of pride embodied this position. To be sure, there was certainly pride in being Buddhist, but the sense was different. For several of the minorities, they would be willing to die for their religions; for the Buddhist, it was as though they would never have to. The ethnographies below are largely representative of interviewees that identified as Buddhist. The stories recorded are attributed to singular individuals and not composites. I have chosen this method to maintain the integrity and “sense” of the interview flow.

These ethnographies often reveal a conflation between religious and ethnic categories, further suggesting that religious identities are something more than fideism, but define modalities of being for the day to day. Additionally, a surprising number of those identifying as Buddhist had very little to show for it in the way of practice. While often giving to monks and nuns, very few of my interviewees took part in religious festivals or went to the Pagoda during Buddhist holidays, as is the *remembered* habit.

Kyaw: Remembering being Buddhist in a Diverse Land

Kyaw was a taxi driver that my family and I had become particularly close with. Every morning, he would pick us up outside our residence and maintained a fairly strict patron-client

relationship. He only spoke when spoken to but would answer questions in detail. After about two months, the relationship became more casual and friendly. He stopped opening the door for us, he cut us rate breaks, and he even introduced us to his family, who were always drinking tea at the local *leq-peq-zsain* (open-air tea shop) across the street from our abode. Kyaw was not college educated and was an older taxi driver than most. He had excelled in the monastery, and because he was a monk for many of his youthful years, he married later in life.

On a free weekend, we arranged for him to take us to the National Races Village in Yangon, which he seemed happy to do. He showed considerable excitement that we were taking the time to learn Burmese, ask about Buddhism, and showing an interest in the welfare of the Burmese people. The National Races Village is exactly what it sounds like: a public display of true-to-scale living models of the seven, differently recognized “races” in Myanmar. It is an awkward spectacle in Yangon - though apparently not for the locals. The mock villages are set up in a massive, meandering circle, where one ethnic village house is portrayed after another. The road is large enough to accommodate buses or multiple taxis for tourist purposes. A visitor walks from ethnic village to ethnic village, observing and interacting with representative artifacts and objects of the various races in Myanmar. One can touch the rattan hats of the Shan people, the looms of the Kayin (Karen), and even the ethnic garb designated for each race. This same ethnic garb is the required uniform for members of the Myanmar Parliament, if they are an ethnic minority. The ethnic garb was standardized: one pattern was meant to represent an entire group of people, irrespective of the cultural, linguistic, or ethnic distinctions within that group. For the Chin, for example, there was the standard red, green, and white or black that is, today, more representative of the Zo. The wonderful diversity in dress of the Hakha, Matu, or other Lai, all ethnically categorized as Chin, is absent from the National Races Village displays. Instead, all of

the ethnic variation and distinctiveness of those living in Chin state is essentialized as “Chin,” with a standardized “Chin” regalia, designating those from that region, irrespective of their actual ethnic garb. Replete with live role-play, some of the villages feature representative peoples from said race. However, others are comprised of Burmese, dressed in designated garb of a particular race, setting about the tasks they envision that group might be doing. The houses represented in each village are massive – mansions by anybody’s standards. Oddly, they are all very similar, even though they represent “races,” which live on very different terrain from one another.

Religious displays are limited to Buddhist icons and replications. The Kyaiktiyo Pagoda of Mon state is miniaturized and other Buddhist stupas are replicated throughout the villages. The religious makeup of the ethnic minorities, especially that of the Chin, Karen, and Kachin, are ambiguous, if not animist, and there is no Muslim representation whatsoever, even though both Islam and Christianity make up ten percent of the entire population of Myanmar. Within the minority regions, especially Chin State, Christianity comprises over 90 percent of the population there. The lack of any sort of religious portrayal on the part of ethnic minorities that overwhelmingly identify as Christian suppresses the religious part of their identity, suggesting that Buddhism is normative throughout. Other religions are not acknowledged, *othered* in comparison to the Buddhist imagining of post 1948 Myanmar.

During our perusal, Kyaw remained with the car, chewing betel nut and smoking as we ventured from village to village. When we approached the Mon village, he hurriedly exited the car, hastily tying his *longyi*, cigarette half-hanging out of his mouth. He was beaming,

“The Mon, they are very important to Burma. We have the same script, and we learned to write from the Mon. Also, we learn Buddha from the Mon. Very, very important. The Mon empire was very great. They control Burma, Thai, Cambodia, everywhere. Very old.”

Kyaw’s notion of greatness seemed emphatically tied to their ancientness, but also the vast land mass influenced by the Mon kingdom. He conveyed his love of the Mon, saying that the Burmese had owed a lot to the Mon, including their religion, script, and language.

“The Burmese, they come from the Mon...our script, our writing...all from the Mon.”

He spoke about the glory of the Mon empire and how the British ruined any chance for Mon greatness, revealing his particularly biased reading of history – not because of his anti-British response, but because the Mon empire had been waning for quite some time before the British arrived. There was a memory of greatness ascribed to the *potential* of the Mon that the British removed. This struck a dissonant chord. In 2016, the Bamar, or at least the Burmese military, were in active warfare with the Mon. There also were territorial disputes between the Federal government and the local government over the right to name a bridge that was under construction. The Federal government wanted to name the bridge after Aung San Suu Kyi’s father, while the Mon want to give it a local name. For Kyaw, he had already completed the mental process of assimilating the Mon into a Burmese vision for the country. His history completely erased the distinctiveness of the Mon, and replaced the Bamar domination of the Mon with the British domination. *The British* were the ones responsible for the decline of the Mon empire. Not Anawrahta, or any other subsequent Burmese monarch. Kyaw glossed over any indication that the Mon might not agree with his version of history.

As we walked away, with a final sense of nostalgia, he opined, “Yeah, the Mon, they are very good Burmese.”

“Why are they very good Burmese?” The statement did not make sense to me.

He immediately replied, “They’re nearly 100 percent Buddhist (*batha*)! Even we Bamars (*lu-myo*) are not that pure.”¹⁹⁵

This was an interesting note for me. The Mon, hailed by Kyaw and others for their ethnic and religious purity, were assimilated into the ethnic memory of being Burmese, and yet, the official position of the Burmese government towards the Mon is in tension due to conflict waged by the Mon for increased independence. It is as if the Mon are resisting the cultural assimilation of the Burmese, and it is for this reason there are hostilities between the Burmese and the Mon, with the Burmese claiming the rich cultural heritage of the Mon, dating back to King Anawrahta’s standardization of the Sangha for Pagan through a Mon monastic heritage.

Kyaw himself was a devout Buddhist. Or, he thought of himself that way. In morning traffic jams, we often heard him reciting prayers and suttas, though that seemed to be the only time we heard him doing that. When traffic was light, he was content to ask and answer questions. He spent time as a novice growing up and continued to learn the various prayers and scriptures, even after finishing his lenten period. His children were not old enough to participate in *shin-pyu*, but it was something he was looking forward to and had even begun saving for the events that would require invitations to distant relatives and community members. It struck me as odd that one would save for a celebration of one’s son entering temporary ordination, an act that required one to renounce all worldly possessions. He himself was ambivalent about Daw Suu’s government, saying that he worried about the place of Buddhism in the country and was deeply concerned about how rapidly the country was changing. He was older, in his early fifties, and had lived in Yangon his whole life. He would often charter himself

¹⁹⁵ Unpublished field notes, July 2016.

out to others wishing to travel over the weekend to Buddhist pilgrimage sites, even as far away as Pagan. This was a sacred duty for Kyaw – hiring himself out so that others could make pilgrimages. It also contributed to his notion of being a devout Burmese.

Monk S'yadaw (title for an abbot): *Merit-making through Burmanization and Textual Deliverance*

The rainy season had begun in Myanmar. It was the beginning of Vassa (Burmese: *Waso*), that time when boys become *go-yins* (young novitiates) and communities flood their local monasteries with robes, fans, bowls, and umbrellas, the only possessions a monk is allowed. Vassa mark the end of alms collection and intensive study and meditation for those who have put on the robes. Before modern times, monks retreated to a larger monastery. The donations accrued until that point, along with the diligent gathering of lay persons, allowed monks to focus their devotion on textual study and meditative practice. It is a time of retreat. In the streets of Yangon, monks still flood the street, scurrying from under the rain, all heading back to their monasteries to combine their spoils and take their mid-day meal.

I was visiting a monastery in central Yangon, near the International Theravada Monastery. This monastery, according to my Burmese S'yama (Burmese language instructor), housed a particular S'yadaw that she listened to on a regular basis.

“Those monks don't even wear sandals, that's how you know they're serious,” she said as I was making arrangements to visit this particular monastery.

I spent the summer studying the Burmese language with a teacher who had earned a reputation for being strict but one of the best. She took us to this monastery on a class “field trip.” Additional visits were made to a home for invalid youths, run by the government, and a convalescent center, subsidized heavily through donations. At each location, she made sure the class witnessed a public giving and receive of funds, in which she would find the manager or

caretaker of those institutions and hand over a sizeable wad of Myanmar Kyat (the currency). That this happened at the monastery struck everyone as unusual. When she attempted to give the large wad of cash to the S'yadaw, after she had already received a dhamma admonishment, laity from the back of the room ran forward to take the cash from her, quickly placing it in an alms bowl. After speaking with some of the laity serving in the small room of the abbot, I secured a date and time when I could return. I went back to this monastery for some additional field research and was able to meet with this S'yadaw, of whom our teacher thought so highly.

He told me about his practice, that he had joined the monastery at a young age, but that, as he got older, he wanted to do something more meaningful with his life, so he took permanent ordination. Under the military regime, ordination often became a means of surviving, but he attributed his ordination to renunciant reasons. He made sure to position his motivation for becoming a monk in textual categories. He wanted to “renounce the world and its desires,” to, “try for nibbana.” As time went on, he told me, he accelerated through the ranks due to his rigorous meditation practice and scriptural memory. In addition to the “Metta Sutta,” the “Mingala Sutta,” and several others, he had devoted the *Vinaya* to memory and countless Jātakas,

“These texts are tools. Without them, we would not know how to escape saṃsāra.”

I found out later that before he took over as S'yadaw, the previous abbot had died unexpectedly, and many others he studied with left monastic lives to take up positions in the government or get married. While I was there, a steady row of taxis brought car load after car load of middle-aged monks, coming from other parts of Yangon. Several were carrying their alms bowls, even though the official season for almsgiving had ended. Several were paying the taxi cab driver, passing cash and change between themselves. Some had sandals on, some were

barefoot. It was clear that not everybody studying here for Vassa was as “serious” as my S’yama thought.

When I asked why Buddhism is important, he made the connection between his particular beliefs and the work of the monastery. He said that his monastery grew considerably under his supervision because of the number of orphans for whom the monastery was responsible. Lining the covered causeways connecting one building to another were massive, blown-up pictures showing different tribal visits to the S’yadaw. Every building project undertaken was documented with photos of ground breakings and ribbon cuttings. Successful “conversion missions” were documented with the abbot and several monks, in their saffron colored robes, standing side by side with exotic, fully clad tribal youth. The monk would make arrangements to receive orphans from the “outermost regions” first because “there they have the most need.

I ask him, “Where are they from?”

“All over. Some from Shan, some from Sagaing [division], some from the South. We take care of them and help them. After some time, they can decide if they want to keep learning the dhamma, or if they want to enroll in the school [adjacent to the compound, but run through the monastery].” It was clear he took this very seriously and had great pride in his position as a caretaker.

“What is it that you teach them?” I asked.

“Mostly the dhamma, but also Burmese reading and writing, literature, and science. Most of them do not know the dhamma that well, so it is important that we teach it to them.”

“How do you teach them? Is it mostly recitation like I see in the other monasteries?”

“Yes, we teach them the suttas, but also Jātaka.”

He points in the direction of a hall I had not seen yet. It was empty and designed for walking meditation. Along the ceiling there all kinds of murals: paintings of several Jātakas,

“Buddhism is everything. It’s what this country is based on. It gives purpose to a meaningless existence. We take in a lot of orphans here. These orphans, they will never get a good education unless we provide it. We give their lives meaning. Many of them, when they come, they can’t even read or write properly [in Burmese]. When they leave, not only do they understand Buddhism, but they can read and write, and hopefully will get for themselves a good job if they pass [the 10th standard matriculation exam]. Many of them that we “rescue” are from far away.”

The monk earnestly believed he was accruing good kamma for himself and for the youths, all of whom were boys, by teaching them Burmese and the dhamma. This was accomplished through long hours of recitation. After the youth could recite several suttas and several Jātakas, they would progress to the next form of education, where the deeper truths of the Jātaka would finally be explained. While the science and math classes required to pass the national matriculation exam were also taught, most of the education centered around learning Buddhism.

My interview with S’yadaw went on for some time. However, one of the areas he had invited me to go to was a Jātaka meditation hall. There, I was met by three *go-yins* or youth novitiates. We did not *meet* there, per se, but rather they followed me around the hall. Once I had made several rounds of the hall, I approached the three youths, who were scampering about, behaving as youths do.

At one point, I turned and asked them, in Burmese, “Hey, how are you all?”

They responded with the expected, “Fine,” flashing big smiles.

I then asked them, continuing in Burmese, “What are these pictures? Who are they?”

They stood dumbfounded, looking at each other, then looking at me. I was worried that they did not understand my Burmese properly. After some time, I resorted to English—hoping against hope for some lingua franca. Much to my surprise, they spoke English just fine.

“Where are you from?”

“Shan.” But this answer was a bit difficult to glean. They seemed embarrassed.

After some back and forth, I asked where they were from within Shan state. They were members of three different tribes, and I was unfamiliar with where exactly they were from. I asked them why they were at the monastery, and they all replied, “For school.” One of them did not really know why he was there and not back home. It turned out he lived in a sizeable village with a government school.

On this point, I asked if they had family, and all of them still had mothers and fathers back home. None were Buddhist, two identifying as not-Buddhist, and one identified as a Christian. For them, this seemed more than mere fideism. In the way that they answered, religion was something that they were born into, not so easily divested from, even though they had been at the monastery for over a year.

Not wanting to upset anybody, I thanked them for their time and then kept moving. A few things were clear: they did not speak or read Burmese, they still had family, and they did not think of themselves as Buddhist. Were these three the outliers? The rabble rousers of the novitiate community? Remembering what it was to be youthful, this certainly seemed like a possibility, except that “Burmanization” is a process well known to Myanmar historians. It was also clear that much of S’yadaw’s claim to fame had been due to the taking in of “orphans” like the ones that found me in Jātaka Hall. Burmanizing. Buddhicizing. Creating a new population

of proper-Burmese-speaking Buddhists that increasingly look down upon their own tribal homeland while seeing the “superiority” of conformity. To be sure, there was nothing malevolent in the monk’s goal or desire. What he conveyed to me was a genuine belief that his mission was, by far, the most important contribution he could make to Myanmar, to his salvation, and to their (the orphan’s) salvation. The method he used was distinguishing these “outliers,” and then bringing them into his monastic compound in Yangon. Those same outliers did not view themselves as such. At least, not the ones that found me. To outlie requires a center from which to *other*. Monk S’yadaw was recentering them in the Buddhist Ecumene so that they “can become good Burmese.”

It was also the case that, for the S’yadaw, the fact that these orphans could not read or speak “properly” was an appeal for the validity of his work. He was teaching them Buddhism and how to read and write Burmese, in order to give them value, membership, and belonging. He was “giving their lives meaning.” Like something out of a script, he was finding recruits to assimilate into the Ecumene.

Aung Aung: Non-Buddhists “Will be Trouble for Myanmar”

The cab driver was young. And a husband. And a father. He was surprised to hear us speaking Burmese to him, and immediately reduced his rate, eager to have a conversation. We got in, and I exchanged the usual pleasantries. When I told him why I was in Myanmar (he had asked), he warmed even further at the mention of studying Buddhism and learning people’s impressions about the new government. It was the summer of 2016, and much change – or the lack thereof, according to other interviewees – was afoot. After giving me permission to take some notes, exchanging phone numbers, and other trust-building connections, I asked him his perspective on Daw Suu (Aung San Suu Kyi). He replied that he voted for her and that he

thought she was fine. However, when I asked what made her good, he went on a tirade about the way things used to be in Myanmar, that “there was no freedom. No jobs. Nothing.”

I asked what it was about Daw Suu that he liked, and he did not give any answers. Not seeing much space for conversation, I redirected towards talking about Buddhism with a series of questions: “Why is it important to be Buddhist?” “How do you practice Buddhism?” “Were you a novice?” “Which prayers and texts do you know?” These questions took some time, and he was eager to talk about his opinions.

“What texts do you know?”

“I don’t really remember any prayers or suttas like I used to when I was a youth (*go-yin*). Oh, but wait, there’s one line of the “Metta Sutta” I know. Oh, and many Jātaka.”

“Do you go to a particular stūpa? Did you go (on Tuesday) for *Waso* (Vassa) celebrations?”

“I didn’t go to the stūpa, but I know I should.”

“Do you give to the monks when they come around? How about the nuns? If you don’t go to a monastery, how do you give?”

“I give to both the nuns and the monks...there is a particular monastery that sells car flowers for taxis. I buy the flowers for my car”

“I see the Buddha image on your dash and the picture of the monk. Who is that?”

“This image? This is my S’yadaw. When I do listen [to a dhamma talk], this is who I listen to. He’s on the radio and TV.”

After a series of questions along this line, I asked, “So, what does it mean to be Burmese?”

He responded, “One should speak and read in Burmese. They should know how to write. Also, one should spend time as a *go-yin* (novice), or even a *thila-shin* (Buddhist nun, or Bhikkhuni) if you can.”

“So...Buddhist.”

“Hoaq (yes...of course).”

“What else?”

“...” [Silence].

I then asked, “Is it possible to still be a ‘good’ Burmese if you become a Christian or a Muslim?”

He wavered in his answer, verbally processing thoughts that are often believed, but rarely spoken, “Of course you’re Burmese. But you should be Buddhist. If you have children, how will they grow up? How will they know how to act? They should learn about Buddhism and being Burmese.” The conversation took a somber diversion, “You know, that’s the problem with Daw Suu. The vice-president: he’s Chin. It’s no good. This will be trouble for Burma.”¹⁹⁶

“Yeah?”

“Yes. How can they know what we need? Others, they don’t trust him [the vice-president].”

He had already spoken up about other foreigners in Myanmar: the Chinese, Vietnamese, Muslims. I found it interesting that he felt liberty to share his frustrations at these foreigners to me, also a foreigner. I could not help but wonder, did I occupy a liminal space in his mind? A white man from the West to be sure. But a student of Buddhism, knowledgeable about the practices and the texts, speaking Burmese. In answering this question, it was clear that there was

¹⁹⁶ Unpublished field notes, June 8, 2016.

a sullyng aspect to not being Buddhist. It was also clear that studying Buddhism created a sense of camaraderie. Why he had spoken so freely about his disdain for the foreigner to a foreigner, I am not sure, but my mention of being a student of Buddhism gave me immediate access elsewhere, too. Myanmar was proud of being the place where people come to learn about *true* Buddhism. It is one of the only countries in the world that issues a visa specifically for foreigners to learn Buddhism. Until recently, this meditation visa was the longest visa duration one could legally receive to stay in Myanmar. As for the vice-president, it was not so much that he was ethnically *other* but that he would not make decisions that would benefit central Myanmar. He was seen as a biased party, someone who would only look out for the interests of his own people. Throughout our conversation, a subtle pejorative echoed that a Chin or a Muslim could not possibly know what was good for all of Myanmar. The implication being that a Bamar did.

Tied to his answer about being a Buddhist was a deferred aggravation with Daw Suu, namely her willingness to associate closely with other religious ethnic groups. In this interview and two others, the support for “Mother Suu” was situated in similar aggregations about the prior military rule. When asked what it was about Daw Suu that they liked, or that they supported, there were accompanying frustrations and fear that she was selling out Myanmar to foreigners. But it was really the notion of Buddhism, and Buddhist preservation, that got the most traction in our conversations about the government, the foreigner, the violence in the outer regions of the country. That Buddhism circumscribed this taxi driver’s sense of normalcy was evident: Buddhism is what teaches families how to behave. Buddhism is what is good for Myanmar. Buddhism provides access and solidarity. But what that Buddhism is, for this taxi driver, meant

being Buddhist in religion and ethnicity. The Chin (*lu-myo*) who was “bad for Myanmar” was “bad” because he was Chin (*lu-myo*), and not Buddhist (*batha*).

Conclusion

In 2014, just before the census was conducted in Myanmar, a survey by *Egress*, a Myanmar think tank, interviewed over 2,000 people from various walks of life. The vast majority of those interviewed associated Myanmar citizenship with being Buddhist.¹⁹⁷ Simply put, this is confusing. However, it is common. During my interviews, several (8 out of 29) gave the same answer for my separate question, “What race are you?” (*Ba lu-myo le?*) and “What religion are you?” (*Ba batha le?*): two questions that are surprisingly common to ask strangers. Of the twenty-nine interviewees, twenty were Buddhist-Bamar and ten were non-Buddhist minorities. Twenty of my interviewees were cab drivers in Yangon and of this group, thirteen were Buddhist. When I approached a Burmese S’yama about these phenomena, she responded that I was wrong, or they were wrong, because “*batha* and *lu-myo*, they are two different things.”

Yet, Burmese learn at a young age that Buddhism and Belonging go together. Not only did I regularly ask clarifying questions, “Wait, *batha* and *lu-myo*, they are not the same, right?” but several interviewees insisted they were. “They’re the same thing.” From the time in which all Burmese are named by their Buddhist astrologers (*bedin-saya*) to the time in which they take temporary ordination (for boys), Buddhism permeates all aspects of life, development, and worldview. While secular education had a large role in dismantling the proliferation of the *hpongyi-caun*, temporary ordination of monks encourages a systematic indoctrination of the Buddhist way of looking at the world. This education involves the memorization of Jātaka tales,

¹⁹⁷ Simon Roughneen, “Poll Finds Burmese Public Linking Citizenship to Buddhism,” *The Irrawaddy*, March 12, 2014, accessed May 20, 2017, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/poll-finds-burmese-public-linking-citizenship-buddhism.html>.

sutta-related liturgical observations, and other parables which reveal the idealized relationship between a Buddhist follower and the world they seek to inhabit.

It also includes the memory of belonging as a Buddhist phenomenon. “Don’t go to *that* area for alms – you won’t get any (because they are non-Buddhist).” Interactions like this and similar ones begin to lay the foundation of who is supportive of a community and who is viewed as an outsider, and potentially even hostile to the development of a Buddhist community. Buddhism provides a network of membership, through which one either participates or refuses. Buddhist vocabularies are the vernacular of political discourse. Thus, leveling a political critique against a politician using non-Buddhist principles, while not wrong, if the critiques are originating from a non-Buddhist source, they lack appeal. Meanwhile, orienting a critique of a political opponent utilizing Buddhist terminology places one on equal footing with his or her opponent. The contest now is purely a function of convincing the public who has the greater charisma and who has the greater divine mandate, again, utilizing Buddhist principles. It is for all of these reasons that considering Myanmar as a contemporary Buddhist Ecumene makes sense. If the politics of today were removed from us and we were considering these phenomena from an historical standpoint, this perspective would be a comparative one. We would be asking *how* Aung San Suu Kyi utilized a dhammarāja paradigm and Buddhist principles to wield power, not *if*.

Predictions and Conclusion

Myanmar is a complex nation with complex problems. In that way, it is no different than most other nations, including my own. In no way is the notion of an Ecumene meant to provide a panacea to the difficulties in understanding behavioral patterns. Nor does it even pretend to capture all the nuances of the ethnic and religious mosaic that makes Myanmar, Myanmar. However, it does provide a needed interpretive lens to understand the actions of its leaders and a significant majority of its inhabitants, the Bamar. Of course, there are exceptions to the principles outlined in this paper. As I have shown already, it is clear that Daw Aung San Suu Kyi considers herself as more than just a leader of a secular state. There is enough evidence outlined in this paper to conclude that she views her office as an ecclesiastical one: that of a dhammarāja, vying for kammatic salvation. Additionally, through ethnographic interviews supplemented with state documents and journalism, it is also clear that the vast majority of the populace (the Bamar) operate as members of an Ecumene, a Buddhist state-society nexus, with the accompanying modes of being that this requires. A subroutine lying within the subconscious, these Buddhist modalities are resolutely in place, being cemented in the minds of the Ecumene through childhood and into adulthood. Through textual appeal and State coercion, Buddhism becomes the standard bearer for belonging. Non-Theravadists are *othered*, especially if they encroach on Buddhist territories, try to convert Buddhists, or are believed to blaspheme the Buddha. *Othering* non-Buddhists has real consequences for the non-Buddhists. This is especially the case with those who live in the outer regions of Myanmar, in ethnic states that were, before 1948, considered the boundaries of the Ecumene. In active attempts to expand the borders of the Ecumene and consolidate a Myanmar nation has had the effects of active warfare, internal displacement, trafficking of “orphans,” and other technologies to encourage assimilation

or subjugation to the Ecumene. If the *othering* is not direct, it is indirect. “Don’t go over to that area for alms, *they* are Karen/Chin/Muslim (not Buddhist). They won’t give you any.” This has the consequence of excluding non-Buddhists from social, political, and economic networks. Full participation in society and politics requires the utilization and manipulation of Buddhist technologies: becoming a novice, learning to read and write in Burmese, learning the Jātakas, familiarity with the Buddhist framework of dhammarāja, speaking Burmese, “being” Buddhist in ethnicity and religion (*lu-myo* and *batha*), merit-making, using Buddhist categories to contest or affirm authority, among others.

Moving towards a prediction, perhaps a theme illuminated in my interviews will suffice. One notable narrative in my interview questions about Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was that she was favored as an opposition party. She was liked because of “how bad it was before.” Conversely, there is a great deal of skepticism about her because of her fraternization with ethnic (religious) minorities. Such is the suspicion with the recent assassination of Muslim NLD lawyer, U Ko Ni. That he, along with the vice-president, are viewed as threats to the dhamma, pollutants to the imagined Ecumene is a major speculative cause for his assassination.¹⁹⁸ Daw Suu’s party has faced some recent challenges in the bi-elections as well. The 2020 election is likely to prove challenging for the NLD. In order to remain in power, Daw Suu must convincingly show the dominant Bamar populace that she is the best candidate to lead the Ecumene and preserve the dhamma. What is likely to happen is that her tenure will be contested on how well she did in preserving the Union of Myanmar, under the auspices of furthering a Buddhist Ecumene. Her opponents will levy their critiques on this very subject, and appeal to their own ability to do a

¹⁹⁸ Kyaw Thu, Thiri Min Zin, Thiha Tun, Waiyan Moe Myint, Win Naung Toe, and Win Ko Ko Latt, “Prominent Myanmar Rights Lawyer Killed by Gunman at Yangon Airport,” *Radio Free Asia*, January 30, 2017, accessed May 30, 2017, <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/prominent-myanmar-rights-lawyer-killed-by-gunman-at-yangon-airport-01302017161100.html>.

better job as a Buddhist leader. This is not the same as simply keeping the ethnic states as part of the Union of Myanmar. It has to do with the perception that Buddhism is being furthered and growing in Myanmar.

Even though the NLD garnered several votes from ethnic minority regions in the 2015 elections, now that the old regime is firmly removed, those regions are likely to favor ethnic parties in the next election. A vote for the NLD was a vote for transition, not a vote in favor. For the Bamar majority, the determining factor will be the perceived effectiveness of Aung San Suu Kyi in maintaining this Ecumene mentality, or if, through failures implicit in the dhammarāja paradigm outlined above, she loses her moral-mandate to rule, indicating that her kamma has been spent. If this is the case, the Bamar will choose a different party, likely the Union Solidarity and Development Party, seen closely associated with the military. The appeal here is that the military are the ones largely responsible for the actions in Rakhine State, that is, the ones responsible for the removal of the Muslims and protecting the Buddhists. There is a very real likelihood that they will be seen as the more capable party to promote the Ecumene. For the ethnic and religious minorities in Myanmar. They will gain little traction in a country where right-to-rule is so closely associated with Buddhist charisma and Buddhist terminology. Unless they are able to code-switch their political desires into a Buddhist language, they will likely continue their resistance to, what is perceived to be, a Buddhist government encroachment into their territories.

In conclusion, the vast majority of Bamar, along with current and prior administrations, participate in an Ecumene: a space demarcated by stūpas, administered by a dhammarāja pretender, and a populace that views Buddhism as a prerequisite for belonging. The Buddhist Ecumene mentality circumscribes engagement between the ruler and ruled, therefore making it

difficult to contest power or to rule if one does not utilize the Buddhist framework of moral-authority. If one is not willing to conform to these norms, they are seen as foreigners or outsiders, setting themselves in tension with the assimilative modality of the Bamar peoples. Furthermore, the geographical positioning of Myanmar's borders after 1948 has created a geography where Buddhism rightly belongs. Muslim encroachment on Buddhist lands and the accompanying concern about dhamma decline has created a scenario where a dhammarāja must intervene or risk losing his or her moral-authority. Moreover, the failure of the dhammarāja to expand the borders of Buddhism, or to consolidate Buddhism, will also challenge their moral-authority. It is for these reasons that the NLD's position of prominence is likely temporary. The Ecumene will continue in its import, irrespective of who is at the helm, for the foreseeable future.

Without this paradigm, scholarship will continue to miss the stories of the Buddhist practitioners, who weave their religious ethnicity through beliefs about representation and who belongs in Myanmar. It is my hope that this paper, in some ways, destigmatizes unsavory words bluntly spoken, and resituates the Bamar of Myanmar as Buddhists who are operating within their historical and textual parameters of being Buddhists. They are not weird Buddhists. They are not schizophrenic Buddhists. They are not hypocrites. They are "true" to a Burmese Buddhist tradition. They are redefining and redirecting their practice of Buddhism, but they are doing it on their terms and in ways that are consistent with the textual and historical examples they access to tell their story.

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