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Militant Buddhist Nationalism: The Case of Burma

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1. Religion and Government in Traditional Burma

The close tie between Buddhism and the Burmese sense of national identity and culture that proved crucial in the emergence of Burmese Nationalism can be traced back almost 1000 years. According to tradition, Buddhism was brought to the Mons, one of the leading ethnic groups of Burma, still during the Buddha's lifetime. But it was not until the reign of King Anawrahta, who united Burma into a single kingdom and founded the first Burmese empire in the year 1044, that Theravada Buddhism became the dominant religion of the country. At a time when Buddhism had all but disappeared from its original home, India, Burma thus emerged as the main center of what has always been regarded as the orthodox school of Buddhism and its people developed the conviction that they were destined to preserve the purity of the Buddha's gospel.

Political authority in old Burma and until the final loss of independence in 1885 was buttressed by several religious pillars. The first consisted of elaborate and dazzling Hindu court ceremonies performed by Brahman priests from India. These masters of sacred ritual were active especially at coronations, royal weddings and audiences. Being learned in astrology they also provided advice in selecting auspicious locations for the capital and lucky dates for the inauguration of important undertakings. The prominent role of Brahmins at the court of kings who took pride in defending and promoting the Buddhist faith reveals the importance of the impact of Hinduism on Burmese culture.¹

A second religious sanction of government was likewise borrowed from India. The king not only was expected to follow the lore of lucky and unlucky days and thus bring his activities in harmony with the universe. He also was seen as residing at the very center of the macrocosmos which Hindu and Buddhist cosmology located at mythical Mount Meru. The king's capital and his palace were identified with this celestial mountain, the abode of the guardian gods of the world, and in this way the ruler himself attained divine status. He was the representative of Indra, the Hindu god of rain, and his exalted status was assured as long as he controlled the royal palace and owned a white elephant, the magical symbol and guarantee of fertility and rainfall.²

The doctrine of karma, taught by both Hinduism and Buddhism, provided the third support of royal authority. The king's vast power and riches were regarded as outstanding examples of merit and reward accumulated in previous existences. As long as the ruler continued accumulating additional merit by supporting the Buddhist monkhood, building pagodas and promoting the welfare of his subjects, the guilt of evil deeds like bloodshed was regarded offset and his title secure even if acquired through rebellion and murder. On the other hand, it was believed that if the karma of the king's past good deeds was not sufficiently replenished or outdone by the demerit of subsequent evil actions, he would perish. Hence some of

the most ruthless and tyrannical Burmese rulers were at the same time the most lavish patrons of Buddhism and generous providers of social welfare. ³

The most important source of allegiance to the king was derived from his role as defender and supporter of the Buddhist faith. Starting with King Anawrahta in the eleventh century, who attempted to suppress the indigenous animistic religion involving the worship of nats (spirits), all Burmese rulers took great pride in promoting Buddhism and their subjects praised these efforts. "Despite the manifold abuses of power arising from royal despotism," noted a historian of Burma, "which led Burmans traditionally to identify the government itself with such basic scourges as fire, flood, famine, and evil enemies, kingship merited popular appreciation because of its dedication to religious ends."⁴ Patronage of Buddhism thus buttressed the king's legitimacy and it enhanced the loyalty and support of the various ethnic peoples of Burma -- the Burmans, Mons, Shans and Arakanese -- for whom the most important bond of unity was their common religious faith.

The king, in addition to promoting Buddhism by feeding the monks and building shrines and temples, also acted to safeguard the purity of the faith by appointing the head of the Sangha hierarchy, suppressing heresy and enforcing discipline within the order. The chief agency of royal control was the thathanabaing ("possessor of discipline and instruction"), a kind of archbishop, who was appointed by the king. The primate was assisted by a commission of eight monks (pongvis); under him were district "bishops" called gainggyoks. This organization enforced monastic discipline, settled controversies within the order, organized the holding of annual examinations and generally supervised monastic training. Routine discipline, however, was normally maintained locally and the court-created hierarchy was often a loose affair. ⁵

While the king invested the primate, who served at his pleasure, the thathanabaing's authority in matters of ecclesiastical organization and discipline was great and interference by the king in sacerdotal affairs rare. The monarch needed the Sangha for it strengthened the royal authority in numerous ways, especially by functioning as the country's teachers. Every village had its monastery or temple with one or more monks in residence and here the local boys learned reading and writing and the basic principles of Buddhism. In a country whose political structure was unstable at the center and often ineffectual outside of the capital, the Sangha performed an important function of social control by teaching the virtues of meekness and humility. "Along with the headman, the monks kept watch over the manners and morals of the village and admonished the people to obey the laws and to pay their taxes." ⁶ The villagers revered the wearers of the yellow robe and the prestige of the king was enhanced by his support of the Sangha.

In some instances monks were sent on diplomatic missions and they occasionally interceded to save the lives of persons wantonly condemned. But by and large the Sangha did not interfere in politics and it largely failed to mitigate the brutality of Burmese kingship. For example, the monks were not strong enough to challenge the established practice of new kings to kill off their brothers and other kinsmen whose presence might challenge the stability of their rule. "Neither the personal influence of the thathapaying nor the humanitarian principles of the Buddhist faith seem to have moderated appreciably the unrestrained violence which characterized most of the reigns." ⁷ Monks sometimes led revolts but such participation in rebellions was rare and Buddhism generally functioned as a stabilizing force.

The cause of kingship was also furthered by the claims of certain rulers, convinced of their extraordinary religious merits, to be a Bodhisattva, a future Buddha. According to the prophecy this Buddha Maitreya (Metteyya in Pali) would usher in an age of plenty, universal love and compassion, and several Burmese kings asserted or believed to be this Buddhist redeemer. King Bodawpaya (1782-1819) made the claim though he failed to convince the Sangha. In other cases, it appears, the people accepted the assertion and the charisma of kingship was appropriately enhanced. ⁸

Great as was the Burmese kings' power it was not unlimited. In the coronation vows the monarch swore not only to respect the laws of Buddha, but he also promised to watch over the people as though they were his sons and daughters. Kingship traditionally was seen based on a contract between ruler and subjects and the king was expected to live up to the people's trust. The way in which individual monarchs responded to this old convention varied a good deal though almost all of them sought to win at least the approval of the Sangha -- the representatives of the public conscience. ⁹ The peace and prosperity of the realm were regarded dependent upon the moral behavior of the king and misfortune would be blamed upon his injustice and misuse of power. The literature of Buddhism told of kings who had come to a sad end on account of their arbitrary rule; the monarch's fear of rebellion was supposed to restrain would-be tyrants. In practice, however, this expectation did not materialize. In fact, it appears that the fear of rebellion provided further incentive for oppressive rule: kings would increase their heavy hand at the first sign of opposition in order to discourage resistance. ¹⁰ Thus in a few instances Burmese monarchs did not even hesitate to massacre monks suspected of subversive designs. In 1540 King Thohanbwa is said to have killed 360 monks and plundered monastic property. According to the chronicles, King Alaungpaya (1752-60) threw 3000 monks to the elephants who trampled them to death as punishment for having opposed his will. ¹¹ Uprisings that did succeed rarely improved the lot of the people; the latter therefore by and large willingly obeyed their rulers, no matter how autocratic, for they preferred the maintenance of law and order to the confusion and unrest of frequent rebellions.

2. The Origins of Modern Buddhist Nationalism

The loss of Burmese independence to Great Britain was a gradual process that lasted one hundred years. Friction between Burma and British India began to develop after 1784 and it culminated in the first Anglo-Burman War of 1824-25. The second war (1852) resulted in the British conquest of Lower Burma. The final collapse came during the reign of King Thibaw -- in the third and final Anglo-Burman War of 1885-86. On November 28, 1885 Mandalay fell to the British and the king and his two principal queens were sent into exile. On February 26, 1886 Burma formally became a province of British India.

The defeat of the king and the seizure of the capital had been a relatively easy affair, but the pacification of the countryside required four years. Disbanded soldiers were joined by peasants. Even monks participated in the guerilla fighting and in many places the leadership of the rebellion was in their hands. Like in earlier outbreaks of resistance to the British, the religious factor was one of the most important. The abolition of the monarchy, a national and religious symbol, had created a serious institutional and psychological void. A British administrator observed in 1887:

The Burman cannot conceive of a religion without a Defender of the Faith -- a king who appoints and rules the Buddhist hierarchy. The extinction of the monarchy left the nation, according to the people's notions, without a religion. We have overthrown the king and destroyed all traces of kingly rule. Naturally they look upon this as the destruction of their nationality. ¹²

After the second Anglo-Burmese War large numbers of monks, unwilling to live under an alien government, had migrated from Lower to Upper Burma. Those who stayed behind felt abandoned and often became corrupt. The British government had refused to assume the traditional patronage of Buddhism or to appoint a primate to enforce discipline. The same development now threatened to overtake the rest of the country. The British authorities not only abolished the court and traditional local self-government, but they also did away with the ecclesiastical commissions that enforced the decrees of the thathanabaing. The latter's juridical functions were severely curtailed when civil courts were vested with exclusive jurisdiction over all disputes of a civil nature and ecclesiastical authority was all but destroyed when a secular judge overruled a disciplinary decision of the Sangha in 1891. ¹³ When the last thathanabaing appointed by the king died in 1895, no successor was named. Gradually the entire machinery for regulating admission to the Sangha and disciplining its members broke down and monastic standards deteriorated.

Coinciding with the decline of the monastic order and a lowering of its prestige was a general weakening of the social order. In Lower Burma, in particular, the influx of capital and labor from India brought about

a new type of commercial rice cultivation. "A footloose Burmese peasant proletariat came eventually to populate much of Lower Burma, where all of the cultivators were debt-ridden and lacking a permanent domicile in a stable community." ¹⁴ Lawlessness spread and defied police controls. Sporadic outbreaks of anti-British violence plagued the country. Some of the leaders were again monks who claimed to be harbingers of a Golden Age that would dawn with the liberation of Buddhist Burma from British rule. ¹⁵

Some writers have characterized this early anti-British agitation as "xenophobic reactions to foreign rule" and have called it a traditionalist-oriented "pre-nationalism." ¹⁶ It is no doubt true that these periodic outbursts against foreign domination aimed at restoring the old order rather than building a modern nation along the Western model. Still, the people of Burma could look back upon 800 years of Burmese history on a common territorial base and they were possessed by a strong sense of national pride. "In fact," writes a Burmese scholar, "hemmed in by the teeming millions of China on one side and of India on the other, the Burmese were able to survive as an independent people, mainly because of their strong sense of nationalism." ¹⁷ The traditional order which the anti-British rebels were trying to resurrect thus had many attributes of a nation-state and it would seem quite appropriate to call these outbursts manifestations of a traditional Burmese nationalism rather than mere anomic disturbances. ¹⁸ Moreover, very soon these poorly organized outbursts were to merge with a more modern type nationalist movement.

Throughout the history of Burma Buddhism had functioned as the crucial integrative force in society and culture. At the turn of the century the traditional religion once again began to assume the role of a unifying factor and it provided the basis for the emergence of an increasingly aggressive nationalistic movement. The Sangha resented the competition of government and missionary schools and the consequent loss of their former hold over education. The monks were disturbed by the breakdown of their religious hierarchy and the colonial government's pampering of religious minorities. Widespread resentment of the foreigner brought about a new flourishing of interest and pride in the Buddhist religion. Europeans might be richer and stronger, many Burmese seemed to say to themselves, but all this was as nothing since they did not possess the jewel of the true faith. ¹⁹ Buddhism became a symbol of self-assertion against the colonial regime.

With the Sangha in a state of stagnation the revival of Buddhism was centered mainly in lay circles and among Anglicized urban intellectuals. Buddhist associations with educational and social ideals were formed in the 1890's; in 1902 the first "Young Men's Buddhist Association" (YMBA) came into being. 83 of the 221 books published in Burma during the year 1908 were devoted to religion; in 1909 two Buddhist newspapers and a periodical made their appearance under YMBA sponsorship. In the following year the Burma Research Society was launched. In the countryside an increased number of itinerant monks were preaching the Buddhist gospel. ²⁰

The YMBA at the beginning was almost exclusively urban. The movement was led by young lawyers and undergraduates; the members were students, clerks and junior officials of the colonial government educated in English schools. ²¹ At first the organization was more social and educational in nature than political; it aimed at bringing about a renaissance of Burmese and Buddhist values and sought to adjust the country's traditional culture to the impact of the West. As time went on the YMBA assumed a more political orientation and gradually it became a training ground for Burma's future nationalist statesmen. As in India and the East generally, nationalistic sentiment was encouraged by Japan's victory over Russia in 1905 -- the triumph of an Asian country over a Western power. The independence of the neighboring Buddhist kingdom of Siam reminded the Burmese of the glories of their own past. Revolutionary ideas seeped in from India and China; their impact was heightened by the emphasis on the ideas of democracy and self-determination current in World War I. ²²

In 1916 the YMBA for the first time became actively involved in political agitation. At issue was the refusal of Europeans to remove their shoes while on pagoda premises. This wanton disregard of Buddhist custom had aroused opposition as early as 1901; under the leadership of U Thein Maung, a barrister, a movement now got under way to put an end to this manifestation of disrespect to the Buddhist religion and Sangha, and nationalist sentiment quickly rallied. Most YMBA branch associations actively supported the agitation which became an outlet for anti-British sentiment. The organization by now had spread into the villages though the unrest was largely confined to Rangoon. The government finally granted to each local pongyi the right to regulate the matter of footwear for his pagoda as he chose but it refused to issue a general decree as demanded by the Buddhists. This ostensibly religious issue thus had become the first important anti-British skirmish involving the educated and often Westernized urban intelligentsia. "The primary role played by religious considerations in the emergence of nascent Burmese nationalism," concludes Cady, "can be attributed to the fact that religion afforded the only universally acceptable symbol to represent an accumulation of grievances, economic, social, and psychological, which were as yet for the most part inarticulate and incapable of direct political exploitation."²³

Proposals for Indian constitutional reform discussed during and after World War I had left Burma out; it was alleged that the country was politically immature. The most that Britain seemed ready to grant was a scheme of self-government on the district level. A series of mass meetings sponsored by the YMBA in 1919 protested this decision and a delegation was sent to London to plead the Burmese case for greater self-rule. After considerable delay the British government in late 1920 finally agreed to include Burma within the dyarchy system of India, but by that time the Burmese nationalists had increased their demands. Violent revolutionary protest was in the air; political agitation had ceased to be the exclusive concern of the Burmese Western-oriented intelligentsia. "The popular revolution for political freedom had begun."²⁴

3. The Unruly 1920's: The Heyday of the Political Monks

The pongyis were brought into the burgeoning nationalist agitation through the movement for national schools which followed the student strike against the new University of Rangoon in 1920. The students objected to the high standards announced for the proposed university, which they interpreted as a move to limit the number of Burmans in attendance. They also protested the meager representation of Burmans on the governing bodies of the University. On December 4, 1920, two days before the dedication ceremonies, a boycott was started which soon was 100 per cent effective. Under the influence of Indian agitators, who sought support and endorsement of the policy of non-cooperation adopted by the Indian National Congress led by Gandhi, the student movement broadened its demands to include complete home rule for Burma and a rejection of the dyarchy reforms -- a two-part division of executive authority with most powers "reserved" to the British governor -- just secured in London. From Rangoon the strike spread to all government schools as well as to a few American missionary schools. Editors and monks joined the strike movement and demanded a system of national schools entirely free from British support and control. Seeking to enlist non-Buddhist support, the Central Council of the Young Men's Buddhist Associations leading the strike now²⁵ changed its name to "General Council of Burmese Associations" (GCBA).

The strike held up fairly well during the year 1921. In many localities Buddhist monks acted as teachers in the improvised national schools. But discipline was absent and the monks, almost totally unequipped to handle modern learning, were no substitute for the trained teachers of the struck schools. By the end of 1922 the experiment had essentially collapsed. Still, the political effects of the university strike and national school movement were great. In the words of Cady: "They marked the birth of revolutionary nationalism in Burma. December 4, 'National Day,' was eventually designated a holiday. The educational agitation brought the teaching pongyis into the national movement as never before, and a fateful pattern was developed for using the university and the schools as instruments of political opposition."²⁶

A further and far more decisive impetus for the emergence of the monks as the grassroots leaders of the nationalist cause was provided by the activities of the pongyi U Ottama whose name is indissolubly linked to the phenomenon of the political monks of Burma. U Ottama had spent several years in India where he had become acquainted with the aims and methods of agitation of the Indian National Congress. He also had studied in Japan and was said to have learned to appreciate the Japanese characteristics of discipline and perseverance. Upon his return to Burma in 1921 he quickly became the acknowledged leader of the politically active monks. During the interwar period Burma had approximately 100,000 pongyis²⁷ though this figure cannot be regarded as exact on account of the often temporary nature of Sangha membership -- many Burmans don the yellow robe for a while in order to flee the world's stress or, occasionally, to escape the reach

of the law. Probably only a minority of the monks took an active role in the nationalist movement, but most of them were in sympathy with the nationalist cause and their backing proved a crucial factor in the development of Burmese nationalism into a popular movement. The pongvis had good reasons for opposing alien rule which rapidly eroded the status and prestige of the monk. "There was no place for him in the new Western-oriented social hierarchy, his educational functions were assumed by other agencies, an unknown foreign language prevented him from understanding what was going on, and westernized Burmese laymen increasingly regarded him as irrelevant to modern life." ²⁸ Small wonder that the pongvis emerged as the most aggressively nationalistic force on the scene -- a fertile soil for U Ottama's preaching.

U Ottama toured the country and in his speeches called for non-payment of taxes and non-cooperation with the British administration. He demanded home rule and promised that France and America would come to Burma's aid. The emphasis of his appeal varied with the nature of his audience and circumstances. Many of his speeches were religiously colored and aimed at giving the struggle for independence a Buddhist meaning so as to convince the traditionalist rural masses. Nirvana, deliverance from universal suffering, U Ottama told the villagers, could not be obtained without prior deliverance from political bondage. "Pongvis pray for Nirvana but slaves can never obtain it, therefore they must pray for release from slavery in this life." ²⁹ This modernistic interpretation of Buddhism successfully merged with popular prophecies of a perfect Buddhist society headed by an ideal Buddhist ruler who would humble all foreign conquerors and unbelievers. ³⁰

In the days of the Burmese kings, according to U Ottama, the Burmese people's religion and culture had prospered while British rule degraded and corrupted their morals. The monks therefore had to fight to prevent the total destruction of the national religion. The struggle for independence was to be non-violent but resort to force was not rejected in principle. Violent incidents, in fact, became a fairly common occurrence and monks often were the instigators or perpetrators. When a Burmese theatrical group performed for the visiting Prince of Wales in 1922, thus disobeying a boycott of the royal visitor declared by the GCBA and the political monks, it was later attacked by a group of pongvis armed with knives, stones and sticks and several of the actors were seriously wounded. ³¹ Two months earlier a pitched battle between several hundred monks and police had taken place in Rangoon. In the countryside crops were destroyed, cattle maimed and arson and murder committed. Many of these deeds were committed by lay political agitators or ordinary criminals seeking the shelter of the yellow robe. "With the breakdown of social controls and the increase of economic distress, it became increasingly difficult to distinguish between the opportunistic criminal and violent nationalist." ³²

The political involvement of the monks was facilitated by several factors. The pongyis in the cities and towns lived in monasteries of several hundred members and it was easy to mobilize them for meetings or demonstrations. Every village had at least one monk and by virtue of this fact the Sangha had a readymade political network no political party could match. The government, for its part, found it difficult to proceed against the political monks. The pongyis enjoyed the admiration and reverence of the Burmese masses and any attempt to arrest, prosecute and convict monks for violations of the law inevitably triggered popular indignation and charges of persecution of the sacred Sangha. Lastly, the British had earlier practiced a policy of neutrality and non-interference in religious matters and for several years the Sangha had been without a thathanabaing. The colonial administration had feared that a strong Buddhist primate might become a threat to British rule. In 1903 a new thathanabaing had been recognized but his authority was strictly limited and this weakness of the Sangha hierarchy freed the monks from the traditional restraints and enabled them to carry on their nationalistic activities. In vain did the government now strengthen the primate's authority. A conservative thathanabaing in 1921 forbade monks to participate in any form of political agitation but by this time discipline had become so weak that the political monks could simply disregard this order. ³³

The principal coordinator of the monks' political activities was the General Council of Sangha Sametggi (GCSS) organized in 1922. The influence of this politicized faction of the Sangha was strongest in the villages. The British had forbidden the headmen, who were officials and presumably allies of the government, to participate in politics and the political monks stepped in to fill this vacuum of leadership. Very soon they managed to gain control of many of the village athings -- political associations set up by the GCBA in 1921-22. The pongyi radicals also worked in close cooperation with the leaders of the so-called Bu athings, conspiratorial secret organizations striving for home rule by resort to violence and intimidation that appeared in the villages in 1922. ³⁴ The Bu athings were declared illegal in August 1923 but their appeal could not be ended by edict. Tension between the government and the rural population was increased by the agricultural crisis afflicting Burma. The land was slowly but steadily passing into the hands of money-lending landlords. At the time of the census of 1921 only one-half of the agriculturists in Lower Burma owned their own land, 27% were landless laborers and 22% tenants. ³⁵ The alienation of land and growing agrarian distress created instability, undermined communal life and fed the fires of discontent.

The political monks used prophecies, magic and other more modern forms of agitation to turn the villagers against the foreign government and its agents -- the police, the courts, the tax collector and the village headman. They pleaded for a boycott of foreign goods, the establishment of national schools, boycott of the civil courts, abstinence from liquor and other intoxicants. The ultimate goal of the pongyis was home rule, a term borrowed from India; it meant for most of them a restoration of the old order in which a king and the Sangha would cooperate and the monks once again be the source of moral leadership. ³⁶

The political monks' distrust of Western political ideas and forms found expression in their call for a boycott of the elections to the legislative council under the Burma Reforms Act of June 1922. The pongyis excelled in direct agitation on the village level; a shift of focus of the nationalist movement toward a political struggle within an elected legislative chamber could only diminish their influence.³⁷ A majority of the lay GCBA, committed to home rule and opposed to the dyarchy scheme, similarly decided to boycott the elections and as a result the inauguration of dyarchy on January 1, 1923, representing a considerable advance in self-government, met hardly any popular acclaim.

Relations between the different factions of the GCBA and the monks' GCSS during the following years were not always smooth. U Ottama advocated a line of revolutionary action, including a campaign for the nonpayment of taxes, while many members of the GCBA favored a more moderate course and gradually came to resent pongyi dictation. Still, the Westernized intelligentsia could not dispense with the political monks and the massive political ground swell generated by them. In the words of Cady: "In contrast with the situation in India, where the Congress Party found its main support among the middle class and business and professional people, Burma had no such indigenous middle class. If nationalist politicians in Burma wanted popular backing, they had little choice but to line up with the political pongyis, who alone swayed the village Wunthanu Athins. Since a monk's denunciation could ruin the standing of political aspirant, most of them sought religious support."³⁸

The dominant position of the political monks in the nationalist movement began to weaken following the failure of the anti-tax campaign of 1924. The agitation had led to considerable violence, at times indistinguishable from plain criminality, and this had further alienated the urban nationalists. By 1925 the question of pongyi influence and other issues involving personal rivalries had left the GCBA fragmented into a host of splinter groups. Following a riot in August 1924 U Ottama had been sentenced to three years' imprisonment for sedition; this long jail term (his second) deprived the radical pongyis of their most able leader and their influence declined. The first attempt to build a united nationalist movement, bridging the gap between the more Westernized urban elements and the traditionalist political monks, had failed.

U Ottama was released from jail in February 1927 and the pongyis' political activities revived. The anti-tax campaign was taken up again and the colonial administration had to resort to mass arrests of monks to silence the agitators.³⁹ A favorite tactic of the pongyis consisted in the circulation of rumors that the British were about to withdraw and that the revived Burmese kingdom would abolish all taxes. Several pretenders to the vacant throne at Mandalay now made their appearance in the villages and revived the old hopes of a deliverer king who would overthrow the alien ruler and restore national honor and prosperity. The most serious incident involved the savior king Bandaka in the Shwebo district of Upper Burma in 1928. Bandaka collected men and money and rose up against the British. The rising became serious enough for the government having to call in troops to suppress it. Eventually Bandaka and 25 followers were rounded up, tried and sentenced to transportation for life.⁴⁰

In 1928 U Ottama was arrested for the third and last time; he eventually died in jail in 1939. The next most important leader of the political monks, U Wisara, in 1929 succumbed after a prolonged hunger strike which he had undertaken to secure the right to wear the yellow robe during his imprisonment. Popular feeling ran high and some 2000 Burmans participated in the cremation ceremonies for U Wisara who was regarded as Burma's pongyi martyr second only to U Ottama.⁴¹ The death of U Wisara happened while the Simon Commission was holding hearings about the future of Burma. The country's nationalists had made a futile effort to present a united front to the visiting commission. A lay-controlled group advocated separation from India, the curtailment of Indian immigration, freedom from pongyi domination and the enactment of legislation designed to discipline and purify the Sangha. The pongyis and their lay followers, on the other hand, demanded a retention of the tie to India and cooperation with the Indian National Congress. Irrked at the proposals for control of pongyis made by their rivals they formed a "Hundred Committee" and demanded obedience to the monks. It was this committee that instigated the boycott of the Simon Commission. While the latter attempted to find a constitutional solution to the Burmese problem unrest continued in the villages and military police had to be used to suppress political agitation against payment of the capitation tax.⁴² In the Tharrawaddy district the groundwork was being laid for a fullscale rebellion.

4. The Saya San Rebellion

Saya San was a native of Upper Burma, a one-time monk, who had settled in Belugyun in Lower Burma and earned a living as practitioner of indigenous medicine. He joined a radical faction of the GCBA but in 1928 withdrew from it and began to form secret associations to forcibly resist the collection of the capitation tax. Eventually this agitation broadened into a plan to overthrow British rule in Burma.

The upper delta district of Tharrawaddy was the center of the planned rebellion. For years this district had been a favorite resort of agitators and in 1927-28 it had become notorious for a widespread anti-tax campaign. Economic conditions were depressed, the price of paddy had fallen and the cultivators were in debt to money-lenders. Saya San's nationalist speeches here fell upon receptive ears. He blamed the British for the villagers' difficult situation and exhorted the people to rise against the foreign exploiter. He reminded them of an old prophecy that a min'aung (prince) would appear and free the country from British rule.⁴³ A small army, albeit with few weapons, was drilled and a "capital" prepared in the jungle some twelve miles east of Tharrawaddy town.

On October 28, 1930, at the auspicious moment of 11:33 P.M. selected by astrologers, Saya San was proclaimed King of Burma, assuming the title Thupannaka Galon Raja. The galon was a legendary bird of Hindu mythology which attacked and destroyed the snake. In Saya San's adaptation of this fable the snake represented the foreign ruler and the galon thus became a symbol of victory. In fulfillment of an ancient prophecy Saya San next became a monk and after a brief sojourn in a monastery he was proclaimed king a second time. This coronation ceremony was carried out in the traditional manner and the "Bird-King" assumed the throne with the five royal regalia: the white umbrella (ancient Brahman symbol of divine kingship), the crown of victory, the sacred gem-studded slippers, the victorious sword and fan. A bamboo hut was built and an inscription designated it as the "Palace of the Buddhist King."⁴⁴

On December 21 Saya San reviewed his army. As the four regiments marched past a prayer was chanted: "May Thupannaka Galon Raja live at Aung Chan Tha, the City of Wealth and Victory, and may his contemplations be speedily successful. May the Guardian Spirits of the Religion, the Dragons and the King of Angels sustain him. May he become Emperor of the Four Islands and of the thousand lesser isles adjacent to them." At the end of the review the new king read the following proclamation: "In the name of Our Lord and for the Church's greater glory, I, Thupannaka Galon Raja, declare war upon the heathen English who have enslaved us."⁴⁵

The deliberate use of traditionalist language, symbols and ceremonial contributed to the great emotional power of the movement. It soon represented not merely a peasant uprising motivated by economic grievances but also assumed the character of a rebellion propelled by militant religious ideas.

"It was a phenomenon of what anthropologists call 'nativistic' response against overwhelming impacts of an alien civilization that had been dissolving traditional society up to its economic foundations and challenging the traditional conception of Burmese folk Buddhism." It was "a revolt against the new forces in the name of a search for security in pre-colonial values, a desperate attempt to restore the old symbols of cosmic and social harmony." In the popular mind Saya San was identified with the Setkya-Min, the ideal Buddhist ruler of the Four Island continents and a future Buddha.⁴⁶

On December 22, 1930, hostilities began. One of the first targets of the rebels was the unpopular forestry service. Six officers, including one European, were killed and some 100 forestry houses burnt to the ground. The peasants, at first about 1500 strong, had only 30 guns, mostly home-made; the rest carried swords. But their courage was fortified by magic and the promises of astrologers that the end of British rule in Burma was at hand. Recruits to the rebel army were tattooed with the galon emblem that was believed to insure invulnerability. A magical elixir magical gongs and handkerchiefs also were believed to give them immunity from bullets or make them invisible. In some places the galon soldiers painted white circles on their naked behinds, which they exposed to their opponents, and the sight of the wierd, wriggling circles, often frightened off the government's forces. The Buddha himself was too remote, but the nats (spirits), who had stood by the Burmans since pre-Buddhist times and had become absorbed in folk Buddhism, were within reach and their help was solicited. The mixture of animism and Buddhism that inspired the rebellion can be seen from the following oath that included this plea:

Do away with the heathens, Oh Nats, so that our glorious Buddhist religion may prosper ... Hark! Ye Brahmans and Nats, King of Bramas, Defender of Buddhism, and others. We swear we will not ill treat, nor destroy either the life or the property of the people who are members of the associations affiliated to the G.C.B.A. and the Galon Army as long as Burma does not attain freedom from the British yoke May we overcome the heathens speedily and may the arms and ammunition used by our heathen opponents and their servants turn into water or air or mis-fire and never attain their object.⁴⁷

From the Tharrawaddy district the rebellion spread to much of Lower Burma and the Shan states, largely as a result of the activities of itinerant monks who worked through the local athings. In the Thayetmyo district the uprising was organized by a pongyi named U Arthapa, abbot of a monastery. In the Yamethin district the revolt was led by a monk who had come from Tharrawaddy. He succeeded in collecting 40-50 men; they raided 2-3 villages and killed 1 headman and a police constable.⁴⁸ The peak of the outbreak was reached by June 1931. Men would advance upon machine guns holding amulets in their hands and chanting formulas. Gradually, however, the belief of the galon soldiers in their invulnerability was shaken by the heavy losses they suffered in engagements with the police and troops. Still, the Burmese police was unable to master the situation. Almost two divisions had to be sent from India to help fight the rebels and even then it took one and

one half years to suppress the uprising. According to figures collected by the British, the rebels lost about 300 killed and wounded; 8300 were captured or arrested. The government forces suffered 50 killed and 88 wounded. Many village headmen and several forestry officers were also murdered and the general destruction of property was extensive.⁴⁹

Toward the end the rebellion degenerated into general disorder with attacks upon Indians and Chinese; criminals took advantage of the breakdown of law and order to terrorize the villages.⁵⁰ Even the "true rebels" committed atrocities against those who refused to supply them with food or money. There were reports of villagers being roasted alive and their children killed as a reprisal for cooperation with the police. About 1000 of the captured galon soldiers received sentences of imprisonment and 128 were hanged; the heavier sentences were not for rebellion but for the deliberate murder of inoffensive citizens.⁵¹ Saya San himself was captured, convicted of seditious treason and after a series of unsuccessful appeals executed on November 28, 1937.

A noted Burmese scholar has called the Saya San rebellion appropriately "a strange blend of faith and superstition, nationalism and madness, of courage and folly."⁵² It was not a mass rising comparable to the troubles of 1886-1887, but it did represent an expression of traditional Burmese nationalism. The galon revolt thrived on ignorance and superstition and the more Westernized nationalist leaders not only were not involved in the rebellion but considered many of its features as repulsive and degrading.⁵³ Still, the uprising caught the popular imagination and it gave heart to all parts of the nationalist movement. Cady concludes that "the perpetrators of the uprising breathed new vitality into Burmese nationalism simply by demonstrating the courage of their political commitment against impossible odds. The heat of their frenzied resistance welded a connecting bond, between the culturally disparate pongyi-led masses and the Westernized elite. Although the uprising did not reconcile political differences, it undoubtedly constituted an important landmark in the development of Burmese nationalism."⁵⁴

5. The Emergence of Secular Nationalism

Following the suppression of the Saya San rebellion the political monks increasingly lost their previously held position of prominence in the nationalist movement and leadership and initiative passed into the hands of secular politicians. Such a trend, as we have seen, had begun in the late twenties and it was essentially completed by the end of the thirties. We will here sketch out these developments in brief outline only.

The pongyis did not suddenly disappear from the political scene nor could the urban politicians now afford to dispense with the support of the political monks. "Even the more sophisticated younger men," notes Cady, "who discounted the superstitious lore of religious leaders, dared not leave to their rivals the exclusive exploitation of magic and omens."⁵⁵ But as the struggle for independence shifted into constitutional channels the influence of the pongyis weakened. The main force for secularism was the Dobama Asiatayone (We Burmans Society), formed in 1935 by the amalgamation of two student nationalist groups. The members addressed each other as Thakin, the word for "lord" or "master" customarily used in Upper Burma for addressing Englishmen, and the organization soon became known as the Thakin party. It included in its ranks such young nationalist leaders as Nu, Aung San, Ohn Khin and Ba Swe, all of whom later played a leading role in the final fight for freedom during World War II. The Thakins were not hostile to religion but they rejected the narrow conception of nationalism along religious or racial lines and stressed national unity. Their secular nationalism was reinforced by the influence of Marxism which made itself felt within Thakin ranks.⁵⁶

There were other factors tending to undermine the strength of traditional pongyi-led nationalism. The Government of Burma Act, passed in 1935, came into operation on April 1, 1937 and Burma now at last enjoyed a political identity separate from India. The new constitution provided for "a liberal dose of democracy"⁵⁷ and since all political factions now participated in the political process there no longer remained a boycott party to which the Sangha could belong; the monks regarded direct participation in politics and electioneering as against the Vinaya rules.⁵⁸ Finally, secularist ideas were spreading under the impact of Western education, as a result of the increasing sophistication of lay politicians, and within the growing Burmese middle class resentful of pongyi dictation.

The political monks found an outlet for their frustrations in the series of racial explosions that plagued Burma in the thirties. The peasants resented the Indian moneylenders and usurious Chinese shopkeepers; in the cities friction grew between Burman and Indian laborers. A first clash in Rangoon in May 1930 left 300 to 500 killed; riotous outbreaks continued into 1931.⁵⁹ The pongyis played a more direct role in the anti-Indian riots of July 1938. The immediate cause was the publication in 1937 of a book authored by a Muslim and critical of the Buddhist religion. It had first appeared in 1931 and gone almost unnoticed, but the new edition was exploited by elements of the vernacular press hostile to the government and by the

Sangha. On July 26 a mass meeting was called in Rangoon by the All Burma Council of Young Pongyis Association which demanded that the government ban the book. A protest demonstration organized by the monks turned into rioting against Indian Muslims that lasted for several days and spread to other parts of the country. Verified casualties caused by the rioters included 192 Indians killed and 878 injured.⁶⁰ The official inquiry committee after a careful investigation found that monks had everywhere played a leading role in instigating and directing the riots. The report noted:

It is distressing to have to record that in the majority of cases which have been specifically brought to our notice pongys either have been present among the mobs of looters with dahs [knives] and other weapons in their hands or that, worse still, pongys themselves were responsible for maiming and killing defenceless Indians.⁶¹

Unrest continued into 1939. A series of school strikes began in December 1938 in which the young Thakins took an important part. As in similar strikes in 1936, the students quit their classes "to lend support to the nationalist movement, and partly to evade their on-coming examinations."⁶² The strikes were actively supported by the Young Sangha Associations and on February 10, 1939 a huge demonstration of students and monks in Mandalay, held in defiance of a ban imposed by the government, was fired upon by police and fourteen demonstrators, including seven pongys, were killed. The funeral of the martyrs was a highly emotional affair and led to sympathy demonstrations in Rangoon.

But the alliance between the political monks and the Thakins did not last. In World War II the monks actively assisted the Japanese invaders, assuming that Japan, being a Buddhist country, would restore religion to its rightful place. During the Japanese occupation the pongys acted as ardent collaborators. When the Japanese-sponsored "independence" resulted in growing disillusionment, the monks emerged discredited. They took no part in ousting the Japanese and they got no sympathy from the student-dominated Anti-Fascist Peoples Freedom League (AFPFL) which assumed power at the end of the war. Aung San and the other leaders of the AFPFL were Western-oriented and committed to the idea of a secular state. "When independence was achieved in 1948," writes Smith, "the Thakin-Aung San nationalist tradition was so completely dominant that there was little awareness of the other Buddhist-oriented nationalism."⁶³

The role played by Buddhism in independent Burma forms a separate subject and does not concern us here.⁶⁴ We should merely note that Buddhism has continued to play a role in post-independence nationalism. Religion has been enlisted to help achieve a sense of national identity and restore national pride. The appeal to Buddhism and for the support of the monks at times has been used for personal political advantage; U Nu's victory in 1960 is attributed in large measure to his promise to make Buddhism the state religion and to the forceful campaigning of the monks on his behalf.⁶⁵ But the very success of this appeal is an indication of the strength of the Buddhist ethos among the Burmese masses; even among some sections of the

urban elite a sense of religious commitment is said to be gaining. "These Burmese who had been 'culturally disinherited by colonial acculturation,' who had succumbed to western values and ways of life, found in the reassertion of their Burmese Buddhist identity a truly galvanic experience." ⁶⁶ A similar resurgence of religion has been observed in other newly independent nations -- the case of Islam in North Africa is the most prominent example -- and these often contradictory trends constitute a warning against hasty generalizations about the complete triumph of secularism.

Once again Buddhism thus functioned as an integrative force binding together the diverse ethnic groups of the country. The fact that many of the non-Buddhists in Burma are alien tended to reinforce the traditional view that "To be a Burman is to be a Buddhist." ⁶⁷ However, this conception of national identity also created serious tensions between the Buddhist majority and the religious minorities, especially the Kachins. The adoption of Buddhism as the state religion during U Nu's rule in 1961, in particular, jeopardized national unity, and the coup of General Ne Win in March 1962 was precipitated in part by the army's fear of a threatening disintegration of the state. ⁶⁸ The revolutionary regime has pursued an essentially secular course and relations with the Sangha at times have been strained. In many ways the Ne Win government has gone back to an encouragement of the kind of secular Burmese nationalism first promoted by the Thakins and Aung San. It remains to be seen whether Burma is ready for this stage of modernity.

Notes

- 1) Thaung, "Burmese Kingship in Theory and Practice During the Reign of Mindon," Journal of the Burma Research Society, XLII (1959), part 2, p. 175; John F. Cady, A History of Modern Burma (Ithaca, New York, 1958), p. 51.
- 2) Cf. Robert Heine-Geldern, "Conceptions of State and Kingship in Southeast Asia," Far Eastern Quarterly, I (1942), 17-24; Emanuel Sarkisyanz, Buddhist Backgrounds of the Burmese Revolution (The Hague, 1965), pp. 52-53.
- 3) Ibid., p. 71; Thaung, op. cit., p. 173.
- 4) Cady, op. cit., pp. 8-9.
- 5) Ibid., pp. 53-55.
- 6) Donald E. Smith, Religion and Politics in Burma (Princeton, New Jersey, 1965), p. 32.
- 7) John F. Cady, "Religion and Politics in Modern Burma," Far Eastern Quarterly, XII (1953), 151. Another historian of Burma concludes that "the majority of the kings of Burma were swarthy tyrants and relentless vandals caring but little for the religion." Niharranjan Ray, An Introduction to the Study of Theravada Buddhism in Burma (Calcutta, 1946), p. 257.
- 8) Sarkisyanz, op. cit., p. 59; Heine-Geldern, op. cit., p. 25.
- 9) Sarkisyanz, op. cit., pp. 14-15.
- 10) Thaung, op. cit., pp. 176-177.
- 11) G.E. Harvey, History of Burma (London, 1925), pp. 107 and 235.
- 12) D. Smeaton, The Loyal Karens of Burma (London, 1887), p. 4, cited by Fred R. von der Mehden, Religion and Nationalism in Southeast Asia (Madison, Wisconsin, 1963), p. 124.
- 13) Cady, History of Modern Burma, 170; O.H. Mootham, Burmese Buddhist Law (Oxford, 1939), pp. 123-124.
- 14) Cady, Far Eastern Quarterly, XII (1953), 153.
- 15) Cf. Sarkisyanz, op. cit., pp. 152-157.
- 16) Von der Mehden, op. cit., p. 126.
- 17) Maung Htin Aung, The Stricken Peacock: Anglo-Burmese Relations 1752-1948 (The Hague, 1965), p. 1.
- 18) Cf. Smith, op. cit., pp. 81-86.
- 19) Cf. U Kyaw Thet, "Continuity in Burma," The Atlantic, CCI (February, 1958), 119.
- 20) Von der Mehden, op. cit., p. 708; Sarkisyanz, op. cit., pp. 128-130.

- 21) Hting Aung, op. cit., p. 102.
- 22) Cf. Albert D. Moscotti, "British Policy in Burma, 1917-1937," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1950, pp. 15-16.
- 23) Cady, History of Modern Burma, 190.
- 24) Ibid., p. 212.
- 25) Ibid., pp. 217-218.
- 26) Ibid., p. 221.
- 27) Von der Mehden, op. cit., p. 116.
- 28) Smith, op. cit., pp. 92-93.
- 29) Rangoon Gazette Weekly Budget, September 19, 1921, quoted in ibid., p. 96.
- 30) Sarkisyanz, op. cit., p. 9 and pp. 126-127.
- 31) Smith, op. cit., p. 105.
- 32) Moscotti, op. cit., p. 39.
- 33) Cf. Smith, op. cit., pp. 93-94.
- 34) Cady, History of Modern Burma, 252.
- 35) Sarkisyanz, op. cit., pp. 145-146.
- 36) Smith, op. cit., pp. 101-102.
- 37) Ibid., p. 103.
- 38) Cady, History of Modern Burma, 260.
- 39) Von der Mehden, op. cit., p. 130.
- 40) Maung Maung, Burma's Constitution, 2nd rev. ed. (The Hague, 1961), p. 22; Maurice Collis, Into Hidden Burma: An Autobiography (London, 1953), pp. 162-163 (hereafter cited as Collis, Hidden Burma).
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- 42) Ibid., pp. 281 and 297.
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- 47) Quoted in Von der Mehden, op. cit., p. 155.
- 48) Great Britain, House of Commons, Sessional Papers 1930-1931, vol. XII, "Report on the Rebellion in Burma up to 3rd May 1931" (London, 1931), pp. 6-8.
- 49) Great Britain, House of Commons, Sessional Papers 1931-1932, vol. XIX, "Moral and Material Progress and Condition of India during the year 1930-31" (London, 1932), p. 135.
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- 52) Maung Maung, op. cit., p. 23.
- 53) Lucian W. Pye, Politics, Personality and Nation Building: Burma's Search for Identity (New Haven, 1962), p. 259; Collis, Hidden Burma, p. 195.
- 54) Cady, History of Modern Burma, 318.
- 55) Ibid., p. 365.
- 56) Smith, op. cit., pp. 115-116.
- 57) Maung Maung, op. cit., p. 30.
- 58) Von der Mehden, op. cit., p. 148.
- 59) Cady, History of Modern Burma, 305-306.
- 60) Ibid., p. 394.
- 61) Final Report of the Riot Inquiry Committee (Rangoon, 1939), p. 38, cited by Von der Mehden, op. cit., p. 132.
- 62) Maung Maung, op. cit., p. 41.
- 63) Smith, op. cit., p. 119.
- 64) For a detailed discussion see Smith, op. cit., chs. 5-8.
- 65) Cf. Richard Butwell, U Nu of Burma (Stanford, California, 1963), p. 67.
- 66) This observation of Smith, op. cit., p. 124 is based on the study of John F. Brohm, "Burmese Religion and the Burmese Religious Revival," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell University, 1957. See also Marie Byles, Journey into Burmese Silence (London, 1962).
- 67) Smith, op. cit., pp. 83 and 113.
- 68) Ibid., pp. 281-282.

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13. ABSTRACT

Following a brief discussion of the interaction of Buddhism and government in traditional Burma until 1885, the report analyzes the emergence of the political monks as the main force in the militant nationalist movement for Burmese independence. Buddhist monks played an important role in the violent agitation of the 1920's and in the Saya San Rebellion of 1930-31. In the 1930's the monks are gradually overtaken by secular-minded nationalists. The report concludes with a brief examination of the place of Buddhism in post-independence Burma.

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