

## Communities of interpretation in the study of religion in Burma

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*The paper delineates stages in the interpretation of religion in Burma. Beginning with colonial constructions, the discussion moves to subsequent studies in anthropology and history from which emerged an emphasis on localised articulations of Theravada Buddhist traditions. Others examined religion as a site for colonial resistance and as a means for engaging issues of modernity. More recent interpreters focused on Buddhist voices in the public domain of contemporary Burma and some recent studies moved beyond received boundaries of inquiry to consider religions among ethnic minorities and diaspora communities. The final section charts future development in the study of religion in Burma.*

In *The invention of world religions*, Tomoko Masuzawa explores how the colonial expansion of the West engendered epistemic regimes that were central to the formation of a modern European identity and that defined Europe as the ‘harbinger of universal history, as a prototype of unity amidst plurality’.<sup>1</sup> Early colonial writings characterised the religions of ‘others’ such as ‘Mohammedans’, ‘Hindoos’ and followers of the Buddha as ‘heathen’, ‘pagan’, ‘idolatrours’, and otherwise far removed from the theological truths of the Christian world. Early descriptions of religion in Burma come to us through missionaries like the Barnabite Father Vincentius Sangermano who lived in Yangon between 1783 and 1808, but passed away in Italy in 1819 before his *Description of the Burmese empire* was published.<sup>2</sup> His account was based largely on the Burmese chronicle, Mahayazawin, as well as his own observations. Sangermano’s descriptions express an insurmountable difference between self and other in terms that reflect his social location and colonial zeitgeist:

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1 Tomoko Masuzawa, *The invention of world religions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. xi.

2 Vincentius Sangermano, *A description of the Burmese empire, compiled chiefly from British documents by Father Sangermano*, trans. from his manuscript by William Tandy (London: Santiago de Compostela, Susil Gupta, 1966). An English translation of this work was published in 1833, Rome: Oriental Translation Fund of Great Britain and Ireland; reprinted at the Government Press Rangoon, n.d.

From the nature of their government, which, as has been said, is above all measure despotic and tyrannical, it will easily be imagined, that the Burmese are distinguished for that servility and timidity which is always characteristic of slaves. Indeed every Burmese considers himself such, not merely before the Emperor, and the Mandarins, but also before any one who is his superior, either in age or possessions.<sup>3</sup>

In this passage, the subject of the study emerges at the junctures of larger historical patterns as interpretive communities constitute themselves in relation to historical moments and employ narrative strategies produced in such contexts. The question inevitably emerges, therefore, about the extent to which 'received ideas' shaped inquiries of later interpreters of religion in Burma.

This paper delineates a genealogy of interpretive communities and the ways in which they have constituted the subject of their studies. From the outset, it is important to note that the lens through which they apprehend their subject long predates the academic field of the study of religion. The historical records interpreting religion in Burma therefore predate any critical awareness of how such early descriptions were constructed or what representations they employed. The descriptions of religious practices in Burma are themselves of diverse and disparate origins: they were written by missionaries, explorers, colonial administrators and scholars and later by historians, anthropologists, political scientists and scholars of the Orient. Indeed, scholars of religion are largely newcomers to the interpretation of religion in Burma. Yet, the colonial encounters and their fortuitous nature that initially defined this field are not unique to the study of Burma. Nor are they unique to the study of how religions shape our perceptions of the world.<sup>4</sup>

### **Colonial apperceptions of Burmese religion**

During the early nineteenth century, Masuzawa argues, the colonial attempt to catalogue and classify 'world religions' prompted a conceptual shift. It now was the task of scholars of the Orient, located in London, Paris and Berlin, to uncover the 'origins' of world religions and reconstruct their 'pristine truths' from the 'moral decline' they presumably suffered through the history of local practice. Although the religion of the Buddha came late to the orientalist invention of the 'mystic East',<sup>5</sup> the scholarly inventory of Buddhist texts had become a significant intellectual project of the West by the mid-nineteenth century. In *The British discovery of Buddhism*, Almond writes:

Buddhism had become by the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century a textual object based in Western institutions. Buddhism as it came to be ideally spoken of through the editing, translating, and studying of its ancient texts could then be compared with its contemporary appearance in the Orient. And Buddhism, as it could be seen in the East, compared unfavourably with its ideal textual exemplifications contained in the libraries,

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122.

<sup>4</sup> In the discussion that follows, I group particular foci and subjects thematically in order to show the epistemological concerns of particular communities of interpretation. As a result, I inflict chronological injury on the publication dates of some authors. For that, I ask the indulgence of authors and audience.

<sup>5</sup> See Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and its forms of knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

universities, colonial offices, and missionary societies of the West. It was possible then, as a result of this, to combine a positive evaluation of a Buddhism textually located in the West with a negative evaluation of its Eastern instances.<sup>6</sup>

The curatorship of Pali Buddhism in the West was facilitated through the work of T. W. Rhys Davids (1843–1922), a British magistrate in Sri Lanka who founded the Pali Text Society in London in 1881.<sup>7</sup> This colonial organisation sought to bring together a European scholarly community to compile what they viewed as the ‘pristine’ teachings of the Buddha to an English-speaking audience. Though much criticised for its teleological agenda and for its attempts to define the textual orthodoxy of Theravada tradition, the Pali Text Society is also credited for its philological dictionaries, the publication of Pali texts and their translations into English. Yet, Western scholars abstracted Pali texts from the cultural contexts of their production and located them apart from Buddhists who identified themselves as Theravadin. Masuzawa’s observation that the contemporary study of religions still struggles with this disjuncture is a welcome caveat to the study of the Burmese Theravada tradition.

A karmic convergence, or ‘elective affinity’, between Rhys Davids and the monks he consulted affirmed their preconceived notions about Buddhism, namely the colonial apperception of Pali Buddhism as the historic origins of the tradition, on the one hand, and Theravada orthodoxy embodying the preservation of the Buddha’s original teachings, on the other. This moment of ‘intercultural *mimesis*’, in Charles Hallisey’s terms,<sup>8</sup> acknowledged the hegemony of colonial knowledge and claims to the purity of the Sinhalese Pali tradition. The Sinhalese Pali tradition repeatedly shaped Buddhist political theory and monastic orthopraxis in Burma. It constituted the source of Theravadin orthodoxy during the reign of Dammceti in the fifteenth century and again during the religious reforms of King Bodawphaya in the mid-nineteenth century.

Bishop Paul Bigandet (1813–91), vicar-apostolic of Ava and Pegu was an important collaborator in Rhys David’s curatorial project. In his entry on *Buddhism* in the Encyclopaedia Britannica (1876), Rhys Davids mentions Bigandet’s translation *The life or legend of Gaudama, the Buddha of the Burmese* (1858), a Burmese biography of the Buddha which was based on the *Malālankāravatthu*.<sup>9</sup> The mention of this vernacular, non-canonical text was significant because it recognised implicitly the ‘local construction of meaning’ throughout the Theravada world, including Burma. As Hallisey points out, it was perhaps a first recognition of the local production of religious meaning, of lived religious practices as significant as the textual custodianship of Pali orthodoxy.

6 Philip C. Almond, *The British discovery of Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 24.

7 Ananda Wickremeratne, *The genesis of an orientalist: Thomas William Rhys Davids and Buddhism in Sri Lanka* (Columbia, MO: South Asia Books, 1985).

8 Charles Hallisey, ‘Roads taken and not taken’, in *Curators of the Buddha: The study of Buddhism under colonialism*, ed. Donald S. Lopez, Jr (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 34.

9 Paul Ambrose Bigandet took many editorial liberties with his rendition of the Burmese text that informed his *The life or legend of Gaudama, the Buddha of the Burmese*, vols. 1 and 2, (Trübner’s Oriental Series, 1880). The tradition of recounting older texts as part of a new rendition was also an established practice for redactors of Burmese versions that relied on Pali sources.

If Bishop Bigandet had unwittingly become one of the first missionaries to be a curator of the Buddha's dispensation in Burma, later colonial administrators, including Charles Duroiselle,<sup>10</sup> James Scott (Shwe Yoe), Taw Sein Ko,<sup>11</sup> Shwe Zan Aung,<sup>12</sup> Gordon Luce and J. S. Furnivall<sup>13</sup> helped to construct an inventory of the Burmese Buddhist tradition. These scholars constituted the core of the colonial scholarly project in Burma during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They were prominent members of the *Burma Research Society* and frequent contributors to its *Journal*. While their writings did not focus exclusively on religion, they nonetheless assembled a catalogue of Theravada Buddhism and its institutions in Burma. Their colonial projects had been preceded by the lexicographic work of the American Baptist missionary, Adoniram Judson (1788–1850) who lived in Burma for nearly four decades until his death at the age of 62. Although not a scholar of religion in Burma, Judson's work was instrumental on account of his compilation of the first Burmese-English Dictionary. He also produced the first translation of the Bible in Burmese in 1834.

### Anthropological interpretations of great and little traditions

The Second World War disrupted both colonial rules as well as the episteme of colonial scholarship in Southeast Asia and elsewhere. In anthropology, Redfield's distinction between great and little traditions came to dominate ethnographic inquiries of religion after the Second World War. It differentiated between religions shaped by literati at the court and village traditions comprising mostly non-literate and shamanic practices among local peasants who had few connections to the centre. The work of anthropologists like Melford Spiro<sup>14</sup> and Manning Nash<sup>15</sup> was largely predicated on Redfield and transformed in that way the epistemic focus of their orientalist predecessors on the court of the Burmese Theravada *dhammarāja*. Spiro ignored the fact that the Buddhist tradition encompasses local, ancestral or royal cults in all of its local cultural articulations and emphasised divergence in Burmese Buddhist practice from the orthodox Pali tradition. He argued that most Burmese were unfamiliar with the orthodox Pali doctrines and texts cultivated only by monastic elites. Spiro proposed a 'two religions' hypothesis in which Buddhist ritual and practice in Burma served ultimate goals, like rebirth, while the ubiquitous veneration of the 37 *nat* addressed

10 Charles Duroiselle published *A practical grammar of Pali* in 1906.

11 Taw Sein Ko was Charles Duroiselle's successor as director of the Archaeological Survey. See also Penny Edward's 'Relocating the interlocutor: Taw Sein Ko (1864–1930) and the itinerancy of knowledge in British Burma'. *South East Asia Research* 12, 3 (2004): 277–335.

12 Shwe Zan Aung (1871–1932) was born in Sittwe, Arakan, and received a Bachelor of Arts degree from Rangoon College in 1891. His translation into English of the Abhidhamma, the basket of philosophy of the Theravada canon (Tipitika), was published by the Pali Text Society as Shwe Zan Aung, *The compendium of philosophy* (London: For the Pali Text Society by H. Frowd, 1910). Although he worked as a civil servant, Shwe Zan Aung was also a scholar of linguistics, philology, history and literature whose prolific writing engaged a broad range of subjects. Shortly before his death, he received an honorary doctorate from Rangoon University. For further biographical details, see *The Irrawaddy*, 9, 1 (2001).

13 For a discussion of his orientalist stance on the study of Burma, see Julie Pham, 'Ghost hunting in colonial Burma: Nostalgia, paternalism and the thoughts of J. S. Furnivall', *South East Asia Research*, 12, 2 (2004): 237–68.

14 Melford E. Spiro, *Buddhism and society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

15 Manning Nash, *The golden road to modernity* (New York: Wiley, 1965).

immediate concerns. Implicit in Spiro's approach was also the presumption that local Buddhist practice was at variance with its normative values, evoking again the disjuncture between the colonial construction of Pali orthodoxy and the vernacular practices of its local communities. Nash and Spiro were also among a generation of scholars who perpetuated a romantic depiction of Burma as 'spiritually wealthy' and 'materially poor'. The challenge to dispel such orientalist ideas fell to later researchers for whom Burma's political reality inserted itself undeniably into earlier, idyllic descriptions of its culture and religion.

However, the emphasis on local practices at variance with the high culture of the centre also encouraged new ethnographies on the veneration, rituals, legends and shamanic practices concerning Burmese spirit lords (*nat*). Initially catalogued by Sir Richard Temple,<sup>16</sup> Burmese *nat* were circumscribed by allegiances to local ancestral gods, with regional or tributary nobility, and / or identification with Hindu divinities. Melford Spiro, June Nash and Sarah Bekker pioneered in this area.<sup>17</sup> More recently, Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière showed how the cult to the 37 *nat* articulated hegemonic court culture at the local level.<sup>18</sup> Other studies explored tensions inherent in the hegemonic relationship of the Buddhist state and the *sangha*, especially in regards to monastic lineages and their local or regional constituencies. At the same time, tensions between political centre and multi-ethnic periphery also became visible. Buddhist reforms initiated by the centre came to be interpreted not just as religious initiatives, but also as pragmatic politics and public policy. Among them are Emanuel Sarkisyanz, Donald Smith, Michael Mendelson and John Ferguson and Michael Aung Thwin's work on Pagan.<sup>19</sup>

During the 1970s, two concurrent venues of scholarly inquiry further interrogated conceptual relations between the ascribed Pali orthodoxy of the court and the heterodox Buddhist practice in village contexts. At the University of Chicago, the anthropologist Stanley Tambiah, in collaboration with the historian of Buddhism, Frank Reynolds, illuminated the ways in which Southeast Asian polities embodied cultural, institutional and political values at the core of a Theravada Buddhist

16 See Richard Carnac Temple, *The thirty-seven nats: A phase of spirit workshop prevailing in Burma* (London: W. Griggs, 1906).

17 Melford Spiro, *Burmese supernaturalism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1996); June C. Nash, *Living with nats: An analysis of animism in Burman village social relations* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960); and Sarah Bekker's unpublished paper on Burmese traditional views of the supernatural (Association for Asian Studies, 1982).

18 See *Les rituels de possession en Birmanie* by Bénédicte Brac de La Perrière (Paris: Editions Recherche sur les civilisations, 1989) and her 'The Taungbyone festival' in *Burma at the turn of the twenty-first century*, ed. Monique Skidmore (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005), pp. 65–89; and Juliane Schober, 'Burmese spirit lords and their mediums', in *Shamanism: An encyclopedia of world beliefs, practice and culture*, ed. Mariko Namba Walter and Eva Jane Neumann Fridman (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2004): 803–6.

19 See Donald E. Smith, *Religion and politics in Burma* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965); Michael E. Mendelson, *Sangha and state in Burma, A study of monastic sectarianism and leadership* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975); John P. Ferguson, 'The symbolic dimensions of the Burmese Sangha' (Ph.D. diss., Cornell University, 1975); and E. Sarkisyanz, *Buddhist backgrounds of the Burmese revolution* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1965); and Michael Aung-Thwin, *Pagan: The origins of modern Burma* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1985).

worldview.<sup>20</sup> Galactic polities celebrated the foundational patronage of a just king (*dharmarāja*) modelled on the Maurian emperor Aśoka (third century BCE) over a world renouncing monastic institution (*sangha*) and its lay supporters. Tambiah argues that Buddhist polities in Southeast Asia constituted not only a ‘total social fact’ in Durkheim’s and Mauss’ sense, but they also offered a historical nexus between worldview and praxis, in which the culture of the centre was mirrored throughout a hierarchy of constituent social groups that reached from the court to the local village level.

Concurrently, F. K. Lehman (U Chit Hlaing) published an influential essay entitled ‘Doctrine, practice and belief’<sup>21</sup> in which he questioned Spiro’s description of a ‘lesser’ Buddhism among ‘illiterate peasants’. Most significantly, Lehman underscored the role of cognitive interpretation among practice, doctrine and belief. He argued against simplistic notions of one aspect of religion as derivative from others and underscored the interpretive construction of Burmese worldviews and local Buddhist practices.

These initiatives marked new beginnings in the study of Burmese religion that were, in part, carried out through the projects of doctoral students whom Tambiah, Reynolds and Lehman mentored. Their studies focused on the ways in which texts informed ritual practice and on the ways in which vernacular Buddhist traditions localised universal Buddhist beliefs. They examined the emergence and dissipation of charismatic cults; they focused their work on Theravada cosmology, ritual veneration and the cultural location of sacred icons; and they studied the ways in which polities presented themselves as embodying an ‘orthodox’ Pali tradition and yet, at the same time, shaped hegemonic structures that informed the cultural diversity of the Theravada tradition.<sup>22</sup> Also included within this conceptual frame is Hiroko Kawanami’s study of Burmese female renunciants (*sila shin*)<sup>23</sup> and their participation in contemporary state-sponsored Buddhist reforms.

Commenting on textual divergences between the Pali canon in the Sinhalese and Thai traditions, Steven Collins proposed an alternate approach to Theravada orthodoxy. He suggested that the uniformity colonial scholars and the *sangha* imposed on the tradition was less a historical fact than a core symbol of the tradition.<sup>24</sup> The doctrinal rationality of Pali and especially *abhidhamma* texts earlier scholars had

20 Seminal works in the study of Theravada Buddhism include the following:

Stanley J. Tambiah, *World conqueror, world renouncer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975); and his *Buddhist saints of the forest and the cult of amulets* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); as well as Frank Reynolds and Mani Reynolds, *Three worlds according to King Ruan* (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1982).

21 F. K. Lehman (Chit Hlaing), ‘Doctrine, practice and belief in Theravada Buddhism’ in *Journal of Asian Studies*, 31 (1972): 373–80; ‘On the vocabulary and semantics of “field” in Theravada Buddhist Society’ in *Essays on Burma*, ed. John P. Ferguson (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1981) and ‘Burmese religion’ in *The encyclopedia of religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1987).

22 See Juliane Schober, ‘Venerating the Buddha’s remains in Burma: From solitary practice to the cultural hegemony of communities’, *Journal of Burma Studies*, 6 (2001): 111–39; and ‘In the presence of the Buddha: Ritual veneration of the Burmese Mahamuni image’, in *Sacred biography in the Buddhist traditions of South and Southeast Asia* (Hawaii University Press, 1997): 259–88.

23 Hiroko Kawanami, ‘Patterns of renunciation: The changing world of Burmese nuns’ in *Women’s Buddhism, Buddhism’s women* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom, 2000), pp. 159–71.

24 For an elaboration of this argument, see Stephen Collins, ‘On the very idea of the Pali canon’, *Journal of the Pali Text Society*, 15 (1990): 89–126.

emphasised was in sharp contrast with the diversity of cultural practices and native episteme that affirmed performative ritual realities. The construction of a 'pristine' Buddhism orientalist had taken care to curate was now replaced by countless local articulations embedded in cultural difference. The 'original' Buddhism of colonial curatorship had transformed into many Buddhisms practised in diverse cultural contexts.

### Re-envisioning religious history and historiography

In the field of history, a similar shift occurred that moved the scholarly focus from the cataloguing of local history to a critical study of local historiography. The early work of the eminent historian, Than Htun, focused on religious reforms during various dynastic reigns, beginning with Pagan and ending with a history of the Shwegyin lineage during Mindon's reign.<sup>25</sup> His later compilation and translation published as the monumental *Royal orders of Burma* enabled historians to re-envision and revise Burmese religious history and historiography. The *Royal orders* offered immense specificity not always present in royal chronicles (*vamsa*), many of which still await translation. This work paved the way for alternate readings of Burmese history concerning religious reforms, laws, interdictions and other royal acts concerning the Buddha's dispensation (*thathana*).

Perhaps in response to the publication of the *Royal orders* and also a consequence of the state's renewed Buddhist hegemony in the aftermath of the 1988 uprising, several scholars turned to critical translations of vernacular religious literature. Particularly noteworthy is Patrick Pranke's translation of the *Vamsadipani* (Treatise on the lineage of the elders), an 'apologia' of the Thudhamma reform under Bodawphaya, and consequently also an appraisal of the writing of Buddhist history during the Konbaun dynasty.<sup>26</sup> Jacques Leider similarly explores the rationales and implementations of religious reform under Bodawphaya in his *Text, lineage and tradition in Burma: The struggle for norms and religious legitimacy under King Bodawphaya (1782–1819)*.<sup>27</sup> The theme of Buddhist learning is also explored in Michael Charney's book on Buddhist literati during the last Burmese dynasty.<sup>28</sup>

New readings of Buddhist history also emerge from the work of Lilian Handlin, whose focus on inscriptions dating to the eleventh to thirteenth centuries offers new venues for assessing 'The changing landscape of Pali Buddhism in Pagan',<sup>29</sup> inviting us to rethink our received ideas on Theravada Buddhism in the classical kingdom from which Burmese trace their cultural lineage. Other projects deepen the interpretation of religious history, such as Dietrich Christian Lammerts' study of legal texts (*dharmasat*) from the twelfth to eighteenth centuries as Buddhist narratives in which visions of legal authority are tied to ethical values, such as (*dhamma*), truth (*sacca*) and

25 *Royal orders of Burma, A. D. 1598–1885*, ed. Than Tun, 9 vols. (Kyoto: Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University, 1989).

26 Patrick A. Pranke, 'Treatise on the lineage of elders (*Vamsadipani*): Monastic reform and the writing of Buddhist history in eighteenth-century Burma' (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 2004).

27 See Jacques Leider's essay in the *Journal of Burma Studies*, 9 (2004): 82–129.

28 Michael Charney, *Powerful learning: Buddhist literati and the throne in Burma's last dynasty, 1752–1885* (Ann Arbor: Center for South and Southeast Asian Studies, University of Michigan, 2006).

29 Ingrid Jordt, *Burma's mass lay meditation movement* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2007).

goodness (*sadu*). A related concern with religious ethics is reflected in Jason Carbine's writing on the *Ethic of continuity* as constructed by ordained members of the *Shwegyin nikaya*, a reformist lineage that commenced during Mindon's reign.<sup>30</sup>

### Continuities and disjunctures of religion and modernity

The study of colonial religion as a site of resistance has been taken up by both anthropologists and historians because the cultural history of religion and colonialism demanded new approaches. The Burmese experience of modernity was largely synonymous with the beginning of colonialism during which traditional cultural values, institutions and life ways were rapidly eclipsed.<sup>31</sup> The collapse of traditional institutions, initially in Lower Burma and, after 1886 in Upper Burma, accelerated a restructuring of Burmese society that reflected Western secular values. Colonial rule became in large measure a vehicle for introducing modernity to the region. In this process, facets of power considered secular in the West were effectively dislodged from the Buddhist cosmological worldview in which Burmese cultural notions had been embedded traditionally. Modern Buddhist practices and beliefs no longer presume the sort of conceptual coherence that characterised the cultural realities of the pre-colonial galactic polity. In addition to establishing an administration in which pragmatic, military, economic and political power was transacted separately from its Buddhist foundations, the British also implemented a deliberate policy of non-involvement in the religious affairs of the colony. For instance, the British refused to confirm the authority of the Taungdaw Sayadaw who had been installed in office by King Thibaw as the *sangha* Supreme Patriarch (*thathanabain*) in Upper Burma. When this monk passed away in 1895, the colonial administration did not exercise the traditional responsibilities of a *dhammarāja* to appoint a successor to this important office, leaving it vacant for nearly a decade. This vacuum in monastic leadership hastened the political and organisational decline of the *sangha*, the sole institution of traditional culture to survive the British annexation of Upper Burma in 1886. In the eyes of traditional Burmese Buddhists who expected the British crown to act like a righteous Buddhist ruler, the British refusal further diminished respect for colonial authority.

Colonial rule also introduced alternate configurations of power that had not been a part of Burmese cultural knowledge. It created administrative structures that rationalised and centralised state powers and furthered the economic and political goals of the empire. To protect their mercantile interests, the British reorganised society and promoted administrative rationalisation, modern values and Western education. These changes helped establish the colonial state and simultaneously paved the way for other forms of modernity. In their totality, they had a profound impact on Burmese cultural institutions, religious authority and on the everyday lives of Buddhists. Various modern Buddhist practices and organisations emerged in reaction to the cultural and religious discontinuities that colonial rule created. Despite its stated

30 See Jason A. Carbine, 'An ethic of continuity: Shwegyin monks and the Sasana in contemporary Burma / Myanmar' (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, Illinois, 2004) and Carbine's essay, 'When the thread does not snap: Lineage, continuity and tradition from a Shwegyin perspective', in *Traditions of knowledge in Southeast Asia* (Yangon: Myanmar Historical Commission, 2004): 267–89.

31 Thant Myint-U, *The making of modern Burma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

goal not to become involved in religious matters, the colonial government nevertheless was confronted with various forms of resistance motivated by Buddhist beliefs and practices, forcing the government to address Buddhist concerns in various ways. Burmese Buddhist laity and *sangha* engaged the challenges of modernity and secular power in ways that varied by region and social class. The nature of the Burmese Buddhist engagement also determined the character and extent of supra-regional, national and, in some instances, transnational conjunctures.

Several recent projects examine conjunctures of modernity and tradition in Burmese Buddhist culture. Among them is Eugean Bagshaw's translation of the *Rajadhammasangaha*, a text composed for the purpose of educating King Thibaw in December 1878. In it, eminent monks exhort the king to take seriously the challenges of his reign in the face of encroaching British colonialism. This text points to challenges of royal authority by members of the *sangha* and to political tensions between the monastic elite and King Thibaw on the eve of the Konbaun Dynasty's collapse.<sup>32</sup>

The emergence of modern formations of Buddhism in colonial and post-colonial Burma is the central focus of modern Buddhist conjunctures in Myanmar which discuss issues such as religious and secular education and the public role of the Young Men's Buddhist Association at the 'dawn of nationalism'.<sup>33</sup> Chie Ikeya explores some of the intersections of gender and Buddhist authority in colonial Burma.<sup>34</sup> Additional work on colonial Buddhism is currently being undertaken by Erik Braun on the Ledi Sayadaw's role in shaping modern Buddhism, particularly Insight Meditation, and by Alicia Turner on Buddhist revival in colonial Burma.<sup>35</sup> Maitrii Aung-Thwin interrogates the articulation of traditional Buddhist symbols within colonial contexts of interpretation in his 'Genealogy of a rebellion narrative: Law, ethnology and culture in colonial Burma'.<sup>36</sup> These studies share a common focus on narrative strategies that differentiate contexts of interpretation and emphasise historic complexities in the conjunctures of colonial rule and Buddhism in Burma.

32 First printed in Burmese in 1915, this translation by L. E. Bagshawe is from the version edited with a biographical preface by Maung Htin (U Htin Fatt) and published by the Sape U Publishing House in 1979. Online Burma / Myanmar Library, 5 Sept. 2004, [http://www.ibiblio.org/obl/docs/The\\_Rajadhammasangaha-print.pdf](http://www.ibiblio.org/obl/docs/The_Rajadhammasangaha-print.pdf) (last accessed on 6 Dec. 2007).

33 See Juliane Schober, 'The Theravada Buddhist engagement with modernity in Burma' in *Buddhism in world cultures: Contemporary perspectives*, ed. Steven Berkwitz (ABC-Clio, 2006), pp. 73–100; 'Colonial knowledge and Buddhist education in Burma' in *Buddhism, power, and political order in Theravada Buddhist Asia*, ed. Ian Harris (RoutledgeCurzon Critical Studies in Buddhism, 2007) pp. 52–70 and an unpublished paper entitled 'The dawn of nationalism: Transnationalism and colonial rule in the rise of the Young Men's Buddhist Association in Burma, 1906–1920' (American Academy of Religion, 2005). These concerns are also taken up in Juliane Schober's forthcoming book, 'Modern Buddhist conjunctures in Myanmar' (University of Hawai'i Press).

34 Chie Ikeya, 'Gender, history and modernity: Representing women in 20<sup>th</sup> century colonial Burma' (Ph.D. diss., Cornell University, New York, 2006).

35 Erik Braun, 'The birth of modern Buddhism: Ledi Sayadaw and the origins of insight meditation' (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2008) and Alicia Turner, 'Buddhism, colonialism and the boundaries of religion: Theravada Buddhism in Burma 1885–1920' (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 2008).

36 Maitrii Aung-Thwin, 'Genealogy of a rebellion narrative: Law, ethnology, and culture in colonial Burma', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 34, 3 (2003): 393–419.

### Buddhist voices in the public domain of contemporary Burma

Additional shifts occurred in the cultural, social and political constellations in which new religious practices and institutions emerged after independence. In as much as the political uprising of 1988 marked a watershed in modern Burmese history, it also profoundly altered the subject of study in this field. In the absence of a national constitution, the state turned again to Buddhism to legitimate its political power. It enforced a scripturalist interpretation of Buddhism, commissioned grand-scale construction of Buddhist monuments, and imposed strict controls over the *sangha* and lay communities. Since 1988, the state exercised neo-traditional hegemonic controls over monastic and popular Buddhist practice. State patronage over large-scale rituals were evident in works that focused on the context and location of sacred icons within the Burmese public space.<sup>37</sup> The past decades brought into view diverse monastic locations *vis-à-vis* the state, bringing visibility to renewed fragmentation among the *sangha* and lay supporters. For some, it also brought to light disenchantment with religion in the face of modernity and the civil conflicts of the 1990s.

Increasingly, academic interpreters of Buddhism in Burma have relinquished ideals of 'orthodoxy' in favour of recognising regional, sectarian and political and practice-based differences among the monastic communities. The work of the Venerable Khammai Dhammasami on the current monastic education system addresses these concerns in terms of the tensions inherent in the complexities of contemporary monastic education.<sup>38</sup> During the 1990s, the state reasserted a monolithic and nationalist vision of Burmese Buddhist identity that Gustaaf Houtman has termed 'Myanmarification' in his book, *Mental culture*, in which he details the ways in which popular ideals of democracy have been phrased in Buddhist terms within the lay meditation movement.<sup>39</sup> Ingrid Jordt's study of mass lay meditation movements provides nuanced perspectives of the kind of millennial expectations Buddhist movements in Myanmar often harbour.<sup>40</sup> Recent work on lay meditation movements also made visible some degree of fragmentation within the *sangha* and polarisation of some lay communities centred on meditation. Sai Khma Maung documented fragmentation in the popular lay mediation movements between followers of the Vipassana Meditation Center and followers of U Ba Khin, both initiated during the U Nu era.<sup>41</sup> Aung San Suu Kyi, the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize laureate,

37 Elizabeth Moore, 'Text and new contexts: Shwedagon and Kyaikhtiyoe today' in *Traditions of knowledge in Southeast Asia* (Yangon: Myanmar Historical Commission, 2004). State ritual and the location of sacred icons in Burmese public space are also discussed by Juliane Schober in 'Buddhist just rule and Burmese national culture: State patronage of the Chinese tooth relic in Myanmar', *History of Religions*, 36, 3 (1997): 218–43. See also Janette Philip and David Mercer in 'Politicised pagodas and veiled resistance: Contested urban space in Burma', *Urban Studies*, 39, 9 (2002): 1587–610.

38 The Venerable Khammai Dhammasami, 'Idealism and pragmatics: A dilemma in the current monastic education system of Burma and Thailand' (Ph.D. diss., Oxford University, 2004).

39 See Gustaaf Houtman, *Mental culture in Burmese crisis politics: Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy* (Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, Monograph Series no. 33, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, 1999) and his doctoral dissertation on U Ba Khin. Gustaaf Houtman, 'Traditions of Buddhist practice in Burma' (Ph.D. diss., School of Oriental and African Studies, London, 1990).

40 Ingrid Jordt, *Burma's mass lay meditation movement* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2007).

41 Sai Khma Maung, 'Changing Buddhist practice in Burma' (Honours thesis, Australian National University, Canberra, 2004).

daughter of Burma's national hero and leading figure of Burma's democracy movement, has herself become a Buddhist subject, both within Burma and among communities of Buddhist converts in the West.<sup>42</sup>

Most recently, the role of Buddhism in the construction of a post-colonial state has been both asserted and critiqued. In 'Engaging Buddhism for social change', Min Zin proposed a paradigmatic shift in the Burmese social and political discourse about *samsara*, the Buddhist conception of the world.<sup>43</sup> His work is representative of a wider and diverse community of contemporary interpreters of Burmese religion who are actively engaged in the construction of religious interpretations, particularly various forms of socially engaged Buddhism. These engaged actors and interpreters have emerged in the public arena among groups such as the Generation 88 movement that calls for ecumenical public prayer to affirm national reconciliation and civil society. As such, they are able to claim a greater voice for practitioners and seek to engage audiences within and outside of Burma.

### **Minority religions, ethnic communities and diasporas: Transcending boundaries**

Although most studies have focused on Buddhism as the religion of the majority, the actual diversity of religion in Burma needs to be underscored. In addition to social and regional diversity within Burmese Buddhist lineages and practices, not all of Buddhism in Burma is Burman and not all Burmese are Buddhists. Ethnic minorities who play a pivotal role in the national community identify with their own Buddhist histories, local practices and vernacular literatures. Prominent among them are the Shan, Karen, Arakanese, Mon and Pao, among other groups. Guillaume Rozenberg's *Renunciation and power: The quest of sainthood in contemporary Burma*<sup>44</sup> contributes to our knowledge of Karen Buddhist practice. He examines the ways in which a charismatic cult at the border of community building and forest asceticism interfaces with a national following. His work further demonstrates the continual reinvention of utopian Buddhist communities in Burma. A welcome contribution to the study of Arakanese Buddhism is found in Alexandra Demersan's recent doctoral study, *Ritual space and the making of a locality*.<sup>45</sup> Recent contributions to Buddhist traditions along Burma's border with southern China have also been made by Thomas Bouchert<sup>46</sup> and F. K. Lehman.

By contrast, there is a lack of studies on religious practices and literatures among the Mon and Shan as well as of non-normative Buddhist practices such as those found at some local monasteries, called *pwe kyaun*: that teach martial arts. Altogether absent

42 See Aung San Suu Kyi, *Letters from Burma* (London: Penguin Books, 1997), Houtman, *Mental culture in Burmese crisis politics* and Juliane Schober, 'Buddhist visions of moral authority and modernity in Burma', in *Burma at the turn of the twenty-first century*, ed. Monique Skidmore (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 2005), pp. 113–33.

43 *The Irrawaddy*, 11 (Mar. 2003).

44 Guillaume Rozenberg, *Renoncement et puissance. La quête de la sainteté dans la Birmanie contemporaine* (Geneva: Editions Olizane, 2005).

45 Contribution to the ethnography of the Arakanese, a population of contemporary Burma.

46 Thomas A. Borchert, 'Educating monks: Buddhism, politics and freedom of religion on China's southwest border' (University of Chicago, 2006).

are recent studies of other religious traditions among ethnic minorities in Burma. We know too little about the practices of Christianity among the Naga, Chin and Karen. Apart from U Ba Shin's history of Islam in Burma<sup>47</sup> and Jean Berlie's work on Muslim communities in Arakan,<sup>48</sup> the interpretation of Islam in Burma has been sparse. Similarly insufficient is our knowledge of the diverse Hindu communities in colonial cities such as Rangoon and Mandalay and of various Chinese Mahayana Buddhist traditions practised in Burma.

The state of the field fares better concerning Buddhism in the diaspora. Human rights and non-governmental organisations published reports on Buddhist communities along the Thai border, including position papers by the All Burma Monks' Union and similar groups who re-envision a conciliatory role of Buddhism in civil society. Global extensions of Burmese Buddhist traditions have also been explored by Joseph Cheah who writes on cultural identity among Burmese American Buddhists<sup>49</sup> and by Tamara Ho whose work focuses on gender and transnationalism among Burmese diaspora communities in the United States.<sup>50</sup>

### Future directions

Like other fields, the study of religion in Burma is subject to intellectual developments in related fields and to the political contexts in which interpretive communities construct narratives according to prevailing epistemic regimes. At the present moment, rapid changes in digital communication technologies profoundly transform the ways in which scholars construct their subject. Along with new ways to interpret the study of religion in Burma, the current community of interpreters also benefits from faster dissemination of publications and working papers by means of online resources on the internet. While the directions of future interpretations are yet to crystallise, the rate of production and the quantity of scholarly works produced have increased rapidly in recent years. New means of communication have globalised the study of religion in Burma to some extent in that they made possible more and faster communication among scholars located in Europe, North America, Australia, Southeast Asia and Myanmar. May it suffice to indicate here just some of these digital resources.

The texts range from vernacular palm leaf collections, to print, dictionaries and translations, and now to data available in digital formats. New information technologies have created – and continue to create – various web sites, such as [www.nibbana.com](http://www.nibbana.com) (last accessed on 6 Dec. 2007) and blogs. The Myanmar Book Center, the Union of Myanmar's own websites and online journals, such as *Mizzima* and *The Irrawaddy*, publish regularly on issues of civil society and religion in Burma. Similarly, Michael Charney's Burma Research group, his Living Burma Bibliography

47 Ba Shin, *Coming of Islam to Burma down to 1700 A.D.* (New Delhi: Azad Bhavan, 1961).

48 See Jean Berlie's presentation on 'Past and present of Rakine Muslims', International Burma Studies Conference, Northern Illinois University, 2004.

49 See Joseph Cheah, 'Cultural identity and Burmese American Buddhists', *Peace Review*, 14, 4 (2002): 415–19.

50 Tamara Cynthia Ho, 'Through a Burmese looking-glass: Transgression, displacement, and transnational women's identities' (Ph.D. diss., University of California at Los Angeles, 2005).

project, the Online Myanmar / Burma Library, the SOAS *Burma Research Journal* and the *Journal of Burma Studies* continue to be catalysts that transform the interpretation of religion in Burma as well as the communities engaged in its construction. Increasingly, digital forms of communication and the growth of academic resources accessible through the internet have become critical tools in this field. An increase in scholarly productivity is also evidenced by the impressive number and diversity of recent doctoral work in fields like history and anthropology. Together, these directions bode well for future studies on religions in Myanmar.