Summer 6-6-2014

Shadow Masculinities: Nationalist Burmese Monastics and the Savage Muslim Male

Nevada Skye Drollinger-Smith
University of Colorado Boulder, the.obstreperous.v@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholar.colorado.edu/rlst_gradetds

Part of the Religion Commons

Recommended Citation
SHADOW MASCULINITIES:
NATIONALIST BURMESE MONASTICS AND THE SAVAGE MUSLIM MALE

by
NEVADA SKYE DROLLINGER-SMITH
B.A., Ball State University, 2009

A thesis submitted to the
Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Colorado in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
Department of Religious Studies
2014
This thesis entitled:
Shadow Masculinities: Nationalist Burmese Monastics and the Savage Muslim Male
written by Nevada Skye Drollinger-Smith
has been approved for the Department of Religious Studies

__________________________________________
Holly Gayley

__________________________________________
Greg Johnson

The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we
Find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards
Of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.
Drollinger-Smith, Nevada S. (M.A., Religious Studies)

Shadow Masculinities: Nationalist Burmese Monastics and the Savage Muslim Male

Thesis directed by Assistant Professor A. Holly Gayle

This thesis is a gendered reading of Burma’s nationalist Movement and aims to intervene in Orientalist tropes of the pacifist, self-effacing, non-political Buddhist monk, and seeks to place Burma’s current ethno-nationalist religious violence into historical context. Drawing on Burma’s political history from pre-colonial Buddhist polity to British colonial rule, independence, and Burma’s socialist and military governments, this thesis places Burma’s contemporary anti-Muslim riots against a historical backdrop of British divide-and-rule policy, nationalist political monks, and continually fostered attitudes of xenophobia and fear toward outsiders through the Socialist and military governments. I further argue that monastic supporters of the movement draw on this history of xenophobia in their rhetoric of the Muslim male as violent, rapacious, hyper-sexualized, and greedy. In deploying this rhetoric, these monks construct a hegemonic masculinity predicated on controlled sexuality and reproduction. This hegemonic masculinity operates such that Buddhist monastic privilege is retained in Burmese society.
# CONTENTS

## SECTIONS

I. INTRODUCTION .............................................................................................................. 1
   SOURCE MATERIAL ........................................................................................................ 9
   THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS ...................................................................................... 10
   SECTIONS ...................................................................................................................... 16
   A NOTE ON TERMS ......................................................................................................... 17

II. HISTORICAL CONJUNCTURES .................................................................................. 19
   BUDDHIST KINGSHIP AND POLITY
     IN THE PRECOLONIAL PERIOD .................................................................................. 19
     THE BRITISH INCURSION AND COLONIAL POLICY .................................................. 23
     MONKS AND KINGS IN REBELLION ........................................................................... 27
     BUDDHISM UNDER THE CIVILIAN GOVERNMENT .................................................. 33
     THE JUNTA’S RULE ...................................................................................................... 41

III. THE 969 MOVEMENT AND THE FORMATION
     OF A HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY ........................................................................... 49
     THE 969 MOVEMENT .................................................................................................. 58
     HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY ....................................................................................... 62
     RHETORIC OF THE 969 MOVEMENT ....................................................................... 67

IV. CONCLUSION ................................................................................................................ 85
   FUTURES ......................................................................................................................... 89
   LIMITATIONS ................................................................................................................ 92
   DIRECTIONS ................................................................................................................... 92

V. BIBLIOGRAPHY ............................................................................................................. 94
   PRIMARY SOURCES ..................................................................................................... 94
   SECONDARY SOURCES ............................................................................................... 99
MAPS

FIGURE 1: 2013 BURMESE ANTI-MUSLIM RIOTS

...51
SECTION 1:

INTRODUCTION

In the reckoning of religious extremism…Buddhism has largely escaped trial. To much of the world, it is synonymous with nonviolence and loving kindness, concepts propagated by Siddharta Gautama, the Buddha, 2,500 years ago. But like adherents of any religion, Buddhists and their holy men are not immune to politics, and, on occasion, the lure of sectarian chauvinism…Every religion can be twisted into a destructive force poisoned by ideals that are antithetical to its foundations. Now it’s Buddhism’s turn.

-Hannah Beech, “The Face of Buddhist Terror”

Solemnly gazing out from the cover of the July 1, 2013, issue of Time magazine, in stark relief against a black background, is U Wirathu, a Burmese Buddhist monk and de facto leader of the Burmese nationalist 969 Movement. According to Beech’s article, U Wirathu styles himself the “Burmese Osama Bin Laden,” encouraging Burmese to “…rise up and make [their] blood boil.” While her article is sensationalized, Beech is pointing to a disturbing recent trend in Buddhist discourse in Burma. U Wirathu’s speeches emphasize the importance of halting the spread of Islam in Burma in order to protect the Burmese race and Buddhist religion from the perceived threat of an Islamic takeover. In U Wirathu’s view, Burmese Buddhism is under fire from this advancing global Islamic threat. Beech argues that Wirathu’s speeches are symptomatic of the spread of “radical” Buddhism in Burma, which also takes the form of “machete-wielding Buddhist hordes attacking Rohingya villages.” The Rohingya, a stateless population of Muslims who have been denied citizenship in Burma, often come into conflict with Burmese Buddhists living in Arakan State, on the border with Bangladesh. Beech further connects events in Burma to tensions arising since de-colonization between Buddhists and Muslims in South and Southeast Asia, including the actions of the Bodu Bala Sena in Sri Lanka,

---


2 Beech, “Buddhist Terror.”
in particular, their alleged involvement in the destruction of Christian property, and the often-violent tensions between Buddhists and Muslims in Southern Thailand. In considering the above quote from Beech’s article, her overarching point seems to be that every religion, while peaceful in its essence, can be twisted into something dangerous, divisive, and, ultimately, antithetical to its nature. Although she gives brief nods to the colonial legacies present in Burma and Sri Lanka contributing to ethno-religious unrest, she largely focuses on the ways in which these “radical” Buddhists are twisting a “pure” Buddhism for their own use.

Beech presents a flattened narrative of ethno-religious violence in Burma, and elsewhere in South and Southeast Asia, one that ignores the historical conjunctures in which this violence is occurring. U Wirathu is painted as a monster in this narrative, a fear-inducing inversion of the trope of the peaceful Buddhist monk to which American audiences are accustomed. In an open letter to Hannah Beech posted on the blog Democracy for Burma on June 26, 2013, Wirathu suggested that Beech betrayed him, not revealing the intent of her article while she was interviewing him, which may prompt questions about her journalistic integrity. Despite this flattened narrative, it does not appear that Beech lies about what she has seen. There really have been Buddhist mobs, machete-wielding and otherwise, attacking Muslims in Burma as recently as January 2014. These attacks are carried out not just by laity, but by Buddhist monks as well. Shocking and disturbing video footage from anti-Muslim riots in Burma show a Buddhist monk

---


beating a Muslim man with a stick, before watching another man kill him with a machete. In an interview with *The Irrawaddy*, U Wirathu stated that Buddhists are not attacking Muslims with weapons, and that the violence is prompted by Muslim attacks on monks, and the raping of young girls, placing responsibility squarely on the shoulders of Muslims. Watching his speeches available online, there is no doubt that he is engaging in vitriolic hate speech, fanning the flames of an already-tense situation.

This thesis intervenes in the tropes and sensationalized rhetoric around the emergence of the 969 Movement in order to provide historical context. In particular, the presence of political monks in colonial Burma provides a space in which U Wirathu, and other monastic supporters of the movement, are legitimated as political figures intervening in political life on behalf of the Burmese people. I will argue that recent scholarship on Buddhist masculinities will help us think beyond orientalist tropes of “pure Buddhism.” I do a gendered reading that exposes the ways in which multiple identity markers, such as religion, race, ethnicity, and gender, as well as historical conjunctures are operating within Burmese society. In doing so, I delineate a more nuanced understanding of how Buddhism becomes visible as political or apolitical, peaceful or violent, hegemonic or subaltern, in differing historical configurations.

The release of the *Time* article prompted a proliferation of pro- and anti-969 articles and blog posts. As Western news media notices a new manifestation of Buddhism, there have been reactionary responses by South and Southeast Asian news outlets and governmental agencies. In terms of Western news media, journalists seem fascinated with the question of how these monks

---


can be Buddhist and yet fail to operate in perfect equanimity and pacifism. *The Atlantic* weighed in on “the strange numerological basis for Burma’s religious violence,” framing supporters as “believers to the core.”

Writing for *The New York Times*, Thomas Fuller points to the tension between “Buddhist extremists” and the West’s preconceived picture of a Buddhist monk, stating that “[t]he world has grown accustomed to a gentle image of Buddhism defined by the self-effacing words of the Dalai Lama, the global popularity of Buddhist-inspired meditation and postcard-perfect scenes from Southeast Asia of crimson-robed, barefoot monks receiving alms from villagers.” The 969 Movement disrupts this image, deploying hate speech against Muslims, rioting, involving themselves in nationalist political concerns, and even engaging in physical violence against Muslims. Western news media outlets, relying on this trope, often respond to the disruption created by members of the movement by accusing members them of being “bad Buddhists.”

Sale of the July 1 issue of *Time* has been banned in both Burma and Sri Lanka, and *The Colombo Daily Telegraph* scrubbed the article of all reference to the Bodu Bala Sena in their reproduction of the “full” text. Frances Wade reported Burmese President Thein Sein’s support of the ban, stating “[t]heir concern is that it could affect government effort to rebuild harmony

---


between Buddhists and Muslims… or sully the reputation of Buddhism.”

This response, as Wade points out, ignores the troubling aspects of Beech’s article, including statements from Wirathu such as “Now is not the time for calm. Now is the time to rise up and make your blood boil,” as well as his proclamation that Buddhists “…cannot sleep next to a rabid dog.”

In my gendered reading of the 969 Movement’s rhetoric, I argue that U Wirathu and other supporters of the 969 Movement present a paranoid, xenophobic view of Muslim men as a barbaric other, prone to violence and rape, who lure young Buddhist women with the promise of a rich life, then use them as breeding machines for the spread of Islam. U Wirathu compares Muslims to African Carp who “…breed rapidly, have violent behavior, and eat its own kind and other fishes. They also destroy the natural resources and beauty underwater.” According to this discourse, Muslim men also insinuate themselves into political life through support of the National League for Democracy, as well as through strategic marriages with political and military figures, in addition to monopolizing businesses. All of these actions, according to the movement, are done with the hidden intent of furthering religion and race. This paranoid rhetoric justifies the Buddhist “defense” of majority privilege.

This thesis examines a sampling of the sermons of U Wirathu and U Pyinawara, another monastic supporter of the 969 Movement, which are available in English translation, and blog posts from expatriate Rakhine blogger Maung Tha Hla, written in English. These sermons and


12 Beech, “The Face of Buddhist Terror.”


blog posts emphasize two tactics for preventing the spread of Islam in Burma: boycotting Muslim businesses and preventing Buddhist women from marrying Muslim men. The boycotts are intended to prevent Muslims from gaining monopolies over any industry. The movement uses two common examples of Muslim takeover of businesses: ownership of construction companies in Yangon and a Muslim-owned bus company in Moulmein. Although it is the case that three major construction companies in Yangon are owned by Muslims (Motherland, Fatherland, and Naing Group), the owners of the biggest construction companies in Yangon, those that handle multi-billion dollar accounts, are owned by Buddhists.\textsuperscript{15} According to U Wirathu, the only bus company in the town of Moulmein is owned by Muslims, who refuse to allow monks to ride for free and avoid vinaya restrictions on carrying money.\textsuperscript{16} This refusal is a significant threat to monastic privilege, inasmuch as it prevents monks from traveling freely without paying.

Ranging from large companies to small stores in its boycotts, the movement uses stickers emblazoned with the 969 logo to designate Buddhist businesses, just as Muslim shop owners in Burma use decals with the number 786 to indicate that their shops sell halal foods. Unlike the 786 logo, the 969 logo is a relatively recent invention specific to the boycott in Burma. Groups of 969 supporters hand out the decals to Buddhist shop owners and taxi drivers, and supporters of the movement seek out the 969 logo when shopping. The boycott is meant to keep financial resources in the hands of Buddhists, with respect to helping Buddhists meet subsistence needs, and creating a supportive environment while also keeping money out of the hands of Muslim


\textsuperscript{16} Marshall, “Myanmar gives official blessing.”
men, who are said to use it to lure Buddhist women into marriage, a fallacious rumor which ties directly into the second tactic I analyze here.

The second tactic, which prompts my gendered reading of the 969 Movement, is the creation and implementation of legislation that would prevent Buddhist women from marrying Muslim men without the permission of their parents and the local government. This legislation would also require that the Muslim groom convert to Buddhism immediately, under penalty of a ten year prison sentence. In this way, Buddhist women are protected from their own moral weakness. The underlying gendered construct, as I discuss in this thesis, paints women as weak-willed, polluting, and easily lured by material considerations. The Racial Protection Act was introduced into parliament in 2013 and has since collected over three million signatures of support. President Thein Sein also supports parliament’s consideration of the bill.17

Burmese expatriate blogger Maung Tha Hla defends these tactics by pointing out that they mirror comparable tactics used by Muslims, including the stickers that adorn Muslim shops and the laws in place against intermarriage in Indonesia and Malaysia.18 In a paranoid stance that has gained currency within Burma—one I argue flourishes within a global Islamophobia—Hla expresses the belief that Muslim men came to Burma in order to steal away Burmese women. In his blog post, “The Vituperation of Buddhism and its Adherents,” Hla claims:

[Y]oung Bengali Muslim males were induced to migrate into Myanmar, the land of abundant food and pretty damsels; to marry the native maidens; to convert their wives and the offspring to Muslims; to translate the Koran into Burmese; to spread Islam in the community; to seek public and government offices; to secure the strategic positions in the


military; and ultimately to overthrow the government.\textsuperscript{19}

Hla is drawing on a historical context in which British colonial authority imported a South Asian workforce from colonial India already familiar with English and British regulations to serve as bureaucrats and moneylenders. The British employed a largely Muslim workforce, displacing many Burmese from their positions, significantly disadvantaging them. Within the rhetoric of the movement, which draws on a xenophobia that initially developed in the colonial period, preventing the spread of Islam has become tantamount to preserving Burma as a nation. Within this framework, Muslims pose an economic, political, religious, and cultural threat to the Burmese. Hla’s claim that Muslims lure away “pretty damsels” reinforces the need to prevent Burmese Buddhist women from marrying Muslim men.

In this thesis, I argue that U Wirathu and other monastic supporters of the 969 Movement participate in the formation of an anti-Muslim hegemonic masculinity in deploying ethnonationalist rhetoric. This hegemonic masculinity is constructed against the foils of the Muslim male and the morally weak Buddhist female. The rhetoric of these monastics, and other supporters of the movement, depict the Muslim male as hyper-sexual, violent, rapacious, and greedy, in opposition to the Buddhist monk, whose authority and status as a spokesperson for the nation comes from his celibacy and self-mastery. In turn, the monks draw on a longstanding Buddhist monastic discourse in depicting the moral weakness of women and thereby present themselves as protectors and defenders of the religion, race, and the nation. It is ironic that Buddhist monks, who draw authority from celibacy, have involved themselves in attempts to regulate Buddhist reproduction in their attempt to “defend” the Burmese nation from a “foreign” threat.

\textsuperscript{19} Hla, “The Vituperation of Buddhism.”
Source Material

I demonstrate that particular Burmese Buddhist monks are participating in the production of a hegemonic masculinity via a rhetorical analysis of online video sermons conducted by Buddhist monks, interviews, blog posts, and other online materials. The videos are publicly available through YouTube and have been subtitled in English. These videos, interviews, and blogs were selected based on their availability online and in English, and for the views presented by the authors and speakers. I have purposefully focused on extreme views rather than mainstream discourse in order to analyze the maximalist rhetoric deployed by monastic members of the 969 Movement in order to further understand the causes and conditions that make visible this disturbing movement. Due to constraints in the scope of this thesis, videos and posts that express contradictory views are not addressed.

The videos of sermons were translated by Myanmar Muslim Media, hereafter referred to by the YouTube user name Mmediatube or M-media. The translators are not further identified beyond this designation. There are no other available English translations of these videos. The translators describe the speakers before each video, referring to them as Buddhist extremists and identifying the sermons as hate speech. As a Muslim group, there is much at stake for Mmediatube in these translations, particularly as they are working to bring attention to a troubling discourse underlying ethnic violence, and as such likely translated using the strongest possible language that exposes this view. Although under most circumstances, the use of videos translated by a Muslim organization may be considered too biased for this type of analysis, there is sufficient material from bloggers available in English that share the same strident language.
The blog posts used in this analysis are written by a Burmese expatriate living in New York, Maung Tha Hla. These posts come from an opposing camp, so to speak, as Maung Tha Hla offers full support to Burmese nationalism, in contrast to the Muslims working to raise awareness of the 969 Movement’s hate speech. Even so, the messages conveyed are similar. Maung Tha Hla’s blog, entitled “The Patrimony of Rakhaings,” argues that Muslims, in particular the Rohingya of Arakan state, are Bengali Muslims lying to gullible Westerners in order to gain support for what he views as an illegitimate claim to Arakan state. Maung Tha Hla also founded the Buddhist Rakhaing Cultural Organization of the United States of America in 1996 and has authored two books: *The Rakhaing* and *Rohingya Hoax*.

**Theoretical Foundation**

These primary sources are placed in conversation with existing scholarly works in religious studies and anthropology that use historical and ethnographic work to tease out issues of gender, post-coloniality, and ethno-nationalist religious identity, in order to provide greater historical and cultural context for the movement. In order to do so, I will draw primarily on the works of Ananda Abeysekara, John Powers, Edward Said, and R.W. Connell. Abeysekara cautions us to avoid thinking of Buddhism, violence, politics, religion, and any number of other categories as anything but context-laden, contingent, and variable. Abeysekara’s work on conjunctures of Buddhism in Sri Lanka cuts Buddhism loose from its Orientalist mooring as a humanistic, non-violent religion of peace. In doing so, it allows for analysis that demonstrates that Buddhism and violence serve as shifting, contingent categories. Rather than seeking to understand how the 969 Movement justifies their actions within a Buddhist framework (i.e., to judge whether or not their actions are “authentically” Buddhist), I will seek to understand how
meanings of Buddhism and masculinity are perpetually re-framed and reconstituted as categories. This allows for a more sophisticated view of the ways in which Buddhistness and Burmeseness are entangled with expressions of nationalism, such that defending the Burmese race is tantamount to defending Buddhism and vice versa.

Edward Said argues that human history is comprised of struggles for territory, and struggles for meaning, both historical and social, and that “[t]he task for the critical scholar is not to separate one struggle from another, but to connect them,” which Said does by showing that “...the development and maintenance of every culture requires the existence of another, different and competing alter ego. The construction of identity...involves the construction of opposites and ‘others’ whose actuality is always subject to the continuous interpretation and reinterpretation of their differences from ‘us’.” Moreover, these constructions are “…bound up with the disposition of power and powerlessness in each society...” In other words, these constructions can be linked to the hegemonic inasmuch as the construction of “others” relies on an inability for the other to construct themselves as such. The hegemon, then, is able to construct the other where the other lacks subjectivity to constitute themselves. Within Said’s framework, then, the 969 Movement can be understood as the constitution of an ethnic-national religious identity against the foil of a Muslim other, in particular, a construction of the Muslim male as greedy, violent, and hyper-sexualized. This is visible through U Wirathu’s characterization of Muslims as African Carp who breed rapidly and destroy the natural environment. In one sermon by another monastic and supporter of the 969 Movement, U Pyinawara stated that Muslim men have

---


forced Buddhist women into prostitution in Chittagong, and further argues that Muslim men are “devils” who will lead young women to hell.\(^{23}\)

With respect to gendered analysis, I will draw on the groundbreaking work of John Strong on Buddhist masculinities, as well as R.W. Connell’s refigured work on hegemonic masculinities. Strong and Connell’s work both provide a strong framework for understanding masculinities as institutional, social, and embodied. In *A Bull of a Man*, John Strong challenges the notion of monasticism as an androgynous institution. In the first place, although monks are expected to be celibate, and the Buddha took celibacy upon himself after going forth, Strong points to a range of epithets indicating the Buddha’s physical perfection and manliness in a context wherein “...the bodies of [the Buddha’s] monastic followers were advertisements of the superiority of Buddhism to its rivals.”\(^{24}\) In this context, Strong understands masculinity as a negative-feminine, rather than a stand-alone concept, the sexualized female in contrast to the celibate ascetic, embedding gender roles and social status into an understanding of feminine and masculine.\(^{25}\)

Liz Wilson’s exploration of early Indian hagiographic literature in which the figure of the women as temptress is used to expose the desire for the female form as “false advertising.” She describes the ways in which the figure of the female body in gruesome configurations, particularly the decaying corpse, but also aged, diseased, and mutilated, are used for and the edification Buddhist monastics. Through watching the otherwise alluring female form deteriorate as a rottting corpse, the deceptive nature of her beauty is exposed. Women, according to Wilson,


are dangerous in this scenario because “[h]er charms intact, a woman is a deceptive mantrap for those who lack the insight to see her as she truly is.” According to Wilson, in the narratives in which they appear, women function almost exclusively to edify men, resulting in a loss of women’s subjectivity. The consistent appearance of women-as-temptress in this literature creates a framework for understanding the ideologies of female moral weakness and pollution discussed in my rhetorical analysis. Strong and Wilson are particularly fruitful in demonstrating that the greatness of the Buddha was imbued with notions of manliness, feats of strength, and sexual exploits prior to going forth, and that notions of masculinity, juxtaposed with the morally decrepit woman, inform how we understand Buddhism. These notions are missed if we unduly privilege doctrine alone.

R.W. Connell argues that “masculinity” is a socially constructed category, in particular one which requires femininity as its opposite. Connell’s concept of hegemonic masculinity argues that, although there are many forms of masculinity in a given context, there is one form of masculinity that becomes dominant. This hegemonic masculinity is not by any means static or universal, but is comprised of culturally contingent, shifting representations of masculinities. Connell’s goal is to address how hegemonic masculinity functions in discourse, institutions, performance, experience, and culture rather than explicitly understanding the construction of oppositional categories of masculinity and femininity per se.

For Connell, hegemonic masculinity operates in tandem with patriarchal dividends, or the honor, prestige, and material benefit men receive from living in a patriarchal system, even those who fail to conform to the hegemonic masculine. The patriarchal dividends are dispersed

---

universally, in the sense that all men receive these dividends, but they are not dispersed uniformly. Race, nation, class, generation, and, I argue, religion, are all categories of identity that can impinge on the amount of benefit men receive in a patriarchal system. The patriarchal dividend acts as an incentive for maintaining the gender status quo, and is particularly effective because men need not conform to the hegemonic masculine to receive it.

Although other masculinities proliferate in this framework, Connell does not adequately address the functions of these masculinities with respect to a rhetoric of othering. In my gendered reading, I expand on Connell’s work by addressing what I refer to as shadow masculinities. Shadow masculinities, in the simplest terms, are a demonized masculinities against which the hegemonic masculine is constructed. These shadow masculinities operate as foils to the 
hegemonic in addition to the feminine, and are represented by men who are the negative-masculine, but not necessarily feminized.

This thesis examines the construction of a hegemonic masculinity through the rhetoric of the 969 Movement. This masculinity is constructed against two foils, that of the Muslim male other (the shadow masculine), and the morally weak female. The Muslim male, in this rhetoric, is not feminized, but posited against a hegemonic masculine in the form of a Buddhist monk. In this construction, the Muslim male is hyper-sexualized, rapacious, violent, and greedy, as juxtaposed against the absent referent of the Buddhist monk, a celibate, non-violent ascetic who righteously propagates the dharma, and the Buddhist lay male, who retains disciplined control over his sexuality. The trope of the Muslim man is particularly prevalent in the notion that Muslim men mislead Buddhist women, who are perceived to be morally weak and easily lured by wealth, then force them, often violently, to convert to Islam and give birth to Muslim children. In one sermon, U Pyinawara argues that Muslim men beat their Buddhist brides until
they agree to convert.\textsuperscript{28} The Muslim family is framed as deviant inasmuch as Muslims are perceived as taking multiple wives and using them for prolific breeding practices.

This masculinity is also framed against the moral weakness of the Buddhist woman. Melford Spiro describes the construction of the Burmese Buddhist woman as intellectually and morally inferior. According to Spiro, there is an underlying understanding that women are greedy and willing to leave their husbands for a younger, wealthier lover. They possess “…an extraordinarily powerful libido, a polluting vagina, and sexual allure.”\textsuperscript{29} Based on this underlying moral weakness, Buddhist women must be protected from Muslim men by Buddhist monks and lay males.

Both of these constructions rely in part on the concept of \textit{hpon} or \textit{hpoun}, which can be understood as “honor” or “glory.” This quality is uniquely possessed and embodied by men and indicates the accrual of merit such that one has been reborn as a man.\textsuperscript{30} \textit{Hpon} is often unquestioned because of its self-legitimating status. Min Zin writes “[s]ince \textit{hpoun} is theoretically a ‘prize’ earned through past good deeds, it is self-legitimating: Simply by virtue of possessing power, one has demonstrated that one has acquired considerable merit in past lives. Thus the question of moral legitimacy does not arise. As long as one remains in the ascendancy (whether socially, politically, or economically), one is presumed to possess merit.”\textsuperscript{31} Buddhist monks, called “\textit{hpongyi}” or “great glory,” are understood to possess the highest degree of \textit{hpon} and are, therefore, at the pinnacle of the hierarchy of glory. Wealthy and powerful Buddhist men

\textsuperscript{28} U Pyinawara, “A Burmese Buddhist Monk.”
\textsuperscript{31} Min Zin. “The Power of Hpoun.”
are also understood to possess a high degree of hpon, and their wealth and power are understood to be this-worldly representations of their honor. Since hpon is intimately tied to Buddhist practice through the accrual of lifetimes of merit, the Muslim male, as he is constructed by supporters of the movement, can never achieve it. As hpon is a quality embodied in males generally, and in monks and political leaders in particular, it is unattainable for Buddhist women in this lifetime. In this way, hpon functions to maintain the construction of the Buddhist monk as the ideal masculinity, and perpetuating a broader patriarchal norm in which Burmese Buddhist men retain superiority over the Burmese women and Muslim men.

**Sections**

This thesis will be broken down into two main sections, the first gives a historical overview and reviews the literature to date on the confluence of Buddhist and Burmese identity, particularly through the works of Juliane Schober, Mikael Gravers, and David Steinberg. This section grapples with the historical context of Buddhist kingship and the role of the monk in politics from the precolonial period through the Saffron Revolution. It also highlights the ways in which scholars addressing political monks in Burma have grappled with issues of coloniality, xenophobia, violence, religion, and politics.

The second section is a gendered reading of the rhetoric of the 969 Movement. This gendered reading highlights the ways in which members of the saṅgha, or community of monks, participate in the formation of a hegemonic masculinity. This discourse draws on longstanding Buddhist monastic conceptions of gender operating in conjunction with the distinctively Burmese conception of hpon. Through the increased visibility of Burmese Nationalists like U Wirathu, who are operating within a post-colonial framework still grappling with the impact of British rule, we see a dramatic shift in the manifestation of Buddhist Burmeseness. This new
manifestation includes the primacy of Buddhism and the Burmese race under fire from a perceived Islamic threat. In this conception, Buddhist women must be protected for the sake of the nation. Furthermore, the ways in which the movement deploys this rhetoric of protection against the foils of the Buddhist female and Muslim male cements monastics in their privileged status as the main benefactors of hegemonic masculinity, including continued patronage from a largely Buddhist populace.

**A Note on Terms**

This thesis uses “Burma” to refer to the Republic of the Union of Myanmar throughout. The military government changed the name of the country to Myanmar, ostensibly in order to embrace diversity in the country. “Burma” refers to the majority ethnic group, “Bamar.” However, the terms “Myanmar” and “Myanma” refer to the Bamar ethnic group in a different dialect of the Bamar (Burmese) language. Further, the term “Myanmar” is sometimes deployed to indicate a political alliance with the military government. For the sake of clarity I have referred to the country as Burma, as that is how I have seen the country referred to most often in my research into the 969 Movement.

With respect to the use of the term “969 Movement,” my intent is not to indicate that there is an organized institution or record of membership in the group. Although U Wirathu is considered the *de facto* leader of the movement, there is no officially designated leadership. The numbers “969” are an invented signifier created in response to the *halal* designation 786. “The number 969 … represents Buddhism’s Three Jewels: the nine attributes of the Buddha, the six
attributes of his teachings, and the nine attributes of the Sañgha, or monastic order.”

Although the Three Jewels, Buddha, dharma, and sañgha are present in Buddhist doctrine, the nine attributes of the Buddha, six attributes of his teachings, and nine attributes of the sañgha have never before come into central visibility as categories, except as the sources of refuge. The 969 decals were originally intended to designate Buddhist businesses in Burma. However, the term seems to have become a general designation for anti-Muslim Buddhist nationalists, and any activities that become associated with that extreme form of nationalism.

---

32 Bookbinder, “969: The Strange Numerological Basis for Burma’s Religious Violence”
SECTION II:

HISTORICAL CONJUNCTURES

In order to understand the particular historical conjunctures that allow for the increasing visibility of nationalist Buddhist monks in Burma, it is necessary to examine the historical context. This section briefly examines events from the Kaunbaung Dynasty (1752-1885) through the 2007 Saffron Revolution in order to tease out these conjunctures. In addition, this section serves as a literature review, particularly the works of Juliane Schober, Mikael Gravers, and David Steinberg, scholars who have grappled with the confluence of Buddhist and Burmese identity, coloniality, xenophobia, violence, religion, and politics. In doing so, I will be able to examine the shifting relationship between the saṅgha, or community, in particular the community of monks, the ways in which nationalism and Buddhism became intertwined during the colonial period, and the ways in which the colonial government, civilian government, and military government have contributed to xenophobic attitudes among Burmese, in addition to examining their relationships with the saṅgha as patrons or persecutors of Buddhist institutions.

Buddhist Kingship and Polity in the Pre-Colonial Period

As was the case elsewhere in Southeast Asia, pre-colonial Burma was governed by a series of Buddhist polities. Stanley J. Tambiah refers to these as “galactic polities,” a central structure exerting a sphere of influence over semi-autonomous peripheral entities.33 The semi-autonomous periphery was tied to the center through relationships of family, marriage, and patronage. Because of the relative instability of these relationships, the territorial influence of the center was

---

constantly shifting. This differs from other concepts of polity, particularly those found in pre-Modern Europe, wherein the center exerts absolute (particularly military and administrative) force over the periphery. The aggregate of peripheral planets found in the Galactic Polity is held together “...not so much by the real exercise of power and control as by the devices and mechanisms of a ritual kind that have performative validity.” This model is similar to Clifford Geertz’ concept of dramaturgical statecraft, otherwise referenced as the theater state. Geertz argues that Balinese supralocal politics operate under the doctrine of the exemplary center and the expressive conception of politics. Geertz describes the doctrine of the exemplary center as one in which the center, or court and capital, is the basis of sovereignty and the embodiment of political order. He argues that “...by the mere act of providing a model, a paragon, a faultless image of civilized existence, the court shapes the world around it into at least a rough facsimile of its own excellence.” In this relationship, the court is a reflection of divine order, which generates human order. Furthermore, Geertz argues that the Balinese in this model ruled through theatrical performativity, rather than through tyranny or government.

This model of the Buddhist polity is a total cosmological model. According to Tambiah, Southeast Asian countries with Buddhist polities took into consideration Buddhist cosmological principles in art, architecture, and the layout of territory. The Kandyan Kingdom of Sri Lanka is one excellent example of this. The spatial features, layout, and architecture of the Kandyan

---


35 Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer*, 125.


37 Geertz, “Politics Past, Politics Present,” *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 332.

capital created a spatial hierarchy that linked the kings to the prestige of the Buddha’s tooth relic as its custodian, and subordinated the pantheon of local gods. The hierarchy of the royal offices, Buddhist monastic institutions, and outlying principalities was displayed in an elaborate procession of the Buddha’s tooth relic through the capital, called the perahera, conducted annually for the protection of the state and to bring the rains.\textsuperscript{39}

Throughout Southeast Asia, Buddhist kings were understood to have a significant impact on the social well-being of everyone in the kingdom through the upholding of their moral character and righteous rule. Kings were expected to adhere to the dasavidha-rājadhamma, including charity, morality, altruism, honesty, gentleness, self-control, non-anger, non-violence, forbearance, and uprightness.\textsuperscript{40} Kings could, in theory, be de-legitimized in accord with Buddhist principles if the kingdom was not run well and calamities such as famine ensued. Gravers emphasizes the importance of this model as a total politico-ethnic cosmology in which the king, saṅgha, and laity all operate in accord with one another.\textsuperscript{41} The king supported the saṅgha with donations of land and protection, the laity provided donations of food and robes to the monastics, and the monastics acted as a field of merit. The king’s duties were understood to provide the laity with “protection from arbitrary tyranny” inasmuch as the king’s duties were understood to prevent the king from exploiting his people.\textsuperscript{42} Tambiah affirms this, writing that Burmese, Mon, and Thai kingdoms in particular followed a dhammasattham, a code of justice which fostered more-or-less consistent ethical, legislative, and judicial behavior.


\textsuperscript{40} Aung San Suu Kyi, “In Quest of Democracy,” \textit{Freedom from Fear: And Other Writings} (New York: Penguin, 2010).

\textsuperscript{41} Mikael Gravers, \textit{Nationalism as Political Paranoia in Burma} (Richmond UK: Curzon, 1999), 5.

\textsuperscript{42} Gravers, \textit{Nationalism as Political Paranoia}, 16.
Juliane Schober highlights the import of the saṅgha in this model of Buddhist polity in Burma, as the saṅgha had a tremendous role in the “...cultural integration of Theravāda polity. Because of its role as an education institution, as an intellectual elite, and as a social location for the production of cultural knowledge, the saṅgha profoundly shaped Burmese culture and history.”\textsuperscript{43} Burma’s near-50 percent male literacy rate was attributed to monastic education, both through temporary ordination and village schools run by monastics. The king or seitkya min (universal ruler, cakkavarti) and the saṅgha were often mutually legitimizing, although factionalism often insured that the king did not have total control over the affairs of monastics.\textsuperscript{44}

Lieberman argues that every Burmese king exerted control over the saṅgha during his reign. However, it is clear that not every king approached control over the saṅgha with the same goals in mind.\textsuperscript{45} Schober highlights the reigns of King Bodawpaya (1749-1819) and King Mindon (1853-1878) to demonstrate the shifting relationships between the saṅgha and the king. Bodawpaya and Mindon took nearly opposite approaches to their relationship with the saṅgha. During Bodawpaya’s reign, the Ministry of the Interior was instructed to integrate religious and secular functions in the king’s administration, using the Ministry to enact religious reform, purge the saṅgha of dissenters, and oversee monastic affairs, including examinations and disciplining monks. Bodawpaya thereby imposed his own understanding of Theravāda orthodoxy and encouraged all monks to ordain according to the Amarpura Nikāya. By contrast, Mindon inherited a kingdom already threatened by colonial powers, and fractured by the first Anglo-Burmese War. Mindon attempted to unify the saṅgha through the Fifth Buddhist Council. He


\textsuperscript{44} Victor Liberman, \textit{Strange Parallels}, 192.

\textsuperscript{45} \textit{Ibid.}, 192.
also required monks to renew their vows to abide by the *vinaya*, the regulatory framework for the monastic community, but did not put forth his own vision of Theravāda orthodoxy. During Mindon’s reign, the *saṅgha* became fragmented, monastic institutions declined, and lay practitioners increasingly employed their own meditative practice and exerted claims to spiritual authority.

**The British Incursion and Colonial Policy**

During his reign, King Bodawpaya conquered Arakan (1785), Manipur (1814), and Assam (1817). This westward expansion of the Konbaung Dynasty attracted the attention of the British, and Burma lost these new territories in the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824-1826) that ensued. Two decades later, the British seized Lower Burma, including the Irrawady Delta, the Rakhine and Mon States, and the Tanintharyi Region during the Second Anglo-Burmese War (April-December, 1852). By this point, King Mindon was struggling to modernize, and working to hold together a fragmented dynasty and fractious *saṅgha*.\(^{46}\) The Third Anglo-Burmese War lasted only twenty-two days resulting in British control over all of Burma by November 29, 1885. In 1886, Burma was annexed and placed under the control of the Government of India.

British control over Burma led to a rapid influx of Indians. By the 1930s, more than half of Burma’s population was Indian, both Muslim and Hindu.\(^{47}\) As India had already been under British colonial powers, and many Indians spoke English, and were familiar with British administrative policies, Indians were recruited for low-level administrative positions. As modern medicine and education were introduced, Indians were recruited for professional positions, and


\(^{47}\) Ibid., 156.
many more were moneylenders, laborers, and indentured servants.\footnote{David Steinberg, \textit{Burma/Myanmar: What Everyone Needs to Know} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 30.} This privileging of Indian laborers and administrators created a significant class distinction between Burmese and Indians in Burma. The ethnic Burmese disappeared from the middle class, creating significant tension and resentment, and British colonial divide-and-rule policies set a precedent for fearing an influx of foreign populations. Although many of these Indians were expelled from the country following Ne Win’s coup in the 1960s, the fear and resentment of the Indian population persisted.\footnote{Smith, Martin, \textit{Burma-Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity} (London: Zed Books, 1991), 44.} This resentment is a key contribution to the xenophobic attitudes fostered by the Socialist and military governments, as well as contributing to the fear and hatred of Muslims fostered by the 969 Movement.

As another affront to Burmese Buddhists, the British reformed the Burmese school system, previously under the purview of monastics, and instituted a British curriculum. According to Alicia Turner, monastics resisted the curriculum, refusing to teach subjects such as English and Geometry.\footnote{Alicia Turner, “Religion-Making and its Failures: Turning Monasteries into Schools and Buddhism into a Religion in Colonial Burma,” \textit{Secularism and Religion-Making}, ed. Markus Dressler and Arvind-Pal S. Mandair (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 233.} The availability of costly private British schools and missionary schools contributed to a growing educational divide between Burmese urban elites and rural peasants, the latter of whom relied heavily on general education from the village monastery. Burmese farmers and landowners did not fare well in the shifting economy, and increasingly relied on the services of Indian moneylenders. Steinberg argues that, because of a lack of education about money-lending practices, many owners of private property lost their livelihood. The preferential treatment was in line with British divide-and-rule policies that intentionally pit people of different ethnic groups against one another.
These policies contributed significantly to persistent resentment and distrust of kalar, or foreigners. With respect to Sri Lanka, Sumantra Bose points to these policies as contributing to increased racialization of identity. He writes:

In keeping with Britain’s divide-and-rule policies, her authorities in Sri Lanka baldly favored minority communities at the expense of the majority community’s religion, language, and culture. Independence was therefore seen as a mechanism by which Buddhism, the Sinhala language, and its intertwined culture could be restored to its rightful place of prominence and dominance. The rhetoric...inevitably relied on the rationalization of ethnic identities.

Paralleling the Sri Lankan case, Matthew J. Walton argues that colonial rule cemented Burmese ethnic groups, in part through the collection of census data, and what Walton calls “the colonial obsession with classification.” As with Sri Lanka, language, religion, and cultural values were intertwined in conceptions of Burmeseness. The loss of a Buddhist-controlled state, and British disinterest in retaining traditional elements of Burmese Buddhist cultural life, threatened Burmese Buddhist identity.

Further intensifying ethnic divisions and creating a sense of threat to the majority, Burmans, the largest ethnic group in Burma, were slowly edged out of the armed forces, and eventually expelled all together. The armed forces largely recruited the ethnic minority Mon, Karen, and Kachin. In the minds of Burmans, Walton argues, it is not just Indians and British who became associated with colonial rule, but minority Burmese as well. He states that:

Burmans also perceived British colonial policies as a threat to their cultural and religious identity. Because of the association of non-Burman ethnic groups with British

---

51 Steinberg, Burma/Myanmar, 30.


dominance, the specific content of Burman ethnic identity developed, in part, in opposition to other ethnic groups. They saw these other groups as privileged servants of the British and, thus, a threat to the existence of the Burman people and Burman way of life.\textsuperscript{54}

Burman identity, however, is not solely based on ethnic identification but also Buddhist values. The ethnic populations privileged by the British were not solely ethnic others, but also religious others, as these immigrants were often Hindu or Muslim, prompting further tensions between Burmans and non-Burmans. These tensions become particularly important in navigating the nationalist movements of the 1930s, and the civilian government of independent Burma, as Burmese sought to create a Burmese Buddhist modernity.

Prior to the colonial period, the saṅgha had some administrative cohesion in the person of the thananabaing (supreme patriarch). Since 1784, the thananabaing was appointed by the king and selected according to the king’s understanding of Buddhist orthodoxy.\textsuperscript{55} The thananabaing was granted supreme authority over religious affairs, including the appointment of abbots, management of monastic discipline, \textit{vinaya} interpretation, and administration of Pāli examinations.\textsuperscript{56} The British colonial administration retained a policy of non-involvement with respect to religious affairs. The colonial administration refused to appoint a new thananabaing, as religion was understood to be outside the purview of a secular government. This move undercut the position of Buddhism in relation to the state as well as the administrative cohesion of the saṅgha. They later acknowledged Taunggwin Sayadaw as the thananabaing of upper

\textsuperscript{54} Walton, “The Wages of ‘Burman-ness’”, 8.

\textsuperscript{55} Helen James, \textit{Governance and Civil Society in Myanmar: Education, Health, and Environment} (New York: Routledge Curzon, 2005), 81.

\textsuperscript{56} James, \textit{Governance and Civil Society}, 81.
Burma, but did not appoint him, or grant him administrative power.\textsuperscript{57} The introduction of British secular education further undercut the position of Buddhism, and of Buddhist monastics, as the monastery diminished as the center of village life.\textsuperscript{58} For many Burmese, it seemed the British had little respect for traditional Buddhist practice, as evinced by the refusal to remove footwear in pagodas, the failure to contribute to the welfare of the \textit{saṅgha}, and the refusal to administer the country in accord with Buddhist principles.

**Monks and Kings in Rebellion**

Although there was increasing nationalist sentiment in Burma during the early twentieth century, little record of active agitation against colonial authority is visible until the late 1920s and early 1930s. Mikael Gravers describes the period between 1900 and 1920 as one in which the Burmese struggled with the tension between modernity on the one hand and tradition on the other.\textsuperscript{59} This classification may be too simple. We might more accurately reflect on the period as one in which Western-educated urban elites strove to form a particularly Burmese, Buddhist modernity, one in which the Burmese would be able to control their national destiny in line with particular interpretations of Buddhist principles. Although this period is also marked by increasing lay leadership and involvement in nationalist organizations, monastics retained an important role in agitation against colonial oppression, demonstrating the continually negotiated relationship between the \textit{saṅgha}, state, and the laity, despite conceptions of monastics as necessarily detached from this-worldly concerns.

\textsuperscript{57} Steinberg, \textit{Burma/Myanmar}, 33.

\textsuperscript{58} \textit{Ibid.}, 33.

\textsuperscript{59} Gravers, \textit{Nationalism as Political Paranoia}, 33.
Juliane Schober describes this moment as one wherein “[n]ewly emergent social groups and modern Buddhist communities are shaping the discourse about power in its ‘this-worldly’ and ‘other-worldly’ uses at those moments in history where new venues of power unfold at the frontiers of shifting conceptions of the world.” Schober also argues that it was later in this period that Burmese nationalists strove to return to the pre-colonial cosmological order of Buddhist kingship, perhaps accounting for the seemingly-sudden Saya San Rebellion of the 1930s, revolving around Saya’s claim to be a seitkya min, a wheel-turning king. Saya San, and a new strain of political monks, such as U Ottama and U Wisara, exemplify myriad ways in which Buddhism becomes visible as an element of resistance to British rule during this period. In addition to the rise to prominence of these exemplary figures, the 1930s also saw the occurrence of the anti-Indian riots, and the founding of the Dobama Asioyone, or We the Burmese Association, was founded. The Dobama Asioyone, further discussed in the next session, rocketed key political figures such as U Nu, Aung San, and Ne Win, to prominence.

U Ottama was an Arakanese monk born in 1897, considered to be the first of the political hpogyis (monks). He studied in Calcutta and was deeply influenced by the ideas of the Indian National Congress. He returned to Burma in 1919 after teaching Pāli in Tokyo, Japan, and wrote articles for the nationalist newspaper, Thuriya. According to Mikael Gravers, U Ottama was heavily influenced by and taken with Gandhi’s satyagraha. U Ottama argued for boycotting British goods in favor of Burmese goods such as homespun cotton, as well as organizing and participating in hunger strikes. Ottama was deeply concerned about the fate of Buddhism under

---


62 Gravers, *Nationalism as Political Paranoia*, 34.
colonial rule, and, according to Donald Seekins, he preached that monks should not try to attain \textit{nibbāna} while Burmese were still under colonial oppression, but rather should agitate along with laypeople and intervene on behalf of all Burmese. This view contrasted sharply with that of more conservative monks, who believed that monks should not be involved in politics. Although his initial attempts to incite nationalist sentiment fell flat, U Ottama was central to the nationalist movement by the 1930s. According to Schober, he was arrested numerous times for sedition and inciting violent rebellion during the 1920s and 1930s.\textsuperscript{63}

U Ottama also participated in the founding of numerous Patriotic Associations (\textit{wunthanu athin}) including the General Council of Burmese Associations (GCBA) and the General Council of Sangha Sammeggi. \textit{Wuthanu} is sometimes translated as “racially faithful ones,” and these groups devoted themselves to “promoting pride in Burmese tradition, national identity, and the Buddhist religion and with agitating against oppressive measures such as the 1907 Village Act, which imposed heavy forced labor burdens on the populace.”\textsuperscript{64} According to Mikael Gravers, more than ten thousand village-based \textit{wunthanu athin} were formed in the early twentieth century, providing an alternative authority to that presented by British-appointed village headmen.\textsuperscript{65} Schober and Gravers argue that these organizations were essential to the creation of a particularly Burmese nationalism. Another such organization was the Young Men’s Buddhist Association (YMBA). The YMBA was technically a religious organization, and thus outside the purview of British regulation. This allowed its members to campaign for causes with political ends, such as the No Footwear in Pagodas Campaign, calling for strict observance of the ban on

\textsuperscript{63} Schober, \textit{Modern Buddhist Conjunctures}, 105.

\textsuperscript{64} Seekins, \textit{Historical Dictionary}, 481.

\textsuperscript{65} Gravers, \textit{Nationalism as Political Paranoia}, 34.
footwear in pagodas.\(^{66}\) Although the YMBA played a role in the creation of the nationalist movement, it fragmented as members strove to challenge the offenses to Buddhism perpetrated by the colonizers while also attempting to avoid the status of a seditious group.

Burmese nationalism became increasingly anti-British and anti-colonial, shifting the focus of nationalism from the urban elite’s desire for Burmese modernization, toward a “millennial return of the past.”\(^{67}\) In other words, nationalization in this period focused much more heavily on a revised traditionalism, fostered by non-elites, exemplified by the Saya San Rebellion. This shift edged out the concerns of the YMBA’s Western-educated urban elites.\(^{68}\) Although it is certainly not the case that U Ottama is responsible for the creation of the nationalist movement, he stands as one clear example of a nationalist monk arguing nationalist principles in Burmese history.\(^{69}\)

U Wisara, a colleague of U Ottama, retains an enduring legacy in Burma. U Wisara entered the monkhood in his twenties, after two marriages. He met U Ottama in 1923, and began traveling and making speeches. He was imprisoned twice for inciting sedition. During his first period of arrest in 1926, U Wisara struggled against the prison authorities to be allowed to follow the vinaya during his incarceration. When the prison officials refused he went on hunger strike for forty days before the prison officials relented. During his second period of imprisonment in 1929, U Wisara insisted that he be allowed to wear the robe and fast when appropriate. He fasted for 166 days and died in prison on September 19, 1929. U Wisara was honored as a martyr for the movement and, in 1940, a statue of him was erected near the entrance of Shwe Dagon


\(^{67}\) Schober, *Modern Buddhist Conjunctures*, 75.

\(^{68}\) Ibid., 75

\(^{69}\) Despite his influence on the early Burmese nationalist movement, U Ottama spent his later years in poverty and neglect.
Pagoda. Seekins credits U Wisara with bringing to light the colonial authority’s disrespect for Buddhism, and, therefore, for Burmeseness.\textsuperscript{70}

In a different model of Buddhist nationalism than these political monks, Saya (Hsaya) San was the aforementioned rebel leader who crowned himself king in the early 1930s. Originally called Yar Kyaw, he studied Buddhism as a child at his local monastery, and earned his living in various trades, from selling carpets to carpentry, fortunetelling, and traditional medicine. He wrote treatises about the value of traditional Burmese medicinal practices opposed to British medicine.\textsuperscript{71} In the 1920s, he joined the General Council of Burmese Associations and was appointed to survey the living conditions of peasants across the country. This afforded him the opportunity to connect with the Burmese populace. In 1930, he organized a rebellion, forming the Galon Army, and proclaimed himself king. His followers used Burmese amulets and tattoos of the galon, or garuda, a mythical bird who is the enemy of the nāgas. These tattoos were thought to grant invulnerability to bullets. Saya San combined the rhetoric of nationalism and traditional Buddhist cosmology to rouse anti-British sentiment. In a translation of one of his speeches, Saya San states “[i]n the name of our Lord [Buddha] and for the Church’s greater glory I, Thupannaka Galon Raja declare war upon the heathen English who have enslaved us. Burma is for the Burmans-the foreigners removed the king and destroyed the religion, they are usurpers; we have never taken another country.”\textsuperscript{72} Saya San’s connection between his purported role as a seitkya min and the British destruction of the Buddhist kingship, is a powerful one. He further states “All the inhabitants who reside in Burma: It is for the economic prosperity of

\textsuperscript{70} Seekins. \textit{Historical Dictionary}, 474.


\textsuperscript{72} Quoted in Mikael Gravers, \textit{Nationalism as Political Paranoia}, 35.
Rahan and inhabitants, so also in the interest of the religion of our Lord [Buddhism] that I have to declare war. English people are our enemies.”73 This purported need to wage war on behalf of the religion retains echoes throughout history, as we will see with the 969 Movement.

The rebellion spread quickly throughout Burma. Aung-Thwin suggests that it is possible the rebels were not all followers of Saya San, but rather used the upheaval caused by the rebellion as an opportunity to revolt themselves.74 The rebellion continued for nearly two years before the British could exert enough power to end the fighting between rebel and British forces. Saya San himself was tried for sedition and hanged in 1932. Gravers and Schober frame the Saya San Rebellion as a millenarian pursuit intended to reconnect the Burmese with Buddhist cosmological order. This rebellion played off of millennial return, salvation from British rule based on the possibility of Saya San as a seitkya min, a righteous king. This framework of a return to a millennial past is bound up with notions of a Burmeseness that existed previous to colonial rule, particularly during the reign of Buddhist kings.

Anti-Indian sentiments and the centrality of ethnicity to Burmese nationalism becomes further apparent in the anti-Indian riots of the 1930s. As previously mentioned, there was significant anti-Indian sentiment during the colonial period, fostered by British preference for Indians, in administrative positions, in addition to the role of Indians in moneylending. There were also tensions based on racial characteristics of Indians.75 In May 1930, Burmese and Indian workers clashed when Indian workers returned to work from a strike resulting from a labor issue

73 Ibid., 35.
in Yangon. The clashes quickly escalated into full-scale riots against Hindus and Muslims, resulting in the deaths of two hundred Indians. The riots spread quickly throughout the country.\textsuperscript{76}

**Buddhism under the Civilian Government**

The rise of the *Dobama Asiayone*, or the We the Burmans Association, in the 1930s rocketed Aung San, U Nu, and Ne Win to prominence, and marks a shift in resistance to British rule from political monks to urban intellectual elites. The members of the association inverted the authority of the British by referring to themselves as *thakin* (master), a term used to refer to the British, much like the Indian *sahib*. According to Donald Seekins, the association drew “...on divergent ideologies popular in Asia and Europe during the 1930s: the ideas of the Indian National Congress, the Fascism-Nazism of Benito Mussolini and Adolph Hitler, Japanese ‘Pan-Asianism,’ Sun Yat-Sen’s *San Min Chu-I* (Three Principles of the People), revolutionary Marxism-Leninism, and non-Marxist ‘Fabian’ socialism.”\textsuperscript{77} Given the extent to which these ideological systems may be untenable when mixed, it is unsurprising that the *Dobama Asiayone* split into two factions, left- and right-wing. The enduring significance of this movement is that, according to Mikael Gravers, freedom and nationalism became associated with the expulsion of all foreign influence, particularly capitalist and imperialist.\textsuperscript{78} This fostered xenophobic attitudes which persist today inasmuch as outside influence becomes associated with a threat to Burmeseness. During the colonial period, this xenophobia was marshaled in the fight for


\textsuperscript{77} Seekins, *Historical Dictionary*, 166

\textsuperscript{78} Gravers, *Nationalism as Political Paranoia*, 39.
independence, but became a pernicious legacy exploited by later governments in order to secure their power base.

Following the Japanese occupation (1941-1942) and Ba Maw’s government (1943-1945), Gravers argues that the thakins (masters) fell into the “trap of nationalism,” by which he means that the imperative to preserve the cultural past as natural and eternal, even to the extent that one perpetrates violence and bloodshed to preserve it, prevents the creation of a new consensus.\textsuperscript{79} The trap of nationalism is useful as a framework for thinking about political change that followed Burmese independence in January, 1948, particularly inasmuch as each regime following independence had to seek new ways to navigate a Burmese national identity bound up with a pre-modern notion of Buddhist polity with the formation of a new nation-state. Aung San, U Nu, and Ne Win, prime ministers in the period following independence, had differing solutions to the question of Buddhism’s role in government.

When Burma was granted independence from the British at the end of World War II, General Aung San, former secretary of the Dobama Asiayone, negotiated that independence and subsequently became the first civilian leader of the country. Aung San grappled with issues of how to rapidly modernize Burma, particularly given that much of the infrastructure had been destroyed during the war. In terms of Buddhism’s place in politics, Aung San was hesitant to immediately connect Buddhism and nationalism, and argued for a secular state, nonetheless embedded in a society that emphasized the importance of the saṅgha and Buddhist practice.\textsuperscript{80} Aung San was assassinated in 1947 by a gang of armed paramilitary troopers. The motivations

\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., 40.

\textsuperscript{80} Ibid., 52.

U Nu became the prime minister from 1947-1958 and again in 1960-1962 followed by a period of instability wherein Ne Win took over the position. Unlike his predecessor, U Nu allowed the *saṅgha* to participate directly in the exercise of power. His goal was a democratic welfare state built on a Buddhist Utopian vision, connecting the steps to modernization with the Eight-Fold Path. Under U Nu, Buddhism became the state religion. Gravers describes that, initially, U Nu promised his Burmese and Buddhist supporters that he would not grant special rights for ethnic and religious minorities. During U Nu’s governance, the country experienced increased political fractiousness, particularly through the agitation of those same ethnic and minority groups, forcing him to acknowledge the rights of Christians and Muslims to religious education. This move prompted riots by monks, some of whom were found to be carrying weapons. Other monks openly attacked Muslims and destroyed mosques.\footnote{Ibid., 64.} Although the allowance of religious education for Muslims does not remove the privileged status of Buddhism, the reaction to acknowledging Islam was particularly violent, which is likely due to perceived connection between Islam and ethnic Indians, thus enforcing their outsider status. U Nu’s popularity collapsed and his administration ended after he promised to grant independence to the Arakan and Mon, leaving the way open for Ne Win’s coup in 1962.

Ne Win, founder of the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP), seized power in a military coup in 1962. He was prime minister until 1974, then head of state until 1981. He instituted prohibitions against foreign cultural dominance, including censoring or outright
banning Western news, movies, music, magazines, and books. He also banned foreign missionaries and nationalized hospitals founded by foreign missions. Under Ne Win’s rule, the army took on a significant role in government. Far from holding to U Nu’s promise of independence for the Mon and Arakan, Ne Win pressed minorities to give up the right to autonomy, and took over the administration of local governments from village headmen to ensure compliance with governmental policies. Ethnically Karen people were viewed with suspicion. As they were largely Christian, they were viewed by many as the “fifth column of colonization.” Although the Karen remained loyal to Burma in the fight for independence, many Burmans thought the Karen wanted to be granted an independent state. Furthermore, their status as Christians made them suspect, as Christianity was associated with the British colonizer. In this way, xenophobic attitudes were not solely directed to peoples outside the borders of Burma, but also to ethnic and religious minorities.

In 1974, a new constitution was implemented which defined the nation as an historic community legitimized through a central, unitary state. Ne Win and the BSPP’s stance toward religion was one in which politics and religion were separate but operated in conjunction with one another. Ne Win sought to end nat worship and control the saṅgha in order to hinder rebels and regulate the activities of monks. In this model, the regulatory power of the state enhanced a discourse against superstition and modes of rebellion. Gravers argues that this stance toward Buddhism is a modernist revision of the traditional Burmese Buddhist polity.

In the late 1970s, the Burmese Socialist Programme Party instituted what is known as “The Burmese Way to Socialism,” mixing Buddhist and Marxist principles, including state

---

83 Gravers, Nationalism as Political Paranoia, 48.

84 Ibid., 53.
control over the *saṅgha*. The Sangha Mahanayaka Council was established in 1979, and all monks were registered with the state by 1980. The council established the hierarchy of monks and instituted the regulation of the monastic educational system, as well as reviewing all sects and their teachings. The committees of various monasteries were reviewed, and military officers were placed in control of these organizations. Although individual monks often had significant autonomy, this autonomy varied depending on the political orientation of the abbots at their monasteries. Steinberg argues that the registration and control of monks was born out of a concern for the distribution of autonomous power. The *saṅgha* stood as the only organization that could challenge the *tatmawdaw*, the Burmese military, in terms of size and influence, and, as we have seen, the *saṅgha* had a history of anti-government activity. The government also cited concerns about charlatanry. As Steinberg points out, “[a] common criminal could shave his head, put on a saffron robe, and be considered sacrosanct. A communist insurgent could do the same. Monasteries could become the refuges of rebels.” The concern over communist insurgents stemmed from Burma’s close proximity to China, which was engaging in rapid modernization and expansion under the Maoist government. However, it is not clear that this tactic was used by either common criminals or communists, and may simply have operated as a pretext to justify greater government control and regulation of the *saṅgha*.

As Victor Lieberman and Juliane Schober point out, control over the *saṅgha*, education, and Buddhist orthodoxy all fall within the pattern of monarchical activities of pre-modern Buddhist kingship. However, one major difference is the lack of a *mutually* legitimating relationship. It behooves the government to foster a *saṅgha* that legitimates government

---

85 Steinberg, *Burma/Myanmar*, 69.

86 Ibid., 72

87 Ibid., 71
activities and propagates a particular visibility of Buddhism. However, in the case of the BSPP, and later the State Law and Order Restoration Council/State Peace and Development Council, this visibility is fostered through total control of the saṅgha, rather than through the appointment of the thananabaing. In this way, only a Buddhism approved by the BSPP can be visible without the potential for state retribution. In particular, Ne Win’s government disrobed influential monks who refused to follow the Socialist program.88

With Ne Win’s government, we also see an increase in racialized discourse. In particular, Burman ethnicity became conflated with proper Burmeseness. In essence, although minority ethnic groups were Burmese, inasmuch as they lived in Burma, they were not Burman. Gravers quotes a speech in which Ne Win states:

Today you can see that even people of pure blood are being disloyal to the race and country, but are being loyal to others. If people of pure blood act this way, we must carefully watch people of mixed blood. Some people are of pure blood, pure Burmese heritage, and descendants of genuine citizens. Karen, Kachin, and so forth are of genuine pure blood. But we must consider whether these people are completely for our race, our Burmese people: our country, our Burma. 89

Ne Win’s speech sets up an ethnic and racial hierarchy bound up with a frame of loyalty to the country, feeding into a longstanding attitude of xenophobic distrust of outsiders. He states that ethnic minorities who are citizens of the country are themselves suspect of disloyalty. The implication is that Burmans are the true Burmese, the ones who are for “our race, our Burmese people.” If those of pure blood are suspect, and those of mixed Burmese and Indian blood, then how much more so are those who are of no Burmese blood at all, i.e. those Indian families that migrated into Burma and settled during the colonial period? Perceived loyalty to the state is thus

88 Schober, Modern Buddhist Conjunctures, 79.
89 Gravers, Nationalism as Political Paranoia, 72.
tied to ethnicity and an ethnic hierarchy, further justifying technologies of control and surveillance of non-Burman ethnic groups.

Gravers argues that Ne Win was seeking the inversion of colonial order, wherein those minorities who benefited under the colonial regime are placed at the bottom of a social hierarchy under socialist rule. In other words, in these moments, we see Ne Win and other Burmese excluding foreigners and foreign influence as formerly colonized subjects who fear losing all control over their universe. Gravers argues that xenophobia is not some essential characteristic of the Burmese, but rather is born out of the colonial conditions of colonization and a desire to operate as active agents in the world around them. This desire continues to legitimate militant regimes and feeds into racial biases long after independence, particularly through governments which continue to foster an atmosphere of paranoia.

Gravers touches on, but fails to bring to the fore, the naturalization of Burman ethnicity that is inherent in this type of discourse. As Matthew Walton argues, the implication of this discourse is that Burmans are naturally endowed with Burmeseness while non-Burman ethnic groups, despite their pure-blood status, are inherently suspect. Burman culture is equated with Burmeseness and elevated as the norm, making non-Burman membership in the national group dependent on acculturation to Burman norms, including Buddhism. The Karen and Kachin are non-Burman ethnic groups who identify as Christian, and, in terms of Ne Win’s speech, are suspect as potentially disloyal to the country. Steinberg states that:

Karen, Mon, Shan, Chin, Kachin, and Rohingya peoples had a modicum (and sometimes much more) of contact with their transborder brethren, and thus with the outside world. Religious contacts, support, and activities of both foreign Christian and Muslim groups

---

90 Ibid., 70.

intensified these relationships. The result, as one might expect, was the increased isolation of the Burmans that the growing suspicion, present since independence, that some of the minorities, with the support of Christian states in the West, were conspiring to see the break-up of the Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma.92 Burmese xenophobia, then, is not so simple as excluding those who live outside the borders of the country, or who immigrated during the British colonial period, but rely on complex notions of who is and is not Burmese based on a privileged markers of Burman-ness, including ethnicity and religion such that the participation of minority ethnic groups is provisional, and reliant on assimilation.

The Junta’s Rule

Burma’s military junta governed from 1988 through 2010 in the form of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) and later, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). The military government relied heavily on techniques of surveillance and the rhetoric of external, deadly threats to justify their continued rule. The regime actively deployed xenophobic rhetoric to foster fear of outsiders throughout the country. One very powerful image deployed by the junta was the threat of impending recolonization, the notion that foreigners and local agitators within the country alike were actively working toward a new British takeover of Burma, which would, in turn, subordinate the Burmese to the British and the Indians. Within this framework, democracy activists could not be trusted, even if they seemed to be working for the good of the Burmese people. Like the BSPP, the junta was ambivalent toward the saṅgha, using their support to justify their continued rule, but closely monitoring the daily lives of monks, and squelching political agitation.

92 Steinberg, *Burma/Myanmar*, 70.
The Burmese Socialist Program Party governed Burma until they lost control of their own military in 1988. The BSPP’s efforts to control the populace resulted in increasing unrest, which, in turn, resulted in the BSPP deploying more and more brutal attempts at control. As the government fell apart, interim ministers were selected to lead the country, including Sein Lwin, the so-called “butcher of Rangoon,” who authorized the mass killings of student protestors.93 The Four Eights Uprising, or People Power Uprising, occurred on August 8, 1988. Prompted by an argument in a tea shop between Rangoon Institute of Technology students, the argument escalated, and riot police intervened, killing some of the students. This prompted riots from university students. Fostered by neighborhood associations, the protests soon spread across the country, involving civilians and monks, and in response, Sein Lwin ordered violence against the demonstrators.94 The uprising continued until September 18, 1988, when the military re-established control over the populace. During this transfer of power, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) was formed. The transfer of power was justified by the tatmadaw (the Burmese military) as governing in order to prevent the Union of Burma from fragmenting.95 When SLORC took power in September, 1988, they summarily ousted all prior members of the BSPP from their positions. According to Steinberg, “…in the course of the demonstrations, the coup, and its aftermath, thousands died; early opposition estimates were as high as 10,000, the government claimed only 440. Now, although figures are still unknown, the numbers usually quoted are about 3,000.”96


95 Steinberg, *Burma/Myanmar*, 81.

SLORC justified its continued governance through a rhetoric of chaos and instability. Indeed, it seems that deeming themselves the Law and Order Restoration Council was a strategic choice, reinforced continually by the government through narratives of dangerous foreign intervention and continued ethno-religious unrest, particularly in the Kachin, Karen, and Arakan states. These threats in turn served to legitimate the government’s tight control over media, the denial of the National League for Democracy’s legitimacy, and the presence of the secret police. Burma’s history of colonization, and the continued use of fear and paranoia fostered by the BSPP, lend a tremendous weight to the threats of instability and invasion.

SLORC’s use of xenophobia as a legitimizing rhetoric actively encouraged and sustained an enduring fear and paranoia among the populace. State slogans placed on public billboards and in newspapers, particularly the New Light of Myanmar, seem to rely on fear of outside intervention to foster unity. One obvious example of this is the common slogan of the People’s Desires. This slogan, appearing on red billboards throughout the country, reads:

Oppose those relying on external elements, acting as stooges, holding negative views.
Oppose those trying to jeopardize stability of the state and progress of the nation.
Oppose foreign nations interfering in internal affairs of the state. Crush all internal and external destructive elements as the common enemy.97

In this construction, anyone who questions the state is necessarily an enemy. This includes both foreign nations, those “interfering in internal affairs,” as well as internal dissenters, those who are “stooges” and those who are simply “internal destructive elements.” By understanding this slogan to be the “People’s Desires,” this creates a vision in which all true Burmese will avoid dissenting against the state all together.

This rhetoric is also deployed against specific figures, and perhaps the most telling example is National League for Democracy leader. Aung San Suu Kyi is framed as one of these stooges of outside influence. The daughter of national hero Aung San, she rose to prominence during the Four Eights Uprising. Although elected to parliament in 1991, the junta placed Aung San Suu Kyi under house arrest rather than allow her to take a governmental position. Even under house arrest, she was sought out by her supporters, and she frequently gave roadside talks from the gate of her home in Rangoon. Her political ideologies are grounded in socially engaged Buddhism, connecting principles of social justice, the material and spiritual welfare of the people, the conduct of the state, participatory democracy, human rights, and dignity within a framework of Buddhist kingship and responsibility. She draws explicitly on traditional categories such as the Four Causes of Decline, the Seven Safeguards against Decline, the Four Kinds of Assistance, and the Ten Duties of Kings. Her ethical framework assumes an understanding of universal human rights and universal modern ethics, described as vicious foreign influence by the Junta.

The junta argues that Aung San Suu Kyi is unfit to lead the country because of her gender, her social class, and her marriage to Michael Aris, a British scholar, and because she spent a significant portion of her life outside of Burma, in India and in Britain. The junta’s rhetoric suggested that, because of her marriage, she was pulled by colonial strings, and suggested that her ultimate goal in leading the country is the return to colonial control. Her female nature is also discounted, and she is viewed as using her feminine wiles to gain political control. Monique Skidmore describes the ways in which the junta drew on the Burmese marionette depiction to foster distrust in Aung San Suu Kyi. She is literally depicted as a puppet of colonial powers,

driven by greed, lust, and pride. She is also accused of engaging in the prostitution of her body to a foreign man, as well as the prostitution of the nation.\footnote{Monique Skidmore, \textit{Karaoke Fascism: Burma and the Politics of Fear} (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 135.} Mikael Gravers states that the junta has asked Aung San Suu Kyi to leave the country on the grounds that she may, by her example, convince young women to marry foreigners.\footnote{Gravers, \textit{Nationalism as Political Paranoia}, 107.}

The junta is widely viewed by Western governments as corrupt, and has been accused by Human Rights Watch of carrying out ethnic cleansing practices, particularly against the Muslim Rohingya of Arakan state.\footnote{Human Rights Watch, “Burma: End ‘Ethnic Cleansing’ of Rohingya Muslims,” April 22, 2013. \url{http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/04/22/burma-ethnic-cleansing-rohingya-muslims}} The junta also refused the medical aid of the Red Cross and other organizations after Cyclone Nargis in 2008.\footnote{Seth Mydans, “Myanmar Seizes U.N. Food for Cyclone Victims and Blocks Foreign Experts,” \textit{The New York Times}, May 10\textsuperscript{th}, 2008. \url{http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/10/world/asia/10myanmar.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0}} Surveillance pervaded almost every aspect of social life during its government, which nominally ended in 2010.\footnote{Skidmore, \textit{Karaoke Fascism}, 74.} Monique Skidmore describes the pervasive attitude of fear of surveillance, as well as government control over media.\footnote{Skidmore, \textit{Karaoke Fascism}, 5.} Surveillance practices meant to prevent revolutionary activities were reinforced through the threat of physical violence. It is not unknown for the junta to use imprisoned rebel faction members as “living minesweepers,” even following the supposed democratic elections of 2010.\footnote{Ian McKinnon, “Burmese Prison Inmates used as Minesweepers,” \textit{The Telegraph}, January 13\textsuperscript{th}, 2011. \url{http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/burmamyanmar/8257478/Burmese-prison-inmates-used-as-human-mine-sweepers.html}}
The junta’s attitudes and policies toward Buddhism and the sañgha shifted frequently, sometimes seeking to legitimate themselves through sponsorship of the sañgha and Buddhist festivals, and other times seeking to undermine the sañgha. The junta built pagodas and funded large-scale festivals, including replacing the spire at Shwe Dagon Pagoda with a sapphire and diamond encrusted spire. The state also mobilized supporters of Buddhism as supports of the state, attempting to enhance and legitimate its own power, creating Buddhist museums that link the junta to the Pagan Empire, sponsoring a tour of the Buddha’s tooth relic throughout Burma, and building new temples to house replicas of the Tooth Relic.106 Political activities among monks was discouraged, and careful monitoring of monasteries by the government worked to silence dissent. In contrast to Mikael Gravers’ view of these practices as evidence of a tension between tradition and modernity, Juliane Schober argues that the junta implemented modern Buddhist practice in the service of the state. She argues that “[t]he state’s sponsorship of Buddhist practices, institutions, and communities has engendered a totalizing vision of Burmese Buddhist nationalism that is embodied by a modern nation whose righteous actions have constructed a prosperous present arising from a seamless past.”107 In this formation, the junta used Buddhism to legitimate itself through assuming the role of patron of Buddhism in line with the historical ideal of Buddhist kingship.

It is during the SLORC/SPDC era that the name of the country changed from Burma to the Union of Myanmar. The junta also changed the names of a number of cities, towns, streets, monuments, and marketplaces to attempt to erase a visible residue. They argued that it was necessary to change the names of the country in order to accommodate the minority ethnic groups, as “Burma” necessarily referred to the Bamar/Burman ethnic group. Burma was also the

106 Schober, Modern Buddhist Conjunctures, 93.

107 Schober, Modern Buddhist Conjunctures, 97.
country’s designation under the British and, therefore, part of the legacy of colonialism. As Matthew Walton is quick to point out, with the exception of streets and marketplaces changed to reflect the names of national heroes, the names given to towns, cities, and the country itself are merely the same name in another dialect of the Burmese language, and Myanma itself refers to the Burmese ethnic group. Walton argues that increased Burmanization by the government is evidence of the disregard the regime has for members of other ethnic groups and their cultures.  

Although there had been monastic dissent against the tatmadaw throughout the SLORC/SPDC era, perhaps the most striking evidence of this dissent occurred in September 2007, in what has come to be known as the Saffron Revolution. The removal of fuel subsidies prompted the price of fuel, and hence food costs, to abruptly rise. In this instance, the failure of the junta to institute good economic policies was viewed as a violation of the norms of good government. Monks intervened in the suffering of the Burmese people by demonstrating en masse, and overturning their begging bowls, thereby visibly denying the legitimacy of the government by refusing to act as a “field of merit” to the military and their family members. In this way, the thousands of monks who marched in Yangon, Mandalay, and other towns were operating within an established model of political activism traced back to the colonial period, in the vein of U Ottama and U Wisara. Although the marches inspired popular demonstration, and though the monks were within their rights according to vinaya law, the crackdown was brutal. The monks were framed as traitors, and many were forcibly de-frocked and imprisoned. The defrocking in particular was considered a grave violation, a matter which would normally be prompted by the gravest offense to the vinaya, and one in which the government would not ordinarily have had a hand. It indicates a contestation of monastic status, with the junta


109 Schober, Modern Buddhist Conjunctures, 122.
indicating that the only people who have the right to be monks are those who agree with the government’s tactics, or at least do not criticize their policies. In the aftermath of the Saffron Revolution, the junta increased surveillance, even going so far as to send the army to cleanse the monasteries of dissenters. In order to prevent an international response, the government shut off access to the internet, including email, throughout the country.\textsuperscript{110}

An international boycott and pressures for democratic reform from UN countries placed Burma in a precarious economic position. In 2010, the government of Burma put forth a new constitution that called for general elections. The tatmadaw was to have a controlling interest in parliament, retaining 25 percent of the seats. General elections were held in 2012, and all political parties participated, including the National League for Democracy. A second general amnesty for political prisoners was instituted in 2013. There is still some question as to whether these changes are lasting or have simply been instituted in order to lift international sanctions against the military government and increase the country’s prosperity.

These changes have done little to ease ethnic unrest in the country. There is increasing violence against the Rohingya Muslims in Northwest Arakan state and along the Thai border, a legacy of ongoing xenophobia on the part of Burmese regimes since independence. As a result of an amnesty for certain prisoners in 2012, the monk U Wirathu, who had been arrested for inciting deadly anti-Muslim riots in 2001, has increasingly spread hate speech in a sinister twist on the convergence of Buddhist and Burmese identity that began during the nationalist struggle for independence. U Wirathu and the 969 Movement make visible a nationalist and xenophobic Buddhism that feeds into ethnic hatred and violence, in direct contrast to the pacifist images of monks with overturned bowls that became iconic during the Saffron Revolution. This nationalist

and xenophobic Buddhism is being deployed for the sake of protecting the majority race and religion, and, while rooted in the historical conditions of colonialism, contributes to an ongoing atmosphere of ethnic hatred that results in violence between Muslims and Buddhists today.
SECTION III:

THE 969 MOVEMENT AND THE FORMATION OF A HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY

The intent of this section is to demonstrate the ways in which the 969 Movement’s monastic members construct a hegemonic masculinity, particularly against the foil of a Muslim other, through their rhetoric. I will describe the recent sectarian clashes in Burma and the concurrent rise of the 969 Movement. I will also address pre-existing ideologies of male superiority and female inferiority as they are deployed in the construction of a celibate, monastic masculinity that serves Burmese nationalism. I will then examine rhetoric of the 969 Movement and its supporters using YouTube videos of sermons which have been translated into English by Myanmar Muslim Media, as well as English-language blog posts to demonstrate the construction of a masculinity which uses the celibate Buddhist monk as its absent referent against the sexualized, violent, and deviant Muslim male.

2013 Sectarian Clashes

The tensions between Muslims and Buddhists have become increasingly heated over the last year. In 2012, anti-Muslim riots were isolated to Rakhine state, along the border with Bangladesh. In particular, these clashes involve Rakhine Buddhists and the stateless Rohingya, a group of Muslims who have been denied citizenship in both Burma and Bangladesh. Both Burma and Bangladesh have attempted to re-repatriate the Rohingya to one another, resulting in

---

extended periods in refugee camps and episodes of state-sponsored and state-tolerated violence. In 2013, the Rohingya were no longer the sole target of anti-Muslim violence, and tensions rose in the central regions of the country. U Wirathu, leading voice of the 969 Movement, was jailed in 2003. He was sentenced to twenty-five years in prison for his role in distributing anti-Muslim pamphlets that incited the riots, which resulted in the deaths of ten Muslims. He was released from prison and resumed preaching between 2011 and 2013.  

Figure 1: 2013 Burmese Anti-Muslim Riots


113 Sources differ on the circumstances and precise dates of U Wirathu’s release. Andrew R.C. Marshall has written that U Wirathu was released in 2011 under general amnesty, while an interview in The Irrawaddy states that he was released in January of 2012, and resumed agitation against Muslims in October of that year.
In March of 2013, riots flared in Meikhtila in central Burma. A few weeks prior to the riots, a group calling itself “Buddhists who feel helpless” distributed pamphlets in the neighborhood, which stated that Muslims in Meikhtila were conspiring against Buddhists. The riots were sparked by a dispute in a gold shop between the Muslim shop owner and her employees and two Buddhist customers over a golden hair pin. Aye Aye Naing, a Buddhist woman and owner of the golden hairpin, had the pin appraised at 140,000 kyat and was hoping to sell it and raise money to make an offering to local monks. She and her husband visited the Muslim-owned gold shop New Waint Sein on March 20, 2013. Jason Szep describes the altercation: “Shop workers studied the gold but the clip came back damaged, [Naing] said. The shop owner, a young woman in her 20s, now offered just 50,000 [kyat]. The stout mother of five protested, calling the owner unreasonable. The owner slapped her, witnesses said. Aye Aye Naing’s husband shouted and was pulled outside, held down, and beaten by three of the store’s staff.”

As onlookers gathered, the mostly-Buddhist group turned violent, breaking the shop’s doors and hurling stones. Later that evening, four Muslim men were at an intersection when a Buddhist monk on a motorbike passed through. According to a witness, the Muslim men attacked the driver with a sword, causing him to crash. “A second blow sliced the back of the monk’s head. One of the men doused [the monk] in fuel and set him on fire, said Soe Thein, a mechanic who saw the attack.”

Buddhists responded by burning an Islamic boarding school, killing thirty-two

---


115 Jason Szep, “Special Report.”
students and four teachers.\textsuperscript{116} The Meikhtila riots prompted a state of emergency that lasted more than four months.\textsuperscript{117}

The following month, more than four hundred Buddhists in Okkan, approximately two hundred miles south of Meikhtila, torched more than a hundred Muslim homes and shops. According to Kyaw Phyo Tha writing for \textit{The Irrawaddy}, two Muslim women were arrested for inciting the riot. Kyaw Phyo Tha writes:

In Okkan, the violence erupted on April 31 after a Muslim woman bumped into a novice monk, spilling his food and breaking his alms bowl. The woman and the monk were detained by the police following the incident, and both were released about two hours later after the woman apologized. But when they left the police station, another Muslim woman grabbed the young monk and shook him, accusing him of lying to the police. This prompted both Muslim women to be detained. A mostly Buddhist crowd gathered outside the police station and began destroying Muslim properties in neighborhood[sic].\textsuperscript{118}

The women were arrested under a portion of the penal code that prohibits people from deliberately outraging a person by insulting their religious beliefs, and sentenced to two years hard labor. The Muslim women’s altercation with the monk seems to have been sufficient to spark the communal violence.

In late May, violence broke out again in Lashio, a village in Shan state. These riots began when a Muslim man lit a Buddhist woman on fire. The man was later convicted of attempted murder, voluntarily causing grievous harm, and two drug-related charges.\textsuperscript{119} There is some

\begin{flushleft}


\end{flushleft}
speculation that U Wirathu’s sermons incited violence in Lashio, as he had recently visited the region. During the Lashio riots, a Buddhist mob took to the streets with swords, knives, and canisters of insecticide. Thousands of Muslims were displaced during the riots, as their homes and shops burned. Buddhist homes and businesses were also burned. More than 1,000 displaced Muslims took shelter in a Buddhist monastery where soldiers stood guard. It is ironic that Muslims chose to take refuge in a monastery, given that it is Buddhists who were attacking their homes. It is clear that not all members of the saṅgha share the bigoted views of the 969 Movement or the enactment of these views through violence. However, it seems that the paranoid xenophobic hatred fostered by the 969 Movement’s supporters has gained currency among a significant portion of the population.

In July, the site of one of U Wirathu’s sermons was bombed, injuring five Buddhists. The improvised explosive device, containing nails and pieces of iron, was placed under a car about eighteen feet from U Wirathu. Despite the explosion, Wirathu reportedly continued preaching. It is not clear who is responsible for the explosion. Several bombings also occurred in office buildings and a resort hotel in late October, but Wirathu’s sermons were not targeted in any further bombings. Suspects stated they were paid to put the bombs in place, but police did not state if a particular group, organization, or person was paying them to do so. U Wirathu

120 Lawi Weng, “Fear Grips Lashio After Burma’s Latest Anti-Muslim Riots.”
121 Ibid.
believes his sermon may have been bombed by Muslim terrorists. He stated that “Since [the Muslim’s] plan to fight me via *Time* magazine [sic] has failed, they are now targeting my Dhamma events and the devotees with explosive devices...” and adding “I feel no fear and will not keep a security detail with me because I’m not a special person. I will continue with what I must do but have to condemn this action, as this is affecting the devotees and peace.”¹²⁵ Wirathu’s response is indicative of his attitude of xenophobic fear and hatred of Muslims. In his response to the bombing, Wirathu frames Hannah Beech’s *Time* article as a Muslim attack, implying a global Muslim conspiracy to denigrate him.

Riots flared again in August in the northwestern region of Sagaing, in Htan Gone village. These riots were sparked by a report that a Muslim man attempted to sexually assault a Buddhist woman on her way home from work.¹²⁶ The suspect was taken to a police station, then transferred to prison after the riots. A group of one hundred men demanded that the suspect be handed over, and when the police refused, the crowd got out of hand. Residents of Htan Gone and neighboring villages grouped together, forming a mob of 1,000 Buddhists. According to Aung San, 48-year-old resident of Htan Gone, “People descended on our village with swords and spears, and sang the national anthem and began destroying shops and burned houses.”¹²⁷ Aung San and his elderly parents hid in a cemetery until the riots calmed, then fled the village.

¹²⁵ Zarni Mann, “Wirathu Blames ‘Islamic Terrorists’ for Mandalay Explosion.”


¹²⁷ AP & Zarni Mann, “Buddhists in Burma Torch Muslim Homes and Shops.”
four houses, nine stalls, and four shops were destroyed. The mob turned on police who attempted to disperse them.\textsuperscript{128}

The 2013 riots continued in the fall, particularly in Thandwe Township, Rakhine. The violence in Thandwe began in late September and continued through mid-October with no clear spark. \textit{The Irrawaddy} referred to the riots, in which Muslim homes were lit on fire, and cars traveling through the village were attacked by mobs, as an instance of communal violence. The riots resulted in the deaths of seven Muslims, the destruction of more than one hundred homes, and the displacement of approximately five hundred Muslims from the region.\textsuperscript{129} Both Buddhists and Muslims were arrested when the riots quieted down, and some participants confessed to the murder of Muslims. Tensions in Rakhine flared again in November, following the murder of Ma Zalattwa, age five, and the murder and rape of Mi Mi Nge, age six, both Buddhist girls from townships in Rakhine state.\textsuperscript{130} Although police did not find a suspect, rumors abounded that the attacker was a Muslim man in both instances.\textsuperscript{131}

Isolated incidents continue to flare intermittently, but nothing like the large-scale riots that occurred through much of 2013. These riots share some similar characteristics, in that the largest amount of violence is perpetuated by a mob of Buddhists, and that responsibility for igniting incidents is consistently placed on Muslims. Increasingly, Muslim men are accused of violence.

\textsuperscript{128} \textit{Ibid.}


\textsuperscript{131} Ei Ei Toe Lwin, “Rakhine on edge after two girls found dead.”
against Buddhist women, and particularly accused of sexual violence, which has thus far not been substantiated in a criminal trial.

The use of rape as an incitement to action on behalf of a nation is not new. Ruth Seifert argues that rape as it occurs in war serves a number of purposes for the perpetrating population, including rape as part of the rules of war, emasculation of the other, affirmation of perpetrator masculinity, male communication, raising troop morale, cultural destruction of the other, and as a representation of global misogyny.\textsuperscript{132} Seifert theorizes that, through underlying global misogyny, the bodies of women are perceived of as hateful. Further, women’s bodies are perceived of as exclusively reproductive bodies and, therefore, are considered national resources. These national resources fall under the ownership of men because women’s bodies are also considered property. Therefore, an attack on the reproductive bodies of women is an attack on the nation, one that affirms perpetrator masculinity while denigrating the masculinity of the victim’s nation. In this way, rape becomes a violation of a country’s population, equivalent to the destruction of property and resources, rather than an attack on a woman’s person. Women’s bodies become a referent to the body of the \textit{nation}, and a violation of the body of the nation is an assault on masculinity through the inability to protect the body of the nation. In the case of the Burmese riots, the extent to which Muslim men are perpetrating sexual violence against Buddhist women is not clear. The accusation of rape nevertheless mobilizes anti-Muslim violence.

Indeed, we may find several parallels with Seifert’s connection, albeit an inverted one, between nationalism and the rape of women if we examine the case of the Htan Gone village riots. In the case of this riot, a Muslim man reportedly attempted to sexually assault a Buddhist woman. The rioters respond with the destruction of Muslim property, and, while doing so, sang

the national anthem. In this case, defending Buddhist women and defending the nation became linked in acts of communal violence. The translated sermons and English-language blog posts of 969 supporters frame Muslim men as sexualized and rapacious, which is apparent through the accusation that they steal away Buddhist brides in order to produce more children for a Muslim takeover of the country. Buddhist women become a national resource, and it is imperative for Buddhist men to retain control over these resources in order to win the fight against Muslims.

The 2013 riots coincided with the rise of the 969 Movement, which I have described as a Buddhist ethno-nationalist movement that concerns itself with the defending Burmeseness from the perceived threat of Islam. U Wirathu, U Pyinawara, and others construct a nationalism in which it is impossible for one to be Muslim and Burmese. Although it is not clear that the leaders of the movement have themselves been involved in physical violence against Muslims, or whether they are actively inciting Buddhists to violence against Muslims, their rhetoric contributes to an atmosphere of xenophobic fear and hatred. U Wirathu and U Pyinawara argue that Muslim men receive monetary rewards for marrying Burmese women, particularly the daughters of high-ranking Burmese men. Furthermore, they argue that Muslim men are destroying the Buddhist way of life through failure to support Buddhist festivals, such as festivals that honor Aung San, and Ka Htein, a festival in which Burmese give robes to monks. In this rhetoric, the failure to support Buddhist festivals is tantamount to actively preventing them. Furthermore, in this construction, although Muslims make up a relatively small portion of the population, they are said to have financial backing from groups such as al-Qaeda and Saudi Arabian oil money, making the threat greater than their population size might suggest.
The 969 Movement

The 969 Movement may have its roots in a 1991 pamphlet by Kyaw Lin, then head of the Department for Promotion and Propagation of the Sasana (a notion which includes teachings of the Buddha as well as Buddhist institutions, such as the saṅgha) under the military junta. The pamphlet was initially titled “How to live as a good Buddhist” and was re-published in 2000 as a book, The Best Buddhist. This pamphlet is not available in English, and it is currently out of print. Kyaw Lin’s son, Aung Lwin Tun, describes the book as “…building a fence to protect our religion.” Given that the book was written under orders from the military government, it is entirely possible that the government’s concern over foreign intervention and Western influence is woven through it.

U Wirathu met Kyaw Lin in 1992 and began preaching against Islam in 2001, following Kyaw Win’s death. By 2003, he was sentenced to twenty-five years in prison for distributing anti-Muslim pamphlets which were connected to riots resulting in the deaths of ten Muslims. U Wirathu resumed preaching following his release from prison. His sermons focus on the Islamic threat to the Burmese race. This conception of the Burmese race, identified as explicitly Buddhist, has persisted since the colonial period. U Wirathu’s sermons often amount to little more than Islamophobic hate speech, yet he and his supporters insist that he is working for peace. Nevertheless, although not yet related to the 969 Movement, the connection between U

---


135 Ibid.

136 Ibid.
Wirathu’s speech and violence against Muslims was confirmed by his arrest for inciting violence in 2003.

The Movement’s goal is to halt the spread of Islam in Burma. In order to do so, it proposes two tactics: a boycott of Islamic businesses and the prevention of intermarriage between Buddhists and Muslims. The boycott is meant to keep money in the hands of Buddhists and prevent Muslim business owners from monopolizing certain industries, particularly construction and transport industries. Maung Tha Hla, expatriate Rakhine blogger, argues that the boycott is a response to a similar boycott by Muslims, and also argues that Muslim shop owners are backed by Muslim-majority OPEC countries, in conjunction with terrorist organizations, who assist Muslims in instituting an Islamic takeover of Burma. The rhetoric of a global Islamic threat contributes to an atmosphere of fear and makes the boycotting of Muslim businesses all the more pressing. As mentioned in the introduction, the numbers 786 displayed on Muslim businesses signify that a business is in keeping with *halal* practices. According to a sermon by U Pyinawara, 786 has a much more insidious meaning. The numbers 786 add up to twenty-one, which, according to Pyinawara, signifies the intent of Islam to take over the world in the twenty-first century. By contrast, the newly-minted Buddhist designation 969, adding up to twenty-four, is thought to be the numerological opposite of 786, and represents the Buddha, *dharma*, and *saṅgha*, therefore offering a challenge to this world takeover.

Monastics have also proposed the Interfaith Marriage Act. The Interfaith Marriage Act, also called the Race Protection Act, is intended to prevent Buddhist women from marrying Muslim men without the permission of their parents and the local government. The Muslim

---

137 Hla, “The Vituperation of Buddhism and its Adherents.”

138 U Pyinawara, “A Burmese Buddhist, U Pyin Na Wa Ra, an extremist monk.”
groom would then have to immediately convert to Buddhism or face a ten-year jail sentence. The law also includes monogamy and population control clauses. The initial draft of the act was proposed by a monk, Ashin Tilawka Biwuntha, head of the Organisation for the Protection of National Race and Religion (OPNRR), and member of the State Sangha Maha Nayaka Council (formerly the office of the thanabaing).139

Here again we see women’s bodies as reproductive bodies representative of the nation. Aung Myaing, chairperson of the Theravāda Dharma Network said of the ban “[t]his law is necessary for Burma because it is a loss for Buddhists when [Buddhist women] get married to foreigners and those of other religions... Our Buddhist women are not intelligent enough to protect themselves.”140 Women’s Rights organizations in Burma, as well as Human Rights Watch, have called the ban a violation of women’s freedom and human rights, and its potential implementation as it goes before parliament this year is contentious. President Thein Sein has stated that any draft of the law must not violate women’s rights, but it is unclear on what criteria this is based. It also ignores the racial and religious discrimination imbedded in such a law.141

The monogamy and population control clauses are born out of the notion that all Muslim men control numerous, fecund brides, and that, given free rein, these Muslim families will rapidly out-breed Buddhist families. This contributes to a perception that Muslim men are hyper-sexualized, inasmuch as they require multiple wives to satisfy their uncontrolled sexuality, and contributes to the rhetoric that there is a global Islamic conspiracy to take over Burma.


The role of monastics in drafting and supporting the Interfaith Marriage Act is key in considering the act’s popularity, as monks are exemplars of the male moral life. The morality of the monastic male centers on celibacy and is connected to the regulated sexuality of lay Buddhist men, which is necessarily heterosexual, monogamous, and which does not mix ethnic and religious identities. Further, as described in the previous section, monks have often acted as nationalist exemplars, working to create a modern Buddhist Burma, free from Western imperialism. As such, their rhetoric is highly engaging and persuasive for many Burmese. It is ironic that monks are choosing to involve themselves in the prevention of interfaith marriage, or indeed involving themselves in marriage at all, as it is generally considered a secular affair about which the vinaya has little or nothing to say. Through advocating for such a law, they are constructing a hegemonic masculinity, one in which the Burmese Buddhist family is normalized against a socially deviant Muslim family, predicated against the foil of the Muslim man as rapacious, violent, over-breeding “devils.”

**Hegemonic Masculinities**

Hegemonic masculinity is a theoretical construct contributed by R.W. Connell, drawing on the concept of hegemony in the work of Antonio Gramsci. Masculinity, for Connell, is an inherently relational construct, defined through its relationship to the construction of femininity, and thus is a product of polarized character types. Connell argues that masculinity is not firmly located in the biological, social, or semiotic. Rather, masculinity “...is simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and
the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality, and culture.”¹⁴² This framework is useful for Burma, given a pre-existing ideology of male superiority and female inferiority, further addressed below.

Hegemonic masculinity does not imply that all masculinities fall in line with the hegemonic type, and, in fact, the hegemonic type is itself unfixed and shifting. Connell understands hegemonic masculinity as a particular, momentary answer to the problem of patriarchal legitimacy. In other words, hegemonic masculinities operate to support patriarchal norms through different modes of masculinity. Hegemonic masculinities operate best when there is a connection between institutional power and cultural ideal.¹⁴³ Because hegemonic masculinities legitimate patriarchy, all men receive what Connell and Messerschmidt refer to as patriarchal dividends. Race, class, nation, and generation all impact the extent to which these benefits are received, thus they are distributed universally, if not uniformly. The patriarchal dividends are the honor, prestige, and material benefit men receive from living in a patriarchal society, which operate as an incentive for maintaining the gender status quo.¹⁴⁴

What Connell does not adequately address is the way in which hegemonic masculinities become posited against inferior masculinities, which I refer to as shadow masculinities. In the case of Burma, masculinity and femininity are certainly constructed against one another, with females as the moral, intellectual, and spiritual inferior to men. The denigration of Muslim men is not based on feminization. Rather than being posited as morally inferior because they are like women, they are posited as inferior because they are the opposite of the Burmese monastic male

¹⁴³ R.W. Connell, Masculinities, 77.
inasmuch as they are greedy (as opposed to renouncing worldly concerns), sexually rapacious (as opposed to celibate), violent (as opposed to non-violent), and deceptive (as opposed to righteously propagating the dharma). Burmese Buddhist men are privileged above Buddhist women, but Muslim men are not, thus constructing an ethno-religious masculinity.

One operationalization of the hierarchies of masculinity in a Buddhist Burmese framework is through the conception of hpon (glory). Hpon is the possession of power through the accrual of sufficient merit, particularly enough merit to become a monk, or hpomyi (great glory), and their status as monks becomes evidence of their status as the holders of the highest level of hpon. According to Donald Seekins, it is not thought that proper Buddhist behavior in this life is related to the retention and possession of hpon, but rather that power is retained in this life because of the accrual of merit in previous lifetimes. Thus, even if a ruler is cruel and unjust, his hpon is retained. It is only when that ruler is brought low that his store of merit is thought to be exhausted.145 Hpon belongs exclusively to men and is located in a man’s right shoulder.

Although hpon is not understood to be reduced by immoral behavior, it is thought to be reduced through the polluting power of a woman’s body. Thus, the retention of hpon requires rigid bodily conduct. Men should avoid having their bodies and clothing come into contact with a woman’s clothing, especially her undergarments. Women should avoid touching a man anywhere above his shoulders to avoid reducing his hpon. If a man finds himself in a position of inferiority to a woman, his hpon is also reduced. Contact between monks and women is highly regulated, and their status as celibates ensures that they have little contact with women and, therefore, a smaller chance of risking their hpon. According to Melford Spiro, this control over space is reflected both through the body and through divisions of the household, wherein the

145 Seekins, Historical Dictionary, 208.
male portion of the household is associated with auspiciousness, the east, and the Buddha, and is made of finer quality materials, and the household shrine to the Buddha is located in the male portion of the household, while the female portion of the household is associated with inauspiciousness, the west and is made of lower quality materials.  

According to Spiro, Burmese women enjoy legal rights to own property and divorce and in village life, are thought to hold power in the household. When Burmese women are married to politicians, they are thought to exert much influence over their husbands’ decisions. Nevertheless, there is substantial evidence of a persistent ideology of the superior male and the dangerous female. Spiro writes that Burmese women are conceived of as greedy and lustful creatures, driven by desires, both material and sexual. Although men are considered of higher moral character, women are their weakness and they will consistently be lowered by them. Ma Htar Htar, a Burmese women’s rights activist, started a group called Akhaya (vital) in 2013 to challenge these views of women as polluted, suggesting that these ideologies are persistent.

John Powers writes that this trope is present in Indian literature as well. “[W]omen embody lust and men are inclined toward the higher and nobler pursuits of celibacy and religious practice. Women are men’s adversaries and creatures of passion who seek to satisfy their own cravings and as a result drag down men who would otherwise remain in undisturbed engagement

---


148 Ibid., 15.

with the path to liberation.” In addition to tempting men away from ascetic engagement, women’s vaginas are conceived of as polluting, and, as a man’s life energy is thought to reside in his semen, a woman’s insatiable sexual drive will rob him of longevity. Liz Wilson writes of the ways in which in post-Āśokan monastic literature describes women as temptresses who trap men in samsāra and keep male observers in a state of delusion.

According to Spiro, these ideologies are imbedded in Burmese culture and the propositions accepted as truth by most Burmese. He cites some Burmese proverbs as evidence of this superiority. One such proverb, “[i]f a woman had no nose, she would eat excrement,” suggests that, while men have keen and intelligent discernment of truth and right, a woman requires a strong signal or guiding hand (the smell of excrement) to indicate what is right and wrong. Another such proverb relates to the social status of women with relationship to males as a category of biological sex, “a woman is inferior to even a male dog.” Another proverb addressed by Kyoko Kusakabe and Zin Mar Oo is “Husband is god, son is master.” Although Kusakabe and Oo do not address the extent to which this proposition is accepted, its prevalence does reinforce the gendered position of women in the family, and their role as procreators and culture-bearers rather than breadwinners or leaders. These propositions, as far as Spiro could ascertain during his fieldwork in the early 1960s, were readily accepted by women as well as

---

150 Powers, A Bull of a Man, 75.

151 According to Powers, this conception of male life force, sperm retention, and intercourse is reflected in early Indian medical texts and mythology. Men who retain their sperm were thought to enjoy more robust health, physical energy, and mental alertness, while those who did not experienced illness, morbidity, and premature death.

152 Wilson, Charming Cadavers, 4.

153 Spiro, Gender Ideology and Psychological Reality, 21.

Through these contrasting ideologies, we can see that polarized character types for men and women are operating in Burmese culture. In this construction, women are less intelligent and moral than men and are, therefore, in need of male moral guidance and oversight.

This underlying ideology of female inferiority is deployed by the 969 Movement inasmuch as women must be protected by men from the threat of Islam. Monastic members of the 969 Movement have charged themselves with the responsibility of protecting Buddhist women from themselves, thus preserving the nation from the foibles of Buddhist women, through supporting legislation intended to do just that. Having established the operation of ideologies of superiority, it becomes clear that the rhetoric of the 969 Movement deploys these well-worn gender stereotypes of male and female hierarchies. In addition the movement introduces the Muslim male as an inferior masculinity that preys on the weakness of the Burmese Buddhist female. In this way, notions of male superiority and female inferiority become bound up in a particularly Burmese Buddhist xenophobic ethno-nationalism through the rhetoric of the 969 Movement. In this framework, the morally superior male monk must come to the rescue of the Burmese race and religion, saving the nation from the threat of a violent, sexualized Muslim masculinity. I will now address the rhetoric of the 969 Movement as establishing a hegemonic masculinity that operates against the shadow masculinity of the savage, sexual, violent, and greedy Muslim male.

---

Rhetoric of the 969 Movement

My gendered analysis of the rhetoric of the 969 movement relies on the translated sermons of U Wirathu and U Pyinawara, and blog posts from expatriate blogger Maung Tha Hla. I will use three sermons and one interview from U Wirathu, and a single, lengthy sermon from U Pyinawara, and selected blog posts from Maung Tha Hla. Both U Wirathu and U Pyinawara travel across Burma and give public sermons to their supporters. The sermon’s translators have not noted the dates when these sermons were given nor their location. The sermons are aimed at galvanizing Burmese Buddhists against the perceived threat of an Islamic takeover. Themes of these sermons include the threat Muslim men present through the takeover of businesses and the luring away of Buddhist women, the importance of Burmese Buddhists uniting in the face of a Muslim threat, and the importance of Buddhist education in preserving the country’s traditions.

U Wirathu and U Pyinawara chide Burmese Buddhists for not being nationalist enough; although, the major focus of their sermons is the immorality and deviance of Muslims. U Wirathu argues that Burmese Buddhists must be united for the preservation of the Burmese race. In order to do so, they must support Buddhist businesses and involve themselves more heavily in political parties. Everything that Burmese Buddhist do, according to Wirathu, should be done “in a nationalist sense.”

According to U Pyinawara, Buddhists need to demonstrate nationalist principles by sending their children to monasteries to receive Buddhist education. In doing so, their children, who are currently ignorant of Buddhist principles, would be able to know their role in protecting the race and the nation.

For Wirathu, Muslims are nationalists, and, in fact, are better at nationalism that Burmese Buddhists. Muslims, according to Wirathu, do everything for their people, including involving themselves with the National League for Democracy and operating in complicity with the military government. Although some Muslims have done both, Wirathu frames Muslims as doing so in order to gain ground for their religion and race. He states:

Before current government, at the time of military rule, they make friend with generals, united among under one idea of ‘nationalism,’ they have worked for their own people. They now have the monopoly of construction market in Yangon. Do not think that they love military but only for the sake of the benefit of their own people, they cooperated with them. When current government elected several of them joined the party. They have joined the political parties not because they interest in politics, not because they respect human rights but for the sake of their people.157

Here, Wirathu seems to be giving a backhanded compliment to Muslims as nationalists, and implying that Buddhists should likewise care for their own. If Buddhists do not replicate the tactics of Muslims, they will be crushed by the force of Islam.

In this particular sermon, Wirathu focuses on the perceived Muslim takeover of businesses, particularly construction in Yangon and transportation industries in Burma. As discussed in the introduction, there is no such monopoly of construction businesses in Yangon. Although three large construction companies are owned by Muslims, the largest construction companies with the most lucrative state contracts are owned by Buddhists.158 The perception that Muslims have a monopoly over lucrative businesses serves to reinforce the perceived need for a boycott of Muslim businesses. Through a series of anecdotes, U Wirathu attempts to demonstrate

157 Ibid.
a situation throughout the country wherein Buddhists are slowly being ousted by Muslims, and wherein Buddhist practices are being curtailed by Muslim business owners.

Any gains made by Muslims, according to this logic, prevent the advance of Buddhists and pose a threat to Buddhists in the form of cultural and financial destruction. According to U Wirathu, Muslims are monopolizing businesses and using their status to prevent Buddhists from carrying out festivals. U Wirathu stated in this sermon that:

3 or 4 or 5 days ago, we visited Mon state. We have seen a transport company called Yar Zar Min, owned by a kalar. This kalar became president of transport association. Then he abolished Ka Htein [the widespread Burmese practice of donating robes, fans, and umbrellas to monks] and said it is nonsense things. See, as soon as he got the position no translation] abusing freedom of believe and charity. Be careful. We can differentiate between faith and human rights, but politician they cannot differentiate between human rights and faith. So they can neither protect religion nor the people. If this type of people keep getting the position, the culture of Ka Htein would vanish.159

Here, Muslims are depicted as lacking respect for Buddhist culture and practice. From this statement, it seems that the transport association had formerly been a patron of the Ka Htein festival, a widespread Burmese practice of donating goods to monks, but it is clear that the Muslim president of the association does not deem it necessary for the transportation association to participate. In the rhetoric of the speech, this makes Muslims as a whole guilty not just of refusing to support Buddhism but of contributing to its cultural destruction.

This logic can be tied to the ways in which monastic privilege and Burmese Buddhist traditions were threatened by secular governance during the colonial period, as well as secular attempts post-independence to protect the rights of religious minorities. U Wirathu refers to Muslims as “those who most abuse human rights,” and calls them kalar, a pejorative racial

designation for Indians. U Wirathu’s distinction between faith and human rights and his construction of freedom of religion is telling. In this construction, it is the responsibility of the transportation association to allow Ka Htein to continue. His conception of freedom of religion is an inversion of Western notions of secularism, i.e. the separation of religion into the private sphere, independent of governmental regulation and pressure to conform to or support any given religious view. In this construction, the ability to donate to Buddhist monasteries is viewed as a “human right” and the protection of that ability is a human rights issue, one which should be protected by the government. As monks are the recipients of this patronage, monastic privilege is framed in the language of rights. Buddhism then becomes a special category, one completely intertwined with what it means to be Burmese, and the propagation of Buddhism is separate from the propagation of religious views. In this framework, Burma is a Buddhist polity, and Burmeseness is not solely an ethnic identity, but a religious one as well. Secularization presents a threat to the “religious dividends” received by monks as the highest spiritual authority in this polity.

U Wirathu goes on to claim that boycotts of Muslim businesses are also necessary because Muslim men will otherwise deviously attempt to lure away Buddhist women. In this paranoid logic, Muslim business practices become threats to Burmese culture and ethnic identity if not the nation itself. U Wirathu, speaking on the topic of Muslim monopolies in the town of Moulmein (Mawlawmyine), speaks on the importance of the boycott in preventing Muslim men from destroying Burmese culture. He states:

> When you go shopping, it is not good enough to get cheaper. Do not let your money goes to your enemy. By using this money, they will marry, they will force them to convert to their religion, and their children would be a threat for the country... If we lose now, they

---

160 U Wirathu. “Anti-Muslim Monk Wira Thu talk about Meiktila before riot.”
would form groups and by the support of Saudi Arabia oils money they would compete our businesses... Without mass public support, we will lose Mawlamyine.161

Here, the threat goes far beyond the loss of money for Buddhist families, and immediately leaps to the loss of the fourth largest Burmese city to the Islamic threat. Buying from Muslim shops is directly linked to racial destruction through breeding practices. This conflict becomes framed in a masculinist rhetoric of war against enemy Muslims, one with tremendous stakes for Buddhists, given that losing means the absolute destruction of the Burmese race. The hyper-sexual Muslim male, backed by a global conspiracy of Muslims, will attempt to lure away Buddhist women and destroy Burmese culture. This rhetoric clearly contains incitement to action. According to the translator, this sermon was given in Meikhtila, just a few days before the riots sparked by conflict between a Buddhist customer and a Muslim shop owner.162

In another sermon given on the Arakan conflict, U Wirathu further taps into the notion of a global Islamic conspiracy. In this brief sermon, delivered on the topic of the Rohingya following the 2012 riots in Arakan State, Wirathu argues that a group called the Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO) intends to invade Rakhine and declare an independent Muslim state. He argues that they have already begun this process by disguising themselves as Buddhist women and taking over three towns.163 It is telling that U Wirathu suggests that Muslim men are disguising themselves as women, especially inasmuch as the clothing and ornamentation of women is considered to be linked to the reduction of hpon. In this construction, Muslim men, by donning the garments of women, reduce their own male quality of glory and power. A monk, by

161 Ibid., emphasis mine

162 Ibid.

contrast, could not practice this same sort of deception, both because of the restrictions against clothing and ornamentation in the \textit{vinaya}, and because the status of monks in Burma is tied to the highest degree of \textit{hpon}. Lay Buddhist males would also face reduction to their \textit{hpon} through contact with women’s clothes.

U Wirathu’s appeal to a global Islamic threat—above and beyond the threat of a religious minority—heightens both the xenophobic thrust of his logic and the urgency of his call to action among the Buddhist majority. This threat is worsened by Burmese refusal to amend the situation. Bemoaning the lack of nationalistic fervor among the Burmese or “Myanmar nationalities,” he states that:

\begin{quote}
The Arab world is supporting behind the Bengalis. But behind the Rakhines, sadly even Myanmar nationalities are not supporting them. Those Bengalis are being led by Waqar Uddin and he is again controlled by Jalalaini. With the aids of the Arab world, people like Waqar and Jalalaini have been ordering the Bengalis and systematically waging a Jihad war on Rakhine.\footnote{U Wirathu. “Anti-Muslim Monk Wirathu talk on Arakan conflict.”}
\end{quote}

Tying the Arakan conflict to the Arab world effectively links the Arakan conflict into global concerns about the spread of Islam born of Islamophobia. This rhetoric helps to foster fear and xenophobia, particularly when linked to Rakhine. In this way, Rakhine becomes a contested frontier that Burmese must protect from the encroaching Muslim threat. The Rohingya are generally understood to be an oppressed Muslim population. As briefly discussed above, they have been passed back and forth between refugee camps in Bangladesh and Burma for more than a decade, and many have attempted to escape this life by crossing by boat to Malaysia and Indonesia.\footnote{Greg Constantine, \textit{Exiled to Nowhere}.} By placing them into a framework of a global Muslim threat, U Wirathu turns them from a stateless and relatively harmless population into a global force, and places the Arakan
conflict into a framework of *jihad* and warfare which serves to manufacture further fear and xenophobia in an already tense conflict.

The reliance on the trope of a global Muslim conspiracy to take over Burma can be seen in sermons by other monks and international bloggers, indicating its appeal on the local and international levels. U Pyinawara is a monk who resides in the same monastery as U Wirathu, and has very close ties to the movement. He likewise argues for a seemingly-global Muslim conspiracy to take over Burma, but emphasizes more heavily the trope of the Muslim man who lures away Buddhist women. With a rhetoric similar to U Wirathu, he preaches that by allowing Buddhist money to fall into the hands of Muslims, Burmese Buddhist women are particularly at risk because they lack proper religious education and because their parents often abandon them when they marry Muslim men. U Pyinawara paints a picture wherein young Buddhist women are fooled into believing that they will be allowed to practice Buddhism if they marry a Muslim man, but in the end if they refuse to convert, they are beaten and threatened. It is particularly dangerous for these young women because their choices will have terrible consequences in this life and the next. He states:

> If the girl refuses, they would say that you will not inherit any wealth in the future. Finally those ladies have to convert [to] Islam. If they refuse, even by wealth, they would beat [them] up. I have read in many books that in that case the whole family is united and beat that girl by locking the girls into a room...They would beat the girl day by night. Finally, the girls [are so] extremely frightened that they have no other chance but to accept Islam by force. Even than they are forced to stump [sic] on images of Shwedagon and Mahamuni. …Are not those Buddhist girls pitiful? And their parents didn’t know about that because when they get marriage with Muslim, their parents abandoned the relationship with them. Is it wrong to do or not. The way they abandoned their children is weaker in the way they have educated their children about the religion.\(^\text{166}\)

\(^{166}\) Ibid.
Interrace marriage between Muslim men and Buddhist women is placed into a framework of domestic violence, and Muslim men are described as beating their wives until their conversion is assured, then using them to breed more Muslims.

Although U Pyinawara acknowledges the role of parents in educating their children about Buddhism, it seems that only the morally weak female is at risk while male Buddhists, even young ones, do not face the same danger. If we assume the operation of a longstanding Burmese ideology of the morally weak female, these girls are wooed away from their Buddhist parents by these “devils” ¹⁶⁷ with promises of wealth in this life, and are unable to resist the temptation because of their moral frailty. Muslim men retain their own devious role in this exchange. According to U Pyinawara, they are making use of Buddhist women as breeding stock to fuel a long-term plan for Muslim takeover of Burma, culminating in the outright slaughter of Burmese Buddhists by the year 2100.¹⁶⁸ In this discourse, Muslims receive rewards from their community for marrying the daughters of officials, and they are hungry for accolades. These rewards are arranged according to the prestige of their bride, from the daughters of chiefs to the daughters of generals. U Pyinawara does not make a clear distinction between what happens to “ordinary” Buddhist women, and what happens to high-status Buddhist women who marries Muslims. We might assume that, although it is better to marry into the families of high-ranking officials, U Pyinawara assumes that Muslim men will marry whichever Buddhist women they can lure away. This is reminiscent of U Wirathu’s discourse where Muslims ingratiate themselves to the government and the NLD in order to ensure the success of their people.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.
¹⁶⁸ Ibid.
U Pyinawara implicates the Muslim family in this discourse. He targets Muslim women as starting a breeding war with Buddhist women, but implicates Muslim men by virtue of having many wives. In this construction, the fecundity of the Muslim female is harnessed by the polygamous Muslim male. In his sermon, he discusses the breeding practices of Muslim women, and the ways in which these breeding practices risk the entire Buddhist population.

[Holding up two fingers] How many fingers are there? Two. Yes, two. How may [sic]? Two. We think its [sic] enough for only two kids. How about the amount that Muslim women give birth after marriage? As much as they can. Some women have one dozen, some have ten, some eight, some six. So I calculated on average, one Muslim woman can born [sic] eight children and they allow to marry four wives. Eight times four is thirty two children in one house. It’s just one house. So how many Buddhist houses should be there to reach that amount of kids? Tell me, how many houses? Sixteen houses right? Yes, sixteen houses.169

Aside from reading like a bizarre word problem, this calculation is illuminating. The structure of the Muslim family is inherently deviant, and their purposeful intent nefarious. The objective, according to U Pyinawara, is “religious fertilization.”170 This fertilization, he argues, is taking place all over the world, but particularly in Burma and Thailand.

In a Q&A video on YouTube, U Wirathu deploys a similar discourse about the Muslim family, its breeding practices, and the threat to the Burmese nation using the metaphor of African Carp. Here is the full quote of this metaphor, which was briefly discussed in the introduction:

Muslims are like African carps. They breed rapidly, have violent behavior; and eat its own kind and other fishes. They also destroy the natural resources and beauty underwater. Even though they are a minority, our entire race has been suffering a great deal under the burden of the minority. The majority Burmese have not intruded, corrupted or abused them, but we have been suffering under their burden. That is why if there are as many Muslims as there are Buddhists, Myanmar could never be at peace.171

169 Ibid.
170 Ibid.
This view of Muslims as rapid breeders is juxtaposed clearly with normative reproductive practices framed as Buddhist. In this construction, Buddhists have children for the reproduction of their culture. Muslim men, on the other hand, have multiple wives in order to gain status and control. They do this in order to take over populations for the purposes of their religion. Buddhist hegemonic masculinity becomes visible when considering the celibate monk as the ideal that structures morality according to control over sexual impulses such that a normative Buddhist family who is moderate in their sexuality and reproduction becomes the lay version of moral restraint. This is juxtaposed against a rapacious Muslim male with multiple fecund wives, who are framed as deviant in their reproduction and sexuality.

Outside of Burma, Maung Tha Hla, the Rakhine expatriate blogger, draws on the fear of population concerns and its relationship to a global Islamic threat. In his blog post “The Vituperation of Buddhism and its Adherents,” he argues that young Bengali Muslims were seduced into coming into Burma with the promise of wealth, power, and beautiful women. He states:

The critics [of Burmese nationalists] may be reminded that young Bengali Muslim males were induced to migrate into Myanmar, the land of abundant food and pretty damsels; to marry the native maidens; to convert their wives and the offspring into Muslims; to translate the Koran into Burmese; to spread Islam in the community; to seek public and government offices; to secure the strategic positions in the military; and ultimately to overthrow the government. The cynical conspiracy abroad was complimented with an equally sneering scheme within the country that the Muslim youth were offered monetary incentives to venture into winning the hand of daughters of government officials, especially the military Generals; the higher the status the larger the award. The game plan was to stretch the boundary of acceptance of Islam along conversion consequent upon inter-faith marriages, and to assert influence on the elite in power through their loved ones.  

---

172 Hla, “The Vituperation of Buddhism.”
This rhetoric harkens back to the colonial period when British colonial policy prompted an influx of Indians into Burma. However, rather than suggesting that Buddhist women ought to have more children in order to make up the difference in population (a suggestion present in racialized discourses from Theodore Roosevelt to Adolf Hitler), Buddhist monks associated with the 969 Movement instead seek to curtail the deviant reproductive practices of Muslims and rally lay Buddhists to protect their own daughters, economic interests, and cultural heritage.

U Pyinawara further cements the monk as the hegemonic masculine by framing the figure of the monk as a hero and savior of the nation. In his sermon, U Pyinawara provides an anecdote that constructs the Buddhist monk as a hero in contrast to Muslim men characterized as brutal and sexually violent, stating that:

[A] doctor who was on duty in Maung Taw was caught by Muslim. They widely open the doctor’s mouth and urinated into his mouth. Afterwards, he was forced to sit down and watch his daughter raped by 20 Muslims and there was no way to tolerate. That girl was force to work prostitute in Chittagong about 5 to 6 years. One Rakhine monk, who knows all the Mawlawi things went to stay at the hotel where that girl worked, disguised as a Mawlawi and rescued her.\(^{173}\)

In this anecdote, Muslim men brutalize and defile both a Buddhist doctor and his daughter, then traffick the daughter to Bangladesh. The insinuation here is that Muslim men are unable to control their violent tendencies and excessive sexual urges, even to the point of kidnapping Buddhist women to serve as sex objects. The trafficking of Buddhist women into sexual slavery is tantamount to an attack on the nation, given that women’s reproductive bodies are national resources. Muslim deviance is conquered by a heroic young monk who, disguising himself as a Muslim man, rescues the young girl. In this construction, U Pyinawara inspires fear and outrage through the very real problem of sexual trafficking in South and Southeast Asia. The implication

\(^{173}\) U Pyinawara, “A Burmese Buddhist, U Pyin Nyar Wa Ra, extremist monk.”
is that Muslim men are responsible for stealing Buddhist women, not only through marriage, but for forced prostitution as well.

Drawing again on the masculine rhetoric of war, U Pyinawara describes what he perceives to be the final stage of an Islamic takeover: *jihad*, including outright slaughter of Buddhists. He describes a scenario wherein Muslims declare jihad and go door-to-door beheading Buddhists who refuse to convert to Islam. He states that, once a population reaches a critical mass of Muslims, jihad ensues. He frames jihad as the “...order to kill non-believers on the particular day, that day called jihad. In jihad, there is no restriction about women or men. After that they try to enter Buddhist houses, dragged them out and killed them. Since they are majority than Buddhist, they can do it. Every three Muslims against one Buddhist including children and women. Two Muslims grabbed and one Muslim beheaded the Buddhist.”174 In this framework, a Muslim takeover is brutal to the point of genocide, and even women and children are not spared. Statements of this sort serve to frame Islam as a cruel religion and Muslim men as violent and inclined toward mass murder given majority status.

To bolster his claims, U Pyinawara harkens to historical examples of Muslim conquest and conversion in South and Southeast Asia. He argues that this has already taken place in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Afghanistan. He also draws on the sacking and burning of Nālandā University by Muslim Turk invaders. Nālandā University was destroyed in the twelfth century CE in an attempt to uproot Buddhism from India.175 That Buddhism was finally eradicated in its country of origin by Turko-Afghan invaders is one historical basis for the paranoia in Burma of a Muslim takeover. In addition, U Pyinawara argues that, in Suharto’s Indonesia, more than eight million


Buddhists died at the hands of Muslims, and that, in southern Thailand, Muslims are murdering Buddhist monks with suicide bombings and shootings. Each of these scenarios contains some truth, and, in the case of southern Thailand and Indonesia, a very large amount of hyperbole. Nevertheless, his connections to history lend legitimacy and authority to his sermon. Buddhism is framed as a religion which has repeatedly been persecuted by Islam, and provides a sense of reasonability and perhaps even inevitability to the fear of a Muslim takeover. He inflects this with an argument that only the Burmese stand in opposition to Islam.176

U Pyinawara also supports the boycott of Muslim businesses, linking once again a longstanding Burmese xenophobia with the construction of a Muslim masculinity as the “other” to Burmese Buddhists. Like U Wirathu, he postulates that any money raised in Muslim businesses will either go to the mosque or will be used to lure away Buddhist women. He states that money going to Buddhist shop owners “...goes to monastery or at least their family.”177 Ironically, Buddhist profits that go to a monastery are the functional equivalent of Muslim profits going to a mosque. The difference is in the construction of monks as benign and patriotic versus the mosque as a haven for Islamic conspiracy. In U Pyinawara’s words, money in the hands of Muslims is used “to destroy [the Buddhist] religion.”178

Here again we see a framework wherein the promotion of minority interests is necessarily at the cost of the majority, echoing U Wirathu’s above noted statement that the majority is suffering under the burden of the minority. Even activities used to sustain Muslim communities, such as donating money to mosques or shopping in Muslim businesses take on a sinister

176 U Pyinawara, “A Burmese Buddhist, U Pyin Nyar Wa Ra, extremist monk.”
177 Ibid.
178 Ibid.
character when linked to the paranoid and xenophobic rhetoric of Islamic takeover. U Pyinawara argues that Muslims use the mosque fund to steal away Buddhist women. He states “[a]ccording to their religion, they have to donate ten percent of the money they have earned for the mosque fund. This money has been used on whose daughters a Muslim marry, for normal Buddhist women one rate, for wards authority daughter, for township authority daughter, for pagoda trustees daughter and army officer daughter are different rates of reward.”179 In this way, the problem of luring away Buddhist women falls not onto the heads of individual men, but is part of a broader Muslim campaign to grab power. By deploying this rhetoric, that all Muslim men are out to lure away Buddhist women, it creates a stronger call to action for Buddhist nationalists. In this framework, the problem of Muslim men luring Buddhist women is not a simple matter of a few isolated incidents, but rather is a Muslim power grab that threatens the Buddhist majority.

For U Pyinawara, in addition to the boycott and prevention of intermarriage, it is imperative to educate children about Buddhism. Similar to U Wirathu’s backhanded praise on nationalism, U Pyinawara argues that Buddhist children’s parents are “dumb” for not sending their children to the monastery at an early age, and that lack of religious education makes children weak.180 Education in Buddhism will allow them to counter Muslim claims to Allah’s having created human beings. He states:

Buddhist kids are not go to monastery at the age of 5 but it’s a must for Muslim kids to go to mosques and learn about their religion. Whether the things that they had been taught are right or wrong, it’s engraved into their mind. When you think about it, for example, in one of the international schools, Muslim kid and Buddhist kid had conversation. Muslim kid started to argue in a way that he had been taught in his religious school. Your god had been created by our god, said by Muslim kid. So I asked principle that what did Buddhist boy reply. Principle told me that he was silent. So, can he reply back? So, are not those

179 Ibid.
180 Ibid.
Buddhist kid’s parents dumb? Yes. Don’t be dumb anymore after this preaching...So when they meet the Muslim told that god had created [the Buddha]. The Buddhist kids haven’t gone to monastery yet. So, they couldn’t say that people are born according to the deeds that they had done in their lives words and told me back like that. So what I am trying to about the religion. Are they not weak?\footnote{Ibid.}

Here, U Pyinawara argues that Buddhist children are swayed by a Muslim worldview because their parents have failed to give them a proper Buddhist education. As such, parents are raising children who will be unable to counter a Muslim takeover.

Furthermore, for U Pyinawara a Buddhist education helps to prevent young women from being led astray by the wealth of Muslim men. He argues that these women would then be able to know the risks for themselves in the next life if they choose to consort with Muslims, namely that, in addition to being beaten by their family, intermarriage with Muslims results in rebirth as an animal or in the Hell realms. He states that:

Every year hundreds of Buddhist girls have been taken. The main reason is because those girls do not have any knowledge about religion. If they marry to Muslim because of the wealth, they wouldn’t be very rich for only this life. For the next coming life they would end up in terrible situation. Since they follow Muslims who are devil, it is the biggest sin against the religion....For those who tempted with these Devils, their contemporary life would be nice, but they would end up at hell or become an animal in their next lives.\footnote{Ibid.}

In this construction, Muslims are so objectionable, devious, and sinful that marriage to a Muslim on its own has a karmic consequence of a lowered rebirth, independent of any other factors. In statements like these, Buddhism becomes visible, not as the tolerant religion of Orientalist constructions or of Buddhist modernists in interreligious dialogue, but as deeply prejudiced against another religion. Since Muslim men are so devious, only through education by Buddhist monks can Burmese women become aware of the problem confronting them.

\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}}
The construction of Muslim men in this discourse is one in which they are rapacious, devious, greedy, power hungry, and violent. They are not merely puppets of a devious leadership or pawns in an international plot, but are depicted as actively involving themselves, sometimes by violent means, in the destruction of the Buddhist religion. They are depicted as luring Buddhist women away, but have also been accused of brutally raping and kidnapping Burmese Buddhist women, as demonstrated by U Pyinawara and the events leading up to the Lashio and Htan Gone riots. They are also depicted as degrading Buddhism by refusing to allow practices that support the sangha, which become framed as human rights violations. The Muslim family is depicted as animalistic, breeding mindlessly and indiscriminately. Young Buddhist women are vulnerable and weak, incapable of discernment without monastic and familial guidance, and unable to protect themselves from the threat of Islam, necessitating governmental and community intervention. The Muslim threat encroaches on all sides, and the dark, savage masculinity of the Muslim male can only be challenged by the leadership of the heroic Buddhist monk, and his insight into the problems confronting the Burmese nation.

In concluding this section, let us consider how this rhetoric constructs a hegemonic masculinity. Although these sermons represent the most extreme cases of prejudice and hate speech from leading representatives of the 969 movement, and were deliberated as such, we may still draw from them several conclusions about conceptions of masculinity in Burma. With few exceptions, there is no positive representational force, such as the Buddhist male, presented in these speeches, the positive masculine is an implicit absent referent into which the Buddhist male may be placed. The true foil for the Muslim “other” is the Buddhist monk who is necessarily celibate, and so is unconcerned personally with issues of marriage and reproduction. His relatively few possessions help to insure that, as a category of person, he is not greedy, and he
should be unconcerned with issues of worldly gain, though not apolitical. Building on the cache of the Saffron Revolution, the Buddhist monk retains a legibility in Burma as non-violent and truthful. In this construction, the Buddhist monk embodies the hegemonic masculinity, the highest degree of *hpone* and moral authority. The average Burmese Buddhist man still benefits from this construction, as a positive yet lesser masculinity, enmeshed in worldly concerns and family life. This is particularly the case inasmuch as he retains absolute right to Burmese Buddhist women, and gains in status through his responsibility to help protect the nation, an action that Buddhist women cannot perform because of their vulnerability and weakness.

Of course, the Buddhist monk is just as much a construction as the Muslim male or the dangerous and polluting female. The trope of the Buddhist monk as a pacifist, subservient, effeminate figure has its roots in Western and Orientalist assumptions about Buddhism. The stark reality of this construction is made visible by video footage from the Okkan riots that show a Buddhist monk in a saffron robe beating a Muslim man with a stick in a field before another man comes and stabs him with a machete. This same video shows a Muslim man burning to death, while a monk shouts “No water! Let him burn!”183 The construction of monks as necessarily pacifists who only wish to defend Buddhism and contribute to peace is seriously called into question by video footage of current events like this one. For this reason, we see international news outlets grappling with these monks in new ways and groping for new models, such as “the face of Buddhist terror” in Hannah Beech’s now infamous *Time* magazine cover story.

Nevertheless, the monastic members of the 969 Movement offer what appears to be an appealing vision of Burmese Buddhist nationalism. Given the historical role of the Buddhist monks such as U Ottama, U Wisara, and U Gambira, who worked to create a Burma free from

---

colonial rule, U Wirathu and others have an historical space to occupy as political monks, challenging Islam in the same way that they might challenge Western influence as an inherent threat to stability. The once-subaltern strategy of creating religious nationalism under colonial rule has morphed in sinister ways into the persecution of a minority population by the Buddhist majority.

Given the brutal crackdown of the 2007 Saffron Revolution, non-violent means of protest were demonstrated to be ineffective in Burma. Combined with xenophobic and paranoid attitudes, fostered during both the colonial government and the governments of independence, the 969 Movement’s maximalist approach to defending Buddhist Burmeseness espouses the rhetoric of Buddhists as pacifists, but challenges it in practice. In doing so, they provide a new way in which Buddhism becomes visible as a force in the post-colony.
SECTION IV:

CONCLUSION

In the above sections, I have demonstrated the ways in which the monastic supporters of the 969 Movement in Burma construct a hegemonic masculinity against the foil of a morally decrepit Muslim other. My thesis began by addressing particular conjunctures in Burma’s history that persistently place Burmese Buddhists in opposition to, or tension with, Muslims. In particular, British colonial divide-and-rule policies contributed significantly to tensions between Burmese Buddhists and South Asian Muslims as Burmese Buddhists sought to forge their own modernity. These tensions were heightened when resistance to outside intervention and an emphasis on self-reliance shifted to an outright xenophobic distrust of outsiders that was fostered by the Burmese Socialist Programme Party and further impressed upon the Burmese populace during the period of military government. These xenophobic attitudes persist today, fostering tensions between Buddhists and Muslims and hatred of the stateless Rohingya Muslims in particular.

I have also sought to address historic conjunctures that created a space for the political monk in Burmese culture. The pre-modern model of Burmese Buddhist kingship, as elsewhere in Southeast Asia, situated monasticism as integral to the Buddhist polity and the welfare of the country. More specifically, the office of the thananabaing further fostered a relationship between the king and the saṅgha. In this relationship, the thanhabaing acted as an advisor to king, while the king was able to regulate monastic affairs through the office of the thananabaing. Monks such as U Ottama and U Wisara are prominent examples of monks who agitated against the colonial political order, based largely on Gandhian ideals of non-violent
resistance. U Gambira, a leading monk in the Saffron Revolution, was a key figure in the resurfacing into visibility this image of the non-violent political monk in Burma.

The second section of this thesis examined the rhetoric of the monastic supporters of the 969 Movement, in particular addressing the ways in which their rhetoric contributes to the formation of a hegemonic masculinity, which is deployed against the foil of a morally decrepit Muslim other. In this construction, the implicit norm is the lay Buddhist male whose sexuality is normally contained in contrast to the Muslim male within a Buddhist moral system which retains the Buddhist monk as a hegemonic ideal.

Monastics and lay Buddhist men receive significant patriarchal dividends from this hegemonic masculinity, including monastic privilege. With respect to a hierarchy of morality, monastics reside at the top through their status as holders of the highest hpon. Monastics are, ostensibly, celibate, non-violent, unconcerned with worldly gain, and righteously propagate the dharma. Lay Buddhist males do not have the same moral properties, but through their hpon, their support of the saṅgha, their protection of the nation, and their status as normative reproducers with contained sexuality, they hold significant moral standing. Muslim men, by contrast, are rapacious, sexually deviant, violent, and devious. The Muslim male has little to gain under this system because of their status as other, reinforced through ethno-nationalists concerns.

This hierarchy of moral legitimacy formed through this hegemonic masculinity is bound up with notions of ethno-national identity markers and rights of citizenship as well. According to the 1982 Citizenship law still in place, full citizens are those descendants of residents who lived in Burma prior to the First Anglo-Burmese War in 1823. A person cannot gain the rights of full citizenship through marriage to a citizen. Given that Burma prior to the colonial period was largely a Buddhist nation, this heavily privileges Burmese Buddhists as full citizens. Other
populations can only hope to be “Associate Citizens,” whose rights of citizenship are subject to removal by the state.\textsuperscript{184} The Citizenship Law can be understood as a response to policies instituted during the colonial period, particularly inasmuch as the Burmese fight for independence included the intertwining of Buddhism and Burmeseness, and the role of Buddhism in conceiving of an independent and modern Burma addressed in section one. The 2014 Myanmar census provides a striking example of continued ethnic categorization and hierarchy. Burma has 135 recognized ethnic groups. The census counted ethnic Shan, Chan, Kachin, and Karen refugees living in Thailand, in addition to Burmese living overseas. There are no census categories for people of South Asian descent or mixed-race individuals. U Wirathu demanded the census be stopped, citing fears that allowing the Rohingya to define themselves as a group would boost their numbers and allow them to receive rights of citizenship. Rakhine Buddhists protested the inclusion of the Rohingya in the census on March 16, 2014. The census banned the word “Rohingya” as an unrecognized ethnic group and insisted that the Rohingya instead count themselves as “Bengali.”\textsuperscript{185} This ethno-nationalist religious hierarchy creates a space in which Burmese Buddhists are the only group with claims to rights of citizenship. Minority religious and ethnic groups are inherently undeserving of rights, thus all agitation for rights becomes illegitimate.

Using blog posts, sermons, and interviews, I have demonstrated the ways in which these Buddhist monastics frame Muslim men as greedy, violent, devious, and rapacious. These monks do so through anecdotal evidence, hyperbole, and metaphoric language, as we have seen. For


example, accusations of Muslim men luring Buddhist women with promises of wealth, then forcing them to convert Islam through physical violence. As monks are framed as the rescuers of the nation in the face of this Islamic threat, they take on a masculinized protector status. By deploying rhetoric against the savage Muslim male, these monks create a hegemonic masculinity which purports to prize controlled sexuality and non-violence and is entwined with Buddhist principles. In the formation of this hegemonic masculinity, they also contribute to an atmosphere of xenophobia and fear, one in which Muslims in particular have become the targets of communal violence and must fear for their lives and livelihoods.

The perceived economic threat and rapacious sexuality of Muslims in this discourse is joined to political action. Both the boycott of Muslim businesses and the Interfaith Marriage Act are the result of the 969 Movement actively fostering a longstanding xenophobia. Although there is little news on the boycott, the Interfaith Marriage Act, part of a legislation package often called the National Race and Religion Protection Bills, will appear on the agenda for the Burmese parliament’s next session, beginning May 28, 2014. The act has come under fire from civil rights groups on the grounds that it deprives the rights of women of all faiths and particularly makes a target of Buddhist women with Muslim partners. Democratic Voice of Burma reports that “[a]s recently as mid-April, four family homes were burned down by a mob in Pegu after a Buddhist woman refused to ‘turn over’ her Muslim partner for purposes that remain unknown.” It remains to be seen whether the Act will be drafted into law, and, if it is, what the consequences might be in terms of communal violence and human rights concerns.

Futures

The news media representation of U Wirathu challenges the trope of the Oriental Monk, described by Jane Naomi Iwamura as a wizened, effeminate, pacifist figure. As mentioned in the introduction, Thomas Fuller, writing for the *New York Times*, describes “[t]he world has grown accustomed to a gentle image of Buddhism defined by the self-effacing words of the Dalai Lama, the global popularity of Buddhist-inspired meditation and postcard-perfect scenes from Southeast Asia and beyond of crimson-robed, barefoot monks receiving alms from villagers at dawn.”¹⁸⁷ These images are familiar to many Americans.

This image is palatable, even desirable to an American audience. As Jane Naomi Iwamura describes, the presentation of these figures as pacifists in Western media serve to satisfy a Western audience’s spiritual needs. According to Iwamura, the image of the Oriental monk as effeminate allows Western audiences to view the ‘Mystic East’ as populated by non-threatening, subservient peoples.¹⁸⁸ This narrative, while serving as a positive controlling image, also divorces groups of people for their ideological and geopolitical context.¹⁸⁹ Virtual Orientalism, according to Iwamura, relies on access to representations. “The seemingly uninterrupted flow of representations and their easy access makes stereotypes of Asians and Asian religions all the more obdurate.”¹⁹⁰ In the context of the 969 Movement, Buddhists, and monks in particular, become capable of violence and betray the exoticism and servility of the Buddhist monk, thus


¹⁸⁹ Iwamura, *Virtual Orientalism*, 161.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 151.
disrupting the representation. The 969 Movement reasserts an active and masculine monasticism, causing Western media to scramble to construct new models. Many of these models divorce the 969 Movement from their geopolitical, ideological, and historical contexts, and deploy a narrative of “Bad Buddhists” in its place. Hannah Beech’s *Time* magazine article makes frequent juxtaposition between the image of a peaceful Buddhist monk and U Wirathu’s hate speech. The title of the article in *Time* is “When Good Buddhists Go Bad.” She describes a “peaceful scene,” but one wherein U Wirathu’s message “crackles with hate.”¹⁹¹ Beech juxtaposes these new Buddhists-gone-bad against a Buddhism with which Americans are familiar, that of a peaceful forgiveness and loving-kindness, which she attributes to Siddharta Gautama, lending authority to an idealized vision of Buddhism through the words of the founder.

There are other strategies in the Western press aside from constructing the 969 Movement and its leaders and adherents as simply “Bad Buddhists.” *The Washington Post,* in an article titled “Nirvanaless: Asian Buddhism’s Growing Fundamentalist Streak,” economist and Burmese expatriate Maung Zarni states that “[n]o Buddhist can be nationalistic.”¹⁹² This absolute denial is striking, as is the author’s choice to use it. It is an absolute rejection of the idea that U Wirathu and other supporters of the 969 Movement can be Buddhists in any way. They are not simply bad Buddhists, but they are not Buddhists at all. Ironically, even Dharmapala, one of the early architects of Buddhist modernism as a rational, ethicized religion, would be disqualified on this account.

¹⁹¹ Hannah Beech, “The Face of Buddhist Terror.”

In international media, the discourse becomes framed in terms of the inability of U Wirathu and others to live up to Buddhism, rather than highlighting the tension between conceptions of authenticity based on texts, identified as “true Buddhism,” Buddhist societies, and lives as they are lived on the ground. Ananda Abeysekara, writing on Buddhism and nationalism in Sri Lanka, writes that discussions of Buddhism and violence tend to be “...dominated by a particular assumption, namely that violence is the antithesis of a supposedly authentic Buddhism that specifically teaches non-violence.”193 He further argues that our understanding of Buddhism in particular, but religion in general, is hampered by an attachment to this notion of authenticity, whereas in actuality Buddhisms come into and fade from visibility, driven by conjunctures that are contextual, contingent, and variable. The Buddhist-gone-bad narrative operates under Orientalist assumptions, constructed from early Buddhist texts, and allow the Western press to cling to an idealized vision of Buddhism in its representation of recent events in Burma. In order to shift away from questions of who is or is not Buddhist, this variability must be addressed. By viewing the 969 Movement in the context of hegemonic masculinities, we are able to view the ways in which historical and political conjunctures shifts the focus from “good” or “bad” Buddhists to addressing complex societal relationships and their impacts.

If this narrative continues, it is entirely possible that we will begin to see the face of Buddhism as pacifist and exotic shift. U Wirathu and other supporters of the 969 Movement challenge this notion through their actions, although they profess themselves pacifists, and, in media representations, particularly in Hannah Beech’s article, we see the first emergence of a new trope of the Buddhist terrorist. Yet this, too, challenges Orientalist assumptions about

Buddhism, inasmuch as a new representation presents the opportunity for a greater depth of vision about Buddhism to a Western audience.

Limitations

This thesis was written using a small selection of resources available in English translation. As such, it cannot be a comprehensive rhetorical analysis, but focuses instead on close analysis of a few resources. As I am primarily interested in the implications of extreme forms of discourse, these are the most extreme forms of xenophobia and hate speech, given that they are translated into English and made available to international audiences by a Muslim watch group. It is also limited in that it does not seek to evaluate opposing viewpoints, or dialogues occurring in Burma regarding these same issues of religious, ethnic, and nationalist violence. Furthermore, while gender is an intensely important aspect of all research, in emphasizing a gendered analysis, this thesis does not emphasize important issues of nationalism and state-building, nor does it fully flesh out the ways in which racialized discourses impact sectarian violence.

Directions

Further research in this area would be difficult extensive field research in order to flesh out contemporary gendered dynamics in Burma. My future aims for this research project center around conducting in-depth fieldwork in Burma, ideally in areas where ethno-religious conflict has arisen recently. Although this thesis emphasizes formations of masculinity among the Buddhist saṅgha, my interest lies more broadly in exploring further narratives by and about
Burmese women. Specifically, I am interested in discerning how Burmese women conceive of their own position in public life, government, religious life, legal concerns, and the family, and their self-conceptions in relation to this posited ideology of female inferiority and pollution. Ideally, this research would contribute to an understanding of how Burmese Buddhist women conceive of themselves in this fight against the purported threat of Islamicization. Central to this research is determining whether or not some populations of Burmese women consider these issues to be central to their own lives.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources


Secondary Sources


