

The Origin and the Nature of Political Buddhism in Burma (1906-1930)

Thurein Naing

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Supervisor: Dr. Matthias Riedl
Second Reader: Dr. Carsten Wilke

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Abstract

The thesis studied Buddhist political thought and discourses in Burmese history and national development. It aimed to explore Political Buddhism's origin and role in Burma at the turn of the twentieth century. The thesis discussed the Buddhist discourses entangled in Burmese colonial politics by analyzing the political mobilizations of the Burmese Buddhists in the 1910s and 1920s. It discovered how the early Buddhist mobilization shaped Burmese nationalism and identity formation. The thesis also noted that the Buddhist monks' intervention and involvement in the country were unprecedented in pre-colonial Burmese society. Therefore, the Sangha (i.e., Buddhist monks) entanglement was discussed in detail. It uncovered the power struggle among the Burmese Buddhist politicians and between the politicians and the Sangha. The thesis established the characteristics of twentieth-century Political Buddhism in Burma by examining Buddhist political organizations and their discourses.

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Prologue

In 2010, Myanmar/Burma, after 20 years of direct military control, organized an election for the first time in 20 years. While the Myanmar military heavily administered the election to ensure their political party's victory, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), Myanmar allegedly went through a democratic transition. Quasi-civilian government, formed by the USDP and led by ex-general Thein Sein, liberalized the country, it relaxed many draconian laws on freedom of expression, and many political prisoners, including Aung San Su Kyi, a long-term Burmese national democracy icon, were released. There was genuine excitement among the international community. Myanmar seemed to be on the road to democratic transition, and one of the last pariah regimes in Burma is back to the international embrace.¹ However, like many other democratic transitions and tragedies in Burma, the story did not end there.

While officially transferring the power to the quasi-civilian government led by the ex-generals, the military orchestrated a schizophrenic Buddhist extremist movement. Starting in 2012, a string of socio-religious conflicts against the country's ethnic minority, Rohingya, and Muslim communities emerged across the country, in Rakhine, Meiktila, Mandalay, and others.² It was led by an extremist monk named Wirathu, later dubbed the Buddhist Bin Laden and the face of Buddhist terror in Burma.³ In 2014, a Buddhist extremist organization

¹ Thant Myint-U, *The Hidden History of Burma: Race, Capitalism, and the Crisis of Democracy in the 21st Century* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc, 2020).

This last book of Thant Myint U on Myanmar/Burma history is not necessarily a sober account of the political events of the 2010s. Thant Myint U, while produced credible works on Modern Burmese history, this book is filled with incomplete analyses and biases in favor of the ex-general Thein Sein-led quasi-civilian government. I cited it since the current historiography has yet to produce works on this decade in Myanmar's history.

² Thant Myint-U.

³ Hannah Beech, "The Face of Buddhist Terror," *Time*, July 1, 2013, <https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,2146000,00.html>.

called the Patriotic Association of Myanmar (PAM), colloquially in Burmese, known as MaBaTha, was founded.⁴ It led the charge in inciting racial hatred, conflicts, and Buddhist extremism in Burma throughout the mid-2010s. Later evidence suggested that the Myanmar military was the main organizer and funder in many organizations' activities.

However, in 2016, another turn in Myanmar's alleged transition occurred. After the landslide victory in the general election of 2015, Aung San Su Kyi and her party National League for Democracy (NLD), became the elected government for the first time in the party's 20 years. It was considered one of the major events in Myanmar's transition by many spectators.⁵ The Aung San Su Kyi government, despite having a limited and contested state power, tried its best to curtail MaBaTha/PAM's rising power. One of NLD's regional chief ministers, Yangon Region Chief Minister Phyo Min Thein, started the offensive against the organization by saying the country does not need MaBaTha.⁶ MaBaTha was constantly under-reviewed and scrutinized by the NLD government. After securing an edict and proclamation from the state-sponsored monks' regulatory-hierarchical body excommunicating and declaring MaBaTha non-Sangha unlawful organization, MaBaTha was officially abolished in 2018. An arrest warrant was also issued for the Buddhist terror monk, Wirathu. Wirathu was later on the run. Therefore, by the end of 2018, MaBaTha, Wirathu, and other extremist figures were successfully pushed out of the public space.⁷ The NLD government's constant attack against the MaBaTha may be the redeeming moment of the

⁴ "Myanmar Buddhist Monks Launch Group for 'Defending Religion,'" Radio Free Asia, accessed April 27, 2023, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/buddhist-congress-01152014180734.html>.

⁵ Thant Myint-U, *The Hidden History of Burma*.

⁶ Mike, "Ma Ba Tha Supporters Protest Against Rangoon Chief Minister," The Irrawaddy, July 6, 2016, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/ma-ba-tha-supporters-protest-against-rangoon-chief-minister.html>.

⁷ E. I. Chaw, "Ma Ba Tha Changes Name, Still Officially Illegal," The Irrawaddy, September 3, 2018, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/ma-ba-tha-changes-name-still-officially-illegal.html>.

administration since they colluded with the Myanmar military's atrocities against Rohingya minorities during their stay in power. Aung San Su Kyi herself went to the International Court of Justice in person to defend the allegation against the military's alleged genocide against the Rohingyas.⁸

Nevertheless, this Buddhist extremism/Political Buddhism did not end with the banning MaBaTha. In September 2019, the current coup leader, then the Commander in Chief of the Myanmar Military, Min Aung Hlaing, was awarded the title "Maha Mingala Dharma Jotika" by the Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA) for his work in promoting and defending Buddhism. In 2020, mere months before the November election, he was decorated with another honor by the YMBA. Min Aung Hlaing became the organization's official patron and honorary lifetime chairperson.⁹ The YMBA, at this point, is a politically obscure organization that fell out of public memory for decades. The organization was founded in 1906 at the turn of the 20th century. The YMBA was politically active again for the first time almost a hundred years later after their last political activity. While the YMBA officially rejected the military backing and funding, it was evident that YMBA was mainly supported by the Myanmar military, financially and politically. After the coup on 1 February 2021, the YMBA officially praised the coup and started acting as the pseudo-state institution. The YMBA members served in the military-backed party, USDP, and various regional and local government positions.¹⁰ According to the author's conversation with a military family

⁸ Owen Bowcott, "Aung San Suu Kyi Impassive as Genocide Hearing Begins," *The Guardian*, December 10, 2019, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/dec/10/aung-san-suu-kyi-court-hague-genocide-hearing-myanmar-rohingya>.

⁹ Hein Thar, "Is the YMBA Planning a Return to Politics?," *Frontier Myanmar*, n.d., <https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/is-the-yмба-planning-a-return-to-politics/>.

¹⁰ The Irrawaddy, "Myanmar Military Hands Top Honor to Nationalist Monks," *The Irrawaddy*, February 20, 2023, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-military-hands-top-honor-to-nationalist-monks.html>.

member, the family members of the active-duty personnel were forced to join the YMBA and pay for the membership fees. The question could be raised of why Min Aung Hlaing and the Myanmar military chose this particular politically long-defunct Buddhist organization for their political mobilization. This intrigue set the author to research and study the YMBA and the Political Buddhism that the organization initiated in early 20th-century colonial Burma. Therefore, the readers will find the origin of the YMBA and its historical significance in the thesis. The thesis also dealt with and constructed the nature and characteristics of Political Buddhism in Burma. The readers will also sense the continuities set into motion by the early Buddhist nationalist mobilization in Burma, the discourses and narratives still relevant in contemporary politics.

1. Introduction

Buddhism dominated pre-colonial Burmese society as the center of moral authority, kingship, and governance. Successive Burmese dynasties constructed their legitimacy through Buddhist cosmology and by being the defender of the Buddhist faith in the realm. The Buddhist monks, colloquially known in the Buddhist world as the Sangha, were influential in the Burmese public sphere though they never held actual political power.

After the annexation and pacification of Upper Burma in 1886, the British colonial state was successfully imported into Burma from the Indian empire. Burmese society saw changes in every aspect, religion, socio-political, and economic. The British imported a supposedly secular state into Burma. The Burmese Sangha lost patronage from the ruling class and the state for the first time. The colonial state also threatened the Buddhist monopoly over education by introducing modern education and the school system. The advent of the British common law justice system also challenged Sangha's position as society's moral compass. The pacification campaign until 1900 did not help the Burmese public perception of the colonial state either.

Therefore, it was no surprise that the first anti-colonial figures in Burma were the Buddhist monks who saw the changing of the Burmese society as a threat to its survival. Also, Burmese nationalism and national identity have come to age in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Many Burmese realized the insurrection of pretender princes could not topple the British colonial state. Therefore, the Burmese started to organize politically under the British colonial state and negotiate with the colonial authority for more political rights and participation. However, these first Burmese national mobilizations took refuge in Buddhist identity and Buddhism as the ideological Centre. The first Burmese national organization was

Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA), established in 1906, following the Christian youth organization Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA). Under the guise of a social organization, the YMBA became the first national political organization and Burmese nationalist movement. YMBA was succeeded by the General Council of Burmese Associations (GCBA), which became the first full-fledged Burmese political party in 1920. This first wave of Burmese nationalism intentionally infused Buddhism into their movement. The monks became the spiritual and political patrons of the movement. Various factions under the GCBA tried to garner public support by declaring a specific influential Buddhist monk as their patron. The move was unprecedented in Burmese society, giving the Sangha more power. The Sangha officially became part of the political organizations blurring the distinction between spiritual influence and political power. The infusion of Buddhism into the Burmese political movement consolidated Buddhism as part of the national identity and the political movement. Therefore, the study will explore the nature of Burmese Buddhist politics at the turn of the twentieth century, its role in the formation of Burmese nationalism and identity, and the transformation of the country's Theravada Buddhism to Political Buddhism.

1.1 Sources

The sources used throughout the study are from the British Library and the Library of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. Periodicals, reports, and newspapers reported on the political mobilization in British Burma between 1900-1930. Burmese books and theses on Burmese history and Buddhism collected during the study trip to London were also used. One particular thesis submitted at Mandalay University in 1989 on the political mobilization of the monks was used as an important secondary source.¹¹

Burmese historical works done by local historians like Sagaing Han Tin and Thakhin Ba

¹¹ Kyaw Swe, "The History of Sangha Samagi (1919-1937)" (Mandalay University, 1989).

Maung were used as the source collection since they primarily compiled original documents in their works.

1.2 Literature Review and Theoretical Foundation

The works on militant Buddhism and Buddhist siege mentality were already thoroughly discussed in explaining Sri Lankan Buddhist nationalism. The Buddhist siege mentality emerged from socio-cultural political anxiety after the colonial took over of Theravada Buddhist societies in Sri Lanka and Burma. The Buddhist siege mentality was discussed as the core of both countries' populist and authoritarian politics. The siege Mentality constantly reminded the public discourse and national politics that Buddhism is under attack and safeguarding it should be put at the center of national politics. The enemy to this siege mentality could take various forms, colonialism, communism, or, as the latest addition, Islam. The siege mentality was also argued as the main component of the nation-building process in Burma and Sri Lanka. Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist discourses were used to justify inter-ethnic, religious violence, and authoritarian politics.¹² Another phenomenon prevalent in Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism was the Asoka persona. In the Theravada Buddhism myth, Maurya king Asoka was revered as the Buddhist king whose extensive works help prolonged and preserved Sasana, the Buddhist religion and moral universe.

It is aligned with most of the discussion on nationalism, where the outside cultural threats posed by the colonial powers often led them to be defensive and conscious about their

¹² Peter Lehr, *Militant Buddhism: The Rise of Religious Violence in Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Thailand* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-03517-4>.

national identity; Jaffrelot mainly discussed this.¹³ Buddhism became and developed as the core of national identity as a result. In the Burmese case, I would argue that religion not only intertwined with nationalism in Myanmar but also became a major factor.

The religious and political entanglements in Burma have already been discussed in length by scholars covering pre-colonial and post-colonial entanglements. Studies on Buddhism in Burma were rooted in the tradition of Nineteenth and Twentieth-century Oriental scholarships. Theravada Buddhism, its tradition, and strict adherence to the Pali canon were duly noted when studying Buddhism in Burma. Pali scholarship has been a central state institution in pre-modern Buddhist southeast Asia.¹⁴ Pali scholars, who were monks most of the time, were revered as the “literati,” as Michael Charney called it. It is from this foundation; Buddhist Sangha was able to capture traditional influence and later political power in the colonial Burmese society.¹⁵

When discussing the Buddhism hierarchy and traditional governance, the galactic polity where the power and influence are transferred from the center to the periphery was always emphasized. The entrenchment of the galactic polity has been a key phenomenon in explaining Buddhist kingship and governance in Southeast Asia.

¹³ Alain Dieckhoff and Christophe Jaffrelot, *Revisiting Nationalism : Theories and Processes*, ed. Alain Dieckhoff and Christophe Jaffrelot, The CERi Series in Comparative Politics and International Studies (Hurst & Co, 2005), <https://hal-sciencespo.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-01356826>.

¹⁴ Juliane Schober, “Communities of Interpretation in the Study of Religion in Burma,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 39, no. 2 (2008): 255–67.

¹⁵ Michael Charney, *Powerful Learning: Buddhist Literati and the Throne in Burma's Last Dynasty* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2006).

The arrival of colonialism and modernity in Burma and Southeast Asia was discussed in the sense of erosion. Such erosion of traditional galactic polity and cosmological premises was met with the revitalization of Buddhist polity and kingship. Schober noted the similarities between the rule of Mindon of Konbaung Burma (1852-1878) and Mongkut (1851-68) of Siam. Both kings pushed initiatives for religious revitalization and reaffirmed their position as the Dharmaraja.¹⁶ Schober discussed this continuities and disjuncture in the Burmese society of colonial times in length in her book.¹⁷ She notes the British refusal to nominate Thatanabaing (Chief Buddhist monks), diminishing the power of the colonial state and ending the centuries-old tradition of Buddhist polities in Burma. Schober has also noted that the British refusal to act as the Dharmaraja diminished their legitimacy as rulers of the realm in the Buddhists' eyes.¹⁸

In discussing the colonial and post-colonial Burmese politics and Buddhist entanglement, Sarkisyanz discussed the Buddhist influences in Burmese colonial politics and how they influenced the anti-colonial struggle. He explained the Buddhist foundation in the Burmese kingship and governance and connected it to his time's contemporary left-wing post-colonial

¹⁶ Juliane Schober, "The Theravāda Buddhist Engagement with Modernity in Southeast Asia: Whither the Social Paradigm of the Galactic Polity?," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 26, no. 2 (1995): 307–25.

¹⁷ Juliane Schober, *Modern Buddhist Conjunctures in Myanmar: Cultural Narratives, Colonial Legacies, and Civil Society* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011).

¹⁸ Schober, "The Theravāda Buddhist Engagement with Modernity in Southeast Asia."

Burmese politics.¹⁹ Donald Eugene Smith also produced a long monograph on Buddhism and politics in Burma and its role in the national formations. He, too, reflected on the immediate post-colonial Burmese politics by discussing U Nu's Buddhist revival in the 1950s. Various studies have analyzed and confirmed Buddhism and its Sangha's (i.e., monks) role in colonial and post-colonial politics.²⁰ Local historians like Sagaing Han Tin and Thakhin Ba Maung thoroughly recorded the role of Sangha in Burmese colonial politics. Buddhism's role in the Burmese national formation is undeniable, from aiding and abetting the insurrections in the aftermath of the British annexation to the influences on the Burmese national thinking.²¹

While there already is a discussion on the Buddhist millenarism and identity construction with the Buddhist notion of Sasana and its moral community in British Burma, my thesis would be more grounded in the nationalism paradigm and its effect on Buddhism. I firmly believe that examining Buddhism through nationalism is still relevant. At the same time, religious historians such as Alicia Turner have discussed the moral community provided by the Buddhist moral universe, Sasana. Sasana is thought to be the binding agent in Burmese society.²² Turner emphasizes the moral community aspect of Buddhism as the driving agent in political mobilization. Turner's book, however, discuss in detail the moral panic and siege mentality of the Burmese society in the first years of twentieth-century Burmese society. On Buddhist political thought, Matthew Walton has also produced works on it. However, it is grounded in Buddhist theological discussions and scriptures rather than historical

¹⁹ Manuel Sarkisyanz, *Buddhist Backgrounds of the Burmese Revolution*. (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 1965),

<https://public.ebookcentral.proquest.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=5586011>.

²⁰ Donald Eugene Smith, *Religion and Politics in Burma* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965).

²¹ Thakhin Ba Maung, *History of Wuntharhu Struggle (1906-1936)*, 1975.

²² Alicia Marie Turner, *Saving Buddhism: The Impermanence of Religion in Colonial Burma*, Paperback edition, Southeast Asia (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2017).

development. Walton, however, wrote an excellent analysis of the Burmese Buddhist understanding of Democracy and Buddhism's role in contemporary politics.²³

Nonetheless, I still see the relevance of using the nationalism paradigm in understanding the relationship between religion and politics and explaining the events of the early 1900s British Burma. Especially since this period, Burmese nationalism and identity came into being. Numerous conceptualizations of national identity were experimented with and tested. So, my research would engage more in political history than cultural and religious history. One methodological and theoretical foundation of the study was borrowed from the Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism literature. Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism discusses the political nature of the narratives surrounding Asoka, second century BC Maurya king who was revered for promoting Buddhism. As Tambiah discussed, Asoka pioneered the Buddhist kingship values and the norms of establishing a Buddhist polity.²⁴ Asoka Persona addressed the role of such persona in the Sinhalese Buddhist polity and its influence in later nationalist politics.²⁵ The Asoka persona had influenced and played a role in the rise of exclusive, hierarchical nationalism, state, and political figures.²⁶

The Asoka persona and paradigm were thoroughly explored and used as the foundation to construct Political Buddhism in Burma.

²³ Matthew J. Walton, *Buddhism, Politics and Political Thought in Myanmar*, 1st edition (Cambridge University Press, 2016).

²⁴ S. J. Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer: A Study of Buddhism and Polity in Thailand against a Historical Background*, Cambridge Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511558184.70>

²⁵ Anne Gaul, "Security, Sovereignty, Patriotism—Sinhalese Nationalism and the State in Sri Lankan History Textbooks," *Ethnopolitics* 16, no. 2 (March 15, 2017): 161–78.

²⁶ Michael Roberts, *Exploring Confrontation: Sri Lanka--Politics, Culture and History*, Studies in Anthropology and History, v. 14 (Chur, Switzerland: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1994).⁵⁷

1.3 Thesis Outline

The Thesis was written in seven parts, with four main research chapters. The prologue gave the author a personal encounter, pushing him to study the phenomenon. The first chapters would describe the layouts, theoretical and literature foundation of the study. The final chapter involved concluding remarks and emphasis on the main arguments of the study.

The topic will be explored in the following three chapters. The first chapter (i.e., Chapter 2) deals with the fall of the Konbaung dynasty in Burma and how the reigns of the last two kings were remembered in Burmese public memory. The chapter established the Buddhist polity and kingship that were affirmed and entrenched during this nineteenth-century Burmese history period. The second chapter (i.e., Chapter 3) deals with the arrival of British rule in Burma, the moral panic and status anxiety surrounding the British rule in Burma, and the Burmese Buddhist response to it. The chapter discussed the Burmese political mobilization surrounding the Buddhist identity. The third and final research chapter will deal with the Buddhist monks' (Sangha) involvement and entanglement in the increasingly nationalized nature of colonial politics and how the involvement transformed the country's Theravada Buddhism into a Political Buddhism. The chapter (i.e., Chapter 4) also outlined the characteristic of Political Buddhism in Burma. The research ended with a conclusion and epilogue. The conclusion reemphasizes the points made throughout the study. The epilogue pointed to the continuation seen in the later years of Burmese history, which were not covered by the research.

2. Buddhism, Colonialism, and The End of the Burmese Kingdom

2.1. Introduction

In explaining the development of Burmese nationalism and Political Buddhism in Burma, the events in the last leg of the Burmese Konbaung dynasty cannot be discarded. The Konbaung dynasty was the last royal dynasty in Burma. Founded by Alaungpaya (1752-1760) in the eighteenth century, it was, at one point, one of the strongest kingdoms in mainland Southeast Asia, dominating Siam, Arakan, Lan Xiang, Manipur, the Malay peninsula, and surrounding areas. While remembered for their martial nature, Konbaung kings have always identified themselves with Buddhism. The Konbaung founder, Alaungpaya's name itself means Buddha-to-be, Bodhisattva. Successive Konbaung kings after Alaungpaya included Dharmaraja in their titles. In Theravada Buddhism, the rulers, Dharmaraja, were required to perform specific religious duties, which included forming a Buddhist polity, establishing a unity of Sangha order, promoting purity of Buddhist scripture, and securing the well-being of the Sangha, erecting Buddhist monuments and spaces like pagodas, stupas, and monasteries. Konbaung followed this Dharmaraja notion thoroughly.²⁷ Bodawpaya (1782-1819), the sixth king of Konbaung and the last son of Alaungpaya to rule in the Konbaung house, commissioned some of the most prominent Buddhist monuments in Konbaung Burma and strived to unify the different Sangha (i.e., Buddhist monks) orders into a unified order.²⁸

However, the Buddhist entrenchment of the last Konbaung kings influenced the political development of colonial Burma. After the end of the second Anglo-Burmese war (1852-

²⁷ Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer*, 1976.

²⁸ Patrick Pranke, "'Bodawpaya's Madness': Monastic Accounts of King Bodawpaya's Conflict with the Burmese Sangha, Part One," *Journal of Burma Studies* 12, no. 1 (2008): 1–28, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jbs.2008.0000>.

1853), Konbaung kings lost two-thirds of their kingdom and all the coastlines to the British. The second war was fought amid the palace coup in Ava, and Burmese troops had low morale and leadership. There never was a proper ratification of the treaty for the annexed territories between the British and Konbaung Burma. Min Don never officially recognized the annexed territories in lower Burma.²⁹ Therefore, by the 1860s, the martial prowess of the Konbaung dynasty that dominated Siamese, Arkanese, and Laotian kingdoms and repelled Qing invasions was already curtailed. Konbaung Burma is already landlocked, and complete colonial domination seemed imminent during the reign of Mindon. This chapter explains the conditions during the last phase of the Konbaung dynasty in Burma and its fall. It would provide a better understanding of the continuities and changes brought out by the complete annexation of Burmese society into British colonialism.

2.2. Mindon the Pious

Mindon(1853-1878) came to power after the disastrous war with the British. He won the throne through the palace coup with the help of his brother, Kanaung, who later became his heir apparent. The Palace coups became a frequent phenomenon and the preferred method of succession in the last leg of Konbaung. Mindon's predecessor, Pagan (1846-1853), also won a palace coup against his father, Tharyarwaddy. Mindon's son and last monarch of Konbaung, Thibaw, again succeeded through a palace coup, albeit he did not orchestrate it but rather by the scheming ministers. Mindon himself barely survived a palace coup orchestrated by his sons.³⁰ Therefore, the political atmosphere in Konbaung Burma is one of instability.

²⁹ Thant Myint-U, *The Making of Modern Burma* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001). 104-130

³⁰ Thant Myint-U.130-135

Min Don's reign started with hasty yet unratified peace with the British and scores of socio-economic and security problems in the remaining Konbaung kingdom. British steamer gunboats were right outside his capital, Amarapura. To solve this security problem, after consolidating his power through royal appointments, and marriages, Mindon constructed and moved to a new capital, Mandalay, in 1857, two years before the construction of the Suez Canal started.³¹ In this new royal capital, memories surrounding his reign were constructed.

On the socio-economic side, Burmese society started to experience the effect of colonial governance in Burma, even if they lived in the last piece of Konbaung Burma, Upper Burma. After the annexation of Lower Burma by the British, a large population of monks now resided in British territory. Also, with the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 and the British promotion of rice cultivation as a cash crop, there was a steady stream of Burmese migration to the British-controlled lower Burma. The British government was irrigating the Irrawaddy Delta, increasing arable land in the region, and promising new Burmese settlers land rights and economic prospects.³² The situation presented Mindon with both challenges and opportunities. On the challenges, he now has to ensure the survival of his kingdom, already endangered by the British advancement and lowering demography for tax revenues. Mindon found opportunities in the religion. After the Second Anglo-Burmese War, a significant population of the Sanghas was now in the British-controlled Lower Burma, mainly in areas like Pegu and Rangoon. Mindon actively seeks to encourage the relocation of the monks from Lower Burma to Upper Burma, depriving the emigrant Burmese and the population of Lower Burma of their local religious service providers and discouraging the emigration. Also, by posturing himself as the pious Buddhist monarch, he not only wishes to reverse the migration

³¹ Thant Myint-U.104-130

³² Cheng Siok Hwa, "The Development of the Burmese Rice Industry in the Late Nineteenth Century," *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 6, no. 1 (1965): 67–80.

and revitalize the kingdom but also to the Konbaung influence over the Burmese population of British-controlled Lower Burma.³³

Min Don, therefore, started to fashion himself as a pious Buddhist king devoted to promoting Buddhism. Mindon's position as the Buddhist king, Thant Myint U discussed, stemmed from his weakened position from the colonial onslaught demanding the further need to meet the Sangha's expectations as the Buddhist king and traditional religious obligations.³⁴ Throughout his reign, Mindon consistently carefully reaffirmed his position as the Dharmaraja, the Buddhist king and protector of Buddhism.³⁵

Mindon's construction of a new royal capital followed the Dharmaraja position and values, forming a Buddhist polity. Mandalay was filled with monasteries and Buddhist learning centers. Mindon performs at least one major religious ceremony monthly in the new royal capital.³⁶ In the Southeast Asian example, Mindon's piety is an example of Theatre statecraft where the rulers' piety and performance of religious ritual affirm the statehood and the rulers' legitimacy.³⁷

Mindon attempted the centralization of Sangha's orders like his predecessor Bodawpaya. In promoting the purity of the scripture, Sixth Buddhist Synod was organized in 1871, inviting Buddhist monks from Ceylon, Thailand, and Cambodia. He commissioned a royal project to review and inscribe the Tipitaka, Buddha's teaching cannon, in stone at massive pagoda

³³ Thant Myint-U, *The Making of Modern Burma*.148-153

³⁴ Thant Myint-U.148-153

³⁵ Contrary to Mindon's pious Buddhist persona. He was also noted for his polygamy.

³⁶ Thant Myint-U, *The Making of Modern Burma*.148-153

³⁷ Clifford Geertz, *Negara: The Theatre State in 19th Century Bali* (Princeton University Press, 1980), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1fkgrh>.

complexes near Mandalay Hill. The material wellness of the monks was also closely taken care of by appointing royal officials.³⁸ Mindon also attempted to export this pious image to the Burmese now living under the British by sending funds and the jeweled spire to Shwe Dagon pagoda later played a role in the colonial politics of Burma. His international deeds included sending funds to repair works of the Mahabodhi temple complex at Bodhgaya.³⁹ Mindon allegedly spent 225 million rupees throughout his reign, averaging 9 million yearly.⁴⁰ Mindon, indeed, was following what Tambiah discussed as the Asoka paradigm. The Asoka paradigm was based on the Buddhist king Asoka of the Maurya dynasty, which pioneered all these aforementioned Dharmaraja, Buddhist kingship notions.⁴¹ In the 3rd century BC, Asoka did everything Mindon mimicked in 19th-century Burma. Another exchange benefitting Mindon from the Buddhist Dharmaraja position is not just the political legitimacy. The monks exchanged information with the royal officials regarding the rural administration and informed the peasantry of the changes in the revenue policies. The local monasteries also took the complaint department role for the local officials' mismanagement.⁴² Sinhalese nationalism has discussed the role of personality-based political figures, performing and taking part in the Asoka persona, enticing legitimacy and support from the population.

Mindon was not only busy performing as a Buddhist king, Asoka paradigm/persona, but he also attempted to modernize Burma even though Konbaung's destiny was already set with business interests in India, calling for the complete annexation of the remaining kingdom as early as 1865. Mindon established factories, introduced Western military doctrines to the

³⁸ Maung Maung Tin, *The Grand History of Konbaung (Konbaung Set Maha Yarzawin Taw Gyi) (Third Volume)*, vol. Third, 2020.

³⁹ MahaBodhi Temple is one of the most significant Buddhist pilgrimage site in Bodhgaya, India, founded by Asoka to commemorate the site of Buddha's attaining enlightenment.

⁴⁰ Thant Myint-U, *The Making of Modern Burma*. 152-153

⁴¹ Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer*, 1976.

⁴² Thant Myint-U, *The Making of Modern Burma*. 151-152

armed forces, and sent personnel to study in the West. The rapprochement with the British started, and treaties on trade were signed in 1862 and 1867. Mindon also sent grand embassies to Britain and Europe in 1871. Mindon's diplomacy was based on the reasoning that his plea would be treated in a better light if the Mandalay court contacted directly with London and to balance the British influence with other European powers, France and Italy in particular. However, the French connection doomed the Mandalay court in later years. With Mindon's embassies, the French showed interest in setting up commercial ties in Upper Burma, particularly in the ruby mines near Mogok. Burmese, in return, was seeking potential French assistance in military reforms. Franco-Burmese relations were advanced enough to alarm the British in Lower Burma and India. The Imperial General Staff and the Indian government closely followed the numerous French agents and adventurers attending Mindon's court in Mandalay.

Mindon also welcomed the British residency in Mandalay. Mindon also included taxation and fiscal reforms among his administrative overhauls. However, his reforms and efforts met an abrupt end when he, too, was faced with a palace coup by his sons. Mindon's heir and the head of reform programs, Prince Kanaung, was assassinated in the attempted coup of Mindon's sons, Prince Mingyun and Minkondaing, in 1866.⁴³

The rebellion was crushed within days. The princes fled to the British-controlled Lower Burma and were later sent to Calcutta by the British. Mindon's morale was devastated by the event, and he never picked another heir till his deathbed, further complicating the succession.⁴⁴ His reign in the public memory is remembered as the Buddhist king that

⁴³ Thant Myint-U. 130-135

⁴⁴ Thant Myint-U.130-133

revived Buddhism and attempted to modernize the waning kingdom. Mandalay was still revered in contemporary Burma as a cultural and Buddhist city filled with monasteries and pagodas. Mindon role as the Asoka persona in the Konbaung Buddhist polity was seared into the Burmese memory. This Buddhist revival continued in the reign of the last king of the Konbaung kingdom, Thibaw.

2.3. Thibaw and the end of Konbaung Burma

Burmese nationalist and Western historiography of Burma does not treat Thibaw (1878-1885) in a good light. Thibaw, until Mindon died in 1878, was a minor prince far from the line of succession. He was a perfect candidate for the senior minister and courtiers who wanted to consolidate power. Amongst the minister were reformists and progressive ministers who tried to transform the Konbaung monarchy into a form of British-style constitutional monarchy. Yaw was known for writing a political treatise advocating for limited monarchy power and establishing a parliament.⁴⁵ Ministers who led Mindon's diplomatic missions to Europe, Kin Wun wanted to maintain good relations with the British, and other European powers were responsible for the palace coup. These ministers aimed for an aristocratic democracy and to preserve the independence of the increasingly threatened Mandalay court.⁴⁶

Thus, Thibaw was put on the throne through a palace coup plotted by seasoned ministers and courtiers in October 1878. His ascension was marked by the major bloodshed that massacred imprisoned princes and princesses to secure Thibaw's position. The instability and turmoil

⁴⁵Lord of Yaw, originally named Pho Hlaing, served as senior minister responsible for industrial projects under Mindon. He was quickly disposed of after Thibaw's ascension. He died in 1883.

⁴⁶ Kin Wun, originally named Kaung, senior minister responsible for foreign affairs served under both Mindon and Thibaw. After the British annexation, Kin Wun joined the British administration and was knighted by the Indian government.

followed his reign.⁴⁷ The Shan chiefs in the northern highlands revolted against the new king. Thibaw could not stop the Burmese emigration to Lower Burma as his father did. Throughout the reign, Thibaw is increasingly seen as the puppet king controlled by the ministers and his wife, the chief queen, Supayalat. Taxation and fiscal reforms of Mindon seemed insufficient for Thibaw to have an effective reign. Taxation, as counted, became the central political issue and economic burden over the peasantry. The unrestrained spending from the royal household did not help the situation either. Despite the political turmoil and image of incompetency, Thibaw was a Buddhist with deep learning in teaching and scripture. He was devoted to studying scripture and was ordained as a monk for three years. Thibaw continued Mindon's work as the Sangha unifier and engaged with the monks. Solidifying Konbaung kings in the public memory as the protector of the faith.⁴⁸

Business interests in Calcutta, Rangoon, and London were grown impatience with the Konbaung kings' interference over foreign trade, especially on teak. While Mindon gave up the royal monopolies over trade, trade was still one of the very few sources of revenue for the kingdom. Therefore, various royal interjections ensured that parts of the revenue flowed into the royal coffer. Another is Thibaw's image of incompetency and debauchery was further strengthened among the British officials of Lower Burma and India. While local sources argued for the innocence of Thibaw in the massacres of major princes who had a legitimate claim to the throne and other royal family members, the British officials were sure of Thibaw's involvement in the killings.⁴⁹ Therefore, the business community and Indian

⁴⁷ D. G. E. Hall, "The Last Days of the Konbaung Dynasty at Mandalay, 1862–85," in *A History of South-East Asia*, ed. D. G. E. Hall, Macmillan Asian Histories Series (London: Macmillan Education UK, 1981), 659–84, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-16521-6_37.

⁴⁸ Jordan Carlyle Winfield, "Buddhism and Insurrection in Burma, 1886–1890," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 20, no. 3 (2010): 345–67.

⁴⁹ A. T. Q. Stewart, *THE PAGODA WAR* (Faber and Faber, 2003).60-61

imperial officials foresaw an intervention as soon as the news of the massacre was heard in 1879. Mainly because one of the influential princes, Nyaungyan, escaped the killings and was under British influence, Rangoon. This massacre of major princes became one of the deciding factors in the British abolishing the Burmese monarchy.⁵⁰ However, the Indian government at the time was occupied with another imperial war; the Second Anglo-Afghan War of 1878 erupted after the relations between the British and Afghan rulers deteriorated again. So, Thibaw's Mandalay was spared for the moment. The relationship broke down to the point that British residency in Mandalay was revoked. The official British position was based on the memory of the 1841 Alexander Burnes incident and the killing of British resident Sir Louis Cavagnari in Kabul.⁵¹

Mandalay's continued diplomatic engagement with the French and Italians did not help the Burmese. The Imperial General Staff and the Whitehall thoroughly used the French connection of the Mandalay court as the pretext for the intervention. French has already established protectorates in the Mekong region, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos and successfully encroached on Siamese territories. Burmese dealing with the French, thus increased suspicion.⁵² Moreover, French navigation up the Mekong River in search of the trade route with Southwestern China also ramped up support for the intervention among the business interests. As early as the 1860s, the British requested the Burmese for exploratory rights up the Irrawaddy River for possible trade routes to Yunan, China. Thus, there was a sense of urgency for the British to beat the French in finding trade routes to the back door of China.⁵³

⁵⁰ Stewart.117

⁵¹ Stewart. 63

⁵² Hall, "The Last Days of the Konbaung Dynasty at Mandalay, 1862–85."

⁵³ Thant Myint-U, *The Making of Modern Burma*.136-137

By 1880, Kin Wun's faction in the court was manned by French-educated Burmese scholar-officials. By 1885, the opportunity came for the British. After a brief trade dispute between a British company, Bombay Burma Trading Corporation, and the royal government, the Indian government sent an ultimatum, including the demands to cease all treaties with other European power and conduct foreign diplomacy through the Indian government. The Konbaung government, while accommodating the other British demands, did not give in to these demands over foreign relations.⁵⁴ The British troops were already amassing by the border, no matter the outcome of the negotiations.

The third Anglo-Burmese War of 1885 was swift and decisive. The British expedition came up the Irrawaddy River in November, and by order of Kin Wun, Burmese fortifications along the river barely put any resistance.⁵⁵ Burmese ministers' position was to agree to further British demands and place a new prince on the throne, preferably, Nyaungyan, who was already under British influence.⁵⁶ However, unbeknownst to them is that Nyaungyan had already passed away right before the start of the war. General Prendergast, the leader of the expeditionary forces, quickly sent Thibaw and his family to India. Thibaw never set foot in Burma again. Prendergast set an interim government with Burmese ministers and waited for further instructions from the Indian government.⁵⁷

The Indian government, however, surprisingly lacked plans or initiatives on dealing with the remnant Burmese kingdom. The debates were made on whether to annex Burma or leave it as

⁵⁴ Maung Maung Tin, *The Grand History of Konbaung(Konbaung Set Maha Yarzawin Taw Gyi)* (Third Volume).

⁵⁵ Maung Maung Tin.

⁵⁶ Thant Myint-U, *The Making of Modern Burma*.162

⁵⁷ Stewart, *THE PAGODA WAR*.112

a British protectorate with a suitable prince on the throne. Both the officials in the Indian government and the business community in Calcutta and Rangoon express wishes for putting Burma as a protectorate, nulling all the Mandalay court's foreign treaties. The Indian officials expressed their disfavor for the complete annexation by pointing out the possibilities of insurgency in Upper Burma, dealing with unruly frontier provinces bordering China, and the need to deal with China itself by annexing Upper Burma. However, the decision came from the metropole itself, London. Lord Randolph Churchill ultimately decided that Burma would be annexed into the British Indian empire. His reasoning includes that the complete annexation would end the French intrigues in Burma once and for all, securing the Indian flank by putting Siam as a buffer state between British India and French Indochina. The lack of a suitable prince to put on the throne was also a factor in full annexation. Churchill declared the annexation of Upper Burma on 1 January 1886, presenting a new province as a gift to the Empress of India, Queen Victoria. While vacationing in Howth, Ireland, Randolph Churchill allegedly declared Burma had been added to the empire as a gift to Her Majesty after the new year countdown.⁵⁸

2.4. Conclusion

Konbaung kings, starting from the progenitor, Alaungpaya, heavily identified themselves with Buddhism. In the last decades of the dynasty, the Buddhist revival initiated by Mindon solidified Konbaung kings in the public memory as the Dharmaraja and the ultimate patron of the Buddhist faith. While the Anglo-Burmese conflicts were long and drawn-out affairs, taking up much of the 19th century, the end of the Konbaung monarch was instead a hasty one. The last days of Konbaung Burma were uneventful compared to other international incidents of the time, like the Anglo-Afghan wars, Boer wars, and other Anglo-French

⁵⁸ Stewart.117

colonial exploits in China and Southeast Asia. However, annexing the remaining Konbaung Burma brought wholesale socio-economic impacts on Burmese society and religion, Theravada Buddhism.⁵⁹

The immediate insurgency and the rebellion from the pretender princes produced a pacification campaign that scared the countryside of Upper Burma and created a violent public memory around the colonial state. British colonial capitalism was introduced into the remaining Upper Burma. British non-policy over Theravada Buddhism means the Sangha as an institution does not have formal state sponsorship in the new colonial state.⁶⁰ The Konbaung monarchy's association with Buddhism as Dharmaraja solidified the Sangha's animosity toward the British colonial state and its apathy toward the religion.

This further played a role in the political development of colonial Burma. The British exile of the royal family has induced historical trauma among the Burmese public and moral panic among the country's Buddhist majority. The lax immigration regulation between India and Burma and the importation of Indian and Chinese laborers ignited racial hatred as the Burmese suffered from status anxiety. These instances were reflected in the country's political development and nationalism. Theravada Buddhism, in particular, became the rallying point for the country's Burmese majority and the core of the national identity. The loss of Dharmaraja or the Asoka persona was translated into the search/ mimicking of the Asoka persona and the rise of personality-based political figures in Burmese colonial politics. The following chapters will discuss these developments and intersections.

⁵⁹ Thant Myint-U, *The Making of Modern Burma*.219

⁶⁰ Mark R. Woodward, "When One Wheel Stops: Theravada Buddhism and the British Raj in Upper Burma," *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 4, no. 1 (1988): 57–90.

3. The early Burmese national political organization and mobilization

3.1. Introduction

The establishment of colonial rule disrupted the traditional Burmese society culturally, politically, and economically. The British colonial society was already slowly implemented in lower Burma after the two successive Anglo-Burmese Wars. After the third Anglo-Burmese War, the British successfully pacified Upper Burma from insurrections and defeated pretender princes, and the imposition of the British colonial rules was much more apparent. The pacification campaigns were noted for their violence and later pointed out as the contributing factor in the Burmese public memory over the coerciveness of the colonial State. The British also forcibly changed the traditional and feudal Buddhist society into a colonial and capitalist society. British colonial modernity came into Burma with education, taxation, commercial agriculture, and Victorian social norms.

While most of the country was still rural and agrarian, British Burma saw increased urbanization and the development of Rangoon as the colonial Metropole. Rangoon was the center for much of these socio-cultural and economic shocks. As the colonial administrator/scholar Furnivall noted, the British colonial administration developed a plural society in Rangoon where Indians, Burmese, Chinese, Europeans, and British overlords lived in an economically interdependent yet culturally and politically hierarchical structure.⁶¹ As the attempt to use the Buddhist Sangha as the colonial education center failed, the British established their secular education system to develop support for their colonial administration

⁶¹ Hock Guan LEE, "Furnivall's Plural Society and Leach's Political Systems of Highland Burma," ed. J.S. Furnivall and Edmund R. Leach, *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 24, no. 1 (2009): 32–46.

from the local population. British colonial governance dismantled traditional society and the pre-capitalist economy.

These shocks were manifested in the fears for the survival of the Buddhist faith in the early 20th century. Buddhist Sangha and laypeople alike saw their cultural and religious dominance increasingly challenged by the British. The British colonial rule was equalized to the domination of foreign infidels. The penetration of Christian missionaries also accelerated this view. While the British did not officially endorse the missionary efforts, the Burmese identified Christian missions with the British colonial government. With the advent of colonial secular education and Victorian culture, the Buddhist monks and devoted Burmese Buddhists lamented the moral decay and the decline of Sasana (i.e., the combination of religion and the moral universe). The monks despised modern education as an animalic education that had no value.⁶²

Sasana and its decline were thoroughly discussed in Alicia Turner's book, *Saving Buddhism*. Sasana is interchangeable with religion in both colloquial and vernacular senses. This is not only the case in Burma. Most majority-Buddhist societies in Mainland Southeast Asia have used Sasana and religion in almost interchangeable definitions. It offers a worldview and understanding/explanation of the worldly events in Buddhist societies. In a symbolic sense, Sasana carried a sense of long-term decay. It emphasizes the Buddhist notion of impermanence, Anicca, and Anitya. In this millenarian thinking, even Buddhism and its moral universe, Sasana could not overcome its eventual demise. Several Buddhist texts provide chronologies on how long the Sasana would last, ranging from a hundred years to

⁶² Than Tun, "A History of School Textbooks," *New Works from Literary Workers (Burmese Language)*, 1972, 151–82.

five thousand years.⁶³ Therefore, the Sasana acted as a moral universe where Buddhist causality and temporal cosmology explained the metaphysical and ontological nature of the world surrounding Buddhist societies. It has been used as the rally point or the mobilization mode for the societies in premodern Burma.

Buddhist kingship in Southeast Asia has weighted on this impermanence of Sasana and Buddhism. The legitimacy of these Buddhist kings, whether Burmese, Thai, or Cambodian, stemmed from their ability to protect and prolong Sasana.⁶⁴ As Turner discusses, it is also a point of innovation for these societies. Burmese kings constructed their images and legitimacy as the protector of the Sasana. Konbaung kings led several Sasana reforms throughout the eighteenth century to unfasten the decay and ground their legitimacy.⁶⁵ At the last leg of their dynasty, Mindon orchestrated a grand Buddhist council in his new capital, Mandalay. Mindon fashioned himself as the pious Buddhist king to reaffirm his position in the weakening kingdom and to maintain the claim on the British-controlled lower Burma.⁶⁶

Moral panic and status anxiety started with the British annexation of Upper Burma, the last remnant of Konbaung Buddhist kings. Turner discussed a Russian oriental scholar, Ivan Pavovich Minayev, who happened to be at Rangoon in 1886, mere months after the British annexation. Minayev recounted Burmese in both Lower Burma, which was already under British control for fifty years, and Upper Burma was in a panic by the recent development. Both laypeople and monks fear this as the end of Buddhism in Burma.⁶⁷

⁶³ Turner, *Saving Buddhism*. 25-44

⁶⁴ Smith, *Religion and Politics in Burma*. 20

⁶⁵ Konbaung dynasty is the last dynasty to rule Burma before the British colonial annexation.

⁶⁶ Hall, "The Last Days of the Konbaung Dynasty at Mandalay, 1862–85."

⁶⁷ Turner, *Saving Buddhism*. 25-44

The violent counterinsurgency and the pacification campaign that ensued in the immediate decades after the 1886 annexation also scarred the public memory surrounding the colonial State and added to the trauma of losing the Monarchy as the religious center figure.⁶⁸ The democratic governance and institutions that the British were proud of in their colonies were not presented in Burma until the Burma Reform Bills of 1921 were enacted, and the Dyarchy administration expanded to Burma.⁶⁹

The massive influx of Indian and Chinese immigrants also alarmed the Burmese about their position as British colonial subjects. Indian labor (both in a physical and intellectual sense) in colonial Burma was the prevalent feature of British colonialism in Burma. Indians served in Burma's socioeconomic and political life strata, ranging from menial laborers and dock workers to teachers and junior administrators to the prestige officials of the Indian Civil Service. In Rangoon alone, Indians became half the population in 1930. Rangoon Superintendent's report on Indian immigration stated that the Indian population was over 1 million, 14 million people in British Burma, accounting for almost 7 percent of the total population in 1931.⁷⁰ Therefore, Burmese Buddhists and monks alike growingly saw their cultural and religious dominance in the country challenged. Thus, the general atmosphere of Burmese in the late 19th and early 20th century was in a state of moral panic and status anxiety.

⁶⁸ Mary P. Callahan, *Making Enemies : War and State Building in Burma*, ACLS Humanities E-Book (Cornell University Press, 2005), <https://ceuedu.sharepoint.com/sites/itservices/SitePages/vpn.aspx>.

⁶⁹ Department of Historical Research and National Library, *Burmese Political History (1906-1930)* (Ministry of Religion and Culture, 2017).225

⁷⁰ James Baxter, *Report on Indian Immigration* (Superintendent office Rangoon: Government Printing and Stationery Burma, 1941).p-5

3.2.The YMBA (1906-1920)

By the 1900s, British Burma still lacked a political channel where the masses and the local elites could communicate their political grievances. The draconian laws to repress the insurrections were not lifted, and political mobilization was severely discouraged. The colonial legislatures were not established yet. Therefore, the political parties were not organized. With the general moral panic and status anxiety in society, religion became the rallying point for early political and national mobilization.

Thus, the earliest political mobilization and organization were disguised under religious organizations. The first recorded Buddhist organizations were formed as early as 1897 in Mawlamyine and Mandalay.⁷¹

The Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA) was one of the organizations formed under such pretexts in 1906.⁷² It was founded in Rangoon by a group of individuals educated by the colonial education systems. They represent a new social class in Burmese society, urban, upper middle class, and educated groups of people who still do not have a socio-political standing in the new colonial society. Some of these individuals were educated in elite British universities such as Cambridge and Oxford.

⁷¹ Thakhin Ba Maung, *History of Wuntharnu Struggle (1906-1936)*.⁷

⁷² Thakhin Ba Maung.⁷



Figure 1. The official insignia of The Young Men Buddhist Association⁷³

The British colonial government gradually retired the old traditional feudal elites, royal ministers, generals, and courtiers. However, in the early 1900s, the new local elite class was yet to be formed. These young, newly educated Burmese men wished to join the new local elites. Thus, for them, the YMBA presented them as a political platform for their national aspirations and advancement. Many of the founders later became legislators and ministers in the British colonial administration. May Aung (1880-1926) graduated from Cambridge University and was a prominent scholar until he died in 1926. He was the vice president of the Burma Research Society and published many articles in its journal, the *Journal of Burma Research Society*.⁷⁴ May Aung's intellectual works and discussions over what it means to be a modern Burman and Burmese national identity later consolidated into Burmese nationalism and Burma's political Buddhism. This is apparently seen in one of his lectures delivered in 1908.⁷⁵

⁷³ Department of Historical Research and National Library, *Burmese Political History (1906-1930)*.339

⁷⁴ Pe Maung Tin, "The Late U May Aung,Obituary Notice," *Journal of Burma Research Society* 16, no. 2 (December 1926): 158.

⁷⁵ May Aung, "The Dawn of Nationalism in Burma," *Journal of the Burma Research Society* 33, no. 1 (1950): 1–7.

“It is one of the greatest curses of their generation that their young men learning to drop Burman ideals, to forget and even to despise the customs and habits of his ancestors and to hanker after much that was bad and very little that was good of the alien races.”⁷⁶

In this lecture, May Aung lamented the loss of Buddhist values in the Burmese man and the urgency in indoctrinating Buddhist values into Burmese to navigate the changing modern society.

Maung Gyee(1886-1971), an Oxford graduate, was an influential legislator throughout the prewar years and was later knighted and granted the “Sir” title. Maung Gyee was also a scholar and served as a law professor at Rangoon University in the early 1920s.⁷⁷ Dr. Ba Yin was one of the first medical doctors in Burma, studied in Scotland, and was an officer in the British Indian Army.

Ba Phe(1883-1972), while never studied in the West, had a long influential political life that extended to post-colonial years. He led political parties in colonial electoral politics, held ministerial positions, and advised later national leaders like Aung San on negotiating with the British for independence. Ba Phe was even said to remain influential in post-colonial politics. He was tried for treason in the 1950s for conspiring to stage a coup and persuade Ne Win, then Commander in Chief of the Burmese army, to lead the alleged coup.⁷⁸ The YMBA closely resembled its Christian inspiration, the Young Men Christian Association (Y.M.C.A), and their choice was deliberate. It was said that Ba Phe, Maung Gyee, and Dr.Ba Yin saw the sign of the YMCA while walking in Rangoon and decided to find a similar organization.

⁷⁶ May Aung.

⁷⁷ Maung Zaya, *100 Famous Burmese (First Volume)* (Unity Publishing, 2010).35

⁷⁸ Zaya.



Figure 2. Three Founders of YMBA, Ba Phe (Top left), Sir Maung Gyee (Top right), Dr. Ba Yin (Center)⁷⁹

They represent the first generation of Burmese nationalism, which sought to negotiate with the British for a political compromise, acting as the middleman to deal on behalf of the Burmese populace with freshly gained national consciousness. The YMBA did become the political training ground for these young college graduates.⁸⁰ The colonial government did appease them with political appointments and incorporated them into the colonial elites. As discussed, Ba Phe served in various government and colonial legislatures positions. May Aung, responsible for ideologically binding Buddhism and Burmese nationalism, served as the Minister of Home Affairs.

⁷⁹ Department of Historical Research and National Library, *Burmese Political History (1906-1930)*.

⁸⁰ Sarkisyanz, *Buddhist Backgrounds of the Burmese Revolution*. n128-129

The YMBA proclaimed race, religion, culture, and education as their main issues and adopted Hindu Swastika as their insignia. Their call for Amyo(Race), Batha(language/religion), and Sasana(Buddhist moral universe) remained influential till today. The current military junta tried to muster support through these symbols.

The YMBA started as a small, insignificant social-religious organization based in Rangoon. The first ten years of YMBA were spent testing the ground and exploring the space for the organization. Thus, the organization's early activities were confined to religious, social, and cultural issues. Throughout these years, YMBA organized debates, public lectures, talks, and annual conferences. The resolutions from the YMBA annual conferences between 1911-1920 stated that only six political matters were discussed.⁸¹ However, its offshoots began to form in major urban spaces, Mandalay, Moulmein, Bassein, and other cities. By 1910, the first chapter in Rangoon organized itself as the headquarter, and the YMBA became a federation of local organizations and the first national organization.

YMBA's official slogan was Amyo(Race/Nation), Batha(Religion), Sasana, and Pinyar (Education). However, only by 1916, at the fourth annual conference, the YMBA's official position was confirmed. In a speech by Bo Yin, an early YMBA organizer urging young Burmese to go into the seafaring trades, he argued that the prosperity of the State is based on the prosperity of Amyo, Batha, Sasana, and Pinyar. To Bo Yin and the YMBA, the Amyo, Batha, Sasana, and Pinyar is not only the pillars of the YMBA but also the Burman identity. However, Bo Yin did emphasize and give better importance to the role of Amyo

⁸¹ Department of Historical Research and National Library, *Burmese Political History (1906-1930)*.53-54

(Race/Nation) than other pillars.⁸² The term Amyo has mixed connotations and blurs the meaning between race and nation in the Burmese language. The discourses behind Amyo later dominated the political issues of colonial Burma. Batha(Religion) and Sasana were often discussed and used interchangeably in the colloquial Burmese.

Pinyar meant education which the YMBA saw as an important tool for advancing the Burmese position in the British empire. Unlike the Buddhist Sangha of the time, the YMBA embraced modern education. Education became the central issue for the YMBA gatherings and discussions. It was recorded that 15 of the 29 topics discussed in the 1917 YMBA annual conference were on education. The YMBA started to call for the desegregation of education systems where the European and Anglo-Indian children were sent to different schools from the Burmese. The YMBA pushed initiatives for Buddhist schools, libraries, and universal primary education in British Burma. It also called for incorporating Buddhist teachings into public schools while urging the British government to expand the learning of modern science, engineering, and medicine. The YMBA also played a role in creating the university in British Burma, Rangoon University. The YMBA continuously advocated for chartering Rangoon College to the University status through the 1910s. In a way, the volatile student politics of the 1930s could be traced back to the YMBA since it was centered among the student body of Rangoon University.⁸³

The YMBA members, including May Aung, Ba Phe, and Maung Gyee, worked as members, acting as the pseudo-legislators in the drafting committee for the Rangoon University Act. The definition and discourses around these pillars, Amyo, Batha, Sasan, and Pinya, will be

⁸² Sagaing Han Tin, *The Annals of Burma (First Volume)*, vol. First (Seikku Cho Cho Publishing House, 2011).117

⁸³ Thakhin Ba Maung, *History of Wuntharnu Struggle (1906-1936)*.107

discussed in further chapters. The fourth annual conference also affirmed the central role of Buddhism and the Sangha in the country, which also had repercussions in later colonial politics. The YMBA also disseminated the idea of Burma as a separate colony in the British empire, separated from British India, which later evolved into a major political issue and a heated public debate among the Burmese in the 1930s.⁸⁴



Figure 3. Burmese cartoonist BaGaLay mocked the temple and pagoda officials for their inept attitude toward the British and Europeans⁸⁵

The first political mobilization of YMBA fell under the religious issue, Batha and Sasana, the infamous shoe question. British and Europeans were exempted from taking off their shoes when visiting Buddhist temples and monasteries. The case was problematized and politicized by the YMBA. By 1916-1917, it became a public debate about allowing Europeans and the British. In the aftermath of an earthquake in 1917, British governor Sir Reginald Craddock visited a famous Pagoda in Pegu wearing his shoes. The YMBA officially launched anti-shoe

⁸⁴ Thakhin Ba Maung.76

⁸⁵ Department of Historical Research and National Library, *Burmese Political History (1906-1930)*.74

wearing campaign after the event. It held a public rally in Rangoon, denouncing the colonial officials for the issue. The anti-shoe campaigns spread nationwide, demanding the colonial government banned the practice. The colonial government gave in to the demands of the YMBA and issued a decree barring westerners from wearing shoes in religious spaces.⁸⁶ Therefore, the shoe problem became the first major national political movement in which the colonial government had to cede the public demand. Religious issues were increasingly politicized and penetrated the public sphere afterward. The YMBA increasingly politicized religion and used it for their mobilization. It started to demand certain Buddhist days as public holidays, reinstate the special privilege of Buddhist monks in public institutions, and de-secularize public schools established by the British colonial government.

While the YMBA became a nationalist organization, they were still willing to negotiate with the colonial authority. The YMBA leaders still submit to the dominance of the British empire. YMBA carefully crafted a sense of imperial loyalty in organizational rituals and performances.

“U May Aung accepted the Chairperson/Presidentship of the conference.⁸⁷ He then continues to urge the conference participant to undertake the following.

(1) The chair wishes to record that the YMBA chapters and conference participants would show the utmost loyalty and obedience to the commissioners and officers representing His

⁸⁶ Department of Historical Research and National Library.57-59

⁸⁷It is the fourth YMBA conference organized in October,1916. May Aung chaired the conference. This minute recorded May Aung’s speech. U is the formal title worked in the same way as Mister in English. Also, His Majesty here is referring to George V.

Majesty's government, administering the country on behalf of His Majesty.”⁸⁸

The YMBA conferences sang “God Save the King” and pledged allegiance to the British Empire and the King. The YMBA, following the Indian National Congress, supported the British war efforts in World War I, hoping for better political reforms and rights. The 1918 YMBA annual conference decided that the organization should be more involved in recruiting and mobilizing the Burma Sappers and Miners, the regiment in the British Indian Army.⁸⁹ This could be due to the class origins of the YMBA founders and leaders. As discussed, the founders showed careerist tendencies while establishing the YMBA as a national political movement. The YMBA, like the Indian nationalists of the time, believed that by cooperating with the British war efforts, the British government would grant them further political rights and administrative reforms.

Meanwhile, mid-level bureaucratic officers of the colonial governments are also joining the organization due to the politically accommodating posture toward the colonial government.⁹⁰

Amid the anti-shoe campaign, U Bay, a member of the advisory council of the Lieutenant Governor of Burma, acted as YMBA's chair of the central executive committee.⁹¹ Even when the British did not fulfill the promises of administrative reforms in the aftermath of the Great War, the YMBA leaders were not radicalizing the Burmese youths for independence and self-determination. The ideas spreading in the European colonies in Asia in the aftermath of World War American President Woodrow Wilson forwarded me.

⁸⁸ “All Burma Annual YMBA Conference, Hinthada,” *Thuriya*, October 26, 1916.

⁸⁹ Sagaing Han Tin, *The Annals of Burma (First Volume)*. 103

⁹⁰ The nationalist historiography in the country noted these native colonial bureaucrats later left the YMBA due to the organization's increasing nationalist turn.

⁹¹ Sagaing Han Tin, *The Annals of Burma (First Volume)*. 105-107

However, the direct political interaction/negotiation with the colonial government started when YMBA mobilized the Burmese public for the anti-shoe campaign in 1917. The British attempted to appease the Burmese and Indian desire for administrative reforms by introducing commissions and limited reforms. YMBA representatives were invited to India to discuss administrative reforms.⁹² They met with Edwin Montagu, Secretary of State for India, in Kolkata.⁹³ While meeting with Montagu, the YMBA representatives tried to reaffirm the organizational status as a sociocultural and religious organization, not the political one. Nevertheless, the YMBA formalize its position on the separation from India by formally requesting Montagu to separate Burma from India on religious and cultural grounds.⁹⁴ Their other requests include better representation of Burmese Buddhists in the colonial administration, the establishment of the colonial legislature, and a university in Burma. YMBA leaders also discussed the eventual elevation of Home Rule for British Burma. While the British disagreed with any of their demands, the meeting consolidated the YMBA's domestic position as the national political front. After all, this is the first time for the Burmese political representatives to meet with a cabinet minister from the His Majesty's Government. The meeting provided the YMBA with legitimacy and secured a base simultaneously, further leading to religion's entanglement into the public sphere and politics in Burma. The YMBA's request for the separation of Burma and India was on the grounds of protecting the rights of Buddhist Burmese. This was also the first instance where religion was officially inserted in the Burmese national political rights and participation questions.

⁹² This has a conflicting narrative; Burmese sources suggest YMBA leaders were invited for a talk with Montagu. However, the studies done from British sources wrote that the YMBA was not invited, and they had to travel to India to advocate for inclusion in the administrative reforms.

⁹³ Department of Historical Research and National Library, *Burmese Political History (1906-1930)*.77-78

⁹⁴ Department of Historical Research and National Library.78

The administrative reforms and the Home Rule became the public political discussion of the late 1910s. The YMBA attempted to utilize it for political gain by inserting themselves into these discussions. Again, this is a clear instance of trying to position themselves as the mediators between the Burmese populace and the British. When the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms excluded British Burma, the YMBA leaders responded by sending a delegation directly to London for negotiation.⁹⁵

The news sensationalized the Burmese public. The YMBA rides this domestic nationalist sentiment through fundraisings and publicity campaigns. While it did not receive the official invitation, the general council meeting on May 18, 1919, decided to send Ba Phe, Pu, and Tun Shein as the London delegation. The delegation is publicized as the Phe-Pu-Shein London delegation among the Burmese public.⁹⁶ The YMBA organized a grand send-off and fashioned the Phe-Pu-Shein delegation as the diplomatic mission when it was the advocacy campaign to the imperial capital. The Phe-Pu-Shein delegation arrived in London in August 1919 and stayed in London until January 1920.⁹⁷ During their trip, the delegation had difficulty contacting the parliament, relevant commissions, and influential persons.

While the YMBA established rapport with the retired civil servants and lieutenant governors who are sympathetic to the Burmese plight, the delegation found out that even the joint parliamentary committee, which is responsible for the drafting of Indian administrative acts, do not aware of the Burmese situation. Phe-Pu-Tun Shein delegation's London report provides a first-hand account of the situation.⁹⁸ The delegation also noted the strong presence

⁹⁵ Lord Chelmsford is the Vice Roy of India served between 1916 to 1922. He and Montagu published a report in 1918. Their report led to the Government of India Act 1919 and constitutional and administrative reforms in British India. The reform programs were noted as the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms.

⁹⁶ Thakhin Ba Maung, *History of Wuntharnu Struggle (1906-1936)*.76-78

⁹⁷ Department of Historical Research and National Library, *Burmese Political History (1906-1930)*.81

⁹⁸ Thakhin Ba Maung, *History of Wuntharnu Struggle (1906-1936)*.92

of the Indian lobby in the imperial capital. This presence of Indian efforts in London may have consolidated these first Burmese nationalists' sentiment on the need to separate British Burma from India.

“We concluded that the reason why the Burmese position and plight was in the shadow is due to the fact the hat Burmese never organized the delegations like the Indians. The Indians, however, established two newspapers. The Indian National Congress has had a permanent delegation present in London for a few years.”⁹⁹

Montagu denied the request for the audience first. However, after a series of advocacy through newspapers and sympathetic parliamentarians, the delegation met with Montagu to discuss the YMBA's recommendation for administrative reforms. The YMBA re-emphasized the points made during the first discussion they had with Montagu; the separation of British Burma from India, including Burma on the Indian administrative reform agendas, and the better fiscal arrangement for Burmese in the Indian empire. While the YMBA did not get definitive answers on the first two issues, the British government did agree to remit the Burmese rice export surplus back to British Burma instead of banking it in India.¹⁰⁰

Another symbolic achievement for the YMBA was ending the British military occupation of Shwedagon Pagoda as the military camp.¹⁰¹ Shwedagon Pagoda is one of the strategic vantage points in the colonial capital, Rangoon. British troops occupied the pagoda at the end of the Second Anglo-Burmese War in the 1850s, denying the local Burmese access to certain parts of the pagoda. The YMBA successfully lobbied for the ending of the occupation

⁹⁹ Ba Phe, Pu, and Tun Shein, “The Report of the London Delegation,” 1920.

¹⁰⁰ Department of Historical Research and National Library, *Burmese Political History (1906-1930)*.85

¹⁰¹ Department of Historical Research and National Library.85

through the media and sympathetic parliamentarians. The affair was discussed in the parliament, and Montagu himself had to promise that he would resolve the matter.¹⁰² This was celebrated with much rejoicing among the Burmese public and consolidated the YMBA's positions as the country's defender of Burmese Buddhist interests. By 1920, the organization is increasingly invested in its nationalist turn. The nationalist turn agitated the native bureaucrats, who joined YMBA's works on cultural and religious works, and most of them left the organization. After the eighth annual conference in October 1920, the organization changed to the General Council of All-Burmese Associations (GCBA), embracing the nationalist persona.

The last political showdown between the British colonial government and the YBMA came in December 1920 when the students from the Rangoon College decided to boycott the government for the Rangoon University Charter Act of 1920. It was Burma's first nationwide student boycott, dissenting voice against colonial education and governance. While the YMBA leaders worked in the drafting of the University Act, the YMBA and later GCBA supported the student boycott and worked closely with the student leaders.¹⁰³

The coming section on the GCBA will explain this development and the work of the newly morphed nationalist organization in detail.

3.3. The Rise of political monks

Before discussing the YMBA's evolution to a nationalist organization, the author thinks it is important to discuss the religion-politics nexus/entanglement from the side of the Sangha. Traditionally, the Sangha order in pre-colonial Burma was not bureaucratized or loosely

¹⁰² Thakhin Ba Maung, *History of Wuntharhu Struggle (1906-1936)*.76

¹⁰³ Thakhin Ba Maung.107

controlled. Below the Thatanabaing were provincial head monks, who acted like bishops in their areas. The Thatanabaing, in literal translation, the owner of Sasana) held the highest authority over the Sangha and religious affairs. However, there always were different monastic orders with their head, Sangha leaders, nominally submitted to the authority of Thatanabaing.¹⁰⁴ Successive Konbaung kings since Bodawpaya attempted to unify different monastic orders into one. Yet, they failed to succeed.¹⁰⁵ Thatanabaing had a twelve-member council (Thudharma council) staffed with influential senior monks, helping with the managerial and theological affairs. However, both the council and Thatanabaing were appointed by the royal appointments.¹⁰⁶ Thatanabaing, traditionally, was the old tutors during the king's childhood.¹⁰⁷ They were also term-limited so that each new King appointed a new Thatanabaing. Thatanabaing traditionally were politically neutral and apathetic to state affairs.¹⁰⁸ They were the junior partners and subordinate to the Burmese Buddhist polity, centered on the king as the Dharmaraja and Asoka persona.

When the British came, they were quite apathetic to the Thatanabaing's position and Buddhism. The initial British reasoning was that the Burmese should not be uncertain over the Buddhism position in the country since Burma, which was annexed in the 1860s, has enjoyed the protection given by the British.¹⁰⁹ However, political agents who stayed in Mandalay since the 1870s, like Colonel Sladen, advocated for British recognition of the Thatanabaing system with two different Thatanabaing, one in the r Burma and another in Mandalay. Sladen cites the influential role Sangha played in society. The British eventually

¹⁰⁴ Smith, *Religion and Politics in Burma*.15-17

¹⁰⁵ Pranke, "'Bodawpaya's Madness.'"

¹⁰⁶ Turner, *Saving Buddhism*.35

¹⁰⁷ Thant Myint-U, *The Making of Modern Burma*.86

¹⁰⁸ Thant Myint-U.73-74

¹⁰⁹ Smith, *Religion and Politics in Burma*.44-45

recognized the Thatanabaing elected by Thibaw. However, the clerical authority of the office was limited to Upper Burma.¹¹⁰ While Thatanabaing remained cordial toward the British government, the monks, as the order, became increasingly agitated. While local historians like Than Tun noted certain monks collaborating with the British to instill imperial loyalty among the British, the monasteries and monks in the Burmese rural areas were crucial in the insurrections raised immediately after the annexation.¹¹¹

During the pacification campaigns in Upper Burma, British officers also noted the role of the monks in these rebellions. British officers have noted that monasteries played a central role in the rebellions of pretender princes. The British Indian troops even encountered the monks who disrobed to become leaders of the insurgent troops. Throughout Upper Burma, various influential monks and pretender princes entered into alliances against the British until Upper Burma was pacified. The monks enthusiastically supported the movement when the new national politics and mobilization emerged in British Burma.¹¹²

Donald Eugene Smith, in his book, also noted that limiting the clerical authority of Thatanabaing to Upper Burma backfired for the British. He discusses this gives way for the politically agitated young Buddhist monks to escape the Thatanabaing's authority in Upper Burma and raise their firebrand anti-British speeches in Rangoon, the capital of Lower Burma.¹¹³ In pre-colonial society, Sangha as the institution held influence but not power. They were also indoctrinated to refrain from worldly affairs. Therefore, the rise of such political monks in Burma was unprecedented in Burmese society.

¹¹⁰ Turner, *Saving Buddhism*.10-11

¹¹¹ Tun, "A History of School Textbooks."

¹¹² Winfield, "Buddhism and Insurrection in Burma, 1886–1890."

¹¹³ Smith, *Religion and Politics in Burma*.31-38

These monks were less important in the Sangha hierarchy but became influential through their anti-British firebrand speeches. British rule has cost them royal patronage, a formal position as the education provider, and a decaying influence among the urban Burmese. British refusal to recognize or appoint the new Thatnabaing after the death of Thibaw's Thatnabaing in 1896 also meant these political monks were now officially freed of formal institutional scrutiny.¹¹⁴

Therefore, the YMBA's political mobilization in this period was paralleled by the rise of the so-called political monks in British Burma. They resisted the British colonial order and acted as one of the primary agents in the religion-politics entanglement in Burma. These monks also experienced the exile of the last Konbaung king, Thibaw, to India and the violent pacification campaign of the British Indian Army in upper Burma.¹¹⁵ Compounded with these experiences and frustrated by the loss of royal patronage, they became the first vocal critics of the British colonial government in British Burma.

The British attempted to integrate the monks into the new colonial order by using the existing monastic education system for colonial education. The monks, nonetheless, were not receptive to the ideas of modern education and especially in matters of science. When tasked with establishing a colonial education system, Sir Arthur Phayre, the first commissioner of Lower Burma, attempted to combine the colonial school system and the existing monastic education.¹¹⁶ Nevertheless, the monks saw mathematics, geography, and science as animalic

¹¹⁴ Turner, *Saving Buddhism*.60-61

¹¹⁵ Sarkisyanz, *Buddhist Backgrounds of the Burmese Revolution*.102-103

¹¹⁶ Alexander Campbell, "Education in Burma," *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 94, no. 4719 (1946): 438–48.

teaching and decadence.¹¹⁷ The British had to expand their education service platforms. The expansion resulted from the colonial education system with the prospects for better social mobility in colonial society. Monastic education completely lost the competition in urban societies, with Burmese families opting for the new government schools.

U Ottama(1879-1936) was one of the leading figures as a political monk. Ottama studied in India as a young novice and later in Japan. He was well-connected and traveled as a Buddhist monk of the time. Ottama visited France, Egypt, French Indochina, and China. Ottama met with Sun Yat Sen in China and discussed the Chinese nationalist struggle. Until his return in 1910, Ottama stayed in Japan and toured the country. His experience with Japanese modernization and the Japanese victory over Russians in the Russo-Japanese War also shaped his view on nationalism. Hended to steer Burmese nationalism into more militant and aggressive later mobilization. Upon returning to British Burma, he was connected with the recently founded YMBA and immediately endorsed the organization and helped mobilize. He became an outspoken critic of the colonial government and used his position as a Buddhist monk to agitate the population.¹¹⁸ In the 1920s, Ottama took a more radical turn by directly attacking the colonial government and mobilizing the people the anti-British sentiment. Ottama attacked the government for debasing Buddhist moral values and pushing out the religion's role in Burmese society. After criticizing the lieutenant governor of British Burma, Sir Reginald Craddock, in his infamous line "Craddock Get Out," Ottama was arrested and imprisoned by the government for sedition and conspiracy, making him one of the first political prisoners in colonial national politics. However, Ottama condemned the violence means to achieve political goals, as Indian National Congress largely inspired his

¹¹⁷ Tun, "A History of School Textbooks."

¹¹⁸ Anindita Choudhry, "National Hero U. Ottama," *International Journal of Science and Research (IJSR)*, 2019, <https://www.ijsr.net/>.

mobilization and tactics.¹¹⁹ Yet, his belligerent stance toward the British and agitation was noted by Burmese historians as the later inspiration for the more militant and radical Burmese nationalism in the 1930s. Ottama was also responsible for establishing a formal Sangha political organization, Sanghasammagi, the Sangha Union, in 1921. The organization influenced the General Council of All Burmese Association (GCBA) actions and later factions. However, Ottama's political influence was unable to sustain through the radical Burmese nationalism of the 1930s, which started imagining an independent Burmese nation-state, moving away from the Home Rule and Dominion status within the empire. His political capital was completely exhausted when Ottama tried to rally against the separation of Burma from India in 1935.¹²⁰ Nevertheless, Ottama's legacy and influence on Burmese nationalism are undeniable.

Another political monk who had a major influence on the growing nationalism in Burma was Wisara (1899-1929). Unlike Ottama, Wisara does not have extensive foreign travel experience and education. Wisara was also not a lifelong monk like Ottama and other political monks. He was born in the recently pacified Upper Burma and ordained as a novice during childhood. He left the monastery to join his family and married at 18. However, due to familial and personal problems, Wisara finally joined the monkhood for life in 1912. Wisara studied Buddhist scripture in Mandalay throughout the 1910s. After being agitated by the YMBA's shoe question in 1917, Wisara became a political monk. Throughout the 1920s, Wisara traveled around the country, preached anti-government sermons, and called for non-cooperation with the government, mainly following the tax resistance campaign. Wisara was arrested and imprisoned for his inflammatory speeches in 1926. The incidents during his first

¹¹⁹ Department of Historical Research and National Library, *Burmese Political History (1906-1930)*.128

¹²⁰ Choudhry, "National Hero U. Ottama."

imprisonment foreshadowed his demise. During his first imprisonment, Wisara fought for the rights of imprisoned Buddhist monks to keep their robes eaten accordingly to Buddhist regulations and be exempted from hard labor.¹²¹ Wisara confronted the prison authorities with hunger strikes for such rights. Prison authorities informally agreed to Wisara's demands during this time. However, on his second imprisonment in 1929, Wisara was not granted such rights and went on hunger strikes.¹²² According to the British officials, Wisara's called for violence against the colonial officials, and British residents in Burma denied him such rights as political prisoners and Buddhist monks. After going on hunger strikes for 166 days, Wisara died of exhaustion. Wisara's alleged words, "Be wise when I am gone," stroke the nationalist zeal of the growing Burmese nationalist movement.¹²³

Many monks followed Ottama and Wisara's critical stance in the 1920s, showing their hatred toward the colonial government.¹²⁴ Donald Smith noted several monks inciting racial and political agitation among the populace Thawbita, a traveling preacher in lower Burma, was arrested for sedition after touring the countryside, preaching conspiratorial sermons on Indians and British conspiring to sterilize Burmese Buddhist girls and depopulating the country. Thawbita also was charged with sedition. During the height of the "Shoe problem/question" movement, some monks tried to discipline European visitors violently. With the rising political questions on Home Rule and administrative reforms, Buddhist monks reportedly preached to boycott the taxes until the Burmese achieved Home Rule status.¹²⁵ By the late 1910s, Buddhist monks also organized in parallel with the YMBA by forming unions and associations. Even the monks who do not belong and associate with these

¹²¹ Sagaing Han Tin, *The Annals of Burma (First Volume)*.342-343

¹²² Sarkisyanz, *Buddhist Backgrounds of the Burmese Revolution*.134

¹²³ Sagaing Han Tin, *The Annals of Burma (First Volume)*.343

¹²⁴ Thakhin Ba Maung, *History of Wuntharnu Struggle (1906-1936)*.135-138

¹²⁵ Smith, *Religion and Politics in Burma*.100-102

alleged political monks are stepping into politics as the YMBA has gained momentum in the new national politics. By 1920-21, when the YMBA officially changed its name to the General Council of All Burmese Association (GCBA), the endorsements from the influential local monks became important political capitals for the different factions within the GCBA. The following section will discuss this nexus of monks and national politics during GCBA.

3.4. The GCBA (1921-1930)

After the ninth annual conference of YMBA in 1921, the organization was fully transformed into the first-ever national political organization in British Burma, the General Council of Burmese Associations (GCBA). The conference saw the first political maneuvering and scheming in colonial Burmese politics. It plagued the entirety of the GCBA politics in the 1920s with factionalisms. It has escalated the political confrontation trend that the YMBA started. Immediately after the first student boycott of 1920, the GCBA annual conference of 1921 called for the designation of “National Day”, “Amyothar Day”. Amyothar meant the nation in the Burmese. The decision was made in the 1922 conference, designating the first day of the student boycott, June 17, 1922, as the National (Amyothar) Day adding another layer to the discussion of the growing Amyo, Batha, Sasana, and Pinyar discourse in the Burmese public. The GCBA cited the significance of the nationwide student boycott for the Amyo, Batha, Sasana, and Pinyar causes, connecting the student strikes to Buddhist politics.¹²⁶

During the proclamation of the GCBA formation, YMBA founder and member of the first YMBA delegation, Ba Phe, and others were in London discussing with the British officials

¹²⁶ Phyoo Win Latt, “PROTECTING AMYO: THE RISE OF XENOPHOBIC NATIONALISM IN COLONIAL BURMA (1906-1941)” (National University of Singapore, 2019).74-75

for the administrative reforms during the time of the conference.¹²⁷ Ba Phe and the delegates were circumscribed from the leadership positions of the newly formed GCBA. Moreover, GCBA, led by newly elected Chairman Chit Hlaing, also decided to boycott any new administrative schemes and inquiry commissions without informing the second London delegation.¹²⁸

Ba Phe was agitated, and his faction started to form within the organization. The Whyte committee formed by the Indian government and other British administrative recommendations decided to expand the Dyarchy administration of India to Burma. Under the scheme, a colonial legislative chamber was to be expanded and elected. The first elections in Burma were to be introduced. Lieutenant Governor had to form a cabinet with the elected deputies of the legislative chambers.¹²⁹



Figure 4. The insignia of the General Council of All Burmese Association(GCBA)¹³⁰

¹²⁷ Second London Delegation of YMBA was led by Ba Phe, Pu, and Thein Maung in 1920. Tun Shein from the first delegation was elected himself to stay in Rangoon due to failing health. Tun Shein died the next year.

¹²⁸Chit Hlaing came into the YMBA around 1918 after the shoes question through the familial connections with Tun Shein. It was Chit Hlaing who also initiated to send second delegation led by Ba Phe to London.

Department of Historical Research and National Library, *Burmese Political History (1906-1930)*.91

¹²⁹ Department of Historical Research and National Library.225

¹³⁰ Department of Historical Research and National Library.

GCBA, as Ba Phe suggested, was escalating at this point. Indian-influenced non-cooperation politics was winning within the GCBA over negotiation. It even proclaimed excommunicating the members cooperating with the Whyte committee if they came to Rangoon. The colonial government showed the limit of their patience over non-cooperation and GCBA radicalization when the organization decided to boycott the welcoming of the tour of Prince Edward of Wales in Burma in January 1921.¹³¹ GCBA leaders, including Chairman Chit Hlaing, were temporarily exiled from Rangoon until the end of the Prince of Wales's tour.¹³²

The factionalism within the GCBA grew stronger as the Burma Reform Bills of 1922 were enforced in June 1922. The Dyarchy administration of the Indian empire was officially introduced into British Burma province. The first-ever election in British Buwaswere organized by the end of the year, November 1922. The faction led by Chit Hlaing, Tharyarwaddy U Pu, and Tun Aung Kyaw (Hlaing-Pu-Kyaw GCBA) was rallying for the boycotting of the Dyarchy elections, insisting on fighting for the Home Rule status. Ba Phe, the other 20 leaders of the GCBA (21 personnel GCBA), were calling to join the election and fight the colonial governance within the system.¹³³

The split officially came when the colonial government started the official registration process for the election on 13 July 1922. Ba Phe's 21 personnel GCBA openly declared they would join the election and registered for their tickets. Ba Phe's position, as discussed, was to advance the Burmese interest within the colonial governance framework. They declared they

¹³¹ Edward VIII who later abdicated.

¹³² Sagaing Han Tin, *The Annals of Burma (First Volume)*.364

¹³³ Aye Aye Nwe, "U Ba Phe and Burmese Political History (1906-1948)" (Department of History, Rangoon University, 1979).62-63

would work on the YMBA's original position of separation from India, eventual elevation to Dominion/Home Rule status for Burma, and better Buddhist political rights.¹³⁴ However, his faction was mocked as power-hungry collaborators.

Hlaing-Pu-Kyaw GCBA responded to Ba Phe by escalating the non-cooperation politics. The non-cooperation politics was packaged and burmanized as the Wuntharnu movement. By 1920, being a Burmese patriot and Burmese is closely associated with being Wuntharnu. The local GCBA chapters under Chit Hlaing were also called as Wuntharnu associations. The Wuntharnu movement is a mix of political and economic nationalism that continued the YMBA's already established Amyo, Batha, Sasana, and Pinyar. It called for non-cooperation with the colonial government, avoiding paying taxes and rejecting any form of submission to colonial authority. Wuntharnu politics gave rise to "No associations" in Burma, which became the power base for Hlaing-Pu-Kyaw GCBA.¹³⁵ No associations called for boycotting of Dyarchy, refusal to pay taxes, and non-cooperation with the government. These associations were offshoots of local GCBA chapters and often staffed by the same members. They became the basis of more radical nationalist politics of the 1930s. The British government responded to this disobedience by outlawing these associations and arresting individuals within these organizations. Particularly in lower Burma, where most farm and poll taxes were collected, the colonial government responded with particular harshness. By 1925, over 300 "No Associations" or Wuntharnu-related associations were outlawed.¹³⁶

The ideological components of Wuntharnu politics will be discussed at length in the following chapter.

¹³⁴ Aye Aye Nwe.65

¹³⁵ "No Dyarchy, No Taxes, No Cooperation" Three principle of No Associations.

¹³⁶ Department of Historical Research and National Library, *Burmese Political History (1906-1930)*.232-233

Hlaing-Pu-Kyaw GCBA also secured major support from the Sangha and their newly established Sangha Union. Chit Hlaing's charisma and influence grew disproportionately in this decade. Through non-cooperation politics and support from the Sangha, Chit Hlaing solidified himself as the national leader. In 1922 and 1924, GCBA chapters decided to bestow him the title "President" and called him President Chit Hlaing in their public events. Throughout the 1920s, Chit Hlaing was known as the uncrowned king of Burma.¹³⁷ Chit Hlaing was treated as a king, with local GCBA chapters welcoming him in royal fashion whenever he visited. Chit Hlaing got almost dictatorial power over the GCBA with the ruling in the 1924 conference that gave him unrestricted and unchecked access to the organization's finances.¹³⁸

However, GCBA splintering did not end with Chit Hlaing and Ba Phe split. Another contender to both came from another person, Soe Thein. Soe Thein was another educated western Burmese representing a newly emerged intelligentsia class in British Burma. Throughout the 1910s, he spent time in Japan and eventually chose the United States for his studies. Soe Thein returned to Burma in 1920 after finishing his geology studies and joining Chit Hlaing's Hlaing-Pu-Kyaw GCBA. He quickly rose to prominence due to his education and foreign experiences. Chit Hlaing's GCBA lacked foreign-educated personnel after Ba Phe's split. Soe Thein faction was formed within Hlaing-Pu-Kyaw. After several factional power struggles, Chit Hlaing was accused of misappropriating the organizational funds. Soe Thein's faction officially formed its own GCBA in 1924 with the backing of Sangha leaders.¹³⁹

¹³⁷ Sarkisyanz, *Buddhist Backgrounds of the Burmese Revolution*. 132

¹³⁸ Thakhin Ba Maung, *History of Wuntharhu Struggle (1906-1936)*. 264

¹³⁹ 6/30/2023 9:40:00 AM 274-275

Soe Thein's GCBA and his leadership were noted for his militancy.¹⁴⁰ His GCBA members fiercely boycotted the colonial taxation schemes and rejected colonial governance. One infamous member of Soe Thein's GCBA was Sayar San, who later led the peasant rebellions of 1930. Sayar San's peasant rebellion 1930 is another worthy research topic as it involved Buddhist symbolism, millenarian thinking, and peasant politics.¹⁴¹ By the late 1920s, Soe Thein's faction surpassed Chit Hlaing in popularity as the rural agrarian population supported Soe Thein's focus on farmers' rights and hostile position against British land taxation policies and Indian money lenders.

This militancy of Soe Thein was the leading cause for yet another split of GCBA. In 1929, after Soe Thein's decision to tax boycott and accelerate the agitation of the rural farming population toward the government became a major concern even among his radical supporters and the monks who supported Soe Thein's radicalism. Soe Thein's pleas to form volunteer corps were also considered the eventual step toward an armed insurrection. The monks, therefore, plotted a scheme in the 1929 Annual Conference of Soe Thein GCBA.¹⁴² The plan was to overthrow Soe Thein by voting him out and electing Su, a Chemist who studied in Weimar Germany. However, the monks were split over the issues, and another faction of GCBA was formed under Su.¹⁴³

¹⁴⁰ Department of Historical Research and National Library, *Burmese Political History (1906-1930)*.262-263

¹⁴¹ Sayar San (1876-1931) was a rural organizer of Soe Thein GCBA in the 1920s. He experienced first-hand on economic hardships and exploitation faced by the rural agrarian Burmese which were compounded by the effects of the Great Depression in 1930. After the colonial officials refused to introduce temporary tax reliefs on cultivators, Sayar San led a peasant rebellion in Lower Burma. He proclaimed himself as a Buddhist King and Buddha-to-be, who will drive the infidel British out of Burma and restore Buddhist order in the society. The case of Sayar San also involved Asoka paradigm and Asoka persona.

¹⁴² Kyaw Swe, "The History of Sangha Samagi (1919-1937)."108-109

¹⁴³ Thakhin Ba Maung, *History of Wuntharnu Struggle (1906-1936)*.305-309

By 1930, there were four major GCBA splinters: Ba Phe's 21 personnel GCBA, Chit Hlaing's Hlaing-Pu-Kyaw GCBA, Soe Thein GCBA, and the newly formed Su GCBA. Despite the apparent splintering, common features in these GCBA were personality-based leadership of respective leaders and Sangha leaders providing moral and spiritual guidance. Rather than using political manifestos and ideologies, these GCBA, which were, in essence, political parties, used influential monks as their political platform. Personality-based leadership was apparent in Chit Hlaing and Soe Thein's cases. Both have massive following in their respective population bases and exercise charismatic and inspirational leadership. Each faction has influential monks taking the role of moral leaders who are also the leaders of their own Sangha institutional body Sangha Samagi, Sangha Union.¹⁴⁴ This nexus of Sangha and GCBA factional leaders are mimicking the Asoka persona and the Buddhist polity in the colonial context. The monks, especially the Sangha Samagi leaders, expressed the need for an Asoka persona, a political patron to protect Sasana.¹⁴⁵ However, unlike the royal period, where the Sangha is a junior partner in the ruling Dharmaraja discourse, this Asoka persona is contested between the Sangha and the GCBA factional leaders. The next chapter will discuss more on this contestation.

Nevertheless, for GCBA and its many factions, Sayar San's rebellion in 1930 could be regarded as the closing chapter of their leading role in Burmese colonial politics. The GCBA splintering and factions continued in the 1930s, especially during the discussion of the separation of Burma from India. However, by the mid-1930s, due to in-fighting and

¹⁴⁴ Kyaw Swe, "The History of Sangha Samagi (1919-1937)." 126-134

¹⁴⁵ Roshan de Silva Wijeyeratne, "Buddhism, the Asokan Persona, and the Galactic Polity: Rethinking Sri Lanka's Constitutional Present," *Social Analysis* 51, no. 1 (March 1, 2007): 156–78, <https://doi.org/10.3167/sa.2007.510111>.

corruption among the GCBA leaders and factions, the Wunthernu movement waned. Chit Hlaing's reputation was diminished after financial scandals and corruption among his rank. Chit Hlaing dropping non-cooperation policy in 1925 also reduced most of the support he had left after the scandals. Chit Hlaing's Hlaing-Pu-Kyaw GCBA joined the legislative elections in 1925. Chit Hlaing became the speaker of the colonial legislature in 1932 and 1935. Chit Hlaing also attended the Burma Round Table Conferences (1931-1932) in London, which discussed the potential of separating Burma from India. Ironically, the uncrowned king of Burma also attended the coronation of George VI (1936-1952) in 1937. Soe Thein retired from his political activities after the Saya San revolt. While the colonial government briefly outlawed the Soe Thein GCBA after the outbreak of the revolt in 1930, Soe Thein decided to retire completely from politics.¹⁴⁶ Other GCBA factions absorbed the members of the Soe Thein GCBA. As aforementioned in the previous chapter, Ba Phe survived well into the 1930s, WWII, and post-war politics. However, in the 1930s, Ba Phe took the name Nationalist Party, rather than 21 personnel GCBA in the elections and the legislative chambers.¹⁴⁷

GCBA factions of the late 1930s existed in all but name. The dropping of the non-cooperation policy and apathy to the Saya San revolt by most factions except Soe Thein's meant they had lost the support of rural Burmese communities. The GCBA factions still played an influential role in the above-mentioned Burma Round Table Conferences and competed against each other on the issues of Separation from India. Ba Phe's GCBA turned nationalist party favored the separation. Chit Hlaing and other GCBA's lobbied to remain in the Indian empire.¹⁴⁸ This ideological shift caused them the support of the urban middle classes, especially the educated

¹⁴⁶ Fabian Ba Khine, *Burmese Political History* (Rangoon: Tun Aye, 1936).134

¹⁴⁷ Aye Aye Nwe, "U Ba Phe and Burmese Political History (1906-1948)."138

¹⁴⁸ Fabian Ba Khine, *Burmese Political History*.212

and politically active university students of Rangoon. Also, another contender to personality-based politicians like Chit Hlaing arises in the 1930s. Dr. Ba Maw, another Cambridge graduate, lawyer, and politician, rose to fame after he served as the defense lawyer for the trial of former Soe Thein GCBA member turned peasant revolt leader Sayar San.¹⁴⁹ He stayed in colonial politics and founded a Fabian-like socialist Poor Man's Party (Sinyethar in Burmese), and his policies in the legislative chamber appealed to the rural agrarian population whose insurrection had been squashed recently and facing economic hardships caused by the great depression. He became the first premier of British Burma after the Separation from India in 1937. GCBA factions became a shell of their former self in the 1930s, as noted by the contemporary politician and writer Fabian Ba Khine.¹⁵⁰ Thus, the surviving GCBA factions could not survive independently or compete with the rise of ideologically charged and radical nationalist politics of the Thakhin movement and politicians like Dr. Ba Maw in the late 1930s.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁹ An interesting fact to note about Dr. Ba Maw (1893-1977) is that he is a Christian unlike other politician of the time. Ba Maw could be the first and only Christian politician which served at the top positions in the colonial Burma. While he may be seen as the deviation from the Political Buddhism-dominated colonial politics, Ba Maw pandered to the elements of Political Buddhism. Ba Maw did secure the support of an obscure minor GCBA faction in 1935, supplementing his Poor Man's Party base.

Cady, John F., *A History of Modern Burma* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1958)

Tinsa Maw Naing, *A Burmese Heart*, (Y.M.V. Han, 2015)

¹⁵⁰ Fabian Ba Khine, *Burmese Political History*. 227

¹⁵¹ Thakhin movement was founded by "We the Burma Association" (Doh Bamar Asiayone in Burmese) by Ba Thaung in 1930 after the anti-Indian labor riots of 1930. The association members used the prefix "Thakhin" which literally meant "Master" out of spite for the British colonial bureaucrats who used the same prefix as a pseudo-honorary title among the Burmese public, especially in the rural areas. Thakhins were considered as a fringe radical political group at the start. They were not considered serious political opponents by both the mainstream GCBA politicians or the British colonial officials. However, Thakhins were popular among the politically and nationally conscious young Burmese and university students. They saw it as an alternative to the exhaustive and corrupted politics of GCBA factions. Thakhin movement's call for Independent Burma attracted a lot of Burmese young nationalist and university students. These young Burmese university students became the core of the Thakhin movement and successfully mobilized the nationwide student and labor movement in the 1930s. Thakhins briefly colluded with Ba Maw and his Poor Man's Party founding Freedom Bloc coalition against the British in 1938 which Ba Maw was arrested for his anti-British speeches. The Thakhins like Aung San, Nu, and many others became the core of the future Burmese Independence Army and the Anti-Fascist People Freedom League, which dominated WWII

3.5. Conclusion

The first three decades of the 20th century in Burma were one of rapid changes and disruptions. The Burmese society experienced a wholesale transformation into a colonial society by the British government. The socioeconomic changes of Lower Burma were brought into Upper Burma, centering Mandalay and turning subsistence agriculture into commercial, with rice becoming a cash crop. The Indian and Chinese immigration was changing the cultural landscape of the society. The loss of the Monarchy as an institution in Burmese society produced a scarred and painful memory in this period. Buddhism, in particular, suffered a heavy blow by losing its main political patron and Asoka persona. These colonial shocks were translated into a moral panic and status anxiety in Burmese lay society and the monks. The initial response to these shocks was the insurrections that sprawled across the countryside of Upper Burma. The monks aided and abetted the insurrections, with the monasteries in Upper Burma becoming the base of operation for many insurrection leaders and pretender princes. After the pacification, the monks became the first anti-colonial political organizers. Monks like Ottama brought the idea of Home Rule and self-governance to the colony of British Burma.

At the turn of the century, a new Burmese college-educated intelligentsia emerged in British Burma. Despite their modern and Western education, these young people shared the Burmese moral panic and status anxiety of the public. Such is clear in May Aung's lecture on defining modern Burmese. These young people started testing the political tolerance of the colonial

and post-war Burmese politics. Aung San was revered as the national leader and father of independence. Nu led the first tumultuous decade of the post-colonial Burma. Khin Yi, *The Dohbama Movement in Burma (1930-1938)*, (Ithaca, New York: Southeast Asian Program Publication, 1988)

government by founding the Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA) in 1906. The YMBA started as a cultural and religious organization, and religious issues like the "Shoe question" present an opening for political mobilization. YMBA invested more in the political turn of the organization by sending delegations to the Imperial center, London, lobbying for administrative reforms over the colony, British Burma. The YMBA also found allies in the monks, the Buddhist Sangha, as they were the first anti-British agitators. With the support and collaboration from monks like Ottama and Wisara, YMBA ventured more into the pre-electoral colonial politics of British Burma in the 1910s.

After cementing its position as the national political organization, YMBA became British Burma's first proper political organization, the General Council of All Burmese Associations (GCBA), in 1921. Both YMBA and GCBA became launching platforms for the political careers of individuals like Ba Phe, Chit Hlaing, May Aung, and others. Buddhist politics and factionalism dominated Burmese colonial politics of the 1920s. It was also the point where the Burmese national identity was bonded to Buddhism and transformed and mixed the Burmese Theravada Buddhism with nationalist politics. The next chapter will discuss how Political Buddhism in Burma has unfolded and its characteristics.

4. The Infusion of Buddhism into Burmese Nationalism and Politics

4.1. Introduction

The pre-1930 Burmese politics could be defined as the gradual shift from negotiation to a radical turn. However, this period saw the infusion of Buddhism into the Burmese national identity and the transformation of Buddhism into a political religion. Buddhist revival led by the Young Men Buddhist Association (YMBA) has given birth to Burmese national consciousness and the subsequent nationalist movement. The Burmese national consciousness is seen clearly in the YMBA's successor, the General Council of All Burmese Associations (GCBA). GCBA, while later fractured into various factions, is the first nationalist political platform. However, as discussed in the previous chapter, this nationalist platform has the major influence of the monks, Sangha. In this period, the monks or Sangha resisted colonial governance individually and attempted to organize themselves institutionally. Such institutionalization was developed in parallel with the Burmese laypeople's nationalist mobilization. This incident is presented in the development of the Sangha Union (Sangha Samagi) and its interaction with the GCBA factions. The interaction is the official point of contact between the national identity and the religion in colonial Burma. It is also where Theravada Buddhism in Burma transformed into Political Buddhism. This Burmese Political Buddhism originated from the YMBA's discourse of Amyo, Batha, Sasana, and Pinyar. The YMBA's discourse was transformed and refined into Wuntharnu politics by the GCBA. Thus, the chapter will discuss the rise of the Sangha Samagi/Sangha Union, its implication in Burmese colonial politics, and the characteristics of Burmese political Buddhism in this period.

4.2. The Sangha Samagi (Sangha Union/The Union of Buddhist Monks) (1923-1940)

Monks like Ottama, Wisara, and other political monks have been preaching their anti-British firebrand speeches before the mobilization of YMBA and the GCBA. Ottama and Wisara also closely worked with the YMBA and GCBA. However, by the late 1910s and 1920, the political monk realized the need to organize. This is to prevent tragedies like Wisara and to influence and provide moral guidance to the growing GCBA. The first Sangha Samagis emerged in 1919 and 1920 in Mandalay (Upper Burma) and Rangoon (Lower Burma). The weakened position of Thatanabaing by the British also helped establish the Sangha Samagis as the Thatanabaing's edict on the non-interference in politics and the pro-British proclamations fell silence to the Sangha majority by the end of 1910s. However, the Sangha Unions formed are not a united Sangha union. These are separate organizations with the local influential monks in leadership positions.

Nevertheless, attempts were made to unite the two Sangha Unions of Mandalay and Rangoon in 1920-1921, coinciding with the transformation of YMBA to GCBA. Ottama's negotiations and encouragements also played a role in the formation of United Sangha Samagi, which would play a role in the GCBA factionalism of the 1920s. By 1923, all Rangoon and Mandalay Sangha Unions leaders agreed to form a single united organization. This display of Upper and Lower Burmese regionalism has played a role in the future politics of Sangha Samagi and GCBA, which will be seen in the latter parts of the chapter.¹⁵²

The organization aimed to defend the Sasana, promote the causes for Amyo, Batha, Sasana, and Pinyar, to support the publicly recognized Wutharnu organizations (i.e., local GCBA chapters and "No" Associations). Principally, the Sangha Samagi supported the Chit Hlaing

¹⁵² Kyaw Swe, "The History of Sangha Samagi (1919-1937)."13-25

GCBA's non-cooperation and the Home Rule political demand. The local Sangha Samagi chapters were structured and organized along the same line as the GCBA and closely cooperated with the GCBA's works. Even the Sangha Samagi annual conferences were jointly held with the GCBA.¹⁵³

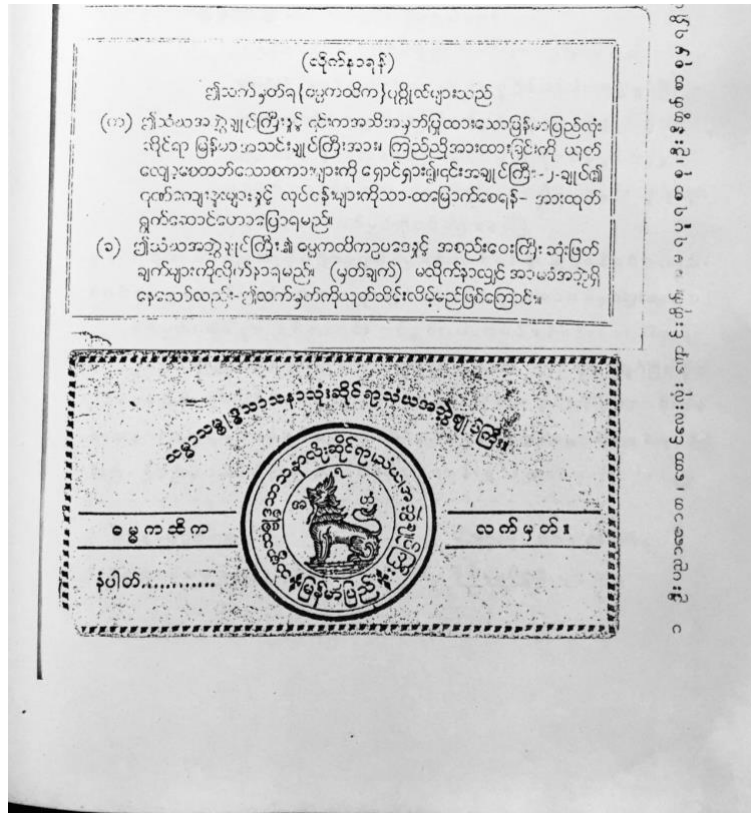


Figure 5. Sangha Samagi membership card for the monks with the organizational insignia.¹⁵⁴

Along with GCBA leaders, Sangha Samagi leaders are searching for their Asoka persona, the ultimate Sasana patron. The search and the need for the Asoka persona are apparent in the founding speech of the Lower Burma Sangha Samagi leader, Kawtilya.

“In ancient times, the people and the Sangha had to rely on the king for the Sasana. Now, I have to accept the responsibility of

¹⁵³ Kyaw Swe.78-88

¹⁵⁴ Kyaw Swe. 120

Chairperson and lead for the benefit of Sasana, Sangha, and the people.”¹⁵⁵

Therefore, it is apparent that Sanghas were experimenting with substituting the Monarchy as the provider of the Asoka persona for their religion and Sasana. Despite the two Sangha unions being united as one organization in 1923, the Sangha Samagi was not immune to the factionalism of GCBA. While the Sangha Samagi maintains organizational cohesion after the Ba Phe 21 Personnel GCBA and Hlaing-Pu-Kyaw GCBA split. They fell prey to the further splintering of the Chit Hlaing’s Hlaing-Pu-Kyaw GCBA.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Hlaing-Pu-Kyaw GCBA in the 1920s was riddled with corruption and financial scandals. Sangha Samagi and its leaders tried to rein in the situation and control Chit Hlaing. However, Chit Hlaing and Tharyarwaddy Pu did not subject to Sangha’s scrutiny. Both GCBA and Sangha Samagi splintered over Chit Hlaing’s financial mishaps. A contemporary politician and writer, Fabian Ba Khine, even proclaimed that Chit Hlaing was given unrestricted access to the GCBA finances to cover up his embezzlement from the organizational funding. The Sangha Samagi leaders tried to wrestle Chit Hlaing’s financial control over the GCBA. Both Chit Hlaing and Tharyarwaddy Pu of Hlaing-Pu-Kyaw GCBA vehemently opposed Sangha Samagi’s plans. Thus, under these circumstances, Sangha's leadership instigated a coup for the leadership changes in the Hlaing-Pu-Kyaw and led to the further splintering of GCBA.

The 12th Annual Conference of GCBA was held on 16 June 1925, and it started with the Sangha leader, Bay Mae Sayardaw’s opening speeches.¹⁵⁶ Bay Mae Sayardaw criticized the

¹⁵⁵ Kyaw Swe, “The History of Sangha Samagi (1919-1937)” (Mandalay University, 1989). 31

¹⁵⁶ GCBA continued the annual conferences of YMBA and numbered accordingly. Sayardaw in literal translation is Grand Master and it is a suffix reserved for Buddhist monks in Burma. The 12th Annual Conference was held in Shwebo, a town in Upper Burma.

conditions of GCBA and the corruption among its leaders. He also proclaimed that the Sangha Samagi would now control and guide the GCBA to strive better for the Amyo, Batha, Sasana, and Pinyar causes. Bay Mae Sayardaw then nominated Soe Thein as the new leader of GCBA. This instance is the first incident in Burmese colonial politics in Sangha. The Buddhist monks attempt to take a more leading role in nationalist politics. It also shows that Burmese Theravada Buddhism is graduated and transformed into a political Buddhism.

The meeting minutes of the 12th Annual GCBA conference show that Burmese political Buddhism and its manifestations are now playing a role in Burma. On the second and third days of the conference, the following decisions were made:

“2(A). The Sangha Samagi would now manage the GCBA’s finances to avoid misuse and embezzlement. The local GCBA chapters also should follow the Sanghas’ guidance in administration and management.

2(B). Any GCBA conferences involving the heads of the local chapters should organize their meeting only after they get approval from the Sangha Samagi’s central committee.

13. Chit Hlaing and Tharyarwaddy Pu were to be recorded as the personnel responsible for the disorganization of GCBA.”¹⁵⁷

Thus, it is clear that Sangha Samagi leaders were considering taking a prominent managerial role in the GCBA and the role of moral leadership in the GCBA’s political mobilization. The conference also gave the Sangha leaders power to discharge GCBA President. The Sangha Samagi leaders seized the assets of GCBA chapters, including printing presses and Hlaing-

¹⁵⁷ Thakhin Ba Maung, *History of Wuntharnu Struggle (1906-1936)*.274-279

Pu-Kyaw GCBA's headquarters in Rangoon. Soe Thein was officially elected as the GCBA President by the conference. Soe Thein declared his GCBA as the Sangha-guided GCBA.¹⁵⁸ Unlike Chit Hlaing, Soe Thein has to share the Asoka persona with the Sangha leader who nominated him.

However, Chit Hlaing and Tharyarwaddy Pu did not go down without a fight against Sangha Samagi's coup. They brilliantly played the regional divide in the Sangha Samagi that has existed since the organization's founding. The Sangha Samagi, as discussed, was founded by joining the two regional Sangha Unions, Mandalay representing Upper Burma and Rangoon representing Lower Burma. Chit Hlaing and Tharyarwaddy Pu exploited the division by courting and securing the support of the Lower Burma Sangha leaders. The 12th conference, led by Bay Mae Sayardaw, was held in Shwebo, a city in Upper Burma. Shwebo was the royal capital of the founder of the Konbaung dynasty, Alaungpaya. Bay Mae Sayardaw himself a native of Shwebo and educated in the monasteries across Mandalay. Therefore, in the conference, his supporter base was mainly among the monks of Upper Burma.¹⁵⁹

Hlaing-Pu-Kyaw GCBA showed their defiance over the takeover by organizing their own GCBA conference, using the same numbering sequence, the twelfth Annual Conference, with the Sangha leaders from lower Burma supporting Chit Hlaing. It was held in Magway, a city in Lower Burma, mere days after the Soe Thein GCBA conference in Shwebo. Chit Hlaing denounced the Shwebo conference and Soe Thein's election as illegitimate and reassured his position as the GCBA President. Chit Hlaing was nominated as the President until British Burma achieved the Home Rule status.¹⁶⁰ Chit Hlaing's unrestricted access to the GCBA

¹⁵⁸ Thakhin Ba Maung, 305-309

¹⁵⁹ Kyaw Swe, "The History of Sangha Samagi (1919-1937)." 78-126

¹⁶⁰ Fabian Ba Khine, *Burmese Political History*.

finances was also reassured. Chit Hlaing was also maneuvering to prevent another Sangha coup from taking over his GCBA. The decision urged the Sangha to work more on religious affairs rather than politics, GCBA finances, and other mundane socio-economic affairs. Chit Hlaing's conference proclaimed that Sangha should only help in the political causes that did not go against the Buddhist canonical regulations for the Sangha. The conference's closing also affirmed where the Asoka persona lay in Chit Hlaing's GCBA as the conference audience, both the monks and the laymen, chanted "Long Live the President Chit Hlaing" before closing. Chit Hlaing was the sole container of the Asoka persona in the Hlaing-Pu-Kyaw GCBA.¹⁶¹

The dual-contested GCBA conferences of various factions became a feature of Burmese politics throughout the 1920s. However, the two 12th Annual GCBA Conferences of Chit Hlaing and Soe Thein also marked the official divide of Sangha Samagi into two factions, each supporting and backing their respective GCBA's. It also marked where the GCBA-like factionalism took root within the Sangha Samagi ranks. Another GCBA splintering while the Sangha Samagi initiated it has ironically caused another split within the monks' organization.¹⁶²

Soe Thein's increased radicalization through the mid-1920s caused concerns among the Sangha leadership, as the monks believed that Soe Thein would lead the GCBA into an armed insurrection. The Sangha leaders saw such insurrection as a threat to the GCBA movement as the British would crush and outlaw it. Therefore, after Soe Thein's alleged call for the formation of volunteer corps in the 16th Annual Conference held in 1929, the

¹⁶¹ Thakhin Ba Maung, *History of Wuntharnu Struggle (1906-1936)*.280-286

¹⁶² Kyaw Swe, "The History of Sangha Samagi (1919-1937)."78-126

Taunggu, Sangha Samagi faction led by Ye U Sayardaw boycotted the conference and left. Ye U Sayardaw held another parallel conference and elected Su as the GCBA President. Ye U Sayardaw's official position on the founding of another GCBA faction is on Soe Thein's disobedience against the Sangha leadership and his management incompetence. Thus, by citing the 1925 Shwebo conference's power of Sangha Samagi leadership to dismiss the GCBA President, Ye U Sayardaw declared Soe Thein was no longer the GCBA President. However, Soe Thein was supported by his faction of Sangha Samagi's leader. Soe Thein could maintain and raise another GCBA faction through such backing. Soe Thein's GCBA, despite the changes in Sangha Samagi and factions, remained a Sangha-guided GCBA.¹⁶³

The Sangha Samagi's influence was the strongest in Su GCBA. Su was pushed into the background, and Ye U Sayardaw took the more prominent role, and the faction was later called in the public Ye U Sayardaw GCBA rather than Su GCBA. Su even retired from GCBA, returning to his profession by working as a chemist in the British-owned oil company Burma Oil Corporation in 1933.¹⁶⁴ Ye U Sayardaw brought in a minor prince from Konbaung royal family, Htite Tin Wa as the leader of GCBA, mimicking the old Royal-Sangha partnership of Konbaung Burma. Ye U Sayardaw also declared his GCBA as the original GCBA. In this faction, the Sangha leaders gained the complete assumption of the Asoka persona as they successfully subordinated the layman counterpart. This was presented in the candidate selection of the 1935 colonial legislative election; only through Ye U Sayardaw's approval candidates from the faction could compete in the election.¹⁶⁵

The following is the approval letter of Ye U Sayardaw in the fashion of royal decrees.

¹⁶³ Thakhin Ba Maung, *History of Wuntharhu Struggle (1906-1936)*.305-309

¹⁶⁴ Thakhin Ba Maung. 305-309

¹⁶⁵ Kyaw Swe, "The History of Sangha Samagi (1919-1937)."169

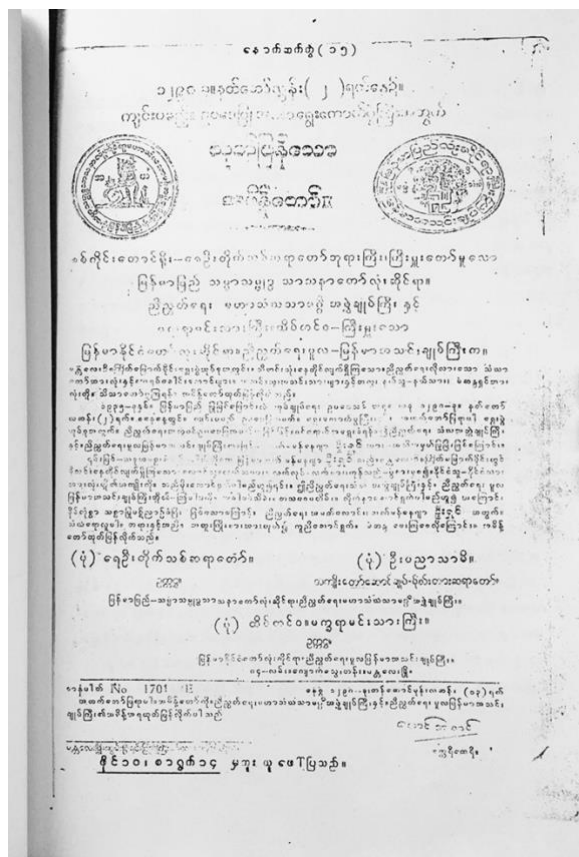


Figure 6. Ye U Sayar Daw's approval letter for a candidate participating in the 1935 legislative election.¹⁶⁶

Therefore, by 1930, four GCBA factions and three Sangha Samagi factions supported their preferred GCBA leaders except Chit Hlaing. In the 1930s, Sangha Samagi splintered further as the GCBA continued. However, as the GCBA lost public support, the Sangha Samagi followed the same pattern. By the Burma Round Table Conferences of 1932, Sangha Samagi lost the support and interest of the majority Burmese population, especially the rural agrarian communities.¹⁶⁷ Like their GCBA counterparts, their political relevance dwindled. Burmese Buddhist politics and Political Buddhism were in retreat by the late 1930s. This was seen clearly in the political mobilization and agitation of the Thakhin movement, where these GCBA and Sangha leaders had little influence in it.

¹⁶⁶ Kyaw Swe.173

¹⁶⁷ Fabian Ba Khine, *Burmese Political History*.

Thakhin movement successfully organized nationwide student boycotts and labor strikes in 1936 and 1938, cementing their position in Burmese politics and nationalism. While GCBA and Sangha Samagi were calling for the Home Rule status, the Thakhin movement demanded complete independence and imagined an independent Burmese nation-state in the 1930s and 1940s. This radical break of the Thakhin movement appealed to the exhaustive Burmese masses who grew tired of GCBA factions and their increasingly disorganized mobilization. The records indicate that Sangha Samagi's faction survived until 1940, organizing their last Annual Conference.¹⁶⁸

The gradual decline and weakening of GCBA and Sangha Samagi were contributed by constant splintering, factionalism, and the advent of more radical nationalist politics.

There is also apparent a definite power struggle between the Sangha and the newly emerged national political leaders to undertake the Asoka persona. In certain factions like Chit Hlaing's, the Asoka persona is invested more in the layman, the politician. Soe Thein GCBA took a middle ground where the Sangha and the politician share the Asoka persona between the Sangha leader and politician. In the Su GCBA case, the monks overpowered the politician, became the GCBA's arbiter, and assumed the Asoka persona.

4.3. The Political Buddhism in Burma

At the turn of the 20th century, Political Buddhism in Burma was influenced and characterized by the socioeconomic and cultural impacts of its time. The British wholesale annexation of Burmese society into the colonial order and the loss of the Konbaung monarchy were always integral and part of the founding narrative. It aided in the emergence of Buddhist politics and nationalism in the first three decades of the 20th century. The

¹⁶⁸ Kyaw Swe, "The History of Sangha Samagi (1919-1937)."126-134

Iterations and the Personification of Burmese Political Buddhism were seen in the many factions of YMBA, GCBA, and Sangha Samagi.

However, despite the chaotic factionalism, splintering, and infightings, these representatives of Political Buddhism in Burma were operating under the same ideological premises. These ideological premises were the core component of 20th-century Political Buddhism in Burma. Even in the 1930s, when the influences of Political Buddhism were in the background, the forces of Burmese nationalism had to conform and appeal to the old Buddhist politics of the previous decades. Thahkhins of We the Burman Association still had to appeal to Buddhist majorities. It was often alleged that We the Burman Association was founded right after the Anti-Indian riot of 1930, responding to and surfing the wave of anti-Indian sentiment. Political Buddhism amplified the anti-Indian sentiment.

After all, the YMBA had closely bonded the Burmese national identity to be Buddhist. Thus, it is unsurprising that the first component of Burmese Political Buddhism started with YMBA. It is the very motto of the YMBA that help in the establishment of Political Buddhism in Burma. Amyo, Batha, Sasana, and Pinyar is the first component of twentieth-century Political Buddhism in Burma. The second is still the extension of the YMBA's Amyo, Batha, Sasana, and Pinyar. In my opinion, the Wuntharnu politics of the GCBA is a refined materialization of YMBA's Buddhist politics. It has a coherent mobilization strategy and political discourses. Thus, it is the second component of Burmese Political Buddhism. The third would be the Asoka persona, contested by the laymen politicians and the Sangha leaders.

The first feature of Burmese Political Buddhism started with the YMBA, the organization that started it all, colonial politics, Political Buddhism, and national identity construction. The discourses it initiated still have relevance in contemporary Burmese politics. Thus, the YMBA's motto, Amyo, Batha, Sasan, and Pinya,^r became the first ground for Political Buddhism to take root in Burma. Amyo, Batha, Sasan, and Pinyar entered the Burmese political scene at the fourth annual conference of the YMBA, where it was confirmed as the organization's official position. However, the conference itself emphasized that the "Amyo" is the most important pillar among the others. The protection of "Amyo" is necessary for the prosperity of Batha(Religion), Sasana, and Pinyar(Education).

Without the "Amyo," the people, Batha and Sasana, will not thrive. In the case of Pinyar (Education), it was seen as a supplementary tool for advancing other causes.¹⁶⁹

In rough translation, Amyo stood for race and nation. Various studies have already discussed the Burmese conceptualization of Amyo. Thant Myint U has discussed Amyo as the blood ties, ancestry, and lineage. Thant Myint U discussed the etymological nature of the "Amyo," tracing it to the word "Lu Myo," which meant race in pre-modern Burma. "Lu Myo" was used to classify and differentiate the races which inhabited pre-modern Burma.¹⁷⁰ Michael Charney, in his Buddhist intellectual history of Konbaung Burma, noted the origin and etymology of Amyo by citing an early Burmese-English dictionary compiled in 1820. Charney recounted that "Amyo" originated as the roots, seeds, and lineage, hinting at the racial concept.¹⁷¹ For the complete genealogical discussion of the word "Amyo," one should read up on Phyo Win Latt's Ph.D. dissertation on the rise of xenophobic nationalism in

¹⁶⁹ Sagaing Han Tin, *The Annals of Burma (First Volume)*.117

¹⁷⁰ Thant Myint-U, *The Making of Modern Burma*. 88-89

¹⁷¹ Charney, *Powerful Learning: Buddhist Literati and the Throne in Burma's Last Dynasty*.131

Burma.¹⁷² All the major discussions over “Amyo” also showed ambiguities in defining race and nation and its politics. The “Amyo” was used interchangeably to discuss and interact with colonial racial and national issues for the Burmese. However, it is apparent that “Amyo” undoubtedly spanned the discussion over the nation's issues in colonial Burma.

The YMBA's call on protecting the “Amyo” and its ambiguities over the race nation means the political discussion and its application can be used in both senses. The politics over “Amyo” started to probe over race relations and the colonial policy over immigration in the late 1910s and became mainstream political issues throughout the 1920s. The YMBA and GCBA politicized the Indian immigration that changed the cultural and ethnic makeup of colonial Burma. The YMBA's official position over the separation of Burma from India was to preserve the ethnic make-up and religious cohesion in the Buddhist Burmese majority country. Like any other emerging nationalism of the time, there was an enemy of Burmese Buddhist nationalism. It was this period that saw the rise of anti-Indian sentiment in Burma. The Indian, colloquially in Burmese known as “Kala,” became the enemy of the “Amyo, Batha, Sasana, and, Pinyar” in Burma. The interracial marriages, especially among the Burmese women and the Indian men, and their domination of all socio-economic and political life strata in colonial Burma were all the causes for such agitation. The “Kala” in Burmese slowly took the negative connotation presented today in contemporary Burma.¹⁷³ By the mid-1920s, the Burmese national duty was to strive for the causes of Amyo, Batha, Sasana, and Pinyar. The race riots of 1930 and 1930 originated in these discourses. The consolidation of these discourses in the Burmese psyches also made it possible for the “Kala” to become the enemy of the Burmese race and nation. In a way, confidence was built through

¹⁷² Phyto Win Latt, “PROTECTING AMYO: THE RISE OF XENOPHOBIC NATIONALISM IN COLONIAL BURMA (1906-1941).”57-71

¹⁷³ Phyto Win Latt.92-100

the ambiguous dealing of Amyo in both racial and national senses. The built-up of confidence and the shift from the ambiguous “Amyo” to the more nationally conscious and confident “Amyothar” (i.e. Nation) was first seen in the student boycott of 1920, where the national consciousness was exercised and shown by the student leaders. The students brought concepts like national struggle and motherland for the first time in British Burma.

Education (Pinyar) as the tool for protecting Amyo, Batha, and Sasana was seen in the YMBA and GCBA leaders’ opinions toward the first nationwide student boycott of 1920. The leaders saw the student struggle, which was secular and nationalistic was viewed as an important milestone for the Amyo, Bath, and Sasana. They were commemorating their boycott day as the National Day, a tradition carried into post-colonial Burma. Also, since the early days of the YMBA, the leaders have been promoting education as the mode of advancement of the Burmese nation.¹⁷⁴ YMBA leaders urged Burmese families and young people to invest more in their education. YMBA and GCBA’s political and material supports were crucial in setting up the so-called national school founded by the boycott students after the 1920 nationwide boycott.

Wuntharu politics extends the YMBA’s Amyo, Batha, Sasana, and Pinyar. Throughout the 1920s, it was an ideological platform for the GCBA and its various factions. After the YMBA officially changed its name to the General Council of All Burmese Association (GCBA) in 1921, all local GCBA chapters under Chit Hlaing, Soe Thein, and later Su were colloquially known as Wuntharu associations. Wuntharu associations became the grass root political organizations and the backbone of colonial political mobilization.¹⁷⁵ Every faction, Chit

¹⁷⁴ Phyto Win Latt. 72-75

¹⁷⁵ Thakhin Ba Maung, *History of Wuntharu Struggle (1906-1936)*. 290

Hlaing, Soe Thein, and whoever basing in the colonial capital, Rangoon, relied on the funds and the widespread support provided by the local Wuntharnu Associations, village nationalist organizations as Gustav Hoffman called it.¹⁷⁶

The Wuntharnu politics is the continuation and the materialization of the YMBA's Amyo, Batha, Sasana, and Pinyar discourse. "Wuntharnu" is a short form of "Wuntharnu Rakhita," a Burmese transliteration of Pali. Wutharnu in Pali is the combination of two words. The first word is "Vamsa," which means lineage. In Burmese understanding, it stands for Amyo (Race-Nation). The second is "Anurakkhit," meaning guarding own kind. Therefore, "Vamsa Annurakkhita," or "Wuntharnu Rakhita," basically protecting one's own Amyo in Burmese colloquial.¹⁷⁷

Wutharnu politics, however, was a mixture of cultural and economic nationalism with xenophobic elements, as Phyo Win Latt stated in his Ph.D. dissertation. Wuntharnu associations attempted to rally the Burmese under the religious identity of Buddhism, further reinforcing the Burmese identity attachment to Buddhism. In the 1920s, local GCBA chapters in the rural areas distributed the Wuntharnu identification cards as part of their membership. The contemporary accounts of the time noted that the Wuntharnu cards worked like pseudo-national identification cards in the rural, with the people brandishing their Wuntharnu cards as part of their Burmese identity.¹⁷⁸ The village Wuntharnu associations were the most militant in the anti-taxation campaigns leading to arrests and outlawing. When Sayar San

¹⁷⁶ Gustaaf Houtman, "Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy," in *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics* (Tokoyo: Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, 1999).234

¹⁷⁷ Houtman.234

¹⁷⁸ Thakhin Ba Maung, *History of Wuntharnu Struggle (1906-1936)*. 183

started his peasant rebellion of 1930 in Tharyardy, the local Wuntharnu members were the backbone of the rebellion.

Moreover, Wuntharnu associations, with political monks' help, launched a campaign to boycott British goods, especially clothing, textiles, and fashion items. The eleventh GCBA Annual Conference in 1924 condemned the using of luxury products and tortoise-shell combs. A female leader named Thein Tin from the GCBA's women's wing, Kumari, led the condemnation.¹⁷⁹ Her reasoning for the condemnation was rather an example of xenophobia seeping into the Burmese psyche. English in Burmese is known as “Inn-Ga-Late” (အင်္ဂလိပ်), and the last word “Late” (လိပ်) bore the same meaning as tortoise if used

standalone. Therefore, to reject the English oppression and attack them spiritually, Thein Tin called for the destruction of tortoise-shell combs from their wardrobe amongst the Burmese women.¹⁸⁰ Both men and women were urged to dress in Burmese-made textiles and clothing by the Wuntharnu associations. Wuntharnu discourses also called for the Burmese to promote and support Buddhist Burmese businesses and boycott Indian and Chinese businesses.

The anti-Indian xenophobia was amplified in the YMBA and GCBA's discourses over women and the distaste for interracial marriages. This period saw a rise in anti-Indian sentiments as Indians were increasingly seen as foreign invaders desecrating the religion and the Burmese women. Burmese women were urged only to marry the Burmese Buddhists and

¹⁷⁹ Kumari was founded in 1919 as the female wing of the YMBA and later GCBA. They were crucial in mobilizing rural women for the GCBA causes and the Wuntharnu politics. The women members were vocal in the taxation issues and loudly called to boycott the poll taxes throughout the 1920s. Thein Tin was active throughout the 1920s and 1930s. She later became a member of the We the Burman association and used adopted their prefix Thakhin Ma (add “Ma” for female prefixes), known as Thakhin Ma Thein Tin.

Tatkato Kyi Mar, *The World of Burmese Women* (Yangon: Sar Pay Beikman, 1975).29

¹⁸⁰ Tatkato Kyi Mar.29

defend the Amyo by refusing to marry non-Burmese, non-Buddhists. The anti-Indian sentiment stemmed from the Indian laborer, junior/middle managers, high-level bureaucrats, and officials prevalent in colonial Burma, especially in Rangoon. This anti-Indian xenophobia played a significant role in the anti-Indian race riots of 1930 and 1938. The “kal,” the Burmese term closely associated with identifying Indians and foreigners, developed more into a negative connotation. The xenophobic turn of Burmese nationalism was apparent in these years.¹⁸¹ Thus, Wuntharnu became a cultural identity that supplemented and compounded the Burmese Buddhist identity; YMBA and GCBA were constructed. The rural and agrarian nature of Wuntharnu politics also features a shift in Burmese politics from the elite mobilization of the YMBA to the rural-driven political mobilization and discourses.

Both the laymen politicians of GCBA and the political monks either operated under the discourse or attempted to steer it. GCBA factions of Chit Hlaing, Soe Thein, and Su also operated under this Wuntharnu Buddhist politics. Chit Hlaing’s GCBA was mobilizing Burmese Buddhist own businesses into forming cooperatives, merchant guilds, and microfinance organizations pandering to the Wuntharnu economic nationalism.¹⁸² Soe Thein tried to move Wuntharnu politics into a more radical and aggressive form by urging his followers to form volunteer corps and fight against the unjust government oppressing their “Amyo and Batha,” race and Religion.¹⁸³

Even Ba Phe’s 21 personnel GCBA while branded as British collaborators, proclaimed their decision to join the dyarchy elections did not deviate them from the Wuntharnu causes. Ba

¹⁸¹ Phyo Win Latt, “PROTECTING AMYO: THE RISE OF XENOPHOBIC NATIONALISM IN COLONIAL BURMA (1906-1941).” 92-153

¹⁸² Thakhin Ba Maung, *History of Wuntharnu Struggle (1906-1936)*.183

¹⁸³ Sagaing Han Tin, *The Annals of Burma (First Volume)*.684

Phe's re-definition of the Wuntharnu politics is to fight the colonial authorities within their system and present a critical voice. As a show of force for this, Ba Phe and his party deputies actively questioned British colonial officials for their punitive policies against the local GCBA chapters, no matter their factional affiliations. Ba Phe maintains consistency with his preference for separation from India, citing religious and cultural differences, a continuation of YMBA policy. When the "No" Associations' campaign for tax boycott was met with British reprisal in 1923, including jailing and the outlawing of the organizations, Ba Phe attempted to reverse the government decision by introducing a motion to dismiss in the legislative chamber. While the motion failed, Ba Phe showed sympathy and ties to the Wuntharnu causes. Ba Phe also showed his solidarity with the anti-taxation campaign of Soe Thein by proposing a committee to report on the possibility of relieving the tax burden for the peasants in 1925.¹⁸⁴

The monks and their Sangha Samagi were the perfect media for disseminating Wuntharnu politics. Their communal ties to the Burmese populace, traditional influence, and role as educators and preachers put them in the position. Many monks viewed that it was their job to educate people not to fear colonial officials and bureaucrats like police officers and administrative officers. Sangha Samagi, as an institution, was also issuing certification to preach as the Dharma lecturer among the public. These Dharma lecturers were not only preaching Buddhist sermons but also the elements of Wuntharnu politics.¹⁸⁵ Some Dharma lecturers, following the footsteps of political monks like Ottama and Wisara, exclusively preached Wuntharnu politics, urging the people to rally under the Buddhist banner. Since the

¹⁸⁴ Department of Historical Research and National Library, *Burmese Political History (1906-1930)*.225-247

¹⁸⁵ Kyaw Swe, "The History of Sangha Samagi (1919-1937)."126-134

late nineteenth century, after the annexation of Upper Burma, the monks were slowly inserted more into the Burmese socio-political life.

This increasing involvement of the Sangha was seen clearly in the third component of Burmese Political Buddhism, the Asoka persona or the struggle for the Asoka persona, to be exact. The Asoka persona continues pre-modern Burmese politics into nationalized colonial politics. It is also the key feature in the 1920s GCBA and Sangha Samagi politics. As discussed in the previous chapters, pre-modern Burmese politics required a Dharmaraja for their Buddhist polity. The kings performed this Dharmaraja personality through donations, temple building, and attempts at preserving Buddhist scripture.¹⁸⁶ The Burmese kings performed these acts also, to prolong Sasana. In the last leg of the Konbaung Burma, the Burmese kings, especially Mindon, re-entrenching this religious duty to legitimize his rule. He succeeded in a way that the public memory surrounding Mindon's to this day was as a pious religious king. Indeed, Mindon was acting as the Asoka persona and performing the necessary rituals to maintain it. The Third-Anglo Bur has disrupted this tradition of the Asoka-like pious Buddhist king protecting Sasana. The British, at first, flirted with the idea of enthroning a Burmese puppet prince to keep this symbolic stability. In fact Senior officials were expecting exiled princes like Nyaungyan to be placed on the throne with British support. A British journalist, Grattan Geary, who traveled with the British troops in the Third Anglo-Burmese War, interviewed Thatanabaing, who has the highest authority over Sangha affairs.¹⁸⁷ Thatanabaing expressed little remorse over the exile of Thibaw; nonetheless, he

¹⁸⁶ Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer: A Study of Buddhism and Polity in Thailand against a Historical Background*, 1976, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511558184>.

¹⁸⁷ Winfield, "Buddhism and Insurrection in Burma, 1886–1890."

expressed wishes to put another Buddhist prince on the throne. The British, however, went on with their plan of complete annexation ending the Konbaung dynasty.¹⁸⁸

The decision has created a huge shock within the Burmese society. The results were the insurrection from the pretender princes and the Buddhist Sangha assisting in the insurrections. The moral panic exerted from the lack of the Asoka persona in Burmese society was compounded by the colonial changes brought by the British. During the insurrection, a new phenomenon rose. The British officers responsible for the pacification campaign noted a new type of pretender who did not have familial ties to the Konbaung dynasty and not minor princes. These persons were called “Min Laung” in Burmese, King-to-be. “Min Laung” were often thought to possess folk magic and supernatural power. These “Min Laung” were heavily supported by the local Sanghas, who hoped to install a new Buddhist ruler to drive out the non-Buddhist heretics. They continued to agitate against the colonial government, whom they saw as non-Buddhist infidels who were destroying Sasana in Burma.¹⁸⁹ Even after the pacification, the monks continued their royal hangover and search for the Asoka persona. The resentment and the loss of the Buddhist ruler, Asoka persona, could be argued as the point of origin for Political Buddhism in Burma. It was also the trigger that transformed Theravada Buddhism into a Political and violent one. As discussed clearly, these Buddhist discourses have incited political and racial violence against the British and Indian immigrants.

At the turn of the 20th century, when the new Burmese intelligentsia started organizing around the Buddhist identity, the Sangha happily joined forces and lent their influence. The

¹⁸⁸ Stewart, *THE PAGODA WAR*.113-117

¹⁸⁹ Winfield, “Buddhism and Insurrection in Burma, 1886–1890.”

Sangha influences were not significant during the YMBA times. However, as the mobilization of Burmese Buddhist identity progressed, the Sangha influence grew so that the 1920s colonial Burmese politics could be argued as the Sangha-defined GCBA politics.

The lay politicians and Sangha leaders wrestle control over the assumption of the Asoka persona. GCBA-Sangha Samagi factionalism discussed in the last chapter can be seen as the struggle to control and assume the Asoka persona in the political space.

In the crude form, the Asoka persona mimicked the monarchy's lost role in the Burmese Buddhist society and attempted to resurrect a Buddhist polity. However, it was to invest power and influence in a single person rather than the institution. This led to personality-based politics, a political trend that survived even after the GCBA decline. Both pre-war and post-war politics saw the rise of personality-based politics in Burma regardless of their ideological affiliations.

4.4. Conclusion

The Sangha Samagi was an institutionalized attempt by the Buddhist monks to intervene in the increasingly nationalized Burmese politics. It could also be viewed as the culmination of the Buddhist politics in Burma. The insurrectionist monks of the 1890s and the political monks like Ottama acted on their behalf. However, the monks in the 1910s and 1920s saw an opening in the new nationalist mobilization of the YMBA and GCBA. They leveraged their roles and influences in Burmese society for political capital. The Sangha Samagi was founded as the monks' response to the Burmese laypeople's YMBA/GCBA. It closely followed the organizational structure of the GCBA, right down to the local chapters. The Sangha Samagi's annual conferences were jointly held alongside the GCBA. It closely followed the GCBA affairs and did not hesitate to exercise its authority.

When looking at the chaotic GCBA factionalism of the 1920s, the Sangha Samagi and the leaders were involved somehow. Sangha Samagi leaders obtained complete control of certain factions like Su GCBA. Nonetheless, the Sangha Samagi itself was not immune to the GCBA factionalism they help initiated. The rise of Sangha Samagi could be explained partly due to the British apathy toward Buddhism and the loss of monarchy as the protector of the Buddhist faith. Another is the loosely bonded institutional arrangement of Sangha in Burma. Thatanabaing, even before the British arrival, was subordinated to the monarchy and gained its power only through royal appointments. It has no bureaucratized clerical or ecclesiastical order. The monastic orders were able to operate as they pleased, showing nominal submission to Thatanabaing. Thus, after the death of the last Thatanabaing in 1896, the Sangha as an institution did not have supreme authority over them. This led to the rise of the political monks and the eventual rise of the Sangha Samagi, which openly intervened in Burmese colonial politics.

These open interventions of the Buddhist Sangha in lay politics are unprecedented in Burmese society. It has transformed Burmese politics and Theravada Buddhism into Political Buddhism in Burma. Even though there was a steep radical and ideological turn with nationalist and leftist ideologies ramping up in the Burmese colonial politics of the pre-war 1930s, Buddhist politics persisted in one form or another.

Burmese Political Buddhism can be defined by three characteristics, each closely associated with the other. The Young Men Buddhist Association (YMBA) started the first characteristic. With the organization's slogan, Amyo, Batha, Sasana, and Pinyar became the central discourse of Buddhist politics in the first decades of twentieth-century Burma. The race-nation questions and ambiguities of "Amyo" gave rise to xenophobic nationalism. The call to

defend Batha(Religion) and its moral universe, “Sasana,” dominated the political spaces. Modern education was increasingly seen as a tool for national advancement. The second, Wuntharnu politics, continued the YMBA’s Amyo, Batha, Sasana, and Pinyar. It formulated cultural identity and introduced economic nationalism among the Burmese. I believe the third continued to the later colonial and post-colonial politics as personality-based politics. The factionalism and the power struggle between the GCBA politicians and the Sangha Samagi leaders could be viewed as the struggle to assume the Asoka Persona in Burmese political life. The lack of the Asoka Persona, which the Sangha as an institution was subordinated under, did not exist in colonial politics. Thus, the proliferation of personality-based politics and the struggle to control the Asoka persona became the critical feature in 1920s Burmese politics.

5. Conclusion

The Thesis started with analyzing and exploring twentieth-century Buddhist politics in Burma, its role in the Burmese identity formation, and the characteristic of Buddhist politics in Burma. To do that and understand the context of the Burmese situation at the turn of the twentieth century, one needs to understand the nature of pre-colonial Burmese society and the political landscape. The first research chapter (i.e., Chapter 2) on the fall of the Konbaung kingdom precisely discusses this phenomenon. The declining conditions of the Konbaung Burma in the mid and late nineteenth century pushed the monarchy into re-entrenching their religious duty. The last two kings of Konbaung Burma, Mindon and Thibaw, were positioned as pious Buddhist kings. Reaffirming their position as the Asoka persona in the Burmese Buddhist polity was seared into the public memory and discourse. Thus, when the British did the complete annexation in the aftermath of the Third Anglo-Burmese War of 1885, Burmese society, the lay people, and the Sangha (i.e., Buddhist monks), were in total panic. The British policies changing ethnic makeups and the socio-economic landscapes further reinforced this moral panic and status anxiety.

The conditions and the response to moral panic and status anxiety were discussed in length in the second chapter (i.e., Chapter 3). The first reaction was through the attempts to re-establish their traditional Buddhist order, the monarchy. The pretender princes' insurrections and the monks' role in these affairs shed light on the first instances of the religious-politics entanglement in Burma. The pacification campaigns in Burma lasted for almost two decades. By 1900, Burma was a violently pacified province on its way to achieving British-introduced colonial modernity like any other province in the Indian empire. However, underneath the pacification and colonial transformation layer lies a disgruntled Buddhist population without

a political platform or voice. The first political mobilization naturally rallies around Buddhism.

The Young Men Buddhist Association (YMBA) was at first formed as a socio-cultural and religious organization with the slogan of Amyo (Race/Nation), Batha (Religion), Sasana, and Pinyar (Education). These discourses became important in the later years. The YMBA slowly crept into the new national political scene through religious issues like the “Shoe question,” demanding changes to the British policy on allowing Westerners to wear footwear on the premises of the Buddhist monuments. The 1910s also saw the rise of the political monks in British Burma, agitating against the colonial government through their anti-British sermons; after consolidating its position and legitimacy through leading delegations and negotiations with British officials, the YMBA successfully established itself as the national political organization in the late 1910s. There also was an official nationalist turn in the YMBA that was solidified through the transformation of the YMBA’s name to the General Council of All Burmese Associations (GCBA) in the 1920s. While the GCBA openly proclaimed itself the national political organization, its politics remained the same ideological premises. The GCBA politics of the 1920s were defined by its chaotic factionalism and the open intervention from the Buddhist monks and their institution, Sangha Samagi.

The third research (i.e., Chapter 4) chapter dealt with the rise of Sangha Samagi in Burmese politics and how its involvement changed Theravada Buddhism in Burma to Political Buddhism. The Sangha Samagi’s participation in the GCBA affairs was unprecedented as it gave the Sanghas in Burma political power for the first time in Burmese history. The Sangha Samagi leaders were crucial in the GCBA factionalism as their support for the particular politician could prop up another GCBA faction. The culmination of both GCBA and Sangha

Samagi in Burmese colonial politics would be the Sayar San's peasant rebellion of 1930 and the emergence of the new nationalist organization named "We the Burman Association" (Doh Bamar Asiayone). While Sayar San was a rural GCBA organizer and his peasant rebels were GCBA local chapters, the GCBA factions' apathy to the rebellion cost them support from the rural agrarian population. The rural population was the GCBA's main support and backbone. Losing it meant the GCBA factions' political role was in a slow descent in the 1930s. The more radical undertakings of the "We the Burman" association have attracted the support of the urban youth population, especially students. They went on to dominate the pre-war and post-war politics in Burma.

Political Buddhism in Burma during the first three decades of the twentieth century had three characteristics, Amyo, Batha, Sasana and Pinyar, Wuntharu politics, and the struggle for the Asoka persona. Amyo, Batha, Sasana, and Pinyar stemmed from the YMBA's official slogan. They were the tool to reverse the moral panic and status anxiety felt by the Burmese at the turn of the new century. "Amyo" had ambiguous meanings carrying both racial and national senses. Both YMBA and GCBA used this ambiguity to probe against the changing cultural and ethnic landscape brought by the colonial policy. It gave rise to anti-Indian sentiments and xenophobia to the growing Burmese national identity. "Amyo" also is crucial in protecting Batha (Religion) and Sasana, the Buddhist moral universe. The loss of the monarchy as the patron of the religion meant it was the Burmese Buddhist duty to promote and protect Batha and Sasana. Pinyar, especially modern education, was seen as the tool of the Burmese's national advancement, and the YMBA called for the Burmese to invest in their education.

The Wuntharu politics continues YMBA's Amyo, Batha, Sasana, and Pinyar discourse. Wuntharu, however, was developed into a pseudo-national identity in the 1920s British

Burma. Besides the Wuntharu politics' call for economic nationalism, being a Burmese Buddhist in the 1920s is closely associated with being a Wuntharnu.

The third component of Political Buddhism, the struggle for the Asoka Persona in Burma, has long-lasting effects on its politics. In short, it could be seen as a power struggle between the lay politicians of the GCBA and the Sangha leaders to assume the Asoka persona. By controlling the Asoka persona, both GCBA and Sangha leaders could mimic the Buddhist polity and its kingship, investing political power solely into their hands. Such investiture of power and influence into a person is the key phenomenon when looking at the GCBA politics of the 1920s. Personality-based political figures like Chit Hlaing and Soe Thein rose to prominence in the 1920s. They proclaimed themselves as the ultimate Wuntharnu who would strive for the Burmese Buddhist causes.

The first three decades of the twentieth century in Burma were crucial in making Burmese nationalism and national identity. It saw the rise of the first national political organizations and parties. It also saw unprecedented political intervention from the Buddhist Sangha on the rising national politics. This political intervention and the entanglements transformed Theravada Buddhism and gave rise to Political Buddhism in Burma.

While the 1930s saw the decline in the GCBA and Political Buddhism in the political spaces, through the rise of ideological and radical politics, Political Buddhism lived on in Burma and remained influential as the political discourse.

Epilogue

The rationale behind ending the study in 1930 was repeatedly stated throughout the study. The rise of the “We the Burman” association and their Thakhin movement has transformed the dimensions of the nationalist movement in Burma. Starting as the fringe movement, where agitated university students and leftist writers converged, the organization gained ground, and its influence rose exponentially within the 1930s. Burmese politics in the 1930s comprised nationalist ideologies and leftist thinking. It is the period that saw the founding of the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) continue to dominate the post-war/post-colonial discourses in Burma. A break from the exhaustive YMBA/GCBA was also signified by the new generation of Burmese, taking leadership in the anti-colonial struggle, most of them identified as Thakhins. At one point, Aung San, Nu, and even the infamous dictator Ne Win were members of the Thakhin movement and adopted the prefix Thakhin in their name. Thus, one could argue that the Political Buddhism influence was gone in the later decades of twentieth-century Burmese history.

However, the elements of Political Buddhism persisted in the country. While Aung San rejected establishing post-colonial Burma as a Buddhist state, the Buddhist discourses resurged in the immediate post-colonial years. Aung San’s successor Nu revived Buddhist politics in the 1950s and fashioned himself as a pious ruler. Buddhism was designated as the state religion during his designation. Even Ne Win’s socialism, aiming to eradicate the Buddhist neo-traditionalist symbols of Nu and lead Burma to a new socialist modernity, could not escape from using Buddhist literary tropes and symbols. The personality politics initiated by the GCBA-Sangha Samagi struggle for Asoka. This persona lived on in the post-colonial years through Aung San, Nu, Ne Win, and Aung San’s daughter Aung San Suu Kyi, rising to prominence through personality politics.

The Sanghas' involvement in the country's politics persisted throughout the country's post-colonial history.

The contemporary revival of Amyo, Bath, and Sasana was an attempt to revitalize and capitalize on these public discourses. While it was used for xenophobia and fearmongering, the current coup leader, Min Aung Hlaing, revival of the Young Men Buddhist Association (YMBA) in the late 2010s and post-coup Myanmar/Burma was a conscious decision to usurp those symbols. Min Aung Hlaing attempted to re-introduce and establish himself as the Asoka persona by manipulating these symbols and discourse.

Thus, the study presented continuities in Burmese society until contemporary times.

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Appendix: Chronology of Important Political Events

1824-First Anglo-Burmese War

1852- Second Anglo-Burmese War

1885- Third Anglo-Burmese War

1886- Burma was added to the Indian empire and presented as the new year's gift to the Empress of India, Queen Victoria. The pacification campaign that lasted until 1900 started.

1906- The Young Men Buddhist Association (YMBA) was founded

1911- Thuriya newspaper was founded (The unofficial YMBA mouthpiece)
Ottama, a famous anti-British political monk, returned from his travels in Japan, China, and India, started preaching anti-government sermons, and worked closely with the YMBA.

1916- The Shoes questions were problematized among the public by the YMBA and the political monks

1917- The British colonial government gave in to the YMBA demands barring the Westerners from wearing shoes in the Buddhist monument

1919- The YMBA delegation was sent to the British imperial capital, London, to negotiate the administrative reforms and express the wishes for separation from India, citing religious and cultural differences.

1920- The first nationwide student boycott led by Rangoon college students
The YMBA was officially transformed into the General Council of All Burmese Associations (GCBA), finalizing its position as the national political organization.

1921- Ottama was arrested for his speech against the government, sparking nationwide outrage.

1922- Burma Reform Bills of 1922 were enacted. The Dyarchy was introduced in British Burma. The first elections for the colonial legislature were held in the November of the same year.

In the first official split of the GCBA, Ba Phe, the founder of the YMBA, formed his own GCBA faction participating in the elections and joined the legislative chamber.

1923- The Union of Buddhist Monks (Sangha Samagi) was founded. The monks were officially involved and entangled in politics.

1924- Chit Hlaing, who became the President of GCBA, was accused of financial embezzlement, and another faction of GCBA led by Soe Thein was formed.

1925- Anti-tax campaigns and the non-cooperation movement against the British proliferated to the point that there were mass arrests and exiles by the official. Soe Thein GCBA was crucial in the agitation.

1929- Third splintering of GCBA plotted by monks agitated by Soe Thein's militancy. Su GCBA was founded and completely subordinated under the Sangha leadership.

1930- The first anti-Indian race riot broke out in Rangoon, the colonial capital.
The We the Burman Association (Doh Bama Asiayone) was founded.
The organization would lead the Burmese nationalist movement of the pre-war and post-war years.
The peasant rebellion of Saya San, former member and organizer of Soe Thein GCBA, spread across lower Burma.