Review Essays

Buddhism and Modernity
Politics of Religion in South- and Southeast Asia

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The authors of these four monographs share a concern for how Theravada Buddhists, both monastics and lay persons, in colonial Lanka, Cambodia, and Burma as well as contemporary Myanmar rearticulated the legitimacy of the Buddha’s teachings, religious discipline, and the relationship between monastics and their lay supporters under the influence of post-traditional political
regimes and their notions of modernity. The authors, moreover, all integrate a deep understanding of the cultural intricacies involved in their subject with a distinct social science perspective. While Blackburn, Hansen, and Schober masterfully ‘provincialise Europe’ (Chakrabarty 2000) by highlighting the local creativity in the production of Buddhist modernities, Rozenberg’s expressed ‘boredom with the tediousness of Buddhist doctrine’ (p. vii) may unnecessarily predispose his readers against what is otherwise a very astute cultural critique.

Demonstrating the resilience of traditional Buddhism in the face of British colonialism in Lanka, Blackburn cogently argues against the total transformation of local Buddhism into a modern variety supposedly stylised after Christian Protestantism. Blackburn’s book thus offsets the seminal study by Richard Gomrich and Gananath Obeyesekere of religious change in Sri Lanka, in which they had devoted a whole chapter on the development of ‘Protestant Buddhism’ during the colonial period (Gomrich and Obeyesekere 1988: 202–240).

That said, Blackburn’s book is not an easy reading for the non-specialist, due to an extensive use of Pali and Sanskrit terms as well as a biographical narrative replete with a confusing lot of different characters. Nevertheless, her detailed account of the religious career of Hikkaduve Sumangala (1827–1911), one of British Ceylon’s foremost monks in terms of monastic leadership and educational innovation, renders palpable the predicament of the Sinhalese Buddhist orders of not being able to rely on the support of a legitimate Buddhist monarch in dispensing the Buddha’s teachings on the island.

When Christian missionaries and institutions kept pouncing on inconsistencies in local Buddhist scripture, ritual, and tenets, Sinhalese Buddhist monks were roused to vigorous opposition paired to efforts of religious reform, albeit along traditionalist, and not Western, lines. At the same time, Sinhalese monastic orders participated in the development of the new colonial cities, by establishing Buddhist temples and schools in the new urban areas. Their networks connected the rural with the urban areas and provided the potentially displaced with familiar moral geographies. Besides, they supplied an increasingly rapid flow of political and educational ideas as well as contacts for commercial enterprise.

A central means of religious reform had traditionally been the organisation of Buddhist councils dedicated to the purification of scripture from aberrations and dilutions. During Hikkaduve’s lifetime, it was the 1868 council in Pelmadulla, in which he was invited to participate as editor of Pali texts on monastic discipline, the Vinaya, that form part of the Tipitaka canon. The organisation of the council was a response to the need to defend the integrity of Buddhist scripture against Christian attacks, by having monastic scholars expunge textual incoherence and other indications of unreliable transmission.
Hikkaduve's participation in the Pelmadulla council confirmed his position as chief monk of the popular pilgrimage site called Adam's Peak (Sri Pada), near Ratnapura. Coming from a high-caste (Goyigama) family as well as having distinguished himself as a monk-scholar, Hikkaduve had been appointed to this position in 1866. In 1873, he was appointed as principal of the new Vidyodaya Pirivena educational center founded in Colombo as part of a widespread endeavor to prevent the decay of age-old Buddhist temple-based education on the island.

This local concern interestingly converged with the fascination with classical Oriental literature among colonial civil servants, including British governors of Ceylon willing to grant the center an annual allowance. In contrast to the locals, however, the latter did not see the center as a monastic but as a conservationist project. Governor Gregory in particular initiated and supported a number of such projects, drawing on the expertise of European orientalist scholars and archaeologists in Europe and India. Apart from excavations in Anuradhapura and Pollonaruva, Gregory instigated the copying of inscriptions, the compilation of a catalogue on Buddhist temple manuscripts, and the construction of the Colombo Museum housing an Oriental Library.

Education at Vidyodaya Pirivena was to be accessible to monks from all ordination lineages and lay people. The curriculum comprised the study of the Tipitaka, Sinhala and Sanskrit grammar, as well as astrological mathematics, astrological science, medicine, logic, and ancient history. Even though the colonial Department of Public Instruction took issue with the fact that no Western science was taught at the center, Vidyodaya Pirivena was able to resist colonial interference and continued its own system of examinations during Hikkaduve's tenure.

Hikkaduve was less conservative when it came to issues of ‘caste’. Contemporary local debates on caste were reflecting a growing self-consciousness and heightened awareness about caste prompted by colonial and Orientalist reifications of caste identities. However, even though Hikkaduve himself was of Goyigama descent, and despite the fact that some of his closest lay patrons as well as students publicly articulated pro-Goyigama sentiments, he himself did work across caste boundaries to counter Christian attacks on Buddhism.

He also cautiously cooperated with Colonel Henry Steele Olcott, the American convert to Buddhism and President of the Theosophical Society. When Olcott first paid a visit to Lanka in order to speak against Christianity, he drew an audience of some five thousand people and inspired the creation of the Buddhist Theosophical Society (BTS), in which Hikkaduve for some time served as chairman of the monastic branch. Despite increasingly unbridgeable differences particularly with regard to Olcott's A Buddhist Catechism (Olcott 1885),
Hikkaduve continued to loosely cooperate with Olcott in order to be able to profit from Olcott’s network throughout Asia.

Hikkaduve also was family priest to the parents of Don David Hevavitarana. When working as a clerk for the colonial Department of Public Instruction, Hevavitarana became enamored with theosophy and eventually traveled Asia as a functionary of the Theosophical Society (TS). After a transformative visit to Bodhgaya in 1891, where Hevavitarana took the name Anagarika Dharmapala, he founded the Maha Bodhi Society in Colombo with the goal to restore the Buddhist sites at Bodh Gaya. Hikkaduve initially saw the Maha Bodhi Society as a means to solicit support from the remaining Buddhist monarchies in Asia, like those of Siam, Cambodia, and Japan, to strengthen Buddhism in Lanka. Yet these hopes soon came to naught, due to Dharmapala’s impetuous anti-Hindu manoeuvres in Bodh Gaya rousing the concern also of other Asian authorities. As Hikkaduve was one of the central Lankan nodes in the international network of Buddhist diplomacy, he soon began to distance himself from Dharmapala’s mission.

International Buddhist relations were already intricate as they stood. The controversy on how to wear monastic robes, for instance, continued unresolved throughout Hikkaduve’s lifetime and raised questions of authority and influence beyond the borders of Lanka. As this was a matter regulated by the Vinaya, Hikkaduve insisted that the novices and monks at least of his order wear their robes over both shoulders, instead of over just one, when leaving the temple premises in order to collect alms food.

The tenuousness of international Buddhist relations became most apparent in Blackburn’s account of the visit to Lanka by the Siamese King, Chulalongkorn (Rama V), in 1897. Hikkaduve and other Sinhalese monastic leaders attached high hopes to the visit of the only Southern Buddhist monarch who was retaining some degree of independence in the face of British and French colonialism. However, all their hopes for Siamese royal patronage of local Buddhist institutions met with grave disappointment when Chulalongkorn’s wish to touch the Tooth Relic was turned down and the king departed from the island in pique.

International Buddhist diplomacy lies very much at the heart also of Anne Ruth Hansen’s study of Buddhist reform in the face of modernity in colonial Cambodia. She roughly focuses on the same period as Blackburn, only extending her analysis a bit more into the first half of the twentieth century. New Cambodian Buddhist notions of how to behave in fact built on earlier efforts of religious reform in Siam. The founder of the Siamese Chakkri dynasty in Bangkok, King Chakkri (Rama I, 1737–1809), had attributed his victory over Ayutthaya in 1767 to the dismal state of Tipitaka studies and the all-encompassing popularity of magic among Buddhist monastics in this kingdom. When about a
century later, European colonisation of adjacent kingdoms initiated the influence of Western science and technology, and Christian missionaries began to undermine the cosmological foundation of his rule, King Mongkut (Rama IV, 1804–1868) again accused local Buddhist monks of deviating from the Vinaya and the prevalence of magic rather than true dhamma.

Mongkut, who had himself been a monk for twenty-six years prior to his enthronement in 1851, then instigated a religious reform that made the Tipitaka the sole authority of Siamese Buddhism. Novices and monks were henceforth obliged to cover both their shoulders when collecting alms food. In 1867, a court functionary published the book Kitchanukit that purged all cosmological speculations from Buddhism and promoted an understanding of dhamma that emphasised moral conduct in one's present life. Mongkut's son Chulalongkorn (Rama V, 1853–1910) continued his father's efforts of religious rationalisation.

When Ang Duong, the son of the Cambodian King Ang Eng (1796–1860) and a Thai consort, had ascended to the throne in Udong in 1848, he initiated a revitalisation of Khmer Buddhism by Bangkok-trained Khmer monks (Hansen 2008: 40). After his death in 1860, France declared Cambodia a French protectorate (i.e., in 1863), which turned Ang Duong's son, King Norodom (1834–1904) into a puppet king and triggered a rapid spread of magic-based millenarianism among the Khmer population. In response to his plight, Norodom invited the Bangkok-educated monk Sungandhadhipati Pan to Cambodia to create a seat of the Siamese Dhammayut Nikaya monastic order in an ancient monastery in Phnom Penh. He also sent a delegation of Khmer monks to Lanka that returned with relics and a Bo-tree seedling planted in front of Phnom Penh's Dhammayut monastery in 1887. Pan and another Bangkok-trained monk, Samtec Brah Sangharaj Dian, the chief monk of the Cambodian sangha, succeeded in fostering religious and monastic reform.

By 1914, a self-consciously modernist Buddhist faction within the Khmer sangha had arisen that openly addressed the deterioration of moral standards within Khmer society on the basis of a new examination of the Vinaya, the knowledge of which they believed the Khmer had lost in previous periods of war and destruction. The members of this faction started to express new ideas of religious purification that reflected the lived experience of Cambodians with modernity. This experience was marked by burdensome changes in tax collection and corvée labour, and a steady rise in the level of opium addiction effected by French colonial intervention. To Buddhists the growing opium addiction among the local population was particularly serious, as it constituted a grave infringement of the fifth Buddhist precept of abstaining from intoxicating substances.
Prior to 1900, Buddhist literary collections in Cambodia were extremely limited. Up to this time, manuscripts in temple libraries and schools as well as in aristocratic collections had often been maintained solely for symbolic and ritual purposes rather than for scholarly study. This had accounted for the fact that Khmer aristocrats and monks had been quite reluctant to permit their manuscripts to be put to scholarly use. Monks trying to pursue modernist textual studies had thus been obliged to travel to Siam to collect religious text and to advance their knowledge of Pali.

At the end of 1911, Georges Coedès (1886–1969), who had just graduated from the École Pratique des Hautes Études in Paris, was appointed to the École Française d’Extrême-Orient (EFEO) and immediately departed to Cambodia to begin his career as an orientalist scholar. By 1912, he had gained sufficient access to Khmer temple libraries to carry out a comprehensive inventory of monastic collections. On his way to Cambodia, he had briefly sojourned in Bangkok where he established good connections with Prince Damrong, a son of the deceased King Mongkut and half-brother of the present King of Siam, Chulalongkorn. Damrong eventually requested Coedès to become Curator of the National Library of Siam. In 1918, Coedès, who had meanwhile married a Khmer aristocrat, took the post of curator as an agent of EFEO. As he extended his activities to the collection of inscriptions and other archaeological remains, a royal decree charged him with the creation of an Archaeological Service under the auspices of the National Library in 1924 (see also http://www.efeo.fr/biographies/notices/codes.htm).

In the course of these developments, Coedès and other French orientalists became important agents in the religious reform movements throughout Indochina. Two modernist Khmer monks, Chuon Nath and Huot That, for instance closely associated themselves with Louis Finot (1864–1935), Director of EFEO in Hanoi. Under Finot’s tutorship, they furthered their study of Sanskrit, philology, Buddhist history, and other subjects. The onset of print in Cambodia around the same time greatly facilitated the dissemination of modernist ideas. They came in new literary forms, such as compendiums, critical translations, and written renderings of oral folklore, which displayed a heightened sensitivity for the moral importance of everyday action. This new religious literature redressed, so Hansen argues, the disjuncture between traditional religious imaginaries and lived experience that had grown since the second half of the nineteenth century. It projected new moral geographies that entailed a strong sense of communal involvement attesting to a shared imaginary of a Southern Buddhist fellowship.

Finot greatly supported the dissemination of this modernist Buddhist literature through the Royal Library, established in 1925 in Phnom Penh, and the
Buddhist Institute, founded in 1930 in the same city. The Buddhist Institute was, in fact, a center for scholarly research on Southeast Asian Buddhism initiated by Finot's student, Suzanne Karpelès (1890–1969). In 1923, Finot had recruited Karpelès to EFEO in Hanoi, where she began to translate and edit critical editions of Buddhist texts. After a few months, her research led her to Bangkok, where she studied Thai and translated a portion of the Dhammapadatthakatha. In 1925, Karpelès became the first librarian at the Royal Library in Phnom Penh. Immersing herself in the politics of textual production in Cambodia, she proposed the foundation of the Buddhist Institute, helped to launch the first Buddhist periodicals in Khmer and oversaw the work of the Commission for the local production of a scholarly version of the Tipitaka.

Apart from their obvious merits, these colonial scholarly activities and institutions were intended to decenter the role of Siam for Khmer Buddhism. Since 1914, the French were noting growing anti-European sentiments, paired to an increase in millenarian activities, among Khmer monks and Indochinese exiles in Bangkok. Secret societies were starting to organise networks of anti-French resistance throughout Vietnam, at times using Buddhist monasteries as covers for fundraising and other activities. In 1916, hundreds of thousands of peasants demonstrated against corvée labour laws, taxation, and the general economic situation in Phnom Penh. The French suspected that monks were behind the organisation of this peasant protest. Their suspicion was fueled by the perception of their increased vulnerability after the onset of World War I.

In 1909 the French had issued an ordinance prohibiting Khmer monks to depart to Bangkok for study. French orientalist efforts were subsequently geared towards a reform of local Buddhist education in order to further discourage the travel of Khmer monks to Bangkok. In their 1922 inspection report to the résident supérieur evaluating the Pali school policy in Cambodia, Georges Coedès and his colleague, Sylvain Lévi (1863–1935), confirmed that the École Supérieure was indeed fulfilling a crucial need that local monastics had formerly only been able to meet with help from Bangkok. Last but not least, the French orientalist efforts also plaid a supportive function to the French attempts to clamp down on the anti-colonial millenarian movements.

However, French colonial orientalist projects never drew on Christian models of religious reform in order to spur the modernisation of Buddhism in Indochina. Hansen thus corroborates Blackburn's observation that religious reform movements in Southern Buddhist colonial societies were largely informed by classical Theravadin teachings and practices with which European orientalist approaches and methods deeply resonated, to the detriment of local ‘folk religion'.
In her analysis of modern Buddhist conjunctures in Myanmar, Juliane Schober takes a broader historiographical perspective than Hansen and Blackburn that expands beyond the colonial period of Burma into modern Myanmar. Motivated by the Saffron Revolution from 2007, Schober pays particular attention to the junctures in Burmese history when public discourse about the relationship between Buddhism and politics boosted specific cultural debates. Of course, the colonisation of Burma at the end of the nineteenth century was pivotal. When the invading British troops desecrated Buddhist temples and monasteries, they demonstrated to the local population that worldly authority was now severed from religion and the traditional merit-making economy. The balance between world conquerors—formerly the Burmese royal patrons, now the British forces—and the world-renouncing local sangha was clearly upset (Tambiah 1977). Instead, knowledge of Western science and technology opened up new avenues to economic, social, and political power.

Due to the fact that the British prohibited political assemblies, Buddhist contexts nevertheless remained the only venues for Burmese to voice political views. Buddhist monks and institutions thus participated in the shaping of positions and ideas that sought to make sense of the changing sociopolitical reality. Besides, a number of lay Buddhist associations emerged that started to propagate Buddhist teachings throughout the country. While these associations drew on modern forms of organisation, their purpose and legitimacy were rather traditional.

The Young Men’s Buddhist Association (YMBA), for instance, was founded in 1906 by young urban Burmese who had studied in Calcutta or England. It lobbied for the reintroduction of Buddhist subjects and the study of the Pali into the colonial school curriculums. It also pushed for the use of Burmese as the medium for school instruction and a compulsory basic school education that entailed a certain standard for mathematical instruction throughout the whole country. For all that, the YMBA was not anti-colonial in orientation, which is why the organisation received tacit support by colonial civil servants and enjoyed the protection from members of the Indian Civil Service. In the 1920s, an array of nationalist movements, both secular and Buddhist, sidelined the YMCA. It was finally submerged by the nationalist General Council of Burmese Associations aiming to also bring the Indian and ethnic Christian minorities of Burma into the national fold. However, through powerful intervention on the part of the sangha the organisation was soon renamed first the General Council of Buddhist Associations and then the General Council of the Sangha Sammeggi (GCSS).

In 1947, the year before Burma attained independence, the Burmese monk Mahasi Sayadaw (1904–1982) initiated a lay meditation (vipassana) movement.
that was to attract a large Burmese and international following after colonial rule had ended (see also Jordt 2007). U Nu, a follower of Mahasi Sayadaw who served as prime minister at the helm of Burma’s democratic governments from 1948 to 1958 and 1960 to 1962, instigated a Buddhist reform by appointing prominent lay people to the Buddha Sasana Council (bsc). As Buddhist organisations had been the only indigenous institutions that had survived British colonial rule, the sangha had continued to use its leverage in public debates on democracy, human rights, and civil society in post-independence Burma. One of U Nu’s objectives for the bsc was to lend legitimacy to Mahasi Sayadaw’s lay meditation movement.

The work of the bsc culminated in the Sixth Buddhist Synod (Buddha Sasana Sangayana) that lasted from 1954 to 1956. Modeled after earlier Buddhist synods organised by royal patrons, it attested to the fact that U Nu had resorted to the traditional method of instigating a Buddhist reform in support of his political ambitions. U Nu also established a Ministry for Religious Affairs that enabled his government to comprehensively regulate the religious practice of lay people, monastics, and the adherents of minority religion.

When, in 1962, Ne Win’s coup d’etat deposed U Nu from office, the military leadership of the Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma began to heavily constrain the influence of Buddhism on state affairs. The state dealt freely with preachers of ‘false doctrine’, infringements of the Vinaya, and disputes over monastic property in state ecclesiastical courts. In 1988, massive demonstrations by students, workers, and Buddhist monks finally led to the demise of Ne Win’s regime, and the military junta that seized government began to promote a kind of heavy-handed Burmese Buddhist nationalism designed to legitimate its rule. State glorification of the national history and the concomitant Myanmarisation of the ethnic minorities included forced conversion of members of the Christian tribal communities and of Muslims in Arakan. At the same time, the state engaged in merit making, for instance by supporting the restoration of the Shwedagon Pagoda or the inauguration of the International Theravada Buddhist Missionary University.

In the face of state suppression of the pro-democratic movement in the public space, it was the lay meditation centers in particular that provided a refuge to opponents of the regime and a spiritual alternative to the regime’s rigid Buddhist nationalism. The leading figure of this movement has been Aung San Suu Kyi, whose National League for Democracy won a landslide election in 1990. When awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991, she used it to establish a health and education trust for Burmese. A practitioner of vipassana meditation, Suu Kyi has frequently couched her political aspirations and critique in Buddhist terms.
Burmese Buddhist monks have also continued to voice critique of the state, although many of them have consequently been imprisoned and forcefully disrobed. The ‘Saffron Revolution’ from 2007, in which tens of thousands of Buddhist monks marched the streets to call for a popular boycott of the regime’s referendum assuring the continuous importance of the military in national politics, was the most recent expression of monastic opposition. The sangha’s solidarity with the disenfranchised attested to the emergence of a socially engaged Buddhism as a new spiritual force in Myanmar.

In contrast to Schober, Rozenberg deals exclusively with the politics of sainthood in contemporary Myanmar. He identifies three distinct categories of holy persons: saintly Buddhist monks, lay and monastic ascetics with superhuman power (weikza), and saints against the state.

For monks to acquire any spiritual renown, it is necessary that they withdraw into the forest, to immerse themselves into a range of ascetic practices, such as severe fasting, meditation, wearing tattered robes, residing in a cemetery or at the foot of a tree, or not dwelling in one place at all. The division between forest monks and village monks reaches deep into the past. Rozenberg’s examples, however, are from present-day Burma.

Weikza are said to be able to prolong their lifespan far beyond the normal limit, change their appearances, travel to many countries under the earth or through the air, walk on water, make themselves invisible, read other people’s thoughts, and predict the future. It is said that they accomplish these feats by intense Buddhist mediation and, so Rozenberg argues, ‘seemingly unorthodox techniques such as alchemy or cabalistic arts’. Like Buddhist monks, weikza live in hill hermitages, village huts, or simple dwelling places in the city, and usually gather a large lay following. In fact, they start out as laymen who, once they have attained some degree of powers, wear only white. The most accomplished weikza, however, have become forest monks, while not every forest monk is a weikza. Rozenberg does not mention a connection between the phenomenon of the weikza and the millenarian movements, related by other scholars. It is very likely, though, that only charismatic monks of weikza status were able to mobilise the masses against illegitimate worldly powers.

Rozenberg’s narrative suggests that the spiritual powers of a monk reveal themselves primarily in the context of lotteries, ever present even in monasteries. One of his examples feature an old monk who became famous for predicting the last three numbers of the Thai lottery for the past two years. The success of his predictions, which he always put in symbolic forms his lay followers then sought to divine, was such that the monk became what Rozenberg calls ‘an entrepreneur monk’. Entrepreneur monks can avail themselves of generous donors in order to instigate the construction of religious sites. Such
work is not only in itself highly meritorious but, incidentally, also an expression of considerable spiritual powers.

Another way for monks to gain the marks of saintliness is redistributing the offerings they have received from lay people to other monastics. Rozenberg describes the case of an old monk, Thamanya Sayadaw, who in the context of the public celebration of his eighty-ninth birthday redistributed money and the surplus of monastic items accumulated throughout the year to attending monks, novices, and nuns. When in 1980 and 1981, the infamous Ministry of Religious Affairs conducted an investigation whether monastics complied with the Vinaya, it forcefully disrobed more than three hundred novices and monks, among them monks of national renown and followers of the weikza path. Some such ‘saints against the state’ left their monasteries of their own volition in order to avoid conflict. In 1998, sixteen charges were brought against a renowned monk in Sangalay who had publicly claimed to have received the physical marks of the Awakened One and to have brought back the golden age of the Buddha, a time when many people had been able to attain instant enlightenment only by listening to the Buddha's sermons. Thamanya Sayadaw, on the other hand, remained completely unblemished by government attack, due to his staunch compliance with the Vinaya and rejection of any un-Buddhist magic. He has nevertheless qualified as a 'saint against the state', not the least because he has publicly supported Aung San Suu Kyi, who herself is recognised as a beacon of Buddhist virtue, and who has incidentally been among his most devoted followers.

On the whole, all four authors engage in a timely rectification of the Weberian misclassification of Buddhism as 'otherworldly' in that they stress the continuous intervention of Buddhist institutions in local politics. They also testify to the local creativity in shaping Asian modernities that belie the one-dimensional Weberian evolutionary model of a progressive disenchantment of the public space.

References


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