# Belonging in a New Myanmar

## Identity, Law, and Gender in the Anthropology of Contemporary Buddhism

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**ABSTRACT:** "To be Burmese is to be Buddhist" is a slogan commonly identified with the dawn of nationalism in the country known today as Myanmar, where violence between Buddhist, Muslim, and ethnic communities has increasingly jeopardized liberalizing reforms. How do contemporary forms of Theravada Buddhist discourse shape ideas of belonging in a multi-religious and ethnically diverse Myanmar following the dissolution of military rule in 2011? How do digital technologies and globalizing communication networks in this nation influence rapidly changing social identities, anxieties, and imaginaries that Brigit Meyer identifies as 'aesthetic formations'? In this article, I trace diverse genealogies of belonging to show how contemporary constructions of meaning facilitate religious imaginaries that may exacerbate difference by drawing on past ideologies of conflict or may seek to envision a new and diverse Myanmar.

**KEYWORDS:** anti-Muslim hate speech, belonging, gender, global communications networks, laws, Myanmar, secularism, Theravada Buddhism

Recent literature on Buddhism in Southeast Asia and especially Burma or Myanmar has focused on Theravada formations in traditional and modern contexts.[1] Theravada civilizations, in particular, are characterized by elite institutions, by their use of a prestige language, Pali, and by related, vernacular narratives that convey in art, manuscript, and print cultures the ethical values or imaginaries of this religious tradition. These imaginaries are sustained through social discourse, cultural practices, and regional networks.[2] The study of traditional Theravada Buddhist social formations thus presumes an encompassing hegemony that is grounded in truth claims about particular civilizational narratives, teleological histories, and the moral universe they embody.

Showing how Theravada Buddhist literature, practices, and discourse have shaped local and regional histories has allowed scholars to go beyond received distinctions between text and practice in the study of Theravada Buddhism. Anthropological studies in particular have centered on Buddhist institutions, monastic and lay practices, and ritual exchange, around which social hierarchies are constructed. Interdisciplinary and transregional studies on Theravada formations also describe the cultural and historical contexts in which the 'Pali imaginary' has been articulated and trace its vernacular iterations in social practices, particular formations, and local and transregional discourses that distinguish Theravada civilizations (Schober and Collins 2012, 2017).

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Since the time of early modern contacts with the West and subsequent colonial domination of many Theravada civilizations, Buddhist civilizations have interacted with modern Western political thought and practices, producing modern social formations that have drawn upon manuscript and print technologies. In his recent essay, "Contemporary Burmese Buddhism," Niklas Foxeus (2016) asserts that modern projects are informed by how they encounter genealogies of the past. He identifies three projects of Buddhist modernity in colonial Burma that allowed the Burmese "to make sense of a changing world" (ibid.: 230): the popularization of *vipassana* meditation, the introduction of Western knowledge and practices, and nation-building projects after independence that linked modernization with Buddhist soteriology.

Contemporary Buddhist formations in Myanmar are also informed by past genealogies and by conventional communications networks associated with print culture. New communications technologies, including digital media, further amplify the impact of emerging Theravada formations amid growing communal tensions. New press freedoms in print and digital media have played a critical role in opening up the range of opinions that can now be expressed and contested through public media. Freedom of expression, although still constrained in many ways, has amplified public discourse through the advent of social media that function largely outside the reach of information censorship. Access to both print and digital media has been vastly expanded, and as a result all forms of media and the press are exploring new boundaries of civil discourse. With almost half of the population using cell phones, individuals and organizations have become adept users of digital media in order to create social networks, shape public opinion, and mobilize supporters (Brooten and Verbruggen 2017). Well-known examples of how new communications technologies have amplified Buddhist public discourse in Myanmar include the socially engaged Saffron Revolution in 2007, which challenged a military regime, and more recent expressions of Buddhist nationalism that have emerged in the political transition since military rule ended in 2011. These technologies have also heightened global awareness of events in Myanmar that show the contestation between the state and religious others in contemporary Buddhist discourse. In this complex scenario, social and historical realities are challenging prevailing Buddhist dispositions and sentiments in ways that threaten democratic reforms under way in Myanmar. The range of local, regional, and global reactions to these amplified and 'essentialized' constructions of identity in communal conflicts focuses our attention on contemporary Buddhist practices and public narratives. Emerging Buddhist nationalism challenges stereotypes, primarily in the West, of Buddhism as a uniquely peaceful and non-violent religion.

This article seeks to explain how highly mediated discourse practices construct religious, ethnic, national, and gender identity in order to formulate contemporary visions of belonging to a new Myanmar. Taking Foxeus's (2016) observations about Buddhist formations in their encounters with modernity and print technology as a point of departure and extending our purview to include recent events, this article looks at contemporary Buddhist formations in Myanmar that are influenced by the immediacy of digital technologies in global communications networks. In this effort, I follow the work of Paul Rabinow (2009), who maintains that the contemporary era is qualitatively different because its complexities are far greater than those experienced in earlier periods in history when political systems such as traditional kingship or even modern print capitalism provided effective social and political rationales. Equally insightful is the work of Birgit Meyer (2009), who shows that mediated contexts in the contemporary era engender social formations that are informed by fluid aesthetic styles, while the imagined communities of nation-states characterized by the communications technologies associated with print capitalism have changed more slowly. Digital technologies of communication in the contemporary period have enabled different realities—in time, space, and identity—to become constant features of social life, thus largely foreclosing the possibility of living in an exclusively emic

imaginary. They mediate often disjointed, fragmented, and episodic narratives that are visually and emotionally charged, circulate rapidly through social networks, and appeal to diverse, translocal audiences whose agency is informed by social media messages. Heightened styles of communication can either disrupt or augment established Theravada discourse and practices and almost always increase their impact on social networks. While some voices use new communications technologies to advocate for a Buddhist nationalism or to incite anti-Muslim hate speech, the range of opinions that are expressed speaks to a salient search for a renewed relevance of Buddhist practices in the rapidly changing contexts of the contemporary era.

## The Discourse on Communal Violence in Myanmar

Contemporary Buddhist discourse in Myanmar is inflected by a heightened awareness of religious identity, ethnic difference, and gender in a new nation that is in transition from a totalitarian state framed by Theravada Buddhist ideology to a democratic federation whose future will require embracing multi-religious identities and multi-ethnic belonging. Among Myanmar's progressives as well as ultra-nationalists, highly mediated 'aesthetic formations' (Meyer 2009) of contemporary Buddhism are creating new kinds of religious and political debates about belonging. A question frequently raised in debates about ethnic identity, religious community, and gender roles is, who belongs to the new Myanmar? The discourse on identity and belonging in Myanmar is shaped by converging social forces and amplified by digital forms of religious media amid uncertain reforms, speaking to deep divisions and anxieties inflamed by the politics of religious and ethnic identities. Since independence, the Republic of the Union of Myanmar has been plagued by a struggle for belonging that has included protracted wars with ethnic groups and violence against Muslim communities. While the central government has been negotiating an end to decades of ethnic conflicts at its borders, protracted communal violence in Arakan between a Rakhine Buddhist majority and a Rohingya Muslim minority has exposed its inability to ensure peace for its citizens (Ei Ei Toe Lwin 2014; Kyaw Phyo Tha 2014).

In the current unstable landscape of heightened anxieties, communal violence against Rohingya in Arakan, also known as Rakhine State, and in Muslim communities elsewhere jeopardizes Myanmar's political, economic, and social reforms. In 2011, Myanmar undertook comprehensive reforms that touch upon every aspect of life in which religious difference has increasingly been marked and social and political identity has been contested. Soon thereafter, from 2012 to 2014, violence against Muslims erupted in communities where, as Nick Cheesman explains (2017b: 338): "The fundamental common interests of the members of one community are irreconcilable with those of another, giving rise to a shared belief that the other community poses an existential threat."[3] Speeches by prominent Buddhist monks often preceded attacks on Muslim neighborhoods, while organizations like Ma Ba Tha, the Association for the Protection of Race and Religion, mobilized their followers to defend the Buddhist nation against a perceived encroaching threat from religious others. Such violent attacks were initially directed against Rohingya in Rakhine: widely seen as not belonging to Myanmar, they were called "Bengali" or *kula*, derogatory names for foreigners. These developments stoke fear about religious difference and rally people around a common cause to defend Buddhism, the majority religion in Myanmar. Anti-Muslim narratives invoke a routinized discourse of mobilization and selective construction of communal memory (Brass 1997; Schissler 2016: 233; Schissler et al. 2017: 390). McCarthy and Menager (2017: 396) stress the violent discourse of rumors, which in essence claim that "Muslim men are the primary threat to Buddhist women and, by extension, the body politic of Myanmar." Other themes expressing anti-Muslim anxieties include the threat

of impending 'dark forces' and the destruction of Nalanda by invading Muslims forces that, so advocates claim, ushered in the decline of Buddhism in India. Rohingya and other Muslim communities in Myanmar came to be seen as the regional representatives of a perceived global Islamic threat against a Buddhist majority. Following the violent attacks on Rohingya in 2012 and 2013, Graeme Wood (2014) described the appalling conditions for internally displaced Rohingya in Rakhine. Others have chosen to become refugees on the open sea, leaving by ship from the Bay of Bengal for Muslim nations in Southeast Asia, where they are also often not welcomed. The United Nations does not recognize Rohingya as stateless, and Rakhine politicians have been resisting efforts by the national government to end this conflict with the help of the Human Rights Commission chaired by the former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan.

Whether recent outbreaks of communal violence are understood as distractions initiated by partisan politics or, more broadly, as endemic to Myanmar's nation-building efforts, they have been justified by a powerful Buddhist discourse that draws distinctions between 'us' and 'them' in absolute, moral terms. While religions make claims about transcendent and universal meaning, Talal Asad (1993) reminds us that religious practice and discourse are nonetheless embedded in the specific social and historical contexts of their production. In a 2017 special edition of the *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, contributors argue persuasively that communal violence is not caused by religion and that the actors involved recall peaceful interactions with members of other religious communities.[4] Schissler et al. (2017: 390), in particular, warn against understanding religious violence in terms of immutable positions and relationships and underscore a reconciliatory potential in disclosing contradictions between past and present events. In her work on communal conflict in South Asia, Veena Das (1998) has similarly cautioned against absolute distinctions between victims and perpetrators. Yet because of the appeal of moral absolutes in selectively constructed narratives that serve to decontextualize historical events, mythologize agendas, and transform neighbors into 'others' (Lincoln 2003), articulating political tensions through religious discourse has often been a powerful tool for mobilizing communities. This discursive move can enable one community to present its struggle for 'Truth' as an existential defense against outsiders, for whom such claims can evolve into acts of aggression directed against them. Media reports on communal conflict inevitably draw on the often partisan discourse of participants and on Buddhist apologetics in Burma or the West, highlighting those who advocate a religious nationalism as well as victims who lack agency. An anthropology of contemporary Buddhism in Myanmar must therefore distance itself from common prejudices that Buddhist practices are inherently anti-Muslim or that the presence of religious others poses an existential threat to Myanmar's national identity.

## Buddhist Identity and the Muslim Other in Myanmar

Buddhist identity is the largest 'common denominator' among Myanmar's many ethnic groups. Nearly 88 percent of citizens are Buddhist, with the remainder identifying as Christian (6 percent), Muslim (less than 5 percent), Hindu (0.5 percent), and others. Although a religious minority, Muslim communities in Myanmar are ethnically diverse and comprise nearly 1.5 million people of Malay, Chinese Panthey, Kamein, and South Asian Zerbadi lines of descent (Farrelly 2016; Yegar 1972). With the inception of the independent nation-state in 1948, the Ministry of Religious Affairs has increasingly regulated religious expressions in public life, focusing initially on Buddhist institutions and practices. Religious diversity also characterizes the nation's ethnic groups, adding further complexity to the political dynamics that already favor a Buddhist and Burman majority. Beginning in the 1980s, the Ministry expanded its purview by imposing stringent controls on

Christian, Muslim, and Hindu communities to ensure that religious identities would not become a site for fomenting political dissent. In a country governed by military rule and in the absence of a national constitution for more than two decades (1988–2010), Buddhist institutions, discourse, and practices have been frequently adduced to authorize political power. Religious identity has increasingly become a source of communal tension, although religious difference was hardly relevant during more predictable times, when it posed no barrier to social interaction and harmony.

Rakhine Buddhists are one of Myanmar's eight 'national races' and constitute the ethnic majority in Arakan. Leider (2014) writes that the Rakhine struggle for recognition within the new Myanmar is marked by anxiety about ethnic identity and national belonging. Today, Rakhine Buddhists see their livelihoods threatened by a growing Muslim population at a moment when political reforms at the center of the state produce ambiguities about their own position in the new Myanmar. Their own historical narratives of belonging are closely linked with the advent of the Buddhist teachings and the Mahamuni image to the region. In the fifteenth century, Arakanese kings of Mrauk U expanded their kingdom to include the Chittagong region. Arakanese become subjects of the Burmese after the conquest of 1785, when King Bodawphaya moved the famous Buddha image to Mandalay, where it continues to attract many pilgrims. In 1826, Rakhine were annexed into the British Empire.

Continual population movement across the border with what is now Bangladesh has created hardships of migration and economic competition for low-wage labor. The region along the Bay of Bengal that spans from the Chittagong Hills and Arakan has become a tinderbox of communal tensions. The end of dictatorship initiated a new market economy at the crossroads between India and China where Myanmar's significant natural gas reserves are located (Al-Adawy 2013). The Rakhine Buddhist majority in Arakan thus sees itself not only in economic competition with Muslims in their homeland, but also as abandoned to its plight by a central government that is dominated by Buddhist Burmans.

Even among Myanmar's educated elites, anti-Muslim sentiments are not uncommon. Some members of the government's Truth Commission, appointed in 2012, indicated to me that peace was impossible as long as Rohingya representatives lied in their statements to the Commission. Political hardliners are stoking threats of a return to military rule, and their monastic supporters are fueling anti-Muslim sentiments, implying that Myanmar is not ready for democracy. These dynamics have made it difficult for politicians to publicly support a populist anti-Muslim discourse. Many are wondering who benefits from these tensions, implying an organized effort behind the violence.[5]

Contrary to Western media reports on recent anti-Muslim violence in Myanmar, such sentiments have been manifest since the economic migration in the 1920s and 1930s, when India and Burma were part of the British Raj and Muslims from the Chittagong Hills and Bengal migrated in large numbers into lower Burma. The largest influx of Indians from Bengal occurred during the colonial period when nearly half of the Muslim population came from Bengal. Labor strikes and the mortgaging of agricultural lands to Indian moneylenders in the delta exacerbated anti-Muslim sentiments in the 1930s that turned violent during the anti-Indian riots in 1930 and 1938. Colonial policy inadvertently created a social space in which religion became a site for political dissent in Myanmar. Violence against Muslims also erupted after independence, leading to an exodus of Muslims from Burma to Bengal in 1977 and 1978 and again in 1993, 1997, and 2003. In 1997, anti-Muslim rioting in Mandalay and other towns in upper Burma lasted for several months. Often, Muslims leaders were warned by members of local village councils of the impending destruction of mosques, shops, and homes. While this strategy may have saved lives, it also points to a deliberate organization of the attacks. Some argue that the riots were instigated by people affiliated with the military regime to deflect public attention away from a failing economy. During this rampage

in Upper Burma, monastic leaders in Mandalay spoke out against the violence, declaring their solidarity with leaders of Christian and Muslim groups and blaming the government for instigating the riots. Similar attacks occurred in Sittwe, in Arakan, and in Taungoo in 2001.

Illustrating the fluidity of ethnic identity, Jacques Leider (2012, 2014) traces the word Rohingya to show how it designates historically different Muslim communities in Arakan. He argues that the imposition of new state borders not only created new ethnic identities, but also shifted the frame of reference for Rohingya identity from a communal context to historical and local contexts. Arakanese Buddhist kings raided and enslaved Muslim populations from neighboring Chittagong, relocating them in Arakan during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. During the decades following Burma's independence, Rohingya in northern Rakhine fought for a separate political status at a time when other ethnic separatist movements also contested the power of the state. This movement, led by middle-class Muslims in Arakan, emerged in response to the imposition of international borders in the Bay of Bengal and reflected the political desire to be recognized as a separate ethnic group (Leider 2014: 236–237).

## Ethnicity, Gender, and Law

While anthropology has long recognized the fluidity of ethnic identity, the Burmese state and many of its citizens continue to adhere to a hierarchy of racial categories to determine who belongs to the Union of Myanmar. The 2015 census shows that the country's citizens include Burmese (68 percent), Shan (9 percent), Kayin (7 percent), Rakhine (3.5 percent), Mon (2 percent), Kachin (1.5 percent), Kayah (0.75 percent), and others. The state classifies its population into 135 ethnic groups and 8 national races that developed from colonial notions about race and ethnic identity that are still seen as the foundation for national belonging. Burmese narratives about the origin of Myanmar claim that Burmans are the original inhabitants of the region, while ethnic minorities migrated there from surrounding areas. These sentiments about ethnic identity and national belonging are conveyed in a permanent exhibit of Myanmar's national races at the National Museum in Yangon. Dozens of mannequin couples dressed in ethnic costumes line the walls, while the Burman couple, represented by slightly taller mannequins, stands apart from and presides over the rest of Myanmar's population.

Ideas about modern Burman Buddhist identity were informed by a colonial ideology of race, language, and Buddhist knowledge (*batha*). In a famous speech in 1914 that inspired early Burmese nationalism, U May Ong, then the rector of Rangoon University, professed that the modern Burman possessed race, language, Buddhism, and erudition—indeed, that "We Burmese are Buddhists" (Schober 2010). Since then, various Burmese politicians have used this slogan to denote national identity and moral superiority at particular moments in the nation's modern history. Over the following decade, the Young Men's Buddhist Association, of which U May Ong was a member, mobilized the Burmese public against colonial rule and promoted an early Buddhist nationalism. While the political impact of this movement faded before the end of colonial rule, Buddhist sentiments clearly inspired not only the early struggle for independence, but also the Burmese sense of national identity after independence. To be Burmese has thus become inseparable from being Buddhist, a sense of national identity that accords a secondary status to those who are ethnically different or practice a religion other than Buddhism (ibid.). This discourse of race and belonging remains evident in the citizenship laws of 1982 that are still in force and that require minorities to document property ownership and residency for three generations. For many Burmese, the fact that Rohingya are not included in the official list of 135 groups proves that they are not citizens of Myanmar and that they migrated illegally

from Bangladesh. Such positions undermine the legal status of Rohingya in Myanmar and their claims to citizenship and land ownership, displacing them beyond Myanmar's borders.[6]

Anti-Muslim attitudes are articulated in other contexts as well. For instance, rhetoric hostile to other religions is found in publications endorsed by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, such as U Kyaw Lwin's 1997 booklet entitled *969* and in a 2010 book entitled *If You Marry a Man of Another Evil Race and Religion*, written under the pen name Pho Pa Nyaw and attributed to a Buddhist monk (see Kyaw Zwa Moe 2014). Further, SIM cards distributed for use in non-networked cell phones contain games and anti-Muslim sermons that facilitate the spread of anti-Muslim attitudes among young people, indicating an organized effort to mobilize the public against Muslims.

The public discourse about national belonging and communal difference often highlights the loyalty to race and religion of women who cross ethnic and religious boundaries. Jessica Harriden (2012) argues that, in an effort to promote Burmese history, the authority of Burmese women has been largely contingent on their ability to influence others. Chie Ikeya (2011) observes that the use of different civil codes for domestic practices focuses special attention on the role of women as intermediaries among cultural and religious communities, thereby turning the rights of Burmese women into contested issues. During the colonial period, customary laws regulated civil matters and institutionalized cultural difference. Separate legal codes were used to adjudicate civil matters such as marriage, divorce, and inheritance for Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, and Christians, recognizing their respective differences in customs and laws (Crouch 2016c; Keck 2016). Employing separate civil law codes not only heightened social differences between groups; it also instituted ethnic difference as a factor in the construction of national identity (Crouch 2016b). According to Than (2014: 112), in the 1920 and 1930s, Burmese print media depicted the lifestyles of women as "determining the fate of the country." Than further states that women were "held accountable for disseminating a 'proper' image of the nation" (ibid.). The anti-colonial discourse often questioned women's loyalty and moral conduct, through public criticism of women wearing Western clothing styles and their marriages to foreigners (Ikeya 2008). Tharaphi Than (2014) notes that modern women were also frequently held responsible for the nation's problems during Burma's democratic era after independence. She writes that "the public often found it easier to blame women for their 'unpatriotic' behaviour than to pressurize the government to take action … Burmese women married to foreigners were most severely criticized. The issue of marriage was greatly politicized, and women marrying foreigners began to be seen as a focus of feminine vice and as betraying their race, their religion and the state" (ibid.: 116–117). During the late colonial era, this threat was seen as a consequence of corrupting Western influence, but in contemporary Myanmar, it is perceived as a Muslim menace to the Buddhist *thathana* (religion).[7]

In addition, profound challenges to women's rights and religious freedoms have been raised in recent legislation to protect Myanmar's race and religion by restricting the religious, social, and reproductive agency of women (Lawi Weng 2014b). They have legal precedents in the Buddhist Women's Special Marriage and Succession Act of 1939, formulated after the 1938 anti-Muslim riots, and in its 1954 renewal, which still remains in force in Myanmar. Their 2015 iteration, while yet to be enacted, mandates official permission for interreligious marriages, places restrictions on religious conversion, imposes population control measures in rural areas, and outlaws polygamous marriages. These laws reveal renewed social anxieties about the agency of women and the rights of citizenship in this new nation. Ma Ba Tha and its supporters, who introduced the reaffirmation of these laws into public discourse, have created a social climate that does not tolerate interfaith communities or criticism of the legal implications that these laws will have for human rights and social policy. According to one report: "The four bills have had the vocal backing of the Association for the Protection of Race and Religion (known in Burmese as Ma

Ba Tha), a group of Buddhist nationalist monks that has been accused of spreading anti-Muslim hate speech and whipping up nationalist sentiment in the country" (Kyaw Phyo Tha 2015).

These laws drew pointed criticism from the international community such as the UN Commission for Human Rights (UN News Centre 2014) as well as from internal critics like the National League for Democracy. The Burmese recipient of the 2012 International Women of Courage Award, human rights activists Zin Mar Aung (2014) has been an outspoken critic of this legislation: "It is high time for the people of Burma, regardless of ethnic background, faith or gender, to unite during the democratic reform process. That is why we women's groups decided last month to issue a second statement against these divisive faith-based bills … [which] are not in accordance with the objectives of the peaceful coexistence of all faiths and the prevention of extreme violence and conflict." More recently, the Myanmar press highlighted women leaders in public life (Moe Myint 2015), emphasizing their contributions to national development, calling for greater economic empowerment, and demanding access to education, health care, and equal pay. Progressive voices in Myanmar have been working to increase representation by women in the government and the national peace process and have been drawing attention to the victimization of women, especially in conflict zones (Nobel Zaw 2015).

## The Public Discourse of the Sangha in the Digital Age

The question of belonging also surfaces in the context of debates about the role of monks whose political force has received much media attention. Previously, dissidents joked that color television in Myanmar was broadcast only in green (a reference to the military) and orange (referring to the robes of monks who supported the military). Today, a range of religious actors employ new communications technologies, including Buddhist television broadcasts and different forms of digital media such as chat rooms, texting, and Facebook, in order to propagate the Buddhist religion (*thathana pyu thi*) and mobilize its supporters. Founded in 2003 and widely popular from 2010 to 2015, Ma Ba Tha organization made adept use of such technologies. Its spokesman, U Wirathu, the abbot of the Mogaung Monastery in Mandalay, preaches that Buddhism and the nation are being threatened by the presence of Muslims in Myanmar. He served a prison sentence for anti-Muslim agitation until his release in 2010 as part of an amnesty. A 2014 newspaper report revealed that his views had not changed: "U Wirathu, a leader of the ultra-nationalist and anti-Islamic 969 movement, made [the following] statement at a press conference at Mandalay's Mogaung Monastery … His message to Muslims was simple: they don't belong in Myanmar" (Cable 2014). Communal tensions frequently followed Wirathu's sermons and speeches in Arakan and around the country, and in 2017 he was again prohibited from preaching.

Wirathu comes from the rural area in Upper Burma that is also home to Senior General Than Shwe, the head of state from 1992 to 2011. This social proximity between the military leader and Myanmar's most fervent anti-Muslim provocateur is a reminder to the Burmese public that democratic freedoms continue to be fragile and that forceful dissent may precipitate a return to military dictatorship (Ei Ei Toe Lwin 2014; Kyaw Phyo Tha 2014). In an effort to contain their corrosive propaganda, the state's highest monastic authority, the Mahanayaka Sangha Council, passed several rulings in 2017 that successively outlawed Wirathu's public sermons and the Ma Ba Tha organization itself.

Debates about who belongs to the new Myanmar also include progressive points of view. Min Zin, a public intellectual and political scientist, has cogently argued that the chasm between Myanmar's people and the monks promotes democracy in Myanmar. In an opinion piece in the *New York Times*, Min Zin (2014) states that a countermovement is underway:

> This rise in religious radicalism has created a countermovement bringing together over one hundred civil-society actors, including the pro-democracy 88 Generation Students Group; popular monks like Metta Shin U Zawana; Muslim and Christian groups; ethnic minorities; associations of intellectuals like PEN Myanmar; much of the mainstream media; and young bloggers like Nay Phone Latt. Together they have launched an anti-hate speech campaign, released official statements of protest, petitioned the legislature and lobbied the international community to condemn discrimination in Myanmar … The advent of a countermovement to Buddhist extremism suggests that the people of Myanmar are emancipating from traditional elites and taking a major stride toward modernity and democracy.

Responses among global Buddhist networks to the discourse on Buddhist nationalism in Myanmar have included comments by the Dalai Lama, who admonished Burmese monks and, together with his fellow Nobel Prize recipients, has called for an end to violence. Others echo the view prominent in the West that Buddhism is inherently non-violent and peaceful, obscuring the political and social realities of those historical moments when Buddhists have been both victims and perpetrators of violence. Jack Kornfield (2014) published his first-hand report about the causes of violence in Arakan, but not without explaining 'real' Buddhism. Under the title "Buddhists Betray the Teachings," he describes social causes for the Rohingya conflict and then concludes that "surprisingly, there is widespread ignorance in Burma of the many core Buddhist teachings. Most of Buddhist practice is devotional … In this culture of devotion, the teachings of the noble truths and eightfold path, of nonviolence, mindfulness, meditation, and virtue, are not emphasized" (ibid.).

Some Western media outlets stressed a resurgence of Buddhist nationalism and Burmese xenophobia. On its cover for 1 July 2013, *Time* magazine identified the "Face of Buddhist Terror" with the Burmese monk Wirathu. This pejorative rhetoric deprives Myanmar Buddhists of voicing their own perspectives, while Abeysekara (2002: 203) reminds readers that the voice of authenticity always belongs to the community of practitioners. Few media reports in Myanmar and abroad focus on positive examples, such as when Buddhist monks gave refuge to 1,400 Muslims in Lashio, in northern Shan State, to protect them from rioting mobs in 2013, or when monks dispersed attackers at a madrassa outside Rangoon in the same year or in a Muslim neighborhood in Mandalay in 2014 (Lawi Weng 2014a). Efforts to strengthen communal peace—such as an interfaith youth conference held in Yangon in 2013 or Muslim community leaders in Mandalay offering meals and robes to Buddhist monks "to promote harmonious intercommunal relations" (San Yamin Aung 2014)—receive much less attention.

The Buddhist discourse on the involvement of monks in worldly affairs is well recorded in texts and colonial histories and is evident in hegemonic practices. Authoritative Theravada discourse tends to present the sangha as a monolithic institution that acts as a unified body in ritual and legal matters. However, events since the popular uprisings in 1988 have shown that the sangha in Myanmar is a highly diverse institution, encompassing a range of Buddhist practices, ethnic identities, vernacular languages, generational divisions, and political affiliations. This social reality has given rise to a renewed discourse about the kind of involvement in society that monks should have, that is, as socially engaged agents of Buddhist modernism, as teachers, or as disciplined sources of merit. Yet the debate also includes allegations about imposters, those who wear robes but do not follow the *vinaya* (the Theravada monastic code of law, conduct, and ritual) due to their involvement in politics. The existence of such debates points to a concern with moral justification and the perception of Buddhist intent as well as the presence of multiple voices within the sangha. Despite these differences, silencing the sangha in the future is unlikely since monks increasingly participate in shaping public discourse across a spectrum of voices that range from socially engaged groups to anti-Muslim agitators.

Regardless of who initiates monastic reform movements, they generally appeal to the foundations of discipline as the hallmark of monastic practice, emphasizing that monks, who are not subject to the state, must live by *vinaya*. This authoritative body of texts guides monks in their moral conduct to ensure that they remain worthy sources of merit for their lay supporters. The *vinaya* thus plays a significant role in monastic organization in the Theravada world and especially in Myanmar, where it is frequently invoked in matters of ordination, transgressions, or disputes about individual and communal property. Under the guidance of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, the monastic state council maintains a judicial system of *vinaya* courts empowered to deal with disputes involving monks. Many Theravadins see the ideal Buddhist monk as a world-renouncing ascetic who is expected to avoid involvement in politics in order to demonstrate his detachment. A 'good' monk is not necessarily uninvolved in matters of political import, but, more importantly, he serves the political powers as a means of obtaining merit. This emic description of 'good' monks resonated with both British colonial administrators and the governments of independent Burma. But such interpretations of monastic conduct must be read as hegemonic statements that presume that the sangha will not contest the power of its lay patrons, thereby endorsing the political status quo. Attention to the public voices of monks who participate in, and often organize, networks of donors shifts the production of meaning from considerations of normative monastic law to a discourse about appropriate monastic interventions in the challenges of contemporary life. Such interventions have taken the form of socially engaged Buddhist activism as well as the mobilization of their followers against Muslims.

Burma's history of so-called political monks includes narratives of resistance against the state but also co-optation by political powers, showing that monks are in a unique position to shape public opinion. After the colonial era, monks emerged as significant political voices, influencing public discourse, rallying popular resistance against the state, and providing social services where public assistance failed. Widespread mistrust of secular power further enabled Buddhist monks to play pivotal roles at historical watersheds that shaped the nation's future. The multiplicity of political voices in the sangha today demonstrates that Buddhist monasticism in Myanmar is not a monolithic institution but embodies various positions and practices, revealing the highly complex monastic contestations of various forms of authority that include political power and civil law. Indeed, the notion of a unified sangha has been a doctrinal ideal, rather than a historical reality.

Collectively, 'political monks' pose a considerable challenge in a political system in transition, where the Burmese experience with secular power during British colonial rule (1825–1947) and under military dictatorships (1962–2010) was often seen as morally suspect and corrupt. Over the past century, monks have been a powerful agent of politics at several critical moments. Buddhism became a fervent ground for anti-colonial resistance and early nationalism during the 1920s, when Burmese fought for home rule, or direct representation under British colonial rule, and thus end their annexation under the British Raj.

After independence in 1947, Burma's first democratic prime minister, U Nu, looked to mass lay meditation to help popularize democracy, promote development, and foster millennial expectations for a prosperous Buddhist nation. Buddhist identity became a flashpoint again in 1961 when U Nu sought to declare Buddhism to be the official state religion, a move that would alienate many of Burma's minorities. During the Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma (1974–1989), the Ministry of Religious Affairs undertook monastic reforms that imposed tight controls on the sangha and began to intervene against charismatic monks and their powerful networks of donors and economic resources.

Between 1989 and 2011, the military junta that came to power after the 1988 uprising succeeded in silencing nearly all forms of dissent, including religious voices, and eventually co-opted

Buddhist moral authority to enhance the state's authority. Ruling in the absence of a national constitution, military leaders increasingly sought to legitimate their power by sponsoring large Buddhist rituals that ensured better rebirths for all citizens of the state. Some Burmese saw in the state's appropriation of Buddhist symbols a moral vindication of the military dictatorship and a repudiation of the violence and political abuses that had been committed under its auspices.

In the 1990s, sporadic Buddhist contestations of the military regime proved to be increasingly difficult to control, even though the majority of monks remained silenced due to the controls the regime had imposed. At several moments during the military dictatorship, for example, in 1988, 1996, and 2007, monks invoked public 'strikes' (*thabei mouk*) and refused donations from the military regime and its supporters. This ritual act challenged political authority by refusing to allow donors to make merit. Since merit-making rituals are the primary means through which traditional social hierarchies are constructed, the monastic refusal to accept donations posed a high risk for potential communal violence.

The struggle against the military junta (1988–2011) united secular opponents of the regime, including university students, opposition leaders, public intellectuals, and members of the sangha. But military dictatorship also proved divisive to many Burmese families with relatives in both the sangha and the military. Monastic factions crystallized between, on the one hand, an older monastic establishment co-opted by the Ministry of Religious Affairs and, on the other hand, a younger generation of monks, many of whom had been victimized by the events of 1988 when the sangha provided infrastructural support to the popular uprising led by student demonstrators.

In 2007, the media image projected by the Burmese sangha to the outside world was that of a progressive force engaged in social reforms and support for human rights, challenging the power of the military junta by protesting in the streets of Yangon and elsewhere. Reports of their marches were featured daily in the media outlets of the global public sphere, creating a powerful Buddhist narrative that equated loving kindness (*metta*) with democracy. Monks again refused donations from military families, challenging the junta in support of a moral government. Along with their protest marches, they accepted food and water from democracy advocates. At the dramatic height of these protests, monks accepted water from and extended blessings to Aung San Suu Kyi who, for the first time in years, appeared in public view at the gate of her compound where she had been under house arrest. Although the protest marches were brutally put down soon thereafter, they nonetheless presented a formidable challenge to the moral authority of the military.

The widespread devastation caused by the tropical cyclone Nargis along the coastal regions in 2008 provided another important moment for the sangha and its civil society supporters to challenge the military regime, which proved incapable of delivering humanitarian aid to people in the ravaged regions and was even unwilling to do so. Some Burmese saw in this calamity karmic retribution for the junta's moral failures. The storm damaged the spire (*hti*) of Shwedagon Pagoda, knocking down jewels encrusted in the diamond bud, thereby signaling to many the bad karma and moral reprehensibility of the junta. Advocating socially engaged action, the sangha became the channel for organizing relief and reconstruction efforts. More importantly, mitigating suffering in the aftermath of this disaster became a significant way of empowering civil society organizations, both morally and politically. A number of highly effective organizations emerged during this period, such as the successful Free Funeral Society, which since then has expanded its mission to alleviate a range of social needs. The emergence of civil society organizations also opened up opportunities to rethink the location of a moral obligation to alleviate suffering. Rather than expecting the state to provide for the welfare of its disadvantaged citizens, these organizations have stepped in to organize private donations and resources in order to meet neglected needs. For many, this development has offered new venues for Buddhist

engagement with the world and the practice of Buddhist moral values. For others, being socially engaged is a way to contest the failures of the state to provide for its citizens.

The national experience of this natural disaster has become a touchstone for renewed moral debates about religious engagement, secularism, and the effective power of civil society organizations in contemporary Myanmar. The sangha's participation in the current political discourse in Burma has frustrated many politicians who are not eager to confront monastic authority, let alone activism. Secular political reformers and progressives hesitate to unleash the unpredictable social forces of monks whose charisma may prove too difficult to contain. Deliberations about contemporary Buddhist practice, the search for new Buddhist engagement in a changing society, the history and future of secular politics, and the roles of religious others within that matrix continue to unfold.

## Conclusion

This article offers a lens on public debates in contemporary Myanmar, highlighting some genealogies that prefigured much of this discourse. By tracing some aspects of Buddhist discourse about race, gender, and religious others in historical and contemporary contexts, the article locates diverse Buddhist voices in certain social moments and shows how religious identities emerge from—or are submerged by—larger political and ethnic convergences. This analysis emphasizes the range of voices in the public debates about belonging to the new Myanmar, demonstrating how religious identities can be fused with ethnic, national, or cultural values.

Pointing to the complex challenges people in Myanmar are facing, I also aim to illustrate how an anthropology of Buddhism can account for the agency of ethnic and religious others living in contemporary Theravada contexts. Until recently, monolithic representations of Buddhist Myanmar tended to submerge tensions surrounding religious and ethnic diversity that cut across identities, communities, and even majorities, while representing ethnic groups as marginal to Buddhist civilizations in the river valleys of the Southeast Asian mainland. The formation of the modern state in Myanmar after World War II created boundaries that both divided and reified national identities among ethnic groups living in border regions, reconfiguring their ethnic identities along national borders.

In the contemporary world, the immediacy of aesthetic formations forecloses the possibility of living in a closed imaginary within a totalizing Theravada discourse since new mediascapes challenge such exclusively emic perspectives. Rapidly shifting contexts of digital communications technologies thus require citizens of the new Myanmar to employ more nuanced ethnographic accounts of aesthetic formations in order to make sense of a changing world.

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## NOTES

1. While Myanmar is now the official name of the country that was called Burma during most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, significant political debates surround the use of these names. I use both terms in order to indicate specific historical contexts in which events under consideration occurred.
2. Since 2009, participants of the Theravada Civilizations Project, funded by the Henry Luce Foundation, have been critically engaged in developing the concept of 'Theravada civilizations' to underscore the creative iterations between literary and intellectual discourse in Pali and vernacular languages and particular social formations and practices across the regions where Theravada Buddhist institutions have prospered. See "Grant Spotlight: The Theravada Civilizations Project" on the Henry Luce Foundation website at http://www.hluce.org/theravadaspotlight.aspx.
3. Cheesman (2017b) distinguishes between communal violence perpetrated between 2012 and 2014 and state-sponsored violence against Muslims, especially in Rakhine, that has been prevalent after 2014.
4. Edited by Cheesman, this special edition of the *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, titled "Interpreting Communal Violence in Myanmar," offers important analytical insights into a range of concerns that come into focus, including law, gender, memory, constructions of ethnic and religious identities, and the role of new media in reporting on these events.
5. Van Klinken and Su Mon Thazin Aung (2017) argue that anti-Muslim violence is being organized by an emerging political movement allied with the military that is framing events of communal violence for public audiences.
6. Cheesman (2017a: 461) points out that the notion of 'national races' (*tain gyin tha*) functions to deny Rohingya and others the right to citizenship, while entailing a solution to their ambivalent status.
7. A recent contestation to the status of women is contained in section 59(f) of the 2010 national constitution that prohibits the president from having a foreign-born family, a clause that continues to be upheld (Khin Mar Mar Kyi 2016). The 2015 electoral victory by the National League of Democracy, led by Aung San Suu Kyi, the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize winner and daughter of Myanmar's national martyr, Aung San, thus required the creation of a new office of State Counsellor because the law prohibits her from assuming the presidency.

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