

About Buddhist Burma: *Thathana*, or ‘Religion’ as Social Space

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INTRODUCTION

Amidst my field memories in Burma, I still have very vivid in mind the vision of an energetic woman belonging to the urban lower middle class that had come about in the 1990s. She was telling me with genuine amazement how she became a caretaker of ‘religion’ (*thathana pyu di*) against all her expectations. After years of economic restriction under the Burmese socialist regime, the new junta¹ had opened business opportunities that together with her husband she had managed to grasp. They

¹Burma gained independence from the British Empire on January 4, 1948, only to experience a very troubled parliamentary era. It ended with Ne Win’s coup in 1962, which imposed the rule of the military. A socialist ideology framed by the BSPP (Burmese Socialist Party Program) was soon implemented, and Ne Win stayed at the top of the state until 1988 when massive popular protests led him to withdraw. However, after the lost elections of 1990, the army stepped back into power with a liberalized economic policy while holding tightly the reins of government. SLORC (State Law and Order Council) and SPDC (State Peace and Development Council) are the two military–government organs that exercised power over Burma (Myanmar) from 1990 to 2011.

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started spending their surplus in setting up a pagoda network in the eastern part of Yangon where they had settled as a newlywed couple some 30 years earlier when it was just urbanizing.² Since that time, very few significant religious establishments had been set up in the new suburbs. Despite their very simple background, the couple had done so well in society following the change of regime that they were able to reach a status that allowed them to take part in the development of Buddhist institutions in the recently urbanized territories; they could share in the new policies meant to legitimate the junta's power through religious foundations. The dazzling social rise as told by the lady was embedded in a truly Buddhist discourse of karmic determination, which was demonstrated by tangible achievements: the transforming of a suburban space into a Buddhized landscape of stupas and religious images.

My sensitivity to the specificity of the Burmese notion of *thathana* (Pali, *sāsana*)—as a rendition of ‘religion’—dates back to this field encounter. *Thathana* was yet to be identified by Gustaaf Houtman and later on by Alexey Kirichenko—two fine connoisseurs of Burmese semantics—as a key word in Burmese conceptualizations of religion, in two seminal papers that will be commented hereafter.³ As to my own understanding of *thathana*, I had yet to learn how the uses of the word might be at bewildering variance according to both particular local contexts and the overall socio-political situation.

The Burmese word tentatively translated as ‘religion,’ *thathana*, encapsulates the ideas of the teachings of the Buddha and their dispensation. Certainly, this word does not correspond with the Western common understanding of ‘religion.’ Nor is it the only Burmese term that could translate one aspect or another of what is subsumed under the notion of religion in the West. *Batha* (Pali *basha*) is another of those terms. Originally used to mean ‘language,’ in the mid-nineteenth century *batha* came to be used to signify religion as a professed denomination. *Dhamma*, a Pali word whose general meaning is ‘law,’ also denotes the doctrinal contents of the Buddha’s teachings.

²See Brac de la Perrière (1995) about the foundation of this network of pagodas.

³Regarding the semantic field covered by *thathana*, and its history, see Houtman (1999) and Kirichenko (2009). In reference to the reformulation of *thathana* through the colonial encounter, see also Turner (2014).

Thus, basic notions referring to different aspects of religion, as it is generally understood in the West, have a Pali origin in Burma and other countries in which Buddhist tradition identified as Theravāda refers to the Pali textual corpus.⁴ However, Pali concepts have evolved in specific ways in the different vernaculars forming what Gustaaf Houtman has called the ‘Pali trap’ (1990). Beyond the intrinsic complexities of the semantic field of ‘religion’ in different countries of the Theravādin tradition, the encounter with Western notions had a distinctive effect on the formation of this field. ‘World religions’ discourses have been, generally speaking, found to impact the identification of ideas, institutions and practice as religious, in different local exotic contexts, in such a way that these processes have come to be addressed under the label of ‘religionization’ or of the ‘making of religion’ (Mandair and Dressler 2011). However, in Burma, these processes have not led to the formation of a clearly differentiated sphere of religious life as I will argue in the following sections.

In Burmese, should one try to find an equivalent for the concept of ‘religionization’ or the ‘making of religion,’ one could choose *thathana pyu*. This was the term the woman at the start of this chapter used to give a sense of what was, at the time, ‘religion in the making’ in Burma, that is, a never-ending process of manifesting the Buddha’s teachings in the social world. However, another discourse about the ‘defense of *thathana*’ has recently developed anew.⁵ This discourse is mainly circulated by the Ma Ba Tha association, which was established by a number of abbots in the wake of anti-Muslim violence in 2013, and draws on the exclusively Buddhist character of *thathana* to promote an aggressive Buddhist nationalism.⁶ This discourse about the ‘defense of religion’ suddenly overwhelmed the public sphere, at a time when Burma was experiencing a political transition and a push for acceptance of human rights values, leaving observers in a quandary.

It is my hypothesis that, in the modern context, this move from one discourse of *thathana* to the other has been an effect of the unstable

⁴See Pereira (2012) about the genealogy of ‘Theravāda’ as the category identifying the Pali tradition.

⁵‘Defense of religion,’ or *thathana saung shauk yay*, has long been present in Buddhist discourses in Burma as a duty of the political power. See below on the traditional articulation of Buddhist and kingship institutions in Theravādin societies.

⁶Ma Ba Tha is the acronym for *Amyo batha thathana saung shauk yay ahpwe*, which could be translated as: ‘Association for the Defense of the National Religion’ (Brac de la Perrière 2014).

relationship between Buddhist and political institutions. This instability can only be explained by the impossibility, up to now, of delineating or isolating a definite domain of religious action in the Burmese socio-political order. It has also to do with the specificity of the process of ‘religionization,’ that is, its non-finiteness. In order to address this question, I will attempt to reach a working definition of the moving concept of *thathana* through an analysis of the semantic field of ‘religion’ and, then, examine how the religious sphere is constructed against other fields of practice conceptualized in Burmese as ‘paths’ (*lan*).

THE BURMESE SEMANTIC FIELD OF ‘RELIGION’

In standard use,⁷ *thathana* only concerns the Buddha’s teachings as they have been spread, materialized, and institutionalized. As such, it cannot be used to refer to any other religious denomination. If translated, it should be through the deictic ‘the religion’ and would actually mean Buddhism, excluding all other world religions or local beliefs present in the Burmese context.⁸ Except in very specific contexts, *thathana* designates Buddhism only. This is a marked difference with the contemporary use of this Pali concept in neighboring Buddhist cultures where *sāsana* may be linked to other denominations, or even to spirit cults in order to denote the ‘religion of the spirits,’ as in the Lao *sadsana phi*, for instance.⁹

While it excludes all other religious denominations, *thathana* does not necessarily lack pluralistic connotations. Among others, it allows for

⁷It is beyond the scope of this chapter to give a detailed analysis of all the uses of *thathana*, be it monastic, administrative, or legal. It is similarly beyond its scope to trace the evolution of its understanding through successive *thathana* reforms. As described by Alicia Turner, historically, the meaning of *thathana* ‘was fluid, reinflected, and reinvented with each new instance of *sāsana* reform’ (2014: 136). Therefore, we shall stay at the level of its general understanding and evolution.

⁸I only recently came across one occurrence of *Kirian thathana* (Christian teachings) in a very specific context: a legal claim placed by the Christian authorities in Burma against an offense to their institution. They needed to use the concept of *thathana* because of the formulation of the law involved. Significantly, the newly formed Buddhist nationalist association (Ma Ba Tha) protested vehemently against this use of *thathana* (*Eleven Daily*, December 12, 2014).

⁹See Sprenger, this volume.

the differentiation of various levels of Buddhist practice.¹⁰ These levels are organized hierarchically under an all encompassing whole, which is ultimately linked to the teachings of Gautama Buddha. According to Buddhist cosmology, this dispensation is supposed to last only five thousand years and then to vanish until the coming of a next Buddha.

In Burma, however, *thathana* refers to the Buddha's legacy as grounded in Burmese society. Historically, this refers to Burmese Buddhist kingship with all its institutions aimed at passing on the teachings of the Buddha and, most importantly, the monastic community or Sangha (*thangha*) that bears the Theravādin tradition. In the Buddhist kingship configuration, different levels of *thathana* were encompassed and crisscrossed by one primary division that set monks apart from the laity. Monks ordained in the Sangha stand apart as crucial defenders of Buddhist teachings and providers of spiritual merit.¹¹ The partition between Sangha and lay Buddhist people was and still is the most striking statutory distinction within the Burmese social world and other Theravādin societies.

In any case, historically, *thathana* allowed for more idiosyncratic delineations than might be suggested by its translation as 'the' exclusive and single 'religion.' Not only did *thathana* imply different levels of practice that could be conceived of as distinctive sets of observances but it also allowed religious pluralism within the Buddhist polity or *thathana-daw*,¹² in which Buddhism and kingship were knitted together in a 'symbiotic' relationship. In this pre-colonial context, people identified themselves or were identified by others as subjects of the Buddhist kingdom, rather than categorized by 'religious' or 'ethnic' denominations (Lieberman 1978).

¹⁰Kirichenko quotes historiographical mentions of differentiated *thathana* according to status, such as the *thathana* of the monks (*yahan-thathana*) and the *thathana* of the lay-people (*lu-thathana*) (Kirichenko 2009). I have come across lists of distinctive *thathana* organized according to monastic practice followed: *pariyatti thathana*, *patipatti thathana*, *pativeda thathana*.

¹¹This function of providers of merit is the basis of the relationship linking the Sangha to Buddhist lay people, as the latter may mainly acquire spiritual merit (*kutho*) in order to progress on the karmic path via their offerings to the Sangha.

¹²Followed by the suffix *daw*, an honorific qualifying particularly royal things, *thathana-daw* could be translated as Buddhist kingdom.

However, through the development of the colonial situation, religious belonging took on new importance, or so we have to infer from the semantic differentiation occurring in the mid-nineteenth century. In dictionaries of Burmese compiled at that time by Western missionaries, *batha*, the Burmese version of Pali *bhāsā* meaning ‘language,’ is defined as ‘religion’ for the first time.¹³ At that point, *batha* was mainly found in the reports of the colonial administration—the census or the legal codes (Kirichenko 2009)—that is to say, in colonial efforts to classify populations. Around 1920, however, *batha* was used to mean religious affiliation quite generally. In the meantime, the all-encompassing dimensions of the previous Buddhist royal order (*thathana-daw*) seem to have lost ground to religious pluralism, which was no longer contained within a Buddhist polity and became restricted to more doctrinal connotations than had been previously the case.

As a concept for religion, *batha* is today understood in two main ways. First, it refers to various ‘-isms’ or systems of religious beliefs that are considered independent of the societies in which they are transmitted. In Burmese, one can speak of *Kirian batha*, *Muslim batha* or *Buddha batha*, and this had set the foundation for evaluative comparisons.¹⁴ But, to the best of my knowledge, there are no occurrences of *batha* used to talk about spirit worship, given that the latter does not fit into the Western notion of ‘world religions’ contained in the newly formed concept. Secondly, *batha* also implies a sense of religion as individually professed and suggests a personal involvement.

To encapsulate the semantic differentiation that occurred through the introduction of the term *batha* between the mid-nineteenth century and the 1920s, one could say that this concept brought about the very categories ‘Buddhism’ and ‘religions.’ The difference construed through opposing *batha* to *thathana* in Burma may be understood as mirroring

¹³‘Religion’ is one meaning of the entry *batha* in Judson’s *Dictionary* (Houtman 1990), and *botdabatha* is used in the title of the Reverend J. Wade’s *Dictionary of Buddhism and Burmese Literature* (Kirichenko 2009). Both dictionaries were originally published in 1852. As *thathana* was embedded in a discourse of true Buddhist views contrasted to false ones, Judson, a Baptist missionary, apparently renounced the extension of its use to Christianity. This would have been the reason for introducing *batha* to designate ‘religions’ (Houtman 1990).

¹⁴See the famous *Shin Okkata & Kyauk Kwin A Yaydawbon*, authored by Myat Hsain in 1962, as one example of literary production about this kind of evaluation. But, as early as 1919, the abbot of Ledi produced ‘a polemical study of the “four great religions” (*Batha-kyi-le-ba*),’ as quoted by Green (2015) through Patrick Pranke.

Western discourses about religion increasingly being replaced by the plural form 'religions,' as opposed to the single form of 'religion' meant to designate Christianity, soon to produce the syntagm 'world religions' (Masuzawa 2005). However, while these discourses evolved alongside the secularization process in the West, this was not quite the case in the Theravādin area, especially in Burma.

Similar genealogies of the way religious terminology coalesced through the colonial encounter could be traced in neighboring Theravādin countries. The case of Sri Lanka is particularly well researched. For instance, elaborating on previous erudition, Kitsiri Malalgoda has shown how *āgama*, a Pali word which had long designated categories of religious texts in the island, was appropriated at the turn of the nineteenth century by Western missionaries to designate Christianity against the prevailing term *sāsana* used for Buddhism as a socio-temporal phenomenon. At the turn of the twentieth century, *āgama* had become the generic term for 'religion' and 'religions' in Sri Lanka (Malalgoda 1997).¹⁵

This brief comparison of concepts for 'religion' and 'religions' in Burma and Sri Lanka emphasizes their commonalities, particularly similarities in the impact of the encounter with the Western notion of 'religions,' soon to become 'world religions,' conveyed by the Christian missionaries. However, out of this common background, the differentiation of the religious semantic field in these two countries produced definite specificities. An immediately perceptible specificity is the Burmese choice of *batha*, referring to 'languages,' rather than *āgama*, denoting 'scriptures,' to mean 'religions' as doctrinal systems independent of the societies in which they are present, as opposed to *thathana/sāsana*, or the Buddha's teachings and the institutions ensuring their transmission in a given society. This choice of *batha* is particularly striking if one remembers the well-documented scriptural dimension of the

¹⁵The first author analyzing the semantics of religion in Sri Lanka is the anthropologist Richard Gombrich in his famous *Buddhist Precept and Practice* (1971). He delineated his object of study as 'religion' in that his informants considered themselves a 'religion,' that is to say, *dhamma*. Another main reference about the semantic field of religion in Sri Lanka is Carter (1993). About the way Buddhism was affected by the British encounter in Sri Lanka, see Harris (2006).

Western discovery of Buddhism.¹⁶ However, this Burmese idiosyncrasy speaks for the independent formation of the semantic fields of religion in Theravādin countries facing comparable circumstances.

There is little to no information concerning the rationale behind the Burmese selection of *batha* for ‘religions’; Kirichenko (2009) notes that this term was first understood as teachings by one of the main Burmese literati of the turn of the twentieth century, the abbot of Ledi, who highlighted the initial oral dimension of the Buddha’s teachings. At first, there was a lack of differentiation between *batha* and *thathana*, the former used only to signify other religions, while the latter retained its value to specify Buddhist teachings and their dispensation. But soon, through the advent of the 1920s nationalist movements, following the formation of lay associations for the defense of the Buddha’s teachings, *batha* took its distinctive identity dimension of ‘religion’ as professed and ‘religion’ as a doctrinal system. *Thathana*, meanwhile, recovered its unique status of delineating the Burmese socio-religious order as Buddhist. However, these categories evolve depending on context. In the current political transition and release of vocal Buddhist nationalism, *batha* takes on a more encompassing dimension, merging religious, ethnic and national belonging, as exemplified in the name of the new nationalist association Ma Ba Tha (see above note 6).

Thathana came out of these developments as a locally reappropriated concept referring to the Buddha’s teachings and their dispensation in the Burmese social order. In other words, *thathana* may be understood as the Burmese Buddhicized *social space*.¹⁷ This is the definition that should be kept in mind while parsing out what counts as ‘religion’ in this social space.

¹⁶See in particular, Philip Almond’s *The British Discovery of Buddhism* (1988). Almond analyzes how Buddhism was identified through Burnouf’s discovery of a Buddhist-Sanskrit corpus and invented during the Victorian era as a textual object located mainly in the Pali Text Society, a history that determined the enduring textual bias of the Buddhist studies. See also Lopez (1995).

¹⁷Regarding the concept of *social space*, see Condominas, who applied this concept to Southeast Asia, defining it as ‘the space delineated by the set of relationships systems that characterize the group under consideration’ (*l’espace déterminé par l’ensemble des systèmes de relations, caractéristique du groupe considéré*) (1980: 14). Aspects of this concept are useful for our depiction of *thathana* in that it is dynamic and applies to various levels of organization of social groups.

THATHANA AND BUDDHISM AS A ‘UNIVERSALISM’

To relate the Burmese concept of *thathana* to the broader context of the Western encounter with Buddhism, it is important to first note how it is inscribed in the locality, far from the universal dimension that the Orientalist discovery found in deciphering the Buddhist textual corpus. From the beginning, whatever ambiguities underlaid the perceptions of its first discoverers in Europe, Buddhism was perceived by them as universal and philosophical. It included the main features of the ‘world religion’ category, that is, a historical founder (the Buddha) and the recognition of an ancient textual corpus. Masuzawa explains how the vision of Buddhism as ‘a historical reform movement’ initiated against Vedism and Brahmanism ‘by an extraordinary but historically real individual’ helped these discoverers to view it as ‘a decidedly non-national religion,’ even before the distinction between world and national religions had been made (2005: 136–138). When these categories came into use, Buddhism *inevitably* entered the category of ‘universalisms’ and was thus represented at the World’s Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893.

However, as suggested by the reformulation of *thathana* in Burmese, there is a gap that needs to be bridged between the notion of Buddhism as a transnational religion and the localized conception of *thathana* as embedded in the presence of a monastic order or Sangha (*thangha*) pertaining to the Burmese society and the nation. The main Buddhist institution in Burma, like in all societies belonging to the Pali tradition, is the Sangha, because in this tradition it is regarded as the main recipient of the Buddha’s teachings recorded in the Pali canon known as the *Tipitaka* (‘The Three Baskets’), as well as the main provider of merit for the lay Buddhist people.

Through their ordination in the Sangha, men are turned into monks who are mendicant renunciators.¹⁸ As such, they are supposed to follow the Buddhist monastic way of life, consisting of practice (Pali *patipatti*) and study (Pali *pariyatti*), in order to transmit the Buddha’s teachings and to get closer to liberation from the cycle of lives (*thanthaya*, Pali *samsarā*). Obedience to the monastic rule, consisting of the 227 precepts recorded in the *Vinaya* book, ensures the monks’ renunciation of the

¹⁸In Burma, women may also adopt a monastic way of life by becoming *thilashin*, but their status is lower than that of monks and the question of their belonging to the Sangha is ambiguous (see Kawanami 2013).

world. The effectiveness of their renunciation is, in turn, what entitles them to receive religious donations from lay Buddhist people willing to provide for their material needs. These latter gain merits through their donations to monks, which improve their karmic status. Monks and ordinary Buddhists are thus in a relation of interdependency based on hierarchically defined statuses.

In historical times, the Sangha was under the lay authority of the Burmese Buddhist king, who guaranteed its ‘purity,’ that is, the effectiveness of its renunciation of the world. The king was the chief donor among his subjects, and his legitimacy was linked to the prosperity of Buddhist institutions that were intended to ensure the proper transmission of the Buddha’s teachings. The implication of such a configuration was that Sangha and kingship were also in an interdependent relation in the political-religious order, which as a whole formed the Buddhist polity (*thathana-daw*), that is, an instance of the dispensation of the Buddha’s teachings.

In the mid-nineteenth century, while Burmese Buddhists were starting to recognize themselves as Buddhists vis-à-vis other denominations through the concept of *batha* (religion as professed), they also learned that they were part of the southern branch of this newly discovered ‘world religion.’ This branch was then designated Hīnayāna, meaning ‘Little Vehicle,’ and distinguished through its Pali canon from the Mahāyāna branch, meaning ‘Great Vehicle.’ It was not until June 6, 1950, that the World Fellowship of Buddhists decided at its inaugural meeting held in Colombo to name the southern branch of Buddhism Theravāda, the Elders’ Path, rejecting the resented Hīnayāna (Perreira 2012). In Burma, The Sixth Buddhist Council held in 1956 in Yangon was decisive in the popularization of the new denomination. Although the genealogy of the differentiation of the two branches (Mahāyāna and Theravāda) has been recently the object of academic debate, Buddhists from Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos, recognize their tradition as pertaining to the Theravāda today.

This brings to light the role of councils as a practice of universality in the Theravādin tradition. In 1956, the 6th council was held in Yangon, at Kaba Aye, a brand new pagoda built for the occasion. The council was a major event for the nascent Burmese nation and for the international community of Theravādin Buddhists. In continuity with previous Buddhist councils, it was a huge gathering of learned monks convened in order to revise the Pali canon (*Tipitaka*). In the case of the previous

historical Buddhist councils, Buddhist kings convened the monastic communities in order to 'purify' Buddhist teachings or *sāsana* in their efforts to control the Sangha, as shown by Robert Lingat (1989). Thus, councils aimed at the redefinition of textual orthodoxy were both an expression of the various communities linked by the Pali tradition and an act of political authority exerted upon the monastic order at the polity level, combining a practice of universality with the affirmation of a localized power.

In the same vein, the Kaba Aye council convened by Burmese authorities aimed at producing 'a new and truly international version' of the *Tipitaka* in the context of newly gained independences (Clark 2015: 95).¹⁹ The council was planned by Nu, who was then the Burmese Prime Minister and who, in the post-colonial context, envisioned a program of Buddhist revival as a tool for national consolidation. The newly defined Burmese nation was to be identified as Buddhist, in concert with other new Asian nations. As a result, Theravāda, a new denomination of the common religious identity of the region's states, was to emerge as a reflection of the post-colonial political agenda, with an enduring impact.

Significantly, the call on universality to reaffirm lay power in a *sāsana* appears to have been implemented through textual practice. The common reference to the Theravādin denomination is indeed the Pali canon or *Tipitaka*, which purports to be an exclusive list of Buddhist scriptures. Steven Collins suggested in his seminal paper, 'On the Very Idea of the Pali Canon,' that 'the actual importance of what we know as the Pali Canon has not lain in the specific texts collected in that list, but rather in the very idea of such a collection' (Collins 1990). Recent studies on religious textual cultures in Theravādin countries have led some scholars to question the permanence of this reference and to show how, in fact, it has mainly percolated in these societies through oral teaching of monks

¹⁹In his recent paper on the 6th Buddhist council, Chris Clark shows particularly that Burmese authorities spared no effort to make the result of this impressive editorial undertaking recognized by the whole Theravāda Buddhist world, although only but a few monks from other Theravādin countries did participate in the work. However, the new edited *Tipitaka* does not exclusively represent a Burmese version but makes liberal use of all the sources and has become a major reference.

and predicators using vernacular commentaries of Pali texts as sources.²⁰ Monks, without having to prove the authenticity of their teachings, are considered the legitimate interpreters of the Buddha's words. In this respect, monks are active agents of transmission for an evolving canon. Thus, whereas the effectiveness of secular powers on Buddhist politics depends on their preserving the supposedly original canon, practices of transmission in the communities reveal that the nature of the Pali canon is in reality much more fluid and elusive.

In local communities, the Pali canon exists mainly as an idea of the 'universal,' orally transmitted, negotiated, and appropriated by monastics seen as the depositaries of the Buddha's teachings. Secular powers have the responsibility to import and preserve the universal canonic corpus and to materialize it through revision, copy, and editing by the most learned monks gathering in councils. Councils are thus politico-religious events enabling the localization of the universal, a transformation that is also, partly, that of the written form into the oral. In 1956, at the Kaba Aye council, the Burmese invented for themselves a national identity partly defined as a return to traditional forms of order conveyed by the concept of *thathana*, in which secular power and Buddhist institutions appear intrinsically related.

SYMBIOTIC VARIATIONS: FROM THE DISPENSATION TO THE DEFENSE OF *THATHANA*

The ideas conveyed through *thathana* belong to their respective times and to evolving configurations of power, as exemplified in the various discourses of dispensation²¹ and the recently renewed theme of national Buddhist identity, suggesting to defend the *thathana* against the presence of other religions. Both also result from the difficulty to differentiate political and Buddhist action in a Theravādin society like Burma. In such society, the relationship between secular power and Buddhist establishment is so intricate that Tambiah (1976) characterized it as a 'symbiosis.' In this regard, determining what counts for 'religion' in Buddhist Burma depends largely on the balance of power between these

²⁰For two brilliant examples of the recent study of textual practices in a Theravādin context, see Blackburn (2001) and McDaniel (2008), both of whom were largely inspired by the analysis of Collins (1990 and 1998).

²¹*Thathana pyu* means literally taking care of the Buddha's teachings, as seen earlier.

institutions in a particular situation and at a given time. That is why, in order to understand the process of religionization in Burma, one must examine the history of power relationships between political and Buddhist institutions.

As explained above, in former times the main Buddhist institution was the Sangha, linked to the Burmese kingship in an embedding *thathana*, which was one manifestation of the Buddha's dispensation.²² The fall of Burmese kingship in the last phase of the British colonial conquest (1885) was decisive in reformulating the Burmese Buddhized social space. The new situation caused major social and political crisis.²³ The fall of the monarchy suddenly deprived the Buddhist institutions of their main protection and destabilized the socio-religious order. Since that time, the delineation of the *thathana* has evolved according to the balance of power between political and Buddhist institutions.

Alicia Turner (2014) has described the colonial scene at the turn of the twentieth century, in which Burmese managed to negotiate a space free of colonial subordination by making use of the changing definition of 'religion.' Under the colonial administration, the defense of the *thathana* became a lay cause in Burma, because of the British avoidance of involvement in religious matters. The laity began to assume royal duties of protecting the *thathana* and expanded the lay donation path with involvement in practices that were previously reserved to monastics, such as the study of Buddhist writings and meditation.²⁴ A number of lay Buddhist associations flourished at the turn of the twentieth century, engaging in the support of the Sangha. Some of them were formed with the purpose of organizing collective donations to the Sangha, on a community base, creating a new sense of identity. Others began financing Pali examinations to promote *pariyatti*, the study of Buddhist teachings,

²²On the history of the Sangha in Burma, see Mendelson (1975).

²³The formal colonization of Burma occurred in three stages during the nineteenth century. The first war ended with the takeover of Arakan and Tenasserim by the Company in 1824, the second was concluded by the seizure of Lower Burma that became a province of India in 1852, and the third ended with the complete surrendering of Burma to the British Empire in 1885.

²⁴This period saw the abbot of Ledi, the famous Burmese cleric, actively promoting among laity the practice of insight meditation (P. *vipāssana*, B. *wipathena*), the most elevated kind of meditation, which was previously only a monastic practice (Houtman 1999; Jordt 2007).

whereas the preservation of Buddhist manuscripts and the supply of copied versions had previously been the prerogative of court monasticism.

As explained by Turner, the first discourses by lay Buddhist associations in defense of the *thathana* made Buddhism public, but they were not explicitly political. ‘Religion’ was simply the only sphere left by the colonial administration in which the Burmese could act upon their lives. However, with the nascent sense of collective identity, new nationalist associations would soon emerge and the whole process was later reinterpreted in the context of the independence struggle. Defense of the *thathana* came to be intermingled with proto-nationalist political discourse that recalled the pre-colonial ‘symbiosis’ of Buddhist institutions and political power, in spite of its anti-colonial stance. This worked as a strong precedent for the contemporary reformulation of Buddhist nationalism.

The defense of the *thathana* has thus evolved into a moral discourse of opposition to political orders—contra the discourse of dispensation—in which members of the Sangha have been vocal on several occasions. This was the case during the colonial era when young monks began to promote the emerging nationalist cause by preaching. Among them, the best known were Ottama and Wisara,²⁵ who were deprived of their monastic status by the colonial authorities under the pretext that political activism was an infringement on monastic rule. This was again the case more recently, in September 2007, when members of the Sangha decided to demonstrate against the junta, in a movement known as the ‘Saffron revolution.’ The leaders of the monks’ peaceful demonstrations were also defrocked and arrested by the Burmese junta on account of their political involvement, which paradoxically aligned the military with the colonial authorities. However, the relationship between the government and the Sangha was no longer the same as in the 1920s. At the time, the British administration was resuming the role of controlling the Sangha—which was previously the kings’ responsibility—without depending on it for its legitimacy. The military, meanwhile, depended on

²⁵Ottama (1879–1939) and Wisara (1888–1929). Wisara died in jail in 1929 following a hunger strike of 166 days intended to defend monks’ right to wear their robes in jail, in other words, while trying to recognize the monks’ rights to act politically without losing their religious status. Regarding these monks, see in particular Smith (1965) and Sarkisyanz (1965).

the monks to gain merits and reinforce their legitimacy as patrons of the monastic order on a national scale.

To summarize the evolution of the *thathana* in relation to the balance of powers, one can say that when the symbiotic relationship between state and Sangha weakened, as it did during the colonial period (1885–1948) or the first military regime (Ne Win era, 1962–1988), defense of the *thathana* and Buddhist practice tended to represent moral opposition to the government. When, on the contrary, the symbiotic relationship was revived, as under Nu during the post-independence parliamentary era (1948–1962) or under the junta after the 1988 events, the politics of the *thathana* tended to invade the public life. Today, however, the defense of the *thathana* has become a discourse that has taken possession of the whole of public life under the motto of a reformulated Buddhist nationalism. The latter has been represented by the tentacular association known as Ma Ba Tha, which was founded by a large, independently convened meeting of monks in May 2013, following anti-Muslim violence, as mentioned above (note 6). No longer expressing a contestation of the authorities, this discourse spread at the expense of the nascent political sphere.

The 2007 so-called Saffron revolution was a monastic protest after decades of containment under military rule. It can shed light on the articulation of politics and Buddhism in Burma, revealing the evolving relations between state and Sangha. In the 1950s, the issue of religion held increasing importance, which led the Prime Minister Nu to put forth an amendment to the Constitution, adopted in August 1961, to establish Buddhism as the state religion (*naingnan daw thathana*). Nu's government was also under pressure from certain monastics to introduce Buddhist teachings in public schools. In this context, Ne Win led military men seized power in March 1962 in order to maintain the precarious national balance concerning the place of ethnic and religious minorities (Smith 1965). Ne Win set up a military regime based on a socialist ideology that advocated secular principles.

Although Ne Win kept a distance from Buddhism and monks, in May 1980 he was forced to hold a national monastic convention and launch a 'purification' program in order to reassert the government's control over the Sangha. This led to a reform and to the unification of various segments under one single administration, the Sangha Maha Nayaka Ahpwe, a body of forty-seven senior abbots nominated by the Department of

Religious Affairs (*thathana yay usitana*) and placed under its authority.²⁶ The Sangha Maha Nayaka Ahpwe exerts disciplinary authority over the Sangha according to the monastic rule (*Vinaya*). It is an irony of history that one of the most important administrative reforms of the Sangha, still in use today, was implemented by the most outwardly secularist regime of independent Burma.²⁷

After the 1988 popular uprising, the army regained power through a coup. Although general elections were organized in 1990, which were overwhelmingly won by the candidates from the National League for Democracy (NLD), the main opposition party, military men did not relinquish power. Instead, the new junta called itself the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). Lacking the legitimacy of the popular vote, the SLORC sought to establish itself through, among other measures, a systematic policy of funding and supporting Buddhist institutions, which represented a clear break from the political approach of the previous regime. As Juliane Schober writes, the ‘military regime’s patronage of Buddhism provided an alternative source of legitimation and transformed a national community into a ritual network’ (Schober 2011: 86).²⁸

However, in 2007 the monks’ protest signaled a return of monastics (some of them at least) to the political arena as a force equipped with a certain degree of autonomy, ready to challenge the powers-that-be. In order to show his opposition to the political power, a monk can only act by refusing donations, that is, by turning his alms bowl upside down (*thabeik hmauk*). This amounts to a break in the ritual relationship with laypeople, which involves a concerted decision of the Sangha. In September 2007, following a series of incidents that prompted the monks’ action, the ritual link with the military regime was broken. Because the regime had used the national economy of merit as the

²⁶In 1962, under Ne Win’s rule, Home and Religious Affairs were merged into one ministry. It is only in 1992 that a Ministry of Religious Affairs (*thathana yay wongyi tana*) was again formed, under which the Sangha Maha Nayaka Ahpwe operates. First constituted of thirty-three senior abbots, today this body has forty-seven members.

²⁷In 1988, Tin Maung Maung Than published one of the few analyses of Ne Win’s religious policy, assessing very favorably the 1980s’ reform of the Sangha (Tin Maung Maung Than 1988). To be noted, parts of the Sangha are, on the contrary, very critical of this reform today, blaming it for having ‘enslaved’ the monks to political power (See Brac de la Perrière 2014).

²⁸See also Houtman (1999) for one of the most comprehensive analyses of the cultural outcome of SLORC policies.

cornerstone for its legitimacy and control over the monks, the break resounded with an astounding strength.

The situation provoked a flow of conflicting comments regarding the effectiveness of the renunciation of the world of those monks involved in the protest movement. For the government and its affiliates, the protest movement amounted to a breach in the renouncer status, which authorized them to question the participants' religious status as monks, by labeling their action 'political.' But many civilians interpreted the act of defrocking monks, to arrest and interrogate them, as an insult to monkhood. The government proceeded to arrest monks according to a decree passed in October 1990 that allowed them to defrock monks involved in anti-governmental action without going through the Sangha Maha Nayaka Ahpwe. Consequently, under the Burmese junta as well as the colonial regime, the label 'political' was negatively used to question monks' action in the secular world whenever they targeted the powers-that-be. Moreover, the term 'governmental' was similarly used to question the authority of those segments of the Sangha deemed corrupted by the political power. Critiques of 'government' monks circulated undercover, alleging that these monks were deprived of 'true' intentions and accusing them of straying from the monkhood world renouncement ideal.

Thus, under military regimes, both sides have used labels of 'political' and 'governmental' to question the authenticity of monkhood renunciation of the world—that is to say, to question the monks' 'religious' status. In other words, these labels have been an integral part of the Burmese debates about what counts for 'religion.' This raises questions of the encroachment of politics on *thathana* in a situation where neither domain is properly delineated. The defense of *thathana* has been mapped onto the moral position of contesting the repressive government. Ultimately, in this eminently political game, no position can be considered exclusively religious or political, due to the renewed symbiotic relationship between state and Buddhist institutions.

However, in March 2011, a new political situation was established by introducing electoral legitimacy and democratic values that contribute to separate political and religious orders in a phase of democratic transition. One can already postulate that regime change and the opening of a legal field of action for politics—legitimized by popular vote—creates a new situation, since the legitimation of power no longer directly depends on the function of monks as providers of merit. Arguably, the opening

created by democratic transition in the political arena is contributing to the weakening of the symbiotic link between state and Sangha, putting monks at risk of being dismissed from public affairs.

This is all the more true, given that political action has now been authorized for civilians within the constitutional framework, but is not allowed for members of the Sangha, who (like in Thailand) are even excluded from voting due to their status as renunciators.²⁹ The issue of the place of *thathana* under a democratic regime is therefore a true cause of concern for the monks, who view their current situation as precarious. This is why, far from withdrawing into their monasteries, members of a new generation of monks are paradoxically attempting to define their role in this new game, weighing the extent of their influence on current issues.

Under the juntas, the defense of *thathana* took the form of a moral stance against the powers-that-be, while discourse on the dispensation of *thathana* was based on the symbiotic relationship between religious establishments and political class. Today, the defense discourse takes the form of a strident nationalism targeting religious otherness, particularly Muslims. Buddhist nationalism is displayed in the association known as Ma Ba Tha, bringing together, in an unheard of way, three overlapping concepts of identity: ethnic identity or nationality (*myo*), religious denomination (*batha*), and Burmese Buddhicized social space (*thathana*). Religious otherness is excluded from the Burmese delineation of national identity through this conflation of signifiers, as if *thathana* in asserting itself in front of an emerging political field of action had to discard all pluralistic potential once contained in this concept, under the aegis of Burmese Buddhist kingship (Fig. 2.1).

THATHANA AND RITUAL

However, Buddhism does not account for all Burmese practices that could be considered religious from an etic perspective. Specifically, Burmese Buddhists do not consider the spirit worship they practice to be a part of their religion (*batha*), but it is nonetheless a part of the Burmese Buddhicized social space (*thathana*). This worship is addressed

²⁹Regarding this constitutional law issue, cf. Larsson (2015). Buddhist monks were also banned from voting in the pre-communist Constitution of Cambodia.



Fig. 2.1 Monks alms round organized by a local NLD office to prepare Aung San’s 100th birthday on the 13th of February 2015

to spirits of the Burmese pantheon of spirit possession, known as the ‘Thirty-seven Lords’ (*thonze hkunit min*), which includes a number of individual tutelary spirits worshiped in local communities.³⁰ The emergence of this pantheon may be seen as the legacy of the kings’ ritual policy of recognizing and paying homage to the main local spirits. It survived the collapse of kingship as an impressive ritual complex that underpins huge annual public festivals, celebrating each member of the pantheon in its specific domain, as well as private ceremonies in which all the spirits of the pantheon are called on to be embodied by mediums. In short, it articulates local rituals commemorating tutelary spirits with spirit possession ceremonies focused on a pantheon of spirits whose specialists are spirit mediums.

³⁰Concerning the worship of the Thirty-Seven Lords, see Brac de la Perrière (1989) and Spiro (1967).

These practices of the Burmese Buddhists could be considered religious, if only because they fit the substantive definition of religion in relation to supernatural beings.³¹ But are we then obliged to conclude that the Burmese have ‘two religions’? This was the thesis of Melford Spiro, who produced the first anthropological interpretation of religion in Burma in two renowned books, *Buddhism and Society* (1970) and *Burmese Supernaturalism* (1967). Stanley Tambiah criticized this thesis of ‘two distinct religions’ on the grounds that Spiro failed to account for the overall structuration of Burmese religion. Spiro in turn defended his position, highlighting the fact that the Burmese exclude spirit worshiping from their Buddhist *batha*. On the one hand, Burmese do not consider their ‘supernaturalism’ to be a *batha* at all, which negates the ‘two religions’ thesis. On the other hand, some Burmese rationalize practices dedicated to spirits on the grounds of Buddhist cosmology. This position was exemplified in a paper by former Prime Minister Nu (1989), but is rather exceptional.

In fact, the acceptance of spirit possession in a context of Buddhism-based morality is a matter of debate among Burmese. While belief in spirits is not necessarily questioned, choosing to worship them or not does denote different standards of practice in the Burmese Buddhized social space (*thathana*). The ‘two religions’ thesis seems unable to account for the intricacies of the Burmese religious field, particularly the historical development of the Thirty-Seven Lords cult under the aegis of Buddhist kingship. In this regard, the words used or avoided are indicative of hierarchies. Putting the label of religion (*batha*) on a field of practices implicitly serves to deny this status to other practices and is thus a gesture of power.

Now, if spirit possession is only religious from an etic perspective, it surely pertains to ritual, a realm of action whose articulation with *thathana* must be examined. However, defining ritual is no easier than defining religion. Scholars’ positions on this matter have varied from those founded on the opposition of sacred and profane (Durkheim) to those who refuse the relevance of the sacred, focusing instead on the meaning of ritual (Leach), and from those who claim ritual as the

³¹ Interestingly, Melford Spiro has authored one well-known formulation of this kind of definition (Spiro 1966).

root of religion to those who locate ritual as the core of all social life.³² Catherine Bell (1992) drew attention to processes of differentiation that produce 'ritual,' or in other words 'ritualization.' This implies that ritualization is what produces the sacred in any given society, which is to take the other way around Durkheim's definition of religion and ritual as that which deals with the sacred.

Aside from these variations, the concept of ritual has been looked down since its inception in early modern Europe (sixteenth century) as the practices of 'others.' As phrased by Edward Muir (1997: 9): 'What I do was ordained by God and is "true religion"; what you do is "mere ritual" at best useless, at worst profoundly evil.' This low esteem is still prevalent in the common use of the word to designate a formal practice without any meaning.³³ In some cultural contexts, rituals may be altogether dismissed on the grounds that they do not belong to the sphere of religious activity.³⁴ Looking at how the Burmese conceptualize the category of ritual—if they do it at all—through an examination of the main words used in Burmese to qualify the kind of events that we would consider rituals will bring forth similar rejection of ritual on a religious basis.

Most ritual events are actually referred to in Burmese by adding the word *pwe* to specific descriptive terms. *Pwe*, however, is a word with a large semantic field. When qualified with specific descriptive terms, *pwe* appears to be a very inclusive category, bringing together various events pertaining to all spheres of social life: the public sphere, the private one, the Buddhist one, or the one connected to the spirit cult. Although this includes the events most vital for the maintenance of *thathana*, *pwe* does

³²One may recall Durkheim's famous definition of ritual and religion as domains of social life which deal with the sacred. However, criticisms of 'ritual' were raised later on by Jack Goody and Edmund Leach, first due to shortcomings of definitions based on dichotomous criteria of ritual actions, such as religious/secular, sacred/profane, or non-rational/rational, for these criteria come mainly from the observer's own categorization (Goody 1977; Leach 1968). See also Coppet (1992), in which he states that 'the domain of rituals resists efforts to theorize about and to define it.'

³³This use of the category of ritual is underlying some critics, as that of Goody in his famous 'Against ritual' (1977).

³⁴The Jains, for instance, would make a radical distinction between the practices that we recognize as rituals, dividing those that they perceive as religious, which are therefore, not ritual, from those that are ritual, challenging most theories of ritual (Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994).

not convey the sense that they are related to the Buddha's teachings. It rather indicates a quality of action that these events share with other rituals. This term includes most Burmese rituals, except those dealing with death (*athoba*), because they are categorized as *a-mingala*, meaning that they are 'inauspicious.' By contrast, *pwe* appears to be imbued with a sense of festiveness.

Other words belong to the semantic field of ritual. The term *yoya* covers a range of social practices legitimated by being handed down by the predecessors, a process that suggests invariance and formality, characteristics recognized as specific to ritual actions. It is often translated as 'tradition' and associated with words such as *dale* and *thonzan*, meaning 'customs' or 'habits,' and with *pwe* as well. *Yoya*, in the sense of repetitive action, is indeed very close to the common sense meaning of ritual as a 'habitual action.' Among practitioners of the spirit cult, one often hears the sentence *yoya hpyek de*, meaning that any initiative in this context, perceived as an interaction with the spirits, will become a ritual obligation.

Yoya, however, also has more specific meanings. It refers to the worship of a particular spirit among the thirty-seven figures of the Burmese pantheon. This practice, transmitted in the family (through women or men), apparently comes from the worship of the tutelary spirit of the place where the family had its origins and is also known as *mi hsain hpa hsain*. In this sense, *yoya* means a particular form of cult practice that is transmitted rather than legitimated by spirit possession. Thus, *yoya* is specific in two ways, first because it qualifies a general characteristic of ritual action, and second because it designates a kind of ritual legitimated by this characteristic as opposed to other rituals in the spirit possession frame.

Another expression belonging to the semantic field of ritual is *a hkan a na*, which may designate the ceremonial or ostentatious aspects of a number of rituals. Among the rituals that could have ceremonial elements, called *a hkan a na*, civil rituals through which a change in the social status is effected, such as wedding rituals, are particularly preeminent.³⁵ The ceremonial part is performed by professional ritualists, called

³⁵ The proper ritual through which an engaged couple is married is the gesture of putting their right hands upon each other, *lek btap de*, after having paid their respect to the Buddha, the spirits protecting the house, and their parents. This ritual could be performed with formal entertainment, in which case it becomes *mingala hsaung a hkan a na*.

beitheik hsaya, whose presence refers to the Indian ritual of *abhiseka*, or unction, particularly as connected with the kings' consecration, which thus appears as the prototype of all transitional rituals.³⁶ The implicit technical reference to the presence of *beitheik hsaya* in transitional rites such as novicehood or marriage is the royal model of rituals, a model borrowed from India.

The fact that these rituals are connected with ceremonial entertainment, as suggested by the expression *a hkan a na*, is in itself revealing of particular aspects of Burmese rituals. One important aspect of these rituals is that they disclose the change that is effected through representation of the missing kingship. In other words, changes of position in the life cycle need to be performed in the context of representation of a royal social order to be effective. Not surprisingly, kingship rituals themselves were construed as a show of the kingship's social order. Nowadays, novicehood, marriages, and other rituals like those of the spirit cults, always display the aesthetics of kingship. The main forms of performing arts are also representations of kingship. Altogether we have an intricate network of links connecting representations of kingship, rituals, and performances, through which the social order is reproduced and changes of position are enacted by means of representing kingship.

Most interestingly, the rituals involved—royal consecration, marriage, novicehood—are included in the same category as other rituals referred to as *beitheik pwe*. Through a technical term rooted in Indian cultural heritage emerges the possibility of gathering, in the same category, rituals from various contexts that all imply a change of status. However, if at the conceptual level, this opens the possibility of considering side-by-side rituals from diverse contexts that have similar functions, such as the consecration of images, at the level of practice, we see a differentiation that tends to separate and distinguish rituals connected closely to the *thathana*, such as the consecration of the Buddha's images (*anekaza tin*), from others like the consecration of spirits' images (*leippya theik*).³⁷

I will not go into further detail here, but will try to reach a tentative conclusion regarding the way the notion of ritual is construed in Burmese, relative to the semantic field of religion. Thus far, we have seen

³⁶As the inheritors of the Indian ritual specialists who once performed these rituals for Burmese kings, *beitheik hsaya* are nowadays quite Buddhicized and Burmanized.

³⁷See Brac de la Perrière (2006) for a comparative analysis of these two kinds of rituals.

a ritual sphere coalescing around the notion of *pwe*, whose moving limits stretch from a quality of action shared by types of ceremonial events to the transmissibility of practice, as in tradition. As such, it does not set 'religion' apart but is so inclusive as to gather events from the whole of social life. In so doing, it creates a unified field of practice whose events share characteristics of regularity and formality, and whose main elements may be found in different ritual contexts. This allows for the establishment of a universal sense of convention or ritual obligation in all the spheres of social life.

However, the specific order in which ritual elements are arranged, in cases like the consecration of images, allows for the differentiation of events pertaining to the *thathana* from those belonging to the ritual sphere. Conversely, those events of civil life calling for a *bkan a na* and mirroring kingship protocol, through which action on the world is possible, are plainly 'ritual' in the Burmese sense. Contrary to the notion of *pwe*, this allows for the examination of the ritual sphere delineated through contrast with the soteriological orientation of Buddhism toward the renunciation of the world. In the same way, spirit worship contrasts with the renouncement orientation of Buddhism because it allows for action on this world. In this sense, it truly belongs to ritual sphere, as it is segregated from 'religion' conceptualized through the individualistic and universalistic notion of *batha*. Significantly, the Burmese make use of the notion of *batha*—the concept for religion that has emerged from the Western encounter—to emphasize the 'religiosity' of the Buddha's teachings relative to ritual practice in their Buddhized social space.

CONCLUSION

During military rule, politics of *thathana* have varied from the dispensation of Buddha's teachings to their defense, depending on the balance of power between state administration and the Sangha, and according to the position of various stakeholders. As the political field opens, unleashing new anxieties, the defense of the *thathana* has become a virulent discourse of Buddhist nationalism conveyed by particularly vocal monks pursuing various agendas. For parts of the Sangha, this political transition represents an opportunity to restore their agency as leaders of the Buddhist 'nation,' a function that had been monopolized by the military for decades. The recent conflation of overlapping concepts of identities in the name of Ma Ba Tha, the main association advocating the defense

of *thathana*, is in the process of reframing the once pluralist Buddhized social space of the Burmese Buddhist kingship into an increasingly exclusive one.

Finally, in Burma, religionization is the process of producing a Burmese Buddhized social space through differentiation from various other individually professed doctrines (*batha*) or of fields of practice defined as 'paths' (*lan*), such as spirit worshiping, esoteric Buddhism, or, pertaining to a more general level, politics, rituals, or exchange. All these domains represent potential infringements on the *thathana*, which in turn reveals itself to be a never-ending process of Buddhization. This is all the more true given that the Buddha's teachings are in a constant need of affirmation against adversaries, due to their intrinsic degenerative tendency.

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