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# Buddhist Nationalist Sermons in Myanmar: Anti-Muslim Moral Panic, Conspiracy Theories, and Socio-Cultural Legacies

Niklas Foxeus

History of Religions, Department of Ethnology, History of Religions and Gender Studies, Stockholm University, Sweden

## ABSTRACT

In Myanmar, Buddhist nationalist movements created a pan-Burmese anti-Muslim moral panic in response to the political and economic liberalisation starting in 2011 and to riots between Buddhists and Muslims that erupted from 2012. Based mainly on Buddhist nationalist sermons and speeches, but also on interviews and fieldwork, the aim of this article is to examine the historical and cultural roots of the anti-Muslim moral panic and its political ramifications. This article argues that Buddhist nationalist sermons contributed to moral panic in three ways. First through aspects of monastic authority by which nationalist, anti-Muslim discourse was authorised. Second, an anti-Muslim conspiracy theory going back to the 1950s and an ingrained historical narrative feeding a sense of collective victimhood and vulnerability among the Buddhist majority created fear that provides justification of discrimination and violence. Third, is a perceived existential threat to Buddhism and Myanmar's sovereignty considered to be posed by groups of Muslims (local and international) that were interconnected in the nationalist imagination; a sense of threat that was reinforced by a globalised Islamophobia.

## KEY WORDS

Myanmar; Burma; moral panic; Buddhist nationalism; conspiracy theories; Muslims

Since 2012, Buddhist nationalist movements led by monks have emerged, disseminating a nationalist anti-Muslim discourse – focused mainly on inter-religious marriages, conversion, nationalist family laws, and business competition – to protect and defend their nation, Buddhism, and their country from the Muslim minorities, thereby creating a pan-Burmese, anti-Muslim moral panic. Globalised stereotypes of a globalised, militant, Islam and violent Muslims have been intensified by social media and projected onto local Muslims in Myanmar, amplified by conspiracy theories and propensities for anti-Muslim sentiments.<sup>1</sup> As in other Buddhist countries in South and Southeast Asia, Buddhist monks in Myanmar exert a strong influence on the laypeople,

**CONTACT** Niklas Foxeus  [niklas.foxeus@rel.su.se](mailto:niklas.foxeus@rel.su.se)  History of Religions, Department of Ethnology, History of Religions and Gender Studies, Stockholm University, Universitetsvägen 10E, SE-106 91 Stockholm, Sweden

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which may involve the authorisation of rumours, prejudices, and conspiracy theories. Although nationalist monks have been called “extremists” (*asun-yauk-thamā*) and even “terrorists” and have been accused of having incited riots by their sermons, they have consistently denied any responsibility (see Walton and Hayward 2014, 27–30).

The novel monk-led Buddhist nationalist, anti-Muslim movements, especially the 969 movement and Ma Ba Tha (discussed below), emerged in response mainly to two circumstances. First, after a long period of military dictatorships (1962–2011), the political transformation in 2011 brought uncertainties. After an election in 2010 – that was neither free nor fair (Lall 2016, 53–55) – won by the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), Thein Sein, a former general and prime minister in the military dictatorship State, Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC, 1988–1997) and State, Peace and Development Council (SPDC, 1997–2011), became president in March 2011. That semi-civilian, semi-democratic government initiated democratisation and political liberalisation and further entrenched capitalism (see Egreteau 2016; Lall 2016). This political transformation – following the seven-step roadmap towards the “discipline-flourishing democracy” – was a top-down process led by the army or the Tatmadaw and was initiated in 2003 (see Egreteau 2016). Linked to that economic liberalisation, the stereotype of the successful Muslim businessman reappeared in the public imagination. Shifts from authoritarian rule through processes of democratisation, political liberalisation, and the establishing of capitalism have often led to uncertainty, fear, tensions, outbreaks of violence, and calls for the enactment of laws to resolve such conflicts (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006). Myanmar is no exception.

Second, riots involving Buddhists and Muslims (especially Rohingyas) broke out in 2012 in Rakhine State in Western Myanmar and were followed by riots in other parts of the country in 2013–2014, including Mandalay and Meiktila in central Myanmar. Most of the victims of this violence were Muslims, including children, youth, and women (see ICG 2013; McCarthy and Menager 2017; PHR 2013a, 2013b). An anti-Muslim moral panic exacerbated existing Buddhist grievances towards Muslims and provided fuel for further tensions, violence, and riots. In Myanmar, anti-Muslim preaching is not new and local riots between Buddhists and Muslims have erupted from time to time, but the current magnitude and impact of such preaching is unprecedented in Myanmar’s history. How a pan-Burmese, anti-Muslim moral panic could emerge after 2012 therefore deserves to be examined. In a study based on interviews with mainly Buddhist laypeople, Schissler, Walton, and Phyu Phyu Thi (2017) demonstrate that a fear of a Muslim threat had developed. In 2012–2015, nationalist monks managed to attract huge audiences and gain popular support and yet there has been no examination of how Buddhist nationalist sermons constructed a Muslim threat, promoted a moral panic, and shaped the views of not merely many Buddhist laypeople, but also of official figures including representatives of the army, the government, USDP, and other politicians who were among Ma Ba Tha’s donors.

Based on nationalist sermons and speeches (2013–2015), publications, fieldwork, and interviews, the aim of this article is to investigate how nationalist monks managed to create and authorise an anti-Muslim moral panic. The article examines the historical and cultural roots of the contemporary tensions and the anti-Muslim moral panic,

while also shedding some light on the political ramification of the moral panic. It is argued that investigating the cultural and historical dimensions is necessary to fully understand the anti-Muslim moral panic as such inquiry can explain how and why the sermons made sense to the audience.

This article argues that Buddhist nationalist sermons contributed to create a moral panic and a crisis. It does this by identifying three aspects of monastic authority through which the monks could authorise nationalist, anti-Muslim discourse. It shows how the sermons drew on an anti-Muslim conspiracy theory and an ingrained historical narrative (the “colonial threat”), which fed a sense of collective victimhood and vulnerability among the Buddhist majority. This created a fear that provided justification for discrimination and violence towards the Muslim minorities, measures that were imagined to be defensive action. In that way, the sense of collective victimhood has contributed to aggravate tensions and to incite riots since the colonial period. The article also suggests that the sermons articulated a perception of an existential threat to Buddhism and Myanmar’s sovereignty considered to be posed by three groups of Muslims (local, regional, and international) that were interconnected in the nationalist imagination. This sense of threat was further reinforced by a globalised Islamophobia.

### **Buddhist Nationalist Movements: The Broadening of Socio-Political Space**

The political liberalisation and the broadening of the political space in the first half of the 2010s entailed the legalisation of demonstrations and rallies (Egreteau 2016, 40–44). This new socio-political space enabled Buddhist nationalist movements to operate and to achieve considerable impact and influence under the USDP (2011–2016). They could perform demonstrations and signature campaigns, hold public sermons, establish Buddhist nationalist journals and disseminate their views through social media. The rapid spread of Buddhist nationalist agendas was facilitated by the lifting of censorship on publications in 2012 and greater access to mobile phones and the internet (Egreteau 2016, 41). During this period, nationalist monks could also freely disseminate “hate speech” (*amoun-sagā*) (see Min Zin 2015).

Ma Ba Tha has been close to the military and its USDP party, from which they have received donations and other support, and donations from military-linked capitalist “cronies” (see Min Zin 2015, 384; van Klinken and Su Mon Thazin Aung 2017, 370; Marshall 2013). Moreover, it was easy for Ma Ba Tha to obtain the necessary permits for holding nationalist sermons and speeches from local authorities during the USDP period before the general election in November 2015. However, after March 2016, when the National League for Democracy’s (NLD) assumed power after its landslide electoral victory it has been virtually impossible to obtain such permits (Interviews, Ma Ba Tha monks and laypeople, September 2017 and July–August 2019).<sup>2</sup> Buddhist nationalist movements were gradually suppressed by the NLD government and the State Sangha Mahā Nāyaka Committee (Ma Ha Na), the ruling body within the Sangha, and were severely weakened prior to the 2021 military coup (see Walton and Tun 2017–2018; Interviews, Upper Myanmar, July–August 2019). Nationalist sermons that were delivered to frequently huge audiences, the majority of which were women,

were a widespread phenomenon only in the 2012–2015 period, when the nationalist movements reached their peak of influence. The sermons served as powerful instruments to forge opinions and views among the public.

In conducting the research reported here, the author interviewed some 90 people within Ma Ba Tha and other Buddhist nationalist organisations in 2016, 2017, and 2019. The majority were monks, with some laypeople and a few “nuns” (*thīla-shin*) also interviewed. Almost all belonged to the Burman majority population. Informants were mostly selected through snowball sampling, with Ma Ba Tha monks suggesting other informants. In addition, the author interviewed 27 Muslims in Mandalay, most of them in focus groups. Semi-structured interviews lasted from about one hour to more than three hours. Most of the interviews were conducted in Upper Myanmar, especially in Mandalay, but also in smaller cities there and some in the Yangon area (in 2016 and 2017). Fieldwork carried out by the author also involved participant observation while attending Ma Ba Tha ceremonies in Mandalay and Yangon and participating in other Ma Ba Tha activities.<sup>3</sup>

The 969 movement was a monastic network established in late October 2012 in Mawlamyine in Lower Myanmar. It became known for its “Buy Buddhist” campaign – buying only at Buddhist-owned shops marked by the Buddhist symbol 969 (representing Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha) and boycotting Muslim-owned businesses marked by the numbers 786 (see below). A “Marry Buddhist” campaign was also included (see Nyi Nyi Kyaw 2016, 195–199; Walton and Hayward 2014, 12–14). On June 27, 2013, this movement largely morphed into a larger and better structured organisation, *Amyou-bhāthā-thāthanā-saung-shauk-yay-ahpwe*, the “Organisation for Protecting Nation, Religion and the Buddha’s Dispensation,” known under its acronym Ma Ba Tha.<sup>4</sup> While incorporating the agenda of the 969 movement, Ma Ba Tha came to focus on four family laws it demanded for “protecting” their nation and religion (*amyou-saung-upaday*); this would, for instance, make it more difficult for Muslim men to marry Buddhist women. By serving as a political lobby group, Ma Ba Tha managed to persuade the USDP government to enact its four laws. The agendas of both movements were aimed to prevent a growth of the Muslim population, perceived to threaten Myanmar’s sovereignty.

The “nation” (*amyou*), according to 969 movement monks and Ma Ba Tha’s constitution, consists of the 135 “indigenous national races” (*taing-yin-thā*) (Ma Ba Tha 2013, 2–3), which are sub-divisions of the eight main groups.<sup>5</sup> This concept of the nation is encountered in nationalist sermons and was adopted by virtually all Ma Ba Tha monks and laypeople interviewed for this research. The taxonomy of 135 national races corresponds to the official position of the state concerning who belongs to the Myanmar nation (Cheesman 2017).<sup>6</sup> Although this interpretation of the nation represents an ethnic nationalist discourse, Ma Ba Tha’s view of the nation is mostly conflated with a Buddhist identity (Walton and Hayward 2014; Foxeus 2019).

### Moral Panic and Ma Ba Tha

In Myanmar, conspiracy theories and historical narratives were driving forces behind the anti-Muslim moral panic and shaped views and expectations during the USDP

period (especially in 2012–2015). The sociological concept of moral panic is suitable for analysing the social dynamic of contemporary Buddhist nationalist sermons and speeches because it assumes that popular anxieties like anti-Muslim sentiments are grounded in society and not merely imposed by the authorities through manipulation. Furthermore, it is relevant because the centre of gravity is moved from the activities of the feared groups to what they represent. Moral panics are less concerned with real than perceived or imagined threats (see Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2009, 3, 17; Morgan and Poynting 2012, 2–3). A moral panic arises in troubled, difficult, and disturbing times of social stress and refers to a disproportionate, exaggerated, and hostile response from society to a group of people perceived to be a threat to the social and moral order. These people are treated as a “folk devil,” an immoral Other, assumed to engage in evil practices and blamed for menacing a society’s culture, way of life, and central values (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2009, 36–37; also see Cohen 2002, 2–3.).

Rumours about Muslims disseminated through media, social media, especially Facebook, and through social networks have contributed to an anti-Muslim moral panic (see McCarthy and Menager 2017, 397). A study by Walton, McKay, and Khin Mar Mar Kyi (2015) applies the concept of moral panic to Ma Ba Tha’s four nationalist family laws. However, the role of the monks and their sermons in creating a moral panic has not been explored. In the following discussion, a moral panic will be examined by focusing on the interplay between the preaching of nationalist monks and their supporters. Both harbour propensities for anti-Muslim sentiments shaped by stereotypes, rumours, and conspiracy theories.

Goode and Ben-Yehuda (2009) outline three models of how moral panics emerge. While focusing on the interplay between the grassroots model (a bottom-up approach) and mid-level interest groups, they downplay the importance of the elite model (a top-down approach). They claim that concern over a non-existent or trivial threat cannot be conjured out of thin air by a cynical elite or by self-serving representatives of an interest group. In the explosion of a moral panic, sentiments of common people serve both as the pre-condition and the trigger and the efforts of social movement activists (the mid-level groups) are the fuse and the match (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2009, 69–70; see also Demmers 2017, 38–39). In this social dynamic, leaders from mid-level organisations serve as “socially accredited experts” making diagnoses, presenting fears in a systematic and convincing form, and suggesting solutions. In this way, these organisations act as a “triggering device” (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2009, 69–70; see also Morgan and Poynting 2012, 5–6).

Ma Ba Tha has been such a mid-level interest group that served as a trigger for an Islamophobic moral panic, drawing on propensities for anti-Muslim sentiments, with nationalist monks serving as “socially accredited experts”; that is, viewed as experts by their followers. The monks, speaking from their position of authority, have articulated local fears and grievances in a persuasive manner to the Buddhist public. Ma Ba Tha is appropriately understood as a civil society organisation situated in the space between the state and the family. It is likely that anti-Muslim moral panics – with the characteristics discussed in this article – have contributed to the eruption of riots in 2012–2014, as well as of comparable riots since the colonial period.

### ***A Muslim Existential Threat to Myanmar's Sovereignty***

A widespread moral panic cannot take place unless some latent fear already exists in the public (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2009, 69; Morgan and Poynting 2012, 5). A propensity for anti-Muslim sentiment has long been widespread among Buddhists in Myanmar and has been linked to the socialisation process, for which both the state and the family have been instrumental. Under normal conditions, such sentiments mostly recede into the background, but a major event might turn such potential into distress and fear, thereby shifting into an active mode of anti-Muslim sentiments. In Myanmar, rumours of the rape of Buddhist women by Muslims have often served as a catalyst for riots (see Fink 2001; McCarthy and Menager 2017). The riots between Buddhists and Muslims that erupted in Rakhine State in June and October 2012 created a sense of existential threat (see Schissler, Walton, and Phyu Phyu Thi 2017). The first wave of riots was reportedly a response to the alleged rape and murder of the Buddhist woman Ma Thida Htwe by Muslims (IHRC 2015, 18). For Buddhist nationalists, she became a signifier of Muslim aggression against Buddhist women. As several Muslims interviewed in Mandalay explained, before 2012 they had friendly relations with Buddhists and socialised with them, but all that changed after 2012 (Interviews, August 2016 and October 2017). Many Ma Ba Tha monks that the author interviewed said that they became committed to the nationalist cause because of these 2012 riots, although some had endorsed anti-Muslim Buddhist nationalist ideology long before that. Moreover, most Buddhist nationalist organisations were formed after these events. The 2012 riots were therefore a watershed. However, these local events were not enough to create a pan-Burmese sense of a Muslim existential threat; this is where nationalist monks became instrumental. These riots brought what van Klinken and Su Mon Thazin Aung (2017, 363) refer to as “frame alignment” that created a volatile terrain, from which nationalist sermons served to ignite an anti-Muslim moral panic. Following the Rakhine State riots, the Buddhist nationalist discourse seemed to be the dominant one in the public sphere for some time, with few influential counter-discourses emerging (see Brac de la Perrière 2016, 323; Walton and Hayward 2014). As a result of the prevailing anti-Muslim atmosphere and Ma Ba Tha's impact, the NLD did not stand a single Muslim candidate in the 2015 election (*The Irrawaddy*, August 31, 2015).

Although its population in Myanmar is small (about 4.3%), the sense of threat posed by local Muslims was amplified by a perceived global Muslim threat. Morgan and Poynting (2012) adapt the moral panic model to a globalised Islamophobia examining the intersections between the global and the local in various countries. They argue that local grievances and fears have melded with a “globally constructed radical Muslim folk demon” (Morgan and Poynting 2012, 5). In Myanmar, globalised Islamophobia has reinforced and melded with anti-Muslim sentiment, local grievances and anti-Muslim conspiracy theories. In sermons, speeches, and publications, nationalist monks and laypeople frequently discussed the threat of the Islamic State (IS) and al-Qaeda, but also voiced suspicions about Burmese Muslims receiving financial and other support from Saudi Arabia and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. A Ma Ba Tha monk in Mandalay, responsible for Ma Ba Tha's courses about Islamisation, explained that the global Islamisation is closely linked to local Islamisation, providing a number of examples (Interviews, Mandalay, July–August 2019). Moreover, a DVD with



Burmese subtitles of an Islamophobic speech by the Dutch nationalist politician Geert Wilders about a Muslim takeover of Europe was sold at Ma Ba Tha events in 2015. In a BBC interview, Aung San Su Kyi said: “The reaction of Buddhists is also based on fear ... There is a perception that Muslim power, global Muslim power, is very great” (*BBC News*, October 24, 2013). In addition, the UN, USA, and Western human rights agencies have been perceived to be pro-Muslim and pro-Rohingya and media is sometimes claimed to be controlled by Muslims (Wirathu 2013, see also Schissler, Walton, and Phyu Phyu Thi 2017; Ware and Laoutides 2018, 215).

Yet another factor creating a sense of threat was the fear of a populous Muslim neighbour – Bangladesh, with more than 160 million inhabitants. Burmese Buddhist nationalists and many Burmese people view Rohingyas as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh and refer to them as “Bengalis.” It is feared that the Rakhine State, the “western gate” or the “front fortress” (*shay-tan-khan-tap-gyi*) of Myanmar might fall due to perceived illegal immigration of “Bengalis,” which is described by U Wirathu as a “tsunami” that will overflow the Rakhine State and the rest of the country. He compared this situation to the 1825 battle between the British and Burmese forces in the first Anglo-Burmese War (1824–1826) at the fort in Danubyu. The Burmese forces led by General Bandula were defeated by the British, whereupon, he maintained, all other fortresses gradually fell all the way up to Mandalay and people of the whole country became “enslaved.” Currently, he explained, Muslims seek to take over the Rakhine State. If they seize Maungdaw (a township in northern Rakhine State), they can defeat the whole Rakhine State and then the entire Irrawaddy Division of central Myanmar. If Rakhine State falls, he claimed, the Muslims can – as the British in 1825 – easily conquer the rest of Myanmar (Wirathu 2013). In U Wirathu’s sermon, the Muslims are thus homologised with the British colonisers in the nineteenth century.

The sense of an existential threat and a threat to sovereignty was reinforced by the perceived collusion of three Muslim “groups” that were discussed in the sermons: (i) international Muslim agents and organisations, including militant groups such as al-Qaeda and IS; (ii) “illegal” immigrants from Bangladesh and Rohingyas; and (iii) local Muslims in Myanmar (apart from the Rohingyas). The third group is sometimes claimed to collaborate with the first and second groups. In the sermons, the focus is mostly on the third group. However, in the contemporary Buddhist nationalist imagination the three groups tend to be interconnected.<sup>7</sup>

### **Nationalist Monks: Defending Nation and Buddhism**

The Burmese monks of the Sangha, the monastic community, enjoy an extraordinary degree of honour and respect (see Spiro 1982, 396). There were at least three aspects of monastic authority contributing to the broad public acceptance of the statements of the nationalist monks. First, the duty of the monks is to defend the Buddha’s dispensation when it is facing danger. Thereby, the statements of the monks, who can draw on their traditional Buddhist institutional authority, tend to be regarded as legitimate and to be accepted by the laypeople because they wish to support actions claimed to be in the defence of the Buddha’s dispensation (Walton and Jerryson 2016, 806–809).<sup>8</sup> Portraying Muslims as a historical and contemporary threat to Buddhism, nationalist



monks claim that it is their duty to defend it against Islam. The Muslims, the monks maintain, after having destroyed Buddhism in India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Indonesia, and Malaysia, have now turned to Myanmar. As the prominent Ma Ba Tha monk Ashin Thawpaka (2015) explains, if Muslims manage to seize the power of the state, Buddhists will lose their sovereignty, and their country, religion (Buddhism) and the nation will disappear. “If the monks,” he maintains, “would not defend the Buddha’s dispensation, it will not last for long.” It is necessary for monks to portray themselves as defenders rather than attackers to maintain their legitimacy.

The second aspect is the social dynamic of the sermons and the asymmetrical relationship between monks and laypeople. The social conventions regulating their interactions are of a naturalised sort. Laypeople are interpellated into a passive and obedient subject position, as an “ideological effect” of the traditional monastic framework (see Althusser 1971, 182).<sup>9</sup> Based on the cultural authority of the monks (Walton and Jerryson 2016), this framework is ideal for the dissemination of a controversial agenda, including monastic authorisation of conspiracy theories and for creating a moral panic.

The third aspect is the illustrious status of the monks who are official leaders of Ma Ba Tha. The authority enjoyed by any monk was amplified by the fact that Ma Ba Tha’s formal leaders represent the elite within the Sangha. Sitagu Hsayādaw (aka U Nyanissara; b. 1937), who was the vice chairman of the Mandalay Ma Ba Tha, is famous and deeply respected across the country (see Kawanami 2009, 218–220). The chairman of Ma Ba Tha, Ashin Tillawka Bhiwuntha (b. 1939), is a highly esteemed monk who has been a member of the central Ma Ha Na. He is also a renowned scholar-monk who has been a professor of Abhidhamma studies at the Pariyatti Sāsana University in Yangon. According to Kawanami (2009, 216–218), many believe him to be on the verge of becoming a Buddhist saint (Pāli *arahant*). Bhaddanta Thilekkhandha Bhiwuntha (b. 1964), one of his disciples, is vice chairman of Ma Ba Tha. He is not an ordinary monk, carrying the title *Tipiṭakadhara-hsayādaw*, meaning that he has memorised the entire Pāli Canon. In September 2017, the author spent some time in his palace-like monastery, situated in the outskirts of Yangon. It welcomes pilgrims from various countries of the Buddhist world, including Vietnam and Korea, who pay obeisance to him. The authority of Ma Ba Tha and its monks has been enhanced by being associated with authoritative figures like these. Criticising such monks would be tantamount to criticising Burmese Buddhism.

The sermons and speeches delivered by nationalist monks and laypeople were shaped by a narrative, originating in the colonial period, about fear of elimination of Buddhism, the nation, and local culture, but also by an anti-Muslim conspiracy theory that can be traced back to the 1950s. These narratives reveal the historical depth of both the current tensions between Buddhists and Muslims and the perceptions among Burmese Buddhists. It is through these narratives that ethnic and religious tensions, conflicts, and violence make sense to people.

### **The Colonial Threat Narrative: Swamped by Foreigners**

A Burmese legacy of inter-religious and inter-ethnic distrust feeds into contemporary narratives that have informed nationalist sermons and speeches through which an

anti-Muslim moral panic was created. A variety of perceived contemporary problems can genealogically be traced back to the colonial period, including unfair business competition and inter-ethnic and inter-religious marriages. Further, there is a distrust towards people regarded as foreigners that is interlinked with a fear of an imminent destruction of the Buddha's dispensation (see Turner 2014). Burmese nationalists felt themselves to have been colonised twice: first by the British and second by the Indians (Taylor 2015, 4; see also Chakravarti 1971, 96–97). As a response to the unrestricted colonial-era immigration of Indians to Myanmar, a Burmese Buddhist nationalist discourse emerged in the early 1900s that came to be both anti-Indian and anti-colonial. During the colonial period, an elite of Indians were provided the best positions within the colonial administration and Indians came to dominate the economy. In the larger cities, Burmese people constituted a minority that occupied the lowest rung in the colonial hierarchical order, while the Indians were the majority situated in the middle position and the British were at the top (see Charney 2009, 30). Mainly Indian men, many of them Muslims, migrated to Burma. It was claimed that when Muslims married Buddhist women, these women had to convert to Islam to acquire inheritance rights (see Ikeya 2011, 130; Chakravarti 1971, 125–126). The humiliating second-rate status of Burmese people, as well as the cultural, social, and economic domination by Indians in urban areas, including the inter-marriage issue, brought about bitterness, frustration, envy, and hatred (*ressentiment*) towards Indians (Foxeus 2019). Fears emerged among nationalists that Buddhism and local culture would imminently be wiped out (see Chakravarti 1971, 19, 129; Ikeya 2011, 121). The result was an “Indophobia” (Egreteau 2011).

The first anti-Muslim moral panic emerged during the 1938 Indo-Burmese riots that left 240 dead and 987 injured (Riot Inquiry Committee 1939b, 281). These riots broke out in the tense situation of the 1937 partition from India, economic depression and social turmoil (see Cady 1958, 396; Smith 1965, 109). Marriages between Buddhist women and Indian men (predominantly Muslims but also Hindus) and economic exploitation were identified as important causes of the riots (Riot Inquiry Committee 1939a, 11–14, 28–33; 1939b). The riots were preceded by monastic mobilising and anti-Muslim inflammatory articles in the Burmese press due to a book written by a Muslim that allegedly insulted Buddhism. As one monk said, Muslims have “taken possession of the wealth of the Burmese people and also their daughters and sisters” (Riot Inquiry Committee 1939b, 8). At a meeting at Shwedagon Pagoda attended by more than 10,000 people, including 1,500 monks, about 12 speeches were delivered constituting “a bitter attack on Muslims.” Monks resolved that “steps would be taken to treat Muslims as enemy No. 1” and to “bring about the extermination of the Muslims and the extinction of their religion” if the British failed to meet their demands, which included enacting a marriage law for Buddhist women (Riot Inquiry Committee 1939b, 12–13, Appendix II). This riot seems a precedent for later ones, with inter-religious marriages, perceived unfair business competition, and insults to Buddhism causing tensions in unstable socio-economic conditions, as well as involving monastic mobilisation with anti-Muslim sermons.

This assemblage of inter-linked threats will be referred to as the *colonial threat narrative*. It comprises perceived external threats to Burma's economy, religion and culture, and political sovereignty and the perceived threat posed by inter-religious

marriages to the integrity of the Burmese Buddhist nation. In contemporary Myanmar, nationalist monks and laypeople have drawn on this colonial threat narrative; that is, a fear of being overrun by people regarded as foreigners (today Muslims). Some scholars have called this fear a “siege mentality” (see Nyi Nyi Kyaw 2016) and others refer to a nationalist “political paranoia” (Gravers 1999) which became an integral feature of the official ideology of the military government SLORC-SPDC (1988–2011), including a fear of hidden conspiracies (see SLORC 1989).

The Indophobia of the colonial period became – around the 1990s – almost exclusively anti-Muslim (Islamophobia) (Egreteau 2011, 50–52). A propensity for anti-Muslim sentiment has been widespread for a long time, with recurrent cycles of anti-Muslim moral panic. As many Muslims are owners of small- and medium-sized businesses, and are businesspeople, shop keepers, owners of hotels, bus companies, and the like, it may locally give the impression that they still dominate the economy, meaning they have often been targeted in periods of economic hardship (see Selth 2004, 110; Fink 2001, 218–219, 225–226; Human Rights Watch 2002). Nationally, however, the economy is dominated by the military and its business corporations, and military-allied capitalist cronies, but also by the Chinese (see Jones 2014).

The colonial threat narrative has shaped the conspiracy theory discussed below, especially the concern regarding inter-marriage and business competition. These issues have been codified into the latter narrative that is perceived to outline a grand master plan and that has been influential since the SLORC-SPDC period until today.

### **The Grand Conspiracy Theory: A Future Islamisation of Myanmar**

Like moral panic, conspiracy theories mostly emerge – or re-emerge – in periods of rapid change and during crises in society. They are usually attributed to a small group perceived as powerful and evil Others living outside one’s own community and who have plotted a plan in secret with the aim of altering the course of history (see Barkun 2003, 3–4; Knight 2003, 15). In the early post-independence period, an anti-Muslim conspiracy theory was invented. It is similar to the anti-Semitic conspiracy theory called the “Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion” that was fabricated by Russian secret police and appeared in 1903. It was later appropriated by the Nazis (see Bronner 2000). The Burmese “grand conspiracy theory” appeared in three articles published in *Thway Thauk Meggazin* in January, May, and August 1953 by the movie director Shwe Done Bi Aung and later republished in a pamphlet entitled *Koudaw-karuṇa* or the “Compassion of the Monk.” This pamphlet constitutes a blueprint for later anti-Muslim conspiracy theories, reproducing what were claimed to be secret documents intended for internal circulation among Muslims alone. It is a conspiracy theory about an allegedly secret plan by Muslims to turn not only Myanmar into an Islamic country but also to achieve world dominion for Islam in the twenty-first century. Under the headline of “The Secret [*hlyaw-hwek*] Spread of Muslims,” it states:

Regarding cherishing and protecting our nation and religion daily in Myanmar, we all [Muslims] must all help and support each other in economic and social affairs. Therefore, we, all the Muslims, as an offensive action regarding economic and social affairs, must ... buy only at shops having the symbol of a star on a half-moon and the

symbol 786, which are Islamic symbols. The meaning is that when the three digits (786) are combined, it amounts to 21. 21 is a symbol that, when the 21st century is reached, our Islam must become supreme among all races/nations [*lū-myau*] in the world, including Myanmar (Shwe Done Bi Aung n.d., 37–38).

It is stated that Muslims should buy only at their own shops marked with the Islamic symbols (including 786) and never buy from shops owned by other “races” and religions. Documents from the pamphlet also claim that the best method to spread Islam is to marry Buddhist women. One of these, “For the Future Spread of Islam,” claims: “Buddhist women and Myanmar indigenous women (*taing-yin-thū*) are like prostitutes who you can obtain if you give them money ... You must persuade Buddhist women and indigenous women with your heart and blood and with economic means to win them over [to our Muslim community]” (Shwe Done Bi Aung n.d., 38).

It is stated that Muslims who marry Buddhist women will receive rewards from a “Mujahedin Mosque.” The amount of money received depends on how many women they marry and the educational level and social status of the women. For instance, if the woman is a daughter of a military officer, the reward is higher (Shwe Done Bi Aung n.d., 38).

The 969 movement’s agenda of buying only from Buddhists and only marrying Buddhists, but also Ma Ba Tha’s four nationalist family laws, were claimed to be a Buddhist retaliation against this allegedly secret conspiracy, recycling the conspiracy theory. It was reproduced verbatim in the undated and anonymous pamphlet “Fearing that the Nation will Disappear” (*Amyou-pyauk-hmā-sou-kyauk-sayā*, hereafter *Amyou-pyauk-hmā*). Informants claimed it had been distributed since the late 1980s.<sup>10</sup> In this pamphlet, it is also stated that Muslims wiped out Buddhism from India, Afghanistan, Indonesia, and Malaysia. In these pamphlets, the Muslims are portrayed as “evil Muslims” who seek to “swallow” (*wā-myau*) other nations/races and religions. Pamphlets with similar content have been disseminated in times of social unrest and instability since at least the 1980s, sometimes by monks (see Fink 2001, 225–226; Selth 2004, 110; Human Rights Watch 2002, 4).<sup>11</sup> One Ma Ba Tha monk said that when he went on alms rounds in 1997–1998 in Mandalay, he distributed copies of the two abovementioned pamphlets to laypeople. According to him and other nationalist monks, these pamphlets were sold at the famous monastic compound the New Masouyein in Mandalay, where the nationalist monk U Wirathu resided (Interview, Mandalay, August 2019). SLORC-SPDC had disseminated similar anti-Muslim views in state-controlled newspapers in the late 1980s. By using a narrative of a Muslim take-over, the military was sometimes accused of having instigated anti-Muslim riots by spreading anti-Muslim pamphlets and rumours scapegoating Muslims, sometimes through USDA/USDP to deflect attention from its own failures (see Fink 2001, 225; Selth 2004).

The conspiracy theory is a “systemic conspiracy” or a “world conspiracy theory” that aims to gain control of a country or even the whole world (Barkun 2003, 6; Knight 2003, 16). In sermons delivered in 2012–2015, nationalist monks – as well as laypeople – have reproduced but also developed this conspiracy theory of a secret plan to turn Myanmar into an Islamic state and to achieve world-dominion in the twenty-first

century. The colonial threat narrative and the conspiracy theory were based on a sense of collective victimhood.

### ***Moral Panic, Collective Victimhood, and Buddhist-Muslim Stereotypes***

The Burmese moral panic was enabled by the colonial threat narrative and conspiracy theory, both of which are based on social, historical memories embedded in society that create a sense of vulnerability and collective victimhood among Buddhists, especially in periods of rapid social change and economic hardship characterised by uncertainty. In the sermons and speeches discussed below, Burmese Buddhists, although being the majority population, are portrayed as vulnerable, weak, and as being under attack or siege by a superior enemy. The sociological and psychological concept of collective victimhood refers to a mindset shared by group members and results from a perceived intentional harm (suffering, oppression, or humiliation) inflicted by another group. This harm is felt to be undeserved, unjust, and immoral and the responsibility is thereby ascribed to the out-group. This generates negative feelings towards the out-group such as anger, fear, and self-pity that often leads to a desire to take revenge (Bar-Tal et al. 2009, 238–239, 241). The perceived harm may have been done in the distant past, for instance, a trauma of colonisation. Past injustice can be maintained in the collective memory through generations. Members of the collective perceive themselves to be morally superior and blameless, innocent victims. Such collectives are prone to view themselves as victims also in new situations, in which the collective victimhood serves as a cognitive frame for interpretation (Bar-Tal et al. 2009, 236–238). That has been the case in Myanmar. The recurrent anti-Muslim moral panics have erupted especially because of this sense of collective victimhood and are comparable to the cycles of violence that have emerged in other countries for similar reasons (see Bar-Tal et al. 2009, 240–242). Moreover, this sense of vulnerability is linked to the *ressentiment* that the perceived unfair business competition and the intermarriage issue brought about during the colonial period and have been perpetuated until today (see Foxeus 2019).

Moral panics constitute cultural politics deploying representations of a folk devil that is based on stereotypes and exaggerations. There must be an increased hostility towards the enemy who is seen as being responsible for the perceived threat to the values, interests, and the moral order of the morally upright people and to the existence of their society. It is a divide of “us versus them” (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2009, 30–31, 35, 38), perceived differences that are magnified especially in times of increased tensions (Bar-Tal et al. 2009, 241–242).

The examples derived from sermons and speeches discussed below display this sociological dynamic of a moral panic and collective victimhood. The stereotypes by which these discourses are shaped are based on essentialised religious differences and the conspiracy theory about Muslims having a plan to take over Myanmar by demography, strategic marriages, economy, and politics. The Buddhist-Muslim stereotypes can be traced back to the colonial period; a construction of incompatible religious identities shaped by Orientalism and the colonial categories imposed by the British administration. This especially relates to a religious and “racial” difference, with Buddhists depicted as tolerant and Indians (Muslims and Hindus) as intolerant (Turner 2019; see

also Ikeya 2011, 26–27; Taylor 2015, 4–5). The alleged Buddhist tolerance became an integral part of Buddhist nationalist discourse in the early twentieth century (Turner 2019). It is today perceived as an essential aspect of Buddhist identity. Buddhist nationalist discourses are permeated by positive and negative stereotypes of Buddhists and Muslims. That is also the case with *Amyou-pyauk-hmā* (n.d., 1–5), which has shaped dominant Buddhist nationalist discourses about the Muslim minorities since the late 1980s. Muslims are portrayed as being immoral, aggressive, violent, expansive, and libidinous rapists, while Buddhists are depicted as friendly, innocent, weak, tolerant, and peaceful, cultivating loving-kindness.

The examples from sermons and speeches provided below resonate with collective memories of past traumas and negative expectations regarding the out-group. Thereby, the colonial threat narrative and the conspiracy theory articulate a sense of collective victimhood that serves as a source of meaning and a cognitive frame for the interpretation of contemporary events and to make sense of them.

### **Buddhist Nationalist Sermons and Speeches: Creating Moral Panic**

The following examples of sermons and speeches delivered in the 2013–2015 period will demonstrate how nationalist monks and laypeople contributed to create an anti-Muslim moral panic. Most of the examples are derived from major Ma Ba Tha events where several monks and laypeople appeared, while some are from single, private-sponsored 969 sermons. Although the agendas of the 969 movement and Ma Ba Tha were somewhat different, both disseminated anti-Muslim narratives and exhorted Buddhists to sever all dealings with Muslims.

A moral panic can be created by demonstrating that Muslims endorse values that represent a moral and existential threat to Buddhists and Buddhism. Buddhists are normatively non-violent; killing sentient beings would cause religious demerit and they would be reborn in hell. In some sermons, like that by Ashin Thawpaka (2015), who discussed the atrocities of IS in his sermon, stereotypes of Muslims that seem to be based on media reports about the atrocities of IS were portrayed as average Muslims. Muslims were depicted as a potential danger because of their allegedly inherent propensity for violence and intolerance towards non-Muslims. A common view in Buddhist nationalist sermons, publications, and revealed in interviews, is that Muslims do not pose a danger as long as they are weak and poor, but that they will seek to achieve dominance if they become stronger. That was repeatedly claimed in Ashin Pyinnyā Wara's (2013) sermon delivered in January 2013. He was a 969 monk and later became a leading Ma Ba Tha member. He claimed that Muslim children learn that they are created by God, that they should be grateful for that, and that they must fulfil God's will. The last aspect, the monk maintained, means they are prone to become terrorists and suicide bombers because they have learned that those who do not worship their God/Allah are the enemies of their God. Those who kill non-Muslims will gain religious merit (*kuthoul*) and those who sacrifice their life for their God and Islam will immediately be reborn in heaven.<sup>12</sup> The monk claimed that Muslim children from the age of five years are “brainwashed” (*yaik-hte-tā*) with this ideology in Myanmar.



When Muslims become stronger, the monk explained, they want to kill all people from other religions by cutting their throats because they are regarded as their enemies. He retold a version of a historical narrative that is common in Burmese nationalist discourse, claiming that in medieval India, Muslims killed about 10,000 Buddhist monks at the monastery Nālanda, burning them to death. He also claimed that in 1940–1941, Muslims waged Jihad war and killed 50,000 Buddhists in Rakhine State.<sup>13</sup> Indonesia and Afghanistan were also discussed in the sermon. Throughout, he predicted that Muslims would perform such violent acts in Myanmar.

Exaggeration and disproportion are necessary features of a moral panic and often involve grossly exaggerated numbers, thereby increasing hostility towards the enemy (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2009, 35, 38, 44). Referring to the conspiracy mentioned above Ashin Pyinnyā Wara claimed that 786, with which Muslims mark their shops, means that Muslims “threaten” (*kyein-wā*) Buddhists by their plan to make Myanmar and the whole world Muslim in the twenty-first century. He said that the number of Muslims in Myanmar in 2012 was 22% and that their population will increase every year because they are breeding fast and are reducing the number of Buddhists by marrying Buddhist women.<sup>14</sup> He explained that the Muslims’ main method of spreading their religion is “promoting religion by breeding” (*thā-hpauk-thāthanā-pyu*). In accordance with the conspiracy, he said that Muslim authorities will give rewards to Muslims marrying Buddhist women and that they will receive higher amounts if they marry Buddhist women of high rank, such as daughters of generals or ministers. Thereby, they will gain political power. U Wirathu likewise maintained that there are “secret” (*hlyou-hwek*) Muslim organisations paying these rewards to Muslim men. If a Muslim man has married a Burman Buddhist woman, he keeps a record of their children and receives a reward for each child every year. Only the Muslim husband, he explained, knows about these secret organisations and lists (Wirathu 2013).

In the coming 40 years, Ashin Pyinnyā Wara claimed, the populations of the Muslims and Buddhists will be the same in Myanmar. In 70 years, the Muslim population will be the majority. They will, he said, constitute two-thirds and the Buddhists one-third. In 80 years, the Muslims will constitute 75% of the population. If not sooner, as he explained, Buddhism and Buddhists will be eliminated in Jihad in 2100:

During the next 87 years, [they think that] the whole Burma must become Muslim. That is their aim and they write the 21st century as 786. So, in the next two or three generations our great grandchildren will have their throats slit [by Muslims], right? Given that [threat], should we live lightly or should we consider this [threat] seriously?

We should consider this [threat] seriously, the audience replied (Pyinnyā Wara 2013).

Throughout his sermon, he repeated this demographic threat to the survival of the Buddhist population and Buddhism.

Furthermore, the religious difference and incompatibility of Buddhism and Islam were demonstrated with examples of the purported aggressive and secretive nature of Muslims that were depicted as another existential threat to Buddhism. For instance, Ashin Kinsanaw Bhāthā (2014) played, in his sermon, an audio recording of what was portrayed as an aggressive Burmese Muslim preacher. Claiming that he wanted to demonstrate the difference between sermons delivered by monks and Muslims, he explained that anyone is welcome to come and listen to Buddhist sermons, but that is not the case

with mosques because Muslims deliver their sermons in secret. The monk held a voice recorder in his hand and played a recording. The alleged Muslim screamed aggressively throughout his speech asking what they must do if they want to be successful:

What orders did Allah give to us? Kill the leaders of those who give instructions [to cause troubles for Muslims]! Who gave this order? Allah! Who gave this order? Allah! Osama bin Laden did not give this order. No organisation gave this order. I did not give this order. It was Allah! ... Kill the leaders who destroy Islam! The order to kill the famous guy called U Wirathu is from the Quran/Allah. I did not give that order. The order to kill him is from the Quran/Allah. Who dares to question the order to kill him given by the Quran/Allah? Who dares to say that it is not right to kill him? It is stated by the Quran/Allah that he must be killed within three days (Kinsanaw Bhāthā 2014).

The monk jokingly asked the audience to say “*sādhu*” (well-done), because, as he explained, this Muslim sermon was delivered in a mosque, their holiest place.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, U Wirathu (2013) claimed that mosques are not open for anyone, like Buddhist monasteries are and added that, “We don’t know how they are planning to cause trouble for us and how they are indoctrinated [*hmaing-taik*] there. This is a great danger for our country.”

In a speech delivered in June 2014 in Mandalay at a Ma Ba Tha event, Maung Thway Khyun (2014), a Ma Ba Tha layman representative, hinted at the conspiracy:

For the sake of their plan to expand their population with our [Buddhist] women, the Muslims or *kalā*, being instigated by wealthy countries like Saudi Arabia and the USA, surround us throughout our country, in every quarter, village, division and state ... First, they destroy our young [Buddhist] women [forcing them to convert], and later, at last, they will seize the sovereignty of our entire state.<sup>16</sup>

Later in his speech, he deployed a colonial narrative to demonstrate how the past can teach them a lesson for the future. He explained that Burmese Buddhists were formerly “enslaved” (*kyun-bhawa*) by the British during the colonial period, but, he warned, in the future, they will be enslaved by the Muslims. In the past, “English subject” was written in their passports, but, in the future, “Muslim subject” will be stated.

In the Burmese moral panic, women are represented as the most vulnerable segment of the Buddhist community and are claimed to be easily duped by Muslims, especially those portrayed as poor and low-educated. This depiction of Buddhist women goes back to the colonial period (see Ikeya 2011). It has been a consistent feature of Burmese Buddhist nationalist discourse since then. In sermons, many nationalist monks told all kinds of horror stories about women who married Muslims. According to these stories about domestic violence, Muslims force Buddhist women to convert to Islam and to step on Buddha images; Muslims beat and maltreat them or even torture and kill them. There is a recurrent discourse that Muslims “insult” (*sawkā*) Buddhism and Buddhist women. One common statement is that, in accordance with the conspiracy theory, Muslims only pretend to be in love with Buddhist women and strategically use them as an instrument for breeding and implementing their plan to expand their group. One famous story that was part of the discourse on Muslim secrecy and dishonesty was about the Buddhist woman Ma Wā Wā Myint. She claims she married a Muslim who pretended to be a Buddhist. Several Ma Ba Tha monks, including U Wirathu, summarised it in their sermons. Ma Wā Wā Myint was interviewed by the

monk Ashin Kinsanaw Bhāthā in a monastery on the October 22, 2012.<sup>17</sup> The event was titled “The voice of a woman who was released from the mouth of a tiger and who has opened her heart.” She portrayed herself as a low-educated, naïve and good-hearted Buddhist woman who did not know much about Islam before she married a Muslim. As she met him at pagodas and Buddhist monasteries, she thought he was a Buddhist. After about seven–eight months of their relationship, he did not allow her to worship the Buddha or to have a Buddhist altar at home. At that point, he revealed that he was a Muslim and that they, henceforth, must practice Islam and go to mosques. He forced her to undergo an Islamic marriage ceremony where she learned that she must abandon Buddhism and practice Islam. However, she continued to practice Buddhism, whereby the Islamic marriage became invalid. Thereafter, her Muslim husband lost all interest and showed no affection for her any longer; he often maltreated and beat her, even while she was pregnant. It was claimed that her husband received an annual monetary reward from Islamic authorities for having married a Buddhist woman, which was probably interpreted by the audience as a confirmation of the conspiracy theory.

Other narratives focused on the stereotype of the Muslim rapist. For instance, in a sermon delivered in January 2013, U Wirathu (2013) said that “There are no [Buddhist] girls who have worked for Muslims (*kalā*) without being raped by them.” Therefore, Buddhists, he admonished, should only work for other Buddhists. Moreover, the nationalist monk, Ashin Kinsanaw Bhāthā (2014), used an eight-year-old girl who claimed to have been raped by a Muslim. As a prelude to his sermons delivered in 2014, this girl appeared on the stage before the seated monk. Having asked her many questions, he asked about her religion (Buddhism) and the religion (Islam) and ethnicity (*kalā-lū-myou*, “Indian”; here, Muslim) of the rapist. Thereafter she narrated her story in detail. After discussing this story with the audience, the monk concluded: “This is a danger, isn’t it? Isn’t this a danger to our Myanmar indigenous people and our underaged Myanmar girls?” Then he explained that such rapes pose a danger not only to young Buddhist girls, but that the Muslims constitute a danger to their entire nation/race (*lū-myou*), religion, and country.

### **The Logic of the Moral Panic: Collective Victimhood among “Peaceful” Buddhists**

The sermons and speeches, in which the Buddhist nation was depicted as being victimised, humiliated, subjugated, and subjected to underserved harm, articulate how an underlying sense of historical and collective victimhood among Burmese Buddhists constituted a driving force behind the moral panic. The Buddhist nationalists reminded the audience of the wrongs committed by the evil out-group in the past, in the present, and how it will affect their future. Burmese Buddhists are a majority group that has developed a sense of collective victimhood and perceives itself as being threatened by a minority group, the Muslims. Their situation is comparable to that of the advantaged majority group of Hindus in India, whose in-group identity was also shaped by “historical victimhood,” with Muslims – a disadvantaged minority group – being perceived as perpetrators. Historical memories, Tripathi, Kumar, and Tripathi (2019, 32–35, 52) explain, feed the “perceptions and feelings of collective victimhood”

bringing about negative emotions like anger and fear. The latter – a kind of “emotional memories” – bind together narratives of collective victimhood and serve to consolidate ingroup identity. The sense of collective victimhood leads to reactions of taking revenge against the Muslims.

Below, two aspects of this sense of Burmese collective victimhood will be analysed, both of which are shaped by a stereotype of Buddhism as a religion of peace, tolerance, and loving-kindness. In two related ways, Buddhists are portrayed as victims rather than agents, thereby denying responsibility. While blaming the other is a recurrent feature of the Burmese Buddhist-Muslim relationship historically, it is also an intrinsic part of a moral panic and of collective victimhood (see Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2009, 31; Bar-Tal et al. 2009).

First, is the aspect of Buddhist normative defensive action and the attribution of offensive action to the Other. There is a contradiction between the portrayals in sermons and the social reality. While the sermons depicted Buddhists as victims defending Buddhism and their nation against aggressive Muslim perpetrators, that situation was reversed in the riots. This Buddhist self-perception of normative non-violence is shaped by Buddhist-Muslim stereotypes going back to the colonial period. There was a tendency to blame the Muslims for the outbreak of riots and portray Buddhists as defensive. Explaining that their nation and the Buddha’s dispensation are under threat and must be protected by “defensive action” (*khan-sic*), Bhaddanta Thilekkhandha Bhiwuntha (2015) compared the contemporary conflict with a football match, in which the Buddhists are merely stopping and kicking away footballs rolling towards them. The agency of the perceived contemporary problems is thus attributed to the out-group alone, the Muslims. Although Muslims are portrayed as a powerful enemy in the sermons, they did not seem to pose a real threat but were apparently the ones mainly attacked physically in riots and symbolically through anti-Muslim discourse in sermons (see ICG 2013; PHR 2013b; Ware and Laoutides 2018).<sup>18</sup> This sense of collective victimhood is also a characteristic of a majority with a minority complex (Appadurai 2006; Foxeus 2019; see also Ware and Laoutides 2018, 153–154). Political elites have displayed this in nationalist rhetoric since the colonial period, thereby blaming others (scapegoating). It is strongly informed by the colonial threat narrative about foreign intruders seeking to wipe out Burmese religion, culture, and nation. Despite the rhetoric of defence, many Buddhists carried out offensive action; that is, they were perpetrators. This situation can be compared with the social dynamic of riots in India, where the roles of the aggressor and the victim were reversed (Das 1998, 122–125). In this way, those least in danger can be the most afraid (Ahmed 2014, 68). The collective victimhood – in terms of blaming the other – can also be understood as using the stereotype of the Muslim perpetrator and sexual predator as a scapegoat for decades of oppression, suffering, and poverty under SLORC-SPDC (1988–2011) and as an outlet for anxieties and fear (see McCarthy and Menager 2017).

A recurrent feature in Buddhist nationalist discourse is an inherent contradiction between the self-perception among Buddhists and their actions. The violence Buddhists (including some monks) committed during the 2012–2014 riots is hardly compatible with the normative view of the national Buddhist self as being essentially peaceful, tolerant, and filled by loving-kindness. That perception is so deeply ingrained in Burmese

Buddhist identity that it tends to entail a denial that Buddhists can be motivated by hatred or that they can commit acts of offensive violence (see Brac de la Perrière 2016, 324). That was also the case in the colonial period. When Burmese ministers were confronted with descriptions of the 1938 riots in the Riot Enquiry Committee's Report (1939b) of violent attacks on Muslims (of Indian descent) by Buddhists, including monks, they refused to believe it and condemned the report saying that it was "a conspiracy between the British and Indian interests to belittle the Burmese nation ..." (Chakravarti 1971, 161–162). In a 1969 pamphlet, "969 Policy" (969-*mū-wāda*), issued in the fall of 2013, U Wirathu, in response to the accusations of having incited violence, claims that the 969 movement is not about violence, being blood-thirsty, instigating riots due to race/nation, religion, and politics, but is rather about living peacefully together, protecting the rights of women, loving-kindness, and compassion.

Second, is the alleged exploitation of Buddhist women by Muslims through inter-religious marriages. The stereotype of peaceful and tolerant Buddhists contributed to develop a sense of vulnerability and is an integral part of the colonial threat narrative. In sermons, Buddhist nationalist journals and pamphlets, including *Amyou-pyauk-hmā* (n.d., 2), Buddhist qualities such as loving-kindness and tolerance, as well as friendliness and hospitality, are portrayed as "vulnerable spots" (*khyek-kaung*) that are claimed to be exploited by Muslims, especially regarding inter-religious marriages and business competition. As Turner (2019, 22) explains regarding the colonial period, which is still valid, such tolerance was perceived by Buddhist nationalists to be "self defeating, allowing Buddhism to become overrun and harmed" and led to a defence of Buddhism and, ultimately, to violence against Muslims. Revenge against Muslims is motivated by the conspiracy theory and the "horror stories" about inter-religious marriages. This explanation is recurrent in nationalist sermons and speeches. For instance, U Aye Paing (2014), a lawyer working for Ma Ba Tha, denied that Buddhist nationalist movements like the 969 movement caused riots in 2012–2014 and instead blamed the Muslims. U Aye Paing listed eight kinds of ill-treatment by Muslims of Buddhist women as the causes, including: persuading them to convert to Islam by giving gifts or forcing them to convert with violence; persuading underage Buddhist girls to marry and then forcing them to convert and even raping and killing them; and Muslim leaders encouraging men to marry Buddhist women in return for rewards. His – and Ma Ba Tha's – solution to these perceived problems, allegedly rooted in the plan of the Muslims to expand their group and to take over Myanmar, was to enact the four laws protecting their nation and religion that included a marriage law. Both the accusations and the solution here are thus similar to that of 1938 (see above).

Whatever reality there might be behind such accusations, which have long been levelled against Muslims by Buddhists, the public anti-Muslim rhetoric in 2012–2015 exacerbated these perceived problems and turned them into a crisis. In that, conspiracy theory played a vital role.<sup>19</sup>

### **Conspiracy Theory: Creating a Sense of Vulnerability and Fear**

By revealing the magnitude of the threat, the grand conspiracy theory about a secret plan amplified fear and a sense of vulnerability and collective victimhood among the Buddhists;

it is the meta-narrative within which the sense of threat was interpreted. In a moral panic, the sentiments stirred up by the perceived threat, the folk devil, is like a “fever: heightened emotion, fear, dread, anxiety, hostility and a strong feeling of righteousness.” Therefore, people condemn a specific folk devil (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2009, 35).

In times of rapid change and “social uncertainty,” conspiracy theories can serve as “larger scripts” providing “vicious certainties” about the Other (Appadurai 2006, 90–91). They can serve as a rationale to make sense of the “little stories” such as everyday grudges, doubts, and suspicions (Appadurai 2006, 91). That is, Muslims do not merely work for personal gain but seek systematically to benefit their own community with the aim of turning Myanmar into an Islamic state by various means, thereby “swallowing” (*wā-myou*) their nation and religion (see Wirathu 2013; Thawpaka 2015). In the sermons, there was a recurrent discourse of the secrecy of Muslims reinforcing distrust and fear. In a “conspiracist worldview,” nothing is as it seems because conspirators wish to disguise their activities to appear to be innocent (Barkun 2003, 4). As U Wirathu (2013) claimed, whatever Muslims do, they do it “only with a nationalist view” (*amyin-thā-yay-amyin-ne-pe*) to implement their plan.

By such reframing, little stories, including the case of the allegedly raped eight-year-old girl, can therefore be turned into national issues – into a conflict between Buddhism and Islam – potentially inflaming existing tensions. In this way, the collective victimhood provides a “cognitive frame” for the members of the majority group to give meanings to their experiences. Thereby, danger is not necessarily an objective condition but could be an effect of discourse, as the language of fear can lead to an intensification of the perceived threats (Ahmed 2014, 72). Nationalist sermons have contributed to create a crisis, a pan-Burmese anti-Muslim moral panic requiring action to be taken and have probably played a part in the outbreak of riots in 2012–2014. Anti-Muslim violence sometimes erupted in towns shortly after 969 monks had delivered anti-Muslim sermons there (PHR 2013b, 6).

The conspiracy theory depicting a threat to Buddhism and Myanmar’s sovereignty gained renewed currency and force in the uncertain and unruly period following the political transformation and democratisation starting in 2011 and the 2012–2014 anti-Muslim riots. Although it was mainly local Muslims that were discussed in the sermons, often the other two groups (see above) were mentioned too, the combined threat of the three groups loomed in the background. In that way, nationalist sermons could create a pan-Burmese, anti-Muslim moral panic. As noted above, Maung Thway Khyun warned for a future Muslim colonisation and claimed that they are surrounded by Muslims in Myanmar, who are supported internationally. Moreover, U Wirathu predicted an invasion of Muslims from Bangladesh that he compared with the British colonisation of Burma. Such discourse created a siege mentality and Burmese Buddhists could, again, develop a sense of collective victimhood. All this created a context where not merely local, but all Muslims were constructed as the fearsome Other (see Schissler, Walton, and Phyu Phyu Thi 2017, 385; Das 1998). These fears were reinforced by the conspiracy theory of Muslims having a plan to achieve world-dominion in the twenty-first century. It served as a rationale behind the perceived global threat. As in moral panics in general, the response to the perceived Muslim threat was disproportionate to the actual threat (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2009).



Although there is a diversity of disparate Muslim minorities in Myanmar (see Selth 2004), Muslims were mostly referred to in the singular in sermons – frequently with the racist derogative word *kalā*, an (Indian) “foreigner” (here synonymous with Muslims). The censored phrase “a different race and religion” (*lū-myou-khyā*, *bhāthā-khyā*) was also used, meaning that Muslims are considered different from the 135 national races, their nation. Das (1998, 125) refers to such stereotypes as “acts of totalization” characteristic of times of collective violence (see also Ware and Laoutides 2018, 183–188). The sense of a global Muslim threat contributed to a homogenisation of local Muslims and to treating them as the “embodiment of a global threat” (Schissler, Walton, and Phyu Phyu Thi 2017, 585; see also Appadurai 2006, 110–112). In the sermons, local Muslims tended to be portrayed in accordance with media stereotypes of Islamic extremism such as IS and were situated within the framework of the familiar conspiracy theory.

The Burmese moral panic that emerged in 2012 exhibited the sociological characteristics of a moral panic, most of which have been discussed above. It will suffice here to examine that of volatility: moral panics erupt suddenly, although they may lie dormant for some time and may quickly subside and reappear again (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2009, 41–43). In Myanmar, anti-Muslim moral panics have reappeared from time to time and then subsided. The one that erupted in 2012 arguably lasted until the general election in November 2015. During that period, Ma Ba Tha enjoyed its peak of popularity and influence and thereafter its popularity has gradually waned, as well as the pan-Burmese moral panic. Without the tacit support of the USDP government through which nationalist monks could obtain permits to preach and other support, and with a NLD government seeking to suppress Buddhist nationalist movements, the moral panic subsided. However, nationalist monks will continue to disseminate nationalist ideology through their informal interactions with laypeople and by teaching children, as well as through other means.

## Ma Ba Tha and Society

There are tensions between different religious communities in Myanmar; for instance, between Christians and Buddhists (see Fleming 2016; Fink 2001, 222–224). However, it is the cleavage between Buddhists and Muslims that runs deepest (see Ware and Laoutides 2018, 61–63). This is reflected in 969 and Ma Ba Tha sermons and speeches. In interviews, Ma Ba Tha monks and laypeople similarly tended to say that, although Christianity also poses a danger to Buddhism due to its missionary activities, Islam constitutes the main threat, because of the alleged plan to destroy Buddhism (the conspiracy theory). In conducting this research, the author has investigated many sermons and speeches of 969 and Ma Ba Tha monks and laypeople and none depicted Christians as a threat. Muslims constitute their only target.

Ma Ba Tha’s nationalist ideology has been shaped by developments since the colonial period up to the SLORC-SPDC period, with a fear of being overrun by the Other (by Indians, and, later, predominantly Muslims) – that is, a fear of an imminent elimination of nation/race and the Buddha’s dispensation, creating a sense of collective victimhood. Such sentiments and values have been part of the socialisation process, education, widespread anti-Muslim pamphlets, as well as state propaganda during the

SLORC-SPDC period. In that way, Ma Ba Tha's ideology is consistent with this troublesome history and reflects a broader set of values that are embedded in Myanmar's society, and it resonates with the values and views of many Burmese Buddhists. The main themes of the anti-Muslim nationalist sermons therefore resonate with views encountered in interviews with Buddhist laypeople, who articulated stereotypes of Muslims as wealthy, aggressive, and sexual predators having a plan to take over Myanmar (McCarthy and Menager 2017; Schissler, Walton, and Phyu Phyu Thi 2017). It is likely that their views were shaped by Buddhist nationalist sermons and speeches, some of which circulate on social media or could be bought on DVDs. Lall's 2012–2013 surveys among youth in Myanmar demonstrated that many embraced similar values as Ma Ba Tha, in terms of Buddhist privilege, support of discrimination of Muslims regarding citizenship rights, and a strong emphasis of nationalism linked to culture and religion, something she claimed was partly derived from nationalist textbooks in state schools. This resurgence of religious nationalism demonstrated that the country was divided along religious lines (Lall 2018, 151–153, 156–157). Ma Ba Tha and the 969 movement should be situated within this complex context that enabled the monks to create an anti-Muslim moral panic.

Arguably, education for youth has also contributed to the propensity for anti-Muslim sentiment. In Ma Ba Tha's Buddhist culture courses (*yin-kyay-leimmā-thin-dan*) for youth, the two abovementioned anti-Muslim pamphlets with the conspiracy theory are used as textbooks (Interviews, monks responsible for such courses, Upper Myanmar, July–August 2019). During the SLORC-SPDC period, the state reportedly disseminated the conspiracy theory in schools. One woman explained that she attended a Buddhist cultural summer course in the mid-1990s, organised by a state school, where she learned about the conspiracy theory. According to some villagers in central Myanmar and others, similar ideas to those of the 969 agenda – they should only marry indigenous Buddhists and only buy from shops owned by Buddhists – have long been disseminated in monastic schools (Interviews, July 2019). Young women said they found the pamphlet *Amyou-pyauk-hmā* at home and read it in their youth, becoming afraid of Muslims (Interviews, Mandalay and Yangon, 2017 and 2019). Several other Burmese Buddhists interviewed stated that they had come across the pamphlet in their youth, from the late 1980s onwards, confirming claims reported by Schissler, Walton, and Phyu Phyu Thi (2017, 388). Many who attended the Buddhist nationalist sermons were therefore already familiar with the conspiracy theory. Frequently, the monks needed only hint at certain aspects of the conspiracy theory because they assumed that it was well-known to the audience.

Another issue is the nationalist depiction of Buddhist-Muslim inter-marriages. The “horror stories” from nationalist sermons about marriages between Buddhist women and Muslim men mentioned above are exaggerated. In Myanmar, there are many examples of harmonious multi-religious families where the parents have different religious identities (Buddhist, Muslim, Christian, etcetera), while their children have different or multiple religious identities. Such cases have been documented in the interviews (Mandalay area, 2014–2019).<sup>20</sup> Therefore, the nationalist monks seem to have selected cases, real or fabricated, of domestic violence as essential stories that are suitable for creating a moral panic.

## Conclusion

In this article, the anti-Muslim moral panic has been analysed as something culturally and socially meaningful for both the Buddhist audience and the monks, due to socio-cultural legacies (conspiracy theories, rumours, and the colonial threat narrative). It provided justification for the campaigns of buying and marrying Buddhist, the boycott of Muslim-owned businesses, and especially for the four nationalist family laws. Moreover, the sense of collective victimhood has been instrumental in inciting riots since the colonial period. The moral panic was a culturally determined, disproportionate response to the fear and uncertainty that was brought about by the political and economic liberalisation that began in 2011 and by the 2012 riots in Rakhine State. The sense of threat was amplified by the three Muslim “groups” (local, regional, and global), which were interconnected in the nationalist imagination; and this was reinforced by global Islamophobia. By the tacit support of the military and USDP under President Thein Sein in 2013–2015, Ma Ba Tha could operate without obstruction from the authorities, disseminate “hate speech” in the public sphere, and obtain permits from local authorities to hold nationalist sermons (which was not possible under the NLD government). Although Ma Ba Tha has authorised anti-Muslim popular rumours and conspiracy theories, as well as institutionalising them (the four nationalist family laws), similar values and views are shared by large numbers of people in Myanmar.

Buddhist nationalist movements reinforced tensions, previous distrust, and resentment by targeting Muslims. The monks provided explanations and frameworks in a systematic form that enabled people to make sense of the transforming socio-political terrain around them. They also provided dystopian prognostications of the future. Thereby, they could draw on a pre-existing repertoire of narratives, tropes, rumours, and conspiracy theories going back to the 1950s, which had been revitalised in the 1980s and the 1990s, but also on grievances and propensities for anti-Muslim sentiments among people. In creating a moral panic, the monks drew on their role as defenders of the Buddha’s dispensation and nation. Thus, they could rely not merely on their own monastic authority but also on the authority of the illustrious monks, who are the formal leaders of Ma Ba Tha. Consequently, this amplified the veracity and impact of their statements. The popularity of the Buddhist nationalist movements and their anti-Muslim moral panic, which came to be a defining feature of the new era of political and economic liberalisation, was thus rooted in the uncertainties and fears that the new era brought about.

## Notes

1. The issue whether the country should be called “Burma” or “Myanmar” in English is complex. Both the corresponding Burmese words (*bamā-pyi* and *myanmā-naing-ngan*) are used in my sources. In this article, the two names are used interchangeably.
2. To give a sermon, a monk must be invited to preach by laypeople, who must apply for permits from local authorities for holding a sermon at a specific location. Permits are applied for at both the township administrator (local Ministry of Home Affairs (*Pyi-hte-yay-wun-gyi-hṭāna*)) and the local Sangha Nāyaka Committee. Both follow the directives from the government (Interviews, Ma Ba Tha monks and laypeople, Mandalay, July–August 2019; see also Nyi Nyi Kyaw 2016, 209).

3. All translations are by the author.
4. Many scholars tend to translate *amyou* as “race.” However, in Ma Ba Tha, *amyou* mostly refers not to a single “race” but to a set of ethnic groups (the “135 national races”), that is, a nation.
5. Kachin, Kayah, Kayin (Karen), Chin, Bamā (Burman), Mon, Rakhine, and Shan.
6. Those excluded from the list are “foreigners” such as persons of Indian, Chinese, or European descent, as well as the contested group of the Muslim Rohingyas.
7. In India, there is a similar sense of threat among Hindu nationalists regarding the Indian Muslim minorities, with the latter being viewed as a kind of “external majorities in disguise” because local Muslims are assumed to be instruments of global Islam and secret agents of Pakistan (Appadurai 2006, 110–112).
8. The Buddha’s dispensation (Pāli: *sāsana*) represents Buddhism as localised, institutionalised, and grounded in society and its embodied and material dimensions. Nationalist sermons and other kinds of monastic religio-political activism began during the colonial period in the 1920s, with U Ottama (1879–1939) and U Wisara (1889–1929) as the most famous figures (see Smith 1965; Cady 1958).
9. Althusser (1971, 182) explains that “subject” means: (i) a centre of initiatives and actions; and (ii) a subjected being submitting to higher authority. In Buddhist sermons in Burma, laypeople tend to assume a role in the second sense.
10. The publication was illegal during the SLORC-SPDC period but seems to have been widespread at the time and it was disseminated from hand to hand. It was also in circulation during the anti-Muslim riots in 2001–2003 (Human Rights Watch 2002).
11. Pamphlets whose contents seem to partly be derived from the two pamphlets mentioned above were also disseminated in various parts of Burma in 2012 (see Burma Campaign UK 2013).
12. This understanding of Islam is recurrent in nationalist sermons and in interviews conducted for this research. Many Ma Ba Tha monks read the *Quran* selectively. Their understanding of Islam seems to correspond to a Salafist interpretation that they attribute to Burmese Muslims.
13. The riots occurred in 1942, with casualties on both sides. The numbers involved remain unknown.
14. The 2014 census calculated the Muslim population in Myanmar at 4.3% and Buddhists at 87.9%. However, before the census was made, many believed that the Muslim population was larger.
15. The word “*thādhu*” (Pāli *sādhu*) is otherwise said by a Buddhist audience three times after meritorious deeds have been ritually performed.
16. The word *kalā* originally referred to people of South Asian origins, especially Indians, and connotes a foreigner. However, Buddhist nationalists refer to all Muslims, irrespective of origin, as *kalā* (see also Nyi Nyi Kyaw 2016, 191). That is recurrent in nationalist sermons and publications. Thereby, all Muslims are turned into foreigners.
17. A DVD with this interview was sold at Ma Ba Tha events.
18. In the sermons, the compounded threat of the three Muslim groups (see above) is mostly in the background.
19. Similar accusations have been made by ethnic minorities against the Buddhist majority. These accusations were similar to the anti-Muslim conspiracy theory and were made during the SLORC-SPDC period by ethnic minorities (especially Chins and Kachins) against Myanmar’s army saying that the latter encouraged soldiers to marry women from ethnic minorities and that it provided the soldiers with monetary rewards, the amount of which depended on the educational level and social standing of the women. Burman soldiers were accused of forcing these women to convert to Buddhism and practice Buddhism. They claimed that it was part of the state’s Burmanisation programme (Belak 2002, 78). Sexual violence, especially rape, has been described as a “hallmark” of the Tatmadaw and as a deliberate strategy to intimidate, terrorise, and punish civilians among the ethnic minorities (Human Rights Council 2019, 18–19; Belak 2002, 73–78).

Moreover, Muslims claimed that domestic violence is common also in Buddhist families (Interviews, Mandalay, July–August 2019).

20. For a discussion of past peaceful co-existence between Buddhists and Muslims see Schissler, Walton, and Phyu Phyu Thi 2017; Holt 2019.

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