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## The Buddha was a devoted nationalist: Buddhist nationalism, *ressentiment*, and defending Buddhism in Myanmar

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### ABSTRACT

Since 2012, Buddhist nationalist movements – especially the 969 movement and Ma Ba Tha – have emerged in Burma/Myanmar seeking to defend Buddhism against mainly the Muslim minority, with monks delivering nationalist anti-Muslim sermons to huge audiences. The aim of this article is to demonstrate how a discriminatory nationalist agenda can – by appealing to the common trope of Buddhism-in-danger – appear to be justified to Buddhists. Based mainly on nationalist sermons, as well as on fieldwork and nationalist publications, this article examines discourse on the Buddha as a nationalist. First, it argues that Burmese Buddhist nationalism, analytically, should be understood as a *ressentiment* ideological discourse that also informs a Buddhist-nationalist discipline claimed to bring karmic merit. Second, it traces the roots of this ideology to the colonial period. Third, the article outlines and seeks to define how ‘Buddhist nationalism’ should be understood in an emic sense.

### KEYWORDS

Buddhist nationalism; Ma Ba Tha; nationalism; Buddhism; religion and politics; Burma/Myanmar

In 2011, a semi-democratic and semi-civilian government under President Thein Sein – a former general – assumed power after a long time of military rule in Burma/Myanmar (1962–2011).<sup>1</sup> In this volatile political transition period, riots between Buddhists and Muslims broke out in Rakhine State, and appeared in other parts of the country the following year. In their wake, Buddhist nationalist, anti-Muslim movements led by monks emerged that sought to protect their nation and Buddhism mainly against an allegedly increasing threat of the Muslim minority (about 4.3 percent) (Ministry of Labour, Immigration and Population 2016). While monks were accused of having incited violence by delivering anti-Muslim sermons, they have consistently denied any responsibility (see Walton and Hayward 2014). These developments should be understood against the background of the opening up of Burma, the implementation of liberal capitalism and projects of modernization and democratization, and the increasing impact of globalization and a global fear of militant Islam (see Walton and Hayward 2014; ICG

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<sup>1</sup>In 1989, the military government changed the English name of the country from ‘Burma’ to ‘Myanmar.’ ‘Myanmar’ would also be used instead of ‘Burmese’ as a designation referring to all the indigenous ethnic groups living in the country (see Houtman 1999). In this article, ‘Myanmar’ is occasionally used in the latter sense for the period after 1989 to reflect the usage in my sources. ‘Burma’ and ‘Myanmar’ are used as interchangeable country-names. ‘Burman’ (*bamā-lū-myōu*) refers to the ethnic majority group (about 69 percent).

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2017). A number of factors have enabled a rapid spread of nationalist agendas and contributed to their popularity. The lifting of censorship on publications in 2012 and 2013 allowed for a mushrooming of new newspapers, journals, and books, while a telecommunication revolution brought mobile-phone and Internet access to a majority of people, and social media rose in popularity, especially Facebook. From 2012 to 2015, nationalist monks were able to freely disseminate what some observers have called ‘hate speech’ (*amoun-sagā*) without the intervention of the authorities (see Min Zin 2015).

The most well-known of these Buddhist nationalist movements are the 969 movement and Ma Ba Tha that have frequently been labeled ‘Buddhist nationalism’ by scholars, although this concept is seldom defined. In some cases, the monks have even been called ‘extremists’ (*asun-yauk*) by Burmese and international media. A recurrent view in many Buddhist traditions is that whenever the Buddha’s dispensation (P. *sāsana*) is perceived to be in danger, acts of intolerance or discrimination, and even violence and warfare, can be regarded as justified to defend Buddhism against its enemies (see Bartholomeusz 2002; Jerryson 2011; Turner 2014; Walton and Hayward 2014, 20–23). This defense is what is perceived to justify the contemporary Burmese nationalist movements.<sup>2</sup>

During the colonial period, monks began delivering public sermons to huge audiences of thousands of people (see Maung Maung 1980); such mass preaching drastically decreased in the socialist Ne Win period (1962–1988) but were revived in the SLORC-SPDC period (1988–2011) (Brac de la Perrière 2016, 334–335).<sup>3</sup> However, in none of these periods do monks seem to have disseminated systematic Buddhist-nationalist, anti-Muslim ideology in sermons. The phenomenon that was witnessed in 2012–2015 was unprecedented. However, after the general elections in November 2015 that Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy (NLD) won, nationalist monks have mainly been engaged in social or charity work (P. *parahita*) and running Dhamma Sunday schools for children. As Ma Ba Tha monks and laypeople explained to me in 2017, it has been nearly impossible for them to acquire permits from local authorities to deliver nationalist sermons.

To my knowledge, scholars have not yet systematically examined the ideological Buddhist-nationalist discourse articulated in sermons delivered by these nationalist monks, nor have they sought to define its nature, logic, and dynamics. What did the monks say to their audiences? What agendas can be discerned? Which instructions did they give? Which themes were emphasized? In short, what were these sermons about? This remains to be investigated.

These contemporary nationalist sermons have thus remained a largely untapped resource in the scholarship. The sermons attracted huge audiences, predominantly women. Sermons mostly present a complex picture of these movements. The nationalist agenda is usually unfolded from within a Buddhist framework, which are often reinterpreted *jātaka* narratives about the Buddha’s previous lives that are familiar to the audience. Although nationalism is a modern ideology, Buddhist myths and legends are recast as nationalist narratives. Some sermons, especially those by U Wirathu, begin with long winding tales from *jātakas* and later, almost seamlessly, shift into a political

<sup>2</sup>In this article, ‘P.’ is an abbreviation for Pāli. All foreign words are Burmese, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>3</sup>SLORC is an abbreviation for State, Law, and Order Restoration Council (1988–1997) and SPDC for State, Peace, and Development Council (1997–2011). These constitute the two consecutive names of the military government.

sermon, discussing the threat of Muslims, conspiracy theories, the government, and the like. The long Buddhist narrative is thus supposed to serve as an allegory for the current situation. Such sermons can go on for about three hours. In this context, the defense of the Buddha's dispensation is the main issue, to which everything else is subordinated. Presenting a nationalist agenda through a Buddhist framework was already a common technique in the colonial period among the nationalist monks in the monastic organization General Council of Sangha Sameggi (GCSS) in the 1920s. Since the Buddhist nationalist movements have been supported by wide swaths of the Burmese Buddhist population, it is vital to understand them from their own perspective, situated both historically and in the current situation.

A recurrent theme in 969 and Ma Ba Tha sermons, but also in nationalist books and articles, is a narrative of how the Buddha was a devoted nationalist both in his previous lives as a Buddha-to-be (P. *bodhisatta*) and in his last life as Gotama Buddha, who defended his 'race' and religion. Sometimes this theme is linked to a narrative depicting the Burmese people – the Burmese nation (referring to the 135 national 'races') – as blood-descendants of the Buddha's Sākiya Clan. In this way, nationalists have created a model of the Burmese nation as traced back to the Buddha's kinship group, and, from the actions of the Buddha and his clan, they have constructed a model of the nationalist practice of defending race/nation and religion, including the alleged endogamy of the Sākiya Clan, that Buddhists (monks, 'nuns', and laypeople) should emulate. In this ideology, Buddhism and nation (that is, national identity) are fused.<sup>4</sup>

The aim of this article is to demonstrate how a discriminatory nationalist agenda can appear to be justified and normalized by being situated within this Buddhist framework of the Buddha as a nationalist defending race/nation and religion. Based mainly on sermons delivered by three famous and influential nationalist monks from 2012 to 2015, as well as on fieldwork, informal and semi-structured interviews with Ma Ba Tha monks and laypeople (about 65–70 people) in Upper Burma and in Yangon area (2016–2017), and nationalist books and journals, this article examines various dimensions of discourse on the Buddha as a nationalist. First, it argues that Burmese Buddhist nationalism should be etically (analytically) understood as an ideological ethnic-nationalist *ressentiment* discourse that also informs a religio-nationalist discipline. Thereby it also shows how the monks attempt to convince the audience that nationalism constitutes an intrinsically Buddhist practice and imagination that not only brings karmic merit but also the higher fruits of the Buddhist path. Second, it traces the roots of this ideology to the colonial period and discusses some historical legacies. Third, based on the aforementioned sources, the article outlines and seeks to define how 'Buddhist nationalism' should be understood in an emic sense.

## The nation and nationalist ideology

In an illuminating essay, Christophe Jaffrelot (2005) argues that theories on nation are frequently confused with theories on nationalism, and that they should be disentangled to avoid 'conceptual confusion'. Linked to democratization in Europe, the modern 'nation'

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<sup>4</sup>The words 'race' and 'nation' have the same denotation here but different connotations.

came to be understood as the ‘people’ ideally embodied in the state (Greenfeld 1992, 6–10). Theories of nation outline the ‘preconditions’ for the emergence of a national consciousness through the complex transformations that modernity brought about (Jaffrelot 2005, 11; cf. Smith 1991, 14, 72). Being state-oriented, Jaffrelot refers to them as ‘the school of nation-building’, for instance, Ernst Gellner (1994 [1983]) and Benedict Anderson (2006 [1983]). Anderson, he claims, misleadingly refers to his concept of ‘imagined communities’ or national consciousness as ‘nationalism’. While theories on nation explain largely passive and unconscious processes, without an ideology, nationalism or nationalist ideology is mostly constructed by a local intelligentsia (Jaffrelot 2005, 17–18; cf. Smith 1988 [1986], Ch 7, 1991, 72–74). Nationalist ideology is rooted in identity politics claiming control of a nation and promoting its own identity against Others. Following Liah Greenfeld (1992; cf. Brown 2008), Jaffrelot (2005) maintains that nationalism is an identity-building process frequently based on *ressentiment* vis-à-vis a dominating Other. This is a reaction to feelings of inferiority and vulnerability (Jaffrelot 1996, 24, 76). Cultural and psychological domination and competition play a major role in the development of nationalism (Jaffrelot 2005, 25). His claim that theories of nationalism have much in common with theories of ethnicity (2005, 11; cf. Smith 1988 [1986]) is confirmed by the present article.

While some scholars view nationalist ideology as an epiphenomenon not deserving serious study, for instance, in a Marxian fashion as ‘false consciousness’ (Gellner 1994 [1983], 124–127), this article follows scholars acknowledging the importance of investigating the content of nationalist ideology (Smith 1988 [1986], 1991; Jaffrelot 1996, 2005; Bhatt 2001), including scholars examining it by discourse analysis (Finlayson 1998; Hansen 1999; Sutherland 2005). The critical study of nationalist ideological discourse is crucial for a nuanced understanding of contemporary Buddhist nationalist movements. The aim of such discourse is to persuade an audience, thereby employing a variety of rhetorical strategies, tropes, and devices (see Sutherland 2005), an audience that previously may not have been committed nationalists. In fact, many monks and lay-people, in sermons, speeches and publications, complained that Burmese Buddhists lack a nationalist spirit, and that they therefore attempt to inculcate such spirit among them.

In the following, I will leave out a discussion of how a national consciousness evolved, and instead make, in two sections, a sketch of the emergence of nationalist movements and how a nationalist *ressentiment* ideology evolved during the colonial period in Burma. Thereafter a brief overview of two contemporary Buddhist nationalist movements is presented, followed by sections on three recurrent discourses derived from sermons: (1) the *bodhisatta* as a nationalist, (2) Gotama Buddha as a nationalist, and (3) the Muslim Other of the nation. While the first two sections deal with the Buddha as a prescriptive model, the section on the Muslims provide reasons and instructions for implementing nationalism in practice. Mainly based on the previous sections, the main features of the Buddhist-nationalist ideology will thereupon be outlined more broadly in the next section, and followed by a final section where some of its aspects are further interpreted and analyzed.

### **The emergence of Burmese nationalism in the colonial period: a Burman Buddhist identity**

While contemporary nationalist monks draw on a variety of pre-modern texts and concepts (Buddhist and local), their views are strongly shaped by modern Western concepts

of the nation. Whereas the latter is conceived as a unique national ‘people’, whose sense of community is based on horizontal identities, engendering a sense of fraternity and equality, and is the main object of loyalty and attributed popular sovereignty (Greenfeld 1992, 6–10; Finlayson 1998; Anderson 2006 [1983]), the pre-modern identity and loyalty were determined by a position along vertical lines within a hierarchy, largely determined by patron-client relationships, especially loyalty to the king, the main patron, and local and regional identities, all of which mitigated the development of a common identity (see Lieberman 1978, 2010 [2003]; Taylor 2005, 265–267; Kirichenko 2009).<sup>5</sup>

The ideology of the contemporary Burmese Buddhist nationalist movements is predicated on an intertwined Buddhist and ethnic identity. A link between a loose Burman identity and a Buddhist social and ritual order – the Buddha’s dispensation (P. *sāsana*) – was already established in the pre-colonial period (see Charney 2006; Kirichenko 2009; Lieberman 2010 [2003], 201). These pre-colonial notions came to be fused with the modern concept of nation during the colonial period (Lieberman 1978, 482; Taylor 2005). The pre-colonial identity became irrelevant in the religiously diverse metropolitan urban areas in modernizing colonial Burma (see Turner 2014), thereby bringing about a ‘crisis of identity’ and a quest to foster national identities (Greenfeld 1992, 14). In this situation, constructing nationalist ideology ‘aims at creating something new to cope with the cultural threats posed by the dominant Other, but is also a defence of the existing culture that needs to be reinvented, precisely to meet this challenge’ (Jaffrelot 2005, 36; cf. 1996, 13).

A nationalist ideology based on Buddhism as the core of an ethnic national identity developed throughout the 1910s, and served to unify the Burmese people as a nation against the British colonizers and the Indian immigrants, their common enemies. As in India (Jaffrelot 1996, 2005; Hansen 1999; Bhatt 2001), nationalism in Burma emerged from religious reform movements, Buddhist lay associations. These were originally non-political but began addressing nationalist, political issues from around 1916, thereby raising demands to the British colonial government (Maung Maung 1961; von der Mehden 1963; Smith 1965; Turner 2014).

In the third Anglo-Burmese war in 1885, the British annexed entire Burma, abolished the monarchy, and incorporated Burma as a colony into British India. The king had been the foremost patron and defender of the Buddha’s dispensation. Many Burmese felt that the latter was under siege facing imminent destruction. In this context, the responsibility of promoting Buddhism shifted to the laypeople (see Turner 2014). Hundreds of Buddhist lay associations were founded between 1890 and 1920 with the aim of saving the Buddha’s dispensation by stemming its alleged decline and preserving Burman culture and language against the perceived threat posed by colonialism and modernity (Maung Maung 1980; Turner 2014). The most influential association was the Young Men’s Buddhist Association (YMBA) that was founded in Rangoon in 1906 by a Burmese Western-educated elite initially viewing themselves as loyal subjects of the British Crown. They served as an indigenous intelligentsia forging an evolving national identity. Initially, according to Alicia Turner, these associations mainly sought to cultivate a collective Buddhist identity, with a sense of equality among members, who constituted a moral community of co-Buddhists

<sup>5</sup>People were rather identified as subjects of a certain kingdom than classified into ethnic and religious categories. While sovereignty resided with the king in the pre-colonial period, it is attributed to the people/nation in the modern period (Lieberman 1978, 459, 482).

who were united in a common Buddhist cause. They prepared the ground for the development of a self-conscious national Buddhist identity and an anti-colonial nationalism (Turner 2014).

The close link between Buddhism and (Burman) ethnic identity was cultivated throughout the twentieth century. In the first issue of *The Burman Buddhist*, the mouthpiece of YMBA, one of the stated objectives of the organization was to foster the intimate bond between their Burman and Buddhist identity (*The Burman Buddhist* 1908, 1 (1), 2).<sup>6</sup> Although the major nationalist movements in the late 1930s adopted Western leftist ideologies, especially socialism and Marxism, downplaying the theme of a Burman Buddhist nation, nationalist politicians continued to emphasize Buddhism as the source of Burmese national identity (Becka 1991, 399). They frequently referred to Burma as a Buddhist country and proposed legislation that would promote Buddhism (von der Mehden 1963, 162; Smith 1965). This pattern recurred during the first post-independence government in 1948 under Prime Minister U Nu (von der Mehden 1963; Smith 1965; Mendelson 1975).

In 1920, after YMBA had turned into an anti-colonial nationalist organization, it changed its name into the General Council of Burmese Associations (GCBA). A corresponding monastic organization, GCSS, was formed the same year. The nationalist monk U Ottama (1879–1939) assumed leadership of the latter, through whom the monks entered the nationalist movement. Maintaining that Buddhism was in danger because of the foreign British government, he urged the monks to leave their monasteries to defend Buddhism (Cady 1958, 231; Maung Maung 1980).

### Nationalist *ressentiment* ideology: anti-Indian and anti-Muslim sentiments in the colonial period

Contemporary Burmese Buddhist-nationalist movements display the trappings of a ‘majority with a minority complex’,<sup>7</sup> and that is a legacy from the colonial period. Ethnic nationalist ideology is frequently invented as a *ressentiment* response to cultural domination and feelings of inferiority (see Jaffrelot 2005, 25–36; cf. idem 1996; Greenfeld 1992). The term *ressentiment*, Greenfeld explains, was coined by Friedrich Nietzsche referring to a psychological state emerging from suppressed feelings of envy and hatred, and a sense of impossibility of satisfying these feelings. Their structural basis is the conviction of a fundamental equality between oneself and the Other, but that a situation of inequality has emerged (Greenfeld 1992, 15–16). One way to overcome *ressentiment* is to construct nationalist ideology (Greenfeld 1992, 254–255).

Burmese nationalism originated in that manner: first as an anti-Indian response (Hindus, Muslims, etc.; see Chakravarti 1971, 101), characterized by *ressentiment*, and slightly later turned anti-colonial. Burmese people had to address their British and Indian superiors as *Thakin*, ‘Master’, and to prostrate (*shikho*) before them in a submissive and humiliating way (see Maung Maung 1980, 2; Khin Yi 1988a, 3; Turner 2014). In 1922, U Ottama accused ‘foreigners of having hypnotized the Burmese into believing that they are an inferior race’ (Mendelson 1975, 223). In 1930, the nationalist Dobama Asiayoun, ‘We Burmans Association’, was founded whose members added the word *Thakin* to

<sup>6</sup>I thank Alicia Turner for providing me with copies of *The Burman Buddhist*.

<sup>7</sup>That is similar to Hindu nationalist movements and Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist movements (see Tambiah 1991, 92; Jaffrelot 1996, 76, ch 10; Appadurai 2006).



their names claiming that Burmans were a 'master race' (see Khin Yi 1988a, 3, 63) to mark their own superiority.

The anti-Indian sentiment assumed political expression in 1917. In that year, the British announced the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms that would grant a degree of self-government to India but it would not be implemented in Burma. The latter country was regarded as not yet politically mature and instead the much weaker Craddock Scheme was proposed. Burma would thus still be subordinated to the government in Delhi, but now with Indians in the government (Cady 1958; Chakravarti 1971, 101). This caused a strong reaction among the Burmese, as it implied that they were perceived to be inferior to Indians (Maung Maung 1980, 12). YMBA sent delegations to India and London demanding that Burma not be left out of the reforms and that it must be separated from India (Maung Maung 1961, 13; Chakravarti 1971, 101).

Anti-Indian sentiments developed during a long period. In 1910, the following was stated in YMBA's journal: 'More and more Chinamen and Indians will settle in Burma; and Burmans will become a Buddhist legend. [—] Wake up, Burmans, wake up' (*The Burman Buddhist* 1910, 3 (1), 13). Such sentiments were also articulated in YMBA's annual meeting in 1917, declaring that marriages between Indians and Burmese women should be avoided (Maung Maung 1961, 12). These sentiments grew more intense during the 1920s and finally erupted in the devastating Indo-Burmese riots in 1930 and the anti-Muslim riots in 1938 (see Cady 1958; Smith 1965; Chakravarti 1971). In the latter, monks assumed a leading role, and accused Muslims of insulting Buddhism and regarded Muslims as Buddhism's 'enemy No. 1' (see Mendelson 1975; Smith 1965, 110).

The first target of this *ressentiment* response was thus the Indian minority. The background for these rising tensions was unregulated immigration and disproportionate influence of the Indians (Egretreau 2011, 36). The British encouraged Indians to migrate to Burma to work in the colonial administration. The elite among them were offered the most prestigious positions, while the Burmese were disprivileged and mostly assumed subordinate positions. The economy was dominated by Indians and to lesser degree by Chinese immigrants. Burmese people became a minority in the larger cities and Indians constituted the majority. Most of the Indian immigrants were men, many of whom, especially Muslims, married Burmese Buddhist women who were required to convert to Islam for the marriage to be legally valid and to acquire inheritance rights (Cady 1958; Smith 1965, 109; Chakravarti 1971; Khin Yi 1988a, 96; Ikeya 2012). The British army that invaded Burma and forced it into subjugation consisted predominantly of Indians. This gave the impression, Chakravarti explains, not of a British but an Indo-British occupation of Burma. The Indians were perceived as a part of the occupying force (Chakravarti 1971, 96–97).

The origin of Burmese ethnic nationalism as *ressentiment* towards especially Indians has left an indelible mark, partly reproduced in social memory. This legacy is echoed in contemporary Burma, and monks and laypeople have, in public sermons and speeches, occasionally reminded the audience of the colonial period – a period of 'slavery' (*kyun-bhawa*). Exhorting laypeople and monks to defend the Buddha's dispensation from threats has recurred in every period of transition: the colonial period, the early post-independence period (starting in 1948), and the current period of transition from military rule (1962–2011) (see also Turner 2014). The contemporary Buddhist nationalist movements, especially the 969 movement and Ma Ba Tha, represent the latest manifestation of this



tendency, along with *ressentiment* towards Muslims. According to Egreteau (2011), the earlier Indophobia has turned into Islamophobia since the 1990s. As Mikael Gravers (1999, 2) explains, the colonial legacy has created a nationalist paranoia in the post-independence period, with a fear of foreign takeover and fear of the disappearance of Burmese culture.

### 969 and Ma Ba Tha: a Buddhist state, Buddhist nationalism, and a Buddhist nation

The agendas of the Buddhist nationalist movements embrace a comprehensive program for the protection of Buddhism, and social and moral reform of society, involving political, religious, economic and educational affairs. In the aftermath of the conflicts between Buddhists and Muslims in Rakhine State in 2012, the 969 movement – a loosely organized monastic network – was formed by the end of October that year. Using a nationalist reinterpretation of the symbol 969, a numerological representation of the qualities of the Three Gems (Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha), it embraced a Buddhist-nationalist agenda that exclusively served the interests of the Buddhist majority. Its activities were a response to a perceived threat from the Muslim minority to Buddhism. The movement aimed to stir up a nationalist spirit and loyalty to Buddhism and the country, to implement a ‘buy Buddhist campaign’ and boycotting Muslim-owned businesses, to encourage Buddhist women to marry only Buddhist men, and to establish Dhamma Sunday Schools for children. These are various Buddhist discriminatory strategies intended to figuratively build a ‘fence’ (*si-you*) with their own ‘bones’ (*ayou*) around their Buddhist nation, according to the 969 song.

On 27 June 2013, this movement largely morphed into a larger and better-structured organization, *Amyou-bhāthā-thāthanā-saung-shauk-yay-ahpwe*, the ‘Organization for Protecting Race/Nation, Religion, and the Buddha’s Dispensation’, known under its acronym Ma Ba Tha, with branches throughout the country. The project of protecting and promoting these three entities seems to have begun with YMBA during the colonial period (Maung Maung 1980).<sup>8</sup> Ma Ba Tha incorporated the agenda of the 969 movement but broadened its purview. Ma Ba Tha served as a political lobby group that persuaded the government under President Thein Sein (2011–2016) to adopt four laws protecting race/nation and religion (*amyou-saung-upaday*); especially by making it more difficult for Muslims to marry Buddhist women. Representatives frequently state that the political leaders of Burma should be Buddhists since only they would be loyal to their Buddhist nation.<sup>9</sup>

The Myanmar/Burmese ‘nation’ (*amyou*), both according to monks from the 969 movement and Ma Ba Tha’s constitution (Ma Ba Tha 2013, 3–4), consists of the 135 national ‘races’ (*taing-yin-thā*). These are subdivisions of the eight ‘root races’ that have been acknowledged since Burma’s 1947 Constitution.<sup>10</sup> The classification of 135 national

<sup>8</sup>In YMBA, a fourth category was *pyinnyā*, ‘education,’ and *bhāthā* meant ‘language’ at that time (Maung Maung 1980, 3).

<sup>9</sup>For more on the activities of the Buddhist nationalist movements in 2012–2015, (see Schonthal and Walton 2016; ICG 2017).

<sup>10</sup>Kachin, Kayah, Kayin (Karen), Chin, Bāmā (Burman), Mon, Rakhine, and Shan. In the following, the word *amyou* will, depending on the context, be translated as ‘nation,’ when it refers to an all-encompassing category (for instance, the 135 national races in contemporary Burma). In that and similar cases, nation and race coincide and therefore ‘race/nation’ is used. The word is rendered singly as ‘race,’ when the focus is on its perceived biological nature, as in the

racism was invented in 1983 by the Ne Win government (1962–1988) (Ferguson 2015; Cheesman 2017). It still represents the official position of the state as to who belongs to the Myanmar nation (see Cheesman 2017).<sup>11</sup> To promote national unification, the state has officially, since the Ne Win period, recognized complete equality among the national races, and arranged them in alphabetical order since 1964 (Houtman 1999, 93). Although no ethnic group takes precedence officially, in practice, the Burman majority has remained the dominant and privileged group (see Walton 2013).

As an analytical concept, Buddhist nationalism is a form of ethnic nationalism. The latter refers to a ‘sense of community which focuses on belief in myths of common ancestry; and on the perception that these myths are validated by contemporary similarities of, for example, physiognomy, language or religion’, and pride in common kinship. This provides a basis of claims for the right of national self-determination (Brown 2000, 50). In Buddhist nationalism, ethnic belonging is subordinated to religious belonging. In the 969 movement and Ma Ba Tha, only the Buddhists among the 135 national races are perceived to belong to their nation. This stance is, implicitly and explicitly, articulated in sermons, speeches, prescription of practices, and publications.

### The Buddha as a nationalist *bodhisatta*: the origin of nationalism

In the following, I will discuss and analyze how three nationalist monks outline a Buddhist version of *amyou-thā-yay*, ‘nationalism’, in sermons delivered from 2012 to 2015. They are and have been prominent figures within both Ma Ba Tha and the 969 movement. U Wirathu (2013) delivers a 969 sermon in Muse, Shan State (Figure 1); Ashin Thawpaka (2015) preaches in Mawlamyaing, Mon State (Figure 2), and Ashin Eindasekka Bhiwuntha (2014) in Lashio, Shan State. In their sermons, the latter two sought to justify Ma Ba Tha’s four nationalist laws. U Wirathu (b. 1968) from Mandalay was a prominent representative of the 969 movement; later he joined Ma Ba Tha, and he is also a member of the Patriotic Myanmar Monks Union in Mandalay. He is one of the *u-hsaung-hsayādaws*, ‘leading monks’, within Ma Ba Tha. That means that he, along with some other monks, serve as an advisor for the headquarters in Yangon, and who must ratify their official statements before they go public. Ashin Eindasekka Bhiwuntha is also one of the leading monks and has a prominent position within Ma Ba Tha in Mandalay. Dr. Ashin Thawpaka (b. 1972), who is another of the leading monks, is linked to the central Ma Ba Tha in Yangon. Being one of Ma Ba Tha’s most well-known representatives, he mostly serves as its spokesman in contacts with Burmese media and has been the editor of many of its official publications. These monks are influential ideologues that represent the elite within Ma Ba Tha, and they frequently delivered sermons to huge audiences from 2012 to 2015.

In the following, it will be demonstrated how nationalist monks turn the teaching of the long *bodhisatta* path to *buddhahood* into a modern Buddhist-nationalist ideology by imposing the premises of the latter onto premodern canonical and commentarial texts. This operation is facilitated by the fact that some aspects of that path, viewed superficially and ahistorically, can lend themselves to that end. While Buddhism has frequently been

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section on the Buddha and the Sākya Clan. (Another word, with a similar meaning, is *lū-myou*, ‘kind of human’, that can also mean ‘race’ or ‘nation’.)

<sup>11</sup> Those excluded from the list are ‘foreigners’ of Indian, Chinese, or European descent, etc., as well as the contested group of the Muslim Rohingyas.



**Figure 1.** U Wirathu (seated) paying respects to Ashin Tillawka Bhiwuntha (standing), the chairman (oukattha) of Ma Ba Tha; at a donation ceremony, central headquarters of Ma Ba Tha, 14 September 2017, Yangon. Photo: by the author.

regarded as a universal soteriological teaching, the aforementioned texts contain some particularistic aspects that tend to be neglected in scholarly literature.<sup>12</sup> By creating a sense of ambiguity and a space for different interpretations (see below), a likewise particularistic ethnic nationalist ideology can draw on them and remold them in its own image.

In Pāli Buddhist texts, especially the *jātakas*, the *Nidānakathā* and the *Buddhavaṃsa*, the Buddha, as a *buddha*-to-be, is portrayed as fulfilling the ten perfections in previous lives throughout incalculable eons before attaining *buddhahood* as Gotama Buddha. Acting in a selfless way, he sacrificed himself for the greater good by performing the five ‘great sacrifices’, for instance, by offering his children, his limbs, or his body for the sake of others, as a way to fulfill the perfection of generosity (P. *dānapāramī*). How is

<sup>12</sup>By particularistic aspects I understand here mainly factors pertaining to kinship and other group identities (clan, species, relatives, etc.). There are notable exceptions, including Wagle (1966) and Chakravarti (1996).



**Figure 2.** Ashin Thawpaka at the headquarters of Ma Ba Tha, Yangon, September 2016. Photo: by the author.

this Buddhist soteriological path related to nationalism? The self-effacing practices of the *bodhisatta* path can, in a nationalist reinterpretation, be perceived to be similar to the selfless and heroic sacrifice of oneself for one's country and nation common in nationalist movements throughout the world (see Smith 1988 [1986], 199, *passim*). This path can therefore serve as a perfect indigenous cultural resource for developing a nationalist ideology, as an almost Weberian elective affinity could be perceived between them by nationalists.<sup>13</sup>

The Burmese word for 'nation' is *amyou*, and 'nationalism' is *amyou-thā-yay* (lit. 'national affairs'). The former can connote not only 'nation' but also 'kind', 'sort', 'species', 'race', 'lineage', 'relative', etc. (see Stewart and Dunn 1969, 252–253). In the pre-colonial period, an important meaning of *amyou* was a descent group or kinship and implied a common origin. It is synonymous with the Pāli word *jāti*, 'birth', which in India referred to 'caste'. It also denoted *varṇa*, the four Indian 'status groups' (see Thant Myint-U 2001, 29–31). During the British colonial period, the word *amyou* came

<sup>13</sup>The nationalist reinterpretation of the *bodhisatta* path is attested elsewhere in Burma, for instance, in a Buddhist esoteric congregation (Foxeus 2012). This idea goes back to the colonial period (see Bha Yin n.d., 27), but it needs to be further investigated.



to denote ‘nation’ in the modern sense, as well as the British concept of ‘race’ (see Stewart and Dunn 1969, 252; Charney 2006; Ikeya 2012; Ferguson 2015). The word *amyou* is thus an ambiguous, polysemic taxonomic concept on which the nationalists draw.

The defense of the Buddha’s dispensation when it is under threat is a recurrent trope in the history of Buddhism and is here – with an addition of defense of the ‘nation’ – attributed to the Buddha in his previous lives as a *bodhisatta* (and to Gotama Buddha himself; see the next section). Ma Ba Tha’s project of protecting race/nation, religion, and the Buddha’s dispensation was, Ashin Thawpaka (2015) claims, already carried out by the Buddha in his innumerable previous lives as a *bodhisatta* while fulfilling perfections. According to U Wirathu (2013), it was ‘not only as a *bodhisatta* that the Buddha embarked on the path of nationalism but he also practiced on that path in his life as the Buddha. Without embarking on the nationalist path, he would not have been able to fulfill perfections and become a Buddha’. Ma Ba Tha’s nationalist agenda is thus claimed to be congruent with the path of the *bodhisatta* and serves as a role model. Nationalism is here depicted as a religious path leading to the attainment of awakening and nirvana.

The concept of the three *cariyās*, ‘practices’, is frequently discussed in contemporary nationalist discourse and has been subjected to a nationalist reinterpretation. That concept is derived from the Pāli commentarial literature and is related to the *bodhisatta* path: *lokatthacariyā*, ‘working, without discrimination, for the benefit of all the sentient beings in the world’; *ñātattthacariyā*, ‘working for the benefit of relatives’ (P. *ñāti; hsway-myou*); and *buddhatthacariyā*, ‘practicing for the attainment of *buddhahood*’. Burmese Buddhists are especially instructed to perform the second one about the relatives; here reinterpreted as work and a willingness to sacrifice oneself for one’s nation, religion, and country.

The nationalist monks interpret ‘relatives’ here not as ‘siblings’ or ‘family members’ but as the larger entity of the ‘nation’ (*amyou*); and ‘working for the benefit of relatives’ is equivalent to protecting ‘race/nation, religion, and the Buddha’s dispensation’ (Wirathu 2013; Thawpaka 2015). As it is common in Burma to refer to co-nationals with fraternal kinship terms, the monks’ ideology probably carries persuasive force for the audience. This usage is common in Ma Ba Tha (see, for instance, Hein Lat 2015, 17), and in nationalist discourse within Buddhist charity organizations (see McCarthy 2018, 175–176). Similarly, General Saw Maung, the first chairman of the military junta SLORC, viewed indigenous ethnic groups as belonging to the ‘Myanmar family’, and as being ‘blood brothers’ (Houtman 1999, 66). As many scholars have observed, the nation is frequently perceived to be similar to kinship and to an extended kinship group indicated by the use of kinship terms to rhetorically refer to co-nationals (Smith 1988 [1986]; Eriksen 1993; Anderson 2006 [1983], 143–144), that is, a kind of ‘metaphoric kinship’ (Eriksen 1993, 130).

Protecting ‘relatives’ is stated to be identical to the ‘nationalism’ or the ‘nationalist path’ (*amyou-thā-yay-lansin*) that the Buddha practiced as a *buddha-to-be* (Wirathu 2013). In the *jātakas*, on which the nationalists draw, the Buddha as a *bodhisatta*, especially in his lives as various animals, is portrayed as a hero saving the members of his own group – his *amyou*, here animal ‘species’ – from being killed by their enemies (cf. Appleton 2010). When the Buddha was a crow, a monkey, a dog or a rooster, he is portrayed as having sacrificed his life to protect and save his ‘nation’ on the nationalist path (Wirathu 2013; Thawpaka 2015). U Wirathu (2013) takes *Mahākapi Jātaka* (No. 407) as an example of how the *bodhisatta* performed nationalist work. As a monkey king ruling over 80 000

monkeys, he, realizing that they faced a danger, decided to sacrifice his life and save all of them from being killed by a human king, and he died as a result. In the 1920s, the nationalist monk U Ottama also related that *Jātaka* in sermons, and likewise made a nationalist interpretation of its narrative (Bha Yin n.d., 27).<sup>14</sup>

Among the three kinds of practices, U Wirathu (2013) explains, the nationalist path is lower than the other two, but it is where one should start. Only when one's nation is peaceful, safe, and developed, he emphasizes, it is possible to work for the benefit of all sentient beings without discrimination. Using the kinship metaphor, he says that if a man helps other families but neglects his own children, his family will not like him. If he repairs the roofs of other houses, but neglects his own house, his family will criticize him. The security of his own family should be his first priority. It is better, he claims, to help other families only when one's own family is secure. Only then one can fulfill one's duty to both one's own family and village. For that reason, he concludes, one should begin with the nationalist path. In such simple language, nationalist ideology could be made reasonable and familiar to the audience.

In the usage of the word *amyou* by nationalist monks, there is thus a homology between what in English would be translated as animal 'species' and 'relative' (*amyou*), on the one hand, and 'nation' (*amyou*), on the other. As a *bodhisatta* in previous lives, the Buddha is portrayed as having repeatedly defended his *amyou*. The effect of this ideological operation is that nation is naturalized by being homologized to species, relative, etc.; that is, a contingent factor is depicted as being part of the natural order, of 'natural ties' (see Anderson 2006 [1983], 143). A similar homology is created between Burmese race, nation (*amyou*) and the Buddha's Sākiya Clan, thereby adding a race biological dimension.

### Gotama Buddha as a devoted nationalist: saving the Sākiya clan and protecting racial purity

The nationalists also claim that Gotama Buddha himself followed the nationalist path in protecting the Sākiya Clan – here reinterpreted as his 'race' and 'nation'. Many articles in nationalist journals, especially the *Thāki-thway Journal*, the 'Journal of Sākiya's Blood', and nationalist sermons refer to one event in that life: the story about King Viḍḍabha of Kosala.<sup>15</sup> The Buddhist narratives about the Sākiya Clan represent yet another particularistic aspect that has been reinterpreted along nationalist lines, and is informed by a modern Buddhist ethnic nationalism protecting racial purity (cf. Bayly 1999). The nationalists have apparently read mainly two related ideas into these narratives: physically intervening to protect one's race/nation and protecting one's race by maintaining racial purity through the practice of endogamy, an important instrument for boundary-making.

During the colonial period, notions of ethnicity ossified, and the British concept of 'race' was introduced. In pre-colonial Burma, people were primarily classified into hierarchical classes/status groups, within which endogamy was prescribed by Burmese Buddhist law treatises (*dharmathat*), but they remained silent on ethnicity and religion (Ikeya 2012, 25). Ethnic identity (*lū-myou*) was sometimes perceived to be culturally

<sup>14</sup>The biography of U Ottama by U Bha Yin published in the 1950s is known as an official biography (see von der Mehden 1963; Mendelson 1975).

<sup>15</sup>That story is derived from *Bhaddasāla Jātaka* (No. 465, in Rouse 1901).



constituted as ‘roles’. By adopting the cultural attributes of another group, one could shift from one ethnic group to another, the cultural characteristics of which served as visible emblems of political loyalty (Lieberman 1978, 457–458; Taylor 2005, 265–267). In the colonial period, ethnicity came to be viewed as discrete, immutable biological ‘races’, which became the main taxonomic category in the British censuses (see Charney 2006, ch. 6; Ikeya 2012, 25–29). This concept of ‘race’ was based on British race theories (see Bayly 1999; Gravers 1999, 72). Today both of these meanings of *amyou* are encountered in Burma – as culturally or biologically constituted (see Taylor 2005; Ferguson 2015). However, many Ma Ba Tha monks tend to interpret ethnicity (*amyou*, *lū-myou*) biologically as ‘races’ involving blood-relationships.

‘Race’ and ‘religion,’ the two main foci of belonging within Ma Ba Tha and the 969 movement, were used by the British colonial administration as primary categories of social division (Taylor 2005, 276; Ikeya 2012, 142), and have left a long-standing legacy in Burma. The idea of ‘race’ but also that of ‘pure blood’ was a central concern in the colonial period (see Ikeya 2012). There was an official discourse of races, and the British organized, to some extent, public space along the color bar in a racist manner and discriminated against non-Europeans as inferior people (see Maung Maung 1961, 12, 1980, 13; Sarkisyanz 1965, 130–131; Gravers 1999, ch 1; Taylor 2005, 275). Burmese Buddhists accused Burmese women who married Indians ‘of “ruination” of the Burmese race,’ producing children of ‘mixed blood’. Such accusations were, Ikeya explains, ‘imbued with biological racism and the eugenics discourse of the “degeneration” of the race’ (Ikeya 2012, 139).<sup>16</sup> Later, in 1982, such views were echoed in General Ne Win’s explanation that ‘Racially, only pure-blooded nationals will be called citizens’ (Ne Win 1982, 4). In a speech delivered in 1979, he talked about the ‘pure blood’ of the national races and raised the issue of the risk of disloyalty of people with ‘mixed blood’ (Smith 1993 [1991], 37). This issue of race and blood-relationships among the national races were frequently also discussed by the SLORC-SPDC government (see Houtman 1999, 66, *passim*). All these factors have produced a propensity of thinking of ethnic belonging in terms of biological race (cf. Gravers 1999, 72–73).

A way of overcoming a sense of inferiority is to take recourse to ‘strategic emulation’ (and an implied ‘stigmatization’), thereby assimilating socio-cultural traits of the ‘threatening Other’ – including the British’s ‘superiority complex’ based on racial superiority and discrimination – that are assumed to be the Other’s source of strength and prestige, in order to resist that Other more effectively, under the guise of reinterpretation of one’s own tradition (Jaffrelot 1996, 16–17, 34, 37; idem 2005, 17, 35).<sup>17</sup> The ancient Buddhist legend of the Buddha’s Sākiya Clan has been redeployed by nationalists in that manner since the 1930s (see below), and some contemporary nationalists have further elaborated on it as an adaptation to the current situation, into a more consistent racist nationalist ideology where the Burmese people is depicted as a superior race that should avoid intermarriages.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup>In a popular Burmese song from the late 1930s, the Indians were said to ‘Exploiting our economic resources and seizing our women, we are in danger of racial extinction’ (Khin Yi 1988a, 96–97).

<sup>17</sup>This mimetic recasting of a cultural resource from one’s own tradition and turning it against one’s oppressors claiming superiority is also a form of *ressentiment* (see Jaffrelot 2005, 35).

<sup>18</sup>In Hindu nationalist movements, a similar sense of inferiority contributed to the emphasis of supremacist and exclusivist ideas of the Hindu people as descendants of the Aryans of the Vedic ‘Golden Age’, an idea shaped by British and German

In Buddhist texts, members of the Sākīya Clan are frequently depicted as being arrogant and proud of their clan (see Malalasekera 2002 [1983], 969–972). Even the Buddha is claimed to have granted certain privileges to members of the Sākīya clan who wished to ordain as monks (Chakravarti 1996, 30, 145), thus verging into a kind of nepotism.<sup>19</sup> The Sākīyans are said to have protected the purity of their clan by strict endogamous practices, even by marriages between siblings. Given these kinship-based privileges, King Viṇḍabha's father wanted to get some favors from the Buddha by becoming his relative, and therefore asked for a daughter from the Sākīya Clan. While giving him a slave woman of mixed descent, they pretended that she was pure. King Viṇḍabha was a devotee of the Buddha, but upon realizing that he was of mixed descent and that his father had been deceived, became determined to kill all the members of the Sākīya Clan in revenge. This narrative is retold by the nationalist monks in their sermons and publications (see also Rouse 1901; Malalasekera 2002 [1983], 969–972).<sup>20</sup>

As U Wirathu explains, that king did not come from a pure race (*amyou*). When the Buddha realized that his 'race/nation' was in danger, he went to the border between the Kosala and the Sākīya Kingdom and sat down beneath a small tree. Arriving with his troops, the king saw the Buddha and told him to instead sit beneath a large banyan tree to get more shade. The Buddha replied that he preferred to sit beneath the small tree because it stood on the ground owned by his country, whereas the large banyan tree stood on the ground owned by the enemy. The shade provided by his own 'relatives' (that is, his nation), he explained, is cool and brings peace.<sup>21</sup> Upon hearing that, the king withdrew with his troops, but came back two more times, with the same result. The fourth time, the Buddha did not intervene because he realized that all this happened due to the bad karma of his Sākīya Clan. The king then slaughtered all the members of his clan.<sup>22</sup>

Setting this narrative within a nationalist framework, U Wirathu (2012) claims that Gotama Buddha's actions demonstrate that he had embarked on the 'nationalist path' protecting his 'race/nation' (*amyou*). Seeking to counter the impression of the apparent inappropriate self-serving behavior of the Buddha, U Wirathu explains that he was without defilements, such as greed, hate and delusion. Nevertheless, he maintains, the Buddha's 'blood was not cool for his nation'. For that reason, U Wirathu criticizes those who remain indifferent to nationalism. Those monks and laypeople, he claims, who only care about their own business and who do not engage in nationalism, do not act in accordance with the Buddha's teachings. In other words, he thus claims that the nationalist

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Orientalism (see Jaffrelot 1996; Bayly 1999; Bhatt 2001, 3). The notion of the Aryans, who were perceived to have been the 'sovereign lords of the earth', inculcated a sense of 'ethnic pride' (Jaffrelot 1996, 16).

<sup>19</sup>This nepotism of the Buddha is referred to in Ma Ba Tha publications (see Bawdhi 2014). To be included in the status group of *khattiyas*, 'warriors', to which the Sākīya clan belonged, required an individual to be pure by birth for seven generations on both father's and mother's side. That was more rigid than among the *brāhmaṇas*. The Buddha said that the Sākīyans are pure in descent but the *brāhmaṇas* are mixed (*Ambhattha Sutta* in *Dīgha Nikāya* I, PTS; see also Chakravarti 1996, 110–111). Society seems to have been kinship-based rather than cast-based at the time of the Buddha (Wagle 1966, 156–158; Chakravarti 1996, 30).

<sup>20</sup>See U Wirathu's (2012). His sermon was delivered before the emergence of the 969 movement and Ma Ba Tha. He discusses this legend at length also later (Wirathu 2013), and in other sermons he delivered in 2012–2015. Ashin Thawpaka (2015) and Eindasekka Bhiwuntha (2014) also refer to the same legend.

<sup>21</sup>U Wirathu explains that the Buddha's 'relatives' here is his nation (*amyou*) consisting of the 'indigenous races' (*taing-yin-thā*) of his Sākīya Clan. The term *taing-yin-thā* used by U Wirathu has come to play a salient role in contemporary Burmese ethnic politics (see Cheesman 2017). This represents an imposition of a contemporary debate onto premodern texts.

<sup>22</sup>This summary is based on Wirathu (2012, 2013).

monks merely emulate the Buddha and are, in effect, truer to his teachings. Here the nationalist Gotama Buddha serves as a role model.

In Burma, the legend of the slaughter of the Sākiya Clan has evolved into a narrative of the Burmese people as its descendants. The original Burmese version was derived from royal chronicles of the Rakhine Kingdom and was incorporated into Burmese chronicles in the late eighteenth century. According to that narrative, some members of the Sākiya Clan managed to escape from the slaughter and ended up in what is today Burma and founded the legendary Tagaung Kingdom. Since the late Konbaung Dynasty in Burma, the courts claimed that their kings were descendants of the Sākiya Clan (Pe Maung Tin and Luce 1960 [1923], 1–5; Koenig 1990, 86–87; Charney 2006, 78–83). Later, this idea has turned into an important nationalist myth of the origin of the whole Burman nation, and, by extension, all the indigenous ethnic groups in Burma (*taing-yin-thā*). It was popularized by the nationalist song made by the nationalist organization Dobama Asiayoun, ‘We Burmans Association’, founded in 1930 and which claimed that Burmans are a ‘master race’ descending from the Sākiya Clan (see Khin Yi 1988a, 7, 1988b, 10).<sup>23</sup> More recently, the narrative of King Viḍḍabha and the theme of Burmese Buddhists being descendants of the Sākiya Clan were also important in a Buddhist esoteric group (Rozenberg 2015, 226–234).

In contemporary Burma, nationalist monks and laypeople frequently refer to this nationalist myth, which is their ‘myth of descent’ (Smith 1988 [1986], 24–25).<sup>24</sup> U Wirathu (2013) and other nationalists claim that Myanmar/Burmese people – that is, their nation consisting of the 135 national races – are the descendants of the Buddha’s Sākiya Clan.<sup>25</sup> This myth serves as a rhetorical strategy to depict their nation as unique and Buddhist, and to inculcate pride. The myth attributes noble and superior status to Burmese Buddhist women, and therefore they should not soil their blood by mixing with other ‘races’, just like the Sākiya Clan itself and its alleged endogamous practices, on which Eindasekka Bhiwuntha (2014) dwells at length in his sermon. That logic is what Finlayson says is ‘integral to its ideological operation’ (Finlayson 1998, 108).<sup>26</sup> Thereby this origin myth also provides legitimacy for a discriminatory agenda of exclusion. The agenda of the 969 movement, with its marry-Buddhist campaign, is rather similar to the strict endogamy of the Sākiya Clan. As Eindasekka Bhiwuntha maintains (2014), if they belong to the Buddha’s Sākiya Clan (*thākī-win*), they must protect their race/nation and be worried that it can disappear if they mix with other races/nations (*amyou*). For that reason, he explains, they have established the four nationalist laws to protect their race/nation and religion. Another nationalist monk, Bhikkhu Thawbhita, also warns against intermarriages between people of different races/nations and religions. When, he explains, the ‘blood is mixed’ (*thway-hnaw*), the race (*lū-myou*) will not be pure. When the race is not pure, the loyalty to one’s race and country will decrease. When there

<sup>23</sup>In Dobama’s understanding, ‘Burman’ referred to all Burmese ethnic groups while ‘Myanmar’ referred to the majority group (known as Burmans today) (see Khin Yi 1988a; Nemoto 2000). This is opposite to the contemporary understanding of these terms (see Houtman 1999).

<sup>24</sup>Not all Ma Ba Tha monks that I interviewed subscribed to this idea, but it has been a strong discourse in Ma Ba Tha publications and sermons.

<sup>25</sup>Some of the nationalist monks I interviewed maintained that only the Burmans are the descendants of the Sākiya Clan whereas others said that all the indigenous 135 national races are included.

<sup>26</sup>It should be added that already in the colonial period, Burmese women who married Indians were regarded as marrying down (Ikeya 2012, 121).

is no loyalty to race and country, both will be destroyed and disappear (Thawbhita 2017, 54). These statements recall Ne Win's speeches regarding pure blood, race, and loyalty above.<sup>27</sup>

Like the Buddha, Burmese Buddhists should thus defend their race and religion, and, like his family, keep to strict endogamy. Moreover, another aspect of the unique status accorded to Burma by the nationalists is that they tend to view their country as the last bastion of pure Theravāda Buddhism in the world. Therefore this 'Great fortress of Buddhism' must be protected so that it does not 'fall into the hands of the enemy', that is, the Muslims (Maung Thway Khyun 2014, 7).

### Defending Buddhism and the nation against the Muslim other

The previous section highlighted the reason why intermarriages are inappropriate, and here the Other as a shrewd aggressor will be discussed. A requirement for discursively establishing a nation (a national identity), an imagined community, a people, a 'we', is to demarcate it from threatening or antagonistic Other(s) through differentiations and constructions of boundaries (see Eriksen 1993; Jaffrelot 1996; Finlayson 1998, 116; Hansen 1999; Appadurai 2006). By positing an Other in that way, the nation acquires a sense of coherence and unity (Finlayson 1998, 116). In the history of Burmese nationalism, that Other, the enemy of the nation, has shifted, although, as noted above, there has been a main Other – the Indians, and, more recently, the related one of the Muslims (see Egreteau 2011). David Brown's discussion of *ressentiment* sheds light on contemporary Burma. Examining conflicts between Buddhists and Muslims in Thailand, where the ethnic majority (Thai Buddhists) is in command of the state, he argues that a nationalist *ressentiment* response may demonize particular minorities as threats to both the dominant group and the nation-state, thereby justifying intolerant policies (Brown 2008, 778). Feeling marginalized, the dominant group may take an 'imaginary revenge' in the form of stereotyping and moral condemnation of an 'evil Other', and a stereotyping of one's own community as 'the virtuous Us' perceived as innocent and being under siege (Brown 2008, 778; cf. Jaffrelot 1996, 78). This 'politization of ethnic consciousness' is not a rational defense against an objective threat and tends to 'inhibit reflective debate on the real causes of contemporary ills' (Brown 2008, 778–779).

Similar dynamics are discernible in contemporary Buddhist-nationalist ideology, in which the role of the evil Other is attributed to the Muslim minority. The latter is regarded as a threat because they, in a stereotypical manner, are perceived to be wealthier and more successful in business in the developing capitalist economy than Burmese Buddhists,<sup>28</sup> although the economy is dominated by the military, Buddhist 'crony' capitalists (linked to the former military government), and Chinese businesspeople (see Jones 2014). In the context of a perceived Muslim treat, the nationalist monks seek to produce, as during the military government SLORC-SPDC (see Walton 2015b), unity in terms of a corporate and communitarian national identity among its followers. The nation,

<sup>27</sup>Similar ideas were conceptualized by the nationalist ideologue V.D. Savarkar in the 1920s claiming that the 'Hindu race' shared the same blood and prescribing endogamy for keeping 'the blood of the nation pure' (see Hansen 1999, 77–78). A tendency of stigmatizing the religious Other as being of 'unclean blood' and an 'enemy of one's race' characterized several Indian nationalist movements (Bayly 1999, 85).

<sup>28</sup>This perception is rather determined by social memory and stereotypes than reality.

U Wirathu (2013) explains, are the 135 national races, who – using the kinship metaphor – are all like his ‘relatives’ and ‘siblings’, thereby viewing the nation as a ‘fictive “super-family”’ (Smith 1991, 12). This kinship metaphor serves as a rhetorical device to create a sense of unity and belonging, thereby demarcating boundaries between the in-group and out-group (cf. Jaffrelot 1996, 349–350). Although Muslims are included among several of the 135 national races, nationalist monks tend to, implicitly or explicitly, exclude them from, and contrast them to these groups. Muslims are regarded as outsiders of the Myanmar/Burmese nation, and are frequently referred to as a ‘different race and religion’ (*lū-myou-khyā*, *bhāthā-khyā*).

In Buddhist nationalist discourse, there are two related ‘nodal points’ around which all discourse revolves (see Sutherland 2005): protecting the essentially Buddhist nation, and defense against the Muslim threat. All three monks speak about the potential danger the allegedly expansionist Muslim minority poses to the survival of Buddhism. By running what aim to be ‘successful campaigns of fear’ (Appadurai 2006, 58), creating an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ antagonism, and exploiting feelings of vulnerability (Jaffrelot 1996, 78), they seek to unify and mobilize Buddhists against them. According to a widespread conspiracy theory, the Muslims are said to have a cunning plan to destroy Buddhism and take over Burma during the twenty-first century through social (marriage), economic, and political means. Thereby they are demonized and posited as the enemy of the Buddhist community. Ashin Thawpaka (2015) outlines four strategies and stages through which Muslims seek to ‘swallow’ another nation, take over their country, and eliminate Buddhism (as in India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Indonesia, and Malaysia). He maintains that Ma Ba Tha has therefore assumed the task to defend the Buddhists against the Muslims. The Burmese Muslims, although a heterogeneous group, is depicted as a singular monolithic entity or as ‘abstract Muslims’ (Hansen 1999, 119). These indigenous explanatory paradigms serve as ‘larger scripts’ (Appadurai 2006, 91) by means of which Buddhists are encouraged to interpret and reframe seemingly innocent events in their everyday lives, thereby, as Schissler, Walton, and Phyu Phyu Thi (2017) explain, turning Muslims into the ‘fearsome Other’.<sup>29</sup>

Given this ‘danger’, Buddhists are urged to defend and promote Buddhism and their nation – the ‘virtuous Us’ – on the nationalist path, on which the Buddha had embarked, by assuming a responsibility and observing a nationalist prescribed mode of conduct that is mostly referred to as a ‘discipline’ (*si-kan*), regarding social (marriage), educational, economic, and political affairs. The aim of these everyday practices is to create a boundary around the nation. As Finlayson maintains, ‘Being part of a nation is a constant and daily renewed phenomenon. It is in our everyday life that its meanings are made and remade’ (1998, 112). The observance of this nationalist discipline creates and remakes the nation and its antagonistic Other and turns them real in a social, experiential, and emotional sense.

Firstly, only marry someone of the same race and religion. All three monks discuss marriage affairs involving Buddhist women and Muslim men as a danger. U Wirathu (2013) expresses low esteem of some Buddhist women. Islam, he claims, seeks to expand its

<sup>29</sup>For examples of how Buddhists interpret events in their lives in that manner, see Schissler, Walton, and Phyu Phyu Thi (2017). For more on the current context and the causes of the anti-Muslim sentiments of the Buddhist nationalists, (see Min Zin 2015; Schonthal and Walton 2016; ICG 2017).

religion by ‘swallowing’ other people. Thereby, he maintains, simple, honest, and low-educated Buddhist women fall into the trap set up by ‘wolves’ (Muslims). When they marry Muslims, he explains, they are forced to convert to Islam. Similarly, Ashin Thawpaka (2015) claims that Buddhist women who are not devoted to religion can easily be ‘swallowed’ by other people (Muslims). U Wirathu (2013) maintains that some villages in Upper Burma have become entirely Muslim in this way. Protecting one’s relatives/nation, he reminds the audience, is the path of supporting one’s nation on which the Buddha had embarked. Eindasekka Bhiwuntha (2014) encourages Buddhist women to follow a role-model derived from a Buddhist canonical text to carry out an anti-Muslim agenda. In ‘A sermon about those who dare to sacrifice their lives for their trust in the Buddha [Dhamma and Sangha]’, that is, the Three Gems, he brings up the example of the Buddhist woman Dhanañjāni who was married to a Brahman man, and who discouraged her to practice Buddhism. However, she, at the risk of her own life, continued her Buddhist practice. In the present context, the Brahman man is understood to correspond to Muslim men.<sup>30</sup>

Secondly, teaching children about Buddhism and morality. The Dhamma Sunday Schools instill, Ashin Thawpaka (2015) explains, a nationalist spirit in the children, without which they would be liable to be ‘swallowed’ by ‘another religion’ (Islam). The parents should, U Wirathu emphasizes (2013), teach their children about the nation and religion or send them to Dhamma Sunday Schools. If the children love nation and religion from their childhood, that spirit will remain in them and they will be trustworthy regarding their religion in the future. That is, they will not marry Muslims and will discriminate against them (in social, economic and political affairs). It is more important, he explains, that the children become good and moral than well-educated.

Thirdly, only buy from businesses owned by someone of the same race/nation and religion. Another danger is the perceived asymmetry in success in business in the evolving capitalist economy between the Buddhist and Muslim communities. ‘A different race/nation and religion’ (Muslims), U Wirathu (2013) explains, is successful in business, and the businesses in Burma have fallen into their hands.<sup>31</sup> Some monks claim that the Muslims are ‘waging a battle of business Jihad’. The solution U Wirathu proposes is the economic, protectionist buy-Buddhist campaign by boycotting Muslim-owned businesses. ‘Don’t,’ he exhorts his audience, ‘be cool regarding nationalism!’<sup>32</sup>

Fourthly, only elect a nationalist Buddhist, as the leader of the country down to the leader of the quarter. Ashin Thawpaka (2015) delivered his sermon a couple of months before the election in November 2015, and he exhorted the audience to elect a (Buddhist) person who is willing to sacrifice himself, even his life, for their nation and Buddhism, and who has a nationalist spirit loving his country, race/nation, and Buddhism. By implication, that meant not voting for NLD and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi (something that other nationalist monks made more explicit). Ma Ba Tha monks seem to have supported, explicitly or implicitly, mainly the military-backed party USDP (see Min Zin 2015; ICG 2017). Many nationalist monks and laypeople view NLD as a pro-Muslim party calling it the ‘beard party’ (*mut-pāti*) or the ‘party destroying their nation’ (*myou-hpyek-pāti*).

<sup>30</sup>His sermon is based on the *Dhanañjāni Sutta* from *Samyutta Nikāya* (PTS, SN I, 160).

<sup>31</sup>Ashin Thawpaka (2015) also mentions this perceived problem.

<sup>32</sup>This boycott of Muslim businesses recalls the Gandhian boycott strategies of boycotting British merchandise that U Ottama, who was a member of the Indian National Congress and the Hindu Mahasabha, introduced in Burma in the 1920s (see Cady 1958; Chakravarti 1971; Maung Maung 1980).



## Is this Buddhist nationalist ideology marginal within Ma Ba Tha?

The three nationalist monks discussed in this article are famous and influential and have frequently delivered sermons to large audiences. Similar views are articulated by Ma Ba Tha monks with formal leadership roles. According to Ashin Tillawka Bhiwuntha, the highest leader of Ma Ba Tha – the chairman (*oukkattha*) of the central headquarters in Yangon – the indigenous races of Burma (*taing-yin-thā*) are descendants of the Sākiya Clan of Tagaung (Ma Ba Tha 2017, 40–41, 46–49). Buddhists, he says, should not buy from shops owned by ‘others who destroy our religion’ (Muslims), thereby refraining ‘watering a poisonous plant’, and should avoid voting for parties working for other races and religions (Muslims)<sup>33</sup> (Tillawka Bhiwuntha 2016, 25). In ‘retaliation’ (*toun-pyan*) against the perceived incursion of those from a ‘different religion’ (Muslims), Buddhists should only have dealings – in business, social affairs, and marriage, etc. – with people of the same race and religion as themselves (Tillawka Bhiwuntha 2013, 25–28). History, he explains, has demonstrated that – and he mentions Afghanistan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Rakhine, as examples – when those from a ‘different race and religion’ (i.e., the Muslims) becomes stronger, they destroy the race and religion of the ‘host’ and the ‘citizens’ (Tillawka Bhiwuntha 2016, 7).

The chairman of Ma Ba Tha of Mandalay Division, Bhaddanta Teikka, the second highest leader, has articulated similar views at public occasions where he delivered sermons to mainly Ma Ba Tha monks. In 2014 and 2015,<sup>34</sup> he claimed that the Buddha was a devoted nationalist, a great patriot, who practiced the *ñātatthacariyā*, and sacrificed himself to benefit his own nation (Thawpaka 2014, 56–57, 2015, 42–47). He is supposed to have urged the monks, ‘the sons of the Buddha’, to emulate their nationalist and patriotic ‘Father Buddha’ (Thawpaka 2014, 57). He recounted the story of King Viḍḍabha and how the Buddha saved his own race out of patriotism. He brought up the issue of the disappearance of Buddhism from Afghanistan, India, Indonesia, and elsewhere. Although he did not mention explicitly Muslims, everyone in the audience knew very well who the culprit was: Muslims. Moreover, he mentioned a ‘different religion’ and an ‘extremist religion’ that have ‘ill-intentions’ towards the Buddha’s dispensation. Again, the audience knew that Islam was implied. In that context, he also warned the audience that if they do not take measures to protect the Buddha’s dispensation against such dangers it will, within one hundred years, turn into a ‘corpse’ (*youp-kywin*) (Thawpaka 2014, 60–61). Similar views are articulated by other monks and laypeople in nationalist journals and sermons.

## Burmese Buddhist nationalism: blurred boundaries

In this section, the aim is to broaden the purview and – based on the sermons discussed above and other sources – outline some general features of the contemporary Burmese Buddhist version of *amyou-thā-yay* (‘nationalism’). It refers to an ideological discourse involving three dimensions: (1) a discourse in which the boundaries between religion, nation, and politics are depicted as being blurred/dissolved; (2) a discourse that is

<sup>33</sup>This especially refers to NLD.

<sup>34</sup>The sermon in 2014 was delivered at the annual meeting of Ma Ba Tha, and the sermon in 2015 was delivered at Ma Ba Tha’s Victory Ceremony (*aung-pwe*) held in Yangon in October 2015.

legitimated and justified on the basis of Buddhist texts; and, finally, (3) a discourse that justifies and prescribes a set of strategies – the “nationalist discipline” – that privilege the Buddhist community perceived as the essence of the nation (the 135 national races). These dimensions reflect a long-standing intimate relationship between Buddhism, nation, and state/country in Burma. An attack on one is perceived as an attack on the others, and protecting one entails a duty to protect the others. Buddhists, including monks, therefore perceive they have a duty to protect all of them (cf, Walton and Hayward 2014).

The second dimension has already been discussed above and the third will be further examined below. Here the first dimension will be outlined. Religion, nation, nationalism, and politics are blurred or fused in mainly four ways. First, religion and politics should not be divided according to Ma Ba Tha monks. There is a Burmese term frequently used by nationalist monks and laypeople to denote such entanglement – *amyoun-thā-naing-ngan-yay*, ‘national politics’, which means that the monks are engaged not in ‘party politics’ but in politics for their nation. To carry out such activities is to defend and promote ‘race/nation, religion (Buddhism), and the Buddha’s dispensation’.<sup>35</sup> According to this nationalist ideology, even the Buddha was engaged in this kind of politics. Second, the idea of the Burmese nation being descendants of the Buddha’s Sākiya Clan represents a fusion between nation, territorial boundaries (Burma), and religion (Buddhism). It represents a myth of origin of the Burmese nation which must be protected from external contamination.

Third, even ‘nationalism’ itself is made into an essentially Buddhist phenomenon that is indigenized. By being intrinsically linked to the path of the *bodhisatta*, and such path is understood to belong to the nature of things that is replicated by every buddha-to-be, nationalism – a modern phenomenon – is naturalized and transformed into an objective, natural fact. That, in turn, is the most essential operation and aim of all ideology. According to this ideology, to be a true Buddhist is to be a nationalist. The monks, laypeople and the leaders of the country should emulate the nationalist Buddha and embark on his nationalist path. Portraying the Buddha as a nationalist *bodhisatta* in previous lives and Gotama Buddha as a nationalist represents a strong case of making nationalism a constitutive and integral feature of the religion itself. When the very path to the attainment of the highest spiritual state within a religion is coextensive with and tantamount to nationalism, as in the Burmese case, the boundaries have dissolved between ‘religion’ and ‘nationalism’.

Fourth, the Buddhist nationalist discourses depict an intimate interlinkage between nation (the 135 national races), religion (Buddhism), indigenous (Buddhist) cultural traditions, and the country – the ‘motherland’, the ‘Golden Myanmar’ – and its territorial boundaries.<sup>36</sup> They are frequently regarded as interdependent entities or as an interlocking system; that is, the one cannot exist without the other, as in the Buddhist teaching of

<sup>35</sup>The Burmese word for ‘politics’ is *naing-ngan-yay* and is frequently associated with negatively viewed party politics, driven by greed, hate and ignorance (P. *lobha, dosa, moha*), and should therefore be avoided by monks. Monks wishing to pursue politics must therefore reframe that activity (see Walton 2015a). This is the reason why nationalist monks use the concept of ‘national politics’, a rhetoric they have inherited from the military government SLORC-SPDC. The latter claimed that they did not engage in party politics but in national politics for the benefit of the entire nation (Houtman 1999, 69, 281). While party politics is divisive, the national politics of Tatmadaw, the Burmese army, only seeks to benefit the whole country and to achieve national unity (see Mya Win 1992).

<sup>36</sup>Their views are informed by the Western concept of a modern nation, with a bounded territory, and a shared culture and history (see Smith 1991, 13–14).

dependent co-origination (P. *paṭiccasamuppāda*): ‘Only if the Buddha’s dispensation (P. *sāsana*) exists, can the Golden Myanmar exist. If the *sāsana* does not exist, Myanmar cannot exist. It is not possible to distinguish between Myanmar and the *sāsana*’ (Bawdhi 2014, 224). If one wants to protect one’s heritage, one must protect one’s nation. If one wants to protect one’s nation, one must protect one’s heritage. After the nation has disappeared, Buddhism will disappear. If Buddhism disappears, the country will disappear (Wirathu 2015, 23–28). Eindasekka Bhiwuntha (2014) explains that if we do not have knowledge about nationalism, a nationalist spirit will disappear. If the nationalist spirit disappears, our religion will disappear. If our religion disappears, our nation will disappear. If our nation disappears, our country will disappear.<sup>37</sup>

This contemporary Burmese Buddhist nationalist ideology represents a hybrid of indigenous and Western concepts and involves an important epistemological dimension. Through this ‘hybridity’ – a cultural encounter and blending – a new meaning, a specifically Buddhist understanding of nationalism, is thus produced.<sup>38</sup> Interpreting and making sense of foreign ideas within a Buddhist framework has been a long-standing tendency in Burma. As Guillaume Rozenberg (2005) – following the anthropologist Marshall Sahlins – has stated, Burmese Buddhism constitutes “the dominant site of symbolic production”, and from which ‘the major cultural categories’ are derived (Rozenberg 2005, 21). Moreover, Gustaaf Houtman (1999; see also Sarkisyanz 1965) has demonstrated that many Western political concepts have been translated into Burmese Buddhist concepts, including those from Buddhist scholasticism (P. *abhidhamma*). In the colonial period, Burmese nationalist ideologues similarly employed Buddhist concepts to translate modern Western political concepts. For instance, independence of Burma was conceived as a nirvana for the country, a *lokanibbāna*, a ‘worldly nirvana’, a novel concept designating a political liberation for the Burmese people. The monastic GCSS developed a guide in the 1920s that made a political reinterpretation of the Four Noble Truths (see Houtman 1999, 34; Kirichenko 2007, 5).

The fusion of Buddhism and nation that is a salient feature of the Buddhist nationalist ideology discussed above is a legacy of the link between an ethnic Burman identity and Buddhism that, for instance, YMBA fostered and cultivated. The novel idea of the nation was interpreted and evolved within a Buddhist framework (see Turner 2014). Similarly, in Indian nationalism, the nation was likewise conceptualized from a religious framework. In reformist neo-Hindu movements by the end of nineteenth century, nationalism and Hinduism were perceived to be synonymous (Bhatt 2001, 16). These movements ‘created the grids of intelligibility through which nationalism could be naturalized in Hindu registers’ (Bhatt 2001, 31). For instance, in the early twentieth century, the revolutionary nationalist leader Aurobindo Ghose (1872–1950) viewed nationalism as ‘not simply related to Hindu religion: to be a nationalist *was* to be religious and vice versa’, and that ‘Nationalism is a religion that has come from God. [—] if you are going to

<sup>37</sup>Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, who invented the Hindu nationalist ideology of *Hindutva*, ‘Hinduness’ in the early 1920s, conceived of a similar close interrelationship between the territory of India, Hindu culture and Hindu people, with the latter being perceived as descendants of the Aryans (Jaffrelot 1996, 27).

<sup>38</sup>M.M. Bakhtin’s understanding of ‘hybridization’ is helpful here:

a mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter, within the arena of an utterance, between two different linguistic consciousnesses, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation or by some other factor (Bakhtin 1981, 358).

assent to this religion of Nationalism, you must do it in the religious spirit' (cited in Bhatt 2001, 38, italics in original).

### The nationalist discipline: social, religious, and political implications

In my fieldwork, I encountered many devoted supporters of Ma Ba Tha. For instance, one man with nationalist tattoos accompanied Ma Ba Tha monks on most of their activities. (Figure 3) A 28-year-old woman (in 2017) who had worked for Ma Ba Tha explained that she, in her childhood, had been drawn into Christian circles through her friends and almost left Buddhism. They were, she explained, very energetic in trying to persuade her to convert. Later she realized this was wrong and began to emphasize her Buddhist identity. When Ma Ba Tha was formed in 2013, she joined that organization and has been a very dedicated supporter and representative. She applies the three 'practices' of a *bodhisatta* mentioned above in her life. As for the support of the 'relatives' (i.e., the nation), she will be loyal and only marry someone of her own race and religion. In the same year, I interviewed a large group of 18-year-old women who underwent training to become teachers in Buddhist Sunday Schools. Their parents were also devoted nationalists. They had learned about the Muslim danger from sermons delivered by Ma Ba Tha monks and other sources. They all explained that they only buy from Buddhist shops to promote their own community. One of them even had the popular nationalist 969 song (see above) as a ring tone on her mobile phone that serves as an important marker of identity, boundary, and loyalty, especially in public spaces where Muslims may also be present.



**Figure 3.** A devoted nationalist lay devotee. His tattoos depict the nationalist monks U Wirathu and U Ottama. In the upper part of the tattoo, a line is written in Pāli, 'May the Buddha's dispensation last for a long time!' Mandalay, September 2017. Photo: by the author.

As for the wider society, Marie Lall's 2012–2013 surveys among youth in Burma demonstrate that many embrace similar values as Ma Ba Tha in terms of Burman Buddhist privilege, with a tendency of excluding non-Buddhists, especially Muslims, regarding citizenship rights; this shows a strong emphasis on nationalism linked to culture and religion. This rise of religious nationalism among youth demonstrated that the country is divided on religious lines, that cohesion will be difficult to achieve, and that there is a potential risk for further religious discrimination (Lall 2018, 151–153, 156–157). Some Buddhist welfare organizations also espouse such values and attitudes (McCarthy 2018).

In the contemporary political transition, the discriminatory nationalist discipline is imposed as a religious-social-nationalist duty on Burmese Buddhists – a nationalist practice performed in a 'religious spirit' – that has led to an increasing politicization of everyday life. According to Ashin Tillawka Bhiwuntha, observing and instructing about this nationalist discipline is a way to acquire karmic merit, as it entails a protection of race/nation, religion, and the Buddha's dispensation (Tillawka Bhiwuntha 2016, 25). In other words, such discriminatory practices of everyday politics are perceived as Buddhist merit-making. This ideology has become normalized by being integrated into Buddhist rituals. For instance, Buddhist water libation rituals were performed by the sponsors and merit was collectively shared at the end of nationalist sermons, rituals that are traditionally performed at merit-making ceremonies. Nationalist sermons were thus treated as an integral part of monastic preaching. Moreover, the three *bodhisatta* practices, including that of protecting one's nation, as we have seen, is a way to fulfill 'perfections' on the path to awakening and nirvana. This way of thinking can be compared to King Thibaw's last royal order issued in 1885, when his kingdom faced an imminent conquest by the British. Protecting the Buddha's dispensation, Burmese traditions and ethnicity by warfare against the non-Buddhist British intruders would bring not only merit but also place the defenders on the path to heaven and to nirvana (Ni Ni Myint 1983, 192–193). These discursive commonalities represent continuities of ideas that have mutated, been reproduced and adapted to a modern framework (cf. Smith 1988 [1986]; Hansen 1999; Jaffrelot 2005).

Discriminatory practices are thus seen as legitimate because they are recast as genuinely Buddhist practices that serve the aim of saving and protecting the Buddha's dispensation (cf. Brac de la Perrière 2016, 324). As Alicia Turner (2014) has explained, reforms of Buddhism intended to save the Buddha's dispensation, which are mostly intensified in periods of rapid change, serve as a mechanism for change, and specifically for the transformation of Buddhism (cf. Jaffrelot 1996). In the current historical juncture of a political transition from a long period of military dictatorship that supported Buddhism, the nationalist reformulation of Buddhist imagination and practice has meant adapting Buddhism to a context of fear and uncertainty and reaffirming Buddhist loyalties.<sup>39</sup> In this respect, Ma Ba Tha and the 969 movement should be understood as Buddhist reform movements.

As I have tried to demonstrate above, the nation and its culture is a construction with its own specific trajectory. Thomas Blom Hansen argues that we must ask how the nation became 'culturalized', and he claims that 'culture is yesterday's politics stabilized, depoliticized, and authorized as "truth" and "history"' (Hansen 1999, 30). Burmese nationalism

<sup>39</sup>While some Ma Ba Tha monks have criticized NLD for supporting Muslims, Ma Ba Tha has been accused for collaborating with the military-backed party USDP (see Min Zin 2015; ICG 2017).

emerged in the colonial period, fueled by the dynamics of a *ressentiment* response that resulted from a sense of inferiority and vulnerability vis-à-vis especially the Indians and their dominance. A British racist discourse and a humiliating social subordination created a sense of inferiority and the idea that the Burmans are a ‘master race’ descending from the Buddha’s Sākīya Clan. These historical ‘sedimentations’ (Finlayson 1998, 115) have persisted as a historical legacy that impinge on the present situation. Many Burmese Buddhists still have a sense of inferiority vis-à-vis the Indian minority (today the Muslims) that is perceived to be more affluent and powerful, especially regarding success in business and in marriage affairs, but also in political matters (e.g., their alleged influence on NLD). In nationalist discourse, Burmese Buddhists are portrayed as defenseless victims of the Muslim minority, which is demonized and depicted as an immoral voracious creature that ‘swallows’ other nations in a calculated manner. This stereotype appears to be a blaming the Other by Buddhists for their own perceived shortcomings, a scapegoating.

At this point, a pressing issue must be addressed: Was not the Buddha an Indian (a *kalā*)? I asked that question to the highest leader of Ma Ba Tha, Ashin Tillawka Bhīwuntha, in September 2016. He flatly denied that. The Buddha, he replied, came from Nepal and looked like Burmese people. He hastened to show me an image on his mobile phone of some Nepalese people to prove his statement. Other Ma Ba Tha monks I interviewed agreed with his view. According to Donald Eugene Smith (1965, 113), many villagers in the late colonial period and later refused to believe that the Buddha was an Indian.

## Conclusion

By focusing on this ideology of the Buddha as a nationalist, and the related idea of the Burmese people as descendants of the Sākīya Clan, I intended to draw attention to a major discourse that has been influential mainly through sermons during the volatile transition period of 2012–2015. Furthermore, my aim has been to situate this ideological discourse historically and to demonstrate that it is a product of identity politics, framed by a British discourse on race and religion, originating in the colonial period, and has today transformed, mutated and been reinvented. It remains a historical legacy that has shaped present attitudes.

Furthermore, there is an epistemological dimension, insofar as Burmese Buddhists tend to translate foreign concepts into indigenous conceptual Buddhist registers. This ideology is informed by modern Western ideas of a nation and a nation-state. These notions entered Burma during the colonial period and became indigenized through a complex interplay between local and foreign ideas, concepts and practices. The nationalist ideological construction, including that of the Buddha as a nationalist, is a product of Burmese Buddhist imagination, and represents a hybridization of local and foreign Western concepts.

At the same time, there is an ideological dimension of justification and legitimation of the agendas of Ma Ba Tha and the 969 movement. Nationalism and protecting race/nation and religion (Buddhism) are regarded as an intrinsic part of the Buddha’s path to awakening and nirvana. The Buddhist nationalists seek to base their nationalist ideology on Buddhist teachings and narratives. Remolding Buddhist narratives and Buddhicizing



nationalist key concepts, they have thereby turned Buddhist teachings into a nationalist ideology. In that way, nationalism has been naturalized in Buddhist registers and depicted as an essential aspect of Buddhism.

This ideology demonstrates the religious/Buddhist underpinning of Burmese political culture. The ideology also offers Buddhist role models derived from the *Tipiṭaka* and the commentaries, and from Burmese chronicles. The characters, including the Buddha, are set into a Buddhist nationalist framework, and their motives are reinterpreted and refashioned to bear on the contemporary situation, with its tensions between Buddhists and Muslims. It serves as a way to instill a sense of duty towards nation and Buddhism, and to mobilize the laypeople to implement these nationalist agendas in their everyday lives. As for the current nationalist monks, they claim to be simply emulating the Buddha, and they view criticism of their activities as being misguided. In this way, it constitutes a Buddhist and nationalist ideology that prescribes and justifies social, political and economic strategies (the agendas of the 969 movement and Ma Ba Tha) that privilege and serve the interests of the Buddhist community to which it attributes a superior position, with the aim of maintaining its dominance and hegemony in society vis-à-vis the Muslim minority that is thereby marginalized. In the Buddhist nationalist ideology, the Muslims are thus constructed as the hostile Other in relation to which the Buddhists can acquire a sense of unity and purpose.

In my usage, the term 'Buddhist nationalism' refers, analytically, to a specific form of ethnic nationalism based on religious identity that emerged as a *ressentiment* response. It not only seeks to capture the gist of the emic views but also to convey the ideological dimension of nationalist discourse, in which nationalism acquires its legitimacy on the basis of Buddhist teachings, narratives, and role models. Buddhist nationalists have thus read modern ideas of nationalism and racial difference and, in some cases, the supremacy of their own 'race' into Buddhist texts, wherein they claim to have found sanction for nationalist and political mobilization demanding loyalty to nation and religion.

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