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# BUDDHISM, THE ROYAL IMAGINARY AND LIMITS IN WARFARE: THE MODERATING INFLUENCE OF PRECOLONIAL MYANMAR ROYAL CAMPAIGNS ON EVERYDAY WARRIORS

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## ABSTRACT

Rules on the treatment of civilians and other non-combatants in conflict are often attributed to Western origins, particularly the increasingly widening circles of empathy that grew out of the European Enlightenment and found international implementation in the twentieth century. Nevertheless, such limits were pursued or encouraged by many non-Western societies as well, particularly amongst indigenous Americans. The present article examines the case of Myanmar and the ways in which the Myanmar court set limits on violence in administration and limits on warfare. These limits were not an imposition of the West but emerged entirely within the Myanmar-Buddhist historical experience. It is argued that these provide an existing, discernible and indigenous model for limiting violence in warfare in Myanmar society. The article also explains why this model was forgotten. The removal of the king and disintegration of the standing army that came with the end of indigenous rule in 1885 did away with crucial moderating influences, while the violence of the brutal Pacification Campaign from 1885 erased from Burmese social memory the idea that there could be limits in warfare.

**KEYWORDS** Buddhism; Myanmar; armed conflict; state imaginaries

## Introduction

Contemporary historiography on the non-Western world holds that our modern scholarly disciplines were shaped on the basis of Western systems of knowledge. In effect, Europe carved out for itself a privileged space as the only centre for the emergence of modernity. Even to the present, academic faith in European exceptionalism still exerts an overwhelming influence on a number of fields, from international relations to human rights theory. Comparatively fewer examples of non-Western modern thought are viewed as being sufficiently robust to draw into broader debates. This bias remains

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pervasive, even over a decade after Dipesh Chakrabarty's call to provincialise Europe (Chakrabarty 2008). Nevertheless, processes comparable to the European Enlightenment occurred elsewhere as well, at roughly the same time. Myanmar, like other non-Western countries, has been shown to have undergone an indigenous process of cultural and religious reformation in the late eighteenth century that might be usefully compared to the European Enlightenment (Charney 2006). While there is no suggestion here that we should deny European peculiarities in the thought that would provide it with unique takes on such things as how to treat non-combatants in war, it is argued that there is value in looking for indigenous cognates to doctrines of limited warfare and restrictions on the application of violence against civilians and non-combatants rather than seeing these as uniquely European.

Recent research by the present author on the precolonial Myanmar provincial administration and its standing army has emphasised the importance of villagers and village ways of combat in larger campaigns that are normally understood through depictions in the chronicles that are heavily formulaic and court-sopic (Charney 2017, 2020). Beneath the veneer of ordered and obedient soldiery, however, was a chronic tension. On the one hand the court, its generals and its ministers sought to regulate the limits of warfare and administration in line with a royal imaginary predicated on beneficent rulership, Buddhist values and the establishment of universal harmony. On the other hand, local commanders and village warriors dealt with the weak administrative structures by relying on violence to achieve their assigned ends. In effect, villagers were raped, maimed, killed and sold into slavery, and administrative officials and commanders were punished, removed from office and even executed for having engaged in this activity. But over time, particularly in the last century of the Konbaung Dynasty (1751–1885), the Bamars (the dominant ethnic group) had evolved their own doctrines on the limits of violence, although this came to an end in 1885 because of the profound impact of regime change with the British colonial conquest.

The present article examines the ways in which the Myanmar court set limits on violence in administration and limits on warfare, and the impact of the removal of the king and disintegration of the standing army that came with the end of indigenous rule in 1885. These events did away with crucial moderating influences. What followed in Myanmar was a less regulated colonial approach to war and violence and a reversion in indigenous warfare to the more violent traditions of rural fighting. It is argued that there is an existing model for limiting violence in warfare that is not an imposition of the West but has emerged entirely within the Myanmar-Buddhist historical experience. Unfortunately, the violence of the Pacification Campaign from 1885 has erased this from Burmese social memory.

## The lack of limits in rural warfare

No matter how large Myanmar armies grew in size, the bulk of their numbers remained assemblies of armed rural folk. The earliest practice for wartime was to call up villagers who would come in groups, armed with local weapons for war. Myanmar royal edicts claimed that the legendary King Duttabaung (said to have ruled in the fifth century BCE) had introduced assigning quotas to different towns (districts) on the basis of their population size according to whether they could produce levies in the tens, hundreds or thousands, and this same classification system was in place in the late Bagan Dynasty (eleventh to thirteenth centuries) with a new quota being recalculated in the thirteenth century. This basic system would remain in place for provincial levies during wartime to the end of the dynasty, although these levies had little to do with the standing army. Most warriors in the royal armies were thus certainly rural folk first. When they were gathered for campaigns, they came as rural folk; in the royal army, which involved no system of centralised training for levies until late in the pre-colonial period, they remained rural folk; and when they went into the field they fought as rural folk. In some cases, they were merely picked up as levies en route to the battlefield. As a result, armed rural folk brought to the enemy the kind of warfare that was waged at the local level whenever competition among rural settlements over resources led them to violence in rural Myanmar (Charney 2017).

In the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the political centre in Myanmar weakened on several occasions, and during these periods of weakness, or interregnums in which complete political collapse had occurred, local conflicts became accessible for scrutiny. Not all of these periods yield much data on the actual fighting, although they provide extensive evidence of inter-settlement conflict in such cases of royal decline. Perhaps we might see in these men the same kind of rural leader as Alaunghpaya (r. 1752–1760), before his rise to power, when he was merely the headman of a settlement and a rural strongman at the head of a body of his kith and kin. Nevertheless, although we find evidence of what appears to be local, rural conflict, we lack the clear descriptions by the participants themselves or direct observers that would make this a convincing argument for what was going on. Rebels in the British counterinsurgency campaign known as the Pacification Campaign (1886–1889) are generally depicted as dacoits or independent princes in the European accounts (Ghosh 2000). By contrast, in pre-1920s Myanmar accounts, the rebels are viewed either as denizens of the court or – by Bamar historians of the late colonial period and after – as nationalists. Such interpretations obscured the continuing legacy of rural warrior culture in Myanmar well into the colonial period and even after.

There were two determining factors for this kind of warfare. First, there was a low population-to-land ratio, so there was rarely a density of population anywhere sufficient to avoid relying on masses of rural levies. Second, a distant state centre challenged by weak transportation infrastructure made a centralised military institution that could train rural men in the art of war a difficult proposition. When villagers went back to their homes after war, they brought experience and booty that then entered local, rural mythologies and oral traditions unknown to court scribes. And when state rule was weak, indirect or absent on occasion, or when adverse intervention from the state through normal channels was expected, there was likely some attractiveness to inter-settlement fighting over local squabbles.

When the indigenous state collapsed and lowland rural folk became fully visible, their manner of fighting appeared very different from the descriptions of war found in the court chronicles. Importantly, the rural way of fighting was considered to be just as crude by the late Burmese court as it was in early colonial appraisals. It was noted for its violence, its lack of limits on who was and who was not a combatant, the lack of rules of war, its treatment of captives, the mutilation of the dead, and rapine. For the middle and late Konbaung court that saw order as a measure of universal harmony, rural warfare was also unacceptably disorganised. This distaste was a consequence of the gentrification of warrior elites of the earlier years of the dynasty,<sup>1</sup> the influence of orthodox Theravada Buddhism on these elites, and the emergence of a professional soldiery – a standing army. The interest in enforcing Theravada Buddhist orthodoxy was directed at monastic and ritual practice and included banning such obvious transgressions as the sacrifice of chickens in the Shan states under Bodawhpaya (r. 1782–1819), for example. But before that, Bamar and other precolonial kings of Myanmar also drank from skulls of defeated enemies, fornicated with the wives of their soldiery when they were away to war, encouraged their warriors to take heads and even, when necessary, condoned the eating of human flesh, although this may be a warped relation of the drinking of blood to instil a sense of comradeship. Torture, rapine, theft and other acts of violence and personal gain were condoned amongst the soldiery. Sexual violence was very common. In other words, before the early years of the Konbaung Dynasty (1752–1885), there appear to have been few limits in war, regardless of Buddhist influence in other areas of Myanmar life within the capital zone.

### Limits on violence in rural administration

By the early nineteenth century, the boundaries of the Myanmar kingdom had stretched to include roughly what colonial and independent Burma would cover geographically and were held together in part by a proto-bureaucracy, a proto-national culture and a shared sense of Buddhist

orthodoxy that had grown over time.<sup>2</sup> But an imaginary of the kingdom was also fundamental. In the royal imaginary, the king maintained peace and harmony and supported the Sangha so that monks could provide merit and continue on their path to Enlightenment. From what could be seen in the central provinces, the state space of the kingdom, peace and prosperity sustained this image. In the core of the kingdom, those areas within the direct reach of the court, the state had become so deeply rooted that the court did not have to rely on physical force to enforce laws or collect revenues. This area formed what James Scott calls the 'padi state', where it was possible to concentrate grain production and, as 'state space', terrain that was easily governable (Scott 2009, 13). The court exercised here closer administrative scrutiny. This was where the state's wealth was concentrated. It included most of the monasteries under royal patronage, the main colonies of royal bondsmen and the kingdom's richest agricultural districts.

But the reach and administrative capacity of the precolonial Burmese state even by the early nineteenth century was weak and uneven in the outlying provinces. Outside of the immediate economic, social and cultural life of the royal capital, the non-state space was dominated by highlands and wetlands that were difficult to govern. Central officials sent out to these areas found that local populations did not subscribe to the royal imaginary as easily as did those closer to the royal capital. The complex of overlapping administrative, economic and cultural structures that ensured popular submission to the court in state space were nearly wholly absent in the non-state spaces. Villages in these areas were not as tied to particular parcels of land as those in the lowland areas and are better viewed as temporary trading, fishing and agricultural colonies than as permanent settlements. If state demands became too heavy, the village moved farther out of reach unless local officials used force. As Martin Thomas has observed regarding colonial policing, 'coercive policing . . . was a powerful indicator of the colonial state's limited reach' (Thomas 2012, 75). Supplied only with credentials backed by a distant royal court and soldiers, Myanmar officials often relied on the force of the latter rather than on the authority that came with the former.

Such officials were thus often merciless in their imposition of demands, for soldiers for royal campaigns but in particular for revenue. As Canning described the situation in Lower Myanmar,

the people are exposed to the unrestrained violence and exactions of [the Governor of Hanthawaddy's] Ministers and followers of every description. This system of uninvited rapine finds its excuse in the nature of the Burman Government, which allowing no salary to any of its officers and exacting on the contrary from the high in office and they again from those under them, considerable sums every year of the privation of their respective situation all

from the Governor of a province to the lowest writer in service to plunder indiscriminately whenever power or opportunity exists. (IOR F/4/310, 29 November 1809, 64)

Evidence that violence was going too far, however, was a potential threat to the validity of the royal imaginary. This was particularly a problem during the preparations for royal military campaigns, as commanders would be charged with making use of local resources to set up supplies, build ships, form groups of levies and so on, creating a situation in which villagers would be forced to make sacrifices of revenues, crops or labour. Equally, by custom, the commander would supply his own personal needs as well, sometimes to excess, particularly if his retinue of clients and family in the royal city was substantial in size and/or given to luxury. It was on these occasions that things were most likely to go beyond local tolerance and be reported back to the court by political rivals or the villagers themselves or, worse for the court, lead to a local rebellion, which would also draw its attention. A good example was when the court became concerned after sending the royal *atwinwun* (the interior minister) to Martaban in May 1809 with 'broad powers' to go to Tavoy, build up resources for a military expedition and then lead an attack on Siam (Anonymous 1962, 149; Koenig 1990, 155). Viewed from the royal court, the *atwinwun* was a royal army commander who had been sent to Southeastern Myanmar to raise troops and build an army that would then attack the Siamese and secure the frontiers of the kingdom and hopefully deliver booty to the royal court as well. The *atwinwun* appears to have gone through the motions of acting out this role.

On the ground in his appointed province, however, the *atwinwun* prioritised the enhancement of his political strength, through the acquisition of manpower and wealth to support it. This was often carried out with much violence that was at odds with the harmony between royal rule and society that was a core element of the royal imaginary, particularly as it was mainly directed at women and children. Women shouldered much of the *corvee* labour impositions and taxation demands because it was mainly women who remained in the village after men had been conscripted for an ongoing war. The *atwinwun*'s officials punished village women with rape, and when they could not pay their taxes their children were sold into bondage. When opposed, the *atwinwun* had no qualms putting villagers to death. By this time, the early nineteenth century, this kind of official behaviour was common in outlying provinces. Central appointees sent out to run outlying areas found it expedient to engage in spectacular displays of violence to achieve their aims. This was an immediate solution to their administrative weakness as non-state space had not yet been transitioned into state space while the state remained functionally weak outside of the central, royal zone.

More importantly, the violence was not condoned by the king. In the aforementioned example from 1809, the *atwinwun* put so many people to death that it attracted the attention of the court. The king immediately intervened and gave orders releasing all of the *atwinwun*'s prisoners and initiating an investigation into why the *atwinwun* was carrying out so many executions. The *atwinwun*'s violence was not the will of the king, but in defiance of him. So long as it did not reach the royal ear, outlying officials and commanders might indeed resort to violent means to a royal end, but they risked severe punishment by the court when they violated the operating principles of the royal imaginary predicated by this time on the rule of the Dharma, the Buddhist moral law, which the king upheld.

So much was this a key part of the royal imaginary that, while these transgressions are recorded in non-central literature,<sup>3</sup> they are expunged from the royal record, the royal chronicles. In the royal imaginary, in the world run by the king according to Buddhist law, the king's officers and officials should not allow their charges to engage in the rape or murder of anyone. Such activities brought severe disruptions to the royal imaginary and were signs of weakness rather than strength and the sign of bad rule as opposed to good. Those who engaged in such seditious activities were punished for their immoral behaviour and even sentenced to death.

### The beginning and end of indigenous ideas on limits in warfare

Prior to the Konbaung Dynasty and even well into it, the organisation of military manpower followed the same pattern for all manpower going back to the Bagan period and earlier. This approach emphasised consanguinity (through ritual blood-drinking or *thwethauk*), endogamy and occupational exclusivity (including the hereditary pre-determination of occupation) for the community as a whole. Free people were peasants who remained cultivators except when temporarily mobilised for war and came armed as they were. Similarly, war captives were planted in different parts of Myanmar in new village communities in which they were royal servicemen who spent their time, when they were not cultivating, honing their skills with a particular kind of weapon or mount, or both. Burmese sources from across the early modern period indicate that well into the late eighteenth century this approach to manpower organisation did not change. It also created a very significant obstacle to technological change across the military establishment and did not invite very much experimentation. The introduction of rudimentary Chinese firearms in the fifteenth century and better Portuguese guns in the sixteenth century thus did not bring about a revolution in Myanmar warfare or in the army (or navy) as it did in many other places.



Major change did occur in the 1760s and thereafter maintained momentum throughout the remainder of the dynasty. The Myanmar army became a standing or professional army that regularly watched for new technology, tactics, organisation and the like, experimented, and changed on a regular basis. The major stimulus for the military change in late eighteenth-century Myanmar was not technological innovation, but the spectre of imperial rivalry and conquest, presented first by Qing China and then by the British. These two imperial rivals forced the Myanmar court to reorient its military establishment towards deterring them from transgressing Myanmar's frontiers, requiring the creation of a permanent and standing military organisation around the royal capital. Understood at the time as a necessary measure to provide stability and security of the kingdom in an uncertain political and economic climate, the decision taken was to shift the army from a mass of reservist cultivators to a standing army of permanent regiments concentrated in the royal capital. This decision initially involved no change to the organisation of soldiers within units, the command structure, the way they fought or the way they were armed. The only change that occurred was that instead of being demobilised and stationed on lands in the provinces, they would be kept on a permanent war footing around the royal capital. However, this singular change created a military that could be tinkered with and made military reform *per se* possible.

The standing army that emerged was formed from the ranks of the *ahmudan* or royal servicemen or bondsmen. Technically they were hereditary royal slaves who specialised in certain kinds of weapons or combat and lived in special villages assigned to different *ahmudan* groups where they waited until called up for royal service. One of the many outcomes of the creation of the standing army was that the *ahmudans* emerged as a new landed elite in the countryside. Despite their *ahmudan* status, soldiers of the standing army asserted private ownership over state lands and used them to gain wealth through trade and other work in the private sector.

More importantly, for our purposes here, these soldiers periodically circulated between their villages and their posts in the royal capital. From the late eighteenth century, the *ahmudans* in the standing army split their time between the royal capital and their assigned villages in the rural areas, with 10% on duty at any one time in the royal capital and the other 90% remaining in the village. The posting in the royal city and in the palace meant constant exposure to the culture of the court and its elites, central monastic institutions and symbolisms. Relieved annually by a different 10% of the *ahmudan* regiment, the circulation meant that this exposure had a regular and reinforcing influence in the rural areas. Over time central culture became the culture of these villages, and as these *ahmudan* became the new landed elite of the countryside, this culture became the 'high' culture of rural society. This included the doctrine of the Myanmar Buddhist royal imaginary that there

were limits in warfare which the army and officials must respect. The *ahmudans* now garrisoned the kingdom both in the abstract as an imaginary and in practice on the ground in the core provinces of the kingdom. The limits on war were reinforced now by an army as well as by a king.

As in many other parts of the non-Western world, where strong, vibrant moral systems maintained social harmony and peaceful state relations, colonial conquest destroyed the institutions sustaining them. The British steamed up the Irrawaddy to Mandalay, shelling the three Italian-built forts on the banks of the river as they ascended, and forced Thibaw's surrender, all within three weeks in November 1885. Thibaw ordered the standing army to lay down their arms and although many did not and fled the royal capital, the standing army had effectively and permanently disintegrated. The British decided to annex Myanmar to India and to exile King Thibaw. They did not replace him with another indigenous ruler in the lowland areas (although highland *sawbw*as would remain in place). As the standing army had already fallen apart, resistance to the British took the form of a decentralised insurgency, dominated by villagers who fought using time-honoured methods of rural warfare. The royal imaginary immediately faded. The institutionally codified limits on warfare, that had emerged in the precolonial, Myanmar Buddhist tradition, first within the court and then through the rise of a standing army, were erased. The loss of the king and the loss of the standing army meant that the Buddhicising role played by both and the limitations they set on violence in war and administration were lost. This meant that Buddhist influence was relegated first to monks alone and then to lay Buddhist associations as well, outside of the institution of the military.

The idea that there were limits in war and that killing unarmed civilians was wrong was replaced by the colonial idea that the army could engage in unlimited warfare in pursuit of state security. The colonial forces of the time sanctioned weaker limits on violence based on Western experience and a Western timeline. Civilisational and racial discourse also identified Bamars as inferior to Europeans. Their welfare was thus of less concern than would be that of European opponents. The colonial army reintroduced unlimited warfare against the Bamars in the Pacification Campaign and in counterinsurgency operations later during the anti-colonial revolts. In these conflicts, villages were surrounded and burned to the ground, Bamars were decapitated and prisoners were executed. Worse, civilians were also punished if they were believed to have provided support or sustenance to the enemy or if they were suspected of not having reported such behaviour by their fellow villagers. Burning villages to the ground, including everyone's personal possessions and means of livelihood, was a routine measure that was undertaken without qualms by the army.<sup>4</sup>

As indigenous resistance was left to villagers who came from outside the now-defunct standing army, and who practised warfare as it had always been practised in rural areas in outlying parts of the kingdom (those areas that had not been closely administered by the central state), the limits on warfare that had indoctrinated the standing army were no longer in evidence. By all accounts, including those of Bamars, village bands that fought the British, whom the British labelled as dacoits or bandits, also burned villages, carted off valuables and women, engaged in rapine and crucified their prisoners. They also mutilated the relations of those who collaborated with the British. As Charles Crosthwaite claimed of one Bamar band's behaviour during the conflict:

Money and food and women were demanded from the villages, and those who refused supplies were unmercifully punished, their property seized, their villages burnt, their women dishonoured, and their cattle driven off by hundreds. Those who in any way assisted the troops were the objects of special barbarities. If they could not be caught, their fathers or brothers were taken. One of his followers deposed that he was with Ya Nyun when three men who were related to a man who had assisted the British were ordered to be crucified in front of the camp. He says: 'I saw the bodies after they were crucified. They were crucified alive and then shot, their hearts cut open'. (Crosthwaite 1912, 111)

The crimes committed against civilians by both sides in this war erased any social memory of the accepted limitations on warfare and violence against non-combatants. As Mr Labouchere, Member of Parliament from Northampton, complained in the Commons in August 1886, just eight months into the campaign:

Our conduct in that country had not been such as to be likely to win over the people. In consequence of it the country was now open to rapine on the part of Native robbers, while our soldiers were sent from village to village to punish the inhabitants by killing them and burning their villages. (House of Commons Debates 1886 August 30)

From this conflict on, British and indigenous populations would fight each other brutally.<sup>5</sup>

## Conclusion

This article has argued that Myanmar had a code of ethics of war and administration that had emerged within the royal court and administration and then was instilled in the ranks of the standing army as it emerged from the mid-eighteenth century. Gradually, unlimited violence in war (and peace) was limited in principle and – where the court or army knew – in practice as well. This ethics was something that was enforced in theory throughout the royal imaginary. Nevertheless, in the mundane world, on the periphery of the

kingdom, beyond the practical view of the court in the outer districts where Konbaung administrators, charged with extracting resources from villagers in what was effectively non-state space, violated this ethics. Spectacular violence, without limits, targeted families, men, women, children, the aged and young alike, ranging from burning villages to rape, torture and execution. When the court learned of such transgressions, it punished the perpetrators, regardless of their rank or the purpose to which this violence was put, with the deprivation of rank and wealth, imprisonment and even death. In the king's domain, there were limits on what could be done in the name of war.

This Myanmar ethics of war and administration was erased with the overthrow of the king and the standing army's collapse in 1885. Rural warfare – unlimited, local warfare, less influenced by the tenets of Buddhism and royal experience – continued to provide the template for Bamars in the village afterwards. As a result, rural conflict subsequently, partly reinforced by the unlimited colonial warfare introduced by the British, consisted of warfare without limits. These two different traditions, one indigenous and rural, and the other colonial and foreign, would influence the existing inheritance regarding how one should or should not wage war. Decolonising the way the limits in war are understood in Myanmar can be achieved by dropping the colonial example and the rural village warfare templates and looking into Buddhism and the royal traditions of war as they had evolved by the middle and late Konbaung periods.

## Notes

1. For a comparable trend in early modern France, see Elias (1982). For a different view, see Carroll (2006).
2. See Lieberman (2003, 1984) and Koenig (1990).
3. From early modern Myanmar a vast variety of materials are preserved from outlying areas, in Burmese and in ethnic minority languages, that record local histories and accounts. Some of these manuscripts relate to the histories of temples, but others deal with local legend, literature, local family lineages and so on. Another important local source of information were revenue inquests, the headmens' reports to the court. Some of the latter are reproduced in translation in Trager and Koenig (1979). Many of these kinds of sources were collected in the royal library, but many more were kept in local monastic libraries and private collections, helping to explain their survival to the present.
4. This is supported by many accounts of the campaign, including, for example, statements in 'Personal Recollections of the Upper Burmah Campaign 1886–7 by Major Richard Holbeche (1850–1914)', Sutton Coldfield Local History Research Group Archive, <https://sclhrg.org.uk/research/transcriptions/2182-personal-recollections-of-the-upper-burmah-campaign-1886-7-by-major-richard-holbeche-1850-1914.html>.
5. See the example of highlanders fighting in 1891 that included the killing of 'all' women and children in affected villages (Watson 1967, 8).

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## Notes on contributor

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