

On the Place of U Nu's Buddhist Socialism in Burma's History of Ideas

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U Nu's Burma has been studied in a number of works that deal with its political history,¹ its administrative development, economics,² sociology,³ and international relations.⁴ While these spheres have been repeatedly treated, relatively little has appeared in either English or Burmese on the intellectual history of modern Burma. On the other hand, the comparative history of ideas indicates the significance of intellectual developments in Burma, as it is the only major area of Theravāda Buddhism to pass through an acute intellectual crisis and collapse of the traditional form of state.

The political implications of its Buddhism seem less comprehensible in the context of the canonical, monastic Buddhism of the Pāli scriptures than in connection with the not so widely known and less monastic Buddhist ethos of medieval Burmese kingship in the tradition of Aśoka, as exemplified in epigraphic

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sources, best known from the Pagan period. Thus King Alaung-sithu proclaimed in 1141 the prototype of his aspirations as follows:

I would build a causeway sheer athwart the river of Saṃsāra,
And all folk would speed across until they reach the Blessed
City.

I myself would cross and drag the drowning over.

^y, myself tamed, I would tame the wilful; comforted, com-
fort the timid;

Wakened, wake the asleep; cooled, cool the burning;

Freed, set free the bound. Tranquil and led by the good doc-
trines

I would hatred calm. . . .

Won not by oppression may my wealth remain. . . .

As the best of men, forsaking worldly fame and worthless
wealth,

Fled, for he saw their meaning.

So would I, all worldly wealth forsaking, draw me near

Religion and the threefold course ensue. . . .

Beholding man's distress, I would put forth my energies,

And save men, spirits, worlds,

From seas of endless change. . . .⁵

Thus within Theravāda Buddhism political power over the world of impermanence rationalized itself in terms of the king's exemplary charisma of liberation from this impermanence. Such salvation in the Buddhism of Burma is to be achieved only through individual contemplation and meditation. The corresponding political ideal was the creation of such social conditions as would permit the liberating meditation. Therefore the state was to ensure economic relationships allowing leisure for meditation on which depended the achievement of Nibbāna.⁶ This constituted the Buddhist ethos of Burmese kingship, with its ideal of a social order permitting each living being to save himself. Thus King Kyanzithā of the Pagan Dynasty proclaimed in 1098 or 1099 what we may call his Buddhist ideology of state in the following words:

Tribhuvanādityadhammarāja, with his right hand he shall give boiled rice and bread to all the people, with his left hand he shall give ornaments and wearing apparel to all men. Men who are not equal in body, speech, or in spirit, the king shall make them equal. . . . Even all the poor old women who sell pots and potlids . . . they shall become rich. . . . Those who

lack cattle shall have plenty of cattle. . . . The pious gifts the king made in . . . digging tanks or planting groves . . . only in order that all beings might escape out of Saṃsāra, . . . might obtain happiness in the worlds beyond until they arrive in Nirvāṇa. The bar of the gate of Heaven . . . by wisdom shall the king draw open . . . and shall bring all mankind into heaven. He shall empty the four painful states of existence. When the King of the Law shall preach the Law, the sounds of applause of all men shall be like the sounds of rainstorm at the end of the year. . . . That all beings may obtain . . . plenty and be free from famine in every place that lacks water and land, our lord, the king, digs water tanks, creates cultivation, . . . the exalted mighty universal monarch, the omniscient one, the Bodhisattva, who shall verily become the Buddha that saves and redeems all beings, who is great in compassion for all beings, who is exalted above all other kings that dwell in the four quarters of the earth. . . .⁷

Even at its worst in practice, a practice that as often as not meant ruling with methods of blood and iron, the Burmese monarchy had preserved to the end of its existence in theory this ethos of the ruler as "Cakkavati" and potential Buddha, benefactor and saviour of all beings. If these ideas have been illustrated above by examples from the epigraphy of the Pagan period (1044-1287) and not from the inscriptions of later dynasties, it is firstly because the era of Pagan was the formative period of Burmese culture, and secondly because the inscriptions of its successors have hardly been systematically published beyond the fourteenth century, let alone edited and made accessible. But the continuity of these traditions, which were so vivid in medieval Burma, has been preserved into the twentieth century by Burmese folklore which is robustly alive among Burma's rural majority and even affects the cities. A perfect Buddhist ruler, closely associated with the future Buddha, is the theme of some of Burma's most popular prophecies, and of one of Burma's most widely read vernacular books, republished again and again, including an edition in 1955.⁸ Although its "Buddha Raja Marvel Prince" apparently is not mentioned explicitly in the Western literature about Burma, the belief in him is almost universal among the Burmese people outside the English-educated minority—and in many cases it is even found within it. This lore ultimately derives from the Pāli Dīgha-Nikāya, but has "Burmanized" its Cakkavati world-ruler

through associations with the last Burmese (Konbaung) dynasty and postwar events. "Sedja Min" is expected to establish a perfect society with inexhaustible wealth for all and to win the whole world for Buddhism.⁹ Such utopia is to come at the end of the present world age of degeneration. This cycle of decline began, according to Pāli Buddhist philosophy of history (as exemplified by the Ceylonese Mahāvamsa—and the Burmese Manu-Dhammathat), when the Illusion of the Self led men to the appropriation of the freely growing means of livelihood, originally held in common by all men, as private property, causing the disappearance of the legendary Padeytha-Tree that had supplied all material needs of humanity and making necessary the election of the first ruler, a future Buddha.¹⁰ Thus from Burmese folklore and ultimately from the Buddhist historiography of Ceylon comes the tradition about a perfect utopian society that was thought to have existed at the beginning of time, before men succumbed to the suffering-causing illusion, when property originated from theft and men were obliged to elect a chief executive.

Although with the collapse of the Burmese Kingdom in 1885 Burma's elite turned increasingly away from Burmese traditions and became culturally anglicized to varying degrees, these folk-ideas about a perfect society, its loss, and the consequent origin of political power from the people were transmitted into the ideology of the Burmese Revolution and independence movement by Thakin Kudaw Hmine through his book *Thakin-Tikā*, a literary glorification of the revolutionary Thakin-Dobama Party.¹¹ To this eventually victorious independence party (which was organized by English-educated students, and which produced the present ruling statesmen of Burma), Thakin Kudaw Hmine, called "Burma's Rabindranath Tagore," made important ideological contributions from Burmese tradition and Buddhist sources. That such traditionalist elements in "Thakin" ideology have remained practically unnoticed in the Western literature about modern Burma is largely due to their lack of expression in sources in the English language: Thakin Kudaw Hmine does not write in English. This octogenarian poet is a living historical link of the Burmese Revolution with the cultural traditions of pre-British Burma. As a ten-year-old pupil in a Buddhist monastery school he wept bitter tears at the sight of the last Burmese king

being taken away into British captivity (in 1885). At a time, in the early twentieth century, when Burma's secular elite through its colonial education had become separated from Burmese culture, had lost touch with Burmese history, and had largely lost familiarity with literary Burmese as means of written expression, Kudaw Hmine brought back to the consciousness of the intelligentsia Burma's historical and literary lore.¹²

On the other hand, as is well known, this intelligentsia's opposition to the often described economic and social effects of the British conquest was rationalized by Occidental slogans of nationalism, though Buddhist organizations were used as means of mass pressure on British power in the 1920's and 1930's. But to the mind of the unwesternized rural masses, Buddhist goals remained a primary aim of the struggle for independence from the colonial system which had undermined Burma's economic bases for her monastic institutions and thereby the bases for the meditation which alone was to free men forever from the realm of Impermanence and Suffering.

And the "Red Dragon" party song of the Thakin nationalist revolutionaries of the later 1930's explicitly postulates as an aim of the independence struggle the restoration or establishment of Burma's prosperity "so that the poor will be enabled to build monasteries,"¹³ that is, economic reforms *as means* for the pursuit of Nirvāṇa as the *goal*.

One of the key concepts of Burma's socialism is the idea of Lokka Nibbān, a kind of earthly Nirvāṇa as designation for a state of absolute harmony. Many anglicized Burmans believe the notion of Lokka Nibbān to be of Marxist origin, a Marxist innovation in Burmese political terminology. But this term had appeared in Thakin Kudaw Hmine's book *Thakin-Tikā* in 1938.¹⁴ And as Thakin Kudaw Hmine does not understand English, it cannot be the result of direct Western, including Marxist, influences on him. On the other hand, the antisocialist, traditionalist Buddhist preacher U Nye Ya also demanded (perhaps even earlier?) the kind of independence "that would establish a Nirvāṇa in this world."¹⁵ While I have not yet succeeded in tracing the earliest use of this term, all evidence indicates that it is not a pragmatic adaptation to Burma's postwar political requirements but rather is to be understood as an offshoot of cer-

tain secularizing trends in Burma's Buddhist thought of the 1920's: the concept of Lokka Hibbān echoes the activist, "nationalistic" Buddhism of Sayadaw U Ottama, the leading "political monk" of the 1920's, whose monastic following already quite explicitly emphasized the attainment of such political and social conditions as are propitious for the quest towards Nirvāṇa.¹⁶ And as prototype for the selflessness of the liberation movement U Ottama invoked the Bodhisattva ideal (of renouncing personal liberation until the liberation of all beings from Suffering is achieved),¹⁷ just as in 1948 U Nu attributed to Aung San, the murdered father of Burma's independence, Bodhisattva-like qualities of selfless abnegation¹⁸ (as have been found associated with the ethos of Buddhist kingship).

Once the struggle for independence had been won, Burmese statesmen like U Nu were no longer primarily concerned with an Anglo-Saxon frame of reference to appeal to English audiences, but were confronted by the nonwesternized majority of Burma's people with its traditionalist outlook. This traditionalism has affected the thought of the decisive revolutionary Thakin group of the subsequent Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League through such figures as its one-time president Thakin Thei Ku Daw Gyi,* and particularly the ardent Buddhist U Ba Choe, a Burmese poet and editor of the once influential journal *Di-do*, a close friend of U Nu since his student days. U Ba Choe, a member of the Burmese Cabinet who was murdered together with Aung San in 1947, was an outstanding specialist on Burmese folklore.

The folkloric tradition about primeval perfection with the absence of the notion of Self and community of property was interpreted by U Nu as an argument for socialism. Thus U Nu declared in 1949 (and then again in 1950) that when the world began, the material needs of all peoples were satisfied by nature without effort, but that greed had moved them to appropriate supplies beyond their immediate necessities and to separate them as private property, and that this has caused want and misery ever since. He emphasized that socialism is the teaching which can bring humanity *back* to that blissful past.¹⁹ Earlier, in 1948,

*Thakin Thei Ku Daw Gyi is a socialist descendant of King Mindon, who married a daughter of Burma's last monarch, Thibaw (1879-1885).

he declared that property has only a functional place as means for the pursuit of Nirvāṇa (through meditation) and that the class struggle had arisen out of the illusion about the inherent value of property, that this illusion has caused bloodshed throughout history, so that its overcoming would usher in the Nirvāṇa in this world (Lokka Nibbān) through a perfect society.²⁰

Thus U Nu's Buddhist socialism appears against the background of Burma's intellectual history not as purely pragmatic adaptation to postwar political requirements but as a modernized expression of ideas deep rooted in Burma's Buddhist heritage of the Aśokan tradition.²¹ The economic and sociological environment of U Nu's political life has been regularly discussed by practically all American writers on postwar Burma and therefore need not be considered here. An intellectual biography of U Nu *in the context of* Burma's history of ideas indicates fewer pragmatic adaptations of ideology to circumstance than have appeared to those observers who cannot help taking pragmatism for granted. While his political shifts have been pragmatic enough, they have been mainly shifts in emphasis and in terminology. If they have been overestimated and the inherent consistency of U Nu's thought underestimated, it may be largely because his writings have never been collected and examined by historians in their totality. For example, his prewar essay "Kyan-daw buthama" (which U Nu told me was written in 1935) indicates that already at the beginning of his political career his image of capitalism referred to its underlying utilitarian primacy of the Self, the Self in which Buddhism sees the basic illusion and a cause of suffering. Already in 1935 he blamed it for people's turning away from Buddhism, maintaining that not the elimination of capitalism, nor even the prosperity of the people, were ends in themselves, that only Buddhist goals were.²²

Buddhist soteriology was—and has remained—primary in U Nu's thought, socialist economics secondary. As for the social ethos of medieval Burma, so for U Nu's ideology a welfare state (providing the economic presuppositions for meditation) is only a means, the overcoming of the Illusion of the Self—and release from the bonds of attachment to transitory existence—the final aim. Throughout U Nu's ideological adjustments between Buddhism, Fabianism, and Marxism, socialism and the welfare state

have remained for him consistently economic means for Buddhist eschatological goals. Even when advocating Marxist unification, U Nu never accepted the Marxist *philosophy*. When in 1958 he formally rejected Marxism, he did not thereby completely reject Marxist *economics*. It is true that his more Marxist (revisionist) rivals like Kyaw Nyein of the Stable AFPFL (in 1959) also occasionally used some Buddhist slogans. But the latter explicitly explained to me that this was done after the pattern of Occidental socialism and Christian democratic parties and not out of Burmese tradition. This constituted a difference between the essentially (though no longer nominally) revisionist Marxist sources of the socialism of the Stable AFPFL faction and U Nu's more traditionalist outlook—in emphasis if not in content. And U Nu's traditionalist charisma is reflected both in folkloric identifications of his personality with the "Sedja Min," the expected ideal Burmese Buddhist ruler of the future and bearer of a social utopia,²³ and "enlightened" accusations that he is influenced by the example of medieval Burmese kings.

Precisely his closeness to the traditional Burmese folk outlook made U Nu suspect among the bureaucratic elite of English education and utilitarian outlook of the London School of Economics. Since the colonial period their social superiority has rested precisely on their enlightenment in British style and corresponding notions about the "backwardness" of the culturally more Burmese rural majority. For such successors of the British colonial administrators a statesman who takes folkloric (what they call "superstitious") notions of the "uneducated" villagers seriously—and even formulates his platform in their direction—committed "treason on the educated class." (Thus on July 6th, 1959, Dr. Hla Myint, then Rector of the University of Rangoon, declared in his official capacity to the writer that "Buddhism is unimportant for Burma politically" and that "Burma has no original ideas worth studying.") But all Buddhist abbots of the main monasteries of Sagaing, Ava, Amarapura, and Mandalay, the historical centers of Burmese culture, have (with one exception) told the writer that U Nu (who at the time of the interviews, in 1959, was out of power) came closest to the ideal Buddhist statesman in the tradition of Aśoka. In his elaborate election platform of November 16th, 1959, U Nu made reference to

this Cakkavati ideal of the perfect Buddhist ruler—a notion that inspired, for example, the above-quoted inscription of King Kyanzithā in the 1090's—and described his Buddhist socialism, reiterating (as in 1935) that acquisition economy had developed out of the Illusion of the Self which Buddhism aims to overcome, and that it obstructs a social order that would make meditation economically possible for all, thereby permitting universal liberation from impermanence.²⁴

Such ideas of U Nu have not been taken seriously by the culturally anglicized—like the editor of the *Nation*, a Rangoon newspaper in the English language that constitutes the bulk of the source material on which much Western writing on contemporary Burma is based. Such ideas of U Nu have not been taken seriously by area experts, who—in the tradition of Protestant missionary education—may concede to Burma a right to political independence but cannot easily grant the existence of a living Buddhist source of social ethics as alternative to Protestant utilitarian values. But if these concepts of U Nu have been lightly dismissed by such Burma experts, they have been taken very seriously indeed by the Burmese people themselves, whom they reminded of what have been long cherished ideals: U Nu was given an overwhelming majority in the elections of February 6th, 1960. His victory was a triumph of charismatic personality over a party machine, of Burmese tradition over imported slogans.²⁵

NOTES

1. J. Cady, *A Modern History of Burma* (Ithaca, 1958).
2. J. R. Andrus, *Burmese Economic Life* (Stanford, 1948).
3. H. Tinker, *The Union of Burma: A Study of the First Years of Independence* (London, 1957).
4. G. McT. Kahin (ed.), *Government and Politics of Southeast Asia* (Ithaca, 1959).
5. The Shwegugyi Pagoda inscription translated from the Pāli by G. H. Luce. In: *Journal of the Burma Research Society*, X (1920), Part i, pp. 69-74.
6. Sarkisyanz, *Russland und der Messianismus des Orients* (Tuebingen, 1955), pp. 327-368.
7. Abridged from Kyanzithā's Shwezigon Pagoda inscription, translation from Mōn in *Epigraphia Birmanica*, Vol. I, Part ii, edited by Ch. Duroiselle (Rangoon, 1920), pp. 117, 123, 142, 146, 166.
8. Seya U Po U, *Bodayaza Min Sedja* (Rangoon, 1955), pp. 140, 142, etc.; Zeyawadi Kyaung: Seyadaw (U Win), . . . *Budayaza Sedja Min la-pyi* (Mandalay, 1953), pp. 52, 54 ff.

9. Interview at a Mandalay pagoda (September 2, 1959) with astrologer who, because of political circumstances of that time, asked not to be identified by name.
10. *Manukyay Dhammathat* (Rangoon, 1953), pp. 3, 5.
11. Kudaw Hmine, *Thakin-Tikā* (Rangoon, 1938), pp. 163 ff.
12. Sarkisyanz, "Thakin Kudaw Hmine, 'Burma's Rabindranath Tagore,'" unpublished Communication to the American Oriental Society, March 30, 1960.
13. Text of the Naga-ni Song as supplied by the Burmese Broadcasting Corporation, Rangoon.
14. Kudaw Hmine, *Thakin-Tikā*, p. 181.
15. Nye Ya, *Lo-la ye alin* (Rangoon, 1952 reprint), pp. 13, 15; date of original publication not specified in reprint.
16. Zeyawadi U Thilasara, in *Pinnya Alin*, September 1, 1923.
17. Bhama-khit U Ba Yin, *Sayadaw U Ottama* (Amsterdam, 1959?), pp. 26 f.
18. U Nu's speech of April 16th, 1948: Thakin Nu, *Mein Khon-mya* (Rangoon, 1949), p. 42.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 108 (speech of July 19, 1950); Burma Ministry of Information. Thakin Nu, *Towards Peace and Democracy* (Rangoon, 1949), p. 129.
20. Tain: pyi pyu hlut-daw. *Myanma hnaingan-daw . . . (paliman) sahtama nyi-la khan hmat htam:*, Vol. VI, #30 (Rangoon, 1949), pp. 1179 ff. (U Nu's speech on October 11, 1948, delivered during the parliamentary debates on the Land Nationalization Act).
21. Sarkisyanz, *Russland und der Messianismus des Orients*, pp. 330-337, 350-361.
22. U Thein Pe Min (ed.), *Buwada hnin Dobama* (Rangoon, 1954), pp. 57, 61 ff, 66.
23. U Po U, *Bodayaza Min Sedja*, p. 142, as interpreted, for instance, by U Maung Gyi Daw Thein, the publisher of the corresponding prophecies in our interview of August 15, 1959.
24. *Bama-khit* (Rangoon) of November 17, 1959.
25. Sarkisyanz, "U Nu's Sieg: Der geistige Hintergrund der neuesten politischen Entwicklung in Burma." *Europa-Archiv*, XV (1960), No. 15, pp. 477-482.