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## Whose Nation is This? Conceptualizing Burmese National Identity Through Case Studies of Inter-Ethnic Conflict

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**WHOSE NATION IS THIS? CONCEPTUALIZING BURMESE  
NATIONAL IDENTITY THROUGH CASE STUDIES OF INTER-ETHNIC  
CONFLICT**

Jason Leong  
History Honors Thesis  
Colby College  
May 2022

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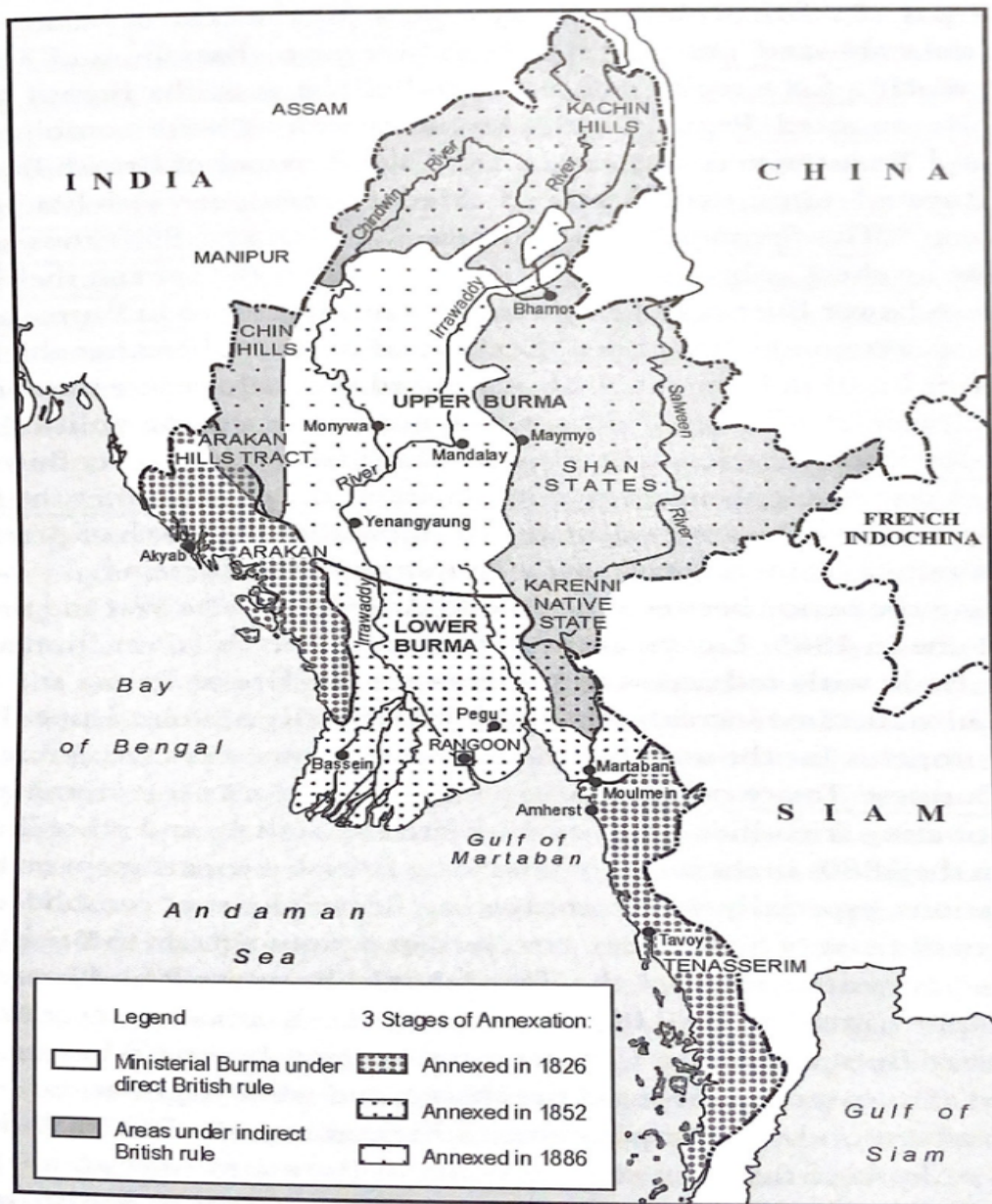
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## INTRODUCTION

Images of scorched villages and corpses in the Rakhine State of western Myanmar appeared in mainstream Western news outlets in 2017, catapulting the country onto the world stage. These images were of the Rohingya People, a Muslim minority indigenous to Myanmar's Rakhine State, facing extrajudicial killings perpetrated by the *Tatmadaw* (Myanmar Armed Forces). While many 20th-century genocides have been sparked by a singular event or dictatorial demand, the Rohingya Genocide is a popular movement built on an extreme expression of Burmese identity. Whether seen through a civic, ethnic, national, racial, or religious lens, contemporary Burmese identity began with the Bamar ethnolinguistic majority crafting a Burmese identity to unite themselves against perceived ethnic minority oppressors during British rule. To hinder the political and economic influence of ethnic minorities, Bamar nationalists conceived "Burmese-ness" to be along the lines of an established Bamar identity. Thus, to understand the causes of the Rohingya Genocide, it is necessary to look for its roots in the development of a national identity based on religion and ethnicity in Myanmar's colonial past.

The killings and forced displacement of Rohingya minorities did not happen overnight but are the culmination of a propaganda campaign that defined Burmese identity by articulating that the Rohingya are not Burmese. Vernacular newspaper articles under such headlines as "Muslims Are Not the Union Born Indigenous Citizens," from 2016, characterize Burmese identity as being Buddhist and subscribing to the Bamar government's ethnonationalist rhetoric by arguing

that Rohingya Muslims are neither indigenous nor citizens.<sup>1</sup> The government of Myanmar does not even recognize the term “Rohingya” and billboards with anti-Rohingya messages such as “protest against US embassy use of the fake term ‘Rohingya Community’” are a call for mass action to erase Rohingya identity.<sup>2</sup> Myanmar’s government officially recognizes 135 ethnic groups, some of whom wage insurgencies against the state, yet the Myanmar government distinctly refers to the Rohingya officially as “Bengalis.”<sup>3</sup> By calling the Rohingya “Bengali,” the Myanmar government characterizes them as “Indian” and manufactures the lie that the Rohingya are not from the Rakhine State but “Bengal” in today’s northeast India. As a result, the Rohingya are thought to not be entitled to hold Burmese citizenship or receive legal protection. This raises the question of why the characterization of the Rohingya as South Asian makes them appear different, other, and alien to the Burmese to such a degree that they cannot even receive recognition as an indigenous ethnic group. Why does Burmese identity appear to include a phobia of South Asians?

The majority of Myanmar’s population views Burmese identity as distinctly incompatible with Rohingya identity. Although traditionally arbiters for peace, Buddhist monks called *pongyis* are among the leading inciters of anti-Rohingya sentiment, with one monk, U Thu Min Gala, charging that “[t]hey [the Rohingya] stole our land, our food and our water. We will never accept them

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<sup>1</sup> “Burma’s Path to Genocide,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, n.d.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Gregory B. Poling, “Separating Fact from Fiction about Myanmar’s Rohingya” (Center for Strategic & International Studies, February 13, 2014). The word “Bengali” refers to a person from Bengal, a geographic region covering Bangladesh and the Republic of India’s state of West Bengal.



back.”<sup>4</sup> Even Myanmar’s internationally-beloved pro-democracy leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, defended the actions of the *Tatmadaw* before the United Nations. The widespread Burmese antipathy toward the Rohingya is the product of a Burmese identity defined by what the Burmese are *not*. This thesis excavates the roots of inter-ethnic tensions and genocidal oppressions in contemporary Myanmar by tracing the historical development of Burmese identity based on the exclusion of ethnic and racial “others.” The subsequent chapters will illustrate how Burmese identity developed during Burma’s fight for independence from Britain and became increasingly exclusionary and phobic of South Asians. To understand what it means to be Burmese, we must understand Myanmar’s colonial past.

In this thesis, I argue that Burmese national identity is defined by Bamar ethnolinguistic and Buddhist identities, with this definition originating as a way to unite an ethnic majority against British colonial rule. Ethnic and religious nationalism came at the expense of minority groups, especially the Indian minority population, due to the divide and rule policies of the British Empire. The British created a volatile environment where nationalism would take on a racialized tone, aimed at unseating perceived co-colonialist minorities who helped repress the Bamar Buddhist majority. Bamar nationalists, unable to directly attack the British, constructed a national identity centered around their ethnicity and religion to exclude both the British and their co-colonialist allies from a proud post-colonial Myanmar. This resulted in inter-ethnic violence between

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<sup>4</sup> Hannah Beech, “Across Myanmar,” *The New York Times*, October 24, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com>.

Myanmar's government and ethnic minorities, which has continued since independence from Britain, in what has been described as "the world's longest civil war."<sup>5</sup> According to political scientist Robert H. Taylor, while "ceasefire agreements with ethnically-designed groups provided an opportunity to restate the argument as to what it means to be a Myanmar citizen...the country's multiethnic identity was championed [by the state]...no clear definition of Myanmar-ness was provided."<sup>6</sup> Rather than clearly defining Burmese national identity, defining who constituted an out-group became how "Myanmar-ness" would be expressed both in contemporary and colonial Myanmar. Despite the Myanmar government characterizing national identity as being loyal to the state "irrespective of ethnicity or religion," the Rohingya Genocide illustrates that persecution exists in Myanmar on the grounds of religious and ethnic identities. With this project, I will explore how the Myanmar state emerged from colonial-era racial and religious identities; thus, its national character is synonymous with ethnicity as well as religion and cannot be defined without either.

History is what makes us human, we are the only species to record our experiences, and thus when agents purposely distort history it is often to cover up a truth. Amidst ceasefire agreements in 1988, the Myanmar government went about "distorting the variety and diversity of Myanmar's historical relations." Myanmar's history has now become "the history of Myanmar kings and a heroic struggle against British colonialism," which is just as much of a distortion as the

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<sup>5</sup> David Miliband, "David Miliband: How to Bring Peace to the World's Longest Civil War," *Time*, December 12, 2016, <https://time.com/4597920/myanmar-peace/>.

<sup>6</sup> Robert H. Taylor, *The State in Myanmar* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009), 473.

previous British narrative of Myanmar's "kings oppressing the indigenous peoples."<sup>7</sup> In both cases, the historical narrative is dichotomous, stories of interethnic conflict are swept away in favor of promoting a national identity based on a constructed idea of unity. While Myanmar's government certainly deserves the right to frame their people's struggle against the British as one of exceptional courage, the presence of co-colonialists, disunity in the nationalist movement, and nuanced conversations, in general, are suppressed in favor of the idea of a united Burmese people without a clear definition of what that identity entails. Chapter One explores this larger historiographical debate, of the role of pre-colonial Burmese kingdoms and British colonization in formulating a Burmese nationalist movement. To understand how Burmese nationalists chose to resist British rule and create a modern Burmese identity, Chapter One introduces the nuances of Burmese identity before the British invasion. This provides a control group to which the evolution of Burmese identity at different stages in the 20<sup>th</sup> century can be compared. Through studying pre-colonial notions of Burmese identity, we can better understand who is defined as "British" in the Myanmar government's version of their anti-colonial struggle.

To understand why the term "Bengali" takes the form of a racial slur in modern Myanmar, we must understand the evolution of what it meant to be a part of the post-colonial Burmese state. The anti-colonial independence movement that founded Myanmar was primarily led by the Buddhist Bamar ethnolinguistic group, whose vision of national identity was affected by whom they had to fight

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 474.

to gain independence. The most common anti-colonial narrative only gives agency to the Bamar nationalists and the British, but what about ethnic groups that had different visions for the future? This thesis will trace the evolution of Burmese national identity over time through three case studies from Myanmar's colonial past, each highlighting a major instance of interethnic conflict and the role of the British in exacerbating tensions. These case studies help us define key manifestations of Burmese identity that will help explain what it meant to be Burmese in post-colonial Myanmar and why the nation continues to experience large-scale interethnic violence.

The first case study will introduce how Burmese history's largest anti-colonial peasant rebellion used the legacy of pre-colonial Burmese kingship and Buddhism to assert from that point forward that "to be Burmese is to be Buddhist." Burmese peasants used Buddhism and traditional symbols of kingship from the pre-colonial era to unite the countryside against the British and their co-colonialist allies. We shall see that the importance of Buddhism to the modern Burmese is a continuation of pre-colonial expressions of Buddhist identity as a tool of anti-colonial resistance. Burmese national identity was also fortified through geography during the colonial era and the characterization of the Rohingya as "Bengali" illustrates that geographic origin continues to define membership in a national community.

The second case study will show the debate over whether colonial Burma and India should be separated provided a platform for defining Burma and South Asia and their respective indigenous peoples as distinct. Geography could now

transform ethnic differences into racial divisions and provide concrete boundaries upon which South Asians could be excluded from a Burmese national community. The conception of South Asians as an “out-group” united Bamar Buddhists as the stakeholders in an independent Burma and sheds light on why the term “Bengali” is a pejorative.

Finally, the third case study examines the ultimate expression of Burmese identity where exclusion transformed into violence and birthed a civic identity of protecting “Burmese-ness” through action. This case study will show how the Islamophobia and dehumanizing rhetoric toward South Asians was a deliberate act by Bamar ethnic-nationalists to unite themselves under a single identity of being Bamar, Buddhist, and distinctly *not* from South Asia. The violence described in the third case study is comparable to anti-Rohingya pogroms and illustrates the relevance of Myanmar’s colonial history in the modern world. Through these three case studies, we will see how modern Burmese anti-Rohingya rhetoric can be traced to the way Burmese identity evolved during the colonial era.

Myanmar’s government certainly possesses a whitewashed and broad definition of a Myanmar citizen based on a false history of inter-ethnic unity against the British. Under this facade of tolerance, attacks on the Rohingya continue despite the dichotomous narrative of Burmese versus the British. However, this thesis is not a history of the Rohingya Genocide but rather a story of how Burmese national identity during the colonial era became increasingly discriminatory. This path towards exclusivity was not predestined but rather a

deliberate way to unite the Bamar ethnic majority against the British and co-colonialist ethnic minorities. However, we can understand the origins of anti-Rohingya sentiment by analyzing the factors which contributed to an exclusionary Burmese national identity. The Burmese actors who champion exclusivity use British conceptions of race and ethnicity—but do so of their own accord. Through this thesis, we will enhance our understanding of why so many Burmese perceive the Rohingya Genocide as the antithesis of injustice.

## CHAPTER ONE

### **Burma, Burman, or Burmese: Tracing the Idea of a Modern Burmese State**

#### *The Divisive Debate Over Terminology*

I had always known that half of my family hailed from Myanmar. My father never hesitated to talk about his grueling childhood trips to fetch water from the village well. When I asked him what his previous nationality was, he would say “I am Burmese.” Yet something is interesting about the terms “Burma” and “Burmese,” more than that they are in reference to the former name of the nation. The choice of terminology in reference to national identity can embody political affiliation and be an inextricable identifier of a person’s generational upbringing. In 1989 the new military government of the “Union of Burma” changed the name of the nation to the “Union of Myanmar.”<sup>8</sup> My father and his side of the family immigrated to the United States in 1988, carrying terminology from a previous regime. When describing the research that has gone into this thesis project, I am often asked “isn’t Myanmar the *better* term to describe the country?” The answer to this question cannot be given in the form of a “yes or no,” but I will attempt to provide nuance to this ongoing discussion.

Historians Michael Aung-Thwin and Maitrii Aung-Thwin in their book, *A History of Myanmar Since Ancient Times: Traditions and Transformations*, provide the necessary historical context to understand this debate over terminology and provide a nuanced model for terminology which I will use as a

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<sup>8</sup> Michael W. Charney, *A History of Modern Burma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 171, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781107051034>.

guide in this thesis. Both historians recognize that “Myanmar” comes from the Burmese language word *Myanma* which is an adjective that, when used with the word *Pyay*, becomes the name of the country.<sup>9</sup> But what about the name “Burma?” Burma is first and foremost an English language term imposed by the British. Michael and Maitrii Aung-Thwin believe that the word “Burma” was phonetically derived from the indigenous Burmese language word *Bama*, the “colloquial equivalent of *Myanma*.”<sup>10</sup> Burmese is the language of the Bamar (also called Burman) ethnolinguistic majority who have dominated the political sphere in Myanmar both prior to and after British rule. In addition to “Burma” being a British imposed term, it fell out of favor with the Bamar military government who favored the term “Myanmar.” The name changed in 1989 and fell in line with movements to replace colonial names—symbols of foreign domination—with indigenous ones; the renaming of “Ceylon” to “Sri Lanka” represents another such example. It is also important to consider that “Burma” and Myanmar” both represent the Burmese nation-state which was rationalized during colonial rule. Prior to British colonization, kingdoms bearing dynastic names such as Pagan and Kombaung (to reference the first and last Burmese kingdoms), governed the land of Myanmar, as opposed to nation-states. Michael and Maitrii Aung-Thwin suggest that “the word ‘Burma’ has no legal standing internationally, is clearly exogenous, and only perpetuates rather than resolves current tensions.”<sup>11</sup> A

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<sup>9</sup> Michael Aung-Thwin and Maitrii Aung-Thwin, *A History of Myanmar: Since Ancient Times ; Traditions and Transformations* (London: Reaktion Books, 2013), 7, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/colby/detail.action?docID=1127617>.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 8.



*History of Myanmar Since Ancient Times: Traditions and Transformations* is unique in the field of Myanmar studies because it uses the “internationally recognized legal term ‘Myanmar’ for the country, ‘Burmese’ for the national group and language, and ‘Burma’ when the context dictates, usually for references made during the colonial period.”<sup>12</sup> Such nuance in the terminology used by the Aung-Thwins exemplifies the appropriate explanations historians should use when choosing their method of describing the ethnolinguistic and political history of former colonies.

The issue of terminology is further complicated by the spoken and written language, Burmese, from which the terms *Myanma* and *Bama* come. While Burmese is the language used by most of the modern-day people living in Myanmar, it is only one of many languages spoken within the country’s internationally recognized borders. Therefore, we must ask if it is fair to define the civic nationality of ethnic minorities in Myanmar using imposed linguistic terms from an ethnic majority whose members run the Myanmar government and launch “counter-insurgency” operations against these ethnic minorities. Journalist Martin Smith compares the effects of the rapid spread of Burmese in Myanmar to English becoming the dominant language in the British Isles. Smith uses the example of English language dominance in the British Isles amidst continuing Scots, Irish, and Welsh nationalisms to suggest that the Burmese language is part of a longstanding Bamar nationalist effort to forcibly assimilate Myanmar’s ethnic minorities. Smith writes the following:

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

With the rapid spread of Burmese over the last century, language is another confusing denominator for ethnic identity. Certainly, in Great Britain, where Gaelic and Welsh are little spoken today, the widespread use of English has done little to dampen nationalist enthusiasms amongst the Scots, Irish, and Welsh. Nor do the majority Burmans, who are still generally agreed to make up an estimated two-thirds of the population, necessarily form one distinct or homogenous political bloc.<sup>13</sup>

Despite the minimal effects of the Burmese language on uniting the largely monolingual Bamar population, Smith introduces the idea that the Burmese language threatens the cultural longevity of Myanmar's ethnolinguistic minorities in a similar case to the effect of English within the British Isles. While nationalist minority movements will still exist, Smith portrays Burmese as a tool for forced assimilation. Therefore, it is important to recognize that generalizing the people living in Myanmar as "Burmese" removes the agency of indigenous groups such as the Karen People, who have nationalist elements that continue to fight for an independent state. When observers talk about history and events in Myanmar, it is best practice to reference each group by name rather than using the term "Burmese." Therefore, in my analysis, I will use the term "Burmese" to reference those who conceptualize themselves as members of the state in Burma or Myanmar.

There is no right answer to the debate over whether the term "Myanmar" or "Burma" should be used to define the nation. Simply put, a person's feelings towards the Myanmar government are often displayed by which name they use. However, using the Aung-Thwins' terminology model is an effective way to describe the nation and its respective ethnic groups without offending. In this

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<sup>13</sup> Smith, Martin, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity* (London, New York: Zed Books Ltd, 1999), 31.

thesis, I use “Myanmar” to refer to the nation post-1989, “Burma” for pre-1989 events, and “Burmese” to describe language and the nationality while specifying regional ethnolinguistic groups by their English language names. Through this approach, modeled after *A History of Myanmar Since Ancient Times: Traditions and Transformations*, I aim to avoid removing agency from groups within colonial Burma and modern Myanmar.

### *Buddhism, Sangha, and the State*

Theravada Buddhism has been the undisputed dominant religion in modern Myanmar, colonial Burma, and pre-colonial Burma. While the Christian Sgaw Karen and Muslim Rohingya are notable exceptions to total Buddhist hegemony, the persecution of these minority groups illustrates the significance of Buddhism in Myanmar’s history. Understanding the role of Buddhism in Burmese society is one way to clarify the conceptions of Burmese statehood and the impact of interethnic conflict. In a 1922 issue of the *Burma Observer*, the Bamar nationalist, Hting Aung wrote, “the Burmese people cannot think of nationality apart from the religion that they hold, for it is Buddhism which has welded the Burmese together and the idea of nationhood owes its inception to Buddhism.”<sup>14</sup> Published during the colonial era, Hting Aung’s writing demonstrates that conceptions of Burmese nationhood and therefore, conceptions of ethnicity and anti-colonialism are inextricably linked to Buddhism. However, the role of

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<sup>14</sup> Donald Eugene Smith, *Religion and Politics in Burma* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), 83.

Buddhism and its path towards politicization developed gradually over the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial eras of Burmese history.

Historians have formed a consensus that Buddhism influenced the conception and operations of the pre-colonial Burmese state. In his seminal work *A History of Modern Burma*, John F. Cady argues that Buddhism and its associated ecclesiastic organization, the *Sangha* (sacred order of monks), “touched virtually all elements of the population” and was the “most important nonpolitical segment of the society in old Burma.”<sup>15</sup> The significance of the *Sangha* was due to their role in helping “the laity to acquire merit (*kutho*) by contributing to [monks’] daily needs as they made their daily rounds.”<sup>16</sup> With the value of merit in Buddhism, the importance of the monks to the happiness of the populace is agreed upon. Cady’s description of the *Sangha* as nonpolitical contradicts his earlier statement that “[t]o preserve the treasure of Buddhism constituted traditionally the very *raison d’etre* of the Burman state.”<sup>17</sup> While not officially a branch of the last Burmese dynasty, the Kombaung (1752-1885), the *Sangha* and the state relied on each other for maintaining political stability. The creation of the position of *thathanabaing* (head of the *Sangha* in pre-colonial Burma selected by the king) formed the foundation of a Burmese state politically linked to Buddhism and the *Sangha*.<sup>18</sup>

Manuel Sarkisyanz’s work *Buddhist Backgrounds of the Burmese Revolution* argues that the structure of the pre-colonial Burmese state supported

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<sup>15</sup> John F. Cady, *A History of Modern Burma* (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1958), 49.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

the Buddhist faith through policies that provided laypeople with the resources to observe religious traditions. Theravada Buddhists believed that “deliverance could only be achieved through individual contemplation and meditation which alone was to permit man to save himself.”<sup>19</sup> This meant that pious agriculturalists needed to spend valuable time away from the rice fields to meditate; Sarkisyanz suggests that Burmese monarchies implemented policies that took the form of what we would call a “welfare state.” He writes, “[t]hus the royal ideal was a welfare state, at least to the extent of guaranteeing the economic basis of leisure necessary for meditation.”<sup>20</sup> Therefore, for its citizens to achieve salvation, the government needed to maintain favorable social and economic conditions so that the peasantry had time for meditation. Meditation practices in the pre-colonial era for the laymen typically consisted of making food offerings to monks as they made their alms rounds.<sup>21</sup> The Burmese state apparatus safeguarding peasants’ ability to practice Buddhism consisted of royal food distributions and the cancelling of peasant debt, establishing a symbiotic relationship between the peasantry, the state, and the *Sangha*.<sup>22</sup> The state worked to ensure the livelihood of its subjects through social welfare, and in return the citizens meditated and used their surplus money to provide alms to the *Sangha*. In this situation, all three respective groups benefit from the functioning of the other, disruptions to any one element and the system will struggle to function as the livelihood and salvation of

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<sup>19</sup> Manuel Sarkisyanz, *Buddhist Backgrounds of the Burmese Revolution*. (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2013), 56, <https://public.ebookcentral.proquest.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=5586011>.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Harvard Divinity School, “Buddhism in Myanmar,” Religion and Public Life, Harvard Divinity School, accessed March 14, 2022, <https://rpl.hds.harvard.edu/faq/buddhism-myanmar>.

<sup>22</sup> Sarkisyanz, *Buddhist Backgrounds of the Burmese Revolution*., 54–55.

the population would be at stake. The interdependence of these groups would eventually spell the downfall of the entire system in the wake of the total British conquest of Burma in 1885 and establishing a secular state with no intention of supporting the Buddhist religion.<sup>23</sup> British rule was the antithesis of a welfare state due to the introduction of Burma to world capitalism through the development of a rice export economy in Lower Burma. With no royal aid, the peasantry lost the ability to provide alms to the *Sangha* who in turn lost both their ability to influence the state and pray for the salvation of Buddhists in Burma.

The extent to which Buddhism, as well as the influence of royal authority, played a role in pre-colonial Burma varied the distance one traveled from the capital. James C. Scott, in *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, suggests that the plurality of administrative systems between the state core and its border territories can be best described using the Sanskrit term *mandala* (“circle of kings”).<sup>24</sup> In the *mandala* polity, “the influence of the ruler, often claiming divine lineages, emanates from a court center, almost always located on a rice plain.”<sup>25</sup> We have seen that Buddhism and the monarchy in pre-colonial Burma were symbiotic; therefore, Burma’s ethnic minorities living on the outskirts of the *mandala* often retained animist beliefs or converted to Christianity during the colonial era because they were not under the direct rule of the Buddhist monarchy. Scott’s work provides a useful context for

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<sup>23</sup> Jun Young Jang, “Buddhist Nationalism and Its Limitations in Colonial Myanmar: The Crossing of Tradition and Modernity,” *International Area Review* 13, no. 2 (June 2010): 168, <https://doi.org/10.1177/223386591001300209>.

<sup>24</sup> James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, Yale Agrarian Studies Series (New Haven London: Yale University Press, 2009), 58.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

understanding how the colonial state presence, which permeated Burma through its large military presence and the recruitment of indigenous minorities as police, dramatically extended the radius of state authority in Burma. To the Bamar living near the state core who relied on the Buddhist “welfare state,” the colonial state was detrimental to them achieving salvation. In contrast, for the non-Buddhists such as the many Indian immigrants, Karen, and Rohingya peoples, the colonial state brought a sense of relief as Buddhism and state authority no longer worked together to assimilate these groups.

The state-sponsorship of Buddhism weakened the pre-colonial Burmese government in times of conflict. Jordan Carlyle Winfield draws attention to how a mutually beneficial relationship between the state, *Sangha*, and people was upheld only if each group fulfilled its obligations. Winfield argues the following:

Nonetheless divine sanction can also be a two-edged sword. While religion can strengthen the authority of a king and his dynasty, it also places certain obligations upon both him and his heirs, for as long as the church, and state, and the relationship between them, endure. Obedience to authority becomes dependent on how closely that authority meets these obligations.<sup>26</sup>

The introduction of obligations stabilized the Burmese state in peacetime but ultimately made its structure rigid and unable to adapt to the modern world. The people became dependent on their king for the welfare to achieve salvation thus when the British deposed the last Burmese monarch, Thibaw, on 28th November 1885, “the street crowd wept...for, whatever he may have been, he was, after all, their king.”<sup>27</sup> From the perspective that the king represented the welfare state, the

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<sup>26</sup> Jordan Carlyle Winfield, “Buddhism and Insurrection in Burma, 1886–1890,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 20, no. 3 (July 2010): 346, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1356186310000076>.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 352.

peasants' weeping can be interpreted as weeping for the *idea* of the king as a guide to their religious salvation. With the Kombaung Dynasty disintegrated, the Burmese peasants now perceived the path to salvation as blocked. However, this raises the question of why the Burmese Buddhists attached the idea of obtaining salvation to the monarchy? The answer lies in the Buddhist backgrounds of Buddhist kingship.

The Burmese king was more than a political leader, he represented an almost divine being who embodied the values of the Buddhist faith. The reverence towards the king is expressed by Grattan Geary, a British journalist working colonial-Burma, who writes "that the Burmese monarch; that the king in Mandalay, whether Theebaw or another, is the god of their idolatry."<sup>28</sup> The divine conception of the Buddhist king presented the risk of instability in the event of a regime change executed by the British. A non-Buddhist could not bring about stability due to the divine nature of kingship rooted in Buddhist beliefs. The king and his government combined both the material world and the cosmological. Winfield suggests that this "parallelism between the greater universe and the world of men" meant that the British disruption to the dynastic system would permanently damage the relationship between the people and the state as any non-Buddhist leader would not have the cosmological right to rule.<sup>29</sup> Because "the kingdom, the capital, the court and even the coronation ritual [was] to mirror aspects of the Buddhist universe," the Burmese consequently perceived the

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<sup>28</sup> Grattan Geary, *Burma After Conquest: Viewed in its Political, Social, and Commercial Aspects* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle, & Rivington, 1886), 2, quoted in *Ibid.*, 351.

<sup>29</sup> Winfield, "Buddhism and Insurrection in Burma, 1886–1890," 350.



Christian British administration as sacrilegious and an insult to the Buddhist state.<sup>30</sup> Winfield builds on Gratton's analysis that the *position* of king in pre-colonial Burma was perceived as divine which would have lasting implications of political instability when the system was challenged.

Geary expands on the importance of Buddhist kingship and its associated structures, suggesting that the *position* of king, due to its significance in the Buddhist "welfare state," was more important to the people than the inhabitant of the throne. In his travels, Geary interviewed the *thathanabaing* from the reign of King Thibaw and wrote "whoever the prince may be, if he protected the religion and gave comfort and security to the people, he would be a good ruler."<sup>31</sup> Geary builds on the significance of the reciprocity between the state and the people inherent to the Buddhist "welfare state," where kingship meant a reduction of strains on the population through state donations and construction of temples. It was the reduction of strains on the population, associated with the Buddhist welfare state, that attracted reverence towards the crown as opposed to the idea of an absolute ruler or the character of the king himself. Geary suggests that if the peasantry and the *Sangha* were appeased, the existence of the monarchy could be looked upon with indifference. Therefore, so long as the British did not try and appoint a new king and maintained the Buddhist "welfare-state," there would be relative peace. However, the British invasions of Burma disrupted more than any appeasement of the peasantry could ameliorate.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Geary, *Burma After Conquest*, 106-107, quoted in Ibid., 353.

As I have demonstrated, the pre-colonial Burmese state was upheld by interdependency between the *Sangha*, state, and people. However, this narrative has illustrated that while most of the population was Buddhist, the development of a Burmese national identity was still in its infancy. At this point, Buddhism was tied to the state, the people adhered to the religion for salvation but the bottom-up conception of being a member of a national “in-group” was still limited to being Buddhist. The construction of national “in-groups” and “out-groups” would only occur with the destruction of the Kombaung Dynasty by the British. Stephen L. Keck supports the notion that the “end of traditional Burma” came with the end of the Kombaung Dynasty during the Third Anglo-Burmese War of 1885. Keck argues that “British rule over all of Burma required the termination of the Kombaung Dynasty.”<sup>32</sup> With the understanding that the relative stability of the precolonial welfare state was supported by collaboration between the *Sangha* and monarchy, Keck’s argument suggests that British rule over Burma could not function alongside the welfare state system. If the *Sangha* and the people were dependent on the monarchy, then British rule would foreshadow the destruction of Buddhist institutions and the welfare of the peasantry. The definition of “new century Burma” by Keck as “the combination of British rule, modernization and commercial interests in the Indian Ocean” suggests that Buddhism ceased to be the state religion under colonial rule.<sup>33</sup> Due to how Buddhism had been an inherent part of the pre-colonial government, secular rule raised the question of

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<sup>32</sup> Stephen L. Keck, *British Burma in the New Century, 1895-1918*, Britain and the World (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 71.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

whether Burmese civic identity could still manifest itself as association with the colonial state. As Buddhism was equated to welfare in the eyes of the peasantry, the sidelining of Buddhism and the *Sangha* established a clear set of differences the population could use to categorize people. The new regime was non-Buddhist and the Bamar peasantry was Buddhist. This establishment of a new “in-group” and an “out-group” based on religion would thereby form the basis of a national identity for the Buddhist Burmese.

In his book *Religion and Politics in Burma*, Eugene Smith contrasts Keck’s argument that Burmese nationalism emerged from the British destruction of the Kombaung Monarchy and the Buddhist welfare state. Smith argues that Burmese nationalism took two modes, “traditional” and “modern” with the latter developing after the former.<sup>34</sup> He defines “traditional” nationalism as “political unification” and a “separateness from other lands” while “modern nationalism” required the concept “of the nation as the object of ultimate political loyalty.”<sup>35</sup> The contemporary terms “ethnic” and “civic” nationalism respectively reflect Smith’s characterization of Burmese nationalism as taking the forms of “traditional” or “modern.” Rather than Burmese nationalism being traced to the British *destruction* of traditional society in Burma, Smith suggests that “Buddhism became a powerful component of traditional Burmese nationalism” as “[t]he Burmese language was strongly influenced by Pali, the language of the Buddhist scriptures, and many of the best writers in Burmese were monks.”<sup>36</sup> The

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<sup>34</sup> Smith, *Religion and Politics in Burma*, 81.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 82–83.

notion that “*part* of the nationalist response to [British] rule must be understood in terms of traditional nationalism” gives merit to analyzing modern Burmese nationalism through the impact of British colonialism on the Buddhist faith.<sup>37</sup> To be Burmese meant being a Buddhist and not British; the idea that white people could not be Buddhists due to a lack of “enlightenment” and not living on Mount Meru furthered the ties between Burmese identity, nationalism, and the Buddhist faith.<sup>38</sup> In contrast to the more prevalent narrative that nationalism emerged because of indigenous persons borrowing ideas from Europe, traditional nationalism suggests that European invasion *amplified*, but did not create, the modern conception of being Burmese.

Alecia Turner presents a twofold argument regarding Burmese nationalism, while subscribing to the narrative that the earliest forms of Burmese resistance were through a Buddhist lens, Turner acknowledges that Burmese nationalism was “inherently multiple” from the beginning. In her paper “Narratives of Nation, Questions of Community: Examining Burmese Sources without the Lens of Nation,” Turner argues that there emerged “a movement to preserve Buddhism and the Buddha’s [teachings] under changing cultural conditions in the three decades leading up to the 1920s. In the 1910s, some in these movements began to articulate their ideas in terms of nation and by 1921, the nationalist movement, by all accounts, had come into its own.”<sup>39</sup> A Burmese

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>38</sup> Sarkisyanz, *Buddhist Backgrounds of the Burmese Revolution*, 82–83.

<sup>39</sup> Alicia Turner, “Narratives of Nation, Questions of Community: Examining Burmese Sources without the Lens of Nation,” *Journal of Burma Studies* 15, no. 2 (2011): 265, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jbs.2011.0009>.

civic identity, predicated on the idea that the citizenry had a duty to defend Buddhism, developed in the 1920s through a revitalization of the association of Buddhism with Bamar ethnic identity. This argument illustrates the validity of using Buddhism as a lens to understand the multiple visions of a Burmese nation and who “belonged” in this nation. With the first nationalist movements taking root from a Buddhist revival in opposition to Western imperialism, the rhetoric of modern nationhood was linked with Buddhism and thereby Buddhists as well. Turner’s presentation of how “Burmese identity was never singular or completely unified... [d]iverse and hybrid modes of Burmese identity thrived even in the heart of the anti-colonial nationalist movement, and it was this multiplicity that made the response to colonialism possible,” alerts scholars to the danger of starting with one characterization of Burmese nationalism.<sup>40</sup> Turner instead uses an approach where she offers “a micro-history of a single moment in the rise of the anti-colonial nationalist movement,” to better “focus in closely and be more attuned to the diversity of voices apparent.”<sup>41</sup> The importance given to the discourse amongst the *colonized* through this “microscopic” approach promises a return of agency to the indigenous people of Burma considering the prevalence of Eurocentric narratives. Therefore, I am using a similar “microscopic” approach in my narrative of Burmese nationalism through the three case studies presented in the subsequent chapters of this thesis.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 262–63.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 264.

*Race and Nationalism in Furnivall's Plural Society*

The philosophy behind most modern scholarly work on Burma's interethnic history is based on John S. Furnivall's notion that colonial Burma was a "plural society." In Furnivall's words, Burmese society was

a medley of various peoples—European, Chinese, Indian and Native. It is in the strictest sense a medley, a mixture, for they mix but do not combine. Each group holds its own ideas and ways of life. As individuals they meet together; but only in the marketplace, in buying and selling. Under native rule the social organization had a plural character; under Western rule it has been transformed into what may be termed a plural society, with different sections of the community living side by side but separately within the same political unit.<sup>42</sup>

Scholars of Burma such as Michael Adas and John Cady subscribe to Furnivall's notion of a "plural society," because colonial Burma was ethnically diverse yet Burmese identity had a different meaning to each respective ethnic group. The notion of a plural society provides a broad lens by which to provide background for interethnic conflict. Examining the conflict between the Bamar and Indian immigrants using the framework that ethnic groups interacted economically while maintaining separate identities helps contextualize early Burmese nationalist rhetoric. Michael Adas, in *The Burma Delta*, supports this notion that "[d]ivisions and the potential for conflict are far stronger than the forces which serve to integrate the various segments."<sup>43</sup> Fundamental differences in language, culture, and religion between the Bamar, Indian (often laborers, administrators, and

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<sup>42</sup> John S. Furnivall, "The Political Economy of the Far East," *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society* 29, no. 3-4 (1942):198, quoted in, Michael Adas, *The Burma Delta: Economic Development and Social Change on an Asian Rice Frontier, 1852-1941* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011), 103, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/colby/detail.action?docID=3445157>.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

moneylenders from the Indian subcontinent), and Karen peoples made the idea of a unified state unpopular.<sup>44</sup> The Bamar majority would not submit to rule by minorities and the ethnic minorities possessed enough influence that their submission to the Bamar was unacceptable. A plural society does not encourage cooperation between different groups and under the British policy of divide and rule, Furnivall is correct in expressing that Burmese society changed from having a “plural character” to becoming a “plural society.” However, it is important to consider how and when the idea of a singular Burma emerged in the context of pluralism. I will trace the idea of a Burmese nation-state, through the lens of the plural society, for the remainder of this chapter.

Buddhism and Burmese society have been intertwined for centuries with Buddhism forming a pillar of Bamar ethnic identity. However, Buddhism alone could not form the identity of the post-colonial Bamar-dominated state because many ethnic groups including the Shan, Karen, Mon, and Chinese are majority Buddhists within their broader ethnolinguistic identities. The creation of a western-style Bamar-dominated Burmese state only began in the 1900s through the construct of race. Michael Adas argues that a limited number of resources in the plural society led to competition between ethnic groups, with the expansion by any one group destabilizing the society. He writes, “when one of the groups begin to covet and compete for a larger share or control of niches held by others, the

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<sup>44</sup> “Indian” in this period was in reference to people originating from the Indian Subcontinent. Most Indian immigrants to Burma came from the Bengal and Madras presidencies of the British Indian Empire. Particularly relevant in this thesis is the caste of moneylenders from southern India, the Chettiars (also spelled Chettyars).

whole plural society is threatened.”<sup>45</sup> While Adas suggests that economic competition led to antagonism between ethnic groups, this interethnic competition solidified ethnic identity and promoted rejection of plurality. Economic strife was thereby a catalyst for the construction of nationalist movements along ethnic lines. Adas argues that the *Wunthanu Athins* (“own race” organizations) “provided the major bridge between urban-based nationalist leaders and the rural masses.”<sup>46</sup> Here we see ethnic nationalism taking hold and becoming a tool to organize people in the fight for independence. Since the Bamar founded and dominated the *Wunthanu Athins*, we see that the Burmese state found its roots in organizations that advocated for racial divisions. However, we must understand that the characterization of ethnic groups of Burma as separate “races” was a British construction. The subheading of the book *Burma Through the Centuries*, from 1909, describes the work as “being a short account of the leading races of Burma, of their origin, and of their struggles for supremacy.”<sup>47</sup> We see that the British engineered and espoused the rhetoric that the ethnic groups of Burma were distinct, always in competition with one another, and could never be united. This philosophy sewed disunity amongst the indigenous population making colonial “divide and rule” all the easier. Therefore, the intensification of ethnic division laid the foundation for the Bamar ethnonationalist idea that post-colonial Burmese national identity would be dominated by the identity of their majority ethnolinguistic group.

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<sup>45</sup> Adas, *The Burma Delta*, 192.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

<sup>47</sup> John Stuart, *Burma Through the Centuries* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co. Limited, 1909).



Donald Eugene Smith builds on Adas' argument that the development of Burmese nationalism and the conception of a Burmese state emerged from ethnic differences amplified by the British. Smith writes the following:

[c]ommunal conflict tended to define Burmese nationalism more clearly in that it emphasized the positive content of national identity. Nationalism was not simply anti-British sentiment and a movement for freedom from foreign rule. Many Indians in Burma were equally anti-British. Traditional Burmese nationalism was based, among other things, on a common race, language, and religion. In terms of these significant characteristics which identify and distinguish peoples, the Indians were as different from the Burmese as the British were, 'Burma for the Burmans,' a typical nationalist slogan, struck at both the British and the Indians.<sup>48</sup>

Smith's argument illustrates how the Bamar nationalist movement, which constructed the modern Burmese state, was itself constructed through division. The importance of race in determining "who belongs" in Burma is displayed by how the notion of being Burmese meant not being British or Indian. Smith details how identifying and distinguishing between different peoples within the plural society based on race, language, and religion was an important step in the formation of a Burmese state. The Bamar nationalists' anti-Indian slogans such as "Burma for the Burmans" suggest that their conception of Burmese national identity never intended to include those who were not Bamar and Buddhist.<sup>49</sup> While Indians suffered under British rule, the Bamar framing of Indians as an enemy due to differences in race, religion, and language conveys the importance of these British methods of categorization in imagining national "out-groups" and "in-groups." The Burmese nation emerged from the ethnonationalist idea of a

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<sup>48</sup> Smith, Eugene, Donald, *Religion and Politics in Burma*, 112.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

state expunged of the racial diversity of a plural society that would exclude any non-Bamar and be distinctly homogenous.

The visions for the ethnic and religious composition of the Burmese state emerged from Bamar ethnonationalism and exploitations of the racial divisions found in a plural society; however, Albert D. Moscotti says that Bamar nationalists derived the concept of Bamar national sovereignty and race from European philosophies. Moscotti argues that Bamar “[national] awareness, coupled with a distrust of foreigners, did not become a well-articulated nationalist movement until it came in contact with Western political ideologies and institutions.”<sup>50</sup> Despite Moscotti’s Eurocentric point of view, his argument has merits as in pre-colonial Burma, “manpower concerns favored easy assimilation and rapid mobility and, in turn, made for very fluid ethnic boundaries.”<sup>51</sup> The labor paradigm in the pre-colonial *mandala* polity did not favor strict definitions of ethnic identity; thus, an exclusionary national identity would have been detrimental to the survival of the pre-colonial kingdoms. However, in the colonial capitalist state, the population of Burma grew with the help of immigrant labor; therefore, the labor shortage which had made Burmese identity fluid was replaced by European ideas of racial categorization and the formation of a plural society. It was the imported ideas of strict racial categorization which provided an environment for the Bamar ethnonationalists to develop exclusionary definitions of Burmese identity. Moscotti suggests that a “[t]he adaptation of western

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<sup>50</sup> Albert D. Moscotti, *British Policy and the Nationalist Movement in Burma, 1917-1937*, Asian Studies at Hawaii, no. 11 (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1974), 18.

<sup>51</sup> Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed*, 84.

political ideologies and institutions to the aspirations and demands of a homogenous society produce the matrix from which the Burmese nationalist movement developed.”<sup>52</sup> As we have seen, intense xenophobia exhibited by the Bamar provided a vision for the composition of a future state, and ideas of national self-determination after World War One catalyzed a push for self-government. These ideas were not simply adapted from European ones, rather European imperialism created a new environment which fostered exclusivity as a part of a national community. The combination of ethnic pride and “Western political ideologies and institutions” laid the foundation for the Bamar ethnonationalists to act upon their visions of a homogenous Burmese state in direct opposition to a plural society.

Joseph Silverstein, in his book *Burmese Politics: The Dilemma of National Unity*, supports Moscotti’s argument that Western political ideology and Bamar ethnonationalism pushed the vision of a Bamar-ruled Burmese state into fruition. Silverstein cites how the first Burmese nationalist organization, the Young Men’s Buddhist Association (YMBA), “modeled after the Young Men’s Christian Association, was founded to look after the religious, educational, and social needs of the people.”<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, the wave of Burmese nationalism between 1930-1931 saw the growth of the *Dobama Asiayone* or “We Burman Society.” This nationalist group consisted of younger members from the educated Bamar political elite who grew disillusioned with older nationalists that were less

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<sup>52</sup> Moscotti, *British Policy and the Nationalist Movement in Burma, 1917-1937*, 18.

<sup>53</sup> Josef Silverstein, *Burmese Politics: The Dilemma of National Unity* (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 1980), 36.

inclined to directly challenge the British. Members of the *Dobama Asiayone* called themselves *Thakin*, which translates to “master,” and was a term the Burmese used to address British officials.<sup>54</sup> The *Thakins* embodied a radical shift in Burmese nationalism that celebrated the military history of Bamar kingdoms and “drew its ideas from Marxism, the Sein Fein movement of Ireland, and the fascist movements of Italy and Germany” with the goal of independence.<sup>55</sup> The *Dobama Asiayone* became the most influential nationalist movement whose ranks included future Burmese politicians U Nu, Aung San, and Ne Win. Silverstein suggests that Western ideology provided the organizational framework for Bamar ethnonationalism to develop into a political movement that could provide a nominally stable administration. Silverstein does add some nuance to Moscotti’s argument, pointing out that “between 1917 and 1922, the Burmans attempted to organize an all-embracing nationalist movement. The General Council of Burmese Associations (GCBA), which succeeded the Y.M.B.A., attempted, by changing its name and activity, to represent all the peoples in Burma.”<sup>56</sup> The Burmese nationalist movement was not monolithic as the formation of the GCBA illustrated that there was dissent within the YMBA regarding the goals of the nationalist movement. While the YMBA’s “raison d’etre” was to preserve Buddhism, the GCBA’s campaigning to a broader religious and ethnic audience suggests a shift towards civic identity in the effort to create a Burmese nation-state. This encourages looking at anti-colonial resistance from a *horizontal*

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<sup>54</sup> Haruhiro Fukui, ed., *Political Parties of Asia and the Pacific*, The Greenwood Historical Encyclopedia of the World’s Political Parties (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1985), 128.

<sup>55</sup> Silverstein, *Burmese Politics*, 38.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

approach because the GCBA illustrates that not all nationalist movements subscribed to the same visions. However, the GCBA's mission to broaden their constituency "did not attract minorities who gave their support to the British, and it could not contain the politically articulate Burmans who were divided on goals and tactics."<sup>57</sup> We see from Silverstein's work that the Bamar nationalist movement in the early 1920s was full of competing ideas for how best to develop and articulate a Burmese identity. The dissent between the YMBA and GCBA suggests that there was even a divide within established nationalist organizations. However, the rise of the *Dobama Asiayone* in the aftermath of the Saya San peasant uprising of 1930 replaced nuance in the Bamar nationalist conversations in favor of a monolithic Bamar ethnonationalist movement.

To disseminate and convince the Bamar majority of their "superiority" and right to independence, Bamar nationalists used British biological racism to dehumanize and create national out-groups. According to Chie Ikeya, in her book *Refiguring Women Colonialism and Modernity in Burma*, "the term *Kala*, as it was disseminated in the Burmese media in the 1920s and 1930s, pigeonholed immigrants from the Indian-subcontinent as uneducated, lower-class (or lower-caste) men and women, typically of skin color darker than that of Burmese people, when in fact many of those categorized as 'Indian' in Burma were relatively prosperous."<sup>58</sup> The creation of a distinct label for all Indians dehumanizes and creates the perception of an "enemy." The Bamar now

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Chie Ikeya, *Refiguring Women, Colonialism, and Modernity in Burma*, Southeast Asia--Politics, Meaning, and Memory (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011), 138.

possessed a tool to easily malign and threaten Indians using the press and in everyday conversation, promoting of the idea of Bamar racial “superiority” and the conversion from a plural to a homogenous society. Ikeya cites a description from the 1897 British travel book *Picturesque Burma, Past and Present* by Alice M. R. Hart that ““Indian Chetties dress, eat, and live as if they had a very meagre income, and have the appearance of mere savages,”” to argue that the British provided the Bamar with the tools necessary to begin discriminating and “culturally encoding” hatred against non-Bamar, especially Indians, on an extreme scale.<sup>59</sup> Ikeya illustrates that the leading vision for a Burmese state was one built by exclusion using the principles of cultural racism and British biological racism.<sup>60</sup> Ironically, the British used biological racism as the basis for their policies of oppression against the Bamar whom they deemed “unready” for self-governance.

Despite British reservations for granting Burma self-governance, the process of separating the Province of Burma from the British Indian Empire assisted Bamar nationalists in delineating the borders of a Burmese state. Historian Nalini Chakravarti’s, *The Indian Minority in Burma*, suggests that the debate over, and actions towards, separating Burma from British India helped Burmese nationalists define the ethnic composition and borders of an independent Burma. Chakravarti writes “by 1922, anti-Indian feelings had become widespread. The oft-repeated policy of the Government of Burma to prepare the country for

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<sup>59</sup> Alice M. Hart, *Picturesque Burma: Past & Present* (London: J.M. Dent & Co, 1897), 255, quoted in, *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>60</sup> Ikeya, 140.

ultimate separation from India had taken firm roots in Burma politics and ‘separation’ and ‘self-government’ had become synonymous for a large section of Burma politicians.”<sup>61</sup> The reasons Burmese politicians wanted separation from India are multifaceted; however, Chakravarti illustrates that anti-Indian sentiment, caused by a general association between Indians and the hardships under British rule, encouraged nationalists to begin conceptualizing where a Burmese state would extend geographically.<sup>62</sup> The Government of India’s admittance that “Burma was ‘racially and geographically a distinct country from India,” in response to Member for Burma in the Indian Council of State U Po Bye’s call for a committee to investigate the separation of Burma from British India, highlights how the idea of an ethnically distinct and independent Burma emerged from the debate over dyarchy. Furthermore, Chakravarti’s work supports Moscotti, Silverstein, and Ikeya’s arguments that Burmese nationalists used European political structures and conceptions of race to further their agendas. Burmese nationalists showed no reservations in using the Indian Government’s word that Burma was “racially and geographically distinct” to craft their vision for a Burmese state after the dyarchy constitution was introduced in 1923.

The Bamar nationalists’ rhetoric of Bamar and Buddhist superiority came at the expense of all non-Bamar; however, the Indian minority in colonial Burma were subject to particularly vile dehumanization. Former Burmese President Maung Maung, in his book *From Sangha to Laity: Nationalists Movements of*

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<sup>61</sup> Nalini Ranjan Chakravarti, *The Indian Minority in Burma: The Rise and Decline of an Immigrant Community* (London, New York: Oxford University Press for the Institute of Race Relations, London, 1971), 115.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 96.

*Burma 1920-1940*, supports Western authors' claims that Bamar nationalism and visions for the future were distinctly anti-Indian. Maung describes an anti-Indian riot, occurring in 1938 and partly a result of growing Bamar anti-Indian beliefs, perpetrated by members of the *Dobama Asiayone* ("we Burmans" movement) as taking the following form:

There they had raised the Peacock flag and made speeches of commemoration for the unknown heroes of the coolie riots who had defended Burmese people and the national honor. At the rally they shouted the awe inspiring 'battle cry' of the coolie riots '*Dobama!*' [our nation] repeatedly. During the coolie riots, young Burmans who had beaten up Indians they found attacking Burmans usually shouted out '*Dobama!*' as a rallying cry, a sign of encouragement of triumph. In the dark or in a melee this was the only way of maintaining contact or of getting united action among themselves.<sup>63</sup>

The violence perpetrated by the Bamar, "justified" as a defense of national honor, suggests that by the late 1930s the conception of the nation of Burma was almost completely developed with this conception being centered around having a homogenous state with no room for Indians and other minorities. A peacock flag, the symbol of the Kombaung Dynasty, rising over the crowd reflects the rioters' reverence towards the power of Bamar under the Kombaung Dynasty and the importance of their history in crafting the Burmese nation. The combination of the peacock flag and the shouting of *Dobama*, meaning "our nation," by these Bamar nationalist rioters suggests that they associated their imagined Burmese nation as unified by Bamar history and ethnic identity. Maung Maung argues that "[f]rom that time onwards, "*Dobama*" became a national cry and the symbol of the spirit

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<sup>63</sup> Maung Maung, *From Sangha to Laity: Nationalist Movements of Burma, 1920-1940*, Australian National University Monographs on South Asia, no. 4 (New Delhi: Manohar, 1980), 80.



of the Burman.”<sup>64</sup> Such a cry appearing as a tool for emboldening the Bamar rioters not only illustrates that the *Dobama Asiayone* were attempting to build a “Burma for the Burmans” but also illustrates that the builders of post-colonial Burma would be willing to use violence to further their racist ideology. This foreshadows the violence against minority groups that was to come when the Bamar, oppressed heavily by the British, were in control of an independent Burma. Maung Maung illustrates that the “spirit of the Burman” and the acts perpetrated to establish a Bamar Burma would become increasingly xenophobic and anti-pluralistic.

Kei Nemoto argues that anti-Indian narratives showed that Burmese nationalists such as the *Dobama Asiayone*, expressed their beliefs “by describing what they were not rather than what they were, and by attacking their imagined enemies, the *thudo-bama* (“their Burma”) rather than attempting a clear definition of *dobama*.”<sup>65</sup> Nemoto reaffirms the argument presented throughout this chapter, that the nationalists framed their visions of “our Burma” through defining what they believed was *not Burmese* rather than defining explicitly what *was* Burmese. The idea of *thudo-bama* (“their Burma”) representing an “invisible enemy,” allowed the *Dobama Asiayone* to build up their base by stoking the Bamar fear of “losing” their nation to ethnic minorities.

The Bamar nationalist movement’s perceived ability to control their own armed forces after the Japanese invasion of Burma in 1942 provided the

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Kei Nemoto, “The Concepts of *Dobama* (‘Our Burma’) and *Thudo-Bama* (‘Their Burma’) in Burmese Nationalism, 1930-1948,” *Journal of Burma Studies* 5, no. 1 (2000): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jbs.2000.0001>.

movement with the political unity to implement its visions of national identity. Political scientist Mary P. Callahan presents legal Bamar militarization, in the form of militias and the state Burma Independence Army (BIA) during the early period of Japanese rule, as how “indigenous Burmans emerged as local state builders in central Burma.”<sup>66</sup> The bureaucratic vacuum left from the British retreat provided an opportunity for the Bamar to take over old administrative units and develop new ones in their vision.<sup>67</sup> Callahan argues that the creation of the first national army in Burma, the BIA, who “wore uniforms that represented *do-Bama* rather than a foreign power or empire” and their duty “to defend national sovereignty” gave the lower-class Bamar the agency to feel “Burmese” and conceptualize the borders of what would now be “their” nation. The wartime armed forces provided “the institutional basis for the idea of a sovereign, territorially defined ‘Burma’ [which] was indigenized for the first time in modern history.”<sup>68</sup> Callahan’s emphasis on the significance of a Bamar majority armed forces to the idea of Burma, through its defense of national sovereignty, illustrates how the narrative of “in-group, out-group; *do-bama* and *thudo-bama*” continued to drive the Bamar nationalists’ state-building policy. Because “hill populations do not generally resemble the valley centers culturally, religiously, or linguistically,” the independence and military readiness of indigenous groups such as the Karen living within colonial borders challenged the idea of a homogenous

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<sup>66</sup> Mary P. Callahan, *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2003), 45.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 46.

Burmese nation.<sup>69</sup> The idea that the Bamar were always under attack from both real and imaginary enemies would serve as the “justification” for the persecution of minorities in an idealized homogenous state.

Each of the aforementioned authors presents how and why Burmese nationalism became radicalized and racialized; Matthew Bowser in “Partners in Empire? Co-colonialism and the Rise of Anti-Indian Nationalism in Burma, 1930-1938” adds nuance to these arguments by presenting British economic policy as the catalyst for anti-Indian sentiment becoming a part of Burmese nationalism. Bowser argues that the *Maistry* system under the British brought cheap Indian labor to Burma to the detriment of underpaid Indian laborers and the Burmese displaced by Indian labor in the cities. The *Maistry* (translating to supervisor) system in Burma consisted of the *Maistry* coercing lower caste individuals from India into a debt-bondage labor system where illegal deduction of wages effectively kept laborer enslaved to their *Maistry*.<sup>70</sup> Rather than unfairly frame Indian laborers as taking advantage of the demand for labor in Burma, Bowser argues that “unemployment, low wages, long hours of work, disregard for the welfare of labor,” which affected both the Burmese and Indian worker, “all may be traced to one source, namely the free flow of labour” from the *Maistry* system.<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, Bowser conveys that it was the British vision “of a productive class of Burmese owner-cultivators” which caused the Bamar

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<sup>69</sup> Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed*, 20.

<sup>70</sup> Renu, Modi, “Colonial Period Indenture, Kangani and Maistry Systems,” *Group for Research on Indian Diasporas*, 2015.

<sup>71</sup> Matthew J. Bowser, “Partners in Empire? Co-Colonialism and the Rise of Anti-Indian Nationalism in Burma, 1930–1938,” *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 49, no. 1 (January 2, 2021): 124, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2020.1783113>.

agriculturalists to be in debt to Indian moneylenders. Bowser writes “[i]n practice, though not by design, the [Burma Land and Revenue] Act ended up handing over half of the cultivatable land in Burma to non-agriculturalist Indian bankers through foreclosures. British officials did attempt to curb this process.”<sup>72</sup> The framing of Bamar anti-Indian sentiment as a product of British policies is significant because it acknowledges that Indian minorities in Burma were victims of British imperialism as well. Bowser’s work steers the reader away from this narrative and illustrates that while Indian bankers could be considered “co-colonialists,” it was ultimately British decision-making that created this volatile situation.

The rest of this thesis will demonstrate that the question of “who belongs” in a post-colonial Burma was shaped by the divisive religious and racial rhetoric of the Bamar independence movement *over time*. The concepts of *dobama* and *thudo-bama* the Bamar nationalists used to categorize “who belonged” in their envisioned community, while indigenous, took influences from pre-modern and modern times both from Asian and European sources. Burmese nationalists used Theravada Buddhism, from Sri Lanka, racial categorization, and nationalism from Europe to build their “imagined communities.” Seeing how *dobama* and *thudo-bama* represent rhetoric based on a combination of old and new ideas, we must consider the timeline by which nationalists synthesized these concepts. By analyzing case studies in Burmese history between 1929-1939, we can better understand what brought about the xenophobic turn in Burmese nationalism and

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 129.

the effect of said nationalism on subsequent events in time. Now we must ask, to what degree did British colonial policies strengthen the xenophobic rhetoric of the Bamar nationalists in the interim between these case studies. I will trace the increasing radicalization and racialization of Bamar nationalism chronologically through three case studies consisting of the Saya San Rebellion (1930-1932), the debate over the separation of British Burma from British India (1929-1935), and the 1938 Anti-Indian Riots. Extracts from government reports and nationalist newspapers will show that the xenophobic rhetoric associated with *dobama* and *thudo-bama* intensified in response to British colonial policy between 1929-1939. At the conclusion of the final case study, the reader will recognize “who belonged” in the Bamar nationalists’ vision of *dobama* and understand the influences that slowly radicalized the Bamar nationalist ideology.

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Return of a King, Prophet, or Pretender: Saya San's Rebellion as a Prelude for a "Burma for the Burmans"

On October 28<sup>th</sup> 1930, in a pagoda near Rangoon, an ex-Buddhist monk surrounded himself with symbols of Burmese kingship: ruby earrings, gem-studded shoes, gem-studded sword, royal fan, and a white umbrella.<sup>73</sup> Loyal supporters tattooed with images of the *Galon*, the "fabulous bird of Hindu mythology" in constant war with its adversary the *Naga* (serpent), proclaimed him the "*Thupannaka Galon Raja*" or "Galon King."<sup>74</sup> This enlisted peasant army, consisting of Bamar rice agriculturalists—some of whom were members of *Wunthanu* village protection associations—swore an oath of loyalty to the "Galon King," which included the following statement:

Now at this time we are banded together to drive out all unbelievers... Till we are free from the rule of the English we promise to harm no member of the Galon brotherhood and neighbor to molest his wife nor to steal his property... O ye four great *Nats* who guard the world ... deliver us quickly from the unbelievers and their government.<sup>75</sup>

This self-proclaimed king was Saya San, and the stage was set for the largest peasant rebellion in recorded Burmese history.

On December 21, 1930, Saya San established his "capital" on Alaungtang Hill in Tharrawaddy District, "where a royal city, known as a Buddharaja Myo, or 'Buddhist King's Town' was ceremoniously plotted out."<sup>76</sup> Complete with a

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<sup>73</sup> Robert L. Solomon, "Saya San and the Burmese Rebellion," *Modern Asian Studies* 3, no. 3 (May 1969): 210, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X0000233X>.

<sup>74</sup> Solomon, "Saya San and the Burmese Rebellion," 213.

<sup>75</sup> "Rebel Oath" found in *Ibid.*, 221.

<sup>76</sup> Solomon, "Saya San and the Burmese Rebellion," 210.

“ruby-studded banyan-wood lion throne,” Saya San declared war on the British invaders resulting in the first of many confrontations. The following night, Saya San’s followers raided villages in southeastern Tharrawaddy District looking for firearms and killing village headmen and unsuspecting peasants alike.<sup>77</sup> The uprising would claim an estimated 1700 lives between 1930-1932.<sup>78</sup>

Despite proclaiming himself a king, with all the ceremony to legitimize him as a *Buddhist* king, Saya San had neither a capital nor a throne within two weeks of declaring war on the British. Any semblance of a new Buddhist kingdom, in the context of physical territory, disappeared by January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1931, when British troops successfully stormed Alaungtang Hill and drove Saya San and the rebel leadership including U Aung Hla, Bo Aung Shwe, and Bo Aung Pwe into hiding. However, the loss of the Alaungtang Hill was not the decisive blow to the rebellion that the British envisioned; throughout January 1931, insurgent operations spread throughout Lower Burma with rebel leaders coordinating attacks against police stations and government representatives.<sup>79</sup> Saya San’s followers still believed in the divinity of their prophet king and his movement; thus, the loss of a physical capital did not greatly affect the morale of his followers.

By August of 1931, the British had captured, tried, and sentenced Saya San through a Special Rebellion Tribunal which had been previously organized to

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<sup>77</sup> Adas, *The Burma Delta*, 200.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Maitrii Aung-Thwin, *The Return of the Galon King: History, Law, and Rebellion in Colonial Burma*, Ohio University Research in International Studies. Southeast Asia Series, no. 124 (Athens : Singapore: Ohio University Press ; NUS Press, 2011), 6, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/colby/detail.action?docID=1743663>.

process the large numbers of people charged during the rebellion. Saya San's lawyers included nationalist leaders Dr. Baw Maw and "Tharrawaddy" U Saw who represented the cautious and boldly ethnonationalist camps of the Bamar nationalist movement respectively. The execution of Saya San on November 28<sup>th</sup>, 1931, dealt a blow to the rebellion, but an indecisive one as British sources reported disorganized bands of Saya San's followers engaging in *dacoity* (banditry) and wanton violence.<sup>80</sup> While British reports classified these acts as indiscriminate violence, we have to note how such a slanderous narrative aids in the colonial government's efforts to erode support for Saya San's remaining followers and his potential for martyrdom. Continuing resistance against the British suggests that the length Saya San went to legitimize himself as a spiritual and political leader was successful. However, a change in the British narrative of the uprising as one of organized resistance to *dacoity* suggests that government repression, through an increased military presence and censorship, contributed to the realization that challenging the colonial state through violence was futile.

Saya San's Rebellion represents one of the most decisive actions taken by a group of Bamar religious and political leaders in establishing, however shortly, a state free from British influence. The Rebellion helps us define Burmese national identity because its causes, organization, and effects are intertwined with the intense Bamar ethnonationalism of the 1930s that helped create an independent Burma. In this chapter, I will argue that the Saya San Rebellion embodied anti-colonial sentiment and traditional nationalism centered around

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 8.



restoring Buddhist kingship as a solution to the modern economic grievances directed at British rule. The unity of agriculturalists, the General Council of Burmese Associations (GCBA), and *Wunthanu Athins* (“own race” village associations) around the idea that the effects of British economic policy and a disregard for Buddhist ideals were harmful to Burmese livelihood made the fight for a Bamar Buddhist Burmese state appealing to the masses. I will show that while the Saya San Rebellion was neither intended to be racialized nor intended to start a modern nationalist movement, it highlighted grievances and provided a platform for the Bamar to develop the rhetoric of “in-groups” and “out-groups.”

*Causes of Rebellion: The Fall of the Headmen and the “Owner-Cultivator”*

Given the scale of the Saya San Rebellion, it should not be surprising that extensive research has been devoted to its causes and effects. Modern historians most often attribute the causes of the rebellion to socioeconomic factors, in contrast to original British interpretations which described the rebellion as “superstition plain and simple.”<sup>81</sup> To better understand how the Saya San Rebellion can be used to answer the question, “whose nation is this,” it is necessary to examine the causes and narratives of the Rebellion.

British rule in Burma required the destruction of the Kombaung Monarchy and the Buddhist welfare state system.<sup>82</sup> However, the overturning of an old system does not necessarily lead to the seditionist sentiments expressed by Saya San and his followers. As political scientist James C. Scott has argued, armed

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<sup>81</sup> Harvey, G. E., *British Rule In Burma 1824-1942* (London: Faber and Faber, 1947).

<sup>82</sup> See Chapter 1, page 9.

insurrection is often the weapon of last resort for the peasantry to protest changes that threaten their livelihoods. Armed insurrection requires time that could be spent in agricultural cultivation and rebellion can even cost the life of the peasant; therefore, to rebel is to “risk everything” and represents a tactic used when conditions become intolerable.<sup>83</sup> More commonly, “peasants moved into the hills and forests surrounding the Dry Zone or traveled south into the vast wilderness of the Irrawaddy delta” in a form of avoidance protest.<sup>84</sup> The subsistence peasant household is only concerned with cultivating enough food for themselves and for storage in the event of natural disaster. The British introduced capitalist economy aimed at maximizing profits was alien to subsistence farmers in Burma but did not necessarily threaten their livelihoods from the outset. The influx of migrants pursuing rice cultivation from Upper Burma to the Lower Burma Delta pursuing rice cultivation increased from 311,000 in 1881 to 411,000 in 1901.<sup>85</sup> An increase in rice cultivators in Lower Burma suggests that Bamar agriculturists were willing to take part as owner-cultivators in the British capitalist system. However, in the name of profit, the British tore down the traditional patron-client relationships and communal arrangements which provided food security to the peasantry. The pre-colonial *mandala* polity that allowed for geographic mobility was replaced by a colonial state where the importance of land ownership limited the feasibility of

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<sup>83</sup> James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 3, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/colby/detail.action?docID=3421108>.

<sup>84</sup> Michael Adas, “From Avoidance to Confrontation: Peasant Protest in Precolonial and Colonial Southeast Asia,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 23, no. 2 (1981): 234, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417500013281>.

<sup>85</sup> *Burma Census of 1921*, “Imperial Table 2” and the “Place-of-Birth Tables” in the 1881, 1891, and 1901 censuses, found in Adas, *The Burma Delta*, 42–44.

“avoidance protest.”<sup>86</sup> The peasantry now had to balance the benefits of becoming a cultivator “owner” with the deficiencies of the British system; Scott provides a useful term to describe the peasants’ definition and level of tolerance for exploitation – the “moral economy of the peasant.”<sup>87</sup>

The Saya San Rebellion was a product of British instituted changes that threatened the Bamar peasants’ moral economy to such a degree that they would be willing to risk their lives. To understand why the peasantry rebelled, we must examine their socioeconomic conditions before and after the British invasion. During the Kombaung period, *myo* village units were governed by a *myothugyi* (village headmen), a hereditary position. Parimal Ghosh argues in *Brave Men of the Hills* that despite his hereditary position, the *myothugyi* was an advocate for his people and often perceived as such.<sup>88</sup> While the *myothugyi* possessed policing powers and collected taxes, abusing these powers was unlikely due to the position central government’s tendency to allow locals to choose their *myothugyi*.<sup>89</sup> Because the people ultimately chose their *myothugyi*, it was in his best interest to advocate for his people against unfavorable government policies such as tax increases. Therefore, the relationship between the *myothugyi* and the people was based on trust, mutual benefit, and reciprocity often described as a patron-client relationship and a characteristic of pre-colonial Southeast Asian states.

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<sup>86</sup> See Michael Adas, “From Avoidance to Confrontation.”

<sup>87</sup> Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*, 3.

<sup>88</sup> Parimal Ghosh, *Brave Men of the Hills: Resistance and Rebellion in Burma, 1825-1932*, 1. publ (New Delhi: Manohar, 2000), 17.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid, 18.

The British invasion and the introduction of a “Village System,” where the village became the basic district administrative unit run by British appointed “village headmen,” removed the *myothugyis*’ obligations in favor of a patron-client system that deprived peasants of their most able advocate and patron.<sup>90</sup> The 1887 “Regulation to Provide for the Establishment of a Village-System in Upper Burma,” created by Charles Crosthwaite, aimed to “pacify” Upper Burma where rebellion by ex-Komabaung officials continued to take place.<sup>91</sup> The goal of this program was never to help the people but to promote stability during the development of a colonial state. Thus, “the Village System” sanctioned state revenue extraction, stabilized through policing, by transforming the village headmen into salaried bureaucrats loyal to the colonial government.

The British expanded their control over Burmese villages by appropriating successful aspects of the Komabaung village headmen system while modifying it to make the suppression of dissent easier. Village headmen retained policing and tax collecting authority, transforming them into arbiters for British machinations. As expressed by Crosthwaite’s predecessor, Charles Bernard, “[t]he most important agency for maintaining order, pacifying the country, and collecting the revenue, will be the indigenous local officials, such as the *myothugyis* and *thugyis*,” and “[a] District Officer who is able to re-establish the majority of the old *thugyis* in subordination to the present order of things, and to obtain good new *thugyis* of local influence for vacant circles, will have made the most important

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<sup>90</sup> Takahiro Iwaki, “The Village System and Burmese Society: Problems Involved in the Enforcement Process of the Upper Burma Village Regulation of 1887,” *Journal of Burma Studies* 19, no. 1 (2015): 114, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jbs.2015.0008>.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 123–24.

step towards restoring his district to order.”<sup>92</sup> The village headmen would no longer be a member of a patron-client system “involving a largely instrumental friendship in which an individual of higher socioeconomic status (patron) uses his own influence and resources to provide protection and/or benefits for a person of lower status (client) who, for his part, reciprocates by offering general support.”<sup>93</sup> Instead, the village headmen would now serve as colonial bureaucrats, appointed by the British and charged with enforcing colonial policy through their policing power.

Rather than patrons, the *myothugyi* and *thugyi* became servants of the British; there was no need for most village headmen to take the extra step in considering the moral economy of the people when governing. While the *myothugyis* had historically collected the *thathameda* tax (household tax) while remaining exempt from it themselves, the patron-client dynamics had served as a check on *myothugyis* under the Kombaung. Under the British, the headmen did not receive fixed salaries, rather, their income was from a commission based on the amount of taxes collected from a village tract.<sup>94</sup> This policy encouraged extortion of the villagers as the headmen was paid according to the amount of taxes he collected. With fewer checks to the *myothugyis*’ power under the British, the peasantry rightly began to perceive the *myothugyis* as members of the

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<sup>92</sup> “Instructions to Civil Officers in Upper Burma,” BHP, January to June 1886, found in Ibid., 124. While *myothugyi* and *thugyi* are different titles, they both represent the position of village headmen reorganized by the British.

<sup>93</sup> James C. Scott, “The Erosion of Patron-Client Bonds and Social Change in Rural Southeast Asia,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 32, no. 1 (November 1972): 8, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2053176>.

<sup>94</sup> Government of Burma, *The Upper Burma Headman’s Manual*, 4th ed. (Rangoon: Office of the Superintendent, Government Printing, 1912), 1, <http://digital.soas.ac.uk/LOAC000075/00001>.

colonizing group. Saya San's followers singled out and murdering many village headmen between 1930-32, in an act of confrontation as opposed to avoidance protest, illustrates the degree to which the British manipulated the *myothugyi* role.

The privatization of land ownership by the British, an aspect of the Village System, contrasted pre-colonial modes of land ownership and shifted Burmese agriculture further away from a patron-client system. The Kombaung monarchy had divided the land into three types: royal, official, and private land.<sup>95</sup> While royal and official land were owned by the king and government officials respectively, the designation of private land requires its own separate description. Due to the high land area to population ratio found in pre-colonial Burma, as well as throughout Southeast Asia, private land ownership was often disorganized. Rights to land could be obtained by the peasant through clearing and cultivating land which has not been previously settled. While this private land was hereditary and could be sold, the lack of royal oversight on private land, apart from the household tax, allowed squatters to acquire abandoned private land without penalty.<sup>96</sup>

The British desire to develop Burma into a rice exporting region meant the cultivation of the maximum amount of land in the shortest time possible. Through the "new" squatter and *patta* systems, peasants could occupy land and pay taxes or apply for a government grant in which highly undeveloped land was given to the cultivator with reduced taxes, respectively. However, the capitalist intentions

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<sup>95</sup> Cheng Siok Hwa, "Land Tenure Problems in Burma, 1852 to 1940," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 38, no. 1 (207) (1965): 106.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

of the British created a new market for land speculation and moneylending, leading to the loss of land from the peasantry. The high influx of migrants to the Burma Delta who required capital to develop land opened a market for moneylending. Moneylenders, especially the Chettiars (moneylending caste from Southern India), were happy to provide low-interest loans to cultivators; however, should misfortune befall the cultivator the moneylender would often foreclose the land to acquire the payment for their loan.

Crosthwaite's Village System, though unfavorable for the Bamar rice cultivator, was overshadowed by the issue of diminishing land ownership by Bamar "owner-cultivators." The agriculturalists' loss of land to moneylenders and landlords increased continuously throughout the early 1900s. Between 1901-02, agriculturalists owned 82.8 percent of agricultural land in lower Burma. This number drops to 70 percent between 1925-30 and declines even further to 56.6 percent between 1930-35 during the peak of the Great Depression.<sup>97</sup> The significant loss of land to non-agriculturalists, especially non-residents, put increasing pressure on the moral economy of the agriculturist whose status transformed from "owner-cultivator" to "tenant" after the loss of land. Bamar peasants almost universally demonized Chettiar moneylenders as servants of the colonial system much like the new village headmen. There was no relief from the household tax and some peasants perceived an increasing number of immigrants from India-proper as a threat. In contrast to the British colonial authorities,

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<sup>97</sup> Government of Burma, *Annual Reports on the Land Revenue Administration of Burma*, (Rangoon: Superintendent Government Printing and Stationary, 1939) found in *Ibid.*, 113.

historians such as Michael Adas, Matrii Aung-Thwin, and James C. Scott have come to the consensus that these economic conditions helped instigate the Saya San Rebellion which flared up when these conditions were at their worst.

*A Galon King: The Effect of Folk Beliefs in Developing Burmese Peasant Identity*

Buddhist belief and identity had a tremendous effect on Saya San's ability to draw fanatical support and helped determine what beliefs would fit within a Burmese national identity. Saya San's movement can be best described as a general anti-colonial movement but associating it with modern nationalism is inaccurate. If anything, the Saya San Rebellion's bottom-up character exemplifies the traditional form of nationalism described in Chapter One, in which followers' loyalty was to a person and ideology as opposed to a state.

The Bamar peasants did not make a claim for a nation-state, but rather sought a return to a pre-colonial Buddhist kingdom governed by patron-client relationships in opposition to the British capitalist system. It is important to remember that the pre-colonial Buddhist kingdoms from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards became more centralized and "its identification with monarchs who were considered to be ethnically and culturally Bamar, led communities and individuals to accept the state's definition of their cultural orientation."<sup>98</sup> Thus, a return to a pre-colonial Buddhist kingdom characterized by the most recent, the Kombaung (1752-1885), would also be a return to a Bamar culturally dominated society. Saya San appealed to peasants by evoking uniquely Burmese Buddhist beliefs

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<sup>98</sup> Robert H. Taylor, *The State in Myanmar* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009), 25.



such as proclaiming himself as a new *Sektya-Min*, “a benevolent ruler who would appear at the end of Buddhism’s age of decline.”<sup>99</sup> The *Sektya-Min* would become the future Buddha and restore “world moral order,” a powerful claim. Saya San promised a better future for the peasants by returning Burma to a mythical Buddhist past.

Building on the significance of Burmese Buddhist mythology, the peasants’ held onto the traditional belief in the return of the *minlaung*, “a just Burman king or prince who would drive away the European heretics and restore monarchical rule and an idealized pre-European order.”<sup>100</sup> This prophetic rhetoric illustrates that Saya San’s imagined kingdom would be created for Buddhists with no exceptions. Given that the strength of a prophecy is determined by the faith of its believers, Saya San’s reliance on prophecy to unite his followers reflects the degree to which Buddhism was a part of Bamar peasant identity. Reciprocally, the peasantry’s willingness to go to war on the grounds of Burmese Buddhist prophecy reflects why Buddhist village organizations such as the YMBA and later GCBA were integral in recruiting support for the Rebellion.<sup>101</sup> In light of Saya San’s goal to construct a Buddhist kingdom and his ability to convince others to sacrifice their lives for this vision, the Saya San Rebellion illustrates that many Burmese peasants desired a post-colonial society to belong to the Buddhists.

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<sup>99</sup> Michael Adas, *Prophets of Rebellion: Millenarian Protest Movements Against the European Colonial Order* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1979), 101.

<sup>100</sup> Adas, *Prophets of Rebellion*, 102.

<sup>101</sup> Robert P. Weller and Scott E. Guggenheim, *Power and Protest in the Countryside* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989), 99.

British accounts often portray the Saya San Rebellion as “superstition pure and simple,” to deflect their economic mismanagement; however, the rebels’ use of talismans and tattoos with the belief these symbols provided invulnerability to firearms reflects the inherent Bamar Buddhist doctrine of this anti-colonial movement. Saya San was a skilled tattoo artist and almost all his followers were tattooed or carried “enchanted” items in the form of flags and potions.<sup>102</sup> These symbols and items not only made identifying members of the rebellion easier but also represented a set of traditional beliefs unique to Burma and integral in distinguishing Burmese Buddhism from other forms of the religion.<sup>103</sup> The value of charms and tattoos comes from the faith that these symbols would “confer immunity to the hazards of battle.”<sup>104</sup> A rebel force that believes they are invincible is more willing to resort to violence and commit their lives to the cause. British accounts of the bravado of the *Galon* rebels include how:

They attacked unflinchingly against rifle and Lewis gun fire of one of the finest shooting regiments in the [British] Indian army. The attackers went down in their tens and twenties, but they still came on, storming over the lines of the dead. The continuous fire met them and the stuttering Lewis guns tore down their ranks...armed with only spears and swords, ... they boldly charged the military police, who easily repulsed them with rifles.<sup>105</sup>

This open willingness to sacrifice one’s life on account of symbols illustrates the influence of folk beliefs on Bamar peasants and their genuine frustration towards the colonial system. However, these symbols as noted by Aung-Thwin were not universally revered in Theravada Buddhism but were part of animist belief from

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<sup>102</sup> Solomon, “Saya San and the Burmese Rebellion,” 212.

<sup>103</sup> Aung-Thwin, *The Return of the Galon King*, 140.

<sup>104</sup> Solomon, “Saya San and the Burmese Rebellion,” 212.

<sup>105</sup> C. V. Warren, *Burmese Interlude* (London, 1937), 63, 64, 145, found in, Sarkisyanz, *Buddhist Backgrounds of the Burmese Revolution.*, 162.

within the borders of colonial Burma. The participants of the largest armed Burmese anti-colonialist uprising, believing in the power of these symbols, illustrate that the visions for an independent Burmese state would not only be one for Buddhists but also one tied to the specific Burmese form of Buddhism.

A distinguishing feature of Saya San's followers were their tattoos, a tradition from pre-colonial Burmese kingdoms used to mark one's status, especially in the military.<sup>106</sup> The significance of tattooing to the Bamar is emphasized in the following statement from U Arthapa:

Have you not heard that the Galon Raja has risen in the east? You will have to be distinguished by being tattooed. If you are not tattooed, you will have your heads cut off when the Galon Raja arrives... What is the good of depending on the heathen? We must rely on our own people. Saya San will soon be coming. We must get back our own country. I have received my orders from Saya San. Look at the *dah* which I am now holding. If you do not listen to my orders, you all will be beheaded.<sup>107</sup>

U Arthapa not only conveys the importance of tattooing to Bamar culture but also illustrates the genuine belief in Saya San's prophetic claims to build a new society. The phrase "our people" looped into a statement predicting an apocalyptic event for the non-tattooed foreigners illustrates a belief that those who do not practice the traditions from within Burma's borders will be swept away by Saya San. Here, the reverence towards Saya San extends beyond Buddhist belief and into indigenous beliefs in the *Nats* (indigenous god-like spirits) and the power of tattoos. The presence of tattoos on the Saya San's followers, coupled with this

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<sup>106</sup> Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed*, 93.

<sup>107</sup> Government of Burma. *Origins and Causes of the Burma Rebellion, 1930-32* (Rangoon: Superintendent, Government Printing and Stationery, 1934), 24, found in, Government of Burma, Public and Judicial Department, *The Burma Rebellion: General File [Including the Result of an Inquiry into the Origin and Causes of the Rebellion], December 1930* (Rangoon: Superintendent, Government Printing and Stationery, 1930-1937), IOR/L/PJ/6/2020.

prophecy suggesting that the non-tattooed will be vanquished, conveys the importance of pre-colonial Bamar culture to Saya San's followers. For example, "the Burmans alone tattooed legs and bellies," thus specific tattooing practices became an integral way for the Bamar to distinguish themselves from other ethnic groups.<sup>108</sup> Charms and tattoos are more Burmese than Buddhist and the dependence on these symbols reflected the rebels' attempt to build a Bamar kingdom; Figure One, where one of Saya San's followers receives a tattoo on his leg, exemplifies this. We know that the Bamar rebels believed in Saya San's prophesy, the power of tattoos, charms, and the Galon, evidenced by frontal assaults against British machine guns. The Saya San Rebellion represented a reawakening of indigenous culture, led by Bamar peasants, that dreamt of a Buddhist state with indigenous Burmese characteristics.

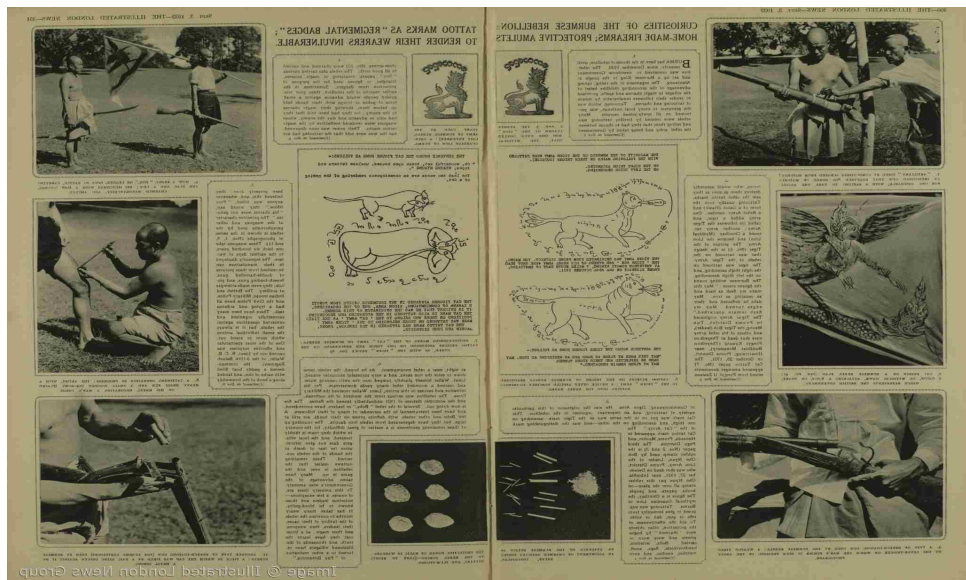


Figure 1: Amulets, Firearms, and Tattoos of Saya San's Followers. Newspaper clipping from the *Illustrated London News* containing images of a *Galon* flag, rebel weapons, and tattoo designs.<sup>109</sup>

<sup>108</sup> Victor Lieberman, *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800-1830*, Vol. 1, *Studies in Comparative World History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 129.

<sup>109</sup> "Curiosities of the Burmese Rebellion: Tattoo Marks As 'Regimental Badges'; Home-Made Firearms; Protective Amulets to Render Their Wearers Invulnerable," *Illustrated London News*, September 3, 1932.

Examining the rebel oath, we see the great extent to which the indigenous characteristics of Buddhism in Burma provided the rebels with confidence in their fight to create a new society. The first part of the rebel oath was titled “Inviting the Gods” and consisted of a call for divine assistance from indigenous *Nat* spirits in the name of Buddhism by saying:

Ye gods, who inhabit the universe: Come today to this place and listen to the solemn oath, taken by these men, who are desirous of promoting Buddhism, the sacred religion of the Buddha, the King of Kings. Oh Gods: Listen to their solemn asservation and take down the names of these men, who are resolved to do away with the heretics in the cause of their religion.<sup>110</sup>

In this passage, the rebels call to the *Nats* to listen to the rebels’ willingness to die in the name of Buddhism. There is a cry for divine guardianship by the rebels and a hope that by “inviting the Gods,” the rebels would receive protection by the gods in the same manner as tattoos and charms. It appears that the indigenous gods are the ones providing aid with a promise to promote Buddhism as justification by the rebels for their protection. The Saya San Rebellion was “an expression of nativistic and revitalistic beliefs and hopes held by Burman *pongyis* and agriculturalists,” as shown by Saya San’s Buddhist coronation ceremony and the rebel invocation to the animist *Nats*.<sup>111</sup> This emphasis on animist belief and its power to incite acts of bravado maintains that the rebels believed their Burmese state was to be based on traditions from within Burma’s borders.

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<sup>110</sup> “Inviting the Gods,” found in, Government of Burma, Public and Judicial Department, *The Burma Rebellion: General File*, 686.

<sup>111</sup> Adas, *The Burma Delta*, 200.

### *Forming an Out-Group*

Saya San's followers fought to reconstruct a pre-colonial Buddhist kingdom, with Burmese Buddhist characteristics devoid of the British. However, to understand the importance of the Saya San Rebellion to the growth of Bamar ethnic nationalism in the 1930s, it is important to trace how religious nationalism paralleled the strengthening of ethnic identities which led to outright violence against ethnic minorities, particularly Indians, in the late-1930s. I argue that the Saya San Rebellion was not caused by anti-Indian sentiment, but more generally against the British economic system which had driven many peasants into losing their land to Chettiar Indian moneylenders.

A perception that the Chettiars, like village headmen, were co-colonialists drove rebels to single out Indian communities for attack, but this was only accessory to the goal of expelling all co-colonialists in general. This is supported by British reports which cite "a racial bias against Europeans and Chinamen as well as against Indians" as a cause of rebellion.<sup>112</sup> However, the Saya San Rebellion laid the foundation for anti-Chettiar sentiment to develop into widespread violence towards Indians in the absence of British economic responsibility. While village headmen, Chettiars, and police officers represented the most obvious agents of the colonial state were the first target of Saya San's followers, eventually, members of whole ethnicities who often made up a high portion of these respective groups became targets. Over time, there was less

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<sup>112</sup> Government of Burma, *Report on the Rebellion in Burma, up to 3<sup>rd</sup> May, 1931* (London: His Majesty's Stationary Office, 1931), 13, found in, Government of Burma, *The Burma Rebellion: General File*, 454.

nuance in distinguishing between targets by Saya San's followers due to rising ethnonationalism. By looking at inter-ethnic conflict during the Saya San Rebellion, we will be able to understand how the Bamar anti-colonialist movement did not begin with xenophobia as the backbone of its proposed domestic policy in the early 1930s.

By December of 1930, the effects of the Great Depression most significantly affected Bamar agriculturalists causing them to default on their loans *en masse*. Rice paddy prices dropped from around 475 Rupees in December 1927 to 232.8 Rupees in December 1930 for 100 baskets of 75 lbs. each.<sup>113</sup> While December of 1930 was the lowest paddy prices would drop, paddy prices declined on average between 1930-1935 when compared to prices in 1927. This coupled with the increasing export of rice to India between 1932/33 to 1933/34 and competition in the rice export market from French-Indochina, Siam, and Japan caused paddy prices in Burma to remain depressed.<sup>114</sup> With the main source of income for the agriculturalist not enough to pay back loans, the agriculturalist handed over their land to non-agriculturalists. Meanwhile, Chettiar moneylenders loaned 100-120 million rupees to Burmese agriculturists annually which represented a fraction of the 330-400 million rupees in long-term loans to agriculturalists. While these figures support Nalini Chakravarti's claim that Indian capital was responsible for building Burma, from the perspective of the

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<sup>113</sup> Supplement to the *Indian Trade Journal*, 1927 and 1930, found in, Ian Brown, *A Colonial Economy in Crisis: Burma's Rice Cultivators and the World Depression of the 1930s* (London ; New York: Routledge Curzon, 2005), 35, 41.

<sup>114</sup> Brown, *A Colonial Economy in Crisis*, 42.

agriculturalist, the Chettiars became the most obvious group to blame for the transfer of land.<sup>115</sup>

The impact of debt to the Chettiars is best described by a passage from the *Report of the Land and Agriculture Committee* published in 1938 that reads:

In regard to the rebellion in the Dedaye Township of the Pyapon District, it was found that many of the villagers who took part were in the grip of the moneylenders. Much of the land in the neighborhood had been lost to the Chettyars within a short period preceding the rebellion. The leader of the Dedaye rebellion and one of his principal lieutenants had recently lost land to the Chettyars.<sup>116</sup>

Both the British and the Bamar peasants blame Chettiar moneylenders for causing the land alienation that helped spark the Saya San Rebellion. The agriculturalist took the position of a client of the Chettiar patron without the security and reciprocity found in the pre-colonial Kombaung system. Capitalism made the act of borrowing money purely transactional and the Bamar client was now in a subservient position to the Chettiars. A loss of land coupled with a blow to Bamar pride transformed the Chettiars into “public enemy number 1.”<sup>117</sup>

An important distinction to make is that Bamar peasant grievances were specifically against the Chettiars and village headmen at the start of the Saya San Rebellion. A British account from the period by B. R. Pearn deduced, “the Burman cultivator suffered not merely the disaster of losing his land but also, in many cases, the unwelcome experience of becoming either a hired laborer or the

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<sup>115</sup> Government of Burma, *Report of the Burma Provincial Banking Inquiry Committee, 1929-1930* (Rangoon: Government Printing and Stationary, 1930) volume 1, 68, 211-212, found in Brown, *A Colonial Economy in Crisis*, 51.

<sup>116</sup> Brown, *A Colonial Economy in Crisis*, 109-110.

<sup>117</sup> Adas, *The Burma Delta*.



tenant of a rack-renting landlord of another race.”<sup>118</sup> This characterizes the Saya San Rebellion as not only an expression of disdain against the economic system but also an outpouring of hatred against feeling second-class to foreign capitalists. This sentiment was more specific to Chettiars than Indians in general as the great majority of Indians in Burma were laborers themselves, not landlords. The Bamar rebels did not hate the Chettiars solely because they were foreigners but because the Bamar felt swindled out of their land. A virtual dependency on Chettiar capital further convinced the peasantry that they were second-class citizens in *their* state. As land was the agriculturalists’ most valuable asset, losing land meant losing power and the ability to make decisions. Now the agriculturist had to work to pay rent in addition to subsistence disrupting their ability to donate to the *Sangha* as well, this was unbearable to their moral economy and pride.

It was not Indians in general who inflamed the Saya San Rebellion but rather an economic system with loopholes for exploitation by both Chettiar *and* Bamar moneylenders. The destruction of old social systems further inhibited the peasants’ ability to recover from the damage done in the new capitalist economic system. There is a distinction between grievances levied against the Chettiars and the general anti-Indian sentiment which developed over time. Indian immigrants to Burma worked in a diverse array of fields but could most often be found working in mining, transportation, domestic transport, public administration, and policing roles.<sup>119</sup> Given the rural nature of the Saya San Rebellion, it was unlikely

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<sup>118</sup> Bertie Reginald Pearn, *The Indian in Burma*, vol. 4, Racial Relations Group (Ledbury Herefordshire England: Le Play House [for the Racial Relations Group], 1946), 24.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid*, 11.

that the presence of many Indians contributed to anti-Indian xenophobia and violence simply because Indians living in Lower Burma were concentrated in cities. While the Indian population grew from 136,504 to 849,381 persons between 1872 to 1931, this represented at most 11% of the total population of Lower Burma including cities such as Rangoon. With only 3.7% of Indians in Lower Burma working in agriculture, “it remains that the work of agriculture was predominantly affected by the indigenous peoples, and that the Indian element played proportionally a small part.”<sup>120</sup> It is therefore reasonable to conclude that the anti-Indian sentiment of the Saya San Rebellion began as anti-Chettiar sentiment specifically. This is in contrast to cities such as Rangoon where the Indian population outnumbered the Bamar population leading to competition for menial labor jobs. The anti-Indian xenophobia found in the Saya San Rebellion emerged in response to Chettiar land grabs rather than Indian immigration and competition for labor. However, anti-Chettiar sentiment in rural Burma would quickly become an exploitable tool for urban Bamar ethnonationalists to develop a new national identity centered on being anti-Indian.

The perceived threat of the Chettiars specifically as a cause of the Saya San Rebellion extends even further back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. In regard to the years 1897-98, James MacKenna reported that “the native [of India] is only dangerous to the Burman when he is, in addition to a land-owner, a money-lender, and then really only because he has more business instinct and methods than suits

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid, 12.

the causal Burman.”<sup>121</sup> The Bamar agriculturalists perceived Indian moneylenders specifically, as opposed to Indian laborers in the cities and farms, as a threat to their livelihood thirty-three years prior to the Saya San Rebellion. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that unfair moneylending practices formed the main grievance of the Bamar agriculturalists as opposed to the ethnicity of the moneylenders. Mackenna also notes that “[o]n the whole, however, the native of India gets on very well with his neighbor Burman and is a useful member of the community.”<sup>122</sup> We see that by the start of the Saya San Rebellion, Indian labor was not competitive with Burmese labor in the fields while the Bamar had felt the burden of debt to moneylenders for decades. Comparing these two statements from the same page of Mackenna’s report illustrates that the moneylending practices of the Chettiars, as opposed to their ethnicity, were not welcome by the Bamar peasantry. However, it was only a matter of time before the Bamar peasants expressed their grievances towards the flawed moneylending system through demonizing Indians as a “race” and eventually launching indiscriminate attacks against them.

When Saya San declared war on the British, his proclamation illustrated that the initial goals of his movement and the rhetoric used was not to throw out minorities from Burma but rather to expel those obstructing traditional society: the British, village headmen, Chettiars, and anyone perceived to be a co-colonialist. Saya San proclaimed:

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<sup>121</sup> James MacKenna, *Report on Revision Settlement Operations in the Bassein District, 1897-98* (Rangoon: Superintendent, Government Printing and Stationery, 1899), 7. IOR/V/27/314/242.

<sup>122</sup> MacKenna, James, “Report on Revision Settlement Operations in the Bassein District, 1897-98” (Government of Burma, 1899), Indian Office Records.

I have to declare war for the benefit of Rahan, Religion, and inhabitants. It is not because I like to oppress the people. Englishmen only are our enemies. We will only suppress the enemies. We do not wish to oppress Indians, Chinamen, Shans, and Karens. We will grant a pardon if you surrender yourselves and your arms through you are drawing pay from the Englishmen. Whoever surrender themselves and admit their folly will be granted a pardon.<sup>123</sup>

The explicit statement that ethnic minorities, first and foremost Indians, were not the primary enemies of the rebellion reflects that Saya San did not begin his movement as an anti-Indian Rebellion but as an anti-British insurrection.

However, Saya San characterizes these minorities as possessing predetermined guilt for in his view collaborating with the British. He offers a pardon to these groups of people only if they “admit their folly” suggesting that ethnic minorities such as Indians, as well as broader agents of the colonial state—village headmen—were guilty of being part of the British system and needed to *prove* their innocence rather than Saya San having to prove their guilt. The belief that Indians, Chinese, Shan, and Karen minorities possessed inherent guilt, from upholding the British system, establishes that Saya San’s followers would not welcome these groups into their vision for a new Burmese kingdom unless these groups confessed their “folly” or subscribed to Saya San’s millenarism. There was an inherent distrust of minorities by Saya San’s followers illustrated when “on 9<sup>th</sup> of October a large rebel ration party from Wettu Hill happened to meet a Karen man and two Karen women outside of Kyauksayitgon near Wagyauung and killed them because they were Karens.”<sup>124</sup> This extremity of distrust manifested itself in

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<sup>123</sup> Thupannaka Galon Raja, “Order of Thupannaka Galon Raja, living in the city of King of Buddha” (1930), found in, Government of Burma, *The Burma Rebellion: General File*, 688.

<sup>124</sup> Government of Burma, *Origins and Causes of the Burma Rebellion, 1930-32* (Rangoon: Superintendent, Government Printing and Stationery, 1934), 21. IOR/V/27/262/19.

open violence against ethnic minorities such as the Karen and conveyed to observers that the rebels' vision for a Burmese community would favor Bamar Buddhists. The prejudice against ethnic minorities in Burma from this account, as well as Saya San's proclamation, set up ethnic minorities as scapegoats for the grievances against British rule. While there was a way for these ethnic minorities and broader perceived co-colonialists to join the "in-group," co-colonialists needed to prove their loyalty to Saya San and his followers' vision of a reformed Burmese Buddhist community.

Anti-colonial sentiment as opposed to anti-Indian xenophobia as the main cause of the Saya San Rebellion can be best described when examining its first victims who were primarily Bamar village headmen. The attacks against headmen were immediate when "on the 16<sup>th</sup> of May 41 Myoma rebels, with 4 guns and 4 revolvers, attacked the house of Banbwegon headmen, the Ledi headmen, and the Nyaungbintha headmen. The latter was abducted and late murdered in cold blood."<sup>125</sup> In contrast to the *myothugyis* of the pre-colonial era, "the headmen is appointed by the Deputy Commissioner...may try persons...[and] they collect the revenue of the village or a fine inflicted on the village."<sup>126</sup> Violence towards their fellow Bamar illustrates that the Saya San Rebellion's chief objective was not to persecute Indians per se but remove all elements of British rule including co-colonist Bamar headmen. No one was safe as "[a] reign of terror spread over the countryside; anybody suspected of Government sympathies was liable to be

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<sup>125</sup> (*Confidential*) *The Rebellion in Burma, April 1931 – March 1932*, 3, found in, Government of Burma, *The Burma Rebellion: General File*, 59.

<sup>126</sup> "The Village Headman's Manual, Lower Burma 3rd Edition," 1907, 1–2, IOR/V/27/254/24.

murdered.”<sup>127</sup> The wide range of victims of the Saya San Rebellion shows that the process of reforming a Burmese Buddhist state would see the purging of all elements, including people, associated with the British administration.

Despite Saya San’s followers and sympathizers possessing diverse ideas on how to best support the independence movement, his followers recognized that increased British policing would only increase the strength of the anti-colonial movement. While this rebellion had the intent to put a new government into power through violence, some elements of the rebellion refused to condone the violence. The GCBA and *Wunthanu Athins*, instrumental in spreading the word about the rebellion, in many cases, stood against the actions of the rebels. GCBA branch leader “U Soe Thein and his secretary did not agree to resort to violence to gain their political ends.” Despite that “[i]t is not possible that many other members of the U Soe Thein GCBA and many members of the affiliated associations to be ignorant to the plans of Saya San.”<sup>128</sup> What did unite the bands of rebels and nationalist organizations was a hatred of British rule. In the Legislative Council debates in the wake of the uprising, representative U Aye argued that “[t]he Government must change with the times and be responsive to popular aspirations instead of killing all political agitation... Lord Irwin [the Viceroy of India] has shown the way in India and has left no stone unturned to win the confidence of the Indian extremists.”<sup>129</sup> U Aye proposes that British

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<sup>127</sup> (*Confidential*) *The Rebellion in Burma, April 1931 – March 1932*, 1, found in, Government of Burma, *The Burma Rebellion: General File*, 58.

<sup>128</sup> “Extract from Official Report of the Burma Legislative Council Debates,” (20 February 1931), 285, found in, Government of Burma, *The Burma Rebellion: General File*, 194.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*

crackdowns of unrest only bred more discontent which eventually caused the Saya San Rebellion. He cites Lord Irwin's suppression of dissent in India as spurring Indian extremism, warning that repression in Burma would lead to outright violence. This gives credit to the point that the Saya San Rebellion was a broad reaction to decades of British oppression, rather than against one specific ethnic minority. However, British power in Burma relied on many different collaborators including, broadly speaking, village headmen and Chettiars. Despite U Aye's comments, British counterinsurgency operations and a lack of action paved the way for specific targets of Bamar wrath to emerge—a consequence of British divide and rule.

*“The Indian” as the Enemy: A Product of British Counterinsurgency*

The Saya San Rebellion was a reaction to the foreign destruction of Burmese pride in addition to a failure of the agriculturalists' moral economies. Starting from the first consolidated Burmese kingdom of Pagan and ending with the Kombaung, “the Burmans, although a small and hitherto not very well-known people are proud of their nationality.”<sup>130</sup> With Saya San's attempt to fulfill Bamar wishes for a glorious return of the Buddhist state, the crushing of the rebellion by the British Indian Army contributed to the characterization of all Indians in Burma as the enemy rather than solely the Chettiars. As “the Burmans are a very proud people and have no mean opinions of themselves considering themselves

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<sup>130</sup> Government of Burma, *Reports and Papers on Agriculture, Including Confidential Revenue Department Report on Agricultural Tenants and Labourers (1924), Printed Reports of t..., 1922-1945* (India Office Records and Private Papers, 1922-1945), Mss Eur E252/15, 16.

vastly superior to Indians,” the death of Bamar reels at the hands of Indian soldiers was particularly inflammatory and insulting to Bamar identity and pride.<sup>131</sup> The Saya San Rebels took on the role of warriors, a position revered since the first Burmese dynasty, and their defeat was emasculating for the Bamar men. Because Bamar men could not be legally warriors as “enlistment of Burmans in the British army was abruptly discontinued in 1887,” taking arms was a symbolic return to a pre-British society.<sup>132</sup> Combat between rebels and government troops was the final stand for the Bamar warrior making defeat feel even more bitter. Immediately after the outbreak of rebellion and Saya San’s establishment of his “kingdom,” the British dispatched the 2/15<sup>th</sup> Punjab Regiment of the British Indian Army to suppress the rebellion in yet another act of divide and rule.<sup>133</sup> The British used the 2/15<sup>th</sup> Punjab Regiment in search and destroy missions where they “marched up from the north-east corner of the Insein District along the *Yomas* [mountains]. The object was to locate any rebel camps and that might exist in the *Yomas*, and if possible to drive the rebels down onto the cordon of Military posts along the edge of the foot-hills.”<sup>134</sup> Though jungle warfare was difficult for the British attackers, these operations were largely successful with rebel resistance transforming into disorganized dacoity as military efforts continued. The British took the last pieces of land, the mountains, which

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<sup>131</sup> U Mya U, “Plea for Separation of Burma From India,” *Rangoon Times Press*, (Rangoon: 1929), 7, found in, Government of the United Kingdom, Indian Statutory Commission. *Burma Memoranda* (London: H.M. Stationery Office, 1929), IOR/Q/13/1/7.

<sup>132</sup> Cady, John, F, *A History of Modern Burma*, 133.

<sup>133</sup> Government of Burma, *Report on the Rebellion in Burma, up to 3<sup>rd</sup> May, 1931* (London: His Majesty’s Stationary Office, 1931), 3, found in, Government of Burma, *The Burma Rebellion: General File*, 449.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid*, 4.



the Bamar rebels believed to be their own. To Saya San's followers and Bamar onlookers it appeared that Indian foot soldiers had stolen Bamar inheritance.

In addition to employing Indian soldiers, the British also relied upon the hill tribes of Burma such as the Karen people in their counterinsurgency operations. It was the 3/20<sup>th</sup> Burma Rifles drawn from the Karen, Kachin, and Chin ethnic groups that marched up Alaungtang Hill and scattered Saya San's base of operations on December 31<sup>st</sup>, 1930.<sup>135</sup> The use of troops levied from ethnic minorities gave the impression to the Bamar majority that ethnic minorities were the cause of their oppression. For the majority, small grievances became unbearable as the British tightened their grip while making colonial troops the face of British occupation. While civilian casualties are almost inevitable in a counterinsurgency operation, to the Bamar, every civilian loss caused by the British Indian Army felt like a personal attack by Indians and the Karen in particular. U Saw describes the Bamar sentiment at the time writing:

Whole villages were burnt down by the Military without warning and villagers—men, women and children—had to flee for their lives *sans* home, *sans* food, *sans* clothing. innocent villagers were shot down by the Crown forces which comprise of the Regulars, the Military, the Civil Police and the Karen Volunteers.<sup>136</sup>

The brutality of the British counterinsurgency destroyed the lives of the poorest villagers as the “rebel” villages indiscriminately destroyed were inhabited by peasants who often had lost their savings to the Chettiers. These peasants

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid, 3-4.

<sup>136</sup> U Saw, *The Burmese Situation A Letter to the Right Hon'ble William Wedgwood Benn, M.P., Secretary of State for India from U Saw, M.L.C for Tharrawaddy South, Burma* (Rangoon: The Burma Guardian Press, 1931), 3 found in Government of Burma, *The Burma Rebellion General File*.

perceived the actions of the British Indian Army as a second wave of hardship unleashed by ethnic minorities in Burma. With such a great degree of loss, it was easy for the peasant to wrongfully associate their Indian neighbors with the murder of civilians by soldiers. The rapid British military mobilization against the Bamar peasantry created an environment ripe for Bamar revenge against their perceived Indian and Karen enemies.

The extent to which the British use of Indian troops bred discontent from the Bamar can even be seen in colonial government newspapers. U Saw cited a statement from the *Rangoon Times*, a newspaper sympathetic to the colonial government, in his own condemnation of the British response. The *Rangoon Times* wrote on May 15<sup>th</sup>, 1931:

There is news of fresh Indian troops coming to Burma. Whether they will be used as a striking force or merely for the purpose of demonstration is not yet known. Neither the actual use nor the show of military strength is the cure for hunger. Every man of discretionary age cannot fail to realize the military resourcefulness of a modern civilized government. Further, communal feeling is bad enough without additional cause and the extended employment of Indian troops in a purely local rising is likely to accentuate it. There is yet time for His Excellency to assert that he is above all a peace-loving pro-Burman.<sup>137</sup>

Warnings against the use of Indian troops from a government mouthpiece illustrated the growing resentment against Indians in general by the Bamar. If this statement had emerged from Bamar nationalist newspapers such as *Thuriya* or *New Burma* then there would be a good reason to scrutinize the statement; however, its presence in English within a government newspaper suggests that

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<sup>137</sup> U Saw, *The Burmese Situation*, vi, in Burma, *The Burma Rebellion: General File*, 317. The British perceived “The Burmese Situation” to be so threatening that they threatened to arrest U Saw for sedition according to Emma Larkin in “The Self Conscious Censor: Censorship Under the British, 1900-1939.”

Bamar anger towards Indians evolved to such virulence that even government sympathizers demanded change. Discontent was visible in society and the government had now at least received warnings about the volatile situation that *they* had caused through divide and rule. We can deduce that the Bamar felt great anger towards Indians as a product of military operations against the Bamar rebels. It is telling that the author describes anti-Indian sentiment as a “communal feeling” because it means that by 1931 the Bamar community had begun to group Indians more broadly as their enemy as opposed to solely the Chettians as seen in the early stages of the Rebellion. The rural Bamar rebels and urban nationalists, as a result of British policies, had created an environment so hostile to Indians that the broader Indian community did feel unwelcome as “[t]he number [of Indians] that had fled [Burma] fearing these outrages amounted to about 15,000 up to the end of May [1931].”<sup>138</sup> Now the Bamar began to take issue with Indians because they were not Bamar, rather than with Indian moneylending practices or competition for labor in the cities. The plea to the King that he should assert himself as “peace-loving” *and* “pro-Burman” foreshadows that being anti-Burman would mean continued violence. These two phrases juxtaposed in the context of the Saya San Rebellion suggest that for even government sympathizers, peace could only be achieved if Burma was a pro-Burman state in all respects. Therefore, the suppression efforts against the Saya San Rebellion strengthened the idea of a Burma *only* for the Burmans and planted the seed for ethnic nationalism.

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<sup>138</sup> “Extract from Official Report of the Council of State Debates; Resolution Re Protection of Indian Residents in Burma,” (3 September 1931), 111, found in, Government of Burma, *The Burma Rebellion General File*, 285.

What distinguished the military operations during the Saya San Rebellion from those of the three Anglo-Burmese wars was not the participants but the visibility and compounding effects of oppression in the former. The high literacy of the Bamar population and the emergence of a vernacular press allowed for the dissemination of information to become even more efficient for nationalist leaders.<sup>139</sup> Newspapers such as *New Burma* published images of desecrated rebel bodies with the intent of turning people against the British regime. The Indians and Karen peoples who comprised a majority of the British forces in Burma could not escape association with British atrocities. While the battles of the previous Anglo-Burmese wars were not often directly felt by the civilian population, the vernacular press reinforced the narrative that the Bamar were the ultimate victims of British and now Indian oppression. Following Figure Two, U Saw includes an image of two Bamar farmers sitting down *shikoing* in front of police and specifies that there is an Indian sepoy sitting on a heap of paddy.<sup>140</sup> As the *shikoing* is a gesture of submission, this image tries to convince the Bamar viewer that Indians are not only serving as occupiers but also controlling the peasants' subsistence livelihoods through intimidation. The act of sitting on top of the paddy symbolizes foreign ownership of the Bamar peasants' means of survival. U Saw's use of these images in succession is a deliberate attempt to portray Indians as the arch-nemesis of the Bamar. The Saya San Rebellion provided the vernacular press

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<sup>139</sup> Ikeya, *Refiguring Women, Colonialism, and Modernity in Burma*.

<sup>140</sup> U Saw, *The Burmese Situation*, xiii, found in, Government of Burma, *The Burma Rebellion: General File*, 320.

with a platform to espouse their rhetoric of “Burma for Burmans and not for Indians.”<sup>141</sup>



Figure 2: Decapitated Heads of Saya San’s Followers. The sixteen heads of rebels killed by British forces in the Prome District. *New Burma* originally published this image on 10<sup>th</sup> June 1931; however, U Saw republished these images in *The Burmese Situation*.<sup>142</sup>

Fear that the employment of Indian troops would facilitate additional tension between the Bamar and Indians was not limited to the Burmese press. British anti-imperialist newspapers, although biased, foreshadowed the indiscriminate violence against Indians which would define late-colonial Burma. The *Daily Worker* wrote, “the Government is endeavoring to give this revolt against British imperialism an ‘anti-Indian’ turn, both by employing Indian troops against the Burmese and by encouraging the importation of Indian labourers, who

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<sup>141</sup> “Extract from the Official Report of the Madras Legislative Council Debates,” (5 August 1931), 340, found in, *The Burma Rebellion: General File*, 252.

<sup>142</sup> U Saw, *The Burmese Situation*, xvii, found in, Government of Burma, *The Burma Rebellion: General File*, 322. *New Burma* was a Burmese language nationalist newspaper owned by Dr. Thein Maung and was viewed as the leftist equivalent of U Saw’s *Thuriya* according to Matthew J. Bowser.

are ready to accept even lower wages than the Burmese.”<sup>143</sup> This passage illustrates that British actions were the cause of the increasing virulence of anti-Indian sentiment in Burma. Moreover, a British newspaper publishing this account meant that these inter-ethnic tensions were common knowledge and that efforts could have been made to alleviate them. Instead, the Government’s continued use of force provided the Bamar with indisputable evidence of their oppression, strong enough for the international press to recognize. The phrasing “to give this revolt an anti-Indian turn” suggests that before the use of Indian troops the rebellion had not been anti-Indian in general. During the Burma Legislative Assembly Debates of September 22, 1931, F. B. Leach states, “I do not think that that amounts to saying that the anti-Indian movement was part of the rebellion.” This is in reference to accounts of rebels looting “the homes of isolated Indian cultivators in the fields.”<sup>144</sup> Leach introduces the idea that the Saya San Rebellion was not inherently anti-Indian, but that anti-Indian sentiment developed over time. However, the images of beheaded rebels allowed Bamar nationalists such as U Saw to use any non-Bamar, but Indians in particular, as scapegoats for British-directed military action.

Where there had previously been a divide in the opinions of urban Bamar nationalists and rural peasants regarding the status of Indians in the Burmese plural society, the Saya San Rebellion united urban and rural Bamar peoples under the idea of “Burma should be for the Burmans Alone.” For the urban

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<sup>143</sup> “War Plans Against Burmese Peasants,” *The Daily Worker* (3 June 1931), found in, Government of Burma, *The Burma Rebellion: General File*, 490.

<sup>144</sup> Government of Burma, *The Burma Rebellion: General File*, 271.

Bamar, anti-Indian sentiment had existed to some degree because cities such as Rangoon were ports where Indian immigrants could immediately settle and form visible communities. H. F. Searle described how “[t]he frequent cry that the Indian is replacing the Burman is due to the large number of Indians that can be seen landing from the ships [in Rangoon]...[and that] the Indian population is [too] concentrated.”<sup>145</sup> This is in contrast to the rural situation at the beginning of the Saya San Rebellion where the British, village headmen, and Chettiar moneylenders represented the initial targets while Indian farmers were not singled out. However, the British use of Indian troops enraged the rural Bama peasantry to such a degree that they now possessed the same anti-Indian beliefs as the urban nationalists, expressing this anger by burning down Indian inhabited residences. The Saya San Rebellion gave both urban Bamar nationalists and rural Bamar peasants the chance to falsely implicate all Indians in Burma for the crimes of a minority of British Indian Army soldiers.

### *Conclusions*

The Saya San Rebellion sowed the seeds of Bamar ethnonationalism which bridged the gap between urban and rural Bamar residents under the guise of anti-Indian sentiment. Saya San’s movement helped develop a Burmese identity through illustrating to all that being a member of an independent Burmese community meant subscribing to a civic identity, consisting of resisting the

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<sup>145</sup> H.F. Searle, *Reports and Notes on Indian Immigration into Burma* (Rangoon: Reforms Department, 1935), found in Bowser, Matthew, J, “Misdirected Rage: The Fascist Response to Co-Colonialism and Capitalism in Burma and the Origins of Burmese Islamophobia, 1929-1942” (Boston, Northeastern University Department of History, 2020).

British and co-colonialists, which was upheld by an ethnic identity of being Bamar. The violent suppression of the Rebellion showed that a violent uprising against the British would be impossible to win for the time being. It did not matter how fanatical the rebel forces were, charging British battalions would never amount to victory. The fight for independence would no longer be on the battlefield but in the halls of the legislature. But in contrast to traditional interpretations of nationalism in Burma emerging from western educated elites, peasants laid the foundations of the Burmese civic and Bamar ethnic nationalism through their establishment of an “in-group” consisting of Bamar Buddhists, and an out-group of co-colonialists. The Saya San Rebellion unified both urban and rural Bamar residents under the idea that the oppression by co-colonialists, especially Indians, could be ameliorated through a violent purge of the British colonial system and its co-colonialist agents.

The use of Buddhist and Bamar animist symbols had been effective for Saya San but within a legislature under British supervision, millenarism had its limitations. Instead, the anti-Indian sentiment which had become a key trait of the late stages of the Saya San Rebellion would serve as a more radical tool for gaining widespread attention. As we have seen, a hatred towards Indian troops was espoused by the majority Bamar population. Bigotry against Indians was an established sentiment for many Bamar at the end of the Rebellion, there was nothing stopping legislators such as U Saw and U Pu from demonizing Indians as members of a fifth column. With the British ready to provide measures of self-



government to the populations of Burma and India in the 1930s, the scene was set for the next step towards Burmese independence – “the Separation Crisis.”

## CHAPTER THREE

### **To Divide or Not to Divide: The Emergence of Bamar Ethnonationalism, Anti-Indian Sentiment, and the Nation During the “Separation Crisis”**

The term “Separation Crisis” defines the late-nineteenth century political debate over whether Burma should separate from India to become its own colony within the British Empire. Discussions that began in the halls of the legislature trickled down into the general populace, both urban and rural, as political factions for and against separation campaigned extensively to win a legislative majority. To understand how this “crisis” came about, it is important to trace the evolution of the legislative system in Burma under British rule, starting at the end of the Third Anglo-Burmese War.

The year was 1885 and British soldiers with bayonets forced the last king of Burma, Thibaw Min, to abdicate his throne and live a life in exile, concluding the Third Anglo-Burmese War. The King and royal court officials boarded a steamship bound for India whilst crowds lined the streets to bid farewell to their monarch.<sup>146</sup> Royalist support did not disintegrate immediately as royal court officials, soldiers, and the *Sangha*, all dependent on the patronage of the king, rose in open revolt between 1886 and 1890.<sup>147</sup> It took over four years for the British to “pacify” Upper Burma and bring the province under a nominal “peace.” The British administration stripped Burma of its sovereignty and made it a

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<sup>146</sup> Margaret, Bertha, Syngé, “The Annexation of Burma,” in *Growth of the British Empire*, 2006. According to W. S. Desai in “Deposed King Thibaw,” Thibaw Min and his family lived the rest of their lives in India. In exile, they were given a stipend by the British government and lived in a stone palace residence in Ratnagiri until his death in 1916.

<sup>147</sup> Aung-Thwin and Aung-Thwin, *A History of Myanmar*, 190.

province of the larger British Indian Empire. Viewing Burma as an appendage of the Indian subcontinent—separating its connection to Southeast Asia—the British implemented an administrative system mirroring that which governed India. There was a reliance on direct administration, “down to the district level,” by British officials. The militaristic chain of command was the antithesis of traditional Southeast Asian modes of administration governed by patron-client relationships.<sup>148</sup> Reciprocity, a characteristic of these patron-client relations, disappeared when royal officials were turned transformed into civil servants. British direct rule foreshadowed the immense number of roadblocks on the road to indigenous rule in Burma.<sup>149</sup>

1897 was a significant year for Burma as the first steps towards indigenous participation in government came in the form of the Legislative Council of Burma. The Legislative Council initially consisted of “four officials and five nominated non-officials” who served as an advisory group to the Lieutenant Governor of Burma.<sup>150</sup> The British did not offer this policy out of empathy but rather to “improve” economic productivity in the province, as these appointed officials included representatives from different corporations looking to maximize the wealth extraction from the colony.<sup>151</sup> Prior to 1897, there was no official outlet for the concerns of people with interests in Burma, including the wealthy. Previously, laws governing Burma were officially ratified in India in a

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<sup>148</sup> Moscotti, *British Policy and the Nationalist Movement in Burma, 1917-1937*, 3.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>150</sup> Ian Brown, *Burma's Economy in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 27, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139059572>. The Lieutenant Governor of Burma stood below the Governor-General of India. Since Burma was a province in the British Indian Empire, it did not have a “Governor” until separation.

<sup>151</sup> Moscotti, *British Policy and the Nationalist Movement in Burma, 1917-1937*, 9.

system where bills drafted by the Burmese administration had to be approved by the Legislative Council of India and the Governor-General-in-Council.<sup>152</sup> With many of the civil servants in the Burmese administration having received their training in India, British officials made laws for the Bamar majority based on legislation already implemented in India. Although the Council was a mere gesture to British rulers, it nonetheless established an important basis for later self-governing efforts by illustrating that British authority could be challenged.

“The Separation Crisis” began with the British restricting self-governing institutions to India-proper, leaving Burma under direct rule.<sup>153</sup> By 1917 the Secretary of State for India, Edwin Samuel Montagu, declared that British policy in India would be that of “the gradual development of self-governing institutions with a view to the progressive realization of responsible government in India.”<sup>154</sup> The proposed “Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms” were realized in the 1919 Government of India Act which introduced a dyarchy system of government to India. Under the dyarchy system, the Crown appointed officials governed alongside elected ministers within the executive branch. A step towards self-governance, certain government departments such as agriculture, health, and education would be under the purview of Indian ministers who were themselves subject to regulation from local legislative councils.<sup>155</sup> However, the Government of India Act did not initially extend to the Province of Burma due to the British

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<sup>152</sup> Brown, *Burma's Economy in the Twentieth Century*, 27.

<sup>153</sup> Matthew J. Bowser, “Misdirected Rage: The Fascist Response to Co-Colonialism and Capitalism in Burma and the Origins of Burmese Islamophobia, 1929-1942.”

<sup>154</sup> Brown, *Burma's Economy in the Twentieth Century*, 66.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 67.

administration in India believing that “Burma is not India, its people belong to another race in another stage of political development.”<sup>156</sup>

While Burma was indeed not India, the notion that the Burmese were not developed enough to receive self-governing institutions was an absurd and inflammatory notion. Decades of British governance dictated by the belief that Burma could be governed in the same manner as India exacerbated Burmese feelings of being treated as second-class citizens when dyarchy was not extended to them. In Rangoon, “Indians found it easier than Burmese to dominate middle and lower echelon commercial and government positions,” and reforms restricted to India-proper strengthened a Bamar belief that they would continue to be treated as inferior to Indians.<sup>157</sup>

Protest against the limitations of the Government of India Act was the start of a modern Burmese nationalist movement. Students at the University of Rangoon, *pongyis*, and the newly formed GCBA called for an extension of self-governing institutions to Burma through both non-violent and violent protest.<sup>158</sup> While the Saya San Rebellion of the 1930s aimed to restore a pre-colonial order, there was hope that these initial demonstrations represented a Burmese nationalism that aimed to create a society where indigenous and Western elements could coexist. Taking inspiration from the Indian Congress Party, Burmese leaders worked with the Indian Congress Party to boycott the first reformed

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Charney, *A History of Modern Burma*, 24. Civil service exams were in English, and even European officials often had to pass exams in Hindustani. This disadvantaged the Bamar as the percentage of those fluent in English within the Bamar community was small. Speaking English was viewed by many Bamar as a sign of being a member of the co-colonialist elite.

<sup>158</sup> Brown, *Burma's Economy in the Twentieth Century*, 67.

legislature election of October 1920 in India – this cooperation would not stand the test of time as anti-Indian sentiment grew during the “Separation Crisis.”<sup>159</sup>

The unity between Bamar and Indian nationalists in the 1920s proved its fruitfulness when passive resistance inspired by Gandhi resulted in the Government of Burma Act of 1921. Dyarchy was thereby extended to Burma and in 1923 the British reformed the Legislative Council of Burma to include 103 members, of which 80 members were elected.<sup>160</sup> However, the dyarchy system was immediately scorned by the majority of the Bamar political activists because dyarchy gave them nominal control over certain ministries with the most powerful positions reserved for Crown-appointed officials.<sup>161</sup> The Government of India Act stipulated a review of reformed government institutions within 10 years through the Indian Statutory Commission, or Simon Commission, led by Sir John Simon. This commission surveyed the efficacy of British rule in India-proper and Burma in 1927 and 1929, respectively.<sup>162</sup> As shown in Chapter Two, the Bamar peasantry held great animosity towards Chettiar moneylenders and perceived Indian immigration into cities such as Rangoon to be competing with Burmese labor. The socio-political climate of Burma in 1929 had drastically changed since 1921 as land continued to fall from the peasantry into the hands of moneylenders and landlords. Unexpectedly, the Simon Commission advocated for the separation of India and Burma into two distinct colonies with independent governments due

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<sup>159</sup> John F. Cady, *A History of Modern Burma*, 215–16.

<sup>160</sup> Brown, *Burma's Economy in the Twentieth Century*, 67.

<sup>161</sup> John F. Cady, “Conflicting Attitudes Towards Burma,” *Far Eastern Survey* 15, no. 2 (1946): 27–31.

<sup>162</sup> Brown, *Burma's Economy in the Twentieth Century*, 67.

to the aforementioned issues, writing that “Burma’s political subservience to India has seriously jeopardized her financial and economic interests and even threatens to denationalize her.”<sup>163</sup> However, this action was not out of empathy but the understanding that inaction would have most likely resulted in civil unrest in response to problems the British themselves created.

The process of separation, organized through two London roundtable conferences undertaken while the Saya San Rebellion raged, resulted in the solidification of “Separationist” and “anti-Separationist” coalitions. The first roundtable conference occurred in 1930 and the second in 1931.<sup>164</sup> The second conference, aptly named the Burma Round Table Conference did not produce the desired result of unanimous support for the separation of Burma from India.<sup>165</sup> As a result, the British Prime Minister demanded “a clear mandate from the Burmese people as to their desires in the matter.”<sup>166</sup> The decision for separation or federation with India could now be controlled to an extent by the Burma Legislative Council. Rather quickly, two political alliances dubbed the “Separationists” and “anti-Separationists” formed.

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<sup>163</sup> Government of the United Kingdom. *Indian Statutory (Simon) Commission 1927-30: Vol 3 Reports of Committees Appointed by Provincial Legislative Councils, 1930* (London: H.M. Stationery Office. 1930), 510. IOR/V/26/261/19.

<sup>164</sup> Cady, *A History of Modern Burma*, 322. Calling these conferences during the Saya San Rebellion was a way for the British to appear to address concerns of the Burmese. However, this was ultimately unsuccessful as the brutal repression of Saya San’s followers bred distrust towards any British promises.

<sup>165</sup> Cady, *A History of Modern Burma*, 333. The first round table conference was attended by four members of the Burma Legislative Council as well as Burma’s governor and two Indian representatives. The second round table conference was attended by members of the British Parliament, Bamar, and two representatives from each of the following minority groups: Karens, Chinese, Shans, Anglo-Indians, and British.

<sup>166</sup> Andrew, E. J. L, *Indian Labour in Rangoon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), xxvi.

The divisions between the Separationists and anti-Separationists became a bitter political feud and illustrated that different philosophies existed within Burmese nationalism. Historian Matthew Bowser characterizes the platform of the Separationists as consisting “mainly of anti-Indian prejudice, encouraging popular hostility towards Indian laborers and moneylenders and accusing the anti-Separationists of being Indian patsies.”<sup>167</sup> As we shall see, this is an accurate representation of the Separationist’s views which eventually dictated the “imagined community” of an independent Burmese state. The political sentiment that evolved into anti-Indian prejudice, however, originated in response to real issues of land tenure and competition for urban jobs with Indian immigrants. The anti-Separationists built their case on the feelings of distrust towards the British during the earlier Montagu-Chelmsford reforms, where a legislature was only extended to Burma after significant protest.<sup>168</sup> Anti-Separationists feared that Burma’s separation from India would place Burma under a stricter British administration when compared to India and they had the suppression of the Saya San Rebellion to show how oppressive the British could be. While both alliances sought independence, they differed in how they approached achieving this goal. The anti-Separationists believed that working with Indian nationalists would be advantageous in securing the independence of both India and Burma whilst the Separationists viewed “Indian immigration in this modern age is a danger to the

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<sup>167</sup> Bowser, “Misdirected Rage: The Fascist Response to Co-Colonialism and Capitalism in Burma and the Origins of Burmese Islamophobia, 1929-1942,” 118.

<sup>168</sup> Andrew, E. J. L, *Indian Labour in Rangoon*, xxvii.



Burmese nationality.”<sup>169</sup> However, I will show that this dichotomous description of the alliances in the “Separation Crisis” is an oversimplification, and that anti-Indian sentiment specifically would emerge in both parties.

Bamar Separationists perceived the findings of the Simon Commission and the following roundtable conferences Commission as windows to Burmese independence that prompted the question of “who belongs” in an independent Burma. While the anti-Separationists initially rejected the Simon Commission’s findings wholeheartedly, the debate over separation in the legislature provided them an opportunity as well to shape a Burmese identity as well. The Simon Commission developed the idea of the modern Burmese nation by centering discussion of the shared linguistic, religious, and national characteristics of the Bamar to take center stage in legislative debate. There was always a concept of a Bamar homeland, but this took the form of the Buddhist kingdoms in Upper Burma where the idea of citizenship was sidelined in favor of Buddhist identity. The Simon Commission expressed the idea that “[British India] is not an association of two peoples [Indians and Burmans] having natural affinities tending towards union.”<sup>170</sup>

Bamar nationalists regardless of Separationist or anti-Separationist allegiance, now had in writing, a justification to claim the land within Burma’s borders as Bamar land. The idea that the Bamar were different from Indians in all

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<sup>169</sup> Government of Burma. *Reports and Papers on Agriculture, Including Confidential Revenue Department Report on Agricultural Tenants and Labourers (1924), Printed Reports of t..., 1922-1945* (India Office Records and Private Papers. 1922-1945), Mss Eur E252/15, 16.

<sup>170</sup> Government of the United Kingdom. *Indian Statutory (Simon) Commission 1927-30: Vol 3 Reports of Committees Appointed by Provincial Legislative Councils, 1930* (London: H.M. Stationery Office. 1930), 510. IOR/V/26/261/19.

respects, which was the philosophical backbone of separation, foreshadowed that the Burmese nation would be formed through the strengthening of Bamar racial identity and the exclusion of peoples. Bamar Separationists embraced British racism to legitimate their claims that Burma's land should belong to them. I argue that Bamar nationalists used the aftermath of the Simon Commission as a chance to imagine a nation governed by the Bamar "race" and religion. The issues of land tenure and Indian immigration which fueled the concurrent Saya San Rebellion meant that the Burmese nation had its beginning in an environment hostile to minorities.

Benedict Anderson's idea of a nation as "an imagined political community— and imagined both inherently limited and sovereign" provides a useful definition to understand why the Separationists would emphasize Bamar race, religion, and geography in their vision for Burma.<sup>171</sup> The process of separating Burma from India provided a platform for Bamar ethnic nationalism to grow at the expense of the Indian minority. The rhetoric of the "plural society" would be supplanted by an imagined national community defined as distinctly "anti-Indian." Rather than explicitly rallying the urbanites to the banner of ethnic nationalism, Bamar nationalist leaders would instead characterize the Indian community as an expanding entity that would replace the Bamar. Thus the "Separation Crisis," concurrent with the Saya San Rebellion, provided the foundation for a modern Burmese nation by constructing a community based on exclusivity rather than inclusivity. In contrast to the Saya San Rebellion, the goals

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<sup>171</sup> Benedict R. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised edition (London New York: Verso, 2016), 6.

of Bamar Separationist and anti-Separationist legislators was to form a modern Burmese nation, for the Bamar, based on egalitarian values. While Saya San's followers who desired a return to a pre-colonial Buddhist kingdom, the urban Bamar leaders of the "Separation Crisis" used modern nationalist rhetoric of country and race to fight for home-rule. Rather than expressing their desire for self-rule using arms, urban Bamar residents would fight in the halls of the legislature to build a modern Burmese state with a clear sense of national identity and citizenship.

### *Separation and the Racialization of the Bamar*

By stating that "Burma is not India" and therefore that the Burmese were not Indian, the Simon Commission made highlighting ethnic differences the first step to imagining who belongs in an independent Burma. Rather than promoting civic ideals to which the Burmese state and its potential citizens could aspire, ethnic nationalism proved to be the easier way to unite the Bamar majority against their British and perceived Indian oppressors. The Bamar during the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial periods shared "a sense of commonality based on a myth of common origins ... a common language, and common customs" which Eric Weitz uses to define the term "ethnic group."<sup>172</sup> As shown in Chapters One and Two, this commonality came from a proud history of Bamar Buddhist kingdoms, Theravada Buddhism itself, belief in *Nat* spirits, the custom of

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<sup>172</sup> Eric D. Weitz, *A Century of Genocide: Utopias of Race and Nation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 21, <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/9781400866229-005/html>.

tattooing, and the Burmese language. However, the British not only differentiated Indian and Bamar peoples as separate races but also categorized the Bamar and other indigenous peoples of Burma as separate races, arbitrarily writing that “[w]hereas the Karen is naturally truthful (perhaps because he is slow-witted), the Burman is a confirmed boaster. The Burman is a delightful and amusing companion, but he is volatile, unstable, incompetent, with sudden enthusiasm and passions, never long sustained.”<sup>173</sup> The British created these false “traits” to divide and rule and this perception that the ethnic groups of Burma each possessed unique transgenerational behaviors constituted a British constructed difference.

Racialization served as an effective tool for the Separationists to unite the Bamar to construct a national identity based on their differences from other ethnic groups residing in Burma. Weitz writes:

Ethnic groups develop into nations when they become politicized and strive to create, or have created for them, a political order—the nation-state—whose institutions are seen to conform in some way to their ethnic identity, and whose boundaries are, ideally, contiguous with the group’s territoriality.<sup>174</sup>

The “Separation Crisis” provided Bamar nationalists with a platform to define themselves as the rightful heirs of the land within British Burma’s boundaries and to develop a political order based on British-defined racial differences from the peoples local to the outskirts of Burma. Separation from India hardened a notion of ethnic difference along colonial borders, thus emphasizing the Bamar as race,

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<sup>173</sup> Ian Morrison, *Grandfather Longlegs; the Life and Gallant Death of Major H.P. Seagrim* (London: Faber and Faber LTD, 1947), 22.

<sup>174</sup> Weitz, *A Century of Genocide*, 21.

“the most exclusive form of identity,” and provided an argument for Bamar rule in Burma.<sup>175</sup> British notions of race strengthened the idea of ethnic distinctiveness during the “Separation Crisis.” Thus, Bamar nationalists relinquished nuanced ideologies, such as the ideas of anti-separation and separation, in favor of a monolithic ideology of “Burma for the Burmans,” which would manifest itself during the 1938 Anti-Indian Riots.

To Bamar Separationists, association with the land of Burma became a key prerequisite to Burmese citizenship and a way to define “outsiders.” The debate over separation disseminated the conception that the land of Burma was different from India proper, and Bamar Separationists used this idea to define the people originally from these respective lands as different and therefore alien to each other. To the Separationists, immigrants needed to *prove* their loyalty to Burma to even have a chance of being a member of the community.

One of the agents within the broader Separationist movement was the Burma for the Burmans League, who published their “definition of a Burman,” in a resolution to the Simon Commission including a draft constitution for a separated Burma. The Burma for the Burmans League was a nationalist organization which well within the broader political group of the Separationist League.<sup>176</sup> This draft constitution was published in 1929 to show the members of the Simon Commission that Burma was ready for self-governance and included citizenship

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<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

<sup>176</sup> Haruhiro Fukui, *Political Parties of Asia and the Pacific*, The Greenwood Historical Encyclopedia of the World’s Political Parties (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1985), 118–19.

requirements such as proving long-term settlement and a connection to Burma both geographically and civically. A “Burman” was defined as:

1. A person of any race born and brought up on the soil of Burma and who continues to make Burma his or her home for good, without any distinction of caste, class, colour, or creed
2. A person of any race born outside of Burma but who comes to Burma, lives in Burma for not less than 25 years, knows Burmese well and claims Burmese citizenship with the intention of making Burma his or her home for good. All others not coming within these two categories are necessarily non-Burmans, and must be treated as aliens and foreigners coming to Burma for temporary purposes only.<sup>177</sup>

The first part of the definition reflects the importance of ties to the geographic territory of Burma for membership in the “imagined community.” This proposed policy of *jus soli* (“citizenship by soil”) overrides distinction based on both inherited and cultural traits such as skin color and creed, respectively. The idea of birthright citizenship illustrates that this nationalist movement, emerging out of the separation debate, wanted to develop a Burmese nation with intangible requirements for citizenship whereas such requirements in writing were not advantageous in a pre-colonial kingdom. Characterizing what makes a citizen strengthened national identity because defining an “in-group” creates an opposing “out-group.”

While the idea of Burmese citizen birthright may convey an emphasis on civic nationalism over ethnic nationalism, the requirement of living in Burma for at least 25 years and mastering the Burmese language illustrates that the idea of being Burmese was tied to the Bamar language, customs, and the soil of Burma.

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<sup>177</sup> “Burma for the Burmans League Parts I to III Memorandum, 1929. Parts I to III,” 33-34, found in, Government of the United Kingdom, Indian Statutory Commission, *Burma Memoranda* (London: H.M. Stationery Office, 1929). IOR/Q/13/1/7.

Despite this definition of a “Burman” appearing to accommodate immigrants into a Burmese imagined community, learning Burmese, the language of the Bamar, provides the Bamar with an advantage in securing a place in the community signaling to ethnic minorities that they were second-class citizens. The use of the terms “aliens and foreigners” outright establishes an “in-group” and “out-group” based on geography and ethnicity. Definitions of membership in the Burmese nation would move towards the idea of *jus sanguinis* (“citizenship by blood”) foreshadowing a growing hostility towards immigrants.

It is important to understand that this Burmese draft constitution was written with the intention of being read by the British as well as the general population, potentially dampening its nationalistic tone. Including divisive statements such as an outright cry for restrictions on immigration would carry an aura of ethnonationalism that threatened British rule; therefore, it is reasonable to assume that the rhetoric found in this definition was a mild version of the true feelings of the Burma for the Burmans League. The name Burma for the Burmans illustrates their goal of forming a Bamar-dominated state, as the terms Burman and Bamar was synonymous in the colonial period. As we shall see, the Separationists were the epitome of an ethnonationalist party.

The Separationists’ definition of a “Burman” captures the importance of geographic ties to Burma and illustrates that Burmese nationalism would increasingly take the form of Bamar nationalism. Bamar nationalist U Mya U wrote in the *Rangoon Times* that:

We Burmans have, as a race, had our own kings before the advent of the British, continuously for more than 1,000 years and are proud of our own

race as every nation has its racial pride...we have one race (Burman), one language (Burmese), one religion (Buddhism), one ideal, and one dress without any caste or caste distinction, while our manners and customs have remained free of diversity.<sup>178</sup>

U Mya U uses Burman as a synonym for the Bamar, characterizing the latter as “race.” The author places the terms “Burman,” “Burmese,” and “Buddhism” in succession to argue that these three items collectively define Burmese identity and are thus indivisible. By sandwiching this definition of Burmese identity between a glorification of Bamar kings and customs that have remained “free of diversity,” the author argues that Bamar and Burmese identity are equivalent. U Mya U attempts to convince the urban reader not only that the Bamar have the right to govern due to their historical ties with the land but also that this right should be inheritable and passed down to the next generation of Bamar offspring. U Mya U emphasizes the continuity and purity of Bamar identity by praising a lack of diversity in “manners and customs.” The idea that the imagined community should conform to Bamar identity and not vice versa builds on the notion that Burma was to be a country for the Bamar. A Separationist, U Mya U directs his article towards the urban elite with the goal of fostering a Bamar racial identity and how that identity will disappear under the current dyarchy system. Imagining the Bamar as the proud historic rulers of Burma contends that only they have the precedent and the continued mandate to rule Burma. U Mya U’s newspaper article illustrates how the “Separation Crisis” drove Bamar ethno-nationalism to new extremes under the hope that a Bamar-dominated nation-state was possible.

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<sup>178</sup> U Mya U, “Plea for Separation of Burma From India,” *Rangoon Times Press*, (Rangoon: 1929), 2, found in, Government of the United Kingdom, Indian Statutory Commission, *Burma Memoranda* (London: H.M. Stationery Office, 1929). IOR/Q/13/1/7.



The ethnonationalism and racialization of the Bamar was not inevitable but rather a conscious choice of nationalists who saw this rhetoric as useful in their arguments for separation and eventual independence. While we have established that the Bamar ethnic group had a proud history prior to British rule, the notion of the Bamar as a “race” and its role in creating an imagined national community was based on concepts from the “Western world from around 1700 onward.”<sup>179</sup> What defines the emerging rhetoric that the Bamar were a race was a hierarchical construction of difference, inherent to racialization, and the notion that the Bamar race could be “defiled.”<sup>180</sup>

The fear of “impurities” in the Bamar race drove U Mya U to advocate for a Burma “free of diversity.” U Mya U actively refuted both the plural society as well as the possibility of creating a Burmese identity inclusive to minorities using British racial rhetoric. Furthermore, U Mya U warns his audience that “[s]ince our annexation there has been an inrush of non-Burmese races into our land. Out of a population of 13 million people, there are 3 million foreign races, that is, 2.5 million Indians and 0.5 a million of all other races.”<sup>181</sup> U Mya U argues that Burma belongs to the Bamar and that his audience should be afraid of an ongoing “invasion” by “non-Burmese races.” By labeling an in-group consisting of the Bamar and an out-group “foreign races,” U Mya U constructs a hierarchy where the Bamar have the greatest claim to the land and membership in the community.

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<sup>179</sup> Weitz, *A Century of Genocide*, 22.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>181</sup> U Mya U, “Plea for Separation of Burma From India,” *Rangoon Times Press*, (Rangoon: 1929), 2, found in, Government of the United Kingdom, Indian Statutory Commission, *Burma Memoranda* (London: H.M. Stationery Office, 1929). IOR/Q/13/1/7.

These statements appearing in a well-circulated government paper such as the *Rangoon Times* not only reflect an attempt to convince the British that separation needed to occur immediately but also an intent to spread Bamar ethnonationalist rhetoric during the process of separation. The author used the debate over separation to argue that foreigners threatened the Bamar inheritance of Burma borders thus the “Separation Crisis” fueled the mentality that a plural society could not stand.

The emerging idea of “racial purity,” a product of the “Separation Crisis,” bolstered the notion that the Bamar as a race possessed the birthright to live in and govern an independent Burma. Separationists and the general population either disseminated or were aware of an emerging hierarchy in which immigrants, especially those from India, were perceived as having less of a claim than the Bamar to live in Burma. This is a rejection of the British imposed ethnic hierarchy part of divide and rule policies where Indians and indigenous minorities in Burma had greater authority than the Bamar. Thus, the Bamar claim to Burma became more radical through the perception that both the Bamar and nation would become “impure” because of co-colonialist ethnic minorities. In reference to Indian immigrants, U Mya U wrote:

Of this 3 million, let us assume that 2 million have been absorbed in the Burmese nation by marriage lawfully or otherwise with Burmese Buddhist women. The issues of such a union could not be *ipso facto* be pure Burmese, and the religious faith of such children would be non-Buddhist, as children generally follow the religion of their fathers.<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

The claim that immigrants needed to assimilate into the Burmese nation through marriage with Burmese Buddhist women illustrates the transformation of Bamar identity from one based on customs to one based on progeny. U Mya U suggests that having a child with a Bamar Buddhist women should be a requirement for immigrants to become a member of the community, illustrating that membership in the imagined community would be based on the amount of Bamar “blood.” However, not all Bamar nationalists wanted immigrants to marry Bamar Buddhist women because they “feared Indians producing half-caste children (called *zerbadis* in the case of Muslim marriages) who would dilute out the ‘pure’ Burmese race over a period of time.”<sup>183</sup> What unites the Bamar nationalists’ opposing arguments is the emphasis on the importance of offspring, the future of the nation, and the maintenance of Bamar racial “purity.” The idea that Bamar blood was required to be a member of the community, in both cases, conveys the Bamar nationalists’ intentional use of racializing rhetoric to create a new Burmese identity. Race and racial purity served Bamar nationalists well as they contributed to building a racial hierarchy, with the Bamar at the top, providing a criterion for membership in their imagined community.

The engineering of an existential threat towards the survival of the Bamar race and its potential “extermination” reflects the Separationist racialization of the Bamar to argue that to be Burmese is to be Bamar. Referring back to U Mya U’s article, he writes “the very existence of the Burmans as a race would be

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<sup>183</sup> Rajashree Mazumder, “‘I Do Not Envy You’: Mixed Marriages and Immigration Debates in the 1920s and 1930s Rangoon, Burma,” *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 51, no. 4 (October 2014): 500, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0019464614550765>.

threatened, choked and finally meet with extermination in the course of a few decades."<sup>184</sup> Words such as “choked” and “extermination” are a direct emotional appeal to the Bamar reader with the goal of sewing a feeling of insecurity. The urban reader becomes a stakeholder in the “Separation Crisis” because the article is inviting them to join the Bamar nationalist cause. By portraying the Bamar as under threat with an emphasis on future progeny and survival, the writer portrays the Bamar as a group that must band together to survive. This defensive racializing rhetoric illustrates that the “Separation Crisis” provided a platform for Bamar Separationists to convince their comrades to battle for separation. The thought of extermination of one’s race is the ultimate motivator to act and fight; therefore, we can interpret U Mya U’s article as a direct plea to exclude the non-Bamar using the threat of “race extinction.”

It is also important to consider that the increasing popularity of the idea of a Burma for the Bamar was noted by the British, illustrating that they felt the colonial apparatus could be threatened by this rhetoric. While the colonial power certainly has a bias against their subjects taking up ethnonationalism, the British also had a vested interest in reporting the development of such sentiment. Oscar de Glanville, a British member and later president of the Legislative Council of Burma, wrote the following in 1929:

Burman opinion has taken up the cry of Burma for the Burmans and desires to exclude Indians, Chinese, and foreigners that mean European British subjects. Their desire is to exclude everyone who is not a Burman

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<sup>184</sup> U Mya U, “Plea for Separation of Burma From India,” *Rangoon Times Press*, (Rangoon: 1929), 4, found in, Government of the United Kingdom, Indian Statutory Commission, *Burma Memoranda* (London: H.M. Stationery Office, 1929). IOR/Q/13/1/7.

Buddhist from Government service and if given a free hand would oppress them in every way.<sup>185</sup>

From this account, we see the extent to which Bamar ethnonationalism began to gain notoriety within government circles and its increasing role in dictating the vision of the Burmese nation. Despite Oscar de Glanville hailing from Britain, his writings provide a good glimpse into the sentiments of Bamar nationalists due to his position as a member of the legislature. The references to the goal of the exclusion of all non-Bamar from Burma illustrate that from 1929 the Bamar urban population, and especially the Separationists, imagined their community to be comprised of and ruled by ethnic Bamar peoples. Separationist leader U Ba Pe said that “to achieve the aim that Burma is for Burmans with a Burmese Government and to re-hoist the standard of our Burmese Peacock it is not possible to rely on any other nation.”<sup>186</sup> U Ba Pe’s statement from 1932 suggests that the ethnonationalist rhetoric discussed continued to grow into the 1930s moving towards a goal of a modern Burmese nation for the Bamar. Self-reliance and a reference to the symbol of the Kombaung Dynasty, the peacock, represents an attempt to develop a new state ideology while using established symbols to unite the population. The desire for a Burman-run government reflects de Glanville’s analysis that an independent Burmese government would be run by Bamar representatives.

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<sup>185</sup> “Memorandum from Mr. O de Glanville,” 3, found in, Government of the United Kingdom, Indian Statutory Commission, *Burma Memoranda* (London: H.M. Stationery Office, 1929). IOR/Q/13/1/7.

<sup>186</sup> Government of Burma, Burma Legislature. *Legislative Council, Proceedings, Vol. XXIII: 5-22 December 1932* (Rangoon: Superintendent, Government Printing and Stationery, 1932), 11. IOR/V/9/4075.

The Separationists' racial characterization of the Bamar people as a race was to unify the Bamar for Burma's separation from India, while the success of this rhetoric came at the expense of the non-Bamar. The "Separation Crisis" is unique because Separationists used it to strengthen Bamar ethnonationalism, through racialization, which had effects in the years to come. The belief that foreign "races" were an invading force that would exterminate the Bamar race persisted beyond the "Separation Crisis" (Fig. 3). The enemy would not only be Indians but also the Chinese and Shans, an ethnic minority historically from the border between Burma and Thailand. An extension of who does not belong in Burma highlights how the construction of the Bamar as a race bolstered the notion that the Bamar were the only in-group in Burma. The caricatures of Chinese and Shans intently charging into Burma were deliberate. Such drawings demonized minorities as intentionally driving the Bamar to the sea towards extermination. Such strong connotations of the threat to Bamar survival illustrate the Separationist success in constructing the Bamar as a race under threat from enemies all over. The degree that this inflammatory rhetoric radicalized the Bamar population can be seen by the anti-Separationist leader and future Prime Minister of Burma Baw Maw's comment that "[w]e were the people who went all over the country during the last elections, that race hatred spread throughout the entire country like a fire. That fire it seems still exists."<sup>187</sup> Not only was the manufactured conception of the Bamar as a race popular, but it also remained

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<sup>187</sup> Government of Burma, Burma Legislature. *Legislative Council, Proceedings, Vol. XXIII: 5-22 December 1932* (Rangoon: Superintendent, Government Printing and Stationery, 1932), 256. IOR/V/9/4075.

present in the lives of the Bamar throughout the country. Baw Maw's concern illustrates the severity of the racialization of the Bamar and how not all Bamar nationalists subscribed to this tactic as the most stabilizing force in the fight for independence. The racialization of the Bamar was a deliberate act, fueled by the desire for independence, executed using the issue of separation of Burma from India, and an act that would proliferate the belief of a "Burma for the Burmans."

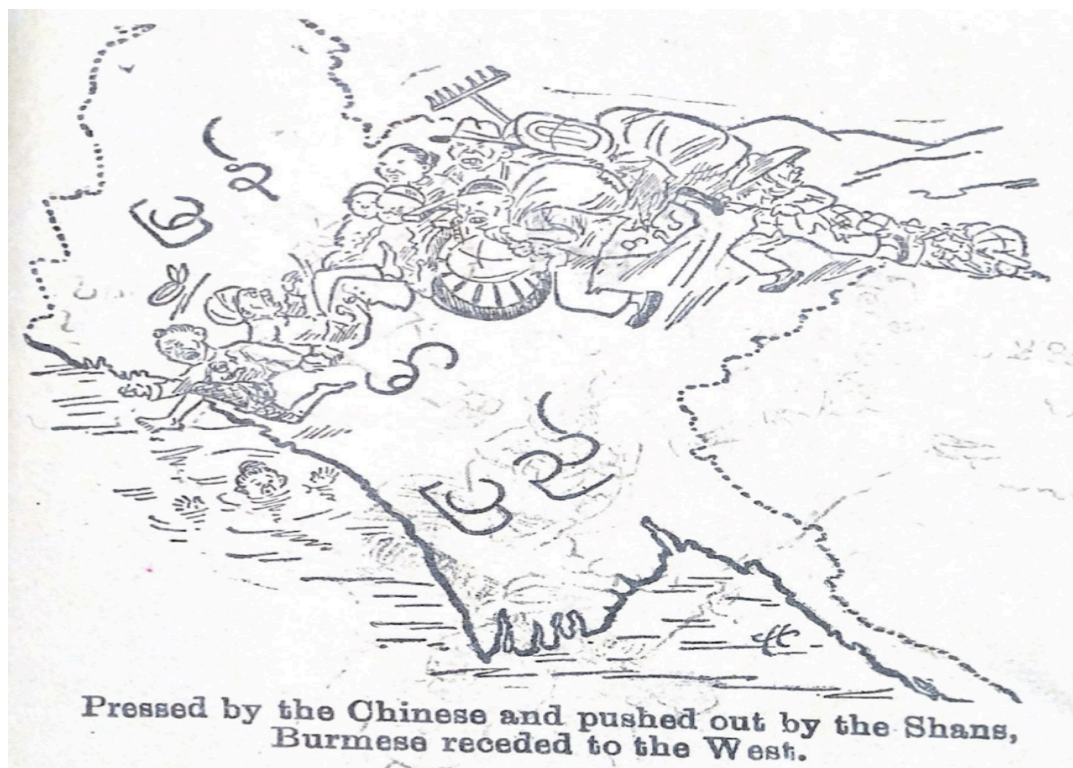


Figure 3: Cartoon, "Pressed by the Chinese and Pushed out by the Shans." The cartoon depicts caricatures of Chinese and Shan peoples driving the Burmese to the sea. This cartoon was reprinted in *The Immigration Problem of Burma* by U Thein Maung which itself was published in 1939.<sup>188</sup>

<sup>188</sup> Maung, Thein U, *The Immigration Problem of Burma* (Rangoon: New Burma Press, 1939).

### *Bamar Ethnonationalism and Anti-Indian Sentiment*

The British failure to fix underlying land tenure issues and competition for labor between Indians and Bamar peoples increased the appeal of ethnonationalism. It is telling that the anti-Indian rhetoric espoused at Burma Legislative Council Proceedings coincided with the rural Saya San Rebellion. Urban Bamar legislators and rural peasants, despite the differences in their visions for Burma, both viewed Indians as co-colonialists and thus opponents of their respective ideas of a Burmese imagined community. In essence, both reactions to British benightedness were movements aimed at restoring the Bamar race to a pre-colonial “glory” by expelling Indians from Burma. However, the evolution of Bamar to become synonymous with Burmese over the course of the “Separation Crisis” began with an emphasis on shared language and culture. The membership criteria for the Burma for the Burmans League illustrated the importance of the Burmese language, writing:

it was decided that membership be open to all Burmans of both sexes: those born in Burma and are able to read and write Burmese; those not born in Burma but are able to read and write Burmese and have decided to settle down in Burma for life and acquire Burmese Domicile.<sup>189</sup>

The criteria that members had to know Burmese, the language of the Bamar, reflects the intrinsically Bamar nature of the imagined Burmese state. Language is central to the identity of a people and nation; therefore, excluding the non-Bamar began the building of a nation that was both “limited and sovereign.” While Burmese literacy served as a convenient criterion for excluding non-Bamar, it still

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<sup>189</sup> “Burma for the Burmans League Parts I to III Memorandum, 1929. Parts I to III,” 2, found in, Government of the United Kingdom, Indian Statutory Commission. *Burma Memoranda*.



provided an avenue for foreigners to join the League so long as they took the time to learn. In the Draft Constitution of the Free State of Burma, submitted by the Separation League in 1929, “[t]he national language of the FREE STATE is the Burmese Language, but the English language shall be equally recognized as an official language.”<sup>190</sup> We see that the Burma for Burmans League, which formed the bulk of the Separationist camp, was also an urban elite organization as it valued Burmese and English literacy, traits unique to the elite. However, making Burmese and English the official language of the nation caters specifically to the Bamar majority, and their temporary foreign allies. In contrast to the peasantry who led the Saya San Rebellion, the League favored the educated and would fight for a Burma for the Burmans through litigation.

While the Burma for Burmans League had an urban and educated membership, they needed the support of the masses and the success of Bamar ethnonationalism required the creation of an out-group. By 1929 anti-Chettiar sentiment was common enough amongst the Bamar that race-baiting would become the tool of the Separationist to unite the Bamar as the in-group of an independent nation. In 1929, the Burma for the Burmans League submitted the following statement to the Simon Commission presenting the reasons for separation:

Burma may therefore be likened to a milch cow and the Central Board of Revenue in India to a clever Indian milkman. For several years past, the Indian milkman milked Rs. 1000 lakhs worth of milk from the Burma milch cow, and fed his wife and children, the Indian people.<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> *Draft Constitution of the Free State of Burma*, found in, Government of the United Kingdom, Indian Statutory Commission. *Burma Memoranda*.

<sup>191</sup> “Burma for the Burmans League Parts I to III Memorandum, 1929. Parts I to III,” 9, found in, Government of the United Kingdom, Indian Statutory Commission. *Burma Memoranda*.

The Separationists attempt to convince the British that the Bamar were being robbed, not by the British but by Indians, using the racist trope that minority populations leech off of the benevolent and naïve majority. There is no specificity in the statement, the Burma for the Burmans League dehumanizes all Indians, even those in India proper, as active participants in the “milking” of Burma for its resources at the expense of the Bamar. The phrases “clever” sews the idea that the minority was purposefully deceitful, and that the plural society could not survive. Such rhetoric inculcates that only the Bamar or Indians could inhabit the land within the borders of British Burma.

To the Separationists, the existence of an Indian minority in Burma not only represented an economic threat but also a threat to the “purity” of Bamar blood. We have seen that Western ideas of race by blood quantum served as a useful tool for some Bamar nationalists to espouse the idea that the Bamar are tied by blood to the land; therefore, their imagined community would be a homogenous one. However, the Bamar defined composition of an out-group would evolve from those who were non-Bamar to specifically target Indians over the course of the “Separation Crisis.” Saya Myo, President of the Burma for Burmans Separation League, discussed “five kinds of destruction” which challenged the Bamar race. The most important one was how:

Consequently, the proportion of Indians to the sons of the soil, being twenty to one, they have to jostle with each other, impairing the purity of the indigenous race. The danger of race extinction is thus upon us and the statement that the Burmese, as a nation, would soon disappear are true.<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> Ibid, 2.

Saya Myo establishes his imagined community, that the “soil” of the Burmese nation belonged to the indigenous races and not to Indians. The notion of “extinction” of the indigenous race suggest that Indians form a present and future threat to the survival of the Bamar. This erroneous claim illustrates that anti-Indian sentiment formed the Separationists’ ethnic nationalist platform. A fear of uninhibited Indian immigration and economic exploitation led to this anti-Indian sentiment becoming prominent “at all levels of the plural society” during the late 1920s and early 1930s, especially due to such rhetoric appearing in vernacular newspapers and pamphlets.<sup>193</sup>

The notion of “indigenous” races can be expanded to tribes such as the Karen who fall within the borders of British Burma; however, Indians are specifically excluded illustrating the hostility of the Bamar towards Indians based on race. The Separationist League’s Draft Constitution supports that “a certain number of seats should be reserved for the Karens or at least such arrangements should be made as to ensure them a certain number of seats.”<sup>194</sup> Through extending representation to the Karen people, the Separationists made the Karen stakeholders in their vision for Burma. This statement from a 1929 memorandum suggests that in the immediate aftermath of the Simon Commission’s report, a subset of Bamar nationalists restricted membership to their Burmese community to those who used the Burmese language, English, and were from within British

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<sup>193</sup> Adas, *The Burma Delta*, 193.

<sup>194</sup> The Separation League, “Memorandum Submitted to the Indian Statutory Commission by the Separation League,” (Rangoon: The National Printing Works, 1929), ii. IOR/Q/13/1/7, E-BUR-988, found in, Government of the United Kingdom, Indian Statutory Commission. *Burma Memoranda*.

Burma's borders. This represents a broad definition of being Burmese, as it included ethnic minorities, but was purposefully anti-Indian; the Bamar Separationists invited both the Karen National Association and British Burman Association to discuss the draft constitution for a separated Burma on December 12<sup>th</sup>, 1928.<sup>195</sup> We see that the Separationist's definition of Burmese excludes coolie laborers from India, who were not afforded the opportunity to learn Burmese and worked meager wages to support relatives in India.<sup>196</sup> Wealthy Indians, such as Chettiars, are also excluded as seen by the example of the "milch cow." The first year of the "Separation Crisis" illustrates that to the Bamar Separationists, Indians broadly represented a foreign element that was leeching off the indigenous peoples of Burma. We see the inclusion of the Karen people, perceived as co-colonialists by the rural Saya San Rebels, in the Separationists' meetings illustrating that the urban Bamar Separationists viewed the Indian minority as the greatest threat to a Burmese and now Bamar idealized community. To the Separationists to be Burmese was to be anti-Indian.

The specificity of the Separationists' actions towards building a Burma with a political and social climate inhospitable for Indians can be seen by an initial willingness to push for separation alongside the Karen National Association.<sup>197</sup> In 1929, the Karen National Association (KNA) sent a memorandum to the Simon Commission detailing their desire for a self-governing Karen state under the guise of supporting separation with a stipulation that Burma

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<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

<sup>196</sup> Pearn, Bertie, Reginald, *The Indian in Burma*, 16.

<sup>197</sup> Bowser, Matthew, J, "Misdirected Rage: The Fascist Response to Co-Colonialism and Capitalism in Burma and the Origins of Burmese Islamophobia, 1929-1942," 104.

would include a federated Karen state nominally part of Burma. The Karen National Association wrote, “if then Burma deserves Home Rule, does not Independence deserve, all the more Independence?”<sup>198</sup> San C. Po, a prominent Karen nationalist, and member of the Legislative Council, advocated for Burma’s separation from India because that would be a prerequisite for a Karen state “under the able guiding hands of sympathetic and efficient British officers.”<sup>199</sup> The KNA’s support of the Separation League was not due to its belief in Bamar ethnonationalism or have any desires to be a part of a Bamar-dominated state. In fact, the opposite was true and the KNA sided with the Separation League for the sole purpose of advancing their desire to maintain a distinction between themselves and the Bamar. The expression of Karen ethnic independence through the means of a separate state suggests that the Separation League’s vision was for a Burma for the Bamar people, thus forcing the Karen to advocate for their own political independence. However, at the Burma Round Table Conference of 1931, the Separationist camp was divided as to the demands of the Karen with U Ba Pe arguing that “the Karens were not a distinct racial group” and therefore should not be entitled to their own state.<sup>200</sup> The Karen had their own identities thus U Ba Pe’s statement does not reflect a welcoming of the Karen into a Bamar Buddhist imagined community but rather one of forced assimilation. From the Burmese language requirements for membership, found in the Constitution of the Burma

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<sup>198</sup> "Statements and Memorandum Submitted by the Karen National Association to the Indian Statutory Commission," (Rangoon: The British India, 1928), 15, found in, Government of the United Kingdom, Indian Statutory Commission. *Burma Memoranda*.

<sup>199</sup> San C. Po, *Burma and the Karens* (London: Elliot Stock, 1928), 79, <https://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks08/0800051h.html#ch1>.

<sup>200</sup> Cady, *A History of Modern Burma*, 333.

Free State, we see that only through a complete shedding of the cultural characteristics that make a person Karen, could a Karen person join this proposed Burma Free State. Thus, the Separationists used KNA political support but imaged their Burma as a Bamar Buddhist society and some members would be willing to make an erasure of Karen identity as a prerequisite for Karen membership in this imagined community.

Another emerging debate during the “Separation Crisis” was that of the marriage between Indian men, especially Muslims, and Burmese Buddhist women. Children of mixed ethnicity in this case were called *zerbadees* and their parents faced scrutiny by many urban Bamar.<sup>201</sup> The idea that Bamar “racial purity” would be disturbed through inter-ethnic marriage was particularly anti-Indian. The Separation League wrote in 1929 that “antiquated Indian marriage laws and customs are now in force to the prejudice of Burmese women and their offspring. Communalism with all its evils is taking root in Burma.”<sup>202</sup> This argument against Indian marriage laws and marriage between Burmese women and Indian men reflects how the issue of separation provided a venue for the development of the idea of a Burmese national identity that excluded Indians. As “[l]aws against intermarriage helped define racial boundaries and contributed to the meaning of ‘race’ itself,” the stigmatization of intermarriage reflects the racialization of the Bamar and how Separationists deliberately fought against the

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<sup>201</sup> Ikeya, *Refiguring Women, Colonialism, and Modernity in Burma*, 122.

<sup>202</sup> The Separation League, “Memorandum Submitted to the Indian Statutory Commission by the Separation League,” (Rangoon: The National Printing Works, 1929), iv, Government of the United Kingdom, Indian Statutory Commission. *Burma Memoranda*.

persistence of a plural society in favor of an imagined community of a Burma for the Bamar.<sup>203</sup>

The specificity of anti-Indian sentiment espoused by the Separationists during a period that overlapped with the rural Saya San Rebellion, which did not start as an anti-Indian movement, can be attributed to an increasing divide between the demographics of urban and rural Burma. In Rangoon, where the Burmese Legislative Assembly held their debates, “Indians constituted over 55 percent of the total population of Rangoon and over 65 percent of the male population.”<sup>204</sup> Such a high concentration of Indians in Rangoon partially explains why many male Bamar leaders felt as if “their” city was being overtaken by foreigners. With a genuine influx of Indian immigrants, the ratio of Bamar to Indian residents decreased and thus to Saya Myo it appeared that their “race” was in danger of “extinction.” The idea that Burma was a “milch cow” for Indian residents to drain of its resources became popular in part because of the high proportion of Indian settlers in cities such as Rangoon. We have established in Chapter Two that competition for land and labor in rural Burma between the Bamar and Indians was often sensationalized in the nationalist press; however, “in Rangoon factories 95 percent of the unskilled and 70 percent of the skilled labor were reported to be Indian in 1928 and the position does not appear to have changed since then.”<sup>205</sup> It appears that in the city where the Separationists camp

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<sup>203</sup> Fischer, Kirsten, *Suspect Relations: Sex, Race, and Resistance in Colonial North Carolina* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002) found in Weitz, 24.

<sup>204</sup> Government of Burma, Public and Judicial Department, *Indians in Burma: Appointment of Agent to Government of India in Burma; Appointment of High Commissioners for Burma in India, and India in Burma; Exchange of High Commissioners between Burma and Pakistan*. Rangoon: Superintendent, Government Printing and Stationery, 1937-1945. IOR/L/PJ/8/211.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

made their arguments, the Bamar and Indians were in stiff competition for work. While this does not excuse the aforementioned statements, the large concentration of Indians in Rangoon, in particular, provides context for why many Bamar nationalists viewed Indian immigrants with such hostility.

The Separationists represented the most vocal of the groups debating Burma's future both before and after the Simon Commission published its report; however, their rise to popularity was slow and their xenophobic rhetoric was not universally accepted. It was the anti-Separationists who won the 1932 Burma Legislative Council elections and would maintain an elected majority until the Government of Burma Act of 1935 formally separated Burma and India. The widely accepted characterization of the anti-Separationists was that they represented a broad group willing to work with the Indian National Congress to fight for independence together, under the guise of Indians and Burmese as victims of British oppression.<sup>206</sup> Anti-Separationists such as U Pe Maung describe this when writing that "when we spoke in our constituency on the subject of Separation and Federation, we were much blamed and we were called, '*kalamet*' (lovers of Indians), and also impious people."<sup>207</sup> The framing of the anti-Separationists as *kalamet* illustrates that to the Separationists, the anti-Separationists represented a pro-Indian party. *Kalamet* existing as a term itself and being construed as an insult by the Separationists illustrates the degree to which anti-Indian sentiment grew during the debate over separation from India.

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<sup>206</sup> Bowser, Matthew, J, "Misdirected Rage: The Fascist Response to Co-Colonialism and Capitalism in Burma and the Origins of Burmese Islamophobia, 1929-1942," 70.

<sup>207</sup> Government of Burma, Burma Legislature. *Legislative Council, Proceedings, Vol. XXIII: 5-22 December 1932*, 220-221.



The shaming of a political party due to perceptions of being pro-Indian shows that anti-Indian sentiment was becoming a normalized and even advantageous ideology in urban Burma. However, prior to their electoral victory, the anti-Separationists sent a denunciation of separation to the Round Table Conference of 1930 and consistently refused to compromise with the British. It appeared that the Separationists, always quick to label the anti-Separationists as *kalamet* and pro-British, were more willing to work with the British than the anti-Separationists. The anti-Separationists defended their position and work with the Indian National Congress by arguing that working towards independence in the long term was more advantageous than working with the distrustful British in the present. They justified anti-Separation through criticizing the British, not by saying that it would help Indian business interests. Being a member of the 1930s Bamar community now meant being anti-Indian and the “Separation Crisis” continued to provide a platform for this rhetoric to diffuse.

Anti-Indian sentiment had circulated through all levels of the plural society to such a great degree that succeeding in Burmese politics required publicly espousing anti-Indian rhetoric. While the anti-Separationists appear to be less anti-Indian than the Separationists, anti-Separationist campaign pamphlets still harnessed anti-Indian sentiment to advance their election goals. A pamphlet titled “Do not make a mistake by Voting for the Separationists,” Ramree Maung Maung claims, “[even] if separation is affected, Indians cannot be driven out. Immigration of Indians and other foreigners cannot be restricted. People cannot

indefinitely withhold payment of the debts which they owe to the Chettyars.”<sup>208</sup>

The anti-Separationist author argues that voting for the Separationists would neither restrict Indian immigration nor relieve debt owed to the Chettiars—the unacceptable status quo would be maintained. This was an attempt to convince readers that a vote for the anti-Separationists would somehow change the status quo and restrict Indian immigration and moneylending. The anti-Separationist author is harnessing the fear of Indian immigration and therefore anti-Indian sentiment as a weapon against the Separationists. This pamphlet illustrates the extent to which anti-Indian sentiment gripped urban Burma and became a key tenant of Bamar ethno-nationalism; the anti-Separationists, viewed as less radically ethnonationalist, felt the need to take advantage of xenophobic feelings to win an election. In rural contexts, the *Wunthanu Athins*, “own-race” village organizations which provided support as an alternative to headmen, also supported anti-separation by writing in a campaign pamphlet “[i]f separation is effected now, the Indians (in Burma) will not have to go back; on the other hand, their lives and property will be protected.”<sup>209</sup> This message targeting a peasant audience on behalf of the anti-Separationists is more inflammatory than the one for urban readers as it scorned the protection of Indian lives. We see a merging of anti-Indian sentiment from both a rural and urban sphere through this publication. To win an election, the anti-Separationists needed to capitalize on Separationist

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<sup>208</sup> Ramree Maung Maung, “Do not make a mistake by Voting for the Separationists,” found in, Government of Burma. *Burma Legislative Council: proceedings on motions concerning separation issue; Conclusions of Government of Burma* (Rangoon: Superintendent, Government Printing and Stationary, 1933), 338. IOR/M/1/46.

<sup>209</sup> “Wunthanus, Support the Cause of Non-Separation,” found in, Government of Burma. *Burma Legislative Council: proceedings on motions concerning separation issue; Conclusions of Government of Burma*, 335.

rhetoric illustrating that much of the public viewed a “Burma for the Bamar” as their imagined community. Sadly, this pragmatic act by the anti-Separationists nonetheless did its part in fostering an equivalency between being Bamar and anti-Indian during the “Separation Crisis.”

Even with the characterization of both the Separationists and anti-Separationist as anti-Indian to some degree, we must note that not all nationalists supported race-baiting. Anti-Separationist Dr. Baw Maw said that nationalism “is a very commendable and excellent thing, but it must be properly understood. Nationalism must be an affirmative factor and if it takes a negative form, that is the terrible form of race hatred.”<sup>210</sup> This unapologetic review of the dangers of ethnonationalism and the racialization of the Bamar reflects that not all Bamar nationalists agreed with the swelling anti-Indian sentiment in Burma. Baw Maw warns his fellow legislatures that nationalism is key to independence but can also be divisive, as we have seen so far. However, as shown by the anti-Separationist messaging to the public, nationalists who disagreed with race hatred towards Indians had little power to stop its proliferation.

In addition to capitalizing on the fear of Indian immigration to appease Separationist voters, the anti-Separationist camp also used the fear of Indian and Karen military occupation of Burma to advance their cause. As shown in Chapter Two, the British use of the British Indian Army and troops from Burma’s ethnic minorities was pivotal in establishing anti-minority rhetoric during the Saya San Rebellion. The persistence of this fear and appropriation of it during the

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<sup>210</sup> Government of Burma, Burma Legislature. *Legislative Council, Proceedings, Vol. XXIII: 5-22 December 1932*, 256.

“Separation Crisis” is exemplified by the following statement from the *Wunthanu Athins*:

If Burma is separated from India, a British regiment and a regiment comprising of Gurkhas and Kachins, which will be five times as large as the present armies, will be stationed in “Excluded Areas,” and the expenditure for their maintenance will be met from the taxes given by the Burmese people.<sup>211</sup>

Not only does this statement illustrate that the British decision to use troops from ethnic minorities was a source of agitation for the Bamar population but it also shows that the anti-Separationists were not a pro-Indian camp. Rather, the anti-Separationist harnessed and harnessed anti-Indian sentiment to advance their goal of independence. In this case regarding British troops, the author uses Bamar pride in their military history and contrasts this with the insult of having foreign soldiers occupy Burma. Martial prowess represented a key tenant of Bamar identity shared by both anti-Separationists and Separationists emphasized by the statement “as long as Burma remains a part of India, its manhood will never have a chance of acquiring military training... and the Burmese people, once famed as a race of soldiers, are now in the sorry plight of being protected by foreign mercenaries” from the Separation League.<sup>212</sup> Increasing number of troops from Burma’s ethnic minorities, and Indians in particular, was perceived as an insult against Bamar ethnic identity. Therefore, we see that Bamar ethnonationalism as an ideology was in direct opposition to a plural society which included Bamar and

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<sup>211</sup> "Wunthanus, Support the Cause of Non-Separation," found in, Government of Burma. *Burma Legislative Council: proceedings on motions concerning separation issue; Conclusions of Government of Burma*, 335.

<sup>212</sup> The Separation League, “Memorandum Submitted to the Indian Statutory Commission by the Separation League,” iv, found in, Government of the United Kingdom, Indian Statutory Commission. *Burma Memoranda*.

Indians. However, the anti-Separationists included many Indian elites such as Mr. Ganga Singh who wanted to unite Indians and the Burmese against British rule arguing that “the Indians are slaves, and you are in the same boat too. There is no difference between a slave and a slave.”<sup>213</sup> A mix of unifying and anti-Indian rhetoric from the anti-Separationists adds nuance to their characterization as “pro-Indian.” The anti-Separationists did not base their platform solely on Bamar ethnonationalism, but capitalization of anti-Indian rhetoric illustrated and added to the persistence of the equivalency of pro-Bamar with anti-Indian.

The formal rhetoric of excluding Indians from an independent Burma even persisted amongst the anti-Separationists in the more nuanced debates of the Burma Legislative Council. While less obvious, U Tun Aung presented a Bamar anti-Separationist double standard that Burma would not be welcoming to Indians while still working with Indian members of the party. U Tun Aung writes:

"When such people command earn a living in Burma there is less chance for Burmans to get work...though we practice the doctrine of love when we find that our own countrymen are in a difficult situation in order to earn their own living. we shall have to take up the cause of our own countrymen. It is not because we hate others."<sup>214</sup>

Here he attempts to justify anti-Indian rhetoric by arguing that the Bamar are struggling to compete with Indian labor and that resistance towards Indians was not out of hate but out of a love for the Bamar. Regardless of whether U Tun Aung truly hated Indians, his statement argues that either Indians or Bamar could make a living in Burma but not both. This statement places a distinct value on

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<sup>213</sup> Government of Burma, Burma Legislature. *Legislative Council, Proceedings, Vol. XXIII: 5-22 December 1932*, 98.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid*, 30.

Bamar ethnicity as a prerequisite for citizenship in an independent Burma, exemplified by his description of his countrymen as Bamar and that “others” threatened Bamar livelihood. One of the key tenants of a modern nation is the ability for any citizen to make a living and concern here that “others” hinder the Bamar from doing so illustrates that both anti-Separationist and Separationists aimed to build a community for the ethnic Bamar. Anti-Indian sentiment was normalized by the anti-Separationists and the perception that Indians are taking wealth that could belong to the Bamar is shown by Figure Four. This political cartoon portrays caricatures of Indians, Chinese, and Europeans plundering Burma while a man representing Burma sits empty-handed. In particular, the caricature of an Indian stepping towards India holding two full bags, as opposed to the caricature of a Chinese man with only one bag suggest that Bamar grievances at this time were directed particularly against Indians. However, this cartoon meant for a general audience suggested that the three main non-Bamar immigrant groups, Indians, Chinese, and Europeans were enemies of the Bamar people. Thus, notions of a separate Burmese identity and borders with India spurred by the “Separation Crisis” helped create a national identity based on the exclusion of non-Bamar peoples and membership with the Bamar Buddhist community.

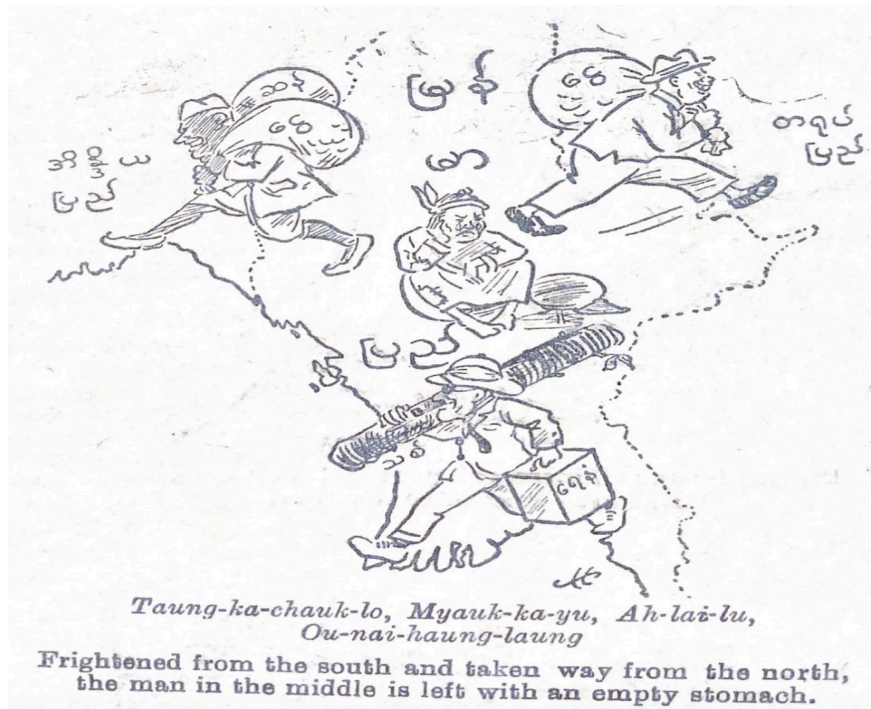


Figure 4: Cartoon, “The Man in the Middle is Left with an Empty Stomach.” There are four caricatures representing the Bamar, Indian, British, and Chinese peoples. The British man is at the bottom of the cartoon carrying a container reading “oil.” The Indian man is at the left carrying two bags reading “rice” and “money.” The Chinese man is to the right carrying a bag reading “money.” The Bamar man sits empty handed in the middle. Republished in *The Immigration Problem of Burma* by U Thein Maung.<sup>215</sup>

### Conclusions:

The Simon Commission and the subsequent debate over Burma’s separation from India resulted in the metamorphosis of Bamar identity into the national identity of an independent Burmese state. The Bamar never needed convincing that Burma was not India but the British use of this rhetoric legitimized Separationist claims that the peoples of Burma and India could not share the same imagined community. With a British blessing in hand, the Separationists moved along an ethno-nationalistic route to secure their “Burma for the Burmans.” Through racializing the Bamar, the Separationists established a

<sup>215</sup> Maung, Thein U, *The Immigration Problem of Burma*.

contrast and incompatibility between the Indians and Bamar to strengthen the unity of the latter group. The move was successful as even the anti-Separationists, traditionally viewed as more tolerant, capitalized on anti-Indian rhetoric in their campaign pamphlets to garner support for their cause. Both nationalist groups using anti-Indian rhetoric in their campaigns illustrates how the “Separation Crisis” contributed to the development of a Burmese national identity centered around Bamar ethnicity and being anti-Indian. Anti-Indian sentiment broadened and crossed the urban and rural divide as *Wunthanu Athin* village organizations took an anti-Indian stance but aligned with the anti-Separationists. Broad anti-Indian sentiment gripped the Bamar population both at the end of the Saya San Rebellion and at the height of the “Separation Crisis” concurrently in 1932. However, separation was not decided by the Burmese but by the British. Woodrow Wilson’s rhetoric of national self-determination served as a beacon of hope for Bamar nationalists on both sides, but the British would not allow these rights for their non-European subjects. In 1933, seeing that the Burmese Legislative Council remained a house divided, the British Parliament decided that it would decide upon the fate of Burma. It passed the Government of Burma Act in 1935 which formally separated Burma and India into two separate colonies.<sup>216</sup> The “Separation Crisis” ended without a consensus from the Burmese Legislative Council but the anti-Indian and ethnonationalist campaigning set a precedent for the direction Bamar nationalist rhetoric took. The next challenge for Bamar nationalists would be to fight for full independence from Britain. The anti-Indian

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<sup>216</sup> Cady, John, F, *A History of Modern Burma*, 347–55.



and minority sentiment spurred by the “Separation Crisis” would dictate the actions of patriotic Bamar in the next swell of nationalism.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### **“Our Burma, Not Yours”: Bamar Ethnonationalist Conceptions of a Burmese Nation-State Told Through the Anti-Indian Riots of 1938**

A Burmese hand did not resolve the “Separation Crisis”; the British Parliament passed the Government of Burma Act in 1935 which separated Burma and India in 1937, infringing on the agency of the Bamar nationalists and fueling their ethnonationalist sentiment. By 1935, the Separation League’s rhetoric of a “Burma for the Burmans” had not only become normalized but also widely supported by both members of the Bamar peasantry and urban middle-class. Ethnic-nationalism had brought together people from both urban and rural areas under the shared idea of a Bamar racial identity solidified through demonizing Indians as the enemy of the Bamar “race.” These perceptions became part of a new Burmese civic and ethnic identity; thus, the act of separation would have no muting effect on Bamar ethnonationalism, desires for independence from Britain, and anti-Indian sentiment. In contrast, separation only served to bolster the most extreme forms of this rhetoric because the Separationists could now take credit for the Government of Burma Act and claim political victory.<sup>217</sup> To the laymen, the Separationists and their anti-Indian campaigning, while failing to win a majority in the Legislative Council Elections of 1932, were powerful enough to extract “concessions” from Parliament and would be the best camp to follow on the road to full national independence. Landless Bamar agriculturalists, urban workers, and

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<sup>217</sup> Bowser, Matthew, J, “Misdirected Rage: The Fascist Response to Co-Colonialism and Capitalism in Burma and the Origins of Burmese Islamophobia, 1929-1942,” 133.

members of a growing professional middle, class whom all felt like second-class citizens to Indians, had no reason to stop embracing the ethnic-nationalism which had appeared to secure them a separate government from India—another crucial step towards full independence. The volatility of this sentiment would materialize with the dissemination of passages from *Moulvi-Yogi Awada Sadan*, a little-known book critical of Buddhism, in the vernacular press.

Written by Maung Shwe Hpi and published in 1931, *Moulvi-Yogi Awada Sadan* also called *Moulvi and Yogi Wada* contained inflammatory dialogue that deemed Buddhism to be an “inferior religion” to Islam.<sup>218</sup> Although the work went unnoticed immediately after its publication, his ideas were revived with the 1938 publication of Maung Htin Baw’s *The Abode of a Nat*, which contained excerpts from Maung Shwe Hpi’s book.<sup>219</sup> However, *Moulvi-Yogi Awada Sadan* was not meant to widely distributed, it was inaccessible to many Burmese without fluency in Pali language.<sup>220</sup> Meanwhile, *The Abode of a Nat* was in Burmese and “Maung Htin Baw saw, and seized, an opportunity to get a little publicity and cheap advertising for his novel by publishing what he recognized as being a sensational discovery.”<sup>221</sup> Within 10 days, 1350 copies of *The Abode of a Nat* were sold to a Burmese audience, and almost immediately after vernacular outlets like *Thuriya*, called for “drastic action” to be taken.<sup>222</sup> Between July 23<sup>rd</sup> to July 26<sup>th</sup>, *Thuriya* headlines demanded, “BUDDHISM HAS BEEN INSULTED.

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<sup>218</sup> Lalita Hingkanonta, ““The Police in Colonial Burma,” SOAS University of London Department of History, 2013, 206-207.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid.

<sup>220</sup> Hingkanonta, “The police in Colonial Burma,” 210.

<sup>221</sup> Government of Burma, *Final Report of the Riot Inquiry (Braund) Committee*, 1, found in, Ibid.

<sup>222</sup> Government of Burma. *Final Report of the Riot Inquiry (Braund) Committee*, 6.

TAKE IMMEDIATE STEPS.”<sup>223</sup> This was a call to action and prompted a protest at the Shwedagon Pagoda, one of the holiest in Myanmar, on July 26<sup>th</sup>. Seeking to control the situation, the British authorities forbade *Thuriya* from publishing for two weeks and demanded a security of 3,000 rupees.<sup>224</sup>

The demonstration at Shwedagon, led by the All Burma Council of Young *Pongyis* Association, was well attended by followers of the intense Bamar ethnonationalist U Saw who expressed Saw’s extreme beliefs through acts of inter-ethnic violence.<sup>225</sup> What began as an act of civil disobedience turned violent when demonstrators quickly became excited and mobilized.<sup>226</sup> The demonstrators marched from the Shwedagon Pagoda towards the “Soortee (Indian) Bazaar in downtown Rangoon” where when “the police attempted to halt the procession, it degenerated into a mob bent on taking vengeance on Muslim Indians.”<sup>227</sup> Among the rioters, were young yellow-robed *pongyis* (Buddhist monks) who were chased and attacked by the colonial police. This assault on *pongyis* was particularly inflammatory and held parallels to when British Indian Army soldiers fired upon Saya San’s followers.

The impact of the nationalist press in fomenting anti-Muslim and anti-Indian sentiment and violence cannot be understated. Vernacular Burmese nationalist newspapers like *New Light of Burma* and *Thuriya*, accused Indian and

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<sup>223</sup> Bowser, “Misdirected Rage: The Fascist Response to Co-Colonialism and Capitalism in Burma and the Origins of Burmese Islamophobia, 1929-1942,” 129.

<sup>224</sup> Emma Larkin, “The Self-Conscious Censor: Censorship in Burma under the British, 1900-1939,” *Journal of Burma Studies* 8, no. 1 (2003): 95, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jbs.2003.0002>.

<sup>225</sup> Cady, *A History of Modern Burma*, 393.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid., Cady describes the All Burma Council of Young Pongyis Association as consisting of young “monks who were not accustomed to ecclesiastical discipline.”

<sup>227</sup> Ibid.

British officers of deliberately singling out monks for attack.<sup>228</sup> Images of monks, bloody from police charging into the crowd with batons, plastered front pages and helped to spread the rioting to districts such as Henzada and Myanaung hundreds of miles away.<sup>229</sup> Rioters armed with *dahs* (knives) targeted Indian Muslims, sacked mosques, and subjected Indians to brutal violence. In one of many gruesome acts, rioters hacked off the hand of an Indian man living on 11<sup>th</sup> Street in Rangoon.<sup>230</sup> In particular, rioters targeted Muslim Indians and sacked mosques; however, Indian Hindus, were also subject to violence.<sup>231</sup> British police acted just as violently, firing into crowds in such an indiscriminate manner than the *Final Report of the Riot Inquiry Committee* investigated 27 accounts of police firearm negligence during the riots and found three cases of misconduct.<sup>232</sup> It is important to consider the widespread scale of the rioting, which reached over ten districts and resulted in significant casualties of 1227 people killed or injured by both rioters and police.<sup>233</sup> But this raises the question, what instigated the riots?

While it may seem on the surface that Maung Shwe Hpi's book was the cause of the rioting, it was rather a trigger which unleashed underlying discontent. Even the myopic British administration who cited religious superstition as the

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<sup>228</sup> Government of Burma. *Final Report of the Riot Inquiry Committee*, 24.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>231</sup> According to a British report on Indian immigration, the number of Indian Hindus and Muslims was almost evenly split in 1931. However, there existed a stigma, particularly against Indian Muslims because of marriage laws in which a wife would need to convert to Islam. Bowser, "Misdirected Rage: The Fascist Response to Co-Colonialism and Capitalism in Burma and the Origins of Burmese Islamophobia, 1929-1942," 51, 160.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid., 302. While the police only considered three out of 27 shooting cases as negligent, the fact that this was even investigated and put into an official report signifies the violent crackdown of protesters by colonial authorities.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid., xxxix.

cause of the Saya San Rebellion understood that the 1938 Anti-Indian Riots were the culmination of growing conflict between the Bamar and Indians. From analyzing the British's interim and final reports, regarding the riots, they failed to admit that it was their negligence that set the stage for the chaos at hand. Growing Bamar ethnonationalism, spurred by "agrarian discontent" and continually growing anti-Indian sentiment since the "Separation Crisis," turned Lower Burma into a powder keg. A new racialization of Indian Muslims, Indian Hindus, and Burmese Muslims collectively as *kala*, a pejorative for Indian or South Asian, became a convenient epithet for co-colonialist.<sup>234</sup> Maung Shwe Hpi's book was simply the lit match that caused both urban and rural Burma to combust into what Matthew Bowser describes as "anti-Indian and Islamophobic pogroms."<sup>235</sup>

I am presenting the 1938 Anti-Indian Riots as the last case study in this thesis because it is the culmination of the unresolved tensions of the Saya San Rebellion and "Separation Crisis." The Saya San Rebellion began as a solely anti-colonial movement, targeting Bamar village headmen, Europeans, and Chettiars but it eventually grew into a general anti-Indian uprising that sowed the seeds of Bamar ethnic-nationalism. Land moving into the hands of Chettiars drove Bamar peasants to join Saya San's uprising but the British suppression of the uprising by force did not fix any land tenure issues. The "Separation Crisis" saw the

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<sup>234</sup> Matthew J. Bowser, "'Buddhism Has Been Insulted. Take Immediate Steps': Burmese Fascism and the Origins of Burmese Islamophobia, 1936–38," *Modern Asian Studies* 55, no. 4 (July 2021): 1115, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X20000323>. Matthew Bowser describes *kala* as a term roughly translating to 'South Asian descent' but it has no official English equivalent. In nationalist writing, it is also used to connote people of darker skin and is used in a derogatory way against Indians in general.

<sup>235</sup> Bowser, "Misdirected Rage: The Fascist Response to Co-Colonialism and Capitalism in Burma and the Origins of Burmese Islamophobia, 1929-1942," 132.

development of a Bamar racial identity and the establishment of the idea that Indians threatened the existence of the Bamar race. Indians further became an out-group and being Burmese meant being anti-Indian to many urban Bamar. As the previous chapters demonstrated, none of the grievances which led to the aforementioned nationalist sentiments had been addressed by the British. Tellingly, the Anti-Indian Riots of 1938 occurred both in the countryside and the cities; the participants consisted of Bamar farmers concerned about their loss of land as well as urbanites still living in a plural society with the ethnic-nationalist rhetoric of the “Separation Crisis” fresh in their minds. The rioters came from a wide range of demographics and were united in their mutual hatred of both Muslim and Hindu Indian minorities.

The 1938 Anti-Indian Riots were a mass expression of brewing grievances, but they were also an expression of political agitation against a leftist government, led by anti-Separationist Dr. Baw Maw, who was willing to negotiate with colonialists to secure long term independence. In the general elections of 1936, to choose a government for a Burma separated from India, Baw Maw was elected prime minister and formed “a coalition government with Burmese moderates and the European, Indian, and Karen reserved seats.”<sup>236</sup> Baw Maw and his *Sinyetha* (“proletarian”) party proposed restructuring village administration, making the village headmen an elected position, and agricultural tenant protection to help the Burmese peasant.<sup>237</sup> By working with ethnic groups perceived as co-colonialists, Baw Maw’s government appeared to be yet another

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<sup>236</sup> Bowser, ““Buddhism Has Been Insulted. Take Immediate Steps,”” July 2021, 1120.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid., 1119.

government of collaborators who would not secure a future for the Bamar “race,” an identity that had only grown stronger. In contrast, the Burmese right-wing formed a league of political parties called the *Ngabwinsaing* (“five-flowers alliance”) which based their platform on creating a “Burma for the Burmans.”<sup>238</sup> Both political ideologies tried to win over the members of the *Dobama Asiayone*, who called themselves the *Thakins*, as they were a grassroots organization of intellectuals that connected to the urban working class.<sup>239</sup> However, in the 1936 elections, the *Thakins* began formally incorporating the idea of *thudo-bama*, meaning “their-Burma” into *Thakin* rhetoric.<sup>240</sup> The “their” in question represented co-colonialists in-general but more specifically Indians. A fear that the agents of *thudo-bama* were working to sabotage Burmese independence and “soil” the Bamar “race” pushed the grassroots *Dobama Asiayone* towards the Burmese right-wing.

The politicization of anti-Indian rhetoric forming the platform of a major political alliance, the *Ngabwinsaing* (Five Flowers Alliance), demonstrated that in 1936 the idea of a Burmese “imagined community” rested on the pressing issue of whether the legislature should focus on creating a Burma explicitly for the Burmans.<sup>241</sup> We shall see that the 1938 Anti-Indian Riots were a product of the synthesis of growing Islamophobia with the three main characteristics of Burmese

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<sup>238</sup> Ibid., 1221.

<sup>239</sup> The name *Thakin* roughly translates to “master” and was what the British demanded to be called when addressed by the Burmese. Thus, by calling themselves *Thakins*, the members of the *Dobama Asiayone* are reclaiming agency for the Burmese. Haruhiro Fukui, ed., *Political Parties of Asia and the Pacific*, The Greenwood Historical Encyclopedia of the World’s Political Parties (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1985), 128.

<sup>240</sup> Nemoto, “The Concepts of *Dobama* (‘Our Burma’) and *Thudo-Bama* (‘Their Burma’) in Burmese Nationalism, 1930-1948,” 4.

<sup>241</sup> Bowser, “‘Buddhism Has Been Insulted. Take Immediate Steps,’” July 2021, 1120.



national identity described thus far: Buddhism, Bamar racial identity, and anti-Indian sentiment. The result was a Burmese national identity consisting of being a Bamar Buddhist critical of both Indians and Islam—an identity that transcended the rural and urban divide. The 1938 Anti-Indian Riots were a nation-building event, the formal political affiliations of the riot’s instigators, namely U Saw, illustrated that their goal was to build a new Burmese nation by purging Burma of their perceived enemies. Rioting served as a disturbance to the status quo which allowed the precipitation of new legislation favorable to Bamar ethnic-nationalists. The widespread targeting of Indians, both Muslim and Hindu, by *Thakins*, peasants, urbanites, and even village headmen in 1938 defined the Burmese “imagined community” as one *only* for Bamar Buddhists. U Saw would replace Baw Maw as prime minister in 1940 signaling that Bamar ethno-nationalism had been victorious, providing the formal political capabilities for the construction of a “Burma for the Burmans.”

*Buddhism, Islamophobia, the Nationalist Press, and a New Burmese National Identity*

Official British reports claim that the 1938 Anti-Indian Riots “were not religious riots. They were political”; however, the broad participation of *pongyis*, the Islamophobia stoked by the nationalist press, and our understanding of the importance of Buddhism to Bamar ethnic identity warrants a discussion on how an insult to Buddhism reinforced the religion as a tenant of a new Burmese national identity. The agents of Buddhism, namely the *pongyis*, would use the

religion as a political tool, to unite Bamar peoples against Indians and Islam in particular. Rioters across Myaungmya, Maubin, Pyapon, Henzada, Prome, Toungoo, and Pegu districts who would “never know most of their fellow-members” were nonetheless united through the imagination of a Burmese Buddhist community.<sup>242</sup> The Buddhism that the rioters fought to protect was the same unique Burmese Buddhism that incorporated *Nat* spirits, was geographically limited to Burma, and insulted by Maung Shwe Hpi’s book. “Tattooing for invulnerability” and charms appeared on rioters, reflecting the persistence of the Saya San’s uprising in the formation of Burmese identity six years later.<sup>243</sup> Monks taking to the streets in the defense of Burmese Buddhism became a pillar of an imagined Burmese national identity that was both “limited and sovereign.”

The idea that a Burmese state free of British control would be Buddhist dated back to the Saya San Rebellion, but in 1938 the nationalist press specified that Buddhism and the “nation” were joined by blood—racializing both. In an article titled “The Mass Meeting in Connection with the Insult Against Religion on Account of National and Religious Prides,” which quoted speeches given at the Shwedagon Pagoda demonstration, *Thuriya* called on the Bamar to avenge the insult to Buddhism described as an insult to the nation of Burma. The following was written on July 27<sup>th</sup>, 1938:

It is necessary to show the external and internal blood to punish those who have insulted the Religion. Everyone knows that Burmans are in a state of ruination day by day. It does not end at passing Resolution. The journey is not thus reached you are requested to take a warning. The insult has reached its highest pitch. Our Nation has been insulted. Why is that? Is it

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<sup>242</sup> Adas, *The Burma Delta*, 212.

<sup>243</sup> Government of Burma. *Final Report of the Riot Inquiry Committee*, 219.

not because we are forbearing all these quietly. They [Muslims] are living on this land and are drinking this water.<sup>244</sup>

The author argues that Buddhism and the Burmese nation are one entity as they characterize an insult to “our religion” in the same vein as an insult to “our Nation.” To defend Buddhism does not mean defending just a religion but now it meant defending the Bamar imagined community “from ruination.” In contrast to the Saya San Rebellion’s struggle to return to a pre-colonial state, the author describes their imagined community as a “nation” with a clear “in-group” and “out-group” consisting of Bamar Buddhists and Muslims, respectively.

As one of the key pillars of nationhood is sovereignty, the statement that the land and water were reserved for Bamar Buddhists illustrates how the 1938 Riots were a call to limit membership to the Burmese community, and the privilege associated with membership, to Bamar Buddhists. Land and water give life to people, thus restricting land and water within a territory to the Bamar Buddhists is itself a threat saying that Muslims in Burma will not be able to survive in this new vision for a Burmese nation. Furthermore, the call for violence to punish those who insulted Buddhism and Burma not only illustrates the degree to which the author felt offended by Maung Shwe Hpi’s book but also calls on members of the imagined community to lay down their lives for its preservation. Nothing illustrates a devotion to the *community* aspect of a nation than a “deep horizontal comradeship” often expressed as a being willing to “die for such

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<sup>244</sup> "To Show the External and Internal Nation Blood," *Thuriya (The Sun)*, (27 July 1938), found in, Government of Burma, *Burma Riots: Committee of Enquiry; Riot Enquiry Committee Ordinance; Indians in Burma; claims for damage during riots* (Rangoon: Superintendent, Government Printing and Stationery, 1938-1941), 320-321. IOR/M/3/514.

limited imaginings.”<sup>245</sup> This call existing in a widely circulated newspaper shows that it was meant to be read by Burmese-speaking people hundreds of miles apart with no contact with each other. Thus, the author is trying to inculcate the sense that any reader could be a part of the community so long as they are part of the Bamar Buddhist in-group and take active steps to defend Buddhism. This sense of belonging even when a person has not met other members of the community is what makes it “imagined.” Therefore, the author uses defending Buddhism to express a Burmese state and identity which was limited, imagined, and a community, the characteristics of Benedict Anderson’s definition of a nation which in this case was Bamar and Buddhist.

The articles published in *Thuriya* in the days after the July 26 demonstrations, which would exacerbate anti-Indian and Islamophobic rhetoric, reinforced the conception of Muslims as an out-group in the Burmese nation. Rather than using its platform during the riots to immediately place blame on the British, *Thuriya* intended to portray the gathering at Shwedagon as a patriotic defense of Buddhism and the nation against a Muslim enemy. In addition to portraying the demonstration as patriotic, *Thuriya* encouraged violence as the civic duty of Burmese citizens. In a passage titled “If I Am a Dictator,” citing a Shwedagon speech, the speaker stated:

You say you cannot bear patiently when any one touches your religion and Nation. Your religion is now attacked. Will you keep quiet? ‘We will not forbear. (Voices). What will you do if you cannot forbear? We will beat. (Voices). What will you do when this meeting is over? We will go down and beat. (Voices).’ In the ancient times when the Buddhist religion was insulted, Datsayo Ngapo was crucified. If we were the dictators, the

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<sup>245</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 7.

Muslims who insulted the religion would also be ordered to be crucified.  
(Applause).<sup>246</sup>

In another call to arms, the speaker argued that the Buddhist religion represented a pillar of the Burmese nation and that both were under attack by Muslims. The use of “Nation” illustrated to a degree not yet seen before, the existence of a modern Burmese national identity and an intent to spread this identity to Burmese speakers. In contrast to Saya San and the early *Dobama Asiayone* whose platforms were based on kingship and the idea of a “Burma for the Burmans” respectively, the rhetoric from the 1938 Riots suggested that the Bamar Buddhists were members of a modern national community. In addition to defending Buddhism, the idea of someone defiling their nation motivated the demonstrators at Shwedagon to “beat.” The speaker deliberately uses the term “nation” to remind the audience what was at stake and why immediate violent action against the constructed out-group was “justified.” Violence against Muslims not only illustrates how the speaker and the broader Bamar audience did not welcome Muslims into this Burmese nation but also that the idea of an imagined community was strong enough that it could spur a crowd to try and purge Burma of its Muslims in the name of a Burmese nation. Furthermore, the idea that the Bamar Buddhists could be “dictators” is an attempt to return the agency to rule back to the Bamar from the co-colonialists, reflecting that even after separation the Bamar still felt like second-class citizens. To the Bamar cheering the speaker,

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<sup>246</sup> "If I am a Dictator," *Thuriya (The Sun)*, (27 July 1938), found in, Government of Burma, *Burma Riots: Committee of Enquiry; Riot Enquiry Committee Ordinance; Indians in Burma; claims for damage during riots*, 323.

a post-colonial Burma would be controlled by them under the guidance of Buddhism in opposition to both Muslim and Hindu Indians.

Rioting extended beyond Rangoon despite the first instance of it occurring at the Shwedagon Pagoda; the *pongyis* and laymen participating in these outlying districts fought for the same reason of defending Buddhism, yet they had most likely never met those gathered at the steps of Shwedagon. In the district of Myingyan, over 200 miles from Rangoon on the 31<sup>st</sup> of July, “a mob of about a hundred *pongyis* and fifty Burmans started to attack Indians with *dahs* [knives] and sticks.”<sup>247</sup> In this district the British cited “the inflammatory accounts in the vernacular newspapers of the riots in Rangoon reach[ing] Myingyan District about the 30<sup>th</sup> of July” as the cause of this “communal antagonism.”<sup>248</sup> Without the vernacular press, the *pongyis* and laymen of Myingyan would probably have not heard of the events in Rangoon for quite some time, yet both Buddhist monks and Bamar villagers immediately took to violence. In Shwebo Town which was a similar distance from Rangoon as Myingyan, the British describe how “we find that the disturbance starting almost as soon as news and rumors reached it from Rangoon. It started on the 30<sup>th</sup> of July and tensions prevailed until the 13<sup>th</sup> of August.”<sup>249</sup> The immediate call to arms once news reached these outlying districts suggests an underlying sentiment that Burma was a Buddhist community and thus an insult to the religion was intolerable. It is reasonable to assume that the *Thuriya* article cited on page 93, published on July 27<sup>th</sup> the day after the meeting

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<sup>247</sup> Government of Burma. *Final Report of the Riot Inquiry Committee*, 219.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid., 144.

at Shwedagon, was the first news of the situation in these districts on July 30<sup>th</sup>. British reports believed “newspapers contributed to the disturbance which broke out immediately afterwards” in Yandoon, specifically “issues of the *New Light of Burma* and the *Sun* [*Thuriya*] containing pictures of the alleged happenings in Rangoon.”<sup>250</sup> A British emphasis on how rioting quickly spread as a result of the press, whom reported an “insult” to Buddhism, suggests that Burmese Buddhism was already a tenet of Burmese identity which the press used to encourage demonstrations and Bamar Buddhist unity. The rioters did not need to be convinced to take up arms against Indian members of the plural society; thus, Burmese communal membership from here on was restricted to Bamar Buddhists.

While Maung Shwe Hpi’s book ignited pre-existing tensions between the Bamar and Indians, the 1938 Anti-Indian Riots were an expression of anti-Muslim anger in addition to being an anti-Indian riot in general. The passages in *Thuriya* illustrated that the demonstrators at Shwedagon did not see Indian Muslims as members of their community; furthermore, this sentiment was expressed through violence in the provinces distal to Rangoon as well. In Mandalay, six mosques were reported to have been damaged by rioters while only one Hindu temple was damaged while in Shwebo all reported damages to religious structures were to mosques.<sup>251</sup> At the conclusion of the mass violence, the rioters had destroyed only two Hindu temples in comparison to 74 mosques throughout Burma.<sup>252</sup> In the districts outside of Rangoon, 89.71% of calculated property losses belonged to

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<sup>250</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>251</sup> Government of Burma. *Final Report of the Riot Inquiry Committee*, Appendix XII.

<sup>252</sup> Bowser, “Misdirected Rage: The Fascist Response to Co-Colonialism and Capitalism in Burma and the Origins of Burmese Islamophobia, 1929-1942,” 232.

Indian Muslims while 9.56% belonged to Indian Hindus illustrating that Bamar rioters specifically targeted Indian Muslims but also that Indian Hindus could not escape a general anti-Indian sentiment and violence.<sup>253</sup> The deadly impact of Islamophobia can also be seen in the loss of life by September 24<sup>th</sup> of 1938 when rioters reportedly killed 139 Indian Muslims and 25 Indian Hindus.<sup>254</sup> The perpetration of islamophobia fueled violence outside of Rangoon further shows the deep-seated Islamophobia and its role in creating a Burmese identity where Indian Muslims became another “out-group” for the Bamar Buddhists to imagine themselves as the “in-group” of a post-colonial Burma.

British classifications of their subjects, based on race and religion, contributed to a “less fluid conceptualization of ethnic identity” that provided the environment for inter-ethnic conflict between Bamar Buddhists and Indian Muslims.<sup>255</sup> The Riot Inquiry Committee’s final report specifically categorizes Indian Muslims and Indian Hindus as distinct. When discussing rioting in the Minbu district, the British describe stones thrown at an “Indian barber’s shop” and an arson attempt at a separate “large Muslim shop.”<sup>256</sup> The British employed these categories as a means of “social segregation,” integral to their practice of “divide and rule,” with religion being “the dominant qualifier of race.”<sup>257</sup> As a result of British divisions, there was “the heightening of racial, religious, and ethnic consciousness in Burma” which led to increasingly exclusive identities.

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<sup>253</sup> Government of Burma, *Final Report of the Riot Inquiry Committee*, 285.

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*, 281.

<sup>255</sup> Ikeya, *Refiguring Women, Colonialism, and Modernity in Burma*, 27.

<sup>256</sup> Government of Burma, *Final Report of the Riot Inquiry Committee*, 220.

<sup>257</sup> Ikeya, *Refiguring Women, Colonialism, and Modernity in Burma*, 26.



With exclusivity, comes the need to protect that specific identity; thus, for Bamar Buddhists who viewed themselves as Burma's "in-group," there existed a heightened willingness to fight the Indian Muslim "out-group." Much like in the "Separation Crisis," British racism provided the Bamar nationalists and their press with a means to characterize Indian Muslims as inherently alien to the territory of Burma and Bamar Buddhist culture.

The virulence of Islamophobia in 1938 emerged in part due to a developing conviction that Indian Muslims were attempting to establish their own separate Burmese identity called *thudo-bama* ("their Burma") in opposition to the Bamar conception of *dobama* ("our Burma"). The 1938 Riots solidified an "imagined community" for the Burmese Buddhists around fears that Indian Muslims were sabotaging a Burmese Buddhist country and the Bamar race. An article written by U Paduma titled "Burmese Blood" from the *New Light of Burma* stated that:

Burma is a Buddhist country. Peoples professing other religions come to Burma, the country of the Buddhist, without hindrance... they have been eating the flesh and sucking the life-blood of the Burmese... seducing Burmese Buddhist women to become their wives, causing dissension in order to create such communities as *Dobama Muslim* [We Burmese Muslim].<sup>258</sup>

U Paduma's grievances centered on this vision of Muslims as threats to the Burmese nation, articulated through the lenses of religion, gender, and ethnicity. By framing Burma as a Buddhist country, he asserted that Burmese identity was

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<sup>258</sup> U Paduma, "Bama Thway," *New Light of Burma [Burmese]*, (25 July 1938), found in, Bowser, "'Buddhism Has Been Insulted. Take Immediate Steps': Burmese Fascism and the Origins of Burmese Islamophobia, 1936–38," *Modern Asian Studies* 55, no. 4 (July 2021): 1112–13, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X20000323>.

both territorially and religiously exclusive, and that any religious plurality would be to the detriment of the Burmese community. By opening with Burma as a Buddhist country and arguing that outsiders are coming *into* Burma, U Paduma airs that Burmese identity was exclusive to Buddhists and those from within Burma's colonial borders. Burma's Hindu and Muslim Indian population did not fit into U Paduma's image of Burma. As the Bamar were Buddhist with few exceptions, U Paduma also argues that all Indians threatened the Bamar "race" through intermarriage—which would result in "racial degeneration." This "marriage question" was gendered, as by speaking out against intermarriage, U Paduma characterizes Burmese women as "pure" and in need of protection from "impure" Muslim men actively "seducing" Burmese women. Therefore, Burmese women came to represent the vessels for upholding Bamar "racial purity" and thus the Burmese imagined community. U Paduma's fear-mongering rhetoric that Muslims were trying to create their own separate *Dobama Muslim* community convinces the reader that the Burmese Buddhist nation was "under attack" by Muslim "agents." The fear that Muslims were molding *dobama* into *thudo-bama* encouraged the construction of a Bamar Buddhist nation through a purge of Burma's Muslims. An idea of "them-ness" empowers the sentiment of "us-ness" thus the idea of a Burmese nation grew stronger reciprocally with flourishing Islamophobia, anti-Indian sentiment, and the fear of *Dobama Muslim*.<sup>259</sup>

One of the ways in which Bamar Buddhists feared that *dobama* would become *thudo-bama* or *Dobama Muslim* was through intermarriage between

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<sup>259</sup> Nemoto, "The Concepts of *Dobama* ('Our Burma') and *Thudo-Bama* ('Their Burma') in Burmese Nationalism, 1930-1948," 2.

Bamar Buddhist women and Indian Muslim men, a fear which exacerbated tensions during the 1938 Anti-Indian Riots. Bamar Buddhists framed their concerns over intermarriage as protecting the agency of Buddhist women, believing that the inheritance shared by Bamar women if her Muslim husband died would be less than that if she had married a Buddhist man.<sup>260</sup> A column from *Thuriya* titled “Burmese National Girls and Male Foreigners” from July 27, 1938, covering speeches at Shwedagon argued that “the position of Burmese women married to the Foreigners is not better than a slave.”<sup>261</sup> While the Bamar Buddhist men claimed to be fighting intermarriage for the “protection” of Bamar women, it was more likely that the antagonism against intermarriage was to prevent the survival of Islam in their imagined community. The same article from *Thuriya* then described how “U Sandawuntha Ashinmyat read from an Urdu book, from which it said that Muslims marrying Burmese women amounted to the propagation of Islam.”<sup>262</sup> It was the fear that Buddhism would be replaced by Islam in Burma, and the mischaracterization that Muslims were actively trying to convert Buddhists to Islam, that contributed to the violent Islamophobia expressed in 1938. The attempt to pass bills through the Burmese legislature, “to remedy the wrongs the Burmese national women are suffering on account of inter-marriage,”

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<sup>260</sup> Government of Burma, *Interim Report of the Riot Inquiry (Braund) Committee* (Rangoon: Superintendent, Government Printing and Stationery, 1939), 32.

<sup>261</sup> “Burmese National Girls and Male Foreigners,” *Thuriya* (27 July 1938), found in, Government of Burma, *Burma Riots: Committee of Enquiry; Riot Enquiry Committee Ordinance; Indians in Burma; claims for damage during riots*, 325.

<sup>262</sup> “Burma Riots : Committee of Enquiry; Riot Enquiry Committee Ordinance; Indians in Burma; Claims for Damage during Riots.”

further illustrates that to be Burmese according to members of the governing body was to distinctly be neither Muslim nor Indian in general.<sup>263</sup>

The desired effect of making Burma's Muslim population feel that *dobama* would not welcome them was ultimately successful; 1938 represented the beginning of the end for the plural society in favor of a "Burma for the Burmans." Ethnic and religious nationalist rhetoric from the 1938 Riots showed Burma's Indian Muslim and Hindu populations that compromise was no longer an option and that all "*kala*" needed to vacate Burma at once. Burma's "*Zerbadi*" community (children of Indian Muslim men and Bamar Buddhist women) expressed the following to the editor of the *Rangoon Gazette*:

"We do not know whether we are to be called Burmans or Indians. Neither the Burmans nor the Indians will accept us for one of them...The Burmans call us *Kalas* (Indians) and denounce us as their enemies...Burma is the only place we know...Except for religion, we are Burmese in every respect...Burma is our only country...but now we find that our Burma brothers have forsaken us...Now we fear that unless something is done the community is in danger of annihilation or ruin if not loss of identity. 600,000 Zerbadis"<sup>264</sup>

The plight of the Zerbadis illustrates the extent to which the 1938 Anti-Indian Riots created an atmosphere where Muslims felt that their lives and community identity were in danger of annihilation. Rioters killed many Muslims as we have seen but the pleas of 600,000 Muslim Zerbadis to the *Rangoon Gazette* not only shows the integral role the Burmese nationalist press had in stoking Islamophobia but also how Burmese Muslims felt that a previously accepting plural community

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<sup>263</sup> Ibid.

<sup>264</sup> 600,000 Zerbadis, "Advice Wanted," *Rangoon Gazette* (March 5, 1939), found in, Government of Burma, *Burma Riots: Committee of Enquiry; Riot Enquiry Committee Ordinance; Indians in Burma; claims for damage during riots*, 349-352.

had now changed from this point onwards. The Zerbadis' expression that "Burma is our only country" conveys that they felt like stakeholders in a Burmese community and had imagined themselves as Burmese with no desire to move to India. The sudden change from Zerbadis believing in a harmonious Burmese community to expressing their fears illustrates how extreme Bamar ethnic-nationalist and Buddhist nationalist sentiment became in 1938. An emphasis on "country," brotherhood with the Bamar, and religion powerfully conveys that a Burmese national identity was being born prior to 1938 and that the Zerbadis imagined themselves as part of this "imagined community." It is also worth considering that British divide and rule influenced the distinctions made between Zerbadis and Bamar Buddhists. British sources describe how "though their [Zerbadis] Indian parentage is usually obvious in their features, most Zerbadis speak Burmese and wear Burmese costume."<sup>265</sup> Highlighting that "features" would distinguish Zerbadis despite their linguistic and costume similarities to the Bamar culture reflects how British concepts of race instilled the idea that Zerbadis, who are culturally like the Bamar, could not be members of the Bamar community due to constructed racial and religious differences. This plea demonstrates that a new Burmese identity had developed, one that was best characterized as "Burma for the Burmans," and the 1938 Riots were a purge of other identities from Burma.

The anti-Indian racism fomented during the "Separation Crisis," adapted from Western racism, was the main source of anti-Zerbadi sentiment, namely that

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<sup>265</sup> Pearn, Bertie, Reginald, *The Indian in Burma*, 4:19.

children of Indian and Bamar mixed marriages “soiled” the Burmese race. While the Zerbadis became subject to criticism for their existence, Bamar nationalists placed an extreme amount of pressure on Buddhist women to uphold the “purity” of the Bamar race. U Kamara, President of the Rangoon Central Thathana Mamaka Young Sanghas’ Association, at the Shwedagon demonstration, “suggested that a procession should be taken out along the Pagoda Road to ‘the Soortee Bara Bazaar as soon as the meeting was over ‘in order to show the real blood of the Burmese people who would not tolerate any insult to their race and religion.’” The audience responded by shouting “‘Burmese who marry Indians! Are husbands scarce in Burma?’”<sup>266</sup> Not only did U Kamara’s statement reflect that “race and religion” became a way to categorize how “Burmese” an individual was but also the response from the audience suggested that it was the responsibility of women to uphold Bamar “racial purity” and religion. Thus, Burmese women who married Indian men were “un-Burmese” and became scapegoats for when Bamar race and religion appear to be challenged. By asking if “husbands are scarce in Burma,” in response to Burmese women marrying Indians, the demonstrators argue that Indians do not count as Burmese husbands and are therefore not Burmese by account of their “race.” This shows how embedded anti-Indian sentiment became in the general Bamar zeitgeist and that Indians, as well as Zerbadis, did not have a place in a Bamar nationalist imagined community. Another point that stands out is that complaints were leveled against Burmese women who married Indian men but not against Burmese men who

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<sup>266</sup> Government of Burma, *Final Report of the Riot Inquiry Committee*, 13.

married Indian women. The demonstrators at Shwedagon upheld patriarchy by blaming Burmese women who married Indians for “soiling” the Bamar race while Burmese men were concurrently liberated of this burden.

The mere idea of Zerbadis living in Burma after 1938 continued to be used by Bamar ethnonationalists to stoke fear that the Bamar “race” was disintegrating and thus action from women needed to be taken to preserve it. In an article titled “Burmese Women Who Took Indians,” from the Burmese language magazine *10,000,000*, the author proclaims:

You Burmese women who fail to safeguard your own race, after you have married an Indian, your daughter whom you have begotten by such a tie takes an Indian as her husband. As for your son, he becomes a half-caste and tries to get a pure Burmese woman. Not only you but your future generation also is those who are responsible for the ruination of the race.<sup>267</sup>

The author suggests that marriage to an Indian would not only be a short-term “problem” but would also destroy the Bamar “race” in the long term.

Characterizing the “half-caste” son as trying to “get a pure-Burmese women” inculcates the idea that children of mixed ancestry—Zerbadis—are not “pure” Burmese and therefore all of their subsequent children would also be contributing to the “ruination of the race.” The fear that the children of mixed descent would marry an Indian or a Burmese woman, both perceived negatively, portrays these descendants as carrying some transmissible element of sin; especially in the case of the “half-caste” son, the author leads the reader into believing that the “purity” of Burmese women would continuously be violated by even a drop of non-Bamar

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<sup>267</sup> “Burmese Women Who Took Indians,” *10,000,000* (27 November 1938), found in, Ikeya, *Refiguring Women, Colonialism, and Modernity in Burma*, 135.

blood. Such intense racism, especially the idea that the longevity of the Bamar “race” would approach ruination, conveys that the future Burmese imagined community would be built upon anti-miscegenation targeting the non-Bamar.

The racialization of the Bamar was grounded in Western philosophies regarding race as shown in *The Immigration Problem of Burma*, published in 1939, where U Thein Maung cites the American immigration restrictions, based on the idea that “every nation has the right to protect itself from deterioration by racial discrimination,” as a positive “achievement.”<sup>268</sup> The praise of American racism illustrates that Bamar nationalists used racist ideas from the Western nations to argue that if the Burmese nation was to become “great,” it must also use the idea of race as the basis for solving “issues” such as competition for labor and land tenure. Bamar ethnic-nationalists, especially the former Separationists, believed that for Burma to be a true “modern” nation, it needed to have policies that maintained “racial purity,” much like the imperialist West.

Race and religion defined Burmese national identity with an emphasis on being neither Indian nor Muslim, exemplified by Bamar village headmen siding with rioters in 1938. Where *thugyis* (village headmen) had once unabashedly served as agents of the colonial state, in 1938 “[i]t has been one of the general complaints but forward by the Indians of Burma that the *Thugyis* to whom they looked for help as often as not sided with the rioters against them.”<sup>269</sup> The confidence that Indian residents had that headmen would come to their aid tells how the headmen became an agent of the British–Bamar peasants had lost this

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<sup>268</sup> Maung, Thein U, *The Immigration Problem of Burma*, 29.

<sup>269</sup> Government of Burma, *Final Report of the Riot Inquiry Committee*, 272.



confidence as illustrated by the Saya San Rebellion. However, the active participation of headmen in the riots, headmen whose livelihoods were dependent on the British, suggests that the headmen now held greater affinity towards the Bamar Buddhists than Indians in general. To give up a position of power and take part in the rioting illustrates the degree to which extreme anti-Indian sentiment fueled the rioting and created an expanded in-group that now included village headmen.

The co-colonialist position of the headmen had previously made them outcasts from the Burmese imagined community of the Saya San Rebellion and the “Separation Crisis;” however, a hatred of Indians had united Bamar Buddhists, including headmen, into an identity characterized as not being a member of a constructed Indian “out-group.” This shift in the allegiance of many headmen was not isolated as “[w]ere there a few such incidents it might be possible to dismiss them...but they are so many and they are out forward with such uniformity...that we are compelled to believe that there must be in many of them some substantial foundation of truth.”<sup>270</sup> The mass participation of headmen in violence against Indians illustrates that being a Bamar Buddhist, conceptualized as *not* being Indian was indeed an “imagined” identity as headmen across vast geography all felt compelled to act in the same way. Bamar Buddhist rioters accepting the headmen into the crowd illustrates that uniting against an out-group consisting of Indians helped develop a Burmese identity centering on being Bamar Buddhist rather than one’s position in the colonial state. Burmese

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<sup>270</sup> Ibid.

identity had evolved, reciprocally with intensifying anti-Indian sentiment and Islamophobia, into a position where Bamar Buddhist headmen could now join a new Burmese community through anti-Indian action.

To the Bamar rioters, the intense government crackdown on the 1938 Anti-Indian Riots illustrated that the British took the side of the Indians in opposition to the Bamar Buddhists. The escalation of the riots both by British forces and the rioters themselves provided a platform for the nationalist press to display the indiscriminate violence of the British police and amalgamate the Bamar population against a common colonialist enemy. While the “Separation Crisis” saw divisions between Bamar nationalists regarding whether cooperating with or challenging British machinations would lead to long-term Burmese independence, the British crackdown on the 1938 Riots, in the same vein as the suppression of Saya San’s uprising, was a uniting force for all Bamar Buddhists against the British colonial system and its perceived Indian allies.

Central to the association of Indians with the oppression of the Bamar Buddhists during the 1938 Riots were the images of British and Indian policemen beating and disgracing “venerable *sangha*.” An image published on the 27<sup>th</sup> of July in the *New Light of Burma* shows a Burmese monk lying unconscious on the ground after a European sergeant beat him amidst onlookers (Fig. 5).<sup>271</sup> To any Bamar Buddhist, such an image could be perceived as religious persecution in the name of protecting Indians. The *New Light of Burma* deliberately published this image because of its inflammatory nature and utility as a tool to unite all

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<sup>271</sup> “Photograph No. 1,” found in, Government of Burma, *Final Report of the Riot Inquiry Committee*; originally published in, *New Light of Burma* (27 July 1938).

Buddhists, including an urban Bamar readership, into acting against the British and perceived Indian allies. Since the majority of Indians in Burma were either Muslim or Hindu, and the British Christian, an attack on Buddhist monks looked as if Buddhism was to be supplanted by “foreign religions.” Both the Buddhist urban elite as well as peasants in the countryside could see the image and understand that “Buddhism has been insulted” by agents of the British colonial system, and that united action needed to be taken to stop these atrocities. It is likely that this image appeared in the articles of the vernacular press which the British cited as inflaming the outlying districts immediately after July 26<sup>th</sup>. Images in the nationalist press sparking riots far from Rangoon reflect that the portrayal of the British crackdown on the 1938 Riots further alienated British and Indians from the Bamar majority. To the urban and rural Bamar, because Indians were the primary victims of the riots, the crackdown appeared to be in the name of protecting the Indian “enemy.”



Figure 5: Wounded Buddhist Monk Lying Unconscious. This image a Buddhist monk lying unconscious in the Soortee Bara Bazaar in Rangoon after injuries caused by European sergeants of the Rangoon Police. Originally published in the *New Light of Burma* on 27<sup>th</sup> July 1938.

The insult to the Buddhist religion as well as the rapid publishing of images, accessible to both the literate and illiterate, by the nationalist press contributed to a national identity of resistance towards the British and Indians. Another such image depicted British and Indian policemen surrounding and approaching a panic-stricken monk (Fig. 6).<sup>272</sup> The officers appear to be walking very forcefully towards a monk with no way of escape or fighting back, an excess of force. This image by itself has a similar effect to Figure Five as both attempt to rally the Bamar Buddhists, by showing how inaction would result in minority groups attacking sacred *pongyis* thus keeping the Bamar subservient to foreigners. The image appearing in the nationalist press reiterates that Burma was to be a Buddhist nation and that defending Buddhism from insult would be a part of a citizen's conscious and national civic identity. This sense of national identity resulting from the British suppression of the 1938 Riots is evident in the caption

<sup>272</sup> "Photograph No. 1," found in, Government of Burma, *Final Report of the Riot Inquiry Committee*; originally published in, *New Light of Burma* (27 July 1938).

of Figure Six from a writer in *Thuriya* to the British government asking how the British administration could allow these abhorred police responses to occur. The caption reads:

Hon'ble Home Minister, look at this picture of an accident near the jewellery shops of the Soortee Bara Bazaar. From this can be judged the extent of the excesses committed by the European Sergeants in yesterday's affairs. The Picture speaks for itself. What are two out of the four Sergeants doing, while going straight for the two *pongyis*? It can be clearly seen how terrified, terror-stricken, and recoiling with fear are those two *pongyis*. Ahead of them is an Indian Constable. In fact the two *pongyis* are cornered without chance of escape. Consider this.<sup>273</sup>

By directly referencing the British administration in response to its forces insulting Buddhism and the Burmese nation, the author comes to represent the voices of all agitated Bamar Buddhists. There is a sense of unity for the author to so confidently express anger and ask the British to “consider this,” a terse statement directed at the highest levels of the British administration but also accessible to readers of *Thuriya*. As this was an appeal to a British and Bamar audience, the issues listed were the gravest; therefore, criticizing British violence against *pongyis* conveyed how important the protection of Buddhism was to a Burmese civic identity. By identifying both Indian and European sergeants, the author implied that all agents of the colonial apparatus were actively working to what appears to be stamping out Buddhism in Burma. Specifying the role of Indian policemen in putting down the riots is reminiscent of the reporting from the Saya San Rebellion which generalized Indians as brutal oppressors of the Bamar Buddhist peasants. Figure Six and its associated caption builds on the

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<sup>273</sup> “Photograph No. 4,” found in, Government of Burma, *Final Report of the Riot Inquiry Committee*; originally published in, *Thuriya* (27 July 1938).

already established sentiment that Indians abused their “favorable position” with the British against the Bamar Buddhists. The 1938 Riots originating in an urban setting furthered the unifying effect of these claims as more people witnessed the violence documented in the nationalist press. Because the Saya San Rebellion was rural, urbanites in Rangoon would not see fallen rebels firsthand, in contrast to the 1938 Riots where witnessing violence against monks was unavoidable. The images used by the *New Light of Burma* and *Thuriya* united the Bamar Buddhist population into believing in a national civic identity of protecting Buddhism and fighting the British colonial state.



Figure 6: Buddhist Monk Surrounded by Colonial Police. This image shows a Buddhist monk surrounded by Indian constables and European sergeants near a jewelry shop in the Soortee Bara Bazaar. Originally published in *Thuriya* on 27<sup>th</sup> July 1938.



## *Conclusions*

The 1938 Anti-Indian Riots represented a seminal moment in the construction of a Burmese civic and ethnic national identity. It has been shown how the mass demonstrations in Rangoon began as a reaction to passages from Maung Shwe Hpi's book and quickly escalated into violence against Indian Muslims and Hindus. The contagiousness of the violence indicated that underlying anti-Indian sentiment had permeated to all levels of the plural society and engrained itself as a platform to which Bamar ethnic nationalism could be refined. Bamar peasants 200 miles from Rangoon, upon hearing of the demonstrations at the Shwedagon Pagoda, took to the streets in solidarity with those in Rangoon rioting in the name of Buddhism and the Bamar "race." Such a level of comradery over the vast territory that is Burma illustrates the development of a Burmese *national* identity and the emergence of a Burmese "imagined community." To defend Buddhism was the call to arms for Bamar Buddhists across Burma and the scale of the reception of this ideology vindicates that they imagined themselves as part of a nation.

While the Saya San Rebellion and the "Separation Crisis" collectively introduced and strengthened anti-British and anti-Indian sentiment, it was in the 1938 Anti-Indian Riots where the Bamar synthesized these grievances to form a collective national identity. While the Saya San Rebellion represented a rural uprising against the British system and the "Separation Crisis" provided urbanites with a chance to unleash anti-Indian rhetoric, the 1938 Riots were unique in that both rural and urban Bamar Buddhists took to the streets to voice anti-Indian

xenophobia and islamophobia, both products of British negligence and the culmination of the emotions from the aforementioned case studies. The British suppression of the Saya San Rebellion never addressed Bamar peasant grievances over land tenure and Indian immigration, thus anti-Indian sentiment especially stemming from the use of Indian soldiers only increased in a rural setting. Debates over the separation of India and Burma amongst the urban elite integrated anti-Indian sentiment into the discourse around preserving Bamar racial “purity” and unity. Through the Separation Crisis, the idea of the Bamar as the race that should determine the future of Burma became mainstream and was disseminated into the countryside through campaign leaflets and the press. By 1938, Bamar Buddhists across urban and rural settings felt that they were a group united by race and a struggle against Indian co-colonialists within the British colonial system. Maung Shwe Hpi’s book served as the spark which would ignite the anti-Indian powder keg that was Lower Burma. However, learning from the Saya San Rebellion, Bamar rioters knew that while confronting the British directly would never amount to victory, violence would capture the attention of the colonial authorities. The “Separation Crisis” showed that with the attention of the colonial authorities, successes toward Burmese national independence could be achieved through negotiations and legislation. The 1938 Anti-Indian Riots were the product of ethnonationalism and religious-nationalist sentiment from the Saya San Rebellion and “Separation Crisis” which defined *dobama* (“our Burma”) by demonizing *thudobama* and *Muslim*. Using the fear of the decline of Buddhism as well as European racial rhetoric allowed Bamar nationalists to label constructed groups of



people, Indian Muslims and Hindus, Zerbadis, and the British as transforming Burma into *thudo-bama*. The 1938 Anti-Indian Riots established that membership in the Burmese nation would first be restricted to members of the Bamar “race” and Buddhist faith. To be a continual member of the Burmese nation would also not just be limited to phenotypic characteristics, ethnicity, or even religious affiliation; instead, the actions of the rioters in 1938 illustrated that being a citizen of the new Burmese imagined community would require a willingness to *defend* the Bamar race, the Buddhist faith, and thus the nation.

## EPILOGUE

When the Japanese Empire invaded Burma on December 23rd, 1941, the lines of Burmese identity had been drawn. Racial, religious, and civic identity based on being Bamar, Buddhist, and anti-Indian was so entrenched into Burmese society that many Indian residents of Burma joined the retreating British forces. The “[g]eneral apathy of the local people, if not hatred and envy consistently encouraged by a section of Burmans, fear for their life, or of molestation...all combined to compel the Indians to leave their homes and properties in Burma.”<sup>274</sup> At the start of the war, Indians were the anathema of the Bamar majority and joined the British retreat because it was evident that the British could not protect the Indian community. Over 500,000 Indians fled from Burma, with between 10,000 and 100,000 perishing during the journey, illustrating that there was no place for Indians in the newly imagined Burmese nation.<sup>275</sup> The “Burmans (as distinct from other races in Burma) could always claim to be a nation: a rare thing in India until 1947” and by “December 1941, Indians in Burma had clearly understood that they would always be regarded as aliens.”<sup>276</sup> We began this thesis by analyzing rural anti-Chettiar sentiment during the Saya San Rebellion and traced how concurrent urban anti-Indian feelings during the “Separation Crisis” transformed the Burmese nationalist movement into an increasingly monolithic anti-Indian movement with the separation of Burma and India in 1937. By framing the Indian minority as an “out-group,” the Bamar ethnonationalists

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<sup>274</sup> Chakravarti, *The Indian Minority in Burma*, 170.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid.

<sup>276</sup> Ibid., 171.

defined being a member of the Bamar Buddhist majority as the foundation of Burmese identity. The indiscriminate anti-Indian violence across urban and rural townships during the 1938 Anti-Indian Riots asserted this new Burmese identity. These years of compounding xenophobia and the catalyst of the Japanese invasion culminated in the Indian exodus from Burma in 1941. While the war had a great impact on the development of new Burmese political factions, which would become influential in antebellum politics, the idea of what it meant to be Burmese was firmly entrenched by 1941.

The tenets of Burmese national identity from the colonial era continue to manifest themselves today through the language used to “justify” the Rohingya Genocide. Nationalists in Myanmar portray the Rohingya as Indian through the terms “Bengali” and “*Kala*,” to suggest that the Rohingya, who are indigenous to Myanmar's Rakhine State, are foreign invaders looking to replace the Burmese people. The terms “Bengali” and “*Kala*” distinctly characterize the Rohingya as racially “Indian,” evoking the colonial idea of “Indian-ness” being the antithesis of “Burmese-ness.” Studying the evolution of Burmese identity from the colonial era allows a modern scholar to understand why contemporary Burmese identity is hostile to the Rohingya. The three case studies examined in this thesis constitute expressions of Burmese identity through the lens of religion, race, and action, which modern Burmese nationalists weaponize against the Rohingya.

Calls for anti-Rohingya violence from Buddhist monks (*pongyis*) is a compelling example of how Buddhism continues to be a tenet of modern Burmese identity. Islamophobia is a key driver of the Rohingya Genocide. In 2017 a

Buddhist monk phrased it as follows: “I am only warning people about Muslims. Consider it like if you had a dog, that would bark at strangers coming to your house—it is to warn you. I am like that dog. I bark.” From this example it becomes clear that *pongyis* deliberately dehumanize the Rohingya on account of their religion.<sup>277</sup> The roots of this commitment to Buddhism as a key part of Burmese national identity can be found in the Saya San Rebellion, our first case study. Saya San’s followers bravely charged British machine guns due to their faith in charms, tattoos, and Burmese Buddhism; and their discontent about losing land to Chettiar moneylenders. Defending the Buddhist religion as the call to arms for independence embodies the significance of Buddhism to Burmese national identity.

Meanwhile, the Islamophobia of the *pongyis* during the 1938 Anti-Indian Riots mirror the rhetoric and action taken by Buddhist monks against the Rohingya today. Burmese Buddhist perceptions that Muslims were “leeching” off the land and “insulting” Buddhism caused many *pongyis* to take up knives and murder Indian Muslims in 1938 in the same manner that *pongyis* dehumanize the Rohingya in the present. The modern rhetoric used by the Myanmar government to demonize the Rohingya characterizes them as “interlopers, stealing land and economic opportunities, with the eventual goal of overthrowing Buddhism as the country’s majority religion.”<sup>278</sup> This rhetoric parallels that of the 1938 Anti-Indian Riots which accuses Muslims of covertly setting up a *Dobama Muslim* (“our

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<sup>277</sup> Marella Oppenheim, “‘It Only Takes One Terrorist’: The Buddhist Monk Who Reviles Myanmar’s Muslims,” *The Guardian*, May 12, 2017.

<sup>278</sup> Gregory B. Poling, “Separating Fact from Fiction about Myanmar’s Rohingya.”

Burma-Muslim”) community or turning Buddhist Burma into a Muslim Burma. The islamophobia driving the Rohingya Genocide is thus not a modern phenomenon, the false notion that Muslims constituted a fifth column in Burmese society has its origins in the colonial era and was integral in the Burmese nationalist project of the late 1930s. We have witnessed through the 1938 Anti-Indian Riots that Islamophobia was a convenient tool for uniting a Bamar Buddhist “in-group” by demonizing an ethnic and religious minority “out-group.” The Rohingya are victims of colonial-era Islamophobia used to unite the Bamar Buddhists in the fight for Burmese independence.

The contemporary Bamar Buddhist majority use racialization of the Bamar ethnicity and the exclusionary rhetoric of a “Burma for the Burmans and not for Indians” from colonial Burma in framing the Rohingya as a foreign threat. One Rohingya man, named Bodru, recalls that “they said ‘Kalar’ [a racial slur]. Then they said ‘Bengali.’ At last, they said ‘intruder.’”<sup>279</sup> *Kala* used as a racial slur against the Rohingya parallels its use against Indians both during the Separation Crisis and the 1938 Anti-Indian Riots as a way to easily reinforce the idea that Indians and Indian Muslims, in particular, did not belong in the Burmese nation. *Kala* in its etymological form broadly means South Asian but since the colonial era has become a pejorative. This transformation of a common term into a slur based on a person’s regional origin illustrates the stigma towards Indians in both colonial and contemporary Myanmar. We see that the persisting characterization of a group as “Indian” to dehumanize them comes from the anti-

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<sup>279</sup> “Burma’s Path to Genocide,” *US Holocaust Memorial Museum*.

Indian sentiments of colonial Burma. Contemporary Burmese identity continues to include an anti-Indian element and Bodru describes how “they are making us valueless” by using descriptors such as “*Kalar*” and “Bengali.” Thus, the anti-Indian sentiment of Burma’s colonial past has fueled the Rohingya Genocide.

The anti-Indian component of Burmese identity carried an aspect of action, being Burmese also meant defending *dobama* (our Burma), and calls for pogroms against the Rohingya reflect the continuing relevance of Burma’s colonial history. Anti-Rohingya sentiment in the Burmese press not only carries the power to dehumanize but also call for mob violence. The article titled “The Thorn Needs Removing if it Pierces,” published in *The Global New Light of Myanmar*, “urged the Buddhist government to take action against the Rohingya” by comparing them to a “thorn.”<sup>280</sup> A thorn will continue to cause pain and even infection unless removed; by characterizing the Rohingya as a “thorn” there is a clear call to action for the “removal” of the Rohingya. The 1938 Anti-Indian Riots where the headline in the vernacular press was “BUDDHISM HAS BEEN INSULTED, TAKE IMMEDIATE STEPS,” expressed that taking part in collective reactions as a part of Burmese civic identity developed during the colonial era. Both the ongoing Rohingya Genocide and the 1938 Anti-Indian Riots convey that “Burmese-ness” is partly characterized by taking action to preserve a Bamar Buddhist state.

While the majority of Burmese neither welcome nor recognize the existence of the Rohingya ethnicity, some experts argue that this xenophobia

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<sup>280</sup> Ibid.

began as a result of ultranationalist policies after General Ne Win seized power in a coup in 1962. The US Holocaust Memorial Museum highlights that in the 1970s the Ne Win government slowly began to escalate the alienation of the Rohingya, first by confiscating their National ID cards, which provided proof of citizenship. This culminated in a 1982 law that based citizenship on ethnicity and excluded the Rohingya, using the term “Bengali” to describe them. While Ne Win’s “government would come to be defined by policies that protected the Buddhist Bamar,” the anti-Indian and Islamophobia of the 1930s did not simply disappear in the years between Burmese independence in 1948 and Ne Win’s coup in 1962.<sup>281</sup> The term “Bengali,” could only dehumanize the Rohingya if the Bamar Buddhist majority already held strong anti-Indian sentiments, which they did. Ne Win’s anti-Rohingya and pro-Bamar Buddhist policies were successful because Burmese national identity, developed in response to British rule, was already defined by being a Bamar Buddhist. Even after Ne Win’s regime, many Burmese citizens have either supported or been indifferent to the continuing dehumanization of the Rohingya using language from colonial Burma. Therefore, Ne Win did not create the anti-Rohingya sentiment, he merely capitalized on the underlying bigotry with colonial origins and used that for his own machinations. The perception of the Rohingya as “other” emerged from the rhetoric of the Bamar nationalists of the colonial era.

Through this thesis project, I have traced the development of Burmese national identity through three case studies and examined their lasting

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<sup>281</sup> Ibid.

implications in fueling the Rohingya Genocide. It is my goal to have shown how the idea of being Burmese is one of pride for many people, pride in resisting the British, pride in the Buddhist religion, pride in Bamar ethnicity, and pride in having one's own nation. While it was Bamar nationalists who espoused anti-Indian rhetoric in colonial Burma, such action was a product of British oppression. However, nationalism has consequences and the parallels in the rhetoric used by modern and colonial-era Burmese nationalists to characterize the Rohingya and Indian minorities respectively, convey how the scars of colonialism have not healed in Myanmar.

After analyzing the development of an exclusionary Burmese national identity, it is important to note that discrimination is not inherent to "Burmese-ness." We have seen how in both colonial and contemporary Myanmar, nationalist politicians and the state government largely dictated the pillars of what it meant to be Burmese through propagandistic messaging. While the Rohingya Genocide illustrates that many Burmese have subscribed to their government's rhetoric, a wave of solidarity between Bamar Buddhists and ethnic minority rebels in the wake of the 2021 Myanmar Coup brings hope that there will be a mutual rapprochement between the Bamar Buddhist majority and Myanmar's ethnic minorities. Burmese identity is constantly evolving but my research shows that Myanmar's colonial legacies are difficult to expunge.



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