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‘Religion’ as an issue in political transition.

Two competing secularities in Buddhist Burma (Myanmar)¹

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“Can ‘secularism’ travel?” That was the question Charles Taylor asked in an afterword to *Beyond the Secular West* (ed. Bilgrami, 2016) as a comment on his monumental *A Secular Age*, published nine years earlier (2007). Akeel Bilgrami’s purpose in editing *Beyond the Secular West* was to go beyond Taylor’s formidable narrative about the category “secular” that began with the “axial age.” It was to ask if the modern political doctrine of “secularism” that resulted from this long-term Western history was exportable to non-Christianized contexts. In other words, it was to question the thesis of secularization as a linear and teleological global process. It was also to extend the debate of alternative modernities with that of alternative secularities; the authors seek to move from the teleological understandings of secularization and disenchantment that presume the reproducibility of the process from its Western template to non-European trajectories of the disentanglement of transcendence and the worldly. Indeed, some of the axial age transformations had been developing in parallel outside of Christendom, such as, for instance, the soteriological rather than ritual orientation of religious practice in the case of the Indian Buddhist primitive doctrine. Also, considering more recent moments of this long history, one has to look at the complex interactions that occurred through colonization, decolonization, and globalization, in which secularism has, more or less explicitly, been an active model of the governance technologies involved.

As a political doctrine, “secularism”—i.e., the doctrine constituting religion as a domain of social life separate from those of politics and public life—was born in the West during the nineteenth century to substitute a democratic and liberal legitimation of modern state power for a religious one. It is the doctrine through which modern states regulate religions. Fundamentally hegemonic, it is grounded in the conceptual binary of the secular versus the religious. The two categories are considered co-constitutive; they belong to a discourse that shapes religion and displaces it while clearing out a space for the secular state. The secular does not only emerge out of a socio-cosmological whole in opposition to religion; it also has an impact on religious beliefs and practice. As David McMahan stated in his recent “Buddhism and Global Secularisms,” Buddhism thus provides its own illustrations of how particular configurations of the binary have been a significant factor in religious change (2017: 115).²

¹ The official name of Burma has been changed to Myanmar—an older and more literary version for the same word—by the military organ (SLORC) that took over in 1988. Both versions of the country name, the official and the historical, are found throughout academic literature, sometimes with political implications, sometimes according to the field of studies or the era covered. Burma is used throughout this paper for convenience sake, except when quoting a specific expression.

² About the secular and secularism see Talal Asad, 2003, Danièle Hervieu-Léger, 2010, Saba Mahmood, 2016, Stanley Tambiah, 1998 and Peter Van der Veer, 2014.

In this paper, Myanmar's political transition and the ensuing outburst of strident Buddhist nationalism will be taken as a case in point of an unrecognized secularity affecting religious dynamics and delineations in today's Burma. What is generally termed political "transition," itself an expression of teleological premises in governance theories, describes the major top-down political reform that followed the adoption of a new parliamentary constitution in Burma through the 2008 referendum: a formally civilian government was invested in 2011 after the Union for Solidarity and Development Party (USDP, an offspring of the military administrations) won the 2010 general elections, which led to a political changeover with the election of the democratic opposition, the National League for Democracy (NLD) in 2015. While the political reform formally put an end to half a century of autocratic rule by the juntas, the constitution had been designed under the military leadership to maintain the army in key power positions, allowing for the formation of a truly hybrid regime that would soon prove a severe impediment to the liberalization process.³

The most harrowing example of this obstacle has been the massive exodus of the Muslim Rohingyas from Northern Arakan (Rakhine) across the Bangladesh border, a process that made the media headlines in September 2017. The roots of this tragedy are complex and entrenched. However, the Rohingya's progressive exclusion from the national Buddhist landscape, their electoral disenfranchisement due to the refusal to recognize them as a "national ethnic group" (*taingyintha*), and the failure of the newly elected civilian democratic government to prevent military exactions against them—all these contemporary developments in the Rohingya situation in Buddhist-dominated Burma resonate with the reinvigoration of an exclusively Buddhist national identity. Instrumental in promoting this exclusive national identity is a newly emergent Buddhist nationalist movement led by monks, known as the Mabatha.⁴ Nothing could bring the weaknesses of the newly elected democratic government more starkly to international attention than the Rohingya tragedy, but this situation has also been sustained by the widely shared Burmese Buddhist opinion that the Rohingya do not belong to the Buddhist national identity that the Mabatha promotes. Founded in June 2013 under pressure from young activist monks who had just led a fierce campaign for the boycott of Muslim businesses all over Burma,⁵ the movement called for broad participation from all strands of the monastic order and advocated the "defense of the national religion," that is, Buddhism, whose teachings it perceived to be under threat from Islamic pressure and in need of revitalization.

This kind of strident religious nationalism arising in a period of political transition is far from unique. Nationalism and religion are Western categories that have mutually enmeshed

³ By constitutional provision, members of the military are appointed to three main ministries, namely the Ministry of Home Affairs, Ministry of Defense, and Ministry of Border Affairs. 25 per cent of the Assembly seats are reserved for appointed members of the military who may use a veto in the case of a constitutional amendment.

⁴ Mabatha is an acronym, often found as Ma Ba Tha in recent analyses on Burmese political transition and religious nationalism. Given that it has become ubiquitous in everyday language and in the literature, and in order to facilitate reading, I choose to normalize its transcription as a single word. For literature on these questions see Iselin Frydenlund, 2017, Mikael Gravers 2012 & 2015, Juliane Schober 2017 and Matthew Walton, 2014. For the analysis of the Mabatha's full title see Brac de la Perrière 2015a and below.

⁵ About this campaign known as 969, see below.

histories and have spread throughout the world, through colonial empires and then globalization, as two conflicting sociopolitical frameworks—namely, that of the secular nation-state and that of the religious identity of large-scale communities. Hannah Arendt once pointed out that the idea of the nation-state was in itself a perversion through which state protection of citizens became linked to the latter’s nationality (1951). More recently, the diffusion of liberal ideology based on democratic secularist ideals has often elicited defensive reactions in liberalizing postcolonial countries that have brought together nationalism and religion in such a way as to make their coalescence seem unavoidable. Analysts of these contemporary phenomena have observed that the post-colonial societies where religious nationalisms have particularly taken hold are those where the idea of the nation-state was problematic and where secular nationalism was seen as a colonial importation.⁶

Somewhat ironically, these phenomena of religious nationalist reactions offer a perfect opportunity to look at secular formations specific to such societies, which were first marked by the colonial secular state and then caught up in the secularizing tendencies inherent to the democratization process. The recent re-emergence of exclusivist Buddhist nationalism in contemporary Burma, also termed “ethnocentric Buddhism” or “chauvinistic Buddhism” (Fuller 2018), both reflects the resilience of religious tradition in politics and reveals the effect of the political transition in the religious field. In this mutual redelineation, the Buddhist nationalist reaction expresses the secularizing effect of political transition, an effect that has not been considered in existing analyses of the situation.

This paper addresses the Burmese confrontation with “modern” values in the context of the current political transition, and its impact on “Buddhist secularity.” Through the analysis of the Mabatha’s formation, it seeks to uncover an ongoing and implicit debate on “Where should the Buddhist monk stand?” and “What is religious and what is political?” given that the delineation of these categories is both culturally specific and endlessly evolving. Political transition is taken as a particular moment in these categories’ genealogies, which can be considered a replication of at least two previous confrontations that led to a discourse of “defense of religion,” occurring respectively at the time of the colonial encounter and of the newly independent Burma. First, the historical background is examined through a sketch of secularity in historical Theravadin polities, the emergence of “defense of religion” discourses in reaction to colonial secularist policies, and a brief depiction of the working of secular political institutions and the governance of religion since Independence. The narrative then turns to the Mabatha’s formation as a site of secularization.

Theravadin Buddhist formations as bearers of a form of secularity

In a Theravadin society, the relationship between politics and religion is framed by the specific construction of Buddha’s teachings as the preserve of religious men, organized in the monastic order (the Sangha) according to the set of rules recorded in the part of the scriptures

⁶ See particularly Mark Juergensmeyer, 2010, Katarina Kinvall, 2004.

called the *Vinaya*.⁷ These rules, supposedly set by Gotama during his lifetime, lay out the life of renunciation required of monks struggling on the path of salvation. Most important on the sociological level are the clauses barring monks from any productive work or business activity, making them dependent on their social environment for their maintenance; in Burma today, the daily alms-tour to collect food is integral to the religious way of life. Obedience to monastic rules allows monks to be merit-purveyors for the lay donors going their own way along the donation-path. This “symbiosis” between the religious order and society at large has been organized in Theravadin societies in what has been called the Asokan model of kingship.⁸ It allows for the formation of two distinctive spheres of religious action, the merit-making path of people inhabiting the world (*lawki*) and the path of monks who ideally seek to escape the karmic cycle and get beyond the world (*lokuttara*). In this model, monks must stay out of worldly affairs to maintain their status as merit purveyors for people inhabiting the world. In Buddhist studies, the Pali word *upasaka*—meant to encapsulate the idea of Buddhist people as opposed to monks—is usually translated as “laypeople.” *Upasaka* is rendered in Burmese as *lu*, literally meaning “human being.”⁹

In the Asokan model, state and religious institutions were indeed “separate,” as Mirjam Weiberg-Salzmann posited in her study on pre-colonial Sri Lanka (2014), so it looks as though a specific form of functional and ideological secularity was ingrained in a Buddhist polity. However, the “lay” and “religious” fields were actually connected through their symbiosis in an all-encompassing Buddhist polity (*thathana-daw* in Burmese) formed as an area of Buddha’s teachings (*thathana*, Pali *sāsana*)¹⁰ and distinguished through the adjunction of the qualifier for “royal” (*daw*). At the apex of this polity, the king was the prominent Sangha’s patron. In this kind of polity, “hierarchy was about degrees of dependency” (Errington, 2012: 22). It allowed for distinctive sets of religious observances, as Alexey Kirichenko (2009) has shown, and even a degree of religious pluralism. *Thathana*—often translated as “religion”—was really the all-encompassing Buddhicized social space (Brac de la Perrière, 2017b).

“Defense of religion” in Burmese colonial history as nationalist politics

In Burma, however, this historical situation was first critically disturbed by colonial conquest. Under British rule, and contrary to Burmese royal practice, non-interference in religious matters was official policy. To counter such “benign neglect,” Burmese Buddhists were

⁷ About the *Vinaya*’s central role in the structures insuring the regulation of Theravadin monks and in the hybrid laws set up over time by the main Theravadin policies, see the recent special issue of *Buddhism, Law & Society* edited by Benjamin Schontal (2018).

⁸ This model of kingship is termed Asokan after the name of its mythic founder, the Buddhist Mauryan emperor, Asoka, who ruled over India from 273 to 232 BC. See in particular Robert Lingat, 1989, and Stanley Tambiah, 1976.

⁹ In Pali literature, Buddhist society is seen as constituted by four assemblies (monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen) according to two criteria: gender and religious status. This Buddhist framing of society still lays the groundwork for the conceptualization of a Buddhist civil society, independent of the state.

¹⁰ *Thathana* from the Pali *sāsana* has long been the main term for designating Buddhist teaching and its institutions in Burmese, a term that could be rendered as Buddhicized social space (Brac de la Perrière, 2017b). See also Gustaaf Houtman 1990 and Alexey Kirichienko 2009.

driven to engage in the safeguard of their “religion”—termed *thathana* (P. *sāsana*)—more directly than ever before. They expanded the donation-path by becoming involved in practices that were previously the preserve of monastics, such as the study of Buddhist writings (*pariyatti*) and meditation (*patipatti*).¹¹ Alicia Turner writes that “the shared responsibility of preserving the *sāsana* produced a moral community that became a powerful source of identity, motivation and shared sentiment for Buddhists in colonial Burma” (2014:82). This movement to preserve Buddhist institutions (*thathana*, P. *sāsana*), she explains, was connected to earlier discourse on religious decline and reform, and later evolved into a proto-nationalist discourse. People’s increased participation in the maintenance of Sangha and Buddhist teachings gave them a new sense of being Buddhists. The result was a social shift from the king-patronized Buddhist society to one patronized by “laypeople” (*lu*), building on the pre-colonial symbiosis of Buddhist and state institutions. These developments can be seen as the first movement of “defense of *thathana*” by laypeople and a model for the contemporary reformulation of Buddhist nationalism.

The colonial situation caused the discourse of “defense of *thathana*” to evolve into a moral discourse of opposition to the powers-that-be, whether the colonial administration or, later on, the military. Members of the Sangha have voiced this moral discourse of opposition on several occasions, from the celebrated involvement of Ottama and Wisara in the nationalist cause in the 1920s to the no less celebrated “Saffron revolution” of September 2007. In all cases, the political authorities were liable to dismiss the monks’ actions as an infringement of their state of renunciation. Both the colonial authorities and the military juntas effectively defrocked and jailed certain monks whom they qualified as “political,” thus bringing their religious status into question. Although these authorities have been harshly criticized for their repression of monks, the “political” label applied to a monk has nevertheless acquired a very strong stigma.

The category of lawki and religious politics in the Burmese independent state

Burma was established as an independent state in 1948. It inherited a secular framework from the colonial administration in which freedom of faith is constitutionally guaranteed, although Buddhism is recognized as the religion of the majority. Aung San, the founding father of the Burmese independent state—who was assassinated before its advent, in 1947—made use of the Buddhist concept of “this-worldly” (*lawki*) to articulate the secularist project of governance implied in the Constitution.¹² However, the phrase has not made its way into everyday language. Today, the locution that qualifies the state as “secular”—*lawki hsan de*—means “that which resembles the mundane.” It is hardly known to the common people in this usage, despite Aung San’s using it while planning independence. To my knowledge, *lawki*

¹¹ Interestingly, Houtman sees this shift as a “monasticization” of “laypeople,” (1999) while it also could be seen as a product of secularization through which the responsibility for maintaining religious institutions shifted from the state to civil society.

¹² See Gustaaf Houtman, 1999, 246. As also remarked by Matthew Walton, Aung San’s choice of words reveals that “even those Buddhist Burmese political figures who have opposed the establishment of Buddhism as the national religion and advocated for separation of church and state still reason about politics from within a Theravada worldview.” (Walton, 2012: 75)

hsan de is only discussed in specific constitutional discourse, or in new discourses derived from the opening up of a legal political field of action in Burma following the inception of political transition in 2011 after half a century of military rule. For instance, it was used in the *Journal of Human Rights and Democracy* of June 2014—a periodical published by non-governmental organizations promoting democracy in Burma—in opposition to the outbreak of Buddhist nationalism linked to the anti-Muslim violence prevailing since 2012. Significantly, the secular is brandished in that publication as the antidote to religious extremist nationalism.

In fact, *lawki* is part of the Buddhist legacy in Burmese, and means “that which pertains to this world.” It stands in contrast to *lokuttara*, which means “beyond this world.”¹³ In this sense, it could perfectly fit the Western use of “secular,” with which it would then share its original religious framing. However, *lawki* is rarely used to delineate a political or public sphere deliberately kept out of religious life, as revealed by the word *hsan de* “to resemble” being added to it in the phrase *lawki hsan de naingngan daw* to signify this specific use. *Lawki* instead brings to mind an alternative religious path to the renunciation of the monks, and thus a sphere in which monks should not enter if they are to maintain their state of renunciation. In other words, it has not lost its religious connotations, as in the case of the word “secular” in Western languages. Secularism—that is, the political discourse maintaining a distance between politics/public life and religion—is not easily translated in the common Burmese language, nor has it been readily adopted from its English form.

Religious issues repeatedly impacted state affairs in the newly independent Burma. Indeed, Buddhism was central to the building of national identity, as exemplified by the Kaba Aye 6th Theravadin Council that Prime Minister Nu sponsored in 1955.¹⁴ While Nu promoted Buddhist nationalism as identity, his government was nevertheless under pressure from young monks who opposed his urban reformist Buddhism and religious policies.¹⁵ In August 1961, amidst the disruption of the first parliamentary era, Nu moved to amend the constitution in order to make Buddhism the state religion, which was one of the opposing monks’ demands. This move was one of the factors involved in the 1962 military coup. Ne Win, the strongman behind the coup, is known to have turned to a secular form of power to stop the monks’ interference in state affairs (Tin Maung Maung Than, 1988). However, the new constitution adopted in 1974 (*The Burmese Way towards Socialism*) was explicitly designed as a Buddhist-inspired socialism, further demonstrating the import of Buddhist ideals in Burmese political thinking.

In May 1980, Ne Win also implemented a religious reform to reassert the government’s control over the Buddhist monastic order (the Sangha) by merging its various segments under a single administration, the *Sangha Maha Nayaka Ahpwe*. This body of senior abbots was placed under the Department of Religious Affairs, which became an independent Ministry in 1992. This reform of the Sangha, drafted by an assembly of senior monks under state

¹³ Houtman, 1999: 246.

¹⁴ On the role of this Council in the consolidation of the nascent nation, see in particular Chris Clark, 2015.

¹⁵ About this period, see Donald Smith, 1965 and Hiroko Kawanami, 2016.

leadership, is still in effect today. It constitutes what Benjamin Schontal identifies as one of the hybrid law systems through which monastic governance has been implemented in South and Southeast Asian Theravadin countries (2018). However, while the Burmese scholar Tin Maung Maung Than praised the reform for its secularism in 1988, parts of the Sangha have more recently raised harsh critiques, blaming it for having “yoked” monks to the government.¹⁶ In fact, it appears that Ne Win’s administration was truly concerned with restraining the Buddhist monks’ initiative by delineating their proper place according to monastic rule (*Vinaya*). Indeed, by forcing the monks to stick to their religious role as it was defined in new regulations, Ne Win’s reform of the Sangha had an enduring impact on religious politics in Burma.

Later on, the military’s return to power after the 1988 events and the lost elections in 1990 signaled a return to the historical symbiosis of the state and Sangha—dating back to the times of Burmese monarchy—through a systematic policy of funding and supporting Buddhist institutions as an alternative source of state legitimation.¹⁷ This renewed interdependency was only questioned by a few standout monastic figures, such as the abbot of Thamanya.¹⁸ However, it was strongly affected by the 2007 Saffron Revolution that marked the return of the monastics to the political arena as a force enjoying a certain degree of agency, as they experimented with new ways of fulfilling religious roles (Brac de la Perrière, 2015b).

Even such a brief record of the relations between Buddhism and state administration since Independence shows that the secular frame of the state defined by the Burmese constitution has not prevented the pervasive Buddhist presence in public space and debate. As Niels Bubandt and Martjin van Beek wrote in their book *Varieties of Secularism in Asia* (2012), secularism is usually envisioned as having emerged in Asia with post-colonial questions of nationality. However, what has been observed in Burma since Independence looks more like tension between political institutions designed to be secular and a social life and national identity imbued with Buddhism.

Monks intervening in “defense of Buddhism”

Today, the 2008 constitution guarantees freedom of faith to all citizens, “subject to public order, morality or health” through article I.34. It is further qualified in various articles of chapter VIII, particularly article 361 recognizing the special position of Buddhism as the faith professed by the great majority. Religious belonging is constitutive of citizens’ identity and has to be mentioned on identity cards together with ethnicity. As for the monks, they are separately registered as members of the Sangha under the Ministry of Religion. Not only does the monastic rule (*Vinaya*) prevent them from becoming involved in politics, considered worldly affairs, but, as is the case for Thai Buddhist monks, they are also constitutionally barred from doing so and even from casting their vote in political elections on the grounds of

¹⁶ Brac de la Perrière, 2015a: 41. On this reform, see also Keiko Tosa, 2013.

¹⁷ See Juliane Schober, 2011.

¹⁸ See Guillaume Rozenberg, 2010.

their renouncer status.¹⁹ Since the advent of the political transition, with the 2010 general elections and the subsequent opening up of a legal political field of action for civil society, some monks have started to perceive their disenfranchisement as a severe disadvantage of their religious status.

It was in this context and amidst the outburst of dramatic anti-Muslim pogroms in central Burma that the Mabatha was founded. The violence started in Arakan (Rakhine State) in June 2012 and was immediately followed by a massive campaign to boycott Muslim-run businesses all over Burma. This campaign, known as 969, was led by a network of already influential, relatively young and very active monks. Religious networks such as the *Theravada Dhamma Kumyeth* (Theravada Doctrine Network) were launched in August 2012 for the express purpose of preaching the defense of Buddhism through the boycott of Muslim businesses and by praising the Buddhist Arakanese people as being Buddhist Burma's ultimate defense against the Muslim threat to the west.

The campaign's success came as a surprise. All of a sudden, in the winter of 2012-13, 969 stickers were everywhere, displayed by Buddhist laypeople on all sorts of businesses, moto-taxis, betel stalls and more established shops. They displayed the 969 logo to assert that the businesses were run by Buddhists and thus eligible for transactions. Activist monks relied on the practice of mass preaching by night, at the invitation of lay collectivities, to distribute the stickers on masse. Such mass preaching had all but disappeared during the Ne Win era. But since the 1990s, the practice had slowly been revitalized with state encouragement, and since the Nargis cyclone it had grown exponentially, appropriated by a new generation of monks eager to gain some independence from the political and religious establishments while developing new ways to perform their religious role.²⁰ Indeed, 969 monks were able to secure access to a large audience through the renewed practice of mass preaching and the wide circulation of sermons made possible by the loosening of censorship and the new media technologies available since the regime change.

Surprisingly, religious authorities, particularly the *Sangha Maha Nayaka Ahpwe*, which was the monastic central authority established by Ne Win administration, did nothing to check the often aggressively anti-Muslim speeches of the Sangha monks. Those ideas had spread so widely following the Rohingya issue that when I arrived in Burma for field research in March 2013, I heard rumors that because of this campaign, "religious war" (*batha taik bwe*) was about to break out. Indeed two weeks later, anti-Muslims pogroms started to flare up in Central Burma.

However, on May 6, 2013, a general convention of monks was held in Yangon under the leadership of the abbot of Ywama monastery (Badhanda Tilawka Bhiwantha), apparently to address the inter-confessional crisis. The context was very much one of criticism of the use of the Buddhist 969 symbol for an anti-Muslim campaign. What came out of this meeting was the formation of the new association that six months later would be dubbed "Mabatha." The

¹⁹ On the disenfranchisement of Buddhist monks in Theravadin societies, see Thomas Larsson, 2015.

²⁰ About these developments, see Brac de la Perrière, 2015b.

main explicit objective of the Mabatha was to defend Buddhism as the religion of the majority group in Burma. This expresses the tension inherent in the constitution's recognizing Theravada Buddhism as the religion of the majority group while also granting freedom of faith. It is worth taking a look at the conceptual framework of the Mabatha's foundation in more detail, using two sources: the text that came out of the May 6 meeting, which is a sort of charter for the Mabatha, and another text that was circulating in the monasteries at the time, whose authors have requested anonymity.²¹

The name "Mabatha" stands for *amyo batha thathana saung shauk yay ahpwe*, which brings together three words qualifying different aspects of belonging in Burmese, all of which are difficult to translate. *Amyo* means familial group, ethnic group, nation or even race, according to the context; *batha* is 'religion' in the Western sense of individually professed denomination²²; and *thathana*, as mentioned earlier, is the Pali *sâsana* and refers to the dispensation of the Buddha's teachings, that is, the institutions dedicated to the maintenance of Buddhism in Myanmar. These notions thus combined refer to Burmese national identity as exclusively Buddhist, as most Burmese conceive of it today. In this compound, *batha*—a concept introduced in the mid-nineteenth century to translate the Western concept of 'religion'—has become the main component of Burmese identity, while *thathana*, which had been the marker of the Burmese Buddhist polity and of the 1930s discourses of defense of Buddhism, is relegated to the background.²³ This conceptual shift is in itself telling of a relocation of religion in the socio-political configuration from an all-encompassing frame into a more individualized and private orientation defined as a faith, a process that translates a degree of secularization.

The defense of the national religion is asserted in the Mabatha's founding charter as a common objective that religious and lay people alike must embrace, in other words, as the cement of national unity. By promoting national unity through the defense of Buddhism, the monastics appropriate for themselves what had been the main prerogative of the army during the military regimes, and what a parliamentary regime accused of being "too divisive" could not achieve. By elevating the defense of Buddhism to a primary national "cause," the monks appropriated national identity as their affair, a religious affair through which they act as surrogates of an army that had previously been the main guardian of the said identity. Thus, the initiative to form the Mabatha has to be considered as emerging from the socio-political situation. It is a product of transitional Burma in which the army has to surrender a number of prerogatives, including the defense of national identity as Buddhist, while monks were left to look for their own role themselves.

²¹ See my 2015 paper in French, "Ma Ba Tha, Les trois syllables du nationalisme birman," for a more detailed analysis.

²² *Batha* is the Burmese rendering of the Indian *basha* meaning language. Its first meaning in Burmese is also language when used with the verb to speak (*pyaw*). When used with the verb to worship (*kokwe*), it refers to religion as an individually professed faith. In the Mabatha's name, the meaning 'religion' is inferred from the discourse of defense of religion that is the main objective advocated by the organization's leaders.

²³ Houtman, 1990 and Kirichenko, 2009. For the appropriation of the Western concept of 'religion' in Burma see Brac de la Perrière 2017b.

Let us note that a general monks' convention outside of the Mahana—as the central authority of the Sangha (the *Sangha Maha Nayaka Ahpwe*) came to be known after the Mabatha's formation—was in itself a strong act of independence by the monks behind the scenes, among whom the 969 activist monks were prominent. Indeed, it could be taken as an act of secession that would be a major infringement of the Vinayic code. The matter was largely mitigated, however, by an explicit appeal to all the monks belonging to the Sangha to participate, on the grounds that the responsibility to preserve Buddhism was incumbent on all sorts of monks, whatever their practice or position. At first, the official and activist Buddhist organizations (Mahana and Mabatha) appeared partially to overlap. The Mabatha's influence in the Sangha was therefore not easy to assess if only because the Mabatha monks were part of larger existing monastic networks.

The discourse of the “political” monks

However, I would like to consider another text, authored by monastics from circles that had previously opposed the juntas. This text was circulating in the monasteries during the Mabatha's formative period. The monks that gave it to me had been imprisoned under the previous administration and requested anonymity, so I can only use its title to identify it: “The discourse addressed to the monastics to freely express their hidden wishes according to their religious karma” dated April 23, 2013. The author presents himself as an historian. The text is a strong critique of the status granted to the Sangha and monks in Burma since the 1980 monastic reform. While the overt opposition to the ecclesiastic authorities in this text is at odds with the Mabatha's charter, its stance for the defense of the national religion is, on the contrary, attuned to that of the Mabatha.

The *Discourse* is a technical discussion of the various acts through which the monastic legal status and the Sangha institution have been run since Independence, according to the dialectics of “just rule” as compared to “rule of strength” (*dhamma sek/ana sek*). It is also a violent critique of the Sangha reform implemented under Ne Win's rule in 1980, which is said to have “yoked” the Sangha to the civilian order. Particularly disputed is the way religious men have been excluded from political action while, in their time, monks such as Ottama and Wisara, heroes of the anti-colonial fight, had taken on the responsibility of awakening the lay people's patriotic spirit. Finally, the *Discourse* claims that political action is legitimate for monks, who should have the right to cast votes and to enter into a political contest.

In other words, the *Discourse* consists in a monastic view on the history of state-Sangha relations in independent Burma, opposing the way monks have been distanced from public leadership, in their view wrongly, whereas they were the true “fathers” of the nation. It expresses a strong opposition to military leadership and encourages the whole Sangha to take the opportunity offered by the democratic transition to recover political initiative in the name of the defense of religion. While there is no anti-Islamism in this text, what it has in common with the Mabatha's charter is the insistence on reclaiming the monks' position as “nation” leaders, the “nation” being understood as Buddhist.

What looking at the two texts together shows is that the Mabatha emerged in 2013 in the midst of intense debate among the Sangha over what monks' role should be during the political transition, a debate driven by the secularizing tendency of political transition. Pre-transitional tension between “governmental monks” and “political monks” opposed to the juntas is translated into the two contrasting positions of the Mabatha charter and the *Discourse*.

However, the political dimension of the Mabatha's program only became clear during the 2015 electoral campaign. At first, the Mabatha monks claimed no political role in their charter, whereas the monks who once opposed the juntas called openly for a political role in their *Discourse*, probably because political action for monks is, as a rule, disregarded in Burma. As already noted, monks are deprived of the right to vote and of involvement in politics both in the new parliamentary constitution and from the monastic-rule point of view. However, what transpires most strikingly from the Mabatha charter and the *Discourse* is that in the name of the defense of Buddhism, both texts claim the same position for monks as leaders of the “nation”—an exclusively Buddhist nation. Arguably, the reason for this is that, due to the ban on political action for monks and the unstated secularizing effect of political transition, no place has been carved out for monks. In other words, the transitional process seems to have driven some monks to put their religious status under threat by involving themselves in worldly affairs rather than risk marginalization.

The Mabatha's political work

In the two years following its foundation, Mabatha took on more and more importance and been increasingly active on various fronts through a range of bodies that mushroomed according to needs. These include the *dhamma skuls* organization operating according to the Sri Lankan Sunday school template, the *Theravada dhamma* network facilitating the monks' preaching activities, various monastic charity foundations (*parahita*), the *Save the Shwedagon* group, and all sorts of activities not directly linked to the Mabatha but with objectives that tie in with the Mabatha agenda and target the envisioned moral reform of Buddhist society. Most of these activities depend on renewed and growing religious donation networks, particularly through the incremental development of public preaching, which has become a new source of wealth for monastics. Meanwhile, the core of the Mabatha organization's monks have been reacting to events, particularly by putting cases against what they consider as religious insults (*thathana saw ka*) or reacting against any public use of the designation Rohingya, which has become intolerable in the Buddhist nationalist worldview. Though not very numerous, maybe a few thousand, these monks have been supported by very dedicated lay followers and acting inside larger monastic networks. They could best be described as “religious activists” working through a nebulous network that has managed to boost the Buddhist nationalist discourse at any price and made it all-pervasive on the public scene.

One important practical objective of the Mabatha, already stated in the May 2013 charter, was to have laws preventing Buddhist women from marrying Muslim men. To quote the charter: “The most important thing to insure harmony between people of different faiths living together is to pass laws firmly protecting (Buddhist women); we believe it is the only way”

(my translation). The argument supporting the proposal to legally require Muslim men who marry Buddhist women to convert to Buddhism is that Islam is a foreign religion and that Muslims are foreigners. The rhetoric of Buddhism as the religion of the Burmese nation actually blocks consideration of other religions in the national framework, regardless of the constitutional clause about freedom of conscience. Indeed, one of the Mabatha's main achievements over its four years of existence has been the drafting and passing of a set of four inter-confessional laws regulating marriage, conversion, polygamy, and reproduction that are usually seen as targeting Muslim communities, although they are not expressed in this way.

Moreover, in the 2013 charter, religion is declared "of the utmost importance, being what shapes humanity." This declaration is to be read as a critique of democratic values, such as the individual freedom included in the Burmese translation of 'human rights' (*ahkwin ayay*). In Burmese, the expression evokes an overly relaxed attitude, which Buddhist nationalists contrast with the notion of 'human value' (*lu tanbo*). This is indirectly a political position, as the partisans of the decried human rights are identified as the democrats from NLD. Moreover, the campaign to have the inter-confessional laws passed in great haste, before the general elections of November 2015, was a means to demonstrate that the Mabatha's core people were aligned with the USDP (Union Solidarity and Development Party, the offshoot of the military administrations) during its mandate and that the USDP made use of the religious association for their political ends on this occasion. Meetings to promote the inter-confessional laws actually served as anti-NLD platforms during the electoral campaign, to the point where the NLD complained to the electoral commission regarding the use of religion in politics, a bias expressly condemned in the electoral law.

However, the electoral commission's decision was to dismiss the NLD complaint because this was not a case of politicians misusing religion, but rather of religious men stepping into electoral politics, a situation that was not covered by electoral law. This shows the ubiquity of the Mabatha, whose agency may be seen as political or religious depending on how one looks at it. Certainly, one argument that Mabatha monks recurrently used in their defense when criticized for infringing monastic rules was that their actions were not political, but merely performed in defense of the Buddhist religion, which is fully consistent with their role in the Sangha. This also shows that, in this case, the religious status of Mabatha monks encompassed that of politicians as it allowed them to get around electoral law. In any case, what was at stake was the place of monks in politics, questioning the inherent secularity of the political field.

Looking back, it seems that the inter-confessional laws must have been the subject of bargaining between the governmental party, then the USDP, and the Mabatha to have been passed in such a short lapse of time—less than two years. The question of the Mabatha's use as a political instrument surfaced on the occasion of the 2015 general elections, only to be denied by the association's leaders, who reasserted that they were not linked to any party and were only acting for the benefit of Buddhism. But, in the end, Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD won the elections, suggesting that the public at large considered it was not the place of monastics to interfere with politics. In this regard, the 2015 elections may be described as a performance of secularity by the laypeople, in which they expressed disagreement with the Mabatha's push

to vote against the NLD. However this secularist performance only concerned the elections and was not followed by a decline of the Mabatha ideology that sees Burmese identity as exclusively Buddhist.

This development did at least force the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi to come out of their silence and overtly condemn the Mabatha's political use of Buddhism. The new democratic government has since made some moves against the Mabatha. The first was to silence one of the Mabatha's main leaders, Wirathu, whose extremism has made him infamous abroad, particularly through the film on "evil" that Barbet Schroeder dedicated to this controversial character.²⁴ Then, the Mahana, the central monastic authority, has declared the Mabatha an illegal monastic organization; its label was banned in July 2017, as 969 was in the summer of 2013. Yet this does not mean that religious-activist monks who have made the discourse of the 'defense of Buddhism' against the threat of Islam so strident over the past few years have disappeared or are less active. On the contrary, some Mabatha monks have decided to act overtly on the political scene, planning to form a party of their own, though so far without success.

The silent work of transition on Buddhist secularity

While general opinion is divided in Burma on the question of how to consider the more extremist monks and whether their activism is acceptable given their monastic status, the religious nationalists seem to have succeeded in uniting Buddhist people around the exclusively Buddhist identity of the Burmese nation. In other words, the specific form of secularity ingrained in Theravadin formations is still apparent in transitional Burma's reluctance to accept that monks may step into world affairs and play an overt political role. However, the secularity of politics involved in the transitional process creates new conditions for political action that formally exclude monks. Thus, the ongoing process of modernization threatens to deprive them—or so they feel—of their central position of influence in the traditional all-encompassing Buddhist polity. In other words, two kinds of secularity are actually in conflict in the Burmese transitional situation: the Buddhist kind and the democratic kind.

As it is, the transitional process has had two interrelated effects in the religious field: first, to elicit the foundation of the Mabatha in order to get around the containment of the Sangha in its religious role and for some monks to step into the political arena and take sides; second, to force the NLD to distance itself from Buddhist nationalist monks and to discipline the Mabatha as an organization run by monks. In other words, it has the dual effect of pushing parts of the religious body into politics and of provoking the reaction of the newly elected democratic government to reassert the governmental authorities' control over the monastic order. These movements are clear signals of an ongoing silent debate on where religion should be, caused by the opening up of the political field and of the inherent secularization process that goes with it. Yet these developments have not yet elicited an open debate concerning secularism and religious pluralism as matters of import for democracy in Burma.

²⁴ *Le Vénérable W.* See also Brac de la Perrière, 2017a.

The transitional moment needs to be compared to that of the colonial encounter, when the British administration's neglect of religion led the Buddhist laypeople (*lu*) to assume the defense of Buddhist teachings (*thathana*) in the place of the kings, taking over religious actions that were previously the preserve of monastics. Now monks have formed the Mabatha, a new organization duplicating the Mahana, the allegedly "impotent" central administration of the Sangha, and stepped into politics to "defend religion"—that is, Buddhism—as the national religion (*batha*). As a result, the moral discourse of "defense of religion" has moved from the traditional conceptual framework of religion as a Buddhicized social space (*thathana*) allowing for a relative religious pluralism, to the exclusivist notion of Buddhist faith as defining the national identity of the Burmese (*batha*). While the Buddhist laypeople defending *thathana* in the face of the colonial rule they resented had no agency left other than religious, the Mabatha monks felt compelled to enter the political and legislative arena to defend the Buddhist national identity and react to universal values of democracy. They seem to have undergone a secularizing process of a sort.

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