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# A New Age for a New Burma

Decolonial Discourse and National Aspirations in post-WWII Burma

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I wish to give my thanks to both family and friends, as well as to Lund University for providing me with this opportunity to hone my skills as a historian and put them to use in researching the history of a nation which has deeply intrigued me for the last decade or so of my life. In particular, I extend my thanks to Lund University's Centre for East and South-East Asian Studies, its wonderful library, and to its Senior Lecturer Elizabeth Rhoads who assisted me with this paper. It is my hope that it can be just one small brick in the much broader wall of Burma Studies. Last of all, thank you Emilie Wellfelt for your incredible work as my thesis advisor, going above and beyond in helping me finish this project on time.

Swedish Title - “En Ny Era för Ett Nytt Burma: Avkoloniseringens Diskurs och Nationens Strävan i Burma efter Andra Världskriget”

**Abstract:**

This study explores the nature of the nationalist discourse in Burma (Myanmar) in the short period of time following World War II but preceding Burma’s declaration of independence on the 4th of January, 1948. Burma, then a British colony in Southeast Asia, had been promised self-governance and potentially full independence in the aftermath of the war, which led to a period of intense political deliberations and public discussions about what shape this “New Burma” would take. The aspirations of the Burmese people and their political leaders were expressed in various sources utilised for this study, including the newspaper the *Burmese Review*, as well as in public speeches and declarations by Aung San, de-facto leader of the independence movement, and his political party the *Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League* (AFPFL) collected in Josef Silverstein’s *The Political Legacy of Aung San* (1990).

The study focuses on interpreting how these sources depict a “transition narrative” between colonial rule and independence, a term derived from the work of Subaltern Studies’ scholar Dipesh Chakrabarty, which seeks to define how a decolonising nation viewed itself, its past, and how it aspired to transform itself through gaining independence, either by emulating the European nations which had ruled it or by rejecting anything associated with European culture and forms of governance. This research has been carried out utilising postcolonial theories laid out by Dipesh Chakrabarty (2002) and in *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin. 2002), as well as studies of nationalism by Benedict Anderson (2006) and methods of media research written by Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini (2004). The results of this study show continuity with previous historical research carried out into this crucial period of Burmese history, namely that decolonisation at this time in Southeast Asia was influenced by European thought and aspired to create states which emulated western notions of secularism and decentralised federalism, but it also shows a break with previous research, emphasising the sources’ lack of references to key decolonial themes such as women’s rights and lack of hostility towards what is perceived to be backwards elements of a nation’s past, which modernisation is often framed in opposition to. This indicates that the Burmese transition narrative defies the usual forms of categorisation and characterisation often given to decolonial struggles in Southeast Asia.

**Key Words:**

Burma, Myanmar, Aung San, AFPFL, the Burmese Review, Transition Narrative, Media Systems, Postcolonialism, Decolonisation, Decoloniality, Nationalism, National Discourse

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## 1.0 - Introduction

The end of World War II marked the decline of European colonial rule over large parts of the world, especially Africa, the Middle East and Asia. Governing systems that had persisted for many generations in spite of their seeming geographic and political contradictions were now crumbling as the European nations struggled to rebuild from the devastating war. Most, if not all colonial empires began to make some concessions to their overseas holdings, promising greater autonomy and in some cases the opportunity for the indigenous populations of these lands to gain full independence.<sup>1</sup> Despite such promises however, these policies could not be implemented immediately, nor often implemented peacefully, so the end of World War II and the subsequent post-war reconstruction marked a historical transition, where independence loomed close on the horizon but had not been fully realised yet.<sup>2</sup>

As postcolonial studies have developed across multiple fields of academia, these twilight years of colonial rule have drawn great attention from scholars. Particularly historians and sociologists who have sought to understand a set of key issues in this period, that Dipesh Chakrabarty of the Subaltern Studies Group has dubbed the “transition narrative”, or “narrative of transition”.<sup>3</sup> This term refers to the discourse of how formerly colonised nations reckon with their past and what they aspire to become in the future. For a nation whose independence is born from a decolonial struggle, be it violent or peaceful, these states have to reckon with transition. They often intentionally strive towards a specific type of national identity and harbour an awareness of what changes that political aspiration entails. Chakrabarty notes that this can manifest in seeking to compensate for having had one's own history distorted by colonial rule or when deciding how to adapt to the nature of world capitalism, whether to think with the “logic of capital”. Decolonial political forces thus build specific narratives, either during the process of decolonisation or express them later in hindsight, arguing for what their country was becoming or should have become.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Tarling, Nicholas *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia: Volume 2, Part 2, From World War II to the Present*, 1999, p.1-33

<sup>2</sup> Jacobson, Liesbeth Rosen *'The Eurasian Question': The Colonial Position and Postcolonial Options of Colonial Mixed-ancestry Groups from British India, Dutch East Indies and French Indochina Compared*, 2018, p.123-131

<sup>3</sup> Chakrabarty, Dipesh, *Provincializing Europe, Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, 2000 p.30-34

<sup>4</sup> Chakrabarty, D. 2000, p.37-46

This study focuses on a transition narrative in one part of the British colonial empire in Southeast Asia, which was home to a relatively recently established yet now soon to be liberated colonial entity; Burma.<sup>5</sup> Though Britain had begun the effort to subjugate Burma as early as the 1820s, the process was not completed until 1885, and even then it took additional years for the British administration to consolidate its rule over the whole country. To put Burma in the context of the rest of Britain's colonies throughout Asia, In India the first British overseas holdings had been established in the early 1600s and total British rule had been enforced over the subcontinent as early as the beginning of the 19th century.<sup>6</sup> On the Malay peninsula in present day Malaysia, Britain had established colonial settlements in the 1770s, with total British political domination of the region following within the next hundred years.<sup>7</sup> Burma was a recent conquest and this does not in and of itself make Burma special, but it has served as a key point of comparison for both the Burmese nationalists of the post World War II era, as well as for modern day academics looking back on the period in hindsight, like Professor Nicholas Tarling who interweaves Burmese, Indian and Malay history in his overview on decolonisation in Southeast Asia.<sup>8</sup>

The Burmese were aware that compared to other colonies, only a few generations of Burmese had been raised in the kind of colonial environment that Dipesh Chakrabarty describes as a period of “tutelage”, referring to how colonial rule was often perpetuated via the justification from the coloniser that it was necessary in order to educate the indigenous populations of these regions in how to be “modern”. Chakrabarty cites colonial era nationalists in India who argued that multiple generations of British “tutelage” had inspired their political and national consciousness, and that many such nationalist movements even if they were not defined solely by the political education afforded to them by colonial rule, were nevertheless still defined by their resistance to a lengthy period of colonial oppression.<sup>9</sup> In spite of this short period of time to adapt to both the modernisation and the oppression of colonial rule, there was a vibrant Burmese nationalist movement that sprung up in the 20th century. Early scholars of this movement, such as J.S Furnivall, trace its origins to a series of lectures given by the Burmese politician U May Oung in 1908 which called on the Burmese people to begin

<sup>5</sup> Burma is today known as The Republic of the Union of Myanmar, after the then government changed its name in 1989. For the purposes of this study I will be using Burma and Burmese to refer to the nation and its people.

<sup>6</sup> Parsons, Timothy H., *The British Imperial Century, 1815–1914: A World History Perspective*, 1999, p.45 and p.81

<sup>7</sup> Gould, James W., *The United States and Malaysia*, 1969, p.43-67

<sup>8</sup> Tarling, Nicholas, *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia: Volume 2, Part 2, From World War II to the Present*, 1999, p.23-26

<sup>9</sup> Chakrabarty, D. 2000 p.10-11 and 30-42

viewing themselves as “Modern Burmans”, members of a modern nation state, not feudal or colonial subjects.<sup>10</sup> By the late 1940s, Burmese nationalism was no longer mere lectures and conjectures, it had emerged as one of the many leading political forces of decolonisation that made its voices heard in a post-WWII world. This kind of nationalist discourse is worthy of further research, and thus I posit the question of how this decolonial movement and the nation it represented sought to portray itself and its aspirations, via forms of media accessible to both its own people and its colonial hegemon. Burmese nationalism was born in a colonial nation that had been pressured to adopt the English language and conform to western notions of media and political engagement. When Burma declared independence, it was as a federal republic, a stark contrast from the feudal system that had ruled just a century prior. Beyond the vernacular of English and the methods of European media systems, this study thus also focuses on how they viewed and utilised foreign notions of class, politics and nationhood.

## 1.1 - Purpose and Aims

The leadership of the Burmese independence movement claimed to represent the whole population of their country, the Burmese masses, which opens up the opportunity for historians to explore how they viewed the past, present and future of their own homeland and their own people as a collective. I have focused on how some of the leading voices of Burmese nationalism addressed this. Among the sources I am using are issues of the *Burmese Review* (henceforth referred to as just the *Review*), a nationally syndicated newspaper in Burma, of a politically moderate character, that published Burma-centric news in English. Despite its differing audience and base of support it maintained close ties to the Burmese political leader Aung San and to his political party the Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League (AFPFL).<sup>11</sup> I am also using *The Political Legacy of Aung San* (henceforth shortened to just *Political Legacy*), a book by Josef Silverstein which contains speeches and statements made by Aung San, the left-wing leader of the whole Burmese independence movement and the President of the AFPFL up until his death, who had a wide political reach and an immense influence over the nationalist movement.<sup>12</sup> Both of these sources represented self-declared spokespeople for what they viewed as the Burmese nation and the Burmese people. Contemporary observers living in 1940s Burma, such as the British historian B. R. Pearn and

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<sup>10</sup> Schober, Juliane, *Modern Buddhist Conjunctures in Myanmar: Cultural Narratives, Colonial Legacies, and Civil Society* 2010 p.67

<sup>11</sup> Maung Maung, *Burma’s Constitution*, 2012 p.45

<sup>12</sup> Silverstein, Josef, *The Political Legacy of Aung San*, 1993, p.4-9

the American historian Cecil Hobbs, place a great emphasis on the way that the AFPFL and the *Review* were able to influence the public.<sup>13</sup> I have limited myself to roughly a year's worth of time between December 23rd, 1946 and January 4th 1948, itself part of a broader period in which an interim Burmese government led by Aung San and the AFPFL was negotiating with the United Kingdom for independence, while also internally trying to decide what a free Burma should and could look like. This period marked a key point in the Burmese transition narrative, the political discourse that Burmese nationalist leaders and members of the intelligentsia, i.e the sources I listed above, took part in to argue for how their nation was going to take its rightful place in the world and finally realise its true potential after it became able to dictate its own political, cultural and economic policies, free of Britain.

I will once again defer to Chakrabarty's definition of transition narrative, that it is a way decolonisation is framed by the colonial subject as a way of advancing from subjugation into modernity, to wield potential that is perceived as having been held back by colonial oppression, by striving and aspiring to achieve modernity. Often this was the pursuit of an European archetype of modernity or a clear rejection thereof, and the acceptance of the "logic of capital" or rejection of it. Chakrabarty uses this expression to explain both capitalism serving as a nation's economic system, but also capital dominating the conception of history, that the pursuit of generating capital, of generating "productive labour", thinking of national and economic development only in terms of a profit motive and as a way to project power, is taken fully for granted. Chakrabarty claims this logic, imposed by colonial rule and European forms of historicism, constrained the realm of decolonial political imagination, leaving the colonised subjects of empire with aspirations to be similar to their colonisers in order to be equal to them, or that they had to explicitly reject what was forced upon them.<sup>14</sup> In Burma the national discourse surrounding which path to take, whether to embrace European influences on the Burmese conception of politics or to reject them, reached its peak when Britain promised independence to the Burmese after WWII. This birthed a discussion of national potential, that independence was now just around the corner and once it arrived, the sky was the limit for what a sovereign Burmese nation could accomplish when it was no longer being held back by colonial rule.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Pearn, B.R, "Survey of International Affairs" 1942-1946, in Kratoska, Paul (editor) *South East Asia: Colonial History Volume 5*, 2021, p.84 and Hobbs, Cecil "Nationalism in Colonial British Burma" in *The Far Eastern Quarterly*, Feb., 1947, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Feb., 1947), p. 113-121

<sup>14</sup> Chakrabarty, D., 2000, p.37-42, p.62-71 and p.232-236

<sup>15</sup> Taylor, Robert H., *The State in Myanmar*, 2009 p.10-11



This national political discourse in this last year of British colonial presence in Burma is also noteworthy because this was a period of relative peace, stability and reconstruction, which afforded the Burmese to be introspective and vocal about what they desired of their nation, compared to the political unrest which followed the formalisation of Burmese independence and the escalation of the so-called “Burmese conflict”, which have been waged by political dissidents and secessionist ethnic groups against the Burmese government ever since independence was declared in 1948.<sup>16</sup> Before these conflicts had a chance to escalate there was a broader sense of optimism and open discussion of what Burma could be, but in the words of the political scientist and Burma expert Robert H. Taylor the realities of governing the nation severely “displaced” and “enfeebled” the role of the state, leading to a decline in political deliberation and political engagement by the Burmese population.<sup>17</sup> While the press remained relatively free even under this political quagmire in the independent government, there was little room for it to act as a forum for political discussion as it had between 1945 and 1948.<sup>18</sup> This is why the transition narrative surrounding those few years is so important to study, this period defined the way Burma would function, or rather struggle to function as a nation ever since. It is also why I wish to emphasise that this research is not dedicated to explaining why Burma became the nation it is today, or even what kind of nation it became, this is an examination of what the Burmese in that crucial year envisioned that their nation could and should become. What I have sought to study is their aspirations.

The overarching question I am basing my research around is:

- What defines the “transition narrative” in the Burmese national discourse in the year preceding independence? What traits do the leaders of the independence movement, as expressed in my sources, attribute to the independence struggle and the transition towards modernity, and what are their aspirations for an independent Burma?

To examine this I have posed a series of sub-questions:

- How does the *Review*, Aung San and the AFPFL address race, class, culture, religion and political agency among the Burmese people?

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<sup>16</sup> Kaicom, Jittrapon “Marking 70 Years of War in Myanmar”, in *The Diplomat*, February 8th, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/02/marking-70-years-of-war-in-myanmar/> Accessed 04/08/2024

<sup>17</sup> Taylor, Robert H., *The State in Myanmar*, 2009 p.219-224

<sup>18</sup> Seekins, Donald M., *Historical Dictionary of Burma (Myanmar)*, 2nd Edition, 2017, p.138

- How does the *Review*, Aung San and the AFPFL view the nature of Britain and its relation to Burma during the twilight years of colonial rule?

I must however qualify my questions and my source materials with an issue with Burma studies pointed out by Josef Silverstein. This field of research has struggled because various source materials relating to Burma are fundamentally incomplete. Even if the national discourse in this period of time is partly accessible to us because it was predominantly written in both English and the native Burmese language, much information has still been lost over time due to censorship by the British during the colonial era as well as from the fallout of domestic conflicts in Burma's recent history and the ongoing political situation in the country. One cannot easily visit Myanmar today or contact academic institutions to gain access to new information that might expand our understanding of the country's history. Silverstein notes his own collection was incomplete and even the digital archive of the *Review* that I have worked with is incomplete as well, missing several issues which I will elaborate on in the "Source Material and Methodology" section of this paper.<sup>19</sup>

## 1.2 - Previous Research

There is no shortage of historical research that has gone into the nascent Burmese nation, especially on the brink of independence, but I have found relatively few historians who explicitly tackle the role of the press during this period. The source materials that I use do show up often, but more so in a brief, supporting context. The *Review* has been a common feature in biographical works centred on its founder, U Tin Tut,<sup>20</sup> but I have not found academic works that really examine the full breadth of material contained within the paper. David K Coffey's *The Drafting of the Constitution of the Union of Burma in 1947: Dominion Status, Indo-Burmese Relations, and the Irish Example*<sup>21</sup> mainly looks at how relations between Burma and the Republic of Ireland were depicted in the paper, and there are other

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<sup>19</sup> Silverstein, 1993, p.17-18

<sup>20</sup> Also spelled U Tin Htut in some sources or just Tin Tut. The "U" in a Burmese name is an honorific, roughly the equivalent to writing "Mister" or "Sir" and as such I have chosen to sometimes leave it off when referring to a historical figure. In the pages of the *Review* U Tin Tut is usually also referred to as "The Hon'ble U Tin Tut", due to his status as Finance Minister and later also as Foreign Minister in the Burmese Government.

<sup>21</sup> Coffey, David K. "The Drafting of the Constitution of the Union of Burma in 1947: Dominion Status, Indo-Burmese Relations, and the Irish Example", in *Law and History Review*, Volume 41, Issue 2, May 2023, Published Online by Cambridge University Press

<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/law-and-history-review/article/drafting-of-the-constitution-of-the-union-of-burma-in-1947-dominion-status-indoburmese-relations-and-the-irish-example/EDAD03879CAD4EA3C119D5A7C0792B86> Accessed 08/08/2024

works that will cite the *Review* when for instance examining Burmese relations to the Israel-Palestine conflict or to the Viet Minh in Indochina, such as Ruth Fredman Cernea's *Almost Englishmen: Baghdadi Jews in British Burma*<sup>22</sup> and Christopher E. Goscha's *Thailand and the Southeast Asian Networks of the Vietnamese Revolution, 1885-1954*<sup>23</sup> respectively. The one book I found that digs into the *Review* itself and casts more than a glancing oversight at it is Frank N. Trager's 1966 book *Burma: from Kingdom to Republic: A Historical and Political Analysis*, which frequently references what political discourse appeared in its pages between 1945 and 1948. Much like with Coffey's work, it also focuses on the Irish-Burmese connections and how Ireland gained a popular role in the Burmese political imagination. Trager also highlights the American connections to Burma that were fostered in the 1950s. His work deals a lot more with Western contact with Burma and how it changed the nation's culture over time through industrialisation and commercial trade, something I could compare to Chakrabarty and the concept of the transition narrative, but Trager's work predates his by almost 40 years. In general Trager seems more interested in using the *Review* to compare native Burmese sources to the writings of foreign observers, especially the Americans. As for Josef Silverstein and the sources he has collected, there are countless other historians who have utilised his work. Silverstein has conducted further research as a historian in his own right who opined on the development of the Burmese nationalism of the 1930s and 40s. *Political Legacy* itself seems to be cited at least once in every book about Aung San from the last few decades that I have come across. I have not seen as many historians utilise Silverstein's work to paint a bigger picture about the political institutions and conceptions of Burmese nationhood however. *The Voice of Young Burma* by Aye Kyaw is the closest I have found, it uses Silverstein's works to examine the history of the Burmese student movements and Silverstein himself had input on the writing process according to its foreword.<sup>24</sup>

Beyond the overlap in working with the same sources, there are also of course those prior historians who focused on the same issues. How did the nationalists view themselves and how did they view where Burma was headed? One such historian is Hans-Berndt Zöllner, whose *Myanmar Literature Project* hosted on both his own website via the online archive [Burmalibrary.org](http://Burmalibrary.org) and published through the University of Passau has been a notable effort in preserving, translating and reproducing native Burmese sources that speak of the ideological

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<sup>22</sup> Cernea, Ruth Fredman, *Almost Englishmen: Baghdadi Jews in British Burma*, 2007

<sup>23</sup> Goscha, Christopher E. *Thailand and the Southeast Asian Networks of the Vietnamese Revolution, 1885-1954*, 2013

<sup>24</sup> Aye Kyaw, *The Voice of Young Burma*, 2018, p.5

development of the nationalist movement in the late 1920s and 30s, sources which were usually circulated through the underground press, student newspapers and book clubs. Zöllner's method of analysis overlaps with mine, but he is working with an earlier time period and focusing on ideological cliques and student groups.<sup>25</sup>

Other historians who have covered the development of a Burmese national identity, as expressed in the press, include Maitrii Aung-Thwin's book *The Return of the Galon King*<sup>26</sup>, Khin Yi's paper *The Dobama Movement in Burma (1930–1938)*<sup>27</sup>, Jonathan Saha's book *Colonizing Animals* and his educational website which shares the same name,<sup>28</sup> Alice Turner's *Saving Buddhism: The Impermanence of Religion in Colonial Burma*<sup>29</sup> and Aurore Candier's various works covering the development of notions of race and nationhood in Burma like *Birmanie (Myanmar) un pays en transition?* as well as her English-language contributions to the *Journal of Southeast Asia Studies*.<sup>30</sup> I note these works as while I believe they have tackled a very similar subject to the one I have researched, their writings mainly dealt with Burmese nationalism in the very beginning of the 20th century and not with the period around 1947. I would be remiss not to mention that both Robert H. Taylor and Maitrii Aung-Thwin have also written books giving broad overviews on Burmese history from pre-colonial times to the present day. I find these to be the closest to the kind of research and subject that I am focused on. Taylor's *The State in Myanmar* examines Burma through the role of state institutions and state actors. There is an overlap between me and him with how we both focus on the nascent Burmese state's political institutions, but Taylor has less of the focus that I put on the role of the press and national identity.<sup>31</sup> Maitrii Aung-Thwin's *A History of Myanmar since Ancient Times: Traditions and Transformations*, written together with his father Michael Aung-Thwin, is a general book on Burmese history and while it does

<sup>25</sup> Zöllner, Hans- Berndt, *Myanmar Literature Project*,

<https://www.zoellner-online.org/myanmar-birma/das-myanmar-literature-projekt/> Accessed 09/08/2024

<sup>26</sup> Aung-Thwin, Maitrii, *The Return of the Galon King: History, Law, and Rebellion in Colonial Burma*, 2011

<sup>27</sup> Khin Yi, *The Dobama Movement in Burma (1930–1938)*, 2018

<sup>28</sup> Saha, Jonathan, *Colonizing Animals: Interspecies Empire in Myanmar*, 2021 and

<https://colonizinganimals.blog/> Accessed 20/08/2024

<sup>29</sup> Turner, Alicia, *Saving Buddhism: The Impermanence of Religion in Colonial Burma*, 2014

<sup>30</sup> Candier, Aurore, *Birmanie (Myanmar) un pays en transition?*, 2020, and Candier, Aurore "Mapping Ethnicity in Nineteenth Century Burma : When " Categories of People " (Lumyo) Became 'Nations'," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 50 (3), September 2019, pp. 347-364, Published Online by Cambridge University Press <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-southeast-asian-studies/article/mapping-ethnicity-in-nineteenth-century-burma-when-categories-of-people-lumyo-became-nations/CB72C230409AF181FAEA7B7C78723F4> Accessed 20/08/2024

<sup>31</sup> Taylor, Robert H., *The State in Myanmar*, 2009. Note, Taylor's book was first published as *The State in Burma*, in its original 1987 edition.

focus on nationalism and nation-building, those chapters describe it during the Cold War.<sup>32</sup> Lastly, I also wish to acknowledge Jordan Carlyle Winfield, whose thesis *Buddhism and the state in Burma: English-language discourses from 1823 to 1962* is explicitly about Burmese nationals writing in English and how they depict Burmese nationhood and nationalism, and reflect on Burmese peoples using the English-language.<sup>33</sup> As implied by the title, Winfield is also invested in how these sources portray religion, which does not play as big a role in my own research. It is however a notable thesis for sharing the same focus as I have on the use of the English language among the Burmese elite to describe themselves, their own people and their own country. Winfield notes the Burmese used the English language to relate to the rest of the world, particularly to the West and to Anglophone nations, to affirm themselves as equals to foreign nations and their old colonial overlords. This is a trend I've found in my own research, how sources of this era often spoke about foreign policy and Burma's place in the world. Language is in this sense not just a tool for communication but also a method by which a nation and its people can construct their identity on their own terms. As I will elaborate on below, this is a factor postcolonial historians have often taken into consideration.

### 1.3 - Theoretical Perspective

I have used a postcolonial theoretical outlook for this paper, befitting the historical and political context of the Burmese independence movement. I am writing about political actors who claimed to speak for the subjugated Burmese people, but many of them did so in the language of their old colonial hegemon. For this reason I've deferred to Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin's collection *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, first published 1989, as it details how best to work with decolonial sources from the Indian subcontinent and Burma concerning this matter. I've also utilised the works of Dipesh Chakrabarty of the *Subaltern Studies Group*, particularly his 2008 book *Provincializing Europe*, in which he has written extensively about colonial and subaltern societies in "transitory periods", helping to define the term transition narrative. For this study, I have sought to develop this theoretical concept further and apply it to Burma, in contrast to Chakrabarty who mainly applied it to India, Bangladesh and the European continent. I've

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<sup>32</sup> Aung-Thwin, Michael and Aung-Thwin, Maitrii, *A History of Myanmar since Ancient Times: Traditions and Transformations*

<sup>33</sup> Winfield, Jordan Carlyle, *Buddhism and the State in Burma: English-language discourses from 1823 to 1962*, 2017

<https://rest.neptune-prod.its.unimelb.edu.au/server/api/core/bitstreams/29036fb9-c190-5d63-a067-531595b79ff5/content> Accessed 08/08/2024

also used Benedict Anderson's 1983 book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* as it explains how nationalism intersects with media to form a collective sense of belonging in a people. I have also come to rely on Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini's work, both their original 2004 book *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics* and I've also taken into consideration their subsequent 2011 followup *Comparing Media Systems Beyond The Western World*. Hallin and Mancini's ideas mostly deal with what was at the time the contemporary relationships between media and politics in the United States and Western Europe, but their methods can also serve as a guiding light for how to examine sources like newspapers in other contexts.

*Empire Writes Back* notes that understanding how other colonised cultures have viewed the English-language, even if it may have been forced upon them, can help us not just to relate to them through a mutually intelligible language but also help us learn a bit more about ourselves in the process and challenge our own preconceived notions about English and the literature produced with it.<sup>34</sup> The articles of the *Review* are usually written with a degree of narrative embellishment and journalistic flair that blurs the line between hard fact and fiction. Much of the *Review* also contains works of outright fiction, containing autobiographical and nationalistic undertones to them, such as depictions of fictionalised Burmese lives during key moments of the nation's recent history. The *Review* was also in part written by Anglophilic Burmans who often reference European and especially English high culture, such as Greek Classics and the works of Shakespeare. In this context, *Empire Writes Back* has given me an excellent theoretical framework to analyse the material through.

Some decolonial and postcolonial authors thought to carve out new ways of emphasising their own works national "authenticity" even if it wasn't written in the native language of their peoples, usually by writing in dialects and with native loanwords, or by using the fact that a work was written in English to induce a Distancing effect that led the reader to question the choice of language. All of this can portray a wider symbolic meaning about language being appropriated by colonised people or forced upon them. *Empire Writes Back* explicitly talks about the use of a colonial language in an indigenous narrative as representing "two worlds". Colonialism can by virtue of representing a dichotomy between the geographic and administrative centre of an empire, i.e "the capital" or "the metropole", contrasted against the

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<sup>34</sup> Ashcroft, Bill, Griffiths, Gareth and Tiffin, Helen, *Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literature*, 2002, p.1-13

colonial frontiers, i.e. “the margins” or the “periphery”, push culture and writing into that same kind of conflict. Postcolonial literature often has to occupy the margins and exist in response to the metropole.<sup>35</sup> I highlight this way of thinking because I found there to be a noted absence of such dichotomies in my source materials. *Empire Writes Back* notes that it is of course not a universal concept with zero exceptions, but the Burmese sources stand out to me as managing to reconcile the struggle between metropole and margins.<sup>36</sup>

My sources are averse to the struggle over authenticity. The use of the English language in the *Review* or in statements made by Aung San and the AFPFL merely represented a cultural imprint that had been left on Burma by the effects of colonialism; it was not treated as an explicitly political statement to publish public information in English. There was also no real attempt to nativise the English language in these sources, and while there are a few attempts to translate English concepts into a Burmese context or vice-versa, those are usually just relegated to offhand comments or footnotes. These sources are writing aimed at an audience already familiar with the English political and cultural vocabulary, who would not see any need to nativise English to make it more authentically Burmese. This can in part be justified by the time period I am working with, this is a period of transition and of one system giving way to another, colonialism to postcolonialism. The influence left by nearly a century of British colonial rule would still be at its peak, and only begin to ebb after Burma has gained its independence. I also point to this as an argument for why I am using postcolonial theories to describe a state that had not yet gained its independence. These sources are from Burmese figures who were writing what they wished for the future of their country to look like. They envisioned what would be, to them, a postcolonial world, even if they were writing at a point in time before we had the modern day legacy of postcolonialism as a field of study and an academic theoretical concept.

*Empire Writes Back* also brings up another interesting concept, focusing on Indian authors who've written in English but have inserted traditional native languages into their texts, such as specific words or attempts to convey cultural context, in a search for authenticity. One of the key examples cited in *Empire Writes Back* is the religiously significant language of Sanskrit and how it intermingles with English and other languages. Indian languages such as Sanskrit and Pali have also had a great influence over the Burmese language; various terms

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<sup>35</sup> Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G., and Tiffin, H., 2002, p.37-43

<sup>36</sup> Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G., and Tiffin, H., 2002, p.11

with Indian etymological origins appear throughout Burmese political discourse, usually due to having some root in a religious context. Take for instance the term “Thamada”, roughly meaning a “ruler” or a “president”, which originates from Sanskrit, as well as Amat, meaning a member of a legislature or assembly, which originates from Pali.<sup>37</sup> I point to this aspect, and the work by the author’s of *Empire Writes Back* more generally, as it is worth acknowledging that Burma, just as India, was not an untouched, walled garden only recently disturbed by the introduction of the English language into social, cultural and political life. Other cultures in these locales had intermingled and influenced each other. One should not think of colonialism as European influence arriving to disrupt centuries or millennia of an untouched, unchanging tradition, even if some colonial subjects and sources may personally think of it that way, as I will explain further along in this paper.<sup>38</sup>

I defer the reader to the definition given of “transition narrative” at the beginning of this paper, but I also want to elaborate on what Chakrabarty views as the “imaginary” and “idealised” Europe that becomes used as a baseline point of comparison for other cultures across the world. This is not an objective measurement of Europe, but rather the idea that in a colonial context Europe (and to a lesser extent the United States of America) becomes synonymous with the ideas of what it means to be “modern” or “functional”, both as a government, a nation and a people. It becomes “the metropole” or “the capital” as *Empire Writes Back* puts it. Chakrabarty primarily compares India, Pakistan and Bangladesh to this idealised European metropole, but leaves room that the theory can just as easily be applied elsewhere.<sup>39</sup> He writes that the dichotomy between the metropole and colonial world can be applied in any number of situations, where you can create a narrative about a specific actor propagating a model for what things should be changed accordingly to. Just as the metropole of Europe remade the colonised world in their own image, so too are there other, smaller centres of political influence that seek to remake society. Chakrabarty cites Marx’s analysis that developed countries, even outside of the colonial context, provide models that other countries aspire to follow.<sup>40</sup> Chakrabarty also notes examples such as how industrial factories in 17th and 18th century Britain provided models for the rest of society to follow, creating a kind of internal transition narrative where one part of a country had to aspire to be like the more “developed” parts of that country. I argue that the transition narrative in Burma contains

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<sup>37</sup> Hla Pe, *Burma: Literature, Historiography, Scholarship, Language, Life, and Buddhism* 1985 p.125

<sup>38</sup> Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G., and Tiffin, H., 2002, p.116-122

<sup>39</sup> Chakrabarty, D., *Provincializing Europe*, 2000 p.3-6

<sup>40</sup> Chakrabarty, D., 2000, p.6-23



similar internal multitudes, the political centres in Rangoon and Mandalay pushed other parts of the country, particularly the “frontier” to follow their example as ethnically diverse, but racially integrated hotbeds of nationalist discourse and political engagement.<sup>41</sup>

Chakrabarty also notes that colonialism is in and of itself a transition narrative, just as decolonisation is. A country is being remade by occupation and exploitation brought by another country. For instance the British Empire promoted a transition narrative that they were a force of good that brought democracy and progress to inherently despotic cultures in Asia. He also emphasises that a transition narrative is rooted in the questions of what could something be, it is an aspiration for change and an attempt to define what that change will, would or could be. He gives the example of when India gained its independence, there were various conflicting transition narratives from the different political forces in the country, attempting to define Indian independence as a transition from British rule towards a certain future, yet none of these political forces could really agree what India was transitioning towards. Was it Gandhianism, socialism, or capitalism? It was a question that could only be answered in hindsight, and in that regard Chakrabarty cites his colleague Sumit Sarkar’s observation that we only really know what the transition wasn’t, for it is in the absence of a true transition that the original ideas of what could have been become most clear.<sup>42</sup>

Contrast this imagined idea of what transition is with the eponymous concept of *Imagined Communities*, from the works of Benedict Anderson. Anderson illustrates how media, primarily print media, fosters a sense of community and national belonging in those who consume it. The origins of his ideas lay in his attempts to study the Sino-Soviet conflict and the escalating war in Southeast Asia in the 70s and 80s, when the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia against the Khmer Rouge and the Sino-Vietnamese War broke out. Anderson used these conflicts as means to examine how the communist movements in these countries had embraced a sense of “national” identity, and to paraphrase Anderson’s own quote from Eric Hobsbawm, “become national not only in form but in substance, i.e nationalistic”.<sup>43</sup> This is important in order to frame colonialism as a nuanced struggle. Anderson’s academic ties to Southeast Asia should also not go unremarked upon, later in life he was briefly involved in Burma studies, commenting on the shifting political situation in the country in the 1980s.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Chakrabarty, D., 2000, p.7 and p.52-57

<sup>42</sup> Chakrabarty, D., 2000, p.30-37

<sup>43</sup> Anderson, B., *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2006, p.17-33

<sup>44</sup> The New York Review, *An Exchange on Burma*, March 26th, 1987

<https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1987/03/26/an-exchange-on-burma/> Accessed 08/08/2024

The theoretical framework laid out by *Imagined Communities* is that media and culture, particularly as manifested through newspapers which are the type of sources I have worked with for this study, informs a set of shared values within a broader community, both through their production and consumption. Anderson extends this concept not just to the written word but also to creations such as public monuments, which has its own fair share of applications especially in the case of both the contemporary as well as historical Burmese nation. These communities are in Anderson's words "imaginary" because "members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion",<sup>45</sup> but beyond this geographic and social factor the imaginary part also alludes to how one may perceive one's nation in contrast to the physical realities of it. This is subject to further analysis in his works, Anderson's view is that reality is only what we as human beings collectively make of it, if enough people believe something that can technically make it fundamentally indistinguishable from any form of "objective" reality. That once more brings us back to the press and to language, how ideas, peoples or parts of the world are described in the written word to someone who has never encountered those things firsthand can seriously alter their perception of them.<sup>46</sup> I find this personally to be a good way to approach nations such as Burma, which are home to diverse ethnic groups whose members may not have any direct person-to-person interaction with each other, but are still aware of each other's existence through things like the press or the fact they share a common nationality. Likewise it is also very applicable to a decolonial context, where struggle over the control of information and political narrative can be a key component to building a national consciousness. The late Nicholas Tarling, a noted historian of Southeast Asia, went as far as to describe the Burmese independence movement as a "Fourth Anglo-Burmese War" in reference to three prior military conflicts that had been waged between Britain and Burma.<sup>47</sup> The Burmese independence movement in 1947 was not marked by any kind of open war of independence as happened with later and contemporary struggles in Algeria, Indonesia, Vietnam or Malaya, but the political struggle and "war" over getting to shape and awaken a sense of national identity and "imagined community" was just as important as winning a physical struggle against an oppressor.

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<sup>45</sup> Anderson, B., 2006 p.22

<sup>46</sup> Anderson, B., 2006, p.30-40

<sup>47</sup> Tarling, Nicholas, *The Fourth Anglo-Burmese War: Britain and the independence of Burma*, 1987

This brings us into *Comparing Media Systems*, a 2004 work that was written as a comparative analysis of the press in “Western Democracies”. Its method of tackling media and especially print media as sources are in my opinion applicable even in other contexts. The political press in British India and Burma was influenced by the newspaper industry back in Britain. Even if it had a more regional tone to it, at its core even native newspapers in these countries were still engaging with a medium that had been imported and introduced to them through colonialism. In this sense, they were not just writing in the language of their colonial hegemon, they were also writing with the “media system” of their colonial hegemon. At its core, Hallin and Mancini’s work argues for the “denaturalisation” of media, that those who research it should not take certain things for granted. This may seem like a very basic source criticism, but it was quite innovative at the time and tackled some preconceptions that had existed in media studies about how to denaturalise media. In general, Hallin and Mancini recommend the comparative approach which I have taken to heart. The two authors note in the book’s introduction that: “If comparison can sensitize us to variation, it can also sensitize us to similarity, and that too can force us to think more clearly about how we might explain media systems”.<sup>48</sup> I believe this to be just as true about older, historical sources when working within my own field as it was for them with how to approach modern day sources. I have sought to highlight this “sensitisation” which they speak of, via a comparative analysis.

I find *Comparing Media Systems* to also be a good summation of the class character of early 20th century newspapers. Even if they are primarily working with “western” politics, Hallin and Mancini inform the reader of the manner in which media, particularly newspapers and for that matter entire newspaper industries, with specific ideological leanings can develop and thrive under specific political climates. I can see some similarities to what they describe of the press industry in the United States of America vis a vis different parts in Europe when I look at how the Burmese press, and the *Review* in particular, described both itself and was described by both contemporary observers in the 1940s, such as the aforementioned B.R. Pearn and Cecil Hobbs, and later historical researchers like R.F. Cernea and C.E. Goscha. *Comparing Media Systems* also inspired me to focus on the nature of what tone is used in the writing of the source material I am examining, and to look at things such as political humour and satire with a more inquisitive lens of how it relates to the broader political context, as opposed to just dismissing it as entertainment or otherwise frivolous content. *Comparing*

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<sup>48</sup> Hallin, Daniel C and Mancini, Paolo *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics* 2004, p.18-19

*Media Systems* places focus on humour and satire, mainly how it was portrayed through the media form of television, but I see no reason why not to apply a similar lens towards the medium of newspapers and other kinds of printed literary sources.<sup>49</sup>

The authors also published a companion book in 2011 entitled *Comparing Media Systems Beyond The Western World*, which consists of a number of essays edited into a compilation by Hallin and Mancini. I would not characterise it as an explicitly postcolonial work. A large chunk of it is dedicated towards studying the media of the former Soviet Union in Eastern Europe, but I have chosen to utilise it here as it has chapters focused on Asia and touches on colonialism at a few points. One such essay is “Partisan Polyvalence: Characterising the Political Role of Asian Media”, by Duncan McCargo, which argues that both historically and in the present day, newspaper media in Asia has not behaved the same way as its western counterpart. While still highly politicised and often nationalistic, McCargo claims that Asian newspapers did not have a history of specific partisan affiliations and often present a much wider diversity of opinion and appeal to much more diverse audiences. Whereas European newspapers can often serve as political tools to divide people, Asian newspapers can serve as tools to unite them. McCargo also highlights the role of personal connections between newspaper journalists, owners and the sources they cultivate, which exist in a “parallel” relationship to one another. While McCargo is primarily working with the contemporary manifestation of this kind of media culture, he highlights its origins and development during the 20th century. I find a lot of the characteristics he applies to Asian media match the impression I have gotten of Burmese media of an earlier era. You can see traces of the media system that would come to wield great influence over the Asian continent. I would also like to highlight that McCargo argues that *Comparing Media Systems* is not inapplicable to Asia, but that Hallin and Mancini misapplied some of their analysis. He criticises the similarities they draw between Southern European and Asian media, without applying conditions that are changing Southern European Media, such as increased homogenization of media enterprises, to Asia. Even so, he notes that: “We can certainly learn something about them from using some of the concepts and comparisons that Hallin and Mancinini outline”.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Hallin, Daniel C and Mancini, Paolo, 2004, p.271-272

<sup>50</sup> McCargo, Duncan “Partisan Polyvalence: Characterising the Political Role of Asian Media” in Hallin, Daniel C and Mancini, Paolo (editors) *Comparing Media Systems Beyond the Western World*, 2011, p.201 to 224

## 1.4 - Source Material and Methodology

This thesis employs a qualitative textual analysis of two collections of materials, comparing and contrasting sources found within them through thematic overview. In addition, I also utilise a more quantitative aspect in some places, observing and analysing how often specific terms or types of words appear throughout the material. Lastly, In order to present a more holistic analysis, I have attempted to also contextualise the manner in which these sources acted as “forums” for political discussion and national aspirations. The mediums that the sources were distributed through are in many ways just as important as the writing itself.

### 1.4.1 - *The Burmese Review*

The *Review* was an English-language newspaper that was primarily active in Burma between 1946 and 1948. It was published weekly and each issue was approximately 16 pages long, counting front page as well as advertising pages.<sup>51</sup> The exact lifespan of the magazine seems contested, I have found various archives that reference it potentially existing up until 1960, but this may have been a different newspaper with the same name or it may have a result of archival materials being conflated with one another, as both the *American Library of Congress* and the *Online Archive of California* lump it together with other papers in a much broader collection of Burmese press material spanning the years 1946 to 1960. *The Irrawaddy*, a present-day Burmese newspaper published out of Chiang Mai, Thailand, claims a magazine with the very same name existed also in 1923.<sup>52</sup> I have found a reference in an academic paper about Irish-Burmese relations to a copy of the *Review* supposedly published in 1937,<sup>53</sup> but this was likely a misprint. The existence of earlier copies also seem somewhat self-contradicting, the material I have looked at indicates the first issue published in May 1946 to be “Volume 1, Issue.1”. For clarity, I am focusing purely on the version of the *Review* that existed after 1946 and which was founded by U Tin Tut, a notable politician who served

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<sup>51</sup> Exceptions to this norm would be the May 26th, 1947 and the October 28th, 1947 issues of the *Review* which contained six and four extra pages of “supplementary” material, respectively.

<sup>52</sup> The *Irrawaddy*, “Burma’s Media Landscape Through the Years”, May 4th, 2016  
<https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/burmas-media-landscape-through-the-years.html> Accessed 04/08/2024

<sup>53</sup> Coffey, David K. “The Drafting of the Constitution of the Union of Burma in 1947: Dominion Status, Indo–Burmese Relations, and the Irish Example”, in *Law and History Review*, Volume 41, Issue 2, May 2023, Published Online by Cambridge University Press  
<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/law-and-history-review/article/drafting-of-the-constitution-of-the-union-of-burma-in-1947-dominion-status-indoburmese-relations-and-the-irish-example/EDAD03879CAD4EA3C119D5A7C0792B86> Accessed 08/08/2024

as Finance Minister in the Interim Burmese government, then as the first Foreign Minister of the independent Burma up until his assassination which occurred on September 18th, 1948.<sup>54</sup>

As for the availability of the source material, everything from the *Review* that I have used is accessible through the Center for Research Libraries' *East View Global Press Archive*, an online visual archive.<sup>55</sup> CRF's digital collection of Burmese newspapers contains 63 issues of the *Review* equating to a total of 1018 pages of material at time of writing. Of what has been preserved, I am using roughly 778 pages worth of material, as I am limiting myself to covering only what I can access between December 23rd, 1946 and December 29th, 1947. I've tried to include as much relevant material as possible from this period. There are five missing issues in the collection between these two points in time, specifically the March 31st, April 21st, September 22nd, September 29th and October 6th issues from 1947, which I have been unable to consult for this research. When citing from the *Review*, I have referred to the frontpage of each issue as page one, as the *Review* is inconsistent from issue to issue over whether its index counts the frontpage as page one. This is for the convenience of both me and the reader, as well as to follow the example by which CRF's own digital archive numbers the pages. The digitised newspapers are of reasonable quality, they look somewhat frail but most of the text is perfectly legible, barring a few smudges, faded ink and tears in the paper that are notable in some issues.<sup>56</sup> Articles within the *Review* can be sparse with attribution and many use only the initials and not the full names of contributors, unlike what one might expect from a modern day newspaper bylines. This was the custom of the time, in part motivated by the extra cost that printing bylines incurred and different norms in the media culture.<sup>57</sup> Many of the articles in the *Review* are also simply attributed to pseudonyms or descriptive appellations, such as "A Playgoer" for an article about Burmese theatre.<sup>58</sup>

The *Review* was sold weekly, with a copy coming out every monday, apart from some of the interruptions that took place usually around holidays. In terms of the paper's readership, Cecil Hobbs mentions the *Review* as popular but claims no native-run newspaper in Burma

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<sup>54</sup> The Irrawaddy, "The Deadly Bombing That Killed Myanmar's First Foreign Minister", September 18th, 2019 <https://www.irrawaddy.com/specials/on-this-day/deadly-bombing-killed-myanmars-first-foreign-minister.html> Accessed 04/08/2024

<sup>55</sup> <https://gpa.eastview.com/crl/sean/?a=p&p=publication&sp=tbrv>

<sup>56</sup> For example, a page in the January 13th, 1947 issue has a large chunk torn out of it that has rendered a few advertisements illegible, but the actual articles in the issue are intact.

<sup>57</sup> Reddin, Debbie, "Byline" in Borchard, Gregor A. (Editor) *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Journalism: 2nd Edition*, 2022, p.265

<sup>58</sup> *The Burmese Review*, December 23rd, 1946, p.13

had at the time managed to exceed a circulation of 10,000 subscribers. Yet he also notes that the Burmese press was still incredibly influential in spite of this seemingly small size. It would not be uncommon for newspapers at this time, in this part of the world, to be read out loud in public gatherings, or for people to discuss in their everyday lives what news they had read, so the *Review*'s reach was definitely stronger than what physical sales would indicate.<sup>59</sup> I've not been able to find if there is a distinct Burmese word for public readings of newspapers, but for a strained comparison, in the fellow Southeast Asian nation of Cambodia at this time there was the term "sdap-kaset" (Listening To Newspapers) which was employed to refer to these kinds of public readings and discussions.<sup>60</sup> Similar activities were also carried out in Indonesia with public readings at "vergaderingen" (Public Gatherings).<sup>61</sup>

As noted above the paper was founded by U Tin Tut and for the entire span of time I've examined, its chief editor was Khin Nyunt Yin, one of Tin Tut's daughters according to an entry in the 1949 Indian Press Year Book which describes her collaborating with her father on numerous projects.<sup>62</sup> Khin Nyunt Yin's prominent role appears to have been known to the *Review*'s readers, as "Letters to the Editor" were addressed with female pronouns.<sup>63</sup> I have not been able to find any information on other editors or members of the newspaper's staff, beyond the fact that there were recurring contributors to the paper. Relatively little has been written about Khin, but U Tin Tut is a very colourful figure who has often been studied by historians of this era, such as Michael D. Leigh who frames him as one of the most important figures in the period between the end of World War II and Burma's full independence, concurring with the Burmese historian Thant Myint-U that Tin Tut was: "the brightest Burmese official of his generation".<sup>64</sup> Tin Tut was one of the first native Burmese members of the colonial civil service, he was educated in Britain and developed very Anglophilic cultural and political views. Even so, he was a proponent first of Burmese autonomy within the

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<sup>59</sup> Hobbs, Cecil "Nationalism in British Colonial Burma" in *The Far Eastern Quarterly*, Feb., 1947, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Feb., 1947), p. 113-121 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2049156> Accessed 04/08/2024

<sup>60</sup> Harris, Ian, *Cambodian Buddhism: History and Practice*, 2008, p.131

<sup>61</sup> Subijanto, Rianne "Enlightenment and the Revolutionary Press in Colonial Indonesia", in *International Journal of Communication* 11, (2017), p.1370-1372 <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/viewFile/5159/1979> Accessed 2024/08/13

<sup>62</sup> The Indian Press Year Book 1949 p.271. From the collection of the University of California, digitised September 29th, 2010 via Google Books. <https://books.google.se/books?id=FDs6AQAAIAAJ> Accessed 04/08/2024

<sup>63</sup> *The Burmese Review*, January 6th, 1947, p.11, January 27th, 1947 p.6 and August 4th, 1947, p.14 for three examples

<sup>64</sup> Leigh, Michael D. *The Collapse of British Rule in Burma: The Civilian Evacuation and Independence* 2018, p.186-188

British Empire and later full independence, arguing that Britain should honour Burma with the same democratic liberties that its citizens could exercise in the metropole.

In terms of the influence U Tin Tut directly had over the *Review* and its editorial line, the *Review* itself argued that it was independent and did not reflect his opinions. In a May 19th, 1947 article, it strove to correct a claim the British newspaper agency *Reuters* had made about Tin Tut's influence over the paper, by noting "As the founder of this journal he has our special regard, but the *Burmese Review* is an independent journal with no party leanings and is owned not by an individual but by an incorporated company, the *Burmese Review, Ltd.*"<sup>65</sup> While there may be truth to this, one should not forget that Tin Tut was both the *Review*'s founder, a frequent contributor, as well as a man who owned a significant stake in it and had also entrusted the role of editor of the paper to his own daughter. Historians such as Josef Silverstein have thus commonly referred to it as "U Tin Tut's *Burmese Review*".<sup>66</sup> John A. Lent also highlights U Tin Tut as a go-between for wealthy Burmans and their subsequent political influence over the *Burmese press*.<sup>67</sup> I am also aware of archival material related to Tin Tut himself, including personal records uncovered in the 1960s by his friends and family<sup>68</sup>, but I mainly want to focus on the nature of the *Review* as a newspaper in the political context of 1947 Burma and as a "forum" for political discussion and national discourse in this period.<sup>69</sup>

### 1.4.2 - *The Political Legacy of Aung San*

*Political Legacy* was originally published in 1972 as a collection of Burmese writings created by the Burma scholar Josef Silverstein. It contains various key speeches, minutes of political meetings and various other sources left behind primarily by Aung San, the first Prime Minister of Burma shortly before its independence. The book also contains a lot of records from the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL), Aung San's political party and the mass organisation that led the Burmese independence movement during the latter years of World War II and would go on to form the basis of all Burmese governments for decades to come. Silverstein is notable for having spent time in Burma and worked tirelessly to record

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<sup>65</sup> *The Burmese Review*, May 19th, 1947 p.8

<sup>66</sup> Silverstein, Josef, *Burmese Politics: The Dilemma of National Unity*, 1980, p.88

<sup>67</sup> Lent, John A., *The Asian Newspapers' Reluctant Revolution, Volume 10*, 1979, p.145

<sup>68</sup> *Guardian*, Volumes 8-9, 1961, p.17. From the collection of the University of Minnesota, digitised May 17th, 2022 via Google Books. <https://books.google.se/books?id=VKgc11F1hukC> Accessed 04/08/2024

<sup>69</sup> Hallin, Daniel C and Mancini, Paolo, *Comparing Media Systems*, 2004, p.160-163



Burmese historical sources, often by interviewing surviving witnesses or political figures as well as by combing through Burmese archives, a process that is today much more difficult.<sup>70</sup> He came highly recommended to me by experts in Burma studies who I spoke with, who made note of the book as one of the most thorough and representative compilations of Burmese political discourse in this era. It is approximately 178 pages long, including an introductory essay by Silverstein and a bibliography towards the end. Silverstein's work builds off of two previous researchers. The first is Maung Maung, a Burmese political scholar who briefly served as President of Burma in 1988. In 1962 Maung Maung published *Aung San of Burma* and *A Trial in Burma: The Assassination of Aung San*, two books that dealt with the late revolutionary's political beliefs. According to Silverstein however, these works were not entirely representative of the full breadth of material available on Aung San and the AFPFL. Silverstein describes Maung Maung's work as a very selective collection and at the time Maung Maung's books were published, archival research in Burma was highly limited and disorganised. Silverstein goes on to note that in the decade that followed, the government-run Burma Defence Services Historical Research Institute was able to collect and organise much more material, that Silverstein himself was later able to access. As such, Silverstein included other source materials that Maung Maung had failed to discover or consciously neglected. For this reason I have chosen to utilise Silverstein's collection.<sup>71</sup>

Silverstein is also cites a Burmese scholar named Shwe Kalaung,<sup>72</sup> who published in 1991 *A Review of Pre-Independence Press (1945-47)* in the Burmese newspaper the *Working People's Daily*. This was an essay which compared various colonial-era newspapers that had issued different kinds of English translations and reproductions of statements made by the AFPFL and Aung San. Silverstein chose to use Shwe Kalaung's publications as part of the book, taking some editorial liberties as Shwe Kalaung was writing for a Burmese audience in the modern day nation of Myanmar, and as such had edited parts of the texts to reflect that. Shwe Kalaung replaced mentions of Burma with the modern day spelling of Myanmar, and Silverstein speculates some other things have been lost in translation or as part of the then government of Myanmar's political censorship. Silverstein describes Shwe Kalaung's work

<sup>70</sup> Mydans, Seth "Josef Silverstein, Scholar and Critic of Myanmar, Dies at 99" in *The New York Times*, July 20th, 2021 <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/20/world/asia/josef-silverstein-dead.html> Accessed 05/08/2024, and Zarni, Maung "Josef Silverstein, The Death of A Fine American Scholar who "Gave Back" to His Subjects" on *forsea.com*, July 1th, 2021

<https://forsea.co/josef-silverstein-a-fine-american-scholar-who-gave-back-to-his-subjects/> Accessed 05/08/2024

<sup>71</sup> Silverstein, 1993, p.2-8

<sup>72</sup> Silverstein spells Shwe Kalaung's name as "Kalaing" on p.1, but every subsequent mention uses "Kalaung", so I will assume Silverstein simply made an unfortunate error.

as not being an attempt to write a “better history” of the press in colonial Burma but rather a critique of how a free and competitive press can distort information.<sup>73</sup>

The records contained within *Political Legacy* are written in English, as at the time Burma was still nominally under British rule and official government protocols had to be recorded in English. A lot of the speeches and declarations that the Burmese nationalists made at this time were also for two different audiences, both the domestic population of Burma and the British Government in London whom they were negotiating with for independence. These speeches and protocols were both propaganda on the home front and also statements of intent to their colonial overlords, over how the future of Burma should be shaped. Silverstein chose to include details of which archives or publications he retrieved each piece of writing from and also included short editor’s notes in most segments of the book, elaborating a little on the context behind why the materials are significant and speculating as to how the materials in question ended up being translated and recorded in English. Among the most prolific origins of these materials is *Thandawsint* (Daily Herald), but some are also derived from smaller papers such *Taing Chit*, the *Burma Gazette* and the *New Times of Burma*. Some also originate from publishing agencies such as the *New Light of Burma Press*.<sup>74</sup>

The versions of the book I am utilising for this paper is a reprint from 1993, also published by Cornell, which contains minor alterations by Silverstein such as highlighting more of Aung San’s personal letters and his familial relationships, at a time when his daughter Aung San Suu Kyi was a growing cause celebre in the international media and the world of Burmese academia. Silverstein amended the book with a new introduction where he notes that since 1972, there had not been any particularly new major discoveries in other source material or in Burmese archival research, nor had there been any other major compilations of Aung San’s speeches, letters and government protocols published for an English-speaking audience in Silverstein’s absence.<sup>75</sup> Even three decades later that statement might ring true, as archival research in Burma (now Myanmar) continues to languish under government censorship, but I have intended for this research to be a demonstration that there are still useful sources for Burma studies that are readily available for historians to utilise.

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<sup>73</sup> Silverstein, 1993, p.1 and p.46

<sup>74</sup> Silverstein, 1993, p.2, p.46-53 and p.119

<sup>75</sup> Silverstein exempts Shwe Kalaung’s work here, seemingly due to the fact he was writing in Burmese for a Burmese audience and, as previously noted, because Silverstein does not view Shwe Kalaung’s work as an attempt to write objective, unbiased history.

### 1.4.3 - Inclusion, Exclusion and Approach to Sources

As noted at the beginning of this segment, this study is conducted using a qualitative text analysis. I have chosen to tackle specific concepts within the source material and use it to answer my thesis statements. Owing to the large assortment of material, this means I have had to be selected with what I included in this paper. With the *Review* I've looked for specific genres and types of articles, though there are some recurring segments I have mostly left out of my analysis. The *Review* often publishes news from abroad or writes profiles about foreign nations and their history, but unless these articles compare Burma to these foreign nations, their peoples and/or their leaders, they lack any real value towards my analysis. I have also avoided focusing too much on those articles the *Review* sourced and republished from other newspapers, as while it may be interesting to analyse why the *Review* wished to repurpose those specific works, they are not written by Burmese authors and their accuracy in depicting events often leaves something to be desired. Some of these include the transcript of the parliamentary Hansard in the British House of Commons, noting down what discussions had been held in Britain about Burma. While this is an interesting thing to feature in the paper, these transcripts are presented devoid of any context or commentary, leaving me with little to work with. The *Review* also had a habit of occasionally republishing biased and incorrect information from foreign newspapers, to highlight what these foreign nations' press got wrong about the political situation in Burma. I have chosen not to focus much on these.<sup>76</sup>

Additionally the *Review* also frequently published ancient Burmese folk tales and various stories from Burma's distant past, but barring instances when these stories are used to speak about the qualities of the Burmese people and the Burmese nation, to indicate a political parallel with recent events, or to highlight some kind of relationship between Burma and other faiths and cultures, I have not found much use for them. In contrast, the *Review* did also publish a lot of politically charged fiction that dealt with the much more recent past, such as the colonial era and the Japanese occupation, which I found far more applicable to focus on. Lastly, in regards to the sources, I defer to the historian Norman G. Owen, who notes that there is a large difference between the lives of those literate elites who shaped what would become the ideologies of nationalism in Southeast Asia, and the often illiterate "masses" who responded to them, but we can observe the voices of the masses through "indirect evidence". We can see how the elites wrote about the nation and about the masses, and then derive our

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<sup>76</sup> *The Burmese Review*, May 12th, 1947, p.7

empirical evidence from it to illuminate a telling history that includes the many, not just the few. Newspapers such as the *Review* in its role as a forum for discussion and a mirror of the Burmese political zeitgeist is a perfect definition of this indirect evidence. Its writing was meant to reflect the national mood, and while it may have served as a kind tastemaker for that mood, it was not produced in a vacuum.<sup>77</sup> This in turn reminds me of Chakrabarty's key argument, that a transition narrative is easiest to define when we look at what a nation didn't become but that it aspired to be. In a sense, transition narratives are also indirect evidence.<sup>78</sup>

## 1.5 - The Political Situation in Colonial Burma

Burma as a unified political entity has existed for over a millennia, originally ruled by a series of royal dynasties that rose and fell over the course of history. Power has generally been concentrated in the Bamar ethnic group, who make up a majority of the Burmese population. The Bamar were for most of recent history referred to interchangeably as the Burmese because of this, in the same way as one might refer to the Han people as the Chinese. The Bamar are nearly exclusively Buddhist, although it is worth noting that Buddhism in Burma has gone through many iterations and schools of thought, and is often syncretised with traditional rural folk beliefs.<sup>79</sup> The official term used by the current government of Myanmar to refer to Burmese ethnic groups is "national ethnic races".<sup>80</sup> The term races was also used by colonial era British and in Burmese sources, as the Burmese people of this era saw themselves as a distinct genetic, cultural and spiritual race, not as an "ethnic group" in the way we might conceive of it in the 21st century.<sup>81</sup>

The European presence in Burma dates back to traders and missionaries who arrived in the 1500s during the Age of Exploration, but the most notable exchange with the west began in the 1800s, when the then ruling dynasty of Burma, the Konbaungs, fought a series of wars against the British Empire culminating in the capture of the capital of Mandalay and the

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<sup>77</sup> Owen, Norman G. "Nationalism and other impulses of the colonial era" in Owen, Norman G. (editor) *Routledge Handbook of Southeast Asian History*, 2014, p.56-57

<sup>78</sup> Chakrabarty, D., 2000, p.37-46

<sup>79</sup> Aung-Thwin, Michael and Aung-Thwin, Maitrii, *A History of Myanmar since Ancient Times: Traditions and Transformations*, p.37

<sup>80</sup> Dittmer, Lowell, *Burma Or Myanmar? The Struggle For National Identity*, 2010 p.52-53

<sup>81</sup> Taylor, Robert H. "Perceptions of Ethnicity in the Politics of Burma" in *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (1982), p. 7-22, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24490906> Accessed 06/08/2024

ousting of the royal family in 1885.<sup>82</sup> The British Raj<sup>83</sup> took over all of Burma, supplanting its government with the Imperial Civil Service (ICS). Burma was notable because it was one of the last major colonial possessions acquired by Great Britain and because the ICS in Burma was unique in contrast to other colonial administrations. It was allowed to run itself in a flexible manner as it had to fill a vast power vacuum left by the British abolishing most indigenous Burmese civil and religious institutions, turning the ICS into an ad-hoc administration over the country with vast influence and very little oversight.<sup>84</sup> The colony of British Burma was initially governed as a province of the wider British Raj and was then “separated” in 1937. From then until 1948 Burma operated as a separate colony within the British Empire with its own Governor.<sup>85</sup> Burma also had its own local government, which was wholly beholden to the Governor and to Britain. This had been established by the Montagu–Chelmsford Reforms of 1923 as a symbolic concession, as part of the system of “Dyarchy”<sup>86</sup> throughout the Raj, meant to permit the indigenous populations to engage themselves politically, such as through elections in ways they had previously been forbidden to or been heavily restricted from. In Burma the reforms created two government bodies entitled the Legislative Council of Burma and the Governor’s Executive Council.<sup>87</sup> Britain’s Government of Burma Act of 1935 also laid the groundwork for a new Burmese Legislature and enshrined new electoral laws that would serve as the model for future governments.<sup>88</sup>

During World War II Burma was occupied by the Empire of Japan a pro-Japanese puppet state was established in 1943, headquartered in Rangoon. This so-called State of Burma was run by Ba Maw, a nationalist politician who became a Japanese collaborator. You could compare the degree of autonomy this state had to various other Japanese puppet states, such as the ones established in China, Indochina, the Philippines and Indonesia. It was not a free, self-governing nation but instead the State of Burma just followed orders it was given by the Japanese government and the Japanese Army. Nevertheless, the State of Burma was notable for becoming something of a symbol of pride for native Burmans and a key part of the

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<sup>82</sup> Aung-Thwin, Michael and Aung-Thwin, Maitrii, *A History of Myanmar since Ancient Times: Traditions and Transformations*, p.188-224

<sup>83</sup> The Raj was a political entity formed in 1858 by the British Government in order to directly administer India, Burma and accompanying nearby territories as British colonial possessions.

<sup>84</sup> Tarling, Nicholas, 2008 p.109-111 and p.280-281

<sup>85</sup> Pillalamari, Akhilesh, “When Burma Was Still Part of British India” in *The Diplomat*, September 30th, 2017 <https://thediplomat.com/2017/10/when-burma-was-still-part-of-british-india/> Accessed 05/08/2024

<sup>86</sup> Literally meaning “Dual Rule”, in the sense that there were two separate governments, a British colonial government and a native local government, with most political power held by the former.

<sup>87</sup> Maung Maung, *Burma's Constitution*, 2012, p.10-24

<sup>88</sup> Rosinger, Lawrence K., *The State of Asia: A Contemporary Survey*, 2023, p.221-222

Burmese national identity, as it was the first ostensibly *independent* Burmese nation that had existed in over 50 years.<sup>89</sup> Many political figures that I will be covering in this paper, such as Aung San, distinguished themselves by serving the State of Burma as auxiliary troops for the Japanese Empire, before eventually rebelling against the Japanese when they felt that this pro-Japanese government did not have the Burmese people's best intentions in mind. They formed the AFPFL as a political and military body to resist Japan, taking inspiration from the Soviet Union and the Chinese Communist Party to create an "Anti-Fascist" opposition to Japan.<sup>90</sup> After the Kandy Conference of 1945 hosted in British Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), representatives of the British government and the AFPFL fully integrated these Burmese militia units into the British armed forces and agreed to work together to ensure a negotiated, peaceful road to Burmese independence would be pursued after the war had concluded.<sup>91</sup> In June 1945 the British government signed the Burma Provisions Act of 1945 and created a "Interim Burmese Government" that would exercise power through the colonial institutions.<sup>92</sup>

Members of the AFPFL were appointed to the Governor's Executive Council, with Aung San most notably serving as Deputy Chairman, a position that was treated as analogous to Prime Minister.<sup>93</sup> On July 16th, 1947 the council was renamed the Provisional Government of Burma and Aung San officially became Prime Minister.<sup>94</sup> At this point, the *Review* spoke of Burma as de-facto independent.<sup>95</sup> A few days later however Aung San and much of his cabinet were assassinated on the 19th of July. A power vacuum formed but was quickly filled by the politician U Nu becoming the new Prime Minister. On October 17th Burmese representatives signed the Nu-Attlee Agreement for a British withdrawal, which began the process of making that de-jure.<sup>96</sup> The agreement had to pass the British parliament and

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<sup>89</sup> Thomson, Virginia, "Burma" in *South East Asia, Colonial History: Imperial decline: nationalism and the Japanese challenge (1920s-1940s)*, 2001, p.363-366

<sup>90</sup> Seekins, Donald M., *Historical Dictionary of Burma (Myanmar)*, 2nd Edition, 2017, p.21-25

<sup>91</sup> Seekins, Donald M., 2017, p.289

<sup>92</sup> Center for Peace and Reconciliation, Myanmar, *Aung San - Attlee Agreement*, January 27th, 1947 <https://www.cprmyanmar.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/AUNG-SAN-%E2%80%93-ATLEE-AGREEMENT.pdf> Accessed 04/08/2024, as well as Tinker, Hugh and Griffin, Andrew, *Burma, the Struggle for Independence, 1944-1948: From general strike to independence, 31 August 1946 to 4 January 1948*, 1983, p.262 and p.333 <https://archive.org/details/burmastrugglefor0001unse> Accessed 08/08/2024

<sup>93</sup> *The Burmese Review*, January 6th, 1947, p.6

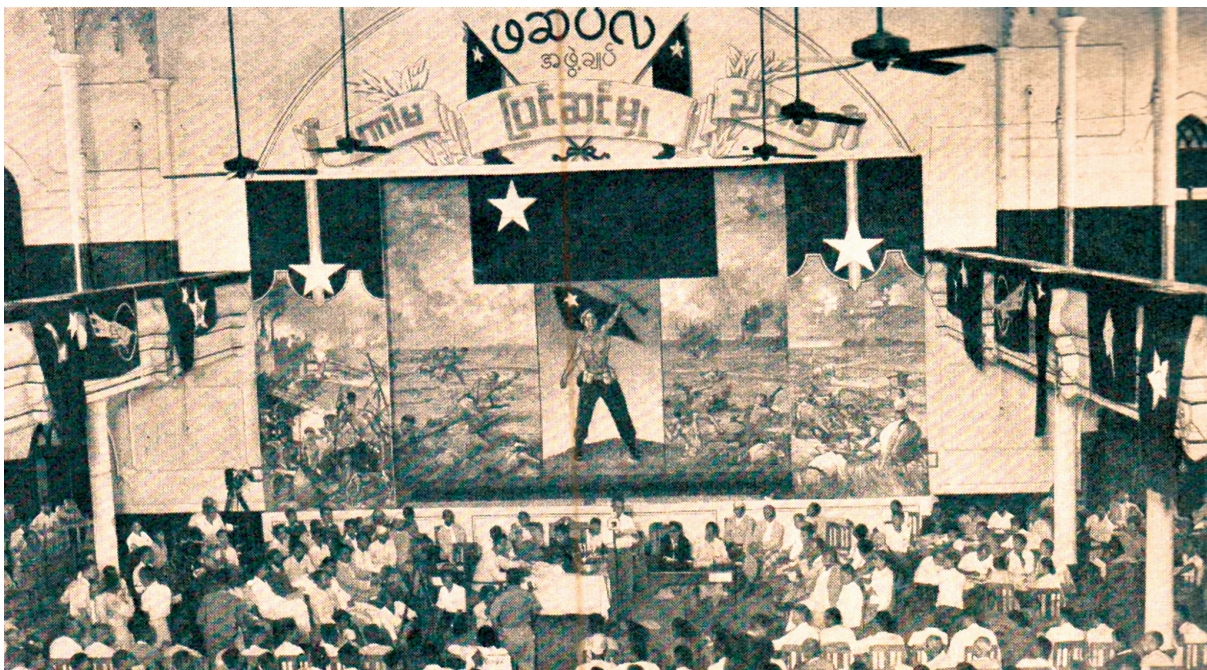
<sup>94</sup> Network Myanmar, "Notes on the Executive Councils appointed by the Governors of Burma, Sir Reginald Dorman-Smith and Sir Hubert Rance 1945-1947" <https://www.networkmyanmar.org/ESW/Files/Historical-Notes.pdf> Accessed 03/08/2024

<sup>95</sup> *The Burmese Review*, September 9th, 1947, p.9

<sup>96</sup> Wei Yan Aung, "The Day Myanmar's Independence From Britain Was Agreed" in *The Irrawaddy*, October 17th, 2019 <https://www.irrawaddy.com/specials/on-this-day/day-myanmars-independence-britain-agreed.html> Accessed 03/08/2024

receive royal assent, which didn't occur until December 10th, and even then Burma waited until January 4th, 1948 to formally declare its independence to the world.

This was not the only, inevitable outcome. Between the end of World War II and Burma's de-jure independence on January 4th 1948, the country was in a state of limbo. Britain said it would honour independence but was also pressuring the Burmese to maintain a "Dominion Status" in the British Commonwealth, rather than outright secede. In such a scenario, Burma would have retained the British monarch as its head of state but be allowed to fully govern itself, akin to say Canada or Australia. The formal declaration of when independence would be formally granted was not made until January 1947. This question was settled in late May with the establishment of a "preliminary convention" hosted by AFPFL delegates who were to later attend a national Constitutional Assembly. As the AFPFL made up over 80% of the delegates to the Assembly, a resolution they made to call for an Independent Burmese Republic, outside of the Commonwealth, led the *Review* to declare the debate to be over.<sup>97</sup> Below you will see a photograph of the May 19th, 1947 convention of the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League, where Burmese leaders resolved to attain full and immediate independence from Britain. This was arguably the moment that decided the future of Burma.



Source: *Myanmar Digital News*<sup>98</sup>

<sup>97</sup> *The Burmese Review*, May 26th, 1947, p.1 and p.11

<sup>98</sup> Myanmar Digital News, "Freedom, Equality and Justice", January 4th 2021, <https://www.mdn.gov.mm/my/lttlpkhng-tnttuunnyiimkhngngttraamtikhng> Accessed 04/08/2024

There are a couple of important historical dates for the reader to keep in mind, which may help following the chronological development of Burma's struggle for independence:

**March 1st 1945** - Founding of the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL).

**September 2nd 1945** - End of World War II.

**January 27th, 1947** - The Attlee-Aung San Provisional Agreements, with Britain promising the creation of a Burmese Constitutional Assembly<sup>99</sup> and independence within a year's time.

**February 6th-12th, 1947** - The Panglong Conference, meant to negotiate the inclusion of various minority ethnic groups in a future federal framework for the Burmese nation.

**April 9th, 1947** - Burmese General Election to the Constitutional Assembly, leading to the drafting of the Burmese Constitution. This body continued to meet for the rest of the year.

**July 16th, 1947** - The Governor's Executive Council is renamed the Council of Ministers of the Provisional Government of Burma, with Aung San adopting the title of Prime Minister.

**July 19th, 1947** - The Assassination of Aung San and several members of his Provisional Government, U Nu succeeds Aung San as leader of the independence movement, President of the AFPFL and as Prime Minister.

**October 17th, 1947** - Signing of the Nu-Attlee Agreement, formally ending British rule.

**December 10th, 1947** - The British King and Parliament approves the Nu-Attlee Agreement by passing the Burma Independence Act.

**January 4th 1948** - Burmese Declaration of Independence and creation of the *Union of Burma* as a sovereign state.

## 2.0 - Outline of Analysis

The following chapters of this paper will deal with the analysis itself. To begin with I want to present some more details surrounding the political and social context that the *Review* as well as Aung San and the AFPFL's statements existed within, namely their role as forums for the national discourse, while conducting an analysis of the language used in the paper and the kind of readership which they appealed to. After that, I have grouped articles from the *Review* and from the documents in *Political Legacy* into four categories based on what the principal theme of them is, be it, the "Burmese Classes", the "Burmese Nation", "Burmese Leadership" and "Burmese Governance". The latter two are distinct from one another as Leadership deals more with the qualities of individual leaders, be they historical or present in

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<sup>99</sup> This body is interchangeably referred to as the "Constitutional Convention", or the "Constituent Assembly" in both the source materials as well as most of the supporting literature I have used.



the late 1940s, whilst *Governance* deals more with the government and the state as a collective entity. Each of these chapters are then broken down further into specific themes and motifs which appear in the source material, such as the role of the peasantry in Burmese conceptions of class, or the role of the military as a part of the Burmese nation, etc. I cannot draw hard lines in the sand here, each of the articles and documents can and often do address multiple themes, I have merely tried to group them together for ease of reading and analysis.

## 2.1 - *The Burmese Review* as a Forum

In addition to the contents of the *Review*, I have also sought to analyse the historical context in which the paper existed. I implore the reader to think of it as what Hallin and Mancini describe as a “forum”, politicised newspapers of this kind existed to advance ideas and debate political issues in a public manner that could engage a wide audience.<sup>100</sup> The *Review* was written in English for a diverse audience of native Burmese, Anglo-Burmans of mixed race and British residents within Burma, who all had some degree of cultural overlap in being familiar with the English language and appreciative of British culture, though there are also references to traditional Burmese culture within it, some which go unexplained and presume familiarity from the audience. Language and culture can play a function in both *dividing* and *uniting* potential audiences of the press.<sup>101</sup> In this case, it favoured unity, allowing the *Review* to engage political dialogue between the different communities within Burma and opened up the opportunity for the newspaper to be read outside of Burma. This was reflected well by the paper’s motto, which appears in some of the early 1947 issues, proudly declaring that the *Review* was: “The mirror of Burmese thought and a record of world events”, as well as in a statement issued in the May 19th, 1947 issue that claimed the *Review* “endeavours to give expression to the views of the Burmese intelligentsia [sic]”.<sup>102</sup>

The *Review* strongly resembles what Hallin and Mancini label a “bourgeois paper” because of this, especially those bourgeois papers of Southern Europe. Just like them, the *Review* was tied to the “political and literary worlds”, not to the world of the markets and economics. The *Review* did not cover trade or finances, this is a trait Hallin and Mancini strongly associate with bourgeois media systems in non-industrialised regions of the world, including the

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<sup>100</sup> Hallin, Daniel C and Mancini, Paolo, 2004, p.161 and p.259

<sup>101</sup> Hallin, Daniel C and Mancini, Paolo, 2004, p.25-26

<sup>102</sup> *The Burmese Review*, May 19th, 1947 p.8

developing world in Asia. This also meant that any international news printed in the *Review* was put there solely for the benefit of allowing readers to connect to the rest of the world and gain a political understanding of it, rather than knowing the latest news about stock prices or international finance.<sup>103</sup> The *Review*'s own coverage of the world outside of Burma comes off as voyeuristic, with Ruth Fredman Cernea, in her research of how the Burmese press depicted Jews, characterising the *Review* as carrying “cultural and political news from all over the world”. I echo her sentiment when she notes that: “International news - from political events to society happenings and fashion - filled the pages, so that in far-off Burma one could still be in the mainstream of world events”.<sup>104</sup>

Another point of similarity between the *Review* and European bourgeois papers comes from Cecil Hobbs, who emphasised the manner in which the English-language Burmese papers had learned to fight against the British by using their own language against them. The Burmese were ultimately partaking in a European media system, they were talking amongst themselves in a language that the others understood. This included of course the British population of the metropole, facilitating communication for the Burmese nationalists to make their arguments for independence to both the British government but also to the British public, but remember that English was also a world language at this time. The Burmese could make their voices heard across the globe to anyone who would listen. An example of this is that Americans who studied Burma were able to gain a perspective into Burmese national politics and the decolonial struggle via the *Review*, through the fact they understood the language it was written in.<sup>105</sup> Hobbs also noted another connection to European media systems when speaking of the Burmese press, claiming that “Liberal thought in England” had influenced not just the policy of the British government, but also the political sentiments taught to their colonial subjects and expressed in the native press, He pointed specifically to the way in which the Burmese nationalists had sought to negotiate with Britain for a peaceful road to independence as one example of this.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Hallin, Daniel C and Mancini, Paulo, 2004, p.90-92 and p.306

<sup>104</sup> Cernea, Ruth Fredman, *Almost Englishmen: Baghdadi Jews in British Burma*, 2007, p.104-105

<sup>105</sup> See for instance *Point Four, Far East: A Selected Bibliography of Studies on Economically Underdeveloped Countries*, p.13-14 published by the U.S Department of State, Division of Library and Reference Services in 1951 and John Calhoun Merrill's *A Handbook of the Foreign Press*, p.223 published by the University of Louisiana Press in 1959. Both cite the *Review* as a source on Burmese politics and economic development.

<sup>106</sup> Hobbs, Cecil, “Nationalism in Colonial British Burma” in *The Far Eastern Quarterly*, Feb., 1947, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Feb., 1947), p. 113-121

I emphasise this bourgeois character, but that is not to say the *Review* was only the paper of the intelligentsia however, the masses and the intelligentsia were presented as influencing one another in Burma's political development, with historians Hugh Tinker and Andrew Griffin describing a kind of symbiotic relationship where the *Review* (and specifically U Tin Tut through the *Review*) was able to influence Burmese mass politics, while also responding to the changing political climate in Burma and the will of the masses. They highlight its role in promoting that good relations should be maintained with Britain, even post-independence.<sup>107</sup> The *Review* sought to embody the cultural and political zeitgeist of the "New Burma", a term which cropped up in articles and advertisements to celebrate the end of the old colonial order and the coming independence. The official AFPFL manifesto in 1945 was even entitled *The New Burma in the New World*.<sup>108</sup> One can compare it to terms such as "New Democracy" which were popularised in Vietnamese and Chinese political discourse around this same time,<sup>109</sup> and which even made its way into Burmese rhetoric such as in Aung San's speeches, in newspapers, and even in a variant of the aforementioned AFPFL manifesto entitled *From Fascist Bondage to New Democracy*. The *Review* thus partook in a kind of political discourse about a new era and new kind of politics that had parallels in much of Asia.<sup>110</sup>

The *Review* published numerous articles that reiterated basic concepts that everyday Burmans would likely be familiar with, such as Buddhist theology and the aforementioned Folk Tales. While this may have been aimed at those readers of a Christian faith and a foreign culture, who may have been unfamiliar with Buddhism and Burmese culture's intricacies, it could also have just been an effort to translate these distinctly Burmese parts of religion and culture into the English language on a Burmese author's own terms, as opposed to wanting to be studied by others. Though it does not involve integrating native languages into English text, I would compare this to the theme of "authenticity" that *Empire Writes Back* notes many

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<sup>107</sup> Tinker, Hugh and Griffin, Andrew *Burma, the Struggle for Independence, 1944-1948: From general strike to independence, 31 August 1946 to 4 January 1948*, 1983, p.556

<sup>108</sup> Maung Maung Gyi, *Burmese Political Values: The Socio-political Roots of Authoritarianism*, 1983, p.257

<sup>109</sup> Marr, David G, *Vietnam: State, War, and Revolution (1945-1946)*, 2013, p.485 and Meliksetov, Arlen and Pantsov, Alexander, *The Stalinization of the People's Republic of China* in Kirby, William C (Editor) *Realms of Freedom in Modern China*, p.127

<sup>110</sup> Houtman, Gustaaf, *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics: Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy*, 1999, p.20 and India. High Commissioner in the United Kingdom. Information Dept, *India and Burma News Summary*, 1946, p.24 from the collection of the University of California, digitised via Google Books on July 11th, 2018, <https://books.google.se/books?id=GCqjQWYFcfC> accessed 04/08/2024, as well as Silverstein, Josef, "The Idea of Freedom in Burma and the Political Thought of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi" in Kelly, David and Reid, Anthony (editors), *Asian Freedoms: The Idea of Freedom in East and Southeast Asia*, 1998, p.203-205

colonised and postcolonial writers sought to include in their works.<sup>111</sup> The Burmese engaged with a European media system, yes, but this shows they intended to do so on their own terms and to not be defined by someone else through it. Notably, a series of articles referred to as *Burmese Folk Tales* marks one of first times in the *Review* where copyright is attributed, to its author Maung Htin Aung, pointing towards a desire to protect these specific translations and interpretations of the stories from unpermitted commercialisation.<sup>112</sup> Similar attributions of copyright also accompany a few wholly original, fictional stories printed in the *Review* and towards 1948 notices of “Burmese Review Copyright” also appeared in some articles as the newspaper continually grew in influence.<sup>113</sup> Eventually at its peak, the *Review* was even able to dispatch its own journalists to other countries to conduct research, such as writing reports on the political situation in Tito’s Yugoslavia and in the Philippines.<sup>114</sup>

There is a high frequency of English-language puns, such as the *Burmese Miscellany* section mocking the acronym for a political coalition entitled the “Democratic Nationalities United Front”, or D.N.U.F, by saying that the public response to them will be to say “E.N.U.F”.<sup>115</sup> A similar pun highlighted the irony of a Burmese politician named U Htin Fatt organising relief for the starving population of Arakan, claiming that he could “hardly be hungry himself”.<sup>116</sup> The *Review* also provides small notes of clarification or translation for an English-speaking reader, who may not be familiar with some elements of Burmese culture. One instance in the January 13th issue contains a footnote that claims that the traditional Burmese noodle dish Mohinga is “Burmese Vermicelli”, referring to an Italian pasta dish.<sup>117</sup> By mid-1947, Burmese language in the print of the *Review* became more common, though it was mainly reserved for advertisements and important notices such as alerting readers if the paper would be out of print or put on any other kinds of hiatus.

In terms of the English language expressions and idioms used within the paper, I found explicitly western terms were sometimes used in unusual contexts that focused on eastern subjects. The majority of this analysis will be in the “Burmese Nation” chapter. For a few illustrative examples though, beyond the puns and the pasta dishes listed above, the *Review*

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<sup>111</sup> Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G., and Tiffin, H., 2002, p.37-43

<sup>112</sup> *The Burmese Review*, December 30th, 1946, p.5

<sup>113</sup> *The Burmese Review*, December 29th, 1947, p.7

<sup>114</sup> *The Burmese Review*, December 29th, 1947, p.9-10

<sup>115</sup> *The Burmese Review*, January 6th, 1947

<sup>116</sup> *The Burmese Review*, December 1st, 1947, p.2

<sup>117</sup> *The Burmese Review*, January 13th, 1947, p.11

also made generous references to western European history, particularly ancient Greece and Rome, as well as references to what was then contemporary pop culture. This leads to several articles which are seemingly intended for a Burmese audience referencing the “Ides of March”<sup>118</sup> or Arthurian myth<sup>119</sup>, as well as using Western expressions like “You’re the cat’s pyjamas”.<sup>120</sup> Perhaps the average Burmese reader may have had some familiarity with these themes, but the classical references in particular would be more obvious to someone with a European education and cultural upbringing. This is both a sign of the class character of the paper, but also a sign of the European influence that had been ingrained on Burma and on the *Review*’s writers, that they did not think twice about including these references.

There are several regular columns which appear in multiple issues of the *Review*. *Burmese Miscellany* is usually on the second page of every issue, containing various jokes written by a contributor under the pseudonym *Thuyai* who provides colourful commentary on ongoing political events.<sup>121</sup> Every issue in late 1946 and throughout most of 1947, also has a weekly entry of the aforementioned *Burmese Folk Tales* written by Maung Htin Aung, a Professor of English at Rangoon University. Later, this was also followed by a series of articles called *Buddhist Stories*, that served the same purpose but which were not accredited to one specific writer. In contrast to *Thuyai*’s work, these sections are broadly apolitical. Some of the stories reprinted in the paper may contain moral or spiritual lessons but they appear unconnected to recent political events or other articles featured in the *Review*. One can interpret this as a political statement in and of itself, that the *Review* set aside this amount of time and space in the paper to talk about their nation’s folklore. There are also dedicated sections of the paper for domestic and international affairs. Both are editorials, with the former being entitled *The Political Front*, whilst the latter is called *Imperial and Foreign Affairs*, covering both news about the broader British Empire such as India and Malaya, but also information on a wide range of other nations such as the United States of America, China, and about ongoing decolonial struggles such as the First Indochina War and the Indonesian National Revolution.

The *Review* also lists local job openings at the back of the paper and has advertisements interspersed on almost every page. These are the source of some of the only images in the

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<sup>118</sup> *The Burmese Review*, January 27th, 1947, p.7 and December 15th, 1947, p.2

<sup>119</sup> *The Burmese Review*, September 1st, 1947, p.3 and December 15th, 1947, p.9

<sup>120</sup> *The Burmese Review*, January 6th, 1947, p.9

<sup>121</sup> The closest I could find to an identity of *Thuyai* is that an article on page 5 of the September 8th, 1947 issue describes him as a man who is at least older than thirty, as the article is meant to be a reproduction from memory of a story *Thuyai* saw in another newspaper roughly thirty years prior.

paper, the *Review* almost never published any photographs or artistic depictions in its pages, outside of advertisements and the *Review*'s own newspaper logo.<sup>122</sup> This stood in contrast to other contemporary newspapers such as the Rangoon Daily which prominently featured both frontpage illustrations and political cartoons.<sup>123</sup> The *Review* would occasionally also publish longer series of articles, often across multiple issues with weekly instalments. These are usually narratives, be it autobiographical stories or works of fiction and allegory. In addition, the paper also occasionally publishes *Letters to the Editor*, which are usually responses to specific articles. This is an interesting source in and of itself, to consider what sort of feedback or criticism the *Review* was willing to publicly acknowledge and print in its pages.

Lastly, the *Review* would also sometimes republish works from other newspapers or sources in their entirety, one notable example is the published January 6th, 1947, which prints the contents of the British parliamentary hansard to retell in its entirety a debate that was hosted in the House of Commons over the differing opinions that the Conservative Party and the Labour Party had over how they should negotiate with and entice the Burmese nationalists to comply with Dominion Status within the British Empire.<sup>124</sup> This goes to show that sometimes news originating from the British Isles could take precedence over local, Burmese affairs, especially if they affected the future of Burma as a nation. It could also be an indication that this was a slow news week, or that it was meant to compensate for a lack of other finished articles, after all it was published in the first issue released after a weeks long Christmas break that the *Review* had gone on over the end of the previous year.

To elaborate on the *Review*'s readership and class character, its founder U Tin Tut had been mainly associated with pro-British political cliques and was seen as an ardent Anglophile by many of his peers. Most contributors shared this kind of background and this would ostensibly make them political opponents of Aung San and the AFPFL, as he and his party had sworn to oppose "bourgeois" nationalism in Burma and instead favour a more revolutionary kind of left-wing nationalism.<sup>125</sup> Aung San had been a member of the Burmese Communist Party and attempted to synthesise Marxism, as well as the administrative system

<sup>122</sup> A few exceptions can be found, the July 21st issue released two days after the murder of Aung San has a picture of him on page 8. Page 7 of the September 8th, 1947 issue includes a photo of the British Minister of Health, Aneurin Bevan, and the September 15th issue contains a photo of Winston Churchill.

<sup>123</sup> Myanmar Mix, "A look at Myanmar news cartoons from 1948 to 1962", February 11th, 2020 <https://myanmarmix.com/en/articles/a-look-at-myanmar-news-cartoons-from-1948-to-1962> Accessed 08/08/2024

<sup>124</sup> *The Burmese Review*, January 6th, 1947, p.3-4, p-12-14

<sup>125</sup> Silverstein, 1993, p.80-85

of the Soviet Union, with Burmese nationalism.<sup>126</sup> Despite this, the *Review* wrote glowingly of Aung San and he seems to have welcomed this, as I could not find any reference to him ever condemning them personally, unlike other newspapers which sometimes earned his and the AFPFL's ire. The *Review* was not blind to the irony that they were strange bedfellows with the AFPFL. *Burmese Miscellany* in the December 23rd, 1946 issue makes a jab at U Tin Tut for now affecting a more nationalist attitude, including wearing more traditional Burmese clothes as opposed to western suits, in order to fit in with the AFPFL, whilst some of his more traditionalist peers like U Ba Sein were donning European clothing for an impending visit to London. The following issue released on December 30th makes a similar joke, this time about the two Anglophilic Burmese politicians Sir Paw Tun (notably referred to by the English honorific "Sir" and not the Burmese honorific "U") and U Pu<sup>127</sup> who had both served as the nominal equivalents to Prime Ministers in Colonial Burma, likening them to the Burmese equivalents of the recently out-of-power Winston Churchill, being "unemployed ex-premiers" who nevertheless still heavily opined on ongoing political developments.<sup>128</sup> I will also elaborate more on the *Review*'s attitude towards Aung San and the AFPFL's strict adherence to socialism and Soviet inspirations in the "Burmese Governance" chapters.

Much of the *Review*'s content appealed to the cultural sensitivities of the upper classes, or at least those who wished to voyeuristically peek into that secluded world. Articles touch on the high-end theatres, cinemas and restaurants of Rangoon, various advertisements in the paper cover a wide range of products available to a range of consumers, from groceries to luxury goods like jewellery. An indicator of the type of audience that the *Review* was catering to is the frequency at which foreign alcohol was advertised, particularly the brands Johnnie Walker and Haywards, which feature in almost every single issue of the *Review* I've examined. These are products that would appeal to those British or Burmese readers who had the funds to buy imported liquor and also held no religious qualms, be they motivated by Buddhism, Islam or Christianity, regarding the purchase and consumption of alcohol. In fact, these were products that the *Review* would later declare to be anti-nationalist, on account of being foreign imports and not domestic produce, but which nevertheless found their way into the newspaper to be marketed to Burmese consumers with tastes for luxury.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Silverstein, Josef, *The Political Legacy of Aung San*, 1993, p.4-9

<sup>127</sup> Also known as "Shwe Kyin U Pu", or "Prime Minister U Pu" to distinguish him from other politicians with the same name.

<sup>128</sup> *The Burmese Review*, December 23rd, 1946, p.2 and December 30th, 1946, p.2

<sup>129</sup> *The Burmese Review*, June 2nd, 1946, p.14

Notably however none of these advertisements make any explicit statements about their intended audience, even when there are openings for social clubs, sporting events or similar entities, there is no specification about who may or may not apply on any racial or religious grounds. In addition to the upper brow advertising, the job offers listed in the *Review* were mainly aimed at the colony's educated elite. For a very small set of examples, the December 23rd, 1946 and the January 6th, 1947 issues requests job applicants from Engineering Graduates from Burmese, Indian or British universities, for a position as Factory Inspector in Rangoon, whilst the January 13th, 1947 issue requests job applicants with at least a Bachelors of Science or equivalent degree in engineering to apply for a position of Executive Engineer for the Port of Rangoon. Similar advertisements for managerial positions, for a variety of professions, appear in every single issue of the *Review*, usually always for prestigious jobs.

## 2.2 - *The Political Legacy of Aung San as a Forum*

*Political Legacy* is a collection of various sources that relate to statements issued either directly by Aung San personally or on behalf of the political party he led, named the AFPFL. These statements were generally distributed through the AFPFL and its affiliates networks of communication, which promoted pamphleteering and nationalist study groups, or these statements were printed in the Burmese newspapers. Silverstein notes that it is easy to find who published these statements and when, but it is considerably harder to discern who made the translations of Aung San's original Burmese speeches into English. Translations such as these were often biased, Silverstein cites from from Shwe Kalaung's 1991 essay *A Review of Pre-Independence Press (1945-47)*<sup>130</sup> which explicitly deals with the issue of how Aung San's speeches were translated by different political factions to suit their own ends. Aung San himself mentions this fact in his speeches, taking particular offence at the communist movement in Burma for distorting his words and "misusing his name" to suit their own ends, and how often newspapers did the same. This trouble in communication was widely known in Burma, the *Review* occasionally picked up on it and was also keen to denounce other papers which they believed were distorting Aung San's policies through biased reporting.<sup>131</sup>

Aung San's translated speeches are written in a much different manner than the *Review*, they more frequently utilise native Burmese words, albeit spelled out in English. For instance, the

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<sup>130</sup> Silverstein, 1993, p.1-2 and p.55, as well as *The Burmese Review*, February 24th, 1947 p.11

<sup>131</sup> Silverstein, 1993, p.46



AFPFL is almost always referred to as the *Pha-sa-pa-la*, which is a phonetic pronunciation of its acronym in Burmese. Britain is almost always called *Bilat*, after an old Burmese word that was historically used to refer to nations west of Afghanistan and beyond the Indian subcontinent.<sup>132</sup> The sources are more prone to spelling mistakes which Silverstein has left untouched beyond highlighting when they appear. By contrast, the *Review* was written in almost flawless English, barring a few odd spellings and printing errors. This too may be a form of striving for “authenticity” and it shows how different groups of Burmans interacted with the English language, especially given that these are often records of public speeches translated and put into writing, not originally newspaper articles written in English.

Beyond the documents related to Aung San and the AFPFL’s political project, *Political Legacy* also includes a copy of *Burma’s Challenge*, which was Aung San’s own unfinished autobiography and collection of speeches he wrote in 1946. It describes his upbringing, his life during the colonial era, his time in World War II fighting first for Japanese and then for the British, and lastly his intentions for the future of Burma. Silverstein claims this was Aung San’s only published work, though I presume he is exempting articles Aung San had written for nationalist newspapers such as *Oway* in his youth.<sup>133</sup> I would also note that the book’s publication was only a long time after Aung San’s death, according to Maung Maung the work was intended to be released while Aung San was still alive but was never widely printed and distributed, only a few private copies were given to Aung San’s friends and colleagues.<sup>134</sup> Silverstein highlights the importance of the book because it was essentially trying to do what his own work, *Political Legacy* and its precursor Maung Maung’s *Aung San of Burma*, had been trying to accomplish. *Burma’s Challenge* is a collection of Aung San’s speeches, as well as containing some of his personal reflections on these speeches and on various stages of his life. Silverstein argues for its importance because: “It is [Aung San’s] selection of documents and therefore it provides the reader with an opportunity to consider what Aung San thought was important and to get the feeling and flavor of his word”. He also notes Aung San appears to have not spent much time editing the book and as such the original statements contained within “add immeasurable dimension to the study of Burma's postwar history”.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Thant Myint-U *The Hidden History of Burma: Race, Capitalism, and the Crisis of Democracy in the 21st Century*, 2019 p.19

<sup>133</sup> Naw, Angelene, *Aung San and the Struggle for Burmese Independence*, 2001, p.27-31

<sup>134</sup> Maung Maung, *Burma’s Constitution*, 2012 p.38

<sup>135</sup> Silverstein, 1993, p.74

*Burma's Challenge* wasn't widely distributed until it was discovered by Josef Silverstein and reprinted in *Political Legacy's* first edition in 1980. I have found references to a publication of it in Burma in 1974, by the Nwe Ni Press, which lists it as a third edition, meaning the book probably had some circulation in Burma, but this was long after Aung San's death<sup>136</sup> If Maung Maung is to be believed, there was nobody reading *Burma's Challenge* outside of a very narrow social circle. Thus *Burma's Challenge* as a single, cohesive book, did not have the same national reach in 1947 as the individual speeches contained within had. Silverstein himself describes that because of this *Burma's Challenge* should be read as a "separate unit" from the rest of *Political Legacy*.<sup>137</sup>

Lastly, I also wish to highlight the AFPFL's relationship to the Burmese press, which was not without issue, an article in the *Review* on December 22nd, 1947 describes tensions forming between the AFPFL led government and the newspaper industry in Rangoon, citing allegations made by the newspaper the *Burma Tribune* that the AFPFL would be likely to maintain certain restrictive laws which would allow the government to control and suppress parts of the free press. The *Review* for its part dismisses this claim as ludicrous, while at the same time arguing that it would be within the government's right to support some dissident papers, if these papers were to engage in sensationalist reporting. The article writes that "the Government and the public require protection against abuses of power of the Press", noting that the AFPFL and civil servants aligned with the party already had quite a bit of influence that could be used to sway public opinion and to combat misinformation.<sup>138</sup> This was congruous with previous articles written by the *Review*, such as one on June 2nd that had also argued that both the current and future government of Burma should accept good-faith criticism, but that "no government, democratic or autocratic, can afford to have its actions and policy misinterpreted to the public through untrue statements of facts or unfair and prejudiced criticism", a sentiment that Aung San and the AFPFL seemed to share.<sup>139</sup>

I wish to compare that quote from the *Review* to a speech by Aung San given April 17th, during the Burmese New Year, right after the AFPFL had won over 80% of the seats allotted

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<sup>136</sup> Aung San, *Burma's Challenge*, 1974, as published by Nwe Ni Press, is listed on Google Books as existing, but I have not been able to find any other info on this publication or on Nwe Ni Press as a whole. <https://books.google.se/books?id=Ij530AEACAA> Accessed 04/08/2024

<sup>137</sup> Silverstein, 1993, p.18

<sup>138</sup> *The Burmese Review*, December 22nd, 1947, p.9

<sup>139</sup> *The Burmese Review*, June 2nd, 1947 p.10

for the Constitutional Assembly. Aung San's warnings here were not just bluster, they were a very clear promise of what his government now had the democratic mandate to deliver:

The Phasa-pala [sic]<sup>140</sup> government will never persecute the opposition. But we will not keep watching when excessive indiscipline and unrest is agitated to the detriment of national interests. We must suppress that. We will allow freedom of speech, freedom of press and freedom to agitate. But if the opposition abuse these freedoms they will be smashed. Barring libelous utterances, cuss us as you like, criticise us as you like whether right or wrong, within the framework of law. But we will not tolerate libel. Try whatever tactics you wish to take over power that is now in our hands. But we smash any one resorting to tactics that would hurt the people and the State. I want to tell this to the opposition: try by all means, excepting dirty tricks, to attain power; go on and agitate but unfair agitation will be smashed. I tell this to newspapers. Compare this government with previous governments very carefully. Try and understand what sort of government the present government is. Support us if you will and criticise us if you will, do as you wish. Be a "goat's balls newspaper" if you prefer that. But we will not tolerate seditious writings, incitements to violence and fabrication of reports.<sup>141</sup>

## 2.3 - The Burmese Classes

### 2.3.1 - Classes and Masses

The AFPFL was almost unprecedented in its status as a Burmese mass party, representing proletarians and peasants. Other organisations claiming to represent the Burmese lower classes had existed prior, including Dr. Ba Maw's Sinyetha (Poor Man's) Party which was modelled after the European tradition of Labour Parties, as well as a Communist Party of Burma that was formed in 1939 and would emerge with a notable degree of influence in 1947. There also existed trade unions, particularly among the Rangoon oil workers and various dedicated peasant organisations in the countryside. The AFPFL traced not just its theoretical framework and political ideas back to these groups, but it shared many of the same leaders who had attempted to organise the Burmese masses in the prior decade.<sup>142</sup> Aung San

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<sup>140</sup> An alternative spelling of "Pha-sa-pa-la", the Burmese phonetic pronunciation of AFPFL.

<sup>141</sup> Silverstein, 1993, p.65

<sup>142</sup> Seekins, Donald M., *Historical Dictionary of Burma (Myanmar)*, 2nd Edition, p.20-26 and p.437-438

was a former member of the Communist Party, his future Deputy-Prime Minister Thakin Mya had led a socialist peasant organisation called the All Burma Cultivators' League, and a variety of other politicians like U Nu had their background in the socialist book clubs of the prior decade.<sup>143</sup> Its status as a mass party placed the AFPFL in a unique situation, promoting both change from above, but also from below, as it became a political platform for the masses to make their voices heard through. It meant that the transition of Burma from colonial rule to independence would be a collective one, driven by the masses, and a process which would have a distinctly proletarian and peasant character. Aung San claimed in a speech from August, 1945 to the “East and West Association”, a group meant to foster cooperation between the Allies in WWII and indigenous political movements in Asia, that the old kind of Burmese nationalism had failed and had easily been co-opted during the Japanese occupation, because it and its proponent had been “indigenous bourgeois” and “bourgeois” in “origin” and “character”, whereas the nationalism of the AFPFL was to be “proletarian” by contrast.<sup>144</sup>

The *Review* was also keen to present the interim Burmese government as one representative of the masses, with a June 16th, 1947 article praising government ministers for mingling with the common people of Rangoon at a political rally to celebrate the opening session of the Constitutional Assembly, even in the pouring rain. The article framed the assembly itself as a representation of the Burmese masses, praising its “spiritual strength” and “undeviating will”.<sup>145</sup> The original 14 points that outline the AFPFL’s goals, methods and ideology used explicit references to the works of Karl Marx, Vladimir Lenin and Josef Stalin in arguing for its definition of Burmese nationhood, and the party also made claims to be the only genuine representatives of the Burmese masses because they were the ones who represented the interests of the Burmese peasants and proletariat. Silverstein repeatedly affirms that while Aung San was no longer a communist as he had been in his youth, he was incredibly well read in Marxist theory and incorporated it into a much broader, holistic form of national liberation. Aung San wanted to adapt the ideas of Marxism to suit the needs of the Burmese people, in a speech where he had previously quoted both Marx, Lenin and Stalin, he also emphasised: “We must take care that "United we stand" not "United we fall." The sort of Union which Lenin deprecates with its part contradicting the whole—would be quite impossible. It must be a Union which can develop its economy unitedly”.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> Silverstein, 1993 p.3-7

<sup>144</sup> Silverstein, 1993, p.80-85. This word is sometimes transcribed as “Petti Bourgeois”

<sup>145</sup> *The Burmese Review*, June 16th, 1947, p.8

<sup>146</sup> Silverstein, 1993, p.12 and p.157-158

Aung San aspired for Burma to be like the Soviet Union, but to surpass the Soviet Union where it had failed to unite its disparate ethnic groups. His vision of a future Burma explicitly contained Socialism and Marxism, it strove towards the Soviet model and towards an European ideology. Further information about how socialism was integrated into the Burmese nationalist discourse will follow in the “Burmese Governance” chapter. For now, it is mainly important to know socialism was not altered for a Burmese audience or painted over with a veneer of Burmese nationalism, it was simply called socialism. Benedict Anderson put it well when he wrote that Marxists can be Nationalists, because Marxism does not counteract and negate nationalist views, rather the two can synthesise without a Marxist ever acknowledging himself to be a Nationalist or a Nationalist ever acknowledging himself to be a Marxist.<sup>147</sup>

### 2.3.2 - The Role of the Peasants

A key illustration of the Burmese relation to socio-economic class appears in a series of articles from late 1946 and early 1947, known as “*The Tale of a Refugee*”, a fictional retelling of life in Burma during the Second World War by an author identified by the initials *T.T.* In the fifth entry of “*Tale*”, published in the January 13th, 1947 issue of the *Review*, the narrative discusses Japan’s occupation of Burma and the promise made that Burma will become an independent state within Japan’s sphere of influence. It opens with a celebratory declaration about how it felt to be there when that promise of independence was made. Incidentally, this is the quote I have derived the name for this dissertation from: “A New World! A New Era! A New Burma! Bring in the Victory Earth. Wear the Victory Flower. Music and songs; speeches, raising of arms and shouts of Dobama<sup>148</sup>. Striking scenes, bold colours and marvellous tableau”. The introduction is followed by a dialogue between a local Burmese leader of a chapter of the Burma East Asia Youth League, a propaganda body that Japan established, who is identified as the “Y.L Leader” and a Burmese peasant identified as “the Ploughman”. Historian Cecil Hobbs estimates that the Y.L had over 30,000 members and 270 chapters throughout the whole country, and that it left a notable imprint on the organisational methods and beliefs of Burmese nationalists in the AFPFL.<sup>149</sup> The characters converse about the occupation, with the Ploughman fearing the instability the war has

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<sup>147</sup> Anderson, B., 2006, p.1-4 and p.157-162

<sup>148</sup> This literally translates to “Our Burma” or “Burma is Ours”.

<sup>149</sup> Hobbs, Cecil “Nationalism in Colonial British Burma” in *The Far Eastern Quarterly*, Feb., 1947, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Feb., 1947), p. 113-121

wrought and being upset that Japanese troops in Burma have begun confiscating cattle and agricultural produce to support the war effort. The Y.L Leader gives off the impression of being naive and overzealous, but chastises the Ploughman for preferring the comfort of British occupation to the current Burma, where freedom is finally within sight. With the benefit of hindsight we can tell that the Y.L Leader's jubilant cries that Japan will grant Burma total sovereignty within the end of the year and that the Japanese Empire will soon liberate Asia from European imperialism will not pan out as promised, but the struggle he supports is nevertheless depicted noble and righteous.<sup>150</sup>

The Y.L Leader promises that Burma will retain control of its own natural resources and be able to stand as an equal among the other nations of the world, which echoes much of the same rhetoric that the AFPFL and the *Review* would go on to use after World War II. He also encourages sacrifice, struggle and to fight for Pan-Asianism, a theme that recurs in a lot of the *Review*'s non-fiction articles and in the AFPFL's political rhetoric at this time, both often taking a stand in solidarity with the Indian National Congress and the Viet Minh. Towards the end of the story, the Ploughman is convinced of the Y.L Leader's good intentions, who then describes how the Burmese masses are the backbone of the country and vital to both struggling for independence and building a future government once Burma is free:

You do your part by endeavouring to produce a good yield from your plot of land; your neighbours will do likewise. The trader must carry on his trade with no greedy profiteering; the cartman and the labourer will do their work earnestly and willingly; every man and woman doing his or her part of the work contributes to the cause for which we are fighting.<sup>151</sup>

This too resembles the rhetoric of Aung San and the AFPFL, Silverstein describes the peasant masses as a source of support for the AFPFL, and this in turn made the AFPFL accountable to the peasantry. They had to find ways to cooperate with the masses that ensured peasants would still pay their taxes and lend their support to the party, and this was coached in the language of suffering individual forms of hardship for the greater collective benefit of the nation.<sup>152</sup> These kinds of sentiments also continued in the *Review* going forward, even as late December 8th, 1947, a month before independence, articles contained rhetoric that spoke of

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<sup>150</sup> *The Burmese Review*, January 13th, 1947 p.11-12

<sup>151</sup> *The Burmese Review*, January 13th, 1947 p.11-12

<sup>152</sup> Silverstein, 1993, p.15

how the Burmese people, particularly peasants, had suffered deprivation during the Japanese occupation but that they would still have to suffer for the greater good, that the Burmese classes of all backgrounds had to cooperate together to rebuild the country.<sup>153</sup> It is important to remember what Japan represents here, an Asian state driving out the forces of European Imperialism. Modern, yes, but one which has created a form of modernisation of its own. Chakrabarty claims that even if there is no nebulous concept of “Europe” or “West” in the equation, a transition narrative is still defined by aspiring to be like or unlike another state which symbolises modernity.<sup>154</sup> If Burma had remained under Japanese rule then this narrative would likely have become centred on whether to become more like the Japanese conception of modernity, as opposed to the European one. Aung San notes that when he was presented with a choice over whether to rebel against Japan, a choice whether Japanese politics would influence Burma or British politics would influence Burma, he viewed Britain as the lesser of two evils but ultimately framed them as two sides of the same coin.<sup>155</sup>

A similar reverence for the Burmese peasant and the Burmese masses is shown in an article from the December 30th, 1946 issue entitled “Thoughts in a Bungalow”, written by Theippan Soe Yin. This article is a work of fiction, but Theippan Soe Yin weaves in enough of the truth and perhaps even his own lived experiences to paint a fascinating picture. Later in life he would also publish numerous articles and books on figures like Aung San, whose career he explicitly described as an “adventure”, continuing his trend of blending dramatisation with reality.<sup>156</sup> *Thoughts* primarily focuses on a character called “Phone Myint”, a native Township Officer sent to inspect the countryside, who comes away convinced that the villages he visits languish under colonial oppression as well as mismanagement by landlords. Phone Myint feels disillusioned by this harsh reality in contrast to the romanticised, idyllic picture of Burmese rural life constructed by both the British, but also by the Burmese themselves:

In his college days he had read many Burmese novels about village life, rosy and romantic pictures, calmness and happiness and gaiety, simplicity and contentment[...]. He had realised long ago that those romantic pictures did not exist in real life. Now he wished to drag these authors by their ears and let them see what he saw then.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> *The Burmese Review*, December 8th, 1947, p.8

<sup>154</sup> Chakrabarty, 2000, p.6-23 and p.52-57

<sup>155</sup> Silverstein, 1993, p.112-117

<sup>156</sup> Bečka, Jan, *The National Liberation Movement in Burma During the Japanese Occupation Period, 1941-1945*, 1983, p.305 and 384

<sup>157</sup> *The Burmese Review*, December 30th, 1946, p.11-13

To Phone Myint, the village is not just a place of misery due to its economic conditions, such as wealth inequality, lack of amenities and bad hygiene, but it also serves to “restrain” the mind of the peasant. Phone Myint claims that the Burmese peasant’s mind “atrophies” because he is forced to toil each day and lacks any intellectual stimuli apart from religion, which Phone Myint sees little benefit from. He believes that the peasants are thus incapable of participating in Burmese culture and that the Burmese village has no culture, it only has the bare minimum social community for survival. He notes that the villagers occasionally express interest in political theories and news of the outside world, but that these are few and fleeting moments. There is a natural dilemma here in that Phone Myint is himself a member of the colonial civil service and his role is explicitly to oppress and exploit the peasants whom he pities: “As Township Officer he had little time for village improvement but had often to press unwilling villagers to pay their land revenue”. The only relief he feels is that at least he is carrying out these acts at a time when the taxes were slightly lower than they had been in the past, and that there is the hope of Burmese independence on the near horizon.<sup>158</sup>

Theippan Soe Yin writes the point of view character with a distinct sense of pity, he is not scornful of the peasants he interacts with, but sympathetic and notes they are drawn towards things such as religion or vices like tobacco for want of other means to console themselves. In this story, I would describe him as embodying traits that *Empire Writes Back* attribute to the self “alienation” of colonialism, especially in how it can force a colonial subject to behave more like the perceived “other”, of the colonial overlord. *Empire*’s authors primarily derive this from the works of Frantz Fanon, but also make their own arguments that colonial alienation often emphasise tragedy as well as the potential for the alienated subject to “subvert” assumptions made by themselves or their colonial overlord.<sup>159</sup> Phone Myint admires the “instinct” of the Burmese peasantry, their ability to survive in the wild when the means are available to them. His only real prudishness comes out when he describes the love life of the villagers, deriding it as crude and lacking in any romance, which he once again contrasts with the idyllic image he had in his own mind, since his days of studying at a British-run academy, of beautiful village maidens who lived leisurely lives. Like with the bitter reality of recognising oppression, we see a subversion of self-orientalisation, the images of Burma that Phone Myint has primarily received from his westernised upbringing turn out false. We can draw similarities between Phone Myint and the Y.L Leader of the previous

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<sup>158</sup> *The Burmese Review*, December 30th, 1946, p.11-13

<sup>159</sup> Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G., and Tiffin, H., 2002, p.122-124 and p.143-145



story, both characters embody the contrast between the modern educated Burman and the rural countryside, both characters exist in times of great contradiction and social change.

I would also like to highlight both the title of Theippan Soe Yin's article as well as the repeated focus on the Bungalow throughout the story. The colonial era Bungalow is not a form of architecture native to Burma, it originated in India and was later popularised throughout tropical parts of the British Empire in the 1800s. In this sense, it became a physical representation of colonial rule, it was just as foreign to the region as say a European neoclassical building. The British colonial officer turned anti-imperialist, Bernard Houghton, writes of the Bungalow as a symbol of "apartness". It is a residence only for higher ranking members of society, such as Township Officers like Phone Myint, and thus it alienates its inhabitants from the other peoples of Burma.<sup>160</sup> U Tin Tut expressed a similar sentiment in a March 24th, 1947 article entitled "*Haunted Bungalows*", describing Bungalows as uncanny and foreign looking buildings that feel out of place in Burma. They are representations of colonial reach, outposts of the British administration that U Tin Tut describe as standing eerily alone against the backdrop of the jungle and wilderness.<sup>161</sup> There are more indicators in the Phone Myint story which serve to emphasise how different the character is from the people he lives among, yet lives apart from, and is tasked with overseeing. Phone Myint describes how he is able to afford high quality boots and garments, as well as large amounts of food, in contrast to the roughspun clothing of the Burmese peasants and their middling diets.<sup>162</sup> We could read this otherness as a reason to accentuate the negative, perhaps the reader is meant to take offence to Phone Myint's privilege and his prejudice towards the village, but this was in a newspaper written by, and to a large extent for, the kind of Burmans who subsisted on the same diet and wore the same garments as a privileged man like Phone Myint. I think it is better to view it as a form of literary nuance, a confession of the alienation from your fellow countrymen that colonialism can instil in a westernised subject of empire.

A third article that echoes this trend appears in the January 27th, 1947 issue of the *Review*, written by Maung Yaza. Entitled "*Village Administration in Old China*", it argues against orientalist preconceptions that Asia, its peoples and its cultures are inherently antidemocratic and backwards, as opposed to the West which was held up as a beacon of democracy and

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<sup>160</sup> Houghton, Bernard, *Bureaucratic government; a study in Indian polity*, 1913, p.90-91

<sup>161</sup> *The Burmese Review*, March 24th, 1937, p.1 and p.12

<sup>162</sup> *The Burmese Review*, December 30th, 1946, p.11-13

rationalism. Yaza refutes this argument and claims the East has a right to dub itself democratic and rational. He begins the article with a clear statement: “The oriental is often told that democracy is an institution which is foreign to his country and that he is to be trained in the rule of democracy before western institutions can be translated into his soil”. Yaza then claims that this western argument can be complicated by the fact that there are “*ancient institutions*” in Asian history which bear a striking resemblance to the modern democracy of the 20th century, chief among them being the traditional village and how it has been managed in many different Asian cultures. Yaza focuses his article primarily on China, but claims that the same traits of agrarian life that he attributes to China are applicable to India, Burma and to the whole of Asia. While the article also claims to focus on the ancient past, Yaza very consciously weaves in the contemporary nature of peasant life, trying to draw a continuity between the past and the present. We see Burma being clearly emphasised as part of a greater Asian whole, a topic this study will return to in the chapter on the “Burmese Nation”. For now, I wish to use this article to emphasise how Maung Yaza portrays the class character of these villages and their leaders.<sup>163</sup>

The vision he draws up of ancient village life is one of self-sufficiency and minarchism, that “every village was a little principality in itself”, democratically managed through a “headman” system. Headman in this context would mean any position of leadership over one or many villages, it is a title that would be familiar to Burmese readers as it had been adopted by the British as an umbrella term for native village chiefs in their colonial possessions, particularly in India and Burma. The term thus came to encompass and simplify a wide number of types of native titles with different regional names.<sup>164</sup> Yaza claims that it was not uncommon for villages in ancient China, and in Asia today, to voluntarily join together into larger administrative entities under a single headman. He is keen to emphasise that the position of headman was one built entirely on trust and understanding with the rest of the inhabitants of the villages. He also claims that the method to choose a headman was democratic because it was “elastic”, headmen were appointed when their services were needed and surrendered their privileges when their leadership was no longer needed.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> *The Burmese Review*, January 27th, 1947, p.4

<sup>164</sup> Huard, Stéphen, *Beyond the village headman: Transformations of the local polity in central Myanmar* 2019 p.19-24 and p.68-75

<sup>165</sup> *The Burmese Review*, January 27th, 1947, p.4

One could hardly expect that every village in all of Asia to be home to a Cincinnatus style figure, who always put their subjects' needs before their own, but Yaza claims the headmen of both the past and the present to be meritorious and well-suited administrators. He argues they were often pulled from the peasants in the villages and were thus acquainted with the rural, agrarian lifestyle as well as the individual professions and types of hard work that each village had to participate in to sustain itself. Additionally, Yaza seeks to emphasise a contrast between the pleasant egalitarian nature of the rural villages and their headmen in contrast to the “often despotic” nature of central governance. Higher officials are described as apathetic and neglectful, not sharing the same bond with the people they govern as village headmen purportedly do.<sup>166</sup> Compare this to Theippan Soe Yin's character, Phone Myint the Township Officer, as that fictional character is not a headman but a member of the ICS, and does not approach the issues of rural life through a local perspective, he looks down and judges them.

At the end of the article Yaza says the lessons of village life can help guide Burma, its people, and its peasants going forward. This kind of rhetoric of how Burma can learn from the village unit is a recurring theme in the transition narrative that the *Review* presents, and not uncommon in the broader Asian context. Utopian socialists of early 20th century China looked to the traditional village as a source of political inspiration,<sup>167</sup> whilst the Malay nationalists of the same era looked to the Kampung (Village) as a source of “authentic” Malay culture.<sup>168</sup> We should see these themes as indications of a way to reconstruct the past while simultaneously moving in a modern direction. I will elaborate on similar rhetoric used in other articles of the *Review* in the “Burmese Governance” chapter of this paper.

There was a similar series of articles about “Burmese Characteristics” printed in the weeks of July, 1947, written by a contributor named Nwe So, that also deals with this focus on what hardship grants to the Burmese. Nwe So claims the purpose of his articles are to argue against stereotypes attributed to the Burmese by foreigners, chief among them being the claim that the Burmese are lazy. It is important to note that for most of these articles, Nwe So simply quotes an anecdote from a European source, says that it is incorrect, refuses to explain why, and then moves on. Nwe So's argument is seemingly that whatever traits the Burmese had

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<sup>166</sup> *The Burmese Review*, January 27th, 1947, p.4

<sup>167</sup> Dirlik, Arif “The New Culture Movement Revisited: Anarchism and the Idea of Social Revolution in New Culture Thinking”, in *Modern China*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (Jul., 1985), pp. 251-300 (50 pages), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/188805> Accessed 08/08/2024

<sup>168</sup> Kahn, Joel S., *Other Malays: Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism in the Modern Malay World*, 2006 p.1-28

were so self-evident to the Burmese themselves that he did not have to explain them, nor explain why the Europeans were incorrect in their own assessments.<sup>169</sup>

It takes him until the third instalment to actually outline Burmese attitudes towards work, to materialism and to religion. Firstly he notes, “We believe that work, that drudgery, is a beautiful thing in itself, that perpetual toil and effort is admirable”, a sentiment which echoes what other writers in the *Review* have noted about Burmese toil and sacrifice. He goes on to explain that the Burmese value adversity and hardship as a means to gain spiritual satisfaction, that they only see the material products of labour such as a daily wage to be fleeting and unimportant compared to the spiritual value that labour brings, quoting from Aristotle's adage that “Work is a means to leisure”. Nwe So also argues that the Burmese learn this value slowly over the course of their lives, as both a cultural trait and also an element of Buddhist faith, that to learn to value struggle and to not focus on material rewards comes slowly “Otherwise all Buddhists would be monks”. Lastly he concludes with a comparison between the Burman and the inhabitant of the West: “Work and power and money are but the means by which he will arrive at the leisure to teach his own soul. First the body, then the spirit; but with the West it is surely first the body, and then the body again”. While it's clear there's some resonance between East and West in Nwe So's mind, given his application of the Aristotle quote, he is also keen to emphasise differences.<sup>170</sup>

A final article I wish to highlight, that deals with the struggles, suffering and sacrifices experienced by the peasants appears in the May 19th issue of the *Review*, transcribing a speech made by U Khin Zaw, director of the Burmese Broadcasting Service and a figure I will return to more. U Khin Zaw summed up the nationalist view on the peasants when he noted: “The masses in the villages, the back-bone of Burma, the cultivators, have been suffering incomparably greater hardships than anyone else. The whole country's financial future depends on these long suffering cultivators”, but his words were not just meant as aspirational or to commiserate with the peasants' suffering, they can also be read as a warning. Previously in his speech, U Khin Zaw had called on the government to always keep the people's needs as their number one priority and reminded the interim government that its authority was ultimately derived from the will of the people. He finishes his speech with the declaration: “This is a time when all thought must be directed to the foundation of the

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<sup>169</sup> *The Burmese Review*, July 7th, 1947, p.4 and p.10

<sup>170</sup> *The Burmese Review*, July 21st, 1947 p.4 and p.10

nation's prosperity, the cultivator; all eyes must be fixed on the paddy fields of Burma, not on pay books” and a warning that the monsoon season was approaching. Perhaps U Khin Zaw was speaking of the literal monsoon season, commonly associated with May in Burma, but it could just as easily be wordplay warning that the Burmese peasants could rise up like a monsoon and overwhelm the country if their needs are not met.<sup>171</sup>

### 2.3.3 - The Role of the Students

I wish to contrast how the *Review* frames the need to uplift peasants into participants in the political scene, while it simultaneously takes a much more stringent view on what influence should be held by those already part of Burmese politics. The January 6th, 1947 issue of the *Review* condemned an impending strike by students at the University of Rangoon, dismissing their activities as counterproductive because as the future generation who will inherit control of a free Burma they should remember to “concentrate on their studies and to leave politics to the many who have left school and university”. They do not explicitly refer to the students as privileged, in fact the article also notes the Burmese educational system has suffered greatly and is still struggling to rebuild after WWII, but there is an implication that the students are well-off enough that political participation does not need to be extended to them and what they are doing by striking is going outside the limits of what role they play in the creation of a future Burma. If the nationalists aspire to uplift the peasants into politics, then by contrast they seem to wish the students’ to be curtailed from having as big of an influence on politics.

We saw a similar attitude when the *Review* spoke of older politicians and well-entrenched figures who opine and complain too much about the development of Burmese politics, but the student movement had historically been such an integral part of the Burmese independence movement. It was the core of many flavours of nationalism, from moderate reformists to more ardent radicals, and it was also the birthplace of the Burmese socialist movement.<sup>172</sup> Thus, this hostility to the students may seem odd, but I believe the *Review* was aware of how intrinsically tied Burmese nationalism and Burmese politics were to what was fundamentally a fairly privileged class of individuals who have been able to seek higher, often western education. As such their hostility may have been motivated by not wanting to be seen as all too privileged to the public. It matches what is expressed in another article on the student

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<sup>171</sup> *The Burmese Review*, May 19th, 1947, p.4

<sup>172</sup> Silverstein, 1993, p.3-4

unrest, published in the January 27th, 1947 issue and written by an author who goes by the name Dingar. Dingar's article, entitled only "*Educational Strikes*," has a somewhat more sympathetic tone, it acknowledges the historical role that the student movement has played in Burmese politics, but claims that the fault is not the government's but rather that there is simply a lack of teachers to fill the need of students. Notably this article tries to place student politics, and the importance of teachers, in a broader historical context that dates back to Napoleon making teachers into "state officials", as well as a broader Burmese mythological tradition of teachers being seen as objects of veneration and paternal figures.<sup>173</sup> This article was written at a time after the generation who led the Burmese student movements in the 1920s and 1930s had grown up into the role of teachers and politicians. Despite much of the AFPFL and other government members having their political roots as student radicals, they had become keen to emphasise themselves as the teachers who knew better than the students.

A week later the *Review* also published a transcript of an interview with a British academic at the Rangoon University, named Dr. Frederick G. Dickason. The article is distinct as it opens with a disclaimer from the *Review* that the opinions of Dr. Dickason do not necessarily reflect those of the *Review*'s editorial board. Throughout all material that I examined, I have never seen any other instance of the *Review* offering such a disclaimer, perhaps indicating how controversial the strike was at the time. It also provides an insight into the fact that the *Review* was very discerning about what material made it into the newspaper. In the article, entitled "*University Echoes*", Dickason expresses his sympathy with the students as he notes the University system has still not recovered from the devastation of World War II. He notes classes and laboratory experiments are being carried out in bamboo huts, and that the vast majority of educational institutions are still shut down, offering no real access to social mobility for Burmese students aspiring to gain a higher education in their homeland.<sup>174</sup>

Dickason emphasises two major points about the strikes, the first is that the lack of a functional educational system is preventing the future Burmese state from gaining access to well-trained professionals such as engineers and scientists. This is a somewhat technocratic approach, but it is a matter of vital import for the government of a soon to be independent nation. The other thing Dickason focuses on however is how he feels the strikes are counterproductive because the most important thing Burmese students could do is serve their

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<sup>173</sup> *The Burmese Review*, January 27th, 1947, p.7-8

<sup>174</sup> *The Burmese Review*, February 3rd, 1947, p.5-6

country by becoming doctors, engineers or scientists. We see the same themes of sacrifice and struggle brought up here, but now applied to those privileged enough to partake in higher education. Compared to the other articles in the *Review*, Dickason's does not seek to curtail student activities but rather emphasises that they should turn their patriotism into productive labour. He doesn't scold the students for their privileges, if anything he says it is the fault of the political leadership in the AFPFL and the Interim Government for failing to recognise that education is not just a material effort in supplying the right locales, dormitories and textbooks, it is also a living breathing, spiritual thing, which the current political leadership has stifled by refusing to accommodate the students.<sup>175</sup>

This line of argument reminds me of Benedict Anderson's focus on student movements as key components in how a sense of nationalism is fostered, as well as his arguments around how European methods of education in colonial societies were largely arbitrary and served more to divide than to uplift.<sup>176</sup> The Burmese educational system of this time was broadly secular and modelled after the British one, Burma's Rangoon University had grown out of the Christian missionary school known as the Judson College. In contrast to this cold, arbitrary system stood a long history of spontaneous, patriotic and populist education, such as the 1920 University Strike when Burmese teachers formed "National Schools" which defied the official British colonial curriculums.<sup>177</sup> These schools were the kind of slapdash huts and impromptu affairs that Dickason described the current school system as resembling. Populist, patriotic and favourable towards the kind of productive work that Dickason sought. Rather than fall back on this tradition as a means to soothe tensions, the Interim Government failed to accommodate the strikers demands while the media like the *Review* denounced the students of 1947 as misguided youths. In this scenario we see the Burmese educational system moving towards the European, arbitrary model, even when in the hands of the native Burmese. It is a break with the traditional customs of Burmese education and the legacy of the radical student movement. These factors should be reflected upon when viewing the Burmese transition narrative, at least insofar as it regards the role of education.

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<sup>175</sup> *The Burmese Review*, February 3rd, 1947, p.5-6

<sup>176</sup> Anderson, B, 2006, p.120-124 and p.170-174

<sup>177</sup> Taylor, Robert H., *Dr Maung Maung: Gentleman, Scholar, Patriot*, 2008 p.111-112

## 2.4 - The Burmese Nation

### 2.4.1 - In Relation to Foreign States, Peoples and Cultures

The Burmese nationalists often took a great deal of inspiration from abroad, comparing their own political movement to those who had come before and aspiring to follow in the footsteps of decolonial revolutionaries like Sun Yat-sen of China, José Rizal of the Philippines, as well as various key Indian revolutionary figures. Some inspiration also came from Europe and America, particularly the Irish independence struggle and the United States' War of Independence. This line of thought was extremely common in the 1920s and 30s, as best illustrated by Professor Hans-Berndt Zöllner's research as part of his *Myanmar Literature Project* which tackled writings published in various underground nationalist newspapers and political societies. By the mid 1940s, this trend still continued but the focus had now begun to shift. The Burmese were beginning to view themselves as soon to be equals of these other revolutionaries, independence was within sight and they no longer needed to aspire or explicitly model themselves off of others, they were now in a position where they could criticise and compare themselves to their inspirations.<sup>178</sup>

China was an early target of this more nuanced approach. Though the Burmese nationalist groups of the 1920s and 30s looked to the Chinese Kuomintang under Sun Yat-sen as a political inspiration, there appeared to be a growing sign of disillusionment after Sun's death and the rise of his successor Chiang Kai-shek's government in Nanjing. Burmese radicals were discomforted by the Kuomintang's violent purges of Communists and repression of civil liberties in China, by the time of the Second Sino-Japanese War, the sympathies of much of the Burmese nationalist scene was firmly with the Communist Party of China. Aung San and early Burmese nationalist had initially attempted to make contact with the CPC and their base areas in northern China, in order to secure the party's help to liberate Asia from foreign exploitation. By the 1940s, Aung San was still maintaining this line of thought of a united Asia casting off the yoke of imperialism, but his speeches now framed Burma as an equal to its peers and neighbours, perhaps even a leading figure in the decolonial struggle, not just a lesser, nascent nation that would have to defer to Chinese seniority and experience.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> Zöllner, Hans-Berndt, *Myanmar Literature Project*, Working Papers No.10:6, 10:7, 10:8 and 10:16, 2011 <https://www.zoellner-online.org/myanmar-birma/das-myanmar-literature-projekt/> Accessed 15/08/2024

<sup>179</sup> Silverstein 1993, p.23-27 and p.144-152



Even moderate voices such as the *Review* were by 1947 cautious of Chiang's authoritarian government, the January 13th issue of the *Review* explicitly likens the recent militarisation of China and the KMT's occupation of the Paracel Islands, a disputed territory in the South China Sea, to the military expansionism of the European fascist states that had just been defeated in World War II. The *Review* often took an ambivalent stance against imperialism, whether that be European, Chinese or Japanese. In many ways, it seemed to approach imperialism itself as a force which was not inherently White, Western or European, but rather one which had its attractiveness to all nations across the world. The January 6th, 1937 issue of the *Review* writes in detail about the destructiveness of imperialism and competition for resources between Great Powers, claiming that both World Wars had been motivated imperial powers attempting to contest and seize each other's colonies. Having witnessed Japan seize Germany's former colonies in East Asia after World War I, followed by Japan failing to seize other European colonial empires as well as the United States of America's territories in East Asia in World War II, it is obvious that the *Review* may have believed that the Kuomintang's China was going down the same path of attempting to wage war against other Great Powers to consolidate its own influence.<sup>180</sup> The *Review* is also usually cautious enough to express support for forms of nationalism that oppose imperial hegemony, such as praising the American revolutionaries in the war of independence or praising the Kuomintang in its attempts to drive imperialists out of China, but they express criticism when these self-same forces now begin to engage in acts of imperialism themselves, such as excessive American meddling abroad or the Kuomintang seeking to invade contested territory.<sup>181</sup>

A key instance of this is with the article "*The Unity of South East Asia*" from the January 6th, 1947 issue, attributed to the *Review* staff, which describes recent endeavours from various political forces across the region to build a united front against western imperialism. The *Review* favourably quotes Sarat Chandra Bose, brother of Subhas Chandra Bose, who was the leader of those Indian nationalists who had chosen to collaborate with Japan in World War II. The article emphasises the shared legacy of South and Southeast Asia, both as communities of nations standing as peers to one another, but also as victims who have suffered under European imperialism together. The author praises the "ancient culture and civilization" of India, the "once powerful" Burmese empire, as well as the "proud" Nguyễn

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<sup>180</sup> *The Burmese Review*, January 13th, 1947, p.9

<sup>181</sup> *The Burmese Review*, December 30th, 1946, p.12-13

dynasty of Vietnam. All of these descriptions come with a mournful declaration that these once great nations were snuffed out by the advent of colonial rule. It goes on to also list the various Malay and Indonesian states, as well as the Philippines as victims of colonialism. In the *Review*'s words, only Siam was spared from this fate, but nevertheless suffered a grave political and cultural decline. There is no acknowledgement of any intra-national conflict between these Asian states, despite how heavily tied it is to many of their own histories and national identities. The self-same Burmese Empire the *Review* praises was only formed by conquering the ancient Ayutthaya Kingdom in present day Thailand, yet the *Review* celebrates the current Thai state on the very same page of the article. We see a contradiction that is not acknowledged. There is no consideration if intra-Asian wars and occupations destroyed parts of these civilizations and cultures just as the arrival of the Europeans did.<sup>182</sup>

One explanation for this position lies in some of the verbiage used in the article, which speaks of the existence of a shared South and Southeast Asian civilization. When talking about Siam, it does not talk about a "Siamese" (or "Thai") civilization, but rather that Siam is one part of "South East Asia's civilization" that has its roots in India and China: "Except in Siam, the ancient civilisation of South East Asia, having its roots partly in the civilisation of ancient India and partly in the no less ancient civilisation of China, fell into stagnation". This is both an interesting claim of cultural heritage, positioning Southeast Asia as not just a geographic crossroads between India and China but also an inheritor to both of their greatness. It also allows the *Review* to construct an imagined identity of an Asia unified through this heritage which can brush aside intra-communal conflicts in favour of concentrating on the crime of an *outside* civilization like the Europeans, with no ties to the indigenous civilization of Southeast Asia, conquering them. This is reinforced by the quote cited from Sarat Chandra Bose: "Asia's future, including that of India, is now being decided on the battlefield of Vietnam". The *Review* goes on to note after this that it was "the lack of cohesion in the South East Asia of old that permitted the Western powers to annex large slices of its territories one by one".<sup>183</sup>

On January 20th, the *Review* published another article about the conflict in Indochina, at this point noting that its coverage had been quite disproportionately focused on foreign issues but the editorial staff of the *Review* argues that "we feel that Burma's future is bound up with the future of the other nations in the Peninsular of Indo-China" (sic). It recaps a lot of what was

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<sup>182</sup> *The Burmese Review*, January 6th, 1947, p.1

<sup>183</sup> *The Burmese Review*, January 6th, 1947, p.1

already covered earlier that month, though builds on some of the discussion about the role of civilisations and what defines “South East Asian civilisation”. They note how historically Southeast Asia has been dominated by the “elder brothers” of the region, India and China, but now with the birth of a “New Asia” taking place in the wake of WWII the time has come for the “younger brothers”, the various other nations that occupy the region, to take their destiny into their own hands. The article argues that this could have been accomplished previously in history, if the younger brothers had combined into a “Indo-Chinese Empire” that united the best of their traits and became a hegemon independent of India and China. We once again see the *Review* focus on the image of a unified Southeast Asia, acknowledging the historical ties of old civilizations to the region, but now arguing that the time has come to stand as equals to them, or even surpass them. When European colonisation of Southeast Asia is brought up, the *Review* is very fast to claim that when India and China dominated the region, those cultures built it up and imparted their knowledge to its natives, in contrast to describing how they see France and Britain as having plundered and destroyed Southeast Asia for their own benefit.<sup>184</sup>

There are also references to Burmese nationalism here, as the *Review* is quick to point out that this prospective “Indo-Chinese Empire” that “could” have been formed, would have been led by Burma during one of Burma’s golden ages in the 17th and 18th centuries. The *Review* argues that the reason Burma is so intertwined with the goings on in Indochina in 1947 is the shared trauma of being colonised, as well as the possibility that had it not been for Siam acting as a buffer state to halt their westward advance from Indochina, then it may have been France that colonised and occupied Burma first before the British could even reach it. One of the big similarities they note between Indochina, and Vietnam in particular, with Burma is that both nations were briefly occupied by Japan and had puppet states established in them, puppet states that the nationalist movements of these two nations came to reject with the Viet Minh rising up in Vietnam and the AFPFL rising up in Burma. Both nations have a history of fighting off a Japanese occupation, making temporary common cause with their old European colonisers to do so. The *Review* also explicitly compares the Viet Minh to the AFPFL in their current political situations, calling both parties “broad, united front[s]”. Some of the *Review*’s information about Vietnam and the Viet Minh appears muddled here, or perhaps self-serving to benefit the comparison to Burma itself. For instance, there are no references to the Viet Minh being a communist movement besides an allusion to its leader Ho Chi Minh having

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<sup>184</sup> *The Burmese Review*, January 20th, 1947, p.9-10

studied in the Soviet Union, the *Review* merely refers to it as a “federation of individuals and parties” aligned with the cause of Vietnamese independence.<sup>185</sup>

This error was later corrected in an article published in the February 17th, 1947 issue, whose frontpage article displayed a commentary about the ongoing situation in Indochina, largely echoing the same sentiments as had been expressed in January. The only key difference was that now mentions of the Viet Minh were accompanied with clarifications of the group’s Communist background and ideology. This article took a dovish view on the Vietnamese independence struggle, urging the Viet Minh to return to the French negotiating table if possible, because the successful agreements between Burma and Britain had proven that a peaceful route to decolonisation was possible in Southeast Asia, and that the French were likely to follow the British policy on account of how impressed they had been with “Britain’s statesmanlike handling of Burmese nationalism”.<sup>186</sup> The March 17th issue, published a month later, had to walk this optimistic view back, declaring that: “The French Government has yet shown no clear indication that it desires to solve the Indo-Chinese problems by the methods which Britain applied to India and Burma”.<sup>187</sup>

I was struck by some of the other wordings used in these articles, as despite their opposition to European rule in the region, the author has employed direct references to European civilization to speak about Southeast Asian civilization. In one case, when comparing how decolonisation under the British had been relatively peaceful in contrast to the Viet Minh’s violent struggle against France, the article described the war in Indochina with the poetic euphemism that “Only in French Indo-China is Mars in the ascendant”.<sup>188</sup> A reference to a Roman God of war, not a symbol of any local culture. This isn’t framed as a civilizational struggle, it is not Mars of the Europeans encroaching upon the culture of the Southeast Asians, it is merely used as a turn of phrase, albeit one which becomes quite notable given the context. Despite its endorsement of a Pan-Southeast Asian cultural heritage and its commitment to a Pan-Southeast Asian struggle for freedom, the *Review* was still writing in English for a predominantly English speaking, erudite audience, who would likely be more familiar with Mars of Rome than with any reference to a local god of war or a similar type of figure, at least as a figure of speech. In this sense, by not harbouring any aversion to

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<sup>185</sup> *The Burmese Review*, January 20th, 1947, p.9-10

<sup>186</sup> *The Burmese Review*, February 17th, 1947, p.1

<sup>187</sup> *The Burmese Review*, March 17th, 1947, p.10

<sup>188</sup> *The Burmese Review*, January 6th, 1947, p.1

Eurocentric language, the *Review* escapes the dichotomy between the “centre” and the “margins” laid out by postcolonial theoreticians in work such as *The Empire Writes Back*.<sup>189</sup> The *Review* occupied a unique cultural presence in Burmese society, and it reflected that by not needing to alter its choice of vernacular, even when discussing issues of international relations and regional unity.

Lastly, it is worth returning to the second key point of the article, beyond the focus on unity in Southeast Asia, it also focuses on comparing the decolonial process across the different nations. There is a lot we can glean here with the benefit of hindsight from the January 6th article, as it speaks of the optimism the *Review* had. The imminent freedom from colonial rule in India, Burma, Ceylon and Malaya are described as entirely peaceful. In regards to the first two in particular it writes: “Through the political wisdom of Britain, India of Burma are about to be free without the ardent nationalism of both countries being called upon to seek the arbitrament of arms”. This dismisses the decolonial violence of World War II where Burmese and Indian soldiers fought against Britain on the behalf of the Japanese Empire, ostensibly in the name of freedom. It shows no foresight of the imminence of the “Burmese Conflict” that would break out after the country gained independence, nor of the communal violence that would escalate in India with the Partition in August 1947, a little more than half a year after this article was published.<sup>190</sup> The article celebrates the political freedoms being given to Ceylon and Malaya, but has no expectation of the Anti-Tamil violence in Ceylon of the 1950s, nor of the Malay Insurgency that would break out in June 1948. When writing of Indonesia the *Review* claims: “In Indonesia, after some bloodshed, the Dutch have been compelled to recognise the determination of Indonesian nationalism to achieve freedom by any means, and a peaceful settlement is well on its way”. Yet there would be no peaceful settlement until late 1949, if anything the violent struggle would only escalate in July 1947 with the Dutch launching Operation Product to retake control over Java and Sumatra. Vietnam and the Viet Minh are given unique focus as the only violent force engaged in decolonisation, remember, “Only in French Indo-China is Mars in the ascendant”.<sup>191</sup>

Other references to European and American nations in comparison to Burma appear in one of the letters to the editor, published in the January 27th, 1947 issue. It was written by a “Ko

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<sup>189</sup> Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G. and Tiffin, Helen, 2002, p.40

<sup>190</sup> *The Burmese Review*, January 6th, 1947, p.1

<sup>191</sup> *The Burmese Review*, January 6th, 1947, p.1

Lay”, who discusses the prospect of whether Burma should seek to remain in the British Commonwealth as a Dominion or to seek immediate and total independence, claiming that no matter what Burma itself wishes the matter will be resolved by “force of circumstances” beyond the nation and its people’s control. Their three main points of comparison were to the 1568 Dutch Revolt in the Spanish Netherlands, to the United States’ War of Independence and to the Indian National Congress in the British Raj. We here see Burma placed in a broader global context that also includes Europe and America, not just Asia. Ko Lay’s argument is that both the Dutch, the Americans and Indians were forced to fight for independence as a last resort because they had no way of reconciling with their respective overlords. He drew a comparison between the failed American “Olive Branch Petition” to George III and similar overtures made by the Burmese politicians to petition for greater Burmese autonomy in the past. Ko Lay claims that it was not just the Burmese who can learn from this history, he argued the British are making the same mistake they did with the Americans centuries prior, by not having acceded to a rebellious colony’s demands for autonomy and liberty before it was too late. This is a rare instance of Burma being likened to western to “Western” independence movements and thus it defies the common dichotomy between the Western Metropole and the usually African, Middle Eastern or Asian colonies.<sup>192</sup>

The Burmese national project was naturally presupposed on the idea that every ethnicity within Burma’s borders would be able to co-exist, but the issue of who actually counted as an *indigenous* member of the Burmese peoples was hotly contested. During colonial rule the British had willfully settled a large population of foreign labourers and civil servants within Burma, many of whom had now resided there for multiple generations and felt a degree of belonging. This was to say nothing for the British themselves who had settled in the colony and lived there, or for mixed-race descendants of British and Burmese intermarriages. The chief targets of scrutiny by the nationalist movement were Indians, who were quite widely represented among both lower class labourers, civil servants and landlords, and were often derided with the racial slur “Kala”<sup>193</sup>. There was also hostility also against the Chinese in Burma, including an attack on the Rangoon Chinatown in 1930, as well as sporadic acts of violence against the British themselves, but these lessened after the end of World War II.<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> *The Burmese Review*, January 27th, 1947, p.6

<sup>193</sup> Seekins, Donald M., *Historical Dictionary of Burma (Myanmar)*, 2nd Edition, 2017, p.282 and p.287-288. Kala literally means “Black” but not in reference to skin colour, it was used in the Burmese political context as a derisive term for Others or Outsiders, including the British.

<sup>194</sup> Khin Yi, *The Dobama Movement in Burma (1930–1938)*, 2018, p.97-98

Thus, a key component of pursuing Burmese independence was to be able to assimilate what the Burmese nationalists viewed as “non-indigenous” minority populations, allowing them to co-exist within Burma and in some manner be subordinated to the Burmese state, without the fear of them forming a separate bloc of political influence.<sup>195</sup> This was echoed in an article entitled “*As You Please*”, in the February 24th, 1947 issue of the *Review*, attributed to an author going by the pen name “Scribbler”. Scribbler described life in post-WWII Rangoon, noting that while the city had always been diverse and “polyglot” in nature, it had only become a true cultural melting pot after the bombings of World War II and the subsequent economic hardship brought different ethnic groups into closer proximity to one another, breaking down the previous barriers of self-imposed segregation. Scribbler treated this a positive development cultural development, that British, Indian, Chinese and Burmese inhabitants were now living side by side in a manner much closer than before, but the author also noted that the mingling of Rangoon’s different ethnic groups has highlighted faults in the city’s urban planning and stoked political tensions that were not as readily apparent when the different populations lived in segregated districts away from one another. This is a good microcosm of the broader issues of integration in Burma, it was a force of progress but exposed faults that colonial rule and segregation had hid. A unified Burma meant that the problems of each ethnic minority would now become the problems of the whole of Burma.<sup>196</sup>

A similar article is shown on the front page of the March 3rd, 1947 issue, wherein the *Review* condemned what it perceived as political meddling in Burma from the British newspaper the *Manchester Guardian* and from contributors to that paper, who had sought to promote secession among the Karen population of Burma as well as the creation of a separate British Crown Colony to retain Commonwealth rule over the Karen population in the Tenasserim and Bassein divisions of southern Burma. The *Review* belittled the British magazine’s ignorance of Burmese affairs, by arguing that the Karen are not one unified ethnic group but rather many different tribes under a single umbrella term, while also noting that many of these tribes were coexisting peacefully alongside the Bamar population and other ethnic groups. Tenasserim and Bassein were not Karen enclaves, they too were becoming cultural melting pots like Rangoon and the old isolation between ethnic groups was breaking down in

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<sup>195</sup> Nemoto, Kei “Exclusive nationalism of Burma (Myanmar) represented by its nationality law” on *Asia Peacebuilding Initiatives*, January 14th, 2014 [https://www.spf.org/apbi/news\\_en/m\\_140124.html](https://www.spf.org/apbi/news_en/m_140124.html) Accessed 20/08/2024

<sup>196</sup> *The Burmese Review*, February 24th, 1947, p.6

the face of a more unified Burma. The *Review* noted that treaties once signed between Karen tribal chiefs and the British Crown had ended and that previously isolated tribal lands were being unified into new administrative entities that allowed the people who lived within them to intermingle with greater ease. By stripping Burma of its feudal past, the new Burma was characterised as promoting racial harmony and integration.<sup>197</sup> A later article published in the March 24th issue of the *Review* went as far as to liken the coexistence between the Burmese majority and Karen minority as the way Englishmen and the Scottish lived alongside one another in Britain. It said that in both cases there had been historical conflicts and resentment, but now both parties were moving past that working to rebuild their nations together, pointing to the post-war reconstruction in Britain and the independence struggle in Burma. It also emphasised that Burma should move past ethnic and cultural differences in order to act as a beacon of light for the rest of Asia, serving as the “United Nation of the East” that others could follow as a dutiful example: “The future history of Burma will be one crowned with peace, good will and prosperity; setting an example to the other parts of this ailing world”.<sup>198</sup> When it came to the British influence, there was naturally concern about the heavily anglicised middle and upper classes of Burmese society, referred to as the “Anglo-Burmese”, or the “Anglo-Burmans”. This was a very wide term that incorporated everything from ethnically British settlers in Burma, to mixed race Eurasians, to ethnically Burmese individuals who had adopted traits associated with British culture. These traits shifted as social trends and fashions of the colonial middle and upper classes evolved. For instance at one point it was popular to reject traditional Burmese honorifics such as U, and instead adopt western honorifics such as Mister, Sir or Missata, the latter of which was a phonetic Burmese pronunciation of Mister.<sup>199</sup> Anglo-Burmans were also perceived as wearing suits and top hats, as opposed to more traditional Burmese robes and kerchiefs. Christianity was also associated with the Anglophilic upper-classes, alongside displays of interest in western culture and history, to the perceived detriment of an indigenous Burmese cultural and historical legacy.<sup>200</sup>

The December 1st, 1947 issue of the *Review* was favourable towards the Anglo-Burmese, comparing them to other mixed race and settler communities in the rest of Asia. The *Review*

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<sup>197</sup> *The Burmese Review*, March 3rd, 1947, p.1

<sup>198</sup> *The Burmese Review*, March 24th, 1947, p.5

<sup>199</sup> The Irrawaddy, “Thakin Kodaw Hmaing (1876 - 1964)”, March 2000, [https://www2.irrawaddy.com/article.php?art\\_id=1836](https://www2.irrawaddy.com/article.php?art_id=1836) Accessed 05/08/2024

<sup>200</sup> See Jacobson, Liesbeth Rosen, *'The Eurasian Question': The Colonial Position and Postcolonial Options of Colonial Mixed-ancestry Groups from British India, Dutch East Indies and French Indochina Compared* 2018, p.86-93 for more information.



made note of the Anglo-Indians, who were framed as haughty racial supremacists, and the ethnically Indo-Europeans in the Dutch East Indies were presented by the *Review* as peaceful and amicable albeit self-segregating and disloyal to the Indonesian independence movement. Compared to these two groups, the Anglo-Burmese were not socially divided from the native Burmese population. The *Review* was optimistic that compared to the Anglo-Indians and the Indo-Europeans, which it saw as struggling to accept their position as a ethnic minority in a native-run country, Anglo-Burmans had come to terms with their role in an independent Burma. In the *Review*'s own words: "the social customs and social tolerance of the Burmese are such that the political assimilation is likely to be accompanied by a close social assimilation".<sup>201</sup> A coda on the Anglo-Burmese discussions was published on 26th of May, 1947, in an article entitled "*Burma and the English Language*", at a point where it stood clear that Burma would pursue independence and not dominion status within the British Empire. The *Review* likened the status of English in an independent Burma to that of Latin in Europe, in their words a relic of a former empire that would still be understood by some but no longer widely spoken. They noted that unlike in India, there was no reason to maintain English as a lingua franca to unite different ethnic groups, as the Burmese language already had this function. The *Review* was keen however to point out that English as a language still had its merit and the Burmese should not willfully discard it, it was "the language of Shakespeare", as well as a world language thanks to the political influence of Britain and the United States. The article urged future generations of Burmese to still seek out the language if they felt interested in it, but not to feel the same compulsion that English would be vital as it had been during the colonial era. It concluded with the remark that English "is a language with a most interesting literature and has great beauty; and in spite of her contradicting Empire, Britain will remain one of the leading Powers [sic] of the world, whose friendship we shall need".<sup>202</sup>

The *Review* throughout its issues was broadly accepting of compromise and coexistence with those Burmese of a different religion, particularly Burmese Christians, publishing a number of articles that sought to promote interfaith dialogue. Some emphasised similarities between Christendom and Buddhism, or between "The West" and Burma, fostering communication between the two faiths and striving to educate each side on their respective similarities and differences. Articles in several issues present similarities and differences between Buddhist and Christian theology, from a Buddhist perspective, with a tone meant more so to educate

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<sup>201</sup> *The Burmese Review*, December 1st, 1947, p.1

<sup>202</sup> *The Burmese Review*, May 26th, 1947 p.9

and inform than to condescend or proclaim any kind of inherent superiority in Buddhism.<sup>203</sup> This was similar to the way some British officials in Burma wrote about their perspective on Buddhism, attempting to draw comparisons to European Christian tradition, particularly the Catholic one, as well as pre-Christian traditions of paganism.<sup>204</sup> The December 30th, 1946 issue argued that Buddhism was a more scientific religion than those of the west, because its conception of cosmology, that there are infinite worlds in the infinity of existence, resembles recent scientific theories promoted by western astronomers. A similar argument was made later that year in a series of articles entitled “*Science and Buddhism*” by an anonymous “Analyst”, published over the course of late July and August 1947, this time likening the doctrines of Buddhism to that of the western rational and scientific tradition born from the renaissance and the modern period.<sup>205</sup>

This is a common theme which occurred throughout much of Burmese writing in the 20th century, according to Jordan Carlyle Winfield there was a conscious effort from Burmese intellectuals to emphasise these traits within Buddhism in order to find common ground with the Europeans and to be respected as fellow “rational” thinkers. In particular, the Burmese often identified with Protestantism which they viewed as an active, populist and rational set of doctrines, all things which they associated their own religious practices with.<sup>206</sup> Ironically this meant that Burmese viewed themselves as akin to Protestants, but Europeans often viewed them as similar to Catholics. The *Review* did not specify any sectarian qualities in its articles that touch on these religious reflections, but this is worth putting in its broader context, that these articles are part of an existing transition narrative of Burma and Buddhism becoming more like Europe and Christianity by becoming more “rational” and “scientific”.

There is little to no mention of Islam in Burma, nor any interfaith dialogue between it and Buddhism. No major acknowledgement was given to Jews or Hindus in Burma either. At this time Islam was less of a direct factor in politics, interactions between the Buddhist Bamar majority and minority populations who practised Islam was viewed more as a racial dynamic

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<sup>203</sup> *The Burmese Review*, December 30th, 1946, p.6, April 7th, 1947, p.5-6 and July 21st, 1947 p.4 and p.10

<sup>204</sup> See for instance, Scott, James George *BURMA: A Handbook of Practical Information*, 1911, p.380-384 and Craddock, Reginald Henry, *The Dilemma in India*, 1929, p.40-42 and p.110, for two very prominent British officials who likened the “Buddhist Church” to the Catholic veneration of saints.

<sup>205</sup> *The Burmese Review*, July 28th, 1947, p.6 and August 11th, 1947, p.4

<sup>206</sup> Winfield, Jordan Carlyle, *Buddhism and the State in Burma: English-language discourses from 1823 to 1962*, 2017, p.11-28 and p.101-128

<https://rest.neptune-prod.its.unimelb.edu.au/server/api/core/bitstreams/29036fb9-c190-5d63-a067-531595b79ff5/content> Accessed 08/08/2024

between the Bamar and Burmese Indians, for as to practise Islam was viewed as synonymous with being an Indian immigrant, being descended from them. A reader of this study might be familiar with the predominantly Muslim ethnic group of the Arakan region, known today as the Rohingya, who have gained a great deal of attention in the 21st century because of their persecution by Myanmar's government, but even they were viewed at this time as merely Burmese Indians. When discussing M.A Rashid, a prominent Muslim politician and later a patron of Rohingya political activism, the *Review* only focused on his status as an "Indian".<sup>207</sup>

Some writing in the *Review* attempted to promote coexistence by pointing towards universal human qualities. Things that people no matter their ethnic, cultural or religious background might be able to find common ground with. One notable instance from the January 13th, 1947 issue discusses the Burma Broadcasting Service, roughly the Burmese equivalent of the BBC in Britain. The BBS' Director U Khin Zaw explained to radio listeners how a debate had erupted internally among employees of how to broadcast music in a way that would be familiar and enjoyable to the multiple ethnic groups throughout the country, whilst also reinforcing the uniquely Burmese identity of the service.<sup>208</sup> He expressed a lengthy criticism that the BBS had hitherto been adamant about primarily broadcasting "classical" music, of both the western variety and also Burmese "classical" music. U Khin Zaw argued that the BBS' decision to do so had been a mistake, as it bored those listeners who tuned in for entertainment. He noted that western music had already been popularised in Burma during British rule through cultural exchange and widespread dissemination by means of technologies like film and gramophone. U Khin Zaw described classical Burmese music as lacking harmonies and consisting of a "single melodic line", claiming it to be in the stage of development western music had grown out of 400 years ago. He also criticised attempts to reproduce classic Burmese music using modern, western instruments and music theory, as well as those Burmese musicians who played western music despite being inexperienced with both its rhythms, instruments and often attempting to translate lyrics into Burmese for a wider popular appeal. In both cases, something of the original music, be it western or be it eastern, became lost in the transition.

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<sup>207</sup> *The Burmese Review*, December 29th, 1947 p.8 and Bowser, Matthew J. "Islam and Race in Myanmar: The Racialization of the Rohingya" in *Maydan*, June 9th, 2022  
<https://themaydan.com/2022/06/islam-and-race-in-myanmar-the-racialization-of-the-rohingya/> Accessed 10/08/2024

<sup>208</sup> *The Burmese Review*, January 13th, 1947, p.6

U Khin Zaw proposed that both sides should learn more from one another, if western tastes in music were going to stay in Burma then Burmese musicians should learn from their western peers how to play it well, and if native Burmese musicians wanted to revive the classical genre then they should put effort into preserving its authenticity and find ways to distinguish it from western music. He claimed that one day the BBS would cultivate and broadcast a kind of music that could unite both East and West, noting that ultimately listeners regardless of their ethnic and cultural backgrounds would want to tune in to the BBS for a shared form of entertainment. He also noted that “light music” is most commonly enjoyed by radio listeners, “in every country” and also argued that the BBS would not base its future programming off majoritarian decisions and instead seek to highlight more obscure genres and forms of programming that carry niche appeal. Here we see dedication towards trying to cultivate something universal and unifying, while also preventing the uniqueness of different cultures from being lost in the process. This critique of radio programming is fittingly similar to what the Burmese nationalists aspired for the Burmese nation, a means to uplift the uniqueness of all different peoples, not to merge them all into one thing that was barely recognizable.<sup>209</sup>

A similar comparison between Burmese and British genres is made in the January 20th, 1947 issue, in the article “*Tragedy and Burmese Drama*” where the author Maung Htin Aung compares how European, primarily British authors, and Burmese authors have historically dealt with the literary subject of tragedy. He likened Burmese writings of old to Elizabethan dramas of English Renaissance theatre, but he also draws broader comparison between the entirety of the European cultural tradition dating back to Antiquity with the Burmese cultural tradition. Maung Htin Aung’s opinion is that the British colonial presence in Burma revealed that the Burmese and the British had more alike in common than they did in opposition, pointing towards what he perceived as literary and cultural traditions that reference similar concepts, which arose independently of one another but became able to intermingle during the colonial period. He went as far as to claim that the British had also culturally enriched the Burmese by teaching them disciplines such as the art of “literary criticism”, which Maung Htin Aung argues did not exist in Burmese culture prior to the arrival of Europeans.<sup>210</sup>

His writings bring to mind the theories outlined in *Empire Writes Back*, as the key idea that Maung Htin Aung seems to want to emphasise is that learning *about* European culture and

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<sup>209</sup> *The Burmese Review*, January 13th, 1947, p.6

<sup>210</sup> *The Burmese Review*, January 20th, 1947, p.5-6 and p.12

learning *from* European culture would benefit the Burmese more than defining themselves in opposition to it. It echoes sentiments of the metropole versus the periphery, how different cultures caught up in the power dichotomy of colonialism define themselves. In particular, the aspiration of being seen as an equal by the “other”, not dismissed as a mere subject of study by the other. The article is a Burmese writer looking for similarities between English and Burmese writing, a native subject of empire initiating the comparison, a method which *Empire Writes Back* attributes as a key component of seeking to consolidate the influence of one’s own colonised culture and as a way to resist being subsumed and “incorporated” into the colonisers culture.<sup>211</sup> Notably, Maung Htin Aung does not address similarities, he seeks to find “parallels”. What he is arguing is that the English and the Burmese are drawing from a broader, shared sense of human creativity, and this is an approach which frames each of their respective cultural traditions as equals to one another, irregardless of influence or of age.

Maung Htin Aung defines the “tragic themes” shared by Burmese and European literature as consisting of a story with a sad ending that is rooted in religious motifs, a fairly arbitrary criteria but in his own words he seeks not to prove Burmese tragedies “were exactly similar but to show how much better we could understand and appreciate our own dramatic themes if we compared them to the themes and conventions of the Elizabethan drama”. While Maung Htin Aung begins the article with a strong focus on Elizabethan drama, he veers into the broader European cultural tradition. He claims that both the eras of Antiquity, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance produced tragic works with religious backgrounds, which he claims are similar to Buddhist themes in Burmese works. He also likens the central struggle of Buddhism, between earthly temptations and spiritual enlightenment, with similar themes that were present in European works of art, particularly during the Renaissance, a struggle which he describes as “worldliness” against “otherworldliness”. Lastly, I also wish to acknowledge an off-hand comment Maung Htin Aung makes about a popular stereotype in Burma at the time:

It is usually assumed now-a-days that the Burmese as a nation dislike tragic themes and unhappy endings, and therefore it will be surprising to many to learn that most of the Burmese plays which had flourished before the fall of the kingdom in 1886 had unhappy endings.<sup>212</sup>

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<sup>211</sup> Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G., and Tiffin, H., 2002, p.50-56

<sup>212</sup> *The Burmese Review*, January 20th, 1947, p.5-6 and p.12

Though this is just one man's judgement, remarking on the cultural climate, it is another indicator that the transition narrative in this period was dominated by a sense of optimism. Maung Htin Aung references similar trends when he claims that the political mood in Burma towards the end of the Konbaung monarchy in the 1870s to 1880s was defined by plays which featured "decadent drama", he categorises these as fiction which exhibits a longing for a past that could no longer be and a deep ennui about a present that soon set to be erased, once the British conquest of Burma was completed.<sup>213</sup> To this effect, Maung Htin Aung frames tragedy in Burmese fiction as something that can both indicate hopelessness and resignation towards the inevitable, but also maturity and cultural enrichment. He implies readers to follow the latter approach, for Burma as a nation and the Burmese as a people to use their cultural legacy as a way to bond with other cultures in the world and also reflect upon themselves, and where the future may take them. In clearer words, a transition narrative, though one more even-handed than the unbridled optimism we have seen from some other articles, such as T.T's story of the Y.L Leader, and which we saw Maung Htin Aung himself remark on as a defining feature of the cultural zeitgeist at the time he was writing.

## 2.4.2 - The Role of the Military

The Burmese military emerged as an integral force in the nationalist discourse, it represented one of the few direct continuations with the Japanese-led *State of Burma* that formed during World War II. During the war, the Japanese had employed local Burmese nationalists to join militias, one of which was named the Patriotic Burmese Forces (PBF) and was commanded by Aung San. The *Review* frames the war in one article as "In Burma, an intensive period in which Burma was overrun by the Japanese, brought forward the national figure of General Aung San"<sup>214</sup>. Towards the end of the war many of these militias rebelled against Japan and switched sides to the Allies. They were subsequently integrated under Aung San's leadership into Britain's military as part of the so-called "Burma Army", a broad term for various former Japanese-aligned forces.<sup>215</sup> After the war, the PBF were demobilised and transformed into the People's Volunteer Organisation (PVO), an armed and uniformed paramilitary made up of both veterans of the war as well as new, younger recruits who joined in peacetime. By late 1947 the *Review* estimated that there were approximately 100,000 PVO members throughout

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<sup>213</sup> *The Burmese Review*, January 20th, 1947, p.16

<sup>214</sup> *The Burmese Review*, December 15th, 1947, p.1

<sup>215</sup> Crosthwaite, Peter S. *A Bowl of Rice Too Far: The Burma Campaign of the Japanese Fifteenth Army*, 2016, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/AD1021928.pdf> Accessed 05/08/2024

the country.<sup>216</sup> In the words of Silverstein, the PVO existed to organise militant nationalists who Britain deemed too extreme to be retained in the Burma Army, keeping them at a manageable distance. It quickly became clear to Britain however, that the PVO could cause immense instability within Burma if left to its own devices.<sup>217</sup>

The PVO exercised a kind of vigilantism and political violence that was condemned by the British but usually treated by the *Review* as a regretful necessity. Banditry and political instability in Burma was still at an all time high and that the *Review* said the country needed its citizens to band together to dole out justice against those who were harming it. One such article was published on May 12th, 1947 in the *Political Front* section under the name “*Law and Order*”. It warned that banditry risked slowing down the “rehabilitation” of Burma, what it called the eventual process of achieving independence. It bemoaned that Burma could no longer practise the “*old methods*” from the feudal era for combating crime, which consisted of mob justice and swift executions. The article argued that Burma had been made soft by British colonial rule, as the British enforced a set of laws on Burma that may have been suited to the British Isles, but which went against how native Burmese preferred to deal out justice. The article celebrated the Japanese occupation of Burma, as the power vacuum that had been formed in the wake of Britain’s retreat allowed Burmese norms of pursuing swift justice to reassert themselves. Even after Japan consolidated its hold, the *Review* argues that the harsh Japanese military courts were very similar to the Burmese methods of justice.<sup>218</sup>

It must be noted that harsh vigilante violence had been celebrated in Burma since World War II, even Aung San himself stood accused by the British having carried out such acts, including the execution of a village chief during the War in 1942, a man whom Aung San declared to be a “wicked person” who had deserved death. Attempts to persecute Aung San stopped after pushback from the Burmese nationalist movement and the case was quietly dropped in 1946 on grounds of insufficient evidence.<sup>219</sup> Silverstein notes that the upswing in paramilitary activity in post-WWII Burma resulted in an attempt by the British government to ban uniformed paramilitary groups like the PVO, but much like the attempts to bring Aung San to trial this demand had to be given up on. I wish to highlight that there was a double standard in regards to this violence in the pages of the *Review*, only Aung San and the PVO

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<sup>216</sup> *The Burmese Review*, October 13th, 1947, p.10

<sup>217</sup> Silverstein, 1993, p.42

<sup>218</sup> *The Burmese Review*, May 12th, 1947, p.8-9 and December 15th, 1947 p.8

<sup>219</sup> Tucker, Shelby, *Burma: Curse of Independence*, 2001 p.115-116

were granted a *carte blanche*, when news would appear that paramilitary groups had been formed by other political parties, such as the Socialist Party of Burma or the Communist Party of Burma, the *Review* would swiftly move to denounce them as being no better than bandits, whilst lauding the PVO for suppressing these dissident militias.<sup>220</sup> The *Review* also occasionally favoured legal proceedings as a means to dole out justice, after the assassination of Aung San and large parts of the Burmese government, it praised the conduct of Burmese prison guards who prevented the suspects tied to the murder from falling into the hands of an angry mob.<sup>221</sup> In this case, the cautious approach to justice may have been motivated by the fact that there was no confirmed culprit behind the murders yet and the legal process against whoever would be deemed responsible for the deaths of most of the Burmese cabinet was not just a national matter but an international one that would catch the world's attention.

The PVO was also not just an armed paramilitary for the AFPFL. It took on vast functions akin to a charitable organisation and mutual aid society, at a time when Burma was still economically recovering from the devastation of World War II and Burmese soldiers were struggling to adjust to demobilising and re-entering civil society.<sup>222</sup> An article in the December 30th, 1946 issue of the *Review*, makes note that former members of the Burma Army and PBF were among the hardest hit by what they describe as a “cost of living crisis” in the colony. The *Review* acknowledged that this hardship will only get worse, as at the time the cost of the Burmese military forces was still being shouldered by the British Empire, but with independence on the horizon Burma would have to finance its own military budget and pay its soldiers with money from its own national coffers.<sup>223</sup> It argued that maintaining the military budget and paying soldiers should be among the soon to be sovereign nation's key priorities, alongside financing government ministries and paying government employees, going as far as to claim that non-soldiers should allow themselves to temporarily suffer the hardships that would come with the economic transition away from Britain. This was labelled a “patriotic duty” for the average Burmese citizen, to give up a portion of their personal livelihood for the betterment of the whole nation. Industrial workers were in particular singled out as one group that should accept reductions to wages, as the first step towards adjusting to a new economic situation post-independence. This emphasis on celebrating groups like the PVO and arguing for creating something of a social safety net and a steady set

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<sup>220</sup> *The Burmese Review*, May 12th, 1947, p.8-9 and December 15th, 1947 p.8

<sup>221</sup> *The Burmese Review*, August 4th, 1947, p.8

<sup>222</sup> Silverstein, 1993, p.42-47

<sup>223</sup> *The Burmese Review*, December 30th, 1946, p.8



of wages for the military and government employees, to the detriment of the broader public, points towards these institutions' hegemonic role in Burmese politics.<sup>224</sup>

As independence grew ever closer, the issue of the military resurfaced in the pages of the *Review*, particularly after the PVO began to beat its swords into ploughshares. On October 13th, it celebrated that the PVO had ultimately chosen to disarm and was planning to dissolve itself, citing this as being in accord with the then dead Aung San's wishes.<sup>225</sup> The PVO would become known as the "National Service Corps" and no longer act as a "private army".<sup>226</sup> The December 15th issue on the other hand mourned the coming dissolution which had been scheduled to be implemented on April 30th, 1948, because even though Aung San had intended to dissolve the PVO at some point, the organisation had still been "sacred to the memory of Bogyoke Aung San", its name and its accomplishments were a key part of his, and by proxy Burma's legacy. The paper commended the members of the PVO on their good conduct, particularly admiring the fact that relatively few demobilised PVO members were being drawn into the sphere of influence of the Burmese Communist movement.<sup>227</sup> The December 29th issue noted ahead of independence, slated for next week, that "the defence forces must be organised and trained to perfection" and called for "watchfulness of the danger of foreign domination either by invasion or by more subtle methods".<sup>228</sup>

### 2.4.3 - Burmese Unity and Geography

The unity of the Burmese nation is depicted in both the *Review* and in *Political Legacy* as paramount. It was clear to all parties across the political spectrum that Burma would only be able to function as a state if the various ethnic groups of the country could be unified and co-exist. This extended not just towards cultivating good relations between ethnic groups, it was also a matter of territorial integrity. The Burmese scholar Pum Za Mang calls this ideal

<sup>224</sup> *The Burmese Review*, December 30th, p.8-9

<sup>225</sup> See Silverstein, 1993, p.42-45 for one of Aung San's manifestos from 1946, outlining the purposes of the PVO and his goals for its eventual transition away from an armed paramilitary towards a civilian Public Works organisation. I believe this may be the same manifesto that the *Review's* article derived its information about Aung San's intentions from.

<sup>226</sup> *The Burmese Review*, October 13th, 1947 p.1. The use of the term *Private Army* is notable, at the time the common appellation in English for Burmese paramilitaries that were aligned with specific political parties, politicians and/or ethnic groups was "*Pocket Army*", which was far more derogatory. Even when highlighting a negative aspect of the PVO, the *Review* is using a more neutral term for it. See Silverstein, p.156 and Burma. Dept. of Information and Broadcasting, *Burma, Volume 8, Issue 2*, 1958, p.1-2, from the collection of the University of Michigan, digitised via Google Books on January 30th, 2007. [https://books.google.se/books?id=\\_BYoAAAAMAAJ](https://books.google.se/books?id=_BYoAAAAMAAJ) Accessed 03/08/2024

<sup>227</sup> *The Burmese Review*, December 15th, 1947, p.8

<sup>228</sup> *The Burmese Review*, December 29th, 1947, p.1 and p.8

the signature policy of the AFPFL during the era Aung San led it.<sup>229</sup> According to Silverstein, the AFPFL favoured strength through diversity and called upon the rights of all Burmese citizens to be guaranteed, offering special protections and rights to self-governance within a federal Burma to those minorities “who differ from the majority in race, language, culture and historical traditions, and form at least 10% of the population”.<sup>230</sup> Parts of this definition entered into law after the Aung San-Attlee Agreement of January 1947, with the *Burmese Review* citing a portion of the Agreement that outlines temporary measure in order to register voters and candidates for the Assembly:

A Burma National is defined for the purposes of eligibility to vote and to stand as a candidate at the forthcoming elections as a British subject or the subject of an Indian State who was born in Burma and resided there for a total period of not less than eight years in the ten years immediately preceding either 1st January, 1942 or 1st January, 1947.<sup>231</sup>

The issue of Burmese unity also ties into geography, as Burmese society for thousands of years generally revolved around the vast Tharrawaddy River running along the centre of the country, and the valleys surrounding it. This was the historical homeland of the Bamar people after their arrival in Burma, alongside several other ethnic groups, but certain other groups in the country were isolated from this geopolitical centre. Two key examples are the so-called Hill Tribes, who live in the Patkai Mountains alongside what is now Burma and India’s border in Assam, and the Shan people who live both in the west near Assam and on the eponymous Shan plateau to the east, near the border with China and Thailand. Ethnic groups such as these were still integral to the Burmese national project and their homelands would invariably fall within the borders of Burma, as the *Review* notes: “Fortunately for the future of Burma, geographically there can only be one Burma”.<sup>232</sup> As such, both geographic and cultural distances to these more remote parts of the country had to be resolved, if a unified Burma was to be maintained. According to the works of James C. Scott, the isolation of the frontier was self-imposed by ethnic minorities as it allowed them to manage themselves free of interference from both the feudal Burmese state, as well as later the British colonial system and the Union of Burma. This was a system of “state avoidance” that the nascent Burmese

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<sup>229</sup> Pum Za Mang, “Religion, Ethnicity, and Nationalism in Burma” in *Journal of Church and State*, Vol. 59, No. 4 (Autumn 2017), pp. 626-648 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48555079> Accessed 04/08/2024

<sup>230</sup> Silverstein, 1993, p.12-13

<sup>231</sup> *The Burmese Review*, February 10th, 1947, p.11

<sup>232</sup> *The Burmese Review*, February 10th, 1947, p.7

government had to combat by connecting the urban centres to the frontier, in much the same way a colonial state reigns in its subjects, and how Chakrabarty describes the industrial cities of Britain internally colonising the countryside.<sup>233</sup> This also aligns with an argument made by Anderson, which draws a distinction between the pre-colonial national identities of Southeast Asia which he primarily defines as revolving around feudal obligations and religious cosmology as a means to delineate national boundaries. Previously these provinces and these peoples were bound to particular legal and religious customs with their rulers, but later they adopted a modern and post-colonial national identity that was heavily defined by the idea of a shared set of borders on a map. Bridging geographic distances within a nation and outlining the boundaries surrounding it was a key component of the transition from the old to the new, with Anderson even naming Burma specifically as an of this.<sup>234</sup>

These efforts did not truly bear fruit until the Panglong Conference held between February 6th and 12th. As per the *Review*'s own reporting, negotiations had been conducted between representatives of various different ethnic groups since 1945, when the peaceful path to Burmese independence was first offered by Britain. It was at that point immediately apparent that Burma had to become a federal state if it was to accommodate the different cultures, languages, faiths and "races" that inhabited it. The *Review* first wrote in its February 10th issue that a conference was being held in the remote town of Panglong on the Shan Plateau to agree on the exact nature of this federal structure. Though these talks had been ongoing for almost four days at that point, the *Review*'s article is sparse with any details and mostly just covers the background to the negotiations. Even so, the article is optimistic, arguing that it is natural that the Burmese ethnic groups will find a way to compromise, citing their centuries long shared history, the mutual economic benefits of a unified Burma, as well as the "close racial affinities" between the various ethnic groups.<sup>235</sup> The subsequent February 17th issue of the *Review*, after the successful negotiations, contained a similar compliment, noting that the frontier was populated by "virile and attractive races which are cousins of the Burmese".<sup>236</sup>

This February 17th issue bore significantly more concrete details. It contained a reprint of what had become known as the "Panglong Agreement" as well as a commentary about which

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<sup>233</sup> See Scott, James, C., *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, 1985, Scott, James C., *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, 2009, and Chakrabarty, D., 2000, p.7 and p.52-57

<sup>234</sup> Anderson, B., 2006, p.170-178

<sup>235</sup> *The Burmese Review*, February 10th, 1947, p.7

<sup>236</sup> *The Burmese Review*, February 17th, 1947, p8

issues brought up at the conference could be immediately addressed by the current Burmese government and which would have to wait until further autonomy was delegated to Burma after the General Election and the convening of the Constitutional Assembly. The chief change that the agreements brought about was giving the interim government Burma a greater say over governance of the frontier areas, while also opening up the door towards the eventual establishment of autonomous Kachin, Shan and Chin “states” within a Burmese federal framework.<sup>237</sup> A subsequent article on June 23rd revisits this topic, at the time when the discussion of the Burmese federation was moving to be deliberated upon by the Constitutional Assembly. It quoted from various representatives of the ethnic minority populations at the assembly, such as a Shan nobleman Sao Shwe Thaik, the Karen politician Mahn Ba Khaing, as well as the Kachin delegates Sama Duwa Sinwa Nawng and Duwa Zawlung, emphasising that the ringing endorsements for the federal project from all these representatives was a clear sign that even minority ethnic groups could now partake in the “regaining of lost freedom” that would accompany Burmese independence.<sup>238</sup>

The justification for what constituted the borders of a Burmese state was primarily cited as ensuring a continuity of government and territory with the old colonial system, while these closely resembled historical Burmese territorial boundaries that had existed under the native royal dynasties for centuries both the AFPFL and the Burmese Review refer to the colonial borders as the be all, end all. They utilise colonial names and terminology when speaking of these regions, such as Tracts, Hills and Highlands, which had originated as geographical descriptors used by the British. In this sense, the colonial vision of Burma’s geography and borders had superseded previous native conception of these lands, at least for a time.<sup>239</sup> Pum Khan Pau, a modern scholar of Burma’s north-western frontier, has written that there was a cultural revival of indigenous terms used by the peoples of this region to refer to themselves, which filtered down into official Burmese government policy, but it did not take off in earnest until the 1950s. Before then, Burma had in large parts inherited both the nomenclature and the attitudes that Britain had adopted for the Burmese borderlands.<sup>240</sup>

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<sup>237</sup> *The Burmese Review*, February 17th, 1947, p.7 and p.10

<sup>238</sup> *The Burmese Review*, June 23rd, 1947, p.9

<sup>239</sup> *The Burmese Review*, February 17th, 1947, p.7 and p.10 as well as Silverstein, 1993, p.68 for two examples among many of these colonial-era geographic descriptions being used in official Burmese government and party documents, respectively in the Panglong Agreement and in the AFPFL’s “Fourteen Points” for a federal Burma.

<sup>240</sup> Pum Khan Pau, *Indo-Burma Frontier and the Making of the Chin Hills: Empire and Resistance*, 2019, p.200-215

Review issues from late 1946 tackle an ongoing territorial dispute with the provisional Indian government over the tiny township of Maungdaw, located on the Burmese border of what is today the nation of Bangladesh. The authors of the *Review* laid the blame for this dispute with the local Bengali branch of the Muslim League of India, which they claimed was trying to forcefully organise an annexation of Maungdaw, against the will of those Burmese who lived in the township. This dispute petered out, but was used as a motivating factor for the *Review* to urge that a Burmese state must consist of the entirety of the present territories of colonial Burma, no lands could be split off from the fringes of this unified Burmese state and no foreign neighbours should be allowed undue influence over its frontiers.<sup>241</sup>

A similar discussion to the one about Maungdaw emerged much later in 1947, over the issue of Manipur. Today a state of the Republic of India, Manipur had historically belonged to the Assam region which had been partly ruled by Burma prior to being seized by Britain in the Anglo-Burmese Wars. After Burma was fully subjugated, there was discussion within the colonial administration over whether or not Manipur and other parts of the Assam region should be attached to Burma, owing to its historical ties, or to Bengal due to its more developed administrative service, ultimately settling on the latter.<sup>242</sup> Even so, nearly five decades later the *Review* was still pining for Manipur as something of a lost limb that had been detached from the greater Burmese nation. In the December 15th, 1947 issue, Professor Tha Hla wrote an article entitled “*Burma and Manipur: Historical Relations*”, that delved into the history of how Burma came to possess Manipur, how it historically had administered it, and why there was still a strong historical tie between Burma and its former possession. Of particular note is the fact that Tha Hla likens the historical relationship between Burma and Manipur to that of the British Commonwealth and its subjects, claiming that Burma was a benevolent and hands-off overlord who were lenient towards its “dependencies”. Tha Hla emphasises his belief that Burma’s rule over this region has been mischaracterised by European orientalist who frame Burma as conquering and colonising Manipur, what Tha Hla likens to the conduct of the British Empire, but he seeks to affirm that Burmese rule was more akin to the British Commonwealth of the 1940s than the British Empire of the 1800s. He uses moralising language in the text, framing Manipuri uprisings and raids in the 18th century as brazen and wrong, whereas the Burmese punitive expeditions into Manipur as

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<sup>241</sup> *The Burmese Review*, December 23rd, 1946, p.9 and December 30th, 1946, p.2

<sup>242</sup> Pum Khan Pau, *Indo-Burma Frontier and the Making of the Chin Hills: Empire and Resistance*, 2019, p.150-155

reprisal for these attacks was something Burma had to do and that they were not "sorely as revenge", "they were conducted in pursuance of a definite policy which was to instil into the Manipuris' minds that their State was part of the Burmese Empire since the 16th century".<sup>243</sup>

Tha Hla stops short of arguing that the Burma of his day should pursue an irredentist policy towards Manipur, he claims that while the territory had been unjustly stolen by the British and given to India, it was now in Burma's best interest to withdraw their claims and to foster goodwill with their Indian neighbours. He noted that "it may not be inappropriate for the Burman masses to declare unequivocally that Burma is no longer interested to take up her previous legal position of the 19th century over the said areas" and that "Such a declaration will remove the possibility of suspicions from the minds of some people in those areas who may still be dubious of Burmese future intentions". Tha Hla was keen for the Burmese to remember that they once rightfully ruled Manipur, that it was wrongfully stolen from them, and that this was no fault of Manipurese themselves whom he claimed had been deceived by the British to act against the Burmese, and whom were later made dependent on colonial rule to help oversee a large number of territories and ethnic groups in the region that Britain had unified into the much wider territory that makes up the Manipur state that we see today.<sup>244</sup>

Burma's geography is also referenced in the December 29th, 1947 issue of the *Review*, in an article entitled "*Industrial Service*", written by an author going by the initials "M.K" which focuses on Burma's geography and its natural resources. I have chosen to highlight this article as while there are a lot of instances of the Burmese Review discussing Burma's natural resources, "*Industrial Service*" is fairly unique in that it deals less with discussing the resources themselves and more with the geography of Burma, the manpower required to map out and to manage the country's resources, as well as what administrative service the country will be inheriting from the British. M.K writes that a key issue that is affecting Burma on the precipice of its independence is the lack of a native civil service familiar with the country's geography and its natural resources, which severely hampers Burma's ability to industrialise. M.K claims this is not an uncommon problem among other decolonial movements and soon to be independent nations, noting that the vast majority of colonial empires did not educate their indigenous civil service members in these intricacies, with the sole exception being the Dutch whom M.K claims imparted this knowledge via a "Native Industrial Service" in

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<sup>243</sup> *The Burmese Review*, December 15th, 1947, p.3

<sup>244</sup> *The Burmese Review*, December 15th, 1947, p.10

Indonesia. M.K argues that if Burma can not adequately understand its own geography as well as the wealth that lies in its forests and its minerals, then that will form a power vacuum which will be filled by foreign “capitalists cum exploiters”. As such, the author calls on the future Burmese government to immediately begin mapping the nation’s forests and geological deposits to ensure that Burmese resources remain in Burmese hands. They cite European and American public utility projects that Burma should look to for inspiration, such as the National Resources Commission, the Tennessee Valley Authority in the United States, as well industrial projects and geographic surveys that were already carried out by the British Empire in India and Burma, like the Tamoda Valley Project and the Hydel Committee.<sup>245</sup>

M.K argues that the biggest hindrance to chart Burma’s natural resources is that Burma would need to construct a public service fit for the task in a short amount of time, but also the necessary personnel with the right expertise already exists in Burma, it is just a matter of the government knowing how to put them to use as well as how to future proof it so that this system can be innovated upon and adapt. M.K also argues that the government should seek popular support, pointing again towards the Tennessee Valley Authority and F.D.R’s New Deal as examples for how to channel a people’s desire to engage in productive labour and make the most of their own natural resources, in order to attain industrial self-sufficiency. M.K emphasises a transition away from colonial systems built for the extraction of resources to the benefit of the metropole, towards ones founded by and for the benefit of the Burmese people. This is a useful look into both how the *Review* imagines Burmese institutions changing with the coming of independence, how the issue of geographic understanding and national unity seeps into economic issues, not just social and political ones.<sup>246</sup> One should still keep in mind Chakrabarty’s reasoning however, that a transition narrative often compels decolonised nations to think in the “logic of capital”, even if it may be for benevolent reasons a decolonial movement can often end up embracing and prioritising the profit motive, as well as viewing methods of exploitation as necessary prerequisites to becoming a modern state. Generating wealth and championing productive labour can thus also become tools to enrich the upper classes, and not just components of national pride, prosperity and wellbeing.<sup>247</sup>

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<sup>245</sup> *The Burmese Review*, December 29th, 1947, p.3

<sup>246</sup> *The Burmese Review*, December 29th, 1947, p.3

<sup>247</sup> Chakrabarty, D., 2000, p.49-72

#### 2.4.4 - The Role of Gender

I noticed there was a curious absence of explicitly gendered topics within both the pages of the *Review* as well as within Aung San and the AFPFL's statements. There are references to them, yes, such as a few off-hand jokes in the satirist Thuyay's column criticising the growing popularity of trousers among Burmese women,<sup>248</sup> and the aforementioned aversion to the romanticised depiction of Burmese women in Theippan Soe Yin's writings, but there is not really an explicitly gendered approach towards women's rights or the politics of gender. There are no discussions of how women should contribute to the struggle of the Burmese people, nor of how the role of women may be uplifted. I have chosen to include a few brief mentions I stumbled across, but it these were few and far between.

One of the first mentions I could find was in the article in the January 6th issue where the *Review* condemns the impending University Strike among Burmese students, by noting that they encourage "lively interest in national politics" and "signs of activity among students of both sexes". The article goes on to frame both Burmese men and women as the future heirs to their country, who will finally have a chance to flex their political muscles and govern themselves very shortly, but generally the article doesn't use very gendered language for this. It simply refers to students in general, with the qualification that they also mean female students. The mentions of "men and women" as well as "boys and girls" in regards to the future generation who will inherit a free Burma does not attribute any importance to there being young women in education who will likely have key political roles in the years to come in a nation about to achieve independence. It simply remarks upon the fact that they exist.<sup>249</sup> I will also note a poem by "C.J.R" from the January 6th, 1947 issue, entitled "*To Miss Burma, 1946*", where the author speaks to a symbolic female figure<sup>250</sup> that embodies the qualities of the Burmese nation, most prominently its shared indigenous and European culture. The subject of the poem is a woman who is described as a great beauty, who can wear traditional Burmese garbs such as the eingyi blouse and the htamein skirt, but can also wear her hair in a Western style and use foreign cosmetics such as red lipstick and painted nails. Even the

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<sup>248</sup> *The Burmese Review*, December 30th, 1946, p.2

<sup>249</sup> *The Burmese Review*, January 6th, 1947, p1

<sup>250</sup> While the name may give an impression that this could be a beauty contest, and indeed there was one by this very name held in Burma, the "Miss Burma" competition did not start until 1947, a whole year after this article was published. See India. Ministry of Information and Broadcasting *Burma, Our Neighbour*, 1949, p.43, from the collection of the University of Minnesota, digitised via Google Books on June 25th, 2019. <https://books.google.se/books?id=cb7ojyTi9vgC> Accessed 04/08/2024. As such, I will presume this is referring to a symbolic figure.



language of the poem invokes a mixture of styles, there are Burmese loanwords such as the aforementioned types of clothing, right next to western English expressions of affection such as “You’re the cat’s pyjamas”.<sup>251</sup>

Around the time of the election to the Constitutional Assembly, the *Review* made an offhand comment in the March 10th, 1947 issue noting that they were pleased there were so many female candidates on the ballot. This was not elaborated on, neither in this issue or any subsequent one, as to why the *Review* supported women’s participation in the political process.<sup>252</sup> Additionally, the contributor Maung Maung’s first two articles about “*How the Resistance Movement Began in Burma*”, from July 7th and July 14th in 1947, also reference women prominently. Maung Maung was a member of the Burmese auxiliaries who fought first for Japan and then for the United Kingdom. He describes how when the Japanese arrived in Burma he and his fellow soldiers were treated as members of a vanguard for Burmese independence, which granted them social influence, particularly with Burmese women. One of Maung Maung’s anecdotes in the July 7th article is about meeting with a female leader in the Burma East Asia Youth League, the same organisation I covered T.T’s writing about in “The Role of the Peasants”. Maung Maung notes the romantic attraction and admiration he claims to have received from this woman at a public meeting of the Y.L. “She pointed her finger at me and said, “Look at the young soldier there: he is my ideal. When the war is won and he comes back after having done his duty, I shall be glad to be his wife, if he wants me”. That was a shock that knocked all the breath out of me”.<sup>253</sup>

In here we see a rare archetype of Burmese idealised male gender role, a brave and handsome soldier fighting for the cause of liberty. Maung Maung goes on to describe this woman as a symbol of a new and rapidly changing Burma: “But look! - A young Burmese lady, throwing her famous modesty to the winds, saying she would marry any soldier who had fought for the country's cause - she was the symbol of the new Burma born of the war”.<sup>254</sup> The article leaves room for speculation about Maung Maung’s views on women; earlier he had described how the war brought deprivation to Burma and how Japan had exploited the Burmese nation. In that context, perhaps “the new Burma born of the war” was one of degeneration, of women abandoning their morals and throwing themselves at men. It could also be a reference to the

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<sup>251</sup> *The Burmese Review*, January 6th, 1947, p.9

<sup>252</sup> *The Burmese Review*, March 10th, 1947, p.8

<sup>253</sup> *The Burmese Review*, July 7th, 1947, p.14

<sup>254</sup> *The Burmese Review*, July 7th, 1947, p.14

presence of so-called “Comfort Women”, sex workers who were forced or deceived into serving Japanese army soldiers. While some of these were of a native Burmese background, most Comfort Women in Burma were Koreans who had been trafficked there.<sup>255</sup>

In the July 14th article Maung Maung describes other women he encountered during his time as a soldier, this time was when he was fighting against the Japanese following the Burmese Auxiliaries' defection to Britain. For a while he lived among the Karen people and notes that just like with the Y.L woman, he became an object of attraction for Karen women. Maung Maung confesses this was in part because the only words he spoke of the Karen language was how to ask for someone's name and how to say “You're pretty”. He describes being well treated and fawned over by both “old ladies” and “young girls”, and he doesn't make any negative judgements about their moral character for this. These were women who were depicted as helpful and friendly to him. Maung Maung praises the fact that several women of both Karen and Burmese background had fought beside them and supported the resistance against the Japanese, calling them “Our comrades, our sisters, our mothers”.<sup>256</sup>

One might expect there to be a greater focus on women's role and women's struggles in the Burmese independence movement from a paper that was edited by a woman, Khin Nyunt Yin, but I can only speculate as to how her experiences affected what material she chose to include in the pages of the *Review*. As noted previously, I do not know how much influence Khin Nyunt Yin's voice had among the *Review*'s staff. When the paper chose to include female perspectives or to use particular kinds of language about women, there was at the very least a female voice in the room when the decisions were made, but Khin Nyunt Yin likely still had to answer to her own father, the newspaper's founder U Tin Tut. I do want to highlight the letters to the editor printed in the *Review* and how they address the role of gender, as they are specifically addressed to Khin Nyunt Yin and use female pronouns when referring to the paper's editor.<sup>257</sup> The fact a woman was running such an influential newspaper was seemingly well-known and not much of a cause of concern for those who submitted letters. There are also contributions made to the paper by other notable women in Burmese politics, such as Daw Mya Sein in the January 20th, 1947 issue.

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<sup>255</sup> Tanaka, Toshiyuki, *Japan's Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery and Prostitution During World War II and the American Occupation*, 2003, p.37-42

<sup>256</sup> *The Burmese Review*, July 14th, 1947, p.3 and p.14

<sup>257</sup> *The Burmese Review*, January 6th, 1947, p.11, January 27th, 1947 p.6 and August 4th, 1947, p.14

### 2.4.5 - Looking Back on Burmese History

Following the Aung San-Attlee Agreements and the Burmese General Election, the *Burmese Review* began to publish an increased number of articles about Burmese national history, providing a useful retrospect which helps to illustrate what kind of image of Burma and its historical development that the newspaper wished to present. Most of these were generally published towards the end of 1947, but to begin with I want to focus on an earlier one, from the 19th of May. This article is another one of U Khin Zaw's speeches given via the BBS that was transcribed and printed in the *Review*. Entitled "*The Burmese Under Crisis*", U Khin Zaw begins by comparing the Burmese national character to that of the English one, noting that he was surprised by many English political commentators who had noted that the English as a people excel under crisis, citing the recent World War II and how England weathered it. When it comes to Burma however, U Khin Zaw claims he does not believe that the Burmese excel under a crisis, rather that they endure it until the point it becomes unbearable, at which point they strive to break out of it. He elaborates with:

There has been the war to prove it, the most terrible war in history. Twice fought over from end to end, invaded and re-invaded, bombed, starved, terrorised - when all's done the Burmese have become a stronger and more united nation. That crisis was so convincing that the Burmese put forth, at long last, their national character.<sup>258</sup>

He went on to note this wasn't the only time the Burmese national character had shown itself:

It was there all the time, of course else, how do you suppose the Burmese united this part of the Indo-Chinese peninsula into a kingdom? But since its great outburst during the Alaungpaya Dynasty<sup>259</sup>, the last of Burmese Dynasties, the Burmese national character had become more and more deeply buried until the war dug it out again, and behold, the Burmese nation was resurrected.<sup>260</sup>

The crisis of Burma during the World War and the kind of determination the Burmese showed is directly compared to the kind of conquering spirit that unified Burma in the first place and led it into its historical golden ages. U Khin Zaw is keen to emphasise that the Burmese have something of a Blitz Spirit of their own, as the British civilian population's endurance during the German bombings was lauded as. Ultimately, U Khin Zaw's belief is that with the

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<sup>258</sup> *The Burmese Review*, May 19th, 1947, p.4

<sup>259</sup> Also known as the "Konbaung Dynasty"

<sup>260</sup> *The Burmese Review*, May 19th, 1947, p.4

hardship and sacrifice of World War II, as well as the struggles that has followed in the reconstruction that followed, the Burmese have reawakened their national spirit and must now keep it alive going forward. Much like the writings of Nwe So, that we covered in “The Role of the Peasants” section of this study, the nature of the Burmese national character is depicted as somewhat self-evident and not something that would need explanation to the Burmese themselves. What U Khin Zaw seems to be doing is rather than explain what the national character is, he tries to put it in relation to specific historical contexts such as the unification and the liberation of Burma. U Khin Zaw claimed that with the determination shown by the Burmese people, independence is “inevitable”, but Burma must prepare for the hardships that are to follow: “We must show our fitness for our independence by shouldering our responsibilities in the right way. We must dig out once again our national character”.<sup>261</sup>

The second article is from June 9th and concerns a speech given by Aung San himself, at the so-called Rehabilitation Conference which discussed the social, political and economic reconstruction of Burma. The article primarily quotes Aung San’s speech as it concerns the latter type of reconstruction. One such excerpt given reads:

I wish to emphasise to you that ancient but ever new way of national rehabilitation and reconstruction, viz, the people's way. We have known of our people in the past who had lived on an economy of mutual co-operation. *We must resurrect this classic way of the people, on a country wide scale, so that we should build soon a ready foundation upon which the new independent Burma can be reconstructed according to plan.*<sup>262</sup>

Once again we see the Burmese past being invoked to give shape to the Burmese national character. The article also frames the conference and Aung San’s political endeavour as being in direct continuity with the Burmese resistance movement from WWII, because the goal of Burmese reconstruction was not just to right the wrongs of nearly a century of colonial occupation, it was also to right the wrongs of three years of Japanese occupation and the subsequent destructive effort that was required by the Allies to drive back the Japanese. The *Review* notes the hardship visited upon Burma has its immediate roots in the occupation, describing how “Burma is one of the countries which sustained the greatest destruction on

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<sup>261</sup> *The Burmese Review*, May 19th, 1947, p.4. This second sentence was italicised in the original article.

<sup>262</sup> *The Burmese Review*, June 9th, 1947, p.1

account of the late war”.<sup>263</sup> As for the articles from later in the year, weekly instalments in a series called “*The Burmese Era*” were written by one Dr. R. L. Soni across the autumn and winter of 1947, as well as the beginning of 1948, categorising Burmese history into a series of “eras” and “periods”, in the same way as one might divide European history into antiquity, middle ages, renaissance and modernity, or how one might divide Chinese history after the imperial dynasties. Soni will often make allusions to what other contemporary events happened in the rest of the world during this phase of Burmese history, such as what the state of the Roman or Indian empires were like.<sup>264</sup> Soni draws comparisons between recent Burmese history and this ancient past, at one point he likens the harmonious relationship that the early Pagan Dynasty<sup>265</sup> maintained with the rest of Asia to the utopian ideal that the Japanese sphere of influence was supposed to represent during World War II. Soni’s system of dividing Burmese history is best outlined in his 10th article, written in the December 1st issue of the *Review*.<sup>266</sup> He argues that the ancient Burmese themselves had a conception of their various kingdoms existing in different historical periods, giving them a kind of agency in his historiography. Soni also argues that the rise of the early Pagan Dynasty in 640 CE saw the foundation of the current “Burmese Era” where a coherent identity of Burma as one unified nation took root. All in all, this type of historiography frames Burma as a nation that has been fluid and is ever transforming, with the transition into colonial rule and now out of it just being one of many chapters in a very long national history.<sup>267</sup>

Another historical retrospective on the part of the *Review* in late 1947 is a pattern of articles that show a new trend of attempting to downplay the effects of colonial rule on Burma, especially compared to how integral the traumatic suffering, indignity and exploitation wrought by colonial rule had been in articles earlier that year. The attempts to forge solidarity with the Viet Minh and other struggling colonial subjects, or to emphasise the civilizational decline in Asia wrought by European imperialism, was now giving way to a new line of argument that claimed that colonial rule in Burma was actually just a very brief aberration in the nation’s longer history. The December 29th, 1947 issue of the *Review* made diminishing remarks about how independence was the “setting right of an unhappy historical incident”, with the same issue’s frontpage article even claiming “Few countries had a more fortunate

<sup>263</sup> *The Burmese Review*, June 9th, 1947, p.1

<sup>264</sup> *The Burmese Review*, December 1st, 1947, p.13 , December 8th, 1947, p.14 and December 22rd, 1947 p.6

<sup>265</sup> Note, this does not refer to the religious term “Pagan”, it is merely a translation of the name of the historical Burmese state.

<sup>266</sup> *The Burmese Review*, December 1st, 1947, p.13

<sup>267</sup> *The Burmese Review*, December 29th, 1947, p.13

history” than Burma. The *Review*’s argument was that Burma had never been conquered and ruled by a foreign people until the British arrived in the early 1800s, and even then British rule only lasted “scarce a hundred years”. They also emphasised that Burma had the benefit of swiftly transitioning towards independence because Britain was departing “in all friendliness” and that Burma had not been forced to resort to “the armed conflict which in the past was a necessary prelude to the restoration of freedom to subject countries”.<sup>268</sup>

Burma now stood in contrast to the situation in Vietnam and Indonesia, where colonised subjects had resorted to rising up in rebellion. These two fellow colonies were now no longer being presented as the examples Burma should carefully watch and seek inspiration from, should the worst come to pass. Burma was now presented as the country that had succeeded where its peers had failed, successfully disentangling itself peacefully from its overlord. While there may have still been an undercurrent of East Asian solidarity, this change in tone stood out to me as a stark contrast. There is some continuity here however, one can read the comment about armed conflicts as indicative of the *Review*’s optimism, that perhaps all future colonial states will be able to disentangle themselves peacefully and violence will always remain a last resort that only a few nations had to regretfully resort to. The comments are also somewhat self-serving, the *Review* and its editors surely cannot have forgotten that Burma did take up arms against the British, both in the many sporadic insurrections that marked the late 1800s and early 20th century, as well as while fighting for Japan during the war, in what was in essence a “prelude” to the post-WWII negotiations for independence.

## 2.4.6 - Symbols of the New Burma

I wish to present a few national symbols that the *Review* and AFPFL latched onto as means to generate support and political legitimacy for the New Burma. Previously I referenced the role of Burmese clothes when discussing the playful tone that the *Review* took to U Tin Tut beginning to dress in traditional Burmese garbs in public.<sup>269</sup> The Burmese national costume, specifically the Bamar variant, consists of the longyi, a type of skirt reaching from the waist down to the ankles and the gaungbaung, a type of kerchief worn around the head and tied to the side. Its origins lay in the practical garb worn by Burmese of the pre-colonial era, but it became synonymous with an intentional rejection of European colonial fashions. Historian

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<sup>268</sup> *The Burmese Review*, December 29th, 1947, p.1

<sup>269</sup> *The Burmese Review*, December 23rd, 1946, p.2

Penny Edwards describes it as the “de rigueur” of the nationalist movement and emphasises the costume as one part of a broader political struggle which manifested through concrete material efforts like the boycotting the import European textiles and favouring of homespun material, akin to the Indian Swadeshi movement, but also through more symbolic efforts, like attempting to construct an ideal of what was inherently Burmese clothing.<sup>270</sup> The Burmese national costume was also praised in the October 13th, 1947 issue of the *Review*, where the editors applauded Burma for asserting its independence when the judges in the trial against the suspects in the assassination of Aung San all wore gaungbaungs, as opposed to the white wigs that had been synonymous with judges in the British colonial justice system.<sup>271</sup>

Following the inaugural session of the Constitutional Assembly, the *Review* noted in its May 16th issue that: “A pleasing feature was the way in which the Burmese gaungbaung, after the vicissitudes of war, once again flaunted its pride-pennant”, pennant here referring to the part of the gaungbaung’s knot worn on the side of the head. The article goes on to celebrated that Aung San had chosen to wear the national costume as opposed to his usual European style military uniform, as well as the fact that delegates from the Burmese ethnic minorities had turned up wearing their own national costumes: “It was also an auspicious augury that the various members from the Frontier Areas were present in full force, in their lovely and historic national dresses”. These costumes differ from the Bamar one in patterns and colours, as well as different styles of kerchief or jackets and skirts that are of shorter or longer trim than the Bamar kind.<sup>272</sup> The *Review* described this as containing “little signs and indications which mean so much, the signs and symbols that mean a break with the past”.<sup>273</sup> An article on the same page addresses ongoing debates about what should be Burma’s national flag, another key symbol for a country. Historically the last Burmese monarchy, the Konbaungs, had used a peacock as their royal emblem and this symbol was later resurrected during the Japanese-administered State of Burma where it adorned its flag. The peacock was practically synonymous with Burma as a concept, even the *Review*’s own logo contained a peacock symbol. Yet when it came to the new national flag of the prospective “Union of Burma”, the

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<sup>270</sup> Edwards, Penny “Nationalism by design. The politics of dress in British Burma” in *IIAS Newsletter* (46). International Institute for Asian Studies, 2008  
<https://uhsea.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/nationalism-by-design-edwards.pdf> Accessed 08/08/2024

<sup>271</sup> *The Burmese Review*, October 13th, 1947, p.8

<sup>272</sup> Treadwell, Brooke A. “Downplaying difference: Representations of diversity in contemporary Burmese schools and educational equity” in Joseph, Cynthia and Matthews, Julie (editors) *Equity opportunity and Education in Postcolonial Southeast Asia*, 2014, p.32-58

<sup>273</sup> *The Burmese Review*, May 16th, 1947, p.8

*Review* acknowledged that the peacock was no longer as popular of a symbol among what they labelled as the younger generation, with these youths supposedly deriding it as too “effeminate” and not indicative of the “virility of the Burmese people”. This is a case of gendered language when referring to the Burmese nation, or at least to a Burmese national symbol, and another rare reference to masculinity. The *Review* conceded that the New Burma could adopt a different symbol than the peacock going forward, suggesting perhaps the traditional Buddhist guardian lion associated with Burma’s pagodas.<sup>274</sup>

The December 29th, 1947 issue of the *Review*, in the week preceding independence, had an article dedicated to the new Burmese flag written by Maung Maung. This flag was a field of red with a blue canton containing several stars in the upper left corner, similar to the Republic of China’s flag. Maung Maung was less concerned with the aesthetics however, as he notes that: “The flag is not the red, blue and white and the big star and the small stars painted on the square piece of cloth”, instead the flag is a living, breathing thing that represents the spirit of every Burmese citizen. He addresses the aforementioned complaints that the flag did not contain the peacock symbol, as well as new complaints that had emerged over the flag not bearing the traditional gold colour of Burmese nationalism, with Maung Maung claiming these complaints were irrelevant because the flag would still represent the collective virtue of the Burmese people no matter what it looked like. The actual appearance was irrelevant, what mattered was that Burma had a flag that represented it as a nation and represented its people. I feel he also frames this as a challenge, his language indicates that if the Burmese people are not satisfied with what their flag looks like and they believe its garishness will hold them back, then they should aspire to compensate for this by showcasing Burma’s strengths so that even an ugly flag can draw the world’s attention to Burma’s greatness.<sup>275</sup>

## 2.5 - Burmese Leadership

### 2.5.1 - The Role of the Bogyoke in Life

I have previously elaborated on paramilitary group PVO’s social functions, as well as the military legacy it represented as the heir to the PBF and the Burma Army, an integral part of

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<sup>274</sup> *The Burmese Review*, May 16th, 1947, p.8

<sup>275</sup> *The Burmese Review*, December 29th, 1947, p.4



Aung San's political career. Due to his military prestige he was known as the Bogyoke<sup>276</sup> to his followers, which is sometimes used synonymously with his name or simply added to the front of it.<sup>277</sup> This title has received a number of translations through the years and one can emphasise different parts of its meaning. In a literal sense, it is a military title equivalent in rank General or Major General, and usually associated with the Commander-in-Chief of the Burmese armed forces.<sup>278</sup> Thus, it was also loosely translated to "Generalissimo" in both a 1958 issue of magazine *The Atlantic*, as well as in the memoirs of Aung San's comrade and future successor, U Nu.<sup>279</sup> Perhaps this was to convey a similar sense of significance to the Kuomintang leader and President of the Republic of China, Chiang Kai-shek, who was known as Generalissimo in the west. The term even saw some loose translation into "Führer", at least in one British article in the *Daily Telegraph* that the *Review* saw fit to reprint on May 12th, 1947, in order to mock how ignorant it was of the Burmese independence movement.<sup>280</sup> Aung San Suu Kyi, Aung San's daughter, wrote her own attempt to translate the title in 1991. There she broke the word down into its two composites. Firstly "Bo", also spelled "Boh", a traditional Buddhist term meaning force, and then "Gyoke", meaning chief. She translates the title as explicitly referring to her father's political reputation and cult of personality, not just his military rank, emphasising that it meant Aung San was a man who commanded force, not just military force but also a kind of spiritual and national force through his charisma.<sup>281</sup>

The *Review* was keen to depict Aung San as simultaneously being a strong and unflappable leader, who joked and jived at the British colonial hegemony without fear of reprisal, but also as a deeply compassionate and wise man who was keenly aware of the weight that rested upon his shoulders. This is reflected in Aung San's own speeches and writings, one notable instance was in the middle of a speech given in October, 1946 when he openly declared that had he wished to do so, he could have led Burma in a revolt against the British after WWII

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<sup>276</sup> This word is also spelled as "Bogyok" without an E at many points throughout the *Review*, as no consensus had formed yet for how to translate it from Burmese. "Bogyoke" is the more common spelling used today and the one used in Silverstein's *Political Legacy*, so I have chosen to use it for this paper.

<sup>277</sup> See *The Burmese Review*, December 29th, 1947, p.8 and Silverstein, 1993, p.72-73 for two key examples.

<sup>278</sup> Seekins, Donald M., *Historical Dictionary of Burma (Myanmar)*, 2nd Edition, 2017 p.110-111

<sup>279</sup> The Atlantic, "A Glossary of Burmese Words", February 1958

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1958/02/a-glossary-of-burmese-words/640880/> Accessed 05/08/2024

<sup>280</sup> *The Burmese Review*, May 12th, 1947, p.7

<sup>281</sup> Aung San Suu Kyi, "The True Meaning of BOH" in *Asian Survey*, Vol. 31, No. 9 (Sep., 1991), pp. 793-797 (5 pages) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2645295> Accessed 05/08/2024

concluded. Aung San added that he still had the plans for that revolt written down on paper, should he need them in the future, if Britain ever goes back on its word to Burma.<sup>282</sup>

I have chosen to compare a few articles, the first from January 13th when Aung San gave a press conference in the Indian city of Delhi, on the upcoming negotiations with the British prime minister, followed by another article on February 17th which looked back on the results of these negotiations. The former article emphasised the Burmese leader's devil-may-care attitude and his confidence, that he did not feel threatened by either the British or by political opponents back in Burma, and just as in October 1946 he noted that he had not ruled out the possibility of armed struggle to secure independence should peaceful negotiations fail.<sup>283</sup> The latter article focused on criticism Aung San had sustained from political rivals, with the *Review* fuming that accusations that Aung San had been "bullied and cadjoloed [sic]" by the British government, or that he had signed the agreement with a "trembling and hesitant hand", was slander from political rivals which belittled the immense sacrifices Aung San was making for the nation of Burma. One key thing both articles repeatedly emphasised was that had Aung San not been Burma's leader, then the peaceful transition towards independence would have been unlikely. Though he was not one to shy away from confrontation, the *Review* often praised him for not choosing violence as his first resort and for keeping Burma away from the kind of violent insurrection that was presently sweeping French Indochina.<sup>284</sup> This sentiment was echoed on February 24th, 1947 in an article by U Tin Tut, which warned that Burma had to strive for full independence through peaceful negotiation with Britain:

Or else it would be war, a war of independence likely to be fraught with much bloodshed, much suffering to the already war devastated Burma, possibly many years of guerilla war, perhaps with independence at the end of it, but certainly a termination of Anglo-Burmese friendship and cooperation.<sup>285</sup>

The role of Aung San as a military man who acted more as a peacekeeper and as a man who held back the prospect of war was echoed by U Khin Zaw in an April 28th article following the AFPFL's enormous victory in the elections to the Burmese Constitutional Assembly. U Khin Zaw noted that thanks to Aung San and the AFPFL, Burma had experienced a political

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<sup>282</sup> Silverstein, 1993, p.47

<sup>283</sup> *The Burmese Review*, January 13th, 1947, p.7

<sup>284</sup> *The Burmese Review*, February 17th, 1947 p.8

<sup>285</sup> *The Burmese Review*, February 24th, 1947 p.11

revolution on par with the French Revolution, but without going through a “Reign of Terror”. He also noted that Burma had avoided slipping into the grasp of a Napoleon-esque figure and becoming dominated by a despotic leader. U Khin Zaw was keen to argue against those of his peers who had likened Aung San to Napoleon, even if they had meant it as a compliment, as he believed Napoleon had betrayed the humane and egalitarian values of the French Revolution. In his speech he cited from H.G Wells’ *The Outline of History*, which claimed that Napoleon had hijacked the genuine revolutionary movement and constitution promoted by his fellow co-consul Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès in favour of living the “dream of being Caesar”. To U Khin Zaw, the Bogyoke was no Napoleon and no Caesar, perhaps instead he was more of a Sieyès type-figure, because Khin Zaw describes how supposedly unlike the great conquerors of history, Aung San was an “honest” and “modest” man.<sup>286</sup>

Aung San’s domineering political leadership and strong force of personality was notably demonstrated when the AFPFL broke with the Burmese Communist Party in October 1946. Aung San gave a public speech announcing this policy on October 20th, which was then broadcasted via radio two days later and which was written down by an unknown historical source, though Josef Silverstein speculates claims it may have been via the magazine *Taing Chit*. Aung San announced that the Communists had “misused my name and the League’s name to strengthen themselves”, accusing them of undermining the AFPFL by forming “rival mass organizations” and even conspiring with the British against the nationalist cause. According to Aung San, he would have permitted the Communists to act against the Burmese national struggle and against the AFPFL had they merely carried out their subversive work in silence, he had chosen to take action against them after they began to smear him by associating unpopular policies with the AFPFL and his leadership, whilst passing off popular policies instigated by the AFPFL such as famine relief as their own initiatives. This attempt to ride the political coattails of the AFPFL was apparently the last straw to Aung San. In his address, he noted that he would not take any further action against the Communists, he would not violently persecute them or prosecute them within the bounds of the law, instead he challenged them to meet him and the AFPFL as equals and to attempt to prove to the people of Burma that they and their party were more worthier to lead the country to independence:

We have not finished our work to gain independence. We do not yet know how far we might have to go. What we have already done and what we will continue to do will

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<sup>286</sup> *The Burmese Review*, February 24th, 1947 p.11

show you who is more courageous and who is more capable. This I can say with absolute certainty. Come on out if anybody really dares to fight for independence. No growlings and howlings, let us compete in deeds.<sup>287</sup>

Aung San spent the rest of the speech addressing various smears and conspiracies that had been levied at his person, attempting to prove that not only would the Communists be unable to beat him and the AFPFL at its game, he and the AFPFL could beat the Communists at their own games and in their own aspirations. Aung San listed off his proletarian credentials, that he was morally upright man who had not profited off of his service to Burma, he made particular note that in his life he only ever bought three suits, the latest was at the behest of his colleagues who believed his old clothes were too shabby for his new political office. He claimed that he did not enjoy the cutthroat world of politics and that his political career was dedicated solely to the prosperity of Burma, describing the prospect of having to govern the country as having to “sit on top of a volcano”. Aung San noted that just as the communists claimed to derive their authority from the masses, he too was a “mass leader” and that he viewed that privilege as far nobler than any governmental position, going as far as to note: “I regard this post of an honourable minister as a mere speck of dust that clings to the toes of a mass leader”. Aung San was not the leader of the government, he was the leader of the Burmese nation and of the Burmese masses, and that unlike the Communists: “We had never hoodwinked the masses: we had never told them that all that they wanted would be given once we were in the government. To give them all they wanted would be impossible even after independence. We can not produce a Wishing Tree overnight”.<sup>288</sup>

This summarises Aung San’s leadership and the role of the Bogyoke perfectly, he was a larger than life figure who derived his authority from the Burmese masses, but also a man keen to avoid painting himself as infallible and who advised those followed him not to think he was capable of accomplishing the impossible. He even claimed in his speech that should he fail the masses and should the masses desire it of him, he would gladly resign from government and allow other political forces to fill his spot, but until that time came and

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<sup>287</sup> Silverstein, 1993, p.46-52

<sup>288</sup> Silverstein, 1993, p.49 Note, the “Wishing Tree”, or Padeytha, is a Burmese Buddhist folk tale which has a long history of being used in political rhetoric. In essence, it involves a magical tree that will grow anything one desires, but in the story the tree eventually disappears after being overused, because it had only been harvested and not properly nurtured. It is a moral fable about the dangers of short-term gain and long-term detriment. One could also loosely compare it to the Western fable of “killing the goose that lays the golden eggs”. See Sarkisyanz, Manuel, *Buddhist Backgrounds of the Burmese Revolution*, 2013, p.56-57 and p.210-212

someone could prove they were more worthy than him, Aung San would remain. He ultimately ended the speech with another provocative query:

To cut it short: what sort of a man am I? Have I ever got myself mixed up in sex scandals? Have I ever tipped-off any of my colleagues to the enemy? I am ready to publicly answer such questions. I ask, in conclusion, are communist leaders and other non-Pha-sa-pa-la (AFPFL) leaders prepared to do the same?<sup>289</sup>

Lastly, it is worth acknowledging Aung San's attitude towards religion. The nationalism of Aung San and the AFPFL was secular, much to the frustration of more traditionalist political leaders in the country.<sup>290</sup> After Aung San's death, the AFPFL and the nascent independent Burmese state were both led by U Nu, a lay Buddhist who was notable for his religious convictions, but before then Aung San had explicitly warned against the use of politicised Buddhism.<sup>291</sup> We can see reference to Buddhism in places prior, such as with the Wishing Tree. We also see the moral values of chastity, humility and frugality which Aung San promoted, that were broadly in line with the ones called for by his religion. Even so, at other points he was clear to describe religion as a personal matter: "In politics there is no room for religion in as much as there should be no insistence that the president of the Republic should be a Buddhist or that a Minister for Religion should be appointed in the cabinet. I am firmly convinced that those making a fine point of these issues are saboteurs; against them we must fight if the country is not to be doomed".<sup>292</sup> Silverstein emphasises that this was a break with traditions that had held a powerful sway hitherto. For all of Aung San's life, the nationalist movement had viewed Buddhism and Burma as intrinsically linked and the independence struggle was also a spiritual struggle to rejuvenate the Buddhist faith.<sup>293</sup> One can argue whether this was a direct conflict between faith and secularism, or whether Aung San was attempting to reconcile the two with a secular state that nevertheless nourished the private expression of faith. The religion scholar Timothy Fitzgerald acknowledges that there was a self-defeating incongruity to Aung San's policy of trying to keep the faith out of politics: "This meaning of politics is so general it lacks any clear distinction from Buddhist categories or from life in general. If all life is politics, then nothing is. (Equally, if all life is religion,

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<sup>289</sup> Silverstein, 1993, p.52

<sup>290</sup> Lintner, Bertil, "The Resistance of the Monks: Buddhism and Activism in Burma", for *Human Rights Watch*, 2009, p.16-18 <https://www.hrw.org/report/2009/09/22/resistance-monks/buddhism-and-activism-burma> Accessed 10/08/2024

<sup>291</sup> Seekins, Donald M., *Historical Dictionary of Burma (Myanmar)*, 2nd Edition, 2017, p.404

<sup>292</sup> Silverstein, 1993, p.71

<sup>293</sup> Silverstein, 1993, p.5-6

then nothing is.)”.<sup>294</sup> I will add that Aung San’s conception of secularism appears heavily moulded after Europe, such as the French ideal of *Laïcité*. As such, I believe this to be one of the clearest instances wherein Aung San represented the modernising force of the transition narrative, pushing to be more like Europe, whilst his opponents represented those forces in the transition narrative who wish to reject anything that Europe forced upon them.

## 2.5.2 - The Role of the Bogyoke in Death

Aung San was assassinated on the 19th of July, alongside most of his government cabinet. I will defer to Michael and Maitrii Aung-Thwin’s description of the day’s events in their book *A History of Myanmar since Ancient Times: Traditions and Transformations*. There are a huge amount of unanswered questions about the assassination which still vex historians, but which unfortunately go far beyond the scope of this paper. Around 10:30 AM Aung San was presiding over a cabinet meeting at the Secretariat Building in Rangoon when four armed men dressed in Burmese military uniforms burst into the room and executed everyone present before fleeing the scene. Besides Aung San, the victims included seven cabinet ministers and a bodyguard. The Aung-Thwins support the theory that the assassins were connected to Aung San’s political rival U Saw and that they were armed with weapons bought from two British officers known for supplying arms and munitions to Burmese paramilitaries. Whether these officers merely did it for profit or were part of a broader conspiracy was never discerned.<sup>295</sup>

Aung San died on a Saturday, with the *Review* scrambling to put together an issue by Monday to respond to this crisis. The frontpage article was simply entitled “*Bogyoke*” and contained a short description likening the severity of Aung San’s assassination and the outpouring of grief to what happened in America when President Abraham Lincoln was assassinated on April 15th, 1865. After Lincoln’s death he was commemorated in Walt Whitman’s poem “O Captain! My Captain!”, which the *Review* has printed on the frontpage in its entirety, declaring that the poem “written to express the great sorrow of the Americans may perhaps serve to express the great sorrow of the Burmese”. An article the following week drew comparisons between the assassination and the Cagouard murders in 1930s and 40s France carried out by fascists, in addition to the brutality of the Naizs in exterminating their political

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<sup>294</sup> Fitzgerald, Timothy, “Problems of Representation: Buddha Dhamma, Politics, and Nation States” in Verma, Vidhu (editor) *Secularism, Religion, and Democracy in Southeast Asia*, 2020, p.49-50

<sup>295</sup> Aung-Thwin, Michael and Aung Thwin, Maitrii *A History of Myanmar since Ancient Times: Traditions and Transformations*, 2013 p.237-238

opponents, as well as the assassinations of Chancellor Engelbert Dolfuss of Austria on July 25th, 1934 and King Alexander of Yugoslavia on October 9th, 1934. The *Review* bemoaned both the gruesomeness of the killing and the public spectacle Aung San's death had turned into.<sup>296</sup> Comparisons were also made, by both the *Review* and Irish newspapers, to the Irish Republican Army leader Michael Collins who was assassinated August 22nd, 1922.<sup>297</sup>

The *Review* maintained much of the same rhetoric about how the Burmese leader had been indispensable to the independence struggle, but now shifted its focus to the AFPFL as the manifestation of Aung San's legacy. Praise was given to the political leader U Nu, who had emerged as Aung San de-facto heir and successor to the role of Prime Minister. In fact, a little over a month before U Nu was to fill Aung San's shoes, the *Review* had been celebrating him repeatedly for his efforts as President of the Constitutional Assembly. The *Review* effectively rolled out the red carpet on U Nu's political ascent, though I hardly believe any of its authors expected that he would be the leader of the AFPFL before the end of that year's summer and Prime Minister of Burma by January 4th the next year.<sup>298</sup>

I found most writings after Aung San's death began to merely frame U Nu as the face of the AFPFL's collective influence over Burma. This was in keeping with how Aung San had presented himself, a manifestation of the will of the masses who only did what the AFPFL "asked" him to do.<sup>299</sup> An August 4th article described U Nu as a man forced by circumstance into the position of supreme leader, similar to how Aung San presented himself, but the article took care to note that U Nu's most popular quality simply seemed to be the amount of trust people could put into him that he was following in Aung San's footsteps. He was not described as having the larger than life personality which Aung San possessed.<sup>300</sup> In many ways, it appears he was having to work with the political playbook that Aung San had passed to him, that the leader of Burma had to present himself as a humble but virtuous servant of the people. Yet with Aung San having already filled that role for several years and dying the death of a martyr, U Nu was left living completely in his shadow. Several articles from the weeks following the assassination put just as much attention on U Nu as it did on his cabinet of ministers well as the political rise of Sao Shwe Thaik, the Shan nobleman who had taken

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<sup>296</sup> *The Burmese Review*, July 28th, 1947, p.9

<sup>297</sup> *The Burmese Review*, July 28th, 1947, p.1 and p.10

<sup>298</sup> *The Burmese Review*, May 16th, 1947, p.8 and May 30th, 1947, p.8

<sup>299</sup> Silverstein, 1993, p.53

<sup>300</sup> *The Burmese Review*, August 4th, 1947, p.8

over U Nu's role as President of the Constitutional Assembly and would later serve as the symbolic head of state of the Union of Burma.<sup>301</sup> I would argue that it almost paid more attention to these figures than to U Nu, Sao Shwe Thaik was given an entire front page article about his life and his noble fiefdom when he became President of the Assembly, whilst U Nu's ascent to Prime Minister was overshadowed by articles mourning Aung San, relegating him to the *Political Front* section around the middle of the paper.<sup>302</sup>

U Nu was likely not even the first choice for an eventual successor to Aung San. Had only the Bogyoke died on July 19th, who knows who might have succeeded him, but that day also saw the death of other important government figures such as Thakin Mya, who was specifically singled out by a article from the Times, reprinted in the *Review*, as the only man who might be mourned on par with Aung San.<sup>303</sup> Mya was serving as Deputy Prime Minister at the time of his death and Josef Silverstein notes he was a big political influence on Aung San, one of Aung San's speeches reproduced in *Political Legacy* also makes prominent mention of Mya's heroics during World War II.<sup>304</sup> Even when the *Review* was emphasising U Nu's "great personal prestige", as it did in December that year for his part in the peaceful dissolution of the PVO and in ending a brief period of leftist infighting within the AFPFL, that praise was presented in the context of his leadership position in the AFPFL and his closeness to Aung San. U Nu's greatest strength was not his own merits or his personal charisma, such things were rarely highlighted, but his greatest asset was invoking the Bogyoke's legacy when he could not get his way. The *Review* mentions that U Nu helped dissolve the PVO and end the aforementioned dispute by being able to "cite the clear wishes of the Bogyoke" to resolve these matters.<sup>305</sup> An article in the *Political Front* section of the December 22nd, 1947 issue of the *Review*, about a speech given by U Nu mentions that "Due acknowledgement was given to what the people of Burma have achieved under the banner of the AFPFL"<sup>306</sup>, which was followed by a second article in the same section next week that went into detail about the AFPFL and how the Bogyoke's personal beliefs had influenced

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<sup>301</sup> The Irrawaddy, September 25th, 2019 "The Day Myanmar's First President and Prime Minister Were Elected"

<https://www.irrawaddy.com/specials/on-this-day/day-myanmars-first-president-prime-minister-elected.html>  
Accessed 03/08/2024

<sup>302</sup> *The Burmese Review*, August 4th, 1947, p.1 and p.8-10

<sup>303</sup> *The Burmese Review*, August 4th, 1947, p.8

<sup>304</sup> Silverstein, 1993, p.7 and p.86-88

<sup>305</sup> *The Burmese Review*, December 15th, 1947, p.8

<sup>306</sup> *The Burmese Review*, December 22nd, 1947 p.8



it.<sup>307</sup> One could also attribute the *Review*'s refusal to put the spotlight on U Nu as being due to the man's own humility. This would be congruous with assessments of U Nu's personal character and how he personally framed his role as Aung San's successor, according to studies I have seen made by later historians and biographers, such as in Gustaaf Houtman's *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics: Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy*.<sup>308</sup>

In my research I discovered that after Aung San died, the photo printed in the *Review*'s article mourning him was a photo of Aung San wearing the Japanese style military uniform of the State of Burma government puppet government. The *Review*'s photograph is faded but you can make out the contours of Aung San's head and ears, which match a photograph of him from 1943 as Minister of Defence in the Japanese puppet state. I have compared it to other photographs of Aung San and this seems to be the closest match.



The image on the right is taken from the *Review*,<sup>309</sup> whilst the one on the left is taken from an article in the modern day *The Irrawaddy* newspaper.<sup>310</sup> Perhaps this was simply the only picture the *Review* had of Aung San that they could insert on short notice, but I believe it

<sup>307</sup> *The Burmese Review*, December 29th, 1947 p.8

<sup>308</sup> Houtman, Gustaaf *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics: Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy*, 1999, p.262-267

<sup>309</sup> *The Burmese Review*, July 21st, 1947, p.8

<sup>310</sup> Andrews, Jim "Aung San's Winning Ways", August 2005 in *The Irrawaddy*  
[https://www2.irrawaddy.com/article.php?art\\_id=4910](https://www2.irrawaddy.com/article.php?art_id=4910) Accessed 04/08/2024

indicates the manner in which Aung San's service to Japanese had by and large been assimilated into the larger mythos about the man himself. It did not matter if Aung San had served in the Japanese military, an enemy force, here is a broadly Anglophilic newspaper printing a photo of him in Japanese uniform, after he died while serving as the Prime Minister for a British self-governing colony. What mattered was that Aung San had always been loyal to Burma, his allegiances to Japan and to Britain were framed as temporary and irrelevant.

## 2.6 - Burmese Governance

### 2.6.1 - Burmese Republicanism and Dominion Status

The form of government Burma was to take was presumed early on to be a republic of some kind, there was little room in the AFPFL nor in the *Review*, or really in any other groups for discussing an alternative. Though attempts to restore the old Konbaung dynasty to the throne had taken place during the Japanese occupation, these were few and far between, being either instigated by more traditional members of the Burmese nationalist movement,<sup>311</sup> or by the Japanese themselves.<sup>312</sup> The opinion that the Burmese nationalist project was thus inherently republican was seconded by British observers at the time, such as Cecil Hobbs<sup>313</sup> and J.S Furnivall<sup>314</sup> both of whom contrasted the inhabitants of the pre-colonial Burmese monarchy with the "Modern Burman" who had developed as a politically engaged subject during the age of British colonisation and who was drawn towards a republican government. This resembles the transition narrative that Chakrabarty highlights for India, echoing that colonial rule can constrain the political imagination by compelling colonial subjects to compare themselves to their oppressors and to aspire to be like their oppressors. To envision oneself as a "Modern Burman" conforms to the European notions of historicism. Chakrabarty notes that if decolonial movements concede to the idea that they have to become modern, they concede to the European notion that they were "unready" to rule themselves before now, and thus strip themselves of their own agency and justify colonialism as a necessary a form of tutelage.<sup>315</sup>

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<sup>311</sup> Maung Maung, *Burmese Nationalist Movements, 1940-1948*, 1990, p.20-21

<sup>312</sup> Bobo, "The Royal Heirs of Ratnagiri, who have been pensioned since birth", published on *BBC - Burmese*, February 10th, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/burmese/in-depth-47190425> Accessed 04/08/2024

<sup>313</sup> Hobbs, Cecil "Nationalism in British Colonial Burma" in *The Far Eastern Quarterly*, Feb., 1947, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Feb., 1947), p. 113-121 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2049156> Accessed 04/08/2024

<sup>314</sup> Schober, Juliane *Modern Buddhist Conjunctures in Myanmar: Cultural Narratives, Colonial Legacies, and Civil Society*, 2010, p.67

<sup>315</sup> Chakrabarty, 2000, p.6-9 and p.30-40

This conflict between the monarchy of the past and the republic of the future, is referenced in one of Aung San's public statements that was made in 1941 during World War II but then republished in the British newspaper the *Guardian* early 1947. In this declaration, Aung San argues that Burma can no longer be a monarchy, because:

The history of Burma has shown clearly the weakness of this form of state particularly in a country like ours. In the olden days the stability of the administration was frequently disturbed because of the rivalry of claims to the kingship either in the life-time of a king or on his death. In the conception of the Burmese people, everything goes well if the head leads correctly but everything goes wrong if the head misleads or is unable to lead. There were several cases in our history in which chaos and confusion arose out of the debacle of the top leadership and discipline could not be maintained in that case.<sup>316</sup>

Aung San implies one such "debacle" was the British triumph in the Anglo-Burmese Wars. Much like with the issue of modernity, the Burmese had to concede to having possessed certain weakness, or at least what they had now been compelled to believe was weakness. This is one of the few parts of the Old Burma that was mocked and demonised, there was no love left for the monarchy, because the monarchy was so thoroughly associated with defeat. The fear of Burma being misled by an unwise ruler in some ways echoes Aung San's own personal form of leadership, as well as his rebellion against the Japanese Puppet President of Burma, Ba Maw. Veterans of the mutineering Burmese auxiliaries, who later joined forces with the British, made similar claims in the pages of the *Review*. Maung Maung, one such participant in the struggle, claimed that the arrival of Japan was just a "change of masters" and that the Japanese quickly set about elevating compliant Burmese leaders. Yet for the true nationalists "The glitter and glamour of the false independence came too late to attract or deceive", and many set about immediately trying to subvert the Japanese tyranny.<sup>317</sup> Whether true or not, veterans of this struggle were keen to present themselves in its aftermath as having avoided the mistakes that doomed the monarchy. Maung Maung and Aung San's assessments could arguably be correct, one of the arguments that Robert H. Taylor makes is that the *State of Burma* established by the Japanese fell in no small part because its central government failed to control dissident forces who did not wish to settle for what Japan as a

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<sup>316</sup> Silverstein, 1993, p.19-22

<sup>317</sup> *The Burmese Review*, July 7th, 1947, p.3 and p.14-15

new master, having alienated them by not going far enough to push Burma down the road of self-sufficiency and by giving them no real means to interface with the state beyond submitting to Ba Maw and the Japanese's rule, being mere clients of the government and not members of a collective political struggle.<sup>318</sup> In Robert Taylor's words:

The absence of electoral politics and the creation of a one-party pseudo-fascist state by Ba Maw and his associates, coupled with the economic and social dislocation caused by the war, provided no focus for political loyalty and little opportunity for individuals with organisational skills who sought to operate under state auspices.<sup>319</sup>

Another "debacle" from a central leader. This was a pitfall that Aung San took care not to step in, his own leadership when he took de-facto control of the independence movement was rooted in trying to garner mass appeal and to resolve issues democratically before they could fracture the unity of the nationalist cause. Aung San also warned in his 1941 statement that:

The study of Burmese history shows that when a monarchic dynasty was set up it worked well only for two or three generations after which it gradually relapsed into futility for the simple reason that it was impossible for new successors to the throne to discharge the high office and duty of king in a capable manner. The idea of stability associated with monarchy generally is therefore not true in the case of Burma.<sup>320</sup>

This too was a danger that his republican form of government managed to avoid, even after Aung San himself died, his successor U Nu was able to rise to the occasion and keep Burma stable on its road towards independence. One might argue to what extent the fear that after "two or three generations" a Burmese state falls into disarray turned out to be prescient, it was under U Nu's rule decades later that the Burmese civil war escalated into a nationwide conflict, culminating in a military coup against him in 1962 which laid the foundations of the current issues which plague modern day Myanmar.<sup>321</sup> Republicanism thus fell into some of the same trappings Aung San had associated with monarchy. Aung San's declaration called for a much stronger central government than the one which took shape in Post-WWII Burma. He explicitly says that Burma requires a leader similar to Hitler, Mussolini or the Japanese Emperors. This too became an argument for republicanism, if monarchism inherently led to weak leaders for Burma. Aung San went on to outline even should Burma be a constitutional

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<sup>318</sup> Taylor, Robert *The State in Myanmar*, 2009, p.233-262 and p.267-268

<sup>319</sup> Taylor, Robert, 2009, p.234

<sup>320</sup> Silverstein, 1993, p.20

<sup>321</sup> Steinberg, David, *Burma/Myanmar: What Everyone Needs to Know*, 2013, p.53-62

monarchy that too would lead to disaster because the king would be viewed as a weak figurehead beholden to the legislature, rather than a leader in his own right.<sup>322</sup>

This article must be read in the context that it was Aung San writing during the time he was actively collaborating with the Japanese Empire, and the historical document was preserved by Japanese observers in Burma, who may have embellished or altered parts of his language. Even so there is continuity with the transitioning Burma of 1945-1948. When Aung San declared that “There shall be only one nation, one state, one party, one leader”, that is effectively the result he got. The AFPFL became an all-encompassing entity which dominated Burmese politics, consciously excluding any dissident parties, whilst the Bogyoke himself became the unquestioned leader of the Burmese national struggle and his later successor U Nu became wholly beholden to that legacy. Burma was unified into a single nation, with many different races joining together through a federal structure, which was nevertheless administered by a single centralised government.<sup>323</sup>

The prospect of an independent decolonised Burma becoming a kingdom is presented in some articles of the *Review* as faintly ridiculous, a key example being the January 20th issue from 1947, where a short story entitled “*Vision of Freedom*” by Nwe Soe tells of a Burmese official named U Po Shwe who holds aspirations of trying to crown himself as King of Burma and liberate it from Britain. After a series of various mishaps, his endeavour fails as he and other aspirants to the throne become too corrupted by the prospect of power, the story ending with a condemnation from one of its narrator, a monk, that it will fall unto the next generations of Burmese, in the coming decades, to see genuine freedom brought to Burma.<sup>324</sup> In addition, terms related to monarchy and to nobility were sometimes used in specifically negative contexts. In one speech, U Nu likened the AFPFL to a theatre play and condemned those members of the party who aspired to play the role of “Prince” and lord over others.<sup>325</sup> There are, however, references to the role of monarchs and nobility during the 1947 Panglong Conference. The very first President of Burma, upon independence in 1948, was Sao Shwe Thaik, a nobleman who had attended Panglong as a representative of the Shan people.<sup>326</sup>

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<sup>322</sup> Silverstein, 1993 p.19-22

<sup>323</sup> Silverstein, 1993 p.19-22

<sup>324</sup> *The Burmese Review*, January 20th, 1947, p.3-4 and p.13-14

<sup>325</sup> *The Burmese Review*, December 22nd, 1947, p.8

<sup>326</sup> The Irrawaddy, “The Day Myanmar’s First President and Prime Minister Were Elected”, September 25th, 2019

<https://www.irrawaddy.com/specials/on-this-day/day-myanmars-first-president-prime-minister-elected.html>  
Accessed 03/08/2024

Other indigenous nobility also flexed their political muscle, such as when the ethnically Kachin representatives at Panglong threatened to secede should the Burmese government ever go back on its word to guarantee their liberties. The delegation's leader Sima Duwa Sinwa Nawng said: "If after freedom is obtained and then the freedom of the Kachins were impaired, then we Kachins will fight the Burmese and appoint our own king if necessary". Silverstein attributes this statement to an article that was written after the conference in the newspaper *New Times of Burma*, but notes it was made in direct response to the *Bogyoke's Seven Points*, a manifesto that was presented by Aung San at the Panglong Conference.<sup>327</sup>

The specifically ethnically Kachin nationalist movement, as it existed outside of the broader Burmese independence movement, was at that time in its infancy, largely revolving around the traditional tribal structure of Kachin society. Sinwa Nawng was something close to a king already, his title of Sima Duwa referred to his status as Duwa (Chief) over the Kachin people in the region known as Sima.<sup>328</sup> His words should not necessarily be interpreted that a hypothetical Kachin state within or without Burma would be a monarchy, one could also read them as a metaphor for the Kachin people taking their destiny into their own hands. Aung San himself had been part of the Thakin movement in the 1930s and 40s, which ran candidates in local Burmese elections under the party name Komin Kochin Aphwe (One's own King, One's own Kind)<sup>329</sup>. Several notable politicians in Burma, such as U Chit Hlaing of the General Council of Burmese Association had been referred to in life by various titles and nicknames that approximated King or Ruler, such as the Burmese word *Thamada* which literally translates to one who was elected but it carried strict religious connotations of Buddhist kingship, as the name was derived from an ancient mythological king who had been elected to lead mankind.<sup>330</sup> Another example would be *Adipadi*, used by Dr. Ba Maw during the time he was the head of state of the Japanese puppet state in Burma. Much like *Thamada*, this carries the connotations of referring to a royal figure, but the State of Burma was a republic and contemporary sources viewed Ba Maw as a President in spite of his choice of title. Historian Richard Cockett frames this title as an attempt to re-enact the pomp and circumstance of previous royal dynasties,<sup>331</sup> but I have seen other historians such as Virginia Thomson maintain that despite the eccentricities of Ba Maw, the State of Burma was an

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<sup>327</sup> Silverstein, 1993, p.22

<sup>328</sup> Laoutides, Costas and Ware, Anthony "Reexamining the centrality of ethnic identity to the Kachin Conflict" in Cheeseman, Nick and Farrelly, Nicholas (editors) *Conflict in Myanmar*, 2016, p.47

<sup>329</sup> Seekins, Donald M., *Historical Dictionary of Burma (Myanmar)*, 2nd Edition, 2017, p.184-185

<sup>330</sup> Taylor, Robert, *The State in Myanmar*, 2009, p.2

<sup>331</sup> Cockett, Richard, *Blood, Dreams and Gold: The Changing Face of Burma*, 2015, p.76

explicitly republican project and in some ways even more so than what the Japanese were comfortable with endorsing.<sup>332</sup> This is all to illustrate that a reference towards an indigenous monarch does not necessarily mean the speaker is also referencing the desire to form an indigenous monarchy as a form of government.

Republicanism also naturally tied into the discussion of Burma's status within the British Commonwealth. If Burma were to remain as a part of the British Commonwealth it would retain the British monarch as head of state, represented by a Governor-General. This would have led to similar issues such as the creation of the Irish Free State, where the heavily republican Irish nationalist cause had to comply with maintaining the British monarch as a head of state, at least until Ireland's exit from the Commonwealth in 1949. Such similarities were acknowledged by the *Review* in a number of articles. The *Review's* editorial staff first made the comparison in the December 30th, 1946 issue, where it claimed that Ireland had gotten a good deal from Britain and that the question of being a republic or a dominion was moot because Ireland had the right to change its own laws and constitutions at any time, without British interference, in fact it even had the political right to secede from Britain's sphere of influence if it so desired.<sup>333</sup> U Tin Tut wrote on March 3rd, 1947 about Irish politics and took a more nuanced tone, arguing that while Ireland was given considerable autonomy in its dominion status and presently held several exemptions, such as its leaders not having to swear an oath to the British monarch, not be represented by a Governor-General, as well as call themselves a Saorstát (Free State) instead of a dominion, these were exceptions that it had taken over 25 years since the establishment of the Irish Free State for Ireland to have codified into law.<sup>334</sup> The implications here were clear that while Burma and Ireland were similar nations whose struggles against Britain bore a striking resemblance, it may not be beneficial for Burma to compare itself to the Ireland of 1947. Both articles also highlighted the consequences of the Irish Civil War of 1922-1923, itself the result of a schism among the Irish nationalists about whether to accept dominion status or to seek total independence. The Burmese nationalist discourse was thus centred on learning from the Irish and avoiding the risk of a civil war akin to theirs during the independence process.

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<sup>332</sup> Thomson, Virginia, "Burma" in Kratoska, Paul H. (Editor), *South East Asia, Colonial History: Imperial decline: nationalism and the Japanese challenge (1920s-1940s)*, 2001, p.363-366

<sup>333</sup> *The Burmese Review*, December 30th, 1946, p.3-4 and p.14

<sup>334</sup> *The Burmese Review*, March 3rd, 1947 p.3-4 and p.13-14

The historian Nicholas Tarling highlights U Tin Tut's desire to use Ireland as a "precedent" for how Burmese independence and its future relations to Britain might play out, but notes that Tin Tut's aspirations failed to reflect that Burma would still be the junior party in the diplomatic relationship. He highlights a telegramme sent to Hubert Rance, the last Governor of British Burma, by Gilbert Laithwaite, one of the leading British diplomats who negotiated the decolonisation. In it, Laithwaite claims that if Burma were to join the Commonwealth, it would become dependent on British aid. What would follow would be a return to the same extractive, colonial relationship where Britain dominated Burma, which both Laithwaite, Rance and the Burmese desperately hoped to avoid. Laithwaite also cited the enormous "disadvantages" it would bring Britain to remain in Burma and be obligated to support a Dominion both financially and militarily. It shows that just like the Burmese wanted to be rid of Britain, there were forces in the British government who wanted to be rid of Burma.<sup>335</sup> Based on these articles, and the warning from Laithwaite about what dire effects Dominion status may entail, I can only speculate what influence the *Review* or U Tin Tut had on the decision for the Interim Burmese Government to seek total independence and to double down on its demand for a republican form of government. U Tin Tut was himself one of the key negotiators for independence at the Aung San-Attlee meeting, his later writings in the *Review* on that meeting do not reference explicit comparisons to Ireland or the question of republicanism versus dominion status, as noted before he principally expressed concern that full independence for Burma was the only way to avert what he saw as an otherwise inevitable war with Britain.<sup>336</sup> Perhaps the kind of war he was dreading was one akin to the Irish Civil War, where some Burmans would not accept dominion status and would rise up against the Interim Burmese Government and the British. The success of the talks with the British Prime Minister and the later creation of the Burmese Constitutional Assembly put some of these fears to rest. Though with the benefit of hindsight, we know that Burma would eventually be embroiled in civil war after independence, but this was a civil war based on sectarian and ethnic divides, not over whether Burma should be a republic or a dominion.<sup>337</sup>

## 2.6.2 - Constitutionalism and Accountability

The *Review* strove to affirm the notion that Burma would be a nation whose leaders and government would be held accountable by its citizenry in a functional democracy. The paper

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<sup>335</sup> Tarling, Nicholas Britain, *Britain, Southeast Asia and the Onset of the Cold War, 1945-1950*, 1998, p.199-201

<sup>336</sup> *The Burmese Review*, February 24th, 1947, p.11

<sup>337</sup> Dittmer, Lowell *Burma Or Myanmar? The Struggle For National Identity*, 2010, p.51-56



was keen to emphasise that by writing and convening to approve a Constitution, the Burmese were taking their nation's independence into their own hands. A February 17th article noted that the promise made by Britain that Burma would be independent by January 1948 was not a "time limit within which Burma will achieve independence", but rather a period of time for "for Burmans to settle the new Constitution as quickly as they can". The agency in attaining independence was presented as being held by the Burmese, not by the British. Independence would not be *granted* to Burma, it would be *won* through the influence of the constitution.<sup>338</sup>

An even earlier prototype for a Burmese Constitution is noted by the *Review* in a January 6th, 1947 article entitled "*A Village in the Vanguard*", where the writer L. B. Allen retells the contents of a broadcast made by Rangoon Radio on December 29th, 1946. This broadcast was in turn a description of events that took place roughly a week prior, when Aung San and a number of other Burmese notables attended a ceremony in the village of Kappali, near the city of Moulmein, where a vast charter was read out noting what the future Burmese government would promise to the individual villages of Burma as basic, guaranteed civil rights.<sup>339</sup> It is unclear whether Allen is retelling an event he was personally in attendance to and if he was the same man who made the broadcast, but he is described in sources outside the *Review* as a missionary who was active in this part of Burma for many years prior to this and reported for Christian missionary newspapers, so I have no reason to doubt he could also have been a correspondent for the *Review* and for Rangoon Radio in this situation.<sup>340</sup>

The Charter described in the article was mostly focused on local, municipal affairs, it echoes the same sentiments that would be expressed by other political figures as the baseline for Burmese governance. The government must be accountable to its people, the government's leaders must show integrity, the government must guarantee peace and lawfulness throughout the country, the government must be a democracy and the government must serve as an example and an aspiration to Burma's neighbours in Asia. Allen's reporting also singles out the similar theme that the many citizens of Burma must struggle and sacrifice together for the greater whole of the nation. He primarily quotes from a speech given by a nationalist named Francis Ah Mya, who had been reading out the charter at the event, as well as from an

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<sup>338</sup> *The Burmese Review*, February 17th, 1947, p.8

<sup>339</sup> *The Burmese Review*, January 6th, 1947, p.5-6

<sup>340</sup> Thompson, Virginia "The Far East in Periodical Literature. I: Indo-China, Thailand, Burma, Malaya" in *Far Eastern Survey*, Vol. 10, No. 14 (Jul. 28, 1941), pp. 166-168. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3021404> Accessed 05/08/2024

anonymous Burmese lawyer who commented on the event and echoed many of the same sentiments. Allen also uses the actual organising of the event itself and of village life in Kappali as a microcosm for how Burma can be governed collectively by its inhabitants. He compares the way in which the villagers of Kappali were able to come together to host the event, to feed its attendants and to prevent crime in the village, to the way that Burma itself can hopefully come together to manage itself.<sup>341</sup>

Lastly, Allen is also keen to single out the diversity that was on display in Kappali, nominally a Karen village, that was predominantly home to peasants, but that the attendants of the event came from a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds as well as professions. He not only singles out that there were both Karen, Bamar, Indians, Chinese, Whites, and Thais in attendance, but that among these there were “teachers, merchants, hpongyis<sup>342</sup>, representatives of the press, the church and government”, in addition to government ministers such as Aung San, British colonial bureaucrats and high ranking religious officials such as the Bishop of Rangoon and the aforementioned Francis Ah Mya. This was a crowd of attendees which crossed many of the boundaries between ethnicity, religion, class and the urban-rural divide. The crowd also included the wives of the key political representatives present, and presumably also wives and daughters of local villagers. This unity in diversity appears to have been so inspiring for Allen to see these people come together in harmony with one another. It is for this reason he dubbed the article “*A Village in the Vanguard*”, this was to Allen and seemingly to the *Review* the archetypical prototype of not just how Burma should be governed but also what the Burma that was being governed would consist of. Allen notes first: “Here was one village setting the pace for a whole countryside. A village in the vanguard of a nation's progress towards freedom and unity” and later in the article that “A village like Kappali, among the thousands of villages of Burma, might become a pattern for the nation”. He cited a local colonial official in attendance, the Commissioner of the Tenasserim Division, who according to Allen claimed that: “If this pattern of life works for a village, then why not for a nation? And if for a nation, why not for the world?”. It should be noted again that this is an article attributed to a missionary writing with positive hopes about Burma, and heavily quotes from colonial officials. It is not a nationalistic and hopeful article by a Burmese nationalist, but rather by a self-professed “observer” and a colonial official who are showing the same

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<sup>341</sup> *The Burmese Review*, January 6th, 1947, p.5-6

<sup>342</sup> A Burmese word referring to fully ordained Buddhist monks, also spelled “Pongyi”, the term had at this point also become synonymous with politically active monks in the independence movement. See for example: Smith, Donald Eugene *Religion and Politics in Burma*, 2015, p.99-107

aspirations as those nationalists, that Burma will be able to govern itself as a harmonious, egalitarian and collectively managed state.<sup>343</sup>

In “The Role of the Peasants”, I brought attention to an article written by Maung Yaza entitled “*Village Administration in Old China*”, that used a romanticised depiction of Asia’s past to argue for the inherently democratic and free nature of the traditional village social unit. That article was published several weeks after “*A Village in the Vanguard*”, but when you look at what concrete proposals Yaza made about how Burma as a sovereign state and the future Burmese government can learn from the village as a social unit, there are some striking similarities to L. B. Allen’s reporting. Yaza was keen to draw a continuity between democratic traditions of the past and the prospects of Burma’s future, he spoke positively of how villages are self-governing and how its people learn to adapt and to sustain themselves. He strikes a chord with Allen, as both writers claim that the idyllic and cooperative life of rural villages permit for religious freedom. Yaza writes that the “Maintenance of economic order, social harmony, political equilibrium and religious liberty” is integral to both village life and to the national governance, arguing that even if villages could not operate the exact same way they did millenia ago, they could cooperate with the central national government and adapt to ensure that these values are upheld. Yaza also writes “Retaining the headmen and the village elders, it may be possible so to frame a constitution wherein each villager, however remotely he may be dwelling from the seat of Government, may easily feel that he is having a hand in the administration of the country”, expressing a similar sentiment to the comments made by the Commissioner of Tenasserim in Allen’s article. The governance of Burma, in the eyes of both writers, becomes a shared responsibility that can be alleviated by building on the already existing bonds of the traditional rural countryside.<sup>344</sup>

The Constitutional Assembly was eventually elected on April 9th and would convene the next month in May, with over 80% of the seats being won by the AFPFL.<sup>345</sup> The election coincided with the Burmese New Year, known as Thingyan, resulting in days of public celebration not just to commemorate the religious significance of the Thingyan festival but also to celebrate the election and the approaching liberation of Burma. The April 28th, 1947 issue of the *Review* printed the transcript of a speech given by U Khin Zaw, director of the

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<sup>343</sup> *The Burmese Review*, January 6th, 1947, p.5-6

<sup>344</sup> *The Burmese Review*, January 27th, 1947, p.4

<sup>345</sup> Ricklefs, M.C, Lockhart, Bruce and Lau, Albert, et al (editors), *A New History of Southeast Asia*, 2010 p.325-326

Burma Broadcasting Service. Entitled “*The Burmese New Era*”, U Khin Zaw compared these jubilant days following the election to the aftermath of Victory in Europe Day and Victory over Japan Day in the United Kingdom. He was also keen to emphasise that the celebrations would come to mark a transformation of Burma and he shared the same sentiment expressed by the writer “Scribbler”, remarking that Rangoon was becoming more of a cultural melting pot in 1947 as all parts of the city were participating in the Thingyan celebrations together.<sup>346</sup>

### 2.6.3 - Burma on the World Stage

The impression of Burma given by the writing in the *Review* and in *Political Legacy* is that the nation, or at least its leaders and its intelligentsia, were keen to announce Burma’s independence to the rest of the world and to secure a position among the broader community of nations. 1947 contained a number of articles in the *Review* which spoke about the prospect of Burmese foreign relations and diplomatic engagements abroad. One such article was published on January 20th, 1947 entitled “*UNESCO And Burma*”, reprinting a speech given on the BBC by Daw Mya Sein, a prominent feminist who led some of the first women-focused political societies oriented towards Burmese independence. Mya Sein was a frequent representative of the Burmese people to feminist conferences and other political events abroad.<sup>347</sup> UNESCO refers to the “United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation”, at the time a new intergovernmental body which Mya Sein viewed with a great deal of optimism as her speech argues that it could serve as an important lynchpin in preserving the new peaceful world order after the end of WWII. Though Mya Sein highlights many of UNESCO’s and the UN’s stated goals, such as combating widespread “ignorance of each other’s ways and lives” and “notions about the inequality of men, races, and civilizations”, she puts emphasis on the organisation’s commitment to maintain the free exchange of ideas between different peoples and states as well as its responsibility to assist those nations that “must be helped to educate their people” due to ongoing circumstances such as “economic instability”, “poverty” and the aftermath of WWII.<sup>348</sup>

It is clear with this that Mya Sein views UNESCO and the UN as genuine attempts by what we today might call the Global North to reach out to less fortunate nations of the Global South, especially recently independent ones and assist them. Or, the centre reaching out to aid

<sup>346</sup> *The Burmese Review*, April 28th, 1947 p.6

<sup>347</sup> Blackburn, Susan and Ting, Helen (editors), *Women in Southeast Asian Nationalist Movements*, 2013 p.34-44

<sup>348</sup> *The Burmese Review*, January 20th, 1947, p.1 and p.7

the margins, if we use *Empire Writes Back*'s terminology. For such a beneficial relationship to be formed and be maintained however, nations must remain on peaceful and cooperative terms with one another. The *Review* entitled the speech "UNESCO and Burma", though it appears she leaves much of the actual concerns of Burma to the mere implications the speech makes. In the political climate of Burma in 1947, with independence looming on the horizon and the adamant desire of many political forces to make a decisive break with the past, through radical actions such as an immediate independence or the nationalisation of former colonial property, Mya Sein urges caution. She spends a lot of the speech explaining that UNESCO will not be a perpetuation of the exploitative and extractive relationship previously maintained between Europe and Asia, but rather it will be a mutually beneficial and "international" one. In her own words:

A condition of solidarity, harmony of purpose and coordination of activities in which free men and women can live a secure and satisfactory life. How can that peace be achieved unless the nations begin to understand each other, are able to communicate freely and to share each other's best products; unless the people of the world have been educated to accept the idea of a common world civilisation in which each natural culture will play its own part.<sup>349</sup>

She says that "There is no question of UNESCO becoming a cultural superstructure or of spreading any one culture over the others", urging readers to personally peruse UNESCO's constitution and various writings produced by the organisation. It is clear she favours the idea that Burma can not cut itself off from Europe after achieving its independence from Britain, the former colonial metropole will always remain a player in the political world stage. Her rhetoric is similar to what *Empire Writes Back* and Chakrabarty observe, that a decolonial nation can not ever truly entangle itself from its old oppressor, because to totally cut ties with its former rulers and the European metropole renders decolonial movements as existing in perpetual antagonism and rejection of the centre. They do not escape them, they merely act in opposition to them. Thus if given the choice, Mya Sein's speech frames the Burmese question of foreign policy, in particular its position towards the UN and UNESCO, as a choice where Burma should make peace with the old nations of Europe, in order to cooperate for their mutual benefit. Towards the end of the speech Mya Sein states: "Nations cannot come to know each other if they cannot exchange the fruits of their studies and pool together their

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<sup>349</sup> *The Burmese Review*, January 20th, 1947, p.1 and p.7

knowledge". This is congruous with other articles published by the *Review*, many of whom have urged for Burma to take its place on the world stage as an embodiment of a renewed Asian civilisation, the urging for Burma to aid in the creation of unified world peace and world culture is not mutually exclusive with also promoting a regional diplomatic and cultural renaissance.<sup>350</sup>

Another article I would like to highlight was released on February 24th, it warned that Burma was falling behind compared to India in making its voice heard abroad and in securing international diplomatic representation. It noted that prior to the separation from the British Raj in 1937, Burma had technically been a member of international bodies such as the League of Nations and the International Labour Organisation, as per its status as a province of the Raj, but after separation there had not been any major initiatives by Burmese leaders to follow up on reviving these diplomatic ties to non-governmental organisations. At the time the article was published, there were still ongoing discussions between the Interim Burmese government, as represented by the Governor of Burma's Executive Council, and the government of the United Kingdom over how Burma should be represented internationally. The *Review* called on the Burmese to cooperate with Britain to facilitate means by which Burma could forge formal bi-lateral diplomatic relations with other countries, particularly with its neighbours India, Thailand and China, as well as with the United States, the latter of which the *Review* claimed was emerging as the political nerve centre of the whole world.<sup>351</sup> Articles published in the following week expressed a varying tone, with the March 3rd, 1947 issue expressing indignation that in their eyes Burma continued to lack full diplomatic access to international organisations, rather than optimism that it would be granted soon. Though Burma had received an invitation that week to the International Emergency Food Commission in Washington, the *Review* still complained that British policies had "reduced Burma's international status to that of a colony and Burma's interests could not be properly or adequately advanced by this method". The paper was satisfied however that Burma had been invited to the British Commonwealth Trade Conference and its delegation would be treated as equal to those of the British Dominions. Even though the political sentiment within Burma leaned towards a swift but cordial exit from this sphere of influence, the *Review* still felt the country deserved to be treated with this degree of prestige.<sup>352</sup>

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<sup>350</sup> *The Burmese Review*, January 20th, 1947, p.1 and p.7

<sup>351</sup> *The Burmese Review*, February 24th, 1947, p.8

<sup>352</sup> *The Burmese Review*, March 3rd, 1947, p.7

By contrast, the March 24th issue was quite jubilatory, as Burma had at that point succeeded in negotiating a treaty with the United States of America for economic loans via Lend-Lease, independent of any mediation by the British. The article made note of Burma's history of attempting to pursue foreign relations even while under British rule, such as successful agreements in 1937 and 1941 negotiated by the then Prime Minister of Colonial Burma, U Saw, with his opposite in the British Raj to foster trade and freedom of movement with India. The article also notes a failed attempt in September 1941<sup>353</sup> by U Saw to negotiate an immigration treaty with Chiang Kai-Chek's Republic of China. The American loans were presented as the spiritual successors to these prior Burmese diplomatic ventures, and the *Review* framed the successful talks with Washington as the opportunity finally presenting itself for new Burmese diplomatic endeavours abroad. The *Review* was also keen to emphasise that this should mark another stage in what it hopes to be a long and prosperous relationship with the United States, noting that Burma already owed a great debt to the U.S thanks to efforts of the American Baptist Mission to educate native Burmese during the colonial era, and the efforts of American soldiers in liberating Burma from the Japanese during WWII. The *Review* describes these soldiers "appealing" to the Burmese because of their "frankness and generosity", while the Americans had in turn been "charmed" by the "racial characteristics of the Burmese", hopefully fostering a friendship between the two peoples going forward.<sup>354</sup>

In the December 29th, 1947 issue of the *Review*, the question of Burma's place in the world once again came to the forefront. This issue was published 6 days before Burma was to declare its independence and the frontpage article "*On the Threshold of Freedom*" by editor Khin Nyunt Yin was keen to emphasise this would allow Burma to finally be "politically equal to all other free nations". The transition from colony to a sovereign state was not just one of liberation for the Burmese peoples but also a chance for Burma to finally let its voice be heard in the world as an equal peer to other nations and not a subject of the British Empire. Khin Nyunt Yin repeatedly affirms, as we have seen argued before throughout the pages of the *Review*, that one of the most important parts of the declaration of Burmese independence is to announce Burma's triumph to the rest of the world, and to be able to build equal

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<sup>353</sup> In the article this is printed as 1947, but that would be impossible as the article was published March 24th of that year and it references U Saw's arrest in 1941, as such it is probably just a misprint.

<sup>354</sup> *The Burmese Review*, March 24th, 1947, p.9

diplomatic relations with other nations. She is keen to affirm that Burma will require allies going forward, even if Khin does argue that “in the main the people of Burma will have to rely on themselves to maintain the freedom that has been regained”.<sup>355</sup>

#### 2.6.4 - Burmese Socialism in Government

“*On the Threshold of Freedom*” is also notable for beside its diplomatic appeals, it also contains a clear statement of intent that “the task of building up a socialist state must begin”.<sup>356</sup> As noted above, the article was written by the editor of the *Review*, Khin Nyunt Yin, and it explicitly argues that Burma is to be a socialist state, on the paper’s frontpage. Socialism had already been the policy of the AFPFL for nearly a year at this point, which *Review* had conceded to on December 8th in an article in the *Political Front* section where the paper noted that the policies of the two newly formed political parties, the Burmese Socialist Party and the Marxist League, were practically synonymous with the “economic principles” promoted by the late Aung San, but the writers and publishers of the *Review* rarely personally chosen to use the same kind of left-wing rhetoric. The very same article contains the *Review* editorial staff arguing in favour of “a planned socialist economy not in its ideological but in its practical sense”<sup>357</sup>. This type of expression was common during most of 1947, an article from May of that year during the announcement of the Burmese Draft Constitution was keen to point out that the Constitution was “not that of a socialist state”, though it was described as a “swing towards the Left”.<sup>358</sup> Likewise, an article from July likened both capitalism and socialism to a Burmese folk tale about a Wishing Tree that grants any gift one requires, but when mankind started consuming the fruits of the tree in far greater excess, it eventually vanished. This is the same story Aung San referenced during his expulsion of the Communists from the AFPFL over their “misuse” of his name (as was covered in “The Role of the Bogyoke in Life”), which served as a metaphor for why he could not immediately solve all of Burma’s problems overnight.<sup>359</sup> Now we see the *Review* using it as allegory for the crisis of the western capitalist system during the Great Depression and World War II, as well as the ideological zealotry of the Soviet Union, arguing that only

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<sup>355</sup> *The Burmese Review*, December 29th, 1947, p.1

<sup>356</sup> *The Burmese Review*, December 29th, 1947, p.1

<sup>357</sup> *The Burmese Review*, December 8th, 1947, p.8

<sup>358</sup> *The Burmese Review*, May 26th, 1947, p.10

<sup>359</sup> Silverstein, 1993, p.49



“practical socialism” as embodied by the motto “Produce and Trade” can nurture the the independent Burmese nation.<sup>360</sup>

Khin Nyunt Yin’s article “*On the Threshold of Freedom*” is directly accredited to her by name and contains a ringing endorsement that was a break with the *Review*’s more neutral coverage of socialism. Whether that neutrality had hitherto been due to personal distaste, or for risk of alienating their more upper-class readership, I cannot say, but this stands out as a key point which the socialist future of Burma was recognised as undeniable and inevitable by even the *Review*. Khin also frames the future Burmese state as a “great machine”, run according to the collective will of the Burmese people. The kind of language she uses to describe the socialist ideology that will guide its government is a stark contrast to the “practical” socialism that the *Review* was speaking about just weeks prior. Khin’s rhetoric is not just about public healthcare or nationalisation of key industries, she frames socialism and collective rule as a foundational cornerstone to the Burmese state and to the very identity of the Burmese nation. The satirist Thuyai punctuated this victory for Burmese socialism and its recognition in the Burmese *Review* with a joke on the next page about how greater accommodations for left-handed people was a clear sign of the world’s “leftist trend”.<sup>361</sup>

The *Review*’s change in tone over the course of these weeks could be explained by some the paper’s own justifications made in the *Political Front* section of the paper, now socialism was being framed as a policy that had been adopted as an integral part of Burma’s political and national identity by democratic resolutions in the Burmese legislature, and thus it represented the will of the people and the spirit of democracy, it was no longer at risk of being an imposition made upon the nation and its people. In a short editorial entitled “*The Economic Front*”, the *Review* argued that “state socialism” was a simple concept that the average Burmese peasant or proletarian could understand, describing the policy “as natural as it is wise”. They affirmed that it would also be a cudgel against the more extreme forces of communism and that it would be founded upon cooperation between “all classes of people” without favouring any to the detriment of others. The *Review* went as far as to describe socialism as a form of economic liberty that was synonymous with the political liberty that a sovereign Burma and its people would soon enjoy.<sup>362</sup>

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<sup>360</sup> *The Burmese Review*, July 7th, 1947, p.1 Note, the quote here is referring to “produce” as in “to produce something”, not “produce” as in “a product”.

<sup>361</sup> *The Burmese Review*, December 29th, 1947, p.2

<sup>362</sup> *The Burmese Review*, December 29th, 1947, p.8-9

### 3.0 - Summary and Conclusion

The national discourse of Burma, immediately preceding independence, was defined by what the source materials tell us were conflicts between a more pro modernisation, pro European transition narrative, versus forces who explicitly rejected these policies. These sources give little evidence if these forces of reaction and tradition were actual real, concrete threats to the future of Burma, but they were definitely perceived to be that way. Ultimately though there was also a nuance and varying degrees of commitment to modernisation, as evident by debate over Dominion status and broader conflicts over how to deal with the legacy colonialism had left on Burmese culture, where even ardently pro-European forces took a step back and argued for a more cautious approach that either found itself somewhere in the middle between European modernity versus native tradition, or which sought to circumvent and ignore this dichotomy altogether. Take for instance the attempts at integration of Burmese racial and religious minorities, rather than perpetuate European colonial methods of governance and segregation between the peoples of Burma, both the *Review* and Aung San declared that Burma should be a cultural melting pot and that minorities would have the right to be recognised as individual members of the greater whole of Burma. The pursuit of federalism was modelled after Europe and the West, the source materials make explicit comparisons to both the Soviet Union as well as the British Commonwealth as systems similar to the ones they envision for Burma, but we must also remember that the Burmese claimed that this kind of ethnic autonomy was already in place before the British arrive and had merely been disrupted by colonial oppression.

Authors like Ta Hla in his article on Manipur, as well as the *Review*'s repeated editorials about "close racial affinity" between Burmese ethnic groups promoted a narrative which sought to circumvent the dichotomy between Modernisation and Tradition. With this way of thinking, becoming modern was simultaneously a way to return to what was perceived as a tradition. We see a similar type of rhetoric used in the various descriptions of Asian and particularly Burmese village life as a model for governance and broader society, here Burma was returning to what was seen as an inherently progressive and democratic aspect of its society which were dismissed and suppressed by Europe's prejudice. Both sources often promote this way of thinking as a beacon for other nations, particularly in Asia, to follow. A recurring theme throughout all the materials I have examined is Burmese independence being presented as something inevitable, that this was a natural outcome with the arc of the

universe bending towards some kind of justice where oppressed nations returned to the world stage after WWII. It was not depicted as a material process motivated by the physical realities of the war or of Britain being unable to maintain a colonial hegemony in the region any longer. It was, to both the *Review*, the AFPFL and to Aung San, simply the way that things were meant to be that Burma had manifested some kind of force greater than itself.

I am reminded of Aung San Suu Kyi's description of her father, a biased retelling of a man she only ever knew as a child, but one I believe provides a useful perspective on the kind of the reverence shown for Aung San. His larger than life personality allowed him to command not just troops and political power, but also commanded a kind of spiritual, national force which transcended physical description. I am inclined to believe her, based on both the sources and literature I have read, Aung San and the independence movement in this era had a strange ability to unify and direct political force. The source materials give the impression that he does embody an image of "history on horseback". Whether this was due to some supernatural charismatic quality in the man himself, or if he was merely in the right place at the right time to command this kind of political movement, is another question altogether.

U Khin Zaw elaborated on the kind force and character of Burmese nationalism in his May 19th speech, and it is also referenced as existing in other Burmese struggles, such as in the unification of the old Burmese Kingdoms and their various golden ages. It was also a force that, according to the *Review* and *Political Legacy*, was not derived not from any inherent racial and cultural supremacy among the Burmese, but instead through their willingness to struggle together, endure hardship and sacrifice for a greater good. Of note is also the fact that this spiritual force and this national character was not explicitly Buddhist. Both the *Review*, Aung San and the AFPFL certainly appealed to Buddhist values and utilised expressions derives from Buddhist myths intermingled with Burmese folklore, but it reads more to me more as the Burmese themselves framing it as a secular esprit de corps or a type of cultural character which empowered the Burmese, rather than a religious zeal associated with a specific organised faith. Combined with Aung San's aspirations for a secular state, perhaps this was a way to expand the Burmese national identity to religious minorities.

This "force" overlaps somewhat with the sense of Burmese exceptionalism presented throughout the source material, particularly in the *Review*, that Burma was the nation that would demonstrate peaceful decolonisation was possible and serve as a guiding light for the

rest of Asia. Take for instance Maung Yaza and other Burmese writers imploring Asia to look to the traditional peasant village as a model to not just rebuild after World War II, but also to model a future nation after. This kind of attitude was sometimes boastful and at other times naive, see for instance the *Review* imploring the Viet Minh to return to the negotiating table with France, or being blindsided by the outbreak of violence in India and Indonesia. I would argue that the *Review*'s blind spot in failing to acknowledge Burmese Muslims could also fall under this naïveté. I say this not to demean the *Review* for being unable to predict the future, but it is remarkable that much of the optimism about peaceful decolonisation expressed in early 1947 was proven wrong in a matter of months. I believe it speaks to the zeitgeist at the time, one rooted in optimism and belief that the hard part of independence was behind them.

Chakrabarty defines transition narratives as discourse around modernisation, where the two possibilities for decolonised peoples are most often to either mimic their European oppressors by getting rid of what made them weak, “backwards” and susceptible to being colonised in the first place, or to wholly reject everything European that had been forced upon them and instead to double back on their traditions and the image of a romanticised past. I find that the Burmese transition narrative dabbles in both of these to an extent, as there is definitely a focus on wanting to build a better Burma that can not be harmed again and which will retake its rightful place in the world as a modern nation state, but neither the *Review*, Aung San or the AFPFL go as far into the first approach as to call for the abandonment of Burmese traditions or labelling Burmese traditions in and of themselves as backwards. I would argue that they became susceptible to what Chakrabarty dubbed thinking with the “logic of capital”, embracing Western notions of industrialisation as key to modernity and emphasising the need for productive labour. Even so, they never derided their precursors as weak or unproductive, merely as oppressed by powers greater than them. They praised older traditions and sought a continuity between Burma's past, its present struggles, and its hopeful future. A few subjects are singled out as negative, such as the former Konbaung Dynasty and some of the blind devotion that they claim that the Burmese masses have often shown towards their leaders, but there is no over hostility to the past. There is a break with the past, an acknowledgement that this is to be a New Burma, but it is an amicable separation from the pre-colonial past.

In terms of the option for the Burmese to return to tradition and to reject European influence, this was almost entirely ruled out; nobody in the source materials wants to reject the benefits of modernisation. They instead believe that the negative aspects of colonial rule, the wounds

it has left in the Burmese psyche and the way it has altered Burmese culture, will inevitably resolve themselves and heal. The English language will gradually slink back into obscurity among the Burmese, European fashions will cease to be as popular, and the vast gulf of differences between Buddhism and the Christian faith will eventually be bridged by common understanding and interfaith dialogue. Take note however that no such peaceful assimilation was ever discussed for Islam. Despite its supposed prominence in most decolonial discourse, especially in Southeast Asia according to *Empire Writes Back*, throughout the materials I researched there was no acknowledgement of cognitive dissonance in regards to language. Neither the *Review* nor Aung San and the AFPFL pay much attention to the fact they are writing and publishing works in English, the language of their old hegemon, and the *Review* in particular makes gleeful wordplays in the English language. They do not acknowledge that by their own logic, if Burma will abandon English and it will go the way of Latin and only be remembered by a small set of aficionados and academics, then they are condemning much of their own writing to the dustbin of history.

The *Review* also makes constant references to European, and particularly British history and elements of high culture such as the Ancient Classics, Shakespeare and Arthurian Myth, blending them occasionally with references to Burmese and Buddhist history and myth. Aung San and the AFPFL however mainly focus on just Burmese and Buddhist references, though even these are few and far between compared to the quantity of Europeanisms brought up in the *Review*. This kind of mixings of language, religion and culture is never really outright acknowledged in the source material, besides the *Review* praising Burma for becoming more of a melting pot and arguing that things such as the English language will steadily fade away. The European topics are not referenced to make a point whether that be to be more European or to highlight how out of place they seem, barring a few symbols such as the Bungalow, but instead they are just treated as a part of daily life, daily conversation and daily political discourse in Burma, for better and for worse. In terms of the Burmese transition narrative and the nation's aspirations, the results of this study has led me to believe that the transition narrative and Burma's decolonial discourse is just one small part of the much broader history of Southeast Asia. The *Review* and Aung San himself makes many conscious remarks tying Burma's history and its fate to that of its fellow decolonising states, particularly Vietnam as well as to a lesser extent India and Indonesia. A similar study could be carried out using my methods and theories, and a similar set of sources such as public statements on newspapers, that examines these other nations, either with the intent of analysing them in comparison to

Burma or in order to discern a broader transition narrative for the whole of Southeast Asia. Chakrabarty and the Subaltern Studies Group have already lit the way for this with efforts to study India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, so I implore others to read his works and to see if his theories may be applicable to even more countries in South and Southeast Asia.

I believe there would be merit to examining more about how the *Review* and the documents of the AFPFL address specific nations and cultures in the world. I have generally sought to highlight those instances where the source material contains specific comparisons between Burma and the Burmese with another state, culture or people, but more could be gleaned from trying to discern what specific traits that the Burmese political intelligentsia at the time attributed to other nations. I have referenced a study of this nature already by David K Coffey which was carried out on how Burmese sources described Ireland, its people and its politics. There is also Frank N. Trager's work, which deals with early Burmese-American relations, as well as Ruth Fredman Cernea's research into how the Burmese viewed Jews and the foundation of the State of Israel. Similar efforts to these could be carried out with how the *Review* describes foreign nations like the Soviet Union, Thailand or the Philippines, all of whom make fairly frequent appearances throughout the source material I've covered. This may also open up more room to study the *Review's* and *Political Legacy's* attitude towards Burmese Muslims, and members of other faiths besides Buddhism and Christianity.

There is a noted absence in all of the source materials of issues addressing Burmese women, at least insofar as I am accustomed to when researching postcolonial topics or when reading literature on the subject such as *Empire Writes Back*. I could find very little intrinsically linking them to the national discourse or to the transition narrative. This is surprising to me, as the Burmese Nationalist Movement of the 1920s and 30s was ripe with discourse about women. I will note two scholars of this field, Chie Ikeya who writes about what forms of women's fashion was seen as pro-Burmese or anti-Burmese, and Nyi Nyi Kyaw who writes about the racialised aspect of Burmese xenophobia which often depicted Indian and Chinese labourers in the country as coming to steal and violate Burmese women.<sup>363</sup> Based on my previous familiarity with the Burma of this era, I fully expected to see references to these

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<sup>363</sup> Ikeya, Chie "The Modern Burmese Woman and the Politics of Fashion in Colonial Burma", in *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 67, No. 4 (Nov., 2008), p.1277-1308. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20203486> Accessed 07/08/2024 and Nyi Nyi Kyaw, "The Role of Myth in Anti-Muslim Buddhist Nationalism in Myanmar" in Frydenlund, Iselin and Jerryson, Michael (editors) *Buddhist-Muslim Relations in a Theravada World*, 2020, p.209-210

issues in my source material and I was very surprised by their absence. They are almost genderless in how rarely they address Burmese men and Burmese women. This may be a subject worth researching for other scholars, especially considering the way that women have today become rather ubiquitous with the political situation in Myanmar, such as with the treatment of Aung San Suu Kyi and the numerous women's protests against the current military government. I believe it would also be beneficial to study the image of masculinity in Burmese history, though both approaches should consider using a wider assortment of sources, especially among other Burmese newspapers that may lend themselves better as material for gender studies.

I was encouraged by my thesis advisor to go outside my comfort zone and seek out new writers, such as those of the Subaltern Study Group, in order to conduct a more extensive study on Burma. This was a good first step, but I believe that a truly holistic view on the Burmese transition narrative will require further insight into both the psychology as well as the sociology of colonialism and decolonisation. I have some experience with this, in regards to Burma thanks to the work of Maitrii Aung-Thwin, but he primarily writes about what had historically motivated violent insurrections against the British. Psychological and sociological approaches to the trauma of colonialism and the motivations that defined the independence struggle in its peaceful, negotiated phase, would be greatly beneficial I feel, especially when dealing with people such as Anglo-Burmans who are in a sense torn between two worlds. While psychology and sociology is one angle, I would also encourage other researchers to tackle the *Burmese Review* and Silverstein's collection with the benefit other postcolonial theorists as well as theorists of nationalism that I did not have room to include, there is the opportunity for more insights there and had I more time to research it as well as the space in this paper, I would've gladly incorporated more of James C. Scott and his views on East Asian nationalism, particularly in the remote frontiers of the region. There is also room to tackle the role of gender and sexuality in the Burmese transition narrative, as previously noted it struck me as consciously absent from the pages of the *Review* and other source materials, but I did not cover what the *Review* wrote about foreign women or specifically British women, as it did not relate directly to comparisons women of Burmese descent.

Lastly, to conclude this paper I wish to harken back to a subject Silverstein brought up in *Political Legacy*, that the field of Burma studies is fundamentally incomplete and may be impossible to complete due to the amount of missing information that has either been lost to

history or sealed away in Burmese government archives which have not opened for decades. In Silverstein's life, Burma/Myanmar went through many periods of political thaw and authoritarian resurgences, which affected historians ability to access source materials, and as previously noted he considered his collection of Burmese materials to be the most recent and most accurate one extant by the 21st century. Knowing this context and this struggle with Burmese source materials, I chose the Burmese Review to work with because I knew it was easy to access but could not find many other historians who had endeavoured to utilise it.

I hope this goes some way to demonstrate that in spite of Silverstein's pessimism, there is still material out there, available online, available in the world language of English, that historians can access and take into account for their own research. Silverstein claimed that no major innovations or discoveries had been made in terms of Burmese source materials since the 1970s, but in spite of that I personally do not believe the field of Burma studies to be at a total dead end. My own aspiration with this paper is to show that it is worth the effort for historians to continuously push the boundaries of what we can learn about Burma's decolonial history by continuing to pour over what materials that are available to us, and to make them more readily available, until we have well and truly exhausted every part of them.



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