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BURMESE CULTURE DURING THE COLONIAL PERIOD IN THE YEARS 1885-1931

THE WORLD OF BURMESE VALUES IN REACTION TO THE INCLUSION OF COLONIALISM

ABSTRACT The colonial period in Burma marked the start of slow changes which would eventually turn a traditional society into a modern one. The changes in Burmese culture which took place in the colonial period were an important aspect of this transformation. In the period of British rule, Burmese culture found itself in an ambivalent situation, on the one hand opposing foreign models and ideas and, on the other, adopting numerous foreign cultural elements which, if treated as cultural tools, allowed for the protection of autotelic indigenous Burmese values.

Keywords: Burma, colonialism, culture, values

The country presently known as the Republic of the Union of Myanmar may be considered an entity created primarily by the events that took place in the 19th century. This century of conquest, electricity and steam had a great impact on the political, economic, social and cultural situation in the country. The three Anglo-Burmese wars which took place during this period, the first in the years 1824-26, the last in 1885-1886, eventually resulted in the total annexation of Burma (FINK 2001: 17). Even before this turn of events, Burma's political elite were well aware of the political and technological superiority of the invaders. Although attempts were made to modernise the country, the impending tragedy could not be stopped. The colonisation of Burma was partially a result of external factors such as the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 which revolutionised the economic relations between the East and the West. Burma became a profitable source of raw materials for the Western market. The colonisers attempted to transform Burma into a consumer of western goods and, through trade, incorporate the country into the sphere of world economy. The Burmese economy had to adapt to this new approach and many structural changes were introduced. Colonialism led to economic exploitation and military oppression but it was also a source of previously unknown inventions, ideas and currents of thought. These pertained to the economic changes mentioned above, the political sphere and even the legal system. As in other colonies, these changes posed a challenge for Burmese culture, the traditional Burmese way of life.

In the period of British rule, Burmese culture found itself in an ambivalent situation, on the one hand opposing foreign models and ideas and, on the other, adopting numerous foreign cultural elements which, if treated as cultural tools, allowed for the protection of autotelic indigenous Burmese values. This process of cultural mimicry¹ also occurred in British Burma among other forms of reaction to colonialism. According to Partha Chatterjee, who may be considered the anthropologist of nationalism, this ideology, a "European import" that founds its way into the colonies, functioned in two parallel domains: the material and the spiritual. Chatterjee describes the first domain as external, encompassing the spheres of „the economy and of statecraft, of science and technology, a domain where the West had proved its superiority and the East had succumbed" (CHATERJEE 2010: 26-27). It was this domain that was subject to the process of cultural mimicry in its attempts to resemble the West, it was here that "Western superiority had to be acknowledged and its accomplishments carefully studied and replicated" (CHATERJEE 2010: 27). The exact opposite situation took place in respect to the spiritual domain, considered independent and "internal," containing the essence of cultural identity (CHATERJEE 2010). Any attempt to intervene in the spiritual domain, where the autotelic values of any given culture are located, is met with spontaneous and uncompromising resistance direct against the colonial power. That is why close examination of the changes which take place in the spiritual domain in times of colonial rule is of the utmost importance for studies on the development of local nationalism.

¹ For more on the subject of cultural mimicry see: BHABHA 2010: 79-88.

Since the colonisation was conducted by the British Raj, Burma was annexed to it as a subordinate province. This was the greatest mistake made by Great Britain in its relations with the newly acquired colony. As a result of the introduction of administrative models based on those introduced by the British in India, administrators who did not speak Burmese and had little or no knowledge of Burmese culture and customs, were unable to create a system which would relate to the local reality. In order to impose its rule, the British Empire, “on which the sun never sets,” relied on its technological superiority and the power of its state-of-the-art army, which were the primary factors that allowed for the spectacular conquest of Burma. Upon seizing power the borders of the new colony were established in an arbitrary manner by Victorian diplomats and cartographers at Fort Williams (THANT MYINT-U 2001: 220), which upset the existing ethnic and religious ties. Apart from ethnically Burmese lands, the newly established area covered a part of the borderlands whose relation with the Kingdom of Ava was tributary or formally non-existent. However, in the 20th century, these borders, marking the areas of colonial influence, became a basis for the establishment of the geopolitical framework of the newly formed Burmese state. What is more, the British, employing the old Roman principle of *divide et impera*, would frequently favour the representatives of the ethnic minority, allowing them, for instance, to serve in the colonial army, which was inaccessible to those who were ethnically Burmese (SILVERSTEIN 1977: 16). By and large, representatives of the British Crown allowed the heads of the local ethnic communities to retain their internal autonomy. Consequently, local social structures were preserved in an unchanged state. Royal and subsequently colonial policy resulted in the creation of strong separatist tendencies within the ethnic minorities which still exist in present-day Burma and are particularly evident among the Shan and Karen people. These tendencies had a substantial impact on the relations between the dominant ethnic group and the minorities and resulted in the creation of a specific type of nationalism in Burma – ethnic nationalism.

THE CLASH OF CULTURES

During a visit to a newly constructed British estate in colonial Burma in 1901, the Viceroy of India, George Curzon, known as the Lord Curzon of Kedleston, assured his listeners that “British [...] do not [...] wish that people should lose the characteristics and traditions [...] of their own race” (CHARNEY 2009: 7). In reality, however, the actions of the new British rulers brutally targeted Burmese culture and national pride. For instance, the Village Act of 1889, among other sanctions, obliged all Burmese nationals apart from Buddhist monks to show respect to British officers by use of the *shikho* greeting, previously reserved for the most important elders, representatives of the *Sangha* – the Buddhist monastic order – and the Buddha (CHARNEY 2009). In the aftermath of colonial conquest, Buddhist values and personal responsibilities to the royal throne were replaced with the indifferent, if not directly hostile, British administration which had little to no knowledge of Buddhist ideals.

The British colonialists of the time were adamant that

England [was] the most highly enlightened and civilized nation upon earth, enjoying the knowledge of the sublime truths of the Christian revelation in its purest form, freed from the errors and corruptions which human devices introduced [...] (ALMOND 1988: 40).

Moreover, this “exceptional” nation had a specific mission to carry out, best described by an article from an 1854 issue of the *London Quarterly Review*, in which the following words appear:

we have been raised up to civilize the savage, to colonize the uninhabited, but habitable, portions of the globe, and to diffuse the blessings of the Gospel amongst mankind (ALMOND 1988: 42).

The majority of the British shared the cold sentiment of superiority in relation to the peoples under the authority of the British Empire. This belief was best expressed by the famous British coloniser Cecil Rhodes, in whose honour the name Rhodesia was given to one of the colonies in Africa, who once said: “We happen to be the best people in the world, with the highest ideals of decency and justice, and liberty and peace, and the more of the world we inhabit the better it is for humanity” (SHAH 2012: 45). A common belief in the Victorian era was that the so-called “oriental brain” was “less intelligent, more fanciful, childish and simple, prone to exaggeration, generally indolent, and lacking in originality” (ALMOND 1988: 41). The Burmese themselves were deemed “simple as children of Nature, kind towards man and beast and creeping things, easily pleased, courteous to the last degree contented and peaceful, and devoted to the faith of the Buddha” (ALMOND 1988: 48). Racism was not so much an incidental fact in the history of the British Empire, but rather the chief support behind the entire British colonial system (DARWIN 2012). Because of this approach towards the colonised many among the British colonisers did not even attempt to understand the Burmese in the context of their own culture. The British and the Burmese, two neighbouring societies, were divided by pronounced cultural differences, as stated by a Burmese minister during his conversation with a British emissary in 1826: “Your and our customs are so completely opposite in so many points. You wrote on white, we on black paper. You stand up, we sit down, you cover your head, we our feet in token of respect” (SHAH 2012: 45). Apart from racism, the macho ethos cultivated by the colonisers, according to which they were “masculine imperialists conquering the feminine East” (SAHA 2013), was also highly important in the history of the British Empire.

CREATION OF COLONIAL HISTORY

When writing about the colonial period in Burma it is worth noting that historians who study this period select certain facts which, according to them, are the most important and subsequently present them in a certain order while also suggesting a particular ex-

planation of these events (HONG 1996: 46). Analyses pertaining to the colonial period focus primarily on the history of the creation and development of local political elites, the study of political parties, their leaders and nationalist movements. As a result, changes that occurred in terms of culture and values remain in the background. Political elites are seen as the most dynamic forces which greatly influence national and political reality. However, it is worth noting that their representatives cannot operate in a cultural vacuum, their actions are always governed by their native culture and the values contained within it. The most important question is not how these new elements, ideas and institutions were introduced into Burma, but rather how they were perceived by the Burmese population and how they were incorporated and subordinated to the pre-existing ideologies and value systems. According to Thongchai Winichakul, history requires that those who create it “reconsider the underlying concepts, assumed theories, and reigning paradigms, within which we are refining our craft” (THONGCHAI WINICHAKUL 2003: 3). This is particularly important in the context of the history of colonial Burma, which was written practically in its entirety by the British, for the British and based on British sources. That is why the materials which serve as sources when writing about the colonial period present primarily the British point of view. Access to local sources is much more difficult due to the language barrier. During the colonial period representatives of the British administration studied “religion, culture and language [...] to understand the ‘mentality’ of colonial subjects.” [...] (HONG 1996: 49), conducting their research in the service of the colonial project. It is therefore highly important that the specific cultural context of the colonial period is recognised by the historian. As stated by Frantz Fanon: “the colonial world is a Manichean world” in which “[...] the dividing line is determined by the fact of belonging to a particular species, to a particular race” (FANON 1985: 23). The colonial reality is therefore marked by a separation between the autochthons and the colonisers who exercise authority over them. The colonisation of Burma coincides with a rapid growth in the number of European sources describing it, written by missionaries, merchants, colonial officials and travellers. Gradually these materials become more detailed, comprehensive and thoughtful. A good example of the latter comes in the form of George Orwell’s *Burmese Days*. Through the words of the book’s main character, Flory, Orwell describes the actions of the British Empire in Burma: “[...] I don’t deny that we modernise this country in certain ways [...] In fact, before we’ve finished we’ll have wrecked the whole Burmese national culture. But we’re not civilising them [the Burmese], we’re only rubbing our dirt on them” (ORWELL 1962: 42).

THE FALL OF MONARCHY AND THE SAYA SAN REBELLION

Among the wounds inflicted on Burmese culture by the colonial administration the abolition of the institution of monarchy may be considered one of the most painful. It took one night to transform the kingdom into a province of the British Raj. The royal family was exiled and the last king of Burma, Thibaw, died in 1916 in the Indian city of Rattanakiri (GRAVERS 2007: 8). Attempts were made to weaken the connection be-

tween the royal family and Burma. Among other restrictions, the king, traditionally the patron of Burmese Buddhism, was denied the possibility of donating in the name of the Shwedagon Pagoda (SHAH 2012: 92). As stated by one of queen Supayalat's maids of honour: "[...] you may say she was not a good queen, he was not a good king, but they were our own. Do you think we can love foreign master as we loved our kings, who was, as it were, part of ourselves" (SHAH 2012: 83). The majority of the population continued to long for the old times of royal rule during which Burma served as a local militant empire and social order was based on the local culture. Many anti-British partisan uprisings broke out in different parts of Burma as a direct result of the abolishing of monarchy. In the years 1910-1932 there were as many as five anti-British uprisings whose goal was the defence of "Buddhism and tradition" and the expulsion of the British invaders. At the helm of these uprisings stood the *minlaungs* or "future kings." The appearance of the *minlaug* was a sign that foretold the restoration of the social and cosmic order which had been disturbed by the fall of the royal dynasty. In the period of British rule, according to western historiography, these uprisings were of a proto-nationalist nature. This theory has received harsh criticism in modern times. The controversy surrounding this issue brings to mind the Katipunan uprising in the Philippines, which was also of a religious and popular nature. The question asked by Reynaldo Clemena Iletto, a historian of the uprising: "do we really understand what the Katipunan uprising was all about?," may also be referred to the Saya San uprising – although it has been the object of study of numerous analyses, in reality the created "[...] the overall framework of interpretation has remained rather constant" (ILETO 1989: 3). The motives behind the rebellion during the British period are comparable to those which led to uprisings in the pre-colonial period (PRAGER 2003: 1-32). The uprising is currently treated as a form of social protest that is part of a long tradition of popular rebellion and may be explained only in the context of Burmese Buddhist culture (PRAGER 2003).

The Saya San Rebellion, considered the largest popular uprising in the times of British rule, broke out on December 22, 1930, at the auspicious (according to Burmese numerology) time of 11:33 PM (THANT MYINT-U 2006: 209). The leader of the uprising, Saya San, was also the leader of the *Wunthanu* in the city of Yazenida, located in the Henzada district (HOUTMAN 1999: 233). The *Wunthanu Athin* were a nationalist association established in rural villages and supported by the GCBA in their protests against the taxes imposed by the British (HOUTMAN 1999). Their chief goal was the protection of their kind and the continuation of the Burmese tradition. The title of Saya may be translated as witch-doctor or shaman, a person proficient in Burmese astrology, alchemy and medicine, occupying an important position in the local community. It is worth noting that during the described period traditional Burmese medicine was considered quackery by the British authorities. San practised the Burmese art of medicine and highlighted its superiority in many of his publications. In his opinion it was cheaper and more trustworthy than western medicine (CHARNEY 2009: 13).

In response to the deteriorating economic situation of Burmese peasants resulting from the Great Crisis, Saya San declared himself the new king of Burma, taking full

advantage of the vast range of royal symbols and using them to bolster his authority. A white parasol was carried above his head and ceremonies were conducted according to established rules. The colonial authorities, focusing on the royal proclamations and symbols, considered the Saya uprising a sign of Burmese traditionalism (GRAVERS 2007: 34). The rebellion was regarded as an outburst of superstition inspired by the Buddhist monastic order, a sign of exoticism and the need to civilise the Burmese people (GRAVERS 2007). Before the uprising broke out, Saya organised *galon athins* in Upper Burma – a secret society whose members were to become recruits in his army. In Burmese mythology *galon* was a mythical bird which killed *naga* snakes. San used the latter term to describe foreigners, most of all the British (CHARNEY 2009: 15). The *galon-naga* opposition is a powerful supernatural force in Burmese folklore which may influence the political situation and facilitate the functioning of *samsara* (HOUTMAN 1999: 235). Political conflict in Burma was traditionally depicted as the clash between *galon* and *naga* (HOUTMAN 1999). An intriguing aspect of the uprising was the tattooing of all those who took part in it. An image of *galon* was tattooed on the chests of the members of Saya San's insurgent army, who also took an oath upon joining the *galon athin* (CHARNEY 2009: 15). It is worth noting that tattooing as a practice was in decline until the 1920s and was revived by the *Wuthanu*. The British “discovered that one of the first evidences of planned insurrection was marked by increased of tattooing activity” (HOUTMAN 1999: 234). Many *weikza* (magicians) also took part in the rebellion. The tattoos and amulets worn by the insurgents were supposed to protect them from British bullets. On December 5, 1930, the foundation stone for the construction of a new royal capital for Saya San, named Buddha Raja, was laid (CHARNEY 2009: 15). Despite the symbolic preparations, the insurgent army, equipped with canons, swords and spears forged by the local blacksmiths, was decimated by British machine-gun fire. As a result of this military defeat San left his capital disguised as a monk. In March 1931 he travelled to the area populated by the Shan people where he began to form a new insurgent army by recruiting local peasants (CHARNEY 2009: 16). However, the uprising was a complete failure. In August San was apprehended by the colonial authorities. His trial, which ended in his sentencing to death, led to two very important changes. Firstly, the budding nationalist movement in Burma gained a martyr. Secondly, his defender, dr. Ba Maw, garnered a great following among the people, which would later earn him the post of Prime Minister of Burma. Saya San was hanged in a colonial prison in Tharrawaddy on November 28, 1931 (CHARNEY 2009). His attempt to defend Burmese values, symbolized by the royal throne and the person of the king, ended in failure. His efforts were directed not so much against an invading foreign power, but rather against the “[...] disintegration of their entire social and cultural order, as defined by Buddhist cosmology” (GRAVERS 2007: 11). In order to sum up this rebellion, reference should be made to the words of Parth Chaterjee who wrote “[...] peasants in their collective actions were also being political, except that they were political in a way different from that of the elite” (CHATERJEE 2010: 39).

THE BURMESE FATE OF THE COLONIAL PRISON

The “Burmese fate” of the colonial prison is an interesting example of how western inventions were actually received in colonial Burma and how they influenced the local sphere of values. The modern prison was one of the many innovations, which also included the railway or western medicine among others, that were brought to Burma by the colonisers in the mid-19th century. The term modern prison refers to an institution whose chief goal is the punishment or resocialisation of prisoners. It is generally thought that the first modern prison was opened in 1842 in Pentonville, to the north of London (WINTIN/BROWN 2005). The Pentonville model spread rapidly throughout the different parts of the British Empire. The central prison in Rangoon and the prison in Insein were both built on this model. Commenting on the prison system created by the colonial authorities Orwell stated that: “They build a prison, and call it progress” (ORWELL 1962: 42). Initially it appeared that the penalty regime introduced by the Burmese rulers would be abandoned along with the implementation of the colonial prison system. However, as soon as the concept of the modern prison found its way into the colony, it was promptly modified and adjusted to better suit local needs, as in the case of many other western inventions. In order to introduce these innovations, the existing local practices and traditional penalties for crimes would have to be taken into consideration. The cultural positioning of western inventions and ideas occurred in this manner. Upon closer analysis the contrast between the two prison models in Burma, the local system and the one introduced by the colonisers, is not that pronounced.

In reality the most important aspects of the prison system during the pre-colonial period were already present under British rule. A number of the “innovations” introduced by the British already existed at that time. The external contrast between prisons in the colonial and pre-colonial periods was noticeable mainly in their architecture. Pre-colonial Burmese prisons, with one main building in which the apprehended prisoners were kept, divided by bamboo fences, gave the impression of something temporary, impermanent. On the other hand, the prisons built by the British authorities were of a sturdy and lasting nature, closed off from the outside world by large, thick stone walls equipped with double gates. The wings, in which numerous buildings along with barriers separated different aspects of prison life and different categories of prisoners, spread out from the central point of these walls. During the Victorian period, the architectural purpose of public buildings constructed in the colonies was to convey the power of the British Empire. Similarly as in the case of present-day architecture, the external form of the building was a way for the colonial authorities to communicate their power to their subjects. During the reign of the Burmese royal dynasty convicted criminals were usually punished by flogging, execution or exile. Alternatively, they could also be tattooed, usually on the face, to denote the crime that they had committed or to wound their body (THANT MYINT-U 2001: 88). Among the similarities between the two systems, it is worth noting that, like the British colo-

nial regime, the Burmese kings also used convicts as a cheap labour force outside of the prison walls, in the construction of irrigation canals, roads and the like. What is more, the true power in the prison, both during the colonial and pre-colonial periods, was in the hands of the Burmese convicted that were in charge of the other prisoners. Rather paradoxically, their position only strengthened during the colonial period. This was a result of the fact that, in comparison to the mostly British and Hindu senior employees, they were simply closer to the prisoners they were in charge of as a result of physical, cultural and linguistic similarities. The convicted-supervisors were the only workers who could easily communicate with the mass of prisoners. Prison as a form of punishment had already existed in pre-colonial Burma in respect to certain categories of convicts. For instance, monks disturbing the social order by claiming that they have supernatural powers, political opponents, dishonest officials and debtors were all kept in prison for extended periods of time. Highly detailed annual reports, which focused on, among other issues, the number of prisoners suffering from malaria or the number of prisoners flogged in a particular building, were conducted in Burma's colonial prisons in order to highlight the omnipotence of the colonial administration, its extraordinary ability to control. However, it seems that everyday reality in the colonial prison may have drastically differed from this state of affairs. Existing continuities have: "[...] particular importance for the historian seeking to understand the daily conditions and administration of Burma's pre-colonial and colonial prisons" (WINTIN/BROWN 2005). First published in 1860, Henry Gouger's account of his two-year-long sentence in a pre-colonial Burmese prison is full of descriptions which highlight the brutality of the guards, the terrible conditions in the prison, the appallingly ill health of the prisoners and the general lack of hygiene:

Putrid remains of cast-away animal and vegetable stuff [...] the stale fumes from thousands of tobacco-pipes [...] the scattered ejections of the pulp and liquid from their everlasting betel, and other nameless abominations, still more disgusting [...] the exudation from the bodies of a crowd of never-washed convicts, encouraged by the thermometer at 100 degrees, in a den almost without ventilation – is it possible to say what it smelt like? (GOUGER 1862: 148).

Gouger was accused of spying for the British Empire and served his sentence in the Let Ma prison, in the years 1824-26. Interestingly, Orwell provides a similar description to Gouger's when describing a latter-day colonial prison. As admitted by the writer himself, while reminiscing upon the period of his life spent in Burma, he met face to face with "the dirty work of the Empire" (ORWELL 2003). He writes about a prison in British Burma: "[...] the wretched prisoners huddling in stinking cages of the lock-ups, the grey, cowed faces of the long-term convicts, the scarred buttocks of the men who had been Bugged with bamboos – all these oppressed me with an intolerable sense of guilt." (ORWELL 2003) During the period of British rule, for the first time in Burmese history, the mass popularising of the vipassana meditative practice took place in colonial prisons. In British prisons this practice referred to an important figure in *Theravada* Buddhism – Angulimala, a ruthless assassin who planned to kill even the Buddha

himself. However, moved by his teachings, Angulimala repented and redeemed himself by becoming the Buddha's student (HOUTMAN 1999: 327). In this way even the colonial prison became a vehicle of religious values, one of the elements in the spiritual war against foreign oppression.

THE CREATION OF NATIONAL COSTUME

The issue of clothing, which assumed different shades in different contexts of colonial reality, is another interesting aspect of the changes in Burmese symbolic culture. Clothing in colonial Burma became a manifestation and a symbol of the values cherished by the wearer. However, before these changes were to take place, a radical change, allowing for the creation of a "we-Burmese" versus "they-colonisers" opposition expressed in clothing would have to occur. As a result of colonial conquest, traditional Burmese costume was abandoned and forgotten. Some of these outfits are currently part of an exhibit at the Victoria and Albert museum in London. In the 1920s the Burmese people increasingly expressed their nationalist ideals through their clothing, which was a product of the colonial era in Burma (THANT MYINT-U, 2006: 182). Anti-colonial sentiment was manifested through a characteristic outfit composed of *gaungbaungs* (CHARNEY 2009: 30) (a type of headgear), *longyi* (trousers), more commonly known under the Malay name *sarong*, and *pinni* (a white jacket) (EDWARDS 2008). It must be stressed that elements of this nationalist outfit were an artificial creation, as noted by the historian Thant Miynt U: "No self-respecting man, at least in Upper Burma in the nineteenth century, would have been caught in public wearing a longyi" (THANT MYINT-U 2006: 182). Despite this fact, they gained an entirely new meaning in colonial Burma. On November 22, 1921, a Burmese man, Maung Ba Bwa, was apprehended by the British police during his visit to the Shwedagon Pagoda – his *pinni* jacket and his *longyi* were treated as a direct "[...] demonstration of his nationalist sympathies" (EDWARDS 2008).

The creation of the Burmese national costume was a reaction to the dress code brought to Burma by the colonisers. It was composed of: trousers, a beret, a helmet, stockings and boots. In this particular context sturdy footwear was one of the manifestations of colonial stratification, according to which "The settler's feet are never visible, except perhaps in the sea; but there you're never close enough to see them" (FANON 1985: 22). It is worth noting that in the relation between the local community and colonial authorities the so-called "footwear issue" remained a key contentious matter for quite some time. To quote the public announcement placed in front of the Shwe Sandaw Pagoda: "None permitted to wear shoes in this Pagoda but English and Asiatic Europeans" (CHARNEY 2009: 31). Upon his return from England in 1916, the lawyer U Thein Maung added the line "with no exceptions" to the announcement (EDWARDS 2008). He chose to ignore the order to remove the added line, issued by the Deputy Commissioner for Burma. Soon after, at the Universal Burmese Buddhist Conference in Rangoon, it was demanded, with the help of the nationalist organisa-

tion Youth Man Buddhist Association (YMBA), that the government ban entry into the pagoda in boots. The lack of consent on part of the colonial authorities resulted in an increase in violence in 1919, which is when a group of monks in the Eindway pagoda in Mandalay attacked a group of boot-wearing, European tourists (CHARNEY 2009: 31). On the one hand, this event is evidence of the determination of the Burmese people in their task of defending Burmese values, on the other, it denotes the growing feeling of discontent among the Burmese resulting from the rejection of foreign authorities.

The issue of clothing was also closely connected to the protection of the local economy. In this case Burmese nationalists were strongly inspired by Gandhi's *Swadeshi* movement. After his visit to Burma in 1929, awed by the artistry of the Burmese spinning wheel used for spinning wool, Gandhi decided to encourage the Hindus to boycott clothes produced in other countries. During his visit to Moulmein, Gandhi openly criticised Burmese women for wearing foreign silk, stating that they should: "revise [their] taste for foreign fineries" (EDWARDS 2008). In Prome he deplored the behaviour of villagers working with foreign yarn, motivated by profit rather than patriotism. Students began to treat the issue of clothing as a symbol of national identity and a way of supporting the Burmese economy. A year after Gandhi's visit to Burma, as a result of low rice prices and the growing indebtedness of the Burmese villagers to Hindu money lenders, race riots broke out between the Burmese and the Hindus. This led to a marked deterioration in the relations between these two nations. In 1930 *Dobama Asiayone*, considered the first modern nationalist political group in Burma, was established. Although the group adopted a highly xenophobic approach, the strategies of the organization were borrowed from India. In that very year it was decided that foreign products, such as cigarettes, clothes etc., cannot be imported. The campaign promoting traditionally hand-sewn garments was supported, whilst the clothes produced in the West were boycotted. Even after the country regained its independence Prime Minister U Nu stressed that the national costume is one of the many symbols which "carries with it that distinctive mark of the culture of the race or nation which is its very backbone" (EDWARDS 2008). The prime minister himself was never seen in public without his *longyi* and *gaungbang*. In this period the *longyi* and *thamein* are officially named as the country's national dress. Aung San Su Kyi also wears a *longyi*, suggesting through her outfit that her efforts are directed towards the democratisation of the country, the "second struggle for Independence" (EDWARDS 2008). The colonial period also resulted in changes in male hairstyles, „Men in the old days also kept their hair uncut and tied up in a knot on the top of their heads, [...]. By the turn of the century hair was cut short, in the English way, and many [...] sported mustaches in the European fashion and times" (THANT MYINT-U 2006: 182) The royal edict of 1811 prohibited short hairstyles for men (THANT MYINT-U 2001: 94). In 1962 General Ne Win carried out a coup and subsequently prohibited the wearing of long hair or Western trousers stating that it would be considered a sign of Western corruption (FINK 2001: 133).

PUPPET THEATRE IN THE COLONIAL PERIOD, FROM THE FALL TO THE REVIVAL

As in the case of Indonesia, the local puppet theatre, in its numerous forms, played and still plays an important role in creating the foundations of Burmese national identity². It was once written that: “[...] no other people in the world enjoy theatrical performances more than Burmese” (SHAH 2012: 27). References to puppet theatre are still noticeable in present-day Burma. For instance, in the Burmese language, the expression *thi’ ta hmau*, which originally denoted the puppeteer’s ability to take out any given puppet out of a box and begin manipulating it, is currently used to describe a trustworthy person (BRUNS 2006: 74). This highlights the importance of puppet theatre in Burma. Puppet shows were educational and attempted to promote Buddhist faith among the people. They were also known to contain a more or less discrete political message. The performances focused on numerous aspects of court life, such as court dress, manners and language. Due to the amount of interest in theatrical performances, Burma, under King Bodawpaya, became the first country in the world to create a Ministry of Theatre (THANT MYINT-U 2001: 93). Its primary purpose was the “[...] to stimulate the theatre, particularly the puppet theatre, along lines agreeable to the State and to keep it in political accord with the policies of the King” (BOWERS 1956: 111). In pre-colonial Burma, as in other countries of Southeast Asia, puppetry-based performances were held in higher esteem than those enacted by actors (FOLEY 2001). They constituted an important part of Burmese cultural life and word of their popularity, spread by emissaries from Western countries, reached as far as Europe. Burmese puppet theatre, known as *Yokthe Thay* in the Burmese language, contains visible elements from neighbouring forms of puppet theatre from India, Thailand and Indonesia. Reaching back to its inception, there has always been a strong connection between puppet theatre and religion in all of these countries. Consequently, Burmese puppetry received great support from the ruling class (Alex R.H. Bruns, *Burmese Puppetry, op. cit.*, p. 9). Those in power wanted to protect the cultural and traditional values kept alive through the institution of puppet theatre. In terms of form, puppet theatre has always been conservative. A basic set of puppets used in the 19th century was composed of twenty-eight dolls, which can be divided into three groups: animals, gods and mythical figures, and people (FOLEY 2001). The outfits worn by the puppets were faithful replicas of those worn at court. The attention to detail was also visible in the puppets’ hairstyles, which reflected those worn in specific dynasties (BRUNS 2006: 112), and in their footwear – known as *hin tha* or *karawei*, typical of court dress under the Konbaung dynasty (BRUNS 2006: 120). There were four puppet stages in place at the royal court during the reign of this dynasty. Rather than financial remuneration for their services, the troupes were given large swaths of land. Puppeteers who were particularly popular received numerous privileges from the king, including the privilege of presenting the royal insignia. Even after

² For more information on the subject see: THANEGI 1994.

the fall of the kingdom the former royal troupes continued to present the insignia with pride (BRUNS 2006: 10). During the peak of its development, in the period of the reign of the last Burmese dynasty, it was not uncommon to see up to forty puppeteers taking part in a single performance of puppet theatre (FOLEY 2001).

Due to the annexation of Upper Burma in 1885 and the resulting abolition of monarchy, puppet theatre lost its chief patron in the form of the king and his court. The British did not show any interest in this area of Burmese art. In consequence of the decline of court patronage, the enforcement of the strict requirements that had previously governed puppet theatre gradually slackened. The artists had no choice but to cater to the tastes of the common audience. Additionally, puppet theatre was no longer free as an entrance fee was introduced (BRUNS 2006: 80). The artists were forced to make numerous adjustments as a result of financial problems and the increasingly popular Western invention of cinema.

In the case of the thematic content of the performances, it is worth mentioning the adaptations of works by U Kyin U, which, along with the *Jatakas*³ and historical dramas, became part of the permanent repertoire of performances (BRUNS 2006: 12). A new character was added among the puppets – Bandula, named after a Burmese general who took part in the First Anglo-Burmese War, usually depicted in a general's outfit from the Konbaung period (BRUNS 2006: 69). The *hsai'kala* stage was also added as a reaction to the introduction of horse-racing, brought to Burma by the British. The *kala* puppet – whose name is a derogatory Burmese remark used to describe Hindus – which appeared on this stage functioned as a stereotypical caricature of a representative of the Hindu community. The *hsai'kala* stage attempted to re-enact the conflict between the Burmese and the wage labourers from India (BRUNS 2006: 60). As in the other parts of the empire, the British encouraged the migration of a cheap labour force from India and China to Burma. The Chinese and the Hindus, along with Burmese ethnic minorities, played a key role in the political and economic development of the new colonial order (HOUTMAN 1990: 32). Migrant communities played an important part in trade, banking and colonial public service. In the years 1900-1930 immigration from India was equal to approximately 150 thousand people a year, a third of whom would remain in Burma permanently (HOUTMAN 1990). With the outbreak of the Great Crisis Burmese farmers lost land to the Hindu *Chettyar*, members of any Hindu caste that dealt with trade. The fact that the Burmese people now had to compete for employment with the Chinese and Hindus led to anti-Hindu (1930), anti-Chinese (1931) and anti-Muslim (1938) riots (HOUTMAN 1990: 33).

Other changes came as a result of the decline in audience size, due to which the performers abandoned puppet theatre in favour of the increasingly popular dance theatre. The expensive *sai wang* orchestra was replaced with a Western invention – the gramophone. For financial reasons, the puppeteers' manual skills became increasingly important, one puppeteer now had to manipulate two puppets at the same time. „Numerous elements of the show with deep symbolic content were sacrificed” (BRUNS 2006: 13).

³ *Jatakas* are: “stories of former lives of the Buddha,” based on: FOLEY 2001.

Additionally, the fragments whose purpose was to delay the action of the play were radically shortened. Finally, at the beginning of the 20th century, the lack of both viewers and artists led to a revolutionary change – women were allowed to become performers. According to tradition, women could not go onto the stage either as performers or as spectators. Initially, productions by troupes from Upper Burma gained great popularity in Lower Burma. The puppet shows “[...] reflected the Burmese kingdom and royal power, which – regardless of the sad reality – was painted in glowing colours” – (BRUNS 2006: 81). At times these performances transformed into patriotic gatherings against British occupiers “[...] under whom the country’s old tradition were trampled on and subsequently declined” (BRUNS 2006: 81). However, with time, viewers gradually became less interested and so did the artists, who gradually joined the *za’pwe*, or dance theatre, which was highly popular in the colonial period. During the period of monarchy, theatre troupes travelled by boat, stopping along the way to give performances. With the development of new means of transport and communication lines, and especially the *idée fixe* of the British Empire – the railroad, the theatre troupes gained access to previously unreachable areas. From time to time they would give performances in cities on the railway line. After the colonial period came to end there were but a few puppet stages left in Burma and the most famous puppeteers had either died long ago or were too old to perform.

After 1962 and Ne Win’s seizure of power puppet theatre became a tool of political propaganda in the hands of the regime (BRUNS 2006: 15). Puppets began to represent ethnic minorities with the goal of supporting national unity, as was the case in Indonesia where a new type of puppet theatre was created after 1949 – *wayang pancasila* (BRUNS 2006: 16). During this period the dances of ethnic minorities were also added to the repertoire. As a result of tourism and Burmese nationalism, puppet theatre in present-day Burma is experiencing its renaissance. In the first decades after achieving independence, the *Yokthe Thay* theatre became a national symbol in the eyes of Burmese nationalists, a symbol which reminds the people of a native, pre-colonial past which is forever lost (FOLEY 2001). Existing theatre troupes did not have a sufficient number of members to stage performances in their entirety, and so the custom ceased to be practised. However, due to the efforts of educated social groups and the interest of Western tourists the tradition has been revitalised to an extent.

THE CLASH OF FOREIGN RELIGIOUS SYSTEMS, THE MISSIONARY CAMPAIGN AND BUDDHISM

The missionary campaign which intensified during the colonial period may be described as a clash of foreign cultures, but also of seemingly contradictory, but in reality complimentary value systems. It was believed at the time that Great Britain was to

to preach the Gospel among nations, to dispell [sic] the darkness that still pervades so large a portion of the globe, to spread abroad the light of Christian truth, and to teach to

millions of her grateful subjects the knowledge of that God who died for their salvation (ALMOND 1988: 40).

The missionaries considered Burma the embodiment of despotism, idolatry and tyranny, which hindered the development of civilisation and salvation. In 1885, the missionaries serving in the area of Upper Burma, armed by the British, stated that “God is with us, tyranny and the Buddhism are a dying monster” (GRAVERS 2007: 23). At that time the Burmese believed Christianity to be “[...] intolerant, arrogant and absolutist” (GRAVERS 2007: 22). The missionary campaign intensified after the total submission of the kingdom of Burma. In the period of British rule the Burmese saw this as an attack directed against Buddhism and traditional culture. The missionaries demanded that their Burmese converts completely abandon Buddhism. Even before Burma’s complete submission King Bagyidaw asked missionary Judson whether Burmese Christians “[...] Are they real Burmans? Do they dress like other Burmans” (GRAVERS 2007: 21). The missionaries did achieve some success in terms of converting ethnic minorities professing animism, but the ethnic Burmese were considered “[...] satisfied with Buddha and their pagodas” (SHAH 2012: 105).

The British, as in the other colonies, attempted to “whiten the blacks” by converting them to Christianity. Natives who had converted to Christianity were seen as black on the outside, but, since they were now considered Christians, “white” on the inside (SHAH 2012: 214). The converts were recruited into the colonial army along with the Hindus, they could also find employment in the lower ranks of colonial administration. Missionary schools were characterised by a high level of education, but their main goal was to convert the natives to Christianity. “Proselytizing was high on the agenda of all European colonisers: ‘the plunder of goods [could be] justified by the gift of Christianity’” (SHAH 2012: 228). Among the missionaries working in Burma, a particularly important role was played by the American Baptist Adoniram Judson from Massachusetts who came to Burma in 1812 (THANT MYINT-U 2006: 210). During his service as a missionary in Burma he survived two wives and then married again, he also spent 18 months in a Burmese prison during the First Anglo-Burmese War. The crowning achievement of his evangelical efforts came in 1819 when the first convert was baptised (THANT MYINT-U 2006). Adoniram Judson served primarily among the animistic Karen who gradually converted to Christianity, casting aside their old beliefs. Judson was also the author of the first Anglo-Burmese dictionary. Judson is thought to have introduced the word Buddhism into the Burmese language by adding the now common term *bok-da’ba-tha*, meaning “Buddhist language, culture,” to his dictionary (HOUTMAN 1990: 55). Thus the missionary campaign also led to changes in Burmese Buddhism (HOUTMAN 1990: 23).

In addition to conducting the missionary campaign, the Western world also attempted to gain more knowledge about Buddhism. As stated by Philip C. Almond (ALMOND 1988: 7), “Buddhism was ‘discovered’ in the West during the first half of the nineteenth century” These 19th-century interpretations of non-Christian religions had a great impact on the formation of Victorian culture. The Victorian view of Bud-

dhism reflects the world in which such an image was created, it functions as a mirror in which one can view not only the Orient but also the Victorian world (ALMOND 1988: 6). At first Western scholars of Buddhism displayed complete ignorance when attempting to tackle the subject. At the beginning of the 19th century most were not even aware of the Buddha's origins. Robert Percival was one of the first to suggest that the Buddha came from Africa: "Buddou [sic!] is always represented [...] with thick, black frizzled hair like an African Negro" (ALMOND 1988: 20). The theory of Buddhism having non-Indian roots was debated for a long time, with researchers pointing to Africa, Persia or Mongolia as the Buddha's country of origin. Until the 1830s, literature written by Orientalist scholars stated that the Buddha most probably came from Ethiopia or North Asia (ALMOND 1988: 21). Finally, in 1850, the Western world stopped viewing Buddhism as a form of paganism, it became "the grandest and purest, after Christianity, of all Eastern religions" (ALMOND 1988: 35). The similarities between Buddhism and Christianity, highlighted during the Victorian period, were the result of the assimilation of Christian terms and phrases to describe Buddhism. For instance, the Christian concept of prayer was the only available analogy to describe the meditational practice of *vipassana* (HOUTMAN 1990: 43). However, it would take many decades for this practice to receive its due respect. Sir James George Scott, more commonly known under his Burmese literary pseudonym Shway Yoe, writes as follows in his, still influential, 1882 book on Burmese culture: "Most of the older members of the *kyaung* do, however, what an Englishman would call nothing, all the afternoon. [...] [they] sink into the meditation and many of the weaker of them into sleep," (SHWAY YOE 1963: 35). In reality it would be better to define the "sleep" described by the author as a meditative trance, which is the highest manifestation of entry into the inner Self, characterised by a detachment from the real world which is dominated by delusion. Shway Yoe, though still considered a figure of authority in the area of Burmese culture, exemplifies the incompetence which was typical of early Western authors when describing Buddhist thought and meditation, concepts which are fundamental for Burmese culture. The fact that the English language did not evolve within a Buddhist community, as in the case of all other European languages, constituted an acute problem, in that it cannot accurately describe the subtle differences within Buddhist religious doctrine (HOUTMAN 1990: 74). In the aftermath of colonial conquest, Buddhism also became more aware of foreigners. In 1885 a representative of *Sangha* described British conquest as follows:

If foreigners are to rule Burma, it will cause many terrestrial animals to be killed and destroyed. The reason is that western foreigners are the type of people who have appetite for enormous quantities of meat. If they arrive in Burma, they will set up killing factories of cows, of pigs, of goats, where so many such creatures will meet their death (HOUTMAN 1990: 29).

As the saying goes, to be Burmese is to be Buddhist, *Therevada* Buddhism is currently followed by 85 percent of the population (HOUTMAN 1990: 36). In Burma,

Buddhism has been a marker of identity for centuries. Until the 19th century, meditation was reserved only for those who had sufficient knowledge on Buddhist books and were of sufficient age. Currently, as a result of changes in Burmese Buddhism which were introduced during the colonial period, *vipassana* may even be practised by non-Buddhists. King Mindon, who reigned in the years 1853-1878, took an early interest in meditation. He compared life without meditation to “eating curry without salt by which one can never feel contented” (HOUTMAN 1999: 267). His interest in meditation was a type of coping mechanism that allowed to him to deal with his grief after the British conquest of Lower Burma (HOUTMAN 1990: 39). The king’s personal involvement in meditation led to a heightened interest in the *vipassana* practice among the royal family, the court, and even among monks and lay people in his kingdom (HOUTMAN 1990: 41). *Vipassana* was particularly popular in the thirties during the colonial period, the practice brought solace in this time of the Great Crisis and the great corruption of the country’s nationalist leaders. After the country regained its independence and the newly formed government began to support Buddhism, there was an increased interest in meditation after 1962 (HOUTMAN 1990: 22). Le-di Hsa-ya-daw was one of the first and most influential monks to teach *vipassana* in the colonial period. In the face of British conquest and in accordance with the tradition started by forest monks, Le-di Hsa-ya-daw led an ascetic life, only meditating in the woods in complete solitude. As foreigners gradually gained more knowledge of Buddhism, Buddhism slowly became more aware of them. The ancient bond between ruler and Buddhism was broken as a result of British conquest. This is particularly important since there is no concrete ritual in the Buddhist faith which binds the monastic order and lay people into one community. For more than a decade the British authorities did not appoint a new *Tha-tha-na-baing*, which was the head of the Buddhist church in Burma and an instrument of control over the Buddhist monastic order and monasteries. Although the previous *Tha-tha-na-baing* submitted to colonial authority, the Indian government could not support religious administration. This fact, along with the Hindu protests, resulted in a proclamation passed by Queen Victoria in 1858. The Queen made it illegal for the British authorities in India to interfere in the religious beliefs of all subjects subordinate to royal rule (HOUTMAN 1990: 35). The immediate consequence of this change was the development of Buddhist sects. Monasteries and monks previously subordinate to monastic courts would have to answer to lay British law and courts during the colonial period (HOUTMAN 1990: 35). *Sangha* was the only institution which, despite numerous wounds, survived foreign colonisation. As a result, it was Buddhism along with the monastic order devoted to its propagation that united the Burmese people in their fight against the lay colonial authorities, strengthening the position of the anti-British opposition. The practice of *vipassana* became, on the one hand, a type of reaction to the politics of the time and, on the other, a form of creating the new nation-state, a way of building a new nation through the transformation of its people.

THE INTRODUCTION OF WESTERN MEDICINE IN BURMA

The impact of the introduction of Western medicine into particular colonial estates in Asia in the colonial period was noticed, already in that time, by the British anthropologist John S. Furnivall, who wrote an entire chapter on the history of colonial medicine in Burma (FURNIVALL 1916). Missionaries-doctors – such as Felix Carey, doctor Adoniram Judson and his wife Anna, doctor Jonathan Price – were some of the first popularisers of Western medicine in Burma. At the 1853 Missionary Convention it was openly stated that medical work was to become one of the means of evangelization (NAONO 2006). In the 1920s the colonial government began a nationwide compulsory campaign against smallpox, which was met with strong resistance and reluctance on behalf of the indigenous population (CHARNEY 2009: 9). Contemporary scholars of colonialism often equate the pacification of the people with vaccination campaigns (EDWARDS 2010). The main reason for the introduction of the campaign in Burma were the epidemics of smallpox which would periodically devastate the indigenous population, at the same time endangering the lives of the British soldiers stationed in Burma. Consequently, vaccination against smallpox was considered a priority by the British administration. Some early campaigns by missionaries were successful, such as the vaccination campaign started by Felix Carey in Rangoon in 1811, but these were later proven to be exceptions to the rule. The campaigns conducted by missionaries in remote mountainous areas among ethnic minorities who had converted to Christianity were also successful. In one of his reports to the chief commissioner, Keith Norman MacDonald, a civil surgeon in Prome, writes: “I fear it will take many years to impress the importance of vaccination upon the Burmese, because they are so much biased against all foreign innovations [...]” (NAONO 2006). The proud colonial authorities were displeased with their failure to popularise free vaccination against smallpox, doctors gradually became frustrated and began looking down on the indigenous population. In reality, however, the greatest problem in terms of conducting medical work in this particular case was the language barrier that existed between the doctors and the natives. In March 1854 the Governor-General of India ordered that every doctor wishing to work in the prison hospital in Burma, which was the main place of employment for doctors in Burma, would have to pass an exam on local everyday language. The primary native language in India was Hindustani and it was this language that was most commonly spoken by the doctors-officers working in Burma. However, as stated by the Undersecretary of the Government of India Robert B. Chapman: “[...] knowledge of Hindoostani will not enable Medical men to converse with their Burmese patients” (NAONO 2006). However, it soon became obvious that passing an exam in the Burmese language would be a troublesome affair due to the lack of linguistic competence in this area among the employed doctors. The first Burmese medical school was opened as late as 1931 (EDWARDS 2010). It is worth noting that the “linkage between Western medical training and nationalist activism was a common theme throughout the British empire and Asia [...]” (EDWARDS 2010).

Although it is difficult to find examples of doctors in Burma who measure up the likes of the Chinese Dr. Sun Yat Sen or the Indian Dr. Mahathir, there were those – for instance, San C. Po or Thein Maung – who played an important role in the development of the local nationalist movement.

BURMESE CULTURE AND THE COLONIAL EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

The Western educational system introduced in the colonial period was yet another threat to the Burmese value system. According to Burmese tradition, scholarly work and teaching were a natural extension of religious vocation. Buddhist monasteries were bastions of civilisation and knowledge for centuries; they were also the traditional centres of education. However, just like Buddhism itself, they had to evolve in the new reality. Education plays an important role in shaping the concepts of culture, identity, national affiliation and religion, it is responsible for the socialization of the elites. The conflict that took place in this area after the British conquest of Burma was particularly important for the country's future. Beginning in 1866, the British administration, embodied in the form of Chief Commissioner Arthur Phayre, attempted to introduce secular subjects into monastic schools with the support of monasteries (SCHROEBER 2007: 59). Monasteries which agreed to hire secular staff and include these Western school subjects in their curriculum were granted financial aid and their students were given scholarships. However, the reform was not received well by the British conservatives in the colonial government and was criticised by the Buddhist monastic order. Until 1871 only forty monastic schools agreed to employ secular teachers and teach Western subjects, two years later that number had increased to over eight hundred (SCHROEBER 2007: 59). However, in 1891, four years before his death, *Thathanabaing* Taungdaw Sayadaw forbade cooperation with the colonial authorities in the realisation of this reform, stating that the presence of secular teachers on monastery grounds was unacceptable (SCHROEBER 2007: 60). Although Taunggwin Sayadaw, who had been chosen as the new *Thathanabaing* by the British authorities, stated that he would remain neutral when it comes to the reform in 1901, he also highlighted that according to *Theravada* Buddhism monks cannot receive pay for their work and that subjects taught at monasteries “[...] should be [...] consistent with the tenets of Buddhism” (SCHROEBER 2007: 61). Due to the lack of cooperation on part of *Sangha*, seen as an attempt to undermine the colonial project by the British, Sir Arthur Phayre's reform was abandoned by the Educational Committee in 1924 (SCHROEBER 2007: 60). The colonial government turned its attention to non-governmental missionary schools and to those belonging to private committees. Thanks to financial support of the colonial government, the new educational system allowed for the teaching of secular and Christian values to the Burmese people. Christian education was founded before the 14th century but did not play an important role until the First Anglo-Burmese War (HOUTMAN 1990: 102). Its primary goal was to convert the people to Christianity, civilising and educating were secondary objectives (GRAVERS 2007: 29). Teaching was conducted in English and

the curriculum was based around popularising Western knowledge. Consequently, students were given new possibilities – they could learn a number of different skills and develop in new ways. In the colonial period, students of secular and missionary schools had better job and career prospects, whereas the students of monastic schools became beggars (HOUTMAN 1990: 103). As a result, Western schools quickly became the primary destination for talented and ambitious Burmese students. This deepened the divide between civic areas and the still traditional Burmese countryside, dominated by monastic education, and may be considered a characteristic trait of the Burmese colonial experience. However, along with the creation of the YMBA (a Buddhist organization which was the product of colonial education and was founded by the Westernized Burmese civic elite) in 1906, it became clear that colonial authority was once again subjected to a universal, but now modern in its form, Buddhist cosmology.

THE COLONIAL CENTRE

A British historian once wrote: “The most serious challenges to the continuity of the precolonial social and cultural life would occur in the colonial capital at Rangoon [...]” (CHARNEY 2009: 6). It was in Rangoon, the anglicised centre of the modernisation occurring in Burma, where the country’s internal contradictions were most noticeable. The city, which served as the main port in Burma, with its Victorian architecture, its pattern of streets intersecting at right angles, its public houses and its ethnically and nationally diverse population, was a typical colonial city, similar to its equivalents in British Malaya, China or neighbouring India. After the annexation of Upper Burma, Rangoon experienced a large influx of immigrants which was directly linked to the expansion of the colonial economy. Many public buildings were also erected at the time, including Dufferin Hospital (1887), the Town Hall (1886) or the Government House, built in the years 1892-1895 (CHARNEY 2009: 20). In 1884 steam trams appear on the streets of colonial Rangoon. In 1900 electricity is partially introduced into the city, in the years 1906-1908 the trams are replaced with electric models and in 1907-1911 electric lighting is installed in the streets (CHARNEY 2009). The appearance of the first private automobile in Burma dates back to 1905, ten years later the country would be home to eight buses, 139 motorbikes, 28 taxis and 426 private taxis and lorries (CHARNEY 2009: 21). Three years before the outbreak of WW2 electric trams were gradually replaced by trolleybuses (CHARNEY 2009). The modernisation efforts that took place in Rangoon transformed this initially small Burmese city into a modern metropolis. The contrast between Rangoon and the vast rural areas was pronounced, to quote Fanon (FANON 1985: 22):

The zone where the natives live is not complementary to the zone inhabited by the settlers. The two zones are opposed, but not in the service of higher unity [...] The settler’s town is a strongly built town, all made of stone and steel. It is a brightly lit town; the streets are covered with asphalt, and the garbage cans swallow all the leavings, unseen, unknown and hardly thought about.

The Burmese language was of lesser importance in Rangoon, its position more akin to that of Hindu languages. At that time a basic knowledge of Hindustani and the other dialects from India was indispensable in everyday life (ZAW 2009). The continuous influx of immigrants from south-eastern India and south-eastern China resulted in the number of migrants surpassing the number of Burmese nationals. The immigrants also began to dominate in the fields of trade, industry and administration. As a result the Burmese living in Rangoon became “foreigners in their own country” (FERRO 1997: 249). This situation was further intensified by the segregation of the native population from the colonial masters, for instance, in the case of the glaring example of the best train compartments being labelled “Only for Europeans” (CHARNEY 2009: 28). In reaction to the ever-present discrimination, Burmese nationalism developed rapidly in colonial Rangoon. Initially, through the YMBA, its primary goal was to protect the Buddhist religion. Soon, however, groups of a nationalist character began to protect the native people and the local economy by boycotting foreign products and inciting ethnic riots.

CONCLUSION

Although the reforms carried out by the colonial authorities in the legal, political, tax, and educational systems had a beneficial impact on the fate of the population, they were of a foreign origin and were not rooted in the local culture. The political system must harmonise with the existing political culture in order to survive. Only then can it be widely supported by the public. If the situation is reversed, the conflict between the political culture and the newly introduced political system will inevitably lead to such great internal tension within society that its release will eventually destroy the established political framework. The case of colonial Burma is an example of this pattern of events. In the pre-colonial period, the kingdom of Burma developed in response to organic, internal political currents, tensions and challenges. In contrast, the colonial authorities modelled their colony in line with the strategic, economic and, above all, commercial interests of the British Empire. British rule in this case was foreign, secular and often of a military nature, which led to the gradual rationalisation of the country in the years 1825-1942, examples of which include: the introduction of differentiation between the public and private spheres, centralization characterised by increased control over the population, increased use of money, increased social mobility, the introduction of Western concepts of law and justice. The colonial period in Burma marked the start of slow changes which would eventually turn a traditional society into a modern one, one type of integrated society into another. The changes in Burmese culture which took place in the colonial period were an important aspect of this transformation. As rightfully observed by Partha Chaterjee (CHATERJEE 2010: 27):

[...] it is not as though this so-called spiritual domain is left unchanged. In fact, here nationalism launches its most powerful, creative, and historically significant project: to fashion a ‘modern’ national culture that is nevertheless not Western.

In the social sciences, local cultures in developing countries are often considered reservoirs of traditional beliefs and convictions which have frozen in place. Only their ongoing substitution with Western models can lead to progress. Consequently, the processes of modernisation taking place in the countries were often confused with changes that took place in the culture. It was wrongly assumed that the changes which were taking place encroached on the sphere of autotelic values, which appeared not to have been affected on closer examination. Ronald Rovencher, an anthropologist, states as follows: "Southeast Asian cultures are changing. However, details have changed much more rapidly than large patterns. Insuring a relationship of continuity between cultural history and modern events in Southeast Asia" (PROVENCHER 1975: 3). Man, along with his culture, was the basic carrier of those ideas and values. That is why the continuity which characterised pre-colonial Burmese culture is also visible in the period after the British annexation of the country. The changes which took place in this distinctive period were a direct response to colonial oppression. However, their main objective was to protect the values encoded in the culture and embodied in monarchical symbolism, theatre, monastic education or the meditational practice of *vipassana*, whose popularity was growing at the time. Existing pre-colonial ideas and values concerning political power and its legitimisation were not replaced by Western models. If anything Western models were influenced by certain aspects of Burmese culture, as in the case of the colonial prison system and the pre-colonial Burmese concepts of power, which were later incorporated into the ideology of the first nationalist organisations in Burma. It is worth noting that the first purveyors of modern Burmese nationalism in the years 1910-1930 and their successors referred directly to the symbolism of monarchical Burma in their actions. Existing values became the basis for the legitimisation of power in post-war independent Burma.

The existing symbolic universe, expressed through clothing, hairstyles, performance arts and other activities, became the cornerstone for the national symbolic universe, in which the echoes of the monarchical past merged with the echoes of colonialism. In this light it seems obvious that any analysis of the development of nationalisms in colonial, or semi-colonial, countries requires, first of all, a more extensive study of the sphere of values and the sphere of symbolic culture, by means of which they are mediated. Attention must be paid to how particular elements which constitute symbolic culture respond to foreign power and oppression. When discussing the damage done to Burmese high culture by British colonialism, it seems apt to quote the still applicable remark of the great Polish sociologist Antonina Kłoskowska, who, referring to the harm inflicted on Czech culture by foreign rulers, writes that "if the intellectual life of the higher classes were to be destroyed, the survival of the elementary, ethnic bases of national culture would allow for its renewal [...]" (KŁOSKOWSKA 2012: 59). The above statement serves as a fitting conclusion to the above considerations on the relationship between the world of Burmese and the changes which took place in Burmese culture during the colonial period.

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