Carol Ann Boshier

Mapping Cultural Nationalism: The Scholars of the Burma Research Society

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Historians of colonialism have often asked how and when the subjects of colonialism were allowed to speak, write, and contribute to the production of knowledge. Carol Ann Boshier's work, *Mapping Cultural Nationalism: The Scholars of the Burma Research Society 1910–1935*, is a rare and fascinating study of the subject, which looks at an instance of inter-elite collaboration and knowledge production that took place in British Burma between the 1910s to the 1930s. Owing to the rarity of such collaborative efforts between the colonizer and the colonized, this work is important both for its historical accounting and the questions it raises.

As Boshier shows, the Burma Research Society (BRS) came into existence at a time when the wind of change was already blowing across Burma; the BRS provided a space for emerging Burmese intellectuals and scholars who felt the need to contribute to scholarship on Burma that did not silence the Burmese themselves. However, in the course of its activities it indirectly contributed to a reductivism of sorts, narrowing Burmese identity to Burman identity and defining the people as a Buddhist nation—at the expense of other minority groups.

The BRS was founded in 1910 (its journal the JBRs appeared one year later) by men like John Sydenham Furnivall (1878–1960) of the Indian Civil Service ICS, who was also a member of the British Fabian Society. Furnivall's Fabian sympathies inclined him towards 'tolerance and sympathy' for the subjects of British colonialism (p. xiv), and the founders of the Society hoped that it would provide a safe space for both British and Burmese scholars to meet and discuss matters pertaining to Burmese history and culture. (Boshier writes that Furnivall was worried that Burmese identity might eventually be diluted or relegated to the margins as a result of Burma's annexation by the British Indian government, pp. 91–92). Thus from the outset the BRS was meant to be a 'boundary-crossing' enterprise that allowed colonized Burmese subjects to meet with British colonial officials and scholars on equal terms—as producers of knowledge working together (p. 4).

But the realities of colonialism created conditions where boundary-crossing was always a privilege of the elite. When the Society was launched, 143 of its 234 members happened to be European, and almost all of the members were 'connected to the new Westernised social, political, and economic programmes

that colonialism had introduced into Burma' (p. 37). The Society's first patron was Sir Harvey Adamson, Lieutenant-Governor of British Burma; and it was made clear at that time that the Society was not allowed to discuss or write about political and economic matters pertaining to Burma. Though the Society managed to court the participation of prominent Burmese like U May Oung, Pe Maung Tin, San Shwe Bu, and Taw Sein Ko, Furnivall remained concerned that they had not included enough young Burmese intellectuals into their group (p. 45).

Boshier notes that as one of the few multiracial Societies in British Burma that brought European colonizers and Burmese colonial subjects together, the BRS was idiosyncratic from the outset and was operating against the new set of norms that were being promoted by the colonial regime: 'By highlighting the dynamic aspects of Burma's history they hoped to inspire modernizing groups to harness traditional symbols to their purposes'. (p. 55) But in the course of doing so the BRS also inadvertently appropriated Burmese history and Buddhism as politically-loaded symbolic tools for change, at a time when Burmese nationalism was on the rise and when other Burmese nationalist movements were clamoring for more radical change. The restrictions imposed on the BRS (pp. 68–69) meant that while discussions on Burmese history were aplenty, the output of the Society was seen as apolitical and thus supportive of the political status quo.

Reading Boshier's work, one is struck by the apparent naiveté of the BRS's founders. The author notes that by the time the BRS was up and running there were also other Asian scholarly societies that were active—from the Society for the Acquisition of General Knowledge that had been formed by students of the Calcutta Hindu College in 1838 to the Maha Bodhi Society to the Siam Society. But the Siam Society was an enterprise undertaken by Siamese who were not forced to live under colonial rule, while the BRS was a body that was formed under the auspices of Empire, carrying 'an implicit political statement in a way that the membership of the Siam Society did not' (p. 17). Compounding matters was the manner in which the whole of Burma had been divided by the British after the Third Anglo-Burmese War and the fall of the last king of Burma. On January 1, 1886 the whole of Burma was annexed by the British Indian Empire, and henceforth administered by the Indian Civil Service ICS. From the beginning of British rule Burma was divided between the upland mountain regions and the plains below, that were regarded as 'Burma proper'. As a result, British colonial power and authority were concentrated on the governance of the Irrawaddy delta area and the management of the Burman ethnic group, but less attention was paid to the development of the minority groups in the colony. This made it doubly difficult for the BRS to recruit members from the

minority groups that lived further away from the centers of colonial power and knowledge-production. The founders of the BRS may have been aware of this obvious difference, and it may account for why they were cautious in their work. As Boshier notes: 'Contrary to the Siam Society, the BRS, although interested in folk tales and descriptions of Burma's minority races, did not wish to embark on any detailed enquiries or surveys that might destabilize the dominant Burman-Buddhist ethos that was central to their conception of cultural nationalism. As a result, this was deemed a much more vulnerable symbol than was conceivable in Siam, not least through the disruptions of colonialism itself' (p. 17).

The tendency to err on the side of caution was seen in cases where members of the BRS like San Shwe Bu wrote and discussed aspects of Burmese history that took them beyond the comfort zone of Burman-Buddhist identity in particular. As Boshier notes in the chapter that focuses on the BRS's treatment of the history of Arakan: 'The history of Arakanese kingship [...] posed a challenge to any national narrative that presupposed the legitimacy of the Burman state historically over an expansive territory. Formerly an independent realm until conquest by the Burmese in 1784, Arakan was a potential site of resistance not only to the state in late colonial Burma, but also to Burman-Buddhist ascendancy' (pp. 164–165). Yet such histories had to be written and discussed in a manner that did not upset the fragile colonial order, or the sensibilities of the Burman majority.

Thus it came to pass that the BRS ended up (perhaps unwittingly) creating a more homogenous and essentialized understanding of Burman-Buddhist identity than its founders originally intended. Though the Society did attract a broad range of Burmese contributors and scholars, and though these members of the Burman elite did feel themselves to be 'part of a global community of knowledge producers' (pp. 19–20), theirs was an accounting of Burmese history from the narrower perspective of the Burman-Buddhists alone, which ended up marginalizing the non-Burman and non-Buddhist communities in their midst. Some prominent Burman scholars like Shwe Zan Aung did use the BRS as a platform to put forward his understanding of modern Buddhist belief and religious praxis, as he also tried to reconcile Burmese sciences and epistemology with Western knowledge (pp. 31–32). But in many of these cases it was the perspective of the Burman-Buddhists that dominated, in the process relegating other voices to the level of the internal subaltern.

In other respects the work of the BRS also failed to challenge some of the foundational ideas and premises of the colonial project itself. While many among the Burmese elite welcomed the idea of preserving the culture and history of Burma, such efforts were also part and parcel of the imperial project,

for there was already 'the colonial preoccupation with decline and the concept of the 'fallen' race' (p. 106), that had been pioneered a century earlier by the likes of Stamford Raffles, whose work *The History of Java* (1817) merely introduced and reproduced the myth of the lazy Javanese and their 'forgotten' civilization—that had to be rescued by the West.

Boshier notes that Furnivall himself would 'later become frustrated with the limitations of the BRS as an agent of social and political change' (pp. 3, 76, 91–92), though his frustration was ironic considering his own role as a colonial functionary who was, after all, a servant of the British Empire—notwithstanding his Fabian tendencies. The contradiction that lay at the heart of the BRS was that it attempted to bring together the colonizer and the colonized in a 'safe space' where their respective subject-positions and the violent hierarchy that divided them could be momentarily suspended; as colonizer and colonized alike labored together in search of knowledge. But like the failed 'bridge party' in E.M. Forster's *Passage to India*, where both the colonizer and colonized end up embarrassed and uncomfortable, the BRS was a venture that was unable 'to satisfy such high expectations, particularly those of ordinary people', for 'the Society's elite, mixed-race membership was unable to effectively match the activism and social engagement of Burmese-Buddhist activists' (p. 3).

Mapping Cultural Nationalism is a well-researched work that delves deep into archives and records, uncovering aspects of Burmese colonial history that had not previously been scrutinized in detail. In the course of doing so Boshier has foregrounded the unstated assumptions, intentions, and contradictions that lay at the heart of the BRS and the colonial enterprise in general. In the manner in which she shows how and why the BRS both succeeded and failed, she gives us a vivid and very readable account of the foibles and follies of the British Empire. This is an important work that is relevant to scholars of both colonial and contemporary Southeast Asia, and explains why communitarianism and sectarianism remain embedded in the country she studies.

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Reference

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