Performing the Nation in Myanmar

Buddhist Nationalist Rituals and Boundary-Making

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Abstract

In 2012, Buddhist nationalist movements in Myanmar started to emerge, disseminating a Buddhist nationalist discourse that aimed to protectively demarcate their nation from the perceived threat posed by Muslims. In sermons, monks exhorted their audiences to make nationalist vows to protect their nation, country, and Buddhism. The aim of this article is to investigate some ritual, discursive, and performative aspects of Buddhist nationalist sermons, and the social dynamics they entailed. The article first examines and analyses three recurrent discursive complexes of the Buddhist nationalist sermons delivered in 2013–2015; it will also look at how the monks drew on their social power and on discursive and performative power to create a boundary around their Buddhist nation and to mobilize Buddhists to protect it, thereby performing their nation. Second, the article examines two ways in which sermons that aimed to protect the Buddha’s dispensation (collectivistic religion) contributed to creating social cohesion and community.

Keywords

Burma/Myanmar – Buddhist nationalism – sermons – performance – collectivistic religion
Buddhist nationalist movements led by monks started to emerge in 2012 in Burma/Myanmar, with the most notable being the 969 movement and Ma Ba Tha.\textsuperscript{1} Nationalist monks disseminated an anti-Muslim, Buddhist nationalist discourse in sermons to protect Buddhism and their nation from Muslims. At these nationalist performances, the audiences were exhorted to be loyal, to carry out nationalist practices, and to make nationalist vows to protect Buddhism, their nation, and their country. In response to perceived threats to the Buddha’s dispensation, nationalist monks, assuming their traditional duty to defend Buddhism and their endangered nation, sought to unify and protect it by restoring and hardening its boundaries, and by preventing perceived incursions by Muslims. One important aspect of Burmese Buddhist nationalism is that it is an integral part of the ‘traditional’ collectivistic religion that each generation has a duty to preserve (Jakelic 2010).

The Buddhist nationalist movements emerged in response to two developments that were perceived to have endangered the Buddha’s dispensation and the Buddhist nation: the uncertainties linked to the political shift from military rule beginning in March 2011, with political and economic liberalization, and democratization; and the riots between Buddhists and Muslims that broke out in 2012–2014. In 2012, riots between Buddhists and Muslims (especially Rohingyas) erupted in Rakhine State, spreading to various parts of Burma, including Meiktila and Mandalay in Central Burma, in the following years (2013–2014) (ICG 2013; PHR 2013). Fear of collusion among a globalized militant Islam, international Muslim organizations, and regional Muslims was intensified by the Internet and social media and fed into local propensities of fearing Muslims, thereby turning the latter into a perceived existential threat to the Buddha’s dispensation (P. sāsana), the Myanmar nation, and to the sovereignty of Myanmar.\textsuperscript{2}

The aim of this article is to investigate some ritual, discursive, and performative aspects of Buddhist nationalist sermons and the social dynamics they entailed. Mainly based on sermons and publications, but also on fieldwork and interviews (2016–2019), this article first examines and analyses three recurrent discursive complexes of Buddhist nationalist sermons delivered in 2013–2015; it will also look at how the monks drew on their social power, and on discursive

\textsuperscript{1} The issue whether the country should be called ‘Burma’ or ‘Myanmar’ in English is complex. There are corresponding words for both names in the Burmese language. In this article, the two names are used interchangeably.

\textsuperscript{2} In this article, ‘P.’ is an abbreviation for Pāli. All foreign words are Burmese, unless otherwise indicated. The term ‘nirvana’ will be used instead of the Pāli nibbāna, since the former has been adopted into English.
and performative power to create a boundary around their Buddhist nation and to mobilize Buddhists to protect it, thereby performing their nation. Second, the article examines two ways in which the sermons, which aimed to protect the Buddha’s dispensation (collectivistic religion), contributed to creating social cohesion and community. Lastly, this article argues that such sermons have authorized, and normalized, Buddhist nationalist, anti-Muslim ideology, as they were performed as traditional Buddhist merit-making ritual events at which monks could exert subtle social control that was amplified by their monastic authority (social power).

In doing so, the article explores key themes in ritual studies that have particularly been associated with Emile Durkheim and his notion of ritual as a means of social control, especially his social-solidarity thesis (Bell 1992:171–177). This article examines such social dynamics in times of increased tensions, in the presence of ethnic and religious conflicts, and will mainly draw on theories from conflict studies, social-movement theory, and Slavica Jakelic’s (2010) concept of ‘collectivistic religions’. However, the article does not focus on the socio-political ramifications per se. The Rakhine State is an area that follows its own socio-political dynamics and is, in many respects, different from the remainder of Burma/Myanmar (see Ware and Laoutides 2018). Discussion of that region will therefore be excluded from this article. The Buddhist nationalist sermons delivered in 2012–2015 in Burma/Myanmar have, with one exception (Foxeus 2019), remained understudied. Furthermore, there has not yet been a study of the sermons as performative nationalist rituals.

1 Buddhist Nationalist Movements: The 969 Movement and Ma Ba Tha

After an election in 2010—regarded as neither free nor fair—which was won by the military-backed party *Pyi-daung-su-kyan-khaing-yay-hnin-hpun-hpyou-yay-pātī* (Union Solidarity and Development Party; herafter *USDP*), Thein Sein, a former three-star army general, was elected president in what became a hybrid government. That semi-civilian and semi-democratic government initiated a process of democratization and political liberalization, and further implementation of liberal capitalism. This political transformation was the result of a top-down implementation of the seven-step roadmap towards a

3 One attempt to explore the political ramifications is Van Klinken and Su Mon Thazin Aung 2017.
'discipline-flourishing democracy' that had been initiated by the military government of the SLORC-SPDC4 in 2003 (Egreteau 2016:2; Lall 2016). The rapid spread of the nationalist agenda was facilitated by the lifting of censorship on publications in 2012, and far-reaching access to mobile phones and the Internet, as well as the popularity of social media. In 2012–2015, nationalist monks were able to freely disseminate anti-Muslim ‘hate speech’ (*amoun-sagā*) without the intervention of the authorities under the USDP government (Min Zin 2015). A broadening and liberalization of the political and social space took place during the USDP period (2011–2016) under president Thein Sein (Egreteau 2016:40–44; see also Lall 2016), which enabled Buddhist nationalist movements to operate and to achieve considerable impact and influence. The USDP government apparently endorsed and supported the Buddhist nationalist movements (Min Zin 2015; Van Klinken and Su Mon Thazin Aung 2017). Since the Amyou-thā-di-mou-kareysi-ahpwe-khyoup (National League for Democracy; hereafter NLD) and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi assumed power in March 2016, the Buddhist nationalist movements have gradually been suppressed by the NLD government and the State Sangha Mahā Nāyaka Committee (Ma Ha Na), and they are today severely weakened. Nationalist sermons were therefore a widespread phenomenon only in 2012–2015, during which time the nationalist movements reached their peak of influence. There were frequently huge audiences attending the sermons, the majority of which were women.

The 969 movement was a monastic network established in late October 2012 in Lower Burma. It is especially known for its ‘Buy Buddhist’ campaign, a boycott of Muslim-owned businesses, and its ‘Marry a Buddhist’ campaign, meaning that Buddhist women should marry only Buddhist men. On 27 June 2013, this movement largely morphed into a larger and better structured organization called Amyou-bhāthā-thāthanā-saung-shauk-yay-ahpwe (Organization for Protecting the Nation, Religion, and the Buddha’s Dispensation, or Ma Ba Tha). While incorporating the agenda of the 969 movement, Ma Ba Tha came to focus on its four family laws to protect the nation and religion (*amyou-saung-upaday*), which if implemented would, for instance, make it more difficult for Muslim men to marry Buddhist women.5 As a lobby group, Ma Ba Tha managed to persuade the government under President Thein Sein to enact the four

4 *Naing-ngan-daw-ngyein-wup-pi-pyā-hmu-ti-hsauk-yay-ahpwe* (State Law and Order Restoration Council, hereafter SLORC) was established in 1988, while *Naing-ngan-daw-aye-khyan-thāyā-yay-hnin-hpun-hpyou-yay-kaung-si* (State Peace and Development Council, hereafter SPDC) was established in 1997. In this article, these two government bodies are abbreviated as SLORC-SPDC and refer to the military government that ruled from 1988 to 2011.

5 U Wimala Bhiwuntha, a co-founder of the 969 movement and later a leading Ma Ba Tha
nationalist laws in the parliament in 2015. The aim of the Buddhist nationalist movements was to protect the Buddhist nation and the sovereignty of the state of Myanmar against the perceived threat of Islamic expansion.

This article is mainly based on Buddhist nationalist sermons (and some speeches delivered by laypeople), which I collected in the form of DVDs in Burma/Myanmar, and Buddhist nationalist publications in Burmese. In this article, interviews primarily serve as a supplementary source. I undertook all the translations from Burmese into English. In 2016, 2017, and 2019, I interviewed about 90 people within Ma Ba Tha and other Buddhist nationalist organizations. The majority were monks (a few were famous, many belonged to the leadership, and some were minor figures); some informants were laypeople, and a few were ‘nuns’ (thīla-shin). Almost all of them belonged to the Burman majority population. I mostly selected informants through snowball-sampling, that is, the Ma Ba Tha monks (and in some cases, laypeople) suggested other informants. Moreover, I interviewed around 27 Muslims in Mandalay, mostly in focus groups though some were interviewed individually. All interviews were semi-structured and lasted from about one hour to more than three hours. Most of my interviews were conducted in Upper Burma, especially in Mandalay, but also in smaller cities there, while some were held in the Yangon area (2016 and 2017). I also conducted fieldwork using participant observation by socializing with the nationalist monks, attending Ma Ba Tha ceremonies in Mandalay and Yangon, and participating in other Ma Ba Tha activities.

2 Social (Relational) Power, Discursive Power, and Performative Power

The Buddhist nationalist sermons can be examined as performances that exercised a variety of powers. An important issue is how these performances impacted their audiences. Isaac Ariail Reed’s (2013) scheme of the three dimensions of power (relational, discursive, and performative), which he demonstrates can be operative at one and the same event, is helpful for analysing the various forms of power intersecting in the Buddhist nationalist sermons.

monk, explained in an interview that the 969 movement and Ma Ba Tha are essentially the same: ‘969 is Ma Ba Tha, and Ma Ba Tha is 969’ (Moe Aung 2015:69–70). My interviews (2016–2019) with Ma Ba Tha monks and laypeople confirmed that Ma Ba Tha adopted the 969 agenda.

6 Most interviewees belonged to charity organizations, while a few were political activists.
I will use Reed’s analytical framework in a modified form, as I view these three dimensions as being more mutually interdependent than he does.

Relational power (a structure of relations that intersect with sources of power, including institutional authority), which I call ‘social power’, determines the ability of some actors to control the actions of others and to direct social life. Discursive power is here understood as a cultural power inscribed in signification and perception that creates certain kinds of subjects, and naturalizes social relations (Reed 2013). That is something others would call ideology or ideological discourse, that is, constructions of reality (social relations, identities, et cetera) that are built into ideologically invested discursive practices, which contribute to the production and reproduction of relations of domination (see Fairclough 2003; 2012 [1992]:87–91). Buddhist nationalist sermons serve as such discursive practices, in which ideology is embedded. The third dimension is performative power, which is a power that, under certain circumstances, can exert control over others and make them do something they would not otherwise do (Reed 2013). Reed explains this power using the analogy of J.L. Austin’s theory of performative speech, according to which certain speech acts entail doing something rather than describing or stating something (‘constative’). Such performative speech acts (‘illocutionary’) include making a promise, a vow, or an order; exhorting someone to do something; forgiving; a priest declaring a couple married in a marriage ceremony, and so on. Such speech acts are neither true nor false, but they are successful or unsuccessful (‘felicitous’ or ‘infelicitous’). They must be performed at the right moment, in the appropriate context, and by the appropriate speaker (Austin 1962; Reed 2013; Bourdieu 1992 [1991]). Speech acts can also create effects in the listener by persuasion and bring about emotional effects. These are called perlocutionary speech acts (see Austin 1962:101; Gaines 1979).

Reed attributes performative power to events that happen under certain conditions and that possess social force in and of themselves, and which cannot be referred back to either the discursive dimension or to the authority (social power) of the speaker (Reed 2013:202). According to Reed, the “event” is, sui generis, its own form of causal power; and a performance ‘can create social power’ rather independent from existing power relations. As noted above, he understands this power in analogy with performative speech acts (Reed 2013:202). In this article, two kinds of performative power will be discerned: the performativity of events and performative speech acts. However, the part of his theory that claims that performative power is rather independent from the other two dimensions is not applicable to the Buddhist nationalist sermons. In my discussion of the latter, I assume that the three dimensions of power are closely intertwined. While I retain Reed’s view of the creative and
performative power that is related to the temporality of the events, I claim that such performative power is amplified by the authority (social power) of the speaker (monks) and by the power of discourse (sermons). In other words, the performative dimension (of the event and the speech act) is dependent on the social status and authority of the monks (see also Bourdieu 1992 [1991]:72–76, 107–116; Walton and Jerryson 2016), as well as on how the discursive dimension resonates with the audience. In that, I follow Bourdieu by locating the force of the performative power of speech in the institutional authority of the speaker (see Bourdieu 1992 [1991]). Moreover, in the case of the nationalist monks, their personal reputation and standing were additional factors that provided their speech with performative force (the ability to be obeyed). The notion of performative power is also consistent with the understanding within discourse analysis that discourses do not primarily reflect or describe social reality, but that they actively shape it. Discourses construct representations of social reality through a ‘politics of portrayal’ (see Demmers 2017:133-4; Fairclough 2003, 2012 [1992]).

Performative power is linked to the ‘eventness’ of the actions, the effectiveness of which depends on felicitous circumstances (Reed 2013:203–204). In that way, the 969 and Ma Ba Tha events exerted performative power due not merely to the authority of the speakers (social power) and to the discursive power, but to the tense and uncertain situation in 2012–2015 that made these events successful and able to exercise a performative power that would not otherwise have been possible to the same degree. This entailed that people would be willing to act unconventionally (see Reed 2013:195, 203, 208). Performative power is, Reed suggests, most likely in ‘unsettled times’, when the standard institutional guides for action tend to be irrelevant (Reed 2013:208). Such a situation emerged in Burma/Myanmar, when it began to open up in 2011. The political and economic liberalization and democratization that occurred during the shift from authoritarian rule brought about uncertainty. Moreover, globalized Islamophobia and concern about militant Islam; the riots between Buddhists and Muslims in 2012–2014; the Muslim Rohingyas being perceived as illegal Bengali immigrants; the perceived risk of a future mass illegal immigration of ‘Bengali immigrants’ from the Muslim-majority country of Bangladesh; and the claims that Muslims in Burma were funded by international Islamic organizations created a fear that Muslims posed an existential threat to Burmese Buddhism and to Myanmar’s sovereignty, even though Buddhists formed the majority in Burma.7 This entire situation created a context, a felicitous situ-

ating, in which the anti-Muslim Buddhist nationalist sermons and the monks were able to exert considerable performative power over their audience.

3 The Social Power of the Monks, Framing, and Anti-Muslim Conspiracy Theories

Nationalist monks delivering political nationalist sermons and other kinds of monastic activism began in the 1920s, with U Ottama (1879–1939) and U Wisara (1889–1929) as the most illustrious figures (Maung Maung 1980; Cady 1958; Smith 1965). The Buddhist monks of the Sangha, the monastic community, enjoy an extraordinary degree of honour, respect, and authority and wield corresponding social power and influence over the laypeople (see Spiro 1982 [1970]:396). When monks assume the role of defenders of the endangered Buddha’s dispensation, they can, relying on their institutional and cultural authority, authorize religio-political discourse, including anti-Muslim conspiracy theories and rumours. Thereby, their statements tend to be accepted by laypeople because they wish to support actions that claim to defend and protect Buddhism (see Walton and Jerryson 2016:806–809). Justification of discrimination and violence in defence of the Buddha’s dispensation has been a recurrent pattern in Buddhist traditions (see Walton and Hayward 2014; Foxeus 2019). In contrast to the 969 movement, Ma Ba Tha was formally led by senior, well-respected and famous monks, such as Sitagu Hsayādaw (vice chairman of Mandalay Ma Ba Tha), Ashin Tillawka Bhiwuntha (the chairman of the entire Ma Ba Tha), and Ashin Thilekkhandha Bhiwuntha (vice chairman of Ma Ba Tha), a Tipiṭakadhara Hsayādaw, meaning that he has memorized the entire Theravāda Buddhist canon. When delivering the sermons, the authority and performative power of other Ma Ba Tha monks were greatly amplified through their ‘delegated authority’ as authorized representatives of Ma Ba Tha, led by such authoritative monks and drawing on their symbolic capital (see Bourdieu 1992:72–76, 107–116).

According to social-movement theory, movements must articulate and disseminate frameworks of understanding that ‘resonate with potential participants and the broader public to elicit collective action’ (Wiktorowicz 2004:15; see also Demmers 2017). This aspect of the framing process is called ‘frame resonance’, and it is important for enabling mobilization by cultural narratives. Moreover, this resonance depends also on the reputation of the people who articulate the frame; the frame must make sense for the participants, and it must be perceived to be empirically credible in real life for them. Leaders must therefore use narratives that ‘tap into cultural experiences and collect-
ive memories’ (Wiktorowicz 2004:16, 18). For that reason, a top-down manipulation of a credulous public would not be possible (see Demmers 2017:30–32). Drawing on their duty to defend the Buddha’s dispensation, the monks have served as reputable and authoritative figures who can disseminate such frames. In Burma, anti-Muslim narratives, especially conspiracy theories, have long constituted such frames that resonate with experiences and perceptions among Buddhists. The success of the sermons therefore depended ‘upon the historically conditioned cultural meanings of their politics of fear’ (Demmers 2017:32).

Since the colonial period, there has been a distrust among Burmese Buddhists towards people regarded as foreigners (especially of Indian descent), a perceived problem of interethnic and interreligious marriages, and fear of Indian (Muslim) dominance of the economy. A Burmese Buddhist nationalist discourse emerged in the early 1900s that was anti-colonial and later anti-Indian, as a response to the unrestricted immigration of Indians to Burma. An Indian elite was provided the best positions within the colonial administration and Indians came to dominate the economy. In the larger cities, Burmese people constituted a minority while Indians formed the majority (see Chakravarti 1971; Smith 1965; Cady 1958). Mainly Indian men migrated to Burma and (especially Muslims) married Burmese Buddhist women. It was claimed that the women had to convert to Islam to acquire inheritance rights (Ikeya 2011; Chakravarti 1971).

From that period, foreigners were perceived as posing a threat that was linked to fear of the imminent destruction of the Buddha’s dispensation (Turner 2014), local Burmese culture, language, nation/race, and traditions that Nyi Nyi Kyaw refers to as a ‘myth of deracination’ (Nyi Nyi Kyaw 2020). The experienced unfair competition (in economy, marriage, and social status) with Indians (later Muslims) has created a longstanding resentment towards them (see Foxeus 2019). From around the 1990s, the anti-Indian sentiments have gradually transformed into Islamophobia (Egreteau 2011). These anti-Muslim sentiments, along with the fear of being overrun by ‘foreigners’, have informed the conspiracy theory discussed below. However, anti-Muslim sentiments have been widespread for a long time in Burma, with recurrent cycles of anti-Muslim riots starting in 1938. As many Muslims are businessmen, shop keepers, owners of hotels, and so on, they have often been targeted in periods of economic hardship.8

In the early post-independence period, an anti-Muslim conspiracy theory emerged that was similar to the anti-Semitic conspiracy theory called the ‘Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion’ that was fabricated in 1903 and was appropriated by the Nazis (Bronner 2000). The Burmese conspiracy theory appeared in a series of articles by Shwe Done Bi Aung published in 1953, which were later republished in a pamphlet entitled Koudaw-karunā (The compassion of the monk). In that pamphlet, allegedly secret documents intended for circulation among Muslims alone, were reproduced, stating that Muslims should mark their shops with 786; they should do business only among themselves; and they should seek to marry Buddhist women to expand their group. According to the documents, the aim would be to achieve Islamic supremacy throughout the world, including Burma, during the twenty-first century (7 + 8 + 6 = 21). Moreover, rewards would be given to Muslim men who managed to marry indigenous Buddhist women (Shwe Done Bi Aung n.d. [1953]:37–38). This conspiracy theory was reproduced verbatim in the undated and anonymous pamphlet Amyou-pyauk-hmā-sou-kyauk-sayā (Fearing that the nation will disappear), which—according to my sources—has been distributed since the late 1980s. In these pamphlets, Muslims are claimed to have a plan to ‘swallow’ (wā-myōu) other nations/races and religions. Pamphlets with similar content have been disseminated in times of social unrest and instability since at least the 1980s (Fink 2001; Selth 2004; Human Rights Watch 2002). In sermons, the nationalist monks repeatedly alluded to the above-mentioned secret plan to turn Burma into an Islamic state in the twenty-first century.

4 Performing the Nation: Buddhist Sermons as Performative Nationalist Rituals

In the following, I will investigate how the nation was performed in 2013–2015 through sermons and rituals. The audiences listened to sermons, sang nationalist songs, made vows collectively, and engaged in Buddhist merit-making. In the sermons, the nationalist agenda was set into a traditional Buddhist framework of ritual merit-making and the traditional structure of Buddhist sermons (with call and response between the monk and the audience), a framework that—along with the authority attributed to monks—served to authorize, normalize,
and provide legitimacy to the nationalist, anti-Muslim agenda (see also Walton and Jerryson 2016).

Buddhist nationalist sermons can be compared to public rituals that perform national identity. Such public performances constitute a ‘ritualization of politics’ and are political rituals that celebrate national, ethnic, and religious identity. They can serve as ‘fundamental catalysts for cohesion and value commitment’ among groups of participants and which, ultimately, aim to produce a unique version of “we-ness” and demarcate the boundaries of their nation (Zuev and Virchow 2014:191–192). Although the nationalist Buddhist sermons were not political events in a formal sense, they served as rallying venues for forming political opinions: monks sought to persuade audiences to support the four nationalist family laws, criticized the NLD, encouraged discrimination against the Muslim minorities, and so on.

The discourses of the Buddhist nationalist sermons were more concerned with social and cultural aspects of religion, including the religious and national group identities that shape communal boundaries, than with Buddhist doctrines (see also Walton and Jerryson 2016:809; Jakelic 2010:10). Although nationalist monks discussed Buddhist texts and doctrines in sermons, such content was mostly reinterpreted to shed light on the contemporary context of the conflict between Buddhist and Muslim communities (Foxeus 2019). Many nationalist sermons were framed by Buddhist narratives derived from Buddhist texts, especially jātaka tales but occasionally also post-canonical works such as the fifth-century Sinhalese chronicle Mahāvamsa.

One important reason for the focus on socio-cultural aspects in the nationalist sermons is that the Buddha’s dispensation (P. sāsana) is an intrinsically social phenomenon. Constituting a ‘Burmese Buddhicized social space’ (Brac de la Perrière 2017), it refers to Buddhism as localized, institutionalized, and grounded in society; it is embodied by the monastic community and the laypeople; and it comprises Buddhist texts, teaching, textual knowledge, moral observances, meditation practices, and Buddhist edifices. Moreover, it comprises a social hierarchy based on mutual moral obligations. This form of religion is what Slavica Jakelic (2010) calls a ‘collectivistic religion’, a religion into which one is born, a social identity that is ascribed rather than freely chosen; it is public/political and is constitutive of local group identities of a historically particular moral community and its collective memories. A collectivistic religion is one in which belonging to a religious community is determined by birth (Jakelic 2010; see also Walton and Jerryson 2016; Demmers 2017:22). In the Burmese case, religious identity is conflated with national identity.

The nation per se, although often mentioned in passing, was seldom subject to discursive elaboration in the nationalist sermons. Instead, the sermons
tended to focus on the enemy of the Buddhist nation, the Muslims. A nation requires one or several outsiders—or, as is often the case, an antagonistic Other—in relation to which it can create its distinctive national identity (Finlayson 1998; Demmers 2017). As noted above, Muslims have long been othered in Burmese Buddhist nationalism. The reason why the sermons were not primarily aimed at instilling a certain ideal of national identity was probably because the audience was assumed to be already familiar with it. The nation (amyou), both according to monks from the 969 Movement and Ma Ba Tha’s constitution (Ma Ba Tha 2013:3–4), consists of the 135 ‘national races’ (taing-yin-thā). These are subdivisions of the eight ethnic groups that have officially been acknowledged since Burma’s 1947 Constitution.¹⁰ This concept of the nation is encountered in Buddhist nationalist sermons and was adopted by almost all of the Ma Ba Tha monks and laypeople I interviewed. Moreover, the concept of the 135 national races corresponds to the official position of the state regarding who belongs to the Myanmar nation. It was invented in 1983 by the government during the Ne Win period and has been used in censuses since then (in 1983 and 2014; see Cheesman 2017; Ferguson 2015).¹¹ Most Burmese people are familiar with that concept. The concept is thus a result of a top-down process by the state which has later become naturalized among the public.

This concept of the nation represents an ethnic nationalist discourse that downplays religious belonging. Although the concept of the 135 national races is a bureaucratic taxonomy, and it is doubtful that it can be perceived as an imagined community in Benedict Anderson’s sense (2006 [1983]), it nevertheless signifies a sense of indigenousness. However, Ma Ba Tha’s view of the nation is conflated with a Buddhist identity and is viewed as indissoluble (Foxeus 2019; Walton and Hayward 2014). The operative form of nationalism within Ma Ba Tha and the 969 movement tends to be a Buddhist nationalist discourse, where ethnic belonging is subordinated to religious belonging, as articulated, explicitly or implicitly, in sermons, publications, prescriptions of practices, and in my interviews.

In the sermons, Muslims, who are found among many—if not most—of the 135 national races, are nevertheless depicted as outsiders of their nation. They are frequently referred to as bhāthā-khyā, lū-myou-khyā, a ‘different race and religion’, that is, they are depicted as being different from the 135 national races; or as kalā, ‘foreigner’, a derogatory word that formerly referred mainly to Indians but is today mostly understood to refer to Muslims (see Nyi Nyi Kyaw 2016; Kachin, Kayah, Kayin (Karen), Chin, Bamā (Burman), Mon, Rakhaing, and Shan. ¹⁰ Those excluded from the list are ‘foreigners’ of Indian, Chinese, or European descent, as well as the contested group of the Muslim Rohingyas.
Egreteau 2011). The nation here is thus essentially a combination of indigenousness and Burmese Buddhism. For instance, in my interviews, Ma Ba Tha monks denied that Chinese Buddhists belong to their *amyou*, ‘nation’, because they are not included in the 135 national races.

Collective singing can be a significant practice in public displays of national identity, and such events can therefore become highly emotional (Zuev and Virchow 2014:193). Community singing of nationalist songs, especially the 969 song, occurred at many Ma Ba Tha ceremonies before the election in November 2015, and the audience—men, women, and children—would sing together. Nationalist songs have been an important element in Burmese nationalism since the Dobama Asiayon (We Burmans Association), which was founded in 1930. Their nationalist song from 1930 summarized their agenda, and a revised version later became the national anthem of Burma (Khin Yi 1988:7–9). The 969 song similarly constitutes a summary of the agenda of the 969 movement. It serves as a mnemonic device through which a simple nationalist agenda can easily be memorized and popularized. Its popularity is also attested by the fact that nationalist monks and laypeople, including some young women, use it as a ringtone on their mobile phones. Furthermore, in September 2017, I accompanied a Ma Ba Tha caravan, consisting of about fifteen cars and trucks, from Mandalay for a ceremony held in a village in the Minbu area. Speakers had been fastened to the roofs of several cars, through which nationalist songs were played loudly. A festive atmosphere emerged when the participants sang together. The 969 song is a nationalist song identifying a threat, an enemy who has conspired to destroy Buddhism; the Buddhists are depicted as victims under attack, who must become united and pledge to defend Buddhism and their nation. The lyrics of the 969 song read as follows:

Hey! The light of the Buddha is shining in our country, in our country. We stand at the front line because the enemy religion [Islam] has determined the era when they will destroy [Buddhism].

They [Muslims] live on our land and drink our water; they [take treasures/resources] beneath our ground and our business. They insult all our daughters and sons; and they offend the host. They have destroyed our generations [lit. 'broken the branches']; they are selfish and show no gratitude.

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12 This refers to the conspiracy theory discussed above.
We, brothers, and sons and daughters of pure lineage (*amyou-kaung*), must make a vow; we must make a vow; we must make a vow to be loyal to our nation, religion, and the Buddha’s dispensation. We will only buy from shops owned by those of the same religion [Buddhism]. We will only choose marriage partners among those of the same religion [Buddhists].

Warm up your blood for our national affairs! Wake up, our Myanmar people! We must build a fence of our bones to protect [our nation], if necessary. We must build a fence of our bones to protect [our nation], if necessary.¹³

This is a song that urges mobilization, almost a battle song for defending the nation and Buddhism. Sometimes a militant imagery was used, probably to stress the urgency of their cause. For instance, in a speech at a Ma Ba Tha event in Mandalay in June 2014, Maung Thway Khyun, a famous lay representative of the organization, said that the prominent nationalist monks U Wirathu and U Eindasekka Bhiwuntha from the Mandalay branch of Ma Ba Tha are ‘the chief generals’ of ‘the great Buddhist army called 969’.¹⁴ Moreover, some speakers, especially some laypeople, delivered their speeches in a rather aggressive manner. All this contributed to create an emotional atmosphere and a sense of urgency and impending danger.

In this article, two kinds of sermons are discussed: privately sponsored sermons and those given at large-scale Ma Ba Tha events, which included several sermons and speeches that were often linked to a Ma Ba Tha meeting. In the sermons delivered in 2013–2015 by Ma Ba Tha and 969 monks, three discursive complexes were frequently combined: 1) defining the nature of their enemy; 2) a solution to the crisis (discriminatory practices and laws); and 3) making nationalist vows to display commitment to the nationalist cause. These three

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¹³ The main part of this song is derived from a poem attributed to a famous forest monk in Burma, Mahābodhi Myaing Hsayādaw. Some claim that he is a ‘saint’ (*P. arahant*). See Ashin Kinsanaw Bhāthā, ‘Saung-lay-myou-nweh-tayā-daw’, 26-3-2014, Thaketha, Yangon (sermon).

¹⁴ Maung Thway Khyun, ‘Amyou-saung-upaday-kaung thi-kaung-sayā-athi-pyinnyā-pay-haw-pyaw-pwe’, 12-6-2014, Mandalay. The two monks are *u-hsaung hsayādaws*, ‘leading monks’, and the de facto leaders of Mandalay Ma Ba Tha (interviews with Ma Ba Tha monks, 2017 and 2019). Militant imagery was also used to portray nationalist monks in the colonial period, which at that time were called the ‘soldiers of Buddha’ (Maung Maung 1980:50). Militant imagery has been used by other Buddhist organizations too, including esoteric groups (see Foxeus 2016).
Discursive complexes are similar to the 'core framing tasks' attributed to social movements (see Wiktorowicz 2004:15–16).

5 Discursive Power: Defining the Enemy of the Buddhist Nation

A discursive approach is employed here to examine how social group boundaries—the 'limits' of communities—are constructed by narratives about social reality which are regarded as the 'social truth'. If people perceive these narratives to be accurate, they may act accordingly, and discourses therefore have real social consequences (see Demmers 2017:126, 133; Fairclough 2003). In nationalist sermons and speeches delivered in 2013–2015, nationalist monks and laypeople disseminated narratives that were especially shaped by the anti-Muslim conspiracy theory mentioned above to construct an enemy for the Buddhist nation. This conspiracy theory served as a 'nodal point' for Buddhist nationalist discourse (see Sutherland 2005:193–194) around which the discourses revolved. These discourses about the Muslim enemy of the Buddhist nation aimed to create perlocutionary effects in the audience, that is, emotional responses such as fear, anger, hatred, and repugnance, and to persuade the individuals present (see Gaines 1979) against having any future dealings with Muslims. A recurrent theme in sermons and speeches, and in my interviews, is the point of view that if Muslims were to become stronger, they would seek to take over the country by various means, ultimately by waging jihad and killing all non-Muslims. The nationalist monks claim that it is their duty to defend the nation and the Buddha's dispensation against Islam. The monks portray themselves exclusively as defenders of the Buddha's dispensation and their nation.

In support of the conspiracy theory, the 969 monk Ashin Pyinnyā Wara (later a leading Ma Ba Tha monk) claimed that there was an increase in the Muslim population, which is about 4.3% according to the 2014 census, and depicted it as a demographic threat to the survival of Buddhism. He maintained that the number 786 signified that in the twenty-first century, Burma and the whole world would become Muslim. The percentage of Muslims in Burma in 2012 was 22%, he explained, adding that their numbers would increase every year because they were breeding rapidly and reducing the number of Buddhists by marrying Buddhist women. According to him, in 80 years, Muslims would...
constitute 75% of the population in Burma. When they declared jihad, he foretold, the audience’s grandchildren would be killed by Muslims, and Buddhism would disappear. Similarly, Ashin Thawpaka explained that a ‘different religion’ (Islam) uses various methods to ‘swallow’ other religions. First, they ‘swallow people by people’, that is, by high rates of reproduction and by religious intermarriages with Buddhist women. Second, they use persuasion (myú-hsweh), for instance, when Muslims become strong in business, they manipulate and swallow those who are poor and ignorant and those who are weak in their religious commitment. Third, they use terrorism as a method (akyan-hpek-de-ní), as illustrated by the actions of the Islamic State (IS), to swallow other nations and religions. Fourth, they seek to seize the power of the state. Through the latter, Burmese Buddhists would lose their sovereignty, country, nation, and religion, and the Buddha’s dispensation would disappear.

A recurrent theme in many cultures is that of a woman representing the body of the nation, thereby signifying the boundaries of the group identity that should be protected from alien Others. In this scenario the female body becomes the battleground for group struggles. The rape of a woman is therefore the rape and humiliation of the body of the nation, and also endangers the maintenance of the nation (Peterson 2000:69–70). The following excerpt illustrates how a sermon was used as a ritual to demonize Muslims and at the same time sacralize the Buddhist nation, represented by an innocent, vulnerable female Buddhist child, the body of the nation. The nationalist monk Ashin Kinsanaw Bhāthā told the story of an eight-year-old girl who claimed to have been raped by a Muslim in order to prove the evilness of Muslims and illustrate the threat they pose to the Buddhist community. As the introduction to his 2014 sermons, the monk interviewed this girl on stage in front of the audience, where she narrated her story in detail about how she had been raped.

Nationalist monks retold horror stories about women who had married Muslims, with the aim of demonstrating how Muslims seek to force Buddhist women to convert to Islam; how they beat, mistreat, and even torture or kill them; and how they force Buddhist women to disrespect the Buddha by standing on images of him. One common claim was that Muslims merely used Buddhist women as an instrument for breeding and implementing their plan to expand their group. U Wirathu in particular spoke about Muslims as ‘hunters’, ‘wolves’, or ‘tigers’ setting up ‘traps’ and seeking to ‘swallow’ (wā-myou) Buddhist women, their nation, Buddhism, and Myanmar. One famous story was

about the Buddhist woman Ma Wā Wā Myint, who was interviewed by the monk Ashin Kinsanaw Bhāthā in a monastery on 22 October 2012. She married a Muslim who, she claimed, had pretended to be a Buddhist but later revealed his Islamic identity, and who forced her to convert to Islam and abandon Buddhism. After she declared to her husband that she wanted to reconvert to Buddhism, he lost all interest in and affection for her. He mistreated and beat her repeatedly. Several Ma Ba Tha monks, including U Wirathu, referred to this story in their sermons.

6 Performative Power over the Audience: Establishing a Boundary around the Nation

Next, solutions to the threat allegedly posed by Muslims were outlined. Especially in 969 sermons, discipline, unity, and loyalty to the nation and Buddhism were emphasized and presented the insular aim of isolating and creating a boundary around their Buddhist nation, thereby protecting it from the Muslim minorities. They constitute everyday nationalist practices that should be adopted as a daily routine to turn the abstract entity of a Burmese Buddhist nation into a lived experience. The nationalist practices and principles outlined below were frequently claimed to be a response to the alleged Islamic plan to take over Burma during the twenty-first century. The exhortations of the nationalist monks that urged the laypeople to adopt nationalist practices constituted performative power.

Nationalist monks urged laypeople to sever all dealings with Muslims; to be loyal to the country, nation, and Buddhism; and to be disciplined and united. For that reason, they should privilege their own group by means of discriminatory practices regarding social (marriage), economic, and political affairs. As U Wirathu admonished: ‘Whatever you do, do it with a nationalist view (amyou-thā-yay-amyin-ne).’\(^{19}\) This admonishment applied to purchases, renting a house, selling a house, practising religion, education, looking for a job, employing staff, political activities, marriage, and so on. Buddhists were instructed to marry only indigenous Buddhists, and to buy only from Buddhist-owned shops marked with the Buddhist numerological symbol 969; they were to boycott Muslim-owned shops. This was a counter to the Muslim number of 786 (which was marked on their restaurants signalling that they served halal food.)\(^{20}\) Loyalty to nation and Buddhism by these practices was sometimes


referred to as a ‘discipline’ (*si-kan*). Being disciplined to avoid being dominated by others was associated with the colonial period, at which time Burmese people were stated to have been ‘enslaved’ by the British because they lacked discipline.  

Nationalist monks claim that everyone, including children, has a duty to defend and preserve their nation and Buddhism. Some Ma Ba Tha monks and laypeople depicted the path of the Buddha, who fulfilled perfections (*P. pāramī*) in innumerable existences before attaining Buddhahood, as a nationalist path. As a *bodhisatta*, Ashin Thawpaka explains, the Buddha did two things in every life: selfless work for the benefit of others and sacrificing himself (*sunhaul-inic-nā-khan*) as much as he could for others. On this path, the Buddha protected his nation and his religion. Ashin Thawpaka maintains that the nationalist Buddha should serve as a role model for contemporary Buddhists. A nationalist myth of the Burmese people as descendants of the Buddha’s own relatives, the Sākiya clan (*thāki-myou*), was employed as an ideological device to protect the boundaries of the Buddhist nation. Some Ma Ba Tha monks, especially Ashin Eindasekka Bhiwuntha and U Wirathu, drew on that nationalist myth to dissuade Buddhist women from marrying people of a different race and religion (Muslims). As the Burmese women are descended from a noble race, they should not contaminate it by marrying other ‘races’ and become ‘mixed blood’ (*thway-hnaw*), thereby prescribing endogamy. The aim of these practices, concepts, and narratives was to create a boundary—sometimes figuratively called a ‘fence’ (*si-you*)—around the nation by the 969 agenda (as articulated within the 969 song) or through the four nationalist family laws (as some monks and laypeople suggested in sermons and speeches).

Finally, vows—which served as nationalist performative rituals—were made to publicly confirm commitment to the cause of defending the nation and the Buddha’s dispensation against the enemy (Muslims). At 969 sermons and Ma Ba Tha ceremonies, the audience was frequently asked by the preaching monk to make collective nationalist vows, thereby affirming bonds of solidarity and duties to their Buddhist community (see Zuev and Virchow 2014). In that way, the audience made nationalist vows collectively in a performative way. As J.L. Austin (1962:5–6, 10–11) argued, a promise or a vow is a performative speech act that changes the social world; it is an action. During the colonial period, vows were occasionally made in anti-colonial nationalist movements, including the ‘rebel oaths’ made in the Saya San rebellion of 1931–1932 (Warren 1937:92–94) and by other rebel groups in the 1920s–1930s (Moscotti 1974:205–207). In sermons, Ma Ba Tha monks depicted the vows made by famous Buddhist kings as models for the present nationalist vows, for instance, King Alaunghpaya’s (1752–1754) vow to defend and promote the Buddha’s dispensation, and a vow allegedly made by the Sinhalese warrior king Duṭṭhayagāmaṇi to defend the Buddha’s dispensation, the nation/race, and to never betray his country. These royal models reflect the shift during the colonial period in the responsibility to defend and promote the Buddha’s dispensation from the king to the laypeople (Turner 2014; Foxeus 2016).

In the sermons I have examined, the collective nationalist vows were made at the end. Two kinds of vows were made in 2012–2015 at nationalist sermons: the 969 vow and Ma Ba Tha’s vows. In a sense, all these vows—because they are performative speech acts enacted in a social context—represent a technology that ritually and formally turned the audience into Buddhist nationalists.

The 969 vow that is included in the 969 song is a condensed summary of the agenda of the 969 movement. As U Wimala Bhiwuntha explains, the 969 vow (thissā-adheīṭṭhān) is about being loyal (thissā-shi) to the nation, the religion, and the Buddha’s dispensation; buying only at shops owned by someone

25 King Alaunghpaya was the founder of the Konbaung Dynasty (1752–1885), the last Burmese royal dynasty; see also Ashin Thawpaka, ‘Amyou-bhāthā-thāthanā-ne-amyou-saung-upaday’, 12-9-2015.
27 In the premodern period, it was the king in collaboration with the Sangha that promoted and protected the Buddha’s dispensation (Smith 1965).
of the same religion (Buddhism); and selecting a marriage partner only among people of the same religion (Buddhism) (Moe Aung 2015:70). The excerpt below is derived from a sermon delivered by Ashin Kinsanaw Bhāthā (b. 1976) on 26 March 2014 in Yangon. The audience consisted almost exclusively of (seemingly working-class) women, but there were also some children and a few men. The monk occasionally preached in a playful manner, the audience frequently laughed, and the atmosphere was at times joyous. This kind of popular preaching might be appreciated among lower socio-economic classes in Burma.

The monk asked the audience to make a series of nationalist vows. He recited loudly and asked the audience to recite after him and to lift their right arm while making the vows. First, he asked the audience to make a vow to be loyal to the nation, the religion, and the Buddha's dispensation with three kinds of karma—verbally, mentally, and bodily in a Buddhist manner. Second, he asked them to make a vow to buy only from shops owned by someone of the same religion (Buddhism). Third, he asked the audience to make a vow to only marry someone of the same religion (Buddhism). Later in the sermon, he explained that they should protect their country, nation/race, and religion with 969. The vow, which he referred to as a ‘blood oath’, comprised the following: 1) they must practise the nationalist discipline (si-kan)—buying only at Buddhist-owned shops and marrying only Burmese Buddhists; 2) they must be united (nyī-nyut); 3) they must obey the words of their leaders (probably the monks and others). In this way, he explained, they would protect their country, nation, and religion (Buddhism) with 969; and they would ‘write their history with their own blood’.

Ma Ba Tha’s vows had a broader implication. A ‘Ma Ba Tha vow’ (ma-bha-tha-adheīţţhān), with some variant versions, was often collectively recited. This vow also appeared in Ma Ba Tha books, at the back of books for Buddhist cultural courses for teenagers; in Ma Ba Tha’s journals; or as a text in the introduction to DVD recordings of Ma Ba Tha events. At larger Ma Ba Tha ceremonies, a monk would appear on stage and recite a nationalist vow through a microphone, which the audience would repeat after him. This collective vow-making was a formal determination to protect their nation (the 135 national races), Buddhism, and the country, and vows seem to have been included in all major Ma Ba Tha events. A ‘victory ceremony’ (aung-pwe) celebrating that the four nationalist laws had passed in parliament was held by Ma Ba Tha on 20 September 2015 at the famous Mahāmuni Pagoda in Mandalay. A monk, U Wira Yāzā, 

29 Vows that are similar to this Ma Ba Tha vow are made by children and teenagers in Ma Ba Tha-run schools.
appeared on the stage. Having a stern expression on his face, he exhorted the audience, consisting of monks, ‘nuns’, and laypeople (men, women, and children), to make a nationalist vow and to recite after him: ‘We will protect our nation so that it won’t disappear. We will protect the Buddha’s dispensation so that it won’t disappear. We will protect our country so that it won’t disappear.’ The monk recited in a quite aggressive manner and at the end he screamed, while the audience loudly recited after him. At another Ma Ba Tha ceremony, held at Eindawya Pagoda in Mandalay, on 30 November 2014, the same monk asked the audience to make a three-pronged nationalist vow. That pagoda is of significance in the history of Burmese nationalism (see Smith 1965). The audience consisted of hundreds of ‘nuns’ (ṭhīla-shin), monks, and laypeople. The monk recited loudly as follows:

We will together protect and maintain our national races (taing-yin-thā) living in the state of Myanmar so that they will not disappear. We will together protect and maintain the Buddha’s dispensation that is worshipped by the national races in the state of Myanmar so that it will exist for a long time. We will together protect and maintain our great state of Myanmar in which all the national races live so that it will not disappear.

8 Protecting Buddhism and the Nation on the Karmic Path to Awakening and Nirvana

One reason why Buddhists might be motivated to participate in nationalist sermons is that they are regarded as merit-making occasions. In the sermons, protecting Buddhism and the nation is portrayed as a religious duty. The nationalist agenda was integrated within the traditional structure of the sermons. For instance, the conclusion of Ashin Kinsanaw Bhāthā’s ‘Saung-lay-myou-nwehtayā-daw’ sermon above, delivered in 2014, represents a hybrid of a traditional merit-making ritual and Buddhist nationalism. Attending this nationalist sermon, listening to it, and interacting with the monk was a merit-making occasion. The monk declared: ‘From this day onwards, may the whole audience who have listened to this sermon, all our relatives, and noble people be able to be “virtuous national people”. May they all be able to work together to carry out the project to raise, protect, and maintain our country, nation, religion, and our Buddha’s dispensation in accordance with the rules of 969’ (the three principles mentioned above). The audience, who had held their palms pressed together in front of their foreheads, responded by saying ‘Sādhu, sādhu, sadhu’ (‘well done’), and prostrating themselves three times, with some touching the ground
with their foreheads. Thereafter followed a traditional Buddhist water libation ceremony and the sharing of the karmic merit generated through the funding and holding of the ceremony by the donors, and by listening to and participating in it by the audience. In sharing the karmic merit, the nation/race, religion, and the Buddha’s dispensation were included as beneficiaries. In a 2014 sermon, U Eindasekka Bhiwuntha shared the karmic merit in a similar manner.  

This — like the nationalist sermons at large — constitutes a subtle form of social control amplified by monastic authority (social power), as it instills a certain ideology or a set of normative values through the naturalizing medium of a familiar ritual, thereby serving as an ‘invisible control’ (Bell 1992:176). Through ‘the hidden persuasion’ of this ‘implicit pedagogy’ a ‘political philosophy’ can be instilled (Bourdieu 2006 [1977]:94). In this way, rituals can control people by defining norms and a reality to be internalized, a control that is not experienced as such by participants. Naturalizing norms invisibly in this manner is partly the source of the effectiveness of such rituals (Bell 1992:175). In this way, nationalist ideology could almost imperceptibly be inculcated into the audience.

Protecting Buddhism and the nation is imagined to be a part of the karmic path to awakening and nirvana. Some nationalist monks portrayed Buddhist nationalism as an intrinsically religious practice, carried out in the emulation of the path of the Buddha as a bodhisatta. In his previous lives as a bodhisatta, the Buddha is claimed to have defended his ‘relatives’ (P. nātattacariyā) in a selfless manner, thereby sacrificing himself for his community. In the modern period, the word ‘relatives’ is interpreted as signifying the ‘nation’ (amyou). This nationalist path should be followed by both monks and laypeople (Foxeus 2019; see also Spiro 1982 [1970]). In the early 1960s, nationalist monks claimed that Buddhists should emulate the Buddha in protecting their nation and the Buddha’s dispensation (Spiro 1982 [1970]:385–392, 394–395). Similarly, one layman, who was a Ma Ba Tha supporter and lived in a village outside the city of Yamethin in Upper Burma, explained that a monk who taught him in the village monastery in the late 1980s said that they would acquire karmic merit (kuthoul) if they protected their nation and the Buddha’s dispensation (amyoubhāthā-thāthanā).  

Defending the nation and Buddhism and discriminating against Muslims is therefore a religious duty through which Buddhists can obtain karmic merit.

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31 Interview, July 2019.
The Creation of a Boundary around the Nation through Fear

This seamless incorporation of nationalist themes within the traditional ritual framework of Buddhist sermons requires some reflection on the nature of ‘collective religion’ and its sociological implications. The three discursive complexes of the nationalist sermons outlined above served to create and to maintain a boundary around the Buddhist community, and created social cohesion and solidarity in the volatile period of political liberalization during the shift from authoritarian rule which brought about uncertainty and fear. In situations of uncertainty, people tend to identify with radical organizations that have demarcated boundaries to overcome uncertainty by employing simple solutions (Demmers 2017:50). As I will discuss in this and the following sections, violence, fear of violence, or a sense of a threat can be an effective instrument of community-building (Demmers 2017:30; Ahmed 2014 [2004]; Finlayson 1998). The Buddhist nationalist sermons were both a response to a perceived crisis and also contributed to creating a crisis.

In the following, I will examine two ways in which the sermons sought to create social cohesion, solidarity, and community. The first was through creating an enemy and fear. In the sermons, stereotypes of Muslims, based on essentialized religious and ethnic differences, were constitutive of establishing Buddhists as a morally superior, righteous moral community and Muslims as an immoral and demonized antagonistic Other. This was predicated on the principle of intergroup comparison, whereby in-group positivity was enhanced by comparison with the out-group, creating a division between ‘us’ and ‘them’ (see Demmers 2017:43; Finlayson 1998; Sutherland 2005). Although latent anti-Muslim sentiment is widespread in Burma, it mostly recedes into the background and resurfaces when a major event occurs (see also Van Klinken and Su Mon Thazin Aung 2017). The June and October 2012 riots in Rakhine State between Buddhists and Muslims were such events; they were a watershed. In response to the riots, many Buddhist nationalist organizations were established. U Wirathu delivered anti-Muslim nationalist sermons as early as July 2012. In this tense situation, nationalist monks were able to amplify the sense of a Muslim threat and turn it from being a local affair into a pan-Burmese issue, thereby developing a stronger sense of the Buddhist community with the Muslim enemy as a unifying factor.

A greater degree of group cohesion can also be a result rather than the cause of conflict (Demmers 2017:25; see also Ware and Laoutides 2018:184). In Burma, the strengthening sense of belonging to the Buddhist nation was arguably developed through preaching and mobilizing against Muslims. The conspiracy theory about the alleged Muslim plan to take over Burma created a
fear of Muslims in general. As Sara Ahmed explains, fear is crucial to establishing collectives. Danger, she claims, is not an objective condition but an effect of discourse rather than the origin of the process leading to fear. The language of fear intensifies the sense of threat, creating enemies and victims. In this way, solidarity is based on a sense of insecurity, and shared risk becomes a binding force (Ahmed 2014 [2004]:71–72). The Buddhist nationalist sermons contributed to creating a kind of community of fear through the creation of a shared Muslim threat.

In periods of uncertainty and crisis, the idea of a common enemy has frequently been employed to unify Burmese Buddhists. In Mandalay, Buddhists have otherwise intermingled with Muslims and other religious groups in the complex social reality there. Many Muslims in Mandalay are Burmans (hamālū-myou) who are culturally acculturated to Burman Buddhist dress and manners and are quite integrated into the Buddhist majority group. They tend to give alms to monks and to ‘nuns’ (thīla-shin), attend Buddhist spirit festivals, and socialize with Buddhists, and so on. Before the 2012 riots in Rakhine State, many Buddhists socialized with Muslims, for instance, by arranging dinners together; or Muslims accompanied their Buddhist friends to their pagodas to sweep the precincts.32

Buddhists and Burman Muslims have common ground, for instance, a shared culture, especially ‘mundane’ (lawkī) practices, such as astrology, magical squares (in), alchemy (eggiyat), and so on. Some visit the same Buddhist holy men (bodaw) for advice and help in mundane matters. For instance, one Buddhist Brahmin cult leader (bodaw) in Mandalay had Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, Sikh, and Hindu clients who participated in the same ceremonies.33 During fieldwork in 2014, I observed Muslims presenting offerings (kadaw-pwe) to Buddha statues and Muslim women becoming possessed by Buddhist spirits (thaik-saung) in a joyous atmosphere. Such pluralist, interreligious milieus are common in this part of the Burmese religious field. Some members of a Muslim charity organization even claimed that they too, as Muslims, seek to attain nirvana (neibbān), and that that is why they give alms to monks and nuns. In this way they hope to gain religious merit (kuthoul) and attain nirvana, that is, to be

33 Many Hindus in Burma have dual religious identities, being both Hindu and Buddhist. The same holds for the Sikhs I met and interviewed in Mandalay. They wore the cultural attributes and dress of Sikhs but practised Buddhism. Interviews, Mandalay, November–December 2014.
34 I accompanied them on pilgrimage trips to Buddhist pagodas in November–December 2014. The Muslims participated in secret. These trips took place after the Mandalay riots in July 2014.
reborn in heaven, as the highest state is envisaged by Muslims. In this hybrid manner, Muslims referred to Muslim notions (‘heaven’) using the Buddhist language (for instance, by talking about nirvana) of the hegemonic majority culture. On a cultural level, there are thus many commonalities between Buddhists and Muslims, at least in Mandalay. Despite their shared culture, the riots in 2012–2014 led to a distancing between Buddhists and Muslims, and those who had previously been friends no longer socialize with one another.

Examining everyday religious practices is therefore a way to avoid the ‘unitary trap’ (Demmers 2017:23–24). In ordinary circumstances, the Buddhists and the Muslims in Mandalay do not form discrete and demarcated religious communities as they have come to more recently. Anti-Muslim rhetoric in nationalist sermons and social media has contributed to enhanced reification of religious and ethnic differences (see Demmers 2017:29–30). Recategorizing peaceful neighbours (Muslims) as the fearsome Other has enabled a different ethical treatment of them and has formed a decisive part of ethnic conflict and violence (see Kreidie and Monroe 2002:27–29). The Buddhist nationalist sermons delivered in 2012–2015 encouraged such ‘recategorization’ or ‘reclassification’.

10 The Buddha’s Dispensation as a Collectivistic Religion
Constraining Individual Choice

The second way in which the sermons sought to create social cohesion was by exhorting Buddhists to be loyal to the Buddha’s dispensation and their nation and by asking them to carry out the moral obligations that such loyalty entails. Ashin Kinsanaw Bhāthā’s above-mentioned nationalist discipline—to be united and to obey the words of their leaders—is not as insignificant as it may seem. An injunction to stand up straight or to be respectful to elders can communicate a whole cosmology (Bell 1992:176; Bourdieu 2006 [1977]:94)—or, as in the present case, a social hierarchical order. The trick of such pedagogy, as Pierre Bourdieu explains, lies ‘precisely in the way it extorts the essential while seeming to demand the insignificant’. This entails a ‘natural’ submission to the established order (Bourdieu 2006 [1977]:95). It is yet another modality of the invisible control discussed above, a control that is amplified by the authority (social power) of the monks.

36 Interviews with Muslims, Mandalay, 2016 and 2017.
In the monk’s admonishment is implied an understanding of a social hierarchy structured by mutual obligations and conditional rights. From the point of view of the Buddhist community, there is rather limited space for individual choice, although freedom of religion has been inscribed in Burma’s constitutions since 1947. Identity and group affiliations tend to constrain choice for individuals in tense situations and social conflict (see Kreidie and Monroe 2002), something that characterizes collectivistic religions in ordinary situations too (Jakelic 2010:194). In Burmese society, such constraints are determined by traditional social and moral obligations. As one NLD politician explained, Western cultures are rights-based, but Burmese traditions are obligation-based, that is, there are mutual obligations between husband and wife, parent and child, teacher and student, monk and donor, and so on. From this perspective, there is more emphasis on what one can give than what one can get. These—mostly asymmetrical—relationships tend to emphasize the moral obligations of inferiors to give and the right of superiors to receive (see also Spiro 1977:74–76), thereby sustaining a social hierarchy. These moral obligations (between the relations mentioned above) are acquired through a socialization process and are part of the Burmese Buddhist *habitus* (Bourdieu 2006 [1977]). These obligations are derived from the Buddhist canonical text the *Sigalovāda Sutta* and are taught in state schools to children as their ‘duties’ (*tā-wun*) (Cheesman 2002:140–141). In a 2014 sermon, Ashin Kinsanaw Bhāthā highlighted the five duties of children towards their parents (see also Cheesman 2002:140–141), especially that of *saung-lay-myou-nweh*, ‘protecting the *amyou* and lineage (*anweh*)’ of their parents. He interpreted *amyou* here as ‘nation’ (the 135 national races), as well as the religion that the parents and their lineage have worshipped; a child’s duty is therefore to protect the nation and religion (Buddhism) of his or her parents. This teaching was instructed as a boundary-making device and to constrain choice for the younger generation.

Some contemporary monks likewise downplay the individual rights set out in international law (for instance, human rights), and instead emphasize duties (Walton 2016:65). In Burma, if concepts such as democracy and human rights

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39 The teaching of *saung-lay-myou-nweh* has been interpreted along nationalist lines since the colonial period and is still taught with that sense in schools today. The teaching originally meant to keep the family traditions, but, in the 1920s, the nationalist Wunthanu Movement interpreted *amyou* as preserving the pure blood of the race/nation and refraining from mixing blood (see Phyo Win Latt 2020:78).
were understood as universal, abstract rights, divorced from the traditional prescriptions of mutual social and moral obligations and deserved rights, they would be viewed as not merely meaningless but also potentially dangerous for the Burmese social order (Wells 2016:254–255). In general, Ma Ba Tha monks and laypeople have been opposed to universal rights such as human rights.40

A recurrent theme in nationalist sermons and publications is the call to Buddhists to achieve ‘unity’ (nyi-nyut-hmu) and is related to facing a threat (Muslims) to their nation and the Buddha’s dispensation. For instance, in a sermon titled ‘If it is important, we must be united’, the monk Kinsanaw Bhāthā explicitly brought up the issue of unity in relation to alleged cases of rape by Muslims, including that of an eight-year-old girl.41 In unstable periods in Burma’s history, there has frequently been a call for unity among both pro-democratic and authoritarian groups (Walton 2015). In Burma’s democracy movement, there is a moral discourse of democracy emphasizing unity under a leader (setting aside one’s own individual interests for the benefit of the whole), protection of the (Buddhist) Burman majority, and obligations of individuals (as opposed to rights)—principles that are incompatible with liberal democracy (Wells 2016:254–255). As a moral concept, Walton likewise claims, unity rejects dissenting voices and ‘represents devotion to a common purpose and loyalty to a group or community; it requires subsuming one’s own interests for the benefit of the whole’ (Walton 2015:5). It could be added that unity represents a corporative ideal, in which the individual is subordinated to the community. A similar concept of unity is taught in schools. It is understood not as consensus or mutual understanding, but in terms of following a common conduct laid down by a superior, their teacher (Cheesman 2002:139).

The duties and loyalty to the nation and the Buddha’s dispensation, and the sacrifices for the greater good on the path of the bodhisatta discussed above, were recast as a nationalist path along similar lines. This was employed by Buddhist nationalist monks as a Buddhist framework to refer to the social and moral obligations prescribed by Burmese cultural traditions. It became an ideological construct that aimed to defend and preserve the Burmese Buddhist hierarchical social and moral order of mutual obligations. Using the elevated language of the path of the bodhisatta served as a trope to evoke positive emotions and a sense of duty to their Buddhist nation, as a way to persuade the audience, which was mainly comprised of women (who would therefore transmit these values to their children). Like the Burmese discourse on unity, the

bodhisatta discourse is predicated on the moral obligations of the individual to subsume their own interests for the greater good (the Buddhist nation), including the choice of marriage partner (as promoted in the ‘Marry a Buddhist’ campaign). A 27-year-old woman working for Ma Ba Tha explained that she protected her nation or ‘relatives’ (P. ňātattacariyā) on the Buddha’s path by deciding to marry someone from her own nation and religion. That was part of nationalism for her.42

In collectivistic religions (Jakelic 2010), people are born into their religion; their religious identity is ascribed to them. They belong to a religious community, and they also have obligations to their community, which is not freely chosen. In a sense, therefore, their religious community also owns them; the members are the religion’s property. As some laypeople explained, it was a shame to their family and community when a Buddhist woman (a relative) married a Muslim man, and they forced her to return to their Buddhist group.43 That is probably the main reason why the nationalist monks condemned the conversions of Buddhist women to Islam. The Muslims were perceived as ‘stealing’ from the Buddhist community when they married Buddhist women. The language of theft in that regard is pervasive in Buddhist nationalist sermons, especially those of U Wirathu, who frequently used the phrase ‘the danger of religious robbery’ (bhāthā-yay-dhā-myā-bhay) in his sermons, calling Muslims ‘hunters’, ‘wolves’, or ‘tigers’ who seek to ‘swallow’ their nation and religion. The nationalist sermons therefore served to reaffirm loyalties and obligations to their Buddhist nation.

11 Conclusion

In the Buddhist nationalist sermons, the nation was performed narratively and came to life, albeit mostly indirectly, in anti-Muslim narratives and conspiracy theories. In the latter, the Buddhist nation was victimized, subjugated, and humiliated, and then protected by nationalist practices, and nationalist vows. In this way, the drama of performing the Buddhist nation was enacted, instilling fear, contempt, and anger that provided motives for action. The nationalist sermons aimed to cause mobilization against an enemy and to tighten the boundaries of the Buddhist nation, protecting it from perceived Muslim incursions.

43 Interview in a village outside Yamethin, July 2019.
Although the performative nationalist sermons served multiple aims, this article has highlighted their social dimension of Buddhist community-building. The sermons sought to restore and protect the Buddhist nation by boundary-making, drawing on the three discursive complexes of the sermons and on their social, discursive, and performative power to increase their impact. In the ritual context, nationalist songs and anti-Muslim narratives created an emotional atmosphere, involving a commitment to defending the nation and religion, and fear and hatred of the Muslim Other, thereby forging unity in the Buddhist nation. An additional aspect of social cohesion was the social dynamic implied by the Buddha’s dispensation as a collectivistic religion, that is, a religion into which people are born, to which their religious identity is ascribed, and that constrains individual choice. This article sought to demonstrate that the sermons contributed to creating social cohesion and community in two ways: through fear and through the observance of social moral obligations.

In the unsettled times in Burma/Myanmar (since 2011), the authority and the performative power of the monks, provided that they claimed to defend the Buddha’s dispensation, were expanded and amplified, and their monastic public roles were likewise extended, thereby enabling them to give rather unconventional instructions to laypeople, for instance, exhorting them to boycott all Muslim-owned businesses, which Buddhist laypeople would not do in ordinary circumstances.

Many Buddhist nationalist organizations were founded in response to the uncertainty and concern brought about by the political shift from authoritarian rule to political liberalization and democratization, and the riots that emerged between Buddhists and Muslims (2012–2014), as well as the emergence of a globalized Islamophobia and radical Islam. In that precarious situation, nationalist monks emerged in the public space to defend their nation and the Buddha’s dispensation. The contemporary Buddhist nationalist sermons, albeit not entirely novel, expanded and became widespread and influential due to the broadening of the political space and to the apparent endorsement of Buddhist nationalist movements by the military-backed USDP government (2011–2016).

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**Appendix: Sermons and Speeches**


