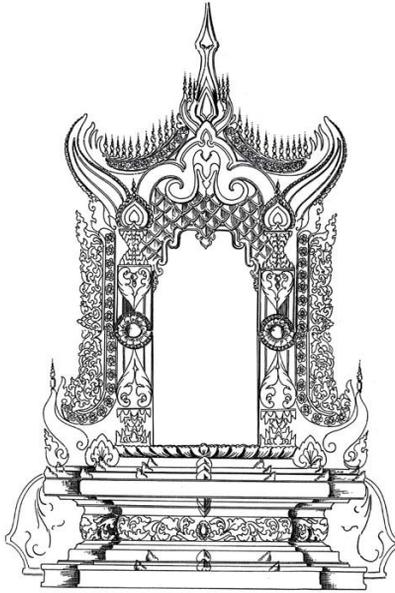


The Journal of Burma Studies



*Volume 8
2003*



Featuring Articles by:

Susanne Prager

Megan Clymer

Emma Larkin

The Journal of Burma Studies

President, Burma Studies Group
F.K. Lehman

General Editor
Catherine Raymond
Center for Burma Studies, Northern Illinois University

Production Editor
Peter Ross
Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Northern Illinois University

Publications Assistants
Beth Bjerneby
Mishel Filisha

The Journal of Burma Studies is an annual scholarly journal jointly sponsored by the Burma Studies Group (Association for Asian Studies), The Center for Burma Studies (Northern Illinois University), and Northern Illinois University's Center for Southeast Asian Studies.

Articles are refereed by professional peers. Send one copy of your original scholarly manuscript with an electronic file. *Mail:* The Editor, Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL 60115. *Email:* seapeditor@niu.edu.

Subscriptions are \$16 per volume delivered book rate (Airmail add \$10 per volume). Members of the Burma Studies Group receive the journal as part of their \$25 annual membership. Send check or money order in U.S. dollars drawn on a U.S. bank made out to "Northern Illinois University" to Center of Burma Studies, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL 60115. Visa and Mastercard orders also accepted. Subscriptions *Tel:* (815) 753-0512 *Fax:* (815) 753-1651 *E-Mail:* bbjorn@niu.edu Back Issues: seap@niu *Tel:* (815) 756-1981 *Fax:* (815) 753-1776 *E-Mail:* seap@niu.edu

For abstracts of forthcoming articles, visit *The Journal of Burma Studies* website at: <http://www.niu.edu/cseas/seap/jbs.html>.

The Journal of Burma Studies will be abstracted or indexed in the following: *America: History and Life; Bibliography of Asian Studies; Historical Abstracts; MLA International Bibliography*

The Journal of Burma Studies
Volume 8
2003

ARTICLES

- COMING OF THE “FUTURE KING”: BURMESE *MINLAUNG*
EXPECTATIONS BEFORE AND DURING THE SECOND WORLD
WAR
Susan Prager 1
- MIN KO NAING, “CONQUEROR OF KINGS”: BURMA’S STUDENT
PRISONER 33
Megan Clymer
- THE SELF-CONSCIOUS CENSOR: CENSORSHIP IN BURMA UNDER
THE BRITISH 1900-1939 64
Emma Larkin

The Coming of the “Future King”
Burmese *Minlaung* Expectations Before and During the Second
World War
Susanne Prager*

Throughout the history of Burma we come across rebellions often led by so-called “future kings,” minlaungs. In western historiography, minlaung-movements are usually attributed to the pre-colonial past, whereas rebellions and movements occurring during the British colonial period are conceived of as proto-nationalist in character and thus an indication of the westernizing process. In this article, the notion of minlaung and concomitant ideas about rebellion and the magical-spiritual forces involved are explained against the backdrop of Burmese-Buddhist culture. It is further shown how these ideas persisted and gained momentum before and during World War II and how they affected the western educated nationalists, especially Aung San whose political actions fit into the cultural pattern of the career of a minlaung.

For a long time, the Western historiography of Burma was predicated on the assumption that in the course of British colonial rule, and due to the dissolution of the institution of kingship, pre-colonial Burmese ideas and values about power and legitimacy had been replaced by modern Western derived models of the state. This paradigm becomes clearly visible in the assessment of various rebellions and uprisings which occurred in different periods of Burma’s history. Throughout the centuries, one comes across local rebellions which were usually centered around the idea of the coming of a *minlaung*, imminent king, who was expected to restore

* Dr. Susanne Prager received her doctoral degree in Political Science of Southeast Asia from the University of Heidelberg, Germany. The focus of her dissertation was the political biography of Aung San. Her interest of research includes inter-ethnic relations in pre- and post colonial Burma, the relevance of Buddhist thought to Burmese politics and Burma’s intellectual history.

the socio-cosmic order whenever signs of decline seemed to have befallen a prevailing royal dynasty.

Even though such *minlaung* rebellions have occurred in almost every period of Burmese history, Western studies have focused on the so-called anti-colonial protest movements and millenarian rebellions which occurred during the British “pacification” period in the 19th century and during the early nationalist period (Ni Ni Myint 1983, Gosh 2000). In particular, the Saya San rebellion of 1930/31 gained prominence as a critical event which led in the long run to an ideological break with the past. Sarkisyanz (1965), for instance, considered this rebellion as Burma’s last desperate attempt to restore a waning traditional socio-cosmic order which, at this time, had already disintegrated as a result of the British colonial system. Other authors interpreted the Saya San rebellion as an early expression of a modernist, anti-capitalist trend in early Burmese nationalism, rather than its being rooted in traditional expectations of the coming of a just ruler (Scott 1976; Herbert 1982; Taylor 1987).

Despite these contrasting evaluations (backward oriented versus facing modernity), in Burmese studies the Saya San rebellion is generally conceived of as constituting the turning point in Burmese nationalism; it gave rise to the modernist oriented Thakin-party which had drawn its lessons from the past and fully subscribed to Western ideas about politics and the state. From that moment on, it is implied, the whole complex of ideas and values which had characterized the millenarian rebellions up to Saya San’s belonged clearly to the past—at least as far as official Burmese political discourse was concerned. And thus, it is further implied, by adopting Western political ideas, Burma’s politicians had paved the way for their country’s independence and for the modern outlook of post-war Burma.

Such a periodization of Burmese “political” movements, ignores a series of features which have characterized Burma’s politics for a long time. Firstly, the fact is neglected that the underlying motives of the pre-colonial rebellions are comparable to those which led to the rebellions during the British colonial period. Secondly, since it is taken for granted that after the abortive Saya San rebellion the ideas concerning the coming of a “future king” have vanished into the background, their possible impact on the

Burmese nationalist movement in the late 1930s and early 1940s has not been examined.

This paper puts forward an analysis of the ideas concerning the coming of the *minlaung* which prevailed in Burma shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 and the way in which these expectations became associated with Burma's most famous nationalist leader, Aung San. These expectations were connected with traditional beliefs in the political and cosmological role of mystical sects, *gaing*, and in the appearance of a famous *weikza*-magician, called Bo Bo Aung.

The "Freedom Bloc" and the Prophecy about Bo Bo Aung

In 1939, shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War, a verse of a two centuries old "history of the future," a *taik*, was recalled in Burma:¹

And on the lake a Brah'miny duck alights
When with a bow a hunter bold, he killed it;
The umbrella rod laid low the hunter bold
But the rod by Thunderbolt was struck.
(Khin 1961:11)

As U Khin later recalled, the verse was interpreted in the following way: The Burmese kingdom of Ava (the Restored Toungoo Dynasty), symbolized by the lake, fell to the Mons, the Brah'miny duck, in 1752. The Mons in turn were overthrown in the same year by Alaungpaya, the hunter, who founded the last Burmese dynasty, called the Shwebo- or Konbaung Dynasty. This dynasty was displaced finally by the British, symbolized by the umbrella rod. The last line foretold that the British would be defeated eventually by a

¹ U Khin called the verse a *tabaung*, "prophetic utterances in verse, which can only be composed or interpreted by sages" (U Khin 1961:11). According to U Than Tun a *tabaung* is a folk song "which rightly interpreted foretells something that would happen in an immediate future" (Than Tun 1960:117). However, the lines we are dealing with here seem to be a part of the so called "Jagaru Natacron—*Taik*," which had been written during the Restored Toungoo Dynasty in the seventeenth century and dealt with the future history from 1739 till 1956 (cf. Than Tun 1960:118;123).

"thunderbolt", in the Burmese language designated as *mogyo* (Khin 1961:11-12).

For the Burmese in 1939, the prophecies mentioned in all lines of the verse except for the last had already been "fulfilled," and given the impending war, the British reign was expected to be terminated by a "thunderbolt," *mogyo*. During this period, the Burmese had already recognized a series of signs predicting the end of British rule, namely, the decline of Burma's rice-industry and the increase in the number of landless peasants; the instability of the colonial capitalist system; strikes among students, workers, and peasants; and riots between Burmese and Indians. Given the logic of Buddhist cosmology, the outbreak of the Second World War was thus not unexpected. Indeed, it was conceived by many Burmese as a manifestation of the eternal cosmic law entailing the ongoing decline of morality, a decline which had reached its nadir under the rule of the British. Ba Maw, one of the leading western-educated nationalists of the 1930s, described how the Burmese interpreted the colonial rule and the war in accordance with the cyclical conception of history of Buddhist cosmology:

As Buddhists the Burmese saw the work of the laws governing all life, such as those of impermanence and of karma, in the events taking place [...]. In a ceaselessly-changing cosmic order such a defiance of the moral as well as historical laws could not go on forever unchanged and unpunished. The laws of retribution would step in some day. So while the illusory world of appearance looked the same outwardly, the forces below were at work to change it all by destroying the great scarlet empires [...]. Turning to the heavens, observers noted that the influences there had lately been very active. The planets pointed to the imminence of widespread disasters and changes that would purify the earth before they ended; and afterwards there would be a just and happy life for all [...] the war had a deep moral and historical purpose; more tangibly, that it would give Burma back to the Burmese and greatness back to Buddhism (Ba Maw 1959:17).

At the same time, in October 1939, shortly after the outbreak of the war in Europe, two Burmese nationalist parties united in a political alliance: the *Dobama Asiayon* (We-Burmese-Association) also called Thakin party, to which belonged the young nationalists Aung San, Nu, Kyaw Nyein, Than Tun; and Dr. Ba Maw's *Sinyetha Wunthanu* party (Poor Man's Patriotic Party). Their basic message to the British was, firstly, that in the case of war Burma would not fight at the side of Britain, and secondly, that extensive constitutional reforms and negotiations about the transfer of power should be undertaken immediately.

Whereas the newly established alliance was called "Freedom Bloc" in the English language, in Burmese it was called *Htwet Yat Gaing*, "Association of the Way Out." This term alluded to a prevailing omen about the impending arrival of a magician, *weikza* Bo Bo Aung, who was supposed to help the Burmese in driving out the British and who would finally enthrone the *minlaung*, the king-to-come. After a public meeting of the Freedom Bloc in June 1940 in Mandalay, many Burmese testified that Bo Bo Aung had already revealed himself in the famous Mahamuni Pagoda (Ba Maw 1968:93).

The symbolic affiliation of a so-called "pragmatic" and "secular" nationalistic organization with a specific configuration of Burmese millenarian ideas has hardly evoked the interest of the Western scholarship on Burma.² However, it reveals the persistence of a socio-political and cosmological complex of Burmese expectations concerning the advent of the *minlaung* and concomitant Buddhist ideas about the cyclical nature of world ages and the rise and decline of ruling dynasties. Such expectations, as mentioned in the context of the "Freedom Bloc," were far from being new to Burma's history. They rather reflect the cultural resilience of a pre-colonial tradition of Burmese thought, in which ideas about dynastic decline, the appearance of a future ruler, and the belief in *weikza*-magicians formed part of the same cosmological framework. In order to assess the role which such ideas played in 1939 and subsequently

² An exception is Houtman's (1999) seminal study on "mental culture" in Burmese politics. See especially Chapter 11 dealing with Burmese concepts of rebellion, liberation and revolution.

during the Japanese occupation, it is necessary to give a brief outline of the system of ideas and values of which these ideas formed part.

World Ages, Dynastic Cycles, and the Concept of *Minlaung*

In the framework of traditional Buddhist historiography deriving from Theravada Buddhist cosmology, the course of history and society is conceived of as being subjected to a cyclical process of rise and decline through successive world ages or *kappas*. Each *kappa* witnesses the continuous decline of morality caused by greed, anger, and delusion. In every world there is a “first elected king,” *maha thammata*, who installs the government and reveals the universal Buddhist moral law, *dhamma*. Time and again, however, the process of moral deterioration can temporarily be reversed by the appearance of a righteous ruler, who is endowed with the qualities of a *cakkavatti*, a universal ruler (*setkyawademin* or *setkyamin* in Burmese). Being one of the ideals of Buddhist (Burmese-) kingship, the *cakkavatti* conquers the world with righteousness and rules in accordance to the *dhamma*. Crucial within this cyclical, historical *Weltanschauung* was the soteriological function of the king, his *dhamma*-guided rule which was deemed necessary for the social prosperity and the moral advancement of his subjects.

In line with this general cosmological framework it seems evident that, in pre-colonial Burma, features of political, social, and economic crisis were interpreted as pointing towards the decline of “morality” within the realm and considered as signs of the ruler’s lack of righteousness. Such signs of dynastic and moral decline usually evoked expectations of the coming of a future king and provoked rebellions led by local leaders, pretenders to the throne, who claimed to be better suited to preserve the socio-cosmic balance (c.f. Lieberman 1984; Aung Thwin 1983). The idea of *minlaung* thus formed an inherent part of institutionalized Burmese kingship. Whenever a Burmese dynasty showed itself weakened, revolts between competing local powers erupted until a powerful man, the *minlaung*, emerged victorious and succeeded in restoring a centralized realm. After a certain period, when several kings of the dynasty had ruled successively, the decentralizing local powers regained strength again and the cycle started anew (Aung Thwin 1985a).

Such revolts, sometimes abortive and suppressed by the king’s loyal followers, sometimes successful and leading to the stabilization and/or the creation of a new dynasty, have been reported from every period of Burmese history (cf. Aung-Thwin 1983:81-85; Lieberman 1984:274-275). King Alaungpaya (r. 1752-1760), for instance, a local village leader, who created the last Burmese dynasty (Konbaung Dynasty), can be regarded as a prototypical *minlaung*. After the decline of the Restored Toungoo Dynasty, Alaungpaya overthrew the Mon rulers and reunified the Burmese empire. And whenever a “non-royal” usurper like him succeeded in becoming king, he usually tried to establish genealogical ties with the royal Burmese line by linking himself to the rulers of the first Burmese dynasty, and ideally with *maha thammata* (cf. Aung Thwin 1982:93-94).

This pattern also applied in the case of rebel leaders who had been less successful. Thus in the 1590s, the 1660s, the 1740s, and again in 1782 and 1805 local rebel leaders emerged, often claiming descent from a Burmese prince, who once disappeared (Lieberman 1984; Koenig 1990). Moreover, in times of dynastic crisis and revolt, there always emerged more than one *minlaung*, for only the successful outcome of the revolt would finally prove the good *karma* and thus the “legitimacy” of its leader.

Similar rebellions which were centered around *minlaungs* occurred in 19th century Burma after the British had established rule; they were also reported from provinces which had not yet been brought under the British crown. One such revolt in Pegu in the year 1839 was led by a man, who claimed to be prince *Setkyamin* (Sarkisyanz 1968:38, n.9).³ Following the British deposition of the last Burmese king in 1885, several princes and local charismatic leaders likewise called upon their followers and started, independently of each other, to rise against the British in an effort to resurrect the Burmese kingdom (cf. Thant Myint-U 2001, Ni Ni Myint 1983). In a similar vein, in 1922, the president of a *wunthanu athin* (Patriotic Organisation) was identified by his followers as the

³ Prince Setkyamin, prince of Nyaungyan, was the son of king Bagyidaw (r. 1819–1837) and heir to the throne. He was executed by the younger brother of his father, Tharrawaddy (r.1837–1846), who ascended the throne in 1837.

minlaung. He possessed the necessary five royal regalia and planned an uprising which allegedly was supported by twenty thousand followers. Again in 1927, the followers of a hermit, who maintained to have been saved from execution by the *weikza* Bo Bo Aung and acted like a Burmese king, were ready to go into action (Sarkisyanz 1965:157-158).

The same motive inspired the participants of the rebellion of 1930/31, who supported the attempt of the healer and ex-monk Saya San to restore the Burmese empire. In this context it is worth mentioning that Saya San was not the only *minlaung* involved in the rebellion. He competed with at least three other potential *minlaungs* who all had their own local followers and private armies. The latter, however, proved to be less powerful than Saya San (Mendelson 1975:207-208).

As briefly outlined before, the Saya San rebellion was not the last incident in Burma's history during which such expectations of the appearance of an imminent king played a prominent role. In 1939, the same ideas were coming to the fore and the Freedom Bloc affiliated itself directly with the *minlaung*-tradition. By merging into an "association of the way out," Burma's leading nationalists seemed to form a corporate body from which the "future king" would finally emerge, at least in the eyes of many of the contemporary participants. This leads to another set of ideas, closely linked to *minlaung* expectations.

Gaings and Weikzas

Members of the Freedom Bloc, by adopting the term *Htwet Yat Gaing* as the Burmese name of their organization, explicitly associated themselves with the mythical world of *gaings*. In Burma, the word *gaing* is meant to denote monastic factions but also designates a type of lay organization. In Western scholarship, *gaings* of the latter type have often been considered in connection with the millenarian aspects of Burmese Buddhism. *Gaings* are held to be a center in which expectations regarding the advent of the "future king," *minlaung*, the ideal Buddhist ruler *setkya min* (Pali: *cakkavatti*), and the coming of the fifth Buddha, *Metteya*, are

fostered.⁴ They have also been shown to have served as the organizational basis for militant millenarian movements, as in the case of the Saya San revolt (cf. Mendelson 1960, 1963b; Spiro 1971; Adas 1987; Tambiah 1987). *Gaings* were centered around a *gaing*-master, who was supposed to command extraordinary spiritual powers; such *gaing*-leaders were often designated as *weikza* (Pali: *weikza*, *weikzadara*: "bearer of wisdom"), *zawgyi* (magician, alchemist) or *yathe* (hermit).⁵

By using ascetic and magical practices, mantras, and alchemy, *gaing*-members and adepts strive to reaching a higher spiritual status in their worldly existence (Mendelson 1960:115). This idea of an "accelerated" spiritual advancement in the here and now displays a remarkable contrast to the canonical Buddhist formula of salvation which stipulates that within a long cycle of rebirths thirty-one planes of existence have to be passed before *Nirvana* (Pali: *Nibbana*) can be reached. A supreme *weikza*, who by magical powers has acquired the final state of perfection, is able to "go out," *htwet yat*, and to reach a superior status. His spirit is no longer bound to his body and by controlling superior transcendental powers he can assume different shapes and can continue to dwell on Earth until the arrival of Buddha *Metteya* (Mendelson 1963a:803-04; Htin Aung 1978:45). According to various Burmese folktales *weikza*-hood was achieved when the adept managed to swallow a magical stone and subsequently underwent a painful initiation ritual in the forest where he remained buried in the earth for seven days. After this period, the adept was reborn from the earth to emerge as a powerful *weikza* endowed with

⁴ Up to the present, our knowledge on *gaings* in Burma is still based on the data collected by Mendelson (1960:1961; 1963a). He estimated the number of *gaings* "at every given moment [...] both in town and village" at a hundred, "some with memberships of thousands, including very many of leading politicians in the land" (Mendelson 1960:115–116).

⁵ These terms do not so much accentuate different types of alchemists or magicians in the Burmese-Buddhist system of ideas as different degrees of their magical or occult mastery, i.e. specific knowledge on the use and powers of iron, mercury, magical characters, and other techniques to obtain "wisdom" (cf. Ferguson & Mendelson 1981:77, n.9; Htin Aung 1978:51–55).

eternal youth and other powers such as the capacity to fly through the air (Spiro 1971:166).

The figure of the *weikza* has been the object of contrasting interpretations in Western studies on Burma. For Spiro, *weikzas* essentially display a non-Buddhist character (Spiro 1971:164), whereas Tambiah identifies them as “saints” and “holy men” who form an essential part of popular millenarian Buddhism, as in the case of Thailand (Tambiah 1987:318). These contrasting interpretations largely reflect the general problem in Burma studies in coming to terms with the blending of Theravada-Buddhist cosmology and the so-called “animist” aspects of Burmese cosmology—magic, alchemy, and the worship of *nat*-spirits.

In particular, the role of *gaings* in Burmese cosmology has caused a major interpretative problem, as they are generally considered a locus where both Buddhist and non-Buddhist elements merge into one and the same conceptual system. Spiro, for instance, has put forward a “two-religion thesis,” arguing that Buddhism and animism constitute two diverging cosmological systems which are generally kept apart in Burmese ideology; it is only in esoteric sects of the *gaings* that both systems have become blended within a syncretism (Spiro 1971:186). To the “animist” domain of the *gaings* thus would also belong the worship of *nat*-spirits, the belief in *weikza*, as well as the use of charms, amulets, and other magical practices.

Tambiah, by contrast, has interpreted the millenarian aspects of the *gaings* (and the role of the “holy man” or *weikza*) as a phenomenon inherent to Buddhism. Nevertheless, as millenarian Buddhism usually emerges in the territorial and social peripheries of the society and polity, it forms a “counterculture and counterstructure to organized and domesticated Buddhism” (Tambiah 1987:320). Mendelson, who was the first in Western scholarship to study *gaings*, has argued that both animism and Buddhism are two poles of a continuum which makes up Burmese religion as a whole (Mendelson 1960:116). According to Mendelson the millenarian beliefs associated with *gaings* have to be located within the context of a fundamental power conflict in Burmese culture between the centralizing forces of Buddhism on the one side, and the localizing forces including “animism” on the other (Mendelson 1960:117; 1963b:113).

Vital in this respect is the fact, that it is indeed the totality of Burmese cosmology which is reflected both in the architecture and in the interior design of *gaing*-buildings.⁶ The world of *gaings* comprises local folk beliefs, the regalia of Burmese kingship, as well as the canonical concepts of Theravada Buddhist cosmology and eschatology as described in the Pali Canon. Despite this totalizing dimension, the question remains whether *gaings* represent a phenomenon which is inherent to Burmese Buddhism or whether they associate themselves with powers which are thought to be situated beyond the Theravada-Buddhist domain.

It is not clear how far the presence of *gaings* can be traced back in Burma's history. Mendelson has argued that they represent old religious traditions which were never entirely brought under the control of Theravada-Buddhism (Mendelson 1961:577). Rather than being associated with the religious and administrative center, "the earliest *gaings* may well have been [...] groups seeking religious prestige for the sake of a triumphant local rule of rebellion, thus bearing witness to the difficulty in Burma's history to establish a permanent central leadership" (Mendelson 1963a:805).

If *gaings* and their leading *weikzas* are associated with rebellion in the widest sense, and if they form a counter structure to the centralizing forces of Buddhism and kingship, it is not by accident that they are affiliated with the idea of the coming of the king-to-be. It is evident that *gaings* are places where the forces deemed necessary to restore the realm and the cosmos are assembled in its totality whenever features of dynastic and moral decline have become visible; hence their encompassing display of Buddhist and

⁶ Mendelson (1961) described a *gaing*-building, three stories high and hiding various sets of symbols on different levels: pagodas, meditating caves, the universal wheel (*setkya*), the *bodhi*-tree, shrines for famous *weikzas* of the past, a room symbolizing the *Mahamyaing* (the mythical forest where *weikzas* practise their arts), Lion throne, Hintha throne, royal regalia, the "Five great *nat-weikzas*" (Thagyamin/ Sakka, Setkya prince, Thuyathadi, Setkya princess, Byammamin/Brahma), Naga-dragons, a white elephant, images and figures of the famous *weikzas* (U Eizagona of Pagan, Bo Bo Aung, U Awbatha, Bo Min Gaung etc.), the perfect saints (*arahats*), the four Buddhas, the throne for the coming Buddha, etc. (Mendelson 1961:560–566; 572; 580).

non-Buddhist elements.⁷ Viewed from that angle, *gaings* constitute a counter structure to the social and political centre, but they themselves display features of a center in miniature.

It is from the *gaings* that the imminent king is expected to arise and restore a new centre of the realm. Restoring the realm, however, requires the invoking of powers which are not subject to the very forces that have caused the decline of the Buddhist polity. Due to their affiliation with a supreme *weikza*, *gaings* are indeed considered as commanding a power which transcends Theravada-Buddhism. As mentioned before, a supreme *weikza* conceptually transcends the Buddhist way of salvation. He has “gotten out” of the 31 cycles of migration and has thus passed beyond the fundamental Buddhist law of *karma*. By controlling superior magical powers, he clearly contrasts with the tenets of canonical Buddhism, a contrast which is also expressed in the idea that the *weikza* fulfills all his desires in the here and now, instead of having to lose them in Nirvana. It also seems that such a *weikza* occupies a special position in relation to the king, marking rebellion and superiority in a specific spiritual sense. This contrast will be discussed in the next section with regard to the legend about the *weikza* Bo Bo Aung.

Coming back to the millenarian expectations of 1939, it is evident that in a specific historical moment of crisis which could be traced back to the ultimate deterioration of the moral and cosmic order caused by the illegitimate rule of the British, so-called “Western-educated” nationalists in Burma united in an association which by its very designation was directly linked with the mystic realm of the *gaings*. The Burmese name of the “Freedom Bloc,” *Htwet Yat Gaing*, alluded to the magical powers of a *weikza* who had already transcended the cycle of rebirths. And just as in the *gaings* the restoration of the realm was expected to gain momentum, the *Htwet Yat Gaing* was considered to reunite the necessary forces which would lead the country into an open rebellion. As stated

⁷ Mendelson was struck by the fact that the *gaing* meetings were also attended by visitors from the Shan hills and from the Kachin territory (Mendelson 1961:569). But if *gaings*, as suggested here, are the locus where the “realm” is preserved in its totality, it is not surprising that the presence of members from various ethnic groups is deemed necessary to achieve this aim.

earlier, shortly after the foundation of the Freedom Bloc, the rumor spread that the *weikza* Bo Bo Aung had already revealed himself and that the appearance of a *minlaung* was near. Before discussing the way in which this amalgam of ideas took shape again during the Japanese occupation period, the legend of the *weikza* Bo Bo Aung and his relationship with the Burmese king must be recalled.

The *Weikza* Bo Bo Aung

In Burma, Bo Bo Aung, whose arrival was expected in 1939, was considered as the supreme *weikza* (Mendelson 1961:567). He is reported to have reached the perfect state of a *weikza* during the period of king Bodawpaya's reign (1782-1819). In one account of his life, it is stipulated that Bo Bo Aung was a former "student" who was befriended by both a Burmese prince and a monk (Htin Aung 1978:59). Whereas the prince later became king Bodawpaya of Burma, Bo Bo Aung transformed himself into a powerful *weikza*, commanding knowledge on magical characters, letters, and numbers, while the monk finally became a *sayadaw*, the presiding monk of a Buddhist monastery. When the king heard about the *weikza*-powers that his former friend had mastered, he suspected that Bo Bo Aung wanted to seize the throne and ordered his execution. The king, however, did not succeed in killing Bo Bo Aung. Instead, Bo Bo Aung made a fool of the king:

"You are indeed stupid to think that the Master of the Runes would ever want your paltry little kingdom.... Friend of my youth, with my runes I could have made you king of the whole world. But you have been faithless to me and now I shall say farewell to you for ever." "Master of Runes," pleaded the King, realizing that he had been foolish, "If you will not protect me, protect my grandson, the young Prince of Prome." "I shall do that," replied the Master of Runes and vanished from view. (Htin Aung 1978:60)

In a slightly different version the king renounces the throne and becomes a Buddhist hermit, after having realized that Bo Bo Aung had attained the supreme mystical powers (Ba Maw 1968:68). What emerges from these versions of the Bo Bo Aung story is the idea of a

structural opposition between the Burmese king and the *weikza*. The king suspects the *weikza* to seize the throne, but the latter renounces earthly power, and the king in his ignorance eventually forfeits the opportunity to become the ruler of the world. The opposition of the two figures also finds its expression in the two types of scriptures with which they are associated respectively. Whereas the Burmese king as the protector of Buddhism and the Sangha is affiliated with the Buddhist Pali canon, the *weikza* commands the lore of magical letters, signs, and numbers. Given this conceptual opposition it is questionable whether Bo Bo Aung can be identified solely as the herald and servant of the “future king” (cf. Ferguson & Mendelson 1981), for it seems that a supreme *weikza* like Bo Bo Aung not only contrasts with, but also may subordinate the king in a specific spiritual context.

It is the *weikza* who can turn the king into a “ruler of the world,” but the king himself obviously has no authority over the *weikza*. Moreover, when in times of crisis Buddhism is threatened or the righteous king is absent or prevented from ruling, the *weikza* may conceptually encompass the function of the ruler and that of the *sangha*. As one story stipulates, Bo Bo Aung saved Prince *Setkyamin* from execution and guided him to one of the *nat*-heavens where the “future kings” are waiting for the moment of their return (cf. note 5). When this time has arrived, Bo Bo Aung will crown the “future king” and thereby restore the ideal Buddhist realm (cf. Ferguson & Mendelson 1981:67-68). During the absence of the king, Bo Bo Aung will replace him as protector of Buddhism. Accordingly, many Burmese were convinced that after the British had deposed the last king of Burma, Bo Bo Aung and other *weikzas* had joined in a *gaing* in 1888 in order to protect the religion until the “future king” had returned to the throne (Mendelson 1963a:800).

In the literature there is some confusion about the question whether some *weikzas* are identical with the “future king,” or whether the appearance of the *weikza* was followed by the advent of a “future king.” In view of the specific relationship between the *weikza* Bo Bo Aung and the king, as sketched above, it rather seems that the *weikza* may replace the king in times of crisis or pave the way for the imminent king, but that he himself is not considered to

strive for royal power.⁸ Concerning the figure of Bo Bo Aung, it was also maintained that the popular cult connected with his person and the concomitant idea of a mysterious lost prince who would come back to restore the Burmese empire only emerged during the British period (cf. Ferguson & Mendelson 1981:74; Mendelson 1975:179).

However this may be, the idea of an opposition between the *weikza* and the king had already come forward during the period preceding British rule. In popular stories, king Dhammazedī who ruled in Pegu at the end of the fifteenth century was portrayed as a patron of the cult of magical signs. As in the case of the Bo Bo Aung story, Dhammazedī, in his role as the king, is opposed to a friend who has almost acquired *weikza*-powers. Fearing the latter's potential power, Dhammazedī, however, succeeds in preventing his opponent from transforming into a *weikza*. Eventually it is Dhammazedī himself, who acquires the supreme powers of a *weikza* during his own reign (Htin Aung 1978:56-57).

To a certain extent, the tension between the *weikza* and the Burmese ruler can be interpreted as a mythical transformation of the relationship between the kings and the supreme Burmese guardian *nat* Min Mahagiri (Lord of the Great Mountain). This is not the place to explore the complex symbolism which pervades the cosmological relation between the kings of Burma and the local *nat*-spirits, nor in particular their relation with the famous group of the "Thirty Seven *Nats*," of which Min Mahagiri and his sister are thought to have been the first to have been transformed into such beings by violent death.⁹ It is evident, however, that the relationship between the king and the *weikza*, as it comes to the fore in the Bo Bo Aung legend, is predicated on a similar logic as the king's relation with the supreme *nat*. As the "blacksmith," Min Mahagiri, commands extraordinary powers which contrast with those of the king, likewise the *weikza* controls powers transcending ones which can be achieved solely by

⁸ Mendelson was told by one of his informants that Bo Bo Aung would come *together* with the "future king" (Mendelson 1961:567, italics added). And in 1961 a *gaing* leader who claimed to be a reincarnation of the *weikza* Bo Min Gaung told Spiro that he was not identical with the "future king" but would be followed by a *minlaung* (Spiro 1971:179).

⁹ For a thorough discussion of the royal cult of the "Thirty Seven *Nats*," see Brac de la Perrière (1989).

following the Buddhist path. This is not to say that *nats* and *weikzas* are identical, but that they represent the same type of beings which are associated with a sphere beyond the Buddhist order as such.¹⁰

Given the popularity of the Bo Bo Aung story, it is hardly surprising that the founding of the *Htwet Yat Gaing* in 1939 was accompanied by expectations of the arrival of Bo Bo Aung. What manifested itself in that year was a persistent and complex system of beliefs in which Burmese ideas about the rise and decline of dynasties, expectations of the coming of the *minlaung*, and concomitant assumptions about the role of *weikzas* and the regenerative functions of *gaings* are all closely related. It might be argued of course, as it is often done in such cases, that the western educated nationalists who had come to be united in the Freedom Bloc were simply instrumentalizing a series of folk beliefs for their own political purposes. But even if these beliefs would have been instrumentalized, their existence and content alone would be worth studying. We shall observe, however, that in the months to come the expectation of the imminent king acquired its own historical dynamics. It not only structured the perception of the peasants, but many of the Burmese nationalists themselves oriented their actions in line with these aspirations.

Advent of the King: Aung San and the Burma Independence Army

In the months following the foundation of the Freedom Bloc, its leading political figures suddenly moved into action. Expectations relating to the coming of a “future king” were met in particular by the young nationalist Aung San. Given the signs predicting war in Southeast Asia, he opted for a violent rebellion against the British and secretly left Burma for Japan in 1940. For the Burmese at home, the subsequent political actions of Aung San assumed a highly symbolic character, since they were in perfect accordance with the

¹⁰ Another aspect in several *weikza* stories which highlights the relation between the king and the *weikza* concerns the potential consequences of the consumption of the body of a *weikza*. If persons other than the king eat the *weikza*'s flesh, they acquire superior strengths and necessarily transform into rebels against the king. For an account of the fate of the famous *kala*-brothers who consumed the flesh of a *weikza*, see Pe Maung Tin & Luce (1960:75–76); for another version of the myth, see Htin Aung (1976:68).

career of a *minlaung* who would resurrect a centralized polity by military force and thus re-establish a "righteous order."

Aung San brought together twenty-nine young Burmese who were trained by the Japanese military on Hainan and were later called the "Thirty Comrades." This group constituted the legendary nucleus of the "Burma Independence Army" (BIA) which was founded in Bangkok at the end of 1941. The formation of such a special force was not undertaken by accident; several Burmese rulers and imminent kings in the past had summoned a so-called "Company of the Braves," *Yeyiphe*, either to consolidate their power or to establish a new dynasty: In the eleventh century, King Anawrahta gathered a group of four extraordinary strong men to lead his army in several military campaigns. During the reign of King Tabinshwehti in 1550, the commander-in-chief, Bayinnaung, prevented the kingdom from disintegration with his troop of twenty-eight loyal soldiers, later becoming king himself. Likewise, Alaungpaya was reported as having overthrown Mon supremacy with the help of his "Golden Company" of sixty-eight brave men, whereupon he founded the Shwebo (Konbaung) Dynasty. The fourth son of Alaungpaya, Bodawpaya, ascended the throne after having resolved the intrigues at the court together with his twelve loyal followers (cf. Pe Maung Tin & Luce 1960:69–70; Tin 1965:136–137). When such a special company was created, the soldiers entered into a blood bond by performing the *thwe thauk*-ritual ("blood drinking"). The soldiers drank some alcohol or water mixed with blood drawn from the arm of each of them (Tin 1965:136–37; Harvey 1925:339; 347). Aung San directly affiliated himself with this royal tradition by letting the "Thirty Comrades" perform the *thwe thauk*-ritual in Bangkok (Let Ya 1962:47; Ba Than 1968:25).

When Aung San and the BIA entered Burma together with the Japanese Army in the spring of 1942, they were enthusiastically welcomed by the population. The BIA-soldiers were reputed to be invulnerable and endowed with magical powers, and, as in former times, carried magical charms such as tattoos, amulets, scraps of paper with Buddhist verses, and silver slivers embedded in their arms (Khin 1961:12; Guyot 1966:115no.3). It is likely that, to Aung San's army, the same superior powers were attributed as had been to the participants of the Saya San-revolt before—they who were earlier believed to have acquired invulnerability by the performance

of magical practices and rituals (cf. Adas 1987:153–154). Thousands of Burmese joined the BIA, among them peasants riding on horses, elephants and bullock-carts. Some young Burmese in Upper Burma, having just heard about the arrival of the BIA in Lower Burma, were killing Chinese soldiers of the Kuomintang commanded by the American General Stilwell in order to obtain the favor of Aung San (Guyot 1966:82; 85). In 1942, Thakins tried to take over the local administration in all parts of Burma, to build up the *dhamma*-guided New Burmese Era and a “paradise on earth,” *loka nibban*, and to get rid of the administration’s “dirty mind” which had been “bewitched” by the British (Guyot 1966:159–161).

Even the Japanese army contributed to the millenarian mood. In no time, they had expelled the British from Burma, thereby fulfilling the prophecy that the British would be driven out of the country by a “thunderbolt.” In accordance with this prophecy, Aung San and the Thirty Comrades’ Japanese military instructor, Colonel Suzuki, adopted the name “Bo Mogyo” (Colonel Thunderbolt) as his *nom de guerre*. At the time, it was assumed that Suzuki, alias Bo Mogyo, was not of Japanese but of royal Burmese descent, that is, a son of the Myingun prince who had been exiled eighty years earlier and whose successor had now returned from the East to expel the British. For many Burmese it was obvious that the fifteenth king of the Konbaung dynasty would finally return to Burma and that a *minlaung* would come as a leader in the Japanese army (Ba Maw 1968:93–94, 139; Khin 1961:12, Khin Maung Nyunt 1968:31).

In the following months, however, expectations for a *minlaung* focused more and more on Aung San. He was presumed to be the coming ruler, leading Burma into a new era. He himself explained his task and that of the BIA in such terms: “Since 50 or 100 years [past] Burmese history has been darkened. Let it shine again. Let us build the New Burmese Era [*bama khit thit*]” (Aung San 1942:87). According to Dr. Khin Maung Win of the Department of Philosophy at the University of Rangoon in 1959, several people identified Aung San in 1942 with prince *Setkyamin*, who had been saved by Bo Bo Aung in the early nineteenth century, and was now supposed to return (Sarkisyanz 1965:178, n.5).

Aung San was further glorified in connection with a popular song which was composed in 1943 and identified him as a savior who has “now appeared.”

For the sake of Burma's Independence, to form the *tatmadaw* in Japan, he actually has risked his life, he has borne pain and pressure. Brave Aung San and his comrades. In our native land Burma—parents must give birth to brave heroes like Bo Aung San. In our native land Burma—parents must give birth to real *azanis*. Like Bayinnaung, Razadarit, Minye Kyawswa and Alaungpaya. Each and every Burman can rely and depend on our heroes. We can pluck the victory flower without fear or fright.

Chorus: History and biography must be kept—the achievement must be recorded—our noble Bo Aung San. He has risked his life for the sake of the country—the true stock of the heroes. He has rescued us from the deep hole of a subdued nation. As we have expected and looked forward to rule ourselves—he's now appeared.

For the sake to build Asia and not to let vanish our national pride, he—like a solar-race, a Sakiyan, the arm of our Burma—is popular all over the world, he is very strong minded and never lowers his pride and aim. For us to be powerful—our brave heroes' fame and honor ever so shine. Thado Maha Bandoola's bravery and achievement was a shining chapter in our history. All these heroes deserve to be called "good sons" of mother Burma. Their achievements must be solemnly recorded. Oh—all you brave heroes of Burma! (MESB 1983:88).

In a literary account of the "Thirty Comrades" written by Mya Daung Nyo in 1943, Aung San's identification with the *minlaung* was further established. He was explicitly placed within the tradition of the great Burmese "warrior—and unifier-kings" who had founded new dynasties or unified the realm under the universal moral law, *dhamma*, and his *cakkavatti*-qualities as conqueror and upholder of the religion were emphasized: "...as only conquering kings are able to erect pagodas and build monasteries" (Mya Daung Nyo 1954: xiv).

It was not by accident that in that same year Aung San's autobiography—in which he affiliated himself with the royal history and with the *minlaung* tradition—was published. He stressed that his

ancestry could be traced back to the “Golden Age” of the kingdom of Pagan (11th–13th Century) and that his family, throughout the centuries, had always maintained close relationships with the Burmese court. Likewise, he mentioned, one of his ancestors in Natmauk, Pinmyingyi U Mya, was a local rebel leader who had competed with Alaungpaya in his attempt to found a new dynasty. U Mya, however, submitted to Alaungpaya, when the latter had proved his legitimacy due to his charismatic power, *pon*, and military power, *let youn* (Aung San 1943a:7–8). Furthermore, being himself a “Saturday’s child,” Aung San stressed the “fact” that Burmese rulers often were born on this day of the week (Aung San 1943b:16).¹¹

The millenarian atmosphere was further nourished when on 1 August 1943 Burma’s independence was announced. Although the nominal nature of the independence under the supremacy of the Japanese was quite evident, it seemed to be a decisive step on the way to the New Era, *bama khit thit*. Aung San—who acted as War Minister in the new Burmese cabinet—declared in his speech on the day that the ongoing war against the United States and Great Britain was a *sasana* (religious) war, in which the Burmese had to fight at the side of the Japanese to win the “victory flower” (Aung San 1943c:26). Two months later, again, he spoke of the re-establishment of a morally just social order, *loka nibban*, as soon as the war was over and independence could be fully enjoyed (Aung San 1943d:56–57).

If the identification of Aung San with the imminent “ruler” persisted during the entire Japanese occupation period, it was mainly because he owned the control of the Burmese troops and thus surpassed other nationalists in *let youn*, military power. His superior qualities as leader were further strengthened by the fact that, finally in 1945, he led the resistance against the Japanese. As in 1942, he assigned to the resistance fighters the revolutionary task to liberate Burma and to establish *loka nibban*; and while stressing the importance of national unity and the popular support for the army, he

¹¹ In Western scholarship on Burma, Aung San is usually portrayed as a secularist whose thought and actions were dominated by European political values. For an analysis of Aung San’s political actions and speeches in the light of traditional Burmese conceptions of kingship and power, see Prager (1998).

declared, that even future Buddhas, *bodhisattas*, had to fight (Aung San 1944a:159–160; 1944b:42).

At last, in a famous speech in August 1945 after the anti-Japanese resistance, he referred to the *minlaung* tradition by comparing the resistance fight with the wars and conquests of the past when Burmese kings had reunified the realm in times of crisis:

I can now say that our forces dare take their position beside any force in the world so far as guerilla warfare is concerned. Burmans are, so to speak, traditionally guerilla-minded. In the 13th century when Kublai Khan and his Tartar hordes swooped down upon the tottering Pagan dynasty, the Burmese troops on heavier elephants and only clever at spears and swords could not stand before Kublai Khan's horsed archers. So they resorted to scorched earth policy, mass evacuation of the civilians, and guerilla action as they retreated southward, so that ultimately Kublai Khan was forced to withdraw from Burma as he could no longer get supplies and so forth. Similarly, when in the seventeenth [eighteenth; S.P.] century anarchy was rampant throughout the country as a result of the military adventures of the Mons from southern Burma, Alaungpara [Alaungpaya; S.P.] tried to reintegrate our nation, he was at first a guerilla chieftain along with many others of his kind in different parts of the country and finally they combined to form one strong national state and thus achieved complete national solidarity... Now the war is over, and we have also achieved a complete national solidarity ... (Aung San 1946a:37–38).

Having successfully negotiated independence with Great Britain, in July 1947 Aung San was assassinated by political opponents. Despite his untimely death, it seems that he had fulfilled the expectations of a *minlaung* in an exemplary way: as military leader of the resistance he built up his military power by using it as base for further political strategies in the independence struggle, and successively transformed himself into a civilian and peaceful politician and unifier. He united the different political parties under

his central leadership within the AFPFL according to *mandala*-lines (Aung San 1946b, 1946c), which also meant that he consolidated his central position by expelling political opponents like the communists.

In the case of ethnic minorities, he traveled around the hill regions to get their consent for the new Burmese state (Naw 2001:197–199). He understood how to deal with representatives of the Chin, Kachin, and Shan and addressed them respectfully in kinship terms, thus harking back to an old tradition of interethnic relations between the king and the ethnic groups of the “periphery.” At the Panglong conference he guaranteed that the future relationship between the Burmans and the ethnic groups would be one of reciprocity (Aung San 1946d:156; 1947:188–189).¹² The assumption is natural that the ethnic leaders in Panglong expressed their trust and loyalty to Aung San rather than to the state. As a Chin leader expressed, “...Bogyoke’s [Aung San] spoken word is a binding treaty” (Vum Ko Hau 1963:121). Given Aung San’s outstanding achievements, it is not surprising that in post war-Burma he was perceived as the founder of a new Burmese era and was recognized as the fourth of the great unifier kings after Anawrahta (r.1044–1077), Bayinnaung (r.1551–1581), and Alaungpaya (Nu 1951:212; Vum Ko Hau 1951:129; Lu Pain 1966:26–27).

In view of the persistent nature of Burmese *minlaung* expectations, it is evident that after Aung San’s death and the end of colonial rule, millenarian expectations of the advent of a righteous ruler-to-come lived on. Since the 1950s, the *weikza* Bo Min Gaung, who is considered to be a somewhat younger *weikza* than Bo Bo Aung, became very popular and was expected to pave the way for a *minlaung* (cf. Aung Myat 1975). In 1959, Mendelson was told by a female member of an upper Burma *gaing* that a new king would come since U Nu, the first prime minister of independent Burma, was not of royal stock (Mendelson 1961:573). At the beginning of the 1960s the same beliefs in the *minlaung* were sustained, and the

¹² Prager (1998, Chap.10).

advent of the "future king" was expected to take place in 1965 (Spiro 1971:172–173).¹³

Given the persistence of such millenarian ideas, it would be worthwhile in future research to study their possible impact on the political upheavals that shattered Burma in 1988 and their possible link with the emergence of the democratic movement and charismatic opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi. At least there are indications that Aung San's daughter was conceived of as "savior" after the general elections in 1990. At that time people allegedly observed that the left chest of various Buddha images became thicker, a phenomenon which was linked with the presence of Aung San Suu Kyi and interpreted as a sign that her power would grow and that she would become "the real leader of Burma in order to save us" (Nemoto 1996:9).

Minlaung-Expectations and Burma's Modern History

In the Western historiography of Burma, the development of Burmese political ideology from the beginning of the twentieth century onwards has usually been portrayed as a process by which former, pre-colonial indigenous ideas and values about kingship and power have been transformed and "rationalized" according to standards of Western conceptions of the state. Socio-religious protest movements which occurred under British rule thus appear to be a desperate attempt to revive and restore a socio-religious order which had been already destroyed under the British influence. Simultaneously it has been assumed that the Saya San rebellion with its magical-religious underpinnings marked a final turning point in Burmese nationalism, giving rise to the modernist oriented Thakins like Aung San or Nu, who subscribed to Western secular models of power, state, and society (Sarkysianz 1965; Smith 1965; Trager 1966; Silverstein 1977). In this linear representation of history, the western oriented period in Burma's history temporarily came to an end in 1962 with the *coup d'état* of General Ne Win. The fact that Ne Win referred to traditional Burmese ideas about kingship and

¹³ Gravers (2001) recently published a profound analysis of comparable ideas among the Buddhist Karen of Burma and Thailand in which he demonstrated the persistence of such "minlaung" beliefs up to the 1990s.

power has been interpreted as an “atavistic regression” in an otherwise ongoing process of ripening of the Burmese state (Maung Gyi 1983).

A different view has been put forward by a few historians who argued for a *longue durée* perspective on the interpretation of Burma’s history. According to this model, pre-colonial Burma was based on a series of institutions which displayed a remarkable stability over time. These institutions, however, in particular ideas about kingship, suddenly collapsed under British rule. Under this perspective, as has been stated before, the deposition of Burma’s last king led to a psychological trauma, since the Burmese were deprived of the political and cosmological centre of the realm. According to this view, the abolition of the monarchy did not lead to a “positive” development towards modernity, rather the British rule introduced an “order without meaning” (Aung Thwin 1985b). This “power vacuum” lasted even beyond independence and during the U Nu period, since, as it is argued, Burma was still ruled by a “westernized” elite whose values differed highly from those of the Burmese peasants. It is only with the military coup of 1962, that the Ne Win regime allegedly was able to restore the central functions of the Burmese state, to revitalize traditional Burmese values, and to re-connect the polity with the pre-colonial ideology, albeit in a somewhat different and modern shape (Wiant 1981; Aung Thwin 1985b, 1989; Taylor 1987).¹⁴ It is interesting to note, that within this discourse, the political conflict between the current SLORC/SPDC regime and the NLD-opposition and its leader Aung San Suu Kyi was recently perceived as a fundamental value conflict—the

¹⁴ A somewhat different view was put forward by Lieberman (1987), a historian dealing with the Toungoo Dynasty, who emphasizes the discontinuity and change, both in pre-colonial and modern Burmese history. Nevertheless, according to his view the changes introduced by the British colonial system definitely exceeded those which had occurred in pre-colonial times, for under the British the Burmese conception of history underwent a major change: “Whereas the pre-modern view of history was cyclic and its image of social organization essentially static, the current government shares with the British a historically rationalized commitment to linear progress, economic development, and social engineering” (Lieberman 1987:189).

regime's continuation of the above mentioned legitimacy practice based on traditional Burmese values on the one hand, the NLD's support of universal western values on the other (cf. Taylor 1998), thus emphasizing the old dichotomy of western-induced versus indigenous ideas and values.

Comparing both historical paradigms it is obvious that they differ in their estimation of the linear versus cyclical aspects of Burma's history but that they converge in their evaluation of the British period as the fundamental watershed in the modern history of Burma. In the "linear approach," the British period marked the end of pre-colonial Burma and paved the way for the introduction of Western ideas about the state which finally shaped Burma's outlook as a modern state. According to the "cyclical model" under the British system pre-colonial ideas and values likewise vanished into an "order without meaning," eventually to be resurrected after 1962 and allegedly lasting until today.

The aspects discussed in connection with the founding of the "Freedom Bloc" and the interpretation of Aung San's thought and actions in accordance with the *minlaung* tradition raise the question of whether traditional Burmese ideas on power, legitimacy, and kingship were ever absent from Burmese history, and whether a true *longue durée* perspective should not, consequently, be adopted for the interpretation of Burma's modern history, as has been done before. Such a perspective, however, should also include the British period and seek to understand continuity in terms of the persistence of ideas and values rather than in the presence or absence of institutions. It goes without saying that the British period has brought about social, economic, and technological changes and has stimulated the introduction of new Western political models. The focal question, however, is not so much whether new elements and institutions were introduced by the colonial power, but how these elements and institutional changes were perceived by the persons affected and how they were incorporated within and subordinated to a pre-existing ideology.¹⁵

¹⁵ For Aung San, for instance, Marxist ideas had no value in themselves, if they were not incorporated into the framework of Buddhist philosophy. In one of his famous writings, he equated Marxist dialectics with the

Given the persistence of what has been called the *minlaung*-tradition in Burma's history, it seems that the British period could be considered as a passing moment within a long circle of dynastic changes. Rather than resulting in a "psychological trauma," the deposition of Burma's last king, along with the illegitimate rule of the British, have been interpreted as signs of the decline of a contemporary dynasty. For many Burmese, it was evident that a new *minlaung* would arise to drive out the British, just as former *minlaungs* had overthrown "weak" or "illegitimate" rulers in order to reunify the realm under the *dhamma*. These ideas had already inspired numerous local rebellions in the pre-colonial period, and so they did during the period of British rule. But as stated before, expectations of the coming of the future king did not cease to exist with the failed Saya San rebellion of 1930/31. Less than nine years later, the same expectations were as alive as before, and the nationalists of the "Freedom Bloc" affiliated themselves with millenarian ideas by forming an association analogous to the *gaing*-tradition. It was in the *gaings* that the expectations of the coming righteous ruler were fostered and where the realm was symbolically recreated in its totality. Likewise, it was assumed that the *weikza* Bo Bo Aung already had revealed himself and that the time of the appearance of the future king was near.

In the years to come it was Aung San who perfectly performed the role of a *minlaung* by collecting loyal followers, founding an army, fighting against the British, and reunifying the realm, including some of the ethnic groups. As stressed before, Aung San repeatedly identified himself with the *minlaung* tradition, and after his untimely death he was finally incorporated into the national pantheon as the "fourth of the great warrior kings" who had succeeded in unifying the realm. This is not to say that Aung San was identical with a king, or that in Burma the institution of kingship had survived its abolition. What is relevant is the fact that in the eyes of many Burmese, Aung San had reunified the realm as former kings had done, that he personally acted in a way that identified him as a prototypical *minlaung*. Even if institutions do not survive, the ideas

fundamental law of karma which Buddha already had revealed in his teachings to the whole world (Aung San 1940:14).

and values on which these institutions were based may still acquire meaning in the present.

References

- Adas, M. 1987 *Prophets of Rebellion. Millenarian Protest Movements against the European Colonial Order*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Aung San 1940 နိုင်ငံရေး အမျိုးမျိုး (Different Kinds of Politics). *Dagon Magazine* 1947, XXI, 9:13–19; XXI,10:137–143. (Orig. publ. in: *Dagon Magazine* 1940, 234:61–70; 236:17–26).
- 1942 ဗမာ့လွတ်လပ်ရေး တပ်မတော်။ အကြောင်းနှင့် အကျိုး (The Burma Independence Army—Its Cause and Effect). In: (Bo) Thein Swe (1951 ed.), pp. 86-87.
- 1943a ဇာတိ (၁) (“Origin” -1-). In: (Bo) Thein Swe (1951 ed.), pp. 1-9.
- 1943b ဇာတိ (၂) (“Origin” -2-). In: (Bo) Thein Swe (1951 ed.), pp. 13-20.
- 1943c ဗမာ့လွတ်လပ်ရေးကျေညာသော အခမ်းအနား၌ မိန့်ဆိုသောစစ်ထေရ်နာပတိ မိန့်ခွန်း (“Speech of the Commander-in-Chief on the occasion of the independence,” 1.8.43) In: (Maung) Kyaw Yin (1969 ed), pp. 25-30.
- 1943d အရှင်ဦးဝိစာရ ၏ ကျောက်တိုင်ဖွင့်ပွဲ မိန့်ခွန်း (“Opening Speech at the Ashin U Wisara Monument,” 2.10.43). In: (Maung) Kyaw Yin (1969 ed.), pp. 55–57.
- 1944a အမျိုးအစား ခိုင်မာတောင့်တင်းသော အင်အား (“A kind of a strong strength,” opening address delivered at the Burma Military Academy, 7.10.44). *Myanma Alin*, October, 8, 1944, p.3. Reprinted in: (Maung) Kyaw Yin (1969 ed.), pp. 159–162.
- 1944b ကိုယ်အား ကိုယ်မွေး၊ ကိုယ်အရေး ကိုယ်ထူထောင်ကြ (“Forster your strength, develop your self,” Public speech on the occasion of the 3rd. Anniverary of the Japanese declaration of war, 8.12.44). In: (U) Maung Maung (1969), p. 42. (Orig. publ. *Myanma Alin*, 10.12.1944, pp. 1–2.)

- 1946a The Resistance Movement. Idem., *Burma's Challenge*. Rangoon: New Light of Burma Press, pp. 7–45.
- 1946b Problems for Burma's Freedom. Presidential Address at the First Congress of AFPFL, 20.1.46. Idem., *Burma's Challenge*. Rangoon: New Light of Burma Press, pp. 47–95.
- 1946c အမျိုးသား ညီညွတ်ရေး (“National Unity”; Speech delivered at the AFPFL conference, 23.1.46). In: Sapey Biman (1971 ed.), pp.91–110.
- 1946d ဗိုလ်ချုပ်မေတ္တာ ၎င်းစောမှာ (“Bogyoke’s metta towards the Jinghpaws;” Speech given in Myitkyina, 1.12.46). In: (Maung) Kyaw Yin (1969 ed.), S.155–158.
- 1947 မြန်မာများကစိုးစိုးလို၍မဟုတ် (“The Burmans don’t want to dominate”; Speech given at the Panglong Conference, 8.2.47). In: Sapei Biman (1971 ed.), pp.185–187.
- Aung Myat 1975 မဟာဂန္ဓာရိဝိဇ္ဇာဗိုဇ် တိုးတော် အောင်မင်းခေါင် အတ္ထုပ္ပတ္တိ တန်ခိုးသိဒ္ဓိ (A Biography of MahagandariWeikzado Bodaw Aung Min Gaung). Rangoon: Myat Sapei.
- Aung-Thwin, Michael 1982 Prophecies, Omens, and Dialogue: Tools of the Trade in Burmese Historiography. In: D.K. Wyatt & A. Woodside (eds.), *Moral Order and the Question of Change: Essays on Southeast Asian Thought*. New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies: Monograph Series No.24.
- 1983 Divinity, Spirit, and Human: Conceptions of Classical Burmese Kingship. In: L. Gesick (eds.), *Centers, Symbols, and Hierarchies: Essays on the Classical States of Southeast Asia*. New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies: Monograph Series No.26.
- 1985a *Pagan, The Origins of Modern Burma*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- 1985b The British “Pacification” of Burma: Order Without Meaning. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 16:245–261.
- 1989 1948 and Burma’s Myth of Independence. In: J. Silverstein (ed.), *Independent Burma at Forty Years*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press (Southeast Asia Program).
- Ba Maw 1959 Burma at the Beginning of the Second World War. *The Guardian*, VI/12:17–20.

- 1968 *Breakthrough in Burma. Memoirs of a Revolution, 1939-1946*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- (Dhammika U) Ba Than 1962 *The Roots of the Revolution*. Rangoon: Government Printing Press.
- Brac de la Perrière, B. 1989 *Les Rituels de Possession en Birmanie. Du Culte d'Etat aux Cérémonies Privées*. Paris: Edition Recherche sur les Civilisations.
- Ferguson, J.P. & Mendelson, E.M. 1981 Masters of the Buddhist Occult: The Burmese Weikzas. *Contributions to Asian Studies*, XVI:62–88.
- Gosh, P. 2000 *Brave Men of the Hills. Resistance and Rebellion in Burma, 1825–1932*. London: Hurst.
- Gravers, M. 2001 Cosmology, Prophets, and Rebellion among the Buddhist Karen in Burma and Thailand. *Moussons* 4:3–31.
- Guyot, D. 1966 *The Political Impact of the Japanese Occupation of Burma*. Ph.D., Yale University.
- Herbert, P. 1982 *The Hsaya San Rebellion (1930–1932) Reappraised*. Melbourne: Monash University, Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Working Paper No. 27.
- Harvey, G.E. 1925 *History of Burma. From the Earliest Times to 10 March 1824 the Beginning of the English Conquest*. London: Longmans, Green & Co.
- Houtman, G. 1999 *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics: Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy*. Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa Monograph Series No. 33. Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa.
- Htin Aung 1978 *Folk Elements in Burmese Buddhism*. Westport: Greenwood Press.
- (U) Khin 1961 *U Hla Pe's Narrative of the Japanese Occupation of Burma*. Ithaca: Cornell University, Southeast Asia Program.
- (U) Khin Maung Nyunt 1968 Japan „Khit“ in Retrospect. *The Guardian*, XV,5:30–35.
- Koenig, W.J. 1990 *The Burmese Polity, 1752–1819. Politics, Administration, and Social Organization in the Early Konbaung Period*. University of Michigan, Center for South and Southeast Asian Studies: Michigan Papers on South and Southeast Asia No.34.

- (Maung) Kyaw Yin ed. 1969 ဗိုလ်ချုပ်အောင်ဆန်း၏ မမေ့နိုင်သော မိန့်ခွန်းများ (Unforgettable Speeches of Bogyoke Aung San). Rangoon; pp.159–162
- Lieberman, V.B. 1984 *Burmese Administrative Cycles. Anarchy and Conquest, c.1580–1760*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1987 Reinterpreting Burmese History. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 29:162–194.
- (Bo) Let Ya 1962 The March to National Leadership. In: Dr. Maung Maung (ed.), *Aung San of Burma*. The Hague: Nijhoff, pp.43–52.
- (Maung) Lu Pain 1966 Remember the Four Great Absentees. *The Guardian*, XIII, 2:26–28.
- (U) Maung Maung 1969 ဗိုလ်ချုပ်အောင်ဆန်း ၏ ဆောင်းပါးများ၊ မိန့်ခွန်းများ၊ လက်ရေးစာမူများ နှင့် ဗိုလ်ချုပ်အောင်ဆန်း ၏ အတ္ထုပ္ပတ္တိ၊ စာအုပ်စာတန်းများ၊ ဝတ္ထုဆောင်းပါးများ အညွှန်း (Articles, Speeches and Manuscripts of Aung San as well as Biographical Sketches). *Journal of the Burmese Research Society* 52(1):27–118.
- (Maung) Maung Gyi 1983 *Burmese Political Values. The Socio-Political Roots of Authoritarianism*. New York: Praeger
- Mendelson, E.M. 1960 Religion and Authority in Modern Burma. *The World Today*, 3:110–118.
- 1961 A Messianic Buddhist Association in Upper Burma. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 24:560–580.
- 1963a Observations on a Tour in a Region of Mount Popa, Central Burma. *France-Asie*, 179:780–807.
- 1963b The Uses of Religious Scepticism in Modern Burma. *Diogenes*, 41:94–116.
- 1975 *Sangha and State in Burma. The Study in Monastic Sectarianism and Leadership*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Ministry of Education of the Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma (MESB)
- 1983 မြန်မာဖတ်စာ တတိယတန်း (Burmese Reader, III. Grade). Rangoon.
- Mya Daung Nyo 1954 ရဲဘော်သုံးကျိပ် (“The Thirty Comrades”). Rangoon, 2nd.ed. (Orig. 1943).

- Naw, A. 2001 *Aung San and the Struggle for Burmese Independence*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books.
- Nemoto, K. 1996 Aung San Suu Kyi. Her Dream and Reality. In. K. Nemoto & M.I. Minamida (edited by Y. Sugita), *Aung San Suu Kyi and Contemporary Burma*. Osaka University of Foreign Studies: KIAPS Discussion Paper No.1.
- Ni Ni Myint 1983 *Burma's Struggle against British Imperialism, 1885-1895*. Rangoon: The University Press.
- (U) Nu 1951 ဗိုလ်ချုပ်အောင်ဆန်း နှင့် ခေါင်းဆောင်ကြီးများ ကျဆုံး၍ ကြေကွဲဝမ်းနည်းကြောင်းအဆို (Obituary speech on the occasion of the death of Bogyoke Aung San and the great leaders, 29.7.47). In: (Bo) Thein Swe (ed.), pp. 201-215.
- Pe Maung Tin & Luce, G. (eds.) 1960 *The Glass Palace Chronicle of the Kings of Burma*. Rangoon: Rangoon University Press.
- Prager, S. 1998 *Nationalismus als Kulturelle Reproduktion. Aung San und die Entstehung des Postkolonialen Birma*. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Heidelberg.
- Sapei Biman (ed.) 1971 ဗိုလ်ချုပ်အောင်ဆန်း မိန့်ခွန်းများ, ၁၉၄၅-၁၉၄၇ (Speeches of Bogyoke Aung San, 1945-1947). Rangoon: Sapei Biman Press, (2.edition), pp.91-110.
- Sarkisyanz, E. 1965 *Buddhist Backgrounds of the Burmese Revolution*. The Hague: Nijhoff.
- 1968 Messianic Folk-Buddhism as Ideology of Peasant Revolts in Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Burma. *The Review of Religious Research*, 10:32-38.
- Scott, J.C. 1976 *The Moral Economy of the Peasant. Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press
- Silverstein, J. 1977 *Burma. Military Rule and the Politics of Stagnation*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Smith, D.E. 1965 *Religion and Politics in Burma*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Spiro, M.E. 1971 *Buddhism and Society, A Great Tradition and Its Burmese Vicissitudes*. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd.
- Tambiah, S.J. 1987 *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets. A Study in Charisma, Hagiography, Sectarianism, and Millennial Buddhism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Taylor, R.H. 1987 *The State in Burma*. London: C. Hurst & Company.
- 1998 Political Values and Political Conflict in Burma. In: R.I. Rotberg (ed.), *Burma*.
- 1998 *Prospects for a Democratic Future*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.
- Than Tun 1960 The Influence of Occultism in Burmese History with Special Reference to Bodawpaya's Reign 1782–1819. *Bulletin of the Burma Historical Commission* 1,2:117–145.
- Thant Myint-U 2001 *The Making of Modern Burma*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- (Bo) Thein Swe (ed.) 1951 ဗိုလ်ချုပ်အောင်ဆန်းအတ္ထုပ္ပတ္တိ (A Biography of Bogyoke Aung San). Rangoon.
- (Pagan Wundauk U) Tin (ed.) 1965 မြန်မာမင်းအုပ်ချုပ်ပုံစာတမ်း နှင့် ဘိုးတော်ဘုရားကြီး၏ ရာဇသတ်ခေါ်သောအမိန့် တော်တမ်းကြီး ဒုတိယပိုင်း (Record of the Administration under the Burmese Kings with an Appendix to King Bodawpaya's Criminal Law *ameindaw tangyi*; Vol.2). Rangoon: Government Printing.
- Trager, F.N. 1966 *Burma. From Kingdom to Republic*. London: Pall Mall Press
- (U) Vum Ko Hau 1951 ချင်းအမြင်နှင့် ဗိုလ်ချုပ် (The attitude of the Chins and Bogyoke). In: (Bo) Thein Swe (ed.), pp. 124–131.
- 1963 *Profile of a Burma Frontier Man*. Bandung: Kilatmadju Press.
- Wiant, J. 1981 Tradition in the Service of Revolution: The Political Symbolism of Taw-hlan-ye-khit. In: F.K. Lehman (ed.), *Military Rule in Burma since 1962. A Kaleidoscope of Views*. Singapore: Maruzen Asia.