

Mimicking the State in Burma/Myanmar

Royal, Nationalist, and Militant Ideology in a New Buddhist Movement

Niklas Foxeus*

Research Fellow, History of Religions, Stockholm University

niklas.foxeus@rel.su.se

Abstract

In the early post-independence period in Burma, a large number of hierarchical, initiatory, and secretive esoteric congregations were founded by charismatic leaders in urban areas. These attracted many devotees, including representatives of the state. The relationship between the state and the esoteric congregations was tense, especially during the rule of the military governments (1962–2011), and the state sought to suppress the congregations in the early 1980s.

In this article, one esoteric congregation—the *ariyā-weizzā* organization—is taken as an example of these congregations. First, the article demonstrates how the members of this congregation view themselves as performing the state, and shows what kind of power they perceive themselves to exercise. Second, in socio-political terms, the article seeks to explain why tensions emerged between the state and the esoteric congregations, and it demonstrates how these congregations have contributed to performing the state.

Keywords

weizzā/weikza – Buddhism – state – conflict – politics – Burma/Myanmar

As suggested in the present issue, a variety of non-state militia/security groups are ‘performing the state’ independently of, or in interaction with, the state,

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occasionally exerting physical violence. However, performing the state may also assume quite unexpected manifestations, ones that seem to require the acceptance of certain ontological assumptions. This article will especially highlight one such case: a Burmese esoteric Buddhist congregation I refer to as the *ariyā-weizzā* organization. From its own point of view, it is performing the state mainly 'behind the scenes', performing ritual violence in a 'war' to defend Buddhism and Burma's national cultural legacy, with support from an 'army' of non-human beings. At the same time, this as well as other esoteric organizations have been 'embedded in the state' in intricate ways (Van Klinken and Barker 2009a).

In the post-independence period in Burma, starting from 1948, a large number of hierarchical, initiatory, and secretive esoteric congregations were founded by charismatic leaders in urban areas. These attracted large numbers of devotees, including many government employees, officials, and military officers. The aim of these congregations was to promote and defend the Buddha's dispensation (P. *sāsana*),¹ and offer exorcism and healing to clients. Throughout this period, especially during the rule of the military governments (1962–2011), the state viewed these congregations with suspicion and subjected them to surveillance, and the relationship between the two was tense (Foxeus 2011; Pranke 2011; Patton 2014). While rationalist forms of Buddhism were officially supported by the state, the practices of the esoteric congregations were not, and they represented, I suggest, a 'rejected knowledge'. More importantly, the congregations were perceived by the authorities as a threat because they represented a quest for power and influence through their creation of translocal social networks in the country with linkages to the state. For these and other reasons, the state sought to suppress these congregations in the early 1980s.

In this article, I take the *ariyā-weizzā* organization as an example of an esoteric congregation. Combining two ontological views on power—Burmese cultural perspectives and sociological ones—I will demonstrate how the *ariyā-weizzā* organization performs the state in two senses: from its own point of view and in socio-political terms. As for the latter, I will explain why tensions arose between the *ariyā-weizzā* organization and other esoteric congregations on the one hand and the state on the other. I will investigate how these congregations, in spite of these tensions, nevertheless informed state performance, thereby contributing to performing the state.

1 The Buddha's *sāsana* refers to Buddhism as a social fact in terms of being institutionalized and anchored in society (Foxeus forthcoming). 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.

Military Rule in Burma

This article covers the periods of authoritarian military rule in Burma (1962–2011). General Ne Win and his socialist Revolutionary Council seized power in a 1962 military coup and promulgated an ideology called ‘The Burmese Way to Socialism’. Instituting a secularist policy of separation of state and religion reminiscent of the colonial period, the state withdrew its official support for Buddhism, and it also censored and sought to suppress what was perceived as superstition (spirit cults, esoteric lore, et cetera), which could serve as impediments to the creation of a modern, socialist state (Smith 1965). However, in spite of its secularist policy, this government later supported scripturalist forms of Buddhism (Schober 2011; Foxeus forthcoming). In the early years of his rule, Ne Win repealed the laws designed for the protection and support of Buddhism that Prime Minister U Nu had instituted in the early 1950s, and implemented a large-scale nationalization of all means of production, including banks and private businesses. The government was accused—especially by the monks—of being communist and of stealing from the people (breaking a Buddhist precept). Monks and laypeople were concerned about the government’s policy since the monastic community was now left without support from the state, and the planned economy had disastrous consequences (Smith 1965:301–5; Charney 2009:118–25; Tin Maung Maung Than 1988).²

The following military government, SLORC/SPDC (hereafter SPDC), seized power in 1988 and ruled until March 2011. It upheld an enchanted worldview and has also officially supported rationalist and scripturalist forms of Buddhism.

Abandoning the socialist and secularist ideology, it sought to restore the pre-colonial monarchical Buddhism, with its relationship to the monastic community (P. *saṅgha*) as a source of its political legitimacy. Although the consecutive military governments sought to project images of themselves as total and monolithic entities with powerful authority and control, such ideological constructs (Van Klinken and Barker 2009b:40–1) concealed the state’s real ‘institutional patchiness’, patron-client relationships, et cetera (Van Klinken and Barker 2009b:32).

2 As observed by some scholars (Smith 1965:288–94; Seekins 2002:43–8), the secular ideology of the Ne Win government (1962–1988) constituted a curious blend of socialism, Marxism, Leninism and Buddhist concepts. However, what is important here is less the government’s ideology as defined and scrutinized by scholars, but rather how the government was experienced by wide swathes of Buddhists in Burma, some of whom regarded it as anti-Buddhist.

The Royal Esoteric Congregations

Historically, the sense of threat to the Buddha's dispensation was heightened by the trauma of the loss of the Burmese kingship and the British deposition of the last Burmese king in 1885. In collaboration with the *saṅgha*, the monarchy had been the main institutional agency through which the Buddha's dispensation was promoted and maintained in society. In response to this precarious situation, with foreign Christian colonizers ruling the country, a large number of lay Buddhist associations and some lay-dominated esoteric Buddhist congregations devoted to the cult of semi-immortal, accomplished esoteric masters (*weizzādhour*) emerged, with the aim of promoting the Buddha's dispensation in society.³ This development thus entailed a reorganization of the work of maintaining the dispensation and moved its centre of gravity to ordinary laypeople (Turner 2014). In contemporary Burma, many still fear that the Buddha's dispensation is about to disappear from society.

After a long period of British colonization, the ontologically enchanted government under Prime Minister U Nu (1948–1962) led a 'Buddhist revival' in the early post-independence period, and religion also flourished in society more broadly. A mass lay insight meditation movement emerged (Jordt 2007) and esoteric congregations mushroomed (Foxeus forthcoming). Most of the latter seem to have been established in that period, including a few 'royal esoteric congregations' (Foxeus 2011) founded by individuals held to be embodiments of a millenarian and anti-colonial figure called Sekyā Min, the 'Lord of the Wondrous Wheel' (roughly corresponding to P. *cakkavattin*).⁴ In these congregations, he was viewed as a powerful, accomplished esoteric master. The main objective of the *ariyā-weizzā* organization, which is probably the only remaining congregation of this kind, is to serve as the foremost agency for the defense of the Buddha's dispensation in the world. It has sought to revive the royal Buddhism of pre-colonial Burma and its model for the relationship between the king and the monastic community.

Mimicking the monarchy, the royal esoteric congregations founded by Sekyā Min-claimants in the early post-independence period sought to establish their

3 As a step on the path to awakening and nirvana, it is imagined, *weizzādhour* (P. *vijjādhara*) acquire supernormal powers and semi-immortality through the successful practice of esoteric arts combined with Buddhist morality and concentration meditation. Having withdrawn to a hidden abode of semi-immortal masters, these Buddhist heroes propagate and defend the Buddha's dispensation, and can communicate with their human disciples (Foxeus 2011; Pranke 2011; Patton 2014).

4 For more on this figure, see Ferguson and Mendelson 1981, Sarkisyanz 1965, and Foxeus 2011.

authority by drawing on a number of indigenous sources of power employed in performative displays. For instance, close to the railway station in Mandalay, Bodaw Sekyā, a former electrician, built a small, three-storey 'palace', in which he placed thrones for him—the king—and his queen. He was carried around in his compound to prevent his royal feet from being soiled, and his subjects behaved in a submissive manner towards him, bowing themselves out of his royal quarters (Spiro 1982:176; Mendelson 1961). Another example is the *ariyā-weizzā* organization. On a photograph, probably from the early 1960s, the founder and his wife are depicted as king and queen. They are seated on a royal gilded couch, looking straight ahead with an air of authority; they are surrounded by devotees and flanked on either side by a servant holding a royal umbrella above them. Authority, following Bruce Lincoln, could here be viewed as an effect of discourse in a wider sense, involving verbal as well as nonverbal instruments and media, thereby using 'the whole theatrical array of gestures, demeanours, costumes, props, and stage devices through which one may impress or bamboozle an audience' (Lincoln 1994:7–11). Moreover, this way of projecting authority is similar to the Southeast Asian cultural constructions and performances of power in the Geertzian, pre-modern, royal 'exemplary centre' and 'theatre state' (Errington 2012).

The royal esoteric congregations bear some similarities with the 'prophets of renewal' or 'wonder-working prophets' who led hill people in uprisings in Southeast Asia (Scott 2009:283–323); the rebellions of 'imminent kings' (*min:laung:*) in lowland Burma (Lieberman 1984); and the series of royal claimants who led Burmese anti-colonial rebellions against the British colonizers (Sarkisyanz 1965). However, these are all pre-modern phenomena and anti-colonial movements. In contrast, the royal esoteric congregations represent post-colonial movements that should be understood in the context of the socio-political dynamics in post-war Southeast Asia. According to Keyes, Hardacre, and Kendall (1994), there was a widespread resurgence of religion in the post-war period in Southeast and East Asia, and a variety of new, eclectic religious movements emerged, reviving traditional cosmologies, and promoting nationalism and local religious symbols and practices.⁵ They explain this re-enchantment as being related to a 'modern crisis of authority' that arose as a result of the tensions between these movements and the state's projects of modernization and nation-building. This view should be supplemented by an

5 Among these new religious movements can be mentioned Cao Dai in Vietnam, Dhammakāya, Santi Asoke, and the Hupphaasawan Movement in Thailand, and comparable ones that emerged in East Asia, such as Japan (Keyes, Hardacre, and Kendall 1994). These are what sociologists of religion refer to as innovative, soteriological 'new religious movements' (NRM).

understanding of these phenomena as representing ‘alternative modernities’, that is, as local forms of modernity (Endres and Lauser 2011).

Being ‘new Buddhist movements’ in the early post-independence period, the royal esoteric congregations represent a hybrid of patterns, practices, and ideas derived from previous movements and amalgamated with novel ones.⁶ Basically, the royal esoteric congregations represent a modern, eclectic, and creative synthesis of the lay Buddhist associations of the colonial period (Turner 2014) and the anti-colonial rebellions, and were strongly shaped by the socio-political issues prevalent during the early post-colonial period. While they practise meditation—frequently viewed as one of the hallmarks of modern Buddhism—to attain enlightenment and nirvana, the Buddhist laypeople who dominate the *ariyā-weizzā* organization also use it to acquire supernormal powers and become accomplished esoteric masters. The *ariyā-weizzā* organization provides courses for new members in a modern way using textbooks and blackboards.

In the absence of state support of Buddhism during the Ne Win period, it—just as in the colonial period—fell to the ordinary laypeople to support the Buddha’s *sāsana* as a collective project in society. Seemingly, this contributed to a mass lay insight meditation movement gaining momentum and an increasing popularity of esoteric congregations, especially Shwe Yin Kyaw Gain (see Tin Maung Maung Than 1988; Aung Kin 1981; Jordt 2007:4, 179–80, 213).

The ‘King’ and His Esoteric Congregation

The *ariyā-weizzā* organization and its discourses on power and authority share many features with the consecutive military governments, especially the later SPDC government. The latter was strongly informed by a political model characterized by (royal) autocracy associated with traditional Buddhist notions of power and authority. It emphasized a cultural fundamentalism, and the generals depicted themselves as the heirs of Burma’s great unifying kings.⁷ In contrast to the previous governments, SPDC outlined no explicit political ideology

6 I have followed Mackenzie (2007) and others in referring to the Buddhist equivalents of NRMS as ‘new Buddhist movements’.

7 These were King Anawayatha (r. 1044–1077), King Bayinnaung (r. 1551–1581), and King Alaungpaya (r. 1752–1760). In Naypyidaw, the capital since 2005, there are three large statues of these kings. General Ne Win also sought to associate himself with these kings, thereby implying that he was the fourth unifying king, and General Than Shwe the fifth (Steinberg 2006).

beyond its attempt to re-establish authoritarian and hierarchical state Buddhism as a source of political legitimacy. It disseminated a Burmese Buddhist nationalism that sought to maintain the unity of the Myanmar nation, and ruled in an autocratic manner that required obedient subjects which were presumed to be united in both their commitment to Buddhism and their wish to keep foreign, Western influences out of Burma's society, culture, and religion (Gravers 1999; Steinberg 2006).⁸

The *ariyā-weizzā* organization is a large, royal, esoteric congregation with thousands of members. Some leaders have given a probably exaggerated number of 100,000 members. Founded by a former military officer in the late 1940s in Taungoo,⁹ the headquarters was soon moved to Yangon.¹⁰ Although some members are monks, the majority are laypeople. They regard the founder as an 'incarnation' of Sekyā Min, as well as a 'righteous king' (p. *dharmarāja*), an accomplished esoteric master, and a future buddha (p. *bodhisatta*). Performing miracles, such as raising people from the dead and materializing objects, he was ascribed charismatic authority by his followers and soon gathered a large following. The congregation was intensively engaged in large-scale proselytizing work, mainly in the countryside, up to the early 1980s, in the main among peasants and other people of lower classes. However, some middle-class people and wealthy entrepreneurs are also found among the members.

During my fieldwork, members were rather silent and secretive regarding the founder's background, but I was told the following. In the mid 1940s, Sekyā Min's consciousness left his hidden abode and entered the human body of an ill military officer, which he appropriated as his new embodiment at the same time as the military officer passed away.¹¹ In contrast to the rulers of the military governments, the connection to famous kings in Burma's history is thus a direct one here. In previous existences, some leaders maintained, the founder had been King Anawryatha (r. 1044–1077), King Alaungsithu (r. 1112–1167), and King Alaunghpaya (r. 1752–1760), et cetera. The founder, whom the members usually addressed as the 'Exalted Royal Father' (*khamedaw-hpayā*), passed

8 However, SPDC did involve some elements of Western ideologies, albeit kept to a minimum (Schober 2011:90).

9 Some other founders of esoteric congregations were also ex-military officers.

10 I conducted fieldwork in Burma periodically from 2005 to 2008, both in Upper and Lower Burma. Due to the nature of the *ariyā-weizzā* organization, I have decided to alter its name and render my informants anonymous. During the time of my fieldwork, Burma was ruled by a military dictatorship, and it would have been ethically irresponsible to explicitly ask people about their views of politics and the government.

11 For more on this phenomenon, see Mendelson 1961, Spiro 1982, and Foxeus 2011.

away in 1999, but the members believe that rather than dying he underwent a transmutation and left for a hidden abode. The congregation is currently led by a council of elderly leaders.

Throughout the post-independence period, the relationship between the congregation and the authorities has been tense. According to a book from a competing congregation, the founder of the *ariyā-weizzā* organization claimed to be a rebellious ‘imminent king’, and was arrested by the authorities in Bago (Htein Win 1976 [1962]:427). Similarly, several leaders of the *ariyā-weizzā* organization maintained that he had repeatedly been arrested during the entire post-independence period, and that the congregation was infiltrated twice by the government’s intelligence service in the 1970s.

During the Ne Win period, the secular government could be viewed as a threat to Buddhism, and the *ariyā-weizzā* organization seems to have responded. For instance, in speeches delivered by the founder in the 1970s, he stated that they, with ritual means, will force immoral (*ma-tayā*:) governments to fall and be destroyed. Enemies of Buddhism, he maintained, also include those who confiscate the property of the people and then rule over them, possibly referring to Ne Win’s nationalization programmes. However, the explicit aim of the congregation is not to assume political power, but rather to serve as a kind of political safety device. By means of its powerful rituals and support from non-human beings, the congregation seeks to ensure that Burma’s government is Buddhist and supports Buddhism (Foxeus 2011).

Mimicking the State: In Mimicry a Magic Dwells

To demonstrate how the congregation performs state-like functions, I will take some clues from the ‘ontological turn in anthropology’ that not only acknowledges multiple realities and worlds, but also emphasizes the agency of materiality (Ladwig 2011).¹² By taking the congregation’s ontological assumptions seriously,¹³ I will show how the congregation’s view of its state performance relies on an ‘enchanted ontology’, such as the agency it ascribes to non-human beings, Buddhist cosmology, and rituals. However, the emphasis on ontology

12 Previously, I have attempted to understand the congregation’s ideology and practices as being mainly concerned with issues of post-colonial identity (Foxeus 2011).

13 The emphasis on ontologies within anthropology is similar to the phenomenological method and its epoché within religious studies. However, I find the recent anthropological way in which local ontologies are discussed and supplemented with sociological analysis (see Ladwig 2007) to be useful.

does not imply that people are assumed to look at things from the point of view of a coherent, static, and comprehensive enchanted worldview. Rather, they can shift from one set of ontological presuppositions to another, depending on the context.

For the work of defending the Buddha's dispensation to be efficacious, certain requirements must be fulfilled. These are based on an ontology pertaining to the Southeast Asian cosmological state, predicated on a 'magical correspondence' between the universe and the world of men (Day 2002:92; Lieberman 1984). A king, possessing an incomparable store of merit and operating within the structures of a monarchy, is not only entitled to carry out this work of furthering the cause of the Buddha's dispensation but is also the one who can do it most efficaciously. A kind of magic, as it were, seems to inhere in mimicking a Buddhist kingdom.¹⁴ This could be a way of going beyond looking at such 'symbols' of authority in a Weberian vein as purely legitimating devices (Skilling 2007:202). There is something more to it. I suggest that the royal features and the cosmology outlined below—pertaining to both the imaginative dimension and the sheer materiality—are understood to constitute and produce power, and held to be necessary conditions for the *sāsana*-preserving project.

The *ariyā-weizzā* organization draws heavily on a Burmese Buddhist royal imaginary. The members are ascribed a royal identity and imagined as being part of a royal family and Sekyā Min's royal lineage, as well as the lineage of other Buddhist kings. In line with the royal tradition, the congregation's practices outline a path of *bodhisatta*, and the members are thus imagined as a moral community of such holy people.¹⁵ At the initiation rituals, members make a series of vows that must be observed for the rest of their lives, for instance, to observe the five Buddhist precepts, and, like the Buddhist kings, to promote the Buddha's dispensation.

The congregation has 25 branch centres called *Dhamma-beimān-dhāt-youn-ein* ("Dhamma Abodes and Power Centres"). These two-storey buildings are owned by the congregation, and serve as centres for propagating the Buddha's dispensation, initiating members, providing courses, and organizing ritual activities, and as living quarters for the local leader and his family. A leader and his family, as well as other people affiliated with the centre, are designated

14 For instance, only a king or a rightful ruler can ritually place an umbrella on the top of certain pagodas (Jordt 2007). The mimicry of the structures of a kingdom could be seen as a kind of magical ritual, or even as a kind of sympathetic magic (Scott 2009:309).

15 The kings modelled their soteriological careers on the narrative of Gotama Buddha. For more on this model for the kings, see Lieberman 1984; Skilling 2007.

as *min* (here a minor vassal king), *mi-hpu-yā-khaung-gyī* (a chief queen), *ein-shay-min* (a crown prince), *sic-thū-gyī* (a commander-in-chief of the army), and *thek-daw-sheh-amat* (a royal minister). There are also minor centres situated in the homes of some members. Finally, the congregation owns a few monasteries and has built many pagodas in the country. When the founder ruled the congregation, the branch centres were subordinated to his 'exemplary centre' in Yangon. Restoring the pre-colonial ternary order of the aristocracy, the monastic community, and the commoners, the highest leaders in the hierarchical organization constituted the ministers in Sekyā Min's royal 'court'. Like the Burmese kings, the founder issued 'royal orders' to the local leaders, which they were expected to read aloud. In this way, the organization mimicked the structures of a kingdom designated as a 'galactic polity' or a '*maṇḍala* state' (Tambiah 1976; Wolters 1999), ruled in accordance with the Asokan model and its two wheels of Dhamma, that is, with a complementary relation between the king and the monastic community (Collins 2006:473; Tambiah 1976).

The *ariyā-weizzā* organization's temple compound mimics the pre-modern royal palace, which served as a ritual-political-cosmic centre, and was supposed to mirror Sakka's (Indra's) palace in the Tāvātīṃsa heaven situated on top of Mt Meru, the centre of the universe. It is arranged like a small royal city surrounded by a wall, with a palace, monasteries, and a Pagan-style hollow pagoda named the Cūlāmaṇi Pagoda, which is just like Sakka's temple. On a poster sold at the temple, it is stated that the temple is the 'Pillar/Centre (*mandaing*) of the World'. At the annual ceremony, the following three flags are ritually hoisted: the 'Peacock Flag of Myanmā'—the same kind of flag that was used during the Konbhaung Dynasty (1752–1885)—the 'Victory Flag of the Buddha's *Sāsana*', and the 'Victory Flag of the *Sekyā*' (p. *cakka*), which represents the world emperor (p. *cakkavattin*) ruling over the four islands. While running up the flags during the annual ceremony in 2008, a layman held a microphone and recited texts invoking a variety of accomplished esoteric masters. Hoisting the flags is considered an efficacious ritual wishing that the flags will make the Buddha's dispensation shine and flourish throughout the five thousand years of the Buddhist era; provide protection from dangers and catastrophes, make the enemies and erratic views disappear, and endow the members with supernormal powers.

Furthermore, inside a palace-like building is a large gilded statue of the founder depicting him as a king, outstretched on a royal couch and surrounded by royal white umbrellas. Many devotees gather there and prostrate respectfully before this statue, touching the ground with their foreheads and praying to him to grant their wishes. Similarly, each branch centre has a royal bedroom before which members behave in a similar manner. At another level, the mon-

umental materiality of the compound contributes to the members' sense of the power of their congregation. As Daniel Miller remarks, '[w]ith monuments some things seem more material than others, and their very massivity and gravity becomes their source of power' (Miller 2005:16).

Through the translocal network of its branch centres across Burma (except the Karen and Arakan states), the congregation constitutes an alternative nation, or an imagined community in Benedict Anderson's sense (2006), comprising Burmans, Mons, Chins, Kachins, various Shan ethnic groups, et cetera, who are united in their work to defend the Buddha's dispensation. The annual ceremony, at which many members gather, creates among them a stronger sense of belonging to this royal, national community with a special mission. As group identity markers, many members hold flags and wear badges on their shirts with the emblem of the congregation. In these ways the congregation represented—during the Ne Win era—a kind of ideal state within the state, led by a 'real' king—a Buddhist state as a counter-discourse to Ne Win's secular, socialist state.

The World Conqueror's Army: Militant Ideology and Burmese Buddhist Nationalism

The *ariyā-weizzā* organization's ideology partly intersects with those of the authoritarian military governments, and reflects fears and values widespread in the broader society. The prevalence of the colonial legacy in early post-independence Burma led Michael Aung-Thwin (1989) to speak of 'Burma's myth of independence'. To gain 'real' independence, he explains, it was necessary to purge Burma of its colonial past. A 'xenophobic', anti-colonial nationalism has characterized the military governments after 1962, and has served as a bulwark against hostile, alien, neo-colonial forces (Gravers 1999:79, *passim*). All things non-Burmese, such as Western culture and ideologies, were considered harmful foreign influences. Seeking to purge Burma from 'cultural pollution', General Ne Win closed down all the foreign private agencies and Western cultural institutions (Maung Maung Gyi 1981:12). SPDC promulgated Buddhist nationalism prescribing a moral code centring on patriotism, duty, and loyalty, and promotion of Buddhism and traditional culture (Gravers 1999:114; Schober 2011).

My sources for the militant, nationalist, and royal ideology, as well as the battle against the anti-Buddhist forces, mainly consist of the founder's speeches delivered during courses for the leaders in the 1970s and 1980s. These speeches are preserved in a collection of his typewritten papers from 1975 and 1979,

titled 'Manuscripts from course 1–3 on the blood essence/spirit of the leaders'. They are also contained in typewritten 'books' from the 1980s written by leaders based on notes and tape recordings of the founder's speeches, titled 'Manuscripts on the ocean of instructions about the accomplishment of the essence of the teaching'. The militant ideology was probably relevant mainly during the Ne Win period (1962–1988). The founder was unable to maintain his leadership of the congregation after around 1988–1989 due to illness.

Some of the esoteric congregations founded in the early post-independence period organized their own proselytizing 'armies'. Representing hybrid entities, these armies were inspired to varying degrees by the Burmese nationalist para-military armies of the 1930s onwards, the Freemasons (Foxeus 2011), and the Protestant Salvation Army (Patton 2014). The founder conferred military titles on the leaders, such as the 'Great, Brave and Righteous Commanders-in-Chief of the Propagation of the Buddha's *sāsana*',¹⁶ and called on them to serve as military officers in the congregation's 'great army' (*tap-ma-gyī*). In various ways, the leaders were empowered and authorized to act as 'kings' in defending Buddhism. Moreover, the leaders should consider themselves a kind of self-effacing *bodhisatta* soldiers, and not hesitate to sacrifice their lives in their work for Buddhism and saving the sentient beings. Filled with a 'spirit of patriotism' (*myo-khyic-seit*), they should protect the Buddha's dispensation, their culture, traditions, country, and nationality/race, whatever dangers they might encounter. Finally, they should regard the founder's prescriptions as an 'iron discipline', and remain united under an authoritarian slogan, 'One Blood, One Voice, One Command'.

The founder perceived Buddhism to be in danger, and sought to fight back against what he viewed as anti-Buddhist forces—primarily by fervent proselytizing work and ritual violence. The 'militant' ideology was supposed to inculcate courage and a fearless spirit among the leaders in their proselytizing work, mainly carried out in the countryside.¹⁷ That was probably turning more and more dangerous in the late 1970s due to opposition from the govern-

16 They were also called 'His Majesty Knight Templar Commander' [*sic*], a title obviously taken from the Freemasons.

17 In the post-independence period, some esoteric congregations—just like the U Nu government (see Smith 1965)—attempted to attain peace in the war-ridden country by making people observe Buddhist morality and by conducting missionary work among the ethnic minorities. The *ariyā-weizzā* organization mainly used exorcism as proselytizing method. Members were sent out to villages throughout Burma, and—in return for exorcist treatment—they asked the villagers to make a pledge to observe the five Buddhist precepts and initiated them in the lower grades of the congregation.

ment. The proselytizing activities served the dual purpose of making villagers more committed to Buddhism in socialist Burma, and creating a social base for the congregation, thereby extending its influence and power.

Destructive Rituals and a World Gone Awry

The *ariyā-weizzā* organization's ritual violence and the violence performed by non-human agents rely on an ontology that is different from that of modern Western scholarly perspectives. The congregation does not exert physical violence but seeks to manipulate sources of supernormal power. In a Durkheimian approach, this 'violence' would be viewed epistemologically as a metaphor/symbol for something else (see West 2007; Ladwig 2011), for instance as an articulation of perceived contradictions in post-colonial Burma. However, explaining the congregation's 'violence' in such a manner or by using other Western scholarly approaches¹⁸ would be misleading if we wish to understand it ontologically as a 'battle'. It exists only within a socially constructed reality shaped by an enchanted ontology. The 'domestication of difference under the sign of a universal human nature' in social theories since the nineteenth century, Shelly Errington argues (2012:32–4), implied an ideological universalization of Eurocentric notions of personhood and power. Taking local ontologies and alterity seriously is therefore a way to avoid such projective tendencies. The anthropologist Harry West grappled with similar antithetical approaches to violence. Having analysed the African notion of 'sorcery lions' as metaphors in a lecture delivered to an African audience, he received the following objection from one perplexed man, explaining that West had misunderstood the matter: 'metaphors don't kill the neighbors, lion-people do!' (West 2007:25).

Many of the founder's speeches were framed in a military rhetoric. The perceived threat of foreign influences was viewed by the congregation as a 'great war' (*taik-pwe-gyi*) between Buddhism and the anti-Buddhist forces, one in which he and his brave 'military officers' must crush these destructive forces by means of various kinds of supernatural weapons:

During the courses on noble esoteric knowledge (*ariyā-weizzā*), I'll give you, my royal sons and daughters, my Brave and Righteous-Commanders-in-Chief of the Propagation of the Buddha's *sāsana*, military training and teach you how to form a military array and use good weapons with which

18 For current Western sociological approaches to violence, see Zizek 2009.

you can really fight against and annihilate (*hpyou-khwin*) a variety of evil enemies, but only if you have thoroughly internalized the spirit of wishing to fight in military operations on the battle ground.¹⁹

These 'weapons' consist of supernormal powers, and it is assumed that such powers can even be fired through the eyes or the mind like guns towards a target; a miraculous dagger, concentration meditation practices, and the ritual recitation of certain texts (Foxeus 2011). The most important of the latter is the ritual text *Mahāsekdawgyī* (The Great Royal Wheel), which refers to the world-conqueror's wondrous wheel (P. *cakka*).²⁰ In the congregation, this wheel is thought to be conjured up through certain rituals and sent out into the world to effectuate changes. The text consists of a number of paragraphs, which are both wishes and Sekyā Min's commands to the accomplished esoteric masters and the gods, as well as some spirits. The wishes should be realized as a miraculous result of 'truth declarations' (P. *saccakiriya*) by the members.²¹ As for the commands, Sekyā Min is regarded as mainly the lord of the non-human beings, and therefore they must obey his commands, lest they be killed by the wondrous wheel.

In this manner, these classes of beings combine their power and all contribute to bringing about changes in the external world. In other words, both human and non-human agents are ascribed agency in the process of transforming society. The congregation's annual ceremony, the *Mahā-dhāt-paung-pwe* (the Great Ceremony of Combining Powers), held at its temple compound, is the main ritual occasion where this machinery is activated and its force unleashed to change and improve the world.²² On such ritual occasions, the leaders should wear ceremonial courtly attire: a long white 'coat' like those worn by princes and ministers during the Konbaung Dynasty, a Burmese turban, and a long silk *longyi*. Seated inside and around the hollow pagoda, according to the pre-colonial ternary order (leaders and monks inside the pagoda, and

19 This speech was delivered during a course for the leaders in 1987 (The Ariyā-Weizzā Organization 1987:7).

20 This text is available at the temple compound, and is included in a ritual manual.

21 Truth declarations were often made by Burmese kings and are common in contemporary Burmese Buddhism. The ritual often serves as a confirmation of one's spiritual status and achievements, as it is frequently made with reference to one's religious practice. In the congregation, the events interpreted as having occurred due to their rituals therefore confirm their spiritual superiority over their enemies. Truth declarations, with expected miraculous results, frequently appear in Pāli texts, especially in the *Jātaka* (Kong 2005).

22 I attended their annual ceremony in 2007 and 2008.

the commoners outside), a local leader, serving as a representative of Sekyā Min, recites texts and the participants recite after him. He concludes by standing up and reading a royal order to the accomplished esoteric masters and the gods, commanding them to carry out the world emperor's orders.

Another text, and likewise a Buddhist 'weapon' entitled 'King Alaunghpaya's truth-declaration',²³ even states that the members—envisioned as the great elect and the main defenders of Buddhism—and the enemies of Buddhism cannot co-exist in the human realm. At the annual ceremony, the members make a ritualized Buddhist truth declaration in standing position within the pagoda, wishing for miraculous results. The text depicts a 'war' between Buddhism and the anti-Buddhist forces in the Liberation Era, the millenarian era that would be inaugurated by Sekyā Min:

If it is true that the lords of power and glory, and the lords of supernormal powers, the right view of 'Buddhism' (*ariyā-weizzā*), the righteous people, the would-be venerable persons, those who have made pledges at the conference in the abode of the gods to propagate the *sāsana*,²⁴ and the Righteous and Brave Commanders-in-Chief of the Buddha's *sāsana* will win in the great battle between 'Buddhism' and the evil forces in the Liberation Era, may all those who adhere to heretic ideologies and heretic doctrines immediately be killed (*kya-hsoun*); may they all be extinguished quickly. Or, if those who adhere to false and heretic ideologies and those who are puppets of unrighteousness (*adhamma*) will destroy the Buddha's *sāsana*, may I [the founder] and the lords of glory, the lords of supernormal powers and the lords of perfection immediately die and appear in Tusita heaven, and may we neglect the human realm. May the great earth stand as a witness and shake greatly. May the ten thousand universes stand as a witness and thunder. May the great ocean stand as a witness and boil and overflow.

THE ARIYĀ-WEIZZĀ ORGANIZATION. n.d.: 246–247

23 The Burmese name of that ceremony is *Min-aung-zeyya-thissā-pwe*, 'King Aung Zeyya's Ritual of Truth'. Aung Zeyya was the name of the king, while Alaunghpaya, not mentioned in the Burmese text here, was a posthumous title meaning 'embryo Buddha' (the same as *hpayā-laung*), and has the same meaning as *bodhisatta*. Since Alaunghpaya is more familiar I have used that name above for clarity.

24 According to the congregation's origin myth, the members originally made their pledges to defend Buddhism in the abode of the gods 100 years after Gotama Buddha's final nirvana.

Hence, if it is true that the members of the congregation are the great elect, natural disasters will follow, eliminating the enemies of Buddhism. The conflict is thus radicalized in an idiom of 'us versus them', which reinforces the organization's dualistic world view of good and evil.

As can be seen in many of the congregation's books and in my interviews, the aim of the congregation's millenarian project is to wipe out the immoral forces in the world and to establish world peace on the basis of Buddhist law (p. *dhamma*). In the *ariyā-weizzā* organization's ritual texts, like many other esoteric congregations of the early post-independence period, the anti-Buddhist forces are explained to have originated in immorality, which is conditioned by greed, hatred, and delusion, and are described as 'evil' (*hsou:*). Among these are 'errant ideologies' such as communism and other political ideologies, and 'heretical religions', such as Islam. The allegedly evil and corrupt ideologies are referred to as a variety of (Western) political ideologies and the politicians who espouse them. It is stated that all these errant religions and ideologies, and those who adhere to them, should be eliminated. As for the ideologies, it could be assumed that the socialism of Ne Win in particular was targeted here, as well as the communist insurgencies that ravaged Burma throughout the post-independence period until the late 1980s, and were generally seen as a threat to Buddhism (Charney 2009).

The Perceived 'Victims' of the 'War' and Justification of Its 'Violence'

A local leader, whom we can call Hsayā Aung, grew up in a village outside a large city in Upper Burma and became a member in 1972 to work for Buddhism and his Burmese nation (*amyo-bhāthā-thāthanā*).²⁵ Before becoming a leader, he was a mine-worker. He was my main informant in the congregation, and in 2007 he was in his late fifties. At that time, he described the results of their destructive rituals, an issue to which he would return several times. The Sinhalese warrior king Duṭṭhagāmaṇī, who allegedly fought against the enemies of Bud-

25 The aim of protecting *amyo-bhāthā-thāthanā*, 'nation, religion, and the Buddha's dispensation', began with the Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA) during the colonial period (Schober 2011). Today ultra-nationalist and anti-Muslim monks use it as a nationalist slogan. It is often translated into English as 'race and religion,' as in the nationalist monastic organization *amyo-bhāthā-thāthanā-saung-shauk-yay-ahpwe*, the 'Organization for the Protection of Race and Religion' (Ma Ba Tha) formed in 2014 (Walton and Hayward 2014).

dhism before the Common Era, seems to have embodied the ideal in the eyes of the congregation. The Liberation Era, Hsayā Aung explained, entails that Buddhism is strengthened and that Buddhist practices are very efficacious. Therefore, he claimed, it is now possible to fight against the evil forces with Buddhist methods and without exerting physical violence like King Duṭṭhagāmaṇī did. As a result of their powerful rituals, as well as support from non-human beings, disasters and accidents have occurred, such as earthquakes, floods, explosions, and storms, by which immoral people and other evils have been wiped out. One such consequence of their rituals was the great tsunami in December 2004, which caused devastation in many countries, mainly in Southeast and South Asia. Hsayā Aung explained:

We really made the tsunami! It is obvious that we made the tsunami. We made the tsunami happen. We did it! If I make such a bold claim, you may think it is something very big and presumptuous.

Why is that? What can we say about the current era? At the time of the mid-point of the *sāsana* era [1956], there was a big clash and competition between the errant ideologies and Buddhism. [...] Now, didn't I say that? The errant ideology is communism, and the heretic religion is Islam.²⁶ Islam is the religion that is the principal destructor of Buddhism. Communism turns Buddhism upside down. Communism recognizes no mother and father nor the Buddha, right? Only if you work, can you eat. But none of [the monks] can work! There cannot be any privileged people [that is, everyone is equal]. If this ideology were to exist, our Buddhism could not exist.²⁷ Therefore, communism is an ideology that is a principal destructor of Buddhism. Now, Islam is the religion which is the most serious attacker of Buddhism. [...] In ancient times, there were hundreds of thousands [of monks at the] Great Nalanda University [in India], and

26 The Muslims in Burma constitute a harassed and minority, and has been perceived as a threat by the Buddhist majority. These communal tensions emerged during the colonial period and have continued unabated in contemporary Burma. Many Buddhists hold anti-Muslim sentiments and regard Muslims as foreigners (*kala*), and even fear that they will take over the country and make it Islamic (Selth 2004; Gravers 1999:27–30). Communal tensions and violence have recently (2012–2014) exacerbated in Burma, with anti-Muslim riots breaking out in various parts of the country and ultra-nationalist monks disseminating anti-Muslim propaganda (Walton and Hayward 2014).

27 That is, the hierarchies of Buddhist polities could not exist under such circumstances, and therefore Buddhism could not exist either.

they were teaching at that Buddhist university. The Muslims killed these monks, who were teaching Buddhist texts there. And we can never forget that.²⁸

When Hsayā Aung said they created the tsunami, he was referring to the members of the congregation, together with the non-human beings. The tsunami, in his view, struck ‘wicked countries’, such as Indonesia, in which the ‘heretical’ religion Islam predominates. In this way, enemies of Buddhism outside Burma were wiped out. Since the conflict is understood to be going on all over the world, it is perceived as a cosmic battle. Hsayā Aung mentioned disasters in the US, China, and India, and spontaneous explosions of bombs stored in armories in Thailand, as being results of the esoteric organization’s ritual battle. The nuclear disaster at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in 1986 in the communist Soviet Union was also, he explained, their work. Since many communists died in that disaster, more obstacles to the Buddha’s *sāsana* were eliminated. Hsayā Aung claimed that communism has disappeared from eleven countries in the world as a result of their powerful rituals. However, as he explained, the lives of these people would have been spared if they had observed the Buddhist moral precepts, probably because these are thought to be in tune with the cosmic law (P. *dhamma*).

The congregation thus justified its alleged use of violence with reference to royal precedents. In pre-colonial South and Southeast Asian Buddhist kingship, violence and warfare, provided they were motivated by the defence of Buddhism against its enemies, were viewed as justified (Jerryson 2010; Schalk 1986). This principle is reflected in the legend of King Duṭṭhagāmaṇī as portrayed in the sixth-century CE Sinhalese chronicle *Mahāvamsa*. According to the legend, the king slaughtered millions of Tamils in a war he waged to defend the *sāsana*. Buddhist saints nevertheless assured him of rebirth in heaven since his aim was to promote Buddhism (Geiger 1964:178). Retelling the story of that king in a way quite close to the original version, though anachronistically viewing the king’s enemies as Muslims, Hsayā Aung explained that killing these Muslims should not be considered a misdeed because the king’s intention was not to kill anybody but merely to defend the Buddha’s *sāsana*.

28 The same narrative of Muslims destroying Nalanda is sometimes retold in contemporary Burma by ultra-nationalist and anti-Muslim monks and others.

Ne Win's Crackdown in the 1980s: Tensions with the Post-Colonial State

In the early 1980s, General Ne Win's socialist government, the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP), pursued a policy of purging the religious field of heterodox elements. That involved a reorganization and purification of the Saṅgha in order to gain control of the monastic community, and a crack down on the esoteric congregations (Tin Maung Maung Than 1993; Schober 2011:82–5). In a speech delivered in December 1979, Ne Win brought up the issue of the esoteric congregations, and took the popular congregation Shwe Yin Kyaw Gain as an example. Ne Win maintained that such deceitful congregations did not merely exist in Burma, but could be found throughout the world, taking Jim Jones and his Peoples Temple in the USA as a warning example. He explained that Jim Jones had made his followers drink poison whereupon more than 900 people had died (Foxeus 2011).

As a result of Ne Win's new policy, the esoteric congregations were harassed, some were banned and declared more or less illegal, many went underground, and some vanished. However, many congregations still exist. The state imposed restrictions on the congregations in order to gain control over them, and since then their activities have been circumscribed (Tosa 1996; Pranke 2011; Foxeus 2011). For instance, the *ariyā-weizzā* organization ceased its large-scale and fervent proselytizing work in the early 1980s; it discontinued certain practices, and changed its name. The fact that it has changed name five or six times since the 1950s indicates a troublesome relationship with the state until 1988.²⁹ As noted above, the founder was repeatedly arrested between the 1950s and the 1980s. In his speeches to the leaders in the 1970s and the 1980s, he frequently hinted at serious setbacks for the congregation, probably as a result of troubles with the authorities, and he seemed to be trying to persuade the members to endure these difficulties (Foxeus 2011). The *ariyā-weizzā* organization experienced its heyday from the late 1950s to the early 1980s, but it still exists and many members gather at the annual ceremony at which the destructive/constructive rituals are performed.³⁰

Why did the state under Ne Win seek to suppress the esoteric congregations? There seem to be three main causes of the tensions: the organizations as such, economic factors, and their knowledge/practices. As for their organi-

29 A local leader from Yangon confirmed that the congregation has changed name several times due to the political situation in the country.

30 The rituals are also constructive since they seek to establish a Buddhist utopia.

zational structures, in Burmese political culture, David L. Steinberg suggests, power is looked upon in a way comparable to the anthropological concept of the 'limited good'. In this zero-sum game, any alternative centre of power would diminish the authority and power of the government, and is therefore regarded as a potentially destabilizing influence. Institutions autonomous from the state are therefore treated with suspicion by the government (Steinberg 2006:37–40). Being a kind of private organizations, not registered with the Department of Religious Affairs, the esoteric congregations have been under constant surveillance by the military governments. Charismatic leaders of secretive congregations, who attract a large following, made the authorities anxious since such congregations were perceived as representing a quest for power and therefore as a potential source of social unrest.

As for the economic reasons, these congregations, Tin Maung Maung Than (1993:18) writes, 'held sway over important sections of urban society: their clientele included rich merchants, civil servants, the educated middle classes, and perhaps even some members of the state's power structure'. The members were and are expected to contribute generously to the building of temples, pagodas, and other buildings, as well as to the holding of ceremonies, and to provide for some of the living expenses of the local leaders and their families. The temple compounds of the esoteric congregations, such as that of the *ariyā-weizzā* organization and the one built by Manaw-Seittouppād Gain in Bago, bear lasting testimony to the wealth possessed by these congregations. The state authorities may therefore have regarded the 'increasing influence of cult leaders as a challenge to state power and the maintenance of regime stability' (Tin Maung Maung Than 1993:18).

The esoteric congregation's mundane knowledge and practices represented embarrassing corruptions that did not fit into the state's Buddhist nationalism and its projected image of being a bastion of pure Theravāda Buddhism (Foxeus forthcoming). They were also feared by the ruling generals, who believed in the efficacy of these practices (Leehey 2010:109). As in many other South-east Asian countries in the post-war period that were carrying out projects of modernization and nation-building (Endres and Lauser 2011), the military Burmese governments, especially the Ne Win regime, mainly supported modern, rationalist, and scripturalist forms of Buddhism. These were perceived to be compatible with a modern society, while those that were regarded as 'superstitious', backward forms of religiosity, such as spirit cults and esoteric lore, were frowned upon. The esoteric practices represent 'subjugated knowledges' (Foucault 1980:81) or 'rejected knowledge' (Hanegraaf 2012). In Europe, esoteric knowledge was subordinated and alienated in the modernization process, and therefore represented a 'rejected knowledge' (Hanegraaf 2012). A compa-

rable tendency of weeding out esoteric lore from the officially sanctioned form of religion and culture can also be found in Burma (Schober 2012).³¹ An official rationalist and scripturalist version of 'Buddhism' has gradually developed since the monastic reforms of King Bodawhpaya (r. 1782–1819), King Mindon's Fifth Buddhist Council in 1871, and the dissemination of Abhidhamma and insight meditation by Ledi Hsayādaw (1846–1923) among the Buddhist laity (Foxeus forthcoming). The tendency to promote these rationalist forms of Buddhism, and reject esoteric lore, has escalated in the post-independence period, especially during the Ne Win era (Schober 2011; Smith 1965; Leehey 2010). For the military governments and other representatives of rationalist modern Buddhism, the esoteric lore represents corrupt practices, and it has been—and still is—denigrated and ridiculed, and, in particular during the Ne Win period, was subjected to censorship (Houtman 1990; Leehey 2010:107; Patton 2014).

In contrast to the esoteric lore, the military governments have officially supported rationalist modern Buddhism, such as insight meditation and Abhidhamma. These are regarded as fine for projecting a 'pure' Theravāda Buddhism as the core of their Burmese Buddhist nationalism (Jordt 2007; Schober 2011:82–6; Foxeus forthcoming). Moreover, they have been a national source of pride and have proved useful for the country's exportation of religion in the post-independence period.³² However, this kind of Buddhism is simultaneously utterly powerless and barren. Supernormal powers and control of the external world can be attained only by means of the practices of the esoteric congregations, such as concentration meditation and esoteric lore.

The Double-Edged Sword

In the post-independence period, there has been an ambivalent relationship between the military governments and esoteric congregations. Officially, these governments discouraged the practices associated with the esoteric congregations, but in private or in secret, as it were, many military officers have turned to esoteric congregations to gain power and protection. Although tensions remained with the SPDC government (1988–2011), they lessened somewhat.

31 These practices mainly consist of the Gandhāra lore (P. *gandhārī vijjā*), which in Burma involves alchemy, esoteric squares, esoteric syllabic figures, and medicine. Sometimes mantras are included as well. Concentration meditation (P. *samatha*) is also a part of this rejected knowledge.

32 Especially Mahāsi Hsayādaw's insight meditation method has been promoted by the state and exported to the West (Jordt 2007).

This was partly due to a partial easing of censorship (Leehey 2010:108), but also to the congregations becoming more circumspect.

Historically, Burmese soldiers and officials have taken an interest in mundane esoteric practices, and some of these were employed in rebellions against the British colonizers. In the parliamentary period (1948–1962), many politicians were members of esoteric congregations (Mendelson 1960). In the 1970s, a large number of soldiers and military officers were members of the esoteric congregation Shwe Yin Kyaw Gain, something that even led to a disruption of the chain of command in the army (Pranke 2011:469). It is well known that Ne Win himself also dabbled with mundane lore, especially numerology, to remain in power. Some high-ranking military officers of SPDC have turned to esoteric practitioners for services. For instance, Bodaw Theingya Than Hla, who was a leader of an esoteric congregation, served as an advisor and ritual specialist for General Khin Nyunt, the chief of intelligence, and when the latter was ousted from power and imprisoned in 2004, Than Hla was also arrested (Leehey 2010). When Khin Nyunt fell in disfavour, the military intelligence service was dismantled since it was suspected of being loyal to him alone. Such patron-client relationships characterized the political apparatus in Burma at the time, and the tentacles of such relationships penetrated into the social fabric of society, not least into the esoteric congregations.

A military officer whom I met in 2007 and 2008 and whom we can call Major Aung is a prominent member of the *ariyā-weizzā* organization. He is an example of how some military officers employ esoteric practices in military operations conducted by the Burmese army. According to the organization, the anti-Buddhist forces can be fought by one of its visualization techniques. By means of this practice, the practitioner can temporarily turn into a king/world conqueror or Sekyā Min. Transformed in that manner, at which time Major Aung was this powerful figure and thereby made invulnerable, he fought what he described as Buddhist battles against Christian Karens in the jungles close to the border of Thailand, and he said he had killed many people there. The major even claimed, as the commander of a military unit and transformed into Sekyā Min, to have conquered the military base Manerplaw (in 1995) situated at the top of a mountain, which was the headquarters for the Karen National Union and Karen National Liberation Army.³³ In this way, there was a curious conjunction of the agendas of the esoteric congregation and the Burmese army. Although the Manerplaw narrative might be just a made-up story, it is popular

33 This 'legend' was told to me by a local leader, and Major Aung in an interview and a speech delivered at the annual ceremony in 2007.

in the *ariyā-weizzā* organization, and one that confirms their power and authority. And even so, it may contain a kernel of truth, namely that the major employed esoteric practices to be successful in military operations.

On another occasion in 2006, Major Aung made use of his military authority to solve a dispute between the congregation and local pagoda authorities regarding the ownership of a pagoda, with the latter yielding to his demands. While talking to the monks and the lay authorities, and in order to harness some extra power, he imagined that the founder, Sekyā Min, was sitting on his head. Hence, as a representative of the state, he carried out business for the esoteric congregation.

In fact, the relationship between esoteric congregations and military officers have for the most part been mutually beneficial. For instance, in 2007, Major-General Ohn Myint, the Kachin state commander at the time, who was not a member of the *ariyā-weizzā* organization, appeared at a ceremony held in one of its pagodas, probably to turn the luck to his favour. Dressed in his green uniform, he not only participated in this ceremony but led it, with his gun in a holster at his waist, flanked by members dressed as gods from Tāvātimsa and leaders dressed as ministers during the Konbaung Dynasty, with Burmese turbans and long white coats reaching down to their shins. Standing on the platform at the top of the pagoda, he prayed with closed eyes. Some leaders and members I spoke with were rather proud of this event, thus suggesting a sympathetic attitude towards the military junta. Such attention from state officials confers prestige on the congregation.

Such examples could be multiplied. Several *bodaw* (leaders of esoteric congregations) I spoke with, claimed that high-ranking military officers have consulted them. For instance, in 2008 an exorcist of Shway Yin Kyaw Gain proudly claimed in conversation with me that he had been consulted in the early 1990s by General Than Shwe, the leader of SPDC. General Than Shwe, he explained, wished to know if any calamities would occur during the 1994 tour of the Chinese Tooth Relic in Burma. As a way to help the general, the exorcist provided him with a medium for an accomplished esoteric master, who predicted that a bomb would explode. To prevent this from happening, the medium explained to the general, the government should construct a toy airplane of metal, stuff it with fireworks, and blow it up. This would serve as a kind of substitution magic, meaning that the airplane would explode instead of the predicted bomb.³⁴

34 This kind of magic ritual is called *yadaya-khyay*, and is a popular device to prevent a predicted misfortune. For more on these devices, see Leehey 2010:224–30. A number of examples are provided in a recent Burmese book about General Than Shwe (Tin Nyunt n.d.).

In this way, being asked for advice by high-ranking military officers could be compared with monks receiving prestigious titles from the government. It is a matter of recognition, and is a fully reciprocal relationship. From the point of view of the esoteric congregations, the relation to the state is thus double-edged: on the one hand it can suppress them, on the other it can enhance their status vis-à-vis other competing congregations.

The esoteric congregations have thus been involved in the affairs of the state, albeit often indirectly, and vice versa. Therefore, as noted by Michel Foucault, what remains to be done in political theory is to ‘cut off the King’s head’. Foucault continues: ‘what I want to say is that relations of power, and hence the analysis that must be made of them, necessarily extend beyond the limits of the State’ (Foucault 1980:121–2). Similarly, as Gerry van Klinken and Joshua Barker (2009a) maintain, the state is ‘embedded’ in the social fabric of society or is a ‘state-in-society’.

Conclusion

In this article, I have shown how the *ariyā-weizzā* organization could be said to perform state-like functions, at least if we accept its ontology. According to its own view, it is performing the state, and contributes to changing its own and other societies. Mimicking Buddhist state performance in accordance with the Asokan model, the congregation quite logically referred to royal paradigms in justifying its alleged exercise of violence. When the state under Ne Win initially was reluctant to protect Buddhism, the *ariyā-weizzā* organization thus served as a Buddhist bulwark—a Buddhist ‘state’ within Ne Win’s secular, socialist state. This cultural construction and performance of power therefore served the dual purpose of amassing power to serve Buddhism and combat its enemies, and, in a Foucauldian sense, of articulating a counter-discourse that served as a criticism of Ne Win’s project of socialist, secularist modernization. In this way, they could be said to represent opposite and alternative forms of modernity—an enchanted Buddhist and a socialist form respectively (cf. Ladwig 2011). Although not seeking to assume political power for itself in terms of ruling the country, the congregation’s proselytizing work in the countryside up to the early 1980s nevertheless aimed at creating a broad social base of support.

Representing an embarrassment for the consecutive military governments, the esoteric congregations have been treated with disfavour and viewed as standing for a ‘rejected knowledge’ that had no publicly acknowledged place and role in the state’s projects of nation-building, modernization, and the

fashioning of a Burmese nationalism. In this way, the esoteric congregations contributed to the 'crisis of authority' mentioned above. The governments instead promoted rationalist Buddhism, such as scripturalism, Abhidhamma, and insight meditation, perceived to be 'exportable' forms of Buddhism and the essence of their Buddhist nationalism.

According to the official stance of the military governments, the esoteric congregations also represented social bases of influence, and potential sources of power and opposition to the government. For these reasons, General Ne Win sought to suppress the esoteric congregations. At the same time, the esoteric congregations represented power, protection, and control, and many high-ranked military officers, as well as soldiers, have sought to appropriate these things for themselves, by becoming members of, or consulting with, these congregations. Being embedded in the state, these congregations exerted an indirect influence on the military governments' activities, and have thus contributed to performing the state in post-independence Burma.

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