

The Shwedagon in Sumatra: Transnational Buddhist Networks in Contemporary Myanmar and Indonesia

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I. Introduction

On a cold, slightly wet October morning in 2010, over thirteen hundred Buddhist monks converged on the small hill-town of Berastagi, located an hour and half from the Sumatran port-city of Medan, Indonesia. Many of them had in fact arrived a few days earlier in the North Sumatran resort town that was famous for its proximity to Lake Toba and its two volcanoes Subayak and Sinabung that were popular hiking destinations. At the crack of dawn, hundreds of monks could be seen making their way on foot from side streets that led to the main road, creating an image of saffron mountain streams entering a river of orange and burgundy. On any normal day, the road would have been sufficient to handle the bustle of early-morning tourist traffic, but on this occasion, the road was jammed tight as monks struggled to find a space on the single-lane street that led to an open field, a mile or so outside of town. Those travelling from more tropical locales would not be accustomed to the heavy fog and chill that greeted them that morning, but they quietly continued their nearly one kilometer walk

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towards the faintly golden bell-shaped stupa that seemed to rise out of the recently cleared fruit and vegetable fields that were known to Berastagi.

The monks were gathered to celebrate the construction and inauguration of a replica of the *ShwedagonPaya*, arguably Myanmar's most important Buddhist stupa (pagoda) and a recognizable icon throughout the Buddhist world. Located atop Theinguttara Hill in Yangon, Myanmar, the *ShwedagonPaya* reaches a height of over one hundred meters and is covered by gold plates. Myanmar legend asserts that the origin of the *ShwedagonPaya* dates back to the lifetime of the Buddha, when two merchants brought back eight strands of the Buddha's hair and enshrined them with the relics of previous Buddhas that had been gathered there by a local king (Strong 2004). As such, the *ShwedagonPaya* is a religious monument that both marks the birth of Buddhism within Myanmar and transcends local histories and boundaries by referring to the stupa's broader association with past Buddhas, their teachings, and the movement of relics. While it is clear that the current structure dates to more recent times, the *ShwedagonPaya*'s reputation remains a significant site of veneration both within and without Myanmar. In addition to its religious significance, the *ShwedagonPaya* has also been associated with political identity and the history of the Myanmar nation-state, suggesting that additional contexts might provide insight into how this iconic structure might be understood (Taylor 2009, 337). Why and how it was built in the hills of North Sumatra between 2007-2010 are central concerns of this study.

The transnational context of the event in Berastagi was clearly evident as representatives from the local Buddhist community attempted to organize the incoming waves of monks according to their national affiliations. At the front of the congested temple complex, numerous volunteers led groups of monks into the pagoda grounds,

holding signs in English and in their native scripts that indicated the monks' country of origin. Many of the monks were grouped together in predetermined sections of the large courtyard, waiting their turn to enter the grand hall that acted as a foundation beneath the stupa. Nearly half of the monks had traveled to Sumatra from nearby Myanmar, while about a third had arrived from neighboring countries in the region and from other parts of Asia. Representatives from North America, Europe, Africa, and the Caribbean were also in attendance. Also in attendance were no less than eight *sangha-rajās* (heads of order) from neighboring Theravada sanghas, adding considerable prestige, authority, and merit to the occasion. As the organizers, local lay devotees, and state officials would highlight in speeches and in official documentation, the fact that the stupa was built in Indonesia (featuring the largest Muslim community in the world) and within an area that was home to KaroBataks (who are predominantly Christian) pointed to the promise of inter-faith relations in the region and beyond. Thus transnationalism was a theme that was strategically utilized by participants at the inauguration of the temple, evoking both religious and historical imagery to anchor the event to the broader histories of Buddhism and Southeast Asia.

Transnationalism--- a term that refers to broad processes and exchanges that transcend borders---had also been a key approach for western scholars studying Southeast Asia. Early colonial scholar-administrators, philologists, and ethnologists charted how the dispersion of language groups did not adhere to the neat boundaries separating one European colony from another. The uneven and wide distribution of Malay speakers in the Southeast Asian island world transcended territorial boundaries between British Malaya, Dutch Indonesia, and the Spanish Philippines; highlighting the need for later scholars to think more broadly about Malay identity and ethnicity in the post-colonial setting(Andaya 2008). Early scholars of religion also

noted the broad expanse of Buddhist networks that characterized early Southeast Asia that was connected to the spread of Sanskrit and Pali-based language cultures. Clear evidence of the movement of pilgrims and monks between East Asia and Southeast Asia was regarded by early scholars of religion as an important indicator of a wider Buddhist ecumene. Available epigraphy tells us that a Srivijayan king had the ability to make a donation to the great Buddhist university of Nalanda on the other side of the Indian Ocean urged scholars to think about religion in distinctly broad terms(Wolters 1967). Transnationalism, and in particular the concern with the study of regional connections and processes, have been ongoing priorities for scholars of Southeast Asia(Lieberman 2010).

Another group of conceptual pillars that compliment the contemporary interest in transnationalism was the study of Indianization, Sinicization, and Islamization; processes of cultural exchange that provided Southeast Asia with the cultural terms, symbols, and models through which local polities and notions of identity were shaped. While early colonial scholars tended to emphasize the role of external forces in shaping the region's communities, area-studies specialists recentered the role of local agents in interpreting these foreign forms, giving weight to local priorities and concerns in the process of acculturation (Coedes 1999). The movement of peoples, materials, and ideas has long been a subject of inquiry for Southeast Asianists and the specific networks of exchange---be they religious, military, or economic---have always been an important focus for scholars of the region(Hutterer 1977). Moreover, scholars have already studied the important ways in which sacred landscapes of the Buddhist holy land (predominantly the region of Behar, India) were reinvented in Southeast Asia through the building of replica temples and pilgrimage sites, creating sacred landscapes in a local context(Naono 1996). From the perspective of Southeast Asian studies, the building of the *Shwedagon* replica in

Sumatra provides an interesting case through which these broader processes might be explored.

This paper seeks to explore the ways in which Southeast Asian religious communities have used the idea of transnationalism as a discourse to develop networks in the region. By focusing on the building of the Shwedagon replica in Sumatra and the role of key figures from Myanmar who were involved in this project, this study addresses the way in which religious, state, and local officials appropriated Southeast Asian regional history to legitimize and contextualize intra-regional exchanges within and beyond formal diplomatic channels. As a result of this focus on transnationalism, the project requires one to examine the story behind the building of the Shwedagon from both the perspective of the Burmese and the Indonesians. At the same time, it is clear that different interests and groups within the “Burmese” and “Indonesian” communities must also be recognized, such as the role played by the KaroBataks, the local Buddhist devotees, and the Indonesian government in facilitating the building of the replica. Exploring the role of the Indonesian communities in the Shwedagon project is beyond the scope of this presentation, which will focus mainly on the key individuals from the Burmese delegation. Thus in broad terms, this study explores the individuals and institutions who were behind the building of the Shwedagon Pagoda replica in Sumatra and the role of the Burmese sangha and other non-state entities in promoting a transnational Buddhist identity.

This presentation focuses on the opening ceremonies of the inauguration of the ShwedagonPaya replica and on the speeches that were delivered for the nearly two thousand monks, dignitaries, and invited guests that attended the event. In particular, attention will be placed on the keynote speech of the SittaguSayadaw, a prominent Buddhist monk who is an influential figure in Myanmar’s domestic

and international affairs. This preliminary examination of his speech suggests that transnational history and the notion of a common Buddhist community was an important theme framing the event. Images of interfaith exchange and a regional Buddhist identity that transcends both historical and national boundaries were reinforced both in ritual and in text. However, the shadow of the nation-state---though de-emphasized by the focus on regional Buddhism---continued to be an important part of the ceremonies as well. Moreover a closer examination of the context in which the project was developed reveals a closer epistemological relationship between the state, non-state institutions, and area-studies scholarship from North America.

II. Origins

The idea of building a replica of the Shwedagon was first mooted in 2003 by a local Buddhist missionary from Myanmar living in Medan who had established a Metta Centre for the local Buddhist community.¹⁾ Together with the head of the Indonesian Theravada Buddhist Sangha Committee, a seventy-two foot high replica was built in Java near Surabaya, with the expectation that a much bigger one might later be built in Sumatra. The opportunity presented itself in 2005 when a local lay devotee and businessman, Mr. TongariodjoAngkasa, invited the Buddhist missionary and members of the Metta Centre to bring Buddha relics to hold a *puja* (offering) ceremony. Upon hearing of the Centre's wish to build a much larger version of the Shwedagon, Mr. Angkasa offered land in Berastagi to build the new pagoda.

With the help of intermediaries, the project proposal was presented to the Chairman of the State *Mahanayaka* Committee, AbbhidhajaMahaRatthaguru

¹⁾ "Working Committee Report", in *Goodwill Messages* (hereafter *GM*), Medan: International Buddhist Centre, Taman AlamLumbini, 2010, 8-10.

Most Venerable Bhaddanta Kumar (the head of the Myanmar's sangha's highest governing council) and the Minister of Religious Affairs, Brigadier General ThuraMyintMaung. With the blessing of the Mahanayaka Committee and the resources of the Ministry of Religion, the project moved forward between 2007 and 2010. Myanmar architects, craftsmen, and artisans were flown in to construct the pagoda, with modifications to the original plan offered by local partners. Various ceremonies that marked important stages in the process of establishing a pagoda were conducted according to Burmese traditions and performed by members of the State Mahanayaka Committee, Indonesian Sangha Members, and state officials from both the Myanmar and Indonesian governments. With completion of the pagoda set for October 2010, a Central Organizing Committee was formed, consisting of members of the Metta Centre, local officials, and Myanmar sangha and state representatives to plan for the inauguration ceremony and its accompanying Buddhist conference.

III. Towards a Vision of Pan-Regional Buddhism:

The Opening Ceremony

The introduction of the secular state in the nineteenth century and the emergence of the nation-state in the twentieth century, Southeast Asian religions took a less prominent role in state affairs that concerned international diplomacy. Nation-states attempted to demonstrate their modernity by being more outwardly secular in the language, symbols, and rituals that were considered part of the accepted norm of international diplomacy. Today, scholars identify resurgence in religion and many have considered Buddhism as the quintessential "Asian" framework that could bind the region, though Buddhism's expansion in Southeast Asia could also be associated with the individual variants of doctrine

and practice that developed in particular contexts of Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Myanmar(Andaya 2010). The case of the Shwedagon in Sumatra reveals the way in which organizers and participants created an inclusive framework within which a regional Buddhist identity could be expressed and articulated.

The opening ceremony commenced following the successful transport and seating of nearly fifteen hundred monks, dignitaries, and invited guests. From the onset representatives from different countries were paraded into the grand hall and seated accordingly. The majority of the room was made up monks from Myanmar (642), grouped together on the south side of the hall while the second largest group of monks from Thailand (371) were seated on the north side of the hall. Other groups of monks were seated in sections in the center of the hall, with the Indonesian monks making up the largest group (94). A stage was erected in front of the West entrance, where the eight-sangha rajas were seated and where speakers would deliver their speeches. A VIP section for state administrators and members of the Buddhist lay community (including the main donor) was reserved directly in front of the stage. The morning session consisted of thirty-two speeches and congratulatory messages from the main donor, the organizing committee, senior monks, government officials, Buddhist organizations, and University leaders. The speech by the Most Venerable Dr. AshinNyanissara (also known as SittaguSayadaw), one of Myanmar's most influential and respected monks, provides a preliminary glimpse into the way in which the inauguration ceremony of the stupa was framed within Southeast Asian and Buddhist history.

His speech began with a welcome to the island of Suvarnadipa, in reference to the ancient name associated with the island world of Southeast Asia and to the Buddha's AparihaniyaSutta, that espoused the idea that frequent meetings of the Sangha would contribute to the well being of the Sasana. By doing so the esteemed monk astutely

associated the day's event with the region's shared Sanskrit heritage and more specifically alongside other important synods that occurred in Buddhist history. He also spoke at length about the importance of the ShwedagonPaya, stating that it contained the Reliquary of the Four (that contained relics of the four Buddhas of this world cycle), marking the Burmese stupa as the quintessential symbol of Buddhism since the reliquary represented the entire span of the teachings in the current universal time-cycle(Strong 2004, 76-80). The Shwedagon in Yangon did not merely contain the hair relics of the Buddha, but it also contained the staff of Kakusandha Buddha, the water filter of Konagamana Buddha and the nether robe of Kassapa Buddha. Thus, the idea of transnationalism was introduced through two over-lapping but integrated contexts: the first reference was to Indianization and the Sanskrit culture that contributed to the appearance of the earliest polities; the second reference was to a more universal Buddhism that extended beyond the teachings of Sakyamuni Buddha to include even the teachings of past Buddhas. The speech was making more than just a claim about the importance of the Shwedagon; it was asserting that it was within Myanmar where the more pure teachings and standards of Theravada Buddhism were maintained.

SittaguSayadaw's speech went on to provide more examples of a regional community that provided a link between the inauguration of the Shwedagon replica, the local community in Berastagi, and the broader and older history of transnational Buddhism in the region. For instance, he noted that the "people of Sumatera were living together with people of Southeast Asia under the same umbrella of Buddha Dhamma," providing an image of a united Sumatra and a coherent Southeast Asia that was linked through Buddhism(GM 2010, 3-7). He went on to describe the history of Buddhist interaction in the region, mentioning that it was Theravada that first arrived in Indonesia, developing in Java and Sumatra between the 5th and 7th centuries.

Srivijaya and its legendary university were also mentioned in relation to its ties with Nalanda University in India, emphasizing the travels of I-Tsing and the maritime links and pilgrimage routes that existed across the Indian Ocean. The first half of the speech ended with a reference to the manner in which “religion unites the world and not divides the people...on this golden island of Sumatera, we as universal citizens have been practicing universal teaching in the spirit of universal brotherhood and harmony for more than two thousand years(GM 2010, 7).”

As much as the speech attempted to package the Shwedagon replica project in the spirit of transnationalism, there was also a very strong theme of highlighting the importance of Myanmar in the broader history of Buddhism. Moreover, it was in addressing this theme that the role of the state institutions and nationalist formulations of Buddhism began to enter the narrative. Sittagu Sayadaw related how it was leading monks from the Myanmar Sangha---the Vice-Chairman of the State Sangha Mahanayaka Committee and Tipitakadhara Sayadaws---that oversaw the installation of sacred relics into Shwedagon replica pagoda and ensured that the pagoda would be “radiating Buddha Dhamma and giving [sic] peace and prosperity to the people of Indonesia.” It was Myanmar’s most revered monks that gave legitimacy to the Shwedagon replica. He went on to say that

In a way, Shwedagon Pagoda Replica in Sumatra denotes the gift of Dhamma from Myanmar to Indonesia...the project got whole-hearted support from the Government of the Union of Myanmar and the blessings of the State Sangha Mahanayaka Committee, which represents more than 500,000 monks of Myanmar. The Pagoda will be the symbol of Myanmar-Indonesia friendship(GM 2010, 5).

Sittagu Sayadaw went on to report that it was within Myanmar that

Theravada Buddhism is preserved in its pristine purity and it was the State Mahanayaka Committee and the Ministry of Religious Affairs that provided support for the building of the Shwedagon replica. He shared that the design of the stupa complex had been drawn by a Burmese architect, that it was the Chairman of the State Mahanayaka Committee that laid the foundation stone of the pagoda, that senior Burmese monks placed relics into the temple, that the final hosting ceremony was presided over by representatives of Myanmar's Ministry of Religious Affairs, and that it was the latter ministry's involvement in the project that provided the materials, relics, and skilled labor to produce the replica. In other words, this entire event was cast as an extension of Myanmar Buddhism into Sumatra, enabling the SittaguSayadaw to make particular claims about Myanmar and its role in the Buddhist world.

IV. Preliminary Conclusions

The inauguration ceremony of the ShwedagonPaya replica (given the name Taman AlamLumbini) provides an opportunity to explore the nature of intra-cultural exchanges in Southeast Asia in contemporary times. At one level it reveals the way in which religion---and in this case Buddhism---continues to offer communities a platform through which political, economic, and social networks can be secured. The building of the replica and the two-day ceremony highlighted the way international relations could develop through Buddhist networks, an alternative to official state-sanctioned cooperative projects. One could regard the event as not the result of an official, bi-lateral initiative between Myanmar and Indonesia, but a grass-root effort of a local donor and his relationship with a Burmese Buddhist missionary that enabled the project to come to fruition. The successful building of a

Burmese pagoda in Indonesia, do indicate that regional exchange can occur outside of official diplomatic channels.

At the same time however, it is clear that the role of the state and nationalism is not entirely divorced from the picture. It was the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Myanmar's State SanghaMahanayaka Committee---two institutions of the Myanmar state---thatultimately played pivotal roles in supporting the construction of the site, organizing the opening ceremony, and providing the administrative support for the project. The ceremony itself stressed transnationalism in the speeches, but also displayed the importance of the nation-state as groups were seated according to national affiliation. Speakers represented nations as much as they represented particular Buddhist institutions. The official program displayed national flags next to the text of each speaker's speech, reminding the reader of both the universal nature of Buddhism and the national contexts within which different forms of the teachings developed. The symbol of the event reflected this interaction between the transnational and the national, illustrated by an octagon outlined in blue with a golden Shwedagon in the center, surrounded by national flags of the participating sanghas. Finally, the presence of a number of state officials, including two ministers of religious affairs (who exchanged models of Borobudur and Shwedagon), suggests that the role of the Myanmar and Indonesian governments in the replica project is an area requiring further investigation.

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<Abstract>

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In 2010, nearly thirteen hundred Buddhist monks from all over the world converged on to the small Indonesian resort town of Berastagi to celebrate the inauguration of the Taman AlamLumbini, a replica of Myanmar's most iconic Theravada Buddhist temple, the ShwedagonPaya. Nestled on Christian lands within a predominantly Muslim country, the building of the Taman AlamLumbini marked several years of negotiation amongst various religious communities, local government mediators, and patrons. This study makes a preliminary assessment of the ways in which cultural and historical discourses were used by participants to evoke a sense of transnational connectedness outside the realm of formal bilateral diplomacy. Through particular Buddhist ceremonies, rituals, and imagery, Myanmar sponsors and Indonesian patrons promoted a sense of broad pan-Asianism that linked monks, state officials, and local lay practitioners into a single community. A brief examination of the key speeches during the opening ceremony reveals that national interest and identity were still very much in play.

Key Words : Transnational, Buddhist, Networks, Myanmar, Indonesia