‘Making Religion’ as a Form of State Territorialisation in Southeastern Myanmar

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Abstract

This paper analyses religious infrastructure projects of saintly and charismatic Buddhist monks as a process of state territorialisation in conflict-affected areas of southeast Myanmar. Amongst lay Karen Buddhists, infrastructure projects which are conceived in the name of ‘making religion’ (*thathana pyu*) and spreading the *sāsana* are widely seen as an expression of compassion, so that they can make merit and build a peaceful Buddhist polity. However, in some areas, these missionisation projects have also inflicted brutal violence on local communities—both Buddhist and non-Buddhist. Drawing on a burgeoning anthropological literature that looks at religious works as a form of infrastructure, this paper explores projects of ‘making religion’ and demonstrates how they hold both enchanting and pernicious qualities for local people, when embedded in processes of state territorialisation. Coinciding with ongoing attempts by the Myanmar military to explicitly and actively missionise contested Karen territories, I argue that these projects can be understood as part of a broader nationalist project from the state to consolidate territorial control in restive parts of the country.

Keywords: *Buddhism; infrastructure; state territorialisation; charismatic monks; Myanmar*

Introduction

In March 2015, I was sitting in a teashop in a small village outside the capital of Karen State, Hpa-an, in southeast Myanmar, chatting with a local schoolteacher[1] who encouraged me to visit a nearby pagoda under construction. She explained that the pagoda would one day be the largest in the world, bigger than the Shwedagon pagoda in Yangon and other equally impressive Buddhist holy sites in neighbouring Thailand and India. Her comments intrigued me,

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considering our location in a small, quite rural area of the country. When I arrived at the nearby pagoda, everything was quiet; barely a soul was in the vicinity of the small Yeh Myo Oo pagoda, which poked out of the ground on a hill, surrounded by a large, dusty construction site where an excavator stood silent. I found my way to a simple wooden monastery complex not far from the construction and spoke to the resident abbot who was helping facilitate the project on behalf of the more powerful Thaungkha Taungalay, a charismatic abbot living in a monastic complex nearby.[2] He reiterated what the schoolteacher from the village had already told me and explained that the community worked many years to raise money for the project from local villagers dedicated to *thathana pyu*, making or propagating religion.

While I chatted with the local abbot, officers from the local Karen Border Guard Force (BGF), a militia group aligned with the Myanmar military, came to pay their respects, handing over a thick wad of US hundred dollar bills. The officers wore army uniforms, and their commander had a noticeable thick gold chain with a large Buddhist amulet hanging around his neck. After a short discussion with the abbot about the project's progress, they left in a gleaming black Prado four-wheel drive, leaving a thick cloud of dust rising in their wake. I asked the abbot if they came often, and he reminded me that as Buddhist soldiers, it was their duty to engage in acts of *thathana pyu* through the construction of pagodas or other religious sites. The BGF commander was also a religious benefactor of the Thaungkha Taungalay. 'It's only through building this monastery that we will be able to reduce the suffering of people here. Come back in five years' time. You will see. Through the generous acts of *dana* (charity) from the Thaungkha Taungalay's religious benefactors, we will see peace and prosperity in this land', he said.

For many Plong[3] Buddhists in Hpa-an, the resurrection of a Buddhist polity is key to how they imagine peace. Like elsewhere in Theravāda Buddhist Southeast Asia, peace and prosperity is believed to rely on a cosmological balance between the heavenly bodies, local spirits of the land and water and the coherence of people's everyday individual moral practice with the teachings of the Buddha (Keyes 1987; Spiro 1970; Tambiah 1976). This is also related to the view that the flourishing of the Buddhist religion, *thathana* (in Pāli, *sasāna)* ameliorates social, economic and political hardships.

Thathana pyu, the call to protect, propagate and expand the Buddhist religion has been a key aspect of Theravāda Buddhist polities and

politics, both historically and today. Underlying the idea of *thathana pyu* is a belief that one must maintain and promote the Buddha's teaching to prevent its prophesised decline. For Buddhists in Myanmar, *thathana pyu* refers to a wide range of practices by the laity as well as the *sangha* (the community of monks and nuns)[4] that contribute to the flourishing of the Buddhist religion. *Thathana pyu* includes building and renovating Buddhist edifices, keeping the precepts, performing Buddhist practice, attending and giving Buddhist seminars, sutra study sessions, conversions, group rituals, *parahita* activities (relief and welfare) and meditation (Rozenberg 2010; Schober 1988; Tosa 2015: 143). As described by Tosa (2015) and Rozenberg (2010), building pagodas such as the one near Hpa-an is only one form of *thathana pyu*, albeit an important one.

Examining the role of charismatic monks in contested areas of Myanmar, Rozenberg (2010: 105) emphasises the importance of constructing religious buildings in particular as 'weaving Buddhism into space'. Tosa (2015) and Hayami (2011, 2023) also stress the importance of material projects of *thathana pyu* as a form of what Tosa (2015) defines as 'Buddhist propagation'. In her research on Myanmar, Tosa (2015) argues that many monks see material projects of *thathana pyu* as the physical manifestation of Buddhist teachings' existence and therefore as having the potential to expand the Buddhist world. In this context, Tosa (2015) also draws attention to the relationship between Myanmar's military state authorities and Buddhist monastic leaders in their promotion of material projects of *thathana pyu,* especially as they align with state-led projects of missionisation and territorialisation in the regions inhabited by ethnic minority populations in the country's frontiers.

When I first arrived in Hpa-an in 2015, I was struck by the constant donation drives orchestrated by charismatic abbots throughout the area and the various projects ostensibly aimed at *thathana pyu.* Given the conflict that had engulfed Myanmar's southeast for more than seventy years[5]—destroying lives and livelihoods—I was equally surprised by the large sums of money donated to monasteries by ordinary people as part of a thriving economy of Buddhist merit making. During my time in Hpa-an, a new pagoda or monastery project seemed to crop up every few weeks, mostly overseen by charismatic monks and their associated close patrons (in Plong, *saboung kachar*). In Hpa-an, wealthy patrons of charismatic monks in particular receive widespread praise for their immense generosity and are objects

of highly moralised depictions as a result of their contributions to helping propagate Buddhism (Chambers 2019).

Amongst lay Plong Buddhists in Hpa-an, donations and physical labour provided in the name of *thathana pyu* are understood as key sites of merit making for this and future lives. The construction of Buddhist temples, pagodas and monasteries materially transforms the landscape into a Buddhist religious land where the *dhamma* prevails—religious infrastructures do not simply constitute physical structures. The building of a pagoda, monastery or dhamma hall materialises, on the one hand, a Buddhist landscape and the dissemination of the Buddha's dispensation and, on the other, enables the making of a moral self for this and future lives. However, the context of a long-running civil war led by a Buddhist authoritarian military state also implicates these projects in violent processes of state territorialisation in the frontier areas of the country.

Drawing on twenty months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in southeast Myanmar from 2015-2019, in this article I analyse the expansion of religious works by charismatic monks in the name of *thathana pyu* as a form of infrastructure in what is a highly contested conflict-affected area. The fieldwork I conducted was part of my doctoral research which explored the pursuit of morality amongst Plong Buddhists in Karen State (Chambers 2024). While living in Hpa-an between March 2015 and June 2016, I spent a significant amount of my time talking with lay Plong Buddhists about the history of conflict in the area, the teachings of the Buddhist canon and the importance of *thathana pyu*. Local histories of Buddhism and Buddhist practice also became a central feature of my fieldwork, as did spending time in monasteries talking to monks and their patrons. I largely base this article on the interviews and conversations I had with 60 people in 10 different villages nearby Hpa-an as part of a study I conducted in June-August 2018 on land grabs under military rule 1962-2012.[6] It was during this time that I came to see the significant role that monks played in facilitating state territorialisation dynamics. In this article, I scrutinise the role these religious leaders in Hpa-an play in state territorialisation through projects of *thathna pyu*. I show how the construction of religious buildings is used as a technological instrument of soft power to secure and territorialise contested lands, rebel zones and frontiers to make them 'legible' to the state (cf. Scott 1998; Tosa 2015). I build here on the proposition that religion and the construction of religious buildings cannot be separated

from the dynamics of state and economy as 'ontologically distinct entities' (McLaughlin et al. 2020: 697; Osella and Rudnyckyj 2017) and a burgeoning anthropological literature that looks at religious works as a form of infrastructure (Hoelzchen 2022). Infrastructure has been shown to play a key role in processes of state territorialisation (Dalakoglou and Harvey 2014; Harvey and Knox 2012)—the set of practices that establish control over a geographic space to organise and control local people and the extraction of economic benefits form the land (Peluso and Lund 2011; Peluso and Vandergeest 1995). Central to state territorialisation in frontier areas are local authorities and administrative organs who have an incentive to collaborate with the state. In Myanmar's frontier areas, territorialisation practices involve a variety of actors, which I argue, also includes monastic leaders.

In the first section, I draw on recent anthropological studies to make a case for why it is worth considering the infrastructural properties of *thathana pyu* as a theoretical tool for analysing their relationships with territorialisation and state-making. Next, I introduce Hpa-an as a site of Buddhist worship. Then I sketch out the historically influential role of Buddhist monks in Plong people's lives and the sangha's relationship with military state and non-state armed actors. Before concluding, I present two case studies of land grabs in the name of *thathana pyu*, to show how religious buildings have become enmeshed in the military state's territorialisation of Karen people and lands.

Infrastructures and State Territorialisation in the Frontiers: Conceptual Framing

The term infrastructure, in common and technical parlance, is used to refer to 'projects of spatial integration' (Carse 2016: 27) which help facilitate the flow of goods, people or ideas. Infrastructures typically evoke the 'built systems that move water, sewage, people, and power to components assembled under the rubrics of security, information, health finance, political mobilisation, and environmental management' (ibid.), including roads, energy works and water systems. Having originated as a technical engineering term and expanded to a bureaucratic neologism used worldwide to describe a wide range of construction projects associated with progress, 'infrastructure' now points to projects that are deeply embedded in state-making and state-craft that in turn shape wider political-economic dynamics (Anand et al. 2018).

Recent anthropological literature highlights how infrastructures are woven into the fabric of everyday life and should be understood as a site for the study of social relations (Appel et al. 2018; Jensen and Morita 2017; Larkin 2013) and state political power (Dalakoglou and Harvey 2014; Harvey and Knox 2012; Rogers and O'Neill 2012). Ethnographic attention to infrastructural works shows how the implementation of material technologies reveals forms of political rationality which give rise to an 'apparatus of governmentality' (Foucault 2010: 70; see also Anand et al. 2018; Mukerji 2009) and systemic forms of violence (Rodgers and O'Neill 2012). Take the construction of roads, for instance. Inasmuch as roads are associated with development and modernisation, they also make claims to land, the environment and communities beyond those controlled by the state (Dalakoglou and Harvey 2014). This is especially the case for frontiers, where the logics of state territorialisation and capitalist extraction intersect in ways that often adversely affect the environment and ordinary people's access to land integral to their livelihoods (Cons and Eilenberg 2019; Vandergeest and Peluso 1995).

Recent scholarship on frontiers of Southeast Asia highlights how material infrastructures intimately link to dynamics of spatial control, of both people and resources, especially in contested spaces (Lund 2018; Mahanty 2022; Woods 2021). Research by political ecologists in conflict-affected frontiers shows the predatory nature of 'peace making' (Woods and Naimark 2020: 1), whereby ordinary, often ethnic-minority or indigenous people are dispossessed of their customary lands through processes and technologies of enclosure, territorialisation, accumulation and violence in the name of peace and development (Dressler and Guieb 2015; Lund 2018; Woods and Naimark 2020). Infrastructures allow frontier areas otherwise perceived as lawless, wild or unruly—with populations historically positioned in opposition to the state—to become more legible and domesticated (Lund 2018; Peluso and Lund 2011). In conflict-affected states like Myanmar, where frontiers have always been sites of contestation, the material technologies of infrastructure including those associated with *thathana pyu* become imbricated in the struggle over land, people, natural resources and territory, reconfiguring social relations through capitalist forms of dispossession (Motta et al. 2023; Sarma et al. 2023; Woods 2011, 2021).

In the next section, I introduce Hpa-an as a site of Buddhist worship and describe how projects of *thathana pyu* are embedded here in everyday understandings of 'pursuing morality' (Chambers 2024).

Hpa-an: A Space of Buddhist Worship

According to the 2014 census, of the 1.5 million people living in Karen State in Myanmar, 84.5 per cent are Buddhist (Ministry for Immigration and Population 2016: 3).[7] Hpa-an, the capital of Karen State, is a centre of Buddhist worship for Plong Karen people, an ethnic minority community that make up a majority in this area of Myanmar. In Hpa-an, as in Myanmar more broadly, a Buddhist religious cosmological imaginary heavily frames local culture and subject formation, colouring most aspects of quotidian moral life (Chambers 2024). Like other Theravādin populations, many Plong Buddhists take the *dhamma* as the source of moral order in the world. Following its teachings offers a path by which people can escape the continuous cycle of rebirth and suffering (in Pāli, *samsara*).

Most villages and towns nearby Hpa-an have at least one monastery, which is the primary institution for the dissemination of Buddhist literature as well as the transmission of moral frameworks and value orientations. In the context of the long-running civil conflict between the military and the Karen National Union (KNU), many abbots have been highly vocal about the importance of moral community and the need to reinvigorate the *thathana* in order to achieve peace and prosperity for Karen people. Those I spoke to often emphasised the importance of reinvigorating the Buddha's teachings through infrastructural acts of *thathana pyu*.

In the eyes of monks and lay people alike, the expansion of religious infrastructural projects holds enchanting qualities as it helps spread the Buddhist religion, creating a virtuous cycle along the Buddhist path, for all parties involved. It is important to note that while monks sponsor the building of pagodas and monasteries, they are not involved directly in the construction process itself. Instead, donations towards and participation in the construction and maintenance of religious infrastructure projects is a key site for the performance of a moral self for lay people and a materially manifest structure of moral value (see also Hayami 2023). The embodied engagement and experiences of people participating in projects of *thathana pyu* who are expected to suspend their lay occupations, provide physical labour and embed the teachings of the Buddha in their own bodies (for example, by practicing vegetarianism during the construction process) (Tosa 2015), allow for individual self-transformation for this and future lives.

As mentioned earlier, these infrastructural projects have also contributed to material and meta-physical transformation of the physical landscape into a Buddhist land, holding the promise of imagined peace and prosperity. Hayami (2023: 20) observes in her research among Karen Buddhists in Thailand that 'religious constructions dotting the landscape represent the ultimate act of propagating Buddhism and forming a Buddhist realm'. This builds off research by Tambiah (1984) and McDaniel (2011) who draw attention to the materiality of Buddhist practice, 'as reminders of Buddha's victory over this world's desires, attachments, and ignorance and, simultaneously, as storehouses of power' (Hayami 2023: 20). Other Buddhist studies in the wider Asian region show that the pagoda holds immaterial power in its ability to manifest both acts of generosity and compassion amongst lay people and, ultimately, enlightenment for Buddhist saintly monks (Cohen 2017; Ray 1994).

While the construction of Buddhist religious buildings in Hpa-an and nearby villages, has been primarily framed by monastic leaders and lay people as a way to transform the landscape into a peaceful and moral space of the *dharma*, the implication of these projects in the state-led efforts at territorialisation of this frontier area is not lost on these actors. Some monastic leaders are famed for critiquing the state and have, in some rare instances, refused alms from military leaders for religious infrastructural projects.[8] However, some of the most powerful religious patrons in contemporary Hpa-an are involved in a predatory form of peace making under the Myanmar military state. To understand the wider dynamics of these religious infrastructure projects and their connection to militarised projects of state-making, in the next section I offer an outline of the history of this region and show how material projects of *thathana pyu* are implicated in political processes of state making and territorialisation over frontier areas and people.

'Making Religion' in Conflict-Affected Karen State

Material acts of *thathana pyu* have long played a role in statecraft throughout Theravāda Southeast Asia (Ferguson 1978; Gombrich 1988; Mendelson 1975). As part of what is referred to as the Asokan model of kingship (Tambiah 1976), the Buddhist 'galactic polity' (ibid.) relies on an interconnected, reciprocal relationship between monks and political leaders (or kings). Where monks are world renouncers, it is considered the duty of a king or state political leader to provide the

material support for the propagation and perpetuation of the *thathana*, including in areas on the edge of the state.[9] While projects of *thathana pyu* have long been a feature of former Burmese political leadership, during the 1990s a more explicit Buddhist missionisation program became entwined with state military-led efforts to domesticate the politically and economically contested frontier areas of the country.

Competition over land and territorial control has defined Myanmar's political landscape since independence from the British in 1948. The history of armed conflict between the state and the many ethnic resistance organisations has contributed to a situation of *de facto* legal and institutional pluralism in frontier areas, where ethnic minority and indigenous communities reside (Kyed 2020; South 2018). In southeast Myanmar, the KNU has been in conflict with the central Myanmar state since 1949 in a struggle for greater autonomy and a federal system of government that would protect the rights of Karen communities, including Plong people (South 2011; Thawnghmung 2008). While the KNU once maintained a mini-state of its own covering large areas of Myanmar's southeast frontier, its influence and power significantly diminished from the mid 1980s onwards after a series of military offensives and an armed rebellion of Buddhist Karen soldiers—the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA)[10]—who signed a ceasefire agreement with the Myanmar military in 1994 (Gravers 1999: 91-95; South 2018: 58).[11]

During this period Myanmar underwent a series of substantial political and economic transformations. After the violently suppressed national protests in 1988 a new (and arguably more brutal) set of military leaders began implementing an ambitious programme of modernisation and economic liberalisation. Driven by capitalist expansion and the exploitation of natural resources, the regime introduced market-based mechanisms to transform the economy and gain control over frontier areas where non-state armed groups controlled significant territory (Callahan 2004). Consequently, during the 1990s, state-led support for investments, mining and agri-business in frontier areas facilitated large-scale land grabs in previously impenetrable territories (Woods 2011). The political and economic changes instituted by the regime also significantly strengthened their power against non-state armed groups, forcing many ethnic nationalist leaders to concede to ceasefire arrangements throughout the 1990s (Callahan 2004). In Myanmar's southeast, DKBA leaders who signed a ceasefire with the military secured access to lucrative business concessions in a system described

elsewhere as 'ceasefire capitalism' (Woods 2011). Labelled by political analyst Ashley South (2011: 19) as 'conflict entrepreneurs', the DKBA's soldiers gained a reputation as predatory and profit seeking. And yet, despite their formidable reputation as extractive and coercive 'strongmen', there was widespread support for the DKBA's project of 'building religion' amongst ordinary lay Buddhists.

As their name suggests, the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), was founded with an explicit Buddhist ethos. Many ordinary Plong Buddhists also associate the creation of the DKBA with a period of Buddhist revivalism as the organisation proclaimed their mission to transform southeast Myanmar into a Buddhist polity. Not without influence was the fact that central to the formation of the DKBA was their close connection to a charismatic Buddhist abbot, U Thuzana, who sought (though never fully accomplished) to 'rejuvenate' a Buddhist Karen polity through material projects of *thathana pyu,* using DKBA soldiers to facilitate this process. U Thuzana came from a long lineage of Karen charismatic religious figures (Gravers 2018) and among many lay Buddhists, U Thuzana was widely respected and believed to possess supernatural powers as a result of his adherence to the 227 *vinaya* rules of conduct for monks and his promotion of vegetarianism and, importantly, pagoda construction and restoration (Rozenberg 2010; Tosa 2015).

Until his death in December 2018, U Thuzana devoted himself to the building and repair of Buddhist religious monuments, encouraging tens of thousands of his followers to donate free labour and money as 'acts of merit' (Gravers 2018; Hayami 2023). When I met U Thuzana in a monastery outside Hpa-an in March 2016, he boasted of having built more than 2,500 pagodas in the last 30 years, and that continued construction was key to strengthening the Karen Buddhist polity necessary for lasting peace and prosperity. The religious infrastructure projects he helped initiate, built his reputation among Buddhist Plong people as a '*talakhoung*', a man of great karma who, as an expression of his compassion for lay people, initiates the construction of religious monuments. In many homes I visited in and around Hpa-an, residents often pinned laminated photographs of U Thuzana to the wall beside the household Buddhist shrine. Many Plong Buddhists made regular pilgrimages to his monastery in Myaing Gyi Ngu village to seek the powerful abbot's blessings for material prosperity and healing and to carry out purification rites. The DKBA's association with such a respected figure translated into popular support for their project of

building religion. On the other hand, U Thuzana's close relationship with powerful DKBA leaders undermined for some, his peaceful mission to restore Karen State as a Buddhist land.

Figure 1: Karen Buddhists gather in Myaing Gyi Ngu on the full moon day of Waso in July 2023, where U Thuzana (and his successor) have led a project to inscribe a Karen language translation of the Theravāda Pāli Canon, the Tipitaka, on stone tablets. *Source*: Photo by Anonymous, 2023.[12]

During the 1990s, a military state project of Buddhist missionisation effectively granted Buddhist abbots like U Thuzana in frontier territories limitless authority to engage in activities to help propagate the Buddhist religion as a form of state territorialisation. Aided by the coercive power of the armed DKBA, which has been allied to the Myanmar military junta, U Thuzana's projects of *thathana pyu* inflicted brutal violence on non-Buddhist communities throughout areas the DKBA controlled, including through land grabs, forced conversions, the destruction of non-Buddhist places of worship and multiple attacks on non-Buddhist communities. Led by U Thuzana and other powerful monks whose works became embedded in a wider mission of 'defending Buddhism' against a rapidly modernising world (Foxeus 2019), land grabs against Christian, Muslim and even Buddhist communities in the name of *thathana pyu* continued during the decade

prior to the 2021 military coup. In the next section, I turn to two case studies of material projects of *thathana pyu* commenced in this period of intensified Buddhist religion making in Hpa-an to show how religious infrastructures hold both enchanting and pernicious qualities and how they effectively aid state-led efforts to territorialise Myanmar's frontier areas.

The Dual Aspects of *Thathana Pyu*

Kyauk Ka Lat

A couple of weeks after arriving in Hpa-an in February 2015, I was encouraged by local people to visit the Kyauk Ka Lat monastery complex built on the site that has been at the heart of Buddhist missionisation projects among Plong people from the time of the Mon kingdoms in the eleventh century through to the contemporary era (Chambers 2024: 17-19). Kyauk Ka Lat is an enchanting Buddhist religious space. It is an active monastery and a scenic site for meditation retreats, surrounded by a large manmade lake and lush green rice fields at the foot of Mount Khwaegabaung, a famed limestone mountain. The monastery is centred around an ancient small white pagoda that balances on the peak of a unique karst pillar, sticking out of the ground like a finger considered by the locals to be a symbol of the Buddha's hand. The monastery is one of the most popular sites for the Hpa-an residents to visit on Buddhist holidays and personal celebrations, and a popular tourist destination for people on pilgrimage in Myanmar.

Figure 2: Kyauk Ka Lat Pagoda, Hpa-an, Karen State, Myanmar. *Source*: Andrea Pepoli, WikiCommons.

Despite its reputation as a Buddhist holy site, a space of merit making and a peaceful meditation retreat, the Kyauk Ka Lat monastery complex has a complicated history. While the pagoda on the karst pillar has stood there for more than 100 years, the land—classified in Myanmar's official state land laws as 'religious land' (in Burmese, *thathana myei*)—that initially surrounded the temple was small, measuring approximately 0.6 acres. However, aided by the power of an increasingly assertive state and the DKBA, in 1998 the head abbot of Kyauk Ka Lat, U Wi Ma Hla, occupied more than 30 acres of paddy land owned primarily by neighbouring Christian Plong farmers. Two years later in 2000, U Wi Ma Hla ordered the destruction of a Seventh-Day Adventist Christian church recently built by the community of 90 households.

When I met with four members of the affected community in July 2018, they were trying to file a court case to repossess their paddy land and to receive permission to rebuild their church as part of a restitution process. This claim was only made possible in 2012 by the introduction of a new set of land laws and the establishment of investigative bodies as part of a wider set of political reforms that were taking place in Myanmar, after five decades of military rule (Mark and Belton 2020). The new regulations claimed to offer restitutive land justice for rural

households affected by land confiscations by the military that took place under the military rule between 1962 and 2011. In this case, the seizure of paddy land in 1998 affected 36 people and the majority of those remained living near Kyauk Ka Lat in informal housing along the road, as they had nowhere else to go.

When I spoke with the four individuals, they explained that ten families now lived along the road near the entrance to the Kyauk Ka Lat monastery complex but did not have access to their rice fields, which they had previously relied on for their livelihoods. When the head abbot of Kyauk Ka Lat first occupied the fields, violence and intimidation from DKBA soldiers left the villagers alienated from their customary lands with little opportunities for political or legal recourse. The community members knew they would never have all their paddy lands returned since some of it had been materially transformed through Buddhist infrastructure projects connected to the monastery. However, they firmly believed they were entitled to have at least some of the paddy lands returned since the restoration process had been put in place.

One woman, Nan Thiri Swe, passionately described the many challenges the community faced due to the land case prior to 2012. When their lands were first taken and their church destroyed in 2000, they could do nothing to protest the situation because the military junta did not allow any recourse for such matters. She described how many of the families affected were forced to send their children to Thailand and find work, since they no longer had land to grow rice. She also talked about the constant intimidation from DKBA soldiers who were close to the resident abbot of Kyauk Ka Lat, U Wi Ma Hla and who made regular threats against the people who remained living beside the road nearby the entrance. The launch of a land restoration process in 2012 galvanised the affected members of the community to try and reclaim their lands back. 'They have taken our ancestors' place, our livelihoods and our religious place', Nan Thiri Swe told me, 'So we have to fight them'. However, even with the land restoration process in place, the community continued to face intimidation by local Buddhist monastic leaders, state authorities and business and armed elite, with threats of violence a common feature of their lives.

Like in most cases that went through the state-led restitution process, the community ultimately failed to reclaim their land. The abbot's power and his close connection to other charismatic monastic

leaders, military state authorities, DKBA armed leaders and wealthy businessmen eventually prevented their claim from moving forward. On top of this, one of the women affected told me how her Christian community was often afraid to come together and pray due to continued threats made against them by the abbot who also often sent armed men to make threats against their legal case. A group of powerful, wealthy donors of U Wi Ma Hla with ties to the military also launched a counterclaim against the Christian villagers, suing them for their attempts to occupy religious land. No local lawyers were willing to take on the villagers' case, and even when someone from another part of Myanmar agreed to represent them, he was eventually driven out of town by ongoing threats from powerful Buddhist patrons, including former members of the DKBA.

Mount Khwaegabaung

Only a few kilometres down the road from Kyauk Ka Lat on the eastern side of the mountain sits the famed entrance to begin the climb up Mount Khwaegabaung. The mountain is one of the most sacred sites in all of Karen State and deeply symbolic within the Buddhist Plong imaginary. Uniquely shaped, the mountain is considered by many as the spiritual home of Karen people and is referenced in stories told by elders from Hpa-an through the eastern hills of Myanmar to Chao Phraya in Thailand (Hayami 2004; Hinton 1999). Many non-human entities, including powerful spirits, consider the mountain home. The golden pagoda within the Upper Yetagun Monastery compound at the apex of the mountain is thought to contain one of the hairs of the historical Buddha Gotama.

Figure 3: Mountain Khwaegabaung. *Source*: Johnny Melon, WikiCommons.

The Upper Yetagun Monastery on Mount Khwaegabaung is led by a highly powerful and charismatic abbot, U Kawidaza. While the monastery has a small population of resident monks, the steep climb up the mountain to reach the golden pagoda is a popular activity for Buddhist pilgrims. In March every year during the four days prior to the full moon in the lunar month of *Tabaung*, thousands of locals ascend the mountain to make an offering at the pagoda to show veneration to the Buddha and his teachings. The ritual hike up Mount Khwaegabaung is thought to provide special protection not only against harmful beings and other dangers, but also prosperity for the year ahead. One woman on her annual climb in March 2016 explained to me the exceptional nature of the mountain: a long time ago when the Buddha Gotama came through this area, he made a ball of rice so that everyone who came to visit the pagoda on top of Mount Khwaegabaung would never be hungry. She added, 'As long as the sound of the monastery bell can be heard loudly throughout this land, there will be peace and prosperity'.

Figure 4: Local people making offerings at the top of Mount Khwaegabaung. *Source:* Photo by Justine Chambers, 2016.

Despite holding deeply spiritual qualities that symbolise the promise of peace, the golden pagoda at the top of Mount Khwaegabaung has become embedded in a wider project of Buddhist missionisation led by its head abbot, U Kawidaza whose actions do not necessarily bring peace to everyone. Installed by the military State Law and Restoration Council (SLORC) as the head abbot of the Upper Yetagun Monastery in the 1990s, U Kawidaza soon developed a reputation for his material projects of *thathana pyu*. The abbot is known to have strong influence (*awza,* in Burmese) based on his personal abilities and many people I met in Hpa-an feared him. He has chaired the Buddhist nationalist Ma Ba Tha organisation since 2019 and maintains patronage networks with state military leaders and former armed leaders of the DKBA.[13] Even after a military coup in February 2021, which saw devastating levels of violence inflicted upon unarmed protestors, U Kawidaza continued to actively support military leaders, accepting large donations from the Senior General Min Aung Hlaing in Hpa-an during public ceremonies. Over the course of his tenure as the head abbot of the Upper Yetagun Monastery, U Kawidaza's relationship with armed leaders has given him significant power in Hpa-an, including the ability to act with near impunity when it comes to infrastructure projects in the name of *thathana pyu*.

During the 1990s much of the land around the sacred Mount Khwaegabaung was declared and officially titled in land records by local authorities as *thathana myei,* land for religious purposes. For hundreds of years, local Karen villagers cultivated the land surrounding the mountain to grow fruit trees and vegetables, as well as to escape violent militarised campaigns ostensibly targeting those that were believed to support the KNU. While many ordinary Plong Buddhists did indeed donate their land to U Kawidaza for *thathana pyu*, that was not the case for everyone. Two women who lived below the mountain explained that the powerful monk claimed ownership over large areas of orchard land customarily used and owned by ordinary Buddhist villagers, without any compensation. They explained that during the 1990s, local communities welcomed the degree of stability and peace that arrived when the DKBA signed a ceasefire agreement with the Myanmar military. However, peace also paved the way for the expansion of Buddhist religious infrastructures into lands that had been used for generations by numerous Plong families. While revered for his position as a senior abbot of the monastery on Mount Khwaegabaung, U Kawidaza came to be feared by local residents who lived within the powerful mountain's domain and claimed their land with no compensation.

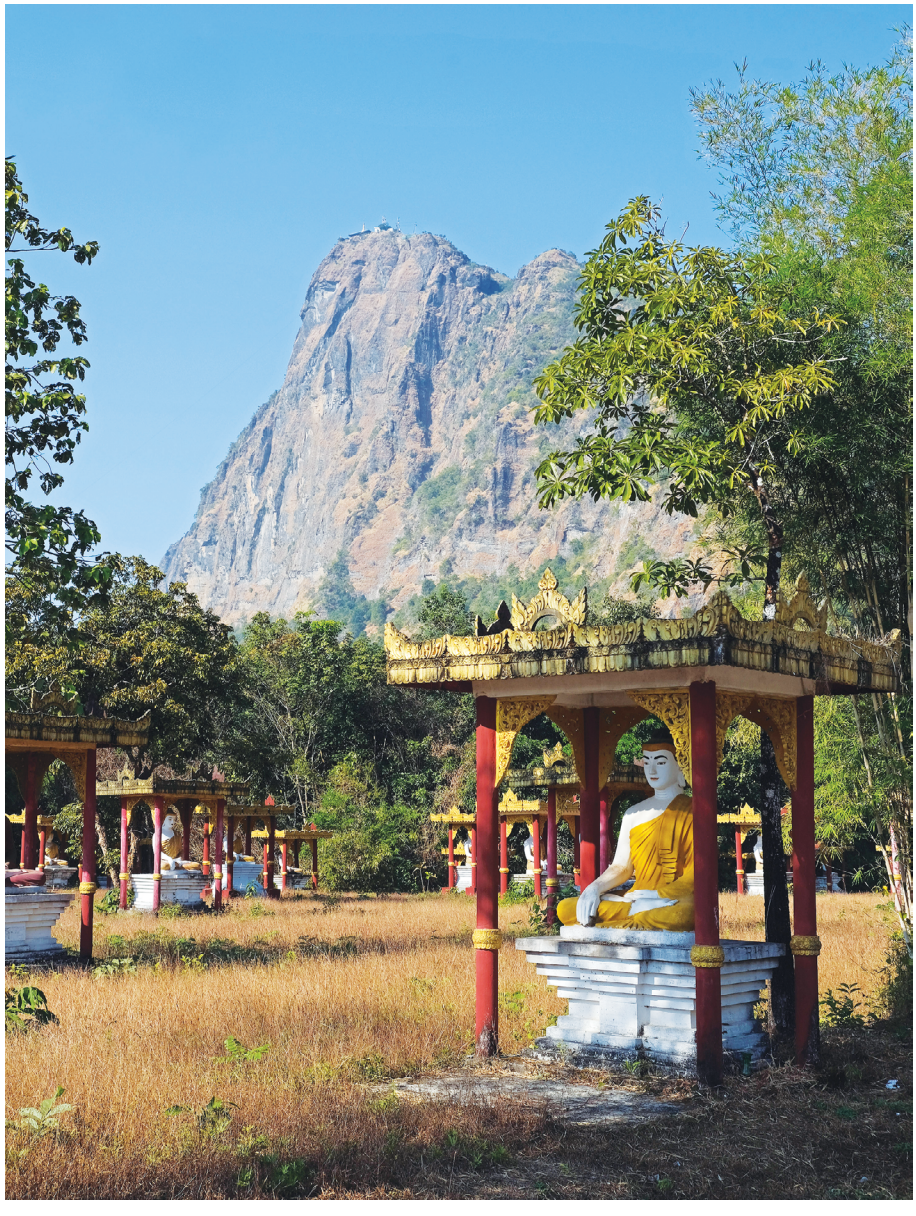

Figure 5: Lumbini Garden, under Mount Khwaegabaung, December 2019. *Source:* Kallerna, WikiCommons.

I spoke to these women on several occasions, but one morning I arrived just after they had returned from planting rice seedlings in their neighbours' fields. Both in their 50s, the women complained that they continued to have to undertake physically gruelling work for

their livelihoods, but that it was not enough to cover their everyday needs and that they largely relied on remittances sent by their children working in Thailand. Whispering in hushed tones, they nervously spoke about the confiscation of their ancestral land by U Kawidaza in the name of *thathana pyu*. They said that many of the Buddhist households in their community used to rely on the orchard lands at the base of the mountain for their livelihoods. When U Kawidaza claimed it for religious purposes, they were forced to send their children to go and work in Thailand. They explained that most people just accepted the land confiscations as they were Buddhist and believed in the importance of 'making religion' as a precondition for peace. However, the women also noted that many locals were upset as some of the orchard lands had been converted into rubber plantations and limestone quarries owned and managed by former commanders of the DKBA. The two women said that as Mount Khwaegabaung is thought to be animated by deities, spirits and other supernatural forces, the conversion of the land into monocrop plantations disrupted the sacred balance between humans and more-than-human worlds, making the 'owners of the land' angry. I asked if anyone in the community had ever protested the land confiscations or sought reparations under land restitution laws introduced in 2012. They responded bluntly, 'Thaungkha [U Kawidaza) can see everything we do with his power– he knows big people with weapons, so there is nothing we can do to protest. It is better to just forget that these are our ancestor's lands. Otherwise, we can be killed'.

Discussion

A focus on religious infrastructure addressed in this special issue alerts us to the power dynamics and forms of governmentality and territoriality embedded in material projects of *thathana pyu* in Myanmar. Viewing the expansion of monastery operations under the banner of *thathana pyu* into ancestral lands as a form of infrastructure enables us to consider their relationship to the state and the way they play into processes of territorialisation. As Anand, Gupta and Appel (2018: 3) suggest, 'infrastructures are critical locations through which sociality, governance and politics, accumulation and dispossession, and institutions and aspirations are formed, reformed and performed'. Most land confiscations in southeast Myanmar involve the military and occurred primarily in the 1990s and 2000s as the central state sought to

domesticate frontier areas and Karen populations in their war against the Karen National Union (Chambers and Butta 2018). A close look at the two projects of *thathana pyu* described above helps to capture how religious infrastructure projects also played into conflict dynamics and predatory processes of state making and territorialisation.

It is important to note the complexity of state making and territorialization in southeast Myanmar, and other frontier areas of the country where ethnic resistance organisations and local militia groups have long controlled territory (Jolliffe 2015). Sovereignty in Karen State has always been fractured and from the 1990s onwards was splintered between the Myanmar military, the KNU, DKBA and other smaller Karen armed groups in a 'mosaic of territorial control' (Oh 2013: 1). As with many other non-state ethnic armed groups who signed ceasefires with the military in the 1990s, DKBA leaders secured access to lucrative business concessions (Woods 2011) and were subsequently absorbed into the military's state territorialisation campaign. The confiscation of lands by military leaders and, by extension, non-state armed groups like the DKBA during the 1990s and 2000s in Karen State 'enabled military state making in frontier territories' (Woods 2016: 119), including through infrastructure projects such as roads, mines, dams and agri-business projects which profited both the military and non-state armed leaders, often at the expense of ordinary Karen villagers. The close patronage relationship between charismatic monks and armed men (both military and DKBA) in Hpa-an, helped to legitimise predatory processes of state-making and a much wider-scale project of disenfranchising Karen people of their customary lands (see Chambers and Butta 2019; KHRG 2015). While the military did not have complete control over DKBA armed leaders nor the charismatic monks I have mentioned,[14] their active engagement in material infrastructure projects–both sacred and otherwise–effectively contributed to state territorialisation of Karen lands and peoples.

Conclusion

Coinciding with ongoing attempts by the Myanmar military to explicitly and actively missionise contested parts of the country, 'making religion' has long been a part of the broader nationalist project to consolidate territorial control. As such, it has also served as a counterinsurgency measure against ethnic resistance organisations, and their ongoing control over large swathes of land and ethnic minority populations. As described above, in some areas of Hpa-an this

has included violent evictions and land confiscations both at the hands of non-state military authorities and Buddhist religious leaders. In the first Kyauk Ka Lat case where the villagers' paddy lands were taken, the ethnic and Christian religious identity of the affected community rendered them politically powerless. The second orchard lands case on Mount Khwaegabaung shows the vulnerability of poor Buddhist communities as well, who equally have little say against charismatic abbots and their armed patrons. The second case also highlights how despite the enchanting qualities of religious infrastructure for ordinary lay Buddhists, it can also hold pernicious qualities that enact violence on local communities and their everyday livelihoods. While for Plong Buddhists, the construction of religious infrastructures allows the conditions for the creation of a Buddhist moral universe, they also can reproduce processes of state violence and dispossession.

By bringing into dialogue Buddhist religious material projects with anthropological literature on infrastructures, this article has highlighted how state processes of territorialization and violence become implicated in moralistic works related to 'making religion'. The examples presented here also speak to debates within Buddhist scholarship on religious-economic relations and the 'reputational, institutional and moral concerns' of fundraising and religious patronage (Caple and Roddy 2023: 706; see also McLaughlin et al. 2020; Osella and Rudnyckyj 2017). As Caple (2020) relates from ethnographic research in Tibet, the expansion of Chinese patronage and state-led interest in Tibetan Buddhism comes with implications for monastic morality (Caple 2020: 77; Caple 2017; see also Makley 2018: 48-49). However, Caple and Roddy argue that commodifying dynamics between the state and Tibetan monks only become 'problematic when economic value [is] perceived as becoming the "paramount value"', through a shift 'embedded in a more individualistic economic "purchasing power"' (Caple and Roddy 2023: 710). Indeed, when we recognise the socially embedded nature of religious infrastructures in southeast Myanmar, it is clear that the relationship of monastic authorities to powerful business elites or armed groups cannot simply be assessed through state-led processes of infrastructure, territorialisation and capture. The power and influence of monks and their ability to enact infrastructure projects of *thathana pyu* are ultimately assessed according to fluid and contingent ideas about modes of financing and norms that underpin 'the basic viability' (Parry and Bloch 1996: 28) of lay-monastic relationships and society more broadly.

The dynamics I have described in this article have become even more complex after the Myanmar military retook control of the government in a *coup'detat* in February 2021. After a decade of expansive political and economic reforms, the coup surprised many people and led to widespread demonstrations and later an armed revolutionary movement which seeks to rid the military from all aspects of political and economic life (see Chambers and Cheesman 2024). While some monks have also joined the resistance, many influential members of the *sangha* are actively supporting the military leaders (Frydenlund and Phyo Wai 2024). Since the coup, the military chief General Min Aung Hlaing has tried to establish himself as the protector and defender of the Buddhist nation state, regularly engaging in public and performative *dana* rituals, donation ceremonies and the construction of new pagodas. However, many monasteries have also been bombed and destroyed by the junta in violent campaigns targeting the resistance (see, e.g., The Irradaway 2024).[15] What role projects of *thathana pyu* are playing during this turbulent moment of Myanmar's history is unclear. What is clear is that the ongoing support of many powerful members of the Buddhist clergy for the military junta and their silence in the face of widespread acts of violence against civilians has fundamentally altered the relationship between lay people and the Buddhist clergy. As Frydenlund and Phyo Wai (2024: 821) note, for many people 'it is not only a democratic revolution but also a Revolution of Buddhism, as a necessary step toward the creation of new social order.' Indeed, the revolutionaries do not simply aim to rid the country of the military, but also to breakdown their influence in all aspects of social and political life, including the 'unholy alliance' with the sangha (Aung Zaw 2024). One can only hope that restitution processes for former land confiscations in the name of *thathana pyu* also become part of a future process of rebuilding Myanmar as a more just and democratic state, as the revolutionaries aim to do.

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NOTES

1 When applicable, names used in this article are pseudonyms to protect the safety of participants.
2 *Thaungkha* is a Plong honorific used to refer to a monk, who is usually the head of a monastery.
3 Plong people, otherwise known as Pwo, identify as a linguistic sub-group of the 'Karen', one of Myanmar's largest nationality groups and a member of the Sino-Tibetan language family. While Plong speaking communities are often referred to as 'Pwo' in scholarship on Myanmar and Thailand, Pwo is an exonym and I have chosen to use 'Plong', which translates directly as 'humans/humankind' and is how Plong people pronounce it themselves.
4 Myanmar's Buddhist monastic community includes almost half a million monks and 60,000 precept nuns (Falk and Kawanami 2018: 41). While nuns are not ordained as *bhikkhuni* and therefore do not hold the same status as monks, they still hold membership within the *sangha* and are expected to follow a specific code of conduct endorsed by Myanmar's Supreme Sangha Council. For more details see Falk and Kawanami (2018).
5 For more details of this conflict see Thawnghmung (2008) and South (2011).
6 This study was part of the British Council's *My Justice* project focused on housing, land and property rights for conflict-affected communities. For more details see Chambers and Butta (2019).
7 The 2014 national census cannot be relied on for a completely accurate estimate of the number of Buddhist people in Karen State, especially without the release of data on ethnicity. However, this proportion is broadly reflective of the many hundreds of people I encountered throughout my fieldwork.
8 The most famous example is U Vinaya, a charismatic and saintly monk whose project of Buddhist moral revivalism during the 1990s served to critique Myanmar's military leaders at the time. U Vinaya died in 2003, but his monastery on Mount Thamanya is still considered to emanate his sacred power.
9 Myanmar's ancient Pagan period (1044-1364), for example, was known as the 'age of Temple Builders' (Hla Pe 1971: 60), where successive kings focused on the construction of religious buildings, pagodas and shrines.
10 The majority of DKBA forces were disbanded and incorporated into Myanmar military-aligned Border Guard Force (BGF) units—created after the adoption of the 2008 Constitution to assimilate ethnic armed groups into the national army—in August 2010.
11 A preliminary ceasefire agreement between the military and KNU was signed in 2012 as part of a broader nationwide political reform process, enacted by the military to 'transition' the country towards democracy. However, a strong body of evidence shows how the military used the ceasefire to expand and consolidate its control in contested areas of Myanmar's southeast (e.g., KHRG 2014, 2015; Woods 2021; Woods and Naimark 2020).

12 This photograph was taken by an interlocutor who needs to remain anonymous due to the sensitivity of the topic covered in this article.
13 Despite being banned in 2017, Ma Ba Tha continues to play a strong and influential role in Hpa-an and other Buddhist-majority areas of Karen State (see Chambers 2024: 145-49).
14 Although individual members of Myanmar's monastic order (*sangha*) are unified in their desire to spread the Buddhist religion, it is not a monolithic institution, and many monks are highly critical of the relationship between the military and various Buddhist leaders, especially in the wake of the 2021 military coup (see Frydenlund and Phyo Wai 2024).
15 *The Irrawady* 2024. 'Buddhist Monastery Bombed in Myanmar: Eight Civilians Killed in Karen State', 2 April.

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