Introduction

Modern Buddhist Genealogies

Faith and power must always, however uneasily, take a stance toward one another. The polity, more than most realms of human action, deals obviously with ultimate things.

Myanmar, formerly Burma, has been embroiled in conflicts at the nation’s center and at its borders almost since its independence from British colonial rule in 1948.1 As recently as September 2007, the so-called Saffron Revolution, a populist uprising led by monks, contested the legitimacy of the state. The discussion that unfolds in this book traces the cultural narratives of Burma’s Theravada Buddhist engagement with modernity at the intersections of religion and politics. In the course of this exploration, I point to conjunctures in modern Burmese history when public discourse about Buddhism and politics fueled particular cultural debates. Such pivotal moments, or conjunctures, may lead to iterations of past conflicts or debates, but they may also open up possibilities for innovation and the emergence of new trajectories that resolve or move particular cultural debates into new directions.2 It is at such moments that modern political formations, for instance, nationalism, secular power, education, identity, colonialism, ethnicity, and otherness, are articulated and become visible in culturally and historically specific contexts. While some potential trajectories unfold, others remain foreclosed.

In the case of Burma, Buddhist practices and institutions often insert themselves into public life, encouraging the politicization of religion. The cultural narratives I have chosen to explore here reveal genealogies of hegemony and subjugation, patronage and resistance, and power and loss. Articulations of these themes emerge at certain moments in history and eventually lose their
cultural relevance, but the genealogies of their recurrence extend from precolonic times to the colonial era and eventually to the contemporary period. Although these genealogies predated colonial modernity in Burma, they remain important historical forces in contexts such as colonialism, nationalism, education, and the cultural other/the foreign. In this book I focus on particular constellations, both cultural and historical, that harbor possible reiterations of the past or movement toward a new and different future. Those moments comprise the modern Buddhist conjunctures in Myanmar.

One such genealogy narrates the state’s patronage of Buddhist institutions in order to enhance its political power. Another genealogy links those moments when Buddhist sentiments offer ways of resisting the power of the state. A third one harkens back in time to, or projects into the future, a perhaps utopian, but surely just Buddhist society. Competing visions of moral authority and civil society become visible in the social practices and discourse of such historical conjunctures, ranging from support for military dictatorship and its patronage of Buddhism to a Buddhist advocacy of democratic rights. Each of these visions represents an enduring struggle for a future in which engagement with modern concerns can be productively formulated. The historical movement between these genealogical trajectories charts the hegemonic discourse of then Burma and now Myanmar. Today, this country’s challenge continues to be the realization of a future in which civil society can prosper without coercive power to guarantee the continuity of the state.

Nearly 90 percent of Myanmar’s citizens practice a form of Theravada Buddhism, with roughly 70 to 80 percent of the population identifying as Burman. The remainder of the country’s Theravada Buddhist population comprises ethnic minority groups, including the Shan, Mon, Pao, Karen, Arakanese, and others. A small number of Chinese Mahayana communities are found in urban centers like Yangon. The identification of Theravada Buddhist practices with the social and cultural category of being Burmese has been a significant factor in the nationalist efforts since the late colonial period. “We Burmese are Buddhist” first became a rallying cry during the nationalist struggle of the 1910s. Since then, this slogan has been invoked by many politicians, including Burma’s first democratic prime minister, U Nu, whose practice of politics relied greatly on Buddhist sources of authority. Even in the popular imagination of Burma in the west, the country is closely identified with Buddhism, nonviolence, and rational ethics. Such perceptions also kindle an imagination of Burma as a romantic and nostalgic place, where people are “materially poor and spiritually wealthy.” Modern Burmese sometimes echo these sentiments. Yet what it means to be Burmese and Buddhist has been articulated differently at particular cultural and historical conjunctures. In this book I explore some of
the most significant moments in which Burmese Buddhist identities have been, and continue to be, constructed in modern contexts.

Burmese polities have defined themselves in terms of Buddhist sources of legitimacy for more than a millennium. The identification of Burmese ethnicity with Theravada Buddhist authority was already central to the hegemonic discourse of precolonial polities. The authority of the court was sustained by the Buddhist teachings that were believed to be the word of the Buddha. Monks acted as intellectual agents who propagated a Burmese understanding of the Pāli tradition to areas beyond the court capital and used Buddhist teachings to educate the population in the basic skills of literacy. In his seminal work on cosmological Theravada Buddhism, *World Conqueror, World Renouncer*, Stanley J. Tambiah highlighted two separate, yet complementary social categories in the Buddhist civilizations of South and Southeast Asia, namely, world renouncers and kings or householders, who were engaged with the world. Kings and householders sought to emulate the ideal actions of a world conqueror (cakkavatti), while world renouncers, traditionally Buddhist monks, emulated the ideal of renouncing worldly concerns in favor of religious practice that lessened the potential for future suffering and nurtured eventual moral perfection. Although the sacred biography of the Buddha encompasses both ideals, involvement with the world and its renunciation, Tambiah shows that Buddhist institutions have encompassed reciprocity between world renouncers and world conquerors.

In a traditional polity, social status was seen as the outcome of a ritual economy of merit that was based on spiritual rewards for material donations in support of Buddhist practices and institutions. A ritual system of exchange of donations for merit facilitated the politicization of Buddhist practices and institutions, and the sangha’s greatest political power continues to rest in its ability to refuse donations from lay patrons and thus deny them their claims to merit and status. Neighboring vassals emulated the court of a dhammarāja to strengthen their social proximity to power. Such religioethnic sentiments were central to the Theravada Buddhist hegemonic paradigm of precolonial Burmese polities in which religious and political power were in dynamic tension. For instance, during the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries and the reign of the later Taungoo and early Konbaun dynasties, the high culture of the royal court was framed by constructions of Theravada universalism that was seen at once as orthodox and Burman. Victor Lieberman identifies four levels of cultural integration in the administration of these kingdoms to facilitate and promote a Burmese Theravada hegemony. They include the erosion of local religious authority in favor of the crown and the sangha; the rise of a socially inclusive literature; imperial loyalties that superseded local ones; and
a growing distinction between Burman and non-Burman ethnic boundaries. Non-Burmans who wanted to bridge the social distance between them and Burman high culture and participate in the politics of the court, adopted its values, customs, and ritual theater.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries European colonial powers subjugated most of Asia, and with the growth of colonial networks, important changes occurred in what until then had been a largely cohesive, traditional Buddhist worldview. The colonization of Burma as part of British India was protracted over the course of three wars between 1824 and 1885. The British had at their disposal a modern and efficient military to help them implement their colonial agenda. By contrast, the Burmese military functioned within the court’s client networks and traditional Burmese warfare was imbued with cosmological and religious significance. The military forces of the Konbaun dynasty were technologically and strategically overwhelmed by the colonial army, their resources, and their administrative networks. In the aftermath of the First Anglo-Burmese War of 1824, colonial rule imposed a new form of governance on Lower Burma that dislodged the received Theravada paradigm of power. Colonial agencies promoted a modern project that disrupted a calibrated balance of Burmese temporal and religious power, undermining the social and cultural foundations of a traditional Theravada polity. Invading British forces desecrated Buddhist spaces and turned them into military garrisons, such as Shwedagon Pagoda in Rangoon and, later, the palace in Mandalay. Their actions constituted grave affronts to the cultural and religious sensibilities of the Burmese, who soon came to experience that in this new colonial reality, political power had been stripped of its religious foundations. The British occupation of the Mandalay Palace in 1885, the last capital of the Konbaun dynasty, proved to be particularly disruptive to the ancien régime. It marked the end of the Third Anglo-Burmese War and the beginning of Burma’s complete colonial subjugation, which ushered in a modern scheme of things to come. The British removed the Burmese Lion Throne, the symbol of the power of a dhammarāja, and plundered many of the court’s possessions and royal regalia. The British sacking of the palace destroyed not only the court and its political culture, it also dispersed service groups within and outside of the palace walls and, by extension, the socioeconomic patronage ties that structured Mandalay society. The economy, supported by the rationale of Theravada hegemony, collapsed, and its symbols of power, courtly appointments, and status markers became meaningless. The culture of the court, the pinnacle of society in precolonial Burma, and its traditional institutions dissolved, while the Buddhist sangha, though greatly diminished in its authority and political relevance, endured as the only traditional institution to survive the advent of colonial rule.
To a large extent the Burmese experience of modernity was shaped by the experience of colonial subjugation. An important aspect of this experience was the colonial insistence on secularizing politics and dislodging it from a Buddhist worldview that had, until then, encompassed it. The advent of modernity therefore implied a challenge to received Buddhist values, institutions, and communities and set into motion profound transformations in received cultural patterns and modes of interaction. That a colonial administration facilitated this encounter of traditional culture with trade networks and global forces prefigured further innovation in the future. This process unfolded at particular historical conjunctures where modernizing forces eventually eclipsed traditional lifeways. Colonial innovations undermined much of the rationale of the traditional economy of merit and its hegemony that were characteristic of a traditional Buddhist polity, and the collapse of traditional culture, initially in Lower Burma and, after 1886, also in Upper Burma, accelerated a restructuring of Burmese society. In its wake, it also gave rise to innovative cultural strategies that privileged rational utility over religious worldviews and moral authority. The modern age was ushered in by new and decidedly colonial patterns of interaction. Access to western knowledge, resources, technologies, and networks empowered indigenous elites to negotiate new venues of economic, social, and political power.

Modern Buddhist institutions and practices emerged from colonial conjunctures that opened up venues and possibilities that had been beyond the scope of the Burmese cultural imagination. In the colonial state, political power was transacted separately from a Buddhist legitimation of power. In this new scheme of things, colonial subjects had access to a new economy, transnational networks, and western knowledge. The separation of secular politics from religious authority was a cornerstone of western post-Enlightenment political theory and British colonial practice during the nineteenth century. The association of secular power with colonial rule in Burma may also explain why the contemporary Burmese state continues to identify some aspects of modernity, such as human rights, with a neocolonial threat from the west. Such claims continue to be voiced in Burmese state-owned media and contribute to a popular perception that secularism lacks moral authority and is inherently weak and suspect.

Despite the discontinuities colonial rule created, Buddhism remained the social ground upon which many Burmese conducted profound cultural debates about various formations of modernity. The Burmese public discourse centered on issues of identity, the nation-state, the authority of civil vs. religious law, education, and the role of foreign influence. British prohibitions against political assemblies in public places deflected this discourse to the religious
realm, a decision that elevated Buddhism as a potential site of resistance against the colonial state and ensured that Burmese cultural debates about modern concerns unfolded mostly within Buddhist frameworks. Although the British had envisioned not to become involved in the religious affairs of the colony, it was the prohibition of political assemblies during the colonial era that turned Buddhist contexts into the primary locations where Burmese were allowed to assemble and voice their views. In time, Buddhist actors and institutions frequently intervened in public debates about the common good in modern Myanmar.

A pervasive theme of Buddhist modernity in Asia is the effort of the state to reform Buddhist institutions, practices, and texts in order to promote the rationalization and centralization of public policies. However, monastic reforms have long been used as an instrument of the Burmese court and thus predate modern history. These reforms were not merely periodic attempts to rein in renegade monks. Rather, they defined a religio-ideological framework for public policies that ministries and government departments subsequently implemented. In this way, reforms set the parameters for the administration of the state beyond the center. For example, King Bodawpaya’s reforms in 1786 introduced the office of the mahadanwun, which, much like a contemporary Ministry of Religious Affairs, oversaw the regulation, finances, and implementation of monastic policies at the local, regional, and court level. Monastic lineages were largely subject to the political alliances of their royal patrons. Relations between the court and individual monks were thus carefully calibrated to maintain a balance between political power and its Buddhist source of legitimation.

Monastic reforms generally embrace two complementary trajectories. One strategy is to affirm the authority of the Theravada texts and especially the three baskets of the Tipitaka as the enduring word of the Buddha. Hence, reforms usually produced new renditions of Buddhist canonical texts that were believed to be free from accretions, pristine and orthodox. This process offered political opportunities to reframe a mythic discourse about the polity and help address, at least indirectly, the needs of the state. An equally significant component of Buddhist reform concerned the practices of members of the sangha. By alleging transgression against monastic discipline (vinaya), teaching false doctrines, or simply rank-and-file lassitude, the state was able to reaffirm the ordination, and hence the status of monastic communities, entire lineages, or individual monks who embraced the goals of reform. While some monks were defrocked amidst public attention, others would choose to be reordained within the new parameters of a “pure” lineage. Monastic reforms thus became tools the state employed to restructure the sangha, its economic assets, its institutional structures, and its relationships with lay supporters. The outcome of monastic
reforms was an indication of the center’s ability to uphold its hegemony, and, as a result, monks often had to relinquish some local control over monastic learning and conduct. The impact of monastic reform thus reverberated throughout the political system in complex and subtle ways and informed political policies. On occasion, Buddhist attempts at reform also resulted in trials that made examples of monastic transgressions of expected codes of conduct. Some monastic factions fell out of political favor and were dealt with severely. The accomplishment of the modern state has been to extend the impact of Buddhist reforms to the nation and to enforce policy implementation through the political administration of the state. Modern reforms were implemented during the U Nu era and later, through the Sangha Mahanayaka Council, under Ne Win and subsequent military regimes.

The genealogy of Buddhist resistance against the state is equally effervescent. Attempts to implement state control over the sangha can make visible certain forms of contestation and resistance to the center. Against the background of religious reforms propagated by the modern state directly, and stemming from a colonial neglect of religious obligations, the Burmese sangha has resisted the policies of the center in overt and covert ways. What began as Buddhist ways of mobilizing resistance during the colonial era continued in different guises under subsequent governments. Cultural expressions of monastic resistance ranged from silent withdrawal to the forest, to the armed militancy of millennial movements, and to the popular agitation of monks in colonial times and, since then, in 1962, 1988, 1990, 1996, and 2007.

The events of September 2007 showed that the sangha currently constitutes the greatest public challenge to the political authority of the military. As the number of monks approximates the number of conscripted soldiers, the sangha represents the largest institution outside the military. It is also the only cultural institution to survive, in a much weakened form, the challenges of colonialism and the modern state. As such it constitutes a moral force whose sources of authority transcend the secular power of the military. Nonetheless, the sangha also experiences fragmentation over allegiances to lay patrons with competing social interests. Buddhist and secular visions of authority offer competing venues to shape the future of civil society in Myanmar.

The sangha and the military have both emerged from Burma’s colonial history wielding considerable public influence. Aung San, the national martyr who was also the father of Burma’s symbol of democracy, Aung San Suu Kyi, is credited with founding the military in order to drive the British and later the Japanese out of Burma. Since independence, the military has intervened at critical moments to determine the nation’s history and to contain popular uprisings and ethnic rebellions. Ne Win’s military coup in 1962 ended the democratic
government of U Nu, who relied upon Buddhist symbols in the construction of national identity. Since then, the state has been governed by military regimes. Today, the military and its forces comprise about 500,000 soldiers. Proponents of military rule argue that the armed forces are pivotal to the stability of the state, national unity, and the safety of its citizens. Opponents of the regime define the military's authority as essentially colonial. They argue that the junta lacks moral legitimation and functions primarily to extract resources from the country in order to enrich those in power. The state provides generously for members of the armed forces. Increasingly, revenues for state ministries, including the military, are generated independently of the state through joint venture enterprises with foreign capital. Mikael Gravers suggests that the military state in Myanmar still functions according to a colonial blueprint. Many of the civil institutions characteristic of postcolonial societies, such as an independent judiciary, a well-developed system of higher education, and popular access to global economic and information networks still lie beyond the reach of most people in Myanmar today. A military's hold on power may be surprising in a nation where national ideology and civil institutions are infused by Buddhist values. Yet despite military rule, a battle continues to rage within this nation over moral justice, the limits of the state's authority, and a renewed vision of civil society. Time and resources will be required to foster civil institutions capable of replacing the military's control, while ensuring the continuity of the state.

Modern Buddhism relinquished a totalizing cosmology in which all aspects of life cohered across cultural, social, economic, scientific bodies of knowledge. Instead, contemporary Buddhist communities accept the fragmented nature of modern knowledge. Modernity also transformed the centralized institutional authority of the sangha and made monastic norms of conduct subject to local reinterpretations. Printed journals like *The Light of Dhamma* were widely read and popularized the new religious roles of lay people. The colonial context not only facilitated the rise of Buddhist lay authority, but it also initiated modern transformations in knowledge and education. At the same time, many Burmese distrusted secular forms of governance and felt disenchanted with modern forms of living under colonial rule. Secularism entered Burmese public consciousness as part of the colonial discourse on politics and religion. Initially, it underscored the colonizers' refusal to assume responsibilities toward the Buddhist sangha. This reinforced a general public perception of secularism as suspect politics and helped foment anticolonial sentiments. Since independence, the Burmese state has at least nominally espoused a variety of secular political ideologies, ranging from democracy to socialism, militarism, and venture capitalism. However, modern political ideologies have failed in governing the country's center, and since the inception of the independent
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state, governments have consistently employed Buddhist constructions of power in order to legitimate the current political order.

The fluid practices of modern Buddhist communities often resist neat categories. Greater authority is accorded to lay practice and especially to lay meditation. Some of these modern Buddhist groups emphasize rationality, others have a social mission to transform society, and still others promote new rituals and mythologies. Some seek to revive past beliefs and practices. Some communities venerate a particular individual believed to embody moral perfection (*nibbāna*). Some developed organizations have been local or regional in scope, and others have focused on a national community. Some modern movements have expanded to include social networks of Buddhist and Burmese among global and transnational communities.

Certain modern Buddhist transformations constitute a clear departure from traditional practices. For instance, becoming ordained in the Buddhist sangha was traditionally the primary way of renouncing one's attachment to lay life. In modern contexts, Theravadins and other Buddhists have experimented with new ways to renounce the world. Modern contexts frequently require a reinterpretation of rules for monastic conduct, such as the need to purchase items and to use modern communication technologies. As cultural definitions of monastic roles have undergone innovation—a development that some describe as the waning authority of the sangha—the influence of the laity has grown considerably. New forms of ascetic practice and renunciation of the world, along with new social roles for spiritual leadership, have been promoted through meditation and other religious movements, including Socially Engaged Buddhism. In addition, the modern world of Theravada Buddhism has seen a rise in the status of women renouncers as novices (*thīla shin*). At present, however, there are no fully ordained nuns in Burma. By contrast, fully ordained women in Thailand include Bhikkhuni Voramai Kabilsingh, who received her ordination in Sri Lanka, and her daughter, Bhikkhuni Dhammananda, who is working to reestablish a new lineage for women renunciants. Other modern Buddhist movements have promoted a synthesis with political ideologies such as nationalism, militarism, democracy, or socialism. Still others have developed Buddhist strategies to accommodate the political powers of the modern state within a Buddhist worldview. The popularization of meditation among lay people has lent itself especially to ready rationalization of its teachings and has opened new venues for spiritual achievement among the laity.

An important concern of our time focuses on the modern conjunctures of religion and politics and the ways in which they shape the future of civil society. The conjunctures of modernity identified here articulate a mythic discourse about the polity and its ultimate concerns. For example, during the
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nationalist movement and later, during the U Nu era, national development was conceptualized as stages on the path to enlightenment. The transcendent discourse during this era has been characterized by a Buddhist universalism articulated in beliefs, practices, and institutions. The chapters that follow trace a narrative in which modern Buddhist communities have produced and reproduced historical formations that intertwined Buddhism with the moral claims of the state. Modern knowledge and secular power became the historical locations in which received traditions were contested and reinvented. Burmese Buddhists have repeatedly questioned the power of the secular, modern state and its military coercion. During the two decades following the 1988 uprising, Burma functioned without a national constitution to define the limitations of secular power, and the modern state has repeatedly turned to sources of Buddhist authority to legitimate its practices.

In recent years the study of religion has benefited from renewed attention to the role of religion in public life. This shift was prompted in part by the inadequacy of theories about the inevitable secularization of the modern project. As scholars have articulated new perspectives on religion in public discourse, they have taken account of local and national communities as well as the civilizational projects of religious traditions in transnational contexts. Among modern Theravada communities, the emerging discourse reflects an awareness of a colonial or western “other,” while affirming the foundational reality of an economy of merit, however fragmented and circumscribed its contemporary practices may appear. Contemporary realities no longer constitute a total social fact, as Tambiah has argued to be the case for the traditional galactic polity, but the exchange of merit for power still defines the parameters of politics in Theravada contexts.

This shift in scholarly attention challenges us to examine critically received categories of knowledge we use to apprehend our subject of study. In particular, modern Buddhist conjunctures make evident that a Weberian description of Buddhism as “otherworldly” obscures our understanding of the social engagement among modern Buddhist institutions and communities. Similarly, we must recognize that understanding authentic practice as inherently nonpolitical forces a collusion with a colonial hegemonic discourse that aims to maintain the status quo. One may add to this list of obsolete categories the normative ideal of nonviolence and similar conceptions of normative practice. It is not a scholar’s role to assert that the practice of protesting monks is inauthentic and undermines their religious status. Further, we must relinquish the view that modern Buddhism has undergone a form of protestantization that has relegated religious activity to the private domain of civil society. Instead, Buddhist sources of power engage in a moral discourse
within their social, political, and cultural contexts. Our scholarly premise must acknowledge the public role of a Theravada Buddhist discourse in such contexts. These conceptual shifts enable scholars to appraise critically their own intellectual genealogies and produce new readings of modern Buddhist conjunctures.

The sociologist Max Weber posited that Buddhism was inherently “otherworldly” and hence not capable of becoming a social force similar to Protestant ethics that propelled the rise of capitalism in modern Europe. Weber’s categorization relied on the work of the nineteenth-century indologist, Max Müller and was very influential in the late twentieth century, when many theories about Theravada Buddhist cultural practices, institutions, and societies explicitly referenced his work. Indeed, Weber’s work continues to be invoked at many junctures in the study of Theravada societies and his influence has been noted in a number of recent studies by, among others, Choompolpaisal, Gellner, Keyes, and Kitiarsa. In light of such influential work, I offer in the chapters that follow a critique of the Weberian premise of Buddhist otherworldliness and propose an opposite point of departure, namely, that Buddhist conceptions and practices are intimately tied to conceptions of political power in social, economic, and political realm. If such critique of Weber is innovative by any measure, it is perhaps in the consistent reminders to readers of the ramifications the Weberian premise harbors for our understanding of Theravada social and cultural practices and the need to evaluate critically our received genealogies of knowledge.

This study engages thematic intersections of modernity from the disciplinary perspectives of anthropology, religious studies, and history. I do not present an exhaustive chronology but seek to illuminate instead particular conjunctures of Buddhism and civil society that highlight modern tensions. The chapters draw on several periods of ethnographic fieldwork I conducted since 1981 in Mandalay, Yangon, and Bagan and profile cultural and historical locations at which some forms of knowledge open access to power, while other bodies of knowledge lose relevance in the political context of their time.

**Summary of Chapters**

Chapter 1 illustrates the impact of Buddhist reforms on the affairs of the state and its public policy during the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, when new empires formed that were modeled after the classical polities of Southeast Asia. Contrary to Weber’s characterization of Buddhism as otherworldly, the cultural practices of the court were, in fact, at once religious and political. The court’s construction of authority through Buddhist reforms was central to its
hegemony. Religious reforms centralized the power of the court and produced a discourse of the Buddhist “other.” The polity affirmed its policies through ritual networks and a this-worldly economy of merit in which social status was linked to the practice of generosity. The culture at the court of the dhammarāja, the righteous ruler of the center, encouraged competition for power among hierarchically structured communities and mobilized various segments in the support of its agenda.

Chapter 2 explores the ways in which modernity was articulated as part of the colonial project following the three Anglo-Burmese Wars (1824–1826, 1852, and 1885). As the British established control over the territories of Lower and Upper Burma, colonialism became a herald of modernity that limited traditional cultural realities. After the annexation of Mandalay, the Burmese experience of modernity was, in many ways, consonant with a rapid eclipse of traditional cultural values and lifeways, giving way to a sense of alienation from religious and cultural practices. The conceptual shifts of colonial modernity displaced traditional venues to power rooted in Theravada Buddhist belief and karmic practice. They profoundly transformed Burmese cultural institutions, religious authority, and the everyday lives of Buddhists and, during the nineteenth century, led to divergent regional developments in Lower and Upper Burma. In this way the widespread collapse of traditional institutions accelerated a restructuring of Burmese society and led to the rise of colonial forms of knowledge.

Chapter 3 examines the ways in which the Burmese encounter with modernity was informed by colonial knowledge and western education. Here, I investigate attempts by British colonizers and colonized Burmese to educate the “other” as part of a public discourse about the moral legitimacy of governance. While the impact of colonialism on monastic education was profound and tensions between western knowledge and Buddhist education still reverberate in the contemporary period, the history of Buddhist education in modernity is not a continuous narrative that offers neat distinctions and categorizations. Rather, it teaches us the disparate articulations of modern themes and their fragmented trajectories through time. The chapter highlights the debate about the place of Buddhist education in a modern public curriculum. As demand for colonial knowledge increased, Buddhist education was associated with the decline of a traditional Buddhist polity and with the sangha as a cultural institution. After independence, Buddhist literacy experienced a resurgence as Burmese intellectuals stressed the rationality of the Buddha dhamma as the foundation of modern science. Since then, various governments have employed monasteries to deliver basic education, especially in rural areas. While Burma is often said to maintain today a high degree of Buddhist learning among its monastic
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population, Buddhist education no longer retains the privileged status it commanded prior to the British presence.

Chapter 4 delineates the colonial project of constructing modern Buddhist identities. Colonial society, both Burmese and western, self-consciously sought to change traditional Buddhist practices and develop modern identities. These efforts were empowered by the growing influence of lay Buddhist associations, particularly the Young Men’s Buddhist Association (YMBA). Initially a social club for an elite group of western-educated young Burmese men, the YMBA intentionally modeled itself after the YMCA and began to mobilize a rapidly growing membership under the banner of a modern Burmese Buddhist identity. While the YMBA initially benefited from the support of the colonial government, it was unable to resolve internal challenges. At the height of its popularity, fragmentation set in after a large, national convention in Mandalay in 1919. The organization was soon overtaken by competing nationalist movements composed of anticolonial Buddhist traditionalists and later also secular nationalists.

Chapter 5 focuses on national politics as a form of Buddhist practice and underscores from yet another vantage point the conjunctures of Buddhism and politics. At issue are attempts by three governments after independence to control Buddhist institutions, doctrines, and practices. Their reforms included propagating Buddhism among tribal peoples living at the periphery of the state. During the U Nu government, the Sixth Buddhist Convocation or Sangāyana fostered utopian expectations of an imminent wheel-turning monarch (cakkavatti [P], setkyā min: [B]) and popularized meditation for the masses. The country’s economic progress was likened to the nation’s spiritual achievement of stages along the Eightfold Noble Path to Perfection. By contrast, Ne Win’s reforms disrobed influential monks to curtail their charismatic influence with powerful lay supporters. Unlike U Nu, whose ascetic practice was widely admired, Ne Win was seen as a superstitious, rather than religious, person. After the 1988 uprising, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) succeeded Ne Win and implemented extensive controls on monastic institutions. It also commissioned large-scale state rituals and sponsored the restoration of sacred sites. Through these efforts the state mobilized networks of Buddhist donors throughout the nation as supporters of the state in order to enhance its own power in the absence of a national constitution between 1988 and 2008. Many members of the sangha were silenced, and lay assistants were assigned to them to manage their money, travel, and activities. The surveillance extended particularly to young monks, many of whom had participated in the 1988 uprising.

By contrast, chapter 6 chronicles a genealogy of Buddhist resistance against the state and describes how modern movements employed Buddhist
practices to resist the power of the state. In precolonial times, monks defied royal authority on occasion by eluding the king’s summons and taking up solitary practice in the forest. But the kind of civil disobedience and government boycott anticolonial monks organized during in the 1920s and 1930s differed from earlier forms of dissent and the popular anti-British sentiments they created. Activist monks encouraged their lay supporters in public sermons to boycott imported goods and use only local products. Their popularity grew further through the grassroots mobilization by organizations such as the YMBA, the General Council of Burmese Associations (GCBA), and the General Council of Sangha Sammeggi (GCSS).

Chapter 7 examines the events of September 2007, the most recent instance of monastic resistance against the state, and delineates fault lines in the contestation between the sangha and the military. Amidst a widening economic disparity, the sangha has challenged the state with moral and ritual sanctions against the military junta. As the only cultural institution surviving colonial rule, the sangha has used its moral authority as political leverage and promotes socially engaged Buddhism, human rights, civil society, and democratic practices in Myanmar. Globalization and its economic demands for sources of energy have ultimately upheld the regime despite a commonly held view of the junta as internal colonizers who have benefited from extracting the country’s resources at the cost of national development. The chapter concludes with interrogating the Burmese and academic uses of the notion of “political monks” and shows that this designation is itself a product of a colonial hegemonic discourse.

Chapter 8 recapitulates the trajectories of Buddhist modernity in order to draw the reader’s attention to potential Buddhist futures in Myanmar. In doing so, I conclude that the tensions of modernity remain unresolved and confine moral visions of the future within the limitations of a colonial past. Myanmar’s elites have yet to come to terms with half a century of totalitarian rule and the role Buddhism has played in that history. Global realities have also helped determine the options for the future through patterns of energy consumption and through access to digital-knowledge economies. These factors increase the likelihood of continued Buddhist contestations and calls for renewed social engagement and relevance in the future.