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The Role Of Theravāda Buddhism In Shaping Early Myanmar Kingdoms

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Abstract: The role played by Theravāda Buddhism in influencing the formation of early Myanmar kingdoms is a significant chapter in its history, affecting not only religious aspects but also political, cultural, and social patterns. This study examines the emergence and dissemination of Theravāda Buddhism in Myanmar, as well as its contribution to the development of early states, notably the Pagan Empire. The advent of Theravāda Buddhism in the 11th century, with the conversion of King Anawrahta of Pagan, marked a turning point in the first unit of the native monotheistic tradition, which became the state religion and paved the way for subsequent developments in governance (Luce 112; Htin Aung 145). Royal support of the religion contributed to the establishment of temples, monasteries, and significant pagodas, which were physical manifestations of religious piety and royal places of worship. Legal codes, social hierarchies, and education were also influenced by Buddhism, whose monastic institutions served as centres of learning and cultural preservation. The paper examines the impact of Theravāda Buddhism on the political strategies of early Burmese Kings, on the reinforcement of social unity and on cultural contacts with neighbouring territories. Faced with obstacles, such as opposition from local traditions and other competing kingdoms, Theravāda Buddhism endured and became a significant influence in Myanmar's history and legacy as a Buddhist country. This character still resonates with me to this very day.

Keywords: Theravāda Buddhism, Pagan Kingdom, King Anawrahta, Monasteries and Education, Buddhist Architecture, Cultural Legacy

Introduction:

Ancient Burma, also known as Early Burma, is part of the extensive Burmese history. A diverse range of cultures has existed within this Southeast Asian country since the emergence and decline of kingdoms, all of which have significantly contributed to the political, cultural, and religious development of the region. The process of “centralization” was also two-pronged in that it enabled the development of economy and trade, and then, through trade, Buddhism (Hudson). Theravāda Buddhism was one of the most profound transforming influences in the history of ancient kingdoms; it also dramatically altered religion, politics, society, and culture in each of the affected regions.

Theravāda Buddhism, also known as the “Teaching of the Elders,” is one of the oldest surviving Buddhist schools. It places a heavy emphasis on becoming enlightened through meditation and leading a monastic life, in contrast to Mahayana Buddhism. Compared to other orders of Buddhism, Theravāda encourages intellectual and personal enlightenment through meditation, morality, and the study of ancient texts. Its teachings influenced the social and political institutions of countries such as those in Southeast Asia, including Cambodia, Thailand, and Laos, to varying degrees. Some of these countries became Theravāda Buddhist strongholds, to the point where opposition to the Theravāda doctrine was viewed as heretical.

In this article, the influence of Theravāda Buddhism on the early Myanmar kingdoms is examined, particularly during the Pagan period (11th-13th centuries), when Buddhism solidified its position as the state religion. At the centre of this investigation, we find the conversion of the Pagan King Anawrahta, which led to a sustained fusion of Buddhism with politics and culture in Myanmar (Luce 112; Htin Aung 145). The paper will examine how Theravāda Buddhism influenced governance, social structures, and artistic creativity in early Myanmar, thereby exerting a lasting impact on the country's history. In doing so, we attempt to gain an understanding of how Buddhism came to shape the identity of modern Myanmar as a Buddhist nation.

Aim of the Article:

The role of Theravāda Buddhism in shaping early Burma, and in the Pagan Empire during the 11th and 13th centuries, has been a constant aspect of Burmese history and culture. The article aims to emphasize how the arrival of Theravāda Buddhism, as it emerged from India and was adopted by key rulers in Myanmar, became one of the most important factors in shaping not only the political, social, and cultural life of the area.

The central theme of this article is the conversion of Pagan King Anawrahta to Theravāda Buddhism, one of the most significant events in Burmese history (Luce 112; Htin Aung 145). Through exploring the reasons for Anawrahta's promotion of Buddhism as a state religion, this paper seeks to illustrate how Theravāda Buddhism offered a religious and legal model that could serve to enhance Anawrahta's supremacy, unify the many different races of the Pagan Kingdom, and justify his power. It will examine how Buddhism, sponsored by kings, influenced the rule of law, royal dominance, and foreign relations with other lands.

Furthermore, this article aims to examine the social and cultural impact of the spread of Buddhism in early Myanmar. Key indicators of this transformation are the creation of monastic institutions, the dissemination of Buddhist educational concepts, and the development of religious monuments, including pagodas and stupas (Reynolds and Swearer 212). These various cultural and architectural innovations were undertaken to demonstrate the workings of royal authority and to consolidate the preeminence of a social order dominated by a Buddhist way of life and identity.

By examining these realms of engagement, the article aims to demonstrate that Theravāda Buddhism was not merely a religious discipline, but a profound influence on the development of early Burmese political formations, social institutions, and identity. Ultimately, it aims to illuminate not only the influence of Theravāda Buddhism on Myanmar's historical trajectory, but also its enduring impact on the country's identity as a Theravāda Buddhist state.

The Introduction of Buddhism to Myanmar

Buddhism is believed to have first penetrated Myanmar during the early centuries through the exchange of religious and cultural values from neighbouring India. These interactions were critical in shaping the spiritual landscape of Myanmar and ultimately contributed towards the mass prominence of Theravāda Buddhism. Contact between the two regions was facilitated in part by Myanmar's strategic location in relation to India, via trade routes connecting mainland Southeast Asia and the Indian subcontinent. Merchants and sailors, as well as scholars and other people bearing their ideas, crossed the Bay of Bengal, carrying with them commodities as well as ideological ideas, religious beliefs and philosophic teachings. The impact of Indian civilization was already felt at the time of the rise of Buddhism in the 3rd century BC. It was the time of the Buddhist Mauryan Emperor Ashoka, when the Buddha's message spread from India and became familiar throughout the Near East (Harvey 25). While Ashoka's efforts primarily targeted regions like Sri Lanka, evidence suggests that his missionary activities may have reached the early Pyu city-states in Myanmar.

Role of Missionaries and Traders in Spreading Buddhism

Missionary efforts played a crucial role in introducing Buddhism to Myanmar from the 5th century onward. Primitive Buddhist missions had probably been dispatched from India or Ceylon, the headquarters of the Theravāda Buddhist teaching. Buddhist scripture, iconography, and relics were shared throughout the region, and traders and monks introduced the practice to Indian traders. Monks also traversed the maritime trading

routes into Ceylon, Southeast Asia, and further east, including present-day Burma. These missionaries, most of whom were monks from the Sri Lankan and Mon spiritual traditions, were responsible for teaching the Dhamma and founding Buddhist monastic communities. (Gokhale 88)

Palembang. The traders who travelled from India to the Burmese coast played a significant role in the exchange of material goods between the Indian subcontinent and the Malay Archipelago, serving as cultural intermediaries. They introduced Buddhist thought, and the concepts slowly infiltrated the local belief systems. These farmers and merchants, who had turned to missionary work, settled in the area. They established monasteries and shrines that paved the way for Buddhism to become a significant religious influence in Burma. (Than Tun 77)

Influence of Mon Kingdoms in the Introduction of Theravāda Buddhism

Of the Mon kingdoms, the Thaton kingdom is believed to be one of the earliest that influenced the area that would become Myanmar (Aung-Thwin, *Mists of Ramanna*). The Mon people in the lower Irrawaddy region had strong cultural and curious ties with the Indian subcontinent, particularly during the spread of Buddhism from Sri Lanka. By the fifth century, Theravāda Buddhism and monasticism had been adopted in the Mon kingdom, and its culture and political philosophy revolved around the religion.

The Mon were instrumental in the introduction of Buddhism to the rest of what is now Myanmar. Theravāda Buddhism, the vehicle of salvation and enlightenment, is rooted in the Mon kingdom of Thaton, from whence it arrived in the 9th-century Pagan Kingdom (Aung-Thwin, *Mists of Ramanna*). Mon monks, and the sacred texts and relics they carried with them when exiled from Thaton, along with the dissemination of Theravāda teachings, is believed to have been among the early motivations for the Bagan kings to become involved with the Buddhist religion, particularly the unification of religious practices and establishing them as orthodox within the kingdom itself. This encounter between the Mon kingdoms and the beginning of the Burmese state is considered by many to have been the catalyst that turned the vast majority of the Mon people, including the Burmans themselves, into Theravāda Buddhists over the following two centuries, and put them on the path that would eventually lead to the formation of the Pugu state.

King Anawrahta, the most illustrious ruler in the historical annals of Myanmar, ascended the throne of Pagan from 1044 to 1077 A.D. (Luce 112; Htin Aung 145). He is responsible for reuniting much of what is now Myanmar. He would have overwhelmed the Pagan Kingdom, helping establish it as a dominant political and cultural presence in Southeast Asia. Before his rule, the area was composed of smaller, sometimes-warring, city-states, each with its own local traditions and religious practices. Pagan, an early city-state founded by the Burmans, is merely a small kingdom (a little over 30 square miles) lying along the Irrawaddy River, and was surrounded as well as divided by neighbouring co-ethnic Mon polities at that time.

During the reign of Anawrahta, the government was unified and underwent significant changes (Luce 112; Htin Aung 145). His general aim was to foster a political cohesion in his realm and a justification for his reign across such a diverse range of peoples. The king also sought to expand his kingdom and integrate indigenous traditions with those he promoted, so that they would form the foundation of Burmese culture and religion for many centuries to come.

The Conversion of Anawrahta and Its Significance

The acceptance of Buddhism by Anawrahta was an epoch-making event in the annals of Burma (Luce 112; Htin Aung 145). While Buddhism had been present in the area since the arrival of missionaries from India and Sri Lanka, it was not until this period that it was fully integrated into Pagan's cultural way of life. Initially, Anawrahta practised the traditional animist Burmese folk religion of his people. However, as his power increased and he sought to consolidate it, he realized that embracing Buddhism, notably the Theravāda Buddhism practised in Sri Lanka, could be a unifying factor in his kingdom.

The inspiration for Anawrahta's conversion was provided by the Mon people of the Thaton Kingdom, situated to the south of Pagan (Aung-Thwin, *Mists of Ramanna*). In 1057, after a battle, Anawrahta took Thaton, whose ruler had already accepted Theravāda as the state creed. The Mon had long been followers of Theravāda Buddhism, and the capital contained numerous monasteries and stupas (Buddhist relics). During the conquest,

Anawrahta first met Mon monks, who played a crucial role in his conversion. The conversion of Anawrahta to Theravāda Buddhism had far-reaching effects for both the king and the kingdom at Pagan.

Establishment of Theravāda Buddhism as the State Religion

After his conversion, Anawrahta established Theravāda Buddhism as the state religion, a politically formative move that would significantly shape Burma (Luce 112; Htin Aung 145). His decision to adopt Theravāda Buddhism had far-reaching and timely consequences. First, it assisted Anawrahta in solidifying his rule with a unifying ideology. His authority was underpinned by Buddhism, which reinforced his authority, casting him as a defender of the faith and a ruler whose legitimacy stemmed from a divine source.

Anawrahta's sponsorship of Buddhism was not only a matter of personal faith: it was a strategic and cultural move (Luce 112; Htin Aung 145). He assisted in the construction of Buddhist temples, stupas, and monasteries, which represented his power and his project for imposing a new religion. The most celebrated of these was the Shwezigon Pagoda, which remains one of Myanmar's iconic places of worship. Anawrahta also promoted the study and translation of Buddhist scriptures into the Burmese language, thus establishing Buddhism as a catalyst for cultural richness and spiritual backbone in the kingdom.

Moreover, Anawrahta invited monks from Sri Lanka to supervise Theravāda traditions and doctrines, which in turn guaranteed the purity of the religion (Luce 112; Htin Aung 145). These monks laid the foundation for a strong monastic tradition that this nation will enjoy for many centuries to come. By establishing Theravāda Buddhism as the state religion, Anawrahta maintained religious unity throughout his kingdom and laid the foundation for the integration of Buddhism into the national identity of Myanmar. This legacy is still a fundamental part of the country's culture and politics.

It can be concluded that King Anawrahta's conversion to Theravāda Buddhism marked a significant turning point in Myanmar's history, paving the way for Theravāda Buddhism to become deeply embedded in the political and cultural institutions of the Pagan Kingdom (Luce 112; Htin Aung 145). Through his royal patronage, Anawrahta established Buddhism as a unifying force that helped shape Myanmar's future spiritually and socially.

The Spread of Theravāda Buddhism in Other Early Kingdoms

The spread of Theravāda Buddhism in Myanmar was not exclusive to the Buton Kingdom. Still, it gradually came to include other early kingdoms, such as the Thaton Kingdom, and the regions adjacent to it (Aung-Thwin, *Mists of Ramanna*). With the success of Bagan, Buddhism took root in the area under King Anawrahta, influencing the region with its political, social, and cultural legacy, which is still evident in modern-day Myanmar.

Lower Burma also received the full impact of the religious influence of the Mon kingdom of Thaton and, of all the parts of the country, has probably, since the period of the Indian missions down to the present day, experienced most direct impulse from that civilization (Aung-Thwin, *Mists of Ramanna*). As noted, the Mon were the first of the Tais to adopt Theravāda Buddhism, primarily through Sri Lanka. Thaton and other Mon cities already had a tradition of Buddhist monasticism, and these places had some of the world's most well-known temples, stupas, and monastic schools.

King Anawrahta of Pagan conquered Thaton in 1057 and brought from there the Mon kingdom's Buddhist culture and literate civilization, including the Burmese script (Aung-Thwin, *Mists of Ramanna*). This script played a crucial role in the propagation of Theravāda Buddhism throughout Burma. It was not so much that Anawrahta's military conquest of Thaton was anything out of the ordinary as it was that with it, Buddhist practices, Buddhist sacred texts, and Buddhist monks were effectively integrated into the Pagan Kingdom.

Other early Myanmar polities also established quite open relationships with Buddhism, including the Pyu city-states and the areas of Chin and Shan (Hudson). Even though Theravāda Buddhism continued to make deep inroads in the Pagan and Mon areas, Buddhism was transmitted there through traders, monks, and pilgrims. In these kingdoms, the adoption of Buddhism was generally gradual, mainly due to the influence of the Pagan example, as well as the wandering religious leaders and teachers who travelled from place to place in these various regions.

The Establishment of Buddhist Monastic Systems and Institutions

As Theravāda Buddhism spread among the early kingdoms of Myanmar, it became necessary to develop the monastic system and the institutions required to facilitate the growth of the religion and the proper teaching of Buddhist doctrines. The Buddhist monasteries (vihara) were a principal institution in this regard, as they functioned as spiritual centres, as well as the point of focus for the exchange of learning, culture, art, and social intercourse. (Than Tun 77)

With the backing of King Anawrahta, monastic schools were established in Pagan and throughout the kingdom. Through these institutions, it became possible to guarantee the continuity of Buddhist practice while training new monks and transmitting knowledge of Buddhist scriptures and philosophy. Monasteries were also sponsors of charity and social welfare, serving as arcas and xenones (lit. counters and hostels), which provided food, accommodation, and healing to the destitute and outcast members of society. (Gokhale 88)

A notable characteristic of the spread of Theravāda Buddhism throughout early Burma was its relatively rapid adoption by the elite class of Burmese society. Kings and their noble followers took a keen interest in the protection and propagation of Buddhism as a means to establish and solidify their power and social harmony. Buddhism received royal backing and was adopted by the masses, both the rich and the poor.

Pagan Saw Lu's sponsorship of monumental Buddhist temples and pagodas, such as the Shwezigon Pagoda, attests to the monarchy's devotion to Buddhism in Pagan (Harvey 131). These were not only symbols of religious piety but of royal power and legitimacy. Kings and members of the aristocracy provided offerings to Buddhist monasteries, funded ordinations, and participated in religious observances, thereby binding their rule even more closely to the teachings of Buddhism.

Becoming Buddhist worshippers, the elites contributed to the dissemination of Buddhism to ordinary people. With the Buddhist rituals and customs accepted in royal courts and by nobles, it became a pattern for the entire society. Vegetarianism, alms giving, and participation in religious festivals became part of the mainstream culture and social life in ancient Burma.

In sum, the early historic spread of Theravāda Buddhism in Myanmar, especially to places such as Thaton and Pagan, was a living process that was carried out through the sponsorship of the kings, the creation of the infrastructure of monasticism and the strenuous participation of the elite (Aung-Thwin, *Mists of Ramanna*). Buddhism not only became the foundation of political legitimacy but also permeated the social and cultural life of the kingdom, laying the groundwork for its continued prominence in Myanmar's identity.

Construction of Temples, Pagodas, and Stupas as Symbols of Royal Authority

One of the most enduring legacies of the Theravāda Buddhist influence in Myanmar is the monolithic architecture, especially in the Pagan kingdom. With the adoption of Buddhism as the state religion, kings and aristocrats constructed a staggering variety of religious edifices, ranging from temples, pagodas, and stupas to monastic compounds that not only exemplified their devotion to the faith but also demonstrated their authority as leaders (UNESCO, "Bagan"). Monuments like these provided physical manifestations of royal power, frequently made on a lavish scale and decorated in elaborate detail to convey the king's legitimacy as a patron of Buddhism.

Religious architecture in Myanmar took a new direction under the Maungmagan period of the Pagan Kingdom with the patronage of King Anawrahta (Luce 112; Htin Aung 145). One of the most famous buildings erected during this time was the Shwedagon Pagoda, which remains one of Myanmar's most sacred locations. The Shwezigon Pagoda was constructed to house both the Buddha's relics and serve as a symbol of Anawrahta's spiritual and political authority. Its golden stupa, surmounted by an hti (umbrella), which is a characteristic of Burmese pagodas as well, was designed to symbolize the dominance of the monarchy over the Buddhist religion amidst a clampdown against Shwegugyi Miracular. On this millennial-old trail, miraculous and custodian events surrounding the relic occurred.

Apart from the Shwezigon, King Anawrahta built numerous temples and stupas in Pagan (Luce 112; Htin Aung 145). These structures were temples and the symbols of royal power. By sponsoring these building campaigns, the king was asserting the link between his political authority and role as the protector of

Theravāda Buddhism. The ornate and extensive decoration of these sites was developed to convey the power of both the kingdom and the faith.

The Development of Early Myanmar Buddhist Art and Iconography

The construction of stupas and temples also promoted the growth of early Myanmar Buddhist art, which combined local styles with imported Indian and Sri Lankan ideas (Schober, *Theravāda Buddhism* 57). Influences: Early Buddhist art in Myanmar shares similarities with the Indian Gupta style in portraying the Buddha and stories from his life. However, Burmese artists eventually developed a distinctive style, drawing on indigenous elements, and the country emerged as a uniquely Buddhist civilization.

One of the most distinctive features of early Myanmar Buddhist art is the representation of the Buddha's image in sculpture. Early Pagan statues of Buddha were typically crafted from stone or brick, and such statues often conveyed a passive and meditative quality, reflecting the Buddha's peaceful and transcendent nature. The Ananda Temple in Pagan, built during the reign of King Kyansittha, is renowned for its exquisite statues of the Buddha, which are classical in their idealized perfection and have become the typical standard in Burmese art.

Myanmar Buddhist iconography was present in the very temples, pagodas, and monasteries, as well as in the decorative arts (Than Tun 77). Temple walls were covered with complex murals, decorated carvings and statues depicting Buddhist fables and legends (like the Jataka tales [stories of the Buddha's past lives]). These works of art were not just ornaments; they also had a didactic purpose, providing infographics to a largely illiterate populace on the beliefs of Buddhism. The scenes from the life of the Buddha and from the lives of Gods and Devils were a very important part of the art, which made the Buddhist way of life alive and visible to ordinary people.

Impact of Buddhism on the Cultural and Architectural Legacy of Early Kingdoms

The legacy of Buddhism in the cultural and architectural life of early Myanmar was deep and lasting. The temples, stupas and monastic complexes constructed in the Pagan era formed the nucleus of religious and cultural life not only in subsequent periods, but also the artistic canopy under which all other art forms in later Myanmar drew their inspiration and styles, and from which emerged the religious and ideological imperatives which formed the basis of Myanmar's society, culture and political philosophies. These colossal monuments served as symbols of Myanmar's status as a Buddhist kingdom, and as a reminder that the monarchy and the people were united in their devotion to the Buddha.

The influence of these architectural developments is still felt today in contemporary Myanmar. Pagan's massive temples and pagodas came to define Burmese religious architecture, the clear lines and striking form of its dikke resembling the subsequent paradigmatic Burmese pagoda (UNESCO, "Bagan"). Later visual arts Although stupas (dome-shaped shrines) now dominate the Burmese landscape, the murals and sculptures developed during the Pagan period were also important. This and other visual arts would influence later styles, particularly the spread of Buddhist imagery, which remains a significant part of the country's cultural heritage.

In summary, the influence of early Theravāda Buddhism in Myanmar has had a profound impact on the country's architectural forms and artistic trends. Religion was used as a means to consolidate the monarchy's power by building massive temples, pagodas and stupas (UNESCO, "Bagan"). This period also witnessed the flourishing of Buddhist art and iconography, which would produce enduring cultural symbols. These architectural and artistic successes represented the victory of Buddhism in Myanmar. They became instruments of nation-making, which also testifies to how religion underpinned the early Myanmar kingdoms and how closely intertwined the relationships were between religion, politics, and culture.

Theravāda Buddhism's Influence on Social and Educational Systems

Theravāda Buddhism had a profound influence on early Myanmar society and education, affecting how religious rituals were practised, how social classes interacted, and how cultural ideals were shaped (Reynolds and Swearer 212). Buddhism, the religion of the Pagan Kingdom, is the link between Burmese culture and its earliest kingdoms, and later became a significant influence on Burmese law, religion, and social organization.

Early Burmese Buddhism emphasized a hierarchy that existed on both spiritual and worldly levels. At the upper levels of the social pyramid were the kings and aristocrats, who were viewed as the guardians of Buddhism here on earth. The royal office itself, as a Buddhist ruler, was thought to have been divinely invested and was integral to the preservation of social harmony and order. Below the royal and noble bloodlines, which held a certain standing in society, are the monks. Monks represented the spiritual leaders and guardians of religious wisdom, while also playing an essential role in advising rulers and upholding society's ethical standards. (Gokhale 88)

The commoners, too, followed a code of social conduct influenced by Buddhism. Buddhist moral precepts were emphasized, and spatial communities were established around Buddhist temples and monasteries, serving as the fundamental unit of social life (Than Tun 77). Feeding monks became a significant social ritual, fostering community spirit and bridging all social classes.

Monasteries as Centres of Education and Scholarship

Monasteries played a central role in early Myanmar's educational and intellectual life (Gokhale 88). Monasteries were places of religious practice and centres of literary, philosophical, and juridical study, only surpassed by the cathedral schools, regardless of not being places of episcopal anointing. Monks were the first educators in ancient Burma, instructing in Pāli grammar, religion, life, ethics and healing.

Monasteries in the Pagan Kingdom of the 11th century had effectively become finishing schools for the nobility. Buddhist texts such as the Pāli Canon were translated into Burmese, and monasteries were established as centres of learning and spiritual instruction. Monastic schools played a role in promoting literacy, as monks were called to serve rulers in administration, while laypeople were drafted for war or heavy labour (Gokhale 88). The ascetic tradition of scholarship helped preserve and promote Myanmar's literary heritage, influencing future generations of writers, scholars, and thinkers.

Influence on Literacy, Ethics, and Social Norms

Early Myanmar was nurtured by the teachings of Theravāda Buddhism, which played a crucial role in the rapid increase of literacy and the establishment of a moral compass in society. Pāli books, used in the Theravāda tradition, were a catalyst for the development of the written Burmese language. By Pagan times, literacy had extended to at least some of the individuals who were not monks (Than Tun 77). The custom of reading and reciting Buddhist scriptures also led to an intellectual culture of study and questioning.

All rigorously derived from first principles. I believe that Buddhism has made an ethical contribution to establishing social norms centred on compassion, nonviolence, and respect for all living beings. The Five Precepts of Buddhism, namely non-killing, non-stealing, celibacy (or monogamy), truthfulness, and abstention from intoxicants, are the ethical code of conduct by which members adhere for community living. These ethics influenced the behaviour of the royal family, the aristocracy, as well as the common people in Chinese society, and this ethics has formed a culture and a way of life based on an ethical sense of humanity.

Finally, Theravāda Buddhism had a significant impact on the social and educational order in early Myanmar (Reynolds and Swearer 212). Religion: Buddhism provided the key links to social hierarchy, education through monastic institutions, and morality through ethical norms. In their etchings, we can hear these primordial echoes that still reverberate in the social and educational systems of Myanmar.

The early propagation of Theravāda Buddhism in Burma was also not free from obstacles and friction, especially from both internal and external sources. Although Buddhism eventually became the dominant religion in the Pagan Kingdom, the process was not entirely smooth, as it was met with resistance from other religious factions, including non-Buddhists, rival kingdoms, and internal divisions within the Sangha itself.

Resistance from Non-Buddhist Factions and Rival Kingdoms

The change met with considerable resistance, led by indigenous animistic and non-Buddhist religious groups. In the frontier areas of Myanmar, many local populations practised beliefs in spirits, deities, and the worship of ancestors, which clashed with the non-theistic nature of Buddhism. Members of these sects were typically reluctant to convert, or they disparaged Buddhist tenets, thereby weakening their customary observance. They, as well as neighbouring states of the Khmer Empire, with its Mahayana state religion, and the Mon kingdoms, considered the rise of Theravāda Buddhism in Myanmar a threat to their own political power, as well as a deviation from the Buddhist teachings they had adopted from their empires within the subcontinent (Gokhale 88). The rivalries of these kingdoms, and at other times, the Pagan Kingdom, led to military and diplomatic fireworks, and competing polities often manipulated religion in the course of these political conflicts.

Domestic rivalry was also prevalent between the Buddhist clergy and the court. Not all members of the monastic community would agree on the application of Buddhism. Disagreements over exposition of aspects of doctrine are particularly prominent among the monastics, who frequently insist that they are the ones most qualified to interpret certain aspects of the Buddha's teachings. King Anawrahta's attempts to unify Burmese Buddhism with that of Sri Lankan Theravāda were resisted by local monks who followed various practices (Luce 112; Htin Aung 145). These tensions sometimes created friction between the monarchy and the clergy.

Conflicts with Other Forms of Buddhism and Local Traditions

Theravāda Buddhism similarly had to compete with other forms of Buddhism, including Mahayana, which was practised in the Southeast by the Khmer and the Mon (Gokhale 88). The rivalry within Buddhism caused doctrinal as well as political disputes. Moreover, the integration of folklore animistic beliefs with Buddhist religious practice was intended to create a more inclusive religious system. However, tensions and, at times, a holistic "syncretism" of sacred "non-lord" Buddhist elements within traditional religious rituals were often frequent.

Consequently, although Theravāda Buddhism came to prevail as the kingdom's principal religion, it encountered native religious resistance, competition from rival Buddhist traditions, and internecine conflict within the royal family and the Sangha during the course of its propagation. In the face of these obstacles, Buddhism ultimately became the dominant religious element in Myanmar, imprinting its social and cultural patterns on the country.

Discussion

The importance of Theravāda Buddhism, particularly during the Pagan period, in the formation of early Myanmar kingdoms is a complex and essential aspect of Myanmar's history. In this article, the main reasons for the acceptance of "country Buddhism religion, acceptance and influence of social structure and its architectural art, and education aspects were investigated (Reynolds and Swearer 212). It is equally crucial to examine the challenges and controversies as Theravāda Buddhism developed, its influence on national identity and culture, and the religious identity of Myanmar.

The 11th-century conversion of King Anawrahta of Pagan became a key turning point in Myanmar's history. Anawrahta's decision to be a convert Buddhist from conqueror to Thaton was not a mere religious switch, but a politically motivated change following the Ayeyarwady valley's sociopolitical norm (Aung-Thwin, *Mists of Ramanna*). Through the establishment of Theravāda Buddhism as the state religion, Anawrahta attempted to unify an entire population under a single religion and moral authority. Such a policy both enforced his dominion there and gave him an opportunity to gain the approval of his new subjects and to legitimize his rule among neighbouring countries. Kyanzittha's religious extension on pagodas and temples, notably the construction of the Shwezigon Pagoda, indicated his authority and role as a defender of the faith.

Meanwhile, the impact of Buddhism on the early Myanmar kingdoms extended beyond the court. The penetration of Theravāda Buddhism into other areas, such as the Mon kingdoms, facilitated the creation of a common religious and cultural identity throughout the region (Gokhale 88). Monastic establishments were the focal point of spiritual, educational, intellectual and social life. These constituted important agents for literacy and the study of Buddhist texts, supporting the rise of a literate and moral society. This monastery-

based system of education, which focused on the study of Buddhist scriptures and ethics, shaped the intellectual and moral character of the population and fostered a learning culture rooted in respect for Buddhist teachings.

“Spreading” Theravāda Buddhism was, however, not unproblematic: such an act was also met with difficulties and conflict, as the article reveals. One of the major impediments was local animistic customs and rival religious traditions (indigenous or from neighbouring kingdoms). The conquest of the Mon kingdom and Pagan’s subsequent rule of present-day Burma is remembered as a period of reform and integration into the Buddhist world, as well as conflict between traditional piety and reformist Theravāda currents (Gokhale 88). In addition, the expansion of Buddhism was probably not without its complications within Myanmar, where Gruenler argues that we can surmise from evidence in the monastic register that a certain amount of division concerning questions of orthodoxy and the interpretation of Buddhist teachings was taking place within the monastic community. King Anawrahta’s attempts to align Burmese Buddhism with the Theravāda Buddhism of Sri Lanka, however, occasionally put him at odds with local customs and monastic practices, resulting in splits within the Sangha.

Buddhism’s reception was further blemished by the rivalry with other types of Buddhism, including Mahayana Buddhism, which had popularity in the neighbouring Khmer Empire. The rivalry extended to religious matters and had political ramifications, as the rulers in the region sometimes used religion to assert their legitimacy and challenge the power of surrounding kingdoms.

Despite—or perhaps because of—this, the lasting influence of Buddhism on Burma was profound. Massive Buddhist temples, pagodas, and stupas were constructed, and Buddhist art flourished, leaving a lasting legacy in both architecture and culture. These religious monuments represented not only the king’s power but also the consolidation of Burma under a common spiritual framework. The stylistic conventions developed in these years blended influences from Indian, Sri Lankan, and native styles to form the basis of Burmese Buddhist art at once indigenous and foreign (Schober, *Theravāda Buddhism** 57)

Furthermore, Buddhism’s deep integration into early Myanmar’s social and educational systems laid the groundwork for a society that valued education, ethics, and moral conduct. Monasteries became centres of education, where literacy was promoted, and ethical norms were taught, shaping the social and cultural values of the population (Gokhale 88). Moreover, to be sure, the deep penetration of Buddhism into the social and educational institutions of early Myanmar meant that the elements of a society that, in many respects, treasured learning, ethics, and good behaviour also existed. Monasteries served as institutions that promoted literacy and, through the rule of law and order, passed on the values of society to the population.

Buddhist ethics significantly influenced social behaviour by promoting kindness, nonviolence, and the protection of life. Conclusion Although the dissemination of Theravāda Buddhism of early Myanmar was fraught with challenges, it was shaped by powerful influences on the region’s political, social, and cultural scene. Buddhism’s undeniable impact on Myanmar’s monumental architecture, social norms, and current religious and cultural identity is evident throughout the country’s landscape today. The early Burmese were an amalgam of many peoples. Still, the new Theravāda Buddhist religion unified them into a nation and provided an ideological and moral basis for Buddhist society.

Conclusion

Early Myanmar kingdoms were essentially a Theravāda Buddhist state, and it shaped the Pagan Empire, the first ever unification of the Irrawaddy valley and its periphery (including the modern Shan State). A significant development in the 11th century was King Anawrahta’s religious conversion to Theravāda Buddhism; Theravāda also became the state religion. This Theravāda firmly established the king’s power and paved the way for the integration of Buddhism into Myanmar’s social, political, and cultural fabric. By building temples, pagodas and monasteries, Buddhism represented royal authority and facilitated a common cultural perspective among the populace. Monasteries dotted the landscape, drawing local people and monks to obtain an education in literacy, ethics, and Buddhist philosophy, thereby shaping social mores, daily life, and the community. (Gokhale 88)

The influence of Buddhism in Myanmar's culture, language, politics and national identity is so significant that some historians have compared the role of the Sangha in Myanmar to that of the Communist Party of China in China. Buddhism played an essential role in the unification of the kingdom and in establishing a moral and ethical framework within the monarchy. It was also instrumental in the development of Burmese architecture and artistic styles, the latter of which includes monumental and distinctive pagodas, as well as the reliquary sculpture and painting of standing and seated Buddha images (UNESCO, "Bagan"). The tradition of Buddhist monasticism played a significant role in providing the intellectual and social foundation for the continuity of culture across numerous generations.

The enduring impact of early Buddhist settlers remains widespread in present-day Myanmar, where the practising Theravāda Buddhist tradition still dominates the country's culture and has created a collective national identity, even during the past eras of military dictatorships and British colonialism. — Buddhist structures remain the focus of daily life, and Buddhist principles retain their influence on social relations and morality. Utilization of Buddhism as a realm of national identity. Despite the vicissitudes and conflicts throughout its long history, Buddhism has become an integral part of Myanmar's national identity, as it constitutes a significant aspect of the country's culture, as well as a cornerstone of national integrity.

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