

Modern Buddhist Conjunctures in Myanmar: Cultural Narratives, Colonial Legacies, and Civil Society. By Juliane Schober. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011. 207 pp.

Schober's book is another welcome addition to a number of recent publications that have examined Myanmar/Burma's modern religious and political trajectories in an attempt to learn from its past and foresee future directions. The book comprises eight chapters that engage with Myanmar's modern history from the precolonial period in the seventeenth century right up to the event marked by the uprising of Buddhist monks in the country in September 2007. By means of historical enquiry and sociological analyses drawing from previous works of Western scholarship, Schober unravels the tension brought upon the country as a result of colonialism, nationalism, modernity, and secularism.

Chapter 1 examines Buddhist institutional structures that informed the political discourse in precolonial kingdoms. The discussion draws on Tambiah's model of galactic polities and describes how the cycle of rituals and religious exchanges affirmed the positions of regional subjects, consolidating the hegemonic power of royal courts. The following chapter describes how modernity was articulated as part of the colonial project. Schober sees "colonial modernity" to have instigated the widespread collapse of traditional cultural institutions, eroding the Buddhist monastic authority and leading to a profound restructuring of Myanmar society. Chapter 3 follows on this idea and examines the attempts made by colonizers to educate the "other". In this discussion Schober juxtaposes Western knowledge and traditional monastic education, focusing particularly on the debate about the place of Buddhist education in an increasingly secular society. As in Chapter 2, Chapter 3 also discusses the ways in which colonial rule introduced secular structures through which Buddhism's traditional role as legitimator of power was eclipsed under the growing influence of the modern state.

In the following chapter, Schober focuses on “modern Buddhist communities” such as the YMBA (Young Men’s Buddhist Association) and how their emergence appealed to urban intellectuals, “who longed for spiritual renewal at a time of disenchantment with modern society and a perceived loss of national identity and religious values” (p. 66). She saw members forging rational Buddhist identities and transnational connections, which contributed to further development of Buddhist rationalism. Among the middle class, the construction of such modernist Buddhist identity was one way of responding to the colonial reality, although this new identity was becoming submerged under the waves of Burmese nationalism.

Chapter 5 examines the attempts made by successive regimes to “infuse political ideologies” with Buddhist meaning as they tried to control the sangha while enhancing their political legitimacy. In order to realize their respective visions of nationhood, Prime Minister U Nu instituted Buddhism as the state religion to enhance unity in the Union of Burma, which however had the reverse effect, while General Ne Win was more intent on controlling the monks’ revenue sources to curb the millennial potential in the country. Both the SLORC (State Law and Order Restoration Council) and SPDC (State Peace and Development Council) regimes are seen by Schober to have promoted a far more totalizing vision of Buddhist nationalism, and especially in the absence of the national constitution between 1990 and 2008, the state actively appropriated the *sāsana* (Buddha’s dispensation) to impose their notion of Buddhist nationalism in the era of “Myanmarsization” (p. 91).

Chapter 6 examines various expressions of resistance to the modern Myanmar state, and Buddhist identities are seen to have assumed a core role in mobilizing resistance against the colonial government as well as expressing opposition to the state after independence. Schober argues that the 1988 uprising, in particular, was seen as a “defining moment” in Myanmar’s post-independence history, and describes how monks and students emerged as an oppositional force:

“Monks provided logistical support for widespread antigovernment mobilization, relayed information through an internal monastic network, and even stepped up to administer some judicial and civil infrastructure” (p. 107). At this juncture, Schober deliberates on the moral vision of Aung San Suu Kyi, described to have derived from “a modern, rational Buddhist ethic in which the moral conduct of the state, social justice, and the material and spiritual welfare of individuals and families are closely linked to issues of participatory democracy, human rights, and dignity” (p. 111). Her messages cast in post-Enlightenment liberal idioms seem to appeal to the Western audience including Schober herself who upholds Aung San Suu Kyi as a beacon of moral authority. In Chapter 7, the author chronicles the events of the Buddhist resistance in 2007 known in the West as the “Saffron Revolution”, but the treatment of the sequence of events is rather sketchy and could have engaged more deeply with the range of vernacular materials that has become available on the Internet following the event.

One of the main issues the book raises is the cross-cultural translationability of many of the terms frequently used: conjuncture, disjuncture, genealogy, secularism, discourse, paradigm, and so on. It questions how much these English terms help in understanding the events and historical trajectories in the contexts of Myanmar history, since they add another layer of Western pedagogical categories and assumptions on the social reality and alienate the majority of the non-English speaking population in Myanmar from the debates about their own past, present, and future. More references to primary source materials and “cultural narratives” in the vernacular language would have helped to open up the discussion and rectify the imbalance between Myanmar’s socio-political realities and the outside world’s perception of them. Moreover, the implication of the key term “conjuncture”, a notion taken from David Scott’s work (p. 183), remains unclear throughout, although it may have been juxtaposed with another term: “disjuncture”. This term, however,

seems to contradict another key word; “genealogy”, since it is difficult to imagine that some kind of symbolic valuable has been passed down should there have been numerous disjunctures in people’s collective memory.

Following this, I question whether Myanmar’s colonial experience, as described by Schober, could be reduced to a simplistic account of “cultural disintegration” that resulted in drastic social disjuncture and the subsequent marginalization of the sangha. In other words, it is doubtful whether the colonial rule penetrated that deep especially in rural upcountry where village associations and regional channels continued to operate often mediated by influential monks and their groups of lay followers. If the encounter with colonial modernity had such a significant impact on Myanmar society, eroding the traditional religious authority and the political culture, as suggested by the author, I wonder why successive governments have found the monastic community so difficult to control and its social influence impossible to harness. One of the problems in her analysis could have stemmed from observing the sangha as a top-down institution (as shown in the description of events following the loss of the *thathanabain*’s authority, pp. 37–38) rather than as a religious community, which is comprised of an intricate web of teachers and students, a network of monastic alumni and friends, and an interdependent relationship between lay benefactors and monastic beneficiaries — operating as a vibrant social network long before the advent of the Internet. Although monks and nuns in Myanmar do not have civil rights in the constitution, monastic members (amounting to one per cent of Myanmar’s population) have continued to assume pivotal roles in public life and the sangha has offered alternative channels to those of the state.¹

The last chapter, titled “potential futures”, written some time before the general elections in 2010 will no doubt have to be rewritten in view of Myanmar’s new reformist directions, democratization, Aung San Su Kyi’s active political participation, and the country’s shift away

from China and towards other important players in the regional and international community. Additionally, the increasing “democratizing forces of the digital information age” (p. 153) will have to be taken into account, lending to a more informed and meaningful debate about Myanmar’s future trajectories.

NOTE

1. It seems misleading to suggest that civil society in Myanmar is weak or nonexistent (p. 149).

HIROKO Kawanami