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Keynote: The Myth of “Splendid Isolation”

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Thank you for honouring me as keynote speaker for this marvellous occasion, especially since it is an international conference being held in Myanmar Pyi, and of all places, at Pagan. I could not have imagined as a *Yangon tha* (“son of Yangon”) growing up in Yan Kin (and South India) that one day I would be back to give such a keynote address. That reminds me of the time when I was a young lad in Yan Kin during *thingyan*, when people would build floats, and go around town reciting the poetry they had composed in front of judges who gave them scores for originality and “importance”. Much of the poetry was social satire. I remember a few stanzas of one of these composed by nearby high school students:

ရန်ကင်းမြို့မှာ နေ့အခါ၊ ရေ မလာလို၊ ချွေး တလုံးလုံး၊
သုံးထပ်၊ လေးထပ် အခန်းတွေ၊ အခက်ပေါတာ၊ ထက်လိုက်ဆင်းလိုက်၊
Duplex က ဆရာတွေ၊ ပန်းပင်တွေကာ ရေတရွဲရွဲ။

That’s all I remember. For those who don’t know Burmese, much will be lost in translation because of the metre, rhyme and context. But let me try anyway:

At Yan Kin in summer, with no running water, beads of sweat,
 Three- and four-storey apartments, difficult to go up and down,
 The *sayas* in the Duplexes, their flowers are awash with water.

So, it is indeed an honour, from Yan Kin *cha teik* (young whippersnapper) to keynote speaker. Now, to bite the hand that feeds me.

The conference premise states: "It has often been the case that the history of the ancient cities of Myanmar has been examined in splendid isolation, without sufficient reference to their external links", and so "it is this aspect of regional and broader connectivities of Myanmar polities which we hope to underline through this conference". The conference will attempt to produce an "overview of the relations between historical Myanmar polities and other Mainland Southeast Asian political and cultural centres, including those of the Tai, Thai, Mon and Khmer, as well as with the polities of India, China and maritime Southeast Asia ... [to] ... examine the external linkages of the major Myanmar polities and their urban centres prior to the 16th century".

I have no quibble with the *goals* of the conference and its attempts to demonstrate these external linkages. But I do have a quibble with the *premise* that the study of Myanmar's ancient cities has been done in "splendid isolation".

First of all, since the period under discussion extends to the 16th century, it includes not only the earlier cities of the so-called "Pyu period" but later ones such as Pagan, Inwa, Bago, Muttama and Toungoo, all predating the 16th century. The contention, therefore, is that all these cities have been examined in "splendid isolation". Second, and perhaps the more important aspect of my quibble, there is the question of what we mean when we say "city". I don't want to debate whether or not a city is orthogenetic or heterogenetic and all that John Miksic has to say about that subject, just to ask the following: Are we referring *only to the physical entity* outlined by its brick walls? Or does the word "city" include the "stuff" inside it? Are we talking about just the "box", or the "contents" of the box as well?

I can't imagine that by "city" all we mean is the "box" and not its "contents": the peoples, the languages, the products (such as literature, art, artefacts, architecture), the conceptual system including notions of power, legitimacy and authority, along with the symbolic dimensions of the city itself. How can one talk about the city of Pagan, for instance, without talking about its rulers, its people, its art and architecture, its

symbolic dimensions, its wealth and power, its political and cultural role, its significance to the country’s history? All these are legitimate parts of the discussion, so the question is whether they too have been examined in “splendid isolation”? My answer is for the most part, “no”, with an important exception which I’ll get to later. The issue is thus much broader, so that the premise of the conference must be expanded to deal not only with the city per se but the “stuff” inside the city as well.

The Myth

If one looks at the existing scholarship, both in terms of the *periods* under discussion — pre-historic, urban, classical, and early modern — as well as in terms of the *disciplines* that have contributed to the study of those periods — archaeology, epigraphy, history, anthropology, art history, and so on — it is clearly *not true* that Myanmar’s urban history has been examined in “splendid isolation”. Scholarship on Myanmar’s Palaeolithic and Neolithic cultures, its bronze and iron civilizations (relevant here because they provided the very foundations of our “ancient cities”), the urban civilization that followed (here we get the true “city”, best represented by Pagan, Ava, Bago and Toungoo) have *not* been studied in “splendid isolation”. On the contrary, nearly all the scholars who have dealt with these latter cities and the “stuff” inside them have been quite cognizant of the larger context in which they existed. Let us take a look at the work done on the subject heretofore.

There’s no reason not to begin with scholars such as Thilawuntha, U Kala and Twinthin, the three most influential and important chroniclers of the pre-colonial era. Although admittedly not focused just on the city, note that only about ten per cent of Thilawuntha’s *Yazawinkyaw* is about Myanma Pyi; the rest is about his understanding of the “holy land” — in this case, Buddhist South Asia. Not only was it *not written* in isolation, his work actually gave “agency” to the *external*, not the *internal* world. It is true that U Kala’s *Mahayazawingyi* is primarily about Myanma Pyi. But then, that was his subject matter; he chose to write about it. Even then, he was very much influenced by Sri Lanka’s *vamsa* tradition; in fact, the title of his work was taken from the *Mahavamsa*, while his long prologue dealt with Buddhist mythology. When he got to the actual history of Myanmar he was always cognizant of the kingdoms, countries and peripheral areas surrounding Myanma Pyi, using over seventy different texts, some of them representing these regions. China was always in the story, as were Siam

and Cambodia, and in terms of religion and culture, Buddhist South Asia and Sri Lanka were the models par excellence. As for Twinthin, it is true that his section on Buddhist South Asia and its linkages to Myanmar are very short, while most of his work is on Myanmar itself, hence his original title, *Myanma Yazawinthat* — NOT *Mahayazawinthat*. I don't want to get into a debate here over whether it was originally titled *Myanma Yazawinthat* or *Maha Yazawinthat*; but, like U Kala's work, his subject matter focused on the country deliberately. In other words, if you *choose* to write about the American Civil War, I can't really criticize you for not including European history, can I?

Beyond these early indigenous historians, if you glance at the 19th-century *Pitakat Thamaing*, which represents many different scholars and generations, and its 2047 distinct titles, you will find in the list treatises about regional states and cities: Ayudhaya, Chiangmai, Sri Lanka, India and China. Then, if you look at the list of manuscripts microfilmed by Kagoshima University in the early 1970s — particularly those that were not included in the *Pitakat Thamaing* — you will find accounts written by indigenous scholars of Portugal, Italy, France, and even Iran.¹ How many people in Southeast Asia at the time even knew that such a place as Iran existed, let alone write about it? To me, that these works were even written suggests that the outside world was not unknown or ignored by Myanmar scholarship. And this attitude continued during the late 19th and 20th centuries as well. Let's look at the latter, which I will organize around the periods that they represent in Myanmar's history.

Prehistory

The late 19th and early 20th-century geologists and prehistorians (Fritz Noetling, G.E. Grimes, E.H. Pascoe, G. Cotter, D.L. Stamp, E.I.C. Clegg, P. Evans, C.A. Samson, and Chhibber, along with the more famous Movius, de Terra, T.O. Morris, and Anderson) had linked (rightly or wrongly) both Myanmar's geologic periods and Stone Age sites (precursors to, and foundations of, our "ancient cities") and their artefacts (the "stuff" inside the cities) to regions outside Myanmar: particularly Africa, Europe, India, China, and Southeast Asia while using external periodization schemes: Palaeolithic, Neolithic, Chalcolithic. The use of such terms in itself shows that these authors did not assess the data in isolation. It's true that they gave agency to Europe, particularly von Heine-Geldern who theorized that bronze was brought to Southeast Asia by Europeans via China and

Vietnam. But whether they were right or wrong is not at issue; rather, whether the scholarship was done in isolation.

This pattern of looking at the larger context was continued by local scholars like U Myint Aung and U Aung Thaw in their works on Myanmar’s geology and prehistory, along with those of Wilhelm G. Solheim II in the 1960s. More specifically, domesticated agriculture, pottery and bronze artefacts were linked to Spirit Cave, Hoa Binh, Dong Son, Arikamedu, Ban Chiang, and other places in South and Southeast Asia. Subsequently, and more recently, Bob Hudson and the late Pam Gutman connected the Myanmar “Neolithic” in Western Myanmar with the rest of Southeast Asia. In fact, they wrote their chapter as part of a general volume on prehistory of the region, linking these cultures in Myanmar to what was also found in the rest of the region. Even the late Than Tun, who was not a prehistorian, in the earlier chapters of his *Nay Hle Yazawin* made similar, broader connections between what was in the country and what was outside.

Early History

In terms of early history — that is, the era just prior to the true Urban Period with the “Pyu” — U Win Maung and Elizabeth Moore continued this way of looking at internal things with external references by placing Myanmar’s “River Valley Civilizations” in a broader context, particularly when they dealt with the metal cultures of the Samon, Mu, Irrawaddy, Chindwin, Sittaung and Thanlwin. There is a clear realization in their work, especially that of the Samon River Valley Civilization, not only that it had cultural ties to the Dian Culture of Yunnan but that they were also pre-Buddhist. (Both are very important conclusions, providing the rest of us the wherewithal to pursue it even further with our own scholarship.) The evidence that they gathered — beads, bronze and iron weapons and implements, pottery shards, stone and metal figurines — reminds us of many other sites in Southeast Asia — so that *even without an explicit statement about linkages* to external regions, the evidence they provided itself did the linking that was far from being done “in splendid isolation”.

Urban Period

When we get to the Urban Period proper (what we call the “Pyu period”, let’s say the thousand years between the last half of the millennium BCE and the first half of the millennium CE), the scholarship remains

aware of external studies. Most scholars who have researched this culture and period were cognizant of what was happening in especially South India and Sri Lanka — particularly the sites of Nagarjunakonda and Polonnaruwa. U Aung Thaw showed these connections, as did Janice Stargardt, not to mention several before either of them: Blagden, Duroiselle, Ray, Taw Sein Ko, U Tha Mya, and Luce. In more recent years we have Paul Wheatley and once again the late Pamela Gutman's thesis on Arakan and Bob Hudson's on the Pyu, and Elizabeth Moore and U Win Maung's works of the same period. And don't forget our younger and newer, in-country scholars like Maung Maung Swe, Htwe Htwe Win, U Myo Nyunt Aung, U Kyaw Lat, amongst others; they all dealt with this period as well. All their works are cognizant of the entire region of Asia and beyond; some more, some less. Are you telling me that all of the above worked in "splendid isolation"?

In short, the period from the Stone and Metal Ages settlements to the early urban age in Myanmar has seen many scholars who have been quite aware of the cultures around Myanmar and have not been as parochial as implied. Let's now investigate the historical phases.

"Classical" and Early Modern Periods

When we get to the "classical" and "Early Modern Periods", realization of Myanmar's external context was not only continued but accelerated. The ancient cities, especially Pagan, along with the "stuff" it contained, were rarely examined without the context that was India. Everyone who has written on Pagan, from some of the first colonial writers (such as Henry Yule and Michael Symes) to Phayre, Taw Sein Kho, Duroiselle, Blagden, Chen Yi Sein, G.H. Luce, invariably had India, China and (even if wrongly) Europe in mind, not only in their explicit analyses but also in their general conclusions. This is particularly true of the art historiography of these sites. Now, whether the studies were mainly accurate or not is, once again, *not* at issue; it is whether they saw little or nothing beyond Myanmar Pyi, conceptually and empirically.

Let us examine in greater detail just a few of those external influences concerning one of those cities: the ground plans, vaulting techniques and symbolism of the Pagan temples. That question (the ground plans and vaulting) has vexed art historians since the beginning, with travellers like Henry Yule, whose sentiments were articulated by his travelling companion,

a Mr Oldham. They thought that the ground plan of the four-sided Pagan temples (such as the Ananda) represented a Greek Cross, so to them it suggested Christian influences in the design. He wrote that “so strongly unlike all other Burman buildings, can these have owed their origin to the skill of a Western Christian or Missionary? May not the true cross-like plan of the Ananda be thus symbolical, and may he not, in the long-trusting hope of a zealous worshipper of Christ, have looked forward to the time when this noble pile might be turned from the worship of an unknown god to the service of the Most High? I can’t think any Burman ever designed or planned such buildings”.² Even though obviously wrong, he was *not* thinking in “splendid isolation” either; in fact, *non-isolation* — that is, his assumption of the universalism and truth of Christianity — was what caused his faulty conclusion.

In terms of Pagan vaulting techniques, serious and competent art historians invariably invoked China, the Romans, East India, and other parts of Southeast Asia when assessing that phenomenon. Although none of these explanations is entirely satisfactory, the point is that they were *not* done in isolation. Pierre Pichard’s work on the vaulting — perhaps the closest we are going to get to their origins — was done with a broad knowledge of engineering techniques and examples found outside of Myanmar.

The *symbolic dimensions* of the stupa-temples and related issues — their alignments, their doctrinal bases, their everyday functions, their iconography, their art work — that have been raised by art historians and Buddhist scholars, have *not* been done in “splendid isolation” either. U Ba Shin, Sergei Oshsegove, Lily Handlin, Daw Nyunt Nyunt Swe and others have scrutinized the information regarding and gleaned from individual temples that have sought links outside Pagan in the larger Buddhist world. Apart from the temples per se, the symbolism of some of these cities themselves, particularly those that were capitals/centres (Sriksetra, Pagan, Inwa, Toungoo and Bago), were also a subject of discussion by scholars who took the analysis outside Myanmar, especially to India. Particularly the way in which the capital cities were placed in the context of a larger Buddhist–Hindu cosmology, linking it with *Tavatimsa*, the abode of Sakka/Thagya (Indra), a Vedic deity. Such symbolic dimensions are truer of Sriksetra, Pagan, Toungoo and Mandalay, and less so of Amarapura, Inwa and Bago. Bago’s design, especially Bayinnaung’s capital, was more secular than it was religious, while Inwa’s had Sinic elements in it. Both

sites need further study for sure, but the current scholarship has not been done in “splendid isolation”.

Beyond the contents and symbolism of these cities, even the question regarding the *origins* of cities was not done in isolation; the subject is invariably part of conceptual and theoretical studies enmeshed in the issues surrounding “the origins of the state”, for the city itself is believed (by the best historical geographers like the late Paul Wheatley) to have been the foundation of the state, a subject that is quite broad and found nearly everywhere in academia. To reiterate: all the above studies pertinent to the conference question of “ancient cities” and its contents were not done in splendid isolation.

In terms of the discipline of history, my generation certainly did not write in “splendid isolation” when we dealt with Pagan, Inwa or Toungoo. In fact we went even further in terms of using the influence of Western social science theory in our studies, by listening to anthropology and (god forbid) even to postmodernism. Consider my own dissertation, resulting in *Pagan: the Origins of Modern Burma*. It certainly was not written in “splendid isolation”, even if I personally felt isolated in cold, Ann Arbor, Michigan and Elmira, New York. Consider also Vic Lieberman’s recent works. Has he worked on Myanmar history in “splendid isolation”? Not even close: he is probably the one who has linked the field of Myanmar Studies (and Southeast Asian) history to a far larger world than anyone else had done before, placing Myanmar’s history not only in the context of world history but in the context of world climate, world demography, and world disease.

The generation of historians that followed ours continued that tradition as well. Consider all the historians who wrote chapters in Jos Gommans and Jacques Leider’s edition of *The Maritime Frontiers of Burma*. The entire volume was intended to place Myanmar — whether its cities or its commerce — in a larger Bay of Bengal context. Similarly, the scholarship of younger historians who followed them, represented by one of the newest and youngest Pagan scholars in the audience (Geok Yian Goh), also placed her thesis on Pagan in a much larger intellectual Theravada Buddhist context of South Asia.

How can we say, then, that these are examples of scholarship done in “splendid isolation”? There are many others (such as Bob Taylor, Maitrii Aung-Thwin, the late Kris Lehman, Juliana Schober, Erik Braun, Pat Pranke, Alicia Turner, Alexey Kirichenko, Pat McCormick, to name just a

few) whose works I haven't mentioned because their disciplines and foci lie outside the general period of time with which this basically historical conference is concerned: that is, up to the 16th century. These works were anything but done in “splendid isolation”, empirically or conceptually. In fact, just the opposite!

Why Then?

The more interesting question for me is why are we saying this? Why are we saying that we have been parochial, working in “splendid isolation”? Why are we needlessly beating ourselves up? I think a plausible answer may be that we have (unfortunately) begun to believe what everyone outside has been hammering away at for the past two decades: that we are isolated, parochial, inward looking, xenophobic. The last, xenophobia, is an accusation that has been around for over a century. And we want desperately to disprove this by showing that we are quite cognizant of the “global” as well. This more recent pressure from, and fetish with, “globalization” (academically anyway) has also been in part responsible for the contention that we have been heretofore “isolated”.

There are *historical and political reasons* for creating this myth of isolation. The outside, especially the Western world, has always considered the coasts of Myanmar to be the “front door” of the country, for that is where *they* entered. It must have been the front door, for they would never stoop to enter via the back door. Historically, however, the coasts of Lower Myanmar were not the country's “front door” but its “back door”. The *north* was the country's “front door”. For most of the country's history, China has been most important politically, while India (call it the “side door” if you wish) has been the most important culturally. Lower Myanmar was the “frontier” — the “boondocks”.

So when the West entered Myanmar Pyi by the back door and found the Burmese looking the other way — to the north towards China or sideways towards India — and away from *them*, they took that as looking “inward”; hence, the terms parochialism, isolationism, xenophobia. In other words, this whole notion regarding the direction of Myanmar's gaze has contributed to the myth of “isolation”. (Most Western news reports continue this image: the BBC, AP, VOA invariably characterize the country as “isolated”, even with the tremendous transformations that have occurred during the last two years. The reason is that this notion of

“isolation” gives “agency” to forces *outside* the country, not the forces *inside* the country, so that the Burmese people are seen as passive recipients and beneficiaries, *not actors and agents of change*, a self-fulfilling argument. The outside world has the perception that unless *they* do something, nothing gets done inside. That’s largely untrue, as has been proved by the political events that have transpired in the past two or three years.

To use one example, but outside of academia — that is, in politics, perhaps the most *difficult* area to transform in any society — the reason there has been a warming of relations between some of the most intransigent Western countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom and Myanmar is *not* because of what *they* did; it’s because of what *you* did. You, the people and government of Myanmar, held the line and “stayed the course” under tremendous political and economic pressures, both external and internal.

It is because *you* were successful in implementing multiparty democracy as promised in 1987 — despite tremendous odds, trials and tribulations, natural disasters, economic sanctions and relentless political pressure perpetrated by the strongest and wealthiest corporations and nations on earth to affect the kind of change *they* wanted. Despite that, we have the situation today that we have. It is not because of *them* but because of *you*. You successfully ended the half-century of civil war by 2000 (if not earlier), implemented the seven-step road map to democracy initiated in 2004, wrote the new Constitution in 2008, held free and fair elections in 2010, seated the Hluttaw in 2011, dissolved military rule in March of the same year (as promised) and held by-elections subsequently. It is because of these *internal actions* that we have the current state of affairs.

The outside world did very little to help. In fact they were an obstruction nearly every time something positive was about to occur. (I have an acquaintance at the Foreign Correspondents Club in Bangkok who told me in confidence that any positive news that came out of Myanmar during the past twenty-five years, they suppressed, as their “contribution”. To what, I’m not quite sure; certainly not freedom of the press!) Some even wished an “Arab Spring” on Myanmar Pyi! (I guess they really don’t care much about the country or its people.)

So, it is not *because* of them but *despite* them that these changes have taken place. *You* did most of the hard work to make that happen. So don’t let them tell you it was because of their generosity, magnanimity, goodwill and so on that led to these better relations. If *you* hadn’t done what you

did over the past twenty years, they wouldn't have even considered it. (Of course, there were other, broader geopolitical reasons that were also factors, but I won't get into them here.)

Now, how is all that related to our conference premise of “splendid isolation”? In the following way: what had happened politically during the past twenty-five years within Myanmar had internationalized Myanmar Studies, so that the country was being scrutinized by the outside world far more closely than it ever had been previously, but only with regard to a very narrow range of select subjects. In other words, it was another kind of “splendid isolation” — isolation of external people from the country: its local events, its languages, its priorities, its post-colonial history, its political values. Put another way, some academic (but mainly journalism's) treatment of Myanmar was almost totally unrelated to what was most important to most of the people living inside it. Without even stepping into Myanmar in many instances — or in others, just barely, in order to legitimize one's research, to say “I've been there” — nearly everything in Myanmar's past was reinterpreted to fit that imagined *present*, to be commensurate with one's current *image* of it. That *external* form of “splendid isolation” did much more damage to Myanmar scholarship than any internal “splendid isolation” might have done. The point I'm trying to make here is that “splendid isolation” can work both ways — you can be as isolated *from* the country as *in* the country.

More specifically, if you look at early Burmese history (even art history) written *before* the riots of 1988 and *after* the riots of 1988, you'll notice a clear difference. The dissertations, books and articles published *after* 1988 were invariably characterized by a “sub-text” that was *binary* in nature, that posited authoritarian against democratic values. Even earlier works that had been influenced by Karl Wittfogel's “Oriental Despotism” (and long put to rest in academia) reared their ugly head after 1988, with unequivocal statements about the tyranny and despotism of Myanmar's *past*. And yet, the evidence itself had not changed: the Old Burmese inscriptions, the chronicles, the art and architecture of the Pagan Temples had not changed. What *had* changed was the *way Burmese society was being reinterpreted* by the outside world *because of 1988*.

It is true that such influences by political events were mostly the domain of those in more “present-oriented” fields, such as political science and journalism, although there were, I'm afraid, some scholars who also succumbed to the political winds of the time and jumped on

the bandwagon in fields as non-political as art history. My point is that what happened *politically* had an important impact on the historiography (even art historiography) of Myanmar Pyi. And unless we are cognizant of this kind of influence on our scholarship and are on guard for it all the time, we will be working in another kind of (external) “splendid isolation”.

The Reality

So much for the myth of “splendid isolation”; let us now deal with the *reality* of “splendid isolation” in Myanmar scholarship. And that reality, in one particular respect at least, is that we *have* indeed been working in “splendid isolation” — in the *conceptual and theoretical arena*.

The Theoretical Arena

I know that many, especially older, academics in Myanmar look at theory with some scepticism. But let me assure you that not only am I an older academic but also that theory is *not the opposite* of empiricism. Rather, it enhances empiricism. It is really a particular way of thinking about things. It raises issues that would not be raised if all we were concerned about were “the facts”. A theoretical approach asks particular kinds of questions about those facts and problematizes them. If we don’t, we will never progress beyond a certain point. And once these questions are asked and the issues raised, the answers must not only make sense, they still must be supported by “the facts” anyway. So, theory and empiricism are not contradictory but complimentary.

This is an area where some of my respected predecessors have failed: they had the facts — in some cases, better than I had — but the most famous ones did not know what to do with them. They did not ask the kinds of theoretical questions of those facts; that is, what these facts meant or their significance in a broader theoretical and conceptual framework. And that’s because Myanmar Studies lacked a theoretical component. Theory includes epistemology, which asks the question “how do we know what we know”, as well as methodology, which asks the question “how do we approach that subject”. These are questions that Myanmar scholarship up to the mid-20th century rarely asked of itself or its data. In *that* sense I would concede that Myanmar Studies in general was conducted in “splendid isolation”.

But it is a problem that can be redressed, and where much progress can be made. Myanmar scholars, with their language skills and in-depth knowledge of the country and culture, but using the kinds of theoretically sophisticated analyses and approaches to the study of the country found outside it, can contribute immensely to the field. The reverse isn't always true: no matter how long and hard non-native scholars study the language, they cannot acquire the kinds of language skills that you have — with some exceptions like Saya John Okell and a few others. Take advantage of that: combine the language and cultural knowledge with what the outside has to offer in terms of theory.

But do it on your own terms. In the same way that Myanmar has been the main agent in successfully bringing in the outside world politically in recent years — on its own terms — we can do the same academically by providing the *internal* wherewithal for such success. We will have to do the work that will allow people (with more money) who sincerely want to help us in this endeavour. In the long run though, the definitive prehistory, early history and early modern history of Myanmar must be, and will be, written by scholars who know the country's languages and cultures best, who have lived here for years, who know the people, who have *experienced* rather than just observed Myanmar from the outside.

In order to implement this, one can use different strategies. Just to suggest one, we should start thinking about working towards adding another component to the kinds of projects that translated Burmese materials into English (such as Dr Than Tun's “Royal Orders” or, in the China field, Geoff Wade's work on the Ming sources into English). Perhaps we should do the reverse: start translating into Burmese the most important *theoretical and conceptual* works in English and other languages for Myanmar scholars, and make sure that they have easy and inexpensive access to them.

So far, we on the outside have taken, taken and taken, and not given back much to the country. Oh sure, we've left our old cameras, flash units, old motorcycles and bicycles for those who worked with us, but what about something more substantial? What about creating a centre in Myanmar that is academically linked to the Nalanda-Srivijaya project of ISEAS, to help implement this and other future goals? We can start on a small scale and see where it goes. I cannot think of a better Buddhist country today than Myanmar and a more appropriate place than Pagan with which to link the Nalanda-Srivijaya project, given its stated objectives. Can you?

Conclusion

Finally, and to end this keynote address, let me reiterate that although I don't think Myanmar's history up to the "early modern period" — even if focused narrowly on ancient cities — has been carried out in "splendid isolation", the *goals* of this conference are in fact to demonstrate that external linkages *did exist* between Myanmar polities and centres outside them. Thus, although the premise of the conference may be a bit faulty, its *goals continue* the tradition begun by our predecessors rather than depart from it.

Notes

1. *The Catalogue of Materials on Myanmar History in Microfilms Deposited in the Center for East Asian Cultural Studies*, vol. 1, edited by Thu Nandar, p. 12, reels 43 and 44. These are *Italian Than Yauk Sa Tan* and *Iran Than Yauk Sa Tan*, both parabuiks.
2. See Michael Aung-Thwin, *The Mists of Ramanna* (Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), p. 203.