

BUDDHIST BACKGROUNDS  
OF THE  
BURMESE REVOLUTION

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## CHAPTER XXIII

### THE BEGINNINGS OF BURMESE SOCIALISM AND BUDDHIST-MARXIST SYNCRETISM

From the standpoint of the principal Burmese politicians of the 1920's such outbreaks of "superstition" were neither intended nor politically relevant.<sup>1</sup> In spite of them, the impact of Saya San's Peasant Revolt was such that for the most important of their successors of the 1930's this "Galon"-Movement became a symbol of Burmese solidarity. U Saw, one of the Burmese politicians supporting the "Galons," took himself the title Galon and under this name of Saya San's army organized a private force. This association with the crushed peasant revolt attracted to Galon U Saw considerable popular following. The same motivation induced him to perform the Plowing Ceremony, associated with the kings of independent Burma (cf. p. 50f.).<sup>2</sup> U Saw's "Myo-chit" ("Patriotic") Party had a rival in Ba Maw, a brilliant counsel for the defense of Saya San in 1931. While U Saw attempted to capitalize on the folkloric symbols of that Galon chief, Ba Maw emphasized the economic grievances underlying the Peasant Uprising of 1930-1932. Ba Maw called his own organization Sinyetha (the Poor's) Party and gave it a platform of far-reaching social and economic reforms. Dr. Ba Maw, the most western cultured of Burma's statesmen, was the first to attempt an application of Marxist socialism to Burmese politics. Though hardly Buddhist-minded himself, he obtained the backing of two prominent Buddhist abbots, the Mingalun Sayadaw and the Thetpan Sayadaw, with their remaining faction of the General Council of Burmese Associations. However, when his opportunity came to be Chief Minister of a coalition, Dr. Ba Maw declared that, as there could be no consistency in politics, he would follow not the Sinyetha Party platform, under which he had been

<sup>1</sup> Interview with U Ba Pe, August 5, 1959.

<sup>2</sup> Maung Maung, p. 44.

elected, but a coalition compromise.<sup>1</sup> He proved a master of politics, a master of the Art of the Possible. But, as he did not reach for the seemingly impossible, he came to be outflanked by those who dared the attempt: The future was to belong to a less practical and less mature group of Burmese radicals who dared to demand for Burma complete independence, who preferred the uncertainties of struggle for Burma's full emancipation to the security of colonial office. This new generation was emerging within the Dobama Asiayon ("We Burmans Association"), first formed during the peasant rising of Saya San, in 1930/31. One of its members, U Ba Thaug, after reading an English translation of Nietzsche (who had already been familiar to the Maha-Bodhi's modernistic Buddhism<sup>2</sup> – cf. p. 117), decided that Burma needed a "Master Mentality" – to do away with the "colonial Slave Mentality": At a meeting of the Dobama Asiayon, in 1930, he proposed that its members should assume the title Thakin (Master) – corresponding to British India's "Sahib" and previously applied to Englishmen only. Initially he was laughed at, and for a time was the only modern Burman titling himself Thakin. Subsequently, others followed his example.<sup>3</sup> The Thakin title came to be a designation of the Dobama Asiayon. It was meant to connote the demand for mastery of the Burmese over their own country and also signified a claim to equality with the "White Sahibs" of the Empire.

The British Empire's hegemony over the Burmese had resulted from that technological superiority which had enabled the utilitarian and worldly oriented industrial England to subdue Buddhist-motivated if not mediievally other-worldly Burma (cf. p. 98f.). But, almost half a century after it conquered Burma, the omnipotent industrial England came to provide – in the form of Marxism – an ideological system indirectly vindicating "in modern terms of Science" Burma's culture by "proving" that the capitalistic industrial civilization of the West was not only unrighteous and unholy but also by its own laws headed for crisis and collapse. It was the derivation of British Imperialism from Capitalism that first made Marxism relevant to Burmese nationalism.<sup>4</sup> While Marxism became known in Burma later than in other Asian countries – Marxist literature having been introduced in Burma in 1931 – its acceptance, up to the point of dialectical

<sup>1</sup> Maung Maung Pye, p. 35.

<sup>2</sup> *MBUBW*, XIII, No. 11/12 (March/April, 1905), p. 85.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Thakin Ba Thaug, on July 26, 1959; Maung Maung Pye, p. 18.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. John Seabury Thomson, "Marxism in Burma," in: Frank N. Trager (Editor), *Marxism in Southeast Asia. A study of four countries* (Stanford, 1959), p. 15.

materialism, was prompted in this Buddhist country precisely by a reaction against the materialistic rationale of Empire, against imported values making acquisitiveness the supreme virtue. In the unrestrained acquisition ethos of colonial economic progress the decisive wing of Burmese nationalism came to see the chief cause of social disintegration<sup>1</sup> (cf. p. 140f.). In this sense the non-acquisitive Buddhist traditions of detachment, Burma's Buddhist ethos that prevented her from acquiring control over both the destructive and the productive forces of nature, seemed to be vindicated by Marxist explanations of history: The Marxist type of materialism seemed to be vindicating Buddhist "idealism."<sup>2</sup> And the Marxist heresy of the West came close to becoming an orthodoxy of the Burmese East.

The most orthodox theoretician of Burmese Marxism, Thakin Soe, studied Buddhist philosophy before taking up the study of the Marxist "classics."<sup>3</sup> He used Buddhist philosophical terminology to explain Marxist concepts. It would hardly have been possible to do otherwise than to explain the unfamiliar new ideology in terms of the familiar ancient religion: The only philosophical terms established in the Burmese language are (largely Pâli) designations for Buddhist concepts. Therefore only Buddhist terminology was available to expound Marxism to Burma – if Marxism was to be widely understood. Thus Thakin Soe attempted to explain the Leninistic unity of revolutionary theory and practice in terms of the Buddhist Abhidhamma's "Priatti, Prâpti, Privedi" (preservation of [Buddhist] scriptures, possession of knowledge, practice based on scriptural knowledge).<sup>4</sup> This principal Burmese theoretician of Leninism used the characteristically Buddhist concept of Perfection (Pâramî) to describe the special perfections that a "revolutionary leader" must possess.<sup>5</sup> In his exposition of Marxist-Leninist theory, the Buddhist term for periodical (cyclical) generation and destruction of worlds (Upathi bin) was used to designate the eternal flux of Matter in the context of Dialectical Materialism.<sup>6</sup>

The Marxist scheme of history presupposes a predictable and immanent regularity of the sequence in which classes are supposed to rise and fall, according to "changes in production." It is a linear

<sup>1</sup> J. S. Furnivall, "The character of Society," in: F. Trager (Editor), *Burma* [unpublished mimeographed typescript of the Human Relations Area Files (New Haven, 1956)], p. 60.

<sup>2</sup> F. Trager, "The impact of Marxism," in: Trager, *Marxism in Southeast Asia*, p. 255.

<sup>3</sup> "The Communist Builders of the People's Resistance" (Brief biography of Thakin Soe), Typescript in the Military Science Research Institute, Rangoon, Burma.

<sup>4</sup> Thakin Soe, *Bama-to hla-mu* (Rangoon, 1934), pp. 125f.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 246.

concept of history – like its model, the Hegelian teleology. In contrast, the Hindu-Buddhist world conception presupposes a regular cyclical sequence of world ages, in accordance with periodical waxing and waning. Buddhism’s cyclical notion of history seemed to become compatible with the linear scheme of Marxist teleology when the boundlessness of Buddhist cosmological concepts in time and space was disregarded (cf. p. 107): Their compatibility occurred in the sense that the immediate part of a circle with an infinitely large radius can be seen as a straight line. Against this background, starting with a continuity of nomenclature, Burmese Leninist Marxism came to “equate” the Buddhist principle of Causality with Dialectics.<sup>1</sup> Against the background of the Buddhist principle of Causality rejecting the concept of Creation, U Ba Swe, at one time a prominent spokesman of Burmese Marxism, subsequently pointed out that the Marxist “Abhidhamma” (a term traditionally connoting the philosophical part of the Buddhist Canon) too “reasonably rejects the idea which appeared and existed a long time ago [about] Creation.”<sup>2</sup> The Buddhist concept of the origin of the world being based upon the principle of Causality, and Causality conditioning Impermanence, among the Burmese Buddhist terms for the Liberation from Impermanence is one (“bhava”) that U Ba Swe used to designate the notion of social liberation through revolutionary struggle.<sup>3</sup> His most effective contribution to Burma’s independence struggle was a revolutionary organization of Labor, for example, the petrol workers strike of 1938. And the very terminology for Strike (thabeit hmauk) and Strikers (thabeit hmauk-thu) was borrowed by the Burmese revolution from a traditional term for a refusal of Buddhist monks to accept alms (by inverting their bowls as protest against the givers).<sup>4</sup> Of Buddhist origin is the Burmese strike slogan, “turn down, turn down” (the alms bowl: “Thabeit thabeit hmauk hmauk”).<sup>5</sup>

Of Buddhist origin is also the term often used in Burmese Marxism and radical nationalism for the goal of the revolutionary struggle, the perfect society: Lokka Nibban (“the Earthy Nirvana”) with the political connotation of paradise on earth (cf. pp. 86, 108). Thus Ba Swe did at one time, apparently in the middle of the 1930’s, call Stalin – a

<sup>1</sup> Interview with Colonel U Hsaw Su of the Burmese Army’s Psychological Warfare Department, August 1, 1959.

<sup>2</sup> U Ba Swe-ī, *Bama-to hlan-yei: hniñ Bama lou’tha: lu-dū* (Rangoon, 1955), p. 27.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>4</sup> *Chullavagga*, V, 20, 3: *SBE*, Vol. XX (1885), pp. 119f.

<sup>5</sup> Tet Toe, *English-Burmese Dictionary* (Rangoon, 1957), p. 1288.

“builder of Lokka Nibban” . . . , attributing to that Soviet dictator the goal of establishing the Lokka Nibban.<sup>1</sup> In this context, the very term Lokka Nibban is assumed by many Burmese modernist Buddhists to be of Marxist origin, a Marxist innovation in Burmese political terminology.<sup>2</sup> Prior to the twentieth century there seems to have been no Burmese term for “paradise” – except “World of Nats” or “World of Gods” (Deva-Lokka), a notion not suitable as a political symbol outside the medieval context (cf. p. 84). Thus the term Lokka Nibban, the earthly Nirvana in the sense of a political ideal of perfect society – having in common with the absolute Nirvana a State of Peace and Harmony – is of modern origin. According to Dr. Hla Pe, the popular use of the word Lokka Nibban began with a Burmese film of that name produced “in the 1930’s,” though the word must have been used, in the sense of paradise on earth, long before that moving picture.<sup>3</sup> Actually this term appears to have been taken for granted by the time that Thakin Kudaw Hmain used it in his “Commentaries on the Thakins” (published in 1938).<sup>4</sup> As Thakin Kudaw Hmain does not understand English, it can hardly be the result of direct western Marxist influence on him. On the other hand, the anti-socialist Buddhist preacher U Nye Ya referred (apparently even earlier) likewise to Lokka Nibban – to a vow to accomplish Lokka Nibban – and demanded for Burma an independence devoid of greed, hate and delusion but endowed with Metta (universal love), an independence that would establish Lokka Nibban.<sup>5</sup> His concept of Lokka Nibban seems to have developed as an offshot of secularizing trends in Burma’s Buddhist thought of the 1920’s, apparently echoing the activistic, “nationalistic” Buddhism of U Ottama, whose monastic following among the “political monks” of the 1920’s<sup>6</sup> already quite explicitly emphasized the attainment of political and social pre-requisites for the state of Nirvana (cf. p. 125). That Nirvana is to mean not absolute non-existence but a life of fellowship in an atmosphere of Truth, Goodness, Freedom and Enlightenment was claimed already in 1907 by the Buddhist

<sup>1</sup> Ba Swe, “Lokka Nibban-te hsau-ne-thu Stalin,” in U Thein Pe Myin Ywei hce ti: hpyat-tho (Editor), *Hbun-wada hnin Dobama* (Rangoon, 1954), p. 122.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. E. Sarkisyanz, “On the place of U Nu’s Buddhist Socialism in Burma’s history of ideas,” in: R. Sakai (Editor), *Studies on Asia, 1961* (Lincoln, USA, 1961), p. 57.

<sup>3</sup> Personal communication by Dr. Hla Pe of the Burmese Dictionary Project of the London School of Oriental and African Studies, dated February 19, 1961.

<sup>4</sup> Kudaw Hmain: *Thakin Tikhā* (Rangoon, 1938), p. 181.

<sup>5</sup> Thayawadi U Nye Ya Sayadaw-i, *Lu’la’ye: alin: pya* (Rangoon, 1314/1952), pp. 13, 15. The date of the original publication is not specified in this reprint.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. M. C. Sen, *A peep into Burmese Politics* (Allahabad, India, 1945), p. 18.

modernist Lakshmi Narasu.<sup>1</sup> The general idea of “attaining *in this life* the goal of Nirvana” still plays a role in Theravāda Buddhist modernism,<sup>2</sup> quite apart from Marxist interpretation.

Actually such interpretations of Buddhism remained not unopposed as early as the 1930's. It was to counter anti-socialist objections with Buddhist arguments that “Maung Nu” (U Nu) wrote the essay “Kyan-to Buthama” (around 1935, according to his explanation to the writer). At that time U Nu pointed out that socialism is not more removed from the Buddhist goal than is social (family) life in general,<sup>3</sup> implying that its place was to be sought within the context of a lay Buddhist ethos (cf. p. 36f.). The justifications for contrasts of wealth and poverty as the results of merit and demerit from past lives (cf. p. 68–71) he already then put into question – as constituting only a part of the Buddhist teaching that taken out of context would lend itself to abuse and rationalization of privilege. Instead, emphasis was put on action aimed to overcome suffering in this life: <sup>4</sup> U Nu stressed that even the Bodhisattva in a previous existence (as a Crab) used his force to save his friends from suffering.<sup>5</sup> The root of the social suffering of the countryside in contemporary Lower Burma, the abuses of the economically privileged,<sup>6</sup> he described as the Illusion of the Self (cf. p. 40, 200). In the overcoming of that illusion, community of property was to be the first step,<sup>7</sup> since the accumulation of capital appeared to him as an effect of Greed, Hate and Delusion. An elimination of sharp differences in wealth was to overcome this source of Greed, Hate and Delusion.<sup>8</sup> For traditional Buddhism, Greed, Hate and Delusion caused Suffering. Modernistic Buddhist Socialism stressed that among the reasons for Greed, Hate and Delusion were economic inequities: It tended to assume that economic reforms would help to eliminate these aberrations. Thus U Nu wrote that the capitalistic concentration of wealth reduced the number of those economically capable of performing works of piety (works of Merit) and that, therefore, the impact

<sup>1</sup> Lakshmi Narasu, *The essence of Buddhism* (Madras, 1907), pp. 205f.

<sup>2</sup> J. R. Jayewardene, *Buddhism and Marxism and other Buddhist Essays* (Colombo, 1957), p. 41.

<sup>3</sup> Maung Nu [U Nu], “Cun-do buthama” in: U Thein: Pe Myin ywei: (Editor), *Hbun-wada hnin Dobama* (Rangoon, 1954), p. 55.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>6</sup> U Nu, “Man, the Wolf of Men,” in: *Guardian* (Rangoon), Vol. I, No. 9 (July, 1954), p. 10; Vol. II, No. 2 (December, 1954), p. 21.

<sup>7</sup> Maung Nu, “Cun-do buthama,” in: U Thein: Pe Myin ywei: hce ti: hpyat-tho (Editor), *Hbun-wada hnin Dobama* (Rangoon, 1954), p. 67.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

of Capitalism on Burma should be considered responsible for the people turning away from the Religion. This led him to the conclusion that the elimination of capitalism's inequities would be a good Buddhist deed. He emphasized that the economic problems of the people must be solved in order to increase the number of the Pious, since people must have their economic support in order to be able to meditate about Impermanence (cf. p. 56-58). Observing that the relative economic decline of the Burmans had caused the number of those meditating in monasteries to decline too, U Nu held Capitalism responsible for the people turning away from Buddhist goals. He thought that common ownership would assure everybody the same well-being and peace of mind through overcoming the fire of Greed, Hate and Delusion, so that more people would be able to perform acts of piety and everybody would be enabled to practice meditation.<sup>1</sup> As the Struggle for Self-preservation was to be reduced, so was Buddhist piety meant to increase: According to U Nu, neither social reforms nor an elimination of Capitalism nor the enrichment of the Poor should be ends in themselves; they could be but economic methods for the achievements of a religious goal.<sup>2</sup>

For such economic methodology U Nu's Thakin group – within which he had become politically prominent through the Student Strike of 1936 – was largely indebted to John Furnivall. This economist and retired colonial official sponsored a Burma Book Club which contributed to the popularization of Fabian and other socialist ideas among the Thakins.<sup>3</sup> Under the influence of Furnivall, a Fabian welfare-state program was taken up by U Ba Choe, one of the first Burmese theorists of socialism. Ba Choe became, in 1936, founder and president of Burma's Fabian League.<sup>4</sup> He edited the Burmese Deedok Journal – apparently an important source for the intellectual history of Burmese socialism in general and its traditionalist elements in particular. "Deedok Ba Choe" delved deeply into Burmese folklore, collected and edited old Burmese songs and was an ardent Buddhist. Ba Choe seems to have exercised strong traditionalist influences on U Nu during his university days.<sup>5</sup> Both U Ba Choe and U Nu were among the disciples of Thakin Kudaw Hmain. This now octogenarian poet, one of the

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 60-63.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>3</sup> Cady, *A history of modern Burma*, p. 377.

<sup>4</sup> J. S. Thomson, "Marxism in Burma," in: F. Trager (Editor), *Marxism in Southeast Asia*, pp. 320, 20.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with U Nu, in Rangoon, July, 1959.



most beloved of Burma's writers (who is barely mentioned in the standard Anglo-Saxon works on modern Burma) is a living historical link between the Burmese revolution and the cultural traditions of the pre-British Burmese Kingdom. As a ten-year-old pupil in a Buddhist monastery school of 1885, he had wept bitter tears at the sight of Burma's last king being taken away into British captivity.<sup>1</sup> An authority on Burmese classical lore and the Burmese humanities, he became – through a number of satirical and patriotic works<sup>2</sup> in the course of the 1920's and 1930's (under the name of U Lun and "Mister Maung Maung") – the main literary influence on Burmese "nationalist" politics. By the late 1930's he is said to have become something called "the real ideologist" of the Thakin group,<sup>3</sup> having reconciled the personal rivalries that had caused a split among the Thakins. From Thakin Kudaw Hmain seemed to stem some of the traditionalist symbols that were to become ideologically so effective in Burma's post-war Buddhist socialism with its concept of an ideal Buddhist social order.

Thus Thakin Kudaw Hmain wrote in his "Thakin T̄iká" (published in 1938) that in the beginning of the World Age, when everybody had mastery of himself and man's economic necessities were supplied by the Padeytha (Wishing)-Tree, while no one was bound by a yoke, there had been the Worldly Nirvana (cf. p. 10ff.). In that state, as sung in a poem by the Upper Burman Governor of Paley, all men enjoyed the fruits of the Padeytha Tree in common. As their minds became polluted by Greed, they started to store and accumulate food – and the primeval bounty disappeared: Men's necessities could no longer be supplied by merely picking them up as in the past. Looting and fighting began. Codes of law became necessary. As a result, man voluntarily elected a Future Buddha to be their ruler. They allowed him one-tenth of their produce as his fee – voluntarily taxing themselves to provide for the expenses of maintaining Lawfulness and Government. From this Thakin Kudaw Hmain concluded that those who supplied the taxes and provided the government's revenue had been and once more should be their own masters; that the people paid

<sup>1</sup> Sarkisyanz, "Thakin Kudaw Hmain, Burma's 'Rabindranath Tagore'" unpublished Communication, presented to the American Oriental Society's Annual Meeting, on March 30, 1960.

<sup>2</sup> Thakin Kudaw Hmain: [pseudonym: "Mi'sata Maung Hmain:"]; *Bain: kau' T̄iká-ci:* (Rangoon, 1927); «Mi'sata Maung Hmain:» *Myau' T̄iká* (Rangoon, n.d.); Thakin Kudaw Hmain:; *Hkwei: Gane'i'hta* (Rangoon, 1298/1936).

<sup>3</sup> V. F. Vasil'iev, "Put' k nezavisimosti," in: Akademiia Nauk S.S.S.R., Institut Vostokovedeniia, *Birmanskiĭ Soiuz. Sbornik stateĭ* (Moscow, 1958), p. 88.

their government so that it could serve them, patronizing particularly the monastic order.<sup>1</sup>

Kudaw Hmain's radical interpretation of Buddhist tradition about the origin of the state, of political power and of social classes (cf. p. 12ff.) had the effect of vindicating Burma's "indigenous heritage" by deriving from it both precisely those democratic values in the name of which the British colonies now were claimed for the Empire, *and* the socialistic ideals which in Burma's economic situation had been taken up by the most radical proponents of Burmese independence. After Saya San's uprising had failed in its attempt to restore the traditional state and undo the inroads of irresistible alien "modernity," with its liberal economics, Burmese "Nativism" – modified by an acculturation process among the Burmese intelligentsia – produced new and more effective responses to Burma's crisis by accepting the revolutionary symbols and Democracy and Socialism.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, continuity with Buddhist political traditions was initially sought even by Burmese Stalinist Marxism: An attempt was made to find in the above-mentioned Buddhist ideas about the ideal society of the distant past a point of departure for the Marxist notion about "primeval communism" and the origin of the state with its class contradictions. In this sense the village educated Burmese Communist, the subsequent "Stalinist" leader Thakin Than Tun, wrote, in an article entitled "Socialist Ideology and Burmese History," about the olden times when people enjoyed as common property the produce of plants growing by themselves (without cultivation), before distinctions between private properties, fencing in of land and individual ownership appeared. For Than Tun this tradition afforded a point of departure for the Marxist claim that it was through private ownership that differences developed not only in property but also in the mind of man, as those of poor character began stealing and looting. This subsequent Communist guerrilla chieftain repeated the Buddhist tradition, handed down in the Pāli Canon, according to which it was to solve these social problems that one man had been chosen as leader and given payments so that he would not have to spend his time in labor – giving origin to government and autocracy.<sup>3</sup> Thus the traditional Buddhist account about the origin of Government coincided

<sup>1</sup> Kudaw Hmain: *Thakin Tikhā* (Rangoon, 1938), pp. 163–165.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. W. E. Mühlmann, *Chiliasmus und Nativismus* (Berlin, 1961), p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> Than Tun, "Hsou-she-li' wa-da hniñ Bama yazawin," in: U Thein: *Pe Myiñ ywei: hce ti: hpyat-tho, Hbun-wada hniñ Dobama* (Rangoon, 1954), pp. 106f.

with the basic idea of the Social Contract Theory of the early modern classics of liberal democracy, as well as with Marxist notions that the rise of private property and the differentiation between classes had given origin to the state.

Actually the Thakins' political thought was strongly syncretistic; it was characterized by various degrees of nationalistic, socialistic and Buddhist syncretism and influenced by Western revolutionary models – but also by Burmese traditions. Traditionalist Buddhist influences had affected the Thakins particularly through the preachings and writings of the abbot Ledi Sayadaw Pandita U Maung Gyi (cf. p. 128).<sup>1</sup> While the Buddhism of such popular monks affected the ideological outlook of many of the Thakins, the influence of Thakin radicalism was carried by “political monks” into the traditionalist countryside.<sup>2</sup> In rural Burma of the 1930's the traditions about the ideal Buddhist kingship were apparently still alive; this is indicated by the “royalism” of the peasant revolts of 1930–1932 (cf. pp. 161f.). And a descendent of King Mindon, of Burma's penultimate monarch, the prince Thakin Thei Ku Daw Gyi, who had married a daughter of the last Burmese king, became President of the Thakin Party.<sup>3</sup> Neither did he know the English language nor was he much affected by English cultural influences. He gave up his British colonial government's pension and was a socialist. Socialism was identified with the “traditional Buddhist” (monastic) community of property in the Thakin campaign pamphlet “Samghaka Wada Sadaw” by Thakin Tin.<sup>4</sup> That pamphlet appeared in 1936 on behalf of the Kou-Min: Kou-Chin (“Own King, Own Kind”) Party through which the Thakins participated in the elections of November, 1936.

Nevertheless, as they had only belatedly decided not to boycott but to contest the election, they obtained only three seats in the following Legislature. To prove their disinterest in politicians' profits, these deputies refused to accept their parliamentary salaries. They consistently opposed the still “Dyarchical” constitutional settlement of

<sup>1</sup> Ledi Sayadaw Paya: ci; *Satu thamma di-pani* (Rangoon, 1951); Ledi Sayadaw Paya: ci-i, *Thamma dei'hti di-pani* (Rangoon, 1952); Ledi Sayadaw, *Bodhi pahkiya di-pani* (Rangoon, 1952); Ledi Sayadaw, *Ottama puritha di-pani* (Rangoon, 1952).

<sup>2</sup> A figure of such a “political monk,” influencing opinion in the villages in favor of the Thakins' cause, appears in U Nu's drama, “Man the Wolf of Men,” in: *Guardian* (Rangoon), Vol. 1, No. 9 (July, 1954), pp. 12ff.

<sup>3</sup> Not of the (subsequent) A.F.P.F.L., as has been (through a writing error) stated in Sarkisyanz, “On the place of U Nu's Buddhist Socialism in Burma's history of ideas,” in: R. Sakai (Editor), *Studies on Asia, 1961* (Lincoln, USA, 1961), p. 58.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Thakin Thein: Maung Gyi: (Rangoon, July 8, 1959), who will deal with this topic in detail in a forthcoming book of his.

1935<sup>1</sup> – as it left the control of Foreign Affairs, Defense and Finance to the British Governor and not to Burma's parliament. Not only had this "Legislature" to depend, in practice (even for such branches as it was supposed to control – Instruction, Public Health, etc.) on the Governor's ministers for approval, but the British Governor could override Parliament in the most vital matters.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, at the outbreak of the Second World War, the Thakin-Sinyetha (cf. p. 182) Freedom Block alliance declared only qualified support of democratic Britain's struggle against Fascist imperialism, demanding in return a recognition of Burma's right to independence. Among its spokesmen the Thakin Aung San had already risen to political prominence.<sup>3</sup> He was thought to be the grandson of U May Aung (Shwe La Yaung Min:), one of the governors under King Thibaw, a resistance fighter who continued the struggle after the capitulation of that king and was eventually beheaded by the British conquerors (cf. above, p. 106).<sup>4</sup> Aung San had in his adolescence desired to serve as novice in the attempted Buddhist world mission but was not permitted by his parents to do so.<sup>5</sup> Subsequently he became less interested in Buddhism, sceptical about many of its monks and critical of priestcraft.<sup>6</sup> While Thakin Aung San's greatest achievements were pragmatic rather than ideological, Thakin Socialism during the beginnings of his political career was allegedly strongly influenced by the radical social reform projects of the Siamese statesman Luang Pradit (Pridi Phanomyong).<sup>7</sup> This French trained economist, Thailand's subsequent Foreign Minister, Regent and Prime Minister, had justified his very far-reaching planned economy project of 1933 (which at one time was suspected of Communism) on the basis of the Buddhist [Dīgha Nikāya scriptural] prophecy about the future golden age:<sup>8</sup>

When the administration shall have brought the final consummation of the aims set forward by the People's Party in their six point platform, the state of prosperity and felicity . . . , which in classical language [Pāli] is called Sriaraya, will have dawned . . . They [the people] will be able to feast on the fruits of

<sup>1</sup> Maung Maung, pp. 32, 38.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. G. E. Harvey, *British rule in Burma*, pp. 78, 82f.; Cady, *A history of modern Burma*, p. 353.

<sup>3</sup> *New Burma* of September 27 and October 13, 1939, cited by Cady, *op. cit.*, p. 416.

<sup>4</sup> Kudaw Hmain:, *Thakin T'iká* (Rangoon, 1938), pp. 205, 209, 212.

<sup>5</sup> Bo Thein Swe (Editor), *Bogyoke Aung San Ááipáá* (Rangoon, 1951), p. 46.

<sup>6</sup> Maung Maung (Editor), *Aung San of Burma* (Hague, 1962), pp. 127f.

<sup>7</sup> J. Leroy Christian, *Modern Burma: A survey of political and economic developments* (New York, 1942), pp. 274f. Pridi Phanomyong's influence on Burmese socialism has not been confirmed in any other source known to me.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. above, pp. 88f.; *Dīgha Nikāya*, XXVI, 21-26: transl. Rhys Davids, pp. 71-74.

happiness and prosperity . . . . According to this prophecy, every act of devotion on the part of the faithful followers of religion brings that Golden Age nearer . . . . In this plan [of social reform] we have a system by which *we can press forward to this Golden Age*. And yet there are some people who hesitate, who draw back so violently that one would suppose they contemplate a return to the age of unenlightenment of 2475 years ago, when Buddha had not yet come.<sup>1</sup>

The underlying concept of the waning and waxing of world ages apparently influenced popular Burmese attitudes on the eve of the Japanese invasion. This was observed even by such a pragmatist as Dr. Ba Maw, who is by no means a Buddhist mystic but a sober French trained lawyer. He pointed out that in the catastrophies with which begun the Second World War Burma's Buddhist outlook tended to see the work of laws governing all life, the laws of Impermanence:

The West, strengthened by an early industrial revolution, had stripped the Eastern countries of very nearly everything they could carry away and had grown rich and strong on the enormous gains. In a ceaselessly changing cosmic order such a defiance of the moral as well as historical laws could not go on forever unchanged and unpunished. The laws of retribution would step in some day. So while the illusory world of appearances looked the same outwardly, the forces below were at work to change it all by destroying the great scarlet empires that had destroyed the weaker peoples for centuries; and thus Asia would soon be restored. These forces had made the war inevitable, and they would just as surely bring about a new world order in which Burma together with other colonial countries would rise again. Turning to the heavens, observers noted that the influences there had lately been very active. The planets pointed to the immanence of widespread disasters and changes that would purify the earth before they ended; and afterwards there would be a just, happy life, for all. Thus their oldest beliefs, their equally old sense of fate, and their new frustrations and longings as a people mingled to give the Burmese the feeling that the war had a deep moral and historical purpose; more tangibly, that it would give Burma back to the Burmese and greatness back to Buddhism. As I have said, it was still no more than a mixture of feeling and dream during the first months.<sup>2</sup>

Beliefs and prophecies telling that the British Empire-builders would not leave Burma before the end of the present World Age<sup>3</sup> implied that they would vanish when the decline of the World Age would catastrophically pass its lowest point. After the lowest point of the World Cycle, that is after the disappearance of British rule, according to traditional beliefs, was to follow the era culminating in the realization of Buddhism's perfect society (cf. pp. 152, 88). It is true that by the late 1930's the achievement of this ideal society

<sup>1</sup> K. P. Landon, *Siam in Transition* (Chicago, 1939), pp. 292f.

<sup>2</sup> Ba Maw, "Burma at the beginning of the Second World War," in: *Guardian* (Rangoon), VI, No. 12 (December, 1959), p. 17.

<sup>3</sup> U: Maung Gyi: Do Thein: (Editor), *Saya U: Po U, Buddha-Yaza Min: Setkya Thaik hniñ Co Hla, Than-jou a'hppei* (Rangoon, 1317/1955), p. 6.

had, in the context of Buddhist modernism, become subject to the human will: Thakin Kudaw Hmain had emphasized that men should not blame this dark "era of decline" (*hsou' ka'*) as they themselves are in reality responsible for it. He compared this World Age to clay that is to be moulded by human beings, shaped by man into the "Ascending Era" (*te' ka'*) that they desire.<sup>1</sup> Yet clearer than in the ideological programs, into which Burma's modernistic acculturation has formulated its "nationalism," do nativistic political expectations arising from Buddhist ideas about the waning and waxing of World Ages appear in Burma's folk prophecies.<sup>2</sup> One of them was referred to in sermons by the popular Buddhist preacher, U Nye Ya, declaring that, when the Buddhist teachings will have been fully followed, there shall appear the personage that is to open the gate of *bygone* abundance and peace (*hcan: dha* - c. p. 206). That gate, he said, was waiting for its opener - in the context of prophecies to the effect that, during Europe's war crisis, the Peacock (royal symbol of Burma) would emerge and British domination come to its downfall. U Nye Ya preached about both prophecies in allegorical terms.<sup>3</sup> But both he and Shwe Myiang Pandita are said to have referred in their political independence sermons of the 1930's to the Setkya-Min (cf. p. 152ff.).

Invocations of traditional prophecies and songs about Setkya-Min popularized the radical social transformation program of the Thakin revolutionaries among Burma's non-westernized rural majority. But such invocations also gave the radical socialistic propaganda a religious folkloric alibi that could but rarely expose it to penalties for "subversive politics," although, in Pegu, Set Kyein Da's preaching about Setkya-Min in 1933/34 had at the time been considered to be an appeal for an uprising.<sup>4</sup> By the catastrophic year of 1942 identity with Setkya-Min was already attributed to Thakin Aung San.<sup>5</sup> The Thakin Party's symbolic Red Dragon (Naga Ni) was interpreted among the people as a forerunner of Setkya-Min.<sup>6</sup> The song about Setkya-Min was popularized by the same performer (Khi Maung Yin) as the Naga-

<sup>1</sup> Thakin Kudaw Hmain, "Hkit Kala pyu pyin pyaun: le yei," in: U: Thein: Pe Myin ywei: hce ti: hpyat-tho (Editor), *Hbun-wada hnin Dobama* (Rangoon, 1954), p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. W. E. Mühlmann, *Chiliasmus und Nativismus* (Berlin, 1961), p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> Thayawadi U: Nye Ya Sayadaw-i, *Dou hpyi' htwei* (Rangoon, no date: 1943?), p. 40.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with U Khin Maung (September, 1959), at Mandalay.

<sup>5</sup> Setkya Min's connection with Aung San was explained by Bobo Aung having saved and protected Setkya Min: Interview with Dr. Khin Maung Win of the Department of Philosophy, University of Rangoon, August 12, 1959.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with U: Kyaw Sein of the Burma Historical Commission, University of Rangoon, November 4, 1959.

Ni Song, the Red Dragon hymn of the Thakins. This unofficial party anthem announced an era in which Burma would rise again through her struggle for independence, an era associated with prophecies about Setkya Min:<sup>1</sup> The goal was to be the restoration or establishment of Burma's prosperity, so that the people would be freed from poverty, so that the poor would be enabled to perform charities and to build . . . monasteries": This song of the revolutionary Thakin Naga Ni Society – an organization associated particularly with Thakin Nu (U Nu) – specifically reminded of the Gold and Silver Rain that was reputed to have fallen during the Period of Pagan (cf. pp. 49f., 184) and announced the approach of a comparable era of abundance and wealth.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> U: Maung Gyi: Do Thein (Editor), *Buddha-Yaza Min: Setkya Thaik . . .*, p. 140.

<sup>2</sup> Text of the Naga Ni Song as supplied to the writer by courtesy of the Burmese Broadcasting Corporation in November, 1959.