

The Buddhist World Emperor's Mission

Millenarian Buddhism in Postcolonial Burma

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Abstract

In early postcolonial Burma, a number of so-called royal esoteric associations with a millenarian and eschatological orientation, and founded by persons believed to be the world emperor, emerged in response to political turmoil, nation-building projects, modernization, and after-effects of colonialism. These Theravāda Buddhist esoteric congregations, revivalist and innovative at the same time, were indicative of a general crisis of authority and identity. Like other new religious movements that emerged in Southeast Asia in the wake of World War II, the royal esoteric associations represented a resurgence of religion and a quest for identity in the postcolonial era.

This dissertation, based on fieldwork (2005–2008), is a study of one such royal esoteric association founded in the early 1950s. The aim is to analyze the variety of discourses (tenets, practices, speeches, etc.) of the congregation. It is demonstrated that its royal, nationalist, bodhisatta, and millenarian discourses and rhetoric served as important sources of identity and empowerment in the face of modernization and the pervasive presence of the colonial legacy and Western political ideologies. The latter were perceived as threatening to undermine the authority and validity not only of Buddhism but of the indigenous traditions and culture as well. One solution to this postcolonial predicament was a cosmic “battle” against the evil forces, fought by supernatural means, with the aim to decolonize the Burmese mind and society.

It is also shown that at least three different discourses competed with regard to what constitutes “authentic” Buddhism in postcolonial Burma. Finally, the study critically examines previous scholarship on the royal esoteric associations and seeks to present a new interpretation of this phenomenon.

Keywords: *Buddhism, millenarianism, weizzā (weikza), esotericism, supernatural powers, identity, politics, Burma, Theravāda Buddhism, cakkavattin, authority, legitimacy, charisma.*

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