

## Relics, replicas, and the generals in the “fairyland” of Myanmar

Is Naypyidaw, Myanmar’s new administrative capital, becoming a “Legoland”? The military regime moved all ministries there in 2005 while it was still under construction. And after building replicas of the Shwedagon, the country’s most sacred pagoda, and the Mahamuni, the country’s most venerated Buddha image, there are now rumours that the military regime will erect there a replica of the famous golden boulder located at Kyaikhtiyo, a most sacred place for Burmese Buddhists. More than just a fortress located in the country’s geographical centre, the military regime appears to be turning the new capital into a microcosm of the realm they control.

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THIS IS THE LATEST EXAMPLE of the ruling generals’ policy to engineer and re-create the country’s cultural heritage, a policy started in the mid 1990s. With assistance from hand-picked Myanmar academics and developed within a regional context of promotion of ‘Asian values’ (Myanmar became a member of ASEAN in 1997), this policy simultaneously constructs Myanmar’s cultural heritage as a tool for propaganda and legitimacy, a commodity, and a means to restrict expressions of ethnicity and religion. These are all aspects that will be successively considered here.

### ‘The origin of Myanmar is Myanmar’

On July 3-4, 2010, in Naypyidaw on the occasion of a research paper reading session attended by Myanmar academics, a decade-long governmental stance was re-affirmed in the following tautological statement: ‘the origin of Myanmar is Myanmar’ and ‘Myanmar is the land of human origin’, a modification of the belief previously taught in schools that ‘the origin of Myanmar is Tagaung’, the first legendary Myanmar kingdom.

Since the late 1990s, the generals have indeed embarked on a grandiose, but scientifically dubious, venture that seeks to ‘construct’ a supposed continuity between fossilized remains of Pondaung primates said to date back 40 million years and present-day Myanmar people. At that time, Lieutenant General Secretary I Khin Nyunt was at the forefront of this venture. He was reported by Myanmar newspapers to have said that “there are firm historical links that Myanmar have evolved through Stone Age, Bronze Age, Iron Age, and different stages of civilization in their own nation.”

In Myanmar this rhetoric emphasising a primeval lineage is supposed to serve two main purposes. First, it is seen by the generals as a means to cement national spirit towards a supposed common heritage while the legacy of Aung San, Myanmar’s independence hero, has been obliterated from official narratives by the regime. Second, it is an attempt to enhance the country’s profile on the international scene when its socio-economic records otherwise invariably put it in the world’s lowest rankings. With Khin Nyunt’s arrest in 2004 and Senior General Than Shwe’s consolidation of his power base, efforts in pursuing these claims have been somewhat overshadowed by more immediate and materialistic concerns. Yet, some of these claims do reappear sporadically at official events as evidenced by the July 2010 research paper reading session.

### ‘Lord of the White Elephant’ and the monarchical trappings of the generals

On August 2, 2010, in the remote forests of Rakhaing State, a white elephant was captured. Some days later, it was transported to Naypyidaw and offered to Than Shwe (*in absentia*) amid grand ceremonies. The event is most peculiar as a white elephant is a palladium for royalty. Although the top general does not go as far as bearing the title of ‘Lord of the White Elephant’, one of the regnal titles assumed by Myanmar kings, the parallel between monarchical practices and the August 2010 events is no less than striking.

This recourse to monarchical trappings can be traced back to the military regime’s abandonment in the early 1990s of its ‘Burmese Path to Socialism’ policy initiated almost thirty years before. In a complete reversal of policy, the junta began to foreground the legacy of the Burmese monarchy. Exemplifying the change, a Central Committee for Revitalization and Preservation of Myanmar Cultural Heritage was established in 1993 by Than Shwe and headed by Khin Nyunt.

The initiative materialised with the construction of museums and universities of culture, and the reconstruction of palaces at former royal capitals, which has been criticised by academics in and outside the country. Master builders in charge of reconstructing the royal palaces of Bagan and Bago, from the 12th and 16th century respectively, face a lack of historical sources and archaeological remains and have taken great liberty in interpreting what these two palaces would have looked like. While this is seemingly not in conflict with the government’s policy of promoting ‘the correct knowledge and view’ of Myanmar culture, it may also be viewed as the latest instance of a long-standing monarchical tradition of re-writing history.

Personally too, the generals have sought to emulate the practices of Buddhist kingship in order to further assert their legitimacy. Just like former rulers during the monarchy, Than Shwe had a new umbrella hoisted on top of the Shwedagon Pagoda in 1999. He commissioned a replica of the Shwedagon named Uppatasanti Pagoda at his new capital. The highly controversial reconstruction of temples in Bagan with modern construction materials was also done under the auspices of the generals, just as traditionally kings renovated the architectural legacy of their predecessors. But it is with the construction of Naypyidaw that these royal pretensions have so far culminated. For this labour-intensive and resource-consuming grand project was patterned on those developed by rulers from the last dynasty (1752-1885), when successive royal capitals were built so as to fulfil prophecies.

### Generals and tycoons united: commodification and the state

With the open door economic policy starting from the early 1990s, the government has progressively withdrawn from some of its official obligations. One obligation it was fast to relinquish was the provision of housing for civil servants and needy people, a responsibility that it had, in fact, consistently failed to assume. Instead, the government acts as a facilitator and encourages the newly-formed business groups to cater to the needs of Yangon’s increasing population. Limited opportunities in domestic investments, land and real estate speculation fuelled by the money-laundering of drug lords, and an ever growing fragmentation of the housing market, all have led to a boom in property developments since the mid 1990s.

Not surprisingly, a large proportion of these new developments is located in downtown Yangon where many colonial housing blocks have been already destroyed.

Since 2009, a new step towards further economic liberalisation has been taken by the military regime with the privatisation of



Top: View of Yangon with Shwedagon in the background.

Below left: Renovation of the façade of KMD.

Below right: Rowe & Co. being renovated.

industrial and property assets. Auctioned off to a group of tycoons who dominate the country’s economic sphere, these assets include some iconic buildings of colonial-era Yangon. One is the former Secretariat, famous for its red brick façades and intricate stucco ornamentation, now vacant since the transfer of government offices to the new capital. Another is the former Rowe & Co. Department Store, which until recently housed immigration offices, located right next to the Yangon City Development Committee and the Sule Pagoda. In February 2011, local newspapers reported that these two buildings included within a list of five government buildings would be ‘renovated’. If the recent renovation of the KMD Centre, a private school in downtown Yangon, is any indication, façades would be kept while the buildings’ structure will be reinforced, or possibly replaced.

What these five iconic buildings will be used for, however, remains unknown. Local authorities and some private companies nevertheless may have realized the commercial and tourism-related value of these old buildings. From being historical markers of the British colony and therefore prone to the regime’s disregard, these buildings seem now to be considered commodities. What this shift in perception will hold for the long term remains to be seen. In the meantime, the city’s old urban fabric is progressively eliminated and no strategic planning is devised at the city level.

### ‘The people’s desire’?

In all these considerations about cultural heritage in Myanmar, there is clearly little room for the ‘people’s desire’. This expression is taken from government billboards placed conspicuously all over the cities of the country. Central to this discourse is the national unity and stability of the Union, an objective that, according to the regime, everyone should strive to defend. This political line is asserted without acknowledging the ethnic and religious diversity of the country. The construction of nationalities’ museums and libraries in Chin, Kachin, Shan, Kayin, Mon, Rakhaing, and Kayah States in the late 1980s and early 1990s and a very selective electoral representation of these populations at the newly-formed parliament are but very small concessions in recognition of their cultural identity and heritage. Meanwhile, ethnic insurgencies against the central government have undermined any efforts to promote greater recognition of this diversity.

The military regime has speedily approved large-scale infrastructure projects funded by neighbouring countries. With massive investments at stake, neither impact assessments on the environment nor consultations with local communities which are the norm in other countries have been undertaken. A direct threat to cultural and natural sites located in some of the states above mentioned, these projects include several dams, ports, and railway lines in Rakhaing, Kachin, and Shan states, constructed by Chinese and Thai companies.

Meanwhile, other communities that suffer from active discrimination, this time on the basis of their religion, see their agency in preserving their cultural heritage limited to the upkeep of the community’s religious sites and the sometimes public holding of religious festivities. Hindus, Muslims, and converted Christians have to repress any overt claims to cultural identity, as these are invariably interpreted as disrupting the ‘unity and stability of the Union’.

By contrast, owing to perceived closer cultural and religious affinities and because of the regime’s fear of possible economic and political retaliations by Beijing authorities, Chinese communities, even recent groups of migrants, enjoy a great freedom of movement and entrepreneurship. Public expressions of cultural identity are also very much tolerated as seen with Chinese New Year’s celebrations. This selective treatment of religious and ethnic communities, and the regime’s construction of a national cultural heritage as a means to restrict expressions of ethnicity and religion, have led a single group – the Buddhist Barmars – to dominate the public cultural sphere.

This brief overview on the politics of cultural heritage in Myanmar has shown that, both in discourse and actual policy, the colonial past and some of its markers, and the diversity of cultures have been suppressed. Emphasis has been placed on a supposed common Myanmar heritage, one that privileges the junta’s royal pretensions. All this has given the regime’s policy an Orwellian dimension in which the population is denied any agency for the preservation of its own cultural heritage. In this respect, Myanmar’s cultural heritage – as controlled and re-created by the military regime – cannot be contested, and communities’ heritage not overtly claimed unless it is some government-labelled Buddhist heritage.

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