The Journal of Burma Studies

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The Journal of Burma Studies is an annual scholarly journal jointly sponsored by the Burma Studies Group (Association for Asian Studies), The Center for Burma Studies (Northern Illinois University), and Northern Illinois University’s Center for Southeast Asian Studies.

Articles are refereed by professional peers. Send five copies of original scholarly manuscripts to The Journal of Burma Studies, Center for Burma Studies, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL 60115.

Subscriptions are $16 per volume delivered book rate. Members of the Burma Studies Group (membership $25 per year) receive the journal as part of their membership. For air mail add $10 per volume. Send check or money order in U.S. dollars drawn on a U.S. bank made out to “Northern Illinois University.” Visa and Mastercard orders accepted. Mail to: Center for Burma Studies, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb IL 60115

For abstracts of back issues, visit the website at: http://www.niu.edu/seas/jbs.html

The Journal of Burma Studies will be abstracted or indexed in the following: America: History and Life; Bibliography of Asian Studies; Historical Abstracts; PAIS International; MLA International Bibliography

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Center for Southeast Asian Studies. ISSN # 1094-799X
ARTICLES

THE VOC IN BURMA: 1634 - 1680
Wil O. Dijk 1

VENERATING THE BUDDHA’S REMAINS IN BURMA: FROM SOLITARY PRACTICE TO THE CULTURAL HEGEMONY OF COMMUNITIES
Juliane Schober 111

A GLIMPSE INTO THE TRADITIONAL MARTIAL ARTS IN BURMA
Michael F. Martin 141
Venerating the Buddha's Remains in Burma: From Solitary Practice to the Cultural Hegemony of Communities
Julian Schober*

Introduction

The veneration of Buddha relics and images is a neglected, yet central organizing principle of Theravada culture and religious practice. My essay is informed by a historised understanding of Eliade's hierophany, a manifestation of a universal Buddhist sacred reality that defines and identifies cultural orders at the centers of local, historical contexts. I further rely on Bells' work on ritual and Gramsci's writings on hegemony to describe Burmese veneration of the Buddha's remains in diverse social and religious contexts. These range from the solitary practice, meditation and personal service in the Ananda mode to the Royal mode that defines social hierarchy in public rituals and expresses socio-religious aspirations of individuals and communities through culturally salient metaphors.

The veneration of Buddhist relics and images is a popular practice throughout the Theravada world. Scholars commented on the

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1 The impetus to explore the notion of hierophany in regard to the remains of the Buddha developed from my conversation with Charles Hallisey at the meetings of the American Academy of Religion. I appreciate insightful comments I received from Frank Reynolds, John Strong and anonymous reviewers of the journal. I further benefited from comments by Anne Feldhaus, Mark Woodward, Michael Aung Thwin, Victor Lieberman, Steven Collins, and Kevin Trainor. All omissions and mistakes are mine. Support from the Social Science Research Council, New York and Arizona State University made it possible to focus on writing this article.

2 Without implying divinity, I use the term 'sacred' here to refer to religious practice and belief that are not part of the profane world. I am cognizant that, if asked, some Burmese Theravadin may take objection to the view presented

The Journal of Burma Studies
Volume 6, pp. 111-139
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ritual veneration of the Buddha's remains in contexts ranging from pilgrimage to relic shrines in the solitary periphery to participation in popular and state cults at the centers of Theravada polities. The Buddhist textual tradition, local myths, and a broad range of normative beliefs motivate it. In Theravada cultural discourse, ritual veneration gives expression to beliefs that are universal to the tradition, as relics of the Buddha and his icons are believed to be inherently powerful. Their veneration is popularly thought to guard against the inevitable decline of the Buddhist teachings (dhamma) and religious institutions (sana). As sacred objects like relics and Buddha images constitute potentially infinite sources of merit, the greatest religious merit and social prestige accrues to a Buddhist householder who donates an image of the Buddha. Indeed, material donation for Buddhist causes and patronage of the tradition's physical forms (rakya) are as important to the definition of lay status as is the affirmation of the Buddhist confession of faith to take refuge in the Buddha, the dhamma, and the sangha.

To look at veneration of the Buddha's remains as an organizing principle in Theravada society requires a definition of sacred objects that the tradition views as belonging to a class of legitimate "remains" (cetiya) of the Buddha. These are material manifestations of the sacred, and hence source of merit and power. Included in the category are four types of objects: 1.) the corporeal remains of the Buddha (ar raka) and by extension, of monks and others believed to have attained enlightenment; 2.) objects used by the Buddha (paribhogaka) or other enlightened beings, such as the bodhi tree under which he mediated or the begging bowl he used to receive alms; 3.) reminders (udda aki) and

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here, namely that remains of the Buddha are hierophanies and hence manifestations of the sacred for they do not consider the Buddha a deity or god. Yet, clearly, his spiritual realization is universally considered extraordinary and beyond the realm of ordinary experience.

3 While most Pali dictionaries gloss cetiya as literally the physical remainder, the English term 'remains' more appropriately conveys not only the physical but also symbolic meanings that attach in English and Burmese to the Buddha's relics, images and similar sacred objects assume in consecrated and ritual contexts.

4 This standard list of the Buddha's remains is found, among other places, in Susan Huntington's essay 'Early Buddhist Art and the Theory of Aniconism', Art Journal, 1990:401-408.

112 The Journal of Burma Studies, Volume 6
other representations of the Buddha, including reliquary mounts (st pa), images, and other aniconic representations of the Buddha like footprints, the Wheel of Dhamma, and so on; and 4.) the teachings (dhammacetiya) of the Buddha. They occur in various combinations and in diverse contexts. For instance, stupas may contain corporal relics, images, utensils, or copies of the scriptures and often are surrounded by images at the cardinal points of the structure. Alternatively, an image may be placed under a bodhi tree or contain a small compartment in which 'actual' relics may be placed.

Despite the salience of sacred remains across the Buddhist tradition, each individual or combined set of cetiya exhibits distinctive attributes that are derived from and legitimated by the particularist, historical and social contexts of its construction or 'discovery.' The salience of these sacred remains of the Buddha across the tradition along with their uniquely distinguishing characteristics is noteworthy. Mircea Eliade terms such an object of veneration and the place or structure that contains it a hierophany, a manifestation of the sacred in profane contexts. A hierophany maps a sacred reality onto secular, historical and cultural orders. A Buddhist hierophany also identifies a community of believers by means of ritual merit making. It may engender a ritual and cosmological center around which cultural, historical, and religious orders are constructed. Local attributes further underscore their specific significance. Eliade defines 'hierophany' as a culturally specific manifestation of the sacred in the profane world that is limited to particular expressions and contexts. Accordingly, a hierophany "designates the act of manifestation of the sacred." It denotes:

A reality of an entirely different order than those of this world ... (that is) manifest in an object that is part of the natural and profane sphere... A hierophany

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6 Mircea Eliade, The Sacred and The Profane, 1987:11
separates the thing that manifests the sacred from everything else around it, from all that remains profane.7

Buddhist sacred objects locate specific cosmological visions within particular local and cultural contexts of communities. Ritual veneration of the Buddha’s remains celebrates religious narratives that link universal features of Buddhist narratives to particular localities. In this way, ritual veneration legitimates the agency of temporal power through association with universal Buddhist sacred features, such as relics or images and lends enduring meaning to the particulars of local histories and social contexts. Following the writings of Bell8 and Gramsci9 on hegemonic discourse and ritual practice, I refer to cultural hegemony as the articulation of local histories and cultural processes focused on Buddhist hierophanies by which social hierarchies within and among communities are formed.

In her discussion of ritual practice, Bell draws on a variety of perspectives, including notions of ritual exchange, ritual as a language of communication about culturally recognized - and mis-recognized - realities. She elucidates ritual practices as irreducible human activity characterized by four features:

(1) situational; (2) strategic; (3) embedded in a mis-recognition of what it is in fact doing; and (4) able to reproduce and reconfigure a visions of the order of

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“A mong countless stones, one stone becomes sacred - and hence instantly becomes saturated with being - because it constitutes a hierophany, or possesses mana, or again because it commemorates a mythical act, and so on...a rock reveals itself to be sacred because its very existence is a hierophany: incomprehensible, invulnerable, it is that which man is not. It resists time; its reality is coupled with perennially.”

8 See Catherine Bell’s discussion of the features of practice in her Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice, 1992: 81, ff.

9 See Antonio Gramsci’s The Modern Prince and Other Writings, translated by Louis Marks. New York: International Publishers, 1957
power in the world, or [that she terms] 'redemptive
hegemony.' 10

Bell draws on Gramsci’s notion of hegemony as capturing more than
the traditional understanding of social power and techniques of
coercion to encompass cultural and ideological constructions of reality.
She writes:

...culture as the 'whole social process', and ideology
as a system of false meanings express...the interests of
particular classes. Gramsci’s term recognizes the
dominance and subordination that exists within
people’s practical and un-self-conscious awareness of
the world...(It) politicizes our understanding of ...the
symbolic framework that reigns as common sense.' 11

In the literature on Burma, the veneration of the Buddha’s
remains and the cultural hegemony it engenders has received only
passing attention. While colonial scholarship was marred by orientalist
preconceptions12, the scholarly focus, since the 1970s, on lay-monastic
relations further detracted from a scholarly exploration of rituals.
Building on recent scholarship in Buddhist studies, I focus on ritual
practice of venerating the Buddha’s relics, images and stupas and its
pivotal place in Burmese Buddhism. While ritual veneration of the
Buddha takes on diverse expressions in a variety of social contexts, two
basic modes are identified here. One mode comprises solitary ritual
and meditation that emulate the Buddha’s personal attendant and
disciple, Ananda and his practice of venerating the living Buddha. The
second mode takes place in public contexts that emphasize patronage
over the Buddha’s remains. It proceeds in the populist vein of royal
culls that aim to pattern themselves after the grand funerary
ceremonies venerating the Buddha who departed from this world as
described in the Mah parinibb na Sutta. In doing so, they emphasize

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10 See Catharine Bell, Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice (New York: Oxford
11 Bell, 1992:83.
12 For a discussion of the orientalist tendencies in the history of Buddhist
studies, see Donald Lopez ed. Curators of the Buddha, Chicago: Chicago

The Journal of Burma Studies, Volume 6  115
the socio-religious aspirations of individuals and communities through status symbols, social hierarchy in public contexts and similar expressions of cultural hegemony.13

Venerating the Buddha in the Ananda Mode: Solitary Practice, Service and Meditation
The rituals of venerating the Buddha's remains in the Ananda mode are performed by selfless devotion in predominantly solitary pursuit. It ranges from solitary meditation before images in households or caves to the collective acts of lay offering societies typically encountered in the former capitals of upper Burma. Veneration of the Buddha's remains as devotion and service to him in his Perfumed Chamber is informed by the unqualified dedication with which Ananda served as the Buddha's personal attendant. The Ananda mode is ritually set apart from social differentiation and centers on self-effacing service to ensure the physical comforts of the Buddha in his Perfumed Chamber.14 Its focus is on the personal attention, offerings, and recitation of prayers, solitary meditation and affirmations of vows by individuals who thus perform as if they assumed Ananda's service in the presence of the Buddha. They are acts that express an individual's religiosity in ordinary, unmarked or extraordinary, marked forms of ritual service to the Buddha. The interpretations individual Burmese Buddhist is apt to give to this observance depend in large measure on the significance they attribute to the veneration of images or relics within the broader context of beliefs.

13 These two ritual modes are also taken up in my essay on “Religious Merit and Social Status among Burmese Buddhist Lay Associations” in Blessing and Merit in Mainland Southeast Asia, Nicola Tannenbaum and Cornelia Kammerer, editors, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996:197-211.
14 In this regard, see my essay 'In the Presence of the Buddha: Ritual Veneration of the Burmese Maham ni Image', in Sacred Biographies, 1997: 259-288.

For discussions of the Perfumed Chamber in which the Buddha resides and where offerings are made to him, see two essays by John Strong, entitled "The Transforming Gift: An Analysis of Devotional Acts of Offering in Buddhist Avadana Literature" (History of Religions 18:221-237, 1979) and his "Gandhakuti: The Perfumed Chamber of the Buddha" (History of Religions 16: 390-406, 1977) and Gregory Schopen's "The Buddha as Owner of Property and Permanent Resident in Medieval Indian Monasteries" (Journal of Indian Philosophy, 18;181-217, 1990).

116 The Journal of Burma Studies, Volume 6
Most common examples of this kind of veneration involve the prayers, meditation, and offerings of food, water, or fragrances before the household image that are performed at least once each day by the most senior woman in the home. Ritual observances in the Ananda mode may also include affirmations of truths or vows taken before a Buddha image. These affirmations are analogous to precepts in that they express one's resolution to comply with certain ethical restrictions, such as a vegetarian diet for a specified period of time or to observe other ascetic and meditation practices. Adherence to one's resolution confers merit and other soteriological benefits, whereas failure to abide by one's resolution is thought to cause greater demerit than not taking such vows at all. Hence, these vows tend to figure prominently in conversations about beliefs and religious practice pious Burmese have with their peers—and with anthropologists—and usually observe rigorously.

The resolution to attain enlightenment as a Buddha in a future life is one of the most ardent vows taken before a Buddha image. While most Burmese Buddhists do not commit themselves to high soteriological aspirations, a surprising number of the very religious express such goals in their conversations. However, appropriate disclaimers about the cosmic time spans their realizations will require generally follow their statements. Individual conceptions about the lineage of preaching Buddhas and the role of silent ones (paccekabuddha) during this dispensation are significant variables in this regard. In Burma, such religious practice and speculation is inspired by the story of the encounter of the Buddha-to-be in his life as the ascetic Sumedha with the Buddha Dhamkara which exemplifies the

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16 In his essay entitled 'A Family Quest: The Buddha, Ya odhar, and R hula in the M lasarv stiv da Vinaya' in Sacred Biographies, John Strong employs the notion of karmic life streams to emphasize the causal links and multiple rebirths a Buddhist hermeneutic interpretation of the "individual" necessarily entails.
characteristic pattern of entering the final path stages leading to Buddhahood.\textsuperscript{17}

Among many ethnographic illustrations one can adduce to describe individual meditative practice focused on the Buddha's remains are those associated with vipassana and samatha meditation. Images and other representations of the Buddha are objects of meditation in both vipassana and samatha practice and therefore become significant foci of veneration by individuals whose practice of meditation is related to or takes place before a cetiya hierophany. The veneration of Buddha images is linked to meditation in yet another, esoteric manner through the practice of alchemy as a form of samatha meditation. It is not unusual to come across a dedicated group of meditators and alchemists who dedicate much of their time and effort to the production of peculiar metal composites used in making amulets and Buddha images.\textsuperscript{18} The successful alloy is believed to attest to powers inherent in the image and to the meditative accomplishment of the alchemist who produced it.\textsuperscript{19}

The Eastern Parakkama Monastery on Sagain Hill exemplifies poignantly the veneration of the Buddha as a practice of solitary austerities (dh tanga), a form of vipassana meditation, and devotion in the manner of Ananda, the Buddha's most dedicated disciple.\textsuperscript{20} The resident monks were ordained in the lineage of the Parakkama Abbot,

\textsuperscript{17} For a discussion of the lineage of Buddha as presented in the Buddhavamsa, a late Pali text describing the Bodhisatta's vow before a preaching Buddha, see F. E. Reynolds' essay on 'Rebirth Traditions and the Lineages of Gotama: A Study in Theravada Buddhology' in \textit{Sacred Biography} (1997:19-39).

\textsuperscript{18} Several ethnographers of Burmese Buddhism remarked on the production of Buddha images as alchemy and an exercise in samatha meditation. For discussions, see for instance, Manning Nash, \textit{The Golden Road to Modernity}, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1965:190-192) and Htin Aung's \textit{Folk Elements in Burmese Buddhism} (London: Oxford University Press, 1962: 190 ff.).


\textsuperscript{20} Sagain Hill is an extraordinarily fascinating area because close to four hundred monasteries, among them several prominent ones are located there. In a sense, it represents a monastic city, although the hill itself and its monasteries are technically considered to be forest hermitages located outside of civil boundaries.

\textsuperscript{118} \textit{The Journal of Burma Studies}, Volume 6
a prominent monk during King Mindon’s reign,21 who founded the monastery and was known for his austere meditation practice in an underground cave. His grandson, who was also ordained in this lineage presided as abbot over the monastery at the time of my visit and offered insightful comments about the practice and ideals of the founding abbot of this monastery. He explained that he ought to maintain it in the manner of the founding abbot to honor the memory of his grandfather’s dedicated practice and was engaged in writing his grandfather’s biography. The first Parakkama Abbot sought to follow the path of Gautama’s disciple Mahakassapa, a forest dwelling hermit and, like Ananda, “always placed the Buddha’s welfare foremost in his mind and waited on him as if he lived during the Buddha’s lifetime.”22

The founding abbot had taken a vow to become enlightened, a goal

22 It is significant that the practice of Ananda and Mahakassapa, two eminent disciples of the Buddha, served as models the founding abbot sought to emulate in his own life. Like Ananda, Mahakassapa showed a special devotion to the Buddha, which he expressed by wearing the Buddha’s ragged and discarded robes. Ordained by the Buddha and achieving arahatship after only eight days, he excelled most in the observance of monastic discipline and relentlessly practiced the thirteen austerities (dh tanga) of a forest hermit. While paying homage to the Buddha upon parinibbana, Mahakassapa’s iddhi powers enable him to perceive the Tathāgata’s feet shining out from the pyre through the funerary shrouds so he might venerate them. Subsequently, he carried the Buddha’s relics as they were distributed in all four cardinal directions and he presided over the first council.

Ananda’s populist mission, characterized by compassionate sympathy, stood in sharp contrast to Mahakassapa’s concern for monastic discipline and reclusiveness. Ananda is best known for his unmatched solicitude of the Buddha during the last twenty years of his life, when he served as the Buddha’s personal attendant. First cousins and born on the same day, Ananda did not accept the Buddha’s request to become his servant without stipulations: he insisted he was to receive no special consideration for invitations or robes the Buddha received, but wanted to share the Buddha’s residential chamber. He also requested the privilege to make the Buddha accessible to visitors and donors. Lastly, he asked to be allowed to inquire about doctrinal matters that might elude him or be preached while Ananda was absent.

The Journal of Burma Studies, Volume 6 119
some believed he had attained\textsuperscript{23}. His monastic mentor, too, was thought to have mastered the stage of a non-returner. He left the underground cave only to accept donations of simple foods. He owned only one robe at a time, ate merely one modest meal a day, and curtailed his sleep to avoid possible defilement (kilesa). He practiced the forty types of meditation and thirteen ascetic observances (\textit{dh\text{\_}t\text{\_}t\text{\_}a\text{\_}g\text{\_}a}), focused his mind on the virtues of the Buddha, and attended to the Buddha each morning at dawn. While no one resides permanently anymore in the monastery's meditation cave, individual lay meditators arrange to practice meditation and solitary devotion to the Buddha in the monastery's underground cave for a few days or weeks at a time.

The ordination hall (\textit{s\_m}) of the complex, an old, intricately carved wooden structure, had been donated by a female relative of King Thibaw, Burma's last reigning monarch (1878-1885, r.). It contained several large and some smaller Buddha images. To the left, a smaller building housed many more Buddha images as well as religious objects associated with various forms of magical powders, such as flowers from Mount Poppa preserved in small bottles of oil. A row of silken shawls covered the pathway into that building for the founding abbot of the Eastern Parakkama Monastery was known to revisit, in some ephemeral form, from time to time to pay obeisance to the Buddha in this image shrine.\textsuperscript{24} The adjacent prayer hall (\textit{dhanma\_you\text{\_}n}) featured extravagant architectural provisions for Gautama Buddha\textsuperscript{25} that were located behind a large Buddha image. They

\textsuperscript{23} Scholars of Buddhism will note the doctrinal issues this statement raises concerning the existence of either fully enlightened, preaching Buddhas or silent ones (pacceka buddha) during the present dispensation of Gautama Buddha. My queries in this regard were not really satisfied in the course of the interview as my informant, who referred to his grandfather as the Parakkama hpaya, the "Parakkama Buddha", remained ambiguous beyond indicating that his grandfather's enlightenment was not that of a saint (araha). I therefore retained this ambiguity in my description.

\textsuperscript{24} This building was dedicated for this purpose, yet it will be apparent from the discussion below that other structures within the complex had similar functions. See also again John Strong (1979) and (1977) and Gregory Schopen (1990) on veneration and service performed in the Perfumed Chamber of the Buddha.

\textsuperscript{25} The referent here was clearly Gautama Buddha for whom lavish and extravagant provisions had been made as a demonstration in sincere and
Venerating the Buddha’s Remains in Burma

included a small compartment featuring a European style toilet equipped with modern plumbing and water supply. Next to it was another booth with a Burmese style toilet, followed by a shower installation with modern plumbing fixtures and a fancy, large wooden closet that contained only the eight monastic requisites, namely a set of robes, an alms bowl, a fan, sandals, medicine, an umbrella, and a needle. The monastery’s isolated location on top of a hill and several miles away from the nearest town necessitated the installation of an electric generator and a water pump to supply these installations that, I was told, were exclusively for the Buddha’s convenience.26 These exorbitant forms of devotion to Gautama Buddha’s physical comforts accompanied other unusual features in the complex.

Equally intriguing was an expansive, man-made underground cave in which the founding Parakkama abbot spent extended periods in austere meditation and devotion to the Buddha. Above ground, the cave was indicated by a small, solitary meditation hut next to a stairwell and by a second set of stairs leading to another entrance to the cave at the other end. Inside the cave, a cemented walking hall led into several small underground rooms. A small and austere chamber near the stairwell housed a platform the founding abbot had used for meditation. A simple, chair like back support was attached to it near the back wall, just below a small niche used for burning incense.

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devote service to him. However, there is no denying the intentional ambiguity about the presence of several, simultaneous Buddhas that was suggested in the interview, the spatial arrangements and conceptual structures of this monastic compound.

26 While the generator, supply of running water, and plumbing fixtures were very expensive constructions and equipment in remote location in Burma during the 1980s, I did not notice any use of luxury items or indulgence with lifestyle conveniences in the monastery.
Juliane Schober

Austere meditation and prodigal devotion to the Buddha were echoed throughout the rest of the cave, which appeared to be the perfumed chamber of the Buddha’s residence. At the end of a long, narrow, dark hallway used for walking meditation was a gilded and crowned Buddha image seated on a throne, its style reminiscent of the Mandalay Lion Throne of the Konbaun period. The gilded image was wrapped in monastic robes beneath the brahmanical cords that crossed its torso. A neon light and a white umbrella hung from the ceiling above the image. At the base, an emerald-green alms bowl, fresh flowers adorned it, and incense, while a spittoon and a tray with paraphernalia for beetle nut chewing had been placed on the floor below. A small room branched off from the meditation hallway and had been prepared as the Buddha’s chamber (gandhakut). It housed a delicately carved and gilded bed with a canopy from which a mosquito net was hung to cover the pillows and blankets below. Next to it was a similarly carved wooden chair and small rugs covered the floor. Still farther down the hallway were two small tables that flanked both sides of a gilded, carved preaching platform. The table closest to the image was laden with perfumes, powers, medicines, flower petals, and a second alms bowl made of green glass and filled with fresh bananas. A fancy hammered metal chest, similar to those used to hold clothing was placed on the second end table. An example of extraordinary religiosity, the practice of the first Parakkama Abbot epitomizes the Ananda mode of venerating the Buddha. This is articulated in the sacred biography of the founding monk, in his practice of meditation, and in the architectural design and symbolism of the monastery itself. The Parakkama monastery may be understood as the site of two kinds of hierophanies, those that are manifestations of the Buddha and those that are manifestations of its founding monk. Although he is deceased, the monks of the monastery continue to prepare for him a path paved with white shawls leading to the Buddha images in the prayer hall, as he is believed to return on occasion to pay homage to the remains of the Buddha there. The inference suggested was that the founding abbot’s devotion to the Buddha in the mode of Ananda - or, in Eliade’s terms, the repetition in the ritual gestures associated with hierophanies, - engenders secondary manifestations of the sacred.
Veneration in the Royal Mode and the Cultural Hegemony of Communities

The veneration of the Buddha's hierophanies is not confined to solitary quests and the religious practice of individual merit making, but also takes place in multiple social contexts where it is articulated as patronage over hierophanies. Veneration in the royal mode valorizes status differentiation and social hierarchy. It is epitomized in the royal sponsorship of ritual veneration and in the ostentatious display of materials lavished on the construction of public monuments that enshrine the Buddha's hierophanies. The veneration of the Buddha's remains here is discussed from complementary perspectives: as constituting and reflective of social units such as households or local communities; as a symbolic process and ordering principle among complex communities and even larger social groups, including traditional state systems; and as structuring and reflecting the hegemonic discourse among competing social entities.

The remains of the Buddha define the symbolic centers of local worlds. They also differentiate hierarchically among the members in a community thus circumscribed and engender a competitive hegemonic discourse between social groups engaged in the royal mode of venerating the Buddha's remains. Places that contain the Buddha's remains are considered centers from which power and hence, patronage and protection emanate throughout the surrounding territory. Lehman²⁷ has shown that the extent to which power emanates from such centers defines a social and political sphere of influence as well as the parameters of a field of merit or Buddha field.

The conceptual hierarchy and social structure that emerge around the Buddha's remains order local contexts such that concurrent manifestations of multiple hierophanies create adjacent, overlapping, or encompassing domains of power. They thus engender a cultural matrix and discourse centered on domains of power established by hierophanies in which Burmese religious beliefs are constructed and social relations are negotiated.²⁸ The relevant referent of each domain - that is, the manifestation of individual remains of the Buddha - shifts

²⁸ For a discussion of these concepts in the context of Burmese Buddhist society and culture, see J. Schober, Paths to Enlightenment, 1989.
with contextual and other considerations that impinge upon the cultural construction of these local worlds. Burmese or other Theravadins see the concurrent existence of several such places and local worlds subsumed within the Buddhist universe as a manifestation of the dispensation's diffusion throughout the entire cosmos and believe that greater numbers of the Buddha's remains attest to its strength. One's motivation for making offerings before a certain Buddha image - be it observance of a daily routine, meditation practice, or worry about a sick child - determines the place where such service to the Buddha is performed: before the household image, at the neighborhood prayer hall, or before a much larger source of merit that has enjoyed the patronage of powerful individuals, such as kings, monks or others who claim soteriological accomplishments. Multiple offerings further enhance one's merit and social standing and imply claims of access to power and patronage. They also add complexity to negotiating one's social status within the community appropriate to one's age, gender, and presumed store of merit. Control over the territory or field of merit surrounding the Buddha's remains becomes the marked attribute in the determination of patronage, jurisdiction, and boundaries of domains.

Although Burmese recognize certain universal attributes of all objects belonging to the cetiya, they accord special powers to selected Buddha images. They are as concerned with the proper rituals forms of veneration as they with the places that contain and harbor them. Devout Burmese laity sponsor the construction of sites housing sacred objects or facilitate their production, travel at considerable expense on pilgrimage to such destinations, and comport themselves in a strictly proscribed manner in the presence of such objects to indicate their veneration of the Buddha's remains. The premise that Burmese and other Buddhists invest considerable economic expense, personal dedication, and social prestige only to remind themselves of the Buddha's absence from their world does not explain the popularity of

ritual veneration. Rather, they venerate and make offerings in this way in order to participate ritually in the continual manifestation of the Buddha at centers that hold his remains, or symbolic substitutes thereof and thus replicate a universal order in their local worlds and integrate their lives into an encompassing Buddhist cosmos.

Theravadin hegemonic discourse allows for multiple modes of claiming rightful veneration of hierophanies in the royal mode. In each instance, the central assertion rests on the claims of one community to have subsumed or even subjugated within its sphere of power and influence the ability of a second community to make merit on their own accord. They may include claims of royal lineage or decent, ontological and historical claims, national cults and even international disputes. They validate territorial claims, while their patronage and possession confers legitimacy to reigns, rulers, and polities. The attempts by kings to establish sources of merit as manifestation of their past karmic deeds, power, charisma, and aspirations are documented abundantly in Burmese history and affirm the integral role of cetiya hierophanies in the state cults of Theravadin polities. In this regard, one only needs to recall the attraction royal deeds of merit hold for the many pilgrims that visit them each year in Mandalay and other Burmese capital cities.

The popularity of state cults associated with remains of the Buddha rests on a unique combination of attributes that are universal to the Theravada tradition and specific to local contexts. These include beliefs about the origins of the unusual powers of the hierophary, be they relics or other objects created in his likeness, a miraculous agency that is uniquely linked to its consecration or production, a distinctive association with its location, and often a mythically inspired history of subsequent patronage. Such combinations of attributes build on toposes and evoke normative beliefs within the broader religious tradition.

The social and ritual processes of veneration in the royal mode integrate a local domain into the sacred geography of the Buddha field and totality of his dispensation. Rituals venerating relics provide insight into the particular histories of localities defined by a cosmic center and affirm the pivotal role of hierophanies in the cultural construction of meaning. In this process, they also simultaneously illuminate universal Theravada Buddhist notions concerning the Buddha's continuing presence in the world.

The veneration of the Buddha's remains is central to even the most elementary units of Burmese society, such as households usually
comprised by a male head, his wife, and often multiple generations of dependents, including children, grandchildren, and servants. To most Burmese, a properly constituted household requires a consecrated image suitably placed and venerated within the compound, for, without it, one's ability to make merit on one's own accord, and hence one's civil status as a householder and patron over dependents is called into question. Recognition as a donor of a Buddha image is the highest honor a layperson may attain for the merit derived from this deed is considered to be greater than the merit of sponsoring a monastic ordination. A consecrated Buddha image on the household altar thus symbolizes independent agency and merit making. Even those who argue that no merit is gained from venerating a Buddha image or relic are likely to have in their homes an altar on which is placed an image of the Buddha. A senior member of the household, usually the wife, makes daily offerings of foods, flowers, or water. Affluent households often venerate an entire collection of fancy images on their altars, some of them perhaps modern replicas of famous images at major pilgrimage sites.

However, selective veneration of competing hierophanies by individuals within the same household is uncommon for it would indicate divisiveness within the household. Within a household, certain events usually take place before Buddha images and the intention of certain actions is affirmed when carried out 'before the Buddha.' These events include offerings to invited monks and affirmations of one's sincere intentions. In the arbitration of disputes, for instance, the integrity and authority over social relations within even the most modest households is always preserved provided that the head of the household retains his ability to make merit on his own accord and enables others in his household the opportunity to acquire merit through his agency. The fact that Burmese observe carefully a detailed protocol of acceptable behaviors before consecrated Buddha images and other types of hierophanies underscores their central place in the cultural practice of Burmese society.

When moving into our home in Mandalay, we leased two rooms on the top floor of a home from a family who rented the property from its owner. Our quarters consisted of a small bedroom that was separated by wooden partitions and a curtain from the larger living area where an image of the Buddha was placed on a small altar in the southeast corner. The family's facilitation of our introduction into
their physical, social, and spiritual environment included, among other things, a lecture on proper comportment in the presence of the Buddha image. The image, I was told, must always remain above the height of one's head. One should sleep with one's head oriented towards the image, not sideways, or worse, pointing one's feet towards it. One also must not sit in that way or otherwise act immodestly in its view. Asking about the image's provenance, I learned that it had come with the house, that a previous owner had consecrated it, and that it had not been moved since then. Wondering why the owner of the house had left the image upon renting out his property, I was told that moving a consecrated image was a dangerous act best avoided for one was prone to treat the image improperly and incur bad luck. Hence, the image stayed, while the responsibility for its veneration, though not its ownership had fallen on the family who rented the property and with whom we lived.

Two examples illustrate this notion. When heavy rains in our neighborhood caused local flooding and damage to some houses, the Buddha image of the adjacent monastery had to be moved temporarily to a different location. The residents in the area considered this to be as much of a calamity as the monsoon damage itself and saw it as a bad omen for the future prosperity of this newly established quarter.

A second case concerns the bronze image cast by King Bagiyadaw (1819-1837, r.) in Ava in 1823 and now housed in the Setkyathih Pagoda near the Mandalay Palace. In his Archaeological Notes on Mandalay, Taw Sein Ko voices a common Burmese perception and quandary about the seemingly waning power of remains of the Buddha and their location during the colonial period. He writes concerning Bagiyadaw's image:

It is a curious coincidence that the first Anglo-Burmese broke out shortly afterwards [i.e. after it was cast], that in 1852 the second war broke out after its removal from Ava to Amarapura in 1849, and that in 1855 the third war, which extinguished the Kingdom of Burma, broke out after it had been removed from Amarapura to Mandalay in 1884. Any movement of the image portended a national calamity. In spite of its evil

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30 Rangoon: Superintendent, Government Printing, 1917: 16

The Journal of Burma Studies, Volume 6  127
reputation as a harbinger of disaster, it is one of the finest specimens of Burmese art...

Traveling through the country side in Burma by train, car, or bus, one sees numerous small stupas scattered seemingly at random through the landscape, such as at the edge of rice fields, at some distance from the nearest village, or on top of mountain ranges. Questions why one would build a small stupa in an isolated place solicit ambiguous responses beyond stating the obvious: such sacred objects are placed there because these are appropriate locations for them. Perhaps they were built to ensure fertility in the fields and then fell into disrepair when younger generations failed to maintain the works of merit their forefathers had constructed.

In Burma, the veneration of hierophanies of national significance takes place at major shrines like Shwedagon Pagoda\textsuperscript{31} in Rangoon that houses the Buddha’s hair or at the Maham ni Image in Mandalay which is said to have been cast in the Buddha’s likeness and ‘enlivened’ by him. Other sites include the Buddha’s relics at the Shwebogyun\textsuperscript{32} Pagoda and similar remains housed in stupas and temples in the Shwebo area where the rule of the Konbaun kings, the last Burmese dynasty, commenced with Alaunhpaya’s reign (1752-1760). To many Burmese, the grand religious monuments of Pagan symbolize the beginning of the Burmese State. Their lavish construction during the dynasty of Pagoda Builders that reigned there between the 11th and 13th centuries CE also was a significant factor in the economic and infra-structural involution of this early empire.\textsuperscript{33} Still, many contemporary Burmese view these and similar sites as national treasures that are propitious and powerful because they are repositories of the Buddha’s remains and intimately link events in Burmese history to the Buddhist tradition. A seemingly endless stream

\textsuperscript{31} Annemarie Esche published a volume, entitled \textit{Die Goldene Pagode} (Hanau/Main: Müller and Kiepenheuer, 1985) in which she presents a retelling of the mythology about Shwedagon and discusses some of its cultural and iconographic aspects.

\textsuperscript{32} For a discussion of these remains, see \textit{Burma Gazetteer, Shwebo District} (vol. A, 1929 reprinted 1963, Rangoon: Superintendent, Government Printing and Stationary), pp. 55 ff.

of transnational and multiethnic pilgrims who seek out such sacred places every year witnesses their continuing popularity.

It is a common occurrence in Theravada cultures for Buddhist hierophanies to become a focal point for multiple ethnic and political groups. Several prominent cults of venerating the remains of the Buddha have enjoyed the patronage of various polities at different times. In addition to Burmese examples like the Maham ni image, other instances of cetiya hierophanies across the Theravada tradition have been a significant focus of royal patronage and state cults. They include the Tooth Relic in Sri Lanka, and the Emerald and Sinhala Buddha images in Thailand, among others. Unusually powerful hierophanies, such as relics or images often bear some form of likeness to the Buddha. Commenting on the travels of the Sinhala Buddha image and of the Emerald Buddha Jewel among Sinhalese, Thai, and Laotian principalities, Tambiah notes that

Possession of them is a guarantee of legitimacy and these embodiments of virtue and power will remain with the possessor as long as he acts in an ethical manner. They cannot be moved against their consent; their travels are evidence of their passage from one deserving ruler to another.34

State cults surrounding hierophanies are found in both traditional kingdoms and modern nation states. They symbolize a polity and identify its community in specific historic periods. They typically engender large cultic complexes and pilgrimage sites that engage the religious imagination of kings and commoners seeking to worship them and gain their protection. They inspire kings to acquire

34 Tambiah, "Famous Buddha Images and the Legitimization of Kings: The Case of the Sinhala Buddha (Phra Sihing) in Thailand," *Res* (Cambridge, Mass.: Peabody Museum of Archeology and Ethnology, Harvard University), 4:18, 1982. Burmese ethnography and historiography similarly support the belief that remains of the Buddha reside out of their own volition in righteous dominions and under the patronage of a meritorious ruler. Therefore they cannot be retained or moved by force. Burmese meditators commonly believe that during proper meditative contemplation one can perceive relics flying through the air at night, departing from places that no longer can contain them on moral grounds and searching for other sites of refuge.

The Journal of Burma Studies, Volume 6  129
relics and palatial images of rivaling states and to commission the construction of their own religious monuments in grand styles. Reflecting on the role of such Buddha images in the legitimating of Theravadin rulers and their oscillating galactic polities across Southeast Asia, Tambiah observes that Buddha images are seen as

Permanent embodiments of virtue and power, [which] helped provide their temporary possessors with legitimating, and at the same time, embodied a genealogy of kingship by serving as the common thread that joined a succession of kings and polities with separate identities.35

The cultural discourse concerning the Buddha’s remains and its underlying hegemonic order extends across the Theravada tradition and hence also across most of mainland Southeast Asia. Tambiah’s example illustrates how the veneration of palatial Buddha images over generations becomes a way of re-constructing local history to link the historical present to a distant pristine and sacred past. It identities, stratifies and operates within communities as much as it engenders competition among social groups at difference levels of complexity. The cultural hegemony of venerating the Buddha’s remains in the royal mode is a strong and salient expression of political suppression or military supremacy in the political disputes of traditional polities or even modern nation states. The following two examples respectively illustrate these political ramifications of this hegemonic principle at work and show how intensely political the veneration of the Buddha’s remains may indeed become. A large bronze Buddha image in Chiang Mai exemplifies the use of hierophanies in the negotiation of hegemonic relations of Burmese supremacy and Tai subjugation. The image was cast in 1565 CE during Burmese dominion over the Northern Thai kingdom and bears two sets of inscriptions in Burmese and Tai respectively.36 They poignantly explicate the process by which the image came to embody the power relations that prevailed at that time. The Burmese inscription on the front of the base explains that the

36 This image and its inscriptions, along with the art historical and social history are discussed by Kraisri Nimmanaheminda in “A Chieng Mai Image Inscribed in Burmese and Tai,” JIBRS, no. 1, 1960: 63-66.
image was cast at the instigation of the Burmese general in charge of administering this Northern Thai region.

The Lord Jayya Saram Bana Ca Phan, a minister of the Righteous King who is Lord of the White Elephant and of the Golden Palace, who is Lord of Life and superior to all kings, [who,] desiring to create a refuge for men and devas and brahmans as long as the 5000 years of the Buddhist religion shall last, collected all Buddha images that were broken and cast a new image of the Omniscient One.37

While the Burmese text simply states that the Burmese general acted in the construction of the image as a deputy to the Burmese king, its Tai version sheds a different light on their perceptions of this act of merit as an expression of hegemonic relations. It states that the general in his role as defender of religion and protector of the people of Chiang Mai enjoined the local Tai military and civilian elites to collect all Buddha images damaged during past riots and had them melted down to cast a new one, named after the founder of the Chiang Mai dynasty, King Meng Rai. The Burmese general dedicated the merit of collecting the damaged, old, and presumably Tai images to the local Tai regent.

However, he claimed himself the merit of casting the new image and reaping its benefits in this and future lives, culminating with his wish for his enlightenment as Maitreya’s disciple. The dedication thus states that the casting of the image was born out of hegemonic relations between the past glory of this Tai kingdom and the usurping Burmese general, who, by naming the image after the founder of this Chiang Mai dynasty, tried to integrate himself into this lineage of succession by virtue of his meritorious deeds. Indeed, a Buddhist hermeneutic would suggest that the new bronze image does not merely symbolize but embodies the power relations of this local context as the fruits of past karmic deeds. The Chiang Mai image thus documents religious and cultural rationales associated with the role of Buddhist hierarchies as expressions of hegemonic relations. It also shows that patronage over the remains of the Buddha is an integral aspect of the state cult and also constitutes social hierarchies at the local level. In

this manner, Buddhist hierophanies function both as symbols of local and national identification. Hegemonic discourse on competing patronage over hierophanies and their attendant territorial claims continues to be salient in modern contexts.

The contemporary significance of Buddha hierophanies in relation to the sovereignty of modern states and national boundaries has been highlighted in conjunction with a minor border dispute reported in the Bangkok Post. According to this news account, Thai troops inspected three limestone islets along the Thai-Burmese border following reports from the Thai Ranong Muang district about Burmese attempts to claim sovereignty by means of the construction of a stupa on one of the outcrops, Lham Island. Thirty Thai soldiers, border patrol, and marine policemen found no trace of Burmese military presence, but located a demolished stupa which carried at its base an inscription of a name, ‘Saw Had’, and the year ‘1993.’ These events unfolded while the two governments were negotiating the status of the three outcrops. They had been considered too small to be included on the map of the original agreement between the King of Siam and the British Government of India that was signed in 1868 and confirmed in 1934. Since then, both Burmese and Thai authorities have claimed sovereignty over the three islands.

The somewhat disparate interpretations of these events by local and national Thai officials centered on the relative weight given to religious construction on foreign territory. While local officers in

38 The common focus on hierophanies as symbols of local identification can also be documented in the role and function of pagoda histories. They constitute a separate genre of vernacular literature and their composition is commonly commissioned by the patrons of such local sources of merit.
39 The article whose content is summarized and interpreted here was published in the Bangkok Post, November 18, 1993, under the title “Thais find Chedi, no Burmese on Island.”
Ranong Muan took the stupa’s construction as evidence for a Burmese attempt to occupy the islands, reported Burmese troops on nearby islands to be on full alert, and spotted two dozen Burmese soldiers headed towards Lham Island to inspect the stupa, the attitude at the national level was much more staid. In public statements, deputy secretaries of the interior and foreign ministries affirmed their commitment to seek a diplomatic resolution to this local dispute. The Royal Thai Navy dispatched a patrol ship and aircraft to survey the area and found no evidence of a stupa. The ambiguities surrounding the presence of a stupa erected through evidently foreign patronage on Thai soil were voiced in a statement by the secretary-general of the Thai National Security Council. He rejected the view that the st pa could be interpreted as an attempt by the Burmese government to claim sovereignty over the islets and cited, by way of analogy, the construction of Thai temples abroad which also did not imply Thailand’s intention to lay claim to foreign land. Nevertheless, he expressed his impatience with the fact that Thai inhabitants of the islands allowed the construction of the st pa to occur in the first place and urged provincial authorities to exercise greater vigilance in policing border areas.

The incident and ensuing debates over its interpretation are indicative of the conceptual notions associated with the role of Buddhist hierophanies in making claims to territory and jurisdiction. The destruction of the religious structure prior to its discovery by Thai troops probably diffused tensions and diminished the importance of a symbolically charged, potential international incident. Yet, the delicate ambiguity with which Thai officials handled this matter reveals the persistence of such Theravadin cultural models of hegemony in the context of modern international relations. Thai authorities cautiously repudiated any Burmese attempts to lay claim to disputed territory. Yet, their carefully constructed statements also accede that these actions on the part of the Burmese can, in principle, constitute aggression. As such, the disavowal by Thai authorities validates to some degree the very interpretation they sought to deny.

Conclusions
In Burma and elsewhere in the Theravada world, the practice of ritually venerating the Buddha’s remains creates a hierarchically differentiated Buddhist community centered on a particular
manifestation of the Buddha's remains. It illustrates Buddhist concepts of hierarchy and community expressed in the ritual veneration of Buddhist hierophanies and shows how this symbolic discourse in turn informs increasingly comprehensive levels of Burmese Buddhist society, from neighborhood households to kingdoms, in both traditional and modern contexts. The Burmese ethnography on image and relic veneration in Burmese culture also incorporates elements that are shared in the diverse ritual forms of devotion across the Theravada tradition. These shared features attest to a hermeneutic structure of the religious tradition that underlies local variation.

The previous discussion noted local variations in ritual, practice, and belief in Burma as well as features that are consistent throughout the Theravada world. In discussing a largely neglected Burmese ethnography of venerating the Buddha's remains, I relied on Eliade's notion of hierophany and followed Bell's and Gramsci's reasoning concerning cultural hegemony in order to historicise the veneration Buddha's remains in Theravada society. Referring to various social contexts in Burmese culture, I showed how veneration of Buddhist icons and relics structures and reflects important principles of Theravada religion and society: the order of the Buddhist cosmos; religious beliefs and practice; societal patterns of hierarchy within a household, community, or polity; and the negotiation of cultural and ritual hegemonic among such communities.

The cult of venerating the Buddha's hierophanies and its associated practices locate specific Burmese historical and social contexts in the broader Buddhist tradition. At the same time, those elements or themes in the Burmese veneration of the Buddha's remains that are universal to the Buddhist tradition have implications for a comparative study of lay or popular religion in the ethnography and texts of the Buddhist tradition.

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134 *The Journal of Burma Studies, Volume 6*
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136 *The Journal of Burma Studies*, Volume 6
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138 The Journal of Burma Studies, Volume 6
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