Historiography, Iconography and Political Legitimation in Myanmar

Nation building processes in tumultuous times

M.A. Southeast Asian Studies
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„Who controls the present ... controls the past.”

*George Orwell* -1984
### List of Abbreviations

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<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<tr>
<td>AFPFL</td>
<td>Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League</td>
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<td>MAB</td>
<td>Military Administration of Burma (1945 - 1948)</td>
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<td>NLD</td>
<td>National League for Democracy</td>
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<td>SLORC</td>
<td>From 1988 to 1997 the SPDC was known as State Law and Order Restoration Council</td>
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<td>SPDC</td>
<td>The State Peace and Development Council; the official name of the military regime of Burma, which seized power in 1988</td>
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<td>URC</td>
<td>Union Revolutionary Council, supreme governing body of Burma (1962 - 1974)</td>
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<td>USDP</td>
<td>Union Solidarity and Development Party</td>
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### Myanmar Glossary

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<td>Azarni</td>
<td>a person with discrimination and courage of his conviction; a hero/ heroine who is prepared to sacrifice his/her life for a good cause</td>
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<td>Boyoke</td>
<td>one of the highest Burmese military ranks, resembling the rank of a General</td>
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<td>Chinlone</td>
<td>caneball, traditional team sport in Myanmar</td>
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<td>Hti</td>
<td>umbrella; tops most of Myanmar’s pagodas as final ornament</td>
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<td>Tatmadaw</td>
<td>the official name for the Myanmar Armed Forces, composed of the Army, the Air Force and the Navy</td>
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1. Introduction
The study of the role historiography and public memory play within nation-building processes in Southeast Asia continues to see a steady rise of interest with scholars, governments and in growing numbers also the public eye. In face of continuous local resistance towards national integration, the struggle to define a national identity by converting multiple pasts into a single national narrative remains crucial to authoritarian and post-authoritarian regimes alike. The question of belonging to one nation has yet to be resolved by various communities throughout the region (Aung-Thwin M., 2012). Especially Myanmar’s challenged government tries hard to create a general Myanmar identity that includes not only the Bamar majority, but also all of the people living on Myanmar territory – with the current exclusion of the Muslim Rohingyas.\(^1\) This nation-building attempt is naturally on terms of the government. The streamlining of regional or ethnic histories and narratives poses new threats and worries to the already suspicious minorities amidst the pacification and reconciliation attempts of Naypyitaw. Successive regimes and leaders have tried to both exploit the ideological groundwork laid in the dynastic, colonial and independence eras and to develop innovative new strategies to convince Myanmar’s inhabitants to overlook what divides them and prioritize what they have in common (Metro & Salem-Gervais, 2012).

These “persuasion tactics” include quite drastic assimilation policies by promoting the Myanmar language whilst penalising the teaching of ethnic languages like Mon or Kachin since 1989

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\(^1\) In 1989 the former military regime changed the country’s name from Burma to Myanmar. Since then, the name Myanmar has been used officially by the United Nations but remains a contested political issue. Nevertheless, this thesis will use Myanmar when referring to the modern state and will only use Burma when addressing the pre-SLORC state. Soon after independence in 1948, many colonial names of streets and parks were changed to more nationalistic Burmese names. In 1989, the Tatmadaw changed the capital's English name from Rangoon to Yangon, along with many other changes in English transliteration of Burmese names.
(Callahan, 2004). This *Unity in Diversity* campaign reaches from the rewriting of history books to the iconization or demonization of folk heroes, events or even places. As more and more doubts about the sincerity of the current government’s will to allow democratic change emerge due to the setback in electoral laws, prolonged lack of freedom of the press and harsh human rights violations in Rakhine state, Thein Sein’s *circle of power* tries to prove their legitimacy ever more vigorously to their own people as well as the world community.

The scope of this master thesis bundles past and current academic works of renowned Myanmar scholars on the topic of historiography and legitimacy struggles in Myanmar as well as novel findings of international organisations and results of self-conducted interviews in Yangon in the beginning of 2014.

Since the opening of the country in 2012 Myanmar-related research has seen the same boost in foreign interest as the business sectors. As not only NGOs, foreign investors and tourists flock into the *golden land* but also academic scholars and researchers, it becomes difficult to see through the floods of recently published papers, books and guidelines on Myanmar. I therefore relied on the generous advice of accomplished Myanmar experts like Andreas List, former head of office of the Delegation of the European Union to Myanmar and Aung Soe Min and Nance Cunningham, owners of Pansodan Gallery, Yangon’s social meeting point for anyone willing to participate in the future of the country. I gratefully draw from the work of Michael Aung-Thwin, Mary P. Callahan and Rosalie Metro for insights into Myanmar’s past and historiographical developments in Myanmar.

2. Theoretical background

The theoretical groundwork of this research is based on Oliver Tappe’s work on *Geschichte, Nationbildung und Legitimationspolitik in Laos* [History, Nation-building and Legitimation Policies in Laos] and his approach to Pierre Nora’s *Lieux de mémoire*. Tappe’s work on the state-run national identity in late-socialist Laos and how Laos’ one party rule uses historiographical and iconographical strategies for their project of nation-building and self-legitimation, provides a

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2 The term *golden land* is frequently used for Myanmar, nowadays mostly by associating it with the millions of golden pagodas across the country. But the term was already shaped by Pegu king Dhammazed in 1479 by dubbing the Mon kingdom in Lower Burma *Suvannabhumi - the land of gold*. A term deeply connected to orthodox Buddhist teachings which gave [his kingdom] *antiquity, orthodoxy, and legitimacy* (Aung-Thwin M. A., 2005).
new and thorough understanding of the role historiography can provide in the modern day challenges of post-socialist states and authoritarian regimes. With the opening of Myanmar in 2012, the military-turned-civilian leadership faced a new chapter of defending their suddenly vulnerable role as the self-declared backbone of the country. It is the parallel of highly contested historiography in both countries and the prerogative of interpretation of the respective country’s past that is most striking.

Tappe’s main focus lies on the visualization of nation through historiographical and iconographical techniques. While history- and schoolbooks are excellent sources for historiographical analysis, iconographical elements like memorials or museums serve as physical sources. He investigates what specific notion might be behind a history book or a statue and why it is of such high importance for the state. Tappe focuses on the connection between nation and history and the ideological and power political implications that come with it. The prerogative of interpretation and creation of national identity seems synonymous with control over the nation and it’s people. His research uses the combined concepts of places of remembrance and national topography. As Tappe points out, collective memory and collective identity are deeply connected to the feeling of belonging to a nation and as defined by Pierre Nora, places of remembrance - Lieux de mémoire - are places, where history and collective memory may manifest themselves (Nora, 1989). This may well be an actual place or even a person or event. This thesis uses the examples of the Shwedagon Pagoda and the Mandalay Royal Palace, the national hero Aung San and the Martyr’s Day commemoration to connect this theory to Myanmar’s leadership’s legitimation struggle.

Connected to this, topography represents a certain space, which encircles various levels of time and reality and implies a metaphorical character. In the context of national community, this metaphor represents spatial conditions like centre and periphery, places associated with historic events and figures or demographic facts, all located along a timeline as “Verräumlichung des historischen Narrativs” [spatialization of historical narratives]. Such a space must be seen as a network of movable elements, which are neither stable nor undisputed. For Tappe, historiographical and ideological reconstructions of nations are highly competitive and changeable, just as nation-building processes can never be seen as finalized. To conclude,
Tappe’s concept of national topography covers both temporal and spatial dimensions of nations as a time/space-coordinate system (Tappe, 2008).

When working in the field of nation-building, Benedict Anderson’s work on *Imagined Communities* and Eric Hobsbawm’s work on *The Invention of Tradition* are fundamental in understanding the academic discourse.

Hobsbawm defines *invented tradition* as a broad term, including both invented and constructed traditions and those emerging in a rapid and less traceable manner within a brief period. As he states in his work, invented traditions normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past. Plenty of political institutions, ideological movements and groups were so unprecedented that even historic continuity had to be invented, for example by creating an ancient past beyond effective historical continuity, either by semi-fiction or by forgery (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983). This practice isn’t confined to a certain region, time, or ideology, but can rather be induced by times of social change in various contexts. This has been observed in European pasts, but it is also true for the recent history of Southeast Asia, where the instrument of a fictitious past has been used in government concepts by colonial masters as well as by power holders in postcolonial times (Dahm, 1999). One might also speak about a revival of traditions when it comes to religious responses in times of rapid change. Burmese Buddhism has seen many different forms of religious zeal but not in such a public and state-run concept of defining the Myanmar identity as Buddhist since the dismantling of Buddhist kingship (Jordt, 2007). Anderson defines a nation as "an imagined political community [...], imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign". He believes that a nation is a socially constructed community, imagined by the people who perceive themselves as part of that group. As Anderson puts it, a nation "is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson, 1991).

2.1 Making Myanmars
Since independence, the issue of one united nation state has challenged Myanmar’s leaders. Being confronted with strong ethnic minorities in the country’s border areas and their struggle for secession or - at least - federalism, Yangon’s or Naypyitaw’s ruling elite has felt threatened
in their geographical and financial entity which lead to the continuous civil war raging in various parts of the country until today.

Mary Callahan moulded the term *Making Myanmars* to describe the efforts of the SLORC/SPDC\(^3\) after 1988 to embrace and remake the populations of the border areas into Myanmars. They launched various campaigns, fabricating a singular cultural heritage industry along with development and educational initiatives, as in the new order of post-Socialist politics they couldn’t afford to move troops away from the rebellious central region to deal with the tensions beyond. The former excluded areas had been shifted into focus, when opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi began touring the country in 1989 and was crossing the seemingly impermeable boundary between centre and margin that only the Tatmadaw had crossed before. After her NLD’s landslide win in the 1990 elections, which wasn’t allowed to be turned into a new government by the military, even the possibility of an integrated multi-ethnic coalition of forces was enough to panic the military into making the minorities *think correctly* with unprecedented fervour.

“Over the last fifty years, Rangoon regimes always have framed their formal policies towards ethnic minorities living beyond the central region as programs aimed at teaching “backward” peoples how to think correctly – that is, to think with a Union Mentality (1950s), Socialists (1962-88), and now (since 1988) as authentic and pure “Myanmars”. During the first two time periods, however, one could think, speak, read, and write correctly in any indigenous language, as long as one’s utterances were pro-Union and later pro-Socialist. Since 1988, however, the regime’s cultural homogenization programs suggest that thinking correctly must be done in “Myanmar” language, any diversity threatens all “Myanmars”.” (Callahan, 2004, p. 104).

This is contrasted by Myanmar’s official efforts to comply to ASEAN’s Unity in Diversity campaign. The government lists 135 ethnic groups, which are grouped into eight national races: Bamar, Kachin, Kayah, Karen, Chin, Mon, Rakhine and Shan, while the Bamar account for the

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\(^3\) The State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) was the official name of the military regime of Burma, which seized power in 1988. From 1988 to 1997, the SPDC was known as State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), which had replaced the role of the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP). In 1997, SLORC was abolished and reconstituted as SPDC. The council was officially dissolved on 30 March 2011, with the inauguration of the newly elected government, led by its former member and Prime Minister, President Thein Sein (Owen, 2005).
majority, constituting approximately two-thirds of the population. But the 2014 census, the first one since 1983, sparked new discontent and doubts about the government’s sincerity in this pressing matter. The census faced heavy critique with the inclusion of the contested ethnic classification system. Especially the old and much-criticised list of 135 ethnic groups produced in the 1980s and the refusal of census workers to let Rohingyas state their ethnicity at all, lead to widespread distrust in the government’s will to embrace its true diversity. Daw Khon Ja, a program director with the Kachin Women’s Peace Network, said that her organisation and others had made many attempts to warn the government and the UN assisting Myanmar in conducting the census of the likely problems with it but these were ignored (Network Mynmar, 2014).

2.2 Hypothesis
With the breakdown of socialist states all across the world – or at least their Marxist ideologies that legitimized the respective governments - ideological vacuums emerged to be filled with new ideas. Today’s situation in Myanmar reflects this situation. Even though the socialist one party rule already ended in 1988 with the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) seizing power in a coup d’etat after the 8888 Uprising, the cautious opening of the country only happened in 2012. The years of the SLORC junta, later renamed into the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), saw a harsh and repressive rule while legitimizing itself as being the needed strong hand and backbone of their troubled country. But with the opening of the country and the government’s wish to forge ties with other nations but China, trying to end their dependence on the mighty neighbour, their quest for inner and outer legitimation had to be gained by other means.

So what other ways of creating legitimacy were left for the military-turned-civilian leadership? My hypothesis is, following Oliver Tappe’s work on Laos, that the Myanmar government makes strong use of historiography and iconography in its recent struggle for legitimation. Additionally, with the majority of the country being highly pious, the leadership strongly depends on Buddhist legitimation, which is deeply rooted in the country’s past. To verify these hypotheses, I focused on how history is presented and perceived in todays society in Myanmar, what role national heroes play in this context and how iconography is incorporated in the government’s agenda while taking a closer look on the role Buddhism assumes within the legitimation process.
2.3 Methodology

In the course of my master programme I conducted a research semester in Myanmar on historiography and political legitimation. The research results are incorporated in this thesis. I found guidance for conducting my research in Alan Bryman’s *Social Research Methods*. As my research project involved both historic sources and current perceptions, I chose to combine multiple methods. Next to standard literature research, this involved classic archive work at the University of Yangon Library, which I initially feared would still be restricted for foreigners but was granted without any hesitations. Because of the limited academic works on Myanmar’s recent historiography (limited in quantity, not in quality), I chose to start with various qualitative interviews to get an overview over the current situation. As I can’t present exact transcript of these interviews, often conducted on noisy street corners or at buzzing galleries and functions, I decided to use them as general introduction to my topic and to not quote specific excerpts. I additionally conducted a not-representative survey on the keyword national hero in Yangon in January 2014. Due to my limited Myanmar language skills and the still unfamiliar situation of innocuous open conversation with foreigners, I anticipated and accepted certain restrictions from the beginning.4

I visited both the old palace grounds in Mandalay and the Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon several times to get more details on the iconographic places I chose to work with in my thesis. On both sites I found more than helpful caretakers who were happy to assist in any way - very different to the staff at the National Museum in Yangon, which remained quite elusive in its concept. While searching for a way to get old and new bank notes to verify the concept of compelling iconography in everyday life - without any general bank open to foreigners in Myanmar - I found an expert and collector of international bank notes, Owen Linzmayer, whose collection of Myanmar bank notes I gratefully used.

The results are presented below and incorporated into the thesis. Due to the scope of the research project, the outcome is naturally limited. I feel this should only serve as the beginning of much deeper research into this wide and extremely interesting field of Myanmar studies. I therefore plan to expand my research in a PhD project.

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4 For more details on the field research, see point 3.1.3.1 National Heroes - Survey
3. Historiography
Historiography has long been a powerful ideological tool in the struggle for political legitimation and identity. The construction of identity in today’s territorially defined nation states remains a highly contested field. As Rüsen puts it: „For all human communities, history continues an intentional and organized process of identity formation that remembers the past in order to understand the present and anticipate the future.“ (Rüsen, 1993). If you have a closer look into Myanmar’s historiography, its exploitation within the nation building process becomes quite apparent. But in contrast to common belief, this is not a new development that came hand in hand with the military dictatorship, but can already be witnessed in the old chronicles under Myanmar’s early monarchies. Over centuries, the sources of legitimation for the elites didn’t see as many innovations as might be expected in face of the radical changes in Myanmar’s society that came with the end of monarchy. This can also be observed in school education, especially in the field of history. As Metro’s research shows, successive governments used education to propagate a national ideology, especially by emphasizing the golden past and its heroes (Metro & Salem-Gervais, 2012).

3.1 Historic discourse
The term *history* in Myanmar is quite complex in itself. As with many other Myanmar words, there are various versions of its translation and meaning. Most commonly used is *yazawin* (*ရာသဝံသ*), derived from the Pali word *rāja vamsa* for king and genealogy, meaning chronicle of kings or history. Today it is mainly used to describe chronicles and not history in its general meaning. The modern word for history would be *thamaing* (*သမုိင်း*), derived from the Pali word *sammuti* for either opinion/ view, consent/ approval, or history/ legend. The latter speaks of chronicles and records of dynasties, battles, neighbour states and ancient legends that were only taught to the king and high court officials, while *thamaing* is a relatively new word covering all aspects of the modern understanding of history. The department of history at Yangon University for example is called *thamaing htarna*. Neither of these terms covers the history of the Buddha – *thathenawin* - that is outlined in religious texts and studies, which are kept alongside worldly

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5 The terminology was generously provided by Dr. Uta Gärtner, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin
Before the 19th century, states with fixed borders and clear alliances were a western concept in Southeast Asia (even though the three major contending imperial systems of Myanmar, Siam and Vietnam had all achieved their modern unified national territories by the early 1800 at the latest), leading to the misguided presumption by European colonial powers that Asia was only sporadically ruled by scattered barbarian leaders. The theory of “Oriental despotism”, assuming that Asian political systems in general were tyrannical and without any notion of private property, was obviously very convenient to colonizers who wanted to seize territory in Asia. The Theravada polities of Myanmar, Siam and Cambodia consolidated their power by the public aspiration to be universal monarchs (cacravatin) who ruled through their righteousness, and the Buddhist monarchs occasionally stimulated the popular belief that they were self-denying saints (bodhisattvas), a Buddhist adaption of an older Hindu idea (Owen, 2005, S. 35-72). In what

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6 The conservation of these scripts, often written upon palm leaves, is gaining more and more importance as time advances.
would come to be known as the Southeast Asian *Mandala*-System, traditional Southeast Asian political formations of diffuse political power distributed among principalities were in some ways similar to the European feudal system, linked in suzerain-tributary relationships. But the control over specific territories wasn’t as important as the emphasis on personal relationships: The tributary ruler was subordinate to the overlord ruler, rather than to the overlord state; there were no borders and a territory could belong to various, overlapping power centres (Wolters, 1999).

Myanmar’s monarchy faced the same complications as their neighbouring Southeast Asian rulers, which was their relative shortage of people. In the 18th century, Southeast Asia had roughly half the population density of Europe. Various rulers’ struggles to create and keep legitimacy could not be confined to elite groups, but had to be extended downwards to the labouring people who might otherwise have fled the oppressions of state-making projects in the valleys and head into the plentiful forests or highlands, known as Zomia (Scott J. C., 2011). In Myanmar, the struggle between the ruling “lowland-majority” and the “hill tribes” carry on in the world’s longest-lasting civil war until today.

Nowadays, when talking about the grand monarchies of Myanmar’s past, the limelight belongs to three kings: Anawaratha (1044 – 1077), father of the Burmese Nation, founder of the Pagan Empire, bearer of Theravada Buddhism and initiator of the first history of Burma; Bayinnaung (1551 – 1581), founder of the largest empire in the history of Southeast Asia who achieved the integration of the Shan states into the Irrawaddy-valley-based kingdoms and conquered the adjoining kingdoms of Manipur (India), Siam and Lan Na (Thailand) and Lan Xang (Laos); and Alaungpaya (1752 – 1760), unifier of the Burmese territory and founder of Yangon and the Konbaung dynasty, which lasted until the conquest of the British in 1886 (Owen, 2005). The time between these three golden ages is mostly ignored in the current historiographical context within Myanmar. The marble manifestations of these three kings also adorn the entrance of the National Museum in Yangon.

The British conquest of Mandalay in 1885 marked Burma’s watershed year by irretrievably changing the century-old traditions that had guided the country through even the most tumultuous of times. The story of the first Burmese king Abhiraja, who founded his kingdom
thousands of years ago in the Irrawaddy valley and king Thibaw, who ultimately traced his descent to Abhiraja himself, gave the Burmese people *a sense of deep continuity*, which ended with the fall of Mandalay (Thant Myint-U, 2006).

As for the historic sources these traditions were founded upon, there was a century old tradition in Myanmar of maintaining chronicles at the king’s court in the country’s four historical polities: Upper Burma, Lower Burma, Arakan and the Shan states. In fact, Myanmar possesses the most complete historical records in all of Southeast Asia. The most thorough extant chronicles are those of Upper Burma-based dynasties, with the earliest extant chronicle dating from the 1280s and the first standard national chronicle from 1724. The chronicles were not solely written from a secular history perspective but rather to provide *legitimation according to religious criteria* of the monarchy as Michael Aung-Thwin points out in his book *The Mists of Rāmañña*. In his work he contradicts the common perception that the Mon people civilized Upper Burma. According to Aung-Thwin, 15th century Mon monarchs reconstructed their history and intentionally created this ‘Mon Paradigm’, which gave Lower Burma *an antiquity, orthodoxy, and legitimacy it never had* (Aung-Thwin M. A., *The Mists of Rāmañña*, 2005).

The earliest extant chronicle - and also the most accurate - is the *Zatadawbon Yazawin*, (*ဇာတာတော်ပုံရာဇဝင်*), *Chronicle of Royal Horoscopes*, which records date back as early as the 11th century and which was continuously updated by court historians until the reign of the last king Thibaw. It must have been written in the late 13th century and covers - much like all other chronicles - the monarch’s reign and only little to no information about the general situation of the kingdom (Aung-Thwin & Aung-Thwin, *A History of Myanmar Since Ancient Times*, 2013).

The first national chronicle of Burma, *Maha Yazawindawgyi*, (*မဟာရာဇဝင်တော်ကြီး*), was completed in 1724 by U Kala, a court historian under the Toungoo Dynasty. It was the first work to integrate all the ancient, regional, foreign and biographic histories related to Burmese history and therefore also formed the base for all successive chronicles - also the first English ones. The chronicle's portrayal of the 16th century Toungoo period has been proven quite accurate, yet, his accounts of earlier periods seems less informed. (Liberman, 1986).
The New Great Chronicle, *Maha Yazawin Thit* (မဟာရာဇဝင်သစ်), completed in 1798, was the first attempt by the Konbaung court to examine the accuracy of U Kala’s standard chronicle of the preceding Toungoo Dynasty. Even though its novel findings and corrections weren’t well received at court and eventually discarded, in 1832, the first officially accepted chronicle of the Konbaung Dynasty, had incorporated many of its revisions. (Aung-Thwin M. A., Myth & History in the Historiography of Early Burma, 1998)

This official chronicle, the *Maha Hmannan Yazawindawgyi* (မဟာမန်နန်းရာဇဝင်တော်ကြီး) - famously known as the *Glass Palace Chronicle* in its English translation - was compiled by the Royal Historical Commission and still serves as the main source for school history lessons today. Not very different to the preceding ones’ intention, the chronicle’s main task was to aid the monarchy in establishing legitimacy by linking the Burmese monarchy directly to the Buddha himself (Aung-Thwin M. A., The Mists of Rāmaṇa, 2005).

3.2 Buddhism as Legitimacy – Resuming the king’s responsibility
In the era before the invention of the nation-state, eighteenth-century Southeast Asian monarchies were comparable to monarchies elsewhere in aspiring to be universal empires. Sultan Iksandar Thani of Aceh (1637-1641) publicy announced that he was *the king of the whole world, shining like the sun at midday* and descending from Alexander the Great, who in the islamic tradition, had prefigured the concept of divine law. This seems quite similar to the behaviour of Louis XIV, king of France, *le Roi-Soleil* (1638 - 1715). Similarly, Burmese court genealogists tried to show that Burma’s kings were direct descendents of Gautama, whose teachings Buddhism was founded on (Owen, 2005). Ever since, the link between Buddhism and the ruling elite served as a strong legitimazing tool in the Burmese state:

*When king Mindon felt the British closing in on him from what was then already British Burma in 1853, he tried to strengthen his power by the traditional means of emphasizing the crown’s patronage of Buddhism and its institutions and by enhancing administrative, military and economic recourses of the kingdom. It has also ben argued that Mindon began to develop a*

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7 Correctly translated, it would actually be *Chronicle of the Palace of Mirrors.*
sense of patriotism among his subjects, sowing the seeds for the Myanmar nationalism of the twentieth century (Owen, 2005).

The removal of the king by the British during the colonial period had destabilized the relationship within what Jordt calls the “ternary order of sangha, state, and laity“. After the Second World War, lay people's administrative control of the Mahasi meditation movement enabled them to assume what had been the king's responsibilities to purify and protect the sangha. “Legitimacy in Burma is not about regime performance, it’s not about human rights like the West,” said Ingrid Jordt, “it is something that comes from the potency and karma bestowed by the monks. That’s why the sangha is so important to the government”, referring to the Buddhist hierarchy and the spiritual status that its monks can convey. “They are actually the source of power.” (Jordt, 2007)

The former junta and their ex-generals in the current government have gone to great lengths to strengthen their ties with the Buddhist leadership. Like their predecessors throughout the centuries, the generals have been busy building temples, supporting monasteries and carrying out religious symbolic acts. In 1999, the Tatmadaw sponsored the installation of a new *hti* on the top of the Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon. This was a risky move, for the Burmese commonly believe that only a legitimate ruler can successfully put a new *hti* on the structure. The last ruler to do so was king Mindon, supervising it from a distance, as the British wouldn’t allow him to come near Rangoon (Seekings, 2013). When the work was completed without incident, the generals were reported to have exclaimed, “We won!“.

But with the *Saffron Revolution* in 2007, the balance of power broke down in the streets of Yangon. It became a spark that grew into a broad-based challenge to the government, culminating in the breach between those who hold the moral authority and those who hold the military power.

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8 *Hti* laterally means umbrella in Burmese and tops most of Myanmar’s pagodas as the final ornament.
9 The term *Saffron Revolution* refers to the to the saffron-coloured robes widely associated with Theravada Buddhist monks, who were at the forefront of the 2007 demonstrations. However, this terminology is misleading as the majority of monks in Myanmar wear maroon, not saffron-coloured robes.
“This was not an accidental uprising,” said Zin Linn, a former editor and political prisoner. The transition in leadership in the protests - from militant former students to activist monks - was well planned through secret meetings among young men sharing similar grievances and aspirations for their country. “For the most part, it was not the elders who backed the protests. Over the years, the junta has worked to co-opt the Buddhist hierarchy, placing chosen men in key positions just as they have done in every other institution, angering and alienating the younger monks“ (Mydans, 2007).

How the military junta retained its power base for more than four decades without encountering an open and effective opposition from within the country, despite widespread international criticism, is strongly connected to the sangha. The reigns of U Nu and U Ne Win in their respective quest for political legitimacy drew heavily on the rhetoric of Buddhist kingship. The former „on the basis of his personal morality“ and the latter by undertaking „demeritorious actions for meritorious end goals“. (Jordt, 2007)

Also oppositional forces depend heavily on the support and legitimacy that Buddhism conveys. Some of the most famous public references were photographed by James Mackay for the Moving Walls 19 project. In 2012, he created portraits of political dissidents from Myanmar who posed

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10 The full exhibition is showcased here: http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/moving-walls/19/even-though-im-free-i-am-not.
with the names of political prisoners written on their raised palms - a reference to the Buddhist *Abhaya Mudra* hand symbol for fearlessness. Through this gesture, the men and women in Mackay’s portraits paid tribute to their peers, who still remained imprisoned for their activities and beliefs.

![Aung San Suu Kyi in 2012. Picture credits by Open Society Foundations Documentary Photography Project.](image)

But this dependency on the Buddhist endorsement also takes its toll on the alleged democratic and humanitarian principles of the opposition. With the rising death tolls and the disastrous humanitarian crisis for the Muslim Rohingya people in Rakhine state, the concerned world community expected Aung San Suu Kyi and her NLD to join the protest against the ethnic cleansings and crimes against humanity (Human Rights Watch, 2013) currently committed by the Buddhist majority in Myanmar’s western border region. But her silence on the topic is a strong sign that the NLD won’t risk to alienate the *sangha* and the highly pious Buddhist majority of Myanmar citizens.

3.3 National Heroes – Unhappy is the land that needs a hero

*Unhappy is the land that needs a hero.* This famous sentence of Bertolt Brecht’s play *Life of Galileo* is often referred to when criticizing totalitarian states manufacturing hero cults as distraction and salvation for their deprived country. As mentioned above, historiography plays an important role in the nation-building process. Hence, their national heroes, embodying specific national moral concepts, are essential for national history and are often ideologically exploited.

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“While definitions of grandeur and glory vary, every nationalism requires a touchstone of virtue and heroism, to guide and give meaning to the tasks of regeneration. […] Heroes provide models of virtuous conduct, their deeds of valour inspire faith and courage in their oppressed and decadent descendants” (Smith A., 1999). In Myanmar, the concept of national heroes was for the last decades one pursued by the opposition forces. Facing daily suppression in all aspects of life, the need to look for role models to inspire hope in a seemingly hopeless situation remained crucial for the resistance. But the last years saw a takeover of this concept by the government, rendering it into an important tool in the nation-building process.

Accepting what couldn’t possibly be changed, the state welcomed back the opposition’s hero Boyoke Aung San as a national icon and father of modern-day Myanmar. The independence leader became a beacon of hope in the tumultuous years of transition from colonial rule after playing a crucial role in the liberation struggle. After his assassination in 1947 (see below), negotiations with ethnic leaders about a unified Burmese nation state broke down, as their trust was bestowed on his person alone. Consequently, armed struggle would not take long to wait for, continuing until today and rendering the conflict into the world’s longest-lasting civil war. Aung San’s sacrifice and commitment to the country, as well as his personal and political ties with the succeeding heads of state kept him both in the public eye and in the government’s good graces. With his daughter Aung San Suu Kyi turning into the opposition leader in 1988, his place in the firmament of Burma’s hero pantheon became dangerous to the junta. Lending more legitimacy to Daw Suu by putting her in line with her father and grandfather well known for their fights in the resistance to British rule, the picture of Aung San was banned from all public spaces and his name erased from all history books and chronicles. Today, when walking along the streets of Yangon, his famous portrait is plastered next to his daughter’s to virtually every shop entrance, every taxi and even the scales of the street vendors. What would have guaranteed you a trip to the infamous Insein prison only a few years ago, now belongs to the city sight in the same way as the betel nut stands. In the official discourse, General Aung San is now placed in line with the

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12 Boyoke is one of the highest Burmese military ranks, resembling the rank of a General. Boyoke remains the title generally used affectionately when referring to Aung San. However, as common in Myanmar, he changed not only his title but also his name over the years to reflect changes in the course of his life. Born as Htein Lin, he adopted Aung San during his time as student leader and added thakin to his name, identifying him as part of the Dobama Asiayone Movement. During his army days, his nom de guerre was Bo Teza.
grand fathers of the nation, following the great kings of former dynasties and preceding the generals of post-colonial Myanmar. With the NLD’s plan to celebrate the boyoke’s 100\textsuperscript{th} birthday for the entire next year, which is also the crucial election year, the reaction of the ruling elite has yet to follow.

3.3.1 National Heroes – Survey
I conducted a not-representative survey on the keyword national hero in Yangon in January 2014. As due to the closedown of the country for over half a century, many people in Myanmar speak very little English, the target group was already narrowed down to begin with as a result of my limited Myanmar language skills. Merely three years ago, talking to a foreigner put Myanmar citizens into high jeopardy and would most likely lead to years of imprisonment. These restrictions have been lifted noticeable, and especially in Yangon, people are quite eager to share their opinions and stories with anyone willing to listen. As I am well connected in Yangon, but not the rest of the country, I chose to conduct my interviews solely in the former capital. I am aware though, that people outside the central divisions might answer the question quite differently, as their history and especially their view on current events differs from that of the ethnic Bamar majority.

For a more significant and conclusive outcome, the total number of survey participants would need to be enlarged, as well as diversified in terms of education levels and regional affiliation.

The Myanmar translation of the word \textit{national hero} led to some difficulties, as there is no congruent equivalent for it. The closest thing would possibly be the Pali word \textit{Arzani} (အာဇာနည်), which means a person with discrimination and courage of his conviction or a hero, who is prepared to sacrifice his life for a good cause.\textsuperscript{13} But in daily life, this translation is almost exclusively used to refer to General Aung San and his cabinet and therefore strongly associated with the term martyr. As standing up for your cause against the government meant sacrificing your life - or at least giving up your freedom - for most of the last 50 years, this association might be fitting after all. When talking to people, I used both the English and the Myanmar term to explain my question. This might have influenced some of the interviewees, but was often the only way to make myself understood. I talked to 15 people, aged 26 to 58, 3 male, 12 female.

\textsuperscript{13} See Burmese-English English-Burmese Compact Dictionary (2009), Nance Cunningham and Aung Soe Min
It comes to no surprise, that most of the people I talked to named Daw Aung San Suu Kyi as national hero, mostly above anyone else and many times as the only person they thought worthy of such a title. The other two people frequently named were the two men who are also internationally most commonly associated with Burma: General Aung San and former UN Secretary General U Thant. But also early kings like Kyan Sit Thar (1084 to 1112), famous ’88 student leaders like Min Ko Naing or high ranking politicians like vice-president Dr. Sai Mauk Kham were named. Bearing in mind that expressing criticism and protest through art became one of the most common forms of resistance under the military junta, artists like the comedian Zar Ga Nar or authors like Min Lu were also named.14

3.3.2 The Martyr’s day – Creating a new Festivity Calendar
National holidays are special calendric events, charged with more meaning than other days - be it related to religion, politics, or folklore. They have an intrinsic relation to a country’s history, and after times of radical change, they may have to be reconsidered or reinterpreted. National holidays provide a yearly recurrent opportunity for people to reflect upon the identity of the collective they belong to (Saric, Gammelgaard, & Hauge, 2012). Adventitiously, national festivities are usually commemorated in large gatherings at meaningful places. Thus, certain holidays can either pose a threat to the ruling elite by granting the opening for unwelcomed thoughts and exchange and, in the worst case, the spark to start demonstrations, or can be used to indoctrinate and fabricate certain national views, values and notions. In Myanmar’s tumultuous past, the change in leadership and the radical political upheavals that followed, turned the celebration of some of the festivities into a contested issue:

Many of the national holidays in Myanmar are Buddhist celebrations like the Full Moon of Tabottwal (traditional merit-making and purifying day), the Full Moon of Kason (anniversary of the birth, enlightenment and death of the Buddha) and the Full Moon of Tazaungmone celebrations (marking the end of Kathein season, time for offerings to the Sangha) or the Thingyan festival, the Myanmar New Year Water festival. These are widely celebrated by the Buddhist majority of the country. But there are other, more contested holidays: The Union Day, celebrating the signing of the Panglong Agreement by Boyoke Aung San and various ethnic

14 See Appendix 2 for details of the survey
leaders on 12th February 1947; The Peasant’s Day on 2nd March, commemorating the anniversary of Ne Win’s coup; The Armed Forces Day on 27th March, formerly the Resistance Day against the Japanese occupation; The Labour Day, 1st May, formerly the Worker’s Day, now simply listed as May Day by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; The Martyr’s Day on 19th of July, commemorating the assassination of General Aung San his cabinet members, the Independence day, 4th January and the National Day, varying in date due to Burmese lunisolar calendar, the anniversary of the first university students protests in 1920 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs).

Each year, on the occasion of the Union day, president Thein Sein gives an encouraging speech, which are broadcasted nation-wide via radio. His 2014 speech is showcasing how the festivity is exploited to put the government in line with former leaders and to highlight the unity of all people living in Myanmar, leaving the blame to the former colonial rulers. There is no room for the unfulfilled promises of Federalism that was granted to the ethnic minorities in a spoken agreement, nor for the harsh line the ruling Bamar elite in central Burma has followed ever since.

“All national brethren have been living together with unity in the country, the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, with the continuous history from time immemorial. As the divide-and-rule policy of the colonialists caused misunderstanding among the national races, shattering the national unity, Myanmar had lost its independence. Thanks to united efforts of General Aung San and leaders of national races who acted in unison, the country regained national unity after signing Panglong Agreement on 12 February 1947 and claimed independence.

After regaining independence, evil legacies of colonialism did not disappear and doubts and conflicts still remained in the country for many years. The country got left behind the neighbouring countries in political, economic and social development. Taking lessons of bitter experiences national brethren faced throughout the course of history while fighting back the imperialists and fascists, risking their lives for independence and sovereignty, all national brethren are to make their collaborative efforts for ensuring eternal peace and development.” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs)

As for the Peasants’ Day, the festivities do naturally not incorporate any reference of Ne Win or the socialist days of the country any more. Official statements during the day are concentrating
on the important role of the farmers to feed the local population and on technical assistance the
government may provide to them. The agricultural sector remains the largest proportion of the
GDP with approximately 43 per cent. Two thirds of all employees are living in the countryside, a
number that might change dramatically in the coming years (Auswärtiges Amt, 2014). The same
problematic connection to the country’s socialist past makes it difficult to commemorate the
Worker’s Day. The National Day, marking the beginning of student protests in 1920 and thus the
start of resistance against colonial rule, could be used to evoke national pride in the liberation
struggle, but remains dangerous to the ruling elite, as it also evokes thoughts of the student
protests 68 years later, which were brutally suppressed and in the past and continue to be
suppressed until today. The Independence Day remains a feast for any anti-imperialistic and
unified-in-struggle propaganda.

The most drastic changes can be observed in the evolution of the Martyr’s Day. The 19 July
marks the Myanmar Martyr’s Day - Arzani Ne (အာဇာနည် - to commemorate the 1947
assassination of Boyoke Aung San along with six cabinet ministers during a cabinet meeting.15
The day is remembered as an official holiday ever since, but Myanmar’s former military junta
played down the event after the 1988’s uprising as part of their efforts to stem the popularity of
General Aung San’s daughter, Aung San Suu Kyi. The Martyrs’ Mausoleum was declared off-
limits to the public, fearing a public gathering at the burial site would spark more unrest.
Thereafter, the only visible commemoration on the 19th was the state flag flying at half-mast. The
memorial site stays closed until today.

But since Thein Sein took office in 2011, some of the old traditions seem to have been
resurrected. The government has allowed public tributes at the mausoleum on the 19th and since
her release from house arrest in November 2010, Aung San Suu Kyi attends the memorial
ceremony. 2014 even showed further signs of the government’s embrace of the country’s
beloved independence leader. Unlike the years before, the 2012 ceremony did not see the
Yangon mayor as the highest government official attending, but vice-president Sai Mauk Hkam.

15 Along with General Aung San his older brother Ba Win, Minister of Trade, Ba Cho, Minister of Information,
Mahn Ba Khaing, Minister of Industry, Thakin Mya, Minister of Home Affairs, Sao San Tun, Sabwa of Mong Pawn
and Minister of Hills Regions, Ohn Maung, Deputy Minister of Transport, Abdul Razak, Minister of Education and
National Planning and Ko Htwe, Bodyguard of Razak were assassinated. Tin Tut, Minister of Finance, was seriously
wounded but survived.
In 2014, Myanmar state television broadcasted the memorial ceremony and the tradition of broadcasting a ringing siren on the morning of Martyrs’ Day at 10:37 a.m., to mark the moment when the Boyoke and his comrades were shot dead, had also been allowed after several civil society groups urged the government for their permission (The Irrawaddy, 2014). President U Thein Sein and commander-in-chief Min Aung Hlaing made public donations to members of the Sangha as part of the ceremonies in Naypyitaw and the Yangon memorial service was attended by several high-ranking members of the government, including vice-president Sai Mauk Hkam and Lower House speaker Thura U Shwe Mann.

Moreover, the general coverage of the festivity in the government’s mouthpiece, the *New Light of Myanmar*, has changed drastically over the last years: While the festivities were only mentioned on page seven in a few columns article in 2010, the anniversary made it to the front page the following year, even displaying several pictures of the wreath laying ceremony and naming Aung San Suu Kyi to be attending. In 2012, the ceremony’s coverage included pictures of the vice-president Sai Mauk Hkam, Aung San Suu Kyi and international ambassadors at the memorial. In 2013, the day was marked by a full two-page coverage, including old portraits of the fallen leaders and poetic obituaries, highlighting the words of the Boyoke, that “building a democratic nation at such a time calls for concerted efforts of the entire national people”, adding that “only unity among the national brethren will bring [...] about better outcomes.“ The perspective further states: “As every speech of General Aung San covers unity and hardworking, all the citizens are thus to safeguard the independence and sovereignty aspired by him, remembering and saluting the fallen leaders.“ The 2014 issue displayed president U Thein Sein and his ministers donating offertories to members of the Sangha and taking part in the memorial services across the country to pay tribute to the fallen martyrs in a four-pages spread.16

This change in the coverage of the Memorial Day is not a mere goodwill act, but seems like quite the calculated move by the government. Connecting the emotional remembrance of the country’s beloved hero with open showcases of tribute to “their predecessor” and their Buddhist piety, is

16 See Appendix 3 for copies of the 19th/20th July issues from 2010 to 2014, received from the archives of Yangon University.
killing two birds with one stone. Strengthening their national perspectives with quotes of the Boyoke evoke associations with Laotian and Vietnamese propaganda tools.

4. Iconography
Within the struggle for legitimation, the national iconography of Myanmar’s places of remembrance plays a vital role. National concepts manifest themselves in the imagery of the state. Monuments like statues or memorial sites are used in the national discourse despite - or because - of how deeply rooted they are in former eras (Tappe, 2008). The current government tries to incorporate places, which are already allocated to contrasting ideologies, into their identity and legitimation struggle. Iconography in Myanmar is strongly connected to religious places like the Shwedagon pagoda, national heroes like Boyoke Aung San, and national symbols like the three national animals the peacock, the white elephant and the chinthe:

The green peafowl, *daung* (ဒေါင်း), is a symbol of compassionate watchfulness in Buddhist mythology. It is strongly associated with the Konbaung monarchy and the anti-colonial nationalist movements and thus is popularly seen as the symbol of the Burmese state. The Dancing Peacock, *ka-daung* (ကဒေါင်း), was used as the symbol of the Burmese monarchy and was stamped on the coins minted by the Konbaung dynasty. Upon independence, it was again featured on Burmese banknotes from 1948 till 1966. An alternative pose is the fighting peacock, *khoot-daung* (ခြတ္ဒေါင်း), as seen visibly on the party flag of Aung San Suu Kyi’s NLD, to denote struggle. Due to the political connections, the Tatmadaw has discarded the peacock in favour of the chinthe after 1988.

The chinthe, *hkrang se* (ခြင်္သေ), is a lion-like mythological creature that is often seen at the entrances of pagodas and temples in Myanmar and other Southeast Asian countries. The chinthe had been used as a symbol of state after independence, mainly as a supporting figure to the peacock, but it became more prominent after 1988, when it was promoted by the Tatmadaw as the symbol of state and began to appear on almost all denominations of Burmese banknotes and coins.

The white elephant, *hsin hypu daw* (ဆင်ဖြူတော်), is another symbol of state associated with the days of the monarchy. Like in neighbouring Thailand, the white elephant is revered as a blessing
towards the entire country. The importance of the white elephant to Burmese and Theravada culture can be traced to the role, which white elephants play in Buddhist cosmology and the Jatakas. The possession of a white elephant was regarded as a sign that the monarch was reigning with justice and power, and that the kingdom was blessed with peace and prosperity. How this powerful image kept its significance until today can be seen in the proud announcements of the sighting of white elephants by the Tatmadaw in 2001 and 2002. In June 2010, Than Shwe finally obtained his first white elephant. Burmese state media declared “The elections will be held peacefully and successfully,” after a second white elephant was captured in 2010 - two months before the Tatmadaw won the 2010 general elections. Since Thein Sein came into power, two more white elephants have been found and one was born in captivity. Grand ceremonies marked each of these animals’ arrival to the capital, with officials declaring that they are “a good omen when the state is endeavouring to build a peaceful, modern and developed nation” and that their discovery has led to an “improvement in the country’s foreign relations.” Three other white elephants live in a shabby public garden on the outskirts of Rangoon. Caught in the early 2000s during the rule of reformist General Khin Nyunt, a 2010 article in *The Irrawaddy* suggests that these animals have been deliberately neglected since Khin Nyunt was toppled by Than Shwe in 2004. (Otis, 2013)

4.1 Shwedagon Hpaya – Place of worship and beyond

“*Myanmar has often been referred to as the land of pagodas,* but among the many thousands, both big and small, none has greater significance than the Shwedagon, the country’s premier shrine.” (U Win Pe, 1999)

Shwedagon Pagoda, Myanmar’s most sacred place, is not only of religious importance, but also of political and historic significance. Its origin itself is twined with myths. Myth has it that during the rule of legendary ruler king Okkalapa over 2500 years ago, two young Mon merchant brothers were the first humans to pay homage to the newly enlightened Gautama Buddha in India, who is said to have gifted them eight of his hairs to take back home after he taught them his laws. The brothers were robbed of four hairs on their journey home, but on their return, in

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17 The word pagoda (probably an English hysteron-proteron of the Singhalese dagoba, in turn derived from the Sanskrit धातु गर्भ, or relic container) is not commonly used in Myanmar. Nor do the Myanmar use the Indian stupa to refer to the structures. Some use the term zedi, derived from the Pali etya (offering place), but mostly they use hpaya: (Lord), a term, which might also be used for the Buddha, a monk, or a king (Spiro, 1982).
presence of the king, they witnessed the miracle of all of the eight hairs returning to the embellished box they were presented in. After finding the Singuttara Hill and following the directive to safe keep the sanctum in the same spot where the relics of the three earlier Buddhas were resting, a golden stupa was erected (Esche, 1985).

The created shrine on Singuttara Hill was deemed sacred and is since then a place to worship the Buddha. As it already was the holy resting spot of the relics of the three earlier reincarnations of the Buddha, which makes it the only pagoda to enshrine the relics of four successive Buddhas, its religious significance is unique. Additionally, throughout history is has been believed that the pagoda would legitimize the king’s status as worldly ruler. If the pagoda “accepted” their donations, especially the erection of a new hti on its summit, this was interpreted as a sign of kingly merit and an assertion of legitimate sovereignty over the territory surrounding the stupa (Seekings, 2013). Over the centuries, various kings and queens took part in renovating it and enlarging the structure. This would create immense difficulties for the British after they occupied Rangoon and with it the Singuttara Hill in 1852: The burials of British soldiers on the ground, the restricted public access through blocked military quarters on the hill and the agitation over the “shoe issue” sparked the first university students protests in 1920, which would eventually develop into Myanmar’s independence struggle. The students also held their meetings at the south-west corner of the pagoda, transferring the Shwedagon’s significance towards the national struggle.

At the height of the struggle for independence in 1945/46, Boyoke Aung San used the middle terrace of the Pagoda Hill as the venue for mass meetings. In 1946, responding to his call for strike, workers unanimously set up strike camps on Singuttara Hill. In one of his famous speeches, he explained this significant choice:

“We have convened at a venue, which, throughout our history has been the quintessence of everything noble and fine and auspicious. So I make a solemn wish for our conference to reflect

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18 According to the type of Theravada Buddhism practiced in Myanmar, 28 Buddhas have so far attained enlightenment in this world-age. Shwedagon enshrines the staff of Kakussandha (the 25th Buddha), the water-dipper of Konagamana (26th Buddha), the bathing garments of Kassapa (27th Buddha) and the sacred eight hairs of Gautama (the 28th) (U Win Pe, 1999).

19 The British ignored the long-standing tradition of taking one’s shoes off whenever entering sacred ground.
the nobility and sanctity of the location. The Singuttara Hill is also where the Four-Relic Sacred Shwedagon rests on its crest. The Shwedagon Zedi testified to the nature of our generosity and the noblest of our desires and its golden glimmer is the light of our yearning for the Supreme goal, Nirvana, where reigns peace and tranquillity. If once again we should look at what surrounds us, we will realize that this was where the great movements that fashioned our destiny were born not many years ago. Thus, for us, the people of this land, this place is one to be greatly revered.” (U Win Pe, 1999)

By succeeding him in opposing unjust rule in Burma, his daughter Aung San Suu Kyi as the new face and leader of the opposition movement, held her first public speech at the Shwedagon Pagoda to a crowd of nearly half a million people on 26 August 1988. It was no coincidence that she chose the country’s most holy space to give her first big speech calling for democracy. Speaking beneath a portrait of her father, she declared: “I could not, as my father’s daughter, remain indifferent to all that was going on. This national crisis could in fact be called the second struggle for national independence.” According to Emma Larkin, “Burmese history and folklore is punctuated by millennial leaders and would-be kings who emerge at times of crisis to lead the people to safety. Here, in this modern era, a female version had appeared, seemingly by pure chance, during a catastrophic upheaval…. the crowd was instantly smitten.” (Tripathi, 2012)

It comes to no surprise that in 1999, the military junta sponsored the installation of a new hti on the top of the Shwedagon Pagoda. In successfully doing so, they put their reign in line with the long dynasty of legitimate rulers over the territory surrounding Singuttara Hill, legitimizing them as Myanmar’s rulers.

The Zedi was also the focal point where monks gathered during the Saffron Revolution in 2007, making use of both its religious and political legacy.

4.2 Mandalay’s Royal Court – The Shattered Glass Palace
Ever since Amitav Ghosh’s bestselling novel, the magical allure of the Glass Palace is no longer only for reminiscing monarchists within Myanmar but also for a wide range of readers in over 25 languages. The boost in tourism has not only reached the city of Yangon, but has spread on a two
weeks round trip through the whole country to Myanmar’s holy places like the Golden Rock, it’s scenic landscapes at Inle lake and, of course, the royal palace in Mandalay.\textsuperscript{20}

But with the arrival in front of the ancient palace walls, one quickly realises that the walls might be all that is left of the former royal glory. Almost 130 years after the royal family was marched out of the compound to be shipped off to exile in India, the new tenants left very few original remains of days past for us to see. When the British took control over Mandalay in November 1885, they chose to move their colonial administration into the former centre of power and establish their new rule in the royal halls. The palace was turned into Fort Dufferin, the throne room into the officer’s mess and pavilions into a chapel. The last remains of Thibaw Min’s\textsuperscript{21} palace fell victim to the flames during the fighting between British and Japanese occupying forces in 1945. Following in their footsteps, the Tatmadaw set camp within the old palace walls and erected their northern headquarters around the remains of the royal palace. The glorious former teak, gold and glass construction was rebuilt in concrete and corrugated iron between 1989 and 1996 (Markand, Petrich, & Klinkmüller, 2011). This pastiche palace seems to be emblematic for the efforts of the Tatmadaw\textsuperscript{22} to rebuild ancient royal history and the legitimacy that comes with it, resulting in the same outcome: an uncomfortable copy which can’t elude its apparent lack of authenticity.

Today, the once repressed and forbidden memory of the Burmese monarchy has seen a public revival. In December 2012, president Thein Sein paid homage at the run-down tomb of King Thibaw in the western Indian coastal city of Ratnagiri and met the late monarch’s descendants. He was the first head of Burmese government to visit the grave. In this symbolically significant act, he showcased consistency of his government with Burma’s former rulers. As Thant Myint-U pointed out with regard to the historic visit, “The king was the very centre of the old state. His

\textsuperscript{20}Nowadays, there are various offers for round trip package deals for „exploring“ Myanmar, all of them including Mandalay, city of the last Burmese King. E.g.: \url{http://www.travel-myanmar.net/myanmar-tour-programs.htm}

\textsuperscript{21}Burmese names were originally one syllable, as in the cases of U Nu and U Thant ("U" being an honorific). Scholars such as Thant Myint-U have argued that the rise of complex Burmese personal names resulted from the collapse of the Burmese monarchy, which ended the sophisticated system of Pali-Burmese styles, crown service and gentry titles, leaving the majority of Burmese with single syllable names. Former titles, such as \textit{min} ("leader") were re-appropriated as part of personal names. Until the end of the 19th century, \textit{min} did still have its original meaning as the royal title of kings (Thant Myint-U, 2001).

\textsuperscript{22}\textit{Tatmadaw} is the official name for the Myanmar Armed Forces, composed of the Army, the Air Force and the Navy.
defeat was the overthrow of a thousand-year-old monarchy but also the complete destruction of the old system of governance and aristocracy.” Placing the new leadership in line with the former monarchs by creating a direct link with the ancient ruling system surely makes for a strong case of legitimacy (AFP, 2012).

The same might be said about the moving of the capital. In 2005, the regime ordered the move of the capital from Yangon to the newly founded city of Naypyitaw over night. Speculations about a planned move of the capital were voiced since 2001, but until the actual moving order, no one heard of any concrete plans. Unaware of the move, diplomats who turned up at the former ministries in Rangoon the following week found empty offices where stray dogs roamed (Pedrosa, 2006). The name alone of the new administrative capital is telling enough: Naypyitaw - *abode of kings*. The Burmese history is full of newly founded capitals. With the start of a new monarchic dynasty, Burmese kings often sought to showcase the new rule by moving their seat of power (Owen, 2005).

The location of Pyinmana, the small city east of Naypyitaw (နေပြည်တော်), is also historically significant, as it was headquarters to Aung San’s *Burma Independence Army* during the independence struggle. Pyinmana became an iconic place to the Burmese Army as it was seen as the place where *superior invaders* were defeated by the Burmese.

This forced move enqueues itself well in the royal tradition of moving cities. When king Mindon moved to his newly finished capital Mandalay in 1859, he persuaded the 100,000 inhabitants of Amarapura to come with him – under the threat of death penalty.

4.3 The National Museum – Creating Myanmar
In the process of what Gustaaf Houtman dubbed “Mynmafication”, the regime’s new ideological approach after 1989 is highlighted: Desperate for national and international recognition, the

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23 There was speculation that a mixture of superstition, megalomania and paranoia was behind the decision. The move of the capital was supposedly the doing of Than Shwe’s fortune-teller, guaranteeing that the move would be the only way to hold on to his power. Rumour also has it, that a Burmese architect who studied in the former German Democratic Republic is responsible for the design and planning of the city. Driving through the city with 1980’s East Berlin in mind, this does seem quite realistic. There are no official records or statements about the planning and building process though.

24 Mindon Min was the penultimate king of Burma from 1853 to 1878. He spent most of his reign trying to defend the upper portion of his country from British encroachments, and to modernize his kingdom.
Tatmadaw began large-scale renovation and construction of pagodas, on the one hand, and museums, palaces and ancient monasteries on the other hand. These constructions took place on a scale and with rapidity that had never been witnessed before in the history of Southeast Asia. The biggest investment yet has been the decision to renovate and rebuild all of the thousands of pagodas in Bagan. Over twenty new museums have been built, housing ancient heritage, the history of the army or the Pondaung fossils, which the leadership claims to represent the oldest humanoids of the world. The latter, it hopes, places the Myanmar people as the oldest civilization on the world’s map (Houtman, 1999). As late General Saw Maung stated in 1990, American culture is “very recent ... only 200 years old”, Myanmar’s history “shows our culture has been here for tens of thousands of years”.

In this process, Myanmar’s National Museum in Yangon, originally founded in 1952, has seen major restructuring and remodelling in both its location and concept. Originally a purely historic museum on Shwedagon Pagoda Road, it found a temporary home on Pansodan Street in the 1970’s, before it could move into its current location on Pyay Road in 1996 with the *vision of helping to implement the two social objectives of “Uplift of national prestige and integrity and preservation and safeguarding of cultural heritage and national character”, and “Uplift of dynamism of patriotic spirit”* (Ministry of Culture, 2014).

The ground floor exhibits Myanmar epigraphy and calligraphy and royal artifacts like the famous Lion Throne of Myanmar’s last king. The first floor is dedicated to the prehistoric period and the famous Pondaung fossils, while the second floor shows traditional Myanmar arts and crafts, and the third floor exhibits a Myanmar art gallery. The fourth floor shows the *Culture of National Races*. Leaving the problematic issue of defining all of the various ethnic groups at large aside, the way of exhibiting the *models of national races with traditional costumes, musical instruments and cultural artifacts* turns foreign visitors indignant on account of the *people zoo*, an expression also widely used for the National Races Village outside Yangon, which is displaying the *Union Spirit from the villages of [the] national brethren* in ethnic model villages (Ministry of Culture, 2014).

Myanmar’s more recent history is left out completely and except for the general uplifting banners on national unity and some portraits of the president, the search for valuable information
on national history within the national museum remains unsuccessful. It will be interesting to witness, if the government might use the museum as a more efficient tool in their nation-building quest in the future, or if there might even be a chance of allowing the museum to showcase the full diversity of Myanmar’s colourful past.

4.4 Iconographic bank notes – Of Generals and Elephants

Banknotes and coins are especially efficient in representing the nation state, as they ideally pass through the hands of all citizens of the state and are therefore able to showcase their iconography to all of them. Recombination of icons on the banknotes promotes ever new versions of national values, chosen by the state’s elite. If handled correctly, this communication technique may help the state not only to build trust in the currency, but also in the government’s ability to use its authority to maximize the nation’s thriving. The iconography of the banknote is thus used to contribute to the authority and legitimacy of the state. (Tappe, 2008). The Burmese kyat (ကျပ်) has seen a lot of changes since 1952, when it was reintroduced after the rupee currency during British and Japanese administration. These modifications applied to the denomination as well as to the iconography of the notes, mirroring the socio-political transformation of the country.

In 1952, the Union Bank of Burma took over the sole right of note issue and other traditional central bank functions from the London Burma Currency Board, succeeding the Military Administration of Burma (MAB). In 1953, the Union Bank of Burma introduced the first kyat notes, the design of which was very similar to the last series of rupee notes. The notes prominently showed the three Burmese national animals on front: The peacock, the white elephant and the *chinthe* and the backsides displayed traditional Burmese occupations like rice cultivation with the water buffalo, logging with elephants and traditional spinning with spinning wheels. In February 1958, still under U Nu’s democratic leadership, all notes were updated with a portrait of General Aung San on front. As founder and figurehead of the ruling AFPFL party and longstanding companion of U Nu since university days, this choice came to no surprise.

The 50 and 100 kyat notes were demonetized in May 1964. This was the first of several demonetizations, ostensibly carried out with the aim to fight the thriving black market. With often devastating results for the population, the monetary system in Burma did not add to the state’s legitimacy, but rather continuously unsettled the people’s trust in the leadership. After
General Ne Win’s coup d’état in 1962, the Burmese way to socialism was introduced, nationalizing all banks in 1963 and from 1967 onwards, the People’s Bank of Burma was established as the country’s sole bank. The fronts of the notes would now show General Aung San during his wartime army days, highlighting Ne Win’s bond with his brother in arms during the independence struggle as *Thirty Comrades*.  

From September 1972 onward, the now renamed Union of Burma Bank introduced notes depicting the Boyoke on front and mythical creatures on the back. After the first Burmese Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) Congress in 1971, economic reforms were made in light of the failures of the socialist economic policy pursued throughout the 1960s. In its aftermath, General Ne Win and the rest of the Union Revolutionary Council (URC) retired from the military, but continued to run the country through the BSPP. With the previous issues still depicting mostly agricultural scenes on their backside, a change seemed in order. The mythical and artistic themed backs were created in cooperation with designer U Aye Myint and highlighted Burma’s other accomplishments during its struggle to partly rejoin the outside world.

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25 The Thirty Comrades, lead by General Aung San, were young Burmese men, initially sent to China by the nationalist We Burmans Association, Dobama *Asiayone*, for assistance in their independence struggle against Britain. They were trained by the Japanese and returned to Burma with the invading Japanese army in 1941. The Thirty Comrades played a key role in Burma’s independence struggle. Many of its members became important members of post-colonial Burma’s ruling elite.
In November 1985, the 25, 50, and 100 kyat notes were demonetized without warning, though the public was allowed to exchange limited amounts of the old notes for new ones. All other denominations in circulation at that time legal tender. In November 1985, 75 kyat notes were introduced, the odd denomination presumably chosen because of dictator Ne Win’s predilection for numerology. The 75 kyat note was supposedly introduced to commemorate his 75th birthday General Aung San in national dress, wearing the gaungbaung26. On the back, the lawkanat, mythical symbol of peace and prosperity, was shown. This was followed by the introduction of 15 and 35 kyat notes in August 1986. Only two years later, the government demonetized the 25, 35, and 75 kyat notes without warning or compensation, rendering some 75% of the country's currency worthless. Banknotes for 45 and 90 kyat were introduced, both of which incorporated Ne Win’s favourite number, nine and for the first time depicted other important man like worker’s leader Pho Hla Gyi and peasant leader Saya San. The resulting economic disturbances led to serious riots and eventually the military coup in 1988.

90 and 45 kyat notes from the 1987 issue.

Following the change of the country's name to Myanmar in June 1989, new notes began to be issued, using more practical denominations. This time, the old notes were not demonetized, but simply allowed to fall into disuse through inflation as well as wear and tear. Over the years, higher value kyat notes were introduced to better facilitate financial transactions in Myanmar’s

26 Traditional Burmese turban, literally meaning head wrap.
still largely cash-oriented economy. Since 1990, all of the issues bear the *chinthe* on front and were stripped of all human portraits. This decision came with Aung San Suu Kyi’s NLD party landslide win in the 1990 election and the regime’s decision to ignore the election results, keep her away from the public eye, and to make General Aung San fall into oblivion to cut his daughters claim to his legacy. The back sides depicture various typical Burmese scenes: From *chinlone*\(^{27}\) players to Yangon sights and traditional Burmese crafts. A change can be seen in the 2009 and 2012 newly created 5.000 and 10.000 kyat notes: The front of the 5.000 kyat note shows the white elephant, the back the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw complex in Naypyitaw. The 10.000 kyat note depicts a map of Myanmar, while its back shows the Royal Palace in Mandalay (Linzmayer, 2014). Through the usage of the white elephant as a royal symbol and the Mandalay Royal Palace, the government is in yet another way trying to emphasize its continuance with the former monarchy on its search for legitimacy.

100 and 500 kyat notes from the 1994 issue.
All banknotes pictures are taken from Linzmayer, Owen: The Banknote Book: Burma/Myanmar, 2014.

\(^{27}\) *Chinlone*, caneball, a traditional team sport in Myanmar.
5. Conclusion and outlook
Throughout this research, it became apparent that Myanmar’s government is still trying to find its ways of legitimatize themselves. While to some extend, rewriting of history is understandable and sometimes even necessary, the monolithic conceptions which are deployed through places of remembrance, state-media and education, seem counterproductive to the state’s aim of creating a nation, where everyone feels a strong sense of common belonging. Especially in such a ethnically diverse country as Myanmar with its history (and presence) of civil war, the government has to find new ways to incorporate all of its people in its nation-building attempts. Such a huge discrepancy between the government’s sense of nation and the one of its people can’t serve as the founding stone of a new Myanmar.

It became widely apparent, that a culture of remembrance, which is based on a deep divide between private experiences and historiographical-political interpretation, couldn’t survive in the long term (Cornelißen, 2012).

As can be observed at Myanmar’s places of remembrance, the government tries to “rewrite” the meaning and importance of certain events, people and places. But especially apparent in the case of General Aung San, the people’s perception won’t be changed by order or force. With the government accepting this and reintegrating the Boyoke into their national concept during the last years, the leadership might have found their way to deal with the country’s complicated and diverse past.

New ways for education and information emerged along with the general opening of the country in 2012. While broadcasting systems remain under tight control from the government, August 2012 - as a surprise to many - brought the abolishment of censorship in print-media and spurred hopes of a more independent media environment.28 The recent imprisonment of journalists who were criticizing the military curbed these expectations and sparks fear of backtracking.

28 Different to other Southeast Asian states, Myanmar’s ruling party didn’t have much to worry when it came to critical reporting on the internet. While a strong censorship law controlled print and audio-visual media since colonial times, internet is still a fairly new medium in Myanmar. With exile media institutions like The Irrawaddy maintained a long-standing online presence, internet usage within Myanmar remained almost non-existent until 2010 (Myanmar Advertising Directory, 2013/2014). Since then, internet cafés sprung up all across the cities and as of August 2014, cheap internet-savvy SIM cards are available and led to a sudden increase in internet usage.
Unless Myanmar is successful in creating a new sense of national identity that embraces the country’s cultural, ethnic and religious diversity, the legitimation the government is looking for will remain illusive. But with the elections approaching fast, it remains questionable if the government will manage to change the people’s perception in time or if it will fall back into its old ways of self-legitimation through military strength.
Appendix

1. Map of Myanmar, Nations Online Project, October 2013
2. National Heroes - Survey details

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Male/Female</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Job</th>
<th>Myanmar’s National Heroes – Arzani (အာဇာနည်)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1  | F           | 33  | Program Officer            | 1. Aye Mya Lay (Kayan Leader)  
|    |             |     |                            | 2. Aung San Suu Kyi                  |
| 2  | F           | 46  | Finance Officer            | 1. Aung San Suu Kyi                  
|    |             |     |                            | 2. Ye Htute (President’s Office)    
|    |             |     |                            | 3. Dr. Sai Mauk Kham                 |
| 3  | F           | 28  | Engineering Geologist      | 1. Aung San Suu Kyi                  
|    |             |     |                            | 2. General Aung San                 
|    |             |     |                            | 3. U Aung Zay Ya (Former King)      |
| 4  | F           | 26  | Accountant                 | 1. Aung San Suu Kyi                  
|    |             |     |                            | 2. U Thant                          
|    |             |     |                            | 3. Kyan Sit Thar (Former King)      |
| 5  | F           | 29  | Senior Program Officer     | 1. U Thant                          
|    |             |     |                            | 2. U Nu                            |
| 6  | F           | 46  | Office Staff               | 1. Aung San Suu Kyi                  
|    |             |     |                            | 2. Min Ko Naing (88 student leader)  
|    |             |     |                            | 3. Zar Ga Nar (Comedian)            |
| 7  | F           | 58  | Monitoring and Evaluation Program Officer | 1. Dr. Cynthia Maung (Mae Tao Clinic)  
|    |             |     |                            | 2. Kyaw Thu (Actor)                 |
| 8  | M           | 30  | Operation Officer          | 1. Aung San Suu Kyi                  
|    |             |     |                            | 2. General Aung San                 
|    |             |     |                            | 3. U Thant                          |
| 9  | M           | 29  | Project Manager            | 1. U Thant                          |
| 10 | F           | 31  | Senior Program Officer     | 1. Juu (Author)                     
|    |             |     |                            | 2. Min Lu (Author)                  |
| 11 | F           | 38  | Logistic Officer           | 1. Phay Myint (Author)              
|    |             |     |                            | 2. P Moe Hnin (Author)              
|    |             |     |                            | 3. Ligayee Kyaw (Author)            |
| 12 | F           | 27  | Finance Officer            | 1. General Aung San                 |
| 13 | M           | 33  | IT officer                 | 1. Aung San Suu Kyi                 |
| 14 | F           | 41  | Senior Program Officer     | 1. May Hnin Phyu (Student Activist) 
|    |             |     |                            | 2. Aung San Suu Kyi                 |
| 15 | F           | 34  | Program Officer            | 1. Aung San Suu Kyi                 |
3. New Light of Myanmar copies of the 19th/20th July issues from 2010 to 2014


Declaration of Originality

I hereby declare that this project was entirely my own work and that any additional sources of information have been duly cited.

Passau, February 2015