



# GIVING TO MYANMAR'S 'LIVING IMAGE'

The Mahamuni Pagoda's Votive Networks  
and Management in a New Age of  
Urban Development

Zin Mar Latt and Htet Htet Khaing



*Understanding  
Myanmar's  
Development*

RESEARCH  
REPORT  
**No. 23**





# Giving To Myanmar's 'Living Image'

## The Mahamuni Pagoda's 'Votive Networks' and Management in a New Age of Urban Development

Zin Mar Latt and Htet Htet Khaing



Canada

# Giving To Myanmar's 'Living Image' The Mahamuni Pagoda's 'Votive Networks' and Management in a New Age of Urban Development

Zin Mar Latt and Htet Htet Khaing

© Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD)

No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the author.

Editor: Joe Rotheray  
Cover Photo: Zin Mar Latt  
Design and Layout: Jeff Moynihan

Published in October 2021 by:  
The Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD),  
Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University  
239 Huay Kaew Road, Tambon Suthep, Amphur Muang,  
Chiang Mai 50200 Thailand

Telephone: 66 (0) 5394 3595/6  
Facsimile: 66 (0) 5389 3279  
Email: [rcsd@cmu.ac.th](mailto:rcsd@cmu.ac.th)  
Website: [rcsd.soc.cmu.ac.th](http://rcsd.soc.cmu.ac.th)

## Foreword

The Understanding Myanmar's Development (UMD) publication series, supported by the International Development and Research Centre (IDRC), Canada, is designed to enhance knowledge of Myanmar's development processes, strengthen capacity of Burmese researchers, and encourage them to actively engage the study of development policy and practice. The fellowship grant assists researchers from Myanmar to promote academic exchange and dialogue among researchers. Over 30 fellowships have been awarded to midcareer researchers in their respective areas of social and economic transformation, agricultural, environment and climate change, health and health care systems, and social media and innovations. An additional eight research projects involving 17 fellows under the "Capacity Building in Knowledge Production" program, as well as selected master's theses on topics related to Myanmar's development have also been included in the series.

In this pioneering study, anthropologist Zin Mar Latt and historian Htet Htet Khaing expand and enrich our perspective on recent urban development and its agents in Myanmar through the unusual lens of popular religion. The Mahamuni Pagoda in Mandalay is one of the country's most important Buddhist sites and is attended by growing numbers of both domestic and foreign visitors. The subject of 'Buddhist space' and its management is a complex one in Myanmar, with many categories and local exceptions that have evolved over long periods of time. Maintaining a spatial perspective throughout, the authors show how the popular practices of affixing gold leaf to the Mahamuni Buddha image and grinding thanaka for its daily face-washing ceremony

reflect some inherent values in relation to gender, aesthetics and class. But their real contribution here is in their illumination of the social and economic networks behind these two votive materials—what they call ‘votive networks’—in order to better understand the Mahamuni Pagoda’s management, the agency behind that management, and the broader rubric of its current project of development..

*Chayan Vaddhanaphuti, PhD*  
*Director, RCSD*

## Acknowledgements

First and foremost, many thanks to Sayagyi Chayan Vaddhanaphuti (PhD), Director of RCSD, Chiang Mai University for his kind support to develop social science faculty in Myanmar, which has enhanced academic staff to strengthen their teaching and research capacity in social science, both in previous projects and recently at the University of Mandalay. His goal is very important in helping change the Myanmar education system to be more critically engaged, and I really thank him for his effort to fill the urgent needs.

Additionally, we would like to express our special thanks to Dr Edgard Rodriguez and IDRC who supported this program as part of Knowledge for Democracy in Myanmar. Without their support, this report could not be conducted. He always encourages all of us to support the government with evidence-based policy, emphasizing that evidence-based research is a bridge between the community and the government, and the implementations of the decision makers in development programs should try to understand deeply the issues relevant to them.

Further, we owe extremely deep and sincere gratitude to our mentor, Joe Rotheray who is a religious anthropologist who helped us with our data, providing attentive support in conceptualizing votive networks and recent development of the Mahamuni project. Under his valuable guidance we learned many key concepts in academic research and how to connect them in analyzing data; we have never experienced this in our academic lives thus far. Consequently, we can share this knowledge to our students.

Moreover, our sincere thanks also go to professors, independent scholars from international universities for giving lectures to all of us under the prepared schedules. We learned new pedagogies that combined the classroom and field trip and we could change our teaching processes with their guidance..

We are really grateful to Dr. Thidar Htwe Win, the Professor and Head of Anthropology department, University of Mandalay, for trying to collaborate with Chiang Mai University which organized the capacity sharing program.

We would like to extend our thanks to Elliot Lodge who is the coordinator of the capacity building program. During the program period, he always motivates all of us to become experts in a specific field and to complete our project effectively on time.

This project could not have been accomplished without the support of informants who depend on the Mahamuni Buddhist space, for their engagement in our research. Even though difficult to meet them they are willing to talk on the phone to discuss their experiences and perceptions. We are particularly grateful to two key informants, the Yaetaw Sayadaw and the head of the trustee board, for giving time to discuss developments at the compound.

Finally, our special thanks go to Jeff Moynihan for his work on the design and layout of the report publication.



## About the Series

### **Knowledge for Democracy Myanmar**

Knowledge for Democracy Myanmar is a five-year partnership that nurtures a new generation of young actors to promote inclusion, gender equality, respect for diversity, and prosperity for all in Myanmar.

### **Capacity Building in Knowledge Production**

Since 2018, RCSD at Chiang Mai University has coordinated an intensive research and teaching capacity building project with the University of Mandalay. The project was conceived as part of IDRC's larger Knowledge For Democracy Myanmar initiative, and our goal is to support the long-term professional development of researchers at the university through regular critical engagement. We have provided exposure to ideas, methods and research processes in the social sciences, and given them practical tools and opportunities to put learning into action. The project has successfully emerged from a foundation of shared experience and knowledge between the participants and our diverse team of mentors and support staff affiliated with RCSD. It has also been built on the legacy of Ajarn Chayan's long and continuing commitment to empowering young Myanmar researchers, providing a strong case for potential benefits of academic collaboration across the 'global south'.

The first phase of the project focused on the building blocks of qualitative research, with workshops introducing selected concepts in the social sciences which are applicable to the changing

development context of Myanmar and Southeast Asia. We then worked on improving their ability to build towards conducting research by targeting capacity in fundamental skills in research design and methods. This was achieved through specific workshops on several tools, such as writing a literature review and conducting ethnography in the field. RCSD invited this larger group of participants to submit research proposals by harnessing their growth in these research tools. Eight projects were then chosen by a committee to receive research grants and intensive academic support through the second phase of the programme.

These eight projects involve seventeen researchers from a range of academic backgrounds and disciplines, all of whom are women. Throughout 2019 and 2020 the researchers were closely mentored through their data collection and analysis, with RCSD's team in frequent contact to help shape their skills and approach as they worked, including visits to their field sites, workshops in Mandalay and Chiang Mai, and regular online engagement.

Their research covers a range of important academic endeavors across urban and rural settings—from the dry zone to highland ethnic areas—seeking to give thorough accounts of local people's and communities' experiences amid Myanmar's social, economic and environmental challenges. While the program will produce tangible outputs in the form of eight research reports published in the Understanding Myanmar's Development series, we are more proud of the growth we have seen in the research skills of our irrepressible group of committed *sayama*, and the small contribution we have made to restoring Myanmar's university research culture.

In 2021, in spite of the dual challenges of Covid-19 and the tyranny of the Myanmar coup, we have continued to work closely to finish putting together these monographs. RCSD remains committed to continued engagement and collaboration with our colleagues in Myanmar's universities, civil society, and beyond.

## Abstract

The Mahamuni Pagoda is one of Myanmar's most important Buddhist sites, and a top tier attraction for Mandalay's fledgling tourist industry. This research examines the popular votive practices of affixing gold leaf to the pagoda's Buddha image, and grinding thanaka for use in its daily face-washing ceremony, in order to illuminate a part of the hitherto ignored social and economic ecology in which the pagoda is the pivotal node. The authors introduce the term 'votive network' to describe the thanaka and gold leaf industries and their respective constituents as these relate to Mahamuni, and the term also reflects the materially focused method they employed. Beginning at the source, the authors followed the materials themselves en route to their terminal points at or near the Mahamuni Pagoda, noting the hands, transactions and spheres of influence they passed through and the different meanings and values they accrued. Following a detailed ethnographic description and analysis of the gold leaf and thanaka votive networks, the authors then turn to the recent spate of development and renovation to which the pagoda has been subject. Its six museums are discussed in terms of their rubrics and cultural 'dispensations', followed by a chapter on the pagoda's lay management that looks at its history and the key personalities, aims and values which are driving it in the context of Mandalay's contemporary urban development and tourism industry. This study will be of equal interest to scholars of popular Buddhism, Buddhist space and economics, urban development in tourism in Southeast Asia, and Myanmar Studies.

**Keywords:** Mahamuni, Mandalay, Popular Buddhism, Material Culture, Votives, Thanaka, Gold Leaf, Buddhist Space, Buddhist Museums, Buddhism and Urban Development, Buddhist Tourism

## စာတမ်းအကျဉ်းချုပ်

**ဒွိမေဃမာတို့၏ “သက်ရှိထင်ရှား ရူပပုဂ္ဂိုလ်များ” အား**

**လူဒါနုပုဂ္ဂိုလ်များ၊ မွေးပွားပွားတိုးတက်မှုအကျိုးသက်ရောက်မှု မဟာ မုနိဘုရား၏ လူ့ဖွယ်ပစ္စည်းများမပြုဆိုင်ရာ ဆကျနယ်မှု နှင့် စီမံခန့်ခွဲမှု**

မဟာမုနိဘုရားသည် မြန်မာနိုင်ငံ၏ အထင်ရှားဆုံး ဗုဒ္ဓဘာသာဝင်နေရာများ အနက်မှ တစ်ခုဖြစ်ပြီး မန္တလေးမြို့၏ခရီးသွားဧည့်သည်လုပ်ငန်းတွင် ဆွဲဆောင်မှုအရှိဆုံးနေရာတစ်ခု ဖြစ်သည်။ ဤသုတေသနသည် မဟာမုနိရုပ်ရှင်တော်မြတ်ကြီးတွင် လူသိများသည့် လူ့ဖွယ်ပစ္စည်းများဖြစ်သော ရွှေဆိုင်ကပ်လှူခြင်းနှင့် နေ့စဉ်မျက်နှာသစ်တော်ရေကပ်လှူပွဲတွင် အသုံးပြုသည့် သနပ်ခါးသွေးခြင်းတို့နှင့် ပတ်သက်သည့် အလေ့အထပြုမှုဆောင်ရွက်ချက်များကို ဆန်းစစ်လေ့လာပါသည်။ ထိုလူ့ဖွယ်ပစ္စည်းများနှင့်ပတ်သက်၍ မဟာမုနိဘုရားသည် အချက်အချာကျသော နေရာတစ်နေရာအဖြစ်တည်ရှိရာ ယနေ့တိုင်အောင် လျစ်လျူပြုထားသော လူမှုရေးနှင့်စီးပွားရေး ယင်းတို့နှင့် ပတ်ဝန်းကျင် ဆက်နွှယ်မှုများကို မီးမောင်းထိုးပြသည်။ စာရေးသူများသည် သနပ်ခါး၊ ရွှေဆိုင်လုပ်ငန်းများနှင့် ဆက်စပ်နေသည့် အစိတ်အပိုင်းအားလုံးကို ဖော်ပြရန် “လူ့ဖွယ်ပစ္စည်းများဆိုင်ရာဆက်နွှယ်မှု” ဝေါဟာရ၏ အဓိပ္ပာယ်ဖွင့်ဆိုခြင်းဖြင့် နိဒါန်းပျိုးသည်။ ထိုဝေါဟာရသည် သူတို့အသုံးပြုခဲ့သည့် ရုပ်ဝတ္ထုပိုင်းဆိုင်ရာကို ချဉ်းကပ်လေ့လာသည့်နည်းစနစ်ကို ထင်ဟပ်စေသည်။ စာရေးသူများသည် လူ့ဖွယ်ပစ္စည်းများ စတင်ထုတ်လုပ်သည့် အရင်းအမြစ်မှစ၍ ပိုင်ရှင်များအသီးသီးသို့ အဆင့်ဆင့် ပြောင်းလဲပုံ၊ သူတို့

လက်ခံထားသည့် မတူကွဲပြားသည့် အဓိပ္ပာယ်ဖွင့်ဆိုချက်များ၊ တန်ဖိုးထားမှုများကို မှတ်သားခြင်းတို့ကို ယင်းတို့အဆုံးသတ်သည့် မဟာမုနိဘုရားသို့မဟုတ် ဘုရားအနီးတဝိုက်နေရာအထိ တိုင်အောင် ခြေရာခံလေ့လာခဲ့သည်။ ။ ထို့နောက် ရွှေဆိုင်းနှင့်သနပ်ခါးလှူဖွယ်ပစ္စည်းများနှင့် ပတ်သက်သည့် ဆက်နွယ်မှုများကို ဖော်ထုတ်ရန် ကိုယ်တိုင်စူးစမ်းပါဝင်လေ့လာခြင်းနှင့် မျက်နှာချင်းဆိုင်မေးခွန်းများ မေးမြန်းခြင်း တို့ပါဝင်သည့် နက်နက်နဲနဲ အသေးစိတ်လေ့လာဆန်းစစ်သည့် သုသေသနပြုလုပ်သည့် နည်းစနစ်များအသုံးပြုပါသည်။ ။ ထို့နောက် ဘုရားကြီးတွင်ပြုလုပ်လျက်ရှိသော မွမ်းမံမှုများနှင့် မကြာသေးမီ အချိန်တိုအတွင်း တိုးတက်မှုများအကြောင်းလည်း လေ့လာပါသည်။ ။ မဟာမုနိဘုရားကြီးရှိ ပြတိုက်ခြောက်ခုအားလည်း ဂေါပကအဖွဲ့၏စီစဉ်ညွှန်ကြားမှုများအရ သတ်မှတ်ထားသည့် စည်းမျဉ်းစည်းကမ်းများနှင့် ယဉ်ကျေးမှုဆိုင်ရာ အထူးခွင့်ပြုချက်များနှင့် အညီ မည်ကဲ့သို့ပြုလုပ်ထားသည်ကို လေ့လာသည်။ ။ ထို့နောက် မဟာမုနိဘုရားကြီးအား စီမံခန့်ခွဲမှုနှင့် ပတ်သက်ပြီး ယင်း၏သမိုင်းကြောင်းနှင့် မန္တလေးမြို့၏ခေတ်ပြိုင် မြို့ပြဖွံ့ဖြိုး တိုးတက်မှုဆိုင်ရာ ခရီးသွားလုပ်ငန်းနှင့်ပတ်သက်သည့် ဆက်စပ်မှုများ ဆီသို့ဦးတည်နေသည့် ရည်ရွယ်ချက်များ၊ တန်ဖိုးထားမှုများပါဝင်ပြီး ထိုအရာများကို စီမံခန့်ခွဲသည့် အဓိကကျသော ပုဂ္ဂိုလ်များ၏ အရည်အသွေးများကို အခန်းတခန်းဖြင့်ဖော်ပြထားသည်။ ။ ဤလေ့လာမှုသည် နာမည်ကျော်ကြားနေသော ဗုဒ္ဓဘာသာကို လေ့လာသည့်ပညာရှင်များ၊ ဗုဒ္ဓဘာသာဝင်တို့ အထွတ်အမြတ်ထားသည့် ဘုရားပုရဝဏ်နှင့် စီးပွားရေးကို လေ့လာသည့်ပညာရှင်များ၊ အရှေ့တောင်အာရှ ခရီးသွားလုပ်ငန်းဆိုင်ရာ မြို့ပြတိုးတက် ဖွံ့ဖြိုးမှုနှင့် မြန်မာနိုင်ငံအကြောင်း လေ့လာသည့်ပညာရှင်များအား တူညီသောအကျိုးကျေးဇူးကို ပေးနိုင်လိမ့်မည် ဖြစ်သည်။

အဓိကစကားစုများ ( Keywords) မဟာမုနိ၊ မန္တလေး၊ လူသိများသော ဗုဒ္ဓဘာသာ၊ ရုပ်ဝတ္ထုပိုင်းဆိုင်ရာ ယဉ်ကျေးမှု၊ လှူဖွယ်ပစ္စည်းများ၊ သနပ်ခါး၊ ရွှေဆိုင်၊ ဘုရားပုရဝဏ်၊ ဗုဒ္ဓဘာသာ ပြတိုက်များ၊

# Contents

Foreword	iii
Acknowledgements	v
About the Series	vii
Abstract	ix
စာတမ်းအကျဉ်းချုပ် (Burmese language abstract)	x
List of Tables and Figures	xvi
<b>I: Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
Schober's Mahamuni	7
Al-hu/dana: the Buddhist concept of giving in Myanmar	10
Categories of Buddhist space in Myanmar: an orientation	14
The Mahamuni Pagoda compound	15
A word on method	21
<b>2: Votive Networks: The Material Culture of Mahamuni Veneration and its Flow</b>	<b>23</b>
Thanaka votive network	24
What is thanaka?	25
Thanaka wholesale market at Bon-kyaw Teik	26
Wholesale and retail	28
Historical background of the Bon-kyaw thanaka market	28
Thanaka plantations	30

Organic and GM thanaka	33
Wholesale market demographics	34
Buying and trading thanaka trees	35
Bon-kaw Teik prescription for wholesalers	36
Recent impacts on thanaka market	37
Donations to Mahamuni	40
U Kyaw Moe - chairman of the MTPPA	40
Thanaka retail market in the Mahamuni Compound	46
Background of a typical retail vendor	48
The nature of retail trade	49
Location, location, location...	51
Retail thanaka donations	54
Thanaka grinding workshop	54
Grinding workshop officiant	56
Donor perceptions in their own words	59
Summary and observations	63
Mahamuni Buddha image face-washing ceremony	64
Practicalities and responsibilities in the face-washing ceremony	68
Sacred water and flower-offering ceremony	68
Face-washing ceremony	69
Public respect for the <i>Yaetaw-sayartaw</i>	73

## Contents (continued)

The Mahamuni Buddhia image as source of "power"	73
Summary of thanaka votive network	74
Production	79
The gold leaf industry and Myat Paa Ward	83
Machine-made and handmade gold leaf	84
Mahamuni tender system under U Soe Lin	86
Payment and penalties	92
Reform of gold leaf tender system and retail under U Soe Lin	93
Zaw Min Aung and gold leaf trade organizations	94
Zaw Min Aung and Mahamuni	97
Gold leaf retail clerks	99
Mahamuni's gold waste: a family business	101
Donors	105
Summary of gold leaf votive networks	106
Concluding comments	108
<b>3: Museums</b>	<b>111</b>
Bronze Statue Museum	112
Foreign contributions museum	115
Myanmar traditional handicrafts museum (Dharmachakra Museum)	116
Buddhavam Museum	118



Mahamuni History Museum	119
Brass gong museum	121
Concluding remarks	121
Cost of museum renovation	122
<b>4: The Trustee Board, U Soe Lin, and his Reforms</b>	<b>125</b>
The structure of Mahamuni trustee group and its performance	125
Chairman U Soe Lin	130
Staff and security	141
Staff numbers	144
Criticism of trustee board	145
Discussion and analysis	148
<b>5: Concluding Remarks and Commentary</b>	<b>151</b>
Buddhist materiality: arts, crafts, and votives	152
Buddhist nationalism and nationalist Buddhism	154
Tourism and development in Mandalay: by whom, for whom?	157
<b>References</b>	<b>159</b>
<b>About the Authors</b>	<b>167</b>

## List of Figures and Tables

<b>Figure 1.1</b>	Queues for face-washing ceremony	2
<b>Figure 1.2</b>	Presiding monk and officiants	3
<b>Figure 1.3</b>	Devotees in front of Mahamuni Buddha Image	3
<b>Figure 1.4</b>	Mandalay location	15
<b>Figure 1.5</b>	Mahamuni Compound location	16
<b>Figure 1.6</b>	Official trustee board map of Mahamuni compound	18
<b>Figure 2.1</b>	Lengths of thanaka at retail outlets in Mahamuni Pagoda	24
<b>Figure 2.2</b>	Map of Mahamuni Pagoda and thanaka market	26
<b>Figure 2.3</b>	Thanaka wholesale market at Bon-kyaw Teik	27
<b>Figure 2.4</b>	Thanaka plantation in Ayardaw	30
<b>Figure 2.5</b>	Map of thanaka plantation locations in Myanmar	31
<b>Figure 2.6</b>	Thanaka production in Magwe and Sagaing graph	33
<b>Figure 2.7</b>	Typical thanaka retail shop	47
<b>Figure 2.8</b>	Vinyl sign advertising retail thanaka	48
<b>Figure 2.9</b>	Thanaka retailers in Mahamuni Pagoda	51
<b>Figure 2.10</b>	Current thanaka retail location	54
<b>Figure 2.11</b>	Thanaka grinding workshop at Mahamuni Pagoda	56
<b>Figure 2.12</b>	Grinding workshop officiant gives blessing	59
<b>Figure 2.13</b>	The <i>Yaetaw sayataw</i> in his reception area	68
<b>Figure 2.14</b>	Mahamuni face-washing ceremony	71
<b>Figure 2.15</b>	Thanaka votive network	77
<b>Figure 2.16</b>	Thanaka votive network with spheres of influence	78
<b>Figure 2.17</b>	Male pilgrims affixing gold leaf to the Mahamuni Buddha image	79
<b>Figure 2.18</b>	Beating gold leaf	81
<b>Figure 2.19</b>	Gold leaf worker	82
<b>Figure 2.20</b>	Assembling gold leaf packets	82

<b>Figure 2.21</b>	Tender application form	92
<b>Figure 2.22</b>	Packets of gold leaf with hologram in top right corner	94
<b>Figure 2.23</b>	Gold leaf retail booth	101
<b>Figure 2.24</b>	Gold leaf packets collected for burning in gold waste workshop	103
<b>Figure 2.25</b>	Gold waste workshop furnaces	104
<b>Figure 2.26</b>	Gold waste yield	104
<b>Figure 2.27</b>	Gold leaf votive network diagram	107
<b>Figure 2.28</b>	Gold leaf votive network diagram with spheres of influence	108
<b>Figure 3.1</b>	Map of Mahamuni Pagoda museums	112
<b>Figure 3.2</b>	Bronze Statue Museum after renovations	115
<b>Figure 3.3</b>	Display in Dharmachakra Museum	117
<b>Figure 3.4</b>	Painting in History Museum depicting the casting of the Mahamuni Image	120
<b>Figure 3.5</b>	Mahamuni History Museum	120
<b>Figure 3.6</b>	Cost of museum renovations graph	123
<b>Figure 4.1</b>	New carpark with covered walkway	135
<b>Figure 4.2</b>	New ticket kiosk for foreign tourists	136
<b>Figure 4.3</b>	Security staff of Mahamuni Pagoda	141
<b>Figure 4.4</b>	Thado Minsaw statue	143
<b>Figure 4.5</b>	Staff numbers table	144
<b>Figure 4.6</b>	Staff numbers by year graph	145
<b>Figure 4.7</b>	Arcade shops in Mahamuni Pagoda	147
<b>Figure 4.8</b>	Mahamuni merchandise for sale in arcade shops	147



# 1

## INTRODUCTION

We parked our car in the brand-new parking facility outside the Mahamuni Pagoda at some time before 3am, noting how busy the area was with other pilgrims already. Walking into the extensive compound after surrendering our footwear, we made our way down one of the four arcades that lead to the chamber of the Mahamuni Buddha image itself. Some of the shops that line each side of the arcades were already open, selling all manner of votive items, souvenirs and Mahamuni merchandise to the faithful. Through the other side of the arcade and into a beautifully tiled central pavilion, we join the long queue of pilgrims waiting for the gates to the chamber of the 'living image' to be opened.

Finally at 4am, the gates give way and we see the huge golden Buddha image, its lower body swollen out of proportion with gold leaf. A retinue of officials enter the pavilion, headed by a monk of obvious status and lay officials dressed in white. In the sight of the seated pilgrims, many praying or reciting chants, the monk, aided by his officiants, proceeds to delicately clean each feature and then wash the image's face with thanaka water before drying it with towels. The process takes an hour, before the entire assembly join together in a short prayer and prostrate repeatedly before the image, asking the merit generated by the ceremony to be shared equally amongst them. The white-clad officiants accept gold leaf proffered to them eagerly by pilgrims, and affix it carefully to the image whilst the latter join their hands in front of them respectfully and pray. The thanaka water is shared out systematically amongst

various people, and the presiding monk and his entourage leave the pavilion with some of this water, the towels and other items.

Over the next few hours as the sun rises over Mandalay, all the shops in the arcades open up for business and regular streams of people begin to 'flow' through the compound in all directions. Many of them are going to the Thanaka-grinding workshop where they join rows of other pilgrims in grinding this fragrant wood into paste, to be used in another morning's face-washing ceremony. Others, all of them men, queue before booths selling packets of gold leaf, and then wait their turn to enter the chamber and affix it to the Buddha image themselves, often as their wives and daughters offer prostrations and pray before the image outside.



**Figure 1.1** Queues for face-washing ceremony (Zin Mar Latt)



**Figure 1.2** Presiding monk and officiants (Zin Mar Latt)



**Figure 1.3** Devotees in front of Mahamuni Buddha Image (David Henley, CPA Media)

The Mahamuni Pagoda is one of the most important Buddhist sites in Myanmar, and the Buddha image it contains perhaps the single most important one in the country. Devotees and pilgrims from all over the country and beyond descend upon the compound every day to participate in the ceremony described above, or to donate and grind thanaka or affix gold leaf themselves. In our initial observations of the site, the votive practices that are distinct to the Mahamuni Buddha image intrigued us greatly. Not only were we interested in studying the site from a perspective informed by the idea of 'lived religion' (Hall, 1997), and with a focus on material culture (Morgan, 2009), but these two primary votive items of thanaka and gold leaf used in the worship and supplication of Mahamuni struck us as being symbolically redolent of not only 'Burmese Buddhism' but also of Burmese national and cultural identity more generally. Thanaka, seen worn in stripes across the faces of women throughout Myanmar, is as inextricable from contemporary Burmese identity as the *longyi* (sarong) is. Whilst other Southeast Asian countries have largely abandoned their traditional modes of dress and grooming in exchange for standardized western attire, Myanmar is notable for its resistance to this development. Large numbers of men still wear the *longyi* both formally and informally, and women still use thanaka as a facial cosmetic every day. Whereas handmade gold leaf in Myanmar is a traditional craft that requires the cooperation of many kinds of specialized craftspeople, who all use the same technology and folk knowledge, and observe the same cultural taboos, as their forebears in the craft have in Myanmar for many hundreds of years.

The symbolism of these votive items dovetails also with some of the narratives about the Mahamuni Buddha image and its arrival in Mandalay in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. These are communicated in several of the six museums within the compound, particularly the 'Mahamuni History Museum' and the 'Buddhavam Museum'. As will be discussed below, the narratives in these museums are decidedly nationalist in their glorification of Myanmar's royal history and centrality in Theravada Buddhist history, and as such function not only to communicate the prestige of the Mahamuni Buddha image, but also to celebrate Burmese culture and history. Given that both domestic and international tourism has been so dramatically on the rise in Myanmar since the country began to



welcome foreign tourists in earnest in 2010, a number of interesting questions can be asked about the Mahamuni Pagoda's growing role as one of upper Myanmar's most important tourist attractions.

What, then, can a research focus on the material culture of the Mahamuni Pagoda tell us about the deeper social functions and meanings that the pagoda not only provides, but also embodies? What can selective objects tell us about the character of lived religion, social organization and agency in the world of Burmese Buddhism? Our aim is to illuminate a richer social and economic ecology which depends on the Mahamuni Buddha image and its compound as its central hub, by focusing on the two principal votive materials that are used in the image's worship and supplication: thanaka and gold leaf. By following the materials themselves, respective networks of 'flow' emerged to us that enabled a very different dimension of this Buddhist space than is usually studied to become visible – we introduce the term 'votive network' to describe these. Rather than the flat, timeless depiction of myth, Royal chronicle and identical queues of devotees, we found trade communities and charismatic social actors with complex histories and motivations linked in social and economic networks that required constant negotiation and compromise. The small repertoire of simple rituals undertaken by hundreds of pilgrims every day at the Mahamuni compound support these networks, but the cultural value they possess, and financial profit they generate, are in dramatic contrast respectively.

The compound has gone through a thorough program of renovation, construction and new social regulation since the current chairman of the Mahamuni Pagoda Trustee Board was appointed in 2016. What is the nature of this new management regime, and what is the basis of the trustees' power more generally? What is the agenda they serve, and what have the effects of these changes been so far for the communities tied to the pagoda, and regarding the nature of the site itself? What is to be said about the *values* inherent in this undertaking, and their compatibility with the site and its preexisting activities?

To answer these questions, firstly we must give some additional context to the Mahamuni Buddha image and its compound over the remainder of this chapter. This will begin with a discussion of

the only exclusive study of Mahamuni in English: Juliane Schober's short chapter in an edited volume on sacred biographies in Buddhism of 1997. She gives a clear account of the standard mythic narratives that exist about the image in Myanmar, regarding both its sacred origins and its physical history. We will then give a brief account of types of Buddhist space and related terminology in Myanmar, followed by as comprehensive a description of the Mahamuni Pagoda as is needed to orientate the reader for what will follow. In this, we necessarily limit ourselves to the areas and components of the compound that concern our focus here. Finally, will discuss *dana*, the Buddhist concept of 'giving', and how this concept not only gives special value to votive practice in the Mahamuni Pagoda, but is also both the literal origin, and *raison d'être*, of the entire compound and its contents.

In chapter 2, we will examine the votive networks behind thanaka and gold leaf at Mahamuni. From production to terminus, and every notable point in between, we trace the flow of each material through its network, and comment extensively on this process, the individuals and groups who form the networks, and the broader cultural and economic trends and pressures that affect them. The data for this account was gathered through interviews and participant observation over a year-long period, and the chapter stands as a comparative ethnographic study in its own right. In the context of the Trustee Board's reforms since 2016, these two networks have fared very differently. Not only their respective market values, but also the different cultural values attached to each have been a factor in the trustees' promotion of gold leaf, at the expense of thanaka. We explore how and why this has occurred.

In chapter 3, we give an account of the six museums inside the compound: their emergence, ideological purposes, and renovation under the 2016 Trustee Board. Not only do the museums communicate the narratives, themes and contexts that the pagoda's patrons and curators would like to be emphasized for visitors both foreign and domestic, but their renovation has illuminated some notable inconsistencies between the values of the Trustee Board and that of local devotees.

Chapter 4 begins with as detailed a description as possible of the Trustee Board's origins, function, history and composition. The question of Pagoda Trustee Boards, their purviews, politics and finances, is a very sensitive one in Myanmar as in other Buddhist countries, and there is very little scholarship on this important topic. We were granted extensive access to the chairman of the Mahamuni trustees since 2016, U Soe Lin. He claims exclusive responsibility for the compound's extensive renovation and reforms, which include not just construction and beautification but also new social and behavioral regulation and the reform of the gold leaf tender and retail system – a system that generates significant funds for the pagoda and has far-reaching effects on the traditional handmade gold leaf industry. We give an inventory of U Soe Lin's substantial actions in this regard, and discuss how these have affected the votive networks we described in chapter 2 and the life of the compound more generally. We consider U Soe Lin's values and motivations in this discussion, and balance these with the values and concerns of the groups experiencing change under his regime. We find that developing the compound as a domestic and international tourist attraction is the primary concern at the heart of U Soe Lin's program. In 2011, the economy was deregulated in Myanmar and a program to develop hotels and tourism infrastructure was implemented throughout the country, but especially in the major cities and near religious and heritage attractions. Mandalay is the second largest city in Myanmar and has a number of such attractions. The Mahamuni Pagoda, and its votive markets and museums, have been adapted and renovated to accommodate higher numbers of visitors since U Soe Lin was appointed chairman, and to be more appealing to both domestic and international tourists. Finally, we make some concluding comments and suggestions for further study.

### **Schober's Mahamuni**

There is generally less scholarship on popular religion in Myanmar than in the country's Theravada neighbors, especially in regard to individual cults within the broader tradition, and the relatively recent focus on the material culture of religion (Morgan, McDaniel, Stengs). Looking at popular religion, its 'lived' aspect, and its

material culture, has never been more relevant given not just its endurance but its efflorescence despite ongoing processes of globalization and modernization. In particular, it is the contemporary forms of popular religion that directly relate to and reflect modern capitalist life that are in need of more attention (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1999; 2000). As for Mahamuni specifically, Juliane Schober's short chapter on the contemporary veneration of the image is the only exclusive study in English we have been able to find (1997). Schober is interested in the textual basis and mythic histories of Buddha images and their cults in general as much as the case of Mahamuni specifically, but it will be helpful to give a short summary and discussion of parts of her study here. As well as providing necessary context, Schober's study also helped us to refine our own focus on votive supplication, and the dimension we hope this will add to the scholarly understanding of Mahamuni her work offers, and to that of Burmese popular religion in general.

Schober draws on early scholarship and her own ethnographic research to furnish firstly Mahamuni's origin myth, concerning the casting of the image, and then its history in the domestic context, concerned primarily with its capture from Arakan (present-day Rhakine) and removal to Amarapura (now a township within Mandalay). The origin myth (Forchammer, 1892 [in Schober, 1997]) describes the Arakenese king Candrasuriya wishing to worship the Buddha during the latter's lifetime. The Buddha perceives this and travels magically through the air to Arakan with Ananda and 500 *arahant*, where they land on Selagiri Hill. He then made prophecies to his entourage about the location of future monuments containing his relics in the region, whereupon "Mount Meru trembled and the oceans boiled" (ibid). This alerted Candrasuriya to the Buddha's presence, and he assembled his own entourage and proceeded to Selagiri Hill to pay homage, bringing offerings of "flowers, perfumes, garlands, and parched rice" (ibid). The Buddha gave the king spiritual and political instruction and 'converted' him and his entire kingdom. Before taking his leave, Candrasuriya asked him for a likeness which he could worship in the Buddha's absence.

The Buddha agreed and the king collected together "gems, gold and other treasures for the casting" (ibid). Once cast, the Buddha breathed upon the image which imparted life to it, so that no man

or god could tell the two apart. The Buddha then told the image that it would last 5,000 years, but that it would suffer the results of bad karma from one of the Buddha's previous lives. The king built a shrine for the image and entrusted it to the care of monks to whom he offered jewels, but they declined these and had them buried beneath the image's throne. In addition to other miraculous phenomena, the "holy water" used in the image's ablutions "would never overflow from its receptacle", and water used to wash its head was "of the same pure quality all year" (ibid). Schober also notes that it is believed by many that the image used to speak and offer advice to kings, but that as Buddhism declined it stopped doing this. Its various injuries and vicissitudes over the centuries are also ascribed to the Buddha's declaration that it would have to suffer the consequences of his demerit in a past life.

The 'mundane' history of the image, so to speak, begins with stone inscriptions from the 8<sup>th</sup> century describing the renovation of its shrine in Arakan, where it was the palladium of the Arakanese monarchy. The inscriptions also list the donations of monarchs from outlying kingdoms, which along with its acknowledgement as a major object of pilgrimage, demonstrate its political and cultural significance in the wider region. In 1784, King Bodawpaya of the Bagan dynasty sent his heir Thadow Minsaw to conquer Arakan. The campaign was successful, and Thadow Minsaw captured the Mahamuni Buddha image and transported it back to his father's capital in Amarapura, where the king had it enshrined near his palace and propitiated daily. Schober notes that Michael Symes, a contemporary ambassador to Bodawpaya's court, gives a particularly evocative description of the shrines and its daily rituals. According to him the shrine was attended by 125 Arakanese prisoners and their families, who were offered to the image as slaves by the king, in addition to a daily plethora of offerings that were sent from the palace. Shwe Yoe (in Schober, *ibid*) describes the resplendent opulence of the shrine and its many treasure, which include a tank full of 'sacred turtles' which are fed upon rice and cakes offered to them by the "multitudes of pilgrims". The chants of devotees sounded constantly and the "air is heavy with the effluvia of candles and the odors from thousands of smoldering incense sticks". Schober also acknowledges Than Tun (*ibid*), who records that nearly 200

pounds of gold were removed from the image after it was damaged in a fire in 1884. This, she explains, demonstrates the longstanding devotional practice of affixing gold leaf to the image.

Schober's ethnographic fieldwork was undertaken in the early 1980s, and she includes a postscript to her chapter with some reflections after a further visit to two of the compound's museums in 1994. We give a thorough discussion of all six museums in chapter 3. As mentioned above, Schober's concern is the phenomenon of Buddha images and their veneration in the Theravada world, and the role of this phenomenon in the "Theravadin participation in the Buddha's ongoing biography in religious, social, cultural, and historical arenas" (ibid). Our concern here is with the social and economic realities of this 'veneration' and 'participation'. The study of these lived realities must begin with the votive materials that the veneration of Mahamuni requires, but before we turn our attention to this, it will be necessary to sketch out the cultural basis that equates 'veneration' with 'giving' in the first place.

### ***Al-hu/dana*: the Buddhist concept of giving and its importance in Myanmar**

There is a common Burmese proverb that translates as 'one's hands are always reaching to make donations' (*al-hu yay sat lat nae ma kwar*). Jaquet & Walton (2013; see also Dove, 2017) explain the Burmese concept of *al-hu* as 'generosity' or 'donation', and recognize it as a vernacular rendering of the Buddhist (and previously Vedic) concept of *dana*. The latter term is familiar but rarely used in Myanmar outside of formal contexts. Popularly, this notion of giving is inextricable from its basis in Buddhist doctrine and practice, and is viewed as being a highly auspicious act as well as a pious one. Dove (ibid) remarks upon Myanmar's higher propensity for giving than its Buddhist neighbors, and concludes that the reasons for this lie not just in religious faith, but also the social onus that poverty, natural disasters, inefficient taxation, and no welfare, have occasioned. We would add to this a deeply ingrained social etiquette of gift-giving in a patron-client context, resulting in a robust symbolism that reflects and makes a performance of unequal hierarchical relationships and what is

expected or desired from them on either side. Moreover, a person's status is reflected in the size and nature of their donation, not to mention the status of the recipient. Because 'giving' or 'donation' is so central to the Mahamuni Buddha Image and the rituals undertaken with it daily, it will be useful to explore the concept here in its Burmese context in a little more detail.

In Buddhism, the doctrine of *kamma* (Sanskrit: *karma*), literally 'action', refers to the principle of causality that governs the relationship between ethics and rebirth. All action generates either merit or demerit based on its moral value. The 'balance' of merit accrued over a lifetime determines the nature of rebirth after death. The Buddhist ideal is to generate enough merit over many lifetimes to be reborn as a spiritually superior being, with the ultimate goal of achieving *nibbana* (Sanskrit: *nirvana*), a sublime and perfect state from which there can be no rebirth. 'Making merit', therefore, is a fundamentally important element in daily Buddhist practice (Spiro, 1982). Whilst all forms of charity generate merit, the most meritorious acts a layperson can undertake are those that support the Buddhist monkhood and the propagation of the Buddhist religion, including everything from the donation of food or medicine to monks on their morning alms round, to bankrolling the construction and renovation of monasteries and pagodas (Jaquet & Walton, 2013; Ahmad et al, 2016). This kind of 'giving', which should be undertaken selflessly and without condition, is *dana*, or *al-hu*.

Not only does *dana* generate merit, but it is believed to bring about feelings of spiritual wealth and happiness, and even material wealth, in the present life. *Dana* is one of the ten *parami* or 'perfections' in Buddhism, along with morality, renunciation, wisdom, perseverance, patience, honesty, determination, loving-kindness and equanimity (U Ba Khin, 1991). These qualities in their perfect state are associated with kings, bodhisattvas, and of course the Buddha himself, particularly in his penultimate life as Prince Vessantara as related in the popular *Jataka* tale (Jory, 2016). In this tale, which is omnipresent throughout Theravada Southeast Asia, the prince perfects *dana* by giving away everything including his royal status and even in his wife and children. The tale is celebrated in the form of temple murals, sermons, books and cartoons, and various forms of performance throughout the region.

Clearly *dana* is a deeply embedded cultural idea that also functions beneath the skin-deep performance of religious ritual and “sustains exchange relationships and broader social cohesion” to use Mauss’ term from his classic work on gift-giving (1925). Beyond altruism, this includes the transactional nature of patron-client relationships that still characterizes Southeast Asian societies to this day, and also the public performance and display of status (King, 2007). Since the Bagan period (849-1297), the names of donors who supported the Buddhist religion were preserved in Burmese stone inscriptions that are still legible today (Tun, 2002). Donations included plots of land, entire temples and other religious structures, and even slaves. Land was used equally to build on or as arable plots that could be rented out to generate income for monasteries. Today in all monasteries and pagodas in Myanmar, similar lists of donors are listed on walls and the lintels of buildings. The bigger the donation, the greater the honor, and the more ostentatious the memorial.

Today in Myanmar the government confers a degree and a title upon any lay donor who is distinguished by the size of their donation and meets criteria set by the Ministry of Religious Affairs. The criteria relates to the amounts of money donated, the number of ordinations sponsored, and the volume and nature of religious buildings and monuments sponsored. The lowest of these degrees, for example, requires a donation of no less than 300 lakh, in addition to enough alms to support five monks, plus sponsorship for fifty ordaining novices. There are eight levels of degrees in total. The presentation ceremony takes place at the national level, in the presence of the president and vice-president and their families (Ministry of Religious affairs and Culture, Department of Religious affairs ([http://www.dra.gov.mm/?page\\_id=272](http://www.dra.gov.mm/?page_id=272))).

Most Buddhists of all economic backgrounds in Myanmar usually begin their day by making offerings to a Buddha image in their domestic shrine. These will likely include blessed water, flowers, lamps or candles, incense, and food, often fresh fruit. In addition to this, any visit to a monastery, pagoda, shrine or any other Buddhist site will involve some form of votive offering or ritualized donation. Beyond the strictly religious sphere, during the Cyclone Nargis period the Charities Aid Foundation recognized Myanmar as the number one ‘Giving country’ in the world in terms of



common charity, despite the fact that is one of Asia's most impoverished countries (Dove, 2017).

The complex social dynamic of donation is demonstrated very well by the 2007 phenomenon of monks inverting their alms bowls to prevent those in control of the country offering them alms. The monkhood is a 'field of merit' for laypeople to reap, and in refusing alms they deny the opportunity to make merit. This is a stark and unusual phenomenon, but in it we can see the complex social and cultural implications, not to mention counter-intuitive power relations, that are inherent in the performance of *dana*.

One could argue that *dana* is not only the *raison-d'être*, but also the very lifeblood of the Mahamuni compound. Every element of its contents and even its very buildings and walls were donated (Maung Maung Tin, 2018). Names of donors and the amounts of money they donated are listed throughout the compound on walls, signs and elsewhere. The contents of the museums and the buildings which house them are all donations. The Mahamuni Buddha Image itself was seized from Arakan by Thado Minsaw and *given* to his father in Amarapura, who in turn *gave* the 'living image' an opulent shrine to occupy and a daily regimen of votive offerings. Today pilgrims enter the compound to continue this votive tradition by donating thanaka wood, or their labor in grinding the wood, or buying gold leaf which they offer to Mahamuni by affixing it to his body. A range of other votive options are available for the devotee.

U Soe Lin, the chairman of the Mahamuni Trustee Board, described how his grandparents donated the eastern gate of the Mahamuni compound, where their names are inscribed to the benefit of their social status, and his. In our interviews, he often couched his activities and program as chairman in terms of 'giving' without seeking anything in return. U Soe Lin is developing the compound and managing it in such a way as to promote certain kinds of more prestigious donation at the expense of less prestigious ones, as our research has shown. These choices are aesthetic and economic, and have changed the nature of the compound and its surrounds in various ways, and have had impacts on the networks that obtain and process the materials for votive donations.

## Categories of Buddhist space in Myanmar: an orientation

The subject of Buddhist space and architecture in Myanmar is a potentially complex one, as there are many types of structure and facility that have profoundly religious overtones but are not formally or officially recognized as being consecrated or sacred. A longer and more general discussion of 'Buddhist space' would detail some of these, however, here it will suffice to go into only the following five categories and components that fall under our purview. Note that in Burmese, the word *paya* may refer to both a pagoda in its entirety or a single Buddha image. The word is derived from the Pali *vara* which means 'magnificent' or 'excellent'.

**Pagoda (*paya*):** This is the basic unit of consecrated religious space in Burmese Buddhism, also called 'temple' in English. A pagoda can be big or small and there is much variety, but each one will have at least a boundary wall, a stupa with four stairways leading to it, various shrines with Buddha images and sometimes *nat* (spirit deities), and often a monastery. Because of the more socially holistic role pagodas played as centers of community in premodern Burmese society, they often contain other elements that do not strictly relate to religion. These include all kinds of commercial spaces and activity, landscaped features, art, museums, and centers for traditional culture and games. The land upon which a pagoda is built is called *wot-ta-ka myae*, literally 'land donated for religious purpose'. The standard size is 45 *tar* (472.5 square feet).

**Stupa (*zedi*):** A stupa is conical, bell-shaped construction usually gilded and finish in a steep spire. Stupas contain relics of the Buddha or other spiritually advanced monks, and are worshipped and supplicated like Buddha images.

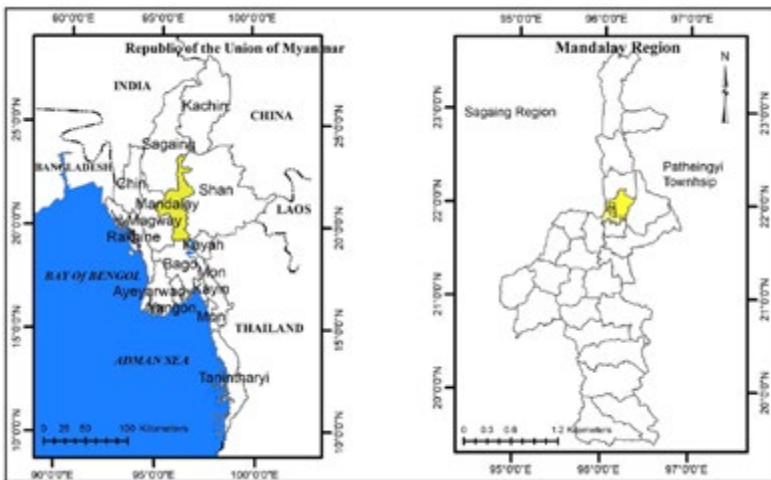
**Buddha image (*paya*):** Buddha images in Myanmar and the rest of Theravada Southeast Asia are heavily stylized and appear in a range of conventional attitudes. Most often they depict the Buddha sitting cross-legged. All representations of the Buddha are considered inherently sacred, but Buddha images can be formally consecrated through a complex ritual that is believed to render them sentient and powerful. This ritual involves, among other processes, monks chanting the Buddha's biography and his teachings 'into' the image,

and thus bringing together the physical body of the Buddha with the body of his insight (*rupakaya*, *dhamakaya*).

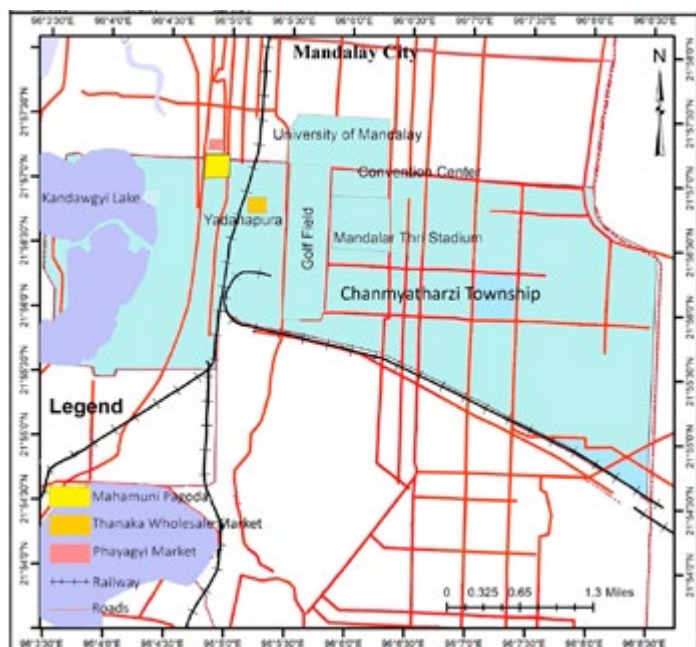
**Monastery** (*Phone-gyi-kyauung*): A monastery houses monks and novices under the authority of an abbot. It has the facility to ordain novices, and hold other Buddhist rituals and ceremonies, including the delivery of sermons for the laity. It may also contain a monastic school or university.

*Teik*: At root, this word refers to a group of buildings belonging to or constituting a monastery, but it can also imply a ‘family’ of monasteries, as the *Yaetaw-sayartaw* explained to us in our interview with him (see p.XX). This is when an abbot has invited monks under him who have advanced in monastic rank to set up their own monasteries within the same complex. Under this arrangement, there is still only one ordination hall and the original abbot retains his authority over the whole *teik*.

## The Mahamuni Pagoda compound



**Figure 1.4** Mandalay location



**Figure 1.5** Mahamuni Compound location





**Figure 1.6** Official trustee board map of Mahamuni compound





In this report we often refer to the Mahamuni 'compound', meaning the physically bounded space of the Mahamuni pagoda. This space is attached to and associated with other pagodas, but our research focus was limited to the compound around Mahamuni itself and any outlying buildings or activity that related to the compound's recent development program or economic activities, for example, the new car park, the new staff apartments, the thanaka wholesale market and so on. Maps are provided throughout where necessary to orientate the reader.

Because the Mahamuni Pagoda is already a top tier religious attraction for Buddhists in Myanmar, and is situated in a densely urban part of Mandalay, the compound bustles with much religious, commercial, recreational, and administrative activity. The four arcades which lead to the Buddha image are lined either side by shops selling Mahamuni merchandise, religious paraphernalia and other goods, and also craft workshops and astrologer's booths. Itinerant vendors also sell their wares in various parts of the compound. Around the compound are six museums of varying size, discussed in chapter 3. These surround the central pavilion containing the Mahamuni Buddha image. The image itself is contained within a special chamber called a *gandakuti*, which it almost completely fills. This gives a strong visual impression when approaching the image, as it is partly hidden from most perspectives and a pilgrim must reach the very front to get the best head on view. It is a dramatic encounter for devotees. The image is remarkably distorted by the gold leaf that has been disproportionately affixed to its lower portions, providing a spectacle that is emphasized by framed photographs hanging around the outer shrine that demonstrate its 'growth' over a hundred years or so. Only men are allowed to enter this chamber and touch the image, affixing gold leaf often on behalf of their womenfolk. Two gold leaf retail booths are located very near the chamber, opposite each other on the last approach.

The thanaka grinding workshop however, is outside the central pavilion to the northeast. It is a relatively informal, open plan work area with a very different atmosphere to the central pavilion. The workshop relies on donations of thanaka wood which are then ground into paste by pilgrims. The wood was sold by retailers



in the arcades, before they were relocated by the trustees to a dingy space near the extremity of the eastern arcade.

It has not been possible to arrive at exact numbers, but in consultation with our informants we estimate that the Mahamuni compound is central to the livelihoods of around 1,200 people. The trustees employ 313 staff members, including cleaners, retail clerks, security etc. At least 800 people work in an official total of 382 shops in the arcades, and at least 50 itinerant vendors work in the compound on a regular basis.

### **A word on method**

In addition to textual research, this study was undertaken through participant observation, and system and non-systematic interviews with consenting informants. Once we had refined our focus on votive networks, we arranged formal interviews with 5-15 individuals from each group or site (thanaka grinding pilgrims, security staff etc.), supplementing these with opportunistic informal conversations, which helped us to triangulate our data. We spent a great deal of time in and around the compound talking to pilgrims and staff at every level alike, in order to build up an impression of how the pagoda functioned in a day-to-day sense. In material terms, our aim was to somehow capture and describe the 'flow' of pilgrims, money and votive items that move through the compound every day.

In addition to this, we secured interviews with U Soe Lin, the primary social actor whom our study is concerned with, and the *Yaetaw-sayartaw*, a figure who is ritually central to the daily life of the pagoda, but who our research revealed to be somewhat removed from the recent reforms and development that interested us. We also interviewed leading representatives of both the thanaka and the gold leaf industry associations, both of whom are dealt with in their own section in chapter 2. All of these more high profile interviews were undertaken with necessary sensitivity and as much neutrality as it was possible for us to maintain.

Finally, we would like to qualify our research on two counts. We recognize that our focus and method are geared toward the material, and this is not to undermine the sincerity with which all

of our informants and participants spoke and behaved in regard to their religious practice and principles. Rather it is in service to a more detailed impression of the underlying economic, and ecological, realities within religious traditions. Secondly, both of the authors of this research are Buddhists from Myanmar. It has been a challenge for us to undertake a study of our own culture from an impartial, ethnographic-sociological perspective. The pitfalls of auto-ethnography are different from those encountered in the study of other cultures, and we have worked hard to guard against them and remain neutral in the execution of our fieldwork and our written analysis.

# 2

## VOTIVE NETWORKS: THE MATERIAL CULTURE OF MAHAMUNI VENERATION AND ITS FLOW

### Introduction

Whilst there are a rich variety of votive materials and items that are used in the veneration of the Mahamuni Image, the two primary forms are thanaka and gold leaf. They are the most visually evident and well-known forms of veneration, and the site is physically geared to accommodate the industries that produce and distribute them. Our aim here is to examine the social and economic networks that these two very different votive materials represent. We ask not merely what these materials *mean*, what values they reflect or may possess themselves, but also where they come from in a literal and physical sense, how they are processed and where their respective terminal points are located. Whose hands do they pass through, whose livelihoods are tied to them, and which social actors and groups have vested interests in their ongoing production and ‘flow’ – or indeed, the obstruction of this flow? How do they influence and form the *material* as well as the religious lives of people?

We use the term ‘votive network’ to describe this material process of production and ‘flow’ from source to Buddha image, or other terminal point. Analytically, each network could be represented by an arc upon which are marked all the points of transformation

and exchange, literal and symbolic, in addition to obstacles, diversions and tributaries. In line with our interest in the study of material culture, our method has been to maintain focus on the votive materials themselves and follow *them*, allowing them to reveal the processes and actors that direct or are affected by their respective flows. In doing this, we have ultimately made clearer the local meanings and social functions of this particular Buddha image and the space it occupies beyond the more usual doctrinal, mythic and historical explanations. The concept of *dana* greatly informs the character of Burmese Buddhism generally, and it certainly drives the votive networks in the Mahamuni Complex. But not only are these driven by mundane economic and social concerns as we shall show, but they are also shaped and exploited by those charged with the management of Mahamuni, whose values they have come in some ways to reflect.

### Thanaka votive network



**Figure 2.1** Lengths of thanaka at the retail outlets in Mahamuni Pagoda (Zin Mar Latt)

## What is thanaka?

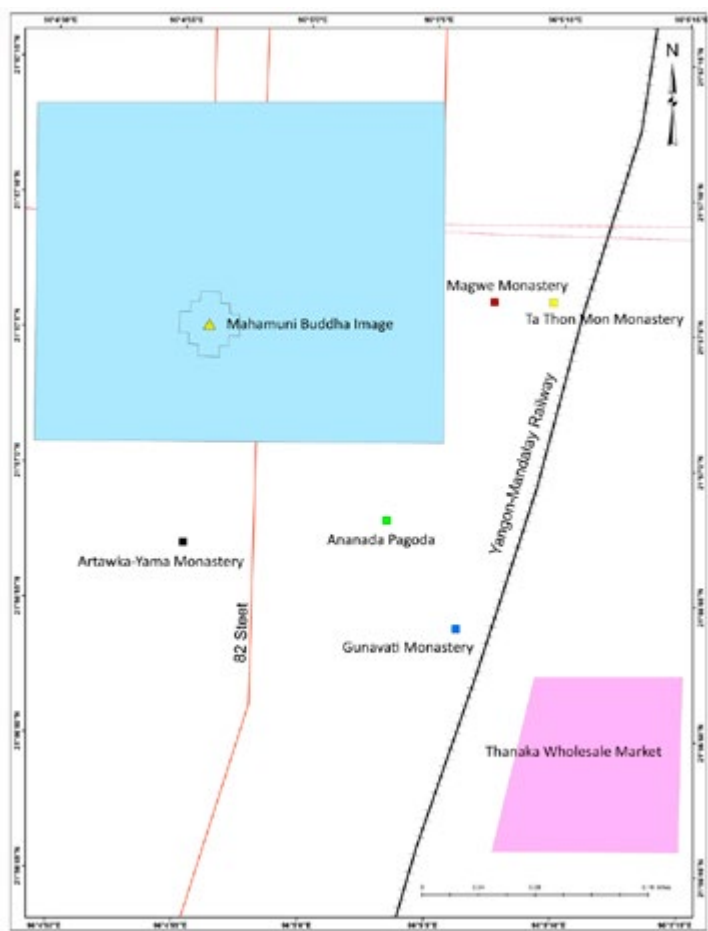
Thanaka is a slow-growing tree that thrives in the central parts of Myanmar, mainly Ayardaw, Myaing, Pauk, Yae-sakyoe and Pakokku. There are few other valuable flora that favor the lack of rain in this part of the country. Thanaka paste is made from the bark of the tree, and sometimes the roots, after being soaked in water and ground on a flat, round stone mortar called a *kyauk pyin*. Traditionally, the trees' fragrant bark can be harvested only after at least 35 years of growth, but many contemporary thanaka farms are now able to harvest after just 3 to 7 years. 'Thanaka' means both 'cosmetic' and 'cleansing' in the Burmese language, and it is widely used not only for cosmetic but also for therapeutic and medicinal purposes.

Most Burmese girls and women today use thanaka for its cooling qualities, its aroma, and to protect their skin from the sun. Occasionally men wear it also. It can be seen applied to the faces of almost all manual laborers, street vendors and agricultural workers. Many higher class women value thanaka as a cosmetic that reflects their national identity, and some even take a small mortar along with them when they travel to other countries in order to grind fresh paste. In the pre-modern era a special thanaka mixture was used by royalty and elites which is lighter, more fragrant and contains added gold dust in order to create a sparkling effect. Common people used the yellow pollen of a special flower called *Gant Gaw* which has a pleasant smell. Even today Burmese women still use this flower to make thanaka preparations.

Due to its association with beauty, purity and cleanliness thanaka is often used in religious festivals and ceremonies, although rarely is it given the ritual centrality it has acquired in the Mahamuni Buddha image's daily face-washing ceremony. Visitors, pilgrims and devotees donate both thanaka logs and the labor required to grind them into paste inside the Mahamuni Compound. This practice is known as "*Nant-thar thawe chin*", literally "grinding fragrance for washing the face (of Mahamuni)". Those who regularly donate their labor are commonly people who live near the compound itself, but others are from elsewhere in Mandalay or from neighboring townships. They include more females than males from working and middle-class backgrounds, usually between 20 and 50 years old. They represent a mix of private sector employees, civil servants, shop keepers, and also monks and nuns.

Below we identify the primary nodes in thanaka’s votive network and trace its flow from one to the next. We start in the wholesale market where the trees are transported from their plantations, then follow the flow to the retail space in the Mahamuni compound, from there to the grinding workshop, and then to the image itself and beyond. We also include a section on U Kyaw Moe, who has emerged as a significant social actor within this network as we will show.

**Thanaka wholesale market at Bon-kyaw Teik**



**Figure 2.2** Map of Mahamuni Pagoda and thanaka wholesale market

It was initially difficult for to us to find the thanaka wholesale market at Bon-kyaw Teik, as it is situated behind Nyaung-kan Teik on the main road into the Mahamuni compound, on the other side of the Yangon-Mandalay railway line. Even locals could not tell us where the nearest thanaka wholesale market in Mandalay was. Finally, a retail seller of thanaka in the Mahamuni compound introduced us to a *toke toke* driver who regularly transports thanaka from the wholesale market to the retail outlets inside the Mahamuni compound, and he was able to guide us there. It is not an easy location to find unless one knows the way, and it has a certain clandestine feel about it.

At nearly ten acres, the Bon-kyaw Teik compound is very large, comprising seventeen separate monasteries. Upon our first visit, the suitability of the space for this sort of wholesale business was clear, given the otherwise dense and cluttered nature of this district of Mandalay. Most of the thanaka wholesale traders are men, and their hometowns and villages are all in or near Ayardaw Township. Most of them are also thanaka growers who own their own plantations. In contrast with the retail thanaka market in the Mahamuni compound, the wholesale market was doing a brisk trade, with vehicles coming and going as people bought and sold.



**Figure 2.3** Thanaka wholesale market at Bon-kyaw Teik (Zin Mar Latt)

## Wholesale and retail

Wholesale Thanaka traders or brokers are called *pwe-sar*, while retail sellers are called *wel-let*. The wholesale traders sell unprepared and un-washed natural thanaka tree cuttings (*a-yaing*) from their own plantations to retail sellers. They trade in the Mahamuni compound, and also in other districts in Mandalay such as Nwae-htoe-gyi, and Kyar-ni-gan in Pa-thein-gyi Township. The retail sellers wash and brush the *a-yaing* and cut them into eighteen-inch lengths, at which point they are ready for sale to individual buyers for grinding.

## Historical background of the Bon-kyaw thanaka wholesale market

According to our informants among the Bon-kyaw wholesale sellers, there are only two thanakha wholesale markets in all of Upper Myanmar: Pakokku and Mandalay. The current monastic secretary of Bon-kyaw Teik (administrative position for a monk, distinct from ‘trustee’) explained that when he arrived there over twenty-seven years ago, he got to know some thanaka retail sellers who were staying in a monastery whose abbot, Wet-pyuit Sayardaw, was from Ayardaw. Wet-pyuit Sayardaw allowed thanaka retail sellers who were also from Ayardaw to stay in his monastery as a courtesy. At that time, there were only very old-fashioned buses that could be used for transport in Myanmar. These would be loaded with baskets of prepared thanaka cuttings from sellers’ home villages and transported for retail in markets elsewhere. A female thanaka seller told us that she inherited a three-acre plantation from her parents, whom prior to this period, had sent orders of thanaka direct to customers. Gradually, the number of retail sellers increased in Bon-kyaw Teik, although their trade remained at a subsistence level as their presence was tolerated rather than encouraged. During that time they sold only *mike-tone* (4.5-inch lengths of prepared thanaka). Each succeeding head of the teik made further allowances for the thanaka trade, and soon sellers were dealing in *taung-tone* (18-inch lengths), and then eventually whole trees. The Bon-kyaw monastery compound became semi-officially recognized as a major wholesale market (*let-kar*) in Mandalay. The origins of this development, then,



were in the patronage of the abbot Wet-pyuit Sayardaw, who felt a responsibility to offer help and support to his fellow migrant villagers in Mandalay, at least to the extent of facilitating thanaka trade at a subsistence level.

Just over two years ago the wholesale market space was extended to Man-yadana Bon-kyaw kyaung Monastery due to the increasing volume of wholesalers. So presently, within the one compound, there are two monasteries hosting wholesale markets. It must be noted here that in formal terms, these markets are not recognized or regulated by the municipal government, for the reason that they are located within Buddhist monastic compounds. Their status is informal and temporary. A female wholesaler who has been trading in Bon-kyaw for over twenty years described the conditions:

If I arrive here first, I pile up my thanaka trees here in this spot. But if somebody else gets here first, they may occupy this spot. We consider this fair: first come first served. As you can see, when one seller sells all of their thanaka, they pack up and leave. And then somebody else will occupy that same spot and start selling. So the place where we trade is not stable or guaranteed.

According to our interviews, in the period before the wholesale markets began to emerge in Bon-kyaw Teik, nobody had enough financial capital for the wholesale thanaka trade. At that time there was still no inflation, and investment of about 8,000 MMK<sup>1</sup> was sufficient to cover three baskets of thanaka, which was enough to for trade for a profit. However, nowadays, because of inflation, the demands of the market, and “the greed of some traders” (informant interviews), the thanaka wholesale traders must invest at least ten *lakh* (1 *lakh* = 100,000 MMK) in order to turn a profit. The environment is also negatively affected due to over-consumption.

---

1. 5,000 MMK (Myanmar Kyat) is equal to roughly 3 USD.

## Thanaka plantations

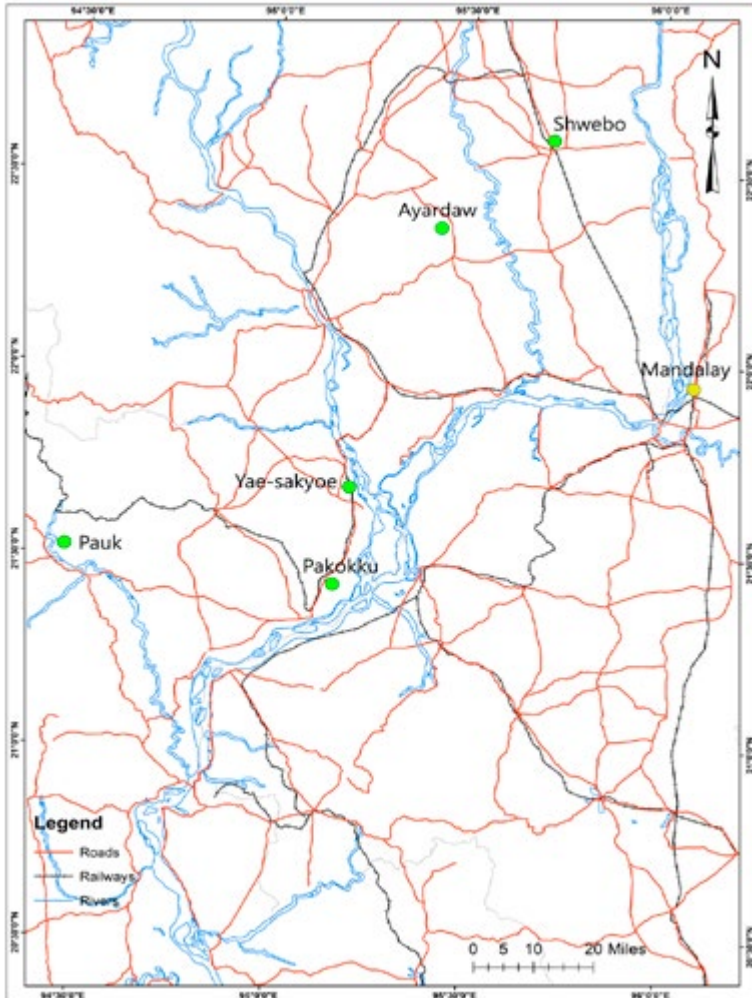


**Figure 2.4** Thanaka plantation in Ayardaw (Zin Mar Latt)

An informant from the Ayadaw Thanaka Planters and Producers Association (ATPPA) explained that thanaka can be grown in the dry zone (the Upper part of Myanmar), even in Y3 level soil, which is the worst quality of soil and cannot be used for arable farming. He said “The poor soil is due largely to the scarcity of rainfall in that part of the country. I sympathize with thanaka growers, as their livelihoods are very difficult and precarious due to these conditions.”

Ko Kyaw Moe, the chair of the Myanmar Thanaka association (MTPPA), was helpful to us in describing the influence of geography on thanaka in more detail. Shwebo township has farmlands, he said, while Ayardaw has thanaka fields. Shwebo and Ayardaw lie adjacent to each other, with about twelve or thirteen miles between their respective centers. The Mu River forms the boundary between them. The shape of Wet-let, Shwebo and Ayardaw together is triangular. For many generations, Thanaka growers who lived in Nyein-san and Hale-kyein in the Ayardaw area sold thanaka in Shwebo market, transporting it by cow-cart. At that time, Ayardaw was an undeveloped rural area with no market, and its thanaka growers were therefore dependent on Shwebo market. Subsequently, thanaka whose origin was in Ayardaw became known as ‘Shwebo thanaka.’ This was explained in detail in an article by Chintwin

Kyawswar Hlaing in the November 2019 edition of *Myanmar Thanaka Magazine* which was shared with us by Ko Kyaw Moe. The article refers to a song written by the composer Sayar Tin about ‘Shwebo Thanaka’ and its special quality.



**Figure 2.5** Map of thanaka plantation locations in Myanmar

Most of our informants from both the wholesale and the retail seller groups reported that the majority of their lay customers ask for Shwebo thanaka or ‘Shinma Taung’ thanaka (grown on mountains near Pakokku), and they are not so familiar with

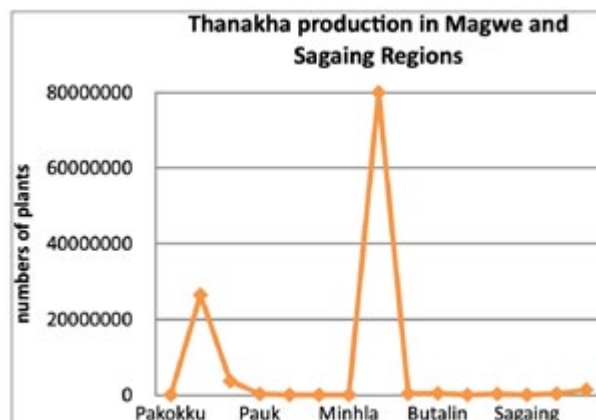
Ayardaw thanaka. Both wholesale and retail traders said that actually people from Nyein-san village in Ayardaw Township sold thanaka from their hometown in the stairways of the Myodaung Pagoda in Shwebo, and customers know it as Shwebo thanaka all over the country, and it is even referred to as such in popular songs. The name has stuck, despite the fact that Shwebo actually produces very little thanaka. One broker told us:

Ayardaw thanaka was sold in Shwebo for a long time and as a result it is well known as ‘Shwebo thanaka’. Likewise, even though thanaka is grown in Pakokku, Ayardaw is the primary source of thanakha. Ayardaw Township is small and it is not well known compared to other townships.

Two retail thanaka sellers from the Mahamuni compound:

Since childhood, we used only Ayardaw Thanaka. We have never sold thanaka from Pakokku. Pakokku has only a name but they don’t actually produce thanaka very much. Pakokku thanaka does have a good smell like Ayardaw. We buy from whichever wholesaler is closest and most convenient to us. Even though many customers do not know where thanaka comes from, there are some who understand about thanaka. Some like Pakokku while others prefer Ayardaw.

Furthermore, three wholesale traders reported to us that thanaka trees are grown in Pakokku and Yaesakyoe townships, but Ayardaw produces by far the most trees when compared to anywhere else in the Magwe and Sagaing regions (see figure below). Plantations can be seen in every village in Ayardaw. Currently, the wholesalers at Bon-kyaw Teik deal only in Ayardaw thanaka.



**Figure 2.6** Thanaka production in Magwe and Sagaing graph  
(Source: Department of Consumer Affairs, Ministry of Commerce, 2019)

## Organic and GM Thanaka

Retail thanaka sellers described two common kinds of thanaka species: organic and genetically modified. The organic kind has a thick layer of fragrant bark beneath a thin outer layer that is discarded, whilst the genetically modified kind is less fragrant and has a much thicker layer of outer bark. The latter is known as Sein Min species, and also called ‘modernized species’ (*Khit-myo*) by traders. U Sein Min who is from Zee-pin-lae village in Ayardaw introduced it and this new species is now famous among thanaka growers because its bark is thick and it thus looks attractive to undiscerning customers. However, the fragrance is inferior when compared with organic thanaka trees.

Some growers who inherited plantations from their parents continue to grow the organic, un-modified species. Young branches sprout from a tree within five or six months, and these can be cut and sold to other growers. The newly planted thanaka trees are fed with organic fertilizer such as goat dung and kept free of weeds. A male thanaka broker explained:

Thanaka can be grow in upland red earth (myae-ni-kone) and stony earth (Kyauk-kone). Depending on

the kind of land where thanaka trees are planted, they are called red bark (A-ni-pyawé) or white bark (A-phyu-pyawé). The smell of white bark is wonderful, and the tree is not too big, and its bark is hard.

### **Wholesale market demographics**

Thanaka traders are mostly middle-aged and are of both sexes. A forty-five-year-old female thanaka trader who is from Yae-chin village in Ayardaw Township and who owns a three-acre plantation explained that she inherited it from her parents. She has worked in the thanaka trade for twenty years. Most of the wholesale traders are from Ayardaw Township and have their own plantations there. A male trader with over thirty years experience told us that there are thirty or so traders who use the market. The amount of time they spend there depends on upon how much thanaka they have harvested, and customer interest. One informant told us: “Sometimes, I am here for a whole month before I sell all of my stock. This must be because my thanaka does not meet retail sellers’ preferences.” We observed that most traders are busy with clients in the morning, and trade ceases in the mid to late afternoon. Those who sell all of their stock immediately return to Ayardaw around 3:00pm, but those whose stock is taking longer to sell may put in a request to the abbot asking to stay longer. Once trade is over for the day, the space reverts back to its religious function until the next morning.

Ayardaw thanaka wholesalers trade in Mandalay because it is the central hub connecting Shwebo, Monywa and other neighboring towns. Data gathered from the wholesale traders indicate that their customers are from many different places such as Rakhaing, Yangon, Bago, the Ayeyarwaddy Delta, Meikthela, and Taunggyi Township. For these retail sellers, Bon-kyaw thanaka market saves them significant time and money, as they can get obtain good quality Ayardaw thanaka without having to travel all the way to Ayardaw.

## Buying and trading thanaka trees

Many thanaka growers cannot sell their harvest at markets themselves because of the transportation costs. They sell instead to brokers who travel to the plantations in Ayardaw to assess and purchase thanaka for retail in Mandalay. An informant working as a broker described her job:

In the villages of Ayardaw I visit many thanaka plantations and make purchases when I am pleased with the quality. The number of trees I buy from each plantation depends on this. Sometimes, it can be very difficult to find enough good quality thanaka trees to fill my quota because some growers do not want to sell their trees for various reasons. So sometimes, it could be as long as ten days between my appearance at the wholesale market in Mandalay with a full stock to sell. I have to make sure that I've collected enough to cover transportation and other expenses first.

After thanaka trees are bought from growers, they are divided into three categories according to the quality of the bark. These are then mixed together and put into piles, and the wholesale traders guess the average capital investment required, including transportation fees, labor fees and cost of trading at the Bon-kyaw wholesale market. Normally, it seems that profit is limited. One informant explained:

Let's say I bought 100 thanaka trees at 5,000 MMK per tree and I mix them with cheaper ones I bought for 3,000 MMK per tree. So, I sell them all for about 5000 kyat per tree, and I make a small profit. That's after I deduct expenses for collecting the trees from the plantations, transportation, rent of wholesale space and so on...

Two of our informants who were female wholesale brokers said that despite the small profit, they prefer the thanaka trade because they can operate as a small independent business and manage their own livelihood. If they worked for private companies or firms their time would not be their own and they would have to put up with an

intrusive boss. One of them expressed that the thanaka trade was particularly suitable for women, due to the lack of hard labor involved. One simply needs the capital investment, she said.

Experienced traders and buyers alike are capable of assessing the bark of thanaka trees to determine the quality and potency of the fragrance that grinding the bark will produce. As one thanaka broker put it: “If there is not enough bark on the thanaka tree or if it is too thin, the tree can only be used as firewood. Thanaka paste comes from the bark, not the wood.”

One female broker explained in an interview that retail sellers usually do not have regular clients, due to the fact that their stock will always vary in quality. Buyers usually have specific preferences about the kind of bark that they are looking for, and they will browse the stock of many sellers in order to find what they want, rather than accepting the best of what one particular seller may have to offer. For this reason, it can be concluded that the thanaka trade is not one that begets strong relationships of customer loyalty. A seller is only as good as his current stock. Thanaka wood is also a product that must be sold and used fresh, and this applies another level of pressure to sell quickly. An informant with over thirty experience explained:

I am only able to store thanaka trees for about one month before they will start to become damaged by moisture. Consumers keep only small pieces which can be sun-dried and stored for longer periods. ----. If the wood between the core and the bark becomes black and discolored, that means it has started to rot and cannot be sold. For this reason, the thanaka trade is thought of and described as only ever being a small business endeavor (tapaing-taning), due to the limits imposed by the short longevity of the stock and the relatively low demand for it.

### **Bon-kyaw Teik’s prescriptions for wholesalers**

According to our interviews with monks from Bon-kyaw



monastery, all brokers usually donate about 5,000 MMK to the monastery toward general utility and maintenance costs. Depending on the size of vehicle, fees for loading and unloading vehicles are also paid to the monastery. This was corroborated by a sign that we observed that listed the fee amounts for different vehicles. For example, pick-up trucks have to pay 3,000 MMK, while three-wheel motorbikes (*toke-toke*) pay 1,000 MMK. The fees are put toward the cost of maintaining and repairing the road. A female informant working as a wholesale broker explained:

As you can see, cars coming in and out all the time are damaging the road, so the monastery collects about 2-3,000 MMK from each one toward filling pot holes, levelling mud and other repairs. We brokers usually donate about 3-500 MMK each to the monastery before we go back home to our village. It's not compulsory though, and if I can't afford to make a donation that is ok. But we all donate some money for electricity and water fees. The abbot never asks for any money though, and does not set the rates for fees.

### **Recent impacts on thanaka market according to growers and brokers**

In our many interviews with growers, brokers and wholesalers, the mood and general outlook was broadly pessimistic. Many opined that the thanaka trade depends on the buyers (as in the retail sellers, not consumers), and their behavior affects the price of thanaka in the market. In the past, thanaka trees were scarce and the price was subsequently high, but now the market is flooded. According to one broker:

In my opinion, the brokers' evaluation and price estimation of the trees is an important factor in the condition of the trade right now. For example, I bought some good quality trees for a high price, but in the end had to sell at a low price because the market is over-supplied and the demand is comparatively low – it's a

buyer's market right now.

Another informant echoed these sentiments and experiences, adding once again that the problem also lies in the fact that thanaka has to be sold quickly before it begins to decay. One trader who has a ten-acre plantation said that the price of a thanaka tree used to be about 10,000 MMK, but now it is around 5,000 MMK. He thought the reasons for the heavy drop in price lay in Myanmar's previous lack of access to foreign markets. However, despite the fact that this is changing, he said he remains focused on the domestic market. Another wholesale broker noted that some thanaka plantations were being replaced with wild almond trees, and predicted that in the future, organic thanaka would be scarce.

Ko Kyaw Moe, chair of the MTPPA, told us that Ayardaw was becoming more famous due to its thanaka, and that the socio-economic life of the township was now defined by the product. All of our broker informants also asserted that every household in Ayardaw to some extent depends on thanaka for its livelihood. Regular agricultural livelihoods depend completely on unpredictable weather conditions, moreover the quality of the soil is growing poorer, and it is becoming harder to find the necessary capital for the growing of seasonal crops. As such, many have turned to growing thanaka trees as a partial alternative to paddy crops. Compared to the latter, thanaka plantations require very little labor. There is about 5-6 years between the turnaround of old and new trees, so it is a longer-term investment. Many growers in Ayardaw pool together and run plantations together. However, the thanaka market contracted noticeably after 2015, as was well acknowledged by our informants. Ko Kyaw Moe identified two reasons for this contraction. Firstly, the changing lifestyles of women in Myanmar. He opined that women were busier and their lives more hectic, with the result that more were opting for readymade thanaka products instead of using the traditional, freshly prepared organic form. The second reason, compounding the first, was the import of foreign fake thanaka cosmetics into Myanmar.

Conversely, when they were asked about the reasons for the downturn, some wholesaler informants discussed the ongoing replacement of thanaka with wild almond trees (*shaw pyu*; Latin: *sterculia*) trees. The gum of this tree is exported to China. In terms

of profit, wild almond is a much more efficient tree to grow: after only two or three years a tree is worth 20-30,000 MMK, whereas as a thanaka tree has to grow for up to nine or ten years, depending on use of fertilizers, to be worth only 10,000 MMK. One female wholesaler told us:

Now, wild almond is becoming more popular than thanaka. I don't know how it's used for sure, but I heard mobile phone screens and car windshields are made from it. China buys it. In the future, I think that thanaka will be scarce.

Another wholesaler informant said that unlike with wild almond, the profit from thanaka plantations depends heavily on the care they are given by growers. If fertilizers are not used a tree may take up to ten years before it can be harvested. If fertilizers are used seven or eight times per year, the growing time can be reduced by four or five years. It is also necessary to thoroughly weed the thanaka plantations, and the daily wage of a hired laborer is about 4-5000 MMK.

Another issue is the variable quality of the bark. Regardless of a tree's size and height, if the bark is too soft, it cannot be ground into paste and the tree is useless except for firewood. This is the reason that the thanaka trade depends upon the evaluation of brokers rather than simply the dimensions of the trees. The brokers' capacity to render a profit therefore depends on their skill in evaluating the trees and their bark. Most reported a profit of 19,000-20,000 MMK per day, if they chose well. One of them told us:

I have over forty years' experience in the thanaka trade, and though it has helped me to make a living, it has not brought me prosperity. I have never been able to buy a car, but at least I and my family can survive. When I am old I'll still be doing this business, but I will have no savings and not be better off than I am now no matter how hard I work. If I could run an extra business on the side, things would be better. Throughout my life as a thanaka trader I have experienced profit and loss alternately. Regardless of my skill in picking trees and selling them, the price

will likely keep going down...

### **Donations to Mahamuni**

Finally, it is worth noting that most of the Thanaka brokers themselves regularly donate good quality organic thanaka trees to the Mahamuni Buddha image. There was a clear association between the quality of the thanaka and the amount of merit subsequently generated by its donation to Mahamuni. Some explained that they made donations whenever they had surplus stock, which is an increasingly common occurrence.

### **U Kyaw Moe – chairman of the MTPPA**

During our interviews with the wholesale traders and retail sellers, mention of U Kyaw Moe was frequent. We were informed that he is very knowledgeable about thanaka, and that he is trying to market Burmese thanaka products abroad. Everyone described him as a sort of activist for thanaka and those in the Burmese thanaka industry, a man with a sincere interest in the promotion and support of the latter, and the improvement of market conditions. We were told how he installed a large welcome sign where the road approaches the boundary of the Ayardaw town, emblazoned with the phrase, “Ayardaw: The Thanaka City”, and accompanied by an illustration of a *Kyauk-pyin* with a piece of thanaka. We were also able to observe a vinyl sign hanging from a tree at the wholesale market that advertised a ‘Thanaka Festival’ held at Mandalay Hill in 2018. According to the sign, the festival was organized by the MTPPA and featured a “Thanaka Market Trade Event” and a special beauty competition for girls wearing thanaka. It was very clear from the content and presentation of these signs that the objective was to emphasize thanaka’s status in Myanmar as ‘cultural heritage’ and as a signifier of national identity, with a particular effort to underline the feminine associations with thanaka. And, as mentioned above, we encountered a thanaka transport driver at the wholesale market who related to us how U Kyaw Moe was issuing licenses to drivers

to enable them to transport thanaka across the country unmolested by the police or Forestry Dept. officials.

U Kyaw Moe is originally from Ayardaw, but he moved to Mandalay in 2016. He has over twenty thanaka plantations. His original profession was photography and video filmmaking, and he has connections with a variety of government officials through having done work for them in this capacity. As a result of this, he is practiced in the institutional culture of government and civil service departments, and is forthright about exploiting this to his advantage in building his own niche position of influence and authority. He presents himself very much in the vein of a dedicated and selfless community leader:

I have accepted that I have to struggle for the lives and livelihoods of all thanaka growers, not only from Ayardaw but also from all other regions in Myanmar. This struggle is an ongoing and difficult one, and the experiences I've had have taught me a lot. Throughout my professional life and experience I have often become entangled with political officials of all kinds, and I am not intimidated by those of a higher rank in society than myself. I am perfectly willing to offer criticism to such people if I believe it is appropriate, and if I am asked a question in return, I will answer it fully and without inhibition. I listen critically to the reasoning of decision-makers, and challenge them in the public forum if necessary. Everything I do, I do for others, and with pure intentions.

After Myanmar's command economy was abandoned in 1988, many industries working with raw materials and other resources faced difficulties adapting to a less constrained market. Commonly, these difficulties arose from a lack of modern technology and expertise. From this time onward, many producers formed associations to try to solve these problems cooperatively, such as the Tea Leaf Association, the Weaving Association and so on. U Kyaw Moe established the Ayardaw Thanaka Planters and Producers Association (ATPPA) in 2014, primarily to defend the domestic industry from fake thanaka products imported from

foreign countries. At present, the association has around 3,500 members. Following this example, local thanaka associations were also formed in Yaesagyo, Myaing, Pakokku, Pale, Bu-ta-lin, Myin-mu, Mon-ywa, and Kant-ba-lu, all of which are recognized by Director-General U Aung Maung, Department of Consumer Affairs under the Ministry of Commerce.

In 2015 the Ministry of Technology selected a variety of domestic products, including thanaka, for placement in workshops, with a view to gaining them internationally recognized GI (Geographical Indication) status for regions in Myanmar. Other products included *Seintalone they* (mango), *Shwebo pawsan* (rice), *Ywangan* coffee and Pagan lacquerware. To get GI status, a product must meet a strict list of criteria. Out of these five products, thanaka came first in meeting these criteria, which were as follows:

1. The product should have an officially registered association.
2. That product's industry should be professionalized and be a source of employment for locals.
3. The product's industry should be sustainable and not harmful to the environment.
4. The product should be in enough supply to allow export to foreign countries.
5. The product should be of superior quality.
6. The product should be one traditionally consumed by a majority of locals.
7. The product's source should be definitively limited to one territory. For example, *Shwebo pawsan* rice cannot be grown in other areas because different soil will change its flavor.

U Kyaw Moe attended a workshop in Bali which helped him develop his ideas and approach for thanaka. He learnt that Myanmar was lacking technological knowledge and appropriate legislation, which was holding the country back to a dramatic extent when compared with other countries. For example, France has over 500 GI products, whilst neighboring Thailand has 29. U Kyaw Moe explained that he realized the potential benefit of

having Ayardaw thanaka registered at the international level as a GI product, both in terms of foreign recognition and domestic political support and protection of the industry.

There are different kinds of produce certificates in Myanmar, and different levels of GI recognition. For example, the MTA recognized the international certification of a Thai product called *De Leaf thanaka Cosmetic*, but stipulated that were it to be distributed in Myanmar, either the MTA or the FDA would test the product for how much thanaka it actually contained. Despite this, the domestic thanaka industry was deeply aggrieved that this could be permitted given the threat it would represent to them.

Since then U Kyaw Moe has participated in many workshops and conferences at the Ministry of Commerce to develop the domestic thanaka industry and address some of its current threats and challenges. These include the replacement of thanaka trees with wild almond, mango, drum-stick trees and other cash crops. He is equally concerned by the idea that changing cultural attitudes and lifestyles are also to blame for the market's downturn:

Nowadays people are too busy with stressful jobs and they don't have time to prepare and apply traditional thanaka, so they use ready-made cosmetics imported from foreign countries which use the name thanaka: Nivea products with the name of thanaka, Eco thanaka, Fair and lovely thanaka cosmetics, Paris soap with thanaka in the name. ... I want thanaka to be thought of as the "jewel of the dry zone", and I want the livelihoods of those in the thanaka industry to be safe. I don't expect them to get very wealthy, but only to be secure in their capacity to support themselves and their families. It is about subsistence.

In 2017 the Myanmar Thanaka Planters and Producers Association (MTPPA) was established with U Kyaw Moe as chairperson. Shortly after he assumed this position, he began addressing the problem of thanaka transportation in Myanmar. As in other Southeast Asian countries, there are complex laws concerning the transport of timber and forest products across provincial and

regional lines that date in part from the colonial era. Some of these remain in force today due to ongoing illegal logging. However, some officials and policemen have been known to use these laws to extract bribes from transport drivers, regardless of the nature of the goods they are transporting. Here is U Kyaw Moe's own words on how he began to take an interest in thanaka transport drivers:

I remember in 2014, a thanaka transport driver was passing into Naypyidaw with thanaka trees and was stopped at a checkpoint by police and Forestry Dept. officials. At that time, we had already formed the ATPPS. Thanaka was technically categorized as a forest product. Before that I remember there was a thanaka broker called Ko Pawe Thein who was arrested going into Sagaing in 2012. He was fined so heavily by them that he went out of business. At that time, the chief ministers would do nothing about this. I often heard stories like these. After I became chair of the MTPPA in 2017, I designed and produced a special smart card with the name of the Myanmar Thanaka Planters and Producers Association inscribed on it. The card states that the bearer has permission to transport thanaka trees for trade all over Myanmar in my name, Kyaw Moe, and with my designation. I took responsibility for whatever problems they encountered. If officials arrested them, I would contact those officials personally and ask them about the precise grounds on which they had arrested the driver. I invoked my position as chair of the MTPPA. I would often receive calls late at night when arrested drivers had arrived at a police station. I would ask the policemen questions such as: Who are you? Who is your immediate boss, and is he aware of this arrest? What is the precise reason for the arrest? What law has been broken, and what is the due process? And so on. Invariably, they were attempting extortion, and when I invoked my position and roughly interrogated them about official process, they often backed down.



He went on to say that he had raised this issue at workshops, trade exhibitions and other events organized by the Ministry of Commerce in Mandalay, Naypyidaw, and Monywa. He had also written articles for the media on the subject. The argument he put forward was that many people in more arid regions grow thanaka as a necessary supplement to their livelihoods, and therefore the transport of thanaka for trade should not face legal obstacles. Due to these efforts, the Union Minister for Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation announced that thanaka and other products whose origin is not within forest areas (private land and plantation land) by a person or business are exempted from registering with the Forestry Department, and did not require a recommendation or an approval letter for transport and trade (Announcement Number 931/2017, September 25th, 2017).

After this notable success, he shifted his focus to more rigorously fighting the import of foreign cosmetics that market themselves as thanaka despite containing little or no real thanaka extract. He delivered samples of various products to the Department of Consumer Affairs in September 2017, suggesting that these products were in breach of the Intellectual Property Law and the Competition Law. As a result of this, the Department of Consumer Affairs went on to compel City Mart (Myanmar's largest privately owned supermarket chain) to observe these laws in regard to a range of thanaka products. Currently, he is lobbying the Ministry of Commerce and the FDA to more directly tackle the import of fake thanaka, through enforcement of a regulation that any product marketed as thanaka must contain at least 20 percent real extract. Logos and seals will be used so that consumers are aware of what they are buying. He also said that he was exploring ways in which foreign companies might be induced to buy Burmese thanaka for use in their products. Also worth mentioning is the MTPPA's collaboration on thanaka research with the Swiss NGO Helvetas, about which U Kyaw Moe was very vocal and opinionated.

Finally in terms of culture, the MTPPA made available a special budget to for a Thanaka Festival in March 2018 along with a thanaka-applying competition in Mandalay's Kyauk-taw-gyi Pagoda. The MTPPA invited thanaka growers, wholesale traders and retail sellers who are from Ayardaw, Shwebo, Pakokku, and

Yasakyo townships to come and showcase and trade there. The festival was celebrated again 2019, but not the following year due to the Covid 19 Pandemic. ‘Myanmar Thanaka Day’ was designated on the full moon days of Taboetawe (February) in 2019, and celebrated simultaneously in Ayardaw, Pakokku, Myaing, and Shwebo. In December of that year, U Kyaw Moe published the first edition of the Myanmar Thanaka Magazine, and also began preparing a venture to open a ‘Thanaka Spa’.

In conclusion, U Kyaw Moe has emerged in the last five years as a significant player and social agent in the thanaka network. He is a charismatic individual motivated by his own experience and interests as a private thanaka grower, with a clear aptitude for organization, leadership and liaising with authority. Through his personal interventions and efforts he has had the law changed to ease transport of thanaka, and thus has literally removed obstacles from its ‘flow’, not just between Ayardaw and Mandalay in the network we are describing, but all over the country. He and his organizations are also rigorously and aggressively promoting domestic thanaka and trying to create new platforms and markets for it, whilst simultaneously fighting the import of foreign products. It is pertinent that in U Kyaw Moe’s efforts on behalf of thanaka and those who grow and trade in it, he looks toward traditional sources of legitimation and authority. His political connections and his own charismatic patronage network are of course very typical of Southeast Asian models of power and authority. But he also invokes ‘national identity’ and ‘cultural heritage’ in his campaigns to protect Burmese thanaka, employing emotional language and appealing to a traditionalist, nationalist sentiment that associates thanaka with women, and Burmese-ness.

### **Thanaka retail market in the Mahamuni Compound**

When we visited the Mahamuni compound for the first time in 2012, we noticed groups of thanaka retail sellers trading in front of the eastern gateway. According to our informants, retail sellers used to trade around the northern arcade which was informally considered a thanaka market area, but were relocated to the eastern gate in 2012. By the time we undertook this study in 2019, the retail

sellers had been moved again, and were confined together in a narrow, covered space located on the outside of the southern arcade – quite a dingy and lugubrious corner when compared to the color and noise of the shops that line the arcade, with their endless flowing streams of customers. We wondered when we first saw these conditions how customers would be able to examine the thanaka bark adequately in so little light. During our interviews, all of them acknowledged that only the first two or three vendors near the entrance to the passageway they occupy are able to do enough trade.

All of the shop spaces look very temporary, being constructed from bamboo poles and tarpaulin covers. Each one has a vinyl banner with the shop name and an image of a young girl applying thanaka to her face hung over it. There are twenty shops paying 15,000 MMK rent per month listed in the records of the Pagoda Trustee Board, although we were only able to count fifteen during the fieldwork period. Some shop spaces were shut whilst we were there, and it was difficult to tell how many ‘units’ these accounted for. Over a three-hour period of observation, only two customers entered the passageway to buy thanaka. Most of the retail vendors are middle-aged females, five of whom were our primary informants for this section. Each of these five either inherited or took over the business from elder family members. Only one of them actually grows thanaka and does wholesale trade also, although her husband handles that side of the business.



**Figure 2.7** Typical thanaka retail shop. Note vinyl sign above. (Zin Mar Latt)



**Figure 2.8** Vinyl sign advertising retail thanaka. (Zin Mar Latt)

**Background of a typical retail vendor**

One of our informants is a 49-year-old woman with over thirty years' experience selling thanaka in the Mahamuni compound. Her mother is from the Sagaing region and her father is from Mandalay. She explained that since her mother and father got married when they were in their teens, the family depended on thanaka for its livelihood. During that period, her mother sold small thanaka tree pieces from a basket in various locations around Mandalay, such as in front of Mandalay palace, and Zay-cho Market on 27<sup>th</sup>, to the west of Mahamuni. She herself began selling thanaka with her mother in Zae-cho market twelve years ago. Shortly after this, itinerant vendors were prohibited from doing business in Zay-cho Market, so she and her mother began trading instead at the turtle pond beside Mahamuni's eastern gateway. In 1989, thanaka shops were opened along Mahamuni's northern arcade. She and her elder siblings traded thanaka in this location from 2000 until 2012, when the traders were moved to their current location. She spoke wistfully of the days when her mother and father would generate a good profit from the thanaka trade:

Before the thanaka market area was established in the Mahamuni compound, my mother sold only Shwe-li thanaka, which comes from Katha and Htee-chaing Townships. Shwebo thanaka was not popular at that time. Shwe-li thanaka, and Myaing thanaka from Pakokku, this is what was available then. Shwe-li thanaka is bright yellow and was sold in half-cylinder pieces. There was another, rarer kind also that was vulnerable to being eaten by pests. Like sandalwood, when it was ground on the Kyauk-pyin, it produced black thanaka paste that gradually changed to bright yellow once it was applied to the face... My mother and father would go to the forest near Zee-pin-gyi in Pyin-oo-lwin township by train, where there were natural thanaka trees growing freely in abundance. They would cut as much they needed, although they were subject to arrest if discovered by forestry officials, which sometimes did happen. But this risk was worth it as they always made a profit in those days, enough not only to live but also to save some money. Things

were better then, today we can barely break even.

### **The nature of retail trade**

Once organic thanaka trees have been bought from the wholesale market, they are cut to lengths of about eighteen inches each. These lengths are then washed using water and an iron brush, and dried in the sun. Finally, they are individually categorized according to three grades of quality before they are ready for trade.

Some of the retailers have the capital to invest in larger amounts of good quality thanaka, and others simply do opportunistic trade in smaller pieces. Our informants explained that the retail value of trees can range from one to ten *lakh* depending on the assessed quality of the bark. Some of those who can afford to regularly stock better quality thanaka are able to attract regular customers who are willing to pay higher prices for good quality.

In the wholesale market, the price of thanaka is calculated per 100 un-prepared and un-washed trees, having come directly from the plantations. This unit of 100 is called a *yar-cho*. Most *yar-cho* are sold from between two to ten *lakh*, but can be sold for as little as only one *lakh*. There is more or less equal market demand for all levels of quality, which retailers allow for when they make wholesale purchases. However, all of our informants reported that today, it is much more difficult to gauge how big an investment they can risk making. One described her experiences:

Before the 'king's<sup>2</sup> regime' nowadays, we could all make a healthy profit. Today it is very difficult to make money and the thanaka trade is not good. In my mother's day, she could sell thanaka and make enough to feed five children. No one needed second job or other income streams then. Today, each family

- 
2. *Bayin*: king. She uses this term loosely, to refer to whoever in Myanmar holds executive power. The term in popular usage refers to absolute authority, which in the local context is, with some implicit resentment, always assumed to exist in Myanmar in one form or another.

in the trade needs to find extra money to meet even a subsistence level of living, because one's daily wages can't cover it. Before, in my mother's day, the necessary investment was much lower than it is today, and the profit was much greater. On top of that, rice and oil prices have increased a lot, and the general cost of living is much higher.

Another informant explained her circumstances:

I am a widow and I have one daughter. Nowadays, due to the poor state of the thanaka trade, I invest about 2 lakh per month which I have to borrow with interest. I have to find daily living expenses for my family, 15,000 MMK rent for the shop, 40,000 MMK for our apartment... I can't make ends meet, and now I work in my colleagues' retail outlets doing odd jobs, such as cutting and cleaning thanaka pieces. I have no experience in any other line of work. Now my daughter is working at home artificially coloring thanaka pieces that have insufficient thicknesses of bark, and she earns about 6-7,000 MMK per day. So, we can just about survive.

Almost all of our informants said that the reason why they do not seek an alternative livelihood is that they lack experience in any other business. Moreover, as it was passed down to them from family members, there is something of a sentimental attachment to the thanaka trade.





**Figure 2.9** Thanaka retailers in Mahamuni Pagoda (Zin Mar Latt)

### **Location, location, location...**

All our informants held that location was central to the health of their retail trade, not just economically, but also in terms of their dignity and the prestige of thanaka as a material with such an important role in the life of the Mahamuni Buddha Image. One of them explained:

“I don’t think we will be in this place very long. They will probably move us again, as I heard that they are going to build a bicycle stand here. They will knock down all the shops along the eastern side of the compound. So, we have no idea where we’ll be in the near future, and how this will affect our business.”

A second informant went into more detail, and with some emotion. It is worth reproducing her statement here in full:

The location of the shop is very important when selling thanaka. Those in the middle always sell less



than those at either side, regardless of the fact that we are all selling the same product. Out of twenty of us, only five are doing a sustainable amount of business, and the remaining fifteen of us are facing great difficulties. Since I was moved to this location in the middle, I have been struggling to support myself...

If they acknowledged our role here and dealt with us according to its importance for this place then that would be good for everybody. The Mahamuni Buddha Image and thanaka go together, they are the same, they are inextricable. So, our thanaka shops should be a priority when compared with other shops in the compound. And yet, you can see many shops who have pride of place not selling thanaka, but selling instead foreign products that have nothing to do with Mahamuni. We are selling thanaka – a product of Myanmar. What will tourists and foreign visitors think when they see this? What presumptions will they make about the value of thanaka when they see us pushed out of the way, or in some dark corner? Other shops selling domestic products such as brass gongs and carved marble can be seen along the arcades, why not us? I want them to know and think about the relationship between the Mahamuni Buddha Image and thanaka. Why is thanaka important here? Because it is used in the face-washing ceremony. We supply the thanaka that is used for donation in the face-washing ceremony! This should be explained and made clear to visitors who come here, and we should have a proper trading area in a place befitting to our trade. I can't decide where we should be, I'm not asking to choose. They (the Trustee Board) should arrange it for us. We are not newcomers here, we've been trading in the Mahamuni compound for over thirty years. This is our heritage, and we are tied to Mahamuni. So they should arrange an appropriate place for us, and by doing this, they will uphold the prestige of thanaka not only for us but

also for Myanmar. We should be relocated to a place where tourists can see us, where many tourists are always passing. But we are afraid to speak this way to them.

What do we learn from this assertive and emotional complaint? The retailers perceive their location within the compound to be more than simply a practical, economic issue, but one that is implicated in the primary ceremonial routine and devotional life of the compound: its very *raison d'être*. There can be no higher authority than the Mahamuni Image itself, and it is for the image that the thanaka is ground and donated. They are also using the contemporary idiom of 'heritage' very much in the context of the newly expanding tourism industry, and the symbolic capital this potentially arms them with. The informant quoted above invokes nationalist and as well as religious sentiment in her assertion of thanaka's value, in addition to drawing attention to the indignity that they endure in their current location.



**Figure 2.10** Current thanaka retail location (Zin Mar Latt)

## Retail thanaka donation

Usually, the retail sellers regularly donate good quality thanaka pieces marked with their shop's name to the grinding workshop. Sometimes, they offer unusually beautiful thanaka trees in their entirety bought from the wholesale market to Mahamuni.

## Thanaka grinding workshop

The thanaka grinding workshop is located at the end of the Mahamuni compound's eastern arcade, close to the Mahamuni History Museum. Opening between 8am and 4pm, it comprises an open space beyond a small courtyard covered by a zinc roof. Twenty or so *kyauk-pyin* are laid out along two parallel, tiled worktops, designed for use by two rows of ten people standing face to face. A channel filled with water separates the two rows, allowing the grinders to scoop what they need as they work. The *kyauk-pin* vary in size and quality, and I (Zin Mar Latt) was unpracticed in telling the good ones from poor when I first tried my own hand at grinding. The quality of the *kyauk-pin* affects how long it takes to grind a piece of thanaka, something I learnt quite quickly through experience. On one of the better *kyauk-pin*, a grinder can fill one of the small bronze cups the workshop provides with thanaka paste in about 25 minutes.

At the far end of the two rows of *kyauk-pin*, in the direction of the Mahamuni Buddha Image, sits a table at which the grinding workshop officiant sits. When they are finished, devotees take the results of their labor and pour them into a large bronze bowl on this table, under the watchful eye of the officiant. The overwhelming majority of the thanaka paste used in the face-washing ceremony comes from this workshop. The workshop is called *nant-thar-thawe* in Burmese: *nant-thar*, meaning 'sweet or pleasant fragrance' such as thanaka or sandalwood, and *thawe*, meaning 'grinding'. The workshop's regulations, dictated by the Trustee Board, are listed on a vinyl sign:

- Each donor should be twelve years old or above.
- Each donor should wash his or her hands before grinding.

- Each donor must not touch lower garments, *longyi* or *htamain*, trousers, skirts or shoes after hands are washed.
- Each donor should remain silent whilst grinding thanaka, and should not apply any paste to their own face.

The first time I entered the grinding workshop I observed some devotees grinding thanaka there. When finished, each of them raised their bronze cups up to their faces and recited words under their breath before pouring their paste into the officiant's bowl. Presently two tattooed youths of about fifteen years old entered the workshop and washed their hands before taking a cup each and approaching the *kyauk-pin*. Despite looking a little out of place, they both seemed very familiar with the workshop and its regulations, and this made me wonder about the demographic constitution of this form of donation. Over the day I selected seven visitors to the workshop for in-depth interviews, including a 29-year-old monk, an 18-year-old youth, a 20-year-old girl, two forty-year-old women, and finally two elderly women. This demographic ratio broadly corresponded to that of the total visitors during the observation period. The officiant said that the workshop receives around 400 people per day, except on full moon days when the daily total can exceed 1,000. Full moon days have religious significance for Buddhists as well as being public holidays, and pagoda/monastery attendance is high nationwide.



**Figure 2.11** Thanaka grinding workshop at Mahamuni Pagoda (Zin Mar Latt)

### **Grinding workshop officiant**

The officiant, who is not a monk but a layperson, explained his background and his status as an employee. He spoke at length about the new staffing arrangements introduced by the Trustee Board:

I'm fifty-nine years old and I've worked here in the Mahamuni compound since 2013. The previous officiant worked here for over sixteen years. He was in the military and he got a pension from the government when he retired. At that time, my duties here were as a gardener, looking after Mahamuni Park on a part-time basis, for which I got 4,000 MMK per day for six months. Then I worked as a security guard for the museums: the Buddhavam Museum and the Mahamuni History Museum. If the Trustee Board are satisfied with someone's work performance at a particular station, they will keep the person in that station indefinitely. But most staff must exchange positions on a monthly basis. After the previous officiant died, I was moved here permanently. The

Trustee Board have changed many things, they now have a whole new application process for people who want to work here. Under this new regime they created new jobs and there are many people who want to work here because the trustees provide an apartment here as part of the package. This is in spite of a very low salary of about 160,000 MMK. Rent is very expensive in Mandalay, so this option is attractive. There are now maybe 250 or 300 more staff here than before.

Unlike other parts of the compound which are depicted regularly in the media, the grinding workshop is not well known or publicized. According to informants, whenever a new Trustee Board takes over from the last, the rules and regulations for the grinding workshop are changed. Unlike under the last regime, there are now no signs pointing the way to the workshop in other parts of the compound.

The officiant described the grinding workshop as being a facility for the generation of merit through the donation of labor, in the form of thanaka grinding, to the Mahamuni Buddha Image. The thanaka paste is delivered to the image by various volunteers, often the gardeners from Mahamuni park and some of the younger staff in the compound. Each day the bowls are placed on the altar ready for use in the next day's ceremony at 4:00pm, although it is possible to grind thanaka after this time. I was also able to observe some devotees offering thanaka paste they had ground at home, rather than in the workshop.

The officiant's duties include keeping the water channel between the *kyauk-pyins* full, and watching to make sure no one applies thanaka they have ground to their own face. He also is charged with making sure no one touches the lower garments whilst grinding, but he explained that he takes a liberal approach to this duty, as he doesn't want to upset or scare off devotees, and end up with less thanaka at the end of each day. He must also operate a system in which three days' worth of surplus paste is kept aside in the workshop, to allow for bad weather or any other circumstances which might keep grinders away for a few days. This surplus is mixed with alum and stored in the workshop.

As for the workshop's supply of thanaka itself, the officiant explained that there are daily donations and therefore a constant surplus, something we bore witness to during the fieldwork. Some devotees donate three or four pieces of thanaka wood monthly, others bring more than they can grind themselves and leave the un-ground wood in the workshop. Many want to donate extravagantly big pieces, but the officiant always discourages this, as larger logs are very hard to grind. Some donors occasionally bring other fragrant woods instead of thanaka, such as sandalwood. In one corner of the workshop lies a large pile of thanaka wood whose bark is too thin for grinding. The officiant explained that this wood was collected for use in the annual Mahamuni Burning Ceremony, in order to warm the feet and hands of the Mahamuni Buddha Image.

Most of the devotees who come to grind thanaka are from Mandalay, and they include manual laborers, private sector employees and civil servants. Sometimes, organized groups come to grind thanaka in the workshop. For example, the San Hein Border School sends groups to the compound for this purpose. One informant who regularly grinds thanaka at the workshop described how busy it can get on full moon or holy days. On occasions such as Waso (June-July), Warkhaung (July-August) and Thadingyut (September-October), pilgrims enter long queues to get into the workshop. Civil servants often come on weekend days.

The officiant supplements his income by offering a special blessing to pilgrims or devotees donating thanaka paste. For 1,000 MMK, he will recite this blessing as the thanaka is formally offered at his table. The words of the blessing reflect a blend of what Spiro (1971) would call the apotropaic, kammatic and nibbanic forms of Buddhism. They are as follows:

May the donor be protected from 96 kinds of ill-health and sources of danger. May the donor overcome the five enemies of mankind: water, fire, royal power, thieves, those with ill intentions, and also the three catastrophes: famine, war and epidemic diseases. May the donor never encounter destitute conditions. May the donor succeed in all areas, in



work, in secular pursuits (*law-ge*) and in religious achievements (*law-koktayay*), which are the way to escape from worldly desire and attachments. May the donor be wealthy: may gold, property and prestige flow in the donor's direction like a wave. May the fruit of religious achievements be transmitted from one generation to the next. May these merits propel the donor toward ultimate enlightenment.



**Figure 2.12** Grinding workshop officiant gives blessing (Zin Mar Latt)

### **Donor perceptions in their own words**

How do donors and devotees understand this form of merit-making? Why do they choose to do it, and how does it fit into the repertoire of optional religious behaviors available to Buddhists in Myanmar? For my part (Zin Mar Latt), although I am not a native of Mandalay, I am myself a Buddhist like my informants, and this fieldwork brought about my own first experience of grinding thanaka as a 'votive option' in the Mahamuni compound: the donation of labor as opposed to a material votive. During my previous visits to the compound I donated money and gold leaf, as I was unaware of the location of the grinding workshop and what was required, and was also pressed for time. As I stood grinding thanaka, I tried to be mindful of the Dhamma, and I was also aware



of the merit I was generating for myself. I discovered from informants that my own intuition in this regard was not unusual, and the physical act of grinding is conducive to meditative recitation. Many explained that they internally recited the Triple Gem (three objects of veneration: Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha) whilst they stood at the *kyauk-pin*, or else other texts and chants they had memorized.

18-year-old male:

I live near the eastern side of Mahamuni and I've been coming here for four years. Every holy day, I come to make merit at the pagoda and also grind thanaka, because I work in the golden umbrella business and the workshop is closed on holy days. Even though I know grinding thanaka paste is female work, I still do it because I'd like to make merit. The grinding soothes my mind and satisfies me. While I grind thanaka I recite Buddha teachings I have learnt by heart. While I add my thanaka paste to the bronze bowl I pray for success in my business as well as my parents' business. ... Only local devotees usually come to here to grind thanaka.

40-year-old female:

I have come to Mahamuni ever since I was 25 years old. I could not go to other pagodas because they are all far away from where I live. I feel at peace when I am here. Even during the Thagyan Water Festival period, I come here to grind thanaka. I recite the nine Buddha attributes, the Metta Sutta, and other chants whilst I am grinding thanaka. I don't pray for any specific objective because the whatever good is generated will come to me in any case. When the face-washing ceremony occurs at dawn, I often think of the merit that it is generating. This makes me feel good. I am always at peace here. As soon as I arrive in the compound I feel at peace. I come here once a week.

20-year-old female:

Since childhood, I've been coming here with my parents. But I've only just discovered the thanaka grinding workshop. I've only been twice. I believe the Mahamuni Buddha image is very powerful and can answer my prayers. I pray to fulfill my goals for the future, and for a better economy and health for my parents. I prefer this kind of merit-making because I physically work to grind a cup of thanaka paste, and I hope this kind of labor donation has more value than other votive offerings.

62-year-old female:

I moved to Mandalay in 1980, and not long after that started bringing thanaka paste to donate to the Mahamuni Buddha Image on a daily basis. Now, my yaetaw age is over 30 years (yae: water; taw: holy. 'holy-water age': the number of years she has been donating thanaka paste). I pray to attain Nirvana, and in propitiation of Aba Aungmyingau (one of the 37 nats). My regular offerings to Mahamuni have yielded benefits. Even though I retired now I don't need to do any job to get money. I invested some money in my younger brother's business and I also get profits from this. Other retired teachers have to give private tuition to survive, but I don't need to find money like them. But I do suffer from knee pain, and I pray to cure it. I still keep up my daily donations of thanaka paste, even though I'm retired.

29-year-old monk:

My hometown is Kathar Township in Kachin State but now I live here. Ten years ago, I came here and learned about the thanaka workshop and its function. I have encouraged my relatives and other patrons from Shan State to come here and grind thanaka for Mahamuni. While I grind thanaka, I recite the Patthana (24 conditional relations), the Pareik, which is a sutta to ward off evil or harm, and the Buddha's

attributes. I also practice pavana meditation whilst grinding. I never pray and ask for personal benefit, but I believe grinding thanaka will have a positive impact on my life. Sometimes I pray for people I know suffering ill-health.

43-year-old female:

Once you've filled your cup with thanaka paste and are ready to make your donation, you should take a moment and concentrate on the Buddha before pouring it into the bronze bowl. ... For me, while I was grinding thanaka I was reciting the Patthana and the Buddha's attributes. Instead of reciting Buddha teachings by counting a rosary, I think that grinding thanaka is a better way to concentrate on the Buddha for me.

I've been grinding thanaka for the Mahamuni Buddha Image since I was 21 years old, and when this workshop was established and I came to grind in here instead of at home. Whenever I have free time I come to here to grind thanakha because I cannot afford to donate money to the Mahamuni image, and I hope that my labor is an acceptable alternative to the Buddha. Unfortunately, after I got married, I could not come as often as before because of agricultural responsibilities, which mean I must go back and forth from Mandalay. Whenever I come here I grind thanaka. I have never experienced difficulties in my life because I have great faith in the Mahamuni Buddha Image and I have made a lot merit here.

60-year-old thanaka wood donor:

I am from Myin-mu Township, Sagaing Region, about two hours from Mandalay. My children opened a shop in the eastern part of Mandalay and I followed them. I started to donate thanaka wood to the workshop over five years ago because my father had thanaka trees and

gave some pieces to me. I decided to donate them to a holy place, and then heard about the face-washing ceremony at Mahamuni. At that time I had never been to this thanaka grinding workshop, and I had to ask security services the way. Whenever I go back to my hometown, where thanaka trees are grown, my neighbors and relatives give me pieces to me as presents. I always offered these to Mahamuni to generate merit for those who gave them to me. During the lent period, I usually come to the workshop to grind thanaka, in order to make merit for myself. While I was grinding I recite the nine Buddha attributes in my mind. If I were to speak them out loud, I worry I might mistakenly spit on the kyauk-pin!

### **Summary and observations**

It can be seen from the above that grinding thanaka for the Mahamuni Buddha Image is a well-established form of popular Buddhist practice in Mandalay, not only for locals but also people from further afield. Whilst many people do make personal wishes as a component of this practice, it seems the majority view it as a general merit-making activity, evidenced by their recitation of Buddhist chants and suttas. Whilst monks and laymen do grind thanaka, this particular form of devotion is associated with and favored by women. This is partly because females are forbidden to approach or touch the Mahamuni Buddha Image and are therefore unable to participate in the other major form of votive devotion: the application of gold leaf to the body of the image. Grinders trust that the thanaka they grind will ultimately come into contact with the face of the image, creating a meaningful connection and an implied intimacy between image and devotee. Because of this contact, the grinding of thanaka is heavily regulated by the Trustee Board to ensure both the physical and metaphysical purity of the thanaka paste that is produced. Grinding thanaka is a form of votive devotion that involves no cost for the devotee, who instead offer their time and physical labor. As such, and despite the fact that men and even monks do grind thanaka, it is associated not only with women but with poorer and lower-class women, who

cannot afford to offer money or buy gold leaf and have a male apply it to the image for them. Despite the apparent centrality of the face-washing ceremony in the cult of Mahamuni, the grinding workshop is not in a central location within the compound, nor is it even signposted in other parts of the compound, at least under the current Trustee Board regime. When compared with the gold leaf facilities and the museums, the grinding workshop more resembles a ‘back stage’ space, like a kitchen in a restaurant.

### **Mahamuni Buddha image’s face-washing ceremony**

The face-washing ceremony is arguably the central ritual in the cult of the Mahamuni Buddha image, performed every day at dawn. The image’s teeth are brushed and its face is washed with a mixture of thanaka paste<sup>3</sup> and purified water, wiped carefully with a succession of small white towels, and then dried with a special fan (*yattaw-thwin*). Then a variety of votive offerings are placed before the image, including fruit, flowers and holy water. In Burmese, the complete ceremony is called *Myat-nhar-thit-taw-yae-kat-hlu-pwe*, literally ‘sacred water cleansing offering ceremony’. It is also sometimes called *Yaetaw-wotpyu-the*, which simply means ‘worship with sacred water’ (Maung Maung Tin, 2018).

### **Upathakar**

The ceremony is led and performed by a presiding monk (*Yaetaw-sayartaw*, literally ‘sacred water abbot’), together with a group of 22 male lay devotees dressed in white with special head dresses (*Upathakar*). Fourteen of these men assist the *Yaetaw-sayartaw* on the altar by handing him fresh towels for the image’s face, whilst the remainder sit on the floor before the altar and recite chants. The *Upathakar* are permitted to take the used towels home for veneration in their domestic shrines. They must arrive in the Mahamuni compound every day at 3:30am without fail. After the

---

3. Also sometimes sandalwood

ceremony is concluded, many of them return to the *Yaetaw-sayartaw*'s monastery to confer alms to him for his breakfast. A fifty-year-old informant from their number gave us his background:

Since over twenty years ago I came here to practice meditation and recite Buddhist texts. I myself venerate the Mahamuni Buddha image as much as the *Yaetaw-sayartaw*, so much that if I missed my devotions even for a single morning I could no longer live here as my home. I have great faith in Buddhism. So, some senior members of the Upathaka noticed me, and invited me to take up responsibilities with them. I since moved to a new district about twenty minutes from Mahamuni, but this has no effect on my attendance. I don't need an alarm to wake me up, I always wake up naturally at the correct time no matter where I am. I sell chinaware and electronic goods in Yadanabon Market for a living. I do not expect any personal, material benefit as a result of my devotion, which is a reward in itself. I don't worship any nats and I don't know anything about all that stuff.

### ***Yaetaw-sayartaw***

In 1988, the Council of Senior Abbots prescribed the criteria for the position of *Yaetaw-sayartaw* as follows:

- Those considered for the position should reside near the Mahamuni compound.
- His age must be between 50 and 70 years old.
- His number of years in the monkhood must exceed forty.
- He must be qualified at the *Dhammasariya* level.
- His face must possess the respected characteristics of the monk.

- He must not be guilty of any infractions.
- He has must not have any skin conditions.
- The position must be filled within one month of becoming vacant.

Since 2010, the position of *Yaetaw-sayartaw* has been held by the 70-year-old abbot of Thae-kone Monastery, located in Taung-pyin-htee-linn Teik, five minutes away from the eastern side of the Mahamuni compound. Due to the prestige of his status and position we expected that interviewing him would be very difficult, and yet this was not the case. Throughout our interaction with him in connection with this study, he was open, sincere, and very down to earth. When we first knocked on the door to his residence in Thae-kone Monastery he opened it himself, beckoning us inside with friendly informality. Inside his residence sat a big Buddha shrine with different kinds of votives such as flower arrangements and fruit. We were also interested to note several large vinyl banners that displayed blown up photographs of him engaged in the various stages of the face-washing ceremony. We had also noted that outside there were several vehicles marked clearly with the words “*Yaetaw-sayartaw*”.

The *Yaetaw-sayataw* was born in 1949 in Thae-gone village, Nattalin Township situated in the western part of Bago Region. His parents were farmers, and he has one younger brother and sister. He entered the monkhood temporarily at the age of sixteen, but his grandparents want him to stay ordained for a period of one or two years. In the end he never returned to lay life. He studied the *Tripitaka* (Pali Canon) in Kantawoo monastery, Nattalin Township. In 1972 he moved to Thae-gone Monastery in Mandalay, named after his home village, after being invited to take up residence there by the founding abbot. He achieved his *Dhamar-sari-ya* monastic qualifications in Pali in 1978, and finally became abbot himself ten years later. He described the circumstances of his assumption of the position at Mahamuni as follows:

Originally, I was not particularly interested in the position for myself, even though I had participated in the ceremony under the auspices of my immediate

senior who occupied the position at the time. However, many fellow monks in my monastery wanted me to assume the position because of this connection. Another reason they were very keen, was that the *Yaetaw-sayartaw* is by convention allowed to take a large bowl filled with *myatnhar-thit-taw-yae* (thanaka water that has been used to wash the Mahamuni Buddha image's face) back to his monastery. Therefore, if I were to become *Yaetaw-sayartaw*, they would also be availed of this benefit, instead of having to request some of the water from others. There are other votive items also that we would receive if I assumed the position. So finally, I decided to apply for it. I won it because I had more experience than the three others who applied. I was very proud and pleased on behalf of my monastery.



**Figure 2.13** The *Yaetaw sayataw* in his reception area. Note framed photographs of face-washing ceremony behind him. (Htet Htet Khaing)

### **Practicalities and responsibilities in the face-washing ceremony**

The *Yaetaw-sayataw* has a role in two of the three rituals in the



vation of the Mahamuni Buddha Image. At 6:45pm, he presides over the offering of sacred water and different preparations of flowers, including arrangements on special stands (*pankalat*) and flower stupas. Then at 4:00am the face-washing ceremony itself is commenced. The third ritual, the closing ceremony of the day's gold leaf offerings, is now attended by a different monk in the *Yaetaw-sayataw's* retinue.

### **Sacred water and flower-offering ceremony at 6:45pm**

A little before 6:30pm, the *Yaetaw-sayartaw* arrives at the Mahamuni compound together with novices from his monastery. The novices assist him by carrying the many votive items such as purified water, fruit and flowers that are offered by donors to the *Yaetaw-sayartaw* at his own monastery, with the intention that he himself will then officially transmit them to the Mahamuni Buddha Image during the ceremony at dawn. As the *yaetaw-Sayartaw* arrives at the entrance of the Mahamuni compound, a volunteer gives out a call to clear the way for him. The first time we were in attendance for this, we observed crowds of devotees and pilgrims waiting to receive him. He was welcomed and shown respect by the latter with a gesture of reverence made by putting the palms together and raising them above the head. Both sides of the arcade in which he walked down were full of people waiting to do this. He then sits down in front of the Mahamuni Buddha image and receives more votives from these devotees, often to mark anniversaries and memorial days. As they make these offerings, he gives a blessing:

I invoke the Lord Buddha's nine attributes... ...and offer this beautifully colored fruit, these fragrant flowers, and this sacred, cool, purified water. May these offerings bring the donors good health, happiness, and peace, and lead them to prosperity.

At 6:45pm, the *Yaetaw-sayartaw* approaches the Mahamuni Buddha Image with his retinue, the *Upathakar*, various special guests and other donors, and presides over the physical offering of the votive materials to the image inside its cloister. He then prepares a golden bowl with a mixture of thanaka, sandalwood

paste and purified water from the three bowls sent from thanaka workshop, and he arranges it in front of image ready for the next morning's ceremony. When this is complete, he ritually confers a set of regalia to the image, including two golden staffs, three golden fans used to dry the image's face, and a special water-filter used by forest monastics. At 7:00pm, the door to the image's cloister is closed, which shuts it off from view. On his way out through the arcade, devotees throw shawls across the floor for the *Yaetaw-sayartaw* to walk over.

### **Face-washing ceremony itself**

The *Yaetaw-sayartaw* always takes a bath at 2:45am before he goes to the Mahamuni compound. He then prepares the following items: two small bowls of silver and gold containing thanaka water which has been sent to him from donors who cannot attend the ceremony in person; a silver container with two types of special toothbrush, and a small jar filled with an essential oil produced in India, to spray in the face of the image. Formerly, many different kinds of oil and scent were employed for this purpose, but these caused discoloration. As soon as he climbs into the vehicle which will take him to the compound, he begins to recite the *pathan*, which is a Buddha teaching that takes about 15 minutes. He repeats the recitation until he arrives, and shares the merit generated with all living beings from the thirty-one realms of the Buddhist cosmos.

In the summer and the monsoon season the door to the image's cloister is opened at 4:00am, whilst during the winter season it is opened at 4:30am. A Burmese traditional orchestra (*Bondaung*) plays as this happens, and the *Yaetaw-sayartaw* enters. Firstly he offers the thanaka water entrusted to him by absent donors, consecrated water (*thauk-taw-yae*), and then the flowers prepared the previous evening. He then sprays the image's face with the essential oil and brushes its teeth with toothbrush. Following this, he washes the face with the thanaka water using cotton towels, and then dries it with one of the fans. The body of the image is protected with a special robe during this part of the process. After the face is clean and dry, he adheres some gold leaf entrusted to him by donors on the previous evening to the shoulder of the

image – he is the only person who has access to the upper body and is therefore able to do this. Finally, he offers alms in the form of a breakfast of rice soup, fruit and the sacred water offered by donors the previous night. The soup is cooked by the monks of his monastery, and he receives donations of rice there for this express purpose on a regular basis. He then chants to share the merit generated with all living beings once again, until he arrives back in his own monastery.



**Figure 2.14** Mahamuni face-washing ceremony (Zin Mar Latt)

As soon as the ceremony is finished, one of *Upathakar* announces

that the remaining thanaka water will now be distributed to those who wish to receive some. The crowds waiting for the thanaka water are large. Vendors and merchants believe that if they spray their produce with it, the latter will be sold within a few days. Others spray it in their home to protect it from harmful influences or intentions. Some apply to it their own head for good luck. According to the *Yaetaw-sayartaw*, most Buddhists believe that the thanaka water has supernatural and auspicious powers connected with the Mahamuni Buddha image, and can bring about health, happiness and peace, economic success and material security. One informant who owns a grocery store told us that he comes to receive thanaka water from the compound once every two days, and sprays it over the goods in his shop. He claimed that his shop sold more than the others neighboring him. Another female informant told us:

My mother usually waits to receive some thanaka water. There are always so many pilgrims there in a long queue waiting for it. I believe that the water can protect a person from danger. Some people spray it on the Buddha shrine in their house, or otherwise all around the house, to chase out any evil presence.

As prescribed in the rules and regulations of the Trustee board, the *Yaetaw-sayartaw* receives a big bowl of the thanaka water to take back to his monastery, and various other items. These include small pieces of thanaka wood which he dries and fashions into amulets, and the towels which he used to clean the image's face. These can then be distributed to his followers and donors who support his monastery.

Additionally, he brings back the flower arrangement stands that were offered to the image during the face-washing ceremony, to offer to his own monastery's Buddha image. The group who prepare these flower stands are supporters of the *Yaetaw-sayartaw*, and began this activity after he was awarded the position of presiding monk in the ceremony. Sometimes he is asked by someone from the group if they can take a flower arrangement and offer it to their own domestic Buddha shrine, which he allows. We interviewed such a person, who explained:

I believe that the Mahamuni Buddha Image is a 'living image' and he will protect me and bring me good health, and good luck in business and social affairs. This flower arrangement stand was offered to the Mahamuni Buddha Image last night, and the living Buddha's sacred power is contained in it. My intention is to take it home and offer it to the Buddha image in my own house.

The origin of these flower arrangement stands is also worth noting here. Amongst the *Yaetaw-sayartaw's* regular supporters are many merchants from Yadanabon market, who used to collectively donate flowers which they put into flowerpots for him to offer to the Mahamuni Buddha Image. Later, they invented the stands in order to be "more respectful, beautiful, and more modern in design, for the Mahamuni Buddha image." Gradually the flower donors increased in number and enthusiasm, and they organized themselves into a formal group to produce and sell the stands. Currently, each stand is sold for 10,000 MMK. Any profit from this endeavor is saved and used for provision and robe offering ceremonies at Thae-gone Monastery.

### **Public respect for the *Yaetaw-sayartaw***

According to the *Yaetaw-sayartaw* himself, donations and support offered to him personally have increased a great deal since he took the position of presiding monk in the face-washing ceremony. We interviewed a vendor from Yadanabon Market who volunteers to clean the *Yaetaw-sayartaw's* toilet and living quarters on a regular basis. He explained that he had seen the *Yaetaw-sayartaw* on Youtube and Facebook, and that he was very famous because of his role in the face-washing ceremony. He said he expected nothing in return for this and did it purely out of respect. At the other end of the social spectrum entirely, a Colonel from the Thai Defense and Army Attaché in Yangon arranges a regular annual health check-up for the *Yaetaw-sayartaw*. The colonel told us in a brief interview that he did this because of the monk's status as presiding monk in the face-washing ceremony of the Mahamuni Buddha image.

### **The Mahamuni Buddha image as a source of ‘power’**

The generator and central node in this constellation of religious behavior is of course the Mahamuni Buddha Image itself. This means not only that the image’s charisma in the Weberian sense transfers to the *Yaetaw-sayartaw*, but also quite literally that the sacred essence of the image can be conducted as if it were electricity into other Buddha images. Contact with the Mahamuni Buddha image renders thanaka water or towels magically protective and auspicious, but in the case of other Buddha images, many believe that some form of powerful and sentient agency is transferred. The word in Burmese is *yin-ngwe-hloun*, and is not easily translatable into English. *Yin* means ‘breast’, *ngwe* means ‘vapour’ or ‘exhalation’, and *hloun* means to ‘warm by the heat of fire or sun’, or to ‘take shelter’. One informant who had come to transfuse Mahamuni’s essence into his own new Buddha image told us:

I’ve come to transfuse my new Buddha image with Mahamuni’s power before I take it home. The reason why I do this is because I want my Buddha image to be “living”, just like the Mahamuni Buddha image. During the sacred water and flower offering ceremony in the evening, I will follow the *Yaetaw-sayartaw* with my new Buddha image while he offers flowers and sacred water to Mahamuni. And then I will leave my image in front of the Mahamuni image to allow its sacred power to transfuse into my image.

This was echoed by the testimony of other informants, whose methods of ‘transfusion’ differed only slightly in terms of how long they would leave their own images in the Mahamuni image’s presence, and what particular rituals and ceremonies they would use to initiate this contact. Many held that the *Yaetaw-sayartaw* would ideally have a role, placing the Buddha image before Mahamuni for them, and performing chants. They held implicitly that he was the ‘middle-man’ between them and Mahamuni, who could ensure that the transfusion would work. We also observed women asking the male security guards around Mahamuni’s cloister to ‘charge up’ their new Buddha image for them, so to speak, by holding it against the body of the Mahamuni image and

reciting a prayer.

### **Summary of thanaka votive network**

Thanaka, the ‘jewel of the dry zone’, is a product used throughout Myanmar and one that invokes national character, cultural heritage, and femininity. It is used mostly by women, and women also make up the larger proportion of those in the thanaka industry. Growing and selling thanaka is an inherently difficult business, and things are getting worse as fake or alternative products push into the market, and alternative crops such as wild almond become more viable for growers. Despite this, associations have formed to protect the industry especially at source, and under the charismatic leadership of U Kyaw Moe, thanaka has been promoted through sustained multimedia efforts, festivals and its registration as a GI product. Not only this, U Kyaw Moe is proving to be an effective patron for thanaka transporters through his efforts to protect the latter from corrupt officials seeking bribes at checkpoints. We can say he is removing or at least ameliorating this obstacle from the ‘flow’ of thanaka.

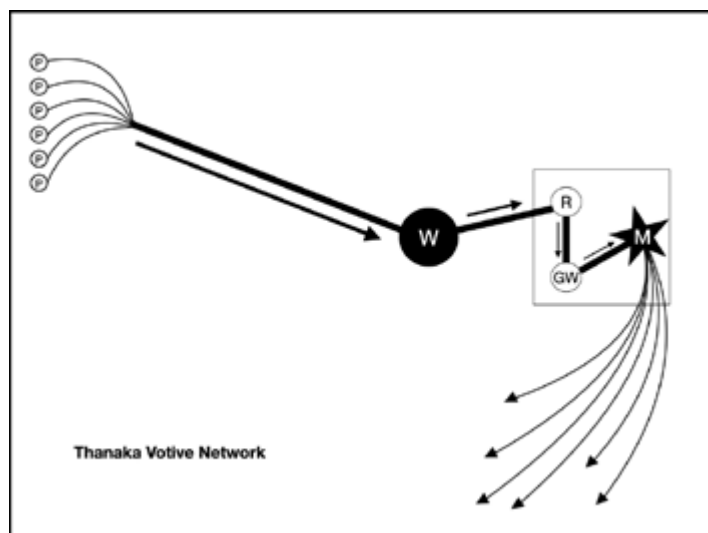
From the plantations, this flow moves through the hands of growers and brokers, reaching the wholesale market at Byon-Kyaw Teik. This is an informal market not subject to regulation due to its location inside monastic grounds, and depends on the patronage of the abbot, who established it originally as a favor to growers from his home town. Retail sellers who rent space in the Mahamuni compound make up the customer base, buying wholesale and then cutting the wood into standardized lengths for sale to individual pilgrims. The majority use taxis to transport the wood from the wholesale market. Under the new Trustee Board, the almost exclusively female retail sellers have been relocated to an unfavorable area in the compound, and are uniformly struggling to survive.

Pilgrims take the thanaka they buy to the grinding workshop, where it is then processed into paste through the labor of pilgrims in a ritual setting, generating merit for all who donate either thanaka or their effort in grinding it. The end product is then transmitted to the central pavilion for the *Yaetaw-sayartaw* to use in the face-

washing ceremony, and in doing so render the entire batch of thanaka water sacredly powerful – raising its perceived value dramatically. It would be convenient to say that the flow of thanaka reaches its terminus at the Mahamuni Buddha image itself, but we have seen that this is not the case at all. Although the thanaka is all ritually offered to the image, not all of it is used in the physical act of face-washing. In any case the run-off is collected. However, whether infused into towels that have come into contact with the image's face, or still in the offering bowl before it, the thanaka's votive status, the fact that it has been *offered* to the image, sacralizes it. This is the reason it is shared out amongst eager devotees after the ceremony to be taken home or to one's place of business and used to a variety of apotropaic ends. The *Yaetaw-sayartaw* receives a whole bowl of it to take back to his monastery, a privilege that comes with his position, as dictated by the Trustee Board. Moreover, he explained to us that this benefit was among the main reasons he applied for the position of *Yaetaw-sayartaw* in the first place.

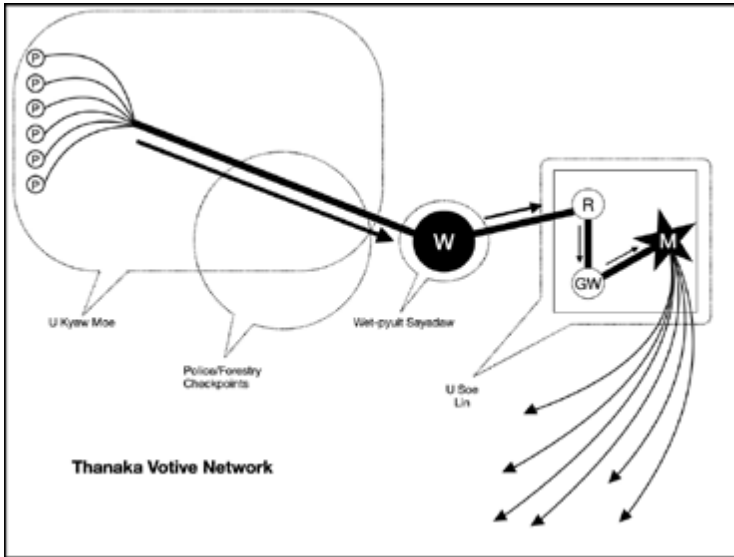
Despite his central ritual position and prestige, the *Yaetaw-sayartaw* does not seem to qualify as a major social actor in this votive network, in which he has little interest beyond his ritual duties. Those who do qualify would be U Kyaw Moe, whose growing agency and influence continues to work in the interest of the thanaka industry. He has interrupted the parasitic actions of another interest group, the corrupt officials who extract bribes from thanaka transporters, and thus improved the flow of thanaka from the plantations to the wholesale market in Mandalay. And of course U Soe Lin, whose assertive reforms have severely affected the compound's retail thanaka trade, and generally devalued its symbolic role by reducing its legibility for the pilgrim or casual visitor as a viable form of votive practice and merit-making offered by the site. Secondary to these two might be Wet-pyuit Sayardaw, the abbot of Bon-kyaw Teik who allows the wholesale market to operate in his monastery. He and U Kyaw Moe operate as patrons of a particular interest group, whilst U Soe Lin, whilst he is certainly a patron also, is perhaps better thought of analytically as an agent of bigger institutional interests, as will be discussed in chapter 4. The overall network, the flow, and these actors and their spheres of influence are visualized in the diagrams below:





**Figure 2.15** Thanaka votive network diagram

From the *plantations* (P) in Ayardaw and elsewhere, the thanaka flows along highways to Mandalay where it is sold at the *wholesale market* (W). From there, retail sellers purchase the trees and cut them into lengths which they sell in their *retail area* (R) in the Mahamuni compound. From this area, pilgrims take their purchased thanaka and donate it to the *grinding workshop* (GW), where it is then taken in batches to the *Mahamuni Buddha image* (M) and used in the face-washing ceremony. After this, it is portioned up and leaves with the *Yaetaw-sayartaw* and individual devotees, where in this diffuse form it finally reaches its terminus in domestic shrines and businesses. At each fixed point in this network, thanaka changes form, and changes hands. Trees to logs, to scrubbed lengths, to ground down paste, to scented water. Each of these points, these transformations, represents the livelihoods and/or interests of a particular group, and the patronage or authority of an individual or an institution. Aside from transport between plantations and the wholesale market, the flow and the industries of its fixed points are dominated by women until they arrive at the *Yaetaw-sayartaw* and the Mahamuni Buddha image itself.



**Figure 2.16** Thanaka votive network diagram with spheres of influence

The spheres of influence of the pertinent social actors are marked here. U Kyaw Moe's sphere and that of the checkpoint police and forestry officials overlap, resulting in a case-by-case contestation that U Kyaw Moe claims to usually win. Wet-pyuit Sayadaw controls the space of his *teik* and allows the thanaka growers and brokers to use it as a wholesale market. U Soe Lin, and the interests he represents, control the space in and around the Mahamuni compound, including the thanaka retail area(s) and the grinding workshop. All of these actors regardless of their purview and orientation in this schema, are male.

## Gold leaf votive network



**Figure 2.17** Male pilgrims affixing gold leaf to the Mahamuni Buddha image (David Henley, CPA Media)

## Production

The traditional production of gold leaf in Myanmar is a craft with a long-established and complex process. Firstly, high quality 24-carat gold must be ‘stretched out’ (*shwe let sant*). To do this, the gold is pressed and placed in the furnace to be purified with sulphuric acid. This softens the gold so it can be flattened out into strips. These are then further worked with a roller until they are 36 inches long and about 0.6 inches wide. Each strip is then cut into 200 equal ‘sheets’. These thin sheets are then placed in *paza* paper, which refers to pre-used *shwe khat* paper, handmade from bamboo specifically for gold leaf production. These packets are then put into bundles of eighty, and sandwiched between eighty sheets of handmade *thanoke* paper, a thick, reddish-brown, leather-like paper made from bamboo and dried rice stalks. Before

they can be flattened down further, this stack or brick of gold leaf sheets and protective paper is then placed inside an open leather cover called an *alone peik ma*, about three inches in size. This is then covered with a layer of fresh toddy palm leaves, and a further layer of dried toddy palm leaves, in order to keep the heat in. The package is then secured with leather straps.

Then, with the use of a water clock made from coconut shell called a *clepsydra*, exclusively male craftsmen manually beat the gold brick with six-pound sledgehammers. After eighteen *clepsydra* cycles of beating, equal to about one hour, the sheets have been flattened into two-inch gold leaves called *paza lone*. These are then each cut into six pieces and are stacked once again into batches of 400, placed between six-inch pieces of bamboo paper (*shwe khat sekku*), and recovered with leather. Stacking them up together in this manner helps the gold to withstand the kinetic force of the falling sledgehammer. Then the brick is subjected to the next round of beating. Each one is beaten for eighteen *clepsydra* cycles, with each cycle representing about 120 strokes. This means that in an hour, the brick has received 2,160 strokes. It takes five hours for three beaters to finish one batch, working in turns.

For the duration of the beating process, no one is permitted to wear footwear. This is because gold leaf is a votive item for donation in pagodas, and will ultimately come into physical contact with Buddha images and other sacred objects. Wearing no shoes is also believed to help the beaters stay cool. This is connected with a further belief that all three beaters must have the same body temperature to create the best gold leaf. If one beater is for some reason distracted during the beating or loses his rhythm, the bamboo paper or even the gold could crack and become ruined. The weather is another factor that can interrupt the beating process. Sudden rainfall on an otherwise hot day can cause the gold being beaten to crack.

Packing the bricks before each round of beating is undertaken in a special room (*shwe pyin khan*) with sealed windows to prevent wind disturbing the gold leaf as it is painstakingly arranged in layers. This task is performed by the women in the family, although we noted the existence of a strict rule that prohibits putting pictures of women

on the teak worktable. Finally, the women peel the gold off the bamboo paper using a six-inch tool made from buffalo horn. They use talcum powder to keep the leaf from sticking to their fingers, as they adhere it to squares of paper called *shwe hlaung* paper. After the gold is stuck to the paper they delicately remove any residue, which is put into a lacquer container and recycled.



**Figure 2.18** Beating gold leaf (Htet Htet Khaing)



**Figure 2.19** Gold leaf worker (Htet Htet Khaing)



**Figure 2.20** Assembling gold leaf packets (Htet Htet Khaing)



## **The gold leaf industry and Myat Paa Ward**

The chronicles state that the boundary of Myat Paa Ward was established by King Mindon Min personally with a golden chain, and named Shwe (Golden) Myat Paa Ward (Maung Maung Tin, 2004). Most gold leaf production is based in this area, although some local producers have now moved their businesses outside of the ward. Some informants from Myat Paa mentioned gold leaf businesses set up in other parts of the city that all failed after a few months. There is a strong impression that it is hard to make gold leaf anywhere else. Within the ward, different stages of the process are undertaken in separate quarters.

In the opinion of Zaw Min Aung, the chairman of the Gold Leaf Producer's Association, in addition to other informants, when compared with the recent past the gold leaf market has become flooded with producers. This is supported by the visible numbers of gold leaf retail outlets that have been recently established in Mandalay. Zaw Min Aung claims that records demonstrate that the numbers have almost doubled, and that today there are something in the region of between 2-300 gold leaf producers. Another factor has been the appearance of machine-made gold leaf, which is cheaper but inferior in quality.

Among the 2-300 gold leaf makers working today, many are former residents and children of families from the traditional gold leaf producing district, Myat Paa Ward. Some moved away to other places after their parents passed away and inheritances were split. Since they have been gold leaf makers for generations, these descendants try to preserve their family businesses. If the gold leaf makers do not have enough money to keep the business going, other family members will pitch in. Once a batch of gold leaf has been completed, it is sold and the profits are shared. Up to five separate families may live together in one house, where they all work together. There are currently 234 individuals in Myat Paa who are formally licensed and paying taxes. Holding a license obligates one to pay tax, so it is not necessarily a desirable status to have depending on the size and nature of one's operation. There are also gold leaf businesses in Maharaungmyay, Chanmyatharzi, and Pyigyithagun Townships, and it has not been possible to come up with exact numbers.

Essentially, the Myanmar gold leaf industry functions as follows: a pagoda trustee board such as Shwe Dagon or Mahamuni will open a call for tender on a predetermined volume of gold leaf. They may accept any number of tender offers to deliver the combined total they require. Sometimes this can be a mixture of large and small gold leaf businesses. When big businesses win contracts with a pagoda, depending on the circumstances they may themselves outsource production to smaller operations within or without their own personal and business networks. This mode of operation is relatively untransparent and offers much opportunity for corruption, although it does tend toward ultimately sharing out contracts across large swathes of the industry. Given the specialized nature of the craft and the limits this puts on output however, sharing large contracts appears to be, at least to some extent, inevitable.

Another problem with this system is that with so many producers filling a single contract, quality standards can be extremely inconsistent. Thirty or so years ago, the convention was that gold leaf makers would only work if a job would generate a profit directly equal to the gold's value. As most gold leaf retail businesses were associated with or run by relatives of gold leaf makers, they would set prices to meet this convention. As of now, increased competition has caused prices and profits to drop. Some gold leaf makers choose to reduce the number of gold leaf sheets per retail packet, or reduce the leaf size instead of decreasing their prices.

### **Machine-made and handmade gold leaf**

Traditional handmade gold leaf is the result of several separate handicrafts with painstaking multi-staged processes that represent hundreds of manhours and potentially years of preparation. This includes the production of the different types of special paper used in the beating of gold. When looked at from this perspective, each piece of gold leaf represents the contributions of well over 100 individual workers and craftspeople. The price of handmade gold leaf reflects this, and it is adjusted accordingly. Machine-made gold leaf needs much fewer and less skilled workers, and has a fixed lower price. One advantage of machine-made gold leaf is its consistent size, which along with its cheaper cost can appeal to wholesale buyers.



The machine process is only a decade old and has yet to be refined. Machine-made gold leaf sheets contain relatively little actual gold, often using bronze or other substitutes to dilute the metal. As a result, the leaf is brittle and prone to crack or rip quite easily. It may also contain potentially harmful chemicals. This is why the Mahamuni Trustee Board do not buy the machine-made product. An informant from the board told us directly that the trustees would never purchase gold leaf whose ingredients were uncertain or impure, as this would put the Mahamuni Buddha Image itself at risk. Pagodas gilded in handmade gold leaf sheets require renovation only once every decade. Producers guarantee that their handmade gold leaf sheets will last at least 5 years depending on the weather conditions. For example, in regions with high humidity and frequent rainfall, the sheets will last between 3-5 years. In Shwe Dagon, they replace them once every 4 years due to the pagoda being uncovered and located in a part of the country that experiences heavy rainfall. In Bagan, due to the acid rain in this region, the gold leaf gilded exteriors have to be replaced every 5 years.

Unlike its machine-made counterpart, handmade gold leaf is flexible and can be easily applied to even an ornately carved and unevenly ornamented surface. The process of traditional production also results in a slightly uneven thickness across the leaf. Zaw Min Aung explained that he could easily identify whether a gold leaf sheet is handmade or not by sight alone, due to small indents on the handmade leaf like fish scales. However, machine-made gold leaf is increasingly being improved to look like the genuine article, and represents tough competition for traditional craftspeople in today's market. Since handmade gold leaves are very thin and delicate, sometimes they tend to rip off the tiny pins that attach them to their paper covering. Machine-made gold leaves are packed together without the need for any protective paper covering between the sheets. Handmade gold leaf is soft and flexible, so cracks and rips can be easily patched over. But if machine-made gold leaf is ripped, the whole sheet has to be replaced. Each kind has its advantages and disadvantages.

### **Difficulties reported by producers**

Our informants explained that the craft depends heavily upon the right weather conditions, especially in regard to the temperature of the ground upon which the gold is beaten. Sudden changes in temperature can cause the gold to separate and fragment into dust, instead of remaining a solid, malleable lump. If this occurs, the beater's efforts are wasted and the gold must be melted down once again, often resulting in some fragments being lost.

As with other crafts relating to religious practice, the attitude and emotional condition of the craftspeople when at work is considered of utmost importance. Anger or emotional stimulation of any kind is held to be an obstacle to a worker's performance, and should be avoided. Having had a full night's sleep is seen as essential. In the absence of such rested equanimity, workers may beat the gold arrhythmically which can lead to the covering paper ripping or being damaged. This also happens when the layers of gold and paper are not sealed and bound together tightly enough.

Finally, informants reported that they often face losses due to the tender process by which they enter into contracts to produce gold leaf in volume for pagodas. The tender process, in which producers try to underbid each other's prices to win a contract with a pagoda trustee committee, often has the effect that the producer ends up agreeing to a price that greatly reduces their profits or even results in a loss. The local gold standard fluctuates constantly, heightening this risk.

### **Mahamuni's tender system under U Soe Lin**

In the past, the Pagoda trustees were required to accept the lowest price when they called for tender from the gold leaf producers. In this system, the gold leaf producers usually accepted some loss due to the need to underbid their competitors. However, under the current head of the trustee committee, U Soe Lin, this system has been reformed. Every workshop is now eligible to sell gold leaf to the trustee committee for a set price, provided they submit to on-site quality inspections made by the trustees. Before it is bought, the size and quality of the gold leaf is also checked to make sure it

conforms to the now standard 1.75 inches. Previously, the standard was two inches. Most of our informants in the industry claimed they appreciated the Mahamuni trustees' new system because it guaranteed them at least some work, and the price was neither too high nor too low. Some mentioned that there are others however who are less satisfied with the new arrangement.

Whenever the Mahamuni trustees' stocks of retail gold leaf is down to less than 5,000 pieces, they advertise a call for tenders to supply another 20,000 pieces. We include a translation of the new regulations for offering tender below. They illustrate the trustees' concern with quality and consistency, and their precise bureaucratic process. They also mention the new requirement to adhere a special hologram on the packets issued by the trustees.

1. The Mahamuni Pagoda's board of trustees will purchase 20000 gold leaves for resale in the Pagoda.
2. Applicants who wish to bid for the 20000 Gold Leaves Supplier Contract must personally purchase the tender (bidder) application form (cost = 20,000 kyats) at the Mahamuni Pagoda board of trustee's office.
3. Selected applicants must deposit exactly 500,000 kyats as insurance and personally sign the contract of agreement.
4. According to 81(Q), paragraph (8) of the Board of Trustee's Rules, the owner of the supplier contract may not under any circumstances resell the supplier contract nor retail gold leaves. If rules are violated, the supplier contract will be terminated and the deposited insurance will be confiscated into the Pagoda's treasury.
5. According to 81(R), paragraph (9) of the Board of Trustee's Rules, should the holder of the supplier contract decease, the supplier contract will be transferred to their legitimate inheritor.

6. Should the owner of the supplier contract fail to supply on time or have their supplier contracts terminated due to violation their signed agreements with the Board of Trustees, the deposited insurance will be confiscated into the Pagoda's treasury.
7. According to Chapter 4, Paragraph (15/J) and 81(J), Paragraph 3, Subparagraph (G), Sub-subparagraph (1/2) of the Board of Trustees Rules and Regulations, all members of the Board of Trustees are ineligible for applying or holding gold leaf supplier contracts.

(A) Upon receiving the supplier contract, the supplier must personally deliver 50% of the gold leaves within 7 days of the deliver date. The remaining 50% must be delivered within 30 days. Failure to comply will result in the transfer of the insurance deposits into the Mahamuni Pagoda's treasury according to Paragraph 3. (B) The supplier contract must be signed within 3 days of being selected.

In the case of the supplier failing to deliver the remaining gold leaves on the designated date, the Board of Trustees may purchase gold leaves externally. Should the cost of the externally purchased gold leaves exceed the supplier's price, the supplier must pay for the amount exceeded.

8. As the large amount of gold leaves delivered makes it unfeasible to inspect and accept every single gold leaf, the gold leaf buying committee may set aside a portion (determined by the Board of Trustees) of the gold leaves as a sample batch in order to carry out quality inspection. This will be carried out upon delivery of gold leaves. Should there be any inconsistencies in the quality and size in the sample amount of gold leaves, the inspectors (gold leaf buying committee) may assume the same rate of inconsistency in the remaining amount of gold leaves

and demand compensation fees accordingly and as determined by the Board of Trustees. (For example, out of a delivery of 10,000 gold leaves, if 100 are inspected and 20 are ripped, the inspectors assume that 20% of the 10,000 gold leaves are ripped)

9. All suppliers must meet the following requirements:

A total of XXXX gold leaf sheets must be delivered.

Each individual gold leaf must be (1.75"x1.75") in dimension.

The gold must be free of impurities.

The gold leaf must be free of cracks and bruises.

The gold leaf packaging must be made of high-quality, un-dyed paper.

Each packet of gold leaves must contain (5) gold leaves.

10. Each individual gold leaf packet must have the suppliers' official stamp imprinted on the front. Additionally, the Mahamuni Pagoda's holographic stamp must be attached on the upper-right corner of the front.

11. On the day of signing the gold leaf supplier contract, the gold leaf supplier must deliver a gold leaf packet containing 100 gold leaves. This packet will be used for quality inspecting purposes. After completion of inspection, the 100-gold-leaf packet will be returned to the supplier. The return will be also registered in the record book by signature and date. The quality inspection of the 100-gold-leaf pack will be conducted in front of the gold leaf supplier. After completing, the gold leaves will be returned to the supplier. The quality of the inspected gold leaves will be assumed to directly reflect the quality of the remaining gold

leaves. If, in case the quality of the gold leaves are deemed inadequate, the decision of the Board of Trustees must be followed.

12. The system for paying gold leaf suppliers is as follows:

After quality inspection of the gold leaves, the gold leaf suppliers will be paid in full by check which will be handed out by the Board of Trustees or those responsible.

(b) The committee will not accept any appeals for negotiation made by the gold leaf suppliers regarding prices fluctuations which may affect the profitability of the gold leaf suppliers.

(c) After all gold leaf orders are delivered by the gold leaf suppliers, the insurance money (which is equivalent to 1% of the total gold leaf price) deposited by the gold leaf suppliers will be returned in cash within 7 days.

13. Applicants for the gold leaf supplier contract must be those who are true citizens of Myanmar, Buddhist, people who depend on gold leaf making for their livelihoods. Suppliers are not allowed to deliver gold leaves purchased from other gold leaf makers.

14.(a) Applicants for the gold leaf supplier contract must be able to present a valid industrial license (original+photocopy) and income tax receipt (original+photocopy).

(b) Applicants are also required to present a photograph which indicates the location, building, and signboard of their gold leaf making business.

15. During the auction for the gold leaf supplier contract, all bidders will be considered regardless of bidding price. The decision of the Board of Trustees is final.

16. Gold leaf business owners who regularly supplied gold leaves for the Mahamuni Pagoda during difficult times and those who meet the gold leaf quality and size standards will be favored.
17. On the day and time of the auction, the gold leaf business owners themselves must be present at the Mogaung Dhammayone (Mogaung Sermon Hall. Translator note: the term “Dhammayone” means Sermon Hall, but in practice, it functions as a Buddhist community hall as well.)
18. The gold leaf workshops of all bidders shall be open to inspection by the Board of Trustees of the Mahamuni Pagoda if needed.
19. Bidders are required to follow any additional rules made by the Board of Trustees.

(၇၀)

မဟာမုနိဘုရားကြီး မဂ်္ဂဟာသနာ့  
မန္တလေး

ခရစ်ဆိုင်းတင်ဒါအမှတ်စဉ်( ၂/၂၀၁၉-၂၀၂၀ )ခရီးပြိုင်တင်ဒါနံပါတ်

မှတ်ပုံ \_\_\_\_\_

တင်ဒါခမလွှဲသည့်အမည် \_\_\_\_\_

နိုင်ငံတော်အစိုးရအမည် \_\_\_\_\_

ခရစ်ဆိုင်းတင်ဒါအမှတ်စဉ် \_\_\_\_\_

စနစ်အမျိုးအမည် \_\_\_\_\_

တင်ဒါအမျိုးအစား \_\_\_\_\_

ခရစ်ဆိုင်းတင်ဒါအမည် \_\_\_\_\_

ခမလွှဲသည့်အမည်နှင့်အတူ

( \_\_\_\_\_ ) တွက်ခွဲခံ ( \_\_\_\_\_ ) တွက်ခွဲခံ

လုပ် \_\_\_\_\_ ကျပ် \_\_\_\_\_

စာပြန် \_\_\_\_\_ စာပြန် \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

အသစ်ခွဲကျပ်( \_\_\_\_\_ ) ခမလွှဲသည့် ပြေစာအမည် \_\_\_\_\_

မှတ်ပုံ \_\_\_\_\_

တင်ဒါခမလွှဲသည့်လက်မှတ် \_\_\_\_\_

အမည် \_\_\_\_\_

ရက်စွဲ \_\_\_\_\_

**Figure 2.21** Tender application form, cost 20,000 MMK

### Payment and penalties

The gold leaf producers have been working with trustees for a long time, and they understand the culture of the gold leaf trade. Over 100 gold leaf businesses have been regularly engaged since U Soe Lin became head of the Trustee Board. Each applying producer



meeting the requirements will be contracted to provide a minimum of 200 pieces of gold leaf per transaction, and will usually deliver this amount in two batches. After the batch has been received and the quality checked, the trustees pay the agreed price via bank transfer. If gold leaf producers renege or are dishonest or negligent in any way relating to the purity and quality of their product, or fail to use the hologram stamp in the required way, the trustees may impose a monetary fine. This is typically around 50,000 MMK per charge. If a producer is repeatedly fined, they may eventually be blacklisted from the tender process altogether.

### **Reform of gold leaf tender system and retail under U Soe Lin**

Prior to U Soe Lin's leadership, the tender system obligated the trustees to accept the lowest price offered by a gold leaf producer. This often resulted in losses for the producer who won the Mahamuni contract, as they would typically have offered a competitively low price in order to win, and might also have seen the gold standard increase in between their tender bid and the point at which they would need to buy the gold to fill Mahamuni's order. Moreover, the former trustees did not regulate and check the gold leaf workshops. The agreed size of gold leaf pieces was 2 inches, but often producers would deliver pieces as small as 1.5 inches, presumably to ameliorate their losses against the gold standard.

Under U Soe Lin, the problems with this system were proactively addressed and reforms were implemented. An initial meeting was set up within the Mahamuni compound to which all gold leaf producers were invited. It was noted that in the original contract, it is implicit that one tikal (58 oz) can be used to produce 30 gold leaves of two inches. However, in reality, one tikal is only enough for 23 pieces at that size. The board acknowledged that to make 30 pieces from one tikal, the size must be reduced to 1.75 inches. This henceforth became the required standard size. Furthermore, the tender system was adjusted as described above to make it more inclusive and fair for the producers, sharing the business between those who qualified, and removing the need to competitively underbid each other.

Reforms were also undertaken in the compound's own gold leaf retail system. Prior to U Soe Lin, all sales records were kept manually on paper, leaving much room for error and potentially theft. To guard against this, the sales process was computerized. New clerks were employed to work in the gold leaf booths. Like most salesclerks in Myanmar, these were all women. As of July 2016, the new standardized gold leaf went on sale from the booths using the new computerized accounting system. Each computer was connected to a main server, and all the sales records were printed, and regular audits carried out. In terms of staffing, every day is divided into shifts. Each clerk beginning a shift is given 100 pieces of gold leaf, and must at the end of their shift return any unsold pieces along with their total takings. This reform greatly increased staff accountability and effective stock management.



**Figure 2.22** Packets of gold leaf with hologram adhered in top right corner (Htet Htet Khaing)

### **Zaw Min Aung and gold leaf trade organizations**

Interestingly, handmade gold leaf has its equivalent of thanaka's U

Kyaw Moe in the person of Zaw Min Aung, who after a series of travails has ended up as the official face and spokesman for the handmade gold leaf industry. Whilst not everybody in the industry agrees with his ideas, he has a reputation for honesty and integrity that has worked to his advantage. The following account is based on our interviews with Zaw Min Aung himself and others in the gold leaf industry.

Zaw Min Aung married a native of Myat Paa Ward 21 years ago, whereupon he entered the gold leaf trade himself. The first incarnation of the gold leaf producer's Association (GLPA) was set up in 2014, in response to the rise of machine-made gold leaf, and Zaw Min Aung has been involved in its organization since the early stages of its establishment, firstly as administrative secretary and then as chairperson.

In his time as administrative secretary, the GLPA's initial stance was to promote the status of handmade gold leaf and argue for its exclusive use at religious sites on the grounds of its superior quality, and its status as a traditional Burmese handicraft that deserved preservation and protection as national heritage. The Association also pushed for the prohibition of machine-made gold leaf. It undertook a census of Myat Paa gold leaf producers, from whom it collected membership fees. With its locus and purview exclusively in Myat Paa Ward, the GLPA also funded various infrastructural development projects there, including the resurfacing of roads.

Following a three-year period of relative inactivity, the members pressed for the partial return of their membership fees and the election of a new administration. Zaw Min Aung conceded his post in advance of new elections. However, it proved difficult to find an eligible candidate for chairperson, partly due to the fact that some candidates had business links to producers of machine-made gold leaf. Eventually, Zaw Min Aung was approached and asked to assume the chair, which, after multiple entreaties, he agreed to do.

Following his assumption of the chair, the GLPA entered into difficult negotiations with the Trustee Board of Yangon's Shwe Dagon Pagoda, Myanmar's most iconic Buddhist pagoda. The

Shwe Dagon Trustees wanted to obtain handmade gold leaf from Myat Paa, but the GLPA was internally conflicted about whether to approve and facilitate this due to the fact that some members of the Trustee board had existing agreements with machine-made gold leaf producers. The majority of Myat Paa's producers were against dealing with Shwe Dagon, despite Zaw Min Aung's own position that Myat Paa should not only agree to supplying Shwe Dagon Pagoda, but should adopt a subsistence approach to their businesses in order to better protect it against the pressures of the marketplace and competition from machine-made gold leaf. He noted the difficulties gold leaf producers had faced as the market had changed, and the dishonest methods that some resorted to in order to keep turning a profit. These included reducing the size and number of sheets in a packet, and even selling fake gold leaf, sometimes called 'disco gold'. Zaw Min Aung described his desire for Burmese people to worship in pagodas that honor the Buddha by being gilded with real, high quality gold leaf. He explained that he had illustrated this principle in practice to the press with the example of his group's gilding of the Kyike Htee Yoe Pagoda using only 2,222 sheets of gold leaf. The previous gilders used a total of 9,338 sheets. This publicized example gained Zaw Min Aung a lot of attention and sympathy. He was also offered contracts directly from several pagodas, but, in a move that further enhanced his reputation for honesty, he declared that he would not accept work through any other channel than the traditional tender system.

A public meeting to come up with a solution was arranged, but this only exacerbated divisions. With the remaining support of only twenty percent of the membership, Zaw Min Aung was asked to resign his post as chairman. It was pointed out by some of his opponents that he was not a native of Myat Paa Ward, and therefore might not have its best interests at heart. Despite again conceding his position with the GLPA, he still met with the Shwe Dagon Trustee Board in his capacity as a private gold leaf producer to negotiate on behalf of his supporters, who included his employees, some of his relatives and their employees, and a small number of other producers who were sympathetic to his sufficiency approach and principles. He was able to persuade the Trustee Board to agree to loosening some of their regulations on quality and consistency, which had long been considered excessive by the Myat Paa producers.

Zaw Min Aung's fortunes changed again in 2018, when the Mandalay City Development Council (MCDC) organized a Myanmar-China cultural exchange event at which he appeared representing gold leaf production as a traditional Burmese handicraft. As a result of this event, Mandalay's municipal government invited him to form a new organization for gold leaf producers. Zaw Min Aung subsequently created the '*Shinthanse Dratme Shwesaing*' organization (literally: 'Gold Leaf, The Handicraft that Endures'). Despite the existence of various similar groups, the Mandalay authorities officially recognize only Zaw Min Aung's organization. As a result, he appears regularly in media features and at seminars on handmade gold leaf production, where he discusses his sufficiency approach to the gold leaf craft with a view to its protection in today's aggressive marketplace. Zaw Min Aung's ideas about handicraft preservation, national heritage, and subsistence business models, drew him positive attention from various levels of government. This official support resulted eventually in the Shwe Dagon Pagoda Trustee Board making a purchase of 30,000 sheets of handmade gold leaf, and vowing to stop purchasing machine-made gold leaf altogether.

In addition to this considerable achievement, Zaw Min Aung also successfully lobbied the government to have the handmade gold leaf trade exempt from income tax (machine-made gold leaf is still taxed). He reasoned that since the production and trade of monk's robes and other religious items was officially exempt from taxation, so too should be the handmade gold leaf business, as gold leaf was produced exclusively for Buddhist pagodas. For many producers, the tax model applied to their trade made it very difficult to generate a profit. Zaw Min Aung's recourse to Buddhist tradition and national heritage were key to the government's sympathetic attitude, in addition to the official status of his organization.

### **Zaw Min Aung and Mahamuni**

Zaw Min Aung has been providing gold leaf for the Mahamuni Trustee Board for fifteen years, during which time he has dealt with three different administrations. We were interested to note that his attitude toward U Soe Lin's reform of the gold leaf tender system

was unfavorable. He was explicit in his preference for the old system in which only a single permit was tendered and awarded according to price offered, as opposed to the current system in which over 100 permits are issued to any producers who qualify, for a fixed price. The Mahamuni trustees also require a hologram stamp to be affixed to the gold leaf packets, which quickly became recognized as a guarantee of quality. He explained that this had led to many dishonest practices, including producers selling the stamps to less reputable or unregulated producers, requiring constant monitoring and the sapping of confidence in the product.

Zaw Min Aung attended the initial negotiations between the gold leaf producers and the Mahamuni Trustee Board under U Soe Lin, where he protested against the latter's introduction of a 50,000 MMK fine for every individual sheet that did not exactly meet the required size and weight. The trustees asserted that the fine was a necessary incentive to meet the standards required. At that time, a single sheet of handmade gold leaf costed 230 MMK. One packet contained 100 sheets, and was sold at a price of 2,300 MMK. Zaw Min Aung argued that the fine was vastly disproportionate considering the value of the gold leaf itself. He also explained that due to the nature of the craft, even with the upmost care there would always be slight variations in shape and volume, and it was not realistic or fair to penalize producers for this. He suggested that warnings be issued instead, and a more proportionate fine of only 5,000 MMK be applied after three consecutive warnings. The trustees refused all of his suggestions saying that their terms were not negotiable. Following this meeting, U Soe Lin invited Zaw Min Aung to a private meeting and asked him to elaborate and justify his arguments. Zaw Min Aung reiterated that the new fine system was unrealistic and unfair, pointing out that no producer he had ever met was rich or well off, and that were they to incur such a fine it would break them. Ultimately he managed to persuade U Soe Lin that he was merely advocating for a fairer system that took the working reality of the gold leaf trade into account, and the fine was reduced to 5,000 MMK.

## Gold leaf retail clerks

We interviewed a number of informants who were employed as clerks in the gold leaf booths. Their attitude to their job and their working environment was unanimously positive, despite the relatively low wages. There are two rates of pay: 'junior' clerks earn 150,000 MMK per month, whilst their 'senior' counterparts earn 165,000 MMK. All reported that they felt lucky to work in a pagoda because as a religious or sacred space it was very peaceful, and did not result in the sort of stress and pressure that other kinds of workers had to deal with. They also believe that working close to the Mahamuni Image was very auspicious. Other positives remarked upon were the conveniently short working hours and the ease of the work itself. Those with children explained that this allowed them to spend time with their families and send their children to school and so forth. It was also convenient for their children to accompany them to work if need be, and spend time in the center of the Mahamuni compound.

The facilities for dining and resting were upgraded by the current trustees with a view to better hygiene and discipline. Most bring a packed lunch which they are allowed to eat in the newly established Moe Kaung Damaryon Hall, very close to the pagoda, as eating meals inside the compound is not permitted. There is also a designated area for resting or sleeping whilst off-duty. Finally, all passed comment on the housing provided for them as employees of the pagoda. Previously they were housed in a building located in front of the compound on 59th Street (Myo Thit Chan Mya Tharsi Township). Under U Soe Lin's leadership, a new apartment building was constructed for them in the Armaythattae Nat Palace area. The apartments are, according to our informants, well built, clean and have reliable electricity and water supplies. It seems this last factor was held to greatly mitigate the low wage they earn, and formed a major part of the basis upon which they expressed satisfaction with the current trustees.

There are two booths near the Mahamuni Buddha Image from which gold leaf is sold, each containing two computers and four clerks. For each computer sales point, the office of the trustees provides a cash float of 50,000 MMK in small denominations and

100 gold leaf pieces priced at 2,500 MMK each. If the cash float, takings, or unsold gold leaf are under at the end of a clerk's shift, then that clerk is held responsible and expected to make up the loss themselves. The clerks noted that it was necessary to take care in separating the gold leaf packets from each other, as it was easy to mistakenly peel off an extra packet and give it to a customer. Each booth sells a mean average of 100 gold leaf pieces per a day, resulting in daily takings of around 500,000 MMK. On New Year's Day the average doubles or triples, and on full moon days and other religious holidays and occasions, the daily average is 150-200 pieces.

The working day is split into two shifts, the first from 4:30am until 10am, and the second from 10am until 4pm. One interesting characteristic of the clerks' working life is that every month they are moved to a different shift and position. Other workers in the compound are also moved around regularly like this. Nominally, this strategy is designed to prevent complacency and negligent or corrupt practices, and it can be seen elsewhere in different spheres of official and working life in Myanmar. However, it is also worth noting that the regular change of workstation and colleague, however minimal, can also serve an authoritarian interest, in that it helps to isolate workers and is an obstacle to them self-organizing or forming non-official relationships and networks. All employees must now wear uniforms in pink on every day except Sunday, on which a different uniform in white and brown is worn. A weekly meeting to discuss administrative issues is held on Sundays, before which all employees must formally prostrate before the Mahamuni Buddha Image.

The overwhelming impression we received in our observations and interviews was that the gold leaf clerks perceive U Soe Lin and his new regime in a decidedly positive light. It must be noted that a number of our informants were new staff hired by the U Soe Lin Trustee Board. In addition to some of the details above, when asked about other positive developments, the examples given mostly related regulations and measures that enforced propriety, hygiene and order within the space of the Mahamuni compound. The new system for storing visitors' footwear while they are inside the compound seemed to be especially popular, partly because, unlike the last system, it deliberately prevents people from using the



compound's arcades as a thoroughfare or short cut as they may no longer take their shoes with them. Many also approved of the prohibition of certain kinds of hawking, especially of food and toys.



**Figure 2.23** Gold leaf retail booth (Htet Htet Khaing)

### **Mahamuni's gold waste: a family business**

Whilst surveying lesser visited areas of the Mahamuni compound in February of 2019, we came across an unexpected and quite fascinating enterprise. U Than Lwin is a member of the Trustee Board with a longstanding connection to the Mahamuni Pagoda

compound. His grandfather, U Maung Gyi, was the head of a special gold production operation at Mahamuni that was established 45 years ago. This small operation was set up to collect the plentiful fragments of gold leaf that remain adhered to discarded paper wrappers and other items, and from the carpet around the Buddha image. This golden refuse is then melted down once a year. Whilst the business was stalled for many years due to internal family complications, it was restarted in 2010 by U Than Lwin and managed by him until he became a member of the Trustee Board. Trustees are not permitted to operate businesses or have a financial interest linked with the compound, so the waste gold operation is now run by one of U Than Lwin's younger brothers, U Yan Aung.

The trustees allocated an appropriate space to use as a workshop behind the nearby Pitaka Teik. Waste items that may harbor gold fragments are collected on a daily basis and stored by pagoda staff. These include the paper packets gold leaf is sold in and the paper dividers between sheets, and also a range of implements used in applying the gold leaf to the image. This includes cotton wool, *tazay tan*, which is a kind of small brush used to apply tree sap to the gold leaf, towels, and even fragments of dirt and dust shaken from brooms used to clean the shrine area. Each February this is then delivered to the workshop who extract and melt down the gold, a process which usually takes between 45 and 60 days. It is a complex and unusual process, which requires specialized equipment that the workshop staff built themselves.

Firstly, all the refuse, implements, towels etc. are burnt in a metal container until the remaining ash is white. This ash is then mixed with powdered lead and sodium borate, and melted down in a special furnace with a fitting at the bottom which allows the lead to form into cylindrical bars. These are then cooled and placed into a special 'bowl furnace' dug into the ground. After three hours, the gold has completely separated from the lead and can be removed and cooled. The cooled gold is then melted down and poured into a container filled with water which is agitated to form a vortex. The velocity causes small nuggets to form, and this was referred to as '*a pwint cha*', literally 'dropping blossoms'. The nuggets are then placed into fireproof containers with nitric acid and heated until the latter evaporates completely. Finally, the resulting nuggets are

melted in a crucible and poured into a mold greased with coconut oil to form a pure gold bar. Last year, their efforts yielded a bar weighing 7 *vis* (11.2 kilos).

U Than Lwin receives no wage, although the workers and their manager do. There are between 10 and 15 employees at any one time, whose wages are paid by the Trustee Board. U Yan Aung informed us that his brother was appointed a trustee in 2016, alongside U Soe Lin. According to informants in the workshop, the two get on and are allies, although they sometimes clashed over issues pertaining to U Soe Lin's development program.

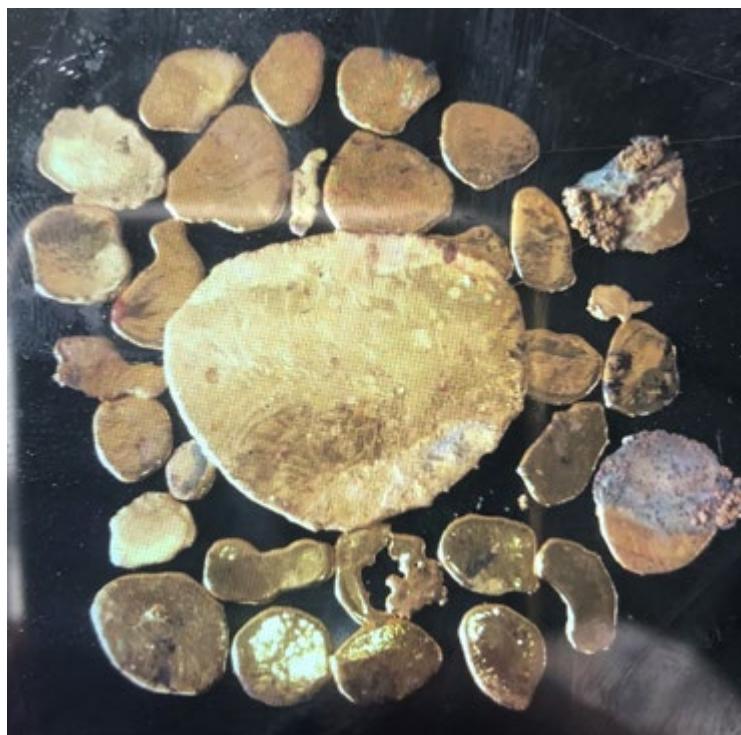
As domestic tourism numbers and pilgrimage have expanded in Myanmar, in addition to the reliability and quality of roads and public transport, an ever-increasing number of people visit the Mahamuni Compound and buy gold leaf to affix to the Mahamuni Buddha Image. The more visitors, the more waste gold is harvested from the paper packet refuse and carpets. After the worker's wages are paid, the profits from this operation reportedly go toward the upkeep and renovation of the compound's buildings.



**Figure 2.24** Gold leaf packets collected for burning in gold waste workshop (Htet Htet Khaing)



**Figure 2.25** Gold waste workshop furnaces (Htet Htet Khaing)



**Figure 2.26** Gold waste yield (Htet Htet Khaing)

## Donors

Gold leaf is adhered to the Mahamuni Buddha Image all day long by supplicants and the image is rarely if ever free from their attention. Unlike in the case of thanaka, a donor—that is to say, a *male* donor—can choose which part of the Buddha Image to affix his gold leaf to. Several factors influence this. A typical situation would be a male donor who is donating gold leaf on behalf of not just himself but also his wife and family. In this instance, the females will try to get as close to the front of the Buddha image as possible and prostrate and pray before it as the gold leaf is affixed on their behalf. The logic of proximity guides male donors to affix their gold leaf on the front of the Buddha Image, so the act is undertaken as close to their wife and family as possible, and within their sight. However, other donors choose to apply gold leaf to a part of the Mahamuni Image's 'body' which corresponds to a part of their own body afflicted with a medical problem, employing the same logic as in the case of the Khmer Bronzes (see chapter 3). Sometimes they must approach an official to arrange this on their behalf, if the bodypart in question is out of their reach.

We found a similar blend of doctrinal and apotropaic approaches to the use of gold leaf as a votive offering that we did in the case of thanaka. Some made a point of emphasising their lack of interest in material benefits and their sole concern with achieving *nibbana*. Others were not self-conscious about their belief that donating gold leaf would ensure that material wishes would be granted and physical safety enhanced. Many informants also described a conscious sense of wellbeing and peace arising as a result of the practice. The only notable difference was the greater number of gold leaf donors engaging in what Rotheray calls 'supplication' (2016). In Burmese the term is *adhitthana*, meaning a prayer for intercession or assistance, with a pledge of offerings to be delivered upon request and receipt of that assistance. With its transactional structure and logic this is an inherently apotropaic practice, but is perhaps less overtly materialistic than in the Thai case described by Rotheray.



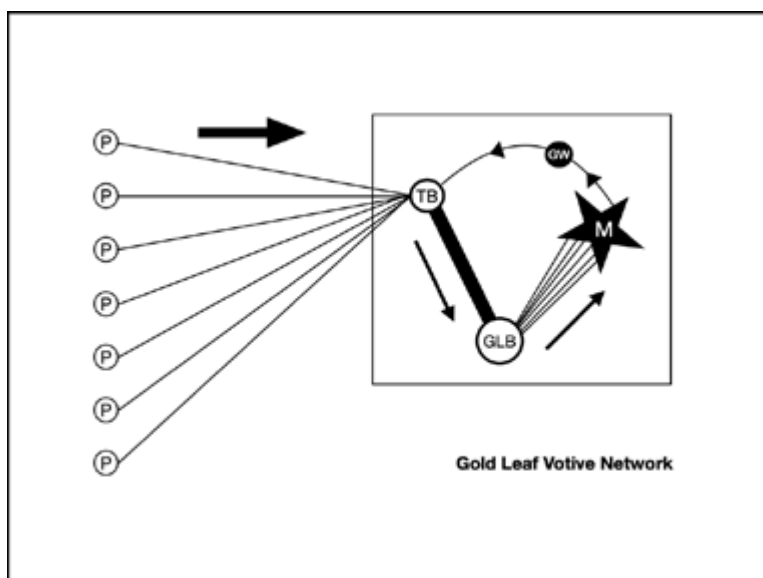
### **Summary of gold leaf votive network**

Handmade gold leaf is not only formed from a very valuable material, but is also the result of a highly skilled craft that is subject to a range of taboos, religious prescriptions and folk traditions. This is not the only respect in which gold leaf differs from thanaka as a votive item. Its network is smaller and more concentrated spatially, it is also urban, and the personnel highly specialised and relatively limited in number. Most of the specialized jobs are prescribed for men only, and only men may enter the Mahamuni Buddha image's chamber and affix the gold to its body. Handmade gold leaf is generally associated with the national, cultural and religious heritage of Myanmar.

The Trustee Board themselves are the primary operator in the gold leaf network, setting the terms for buying gold leaf from producers, and selling it themselves from booths set up very close to the image. They employ a relatively large workforce of women as retail clerks, who are given low wages but free housing, and reported satisfaction in their employer and their work. The trustee's control has been thoroughly tightened under U Soe Lin, with the price now standardized by the trustees and non-negotiable, in addition to a lot more regulation. Whilst the thanaka sellers have been moved out to an unfavourable and low prestige location, the Pagoda's gold leaf business has been restructured, modernized and given pride of place. The Mahamuni Trustee Board have thrown their executive managerial weight behind gold leaf as Mahamuni's primary votive network in symbolic and economic terms.

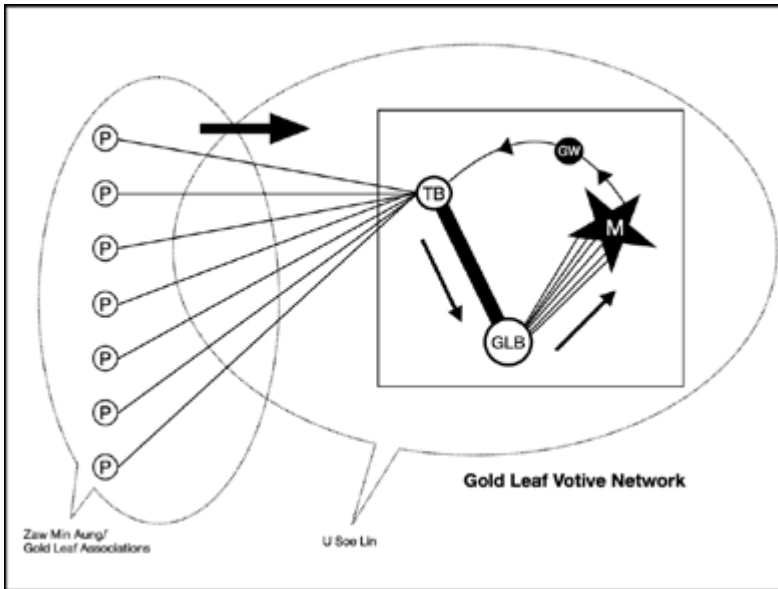
The experiences of those in the gold leaf industry vary, but all report that it is a difficult business that is not financially rewarding, despite the official recognition that their craft receives. As in other crafts and trades in Myanmar, there have been multiple efforts to self-organize through registered associations. Zaw Min Aung has emerged as the closest thing to a leader and spokesman for the Myat Paa gold leaf industry, but he is not universally respected, and his personal agency is limited. Notably, he has been acknowledged by U Soe Lin who has met with him privately and conceded to some of his negotiations, although these were matters somewhat trivial to the Trustee Board.

Unlike thanaka, the ‘flow’ of gold leaf does not pass over the Mahamuni Buddha image and take on new qualities from its contact with this sacred ‘body’ for use in another location – it adheres *permanantly* to this body, *becoming* it, enlarging it, even deforming it. As the image’s body swells with gold, so too does its prestige and its efficacy as a source of magic power and merit. Its symbolic power as the embodiment of not only the Buddha but also the Burmese Buddhist community is also enhanced, as it is this very community who in the hundreds and thousands have swollen its body with donations. And, in the process of arrival at this terminus, waste gold is generated constantly, which can be re-collected, re-melted, re-pounded and re-sold, before being affixed to the image once again.



**Figure 2.27** Gold leaf votive network diagram

The *producers* (P) sell their gold leaf to the *Trustee Board* (TB), who retail it from the compound’s *gold leaf booths* (GLB) to pilgrims. The pilgrims affix it to the *Mahamuni image* (M), and the waste is collected and recycled by the *gold waste workshop* (GW) and passed back to the *Trustee Board*. Again, whilst women are involved in some of the production process such as the making of bamboo paper, and whilst they may buy gold leaf in order for a man to affix it to the Buddha image on their behalf, the flow and the fixed points in this network are dominated by men.



**Figure 2.28** Gold leaf votive network diagram with spheres of influence

Whilst craft associations have been set up by the gold leaf industry, the network is dominated by U Soe Lin and the Trustee Board. They dictate the terms of wholesale purchase and its regulation, they operate the retail business which generates great profits, and they control the space in which this operation occurs.

### Concluding comments

What observations can we make through a comparative analysis of these two votive networks? Speaking in the most general terms, the thanaka network is rural, female and low status. Whilst skill is required to grow thanaka, it is not a sophisticated craft requiring specialization. Thanaka is not a high value material, and the industry does not generate a comfortable living for anyone at any level, let alone anything approaching a surplus. In the Mahamuni compound, despite the great importance and prestige of the face-washing ceremony and the profound religious value of the leftover thanaka water, no other points in the network are valued or celebrated. Instead, it is pushed into corners and out of the



limelight to the disadvantage of many. The pilgrims, mostly female, who grind thanaka to wash Mahamuni's face will never come into contact with the image, which is inaccessible to them.

Gold leaf is urban, male and high status. Its production is a complex and sophisticated craft involving many specialized roles. It is made from an extremely high value material. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, the industry fares only slightly better than thanaka and does not generate more than a subsistence living for those it employs. In the Mahamuni compound, gold leaf is celebrated as the standard form of veneration for pilgrims. The booths selling it are directly in front of the image, and the merchandise and large framed photographs outside the chamber boast of its famously spectacular swollen form. But only male pilgrims may enter the chamber and affix gold leaf to the image with their own hands.

Many interwoven livelihoods and interests depend upon each of these votive networks. Taken together, they depict a relatively consistent impression of Burmese culture – one that values men and gold above women and thanaka, but sees both categories as fitting into a hierarchical but harmonious system. This system is characterized by patron-client relationships; by different but related forms of 'giving' at all levels. Just as Mahamuni represents the highest cosmic authority possible, those who manage the earthly home of the image, and control access to and behavior with it, represent the most powerful agency in both of these networks.

Interestingly, despite thanaka's lower status, its associations have proved more powerful and efficient under the charismatic leadership and organization of U Kyaw Moe. The latter's strategy of appealing to national pride and nostalgic notions of cultural heritage, especially through the GI Product registration which presents Burmese thanaka on the world stage, ultimately reenforces the values upon which this system is founded. Another reason for his success may be that he is not intruding upon any other major actor's territory with his actions, for the time being. It is to the role of national pride and nostalgia in the Mahamuni compound that we now turn our attention in the next chapter.



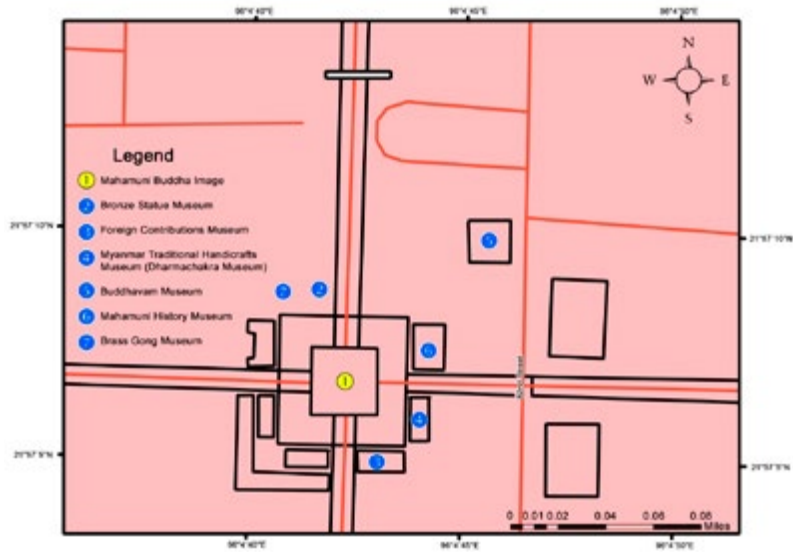
# 3

## MUSEUMS

Museums inside or attached to Buddhist monasteries are not uncommon throughout the Southeast Asian Theravada ecumene (see Gabaude, 2003). Often they consist of personal collections that have been bequeathed to the monastery, sometimes with a theme and sometimes random, or of objects that the monastery has been donated whose volume or nature has been deemed worthy of curated display. Sometimes the monastery, in an echo of its premodern role as all-purpose ‘community center’, is the only logical place to house material collections that are, for one reason or another, intended for public display. Some monasteries of greater stature contain museums or museum-like displays that are related to the monastery directly, such as the personal effects of a high-status monk who resided there, the history of a particular relic the monastery contains, royal associations, and so on. One nearby example would be that of Mingun Monastery, located on the banks of the Ayeyarwaddy River, which contains a museum about its famous abbot Mingun Sayardaw. Likewise Mahagandaryon Monastery in Amarapura also features a museum about its own history and well-known monastics who have resided there.

In the case of the Mahamuni Pagoda, the six museums it contains relate very specifically to the Mahamuni Buddha Image, its history, and its status and widespread veneration. As will be described below, these museums propagate the mythological history of the image in such a way that blends it with modern Burmese nationalist history, and asserts a pan-Buddhist and an international context for it that puts Myanmar at the center of the map, quite literally. In

a less conscious way, the museums share the collective theme of *dana*, the Buddhist concept of giving or donation. Not only are all the items displayed donations, and usually labelled explicitly as such, but also the very bricks and mortar of the museums themselves and their renovations over the decades. It will also be shown that the U Soe Lin Trustee Board has undertaken substantial renovation projects in the museums, that reflect not only the upkeep of presentation and infrastructure, but also a degree of social engineering and purgative reforms.



**Figure 3.1** Map of Mahamuni Pagoda museums

### Bronze Statue Museum

The Bronze Statue Museum is located near the entrance to the northern arcade. It was built in 1955 under the auspices of a well-to-do donor from Mandalay municipal government's treasury. The structure was then thoroughly renovated and extended by U Soe Lin's Trustee Board in 2017. The statues it houses are medieval Khmer bronzes from Angkor, that have come to be regarded as part of the Mahamuni Buddha image's entourage, so to speak.

The bronzes were removed from Angkor by the invading Siamese and taken to their capital of Ayutthya, only to be captured again by the Burmese king Bayinnaung when he conquered the city in 1563 and took them to Hanthawady (Harvey, 2010). Statues such as these, and more commonly Buddha images like the Mahamuni image itself, often functioned as royal palladia throughout mainland Southeast Asia, and in addition to war slaves, were seized upon the successful conclusion of military campaigns and installed back in the palatial complexes of the victors (Smith, 1978). The bronzes were given as a gift to the royal court in Arakan (present day Rakhine State), where they remained until Bodawpaya, the sixth king of the Konbaung dynasty, invaded Arakan in 1784 (Harvey, 2010). The campaign was led by the heir apparent Thado Minsaw, who seized the bronzes along with the Mahamuni Buddha Image, and brought them back to the capital at Amarapura, which is now a district of Mandalay (Than Tun, 1986). Thado Minsaw's gilded statue stands in a display case in the Mahamuni compound, near the 'Foreign Contributions' Museum.

Originally, the bronze statues numbered thirty and were installed in the Ananda Pagoda, directly beside the Mahamuni compound. Many were damaged and lost when the structure containing them collapsed at some point before Pagan Min ascended the throne in 1846, and today only six remain (Maung Maung Tin, 2018). They include three lion images, one *Erawan* or three-headed elephant, and two male deity figures with royal regalia. This war booty, which made up the tail of the Mahamuni Buddha image as it made the journey from Arakan to Amarapura, acquired a distinctive apotropaic function for visitors and pilgrims over the years in the form of miraculous healing powers. Those with physical afflictions would rub the part of one of these statues that corresponded with the location of their own pain, whilst making a short prayer. For as long as our informants could remember, the bronzes had attracted large numbers of supplicants for this purpose. This is evidenced visually by the highly burnished spots on the statues that are observable today. It seems likely that the practice dates back to not long after the statues arrived in Amarapura, if not before.

However, when U Soe Lin renovated the museum in 2017 he put an end to this popular practice by enclosing the bronzes behind glass.

In fact, the entire ‘dispensation’ and aesthetic of the statues’ presentation reflects an entirely different kind of ontological context, that of the modern scientific museum (see Davis’ discussion of Indian statuary, its dispensations and the effects of western museumification, 1999). Previously the statues were in a row against a wall hung with ornate framing, lined up upon a strip of decorative tiles, with no barrier of any kind shielding them from visitors. The room was painted in a color scheme which was consistent with the rest of the Mahamuni pagoda compound. Now however, they are housed in a room of plain white. Their glass enclosure is placed in the middle of the room, and each one sits upon a plain white oblong display stand. Instead of lining up to supplicate a statue one after one, visitors are now encouraged to wander around the statues and gaze upon them as specimens of art history in a scientific, sterile environment. Signs on the wall in Burmese and English relate a brief history of the bronzes and explain that touching them is now forbidden in the interest of preservation.

This can be counted amongst the more assertive reforms that has taken place under U Soe Lin. Despite the nominal motivation of ‘preservation’, it demonstrates with clarity his desire to remove popular apotropaic practice and replace it with a more controlled and sterile environment, and a more universally and doctrinally conventional form of ‘Buddhist’ practice, as far as this is possible within the particular rubric of the Mahamuni Pagoda. The *Myanmar Times* reports him as describing these specific practices as “superstitions” (*Myanmar Times*, 2017). According to our informants, this reform has not been popular, although most individuals interviewed grudgingly accepted that the trustee’s reasons must be justified. There was a strong and consistent current of belief that proximity and contact increase the efficacy of the bronze statues’ healing powers, and consequently regret and disappointment that contact was now restricted.

It is interesting to compare the bronzes and the Mahamuni image itself in this regard: the foreign ‘Hindu’ bronze statues are now ‘pieces’ or ‘specimens’ whose physical forms must not be touched in order to ‘preserve’ them. But the very same institutional management, or ‘curatorial authority’, deems that the infinitely more valuable historical Mahamuni Buddha image *should* be

touched on a daily basis (albeit by men only), and in such a way as to actually distort and alter its physical form in the most deliberate and spectacular fashion. Framed photographs displayed near the Mahamuni image celebrate the extent to which the application of gold leaf has swollen its physique out of proportion.



**Figure 3.2** Bronze Statue Museum after renovations

### Foreign contributions museum

This museum dates from 1969 and is located on the eastern side of the southern arcade.<sup>4</sup> It contains a collection of valuable objects that have been donated to Mahamuni by donors outside Myanmar. The museum was originally called the 'Thibaw Museum' (Thibaw was the last Burmese monarch), and contained objects in gold and silver, plaster statues of King Mindon, King Thibaw and Queen Su Phaya Latt, and wooden statues of the courtiers and royal councilors Kin

---

4. U Maung Maung Tin described the founding date of Museum was 1960 in his book 'History of Mahamuni' but the date engraved on the cornice of the Museum is 1969.

Wun Mingyi, Shwe Pyi Wun Gyi, Yaw Atwin Wun and U Pho Hlaing (Maung Maung Tin, 2018). These statues are now displayed in the reconstructed Royal Palace in the old center of Mandalay.

Today the museum contains primarily Buddha Images, statuettes and ceramics, in addition to other smaller items contained in display cases and labelled in Burmese and English with their country of origin. There is also a large book in which all donations are listed in detail. The museum has a tooth relic from China donated in 2013, a Bronze Buddha Image from Thailand donated in 1997, and a Marble Buddha Image donated by the President of the Lao PDR in 2010. Many other smaller religious items and coins from Thailand, Sri Lanka, Laos, Japan, India and China are on display. Amongst the few non-Asian donations, some decorative chinaware from the UK, Myanmar's former colonizers, is worth noting.

The museum is set up for a domestic and a foreign audience, and functions to enhance both Myanmar's and Mahamuni's prestige by demonstrating the acknowledgement and respect offered by not just any foreign countries, but in the case of Thailand, Japan and the UK, three of the principal antagonists in Myanmar's national history. This respect, as ever, takes the form of *material donations*.

### **Myanmar traditional handicrafts museum (Dharmachakra Museum)**

*Dharmachakra* in Buddhism is the 'Wheel of Dharma', set in motion when the Buddha delivered his first sermon to the first five disciples. This scene is depicted in a sculptural diorama, which is the visual centerpiece of this museum, hence its unofficial second name. Despite its slightly misleading *official* name, this museum houses a collection of mostly courtly historical material culture relating to Buddhism, warfare, royal status and ritual. The museum is located in the southeastern corner of the compound, and was built in 1960. Aside from a new coat of paint in 2011, this museum's first proper renovations were undertaken in 2016 under the auspices of U Soe Lin's Trustee Board. These included new wiring and LED lighting, new tiling, glass doors, air-conditioning and glass display cases.

The content of the museum is divided roughly into categories



displayed in their own cases. These include swords and bladed weapons, court paraphernalia such as betel nut sets, cutlery and vessels for food and drink, bells, and silver and gold trees historically used as offerings or tribute. There are also Buddha images and votive tablets, examples of vases and lacquerware, ornaments and jewelry, and a miscellanea of unique objects. Despite its division into loose categories, like the Foreign Contribution Museum, this collection is made up entirely of donations to the Mahamuni Pagoda, and has not been 'designed' as a collection but accumulated randomly. Almost all the items on display are labeled with a brief description and the name of the donor.

Describing the collection as 'Myanmar Traditional Handicrafts' seems a slightly partial and anachronistic way to approach the content of this museum. Put comprehensively, this is a collection of mostly prestige items of weaponry and fine art that relate to two institutions: the Burmese (Burman) monarchy and the form of Buddhism that it supported and used for political legitimation. The chosen title of the museum, then, asserts a very narrow definition of 'Myanmar', 'tradition', and 'handicrafts', that is consistent with contemporary nationalist depictions of culture and history. The *dharmachakra* diorama in the center of the museum seems arbitrary, but it further asserts the connection and association between Myanmar, Burmese monarchical history and culture, and Buddhism.



**Figure 3.3** Display in *Dharmachakra* Museum (Htet Htet Khaing)

### ***Buddhavam* Museum**

The *Buddhavam* Museum, or ‘Buddha’s Life-story Museum,’ is located in the northeastern part of the compound. Its construction began in 1984 and was completed in 1990. Various cosmetic renovations have been undertaken since the turn of the millennium, including gilding parts of the façade in 2010, but U Soe Lin’s Trustee Board began a more comprehensive program of renovation in 2016. An extension was built at the back of the museum and the whole building was repainted. There are firm plans to continue renovations in the near future.

The central feature of the two-storey museum is a three-dimensional display made of concrete that asserts the Buddha’s one-time historical presence in the territory of present-day Myanmar. It consists of a 3D floor-map of Asia surrounded by water, in which Myanmar is located in the center. The route of the Buddha’s mythical wanderings through Asia is traced out over this map. A grand golden staircase leads up from behind Myanmar to a depiction of the *tavatamsa*: an upper level of heaven within Buddhist cosmology that is inhabited by thirty-three deities. Here the Buddha is shown preaching the dharma to his mother, a popular episode from the Jataka tales (stories about the Buddha’s previous lives). On the ceiling, the planets are depicted with the horoscope on a giant wheel.

Elsewhere throughout the museum on both floors, Buddha Images are displayed with a particular focus on the ‘art-historical’ aesthetic categories associated with different eras in Burmese history. There are also framed photographs of Buddha images and architecture from all over Asia.

Again, this museum is less about what its name suggests, but rather a modern re-assertion of an historical ideological trope: the notion that the Buddha visited the Burmese kingdoms during his lifetime and left some material marker, usually a footprint, bodily relic or Buddha Image. This was a common element in city-founding and monarchical legitimacy throughout Theravada Buddhist Southeast Asia. Almost as an afterthought to this central idea and its exhibit, the sculptural and architectural achievements of pan-Asian Buddhism are displayed through photographs and

organized into countries of origin. Once more, a pseudo-western scientific framework and taxonomy are used alongside premodern myth. However, these photographs serve to further emphasize the pan-Asian context in which Myanmar is being presented so centrally here.

### **Mahamuni History Museum**

This museum is laid out like a western art gallery, which contains a permanent exhibition of eighteen paintings that illustrate the history of the Mahamuni Buddha Image in a narrative which incorporates its mythic origins. It is the largest of the six museums, and occupies what was originally a guesthouse for pilgrims called the Dhammasala Rest House in the far northeastern corner of the Mahamuni compound. It became the Mahamuni History Museum in 1985, and was extended and retiled in 1990. In 2014, Major General Min Aung Hlaing made a donation to cover necessary ceiling repairs. In 2016, U Soe Lin undertook further repairs to the roof, repainting, the addition of an interior wall, installing air-conditioning and spotlights, and the addition of two wooden signboards.

The narrative illustrated by the paintings blends elements of the Mahamuni Buddha Image's mythic origin with the modern historical events of the recent past. Its unique connection to the Buddha and status as a 'living image' is emphasized, as is its journey from Arakan to Amarapura, although the aggression between these states is de-emphasized. As mentioned above, the interior of the museum resembles a western art gallery. The paintings are hung in ornate golden frames and beneath angled lamps. They are executed in the style of 19th century European oil paintings: all figures and landscapes are realistic within a deliberately balanced composition, and perspective is observed. This strongly European aesthetic is curious, especially when compared with that of the presentation of other Southeast Asian palladium Buddha images. In the Temple of the Emerald Buddha in Bangkok, for example, the walls around Thailand's most precious Buddha image are painted with traditional Siamese murals depicting the Thai version of the Ramayana, free of perspective and with highly stylized figures. It would seem logical to retain the arts and styles of the 'national tradition' in contexts of

such cultural and political significance. Whatever the origin of this faux-European aesthetic, it serves perhaps to deliver a slightly more international and authoritative dispensation of the museum's content, like the refurbished Bronze Museum.



**Figure 3.4** Painting in History Museum depicting the casting of the Mahamuni Image (Zin Mar Latt)



**Figure 3.5** Mahamuni History Museum (Zin Mar Latt)

### **Brass gong museum**

This museum is simply an open-sided structure containing the gong, located near the northwest corner of Mahamuni compound. It was built in 1968 with donations from the public. The gong itself was cast in 1965 and finally completed in 1969 again with public donations. It is now situated with two *nat* statues who hold it between them. On the wall many of the donors' names are listed, which include members of the old trustee boards. The nominal purpose of the museum is to showcase a large, collective act of donation in the material form of the gong.

### **Concluding remarks**

The museums are notable for blending traditional and modern dispensations to depict and assert the civilizational status of Buddhist Asia, the status of Myanmar, its culture and history within this ecumene, and the unique power and sacredness of the Mahamuni Buddha Image itself. Thematically they are a blend of Theravada myth, western quasi-scientific curation, and modern nationalism. They strongly propagate the assertion that the Mahamuni Pagoda is a place of great prestige and importance in Buddhist Asia. This was all faithfully reflected in informant interviews, which were conducted with staff, regular local visitors and devotees, and those from outside Mandalay, including people from Rakhine State (previously Arakan). For the latter, the image is perceived as having been forcibly removed from their territory, and this forms an element in the imagery of the revolutionary movement for self-determination in Rakhine State today. In addition to their religious devotion, many informants described feelings of pride in Mahamuni that were particularly accentuated by the museums. Often accounts were given of the individual pride felt when introducing colleagues or family members from elsewhere in the country to the pagoda. The museums helped to ignite these feelings through the celebratory context they provide. In some cases this pride ran almost to chauvinism. For example, one informant attributed the information in the museums as being the key causal factor in her devotion to the Mahamuni Buddha Image, a devotion that she wanted others to cultivate by visiting

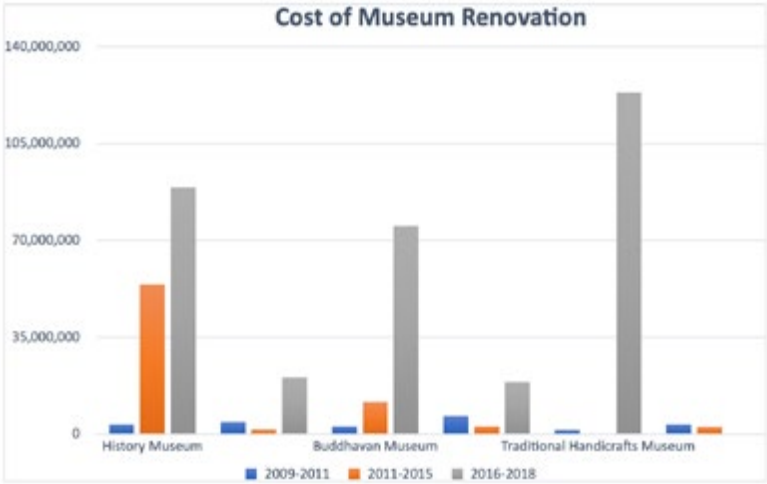
the museums. She expressed that due to the strength of this devotion, she would now be immune from any efforts by the missionaries of other religions to convert her.

Since the museum's earliest incarnations in the 1950s, it has been the incumbent Trustee Board's responsibility to maintain and renovate them when necessary. This is done under the rubric of *dana* or donation, and is advertised as such. However, as the above account shows, the U Soe Lin Trustee Board has undertaken the most expensive and substantial renovations to date. Figures that demonstrate this very clearly can be seen in the tables below. They have also sought to purge certain longstanding behaviors that they perceive are incompatible with the direction in which they are developing the pagoda. These include not only the 'museumification' of the Khmer Bronzes, in which a very popular and traditional religious practice has been suppressed, but also more socially orientated measures. Some of the museums were previously used by itinerant or homeless people to rest and shelter in, as is common in other pagoda complexes in Myanmar. This has now been strictly forbidden, and is enforced by uniformed security officials that patrol the pagoda.

These combined efforts by U Soe Lin and his trustees may have made the Mahamuni Pagoda a cleaner and more organized religious space, but they have also made it a more sterile and coercive one, removing some of the altruistic social function and local meanings the pagoda had accrued over time. Their approach is geared toward the compound becoming an international tourist attraction, and the museums are being brought into line to serve that end: displaying Myanmar and Burmese Buddhism upon the world stage.

### **Cost of museum renovation**

The below data is from Muang Maung Tin's 2018 account of the Mahamuni Pagoda and its history.



**Figure 3.6** Cost of museum renovations graph





# 4

## THE TRUSTEE BOARD, U SOE LIN AND HIS REFORMS

In this chapter, we will give a brief account of the origins and structure of the Mahamuni Trustee Board which draws from Maung Maung Tin's account (2018), followed by a comprehensive inventory of U Soe Lin's activities as chairman. This data was generated by our interviews with him, his staff, and those who have been affected by his reforms. We indicate the more significant of his innovations, with a view to isolating the values and practical motivations behind them.

### **The structure of Mahamuni trustee group and its performance**

#### **Annexation – Second World War (1886-1939)**

Upper Myanmar was annexed by the British Empire in 1886, and King Thibaw of the Konbaung dynasty—Burma's last ever monarch—was exiled to India. The sudden cessation of royal patronage necessitated a new bureaucratic body of some kind to manage and maintain the Mahamuni Pagoda and its many valuable contents. Sites such as these were very vulnerable to thieves especially in times of political instability and change, and appeals were made to the acting Patriarch of the Buddhist Religion appointed by the British Governor General. In that same year, the patriarch established the Patron's Association (*Nayaka Apawe*), an eight-member council made up of senior abbots, ex-privy councilors and

community elders, with one appointed executive officer as head. Then in 1891, the body that would become the Mahamuni Pagoda Trustee Board (*Gawpaka Aphawes*) was established by eleven individuals from the aristocratic class, with the purpose of managing Mahamuni's finances and undertaking maintenance and renovations. This was a matter of some volume and complexity as donations were not merely in the form of cash, but also precious metals and stones, objects, land and infrastructure. There was often conflict regarding whose donations should be given precedence when it came to higher status renovations, and also in regard to the form that these renovations might take. From 1902 onward, the Trustee Board obtained exemption from land tax on the grounds of the Mahamuni Compound being a religious space. The Trustee Board's administration was re-appointed nine times before the outbreak of the Second World War. It remained answerable to a special advisory group of senior monks (*Awwarda-sariya Sayadaws*).

### **Second World War – national independence (1939-1948)**

From 1942 onward Japanese Imperial forces conducted arial bombardment in many parts of Burma, including Mandalay, where much damage was inflicted. The senior monks cooperated with the remaining trustees in the enrollment of hundreds of junior monks (*yahanpyo*) from all over Mandalay to watch over and protect Mahamuni, and ensure that its administration and treasury remained intact. After the conclusion of the war, British administration returned to Mandalay and asked the trustees to organize the cleaning and renovation of the Mahamuni compound, which has fallen into disrepair and had also been used to accommodate many war refugees. The British along with some senior Burmese lay officials then brokered an arrangement to institutionalize the structure of Mahamuni's management and administration. Overseeing with ultimate authority would be the Council of Senior Abbots (*Awwarda-sariya Sayadaws*), whilst the Trustee Board would handle all mundane and administrative affairs with the approval of the former.

### **Independence – civilian rule (1948- 2016)**

After Burma gained its independence in 1948, the Mahamuni

compound was thoroughly renovated and in this time took the form that we more or less see today. A statue of Thado Minsaw, the crown prince who had captured the Mahamuni Image and brought it from Arakan to Mandalay in 1784, was cast in bronze and installed in front of the northern gate (it has since been moved to its current location in the southeastern purlieu of Mahamuni's central pavilion). The museums were constructed with trustee funds and private donations, and the compound upheld a new standard of cleanliness and order.

Not only the Trustee Board, but also lay people whose livelihoods depended on the compound and other local people would seek arbitration from the Council of Senior Abbots. Local informants provided many examples of the abbots solving disputes between various parties in a range of matters, but especially between the Trustee Board and members of the local community. Typical examples concerned the location and size of new constructions, and the imposition of new regulations.

### **Under civilian rule (2016)**

In May of 2016, shortly after the new NLD government had convened for the first time since their election victory, the Mahamuni Trustee Board was reformed and fifteen new members were ratified by the Chief Minister of the Mandalay Region. Henceforth, at least technically, new Trustee Board members would be appointed or elected every five years, with members being permitted to hold a position for no more than two terms. The trustees must confer with and take the advice of the *Awwardasariya Sayadaws* in formal meetings held every four months, during which they must also elaborate any proposals or plans that affect the life of the Mahamuni compound and its management. The trustees must also confer with the township level *sangha* authorities, and the Mandalay Regional Government at both the district and township level. The latter includes the Department for the Promotion and Propagation of the Buddhist Religion, which is answerable to the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Culture.

As of 2016, the criteria for candidates running for election to the Trustee Board are as follows:

- Must be a citizen of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar
- Must be a Buddhist
- Must be 45-70 year-old male
- Must be resident in MCDC, and have been resident there for at least three years
- Must be of good health and sound moral standing
- Must be a layperson
- Must have no criminal convictions
- Must not have livelihood that depends on fishing, alcohol, poisons, commercial sex, or weapons.

#### Codified Responsibilities of the Trustee Board

Trustees must meet with the Council of Senior Abbots every four months to report their activities, proposals for future activities, and to hear advice.

Trustees have to manage in line with the principles of sustainable development, and provide adequate security for the Mahamuni compound's valuable objects.

If the trustees construct or renovate pagodas, religious halls, reliquaries, stairways, toilet facilities, roofs and roof finials, alters, statues, bells etc., they must do so in the appropriate form and location.

If the trustees add or renovate roads, lakes, parks, trees, shops, or other buildings and structures which are situated in the compound, including walls or fencing, they must do so in the appropriate form and location.

The trustees must clean and maintain the compound and ensure that no bad or inappropriate behavior of any kind is undertaken within it.

The trustees must manage religious associations and Dhamma talks as appropriate.

The trustees must follow and defer to the advice of the Council of Senior Monks.

### **Mahamuni's management power structure in summary**

The structure of Mahamuni's custodial management is laid out in a draft publication called *Mahamuni Trustee Board Rules and Regulations* (*Mahamuni Gaw-pa-ka apawe Semyin*, ratified and published by the Dept. of Religious Affairs in 1980). Authority and responsibility are divided into a hierarchy of three official bodies: The Council of Senior Abbots, the Patron's Association and the Trustee Board. The Council of Senior Abbots are charged with "applying principles of 'sustainable development' in Buddhism, managing all religious affairs relating to Mahamuni, and offering guidance, advice and arbitration to the Patron's Association and the Trustee Board." It is composed of fifteen abbots: eleven from Mandalay township, and four from the Mandalay Regional Monastic Patron Association. The chairmanship of the Council of Senior Abbots is taken by members alternately. If a vacancy on the council appears, it is filled within one month. Whilst contact is maintained unofficially, the council meets formally with the Patron's Association and the Trustee Board once every four months to hear reports on administrative issues and proposals for changes, or new projects in renovation and construction. Ultimate authority rests the council, who must advise upon and approve any new projects before they can go forward.

The Patron's Association is composed of the Director for Religious Affairs (Mandalay regional level), the Mayor of Mandalay municipality, and Minister for Culture (Mandalay regional level). Their responsibilities are of an advisory and supervisory nature.

The Trustee Board has fifteen members, although with permission from the Patron's Association they may add additional members.

Membership tenure is five years, and this can be renewed a further two times. Members are jointly chosen and appointed by the Dept. of Religious Affairs and the Municipal Department. The full board must comprise at least one assistant civil engineer, one official from the Dept. of Religious Affairs, one from the directorship of Mandalay's State *Pariyatti Sasana* University and one from the Mandalay township's General Administrative Office. The make-up of the board must proportionately reflect all of Mandalay's municipal townships. The Mandalay Regional Government appoints the four key positions of chair, vice-chair, secretary, and associate-secretary.

In conclusion, these three bodies would appear to be composed from a proportionate representation of Mandalay's religious, political and administrative elite. The religious body of the Council of Senior Abbots takes formal precedence, and the practical management is undertaken by the civil administrative arm in the form of the Trustee Board which is supervised by the three high-ranking members of the Patron's Association.

### **Chairman U Soe Lin**

In 2016, Chairman U Soe Lin of the Myanmar Sugar and Sugarcane Products Association for Chanayetharsan Township, was appointed as chair of the Mahamuni Trustee Board. Since he took up this position, the Trustee Board has undertaken more renovation and construction projects than any previous administration, in addition to introducing more substantial reforms and new regulations. These reforms and construction projects have been very much in line with the regional government's goals of developing Mandalay as both a domestic and international tourist destination. In addition to apparently sharing these goals, U soe Lin's family has a legacy of involvement with Mahamuni's lay administration going back eighty years. His leadership style is charismatic, if authoritarian, and during our interviews he was candid about his vision for the pagoda. He is quoted in his own words at relative length below with a view to capturing some of the texture of this charismatic paternalism, and because of the additional insight this provides into the worldview and agenda of the most assertive Trustee Board Chairman Mahamuni has ever known.

## **Working for Mahamuni, working for Buddhism: a family legacy**

In the 1960s my grandfather took the position of chairman of the Mahamuni Trustee Board. At that time the duration of the chairmanship was only four months and the board took it up alternately. However, his permanent responsibility was as chairperson of the Mahamuni Construction Committee. Besides this, my grandfather volunteered as the chairperson of the Pali Pahtamapyan Alms-food Offering Association (Swne-kyawe-athin) in Mandalay during the U Nu period (1960-62). This association prepared food for all monks from Upper Myanmar who were currently sitting Pali Pahtamapyan Examinations. This particular volunteer position was transmitted from my grandfather to my mother, and then finally to me when she became too old to continue. I hold it to the present day, and I am proud of this legacy in my family. The association was originally founded to address the difficulty of monks travelling to Yangon for the examinations, as was necessary at that time. The roads were poor and travelling was very difficult. My grandfather wanted to establish an examination center in Mandalay for all of northern Myanmar, and this was possible only with the proviso that an alms-food offering association was founded here also. My grandfather did this and took the chairmanship position. I feel a great pride in his achievement, and in the fact that the new center and the association have been functioning without interruption for over seventy years under the management of my family. Nowadays, expenses are covered by the association's many donors. Working for the Buddhist religion is one of my purposes in life.

In 2016, before I was made chairman of the Mahamuni Trustee Board by the Patron's Association, I was then chairman of the Myanmar Sugar and Sugarcane Products Association for Chanayetharsan Township.

(...) When I received the news that I had been given the position of chairman of the Trustee Board it was early in the morning. I scheduled my first meeting for the evening of that same day. I set an example at this meeting by getting the newly appointed trustees to agree to a cut in some of the discretionary funds that their positions entitled them to. From this point forward I have worked with dedication. I barely slept at all for those first two weeks.

### **Life, work and family**

My parents' income depended on rice milling and oil factories, but these businesses were taken over by the state in the Ne Win period. I received a Bachelor degree in Engineering in 1979, after which I decided not to go straight into a government job. Instead I founded a video film making company called 'Lin video', which specialized in wedding receptions, donation ceremonies, regional festivals, Union Day events, Independence events, and especially state level celebrations organized by different departments in Mandalay. At this time making films and working with these people was a passion for me and I took this work very seriously.

In 1991, I went to Singapore and worked there for three years, coming back when my mother turned seventy. Then I worked as a pharmaceutical sales representative for a time. In 1996 I and my business partners rented Mandalay Dairy Plant in order to produce condensed milk, milk powder, butter and ice cream. I was the Operations Director for sixteen years. I retired in 2012, and then took the vice-chairmanship position at Mandalay Maharsi Religious Center, as well as being the Chairperson of the Myanmar Sugar and Sugarcane Association. Then in 2016, I became chairman of the Mahamuni Trustee Board.



I have four children. My eldest daughter lives with me, she runs a Japanese restaurant in Mandalay. My next eldest daughter is in Singapore presently, and my youngest daughter lives in Yangon with her husband, where they operate a catering business. My son has a business selling artificial grass. I take an interest in all my children's businesses when I am free and offer them advice, but I don't play an active formal role in any of them. I sometimes help them financially when they need it.

### **Reforms, renovations and new construction under U Soe Lin**

The following is a comprehensive list, gathered from Maung Maung Tin (2018), our informants in the compound, and U Soe Lin himself.

#### **New Construction and Decoration**

- Fiber optic lighting installed on the ceiling of Mahamuni Image shrine.
- Altar before the Mahamuni Buddha Image was gilded.
- Parts of the structure's roof and the stupas were gilded.
- Fiber optic lighting installed to illuminate outer covering of stupas.
- Stairways have been built where needed throughout and around the compound.
- A new semi-covered carpark has been constructed, with a covered walkway into the compound. A new ticket system instituted.
- A new caneball (*chinlone*) playing ground was built on the pagoda's land.

- New commercial units were built.
- A new park was landscaped and turf replaced here and elsewhere around the compound.
- New accommodation was built for staff in the form of apartment buildings outside the compound.
- New ticket kiosks were built.
- New toilet facilities were built.

### **Renovations**

- Extensive renovations to the museums were undertaken (see chapter 3).
- The compound's roofs were repaired and sealed.
- Tiling throughout the area around Mahaumi Image's shrine was replaced.
- New guardian lion statues were installed at the main entrance.

### **Reforms Relating to Systems, Security and Behavioral Regulations**

- New system and storage for footwear (footwear must be removed and stored outside of Buddhist spaces in Myanmar).
- Eating food in the compound is restricted.
- Visitors may no longer lie or sit on the floor in leisure. Areas that were informally used for rest and recreation were closed or renovated to prevent this.
- Selling food near the Mahamuni Image's shrine is prohibited.

- Smoking and spitting (betel nut juice) is prohibited.
- Begging in the compound is prohibited.
- Additional CCTV cameras have been installed throughout (some informants estimated that these had doubled in number since 2016).
- New LED signs installed listing behavioral regulations.
- Thanaka vendors are moved from the arcades to a new site.
- Itinerant vendors are heavily restricted as to exactly where they may operate.
- Red lines are marked along the arcades to strictly divide walkway from shop frontage.



**Figure 4.1** New carpark with covered walkway. Note structural renovation in progress in background. (Zin Mar Latt)



**Figure 4.2** New ticket kiosk for foreign tourists (Zin Mar Latt)

U Soe Lin projects an impression of great discipline and efficiency. He repeatedly talked about the need for institutional harmony and for a ‘master plan’ that should be complete and agreed upon before the trustees move forward in any endeavor. The Trustee Board’s central responsibility is to manage Mahamuni’s finances. This includes receiving donations, and also deploying the budget for maintenance, renovation, and new construction and landscaping. The various services, systems and facilities in place also need to be reviewed and improved, such as toilet facilities and hygiene, shoe storage, parking, and waste management. Everything must be planned holistically and in harmony with the central vision, not ‘randomly’ or ‘without specific purpose’. There should be ‘unity’ in the masterplan, and small projects should not be undertaken separately from it. Everything the trustees do must serve the unified vision of the masterplan. All this should be undertaken, U Soe Lin explains, to allow pilgrims to worship the Mahamuni Buddha Image in an optimum atmosphere that is conducive to their Buddhist discipline and devotional practice.

U Soe Lin was keen to explain how he had reformed the process for renovation and new construction at Mahamuni. Larger scale

renovations and new construction is offered for tender via an inspection committee and under the additional supervision of the Mandalay Regional Government, who subject all the tender offers to thorough examination. U Soe Lin also requested that the regional government's chief minister send his auditors to inspect all of the Trustee Board's record-keeping and expense data for every project. This process of 'outside-auditing' has now been successfully completed twice, he explained. The Trustees were asked for additional documents by the auditors on both occasions and were able to provide these to the latter's satisfaction. U Soe Lin said that his intention was to make the process more transparent and efficient, and to establish these reforms as a permanent improvement that would be upheld by his successors.

He was also forward in offering a full justification for why the trustees had undertaken so much new construction since his chairmanship:

Why do we construct new buildings to house staff in such volume? Staff accommodation has been inadequate for a long time, and in many ways. There are staff apartments mostly in the eastern and western corners of the compound, and also smaller numbers elsewhere within it. All are in poor condition. But our other primary concern is that the presence of this accommodation within the compound's boundaries results in much profane behaviour taking place here. This includes using the toilet, washing underwear and lower garments, bathing, cooking and accumulating garbage. Also married couples living together and childbirth. Finally, some people may spit on the ground of the compound. It is certainly necessary then, to provide new, good quality accommodation for staff outside of the pagoda's boundaries.

He went on to describe in detail the master plan to address this problem, which is ongoing at the present time. This involved the demolition of various buildings and facilities within the Mahamuni compound, including apartments, toilets and canteens, and the construction of new multistorey apartment blocks in a space

outside and west of the compound. The plan involved not only removal of internal structures, but also some outside that were too close to the compound's walls. The compound is to be cleaned and purged of anything that clutters or covers the ritual and religious components of its architecture, and this includes the boundary walls, inside and out. Anything that "imposes upon Mahamuni's beauty" is to be removed.

Everything must conform to the master plan and be harmonious in theme. It is like when a house is built, and one occupant might choose to paint his bedroom a color that is pleasing to him. This is acceptable only if the color is in harmony with the color scheme of the rest of the house. In our implementation process, we delegate authority on the condition that the rubric of our development plan is respected. And what is this rubric? What is the theme? It is simply that the Mahamuni Compound must be an exemplary Buddhist space in Myanmar; a harmonious garden of Myanmar Buddhism. When pilgrims arrive here, we want them to be impressed by the beautiful and clean environment so that they can concentrate on reducing their greed, anger and ignorance and feel at peace in their worship. So we must make this compound a beautiful, clean and peaceful place. A Buddhist garden which is filled with cultural heritage for the Buddhists of Myanmar. This the rubric that we work to, and the developments we undertake should not be too modernizing or introduce new designs, but be respectful of the heritage and traditional art style of the Mahamuni compound.

Despite the emphasis on heritage and tradition, the master plan also involves major upgrades in infrastructure and security, some of which have been deeply unpopular with members of the local community:

Parking is a big issue. We worked with the Myanmar Architecture Association and the Myanmar Civil Engineering Association to design and construct

appropriate car parking facilities. The design includes a covered walkway for visitors to walk from the carpark to the compound. There used to be an iron fence between the old walkway and the turtle lake, and this fence was supposed to be necessary to keep those with bad intentions; beggars, drug addicts and so forth; from entering via the lake. In my opinion, the best way to deal with people like this is change their mindset through the design of the compound – if it is a beautiful green environment than that will dissuade them from poor and negligent behavior. If this fails, our security services can assume responsibility. I want all pilgrims to feel a sense of ‘openness’ and freedom and a lack of restriction. Whenever we go somewhere and see iron fences we do not feel openness and freedom, and I do not want Mahamuni to be like such places. Good behavior can be encouraged through other techniques. And so we removed the fence, and put down Japanese turf and planted flowers instead. It is a sort of natural boundary. Also, I do not allow itinerant vendors to operate in the compound. I don’t want to see any garbage lying around in our clean environment. I have also forbidden idlers to come in and sleep or lounge around in the compound’s museums and other cool spaces.

All of our new toilet facilities were constructed by a private company. We had to provide signs in the toilets giving rules and regulations for use, as many pilgrims that visit are from rural areas and lack the proper etiquette. We want to educate them, but we are also patient and tolerant. We also put donation boxes outside the toilets, so pilgrims could help with the cost of cleaning and maintaining them. As for the teams of cleaners, I sent them to train with hotel cleaners so that they know how to maintain the highest possible standards. I want to upgrade and develop the Mahamuni compound and its community.

I often post on Facebook about what we are doing, so that people who are interested can see the results of our work. Most people appreciate this I think, but occasionally someone will respond unpleasantly. Many people complained when I instituted parking fees under the new system, some even using very offensive language. However, I don't listen to these rude words. I don't feel anything. I feel confident of my reasons for this decision, and if someone was to call a meeting and ask me to explain myself then I would have no difficulty doing so. The anger and misunderstanding of others does not affect me. It was my decision to build the covered walkway and the roofs that shade the parked cars. Also to put a toll booth at the carpark entrance. The reason for this was that before, many locals would use the street as a short cut, and there were also many taxis parked there looking for fares, in addition to the parked cars of itinerant vendors clogging the space up. This was very unsatisfactory for pilgrims and visitors. The problem has been solved by installing the toll booth and the parking fee system. Now it is the locals who miss their shortcut and the vendors who are dissatisfied – this is who is complaining now. Not only is the carpark improved in the ways I just mentioned, but we also have a sensor and card system to prevent vehicle theft. Despite all these improvements, the toll booth generates a profit for the trustees which can be put toward other such material benefits in the compound.



## Staff and security



**Figure 4.3** Security staff in Mahamuni Pagoda (Zin Mar Latt)

The Trustee Board under U Soe Lin have significantly extended security protocol and increased the number of CCTV cameras and security staff, whom have almost doubled in number (see below). His implicit view is that the Mahamuni compound is a place that needs to be policed, not just in terms of regulating social behavior but also actual crime prevention.

A big part of our responsibility is also to take care of the Mahamuni Buddha Image. Mahamuni's shrines and covering structures have been damaged or destroyed by fire at least nine times, both here in Mandalay and before in Rakaing. Fortunately the image itself was never damaged. Once, a thief broke into my office here and stole valuable objects that had been offered to Mahamuni. This is one reason why we have installed additional CCTV cameras. Other crimes have been observed thanks to these cameras: one case of a thief stealing a woman's purse. This was handed over to the police who prosecuted the case in

court. Several times thieves have tried to scrape off the image's accumulated gold leaf. I once discovered such an instance myself when I was worshipping Mahamuni. I found four gouged lines across the image's back where the thief had scraped off gold. We checked the CCTV footage and identified the thief. His greed inevitably caused him to return for more, but we did not arrest him, I merely ordered security to watch him closely. Because of this he was unable to scrape more gold off the image, and we also obtained from him the tool he was using to do this. Like other thieves, I don't think he will come back again because he knows now of the extent of our security apparatus.

U Soe Lin displayed a reverential attitude toward Thado Minsaw, who as crown prince during the reign of Bodawpaya (1782-1819), conquered Arakan and brought the Mahamuni Image to Mandalay. Interestingly, he valued the historical royal as a '*nat*-like' guardian spirit who watched over the Mahamuni compound, and whose role was mirrored by the Trustee's security team:

It's very important for people to know about Thado Minsaw, who was the son of King Bodawpaya and brought the Mahamuni Image to Mandalay from Rakhine State. We greatly value him as our benefactor, and have honored his statue with fresh gold leaf and new LED lighting in its new location outside. We supplicate him to guard and watch over the Mahamuni compound. Our security team can guard what is concrete and physical here, but we need Thado Minsaw to guard the things of value here which are not physical. Every day we supplicate him, pray for his wellbeing and share our merit with him. Pilgrims who are not familiar with his role in Mahamuni's arrival in Mandalay can learn about this in the History Museum.



**Figure 4.4** Thado Minsaw statue in Mahamuni Pagoda (Zin Mar Latt)

Ultimately however, despite his Buddhist piety and respect for tradition, U Soe Lin's business-oriented values and previous management experience inform his approach to dealing with Mahamuni's staff members:

I am very aware of human psychology, and I use it to my advantage in my management of staff. Everybody wants to feel valued in their work, and I respond to this. My experience comes from my days managing a staff of 300 at a dairy factory. You must have a strategy. I teach my staff how to work, how to think, how to behave, and how to be mindful. The problem is there are two types of staff: those who are essentially responsible and those who are not. I test individuals by setting tasks for them and then I observe how they perform. Now almost all of my staff here perform at a high level. Under my training they have improved themselves and are successful in their endeavors, even beyond their work at Mahamuni. Some have work in other companies, and on numerous occasions

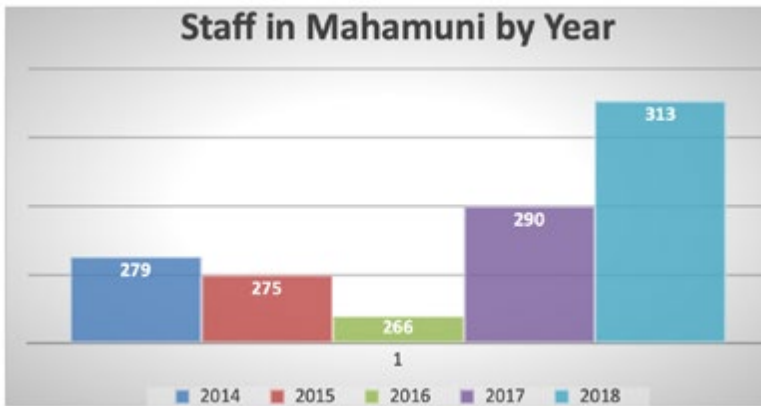
I have received contact from their new bosses, complimenting me on what good and polished employees they are. I dedicate myself to training them well, and am not afraid to use discipline also. If their behavior displeases me then of course I scold and admonish them.

### Staff numbers

The tables below show data given to us by U Soe Lin's office regarding staff numbers from the years 2014-2018. It demonstrates an initial small dip in numbers the year that U Soe Lin was appointed chairman, followed by a relatively steep rise, a trend that has apparently continued according to our informants, although we were unable to obtain exact numbers for after 2018.

Department	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Management	23	23	21	21	18
Cleaning	49	52	45	36	45
Garden	32	25	28	33	38
Museum	23	21	22	27	25
Security (Morning)	16	17	17	22	27
Security (Afternoon)	16	17	17	22	27
Security (Night)	16	18	18	22	29
Financial	55	53	52	59	61
Enterprise	49	49	46	48	43
Total	279	275	266	290	313

**Figure 4.5** Staff numbers table



**Figure 4.6** Staff numbers by year graph

### **Criticism of trustee board**

In and around the compound, attitudes toward the Trustee Board, and U Soe Lin personally, are quite diverse, and many people are supportive of him, respectful of his position, and impressed by his regime's innovations, especially in regard to order and cleanliness. For most of our informants, order and cleanliness were important because they reflected the status of the site and its contents, either in the eyes of visiting Burmese pilgrims or especially in those of foreign visitors. Some were even happy to accept reforms that disadvantaged them personally when it came to Mahamuni's reputation and presentation. However, we also encountered a lot of criticism and resentment of U Soe Lin, primarily from those whose livelihoods and convenience have been affected by his single-minded reforms. He was accused of not consulting the local communities around the compound and those who have worked in it for many years or decades prior to his own appointment to the Trustee Board. Specific issues mentioned included the removal of public drinking fountains, the closure of roads and thoroughfares used by locals as shortcuts, and the over-formalization of parking arrangements. His prohibition of itinerant vendors moving through the compound, and his greater regulation of commercial and social behavior, has been particularly unpopular. We

interviewed a high number of vendors whose income had fallen due to these changes. Many opined that U Soe Lin was a rich man who spent a lot of time abroad, and had no understanding of or sympathy for local people and their needs and lifestyles.

As discussed in chapter 2, thanaka sellers are one group who have uniformly experienced negative impacts from U Soe Lin's reforms. They were all relocated to a new space that is cramped, dark and out of the way, and their businesses are suffering badly as a result. A number of them have had to abandon their trade and leave the compound. Votive flower arrangement volunteers have also suffered since being prohibited by the Trustee Board to work in the arcades where most of the foot traffic is. They were relocated to a space near the Foreign Donations Museum, since when the donations upon which they depend have declined.

Vendors and arcade shopkeepers were one group which contained many critical voices. Some pointed out instances of incomplete and shoddy renovation work, and of renovations and construction which damaged or destroyed original vintage artwork. Most seriously of all, some informants considered U Soe Lin to be corrupt and dishonest. One informant asserted that the Trustee Board only paid outward respect to the Council of Senior Monks, and in many instances ignored their advice and instructions. Another claimed that the Trustees do not open construction jobs for tender fairly, but award the contracts to their own preferred bidders for reasons of personal gain. This informant also asserted that U Soe Lin had claimed expenses for repairs that were not reflected in the finished job, and went on to list specific details and figures. All of this must be considered hearsay in the context of this report.

An uneasy relationship exists between the Trustee Board and the shopkeepers in the compound's arcades. Despite our efforts much remains unclear about this sensitive issue, but the origin is in the fact that an administration previous to U Soe Lin's sold many of the shops in the arcades to their tenants, resulting in a significant portion of the Trustee's budget disappearing. Any further research on Mahamuni's social and economic affairs would ideally try to shed more light on this issue.





**Figure 4.7** Arcade shops in Mahamuni Pagoda. Note the red lines bordering the walkway. (Zin Mar Latt)



**Figure 4.8** Mahamuni merchandise for sale in arcade shop (Zin Mar Latt)

## Discussion and analysis

The power structure we see today in the Mahamuni compound's custodial management emerged in the period after British annexation of upper Burma, and was gradually consolidated and institutionalized after the end of the Second World War and Burmese independence. From early on, this structure was open only to relatively high-status individuals in Mandalay society, who were connected to or part of the city's municipal administration and religious authorities. U Soe Lin was chosen by these authorities, and it can be assumed that there is little or no difference between his values and goals, and those of the municipal government. His broad rubric has been the development of the Mahamuni compound as a prestigious site of high national and religious importance, and as an international tourist attraction.

What does this sort of 'development' entail? The compound has been extensively renovated and rebuilt, and given many cosmetic uplifts including landscaped garden areas and modern facilities. Behavior is more heavily regulated with a view to controlling all commercial activity and making it legible to the Trustee Board, and promoting order and cleanliness at the expense of some of the *de facto* social arrangements that characterized the space and its communities for many decades before. This has included removing poor or itinerant people from the compound, sealing throughfares used as shortcuts by locals, and prohibiting certain religious practices such as touching the statues in the Khmer Bronze Museum. However, it has also made the site easier to visit for tourists in terms of its greatly improved parking and toilet facilities, and heavily increased security. The pagoda now charges foreign tourists an entrance fee, for which they receive a souvenir ticket, sticker and map. The majority of visitors and pilgrims engage in two forms of votive practice: *thanaka* and gold leaf. The *thanaka* trade has suffered under U Soe Lin's regime, who do not in practice seem to accord it prestige or importance. The gold leaf trade has been completely reformed however, with a new tender system, quality standards, staff and kiosks, and the waste gold collection program. Staff and security have also been increased substantially, with new staff accommodation outside the compound and new CCTV cameras and security guards inside.



Despite U Soe Lin's rhetoric about tradition, religious piety and cultural heritage, he has constructed many new modernist buildings both within and without the compound and also sterilized and suppressed some of Mahamuni's less tangible cultural heritage in the form of longstanding social arrangements and popular religious practices. In analyzing his motives, character and performance it has been very difficult to remain objective, given how easily he may seem to fit a stereotypical authoritarian template. Looking at all of our data holistically, he appears sincere in his good intentions for Mahamuni and in terms of his personal conduct, but ultimately his vision is at odds with what the site has been for the community in which it is located. International tourism development of this kind leads quickly toward sterilization, monetization, and gentrification. This is part of a global process, and as seems to be the case now, ultimately more people will benefit from Mahamuni's increased visitor numbers and facilities than will be disadvantaged.

It is not surprising that the Mandalay establishment chose someone with U Soe Lin's background in business and management to develop the Mahamuni compound for tourism. The business world values profit maximization, surveillance, efficiency and innovation—it cares little for tradition beyond the delivery of empty platitudes. But this begs a greater question about the nature of pagodas and other Buddhist spaces in Myanmar in all their myriad social roles and functions. The Mahamuni compound was already a thriving and diverse market long before U Soe Lin was appointed chairman of the Trustee Board. Perhaps there are other more pressing questions to address, concerning for example the status of women in Mahamuni, and in the crafts and trades that Mahamuni patronizes. Female-dominated *thanaka* has been devalued by the Trustee Board despite its ritual centrality along with gold leaf. But the male-dominated latter has been emphasized as the primary and identifying votive practice (and network) of the Mahamuni compound. It is of greatly higher value a material than *thanaka*, it adheres permanently to the Mahamuni Buddha Image itself for all to see, and it generates a significant income for the Trustee Board.



# 5

## CONCLUDING REMARKS AND COMMENTARY

In this concluding section, we give a brief of summary of our research agenda and findings, and indicate the themes that have emerged from these. We then suggest some possible directions for future study.

This research set out to explore some of the material aspects of practice in the worship of the Mahamuni Buddha image, and trace the less visible social and economic ecology that supports, or is supported, by these practices. Our interest was the space itself and how this functioned and was managed, in light of the networks of people and material that flowed in such volume through it. We were also curious as to the extensive renovation and construction that was taking place in the Mahamuni compound, and how this was affecting these networks and flows. Settling on two primary votive practices at the pagoda—thanaka and gold leaf—we attempted to map out a network for each by following the material itself from source to terminus. Then with a more holistic and comprehensive schema in place, something which we call a ‘votive network’, we could target the necessary informants to add texture and address our research concerns about the direction of the pagoda’s development.

In thanaka and gold leaf, we found two votive networks with both similarities and differences. Both are symbolic of Myanmar and its propagated national culture, and both represent traditional crafts or industries which are struggling to survive in the modern market

economy. Both industries have representative associations to act in their interest. Both materials are bought and donated to generate merit, and both come into contact with the body of the Mahamuni Buddha image, upon which they become sacralized. However, the gold leaf finds its terminus in the image itself: it joins with and becomes the image. The thanaka, ground into paste and mixed with water, runs over the image and is collected, before being dispersed amongst individuals and leaving the image and its compound with them. Thanaka is associated with women, and its donation and grinding with poorer female devotees. The grinding workshop and retail market are peripheral or even hidden from the central pavilion. Gold leaf, however, is associated with men, and its trustee-managed retail points are in the very heart of the central pavilion.

The Mahamuni compound is a bustling and complex space with many functions: religious, educational, recreational, mnemonic, and commercial. It is natural that such a space needs constant maintenance and effective management. We wanted to explore the history of Mahamuni's Trustee Board and understand why the current membership were engaged in such noticeably higher degrees of construction and development than at any time before. We discovered in Chairman U Soe Lin a lifelong businessman and pious Buddhist who represents Mandalay's political and administrative establishment. In line with nationwide policies of tourism promotion and development, his goal is to impose social, economic and aesthetic order upon the Mahamuni Pagoda, and assert it as a major domestic and international tourist attraction. This has been of benefit to some and has harmed the interests of others. The thanaka network, especially its retail sellers, have been negatively affected, whilst the gold leaf network has broadly profited. However, the Trustee Board themselves remain the major node and beneficiary in this network, due to the fact that they regulate the trade as a corporate buyer and retailer. Figures remain elusive, but it can be presumed that trade generates a large profit for the pagoda and probably represents its primary income stream.

### **Buddhist materiality: arts, crafts and votives**

Our focus on material culture and the practices that associate with

it has been fruitful. The Mahamuni Pagoda and popular Buddhism in Myanmar more generally is nothing if not at least a celebratory efflorescence of objects, architecture and the rituals that fuse them and their communities together. Monastic architecture, Buddha images and other sacred objects form the religious topography of the country, and they have naturally attracted much scholarly attention (for example Green, 2003; 2018; Fraser-lu et al, 2015; Stadtner, 2015). More ephemeral objects such as votives, religious accessories and merchandise have been largely ignored in the study of Burmese Buddhism, despite their central importance in the ritual repertoires of individual Buddhists, and the establishment of institutions and largescale cults such as that of Mahamuni (for discussion of Thai context see McDaniel, 2008).

In addition to their multivalent symbolic qualities, both thanaka and gold leaf are industries that represent thousands of people. Our research has taken an inventory of the individuals, groups, craftspeople, advocates, wholesale and retail traders, and consumers, who make up these industries and their networks, with particular attention to changes experienced in recent years. We discovered that both of these industries have long struggled to survive, due to competition from alternative mass-produced products that are cheaper but of lower quality, and the emergence of new technologies and markets. Mahamuni has certainly played a role in their survival, but that role is somewhat akin to a life-support machine. The Thanaka grinding workshop and the face-washing ceremony officiants will always need thanaka, but this need does not guarantee or even support the compound's thanaka retailers. At best it will add to the demand for a minimum of trees to be grown and harvested in the traditional manner. However, it may be precisely its 'traditional' status that will allow it to endure—it is this quality that U Kyaw Moe uses to promote thanaka as a form of heritage that needs to be enshrined and protected. It will be interesting to follow the travails of the industry now that thanaka is registered as a GI product, and U Kyaw Moe's association becomes more influential and institutionalized. The Mahamuni Pagoda's influence within the thanaka network should not be over-estimated, given thanaka's much wider use and applications throughout Myanmar.

In the case of gold leaf, the Mahamuni Trustee Board helps to keep

the industry alive through its regular purchases and its thorough insistence on the quality that traditional methods deliver. However, whilst its domination of the trade and its regulation of the tender system have insured that more gold leaf businesses survive due to a consistent bare minimum of orders, an overwhelming number of the businesses we spoke to were struggling to generate any significant profit. Their attempts at cooperation and organization through trade associations have been less successful than the example of thanaka's U Kyaw Moe, although it may be less justified than it appears to compare the two. Gold leaf as a traditional craft is not generally or officially acknowledged as national heritage, and whilst it is now exempt from some taxes due to its status as a religious product, it is not protected or promoted at the governmental level. There remain 'black boxes' in the gold leaf network despite our efforts, but one thing seems clear: the Trustee Board retains its sole right to retail gold leaf inside the compound. It is retail that generates sustainable profit in the gold leaf industry, and this is a clear motivation to maintain their monopoly and increase the flow of pilgrims, or 'customers'.

Without the careful focus on votive materials, this fascinating socio-economic dynamic of Mahamuni, its worship and its management, would remain hidden beneath a more simplistic and surface-level description of mass merit-making and local Buddhist myths. We argue that more materially orientated studies of popular religion in Myanmar would further illuminate the *agency* behind religious trends and movements, and make the mingling of religion, politics and economics in Myanmar more legible.

### **Buddhist nationalism and nationalist Buddhism**

The Mahamuni compound is not merely the reliquary of a revered Buddha image, but also a repository of Burmese historical objects and the modern nationalist narratives that envelop them. This is most clearly the case with the museums, which taken collectively, assert Myanmar's centrality as a Buddhist country with physical links to the Buddha himself, in addition to a rich premodern culture that was on the one hand piously Buddhist, and on the other, monarchical, martial in character, and aggressively

expansionist. The collections of Buddha images and exquisitely crafted votive objects are balanced by weapons, military paraphernalia and items of tribute. Myanmar's status and prestige is enhanced by the Foreign Donations Museum, which showcases items gifted not only by other Buddhist countries but also even Christian Great Britain, its former colonial master. The History Museum with its European-style paintings illustrates the seizing of the Mahamuni Buddha Image from Arakan by the Burmese court during their successful military campaign there, and the Khmer bronzes housed in their own museum are likewise war booty several times over. This unambiguous context certainly adds to Mahamuni's status as a site of national significance within Myanmar, and demonstrates the extent to which Burmese nationalism and Buddhism are alloyed together in contemporary official discourses.

Interestingly, one group of vendors informed us that U Soe Lin was trying to develop the Mahamuni compound with a view to making it the Burmese equivalent of and equal to the Temple of the Emerald Buddha in neighboring Thailand. The Emerald Buddha was the foremost Palladium of the Siamese monarchy in the Bangkok era and has a long and illustrious history in the Tai Buddhist ecumene (broadly speaking, most of present-day Thailand, Laos and Cambodia). It remains the Thai kingdom's most revered and politically important Buddha image to this day. Its opulent shrine is located inside the Grand Palace, and its three sets of seasonal garments are still changed by the Thai king himself in a long-established ritual. The image often appears in state media that happens to depict Thai national symbols, such as videos made to accompany the National Anthem. The Temple of the Emerald Buddha is one of the country's most prestigious and popular tourist attractions in terms of both domestic pilgrims and international tourists. The latter group pay an entrance fee of 500 THB (15.5 USD), which is extremely high compared to other famous temples in Thailand which typically charge foreign tourists a small fee of 20-40 baht. However, the fee also gains tourists access to the rest of the palatial complex in which the Emerald Buddha is housed. The Mahamuni compound started charging foreign tourists an entrance fee in 2019. The tickets feature colorful logo-like depictions of Mahamuni, and visitors also receive a sticker and a map.

There are many correspondences between the Mahamuni Buddha Image and the Emerald Buddha. Mahamuni is probably the single most important Buddha Image in Myanmar, despite the prominence of other Buddhist monuments such as Shwe Dagon in Yangon and the Golden Rock Pagoda in Mon State. Both Buddha images came to their present locations as war booty, and both were the Palladiums of a succession of premodern kingdoms and very much retain the charisma that derives from that, despite how much political narratives may have changed. Both are officially held to be powerfully sentient, and are worshipped and propitiated by political leaders. Both draw domestic and international tourists, and both are intimately bound up in modern nationalist as well as religious narratives in their respective countries. Unlike Thailand however, whose enduring monarchy is the very taproot of modern Thai nationalism, Myanmar has not had a monarch since the institution was abolished by the conquering British in 1886. Throughout Myanmar's post-colonial history, the country's monarchical legacy has occupied an uncertain place in domestic narratives of national history. Different regimes have had varying attitudes toward the institution of monarchy, whose history is so imbricated with that of Buddhism in Myanmar. This ambiguity is reflected in the frequent movement of statues and portraits of historical royalty between museums and pagodas. With this in mind it is interesting to consider U Soe Lin's promotion of Thado Minsaw, and his deliberate association between this historical prince and the idea of security and guardianship.

Leaving aside the complex question of monarchy and the way it is remembered in contemporary Myanmar, we can see clearly why the Temple of the Emerald Buddha is an attractive model for U Soe Lin and the interests he represents. Further bolstering the association between Buddhism and nationhood is certainly desirable for ideological and economic reasons. Domestic visitors supplicate Mahamuni and make merit but the site also engenders feelings of pride and a sense of national community and heritage, something that was evidenced in the interview data we collected. Based on a 2016 gate count, the Temple of the Emerald Buddha draws around 8 million visitors per year (<https://www.tatnews.org/2016/06/bangkoks-iconic-grand-palace-makes-worlds-50->



most-visited-tourist-attractions-list/ [Accessed 8th May 2021]). Given the government's goals to develop Myanmar's international tourist industry, Thailand provides an exemplary template due to its success in this regard and its cultural similarity to Myanmar. (This research was carried out prior to the Covid 19 global pandemic and the 2021 military takeover in Myanmar. Both of these developments render the future of Myanmar tourism extremely uncertain.)

### **Tourism and development in Mandalay: by whom, for whom?**

The number of international tourists in Myanmar has only very gradually increased since the government began to open the country up formally to foreign visitors in 2011, but arrival numbers are still extremely low compared to the country's neighbors. In 2018 there were 1,551,592 arrivals, whilst Thailand received over 38 million by contrast (<https://tourism.gov.mm/statistics/arrivals-2019-december/> [Last accessed 7th August 2021]). Myanmar is the second least-visited country in Southeast Asia after the Muslim sultanate of Brunei. One of the factors that prevents Myanmar's fledgling mass tourism industry from taking off is its lack of infrastructure. Despite a potential wealth of cultural and natural attractions, many of these lack even basic sanitation and adequate power supplies, let alone the necessary resorts, hotels and restaurants to cater for foreign tourists.

The *Myanmar Times* reported in 2019 that the Tourism Development Committee had authorized a project to set up two 'tourism zones' in the Mandalay region, and would at the end of July of that year, put the contracts for their development up for tender (*Myanmar Times*, 2019b). Bidders would need to develop the infrastructure in their zones, according to the Planning and Finance Minister, building roads, public amenities and providing sanitation. They would also have to ensure that the zones were "clean and tidy" as "required" by tourists (*ibid*). They would then be authorized to charge an entrance fee of 25,000 MMK per tourist. The previous April, the same newspaper reported that the Mahamuni Pagoda had for the first time begun to charge foreign tourists an entrance fee of 5,000 MMK (*Myanmar Times*, 2019a).

In the article a spokesman for the Myanmar Tour Guide Association expressed surprise at this development, due to very low visitor numbers and a lack of amenities at the site.

Developing Myanmar's tourist industry is highly desirable, due to the infrastructural development it will occasion, the jobs it will create, and the potentially enormous boost to the national economy that it could offer. This is certainly not to deny the potential problems embedded in this sort of development, such as unsustainable practices, environmental damage and corporate monopolies which enrich elites and do not sufficiently benefit local communities. U Soe Lin was appointed by the Mandalay political establishment, and his motivations and goals are very clearly aligned with that establishment's program to develop the region's tourism industry as a part of the national tourism development plan. We conclude this report with a note of caution: an expanding tourism industry should bring multiple benefits to all stakeholders, including and especially those communities who are set to experience the most dramatic change to their environment and lifestyles as a result of it. Our research has provided evidence of people who are very happy with the Trustee Board's actions since 2016, but also some groups who are decidedly unhappy. The latter groups are all local people, members of the communities in whose midst Mahamuni is located. Not only are livelihoods under threat, but also some longstanding religious and cultural practices have been prohibited or prevented by the trustees. A fine line must be walked by Myanmar's national and local leaders and captains of industry, in order not to sterilize the very living culture upon which tourism is based, and to ensure that the practitioners of that culture are able to earn a sufficient living and share in the fruits of development.

## REFERENCES

- Ahmad, M., Ahmad, M. S., Hashim, J., & Yusuf, W. S. W. (2016). The Role of Religion in Higher Education Funding: Special Reference to Hinduism and Buddhism in Malaysia. *GJAT*, 5(1), 69-74. <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/ea38/59f970b93fa5a55a5b2aaa1a5fc2b614afcb.pdf>
- Aung Khin. (2020, March 9). Religious titles conferred on Sanghas, nuns, lay devotees. *THE GLOBAL NEW LIGHT OF MYANMAR*. P.1-3. <https://www.burmalibrary.org/en/the-global-new-light-of-myanmar-monday-9-march-2020>
- Aung Thar Oo. (2009, May 14). ကမ္ဘာ့က အံ့သြစေးမောရသည့် မြန်မာ့ ရွှေဆိုင်ခင်း၊ 150th Anniversary Magazine of Mandalay, p. 411-414.
- Ba Khin, S. U. (1991). *Dhamma Texts. The International Meditation Centers in the Tradition of Sayagyi U Ba Khin, Dhamma Texts Series 1.*
- Carstens, C. (2020). Gift narration: dynamic themes of reciprocity, debt, and social relations in Theravāda Buddhist Myanmar. *Journal of contemporary religion*, 35(1), 31-51. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2020.1695799>
- Comaroff, J., & Comaroff, J. L. (1999). Occult economies and the violence of abstraction: notes from the South African postcolony. *American ethnologist*, 26(2), 279-303. <https://doi.org/10.1525/ae.1999.26.2.279>
- Comaroff, J. & Comaroff, J. (2001). Millennial Capitalism: First Thoughts on a Second Coming. In J. Comaroff, J. Comaroff & R. Weller (Ed.), *Millennial Capitalism and the Culture of Neoliberalism* (pp. 1-56). New York, USA: Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822380184-001>
- Cook, J. (2013). Justin Mcdaniel: *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk: Practicing Buddhism in Modern Thailand*. xiv, 327 pp. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011. ISBN 978 0 231 15376 8. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 76(1), 189-191. doi:10.1017/S0041977X12001863

- Davis, R. H. (1997). *Lives of Indian Images*. West Sussex: Princeton University Press.
- Department of Myanmar (Myanmarsar-Aphawe). (2017). မျက်ပါးမျက်ပါး ခတ်ရွှေမုန့်ရွှေပြားခတ်ရွှေခတ်၊ ရွှေလှောင်စက္ကူ. In *Myanmar-English Dictionary* (p. 363-423). Sarana Press.
- Department of Myanmar (Myanmarsar Apawe). (1998). Teik. In *Myanmar-English dictionary* (5th ed., p.176).
- Department of Myanmar (Myanmarsar-Aphawe). (1980). ရွှေကြိုးသတ်၊ ရွှေခတ်၊ ရွှေခတ်စက္ကူ၊ ရွှေချ၊ ရွှေခိုင်း. In *Myanmar Dictionary* (1st ed., p. 62). Sape Beikman Press.
- Dove, C. (2017). Giving Trends in Myanmar: More Than Merit Making. *Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies*, 10 (2), 205-222. <https://doi.org/10.14764/10.ASEAS-2017.2-5>
- Fraser-lu, S. & Stadtner, D. M. (2015). *Buddhist Art of Myanmar*. Yale University Press.
- Gabaude, L. (2003). Where Ascetics Get Comfort and Recluses Go Public: Museums for Buddhist Saints in Thailand. In Granoff, Phyllis & Shinohara, Koichi (eds.) *Pilgrims, Patrons, and Place: Localizing Sanctity in Asian Religions*, pp. 108-123. Vancouver-Toronto: University of British Columbia Press.
- Gellner, D. N. (2001). *The anthropology of Buddhism and Hinduism: Weberian themes* (p. 416). Oxford University Press.
- Gombrich, R. (1975). Buddhist karma and social control. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 17(2), 212-220. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417500007751>
- Green, Alexander. (2003). *Burma: Art and Archaeology*. Art media Resources Ltd.
- Green, Alexander. (2018). *Buddhist Visual Cultures, Rhetoric, and Narrative in Late Burmese Wall Paintings*. Hong Kong University Press.
- Hall, D. D. (Ed.). (1997). *Lived religion in America: Toward a history of practice*. Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv143mdcw>
- Harvey, G.E. (2010). "History of Burma". New Delhi. Cosmo Publications.

- Hein Thar. (2020, April 3). Farmers turn away from cultural heritage contender. *Frontier Myanmar*. <https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/farmers-turn-away-from-cultural-heritage-contender/>
- Htin Aung, M. (1967). *A History of Burma*. New York and London. Columbia University Press. <https://www.soas.ac.uk/sbbr/editions/file64430.pdf>
- Htun Shain, N. (2016). ယဉ်ကျေးမှုမြို့တော်မှ မြန်မာ့ရိုးရာလုပ်ငန်းဆယ်ပွင့်ပန်း. (5th Ed.). Zinyatana Press.
- Htun Shain, N. (2018). ဝင်းတွေနဲ့တည်တဲ့မင်းနေပြည်, *The Capital founded with Compounds* (5th Ed.). Linn Thant Press.
- Jaquet, C., & Walton, M. J. (2013). Buddhism and relief in Myanmar: Reflections on relief as a practice of *dāna*. In *Buddhism, International Relief Work, and Civil Society* (pp. 51-73). Palgrave Macmillan, New York. [https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137380234\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137380234_3)
- Jory, P. (2016). Thailand's theory of monarchy: The Vessantara Jataka and the idea of the perfect man. SUNY Press. [https://www.amazon.com/Thailands-Theory-Monarchy-Vessantara-Perfect-ebook/dp/B01FGHSJH2/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?dchild=1&keywords=9781438460901&linkCode=qs&qid=1627443993&s=books&sr=1-1](https://www.amazon.com/Thailands-Theory-Monarchy-Vessantara-Perfect-ebook/dp/B01FGHSJH2/ref=sr_1_1?dchild=1&keywords=9781438460901&linkCode=qs&qid=1627443993&s=books&sr=1-1)
- Khin Su Wai. (2016, August 25). Gold-leaf producers feel price pinch. *The Myanmar Times*. <https://www.mmtimes.com/national-news/mandaly-upper-myanmar/22129-gold-leaf-producers-feel-price-pinch.html>
- King, V. T. (2007). *The sociology of Southeast Asia: Transformations in a developing region* (Vol. 3). Nias Press.
- Kyaw Ko Ko. (2019, June 12). Two tourism zones to be set up in Mandalay. *The Myanmar Times*. <https://www.mmtimes.com/news/two-tourism-zones-be-set-mandalay.html>
- Kyaw Swa Hlaing, C. (2019, November). Thanakha through Song. *Myanmar Thanakha Magazine*, 147-149.
- Ko Min (Indaw). (2019, Jan 19). 1st Myanmar's Thanakha Day to be organized in four different locations. *Myanmar Digital News*. <https://www.mdn.gov.mm/en/1st-myanmars-thanakha-day-be-organized-four-different-locations>
- Ladwig, P., & Sihlé, N. (Eds.). (2017). [Special Section:] Toward a comparative Anthropology of Buddhism [Special Issue]. *Religion and Society: Advances in Research*, 8(1). <http://hdl.handle.net/21.11116/0000-0000-2946-4>

- La Wonn. (2019, Jul 09). Myanmar thanakha products to be exhibited at Thai expo. Myanmar Digital News. <https://www.mdn.gov.mm/en/myanmar-thanakha-products-be-exhibited-thai-expo>
- Mahamuni Pagoda Trustee Board. (n.d). Disciplines of Phayagyi gawpaka apawe (Mahamuni trustee board) (draft), Chanmyatharsi Township, Mandalay City, Mandalay Region.
- Masitoh, A., Syahid, M. A., Jamil, H., & Sabri, W. W. Y. (2016). The Role of Religion in Higher Education Funding: Special Reference to Hinduism and Buddhism in Malaysia. GLOBAL JOURNAL AL-THAQFAH, 6(1), 69-74. <https://doi.org/10.7187/GJAT10420160601>
- Mauss, Marcel. (2011 [1925]). The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies. USA: Martino Fine Books.
- Maung Maung Tin, U. (2004). Konbaungzet Maha Yazawintawgyi (The Great chronicle of Konbaung Dynasty ) Vol.III, (4th ed.). Yarpay Press.
- Maung Maung Tin, U. (2018). Mandalay Mahamuni Yoke-shin-taw: History of Phayagyi, (5th ed.). Gaw-pa-kha Apawe.
- Maung Zaw. (2018, August 11). Mandalay gold -leaf business protest new rules at Shwedagon. The Myanmar Times. <https://www.mmtimes.com/lifestyle/21874-gold-leaf-a-look-behind-the-scenes.html>
- Ministry of Religious Affairs and Culture. (2016). မြန်မာရက်စဉ်သမိုင်း. ပထမတွဲ (အကြိုသမိုင်းကာလမှ ၁၉၄၅ အထိ). (2nd Ed.). Department of Historical Research and National Library. Naypyitaw.
- Ministry of Religious Affairs and Culture. (n.d). Award Degree Qualification Requirement. [http://www.dra.gov.mm/?page\\_id=272](http://www.dra.gov.mm/?page_id=272). 27.7.2020, 2:30am.
- Ministry of Religious Affairs and Culture. (n.d). Historical Background of Award Degree. [http://www.dra.gov.mm/?page\\_id=260](http://www.dra.gov.mm/?page_id=260)
- Myanmar Translation Association. (1970). ရွှေမုံကို အလွှာပြုသည့်မြန်မာ အနုပညာ. In the Bank of Picture showing Knowledge, Myanmar Encyclopedia, Volume XI. Sapaybeikman Press.
- Myanmarsar Apawe. (1972). Mahamuni Paya (Mandalay). Myanmar Encyclopedia, Volume VIII. Sapaybeikman Press.

- Minudain. (2018, September 4). ထိန်းသိမ်းရမည့် မြန်မာ့ရိုးရာရွှေဆိုင်းပညာ. Mandalay Daily, P.4.
- Morgan, D. (2010). The material culture of lived religion: Visuality and embodiment. In *Mind and Matter: Selected papers of Nordic conference*. 40, (pp. 14-31). [pub/home/the-material-culture-of-lived-religions-visibility-and-embodiment](http://pub/home/the-material-culture-of-lived-religions-visibility-and-embodiment) [2019]
- Morgan, David. (2010). The material culture of lived religion: Visuality and embodiment. In *Mind and Matter: Selected papers of Nordic conference for Art Historians*, ed. Johanna Vakkari. *Studies in Art History*. 40, (pp. 14-31). No. 41. Helsinki: Helsingfors.
- Morgan, D. (2009). *Religion and Material Culture: The Matter of Belief*. Oxford: Routledge.
- Myo Win Tun (Monywa). (2019 June 01). Thanakha association plans drive against fake cosmetics. *The Global New Light of Myanmar*. <https://www.gnlm.com.mm/thanakha-association-plans-drive-against-fake-cosmetics/>
- Nandamalabhivamsa, Dr. (8.7. 2017). Thitsar Tayar and Strength of Affection (Myittar). <https://www.thitsarparamisociety.com/dr-nandamarlabiwinsa/>
- Paññavajiro, P. P. (2021). An Analysis of Perfection of Charity (Danaparami) in Jataka Atthakatha. *Journal of Multidisciplinary in Humanities and Social Sciences*, 4(1), 63-73. Retrieved from [https://so04.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/jmhs1\\_s/article/view/244674](https://so04.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/jmhs1_s/article/view/244674).
- Plate, S. B. (Ed.). (2015). *Key terms in material religion*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Prieto, J. C. P. (2017). Iconic Power: materiality and meaning in social life. *Revista Escuela de Administración de Negocios*, (82), 231-237. <https://www.redalyc.org/pdf/206/20652069011.pdf>
- Phyo Wai Kyaw. (2018, January 29). Myanmar Gold leaf making business faces competition, disruption. *The Myanmar Times*. <https://www.mmtimes.com/news/gold-leaf-making-business-faces-competition-disruption.html>
- Rotheray, J. J. (2016). Doi Kham's Miracle: Domestic Tourism and Popular Religion in Northern Thailand. *Asian Journal of Tourism Research*, 1(1), 167-180. [https://www.academia.edu/download/49910748/Doi\\_Khams\\_Miracle.pdf](https://www.academia.edu/download/49910748/Doi_Khams_Miracle.pdf)

- Schober, J. (2011). *Modern Buddhist Conjunctures in Myanmar*. University of Hawaii Press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt6wqrx>
- Schober, J. (2008). Communities of Interpretation in the Study of Religion in Burma. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 39(2), 255-267. [https://www.academia.edu/download/\\*](https://www.academia.edu/download/*).pdf
- Schober, J. (1997). Trajectories in Buddhist sacred biography. In *Sacred biography in the Buddhist traditions of South and Southeast Asia* (pp. 1-16). University of Hawaii Press.
- Schober, J. (1997). *Sacred biography in the Buddhist traditions of South and Southeast Asia*. University of Hawaii Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780824864217>
- Shwe Yoe. Mandalay. (2007). *Mandalay-myo-paw-shi Shay-haung-tankhogyi-phayamya-thamyang* (History of Ancient Pagodas in Mandalay). Shwe Yoe (Mandalay) Book House.
- Smith, Bradley L. (ed). (1978). *Religion and Legitimation of Power in Thailand, Laos and Burma*. Chambersburg: Anima Press.
- Spiro, M. E. (1982). *Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and Its Burmese Vicissitudes*, 2nd ed. Berkeley, CA: University of California.
- Spiro, M. E. (1966). Buddhism and Economic Action in Burma 1. *American Anthropologist*, 68(5), 1163-1173. <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.1966.68.5.02a00040>
- Stadtner, D. M. (2015). *Sacred Sites of Burma*. Bangkok: River Books.
- Stengs, I. (2014). In Conversation: Sacred waste. *The Journal of Objects, Art and Belief*. 10(2), 235-238, DOI: 10.2752/175183414X13990269049482
- Than Naing Soe. (2017, March 7). Look but don't touch statues at Mahamuni Pagoda. *The Myanmar Times*. <https://www.mmtimes.com/national-news/mandalay-upper-myanmar/25210-look-but-don-t-touch-statues-at-mahamuni-pagoda.html>
- Than Tun, Dr. (1986). *The Royal Orders of Burma: (A.D.1598-1885)*. Part 4. The Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto. University.
- Thapyenyo Mg Ko Oo. (1970). *Myanmar Shwe-sain*. Guilding leaf. Sarpe Beikman Press.
- Tikkha Dhamma Lankara, U. (2005). *Myanmar Dating History (Konbaung Period)*. Seikku-Cho Cho Press.



- Thaw Kaung, U. (2004). Selected Writings of U Thaw Kaung: Mahamuni. Myanmar Historical Commission, Golden Jubilee Publication Committee 131-162 <http://www.uclmyanmar.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/14>
- The Republic of the Union of Myanmar, Ministry of Construction. (2016). Urban Development Plans for Target Three Cities: Data Collection Survey on Urban Development Planning for Regional Cities (Mandalay, Patheingyi, and Mawlamyine) (No. Final Report / Part-I: Survey & Preparation). Nippon Koei Co., Ltd., Nine Steps Corporation, And International Development Center Of Japan. <https://openjicareport.jica.go.jp/pdf/12285839.pdf>
- Thein Hlaing. U. (2016). Teik. In Myanmar-English Dictionary of Ancient Myanmar Historical Terms. Department of Historical Research and National Library. Zabutalu Press.
- Toe Hla. (2017). Anantasūra's Inscriptions: Why Among Others? Bagan Metropolis. [www.soas.ac.uk/saaap/news/file124888](http://www.soas.ac.uk/saaap/news/file124888).
- Tun Shein, N. (2018, October 14). King Badon who donated Golden Robe and 8 Viss and 60 tickles of Golden Foils to Mahamuni Image. Mandalay Daily, P.4.
- Tun Shein, N. (2018, October 21). King Badon who donated Golden Robe and 8 Viss and 60 tickles of Golden Foils to Mahamuni Image. Mandalay Daily, p.4
- Vati, K. (2017). An Analytical Study Of Action (Kamma) In Theravada Buddhism [Master of Arts Dissertation, Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University]. Google Scholar. <https://so06.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/Jiabu/article/download/219911/152142>
- Weinryb, I. (2016). Ex Voto: Votive giving across cultures. Bard Graduate Center. NY Bard Graduate Center.
- Weinryb, I. (2017). Votives: Material Culture and Religion (In Conversation). Material Religion, The Journal of Objects, Art and Belief. 13 (1), PP.99-101. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17432200.2017.1272736>
- Win Than Tun. (2002). Myanmar Buddhism Of The Pagan Period (Ad 1000-1300) [Doctoral Dissertation, National University Of Singapore]. Google Scholar. <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/48625521.pdf>

- Yadanabon Boe Hmat-su. (2019). Mandalay (2nd ed.). Seikku Cho Cho Press.
- Yu Wai (2019, July 15). Thanakha Maker putting new face on ancient tradition. The Myanmar Times. <https://www.mmtimes.com/news/thanakha-maker-putting-new-face-ancient-tradition.html>
- Zarnimann. (2014, August 26). Mandalay's Handmade Gold leaf Industry Under Threat. The Irrawaddy. <https://www.irrawaddy.com/features/mandalays-handmade-gold-leaf-industry-threat.html>
- Zeyar Hein. (2019, April 26). Maha Myat Muni Pagoda to charge foreigners K5000. The Myanmar Times. <https://www.mmtimes.com/news/maha-myat-muni-pagoda-charge-foreigners-k5000.html>
- Zeyar Hein. (2020, March 06). Planters of traditional crop thanakha hope to see turnaround. The Myanmar Times. <https://www.mmtimes.com/news/planters-traditional-crop-thanaka-hope-see-turnaround.html>
- Ministry of Religious affairs and Culture, Department of Religious affairs ([http://www.dra.gov.mm/?page\\_id=272](http://www.dra.gov.mm/?page_id=272)).
- Minudain. (2018, September 4). ထိန်းသိမ်းရမည့် မြန်မာ့ရိုးရာရွှေဆိုင်းပညာ. Mandalay Daily, P---.
- “Htein-Thein Rmaet Myanmar Shwesine payar”. “Myanmar Gold leaf to be preserved”.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Zin Mar Latt received her M.A (Anthropology) in 1998 and then began working at the Department of Anthropology, University of Yangon. She received a PhD (Anthropology) at the University of Yangon in 2013 and in 2015 was promoted to associate professor in the Anthropology Department of the University of Mandalay. In 2015 she also participated in collaborative research with Florence University in the “Sustainable Destination Plan for the Ancient Cities of Upper Myanmar (Mandalay, Amarapura, Innwa, Sagaing, Mingun). In 2016, she received funding from the Understanding Myanmar’s Development program, funded by the International Development and Research Center (IDRC), Canada. Her research has focused on community survival adaptation in the face of erosion on the Sittaung River. In 2017 she took part in the “Humanities across Borders (HaB) program” with the support of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. In 2018, she joined additional training at Chiang Mai University with the support of IDRC to upgrade her research and teaching skill. She has been focused on the Mahamuni sacred space through every day worship practices of the Mahamuni image, and the impact of renovation and construction on local people who depend on the space. In 2019, she received a support from the Visiting Fellowship Program, supported by Central European University, Hungary, to aid research and curriculum innovation in the social sciences. In 2021, she has been promoted to prorector at the University of Mandalay, and has been sharing anthropological concepts to her students to develop academic research in Myanmar.

Htet Htet Khaing is a Lecturer in the Department of History, University of Kyaukse. She has been teaching in educational settings for 12 years. She first received her Bachelor Degree B.A (Hons) and MA Degree (History) in 2005 and 2007 respectively.

She started her career as a teacher at Monywa University in 2009. She has since served at Mandalay University, Nationalities Youth Resources Development Degree College (Sagaing) and Kyaukse University. In 2016, she received her Ph.D in History from the University of Mandalay with a dissertation on Police Administration (1948-1962) in Myanmar. She teaches subjects on different elements of the history of Myanmar and conducts research on the social history of the country. She has been engaged in RCSD's capacity building efforts at the University of Mandalay under which she received a fellowship grant to conduct this research.



# GIVING TO MYANMAR'S 'LIVING IMAGE'

## The Mahamuni Pagoda's Votive Networks and Management in a New Age of Urban Development

The Mahamuni Pagoda is one of Myanmar's most important Buddhist sites and a top tier attraction for Mandalay's tourism industry. This research examines the popular votive practices of affixing gold leaf to the pagoda's Buddha image, and grinding thanaka for use in its daily face-washing ceremony, illuminating a hitherto ignored social and economic ecology in which the pagoda is the pivotal node. The authors followed these materials themselves, noting the hands, transactions and spheres of influence they passed through and the different meanings and values they accrued. Following a detailed ethnographic description and analysis of the gold leaf and thanaka votive networks, the authors turn to recent development and renovation of the pagoda. This study will be of equal interest to scholars of popular Buddhism, Buddhist space and economics, urban development in tourism in Southeast Asia, and Myanmar Studies.



Understanding  
*Myanmar's*  
Development

RESEARCH  
REPORT  
**No. 23**