



Mandalay - city of Buddha, centre of diversity, or whose city now?*

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Abstract

Mandalay, a multi-cultural city was a globally connected city in the 19th century. It has undergone many changes since its creation (occupation by British and Japanese) isolation during the socialist reign and now is in the process of another grand cultural re-formation through the work of the military ruling elite who seek to promote the 'real Myanmar cultural heritage'. This paper aims to understand and expose the multiple cultural heritages of Mandalay as identified and described in the terms of the contemporary residents of the city. It is proposed that while the distinct and characteristically unique Burmese feature of Mandalay lies in its universal Buddhist peaceful potential, its complex multiplicity of life's meanings, and its impermanence, Mandalay now represents a city of many separate lives as a result of a brief 150 years of transformations. The paper concludes that the complexity of urban cultural heritage demonstrates that no one simplistic perspective of urban identity makes sense for Mandalay. Life here is a tangle of an elusive cultural heritage.

Keywords: cultural authentication, cultural group, cultural heritage, historical geography, nation state, place identity

Introduction

Of all the old capitals of Burma, whose remains, scattered over a thousand miles from Tagaung to Tenasserim, bear testimony to its history, Mandalay is the newest. And yet its atmosphere is altogether of the past. It stands today for a dynasty which is no more, for a Court whose splendour and whose etiquette are already fading into oblivion, for a sentiment that has all but ceased to exist (O'Connor, 1907: 3).

Mandalay with an historic past is a now brash frontier town with squatters taking positions on the edge of the city as they are pushed out of the centre in the rush to modernize the city. New suburbs spring up along the edges of the city as people seek a home. A boom-time frontier atmosphere exists in Mandalay as the fragile peace settlements between insurgents and the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) takes hold. Mandalay sits at the border nexus of the Assam and the Naga hills of the Indian border as the Chindwin River flows into the Irawaddy just above Pakokku, a day's sail south of Mandalay. To the east of Mandalay is the Shan State and the presence of a variety of travel routes formerly trod by mules and now by trucks. In the north-east is the Burma road, the lifeline of Jiang Jieshi's resistance against the Japanese during the Second World War and for years before. The Burma Road has long been the ancient route to Yunnan. During the 19th century this route was followed by the Muslim People from China, the Panthays, whose rebellion against Chiang rule was suppressed and whose refugees were allowed to settle in the "Golden City" due to King Mindon. The mosque built by them still stands. Here is the confluence of Shan, Chin, Kachin, Indian, Chinese, English, French and Italian.

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Mandalay is situated along the communication cross-roads of the interior on caravan routes of various ethnic groups. It is the strategic centre of commerce. The presence of Chinese is notable in new Mandalay (the area is known as the Yuan zone) since the easing of the foreign trade restrictions and increased trade with China has brought a boom-time frontier atmosphere to Mandalay with the building of new hotels, office buildings and departments stores. Mandalay is now viewed as the major international distribution centre for illegal drugs and as a centre for gambling and prostitution and investment from the profit on drugs allows for purchase of real estate within Mandalay.



Figure 1. Location of Mandalay

These current profiles of the city are distantly removed from the Mandalay designed as a royal capital city of the last Buddhist Kingdom, in Burma built in 1857. As the last capital of the Burmese kingdom, before British control and occupation, Mandalay is considered to be the heart of Burma, the significant centre of Buddhist culture and religion, the home of more than 60% of monks in Burma. Mandalay, as the other royal cities which preceded it, was laid out along the Irrawaddy river bank, in the image of the gods as other cities in Southeast Asia. The city structure, in the shape of a mandala, included a Royal Palace, temples and pagodas in direct copy of the ancient city of Pagan, to ensure continuous royal links between an extraordinary past and the ordinary present. Mandalay represents the “indestructible heart of Burma” (Directorate of Information, 1968).

Mandalay, a multi-cultural city was a globally connected city in the 19th century open to the world, gaining international reputation through accounts and paintings of European travellers and diplomats who referred to Mandalay as the Great Golden Sacred City and the City of Gems and through the international hosting of monks from around the world to participate in the Fifth Buddhist Synod in 1871. Mandalay was a project of King Mindon, a devout Buddhist, a dedicated pacifist, who sought to restore peace, harmony and pride to his troubled homeland (Hall, 1981; O’Connor, 1907; Strachan, 1994).

Mandalay has undergone many changes since its creation (occupation by British and Japanese) isolation during the socialist reign and now is currently in the process of another grand cultural reformation. The city is the focus of the military ruling elite who seek to promote the ‘real Myanmar cultural heritage’ and gain international recognition by attracting international tourists and unifying the nation by engaging in a process of ‘tradition recovery’ through re-construction of the Royal Palace and monasteries. They attempt to seek the glory of the past kingdom.

In this paper, my aim is to understand and expose the multiple cultural heritages of Mandalay as identified and described in the terms of the contemporary residents of the city. How do citizens of Mandalay perceive their heritage and how do they suggest ways of preserving this historical, cultural heritage? In what ways do visions alternative to the official Myanmar cultural approach to preservation of Mandalay appear in the landscape? Where are the border zones of cultural mediation? I propose that the distinct, unique characteristically Burmese feature of Mandalay lies in its universal Buddhist peaceful potential, a complex multiplicity of life’s meanings, of impermanence This

possibility for global recognition of multiple meanings of life is suppressed by the current regime who seeks to promote and sell for profit a simplistic, unified image of Buddhism.

I consider first the context of Burma, a country led by a military regime which attempts to dictate a unified, simplistic vision of the country, in contrast to the rich cultural heritage and diversity of ideas, peoples, and traditions. Mandalay is a focus for this study of dynamic changing place identity.

A Priceless Land

Ever true to justice and liberty,
Our country, our land.
Peace for all peoples and equality,
A country with a pure policy,
Our country, our land.
Let the Union's heritage endure.
Thus shall our resolution stand.
Myanmar through the worlds perpetuate.
We cherish our ancestors' true heritage.
We give our lives to protect our Union Home.
This is our country, the land we own.
Let us strive unitedly for the good of our Land.
This is our duty to a priceless land.

Win Pe (2001)

Win Pe (2001) in his poem writes that “we cherish our ancestors’ true heritage”. Who is the we and which ancestors and whose heritage is to be cherished? What is the “true heritage” of the ancestors of Myanmar? Who authenticates this true heritage? Who is being referred to in the statement of “our country, our land”, in the nation which encompasses over 200 indigenous languages and multiple ethnic cultural groups? Burma is not unique in Southeast Asian countries, as postcolonial ruling elites search for the origins of a nation state, a past which existed in a ‘pure’ state uncontaminated by colonial influence. This recovery of and search for the past ‘ancestors’ true heritage’ is also in response to a growing fear that unique national cultural identity will be lost in the processes of modernization and development (Institute for Japanese Culture and Classics, 1983), and more recently globalization (Editorial, 2000: 4).

The effort to preserve national identity is achieved through reviving and promoting a distinctive, authentic cultural heritage. Who claims to speak for the whole in determining authenticity of ‘true’ national cultural heritage? I suggest that in the present post-colonial world the notion of an authentic culture as being an autonomous internally coherent universe does not seem tenable except perhaps as a useful fiction or a revealing distortion (Hudson-Rodd, 1997). Yet authenticity is increasingly pertinent today in discourses of national identity, because of the symbolic and commercial value of nation building. UNESCO 1972 Convention on the Protection of the World’s Cultural and Natural Heritage defined cultural heritage as the complex of monuments, buildings, and archaeological sites, “of outstanding universal value from the point of view of history, art, or science”. The ultimate mark of achieving this universal heritage value is gained by being recognized and given official status of World Heritage by the International Council of Monuments and Sites (UNESCO) which also means more commercial potential (Peleggi, 1996: 445).

National cultural heritage has important symbolic value in the continuing project of nation-building, in unifying the people, in teaching the young foundation narratives and is also of great commercial value in attracting visitors. The government of Myanmar seeks to attract international tourists and the foreign exchange currency they bring to the economy through commercial promotion of national cultural heritage sites such as Pagan and Mandalay Royal City (Oana-Xinhua, 2001). International tourists bring needed foreign currencies as they visit national museums, archaeological sites, historical theme parks, and re-created sites of national significance. While the quest for authenticity has reached global dimensions, the independent authority of archaeology to authenticate the remains of the past has been questioned as being more a function of nationalist agendas (Trigger,

1984), support for promotion of the official narrative of the historical past and suppression of competing narratives of identity.

This is not unexpected as governments watch over representations of the nation. As Durara (1998: 307) writes, “Regimes stake their legitimacy in important part on their role as custodians of the authenticity of the ‘body cultural’. And as the context of linear time exposes its corrosion, they repeatedly have to reconstitute it”. Regimes rarely have complete control as custodians of the “body cultural” requiring them to guard against its corrosion and different groups within society, minorities, challenge the official meanings given and reveal a multitude of “dissonant” (Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996), conflicting and “contested” (Shaw & Jones, 1997) cultural pasts and heritages.

The pursuit of an authentic national heritage within Southeast Asia is the postcolonial project of the government in Burma to create a past which is untouched by foreign influences and Western governments, oppressive global economies, Western academic research approaches and Western culture (Reynolds, 1992), a cultural heritage unique to a unified Myanmar. General Khin Nyunt, in a seminar for all national academics held at the National Museum of Ethnology (1998) clarified the role of the government as being the sole custodians of heritage. The Government of Myanmar “laid down social objectives which includes the uncovering of true historical records” and while recognizing that throughout the ages, “Myanmar historians, scientists and researchers had carried out research in their own capacity and had been custodians of authentic historical facts”, now all research would be “collated for a correct interpretation and presentation of a coherent authentic history of Myanmar” (Khin Nyunt, 1998).

On December 29, 2000 The New Century Resource Centre and the Resource Centre for Ancient Myanmar Manuscripts (RCAMM) was officially opened in Rangoon, by the Chairman of the Education Committee, Secretary 1 Lt. General Khin Nyunt. The reason for creating these two Resource Centres was to “maintain and preserve national identity in the face of the globalization process” (Khin Maung Nyunt, 2000: 16), for one of the “negative aspects of on-going globalization is the erosion of indigenous cultures of developing nations”, and once this process begins “national identity withers or disappears leading to the loss of national sovereignty and national races”. The RCAMM intends to preserve Myanmar traditions and culture, to organize the people to preserve them, to educate the people to know Myanmar’s education developments throughout history, to enable the public to study ancient manuscripts and to gather and preserve the nation’s ancient manuscripts in one place. So the past is being used to teach the present. The regime is using Myanmar to crowd out all alternative concepts of unity that various ethnic groups and foreign languages might have expressed throughout history.

It appears that only a concerted effort can maintain a tenuous fiction of a self-contained cultural whole (Clifford, 1988; 1997). At the highest state levels, there is a concerted effort to build a national identity that reflects the ruling military’s values and aspirations for a unified national vision. The site of the first project of the Ministry of Culture in the creation of national cultural heritage was reconstruction of the Royal Palace (1989-1996), Mandalay, “to contribute to national reconsolidation” and next the rebuilding of the Atumashi Kyaungdawgyi monastery (1995-1996) to “display the skill and talent of Myanmar to create national consolidation” (Nyunt Han, 1997: 157-61).

Through a study of Mandalay, I pursue to what extent and in what ways individual people from a variety of backgrounds and groups are developing their own senses of historical cultural identity in place, in face of this essentialized image of official authenticate ‘Myanmarness’. I seek to roam at the edges of civil society in Mandalay, to uncover more complex sites of cultural production rather than representatives of a self-contained, homogeneous culture. More “subjects” come into focus as cultural practices and processes of cultural mediation are studied when the concept of culture refers less to a unified entity (a culture) than to mundane practices of everyday life (Rosaldo, 1989). How do people negotiate their day to day life within Mandalay? Cultural border zones are always in motion and Mandalay is currently undergoing rapid change as the government seeks to make the best possible use of its cultural heritage for tourism development. In whose name is this development being constructed and in whose likeness? Who can afford to visit these sites? I suggest that Mandalay now represents a city of many separate lives. Understanding the cultural ‘process’ of cultural reconstruction in Mandalay is especially significant as the urban landscape has changed dramatically according to Daw Ahmar (1993) now in her 80th year as a resident of Mandalay, influenced by a variety of factors. The city in a brief 150 years has undergone many transformations.

City of Buddha

Mandalay, built in 1857 was constructed as the last royal capital city of Burma. It was planned in keeping with the design of other capitals of Buddhist kingdoms in Asia, Mandalay was modelled on the cities of the gods. The square city plan with 12 gates connected by straight roadways dividing the enclosure into 16 blocks is prescribed in The Buddhist meaning of mandala of ritual centre of geometrical perfection (Snodgrass, 1985). The square had sides facing the cardinal directions, with three gates on each side of its sides to give a total of twelve, each marked with a sign of the zodiac. The city was conceived in the likeness of the heavenly constellations revolving around Mt Meru which was represented by the Royal Palace. The French scholar, Charles Duroiselle (1925) noted that the palace in this capital city also served as a fortified citadel. This characteristic design was in keeping with ancient Asian kingdoms of Bagan, Khmer, and Kublai Khan's palace and capital.

In Mandalay the teakwood palace was raised on a brick platform surrounded by walls. The citadel character was evident in the high walls, fortified gates, battlements and the wide deep moats. Common features of Mandalay Palace and other ancient kingdoms include:

1. Palace and city ground are fortified. High wall fortresses, gates, battlements, wide deep moats;
2. With 12 gates in the outer wall, Mandalay City resembled Khan Balik, Kublai Khan's city at the old site of Beijing. Square palace design was built on a raised platform surrounded by another set of walls.
3. Palace was located almost exactly at the city centre on a rectangular brick platform surrounded by walls;
4. The Grand Palace consisted of a group of buildings grouped together on the platform. They were all one storey wooden buildings;
5. The walls defining the boundary of the Grand Palace were there to protect the King.

The Kingdom, the city, the palace were diminishing mandalas each a reflection of the others symmetrically oriented upon East-West and North-South axes. At the centre of the palace was the pyatthat, a storied tower of pyramidal form rising from the throne room symbolically identified with Mt Meru. The throne placed on the vertical axis of the pyatthat was a smaller representation of the cosmic mountain. By a process of concentration each of the cosmic images is fully contained within the next until they all enveloped in the individual king (Snodgrass, 1985). The Meru Palace of Mandalay was not located at the geometric centric of the city but was slightly displaced to the east, the direction of the rising sun, and recalling the symbolism of the dawn and the imagery of the sun at daybreak as the cosmic pillar or "the palace supported on a single pillar".



Source: Wikipedia

Figure 2. *City of Buddha: Mandalay Palace*

According to legend, Gautama Buddha had once predicted that 2,400 years after his death, a city devoted to the revival and study of Buddhism would be built on this site. The city was built and to what end? Mandalay has existed through a variety of forms. How diverse and in what guise is the dominant form? In keeping with his desire to make Mandalay a world renowned centre for Buddhism and Buddhist studies, King Mindon built a group of religious monuments at the base of Mandalay Hill. The Kyauk-taw-gyi Pagoda, a replica of the Ananda at Pagan served to remind scholars of the great past of Burma. A fire in 1892 destroyed the Incomparable Monastery and the giant statue of Buddha as well as many smaller buildings.

The Kutho-daw became for a brief period the symbol of Mandalay's pre-eminent position in the Buddhist world. By 1862 King Mindon initiated the revision of the Theravadan texts. This was a colossal task lasting 9 years and involved the efforts of hundreds of Buddhists monks and novices. In 1987, approximately 2,400 monks from all parts of the world gathered in Mandalay, at the Fifth Buddhist Synod of all Buddhists in the world were asked to consider the revised Scriptures. 733 marble slabs were erected in the court-yard of the Kutho-daw Pagoda, each one holding the verse of Pali. The Scripture was also placed on leaves of gold and silver and placed in the central hall of the pagoda.

Suburbs of Mandalay

By 1886 the city had a population of almost 200,000. Burmans lived in a world shaped by centuries of tradition while Westerners and Chinese existed beyond the pale of the country's legal and country norms. The Chinese were prosperous merchants and their trade was important for the survival of the economic well-being of the people of Upper Burma. Mandalay gradually expanded to encompass the Chinese community (O'Connor, 1907: 79-80). In general King Mindon welcomed foreign involvement in Mandalay. He permitted Anglican priests, Roman Catholic priests, and Muslim brothers to settle in Mandalay. It is these considerable efforts to overthrow the xenophobic approaches of previous rulers which made King Mindon's reign exceptional. King Mindon (1853-1875), like his contemporary, the King Rama IV of Siam, made efforts to prepare the country for assimilation with Western civilization.

British occupation

The British occupation of Mandalay transformed the city obliterating the cosmic symbolism of place. The Royal Palace was looted (Ghosh, 2000) and changed as it became (1885) known as Fort Dufferin and the various Burmese chambers now became the places of British royalty. The British colonial government of India proclaimed Burma a precinct of India. For 15 years the palace served as the upper Burma Club. In 1901 when Lord Curzon visited, he commanded that the club and the church be moved and that the central part of the palace be preserved, not he noted because of its historical significance, but because of its value as a model, the only one that will survive, of the civil and ceremonial architecture of the Burmese Kings (O'Connor, 1907: 417). Lord Curzon was interested in preservation not in complete restoration. Certain buildings chosen for their "specific" character and artistic merit were to be maintained at all costs. Curzon ordered that re-gilding was not to be done unless absolutely necessary. The city of Mandalay was left as it was with no concern by the authorities.



Source: Wikipedia

Figure 3. Colonial Mandalay: Mandalay University

Conclusion

The city continues to maintain its hold as the cultural centre of the nation but this may not be related to the tangible structures which have undergone a variety of changes depending upon individual, but rather an elusive quality of meaning. In sharp contrast to the past impermanence of buildings and the recognition of life as a stream of movement, the search for authentic cultural heritage seeks to capture and freeze, to stop flows of meaning. Perched on the banks of the Irrawaddy River, the ancient waterway, Mandalay dominates the Burmese heartland.



Source: Wikipedia

Figure 4. Contemporary Mandalay: A Chinese-owned hotel in downtown Mandalay

There are difficulties for the present government creation of Mandalay, City of Tourists. With the opening up of the country to the tourist gaze, there is the risk of potential instability as more people view life in Burma. The tourist gaze is volatile and always seeking new focus. While the current leaders seek to preserve for tourist attraction there is the added threat that with increased openness to the outer world, the stability of the tight control will be diminished. A massive re-construction project has been completed of Mandalay Palace by the SPDC, using forced/volunteer labour of young men and prisoners (1989-1996). As a tourist attraction the Myanmar Government claims the reconstruction of the old palace was based on descriptions from *Sithu Maung (City and Palace Construction Record)*, Maung Kyuw's book (in Burmese), supplemented by the archaeological notes on Mandalay and the *Guide to Mandalay*, by Durosilles (1925). The military government rebuilt the place. Instead of wood it is now a concrete building with an aluminium roof. Most of the reconstruction of the palace and the moat was performed by forced labour, first by young men of the city, then by prisoners. Many residents and tourists do not enter because of this. The harsh, clumsy, and unauthentic re-construction has no cultural appeal. Once the home of skilled artisans, the place is now occupied by soldiers who grow their vegetables in the compound.

In Burma palaces consisted of several pavilions and palaces or *monthien*. They served diverse functions besides being residences for kings and consorts. The palace was the heart of the city and the *prasat* the centre of the universe. Together they were ringed by dwellings of the courtiers. The word Mandalay derives from the word *mandala* or *mandhol* suggesting circle of the universe. The word has come to refer to the unbounded radius of monarchic power and virtue. Residing in palaces centred on the spired *prasat*, kings of Burma were eminent figures with their influence radiating through the capital. Great cities in turn served as the centres of the universe. The great palace in Mandalay city signified the omnipotence and absolute control of the Burmese kings. Mandalay was the last of the ancient capitals therefore it is unique in Burmese history. It is the only capital whose mansions and royal residences survive with the exception of Bayinnaung Palace, re-constructed by the military government in P/Begu. Mandalay, as the new capital, represented a new world founded upon the powers and virtues of a young Buddhist monarch. This new capital represented visions of a new Buddhist world founded upon powers and virtues of young Buddhist monarch in space unbounded.

The search for the true Myanmar cultural past is a project in which the nation-state seeks to authenticate itself through uncovering a pre-colonized past. The Ministry of Culture, the government archaeologists and historians, foreign scholars, indigenous scholars, and international tourists all share an interest in the investigation, preservation and consumption of this un-covered pre-colonial past. In

some sense George Orwell was correct when he said that, “in Burma the past belongs to those who control the present” (Houtman, 1999: 53). The search for a true uncontaminated Myanmar past or culture, the origins of Burmese culture is a futile search for there is no moment when Burmese culture was born. Development separated from its human or cultural context is “growth without a soul” (UNESCO, 2001). However, does the tourist promoted, SPDC constructed, re-constructed, re-created Mandalay Palace, represent the ‘true’ cultural heritage of Burma? The act of authenticating remains a political action and involves the (mis)use of historical research for nation building purposes. Is it possible to conduct historical research into pre-colonial Burma without supporting the identification of authentic to be used by the rulers?

Through careful analysis of the changing cultural landscape of Mandalay, an understanding of the diversity of urban experience can be appreciated. The complexity of urban cultural heritage demonstrates that no one simplistic perspective of urban identity makes sense. Life is a tangle. Cultural heritage is an intrinsically contested resource. People share space and history, however the experience of that occupation of space may be entirely different.

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