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# History Textbooks and the Construction of National Identity in Burma

Ada Chai

*Trinity College*, [adachai@gmail.com](mailto:adachai@gmail.com)

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**History Textbooks and the  
Construction of National Identity in Burma**

Ada Chai

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**Abstract:**

Political leaders have often used state education systems as a tool for nation building, using school curricula to shape citizens' national identity to be consistent with their long-term political goals. In this paper, I analyze the narratives of past kings in government-issued history textbooks in Burma examine the political and social values the Burmese State attempts to transmit to students in the process of building a national identity. Using a qualitative content analysis and coding methods, I examine 6<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> grade history textbooks. My findings indicate that the Burmese State uses narratives of ancient Burmese kings to promote: (1) the rule of skilled military leaders who are able to defend and unite the nation and improve national development, (2) the unity of different national races as one homogenous group for national peace and prosperity, (3) cautious interactions with “others”, such as foreigners or dissenting ethnic minorities, and (4) Buddhism as the State religion.

## Introduction

Political leaders have often used state education systems as a tool for nation building, using school curricula to shape citizens' national identity to be consistent with their long-term political goals. Scholarly studies of this global phenomenon have revealed that knowledge transmitted through school curricula is not neutral and that nation-building processes are based on "reinvented narratives of traditional values and militant patriotism of the past" (Apple 1992; Zajda 2009).

Many governments have relied specifically on textbooks as one way to shape national identity of citizens (Vural & Özüyanik 2008; Cayir 2009; Lee 2010; Salem-Gervais and Metro 2012; Williams 2014; Zhao 2014). Textbooks are critical in shaping what students learn as they are commonly presented as authoritative sources of information and used as the main teaching material in classrooms. However, textbooks do not necessarily contain "facts". They contain particular visions of social reality by selectively emphasizing downplaying certain aspects of knowledge (vom Hau 2009). Consequently, it is no surprise that school curriculum and textbook content has been the subject of heated public debate in democratic, developed nations like the United States (Sleeter 2003). However, in the Republic of the Union of Myanmar (Burma), an authoritarian government that exercises full control over the state education system has silenced such debates. Since the political coup of 1962 when military government was instated, the Burmese State has played an active and explicit role in shaping the public school curriculum and determining the content material of textbooks. In this paper, I analyze government-issued Burmese textbooks to answer my research question: Using narratives of past kings in history textbooks, what political and social values does the Burmese State attempt to transmit to students in the process of building a national identity?

I explore how education, or more specifically school textbooks, can be used politically as a means of social control, to build a collective national identity in the context of an ethnically divided, post-colonial nation that has suffered through decades of military rule. I will begin with a review of existing research on the topic of the role of textbooks in shaping this identity. Then I will give a brief overview of the Burmese context and explain the methods I used in collecting and analyzing my data. Finally, I will present my findings and interpretation of the data, followed by a discussion of the implications of the research.

My findings indicate that the Burmese State uses narratives of ancient Burmese kings to promote: (1) the rule of skilled military leaders who are able to defend and unite the nation and improve national development, (2) the unity of different national races as one homogenous group for national peace and prosperity, (3) cautious interactions with “others”, such as foreigners or dissenting ethnic minorities, and (4) Buddhism as the State religion.

### **Literature Review**

There is an abundance of literature pertaining to how history, civics, and social studies textbooks in various nations such as North Korea, Jordan, Turkey, China, India, Nepal, Ukraine, Singapore and the United States foster nationalism or shape national identity. I draw on three interconnected assertions drawn from my readings of these scholarly texts in my interpretation of Burmese history textbook content.

First, many scholars have found that education systems, as a powerful arm of the modern state, are used to construct national identity and ipso facto schools do not transmit politically neutral knowledge (Apple 1992; Sleeter 2002; Nassar 2004; Cayir 2009; vom Hau 2009; Carney & Madsen 2009; Lee 2010; Williams 2014). Governments rely on state education systems to respond to threats, real or imagined, against their legitimacy by disseminating knowledge that

explains the existing social order in such a way as to make the status quo seem inevitable (Carney & Madsen 2009; Williams 2014). In his study of Jordanian national identity, Nassar (2004) finds that national identity is shaped through the use of educational institutions that have a “normalizing, disciplining, and controlling power over individuals” in ways that “reproduce and justify the social order while the mechanisms of power stay hidden from those socialized and indoctrinated by it” (221). This finding is in agreement with the claim Williams’ makes in his book, *(Re)Constructing Memories: School Textbooks and the Imagination of the Nation* (2014), that developing a national identity is not something that occurs automatically in individuals, but must be cultivated carefully by social institutions and forces.

Scholars like Cheesman (2003) present government manipulation of education and knowledge as an inevitable political necessity. Recognizing that control of schooling is an important problem in comparative education and relates to how states derive legitimacy, he uses a historical descriptive analysis to trace the metamorphosis of the education system from pre-colonial times to the emergence of a military dictatorship that established a tightly controlled centralized state education system. Cheesman (2003) concludes that regardless of whoever is in control of the government, that they are unlikely to surrender control to schools as schooling is perceived as “an integral means by which to secure the national ideal” (60). Instead, the meaning of “good citizenship” will be altered and new concepts of national identity will be implemented through a similar model of state-controlled schooling. This notion that state manipulation of national history is a norm is supported by another study of Burmese education by Salem-Gervais and Metro (2012) that prior to the establishment of the state education system, the monastic education system served to convey the legitimacy of state authority and contribute to assimilation of ethnic minorities.

Due to the important socializing effects of education, it is plausible to assume as previously mentioned that knowledge presented as “factual” in textbooks are neither objective nor politically neutral. In his discussion of the cultural politics of texts in textbooks, Apple (1992) contends that what is conveyed as legitimate knowledge is the result of complex power relations and struggles among various groups in society. As such, the knowledge that is excluded or included in school curriculum signifies the deeper political, economic, and cultural relations and history of a society or nation. The school curriculum functions as “the organized knowledge system” of a society, contributing to the social construction of reality and definition of what the right--and therefore true--knowledge, culture, belief, and morality is based on the dominant group’s vision and selection of legitimate knowledge and culture (Apple 1992:5).

According to Zhao (2014), who draws on data found in Chinese political education textbooks published between 1902 and 1948 to understand how the State constructs a national collective identity, it is through such textbooks that governments transmit an ideologically loaded discourse, portraying diverse and heterogeneous population as homogenous to ease political tensions and compelling people to believe in the existence of a nation, or in the words of Anderson (1991) an “imagined community”, a belief that is an crucial prerequisite for citizens to develop a sense of collective identity.

The second assertion further elaborates the process of national identity construction. Scholars have noted that national identity is “discursively—by means of language and other semiotic systems, produced, constructed, transformed and destructed” and is a fluid concept subject to change depending on context (De Cillia et al. 1999:153; Cheesman 2003; Koh 2010). According to Cillia et al.’s (1999) study of the discursive and linguistic devices employed in the construction of national identity, they find that a commonly used strategy in building a sense of

identity is the focus on the conceptions of sameness and difference, as well as the emphasis on a common history.

The implication of using narratives that create identities around sameness based on common characteristics such as shared culture, religion, traditions, beliefs, geography, ethnicity and history, is that in order to maintain and secure national identity, differences and “otherness” must be eliminated (De Cillia et al. 1999:153; Koh 2010). In textbooks, narratives pertaining to the “others” help build a separate identity and boundary of the “we” in relation to the “them”. For example, in Indian or North Korean textbooks, the “others” are depicted in an antagonizing, demonizing, or in other negative ways in contrast to and for the promotion of the positive national identity of ones’ leaders and citizens (Lall 2008; Lee 2010). Some scholars have highlighted the use of complete exclusion from discourse as another way to construct national identity (Nassar 2010). For example, Nassar (2010) finds that the strategy of exclusion is employed against Palestinians in historical narratives in Jordanian textbooks to “set the boundaries of a collective time and space”, which enables a community to conceive of an identity that is distinctive from “others”. Salem-Metro and Gervias (2012), in their explicit deconstruction of the State discourse found in Burmese school textbooks to understand how and why the contents of the history curriculum have evolved or remained the same over time, also find that successive governments used classic nationalist strategies, such as emphasizing national heroes and the golden past, reinventing and projecting national unity in history, and identifying national enemies, to promulgate a national identity.

Third, I assert that history education is particularly important as a society’s understanding of their history will affect citizens’ sense of nationhood, national identity, and their acceptance of their current social conditions (Vural & Ozuyanik 2008; Foster 2011; Williams 2014).



Williams (2014) found that nation-building architects make extensive use of historical narratives that embody and promote the politically correct teleology of the state and that governments revise the historical stories in school history textbooks. Williams' (2014) findings are supported by Salem-Metro and Metro's (2012) analysis of Burmese history textbooks in which they find evidence of political manipulations in history textbooks. They find that historical narratives in the textbooks have been deleted or altered depending on the political atmosphere of the nation. For example, images and texts about a national hero fondly remembered as the "Father of Independence", General Aung San, who was also the father of Nobel Laureate and democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi, were slowly phased out of textbooks after 1962 (Salem- Gervais and Metro 2012). Though his great national achievements did not allow for complete elimination of General Aung San from textbooks, in an attempt to down play the public's memory of him, the government replaced his politicized images and speeches with that of military dictator General Than Shwe and other hardline nationalists (Salem-Gervais and Metro 2012).

My research project is most similar to that of Salem-Gervais and Metro's (2012) in that I will also be analyzing Burmese textbooks and the government's involvement in education matters to achieve political goals. However, it will be different in that the scope of my paper will cover specifically only the middle school textbooks produced in 2013-2014 as opposed to the change in textbooks of all grade levels over time. In comparison, my work would give a snapshot of what the texts reflect in 2014, three years after the alleged political reformation of the nation.

### **The Burmese Context**

With a population of over 53.26 million people (World Bank Data 2013), Burma is one of the largest nations in mainland Southeast Asia, bordered by Thailand and Laos in the

southeast, China in the northeast, India and Bangladesh in the northwest and the Bay of Bengal in the southwest. The Burmese population is highly diverse, comprised of over a hundred different ethnic minority groups with their own language, culture, and traditions as well as South Asian and Chinese immigrants. The Bamar or Burmans make up the majority ethnic group and control the military and the government (Smith & Allsebrook 1994). While the ethnic minorities such as the Kachin, Karen, and Chin have become Christians due to their contact with missionaries during the colonial era, about 89% of the national population practices Theravada Buddhism (Charney 2009; CIA Factbook 2014). Since Burma gained independence in 1948, there have been a series of on-going armed conflicts between ethnic minority rebel groups and government military forces that has forcefully relocated thousands of minorities living in the resource-rich border lands.

Formerly notorious for its abysmal record of human rights violations and often compared to North Korea as a pariah nation, Burma has recently been receiving international attention and applause for its political reforms. Since late 2010, Burma has been in the process of transitioning into a democratic republic after being under authoritarian military rule since 1962. A change in the economic system, from a centrally directed economy to a market-based economy, has accompanied this political transformation (World Bank Data 2013).

The centralized public education system in Burma has been paradoxically both tightly controlled and deliberately neglected by the government to achieve certain political goals. Most primary and secondary schools are underfunded and overcrowded while quality higher education institutions were virtually non-existent until the recent political transformation of the country. According to World Bank Data on Burma (2013), the military governments' spending on

education as a percent of GDP was less than 1 percent prior to 2011. However, that number has allegedly risen to 4.4 percent as of 2013 (World Bank Data: Myanmar 2013).

The British colonization of Burma highly influenced the Burmese education system as it stands today. During the Britain's colonization of Burma from the early 1800s to 1948, in an effort to increase their economic gains and "civilize" the Burmese, the British contributed greatly to the infrastructure of the nation. They established a state education system that replaced the traditional monastic education system (Cheesman 2003). As the British carved up Burma by placing arbitrary boundaries on national land, their school curriculum characterized Burmese kings' activities as "brutal and unsuccessful attempts to dominate other ethnic groups" in contrast to the British who promoted "true unity", depicting ethnicity as the most salient feature of Burmese history (Salem-Gervais & Metro 2012; Steinberg 2010). Burmese nationalists resented the divide-and-conquer strategy used by the British and led a national school movement in 1920. It was during this movement that Burmese historians began to produce textbooks that rejected the British narrative of inter-ethnic competition and promoted narratives that inspired national pride and patriotism at the expense of historical accuracy (Salem-Gervais & Metro 2012). This also led to the formation of a collective national identity of "Burmese-ness", based on the Burmese language, Burman ethnicity, and the Buddhist religion (Salem-Gervais & Metro 2012).

### **Methods**

My primary data source is three public school history textbooks used in the 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grade that are published for the 2014 – 2015 school year. The Basic Education Curriculum, Syllabus, and Textbook Committee established under the state-controlled Myanmar National Education Committee and Ministry of Education is the group solely responsible producing all

textbooks in the public school system in Myanmar (Education System in Myanmar: Self-Evaluation and Future Plans 2013). These textbooks can easily be acquired from street vendors for about 2000 – 3000 kyats (~970 kyats = 1 USD).

As significant revisions to textbooks and curriculum have only occurred a couple of times since the independence of Burma with the last revisions being in 2000, the use of cross-sectional data seemed appropriate and adequate for the purposes of this study (Education System in Myanmar: Self-Evaluation and Future Plans 2013). I focus on history textbooks in particular as scholars have noted that governments have relied on history education to transmit their self-legitimizing vision and to shape loyal citizens' sense of nationhood, national identity, and national character through ideologically slanted perspectives of history (Marsden 2000, Sleeter 2002, Janmaat & Vickers 2007, Salem-Gervais & Metro 2012).

All three of the history textbooks, each with an average of about 40 pages, are structured similarly with the first part of the book attending to Burmese national history and the second half on world history. In the national history section, the 6<sup>th</sup> grade textbook covers the first period of unification in Burma<sup>1</sup> under the Bagan dynasty while the 7<sup>th</sup> grade textbook covers the second union of the nation under the Taungoo and Ava (Inwa) dynasties and the 8<sup>th</sup> grade textbook covers the third union under the Konbaung dynasty up to the colonization of Burma by the British. A disproportionate amount of space in the national history section is given to smaller subsections containing the accomplishments during the reign of individual kings in each respective dynasty. Due to the amount of attention given to past national leaders in the textbooks, I focus my analysis of specifically on these narratives.

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<sup>1</sup> The textbooks refer to the nation as Myanmar, the preferred term by the military government which signifies the unity of the nation and resists the colonial name given to the nation by the British.

Following some preliminary examination of the texts, I used descriptive coding methods to note down themes and phrases that are emphasized through consistent repetition in the texts. I found five categories based on recurring themes in the narratives of Burmese kings: military might, unity of the nation, national political and economic development, foreigners and dissenting ethnic minority groups as the “other”, and the promotion of Buddhism as the national religion. The types of texts and phrases I coded for in each category are briefly explained below.

### *Military Might*

All descriptions of actions taken by kings for the expansion, management, and defense of existing territory and invasion of other territories are included in this category. This includes descriptions of specific military tactics and strategy as well the quelling of internal unrest and rebellions by military force.

### *National Unity*

Under this categorical theme, I include descriptions of national unity as well as disunity. I code for “unity” each time the textbook explicitly used the word or phrase “national unity”, “united”, “disunity” or “break down of unity”.

### *National Development*

National Development consists of both political and economic development. Descriptions of economic development led by kings, such as actions describing the implementation of agricultural reforms, the systematization of tax collection, the standardization of units of measurements, or the construction of reservoirs or irrigation canals were coded under this category. Descriptions of political development, such as the implementation of policies that lead to military related improvements or engagement in foreign relations with other groups for the

political, religious, or social advancement of the nation, are also coded under this national development.

### *The “Other” Code*

The individuals or groups of people that were mentioned in the narrative but not considered as part of the united national empire were coded as being the “Other”. This includes those from foreign nations that the Burmese came in contact with for various reasons as well as ethnic groups traditionally seen as belonging to the nation of Burma that were presented in the textbook as a distinct group outside the unified state.

### *The Promotion of Buddhism as the National Religion*

Descriptions of actions depicting the Buddhist religious practices and affiliations of kings, including partaking in rituals, collecting holy texts and relics, engaging in worship related activities, accepting a Buddhist name, and bringing learned scholarly monks into the nation or their court to promote Buddhism, were all included in this section.

I organized the data into a table containing the themes of kings’ valued characteristics and achievements under three sections that reflect the textbooks’ division of history according to the three different “unified state” periods. I also made a table (see Table 1) displaying the frequency of each code in the separate grade level history textbooks, allowing me to see which themes with the highest to lowest frequencies as well as any differences in the frequencies of the various categories across grade level. Further, all themes were broken down into smaller categories based on the different types of actions that we coded under each respective theme category, allowing me to examine which actions were given most importance.

**Table 1. Frequency of Codes Occurring in Each Grade Level History Textbook**

	<b>Grade 6: 1<sup>st</sup> Union of Myanmar</b>	<b>Grade 7: 2<sup>nd</sup> Union of Myanmar</b>		<b>Grade 8: 3<sup>rd</sup> Union of Myanmar</b>	
<b>Empire</b>	<i>Bagan</i>	<i>Taungoo</i>	<i>Ava (Inwa)</i>	<i>Konbaung</i>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Military Might</b>	9	10	7	7	33
<b>National Unity</b>	8	4	3	4	19
<b>National Development</b>	7	3	2	3	15
<b>“Others”</b>	3	5	2	1	11
<b>Promotion of Buddhism</b>	5	1	3	2	11

### **Data Analysis and Interpretation**

According to the coding outcomes, the theme of “military might” had the highest frequency in comparison to other themes across all grades level, occurring a total of 33 times. The theme of “national unity” had the second highest frequency of occurrence at 19 times, followed by “national development” at 15 times. The “others” theme and the “promotion of Buddhism” theme both occurred a total of 11 times each throughout the textbooks. Though separately coded, all the themes are interconnected and relevant to one another with the theme of “military might” being central to all of the other themes. I found that the narratives consistently depicted military kings as Buddhist kings, as key players without whom there would be no national unity, development, and protection from the external dangers presented by the “others”. This comes as no surprise given the State’s goal to create subjects who will accept, or at least submit to, and view the military government rule as both legitimate and necessary.

Since the texts I examined were specifically about kings, what these narratives impart to students about leadership and the outcomes and characteristics associated with different types of leadership is central to my analysis. I categorize the interpretations of my findings by comparing what knowledge and values are transmitted to students through the various contrasting portrayals of “good” versus “bad” leadership.

Descriptions of military maneuvers related to the expansion and defense of the nation coded under the “military might” theme made up the largest percentage of information. Leaders portrayed in a positive light and described as “competent”, “skilled”, or “qualified” were those who successfully defended the territory from external enemies, expanded and acquired new territories through military tactics and conquests, controlled internal unrest and rebellions, and maintained the peace and unity of the nation as a whole. In addition to being able to offer temporary refuge or military assistance to groups within Burma or from neighboring countries like Sri Lanka or China that were fleeing from enemies, such leaders were also able to pursue national development activities for national prosperity. On the other hand, leaders portrayed in a negative light and described as being “of lesser quality”, “incompetent” and “unskilled” were those who could not quell rebellions and protect the territory under their rule from internal or external threats. The narratives reveal that under the rule of such kings who could not maintain unity, the people and economy suffered within a war-torn nation.

As opposed to those considered successful leaders who got half a page to nearly two page, these leaders had only two to three lines of narrative attributed to them and any other accomplishments or strengths they might have had go unmentioned. Given the fact that the overwhelming majority of the narratives of kings are positive depictions of accomplished leaders



and kings considered less historically significant are merely listed at the end of the chapter, these few sentences of incompetent leaders appear to serve as a non-example or a point of contrast.

What is lacking in these narratives is an explanation of the origins of successful military leaders' ability and skills, making it appear as if they were naturally born with such talents.

While the son or son-in-law of a king usually inherits the throne after the death of his predecessor, leaders without royal blood can also rise to power in times of national unrest if they have the military ability. For example, King Alaungmintayar (AD 1754 – 1760), one of the three great kings who is credited for the third union of Burma under the Kongbaung dynasty, rose to power and was crowned king after re-unifying the divided nation after the fall of the Ava Dynasty. The story of King Alaungmintayar in particular appears to legitimize the military coup of 1962, when the military took power allegedly to maintain national unity and prevent ethnic groups demanding complete secession from Burma from gaining independence (Charney 2009).

The emphasis on military might indicates to students that leaders who have the military skills and knowledge to protect the country should be highly valued as they ensure national unity and peace. It implies that leaders should be chosen based on their ability to maintain order and protect the nation from internal and external elements of danger that threaten the unity and peace rather than on any other particular skills or qualities. Further, the narratives teach students that the people cannot achieve conditions of prosperity and peace in the nation, but that they are dependent on strong-handed leaders to give them conditions of peace in a top-down approach.

Achievement of national unity is the most important indicator of a king's military might and vice versa, only a king with military strength can maintain national unity. The narratives make it apparent that when a strong king maintains national unity by ensuring the cohesiveness and solidarity of different ethnic groups, the resulting peaceful conditions allow national

development to take place, leading to a happy and economically prosperous nation. In contrast, when there is a lack of national unity and solidarity, chaos ensues in the form of political instability, decades of warfare between Burmese ethnic feudal powers, or from attacks from foreign invaders. For example, a passage in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade history textbook reads:

As the lineage of kings who came after King Narapatisithu were of low quality, national conditions of peace gave way to unrest. Because of their inability to maintain the conditions within the nation, external dangers arose. During King Narapati Thiha's rule, the Mongols enemies invaded Bagan, causing him to flee to the city of Pyay where he was killed by the treachery of Prince of Thihathu. The Mongols took advantage of the lack of solidarity and unity in the nation by invading Bagan and crowning Prince Kyawswar. Under Kyawswar's rule, the three Shan brothers regained power once again. Afterwards, under the rule of Shan feudal lords, the empire built during the Bagan era was destroyed. (p.7)

According to the narratives, success in achieving national unity requires the use of military power in two ways: to crush rebellions of dissenting minority groups and to expand territories. The importance of unity reinforces the need for "competent" military kings who can quickly control internal unrest that leaves the nation vulnerable to outside attacks. Although the conquest of new territories or expansion of the empire might seem out of place under the theme of national unity, the narratives equate such expansion that includes territories within the boundaries of modern day Burma as a king's pursuit of national unity. The State textbook authors do not portray acts of war related to expansion as an aggressive attack led by a Burmese king to conquer previously autonomous kingdoms of various ethnic peoples. Rather than presenting Burmese kings as aggressors, the narratives imply that they are rightfully re-claiming and unifying Burmese land and Burmese people living under divided feudal rule. The narratives are written in such a way causes a reader to automatically assume that, just as in modern day

Burma, the ethnic populations have always been a part of Burma, living within Burma's national boundaries, and therefore should be under the rule of a Burmese king. For example, when describing such expansionist acts, a non-informative list of relevant feudal kingdoms within the territory of modern day Burma is followed by a description of a king's conquests of these kingdoms in the name of national unity.

Although the history texts mention a few larger ethnic groups, such as the Shan and Rakhine, the fact that their existence predates the first Burmese empire is not mentioned. Aside from the Mon people from whom the Burmese language, alphabet, and cultural traditions have been derived, there is no mention of the culture, religion, language, and history of other ethnic groups. Nor are there any questions about whether they belong under Burman rule. The ethnically diverse indigenous people are lumped together as a homogenous group whose only valid claim of distinction seems to be the geographic area of residence within the same country. Additionally, as the causes for the outbreak of rebellions are never mentioned and the rule of the Burmese military kings are always characterized by national peace and safety from outside enemies, their resistance against the Burmese kings makes them seem foolish, belligerent, and ungrateful. The narratives exclude the historical perspectives and struggles of oppressed indigenous minority groups, giving a one-sided view of history according to the Burman military ruling class that contributes to the construction of national unity and identity in modern Burma around a concept of "Burmese-ness" (Salem-Gervias & Metro 2012)

While a king's possession of military prowess alone is sufficient for him to be portrayed to readers as a worthy leader, those who have the ability to achieve national and economic development are also valued. However, as national unity is an important prerequisite for national development, the concept that strong military leaders who can maintain unity and create peaceful

conditions should be in power is reinforced. It is no surprise then that those who contributed to national development are usually the great military kings like Anawrahta (AD 1044 – 1077), Narapatisithu (AD 1165 – 1211), Alaungmintayar (AD 1754 – 1760). In addition to the implication that rulers who were able to contribute to nation building and development goals could only do so after first ensuring there is a degree of national unity, the narratives also indicate that national unity is in return strengthened by development. For example, the passage below in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade history textbook about Anawrahta reveals how he uses his military strength ability to lead national development activities:

When Anawrahta first ascended the throne, the Mon people in the north, the Shan people in the north and east, and the Rakhine people in the west of Bagan, were all ruled separately. When Anawrahta ascended the throne, he wanted to unite the divided feudal lands within the union of Myanmar.

In order to strengthen the unity of the Bagan territories, he first prepared to improve the economy. In the Kyautse area, irrigation canals were systematically dug out. He expanded agriculture, the primary source of economic production, by installing an irrigation system. Relying on the Palaung and Zawgyi River in Kyaukse, the indigenous (ethnic) people, led by Anawrahta, installed seven weirs to expand the fields of crops. To maintain and protect the irrigation system, he set up a network of farming villages and districts. He revived the Meiktila Lake, causing Kyaukse and Meiktila to become the main sources of food production and the key economic areas of Bagan.

After strengthening the economy of Bagan, Anawrahta continued to persuade others to join under him and pursue nation building and national defense activities. The conquest of the Thaton area, which is the territory of the Mon people, became an opportunity for the establishment of the first empire of Myanmar. From Thaton, he was able to bring in Buddhist scriptures, scholarly monks, and Mon cultural scholars to Bagan.

He also established the towns of Taung Pyu, Yarpya, and Sepyu in order to recruit more soldiers to defend the empire. To protect Myanmar from the external dangers in the northeast, the Nanzhao (Chinese), he built 43 fortified towns and outposts. He also made provisions for internal law enforcement...

National development is portrayed as being directed and led by kings who are able to utilize the collective power of cooperative subjects. Anawrahta is depicted here as a successful king who was the first to unite the entire nation with his military abilities and strengthen that unity by “systematically harness the people’s power to pursue national development.”(6<sup>th</sup> grade history textbook, pg.6). In contrast to Anawrahta’s narrative, King Narathu Min (AD 1160 – 1165) is described in two lines of text as leader of “lesser quality” because of his inability to contribute to national development.

Any group or individual that posed a threat to the state or national unity was considered the “other”. This included ethnic minority groups that dissented and rebelled against the state, for example the Shan and Rakhine people, as well as foreigners, such as the Thai, Mongols, Chinese, and Indians. The treatment of the two different categories of “others” differs slightly. With ethnic Burmese “others”, the primary goal is to create sense of sameness by excluding information that might highlight differences between and within the ethnic groups of Burma. Narratives use the method of creating a sense of “we” by framing history lessons in terms of the three empires under which all Burmese people were united, ignoring the history prior to unity and building a shared sense of identity based on a supposedly shared history. The dissenting ethnic minorities are “othered” by being depicted as those who stand outside this unity and seek to break it down without caring about the greater good of the nation as a whole. The narratives also imply that these ethnic leaders, unlike the Burmese kings, are not able to rule over the entire country efficiently and successfully but only create more chaos by wanting more power and autonomy.

Parts of the narratives concerning foreign “others”, even when depicted as allies with or in a position of dependence on the Burmese king, show that such contact often brings misfortune and misery to the Burmese people. For example, during the Ava dynasty, when a king aided

some Chinese people fleeing from the Manchurians (Mongols), it led many battles and much blood shed and suffering for the Burmese. The foreign “others” are depicted as often being treacherous and seldom trustworthy. For example, the narrative of King Htabinshwehti (AD 1531 -1550) from the Taungoo Dynasty describes his death at the hands of a Portuguese man:

Htabinshwehti began associating with a Portuguese man. As he carelessly drank and ate with him, the Portuguese conspired against him. (p.3)

The Thai people are also often disparaged and portrayed in an antagonizing way. For instance, in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade history book, there is an account of the Thai king living in captivity in Burma. The Burmese king permits the Thai king to return to his home country as the Thai king claims it will be a religious journey to worship at a pagoda in Thailand. Then the narrative reveals that the Thai king was not traveling for religious purposes but to stage a rebellion in Thailand against the Burmese. Additionally, the Thai are shown as people who fail to honor treaties and often go back on their word. These types of portrayals have contributed to currently existing tensions between the Thai and Burmese.

Such negative portrayals of foreigners caution the student to not be trusting of foreigners and to be cautious in all their dealings with them. This creation of distrust for foreigners is taught, perhaps because of the fact that prior to 2010 the Burmese State has always resisted the aid and urgings of other nations develop the nation politically and economically in fear of losing power.

According to the narratives, all past kings were Buddhists as indicated by the fact that the majority of them accepted a Buddhist title bestowed upon them by religious authority in a traditional Buddhist ritual. Much like the military rulers, the kings are depicted as religious leaders for the people as they are responsible for promoting Buddhism through architectural projects for religious buildings (i.e., monasteries and pagodas) and bringing in monks who are

scholars well versed in the Buddhist scriptures to advance the religious knowledge and spirituality of the people. Being a Buddhist is another aspect of identity included in the concept of Burman-ness that the State hopes to instill in people. Interestingly, when reading the texts, one finds that there are times when a king chooses to not use their ordained names. There are also instances where a king's military actions, especially during times of unrest, are given more attention and the kings described in such narratives are not depicted as pious leaders. This gives the reader the impression that military or political affairs take priority over religious affairs despite the projection of leaders as reverent, devout Buddhists.

### **Conclusion**

In Naypyidaw, the new capital located in the central region of Burma, there are three thirty-foot tall statues of Anawrahta, Bayinnaung, and Alaungmintaya, the three Burmese warrior kings who successfully united the nation through their military conquests. This monument, like the narratives of the kings in the public school history textbooks, has been constructed to invoke the glorious military history and tradition of the nation, a reminder to the people of the legitimacy and necessity of a powerful military government. In my study of middle school Burmese history textbooks, I find strong evidence of the State's self-promoting propaganda in the stories of past leaders that are full of parallels and similarities to those of how the current leaders have gained and maintained power—and why they indeed should.

The limitations of my study is that it is based only upon three history textbooks from one school year and that the data was subjectively analyzed and therefore may be affected by my own biases and knowledge. Future research needs to be conducted using data from history textbooks from all grade levels as well as geography texts in order to confirm the accuracy of my interpretation based on selected middle school texts. Noting that the formation of national

identity is not solely dependent on schooling and that textbook content may be taught differently by teachers, my analysis focused on values that the State textbooks were endeavoring to instill in students rather than the actual impact it has on students' national identity or how such lessons were received by students of different ethnicities. Further research could be carried out to answer this question and to gain student and teacher perspectives.

Education systems are key social institutions that can be used to either reproduce the status quo or to reduce the currently existing inequalities. It is therefore important for state policy makers, scholars, educators, and citizens to be aware of how schools socialize students and what the goals and outcomes of schooling are. In my study of Burmese textbooks, I found that through using the narratives of ancient kings, the Burmese State promotes the unity and solidarity of the different national races, the military might and economic acuity of leaders, distrust of foreigners or those standing outside national unity, and Buddhism as the state religion. With the current political and educational reforms taking place and accompanying rise of student protests over the existing education systems, it will be interesting to see what kind of revisions will occur in government textbooks in the coming years.



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