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Elite Continuity and Religious Custodianship in Transitional Burma:
Recovering the Legacy of U Htaw Lay

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[*Abstract*]

This article presents a critical re-evaluation of U Htaw Lay, a nineteenth-century Burmese elite whose contributions to the religious and administrative spheres have been marginalized in dominant historiography. As traditional systems of Buddhist patronage unraveled, U Htaw Lay was instrumental in preserving sacred religious sites while serving under both the Konbaung monarchy and the British colonial administration. Rather than representing a rupture with precolonial traditions, his career illustrates the adaptive reconfiguration of elite functions within emerging colonial frameworks—an interpretive model here conceptualized as *elite continuity*. U Htaw Lay's involvement in colonial service did not indicate allegiance to imperial authority but rather constituted a calculated strategy to ensure the survival of Buddhist institutions. His actions exemplify a novel paradigm of religious custodianship, grounded in legal negotiation and bureaucratic innovation. By drawing on temple-based historical records, this study underscores the analytical value of non-state archives in challenging

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dominant colonial and nationalist narratives. In recovering U Htaw Lay's legacy, the article contributes to broader scholarly debates on religious authority, cultural resilience, and the contested politics of historical memory in colonial Southeast Asia beyond the confines of Burma.

Keywords: U Htaw Lay, Buddhism, Elite Continuity, Cultural Memory, Colonial Burma/Myanmar

Ⅰ. Introduction

The nineteenth century marked a period of significant transformation in Burma, as the dissolution of the *Konbaung* monarchy and the subsequent imposition of British colonial rule dismantled long-standing political and religious structures. During this period of institutional and cultural disruption, the relationship between Buddhist monastic institutions and the state underwent a fundamental reconfiguration. Buddhist temples—once sustained and regulated through royal patronage—now faced uncertainty under a colonial regime that proclaimed religious neutrality while simultaneously restructuring legal and administrative systems.

Within this transitional context, the role of Burmese elites—especially those who straddled the precolonial and colonial divide—warrants closer examination. This article focuses on one such figure: U Htaw Lay, a senior official who served under both the Konbaung monarchy and the British colonial government. While previous historiography has often overlooked or simplified his contributions, U Htaw Lay presents a valuable case study in what this paper terms *elite continuity*—that is, the persistence or adaptation of traditional elite roles within a transformed political and institutional context (Chatterjee 1993; Migdal 2001; Reid 1997). Rather than viewing the colonial transition as a rupture, this study highlights how actors like U Htaw Lay reconfigured their responsibilities to maintain cultural authority and serve religious institutions under new imperial structures.

A respected administrator under the Konbaung dynasty, U

Htaw Lay played an instrumental role in the protection of Buddhist temples after the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824-1826), which saw Lower Burma, including his home region of Moulmein, come under British rule. Confronted with a drastically transformed political order, he accepted a position in the colonial service, not as an apologist for imperial rule, but as a pragmatic measure to uphold his enduring commitment to the preservation of religious culture. His organization of the bureaucracy reveals the persistence of cultural functions under radically reconfigured systems of rule. This article argues that U Htaw Lay represented a new form of Buddhist savant, one who saved sacred tradition not through royal patronage but through legal negotiation, institutional mediation, and administrative ingenuity. His conduct offers an example of how elite individuals might navigate power relations by reinvigorating their traditional roles during a time of institutional crisis, interacting with colonial power not as passive clients but as agents of cultural transmission.

According to recent scholarship, indigenous elites typically operated within the constrained structures of colonial rule, employing strategies far more nuanced than a rigid binary of resistance or collaboration. Maitrii Aung-Thwin (2011) argues that colonial subjects frequently engaged imperial institutions through legal and cultural negotiation rather than overt resistance. Likewise, Michael Adas (1979) has demonstrated that indigenous resistance and accommodation quite commonly operated simultaneously among subjected peoples, with the result that native agency was often exercised by means of pragmatic accommodation. Robert H. Taylor (2009) also argues that Burmese imperial elites enmeshed in colonial bureaucracies were largely responsible for the continuity of critical aspects of Burmese government and religion. When these more complex historical conditions are brought to bear on the case of U Htaw Lay, it seems that his life and work constitutes a compelling example of what one can call strategic cultural preservation, which defies easy categorizations of either collaboration or resistance.

The evidential core of this study is grounded in the historical records of the Buddhist temple, which provide local perspectives on U Htaw Lay's leadership in temple restoration, his negotiations with

colonial officials, and his broader efforts in cultural preservation. These temple annals serve as a vital counter-narrative to both colonial archives and state-centered nationalist historiography, recovering the memory of liminal figures—monks and lay communities—within monastic and community-based epistemologies.

By casting U Htaw Lay's career through the lens of elite continuity and religious custodianship, this study contributes to broader debates on colonial adaptability, cultural resilience, and the contested politics of historical memory in Southeast Asia. It proposes a critical reassessment of how individuals mediated institutional ruptures while upholding enduring commitments to sacred space—and how such intermediaries complicate reductive binaries of resistance and collaboration in postcolonial historiography.

Ⅱ. The Collapse and Transformation of the Buddhist State Order

In early nineteenth-century Burma, politics and religion were inextricably interwoven. The Konbaung dynasty (1752-1885) positioned Buddhist statecraft at the center of its political ideology, with the monarch presenting himself as a *dhammaraja*—a righteous sovereign and protector of the *dhamma* (Buddhist law). Royal legitimacy was rooted not solely in military conquest or hereditary succession, but fundamentally in the active patronage and protection of the *sangha* and Buddhist institutions.

The concept of the dhammaraja in Burmese political thought represents a distinctive synthesis of religious and secular authority. A dhammaraja derived his legitimacy from moral virtue rather than lineage alone, positioning himself as both the guardian of the Buddhist order and the steward of the secular realm (Collins 1998: 45-69). His role encompassed safeguarding the dhamma, maintaining monastic discipline, and upholding the ethical foundation of society. Within this framework, kingship was conceived not merely as a mode of political governance, but as the fulfillment of a sacred duty to uphold Buddhist law (Schober 2011: 30-35). This integration of temporal rule and spiritual responsibility

constituted the ideological core of legitimate sovereignty in the Burmese tradition.

The dhammaraja ideal was institutionally embedded through the legal and administrative frameworks articulated in the dhammathat and *niti* literature (Huxley 2002: 89-91). Governance was expected to align with core Buddhist ethical principles—such as generosity (*dana*), morality (*sila*), non-anger (*akkodha*), and non-violence (*ahiṃsa*)—which were codified into the legal fabric of the state (Hla Pe 1992, 141). As the supreme legal authority, the king issued royal edicts (*ameindaw*), oversaw judicial processes, and upheld public morality (Lieberman 1984: 67-70). His interventions in civil and criminal affairs were not arbitrary exercise of power, but obligations expression of the higher moral imperatives of Buddhist kingship.

The dhammaraja model also fundamentally structured the relationship between the monarchy and the sangha. The king bore the responsibility of periodically purifying the monastic community to ensure doctrinal integrity and moral discipline (Schober 2011: 55-60). He was further entrusted with the expansion and preservation of the *sasana* (Buddhist dispensation), a sacred obligation that could legitimize political and even military action when undertaken in service of the Dhamma (Harvey 1967: 90-92). In sum, the Burmese conception of the dhammaraja represented a sophisticated politico-theological synthesis in which religious duty and temporal governance were mutually constitutive, forming the ideological foundation of the Burmese state and society (Myint-U 2006: 56-60).

Within this politico-religious order, royal officials functioned not merely as bureaucrats but as stewards of cultural and religious life. In the Konbaung polity, senior administrators were entrusted with responsibilities that extended beyond secular governance; they served as custodians of Buddhist institutions, thereby reinforcing the ideological legitimacy of the monarchy (Aung-Thwin 2005: 92-96; Collins 1998: 45-69; Schober 2011: 34-45). Their duties included overseeing the construction and restoration of temples, managing temple lands, and adjudicating disputes within the monastic

community.

These responsibilities were not simply administrative tasks; they constituted moral imperatives vital to maintaining the king's image as a dhammaraja and preserving the ethical foundation of the state. Temples, in turn, functioned as multifaceted institutions—serving not only as religious centers, but also as hubs for education, manuscript production, local arbitration, and moral instruction (Aung-Thwin 2005: 90-97; Schober 2011: 34-45; Lieberman 1984: 121-135). As such, state authority was intimately linked to the symbolic and institutional maintenance of the Buddhist order. The administrative apparatus was structurally embedded in the protection of sacred spaces, integrating religious guardianship into the core operations of governance.

It is this institutional context that is crucial for understanding that U Htaw Lay's subsequent conduct was not merely an expression of personal religiosity, but a fulfillment of culturally and politically conditioned obligations. His actions under colonial rule—temple renovation, land protection, and the legal defense of Buddhist institutions—can be interpreted as an extension of the moral-ethical and administrative traditions institutionalized under the Konbaung dynasty.

This politico-religious system, however, underwent erosion in the wake of the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824-1826). The British annexation of Lower Burma in 1852 precipitated a fundamental disruption of the traditional order. The institutional nexus between the monarchy and the Buddhist sangha disintegrated, and the economic and legal foundations that had supported monastic life under royal patronage were severely undermined. This rupture was most acute in the lower provinces, which became both a battleground and the first sites of British colonial administration. While the symbolic and psychological heart of the Burmese world remained in Mandalay, anchored by the continued presence of the king, actual institutional authority had shifted to the British.

The most emblematic act made in those days of strife was the deliberate desecration of the Shwedagon pagoda—the most sacred Buddhist temple in Lower Burma. The Shwedagon pagoda was not

just a religious shrine; it was a powerful representation of royal sponsorship and Buddhist legitimacy. Its occupation, looting, and desecration during the war caused tremendous cultural and psychological damage to the Burmese Buddhist world. The violation was made all the more profound by the fact that a deeper ideological rupture had occurred—the monarchy could no longer serve as the guardian of the dhamma. This was when long-held religious and political certainties caved in and the ideological underpinning of Burmese kingship and society were destabilized.

The Shwedagon pagoda, revered as the spiritual heart of Burma, suffered significant damage during both the First and Second Anglo-Burmese Wars. In the First Anglo-Burmese War, following the British capture of Rangoon in 1824, the Shwedagon pagoda complex was seized and swiftly repurposed for military use. According to Michael Symes, who documented early British encounters with Burma, British forces demolished the outer enclosures of the pagoda to construct artillery emplacements, resulting in the destruction of sacred structures and monastic compounds in the process (Symes 1800: 280).

This strategic siting transformed the Shwedagon pagoda from a revered place of worship into a heavily fortified military base. Trenches were dug, artillery was installed, and surveillance posts were established on its sacred terraces—an egregious violation of the site's spiritual sanctity. The damage was not merely physical: religious rituals were suspended, monks were evicted, and the sanctity of the site was profoundly diminished. Widespread looting also occurred, as British officers and soldiers excavated stupas and temple grounds in search of valuables—including gold and silver Buddha images (Phayre 1883, 197-200).

During the Second Anglo-Burmese War in 1852, analogous patterns of desecration reoccurred. The Shwedagon pagoda once again functioned as a strategic stronghold for British forces, its sacred grounds transformed into a site of military entrenchment. Artillery bombardments inflicted further structural degradation upon the pagoda itself and obliterated numerous adjacent shrines. Both indigenous Burmese sources and colonial records attest that British

troops engaged not only in systematic looting but also in the willful defacement of religious artifacts—actions indicative of a profound disregard for the sanctity of Buddhist space (Bruce 1973: 144).

The profanation of the Shwedagon pagoda crystallized Burmese perceptions of British rule as more than foreign occupation; it came to be viewed as a direct affront to Buddhism itself (Hla Pe 1969: 122). The successive occupations and sacrilegious acts committed at the pagoda inflicted not only tangible destruction but also enduring psychological and cultural trauma. Contemporary testimonies from both British officers and Burmese chroniclers corroborate the scale and symbolic resonance of the violation. As such, the desecration of the Shwedagon pagoda epitomized the colonial regime's broader disregard for indigenous religious institutions and became a rallying symbol in the emerging discourse of Burmese resistance to imperial domination.

Meanwhile, during the First and Second Anglo-Burmese Wars, the British colonial administration adopted an official policy of religious neutrality in its governance of Lower Burma, even prior to full annexation. In practice, however, this professed neutrality manifested as the systematic withdrawal of material and legal support for Buddhist institutions. Monasteries no longer benefited from royal decrees, fiscal privileges, or land security. Many experienced the confiscation of monastic lands, the erosion of institutional functions, and progressive marginalization within Burmese society. In some instances, sacred spaces were converted for military or administrative use by colonial authorities.

British commitment to religious neutrality in Burma was shaped by precedents from their earlier colonial enterprise in India. The British East India Company had previously managed Hindu temples and religious endowments directly, based on the principle that noninterference would yield the most favorable local outcomes (Pennington 2005: 112-115). However, such involvement provoked criticism from Christian missionaries and members of Parliament, eventually generating public controversy. In the 1830s, the Company officially renounced religious favoritism in favor of a policy of strict neutrality, with state non-involvement replacing state patronage as

the preferred method for projecting secular and disinterested governance (Metcalf 1995: 84-87). This strategy—designed to minimize the political risks associated with confessional entanglements—became a core principle that British administrators sought to replicate in other colonial contexts, including Burma.

The British continued Lower Burma's transition in governance but imported their India-based principles of religious neutrality following the annexation that resulted from the Second Anglo-Burmese War. Burmese kings had historically been active patrons of Buddhism, which they regarded as a cornerstone of their legitimacy (Myint-U 2001: 45-47). The British administration, by contrast, deliberately withheld support from Buddhist monasteries, institutions, and festivals. They declined to support Buddhist education and did not recognize the sangha as a political ally. Instead, the British emphasized bureaucratic impersonality and secular legal frameworks, expecting native officials—particularly during the formative years of colonial administration—to separate religious matters from administrative affairs (Taylor 2009: 98-101). This marked a radical departure from the precolonial Burmese state, in which rulers and state functionaries maintained close relations with the Buddhist order.

Despite the official rhetoric of impartial governance, British religious neutrality in Burma effectively relegated Buddhism to a state of cultural alienation and marginalization in public consciousness. Burmese society, having for centuries viewed kings as defenders of the faith, came to see the new colonial regime as, at best, neutral—and, at worst, hostile—toward Buddhism. This estrangement contributed to the erosion of the old religious and political order. Although the neutrality policy was designed to prevent religious conflict, it ultimately severed the longstanding bond between the state and the pagoda that had anchored Burmese political society for generations.

In response of these institutional ruptures, some elites remained guided by the moral imperatives and cultural responsibilities inherited from the Konbaung regime. Figures such as U Htaw Lay came to view the protection and renovation of Buddhist

temples as a enduring obligation—one that had to be pursued within the altered legal and administrative frameworks imposed by colonial rule. The following section examines the historical and institutional context necessary to interpret U Htaw Lay's actions not as a rupture with precolonial norms, but as a strategic reorientation of traditional elite functions within a profoundly restructured colonial order.

Ⅲ. Administrative Continuity Across Regimes

The life of U Htaw Lay spanned two fundamentally opposed political systems: the Buddhist kingship of the Konbaung dynasty and the colonial bureaucracy established by the British. Although the old monarchy ultimately was dismantled—its sovereign authority replaced by a foreign administration—U Htaw Lay demonstrated a remarkable capacity for institutional adaptation. Through the re-institutionalization of elite service, he maintained his allegiance to both political authority and religious tradition.

Under the Konbaung dynasty, U Htaw Lay occupied a senior administrative post, with responsibilities encompassing taxation, land management, and the protection of Buddhist temples. His official role embodied the foundational principles of Burmese political thought, wherein the legitimacy of the monarchy was inextricably linked to the safeguarding of the sangha. Temple custodianship was not merely a bureaucratic function; it constituted a moral imperative that reinforced royal authority and upheld the ethical order of society (Aung-Thwin 2005: 92-96; Collins 1998: 45-69; Lieberman 1984: 121-135).

A Mon noble of high lineage, U Htaw Lay was born into a prominent family of Mon ascendancy in 1776 and advanced to the position of a leading figure in the bureaucracy of the Konbaung dynasty. As *myoza* (town governor) of Dala, he fulfilled a wide range of responsibilities, including tax collection, local governance, judicial administration, and regional defense (Myint-U 2001: 42-45). The Konbaung dynasty's reliance on multifunctional officials like U Htaw Lay was crucial for extending royal control into frontier regions,

where administrative and military duties were closely intertwined (Myint-U 2001: 46-47). His responsibilities extended well beyond fiscal matters; he also organized local militias and enforced royal edicts, effectively assuming an integrated civil-military role characteristic of late Konbaung governance. His administrative leadership was vital in maintaining local order during a period of political instability.[1]

In addition to his role as governor of Dala, U Htaw Lay held the military rank of *sitke* (Regimental Officer) and was responsible for administering regional security in the region. His leadership in mobilizing militia forces and suppressing internal rebellions reflects the decentralized yet highly coordinated nature of Konbaung governance (Aung-Thwin 2005: 93-96). As Michael Aung-Thwin observes, Konbaung officials were expected to maintain internal order while exhibiting loyalty to the central monarchy—a dual mandate that U Htaw Lay fulfilled with distinction (Aung-Thwin 2005; 100-103). His career serves as a salient example of how civil and military authority were frequently concentrated in a single individual to enhance administrative effectiveness. Moreover, later chronicles underscore U Htaw Lay's political astuteness in managing the complexities of frontier administration during a period marked by growing internal instability and external threats.

Following the British conquest of Lower Burma, U Htaw Lay was transferred to Moulmein, where his administrative expertise proved invaluable in managing the affairs of exiled Burmese communities. No longer operating under the authority of the monarchy, he assumed a leadership role in resettlement efforts, facilitating the adaptation of refugees to the evolving social and administrative structures of the colonial regime (Kin Thida Oung 2007: 20). Juliane Schober (2011) observes that figures like U Htaw Lay "served as essential go-betweens in the relationship between the traditional Burmese state and the emerging features of colonial society" (48–50). His ability to adapt Konbaung-era administrative models to a radically altered political context attests to the resilience

[1] For further details on the volatile political conditions of the time, see Maung Maung Tine, 2024; 260-289.

of Burmese elite traditions and underscores the enduring relevance of multifunctional leadership in times of systemic disruption.

The First Anglo-Burmese War (1824-1826) marked a profound transformation of the political landscape. In its aftermath, Lower Burma—including U Htaw Lay's native region of Moulmein—fell under British control. Confronted with this new colonial reality, U Htaw Lay reluctantly entered British service at the behest of colonial authorities shortly after the war's conclusion. Formerly a senior official under the Konbaung dynasty, U Htaw Lay effectively integrated into the British colonial administration following his relocation to Moulmein. Initially appointed as a subordinate officer in 1833, he was later recognized for his pivotal contribution to the establishment of administrative structures in Lower Burma (Myint-U 2001: 55). According to the *Konbaungzet Mahayazawindawgyi*, he had previously overseen substantial civil and military responsibilities under the monarchy (Tin 2004, Vol. II: 431). Thant Myint-U observes that the British strategically incorporated experienced figures such as U Htaw Lay to stabilize their colonial regime by leveraging familiar administrative models rooted in the precolonial order (Myint-U 2001: 57).

U Htaw Lay's contributions to settlement organization and the maintenance of civic order were instrumental in legitimizing early British authority in Lower Burma. He exemplifies how indigenous elites adapted to new political realities while retaining aspects of their traditional roles and responsibilities (Aung-Thwin 2005: 100-102). As Kin Thida Oung notes, such figures retained social and political influence by pragmatically engaging with colonial structures while preserving key elements of Burmese leadership traditions (Kin Thida Oung 2007: 20).

U Htaw Lay's life and career offer a compelling example of the complex agency exercised by Burmese officials during a period of profound political transformation. His acceptance of service under the British Crown, paradoxically, served as a strategy to fulfill his enduring cultural and religious responsibilities—chiefly the protection of monasteries and, to some extent, the broader Buddhist ecclesiastical order. His bureaucratic adaptation enabled him to

uphold normative commitments inherited from the Konbaung era, albeit within a fundamentally altered political context. As a colonial official, U Htaw Lay remained publicly committed to the cause of the sasana: he oversaw the renovation of prominent pagodas in Moulmein, submitted formal petitions to colonial authorities to protect monastic lands, and advocated for the preservation of monastic privileges.

While holding the position of sitke in Moulmein, U Htaw Lay grew increasingly concerned about the societal disruption caused by British colonial rule. Although trade and commerce flourished under new material conditions, he observed a corresponding decline in popular Buddhist devotional culture, which he attributed to the ascendancy of commercial materialism. In response, he initiated an ambitious campaign to preserve the town's Buddhist character by systematically restoring its monastic institutions and pagodas. He completed major renovations of Moulmein's most revered religious sanctuaries, encompassing both large and minor religious structures. In addition to these architectural efforts, U Htaw Lay reinforced the doctrinal foundations of the sasana by donating a Pali edition of the Tipiṭaka. These actions reflected his deep commitment to preserving the religious cohesion of the sangha at a time when Buddhist culture faced serious challenges and belief systems were under pressure (Nain Pan Hla 2006: 177).

> An order from British Burma has halted the looting of temples by the British. The Myatheindan temple in Shwemyaing and its annexes (monasteries, caves, zayat, dazaung, archives, and so on.) are in urgent need of repair, and the market in the temple has been removed and enslaved people are not allowed to reside there. We also repaired the pillars and floors of the annexes at the Sandawshin, Kyaik-atauk, and Kyaiktanlan pagodas, where the relics of the Buddha are enshrined. The construction of a brick pavilion at Kuthi Pagoda and the making and hanging of a bell at the pagoda involved 600 people. U Shwe Hla and other Buddhists repaired the collapsed parts of the Boat temple and stupa in the surrounding area, placing Hti on the top. So it looks much better than before. The Payabyu pagoda, which was so damaged that it could not be touched, was also rebuilt by U Shwe Hla and others, including U Htaw Lay. All these repairs were detailed in inscriptions for future generations to

remember (Inscription of Sitkekyi U Htaw Lay, ME 1231 [AD 1869]).

Rather than engaging in covert resistance or engaging in overt resistance the new colonial authorities, U Htaw Lay strategically cooperated with the British administration. His entry into the colonial bureaucracy was not indicative of submission, but a deliberate effort to continue his devout commitment to preserving Buddhism. His adaptation reflects a broader pattern of elite adaptation, wherein members of the traditional aristocracy reconfigured their ethical and ideological commitments within transformed political contexts.

In doing so, U Htaw Lay preserved the normative structure of his former Konbaung service, even as the institutional structures that had once defined his career abolished. He emerges not merely as a political remnant, but as a reconstituted civil servant—one who reconceptualized bureaucratic engagement into religious-cultural custodianship across two fundamentally different regimes. U Htaw Lay thus exemplifies the Burmese elite's adaptability and resilience, meditating between Buddhist kingship and colonial governance at a moment when religion was increasingly denied its traditional place in public life.

Ⅳ. Adapting Religious Responsibility under Colonial Rule

The annexation of Lower Burma by the British in 1852 signified the definitive dissolution of royal authority in the region and introduced a fundamentally different legal and bureaucratic order. For Burmese elites who had long derived their roles and responsibilities through the idiom of Buddhist kingship, the new colonial administration raised foundational challenges. Some were displaced; others resiste d.[2] U Htaw Lay, by contrast, pursued a strategy of adaptation—one that allowed him to continue fulfilling what he regarded as a sacred obligation: the protection of Buddhist sacred spaces.

[2] For Burmese elites who resisted colonial authority after the annexation of Lower Burma (see Aung-Thwin 2005: 103-108; Schober 2011: 45-50; Thant Myint-U 2006: 112-118).

U Htaw Lay's entry into service under the colonial regime has often been misconstrued as an instance of collaborationist behavior. Yet insofar as his actions were motivated by religious duty and the maintenance of religious-institutional continuity, his decision to operate within the colonial bureaucracy was less an concession to colonial authority than a strategic accommodation to sustain elite continuity under emergent structures of colonial governance. He skillfully redefined his administrative role from a traditional agent of royal authority into a colonial custodian of sacred heritage, utilizing the mechanisms of British governance—formal petitions, property rights, and legal appeals—to protect Buddhist temples against neglect, seizure, and sacrilege.

Among the most significant aspects of U Htaw Lay's work during the colonial period was his leadership in temple restoration initiatives, particularly at the Shwedagon pagoda. After the British annexation, the pagoda, reassigned as a military fort, was left in a structural degradation: architectural elements were dismantled, sacred relics desecrated, and monastic discipline had deteriorated. Drawing upon his dual identity as a senior former official and a devout lay Buddhist, U Htaw Lay spearheaded fundraising efforts, negotiated colonial legal constraints on religious property, and oversaw the re-consecration of the site. He exemplifies how traditional elites strategically redefined their roles to defend religious institutions within a fundamentally transformed political order.

Following the British seizure of Rangoon in 1852, Burma's most revered Buddhist shrine was commanddred by colonial authorities for military use. The British reinforced the pagoda's platform, deconstructed sections of its terraced levels to install artillery, and appropriated religious structures to store military equipment (Than Tun 1988: 173). These actions caused substantial architectural damage and led to the removal or displacement of sacred relics. In response, U Htaw Lay filed formal petitions to Queen Victoria and the colonial administration, appealing for the protection of Buddhist archaeological sites—most notably the Shwedagon pagoda—from persistent degradation (Khin Maung Nyunt 2000, 45):

> When Sitke Maung Htaw Lay heard that the British soldiers were looting and destroying the pagodas in Yangon, he was so concerned that he quickly traveled to Hanthawaddy (Pegu) and wrote a petition to the white queen (Queen Victoria) and sent it to England. In it, he wrote that the Burmese have a saying that when religion (Buddhism) is stable and flourishing, all things go smoothly, and all living beings are timelessly free, so please take measures to prohibit the destruction of all religious buildings without delay so that they can keep their faith. He also ordered that anyone who destroyed religious buildings would be punished by imprisonment for one or two years and a fine. All orders were to be promulgated without delay (Inscription of Sitkekyi U Htaw Lay, ME 1231 [AD 1869]).

Despite official proclamations advocating for the protection of religious monuments, British excavations at the Shwedagon continued. During these operations, relics believed to date from the Mon dynasty were unearthed, including gold and silver vessels enshrined within subterranean chambers (Royal Asiatic Society 1857: 230-232). Many of the artifacts discovered were brought to Britain. The British authorities conducted these excavations under the guise of archaeological preservation, though local Burmese regarded the acts as desecration of a sacred space (Maung Hsu Shin 1975 [2012]: 88–90). U Htaw Lay consistently issued official complaints through colonial administrative channels throughout this period.

Concurrent with his legal petitions, U Htaw Lay intiated and coordinated restoration efforts for the Shwedagon pagoda. Drawing on support from Buddhist lay communities, he mobilized community-based fundraising that accumulated approximately 10,000 kyats to finance restoration projects (Burma Gazetteer 1910: 81–82). Restoration activities included re-gilding the pagoda's exterior, the installation of a new *hti* (sacred umbrella), and the removal of military installations from the pagoda platform. U Htaw Lay supervised restoration works to monastic buildings and the construction of ancillary religious structures surrounding the pagoda. Singer (1993) records that U Htaw Lay coordinated the mobilization of artisans and craftsmen who had had formerly been affiliated with the Konbaung court, repurposing their skills for restoration work under colonial oversight (67–69).

The main building of Shwedagon pagoda underwent extensive restoration by 1860. After the Colonial administrative period, the pagoda grounds were cleared of fortifications and the temple resumed its role as a focal point of Buddhist worship. U Htaw Lay's participation is documented in official temple governance and land lease documents implemented to ensure the project's success in the long run (Myint-U 2001: 57). Later commemorative plaques installed at the pagoda recorded the names of donors, including U Htaw Lay, and the tasks that were performed to restore the monument. The inscriptions provide material documentation for the systematic and mass campaigns conducted by U Htaw Lay and other Buddhist committees to save the Shwedagon pagoda at a time of momentous political transition.

Significantly, U Htaw Lay's efforts were not confined to the capital or the preservation of major religious monuments. Temple annals and local administrative records detail his involvement in repairing minor shrines, providing legal counsel to monks in land disputes, and facilitating communication between monastic leadership and colonial authorities. His activities reveal that religious guardianship under colonial rule demanded a distinctive set of competencies: furidical expertise, administrative negotiation skills, and the capacity to operate effectively within a state system whose very foundations were often at odds with the preservation of Burmese Buddhism.

Inspired by these previous projects, U Htaw Lay dedicated his later years to rehabilitating and reconstructing Buddhist temples in Rangoon. He had been working closely with his son-in-law, U Khaing, who had recently resigned from a government post to become the township administrator of Dala. After the British annexation of Lower Burma in 1853, U Khaing's career advanced rapidly and he was successively made myoza of Dala, and then sitke of Rangoon. It was following U Htaw Lay's retirement to Rangoon, that the two men would launch multiple public and religious initiatives, which included the renovation and redeveloping of holy sites in the city. However, they extended their activities beyond temple restoration to undertake a range of general civic infrastructure initiatives, such as endorsing street naming efforts in

Rangoon after British military figures, as well as two Burmese personalities celebrated in the city center (Kin Thida Oung 2007: 24). They were involved in the restoration of the Sule Pagoda, raising it to 123 feet (Khin Maung Nyunt 2000: 139). U Htaw Lay died in 1869 but remained engaged in the oversight of the restoration of important religious sites such as the Naungdawgyi and Sule pagodas establishing his legacy as a key figure in the efforts to restore and maintain Burmese Buddhist heritage during the colonial years (Singer 1993: 81).

U Htaw Lay's experience thus represents a case of elite continuity reconstituted through the logic of colonial administration. His authority no longer derived from royal appointment; instead, it had to be reestablished through personal merit, service to the local community, and efficacy withing a colonial administrative framework. Rather than relinquishing the cultural responsibilities historically expected of Burmese elites, he reframed them within the structural constrains made possible under colonial rule. In doing so, he sought to continue performing religious roles in the absence of the Buddhist polity embodied by the Burmese state.

Through this transformation, U Htaw Lay represented an emergent paradigm of religious custodianship—one grounded not in royal patronage, but in ethical authority, bureaucratic capability, and enduring relationships with local religious communities. His life under British rule offers a compelling demonstration of how cultural and spiritual commitments not only persisted but were revitalized through a process of strategic acculturation led by indigenous elites within a colonial context.

Ⅴ. The Marginalization of U Htaw lay in Burmese Historiography

The historical legacy of U Htaw Lay—despite its significance in both administrative and religious spheres—has remained largely absent from Burmese historiography in the post-independence era. This omission is not incidental, but rather reflective of a deliberate, state-directed memory politics aimed at redefining the nation's relationship with its colonial past.[3] In this context, figures like U

Htaw Lay—who occupied ambiguous positions as both protectors of Burmese culture and participants in colonial administration—have been marginalized, excluded from the pantheon of national heroes, and in some cases symbolically erased from public commemoration.

Following independence in 1948, Burmese political elites sought to build a postcolonial identity grounded in anti-colonialism, Buddhist nationalism, and ethnic sovereignty. In this story, the legitimacy of their place was exclusively attributed to those who struggled against British rule, while many who worked within colonial institutions were publicly discredited as collaborators, no matter what they intended or had contributed. This polarized framework—resistance versus collaboration—allowed little space for transitional figures like U Htaw Lay, who had tried to protect national culture through strategic accommodation, not outright opposition.

The erasure of U Htaw Lay is mos visibly manifested in the renaming of Yangon's streets during the military government's nationalization campaign of 1989. As part of a broader initiative to restructure colonial spatial memory, over 160 streets were renamed to reflect indigenous or revolutionary values. Among them, Sitke Maung Htaw Lay Street—named in his honor—was renamed Bo Sun Pet Street, effectively removing his name from the public spatial memory of the city. This symbolic act of erasure reveals the extent to which the state sought to redefine the moral geography of the nation by rewriting who could be remembered, and who could not (Kyaw Phyo Tha 2018; Seekins 2017: s.v. "Street Names").

Nevertheless, U Htaw Lay's memory was not entirely obliterated. The Buddhist temples he helped restore and protect continue to acknowledge his contributions in their institutional histories. Monastic chronicles—including those of the Shwedagon pagoda and other significant religious sites—chronicle his efforts to secure monastic land, his mediation with British officials, and his leadership in restoration projects. Though marginal in formal

[3] The "politics of memory" refers to the ways in which collective historical memory is constructed, negotiated, and appropriated by political actors to construct historical narratives that serve contemporary ideological needs (Olick 2007).

national historiography, these accounts offer a competing narrative —one in which U Htaw Lay is not cast as a colonial collaborator, but as a cultural custodian and protector of the sasana.

This divergence between official memory and institutional memory illustrates the fragmented and contested nature of historical recollection in postcolonial Burma. While state narratives have tended to emphasize resistance, sovereignty, and anti-colonial struggle, religious institutions have preserved stories of continuity, strategic adaptation, and cultural preservation. U Htaw Lay's legacy, therefore, remains paradoxically both carefully sustained and institutionally erased. Absent from school curricula and state commemorations, his legacy endures within the consecrated religious sites of Buddhist temples, embedded in the architectural and spiritual legacy of Burmese Buddhism.

The marginalization of U Htaw Lay thus signifies not only the limitations of dominant nationalist historical discourse but of the challenges in representing such transitional figures in postcolonial regimes of memory at large. His historical obscurity also prompts a critical reassessment how collective memory is made, by whom and for what reasons. It raises the importance of non-state archival sources—such as temple chronicles and local oral traditions—as alternative repositories for recovering marginalized and elided histories. Reevaluating U Htaw lay in Burmese history reveals that memory is not a static reflection of the past, but a contested space where national identity is constantly negotiated.

Ⅵ. Conclusion

This paper has examined the contested and understudied legacy of U Htaw Lay, a prominent figure of the nineteenth-century Burmese elite who played a central role in saving Buddhist religious institutions amid the tumultuous transition from royal to colonial rule. By tracing his bureaucratic trajectory from the Konbaung monarchy to the British colonial regime and analyzing his sustained emphasis on temple preservation, this analysis suggests that U Htaw Lay embodied a form of elite continuity that redefined traditional

functions within a radically transformed political environment.

Rather than pursuing a path of outright defiance or uncritical cooperation, U Htaw Lay adopted a pragmatic strategy of negotiated adaptation. His decision to enter colonial service did not signify allegiance to imperial authority, but rather reflected a deliberate choice to fulfill a culturally embedded imperative: the protection of sacred space. Navigating unfamiliar legal and administrative frameworks, he assumed the role of Buddhist guardian—one who defended longstanding ecclesiastical authority through modern bureaucratic means. His enduring convictions illustrate a framework of cultural guardianship grounded not in formal political authority, but in ethical commitment and spiritual fidelity.

The case of U Htaw Lay challenges dominant binaries in Burmese historiography that reduce historical actors to simplistic categories of resistance or collaboration. His career demonstrates how elite actors preserved cultural continuity by reconfiguring their engagement with power and repositioning themselves within shifting constellations of authority. In this light, U Htaw Lay offers a productive lens through which to explore broader questions of administrative adaptation, religious entrepreneurship, and institutional resilience under conditions of systemic upheaval.

Equally important is the question of memory—how U Htaw Lay has been remembered or effaced in postcolonial Burma. His erasure from official history, symbolized by the 1989 renaming of Sitke Maung Htaw Lay Street, reflects a nationalist memory politics that marginalizes transitional figures not neatly aligned with dominant narratives of anti-colonial resistance. In contrast, temple chronicles preserve a counter-memory that commemorates his contributions as restorer, mediator, and defender of the sasana. This divergence underscores the necessity of incorporating non-state archives into the reconstruction of historical memory and interrogating the ideological assumptions that shape official remembrance.

Revisiting the life of U Htaw Lay also invites a broader reconsideration of colonial transitions in Southeast Asia and the moral, administrative, and religious agency of indigenous elites. His

experience illustrates how continuity and change intersected in nineteenth-century Burma, and how historical actors can both conform to and complicate the interpretative categories imposed by later ideological regimes.

Other transitional elites who occupied similarly liminal positions, along with the institutional formations—temple councils, lay associations, and municipal committees—that enabled cultural preservation under colonial rule, merit greater academic inquiry. As U Htaw Lay's example demonstrates, the continuity of tradition does not always depend on resistance; it often hinges on reinvention.

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