

‘Theravāda civilization(s)’? Periodizing its history.

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This is not so much a ‘state of the field’ paper as a series of reflections on what might have been involved in the spread of ‘Theravāda’ Buddhism across South and Southeast Asia, and a suggested periodization of ‘Theravāda’ history, both of which are intentionally polemical. I doubt that many, if any, of my colleagues in the Theravāda Civilizations Project would agree with everything, or even much, or even anything, of what I say. But this is the kind of thing we have been discussing. I am posting it to the website in the hope of stimulating wider reflection and discussion. The first half of these remarks is essentially the same as the first half of the Keynote Address I gave at the meeting in Toronto in March 2012. The second is a series of remarks on periodizing Theravāda history, a revised version of which will appear in the second of the two volumes the group is preparing to publish. In both halves I express great scepticism about the possibility and value of trying to decide what was ‘early’ Buddhism of any kind. It is my view that, given the complete impossibility of knowing what ‘early’ Buddhism was, the practice of offering speculative pictures of it inevitably casts all subsequent Theravada history in a pejorative light, which is a bad thing.

1. What spread?

The term *theravāda* has recently been subject to much useful analysis¹. In premodern times, in Pali and in vernaculars, it is in fact a rather rare word, and its meanings were twofold: as Peter Skilling defines the term, it referred to ‘[i] a monastic lineage and [ii] a textual transmission of ethics, metaphysics, narratives - the Pali Canon and the ritual practices of monasticism and liturgy’². The monastic lineage was, in general terms, that which pictured itself as deriving from the elders (the *thera*-s) who met to compile the Pali Canon at the First Council immediately after the Buddha’s death³. The textual transmission could have a narrow sense, as in that collection of ideas defended in

1 Peter Skilling ‘Theravada in History, *Pacific World: Journal of the Institute for Buddhist Studies*, (Third Series, Number 11, Fall 2009): 61-93; Peter Skilling, Jason Carbine, Claudio Cicuzza and Santi Pakdeekham (eds.) *How Theravada is Theravada? Exploring Buddhist Identities*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Press, 2012.

2 Skilling et al. (eds.) p. xxii.

3 See Rupert Gethin, ‘Was Buddhaghosa a Theravādin? Buddhist Identity in the Pali Commentaries and Chronicles’, in Skilling et al. (eds.) pp. 1-63.

the canonical *Abhidhamma* work *Kathāvatthu* –whose commentary provides several instances of the term *theravāda*– and other texts concerned with matters of doxography; or it could refer in a more general way to the Pali canon and the commentarial texts and chronicles (*vaṃsa*-s) which became attached to it. In neither case did it refer, as it now does, to a broader socio-historical ‘religious’ tradition practiced both by members of the Monastic Order and by laity. It would have made no sense for a layperson, for example, to describe him or herself as a *theravādin*. The modern use of the term seems to derive originally from the British civil servant George Turnour in Sri Lanka in 1836; the first uses of the phrase ‘Theravāda Buddhism’ seem to have been by the Thai Prince Chudadharn at the Chicago World’s Parliament of Religions in 1893 (though it was not used there by the much more influential speaker Anagarika Dharmapala), and by the western monk Ananda Maitreya (Allen Bennett) in an article in the *Bulletin de l’École française d’extrême-orient* in 1907 (he wrote of ‘*le pur Bouddhisme de l’école Theravada*’). The single most important factor in establishing the word’s current usage was the decision by the World Fellowship of Buddhists to use the term (as opposed to others such as *Hīnayāna* or *Southern Buddhism*) taken at a meeting in 1950⁴.

If the term ‘Theravāda’ in its current descriptive sense is a modern invention, what can be the point of using it now, especially in the phrase ‘Theravada Civilization(s)’? First, modern Buddhists (or at least some of them - it would be very useful to have contemporary ethnographic evidence on this) use the word; and second, common sense suggests that it would be quixotic for scholars to attempt to prevent the use of such a now standard term: as Peter Skilling, again, puts it ‘I do not propose that we abandon the use of the term Theravāda –that would be absurd– but I do suggest that we do our best to understand its historical context, and that we keep it in rein’⁵. It is necessarily retrospective, a term of art in modern historiography. When we use the term of any premodern time and place what we mean is something, or some things, which can be seen, or argued, to be genealogically related to what we now call ‘Theravāda’. What might such things be? What follows is a list of things which spread, separately and together, from India and Sri Lanka to Southeast Asia starting from at least the 4-5th centuries AD, reaching roughly modern distribution, or basis of it, in the 14th century, given in order of historical importance as I see it, and which I see as reasons for speaking of ‘Theravāda civilization(s)’. These things might be thought of as modules, and the kind of historiography I am recommending could be called modular history: some or all of these things were present in what is now called the spread of Theravāda, but it is an empirical issue which were significant, and how far they were so, in any given time and place. We will probably never know.

4 See Todd LeRoy Perreira, ‘Whence Theravāda? The Modern Genealogy of an Ancient Term’, in Skilling et al. (eds.) pp. 443-571.

5 Peter Skilling ‘Theravāda in History’ p. 80.

(i) socio-cultural contexts, now evidenced in inscriptions especially, in which Pali language was prized and used as performatively efficacious, in such things as liturgies, mantras, protection texts, inscriptional stanzas: for example the *ye dhammā* formula, the *iti pi so gāthā, namo buddhāya*, Abhidhamma lists, etc⁶. This is fundamental: but I am talking here of a *language* and not yet a *literature*. If Pali is present, in any form, then one can, retrospectively and *a priori*, speak of ‘Theravāda Buddhism’; but of course this is not to deny the ubiquitous use of vernaculars which form part of the same genealogy, and not to deny that the role of Pali may have been very different in different times and places.

(ii) images of the Buddha and some monks, in certain recognizable styles, and relics, and practices of venerating both, in some cases with accompanying or subsequently-written histories (*vaṃsa*-s).

(iii) certain monastic lineages, often sponsored by local power-holders (kings), and often called the *Sīhala-saṅgha* or *Sīhala-pakkha*. This relationship between lineages and kings offers instances and patterns of what Leslie Gunawardana happily referred to as an ‘antagonistic symbiosis’⁷ between holders of ideological power and holders of military-political power (this has been called the ‘legitimation’ of kingship, a term I find no longer valuable⁸). Sometimes in this process individual monks had what one might call a starring rôle, and we might think of them as premodern ‘celebrities’.

(iv) a rhetorical orientation to the literature of the Pali Canon (the *tipiṭaka*) as a regulatory idea/ideal - though the entirety of the actual texts so designated would not, indeed, or at least very infrequently, be found together in any one time and place.

6 See Prapod Assavirulhakarn, *The Ascendancy of Theravāda Buddhism in Southeast Asia*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Press, 2010.

7 *Robe and Plough: monasticism and economic interest in early medieval Sri Lanka*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1979, p. 344.

8 Here, briefly, are my reasons: first, the concept seems to presuppose that military-political power comes to exist, and then, as it were, has to look around for ideological support; second, likewise, it is as if the ideologies of ‘legitimation’ pre-exist occasions for their use in supporting some military-political power. But in the historical process both military-political and ideological power evolve together: any trans-local political formation is dependent on an elite ideology, shared by a central power-holder and client-kings, to function, and any ideology must have military-political support to become of civilizational significance. Third, and most importantly, the very practice of ‘legitimation’ contains the potential for de-legitimation: if ideological power is to bring anything to military-political power which the latter does not already have then that must be because ideological power has access to some socially-important values and aspirations of its own, which can always potentially be used to de-legitimize kings and others in a game of one-up-manship. I have argued this general case at length in the General Introduction and Chapter 6 in *Nirvana and other Buddhist Felicities: utopias of the Pali imaginaire* (Cambridge University Press, 1998).

(v) among elites, what I have called the Pali *imaginaire* as a potential data bank⁹; but note that there were rarely many texts outside specialist libraries, and Pali texts always co-existed with other texts, in Sanskrit and in vernaculars.

(vi) the availability of a heterogeneous set of practices of the self, forms of asceticism –I am using *askēsis* in the sense of training, ‘spiritual exercises’– as oriented by (though not uniquely aimed at) the goal of nirvana, as both the (alleged) individual achievement and (more easily verified) the social status of the enlightened man or woman.

There is another tradition (or more likely traditions) which we have only recently come to know about, and exploration of which which remains an urgent desideratum on the scholarly agenda, and which I hesitate to list in order with the other modules since we know so little about it: what has been variously, and inadequately, called ‘tantric Theravāda’, or the tradition(s) of *yogāvacara* or *kammaṭṭhāna* practice¹⁰. This refers to practices of meditation and rumination which, for example, deal with syllables of Pali mantras and their visualized implantation in different parts of the human body and of Buddha-images.

Selecting any one of these modules, or group of them as ‘early’ Buddhism is an act of personal choice and preference. We cannot have any historically certain, or even reliable, knowledge of what Buddhism was. The idea that it was originally a set of ascetic practices and ideas which only later and gradually ‘accommodated’ itself to ‘society’ (a view very influentially held by Max Weber) has been in my view very detrimental to the study of Buddhism, in many ways. (I come back to this in the second half of these remarks.)

9 See Collins, *Nirvana and other Buddhist Felicities*. For a useful critique of this idea see Peter Skilling, ‘King Rāma I and Wat Phra Chetuphon: the Buddha-sāsana in Early Bangkok’, in Skilling et al. (eds.), pp. 297-352, from whom (pp. 345-46) I have borrowed the concept of an *imaginaire* as a databank.

10 For overviews in English see Kate Crosby, ‘Tantric Theravāda: A bibliographic essay on the writings of François Bizot and other literature on the *Yogāvacara* Tradition,’ *Journal of Contemporary Buddhism*, 2000 (2): pp. 141-198, and Lance Cousins ‘Aspects of Southern Esoteric Buddhism’ in Peter Connolly and Sue Hamilton (eds.) *Indian Insights* (London: Luzac Oriental). See also, inter alia, François Bizot, *Le Bouddhisme des Thai, Brève histoire de ses mouvements et de ses idées des origines à nos jours* (Bangkok: Édition des Cahiers de France, 1993) is an account which over-exaggerates the significance of the practices and ideas; see also Bizot’s ‘La place des communautés du Nord-Laos dans l’histoire du bouddhisme d’Asie du Sud-Est’, *Bulletin de l’Ecole française d’Extrême-Orient* 87 (2), 2000: pp. 511-528; François Bizot and François LaGirarde, *La pureté par les mots* (Paris: Ecole française d’Extrême-Orient [Textes bouddhiques du Laos, 3], 1996); François Bizot and Oskar von Hinüber, *La guirlande des joyaux* (Paris: Ecole française d’Extrême-Orient [Textes bouddhiques du Cambodge, 2], 1994); Olivier de Bernon, ‘Le mūl kammaṭṭhān du Wat Ratchathiwat daté de 1661 A.D.: présentation et traduction,’ *Journal of the Siam Society*, 90-1 & 2 (2002), p. 149-160.

It's important that Pali (the language, the Canon, the *imaginaire*, practices of the self, etc.) never existed alone: it always co-existed with vernaculars, often with Sanskrit: there has never been a civilization in which only Pali was valued as a prestige language. The spread of both language and literature was empirically varied: for example, in Cambodia between the 14th and 19th centuries it is, I think, a still open question whether at any time we are looking at a 'Theravāda civilization' rather than at a civilization with some Theravada components.

In thinking of the spread of (what we now call) Theravāda we might think of the spread of both sounds and silences: the *sounds* of texts read out loud (performed), of chanting, protection and other mantras, sermons, etc.; and the *silences* of texts as mute objects, often worshipped not performed, lighting incense and candles, venerating Buddha-images (usually done in silence), practices of the self = 'meditation', etc. (almost all but not quite all of these are silent practices of the mind, 'spiritual exercises', in a sense to which I will return later).

To suggest something of what is at stake here, in a larger civilizational perspective, I will cite a passage from Ben Anderson's *Imagined Communities* about the larger-scale social formations which he sees as preceding modern nationalism:

Few things are more impressive than the vast territorial stretch of the Ummah Islam from Morocco to the Sulu archipelago, of Christendom from Paraguay to Japan, of the Buddhist World from Sri Lanka to the Korean peninsula. The great sacral cultures... incorporated conceptions of immense communities... [and] were imaginable largely through the medium of a sacred language and a written script... All the great classical communities conceived of themselves as cosmically central, through the medium of a sacred language linked to a superterrestrial order of power. Accordingly, the stretch of written Latin, Pali, Arabic or Chinese was, in theory, unlimited. (In fact, the deader the written language –the farther it was from speech– the better: in principle everyone has access to a pure world of signs.)'

I am not citing this to take a cheap shot at a deservedly famous and influential work of scholarship, but: almost everything he says, as a description of Buddhism and Pali, is wrong. One major task on the scholarly agenda is to continue Anderson's reflections on the historical processes which preceded modern nationalism with a more empirically accurate account of what pre-modern civilizational communities were, if indeed they were *communities*: perhaps better said groups of inter-related communities.

I would like to suggest at this point a rough-and-ready distinction between *cultures* and *civilizations*: All human groups have *culture*, since they practice and memorialize linguistic and other forms of representation and exchange; and everyone is capable of asking the kinds of simple question

--where did the world come from? what happens after death? why do good people often suffer and bad prosper?-- to which transcendentalist ideologies like Buddhism give complexly articulated answers. *Culture* is a trait of any human society, but a *civilization*, I want to suggest, exists only in certain contexts in which there is created and maintained an externalized, publicly recognized and institutionalized form of *tradition* which answers such questions (and determines whether and how they are asked) in prestige languages, and whose status depends on the fact of its perceived *traditionality*. Such an institution has, crucially, its own personnel, where authority is transmitted from teacher to pupil rather than from biological parent to child (these roles may coincide). Earlier experience tells me I must emphasize that this use of the term *civilization* is not evaluative, but --for a specific purpose only-- descriptive: I do *not* mean that people who have culture but not civilization are uncivilized, barbarian, or whatnot. I just mean that they do not have a certain social institution, or set of institutions, which I would refer to under the labels *externalized tradition* and *traditionalism* (that is, the fact of tradition, in itself seen as a virtue). Put methodologically, Theravāda Buddhism, in comparison, say, with Australian aborigines (in the past, anyway, before contact with white people) or Amazonian rain-forest tribes, is better studied in a Weberian historicist perspective where values can and do conflict, than in that of Durkheimian sociological holism, seeking what Mauss called 'total social facts'. There are no 'Theravāda total social facts'.

One area where the Weberian and Durkheimian visions are relevant is what I call the civilizational enigma of celibate asceticism: in calling celibate asceticism a *civilizational enigma*, I do *not* mean that such asceticism itself, or its existence in civilizations, is problematic in an evaluative sense. I am referring to the extraordinary fact, to which extraordinarily little systematic reflection has been given, that some civilizations accord central forms of privilege, cultural, economic and other, to a way of life which on the level of rhetoric, though never in fact, rejects involvement in the life of production and reproduction without which no civilization could exist, and often seems even to denigrate it --to use Weber's famous phrase about Buddhism for the laity-- as *an insufficiency ethic for the weak*. How is it (I avoid the impossible question *why?*) that some human groups not only permit but idealize something which would render human life impossible if universalized, a minority option represented as superior to the social processes whose continuing existence is a necessary condition of its own possibility?¹¹

¹¹ The widespread Southeast Asian practice of temporary ordination complicates this issue; we do not yet have a historical account of its development.

One approach, stemming from Durkheim and Freud and revisited in 1987 by Geoffrey Harpham¹², sees the renunciation of instinctual drives, aggressive, sexual and other, as essential to all social order and cultural production; asceticism (in this sense) is not only a collective necessity but also an intrinsic part of social, that is *human* being for individuals. Full-time or temporary ascetics, one might say, act out, as a synecdoche (or as scapegoats), in a maximalist social-performative manner, something which is a minimal requirement of all humanity. The Weberian approach, revisited in 1995 by Ilana Friedrich Silber¹³, connects the varying importances and powers of asceticism in different historical contexts to ideologies of rationalization, perfectibility and universalism: virtuoso ascetic life forms part of the aspiration to a conceptually and behaviorally-ordered perfection, and this aspiration assumes, in varying forms, a culturally hegemonic position.

Both approaches have value, albeit that the first is general and *a priori*, the second dependent on the vocabulary and metaphors of Christian theology. Neither fully explains the enigma. Although the life-styles and practices of members of the Buddhist Monastic Order have always varied greatly, and have covered a wide gamut of human behavior, a rhetorical orientation to celibate asceticism, to practices of the self, has always been central to the social meaning of Theravāda. A significant variable, which I will mention but not go into, is the existence in Theravāda of the practice of temporary celibacy, either as a novice or a full monk, which complicates the issue of the civilizational value of asceticism. We have evidence of this from early modern travelers' tales and ethnography but scarcely any historical data from earlier times.

A number of times in this paper I have chosen to write of 'Theravāda Civilization(s)', with the plural in parenthesis. This is because I am not at all sure whether the singular or the plural is correct. It seems to me in part an empirical issue and in part an interpretative one whether one should regard all Theravada civilization as a single phenomenon, rooted in Pali, lineages, etc., or as different in different times and places. Indeed I am not sure of what might be the criterion, or criteria, by which one might individuate a 'civilization' in any context. And I am not sure what hangs on the decision.

Standardly in western histories civilization is said to require *cities* and *writing*. The criterion of *cities* seems to me appropriate, albeit that not all Theravāda civilizational phenomena are phenomena of urban contexts¹⁴. Theravada civilizations are primarily phenomena of river valleys and

12 *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism*. U. Chicago Press, 1987.

13 *Virtuosity, Charisma, and Social Order: A Comparative Sociological Study of Monasticism in Theravada Buddhism and Medieval Catholicism*. U. Cambridge Press, 1995.

14 See Skilling, 'King Rāma I and Wat Phra Chetuphon, pp. 343-45.

plains with wet-rice agriculture producing a surplus, governed from centers of power in cities¹⁵; there has always been an ambiguous, often contested relationship between such state-systems and the many and various hill-tribes in the swathe of mountains which stretches from Northeast India to Vietnam¹⁶. *Writing* in South and Southeast Asia as a criterion is problematic: in India there was civilization before writing; in South and Southeast Asia Pali language and literature remain in many ways oral. I suggest that we replace *writing* with *entextualization* (a long word for a simple idea)¹⁷: of the millions of verbal utterances produced every day by human beings, there are only a very few which are preserved as memorable in oral and/or written *texts*. A good example of the process is that of proverbs: presumably someone somewhere said ‘a stitch in time saves nine’, or ‘a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush’ for the first time, but that these short texts are remembered and transmitted (usually orally) is because they have been made into textual objects to be referred to, that is, entextualized. Civilization requires a class of clerics to preserve forms of entextualized tradition which have meaning and value in themselves as ‘traditional’. What is the connection between cities and entextualization? Social institutions and the technology of culture: pre-modern state-systems and civilizations relied on stable (better said, *stabilized*) populations of wet-rice cultivators supporting urban centers of power, as tax-payers, in *corvée* labor and in military conscription. They also provided the technological infrastructure of both stabilized oral tradition and writing, for various purposes: administration (tax-collecting, the maintenance and surveillance of subject-populations through legal and other bureaucratic systems), and in the institutions of entextualization and writing, the dissemination and storage of texts, notably those of what I like to call transcendentalist ideologies¹⁸. This ecological perspective will, I suggest, help us to go beyond the now stereotypical discussions of ‘religion’ and ‘politics’.

2. Periodizing Theravāda history

In this section I will offer a tripartite periodization of Theravāda history and reflect on the constraints that the nature of the evidence from these periods imposes on the practice of modern

15 There is a story of a 19th century English vicar who gave a sermon on God’s goodness in which he averred that it was a sign of God’s benevolence to mankind that at the creation he put rivers everywhere where human beings would want to build cities. The twisted logic of this makes the point clear, I think.

16 James Scott, following Willem van Schendel, has recently and influentially called this Zomia. There have been many criticisms of this notion but the contrast between state-systems and hill-tribes is still of value, it seems to me, in thinking civilizationally. See Scott, *Seeing Like a State*. Yale University Press, 1998; and *The Art of Not Being Governed*. Yale University Press, 2009.

17 Michael Silverstein and Greg Urban (eds.), *Natural Histories of Discourse*. University of Chicago Press

18 See Collins, *Nirvana and other Buddhist Felicities*, General Introduction.

historiography¹⁹; and I will offer some remarks on the processes of modernization, in which one key element will be to separate modernization and globalization –which I see beginning in the 16th century and continuing in the contemporary world– from the age of political colonialism, which in Buddhist South and Southeast Asia as restricted to the period roughly from the middle of the 19th to the middle of the 20th centuries. Both the concept and the facts of post-colonialism are also viable and of continuing significance.²⁰

The three periods are: (1) early, pre-Aśokan Buddhism, (2) the ‘long Middle Ages’, from Aśoka in the 3rd century BC till the period of modernization, and (3) modernization²¹. For the first period there is some archeological evidence from Northeast India in the mid-1st millenium BC, from which we may be able to draw conclusions about urbanization and state-formation as contexts for early Buddhism²². But for early Buddhism itself we have only the evidence of texts, all of which are from a much later period. In my view any attempt at delineating what early Buddhism was, and still more ‘What the Buddha Taught’ are fantasies, wish-fulfilment exercises which select materials from the later evidence and project them back to the Buddha. This is a phenomenon of western Orientalism, in the pejorative sense of the term. We have historical accounts in Pali –the *vamsa* texts, apparently from the 4th century AD, drawing it seems on earlier commentarial materials– which do the same thing, in rather different ways, but this should not mislead us: a generalized ‘confidence in the basic accuracy’ of Pali histories as event-histories may be generous, but it is a historiographical mistake. The chronicles tell us only of what their authors/redactors wanted to see as history, not history itself.

Here is, first, a small example of the many kinds of historiographical problem which arise in relation to the first, ‘early’ period. In the texts of the Pali Canon the Buddha is very frequently depicted as interacting with gods and other supernaturals, often giving them doctrinal talks. Many modern historians, who of course must be professionally at the very least agnostic about the existence of supernaturals, assume that one can ignore the nature of the Buddha’s interlocutors but still accept

19 These and some of the following remarks draw on Steven Collins, *Nirvana and other Buddhist Felicities: utopias of the Pali imaginaire* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), General Introduction.

20 It is often said that Thailand escaped –perhaps as the result of deliberate policies by the centralizing, nationalizing Bangkok elite– the predations of colonialism; but recent scholarship has wanted to see this as a kind of ‘internal colonialism’ such that we are now in something like a post-colonial period: see Rachel Harrison and Peter Jackson (eds.) *The Ambiguous Allure of the West: Traces of the Colonial in Thailand* [? Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2010).

21 I find it better to speak of ‘modernization’ than ‘modernity’, since one is speaking of historical processes and not fixed temporal periods, though I shall sometimes use the latter term.

22 As have Greg Bailey and Ian Mabbett, *The Sociology of Early Buddhism* (Cambridge University Press, 2006).

what he is depicted as saying as evidence of ‘his ideas’²³. But if later generations could invent gods for the Buddha to talk to they could also invent what he said to them. We have no way of distinguishing between transmission and invention.

Many scholars in the field think that they have escaped the old stereotype which sees the Buddhism of the Buddha and the early period as an ethical-psychological, non-theistic and rational system which then ‘degenerated’ into the magical, deity-worshiping religion of history and society throughout Asia. But courses and books on Buddhism still very often start with the life of the Buddha and ‘early’ ideas such as the Four Truths and the Eightfold Path, which inevitably presuppose students to think of other kinds of Buddhism as ‘later’. Rather than start from an imaginary picture of the first period, I think we should start from the second or (perhaps better) the third: then we can see, as suggested above, that the non-theistic individualist ‘practices of the self’ which loom so large in the Pali Canon are simply one module amongst many of Theravāda civilization. And it is worth dwelling a moment on the idea of Buddhism as ‘non-theistic’. If one means by this term that Buddhism was and is a system without a single God who creates the world and oversees the processes of salvation, then certainly all Theravāda Buddhism has always been and still is non-theistic. But if one means by it the de-emphasizing or even denial of the many supernatural beings which inhabit the premodern Asian world(s) of Buddhism, and of the dangers and advantages of interacting with them, then of course such a de-emphasis or denial is only appropriate to some very recent forms of modernist Buddhism. It is certainly not appropriate to the world of the Pali *imaginaire*.

A general confidence that the Pali texts, or at least some of them, are ‘ancient’ is generous but ill-founded. And this issue is logically quite separate from the issue of how representative the extant texts are of the early period. The texts may well be reliable in themselves but only partial witnesses. In any case we can only have anything like secure knowledge of the texts of the Canon as we now have them from the time of the commentarial and scholarly works of ‘the committee called Buddhaghosa’²⁴ in the 5th and subsequent centuries AD, in the tradition mediated by the Mahāvihāra group of monks in Sri Lanka. But we also know, or can surmise from the evidence, that this group was only one of several in Sri Lanka, and that the others seemed to have known different texts. The supremacy of this group was only a fact from the 12th century AD, with King Parakkamabāhu’s so-

23 Richard Gombrich’s recent remarks ‘So did the Buddha privately, in his heart of hearts, believe in gods or ghosts? I doubt that we can ever know. Maybe he was so true to his own principles that he thought it pointless to ask himself the question’ (p.73 [and cf. 164] in *What the Buddha Thought* (London: Equinox Pub., 2009) is in my view a *reductio ad absurdum* of the approach.

24 The phrase is from Ñānamoli, *A Thinker’s Notebook: Posthumous Papers of a Buddhist Monk* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, n.d.) p. 235.

called 'unification of the Monastic Order (*saṅgha*)', in fact a subordination of the other groups to the Mahāvihāra.

The second period I call the 'long Middle Ages' in order to draw attention to comparable dates and debates in the history of Europe, where the beginning and end of the period are always and everywhere disputed. The phrase comes from Jacques LeGoff, who saw the Middle Ages as extending from the 4th to the 19th centuries, since it was only by the latter stage that 'modernity was fully embraced', in the sense that the conditions of industrial society, along with the mass education it requires, were not until then widely instantiated throughout society²⁵. In the Buddhist case Aśoka's inscriptions are undoubtedly historical evidence. But it is often assumed that we know what these inscriptions say, whereas in fact our knowledge of them is very hypothetical, from the initial transcriptions from stone to text in 19th and 20th century western scholarly works to the interpretation of them, which remains often in dispute.

The evidence we have for this long period –textual, epigraphical, archeological– is always and everywhere very much less extensive than one would wish, and often impossible to use to write event-history (*histoire événementielle*). It is possible, I think, to make some *longue durée* generalizations, about, say, the relationship between Pali texts and their guardians as holders of ideological power in relation to kings and others as holders of military-political power, but these are derived mostly not from the specificity of the South and Southeast Asian evidence but from a general picture of premodern, agrarian civilizations.

One such set of generalizations is as follows. Although the transition from the conditions of hunter-gatherer and/or nomadic societies to settled agricultural life must have been gradual, and there is no agreed narrative of it, most theorists concur on the main features of the agrarian stage. Food, obviously, now requires co-ordinated and co-operative agriculture; and people living in settled abodes require new forms of conflict-resolution. Society is organized in increasingly large-scale groupings, passing through family societies, local groups with or without leaders termed Big Men, chiefdoms, to agrarian states as regional and trans-regional polities, kingdoms and empires. In South and Southeast Asia, as elsewhere, socio-political formations oscillated back and forth over this continuum (it being an 'evolutionary' sequence only in ideal-typical terms). At the largest end of the spectrum are found rulers called in Pali 'Wheel-turning Kings' (*cakkavatti*-s). The political form of agrarian States is constituted by some mixture of routinized and bureaucratized military and political power. Defining features of the State include: a monopoly over the means of violence in a given area, taxation, the

25 *The Medieval Imagination* (University of Chicago Press, 1988): pp. 28-33.

right, or at least the capacity to draft corvée labor and an army, the enforcement of some form of articulated law, and some ideology which justifies or legitimizes the social status quo. The agrarian stage of world history, and the societies and States within it, are sometimes called 'tributary'. 'Tribute' here refers to food, goods, services and eventually cash extracted by a ruling elite from peasant-cultivators and herdsmen, directly by military or political means, and indirectly by means of ideologies which normalize and so justify the extraction process. (In the Theravāda case this is most obviously through the idea of *karma*.) Society, hitherto egalitarian, is split into two main groups or classes, the tribute-givers and the tribute-takers. Tributary relations vary along what Eric Wolf calls 'a continuum of power distributions': '[i]t is possible to envisage two polar situations: one in which power is concentrated strongly in the hands of a ruling elite standing at the apex of the power system; and another in which power is held largely by local overlords and rule at the apex is fragile and weak'²⁶. These two situations correspond to what have been called the Asiatic and Feudal modes of production respectively. Oscillation between strong/centralized and weak/diffused power –but with a long-term linear trend toward centralization– was characteristic of the socio-political circumstances of Theravāda Buddhist ideology throughout its premodern history. O.W. Wolters influentially named the system of premodern Southeast Asian kingship the *maṇḍala* system²⁷: by this he meant, it seems, a system of client kings surrounding a central power-holder. But this is a feature, it seems to me, of any premodern situation. An army can carry on its back food and water for only a small number of miles; thereafter it has to extract these things from the surrounding population. This can be done by sheer force, but a stable military-political environment cannot be secured that way. This can only be done by a system of alliances and clientships: and such a system is held together not only by mutual self-interest but also by a dominant ideology distributed among the ruling, tribute-taking class.

So far the analysis has divided agrarian society into two classes: peasant tribute-givers and elite tribute-takers. But when the latter category is divided into two one has a tripartite structure of workers (production), warriors/kings (coercion) and clerics (cognition)²⁸. When the category of clerics is divided into two, the ordinary (ritual functionaries) and the virtuoso (ascetic salvation-seekers), one has an elite triumvirate of kings, 'priests' and ascetics. In the Buddhist case, the ordinary-ritualist clerical hierarchy is not so much an explicitly proclaimed discursive artifact as the ensemble of attitudes and behaviors which led, for example, at the upper end of the social hierarchy, to aristocratic members of the monkhood presiding over the coronations of kings, adding a

²⁶ *Europe and the People Without History* (University of California Press, 1982), p. 80.

²⁷ *History, Culture and Region in Southeast Asian Perspective* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1999, 2nd edition). Stanley Tambiah, incorporating the dimension of change over time, used the metaphor 'galactic polity': *World conqueror and world renouncer: a study of Buddhism and polity in Thailand against a historical background* (Cambridge University Press, 1976).

²⁸ See Ernest Gellner, *Plough, Sword and Book: the structure of human history* (University of Chicago Press, 1988).

transcendentalist gloss to the mundane display of power; and at lower levels to their being employed to chant protection verses at weddings, house-buildings, and the like, and to assist in the transfer of merit to dead relatives. Relations between the three groups were such that each one could, from the top of its own hierarchy, look down on the others; but also any two could gang up on the third. Both kinds of cleric could oppose kings, for example, from the institutional position of the monkhood, which as the 'field of merit' for the laity had a higher soteriological status than kings, condemned as they were to actual or potential violence, even for the maintenance of everyday social order. Ascetics, with the king as supporter, could oppose ordinary monks from the point of view of the radical renouncer, claiming that monks should introject and live Buddhist ideology rather than merely exist as institutional emblems of it. Kings and ordinary-ritualists could oppose ascetic virtuosos, looking from the point of view of established social hierarchy down on potentially wayward and undisciplined 'wandering (forest) monks'. Pali texts can be found, at all periods, which reflect these three viewpoints; sometimes more than one of them at the same time.

I have two final, unconnected points about the long Middle Ages period, first about Sri Lanka as an island and second about the self-definition of what we now call 'Theravāda'. In the first place, Sri Lanka provides an exception to the idea that modern nations came about through an artificial process of boundary-marking, the phenomenon Thongchai Winichakul called creating a geo-body' of the nation, as did the Thai and British governments in relation to modern Thailand after the Second World War²⁹. Like Japan, and in some ways perhaps Great Britain³⁰, the island of Sri Lanka (not then, of course, so-called) provided natural boundaries such that power-holders could and did imagine the whole area naturally as a territorial whole, a proto-nation. Although military-political power more often than not proceeded there also by means of alliances between central and peripheral power-holders, as it did throughout the rest of Asia, it also happened that the island was united now and then 'under the one umbrella' of a single king. This –along with the indigenous ideology of its *vaṃsa* texts, in Pali and vernaculars– provided Sri Lanka with an historicist and geographical precursor to nationalism not found elsewhere.

In the second place, I would like to draw a parallel between sect-formation in Thailand in the 19th century, at the end of 'the long Middle Ages,' and the self-image of the Theravāda tradition as a whole, at least in its earlier manifestations³¹. I think there is a parallel between the founding of the royally-sponsored reform Thammayut group in Siam (in 1833 - only officially recognized in 1902)

29 *Siam Mapped: a History of the Geo-Body of a Nation*. University of Hawai'i Press [DATE].

30 Great Britain, the so-called United Kingdom, was in fact a federation of England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland; better said, the English Empire at home comprised these four nations under English suzerainty.

31 'Sect' is of course a problematic term in both cases.

and the identity-claims of the Theravāda as a whole³². The founding of the Thammayut sect (order, group, *nikāya*) was in some ways a founding event in Buddhist modernization. There was never such a thing in Siam or elsewhere as the *Mahānikāya* (*Mahānikāi*) sect until the Thammayut came along, after which the ‘majority party’ –a rough translation of *Mahānikāya*– meant everyone except the minority, reforming group. Likewise if the *vamsa*-s and other texts are to be believed it was not until the minority, reforming ‘Theravāda’ came along, at or after the Second Council, with their fundamentalist ‘back-to-the-origins’ rhetoric (prefiguring the Thammayut in a pre-modern, non-science-challenged way) that the majority party –again a rough translation of *Mahāsaṅghika*– came into existence. This means that the ideology and rhetoric of (some) modernist Buddhism(s) is continuous with a least one strand of the premodern identity called *Theravāda*, initially chosen, like *Thammayut*, by the minority group who gave themselves the name. Later Theravādins in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia had no qualms about seeing themselves as ‘majority’ or ‘mainstream’.

The third period, for which we have increasingly large amounts of evidence suited to modern historiography (travelers’ tales, colonial and nation-state bureaucracies, newspapers, etc.), is a process rather than an event or set of events: modernization. I think the process begins before colonialism, and indeed would have occurred without it. The need to confront modernity should be located not or at least not primarily (neither chronologically nor conceptually) in the economic-political threat of colonialism, but in the objective epistemological superiority of the knowledge-practices of western modernity which came earlier. ‘The West’ represented, among the elite who could know and concern themselves with such matters, an epistemological-pragmatic challenge, based on the clear, experienced superiority of modern western knowledges (it took Christianity centuries to lose the battle against science - Asians had less time). By this I mean, *inter alia*: (i) science, medical and otherwise, and military technology, both of which were visibly superior to traditional Asian practices of health, production, and warfare; (ii) the notion of the spherical earth as a basis for global travel, and the sun-centered planetary system, which together disproved pre-scientific cosmologies, Christian as well as Buddhist; (iii) modern-bureaucratic modes of governance and political-economic record-keeping (e.g. double-entry book-keeping); (iv) a truly globalized economic/political context of merchant capitalism, which was different from premodern trans-local trade networks, and from the premodern ‘cosmopolitanisms’ which had certainly existed in both South and Southeast Asia. Islam was known to Buddhists, in both the Bay of Bengal (including Arakan) and the insular (and to a

32 This idea occurred to me some years ago; I subsequently found it had been articulated by Francois Bizot *Les traditions de la pabbajjā en Asie du Sud-est*. Paris: École Française d’Extrême-Orient 1988. Aspects of Bizot’s formulation, notably the idea that there was a single, coherent, more-or-less unified tradition we can call the ‘non-Mahāvihārin’, I do not accept.

lesser extent, mainland) Southeast Asian systems; so Christian missionaries were nothing new - but Islam didn't bring modernity with it, as Christianity did.

Historians of both premodern and modern periods have drawn a parallel between the spread and modern development of Theravāda in mainland Southeast Asia and Islam on the islands. Both were and are trans-local, patriarchal, text-centred and bureaucratic 'high cultures' which sit on top of oral, polytheistic localisms; the latter often had a high percentage of female practitioners. In the modern period text-centredness, not in itself exclusivist, has given way to exclusivist scripturalisms³³. Anne Blackburn and Michael Charney have shown, in relation to Sri Lanka and Burma respectively, that the text-centredness which has been alleged to be a product of the colonial encounter in fact began in the 18th century³⁴, before political colonialism.

It would be an interesting 'comparative Theravāda' exercise to juxtapose accounts of the colonial ending of indigenous royalty, which seems to have been different, and to have had different effects, in different places. When the king of Kandy in Sri Lanka was deposed in 1815 his territory was not island-wide, and the event seems not to have engendered the same level of cultural anxiety as did the British annexing of Lower Burma in 1852, and then especially the ceremonial de-throning of king Mondon of Upper Burma in 1885³⁵. The fact of taking the king to India and his throne to the Calcutta museum was a striking instantiation of the colonial historicism which saw indigenous royal systems as a thing of the past, or at best mere ceremonialism in modern times. In French Cambodia and Laos the royal families were allowed to continue, but largely as ceremonial: it was the French

33 On scripturalist Islam see Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia* (University of Chicago Press, 1971). It has been applied to Theravāda by Tambiah 1976 and Bond 1988. I think that this application is very fruitful, but less so when it is generalized to refer to the pre-modern period, as both Tambiah and Bond do. In Theravāda countries, as in the Islam of Indonesia and Morocco described by Geertz, it is most helpful to use the term to refer to a religious attitude arising as a reaction to a wide range of phenomena in the experience of colonialism and modernity: the downgrading of localized supernaturalism, the cultural prestige and practical power of western science, the centralization and bureaucratization of power, the establishment of a "secular" educational system, printing presses, and the resulting value placed on literacy. The search for indigenous resources to combat foreign dominance led, amongst other things, to an emphasis on the noble ideals of the early texts: their teachings are abstract and universal as opposed to localized, "rational" and "ethical" as opposed to magical, and fit better with the placing of cultural and political authority in the institutions of bureaucracy and education than do the personalized spiritual interactions of localism. This concatenation of phenomena is, of course, specific to the modern world; and the comparative insight which can be gained from using Geertz's term to describe the Buddhist case seems to me to be lost when it is generalized to become an overall category applicable to all historical periods.

34 Anne Blackburn, *Buddhist Learning and Textual Practice in Eighteenth-century Lankan Monastic Culture* (Princeton University Press, 2001); Michael Charney, *Powerful Learning: Buddhist Literati and the Throne in Burma's Last Dynasty* (Ann Arbor: Center for South and Southeast Asian Studies, 2006)

35 This has led to a theme unique to modern Burma: the idea that laity have come to take on the role, structurally and in practice, of the king: see Ingrid Jordt, *Burma's Mass Lay Meditation Movement: Buddhism and the Cultural Construction of Power* (Ohio University Press, 2007).

who collected the taxes. In Thailand the Chakkri dynasty has been, and at least at the time of writing still is, a crucial component of Thai modernization³⁶.

Just as the Buddhist confrontation with modern scientific knowledge pre-dated colonialism and would have occurred without it so too many aspects of modern nationalism are independent of colonialism, however much the historical facts of colonialism are entwined with the history of modern nations. These aspects concern what has been called the seriality of nationalism³⁷, the fact that the nation-state form seems to require certain things of every nation, regardless of historical specificity. The growth of nation-states and national consciousness was and is a world-wide *international* phenomenon. Perhaps historians of nationalism will argue that it existed in north-western Europe before it started to occur elsewhere; but I think that by the time the process affected South and Southeast Asia each 'nation' was seen as part of a single inter-national system, which was conceived as covering the entire earth. There is no part of the earth which lies outside the nation-state system: whatever border-disputes there are, the theory is that everywhere is part of some nation, actually or potentially. Whenever some group of people (usually with some kind of ethnic consciousness) have wanted or now want to see themselves as *a nation*, they need to get hold of a list of things which – crucially – every other nation has, or will have (not necessarily in this order): a history, a geo-body, an army, an educational system, a flag, a national anthem, a Royal Family (if one is to hand), and latterly such things as delegates to the UN, Olympic athletes, entrants to Miss Universe, etc. And as nations have amassed their versions of each in the list of things a nation must have, one question which has always arisen, given the European model and colonialist assumptions, is the separation of Church and State. Thus however much religious traditions were co-opted into the project of nation-building, as Buddhism certainly was everywhere, the western secular-constitutional model always and everywhere provided a jurisprudential-organizational backdrop which modernizing versions of the old *maṇḍala*-states had to incorporate, somehow, and hadn't known before. And precisely in so far as the constituent elements of a modern nation are *shared*, then a nation may have a slot marked 'national (though never quite 'established') religion' in the list but it must be neutral as to content: *a* religion, but only contingently, historically *this* or *that* one. One thing colonialism seems to have provided (as well as direct models for emulation) was a clearly-delineable *other* to fight against. Producing a

36 The two most important kings in this regard have been Rama V, Chulalongkorn, in the 19th century and the contemporary Rama IX, Bhumibol. For the latter and the connection between Rama IX and the modern cult of Rama V see Paul Handley, *The King Never Smiles: A Biography of Thailand's Bhumibol Adulyadej* (Yale University Press, 2006); and Irene Stengs, *Worshipping the Great Moderniser: King Chulalongkorn, Patron Saint of the Thai Middle Class* (University of Washington Press, 2009). What will happen to Thai royalty when Bhumibol dies is an open and crucial question.

37 Benedict Anderson, 'Nationalism, Identity and the Logic of Seriality', in *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the World* (London: Verso Books, 1998).

national identity is always easier: one can render less visible internal-local oppositions when one has an external elephant in the room everyone can see.

Just as the seriality of nationhood imposed obligations on colonial and colonized nations alike, so one must remember that many things which were under discussion in the colonies were simultaneously in dispute in the metropolises. One such issue was 'the woman question'. Ideologues of colonialism often argued that the subjection of women in the colonies was one thing the civilizing mission was to improve³⁸. But the liberation of woman (an ongoing project today) was only progressing slowly in Europe. Look at the dates for women's suffrage: 1920 in the U.S.A., 1928 in Britain, 1932 in Siam.³⁹

The general principle here is that history was progressing, changing, simultaneously in the colonies and the metropole. One more recent phenomenon *à propos* here is what is now called Engaged Buddhism. A comparative history of this will need to see it as in parallel with, and not merely rooted in, the European social-welfare project. It is true that the phrase (socially-) engaged in this context comes from Thich Nhat Han's exposure to 1940-50s French existentialism, with its demand to be *engagé*, and in Europe this has a genealogy which certainly includes Marxism. But the cultural and political necessity for religion to be oriented to social issues is a wider fact of modernization than it is of mere imitation. In the contemporary world Engaged Buddhism is a set of *ad hoc* responses to the various recent global evils of consumerism, ecological destruction, post-1980s AIDS, etc.?

[this paper has no conclusion.]

38 For India, Antoinette Burton *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865-1915* (University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

39 See Tamara Loos, *Subject Siam: Family, Law and Colonial Modernity on Thailand*. Cornell University Press 2006.