A Saint in Command? Spiritual Protection, Justice and Religious Tensions in the Karen State[1]

Mikael Gravers

Abstract

In 1995, when the Myaing Gyi Ngu Sayadaw, U Thuzana, formed the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army from soldiers formerly in the Karen National Liberation Army, he was considered a stooge of the Myanmar army. However, the monk had his own prophetic vision of revitalizing a Karen Buddhist land, protecting his followers, and uniting all Karen. This article analyzes his strategy and the events that took place from 1995 until his death in 2018. U Thuzana organized a theocratic trust network and provided protection and justice during conflict, yet his later activities created religious tension and conflict. This is related to the general situation in Myanmar where religious identity and nationalism dominates politics. It is argued that religious interventions may create problems for the peace process as well as for democratization and a common law.

Introduction

Since 2012, monks played an increasingly important role in Myanmar's political transition. Since the monks demonstrated in 2007, a new wave of nationalist monks have become active. Their aim is protection and promotion of Buddhism. However, their activities also emphasize ethnic and religious differences, as in the Ma Ba Tha movement,

[1] This online article differs significantly from the original article in the print publication of the Independent Journal of Burmese Scholarship, volume 1, 2020. In 2022 the author revised the article in light of U Thuzana's death in 2018 and the military coup in 2021, including adding a postscript.

which had its name banned by the State Sangha Nayaka Council in May 2017. They were told to take down all their signs and billboards by July 2017.[2] From 2012, religious identity was increasingly being politicized and related to violence. It was applied to demarcate ethnic and national identity boundaries.

Figure 1

The huge Pagoda Park outside Myaing Gyi Ngu.

The particular focus of this article is the Karen monk, U Thuzana, who is the Myaing Gyi Ngu *Sayadaw* (monk) and patron of the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA).[3] He

[2] Ma Ba Tha members in Karen State announced they would continue to use the organization's name. They put up signs banning Muslims from entering villages south of Hpa-an, the capital city of Karen State, which were still present in 2018.

[3] This article is partly based on fieldwork the author conducted in Myaing

followed a communitarian strategy in order to promote Karen Buddhism, reduce Christian and Muslim influence, and unite the Karen after peace is established. He established a modern theocracy as an alternative to the Christian-dominated Karen National Union (KNU). He believed that his strategy could provide security, justice and peace to his lay followers and ultimately unite all Karen. His movement can be characterized as a theocratic trust network based on personal relations, spiritual authority and religious rules.[4] This article argues that the monk tried to replace failed state authority with his armed spiritual authority. His idea was that religious rules transcend the secular in time and space and provide a spiritually founded political justice. This resembled what Weber called a "theodicy of disprivilege".[5] All Karen had suffered injustices, but the Buddhist suffered most of all, according to U Thuzana. Thus, the monk promised to change this negative karmic destiny.

Religious identity embedded in nationalism now seemed to supersede other identifications in Myanmar. The question was whether religious rules were going to supersede a secular judicial order and challenge democratization, as well as Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's emphasis on the rule of law. Could religious rule coexist with a common law in legal pluralism without generating conflicts when it divides local perceptions of justice and security?

After the National Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) was signed in 2015, Karen State enjoyed a relatively calm period until U

Gyi Ngu in 2012, 2013 and 2014. In February and March 2017, the author performed fieldwork in Karen State together with anthropologist Anders Baltzer Jørgensen, Saw Say Wah and Saw Eh Dah. Their assistance was invaluable. On this trip, the authorities denied access to Myaing Gyi Ngu due to ongoing fighting. In 1996, the author interviewed Karen refugees in Thailand who fled from the DKBA. He also interviewed followers of the monk in Thailand along the Myanmar border, as well as in Chiang Mai and Lamphun provinces. The author would also like to thank Tim Schroeder who accompanied the author on fieldwork and shared his knowledge.

[4] Tilly, 2005.

[5] Weber, 1964, p. 113.

Thuzana began to construct pagodas in front of mosques and churches. In 2015 in San Si Myaing, his followers burned down a newly inaugurated school and kindergarten funded by the Myanmar Peace Support Initiative.[6] The monk seemed to believe it was a Christian KNU school, although it was situated in a DKBA area. He wanted new schools to use his script.

A major part of the DKBA was later renamed the Democratic Karen Benevolent Army. The late General Saw Lah Bwe, head of the DKBA, explained in an interview in November 2015 that it was wrong to have a religious name for an army. He was a Christian and DKBA had also signed the NCA. However, a minor faction of the DKBA kept 'Buddhist' in the DKBA name. In 2017, fighting erupted between this faction of the DKBA—led by Commander Bo Pi, who was loyal to U Thuzana—and Border Guard Force (BGF) units around Mae Tha Wau. Fighting and landmines displaced 5,000 Karen civilians who were accepted into Myaing Gyi Ngu by U Thuzana. In May 2017, the army re-opened the area, but in September 2017, new fighting broke out, creating another 500 internally displaced people (IDPs). It was not clear why the ceasefire broke down. However, DKBA and U Thuzana were probably not happy with the construction of the Hat Gyi Dam on the Thanlwin River and the increased dominance of the army and its BGF inside his domain. The fighting also affected local Christian Karen villagers who begged the Karen National Liberation Army's (KNLA's) Brigade 5 in Hpa-pun for help. The KNLA was reluctant to get involved but later helped the Christian IDPs. However, in April 2017, the KNLA also began chasing Bo Pi's DKBA. As addressed in more detail in this article, religious tensions were increasing in many localities in the Karen State.

U Thuzana's activities and sometimes erratic behavior created fear and insecurity in parts of Karen State. The Ma Ba Tha movement supported his pagoda construction, and he

[6] Saw Thein Myint, 2015. According to informants, U Thuzana was informed about the project but still ordered the DKBA to torch the new school.

had numerous lay followers in Myanmar and among Karen in Thailand.[7] In Thailand, U Thuzana cooperated with wealthy and influential Thai businesspersons. U Thuzana gained fame when he motivated Buddhist soldiers in the KNLA to desert in 1994, a serious blow to the KNU.

This article probes into the vision and ideas of this unorthodox monk and argues that the controversial monk's activities have provided justice, security and protection to his followers while simultaneously creating insecurity and injustice to non-followers, Christians and Muslims in particular.[8] He established a moral community where his rules and Buddhist morality governed, and where the DKBA and the BGF secured law and order. His charisma and role as a protector of Buddhist Karen secured him a large number of lay followers. These factors constituted his power of legitimation.[9] He managed to mobilize Buddhist Karen in 1994 by using spiritual politics. At the same time, his activities may endanger the peace process. Before discussing the more recent activities of U Thuzana, I will outline the origin of U Thuzana's religious work, his prophetic vision and the formation of the DKBA. The reasons for the 1994 split in the KNLA are crucial to understanding how religion influences perceptions of justice and security.

[7] Aung Kyaw Min, 2015.

[8] In this article I use the terms justice, security and protection in a broad legal and political sense. Security in Phloûng (Pwo Karen) is *au tjoe bi bo* and justice *ba ghau ba thau*. The last word also means 'level'. Otherwise, Burmese terms are used in relation to state authorities. Pwo Karen words are transcribed following the script made by missionaries in the 1840s.

[9] See Bourdieu (1987, pp. 119-36). U Thuzana appeared as a prophet with considerable symbolic capital in a crisis and appealed to karmic power and Buddhist heritage.

Figure 2

The palace-like Gada Kute pagoda in Myaing Gyi Ngu. The Gada Kute is a pyathat, royal-style ceremonial hall with a nine-tiered roof. (Photo by author.)

'A Saint in Command'[10]

As other young Karen men, U Thuzana (born 1948) had to join the KNLA as a courier for two years when he was young. On his journeys, he discovered many old pagodas (*zedi*) and became aware of the area's Buddhist past. He claims that Myaing Gyi Ngu was a city, Kimala, during the reign of the Mon King Duttabaung, whose two queens constructed pagodas in the area, among these the Nan Oo zedi. Buddhist Karen in Karen State acknowledge Mon rule and often refer

[10] Gravers, 2010.

to Mon kings. Some Karen still use the Mon script called *Lei' Hsu Li,* 'the old script', in Pwo Karen.

After serving in the KNLA, U Thuzana became a monk and decided to use his time for meditation as a forest monk. He hoped to cure his illness (arthritis) with meditation. In 1974, he crossed the Thanlwin River (Salween) and entered the Myaing Gyi Ngu forest (*Khaw Taw* in S'gaw Karen) on the east bank. He met a hermit (*yathey*), a former monk who had lived there for ten years, and the hermit helped him with meditation.[11]

U Thuzana built a small monastery, meditated and constructed pagodas. During 49 days of meditation—as the Buddha did before enlightenment—U Thuzana contemplated bringing peace and restoring pagodas. His following and donations gradually increased, and one day in 1991 an unknown man came with a huge amount of money in a 4-gallon can. The monk asked permission to build a pagoda at KNU headquarters but KNU leaders rejected his proposal. After a dramatic tour on a raft on the Thanlwin (Salween) River, where he and other monks were in danger in the swift current, he promised the local spirit to build a pagoda on Thu Mwe Hta hill near the border with Thailand at the confluence (*myit zone*) of the Thanlwin and Moei Rivers.

Construction work began in 1990 and provoked the KNU leaders who feared that a white pagoda on the hill above their headquarter in Manerplaw would help the army to direct their fire. At that time, the army was closing in on Manerplaw. At first, KNU had given permission to begin construction via U Thuzana's cousin Padoh Aung San, who later defected from the KNU in 1997. The monk was not allowed to paint the pagoda white. However, KNU leaders worried when the monk also began constructing prayer halls.

[11] U Thuzana's experience is narrated in small texts (Myaing Nan Swe, 1999; 2004). See also Rozenberg (2010, p. 31), where the name U Thuzana is explained as meaning 'the virtuous one'. Another journal is a good source on the events of 1994-95 (Karen National Historical Research Group, 1995).

Buddhist soldiers in the KNLA helped with the construction and about 1,000 pilgrims also came to work. The monks recited Buddhist *suttas* broadcast on loudspeakers.

General Bo Mya of the KNU, who was a 7th Day Adventist, ordered the monk to stop construction, after long negotiations. Christian KNLA soldiers began beating Buddhist pilgrims and acted rudely toward them.[12] The Karen National Historical Research Group recorded this behavior and the KNU admitted that KNLA officers beat Buddhist pilgrims.[13] At that point, it seems as if Burman soldiers also assisted in the construction work.[14] The KNU wondered where the monk got the materials to construct such a big hall—as well as food for 1,000 workers. KNU leaders also wondered why Karen people in U Thuzana's domain were not forced to become porters for the Myanmar army when encountered. They could travel freely in 'black areas' (I.e., fighting zones) with a document from the monk.[15]

People moved to Thu Mwe Hta from the Hlaing Bwe area and other places and became vegan. The Animist Karen who came converted and no longer made the complex ritual offerings to evil spirits. They enjoyed the monk's protection from recruitment to the army or the KNLA. Construction of pagodas and vegan practices (*da bae'*) are an important aspect of Karen understandings of security. The word for conversion in Karen is 'to take a new ritual and to change worship' and the Karen thereby hope to be able to control evil spirits. Spiritual and ontological security means that they do not have to fear spirits, illness and misfortune if the monk has

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[12] See Myaing Nan Swe (1999) for details as seen from U Thuzana's point of view. The text provides the viewpoints of the monk and replies from the KNU leaders.

[13] Karen National Historical Research Group, 1995.

[14] Myaing Nan Swe, 1999, pp. 30-31.

[15] The document had a stamp with the Myang Gyi Ngu Nan-Oo pagoda in the sky ('heaven') and 'Myaing Gyi Ngu Old City'—a reference to ruins of old ramparts supposedly from the time of the Mon King that the monk discovered.

a strong morality and supernatural abilities. His followers believed that U Thuzana was able to see and hear what normal people cannot see or hear—and he provides lucky number for followers who use them to buy lottery tickets.[16]

U Thuzana was busy with other pagoda constructions and declined invitations for meetings with KNU leaders and other monks several times. The KNU then arrested four of his disciples. U Thuzana finally arrived in Manerplaw where Bo Mya accused 'the vegetarians' of destroying the KNU and ordaining KNLA soldiers. The monk insisted that he was building for peace and enlightenment. Some monks who were former KNLA members were disrobed by force by KNLA soldiers because they supported U Thuzana.[17] After failed negotiations, Bo Mya ordered the monk to leave Thu Mwe Hta, and U Thuzana departed for a 49 months' repose and meditation after halting the construction. The KNU also evicted the hermit who had come from Myaing Gyi Ngu to help, because he was a Burman and mistrusted.[18]

In December 1994, the conflict escalated. When Buddhist soldiers in the KNLA, including Kyaw Than, an officer from the Karen National Defense Organization (KNDO) who later became the DKBA's military commander, were informed of the monk's eviction from Thu Mwe Hta, they began to gather Buddhist soldiers at the deserted monastery.[19] They detained a high-level delegation from the KNU after the killing of two Buddhist soldiers. Then Bo Mya ordered that all the monks involved become porters for the KNLA. An atmosphere of mistrust and anger was developing.

Bo Mya sent a controversial officer, Saw Charles, to Thu Mwe Hta. In the past, Saw Charles had bullied the Karen in

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[16] Gravers, 2015; Rozenberg, 2010.
[17] Myaing Nan Swe, 1999, p. 162.
[18] Myaing Nan Swe, 1999.
[19] Kyaw Than had written to Col. Htoo Htoo Lay, a high-ranking KNLA commander and Judicial Affairs Officer to stop the discrimination against Buddhists and Htoo Htoo Lay replied positively (Karen National Historical Research Group, 1995).

Hlaing Bwe with heavy taxes. He also invaded U Thuzana's monasteries and displaced many civilians.[20] He evicted the civilians from the Thu Mwe Hta monastery in 1993. Another officer said he would shoot down the pagoda umbrella (*hti).* Pagoda umbrellas are holy objects, signs of Buddha and *dhamma* rule as well as of the power of those who raise them. This behavior angered the Buddhist KNLA officers and confirmed their feelings of being discriminated against by the KNU. They felt that the KNU gave them no justice or protection. The affair ended in the KNLA shelling the Thu Mwe Hta monastery, resulting in many casualties among civilians and monks.[21] The KNU delegation was released a few days later. In December 1995, the KNLA attempted to assassinate U Thuzana and attacked Myaing Gyi Ngu after the Myanmar army, guided by Buddhist Karen soldiers, took the KNU headquarters at Manerplaw.

The monk did not obey KNU leaders while insisting that he was not allied with the military but working to promote Buddhism and peace. He always insisted that he did not work with 'organizations' but with individuals.[22] The KNU resented that the monk had obtained a large following by converting Animist Karen in their recruiting area. They saw him as undermining the KNU's authority. From the KNU's perspective, the construction of a large monastery so close to their headquarters, and the support of the monk from KNLA soldiers, could mean a State Law and Order Council plot in the making. Retrospectively, the incident was the outcome of decades of armed conflict and inter-ethnic mistrust, including continuous internal Karen segmentation.

The Buddhist deserters from the KNLA followed the monk to Myaing Gyi Ngu. They learned about the alliance with the Myanmar army only on 26 December 1994 when they took

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[20] Karen National Historical Research Group, 1995, pp. 11-12.
[21] On the process of internal Karen segmentation, see Gravers (2015b).
[22] Myaing Nan Swe 1999, p. 136. This was also confirmed through conversations with several relevant informants.

an oath of allegiance (*sau the-al'*) to the monk.[23] They were not happy to be used to lead the Tatmadaw (army) to Manerplaw and fight their former comrades, as one former DKBA soldier said: "We were forced to guide the Burmese soldiers, but we did not shoot".[24] He said he did not know U Thuzana before he came to Myaing Gyi Ngu and took the oath. He thinks that the KNU should have taken them back. During interviews in 2017, two former DKBA soldiers revealed that the subaltern deserters did not have the full understanding of the situation because there was no visible contact with the army before December 1994. They trusted and followed their commanders and the monk. One soldier said that he "followed the commander, Tha Thu Kyaw, when Khin Nyunt [the powerful head of the Military Intelligence, who was involved in forming the DKBA] came. We knew his tricks but dared not oppose our officers". It is difficult to say how many KNLA soldiers joined the DKBA. It may only have been about 400-500.

The Myanmar military and KNU had been negotiating a ceasefire when the split occurred and the army launched an offensive in December 1994 on KNU camps along the border. At Dawn Gwin the military captured the camp of the All Burma Students Democratic Front, which was allied with the KNU.[25] Thus, the split seems to have been part of a Tatmadaw plan.

The army's Military Intelligence (MI) and KNU leaders politicized the internal religious divide. This was deepened by U Thuzana's anarchism and spiritual politics. The monk, however, gained a considerable religious and moral authority and a large following in 1995, by promising peace and protection to Buddhist Karen. He established a moral community based on charisma and prophecy and he reordered local ethnic power relations.

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[23] *sau the-al'*, is a Mon word meaning to be true and to be loyal.

[24] Interviews with two former DKBA soldiers in February 2017. One has become a monk in order to be calm in his mind after being a soldier.

[25] Bangkok Post, 1994; The Nation, 1994.

Figure 3

Khin Nyunt (seated) is paid respect to by BGF Karen soldiers as a major patron. (Photo by friend of author.)

DKBA, Military Intelligence, and the Moral Rules

Since 1988, General Khin Nyunt had his spies in the Karen State. Khin Nyunt's MI group promised help when the Buddhist officers formed the Democratic Karen Buddhist Organization (DKBO) on 21 December 1994. The army sent supplies of rice, food and weapons—as well as visiting generals from the Tatmadaw.[26] The KNU maintained that the monk was an army spy before the conflict evolved. However, according to my informants the MI and the army were not involved in the actual split. Nevertheless, the monk had contact with 'both sides', as he explains in Myaing Nan Swe's

[26] One informant observed the work of the MI and knew the monk. In Myaing Gyi Ngu, murals depict Khin Nyunt and other generals paying respect to U Thuzana (see figure 5) as well as soldiers on parade. Khin Nyunt often came with donations for the monk (New Light of Myanmar, 1999).

book.[27] One Burman follower from Yangon is mentioned as being suspected of having army relations.[28] It is certain that MI had contact with U Thuzana and exploited the situation afterwards. One can suspect that the MI influenced the monk in the earlier years. More research is needed in order to understand why U Thuzana accepted military support.

U Thuzana and five monks became patrons of DKBA established on 1 January 1995—not as a commander—but in command since soldiers had to follow his rules and decisions.[29] The monk and the deserting officers probably formed the DKBO on advice from MI and Khin Nyunt in order to have a political body, like the KNU. It is not clear how it functioned as a political and administrative body. Myaing Gyi Ngu became the center of the monk's power, symbolized by the 11-tier Ganda Kuti temple constructed by the Karen in the style of buildings in the Mandalay royal palace. The 'city' had 22 wards, a hospital, an electric power station and other institutions.

U Thuzana addressed the injustices and discrimination experienced by many Buddhists in the KNU. Approximately 70 percent of KNLA soldiers were Buddhist. The clear impression from texts and interviews is that the Buddhist Karen, in particular Pwo, felt they had to take the brunt of the fighting. Wounded soldiers were not being cared for, while the S'gaw Christian KNU elite could go to Bangkok and enjoy hospitals and schools and thus live a more secure and comfortable life.[30] General Maung Maung, KNLA, said that the 100,000 Karen in the KNU's zone suffered from war fatigue, "they can't bear it anymore".[31] From the view of the Buddhist Karen, the KNU did not support Buddhist activities and pagoda construction, but did support Christian activities. In other words, U Thuzana appealed to a growing feeling of

[27] Myaing Nan Swe, 1999, p. 93.
[28] Ibid, p. 98.
[29] Whither KNU, 1995.
[30] See Myaing Nan Swe, 1999, p. 194.
[31] Birsley, 1994.

injustice and discrimination. The KNU and its leader general Bo Mya maintained that there was no religious discrimination and conflict in the KNU.

U Thuzana's biographer writes about the monk's intentions, which indirectly addresses the accusations against the KNU:[32]

> No matter what they say, the Myaing Gyi Ngu *Sayadaw* knows himself. He is free and stays away from politics. *Sayadaw's* main thing in life is to propagate and perpetuate Buddha *sasana*. In truth, *sayadaw* is imbued with nationalism. His nationalism is not what they say. His nationalism is that Karen National(s) were once a highly cultured people. They built *zedis*, stupas, shrines and pagodas in the wildernesses (sic) of the state. These religious edifices were now ruined in the wildernesses. *Sayadaw* has to shine the light, which had been flickered or extinguished in the past.[33]

U Thuzana denied involvement in politics, which here is understood as party politics and government matters. He was a promoter of Buddha *sasana* claiming to revive a Buddhist Karen civilization. He used spiritual politics and justice, and law here means *Dhamma* law. As a defender of Buddhism it would be necessary to accept that violence happens.

When the DKBA/DKBO was formed, many Buddhist Karen took refuge in Myaing Gyi Ngu. U Thuzana estimated that 50,000 Karen came. Informants mentioned 5,000-10,000. U Thuzana announced the rules for those living there:

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[32] The title of the book is *Shines the Light of Dhamma*.

[33] Myaing Nan Swe 1999, p. 133-34. U Thuzana still refers to Saw Ba U Gyi's four principles from 1950: There shall be no surrender; the recognition of the Karen State must be completed; we shall retain our own arms; we shall decide our own political destiny.

Buddhism is the only religion allowed in U Thuzana's domain. Weapons are not allowed in the monastic area. All inhabitants must become vegan and remain vegan forever, and animals cannot be brought into Myaing Gyi Ngu. Drugs and alcohol are not allowed inside Myaing Gyi Ngu.

Visitors were still checked at the gates during my visits in 2013 and 2014. The other rules were:[34]

1) No political discussions or arguments are allowed to disturb the compound;
2) Observe the five moral precepts (*sila*) firmly;
3) No anger and no fighting in the holy compound;
4) No discussion of religious differences;
5) No gossip.

In this way, the monk appeared as a provider of security and a spiritual ruler of justice. Those breaking the rules were placed in a pillory—a six-holed device. In 2014, a ward leader said they were placed in the shade. However, Myaing Nan Swe writes they were placed "in the 6-hole device in the sun all day".[35] The vegan rule was difficult to maintain outside Myaing Gyi Ngu and the monk urged followers to at least keep one day a week vegan.

Food supplies from the army enabled the monk to help many displaced Karen Buddhists and Animists, who became his followers. Thus, the monk gained a reputation of protecting his followers and he began constructing schools, clinics and roads. He had a Karen script called *Lei Gwae Gau* used on signboards and in schools.[36] He claimed it was a 500-year-old Karen script discovered during pagoda construction at Pha Ba Khaw in Thailand.[37] At the same time, U Thuzana

[34] Translated Letter From Burma, 1995.
[35] Myaing Nan Swe, 2004, p. 43.
[36] Lei Gwae Gau, ' Gwae Gau's script', refers to a famous Buddhist Karen rebel and *mìn laùng* from the 19th century, (Gravers 2012).
[37] See Gravers, 2017. Pha Ba Khaw is the Karen name for Wat Phra Bat Huai Tom and the area of the monastic settlement of Buddhist Karen—a place

banned the use of the S'gaw and Pwo scripts which had been created by missionaries in the 1840s.

Myaing Nan Swe summarizes the monk's project as the revival of 'pure Karen' and as the '*perpetuation of race, language and religion*' (My emphasis; 'Pure' in Pwo, *tjei hri*).[38] The latter statement is similar to the more recent Ma Ba Tha rhetoric and is crucial for understanding U Thuzana's strategy.

I have discussed the Karen tradition of waiting for a righteous leader elsewhere,[39] and this dimension of Karen custom is important for understanding U Thuzana's spiritual power. When a strong charismatic leader appears, many Karen give up their former life and loyalties and follow the leader.[40]

U Thuzana's Buddhist-only Policy

U Thuzana, and monks and village leaders who followed him, have provided some kind of justice and security in DKBA areas in Karen State. During fieldwork, many Buddhist Pwo Karen said that when the DKBA came in 1995 the Myanmar army stopped using them as porters and asking for money. Previously, armed Karen robber gangs ruled in areas south of Hpa-an, often forcing people to sleep in the forest. The gangs demanded protection money or robbed people at night. They disappeared when the DKBA came. Villagers then had to support the DKBA who took land for their camps. This picture of relative peace, order and protection may seem surprising. However, in the past, villagers had to pay the KNU and the army depending on who had the upper hand. It was a lawless and insecure time, all informants agreed.

However, the Buddhist Karen had to supply rice and sometimes construction materials to Myaing Gyi Ngu. They

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visited by the Buddha who left his footprint (*phra bat*).

[38] Myaing Nan Swe, 1999, p.196.

[39] Gravers, 2012.

[40] For a discussion of charismatic monks, see Cohen (2017). There are many examples of charismatic leaders in Karen history.

were also expected to give donations at Buddhist festivals and to pay respect to U Thuzana. He urged villagers to become vegetarians and stop eating animals.

The situation was different for many Christians. In 1995, the DKBA attacked refugee camps along the border and in Thailand. DKBA soldiers wore headbands with the letters DKBA and a *dhamma* wheel. They were known as the *dahaung kho pheoeng baung*, 'soldiers of the yellow headbands'. They invaded the camps at night, and in some instances, they looted and burned Christian houses after asking the inhabitants their religion. They killed civilians and abducted at least one Christian pastor. One of the former DKBA soldiers told us that Padoh Phu Ta Ra and Padoh Ma Tin Sein from the KNU were killed. DKBA seems to have targeted 7th Day Adventist pastors, perhaps because General Bo Mya was a 7th Day Adventist. They looked for KNU officials and killed a retired general according to Karen Human Right Groups (KHRG), which is connected to the KNU.[24] They also looked for foreign aid workers in the camps. It seems that Buddhist Karen followers guided the DKBA soldiers on the Thai side of the border. Among the camps raided were Huai Kalok where 690 of 1,020 houses were burned down.[41]

DKBA soldiers, accompanied by some Burman soldiers who remained silent, crossed the border at night and entered the camps in groups of approximately 100 soldiers. Thai military remained passive. In some instances, the DKBA soldiers forced refugees to return with them to Myaing Gyi Ngu. It seems as if the monk ordered the DKBA to return Buddhist refugees to the Karen State and to disarm Christians in the camp. Only Buddhists Karen were secured a safe

[41] See Karen Human Right Group's reports: 1995, 95-16; March 1996, 96-14; August 1998, 98-08. See also Bangkok Post, 1995. KHRG interviewed numerous Karen in the affected camps and the information seems reliable (of course from a Christian KNU point of view). Some of the DKBA soldiers remained in the refugee camps. Khin Nyunt denied that the Burmese state was behind the attacks. However, a Burmese TV broadcast on 14 May 1995 showed military officials meeting U Thuzana in Myaing Gyi Ngu.

passage. No Christians were allowed to go, U Thuzana wrote in a letter dated 2 January 1995.[42] The idea was probably to unite Buddhist Karen under his theocracy. The Myaing Gyi Ngu rules were written on the pass issued to the returning Karen. It is not clear how many came or were forced to come. Informants emphasized that the monk did not order the looting and killing of refugees. One former DKBA soldier blamed two of the DKBA officers. Other informants insisted that the order did not come from the monk, while some thought that the monk was influenced by MI. However, the monk's primary aim was to bring Buddhist refugees back to Karen State and to his domain.

In interviews with KHRG, refugees said that many of the DKBA soldiers behaved as if they were drunk or on 'horse medicine' (amphetamine) and undisciplined.[43] We asked two former DKBA soldiers about these attacks. They said that many 'cowboys' were recruited to the DKBA in 1995. They were young men who were untrained and without discipline, who obtained a sudden power with their guns. These soldiers asked villagers to become vegan and then took their chickens and pigs.[44] The two former soldiers we interviewed confirmed that soldiers ate meat and drank beer when they were outside the Myaing Gyi Ngu zone.

U Thuzana demanded that Christian Karen paid respect to him and to Buddhism in his domain. A 7th Day Adventist (SDA) village in the Myaing Gyi Ngu was told to worship the monk or move. Most of the SDA villagers moved with their houses and a church whereas they donated their school to the Buddhists. U Thuzana also forced Muslims out of his domain.[45] Thus, the monk had little tolerance toward other

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[42] Translated Letter From Burma, 1995.

[43] Karen Human Rights Group, 1996.

[44] Karen Human Rights Group, 1998, p. 3.

[45] In Gravers (2015a), I wrote that many SDAs were loyal to the monk. This is not entirely correct. They were forced to convert or to leave. Karen National Historical Group (1995) wrote that there were Christians who relied on the *sayadaw* and became vegan. I met one Buddhist-SDA family.

denominations. The SDA Karen lost their land in the Myaing Gyi Ngu area. They were also evicted from Kamamaung town on the other side of the Thanlwin River opposite Myaing Gyi Ngu. SDA members who lived in Myaing Gyi Ngu told us that the land has in principle been returned, except land with religious buildings. However, all land is now occupied by other Karen and difficult to retrieve.

According to U Thuzana's cosmological vision, today's Karen State and parts of Thailand constitute an old Karen Buddhist civilization where he was a Karen king in a former existence. Burman kings destroyed many pagodas in Siam (now known as Thailand) during an invasion in the eighteenth century.[46] Before the split from the KNU, U Thuzana prophesized that there would be peace among the Karen when 50 pagodas had been constructed. In recent years, he has also been constructing pagodas in Thailand. In 2012, during the first ceasefire negotiations between the KNU and U Thein Sein's government, he prophesized that there would be peace within two years, which nearly came true when the KNU and DKBA signed the NCA in October 2015.

Construction of pagodas continued at growing speed. By 2017 there were probably well over 100. Some sources said 140. The white pagodas are visible on all hills and dominate the landscape. They signify U Thuzana's spiritual power. Yet, they are often placed on land he has occupied without permission. Few dared question the monk's activities openly.

The DKBA soldiers had to live off the land when supplies and pay from the army dwindled after 1996. At that time, many IDPs also left Mya Gyi Ngu due to declining food supplies. DKBA soldiers demanded 'taxes' at check points; they got involved in logging and cattle trade, and some in trade with amphetamine and stolen cars and motorbikes from Thailand. Some were disappointed and did not like to be

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The SDA Karen woman divorced her Buddhist husband after the monk burned the school.

[46] U Thuzana's royal imaginary is based on Buddhist cosmology. For a discussion of the concepts, see Gravers (2012).

commanded by the Burman officers from the Tatmadaw, who often looked down on the Karen. Some deserted and returned to the KNLA or returned to their villages. The number of DKBA soldiers probably never exceeded 3,000. In 2010, The Myanmar military demanded that the DKBA transform itself into a BGF under army command. Approximately half of the soldiers joined BGF despite U Thuzana's resistance. Part of the remaining DKBA under General Saw Lah Bwe later became the Democratic Karen Benevolent Army (or *Kloo Htoo Baw*), which is based south of Myawaddy. The latter cooperates with the KNU and respects the NCA. The late Saw Lah Bwe explained that it was not appropriate for an army to use religion in the name of an army. He was a Christian. Two minor groups from DKBA remained loyal to the monk. The remaining DKBA around Myaing Gyi Ngu and BGF started a fight in 2013 and the DKBA soldiers were forced out of Myaing Gyi Ngu. Since his objection to the formation of BGF and the fight, the monk has not dared to visit Yangon. The army has gained from the split and has been able to slowly move into areas formerly controlled by the KNU and DKBA.[47]

The Spiritual and Magic Power of the Monk

U Thuzana's spiritual policy was based on a communitarian vision of society, which means that his domain depends on his moral rules and his decisions in order to provide peace and justice to Buddhist Karen. He would put moral pressure on his followers to respect his rules and give donations in return for his spiritual and sometimes physical protection. The white pagodas and his rules symbolically connected his domain. The pagodas signified that the monk is a Buddhist 'field of merit', I.e., that followers could obtain religious merit by donating to his work.

His vision as a Karen king in a former existence is a

[47] On the formation of BGF and KNU splinter groups, see South (2011).

primordial cosmological theory, which provided him with a special karmic authority. Many followers believed in this and it confirmed his strategy of reviving a Karen Buddhist civilization as well as developing his domain in a modern way. That is why he restored pagodas and constructed roads. In this way, he followed an old prophetic Karen tradition of seeking righteous rule, peace and prosperity.[48] He was also a proclaimed Karen nationalist, as mentioned above.

His rule was founded on his charisma. He was believed to have supernatural and miraculous powers. He was not attacked by tigers during meditation, and he saved the raft on the Thanlwin River at Thu Mwe Hta. According to a Pwo Karen follower, Phu Gyai', 'Grandfather Buddha' (I.e., U Thuzana), saved Bangkok from serious flooding a few years ago.[49] He was in the Irrawaddy delta and made offerings of 9,999 plates of rice to the dragon king residing on an island who shakes the Earth. This was also said to prevent a new cyclone like Nargis. His 'medicine' taken by the soldiers, when they took an oath, was also believed to give magic protection against bullets. Some soldiers said it had a bitter taste and gave a strange feeling, 'making the minds soft'. They suspected it contained amphetamine.

In his rules, U Thuzana demonstrates that he is what Weber called an 'ethical prophet'. Obedience to his rules and Buddhist morality is an ethical duty for his 'divine mission'.[50] His prophecies and supernatural abilities make his charisma authentic and legitimize his actions.

The combination of Buddhist cosmology, Karen tradition and his own local version of modernity make his ideology relevant in relation to Buddhist Karen's daily life. His followers share his cosmological visions and spiritual interests. His prophetic discourse also contributes to his power of legitimation,[51] in particular among Karen who have

[48] See Gravers, 2011.
[49] U Thuzana is also called Phu Ga Cha – 'Grandfather Lord', by followers.
[50] Weber, 1963, p. 55.
[51] Bourdieu, 1987, pp. 129-131.

suffered during the long armed conflict. However, this is perhaps less the case for those who have a broader and more secular world view, as for example migrants who studied in Thailand and influential monks interviewed in Hpa-an.

Figure 4

Chit Thu (in yellow shirt) and Khin Nyunt (in Karen shirt). (Photo by friend of author.)

U Thuzana, a Justice Provider or a *cakkavati*?

The monk became popular because he managed to provide protection and spiritual security for his followers during the years of conflict. Followers I have met only mentioned the positive activities of the monk and said he was protecting his land *(ba daung a thi a khaung* in Pwo Karen*).*

In Thailand, he has established a welfare organization, *Phaung Shu Khlaing*, for Buddhist Karen migrant workers. Many of these Karen work for Thai businesspeople in their corn or cassava fields. They give donations to the monk and work voluntarily on his constructions. Migrants pay about 600 baht four times a year and get a kind of insurance in case of illness or death. The organization helps with the valuable identification cards.

He has constructed a copy of the famous Golden Rock Pagoda in Kyaikyito on privately owned land belonging to a wealthy Thai outside Chiang Mai, and Karen monks reside there. U Thuzana is not a member of the Thai *sangha* and cannot build on Thai state land. However, he has constructed a pagoda in Ma Tao, Doi Tao in the Pha Ba Khaw area.[52] The area is reserve forest and the Thai military government sent some of his monks back to Myanmar because they did not have permission to stay in Thailand. A Karen follower in Tan Tar Oo, Karen State, told the story about the construction. According to a myth, the mountain is waiting for a charismatic person, the real owner with *parami* ('moral perfection'), who has power to make the mountain return to an upright position. U Thuzana succeeded with his pagoda, our Karen informant said. He believes the mountain has changed shape. U Thuzana has supporters in the Karen monastic settlement Wat Phra Bat Huai Tom. However, one night in 2014 he and his construction team came at night and proclaimed he was going to build a pagoda higher than the existing one, which is 71 meters. The local monks

[52] Kwanchewan, 2017.

rejected his idea and it came to a scuffle. Police and local authorities were called and they asked U Thuzana to leave: "we can construct our own pagodas" was the reply. After this, many Huai Tom Karen resented U Thuzana's behavior. Young Thai Karen viewed him as a Myanmar monk trying to intrude into and conquer their monastic domain.

U Thuzana has constructed pagodas not only on hilltops and at old ruined pagodas. He also constructed his white pagodas near other religious buildings as part of reclaiming what was the old Buddhist land. In this way, he acts like a *cakkavati*—'a world conqueror' in Buddhist cosmology—by expanding the Buddhist space.[53] At the same time, he claims to bring peace, security and justice to his followers despite the tensions. In 2015, U Thuzana ordered the construction of a white pagoda, 13.5 feet (over four meters) high, in the Anglican compound in Mi Zai village near Kamamaung. The church is 95 years old and registered. The KNU and the villagers wanted the government to react. However, the Minister of Religious Affairs, U Aung Ko, did not want to rush to solve the problem since armed groups were involved. Then a team of religious leaders attempted to mediate. The hoisting of the pagoda umbrella (*hti*) was postponed. In 2017, we had an interview with a respected Karen Buddhist monk from the Karen Peace and Unity Committee who was in the team. They met U Thuzana in a hospital in Thailand where he was treated for a lung complication. Communication with the monk was difficult but he briefly explained it was his intent to build pagodas for peace and his health.

In April 2016, U Thuzana and his followers constructed a pagoda in Gun Taw (Tha Blu Kla) village, Hlaing Bwe Township near an Anglican church. The village had about 20 Christian and 40 Buddhist households. There used to be cooperation between the two religious communities during festivals. The monk's followers, said to number 300, came in the late afternoon and continued until the pagoda was

[53] Tambiah, 1976, p. 39.

finished in the morning.[54] It was a BGF area, and DKBA and BGF soldiers guarded the monk. The soil was too hard in the church compound and they placed the pagoda between two houses—one belonging to a Karen Christian family, the other to a Karen Christian man recently converted to Buddhism. Most villagers kept a low profile in order not to provoke the monk, who came with an armed guard and watched from his car. When we visited the village, the 60-year-old compound had a fence around it. U Thuzana had followers in the village. However, he was not permitted to construct a *zayat* in the village.

U Thuzana has been implementing his vision of a Buddhist revitalization. The Anglican Bishop advised to show 'benevolence'.[55] Then U Thuzana constructed a pagoda in the middle of the entrance to one of the mosques in Shwe Gon village, which had a Muslim community. A Muslim leader concluded, "It is religious violence, but we forgive him".[56] Buddhists wanted to stop the construction, but the police and Karen State ministers allowed U Thuzana to continue the work, according to the Myanmar Times.[57] In other words, no authority dared to stop the monk, and informants pointed to the fact that an armed group backed the monk. When we visited Shwe Gon, the village administrator and the police warned us that any discussion of the pagoda and religion could exacerbate the prevailing tensions. There was also a common tendency of self-subjugation shared by Christians, Muslims and Hindus when communal and religious conflicts occurred. They remained silent and sometimes paid their way out of a looming conflict. Fear ruled in many places (see Pohl Harrisson's

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[54] Interviews in February 2017. The pattern was the same at every event. The monk arrived in the evening or night with several cars loaded with materials, instruments and the construction team as well as armed guards. He never announced where he was going, like a guerilla commander.
[55] Lawi Weng, 2016.
[56] Myanmar Times, 27 April, 2016.
[57] Ibid.

contribution to this special issue). While Ma Ba Tha supported U Thuzana's project of reclaiming Buddhist heritage, Christian religious leaders urged congregations to show benevolence to the monk and not to resist his work. U Thuzana thus seemed to be above the rule of law. During our fieldwork, it was obvious that U Thuzana was widely respected by Pwo Karen Buddhists who also accept his practice. Some may also have refrained from openly criticizing him to avoid a conflict with him. In the village Gun Taw, where he constructed a pagoda close to the Church, people stayed in their houses when the monks came with his armed guard and let them use water and electricity without complaining. They were afraid, they explained.

We learned that U Thuzana and DKBA had grabbed land not only around Myaing Gyi Ngu and for the white pagodas, but also a substantial area in Mae Laung Conservation Park. A DKBA-related company took 66 acres near Pa'o Gau Kyite village in Hlaing Bwe Township, an area controlled by the BGF.[58] Outside Myawaddy, and close to a new settlement for IDPs and refugees, the monk and the DKBA also grabbed land after 1995. This area is now a gated and closed community, Myitta Lin Myaing, guarded by armed BGF soldiers who only allow residents entrance. The area is said to be multi-ethnic and inhabited by drug dealers. Locals say it has a high rate of murder. As in Myaing Gyi Ngu, the monk invited Buddhist Karen to settle provided they paid him respect and did voluntary work for him. If they did not agree to work for him, they were expelled and lost their land. It was not clear how much influence the monk had in these two areas. It may well be that the BGF was in control, and the monk would probably have to obey this force, dominated by Burman soldiers and officers. U Thuzana was said not to have direct contacts to military leaders since the fall of Khin Nyunt in

[58] During an interview, 1988 generation students in Hpa-an said that an area of more than 1,000 acres was taken for a new town. However, it is difficult to assess the exact areas and ownership.

2004. However, some BGF commanders sent personal donations to the monk.[59]

As seen from these examples, the monk provided protection for his supporters. However, he evicted people from other denominations or those who did not follow his rules. He brought security and justice to supporters but created fear and subjugation among non-followers. His practice was tantamount to 'religious cleansing' when he excluded other religions from his domain. Being a Buddhist supporter of the *Sayadaw* is the main religious and political identification among his followers. It was a challenge to democratic rule and the rule of law so often mentioned by the first NLD government. The monk's use of spiritual power originated during the long civil war and was founded on injustices against Buddhist Karen. In the current situation, U Thuzana's activities are creating new conflict interfaces in Karen State, while the NCA political negotiators struggle to reach an agreement.

Despite conflicts, tensions and fear, U Thuzana produced an effective *charismatic trust network* of justice and security, but at a cost of excluding non-Buddhist Karen and other ethnic identities.[60] A growing schism and sometimes erratic behavior was costing him followers by 2017 and he lost control to the BGF and the army in his old center.

His communitarian strategy imposed autocratic rules on followers who had their individual freedoms restricted and created obstacle for democratic citizenship.[61] It was a spiritual governmentality maneuvering between state institutions and the KNU. It was based on moral discipline and control as well as on self-control among followers who may get bad karma if they did not obey.

[59] Personal communication in the field, June 2017.
[60] Tilly, 2005, p. 59.
[61] Tourain, 2007, p.146.

Figure 5

Khin Nyunt (armed) depicted on murals in the main pagoda paying respect to U Thuzana. Khin Nyunt often came with donations until he was arrested in 2004. (Photo by author.)

Plural Authorities and Plural Laws

U Thuzana's domain is an example of how alternative authorities and laws are used to govern when the central state loses control. Karen State, as other states in Myanmar, has several armed groups and organizations competing with state authorities. If we consider his moral rules in terms of legal pluralism and customary law, U Thuzana can be seen as a provider of a kind of justice founded in and legitimized by spiritual authority and religious concepts. Further, his rule and authority are supported by an armed force and was allied to the Myanmar army. In our experience during fieldwork, the monk's activities may not only generate new conflicts but are difficult to harmonize with common law and

justice, which is supposed to equally protect all citizens. While the monk's trust network and protection gave meaning in a conflict situation it could be a problem for future democratization as demonstrated above.[62] When justice depends solely on religious identification, it does not provide equality and common judicial security. This situation has its origin in the lack of just state authorities and the profound Karen mistrust in official state institutions, which are dominated by the Bamar majority. Pwo Karen informants we met all complained about state authorities being corrupt. When they faced conflicts and crimes they asked village leaders and elders to help with informal mediation. Monks, village leaders and armed groups were involved in solving complex cases of land grabbing although not always with success (see Lue Htar in this special issue). The courts and police were seen as unfair. In many cases, brokers were needed as well as substantial payments to officials when individuals were in contact with state institutions, for example for household registration. This situation made religious authority important, and that is why many consulted influential monks for counsel or for mediation. In KNU controlled areas, civilians contact KNU authorities. In villages with mixed authorities, many uncertainties evolved (see Kyed & Thitsar in this special issue). However, legal pluralism has many contradictions and uncertainties, as described by Tamanaha,[63] and depends on the future political situation.

More empirical research is needed in Myaing Gyi Ngu to understand how crimes and the breaking of U Thuzana's rules are dealt with, as well as how the civilian residents there perceive justice and security. However, the concept of legal pluralism is perhaps not relevant for Myaing Gyi Ngu and most of the monk's domain. During an interview with a ward

[62] On the rule of law see Cheeseman (2016, p. 162), who argues that the military law and order regime made corruption possible.
[63] Tamanaha, 2008.

leader in 2014, we were told that they had a list of crimes. Some were probably similar to the KNU laws, for example on extra-marital sex, regarded an offense in Karen communities. The ward leader said that he had to report crimes to the monks in charge, who also selected the ward leaders. In the end, U Thuzana had the last word. The ward leader emphasized that theft was rare in Myaing Gyi Ngu, as it was seen as giving bad karma.

In Karen State, the drug trade was high on the agenda during fieldwork in 2017. The police had started a campaign against drug traders. Our Karen interlocutors, including a police officer, often discussed this topic as a major security and justice concern. They agreed that drug trading had indeed been reduced or perhaps just become less visible. However, they also mentioned that former DKBA and BGF soldiers were believed to be involved. U Thuzana worked against drug use and trade with strict control in Myaing Gyi Ngu. The main traders may respect the monk and keep out of Myaing Gyi Ngu, but drugs are available all over the state. The ongoing campaign only captures the small dealers with 2–3 tablets and users in large numbers. They face long uncertainty in the state's judicial system and have to pay 100,000s of Myanmar Kyat in the process. The main dealers are armed groups who remain untouchable. A son of a KNU leader was arrested in Myawaddy in February 2017 for substantial drug trade, but the case was quickly removed from a popular police website. Religious authority seemed to be limited in solving this problem of security and justice.

As described above, the monk provided ID papers, welfare security for followers, and schools. In this way, he created an alternative to the state system, but more of an exclusionary law and order system, resting on his charismatic authority and only for Buddhist Karen. His education not only contradicts KNU's system but also the state system. It may take democratic governments decades to reconcile these different orders.

Conclusion

In terms of Burmese/Mon Buddhist tradition, U Thuzana acted as a Buddhist saint (*arahant*) as described by Rozenberg.[64] He protected his Buddhist followers, provided recognition of their religious status, which KNU seems to have neglected, and promoted Buddhism (*thathana pyu*). His rhetoric and practices were similar to the Ma Ba Tha movement, but as a Karen nationalist his aim was to keep Bamar influences at bay despite his previous alliance with the army.

He has used his spiritual authority to appeal to the moral consciousness and sense of injustice of Buddhist Karen by addressing their grievances. He outlined the evil-doing of the KNU, explained the reasons for the sufferings of Buddhist Karen and promised peace and ontological security as well as a new Buddhist era. U Thuzana's trust network did provide protection for his followers during the conflict.

U Thuzana's communitarian vision of a moral community is part of a global trend in which nationalist and religious movements have gained momentum. While nationalists opt for more state control, religious movements such as Ma Ba Tha in Myanmar and the Dhammakaya movement in Thailand challenge state control. Simultaneously, these movements also use the state, law and order to exclude other religions. The lesson from U Thuzana's movement is that religious identity and perceptions of justice and security in terms of spiritual and material protection easily turn militant and autocratic with the aim of correcting grievances and sufferings.

U Thuzana's moral community based on Buddhist rules, spiritual politics is an alternative to state building (including KNUs institutions), but it also includes an anarchism that ignores the secular order and its laws. The monk is obviously skilled in "the art of not being governed"

[64] Rozenberg, 2010.

by the state and the rule of law,[65] when we explore his actions from a state perspective. He governs a moral community providing justice and protection only for his lay followers. As described above, spiritual politics and authority are also used to control individual Buddhist Karen, as well as to exclude other religions. This creates religious boundaries and tensions. The monk's alternative to state organization is a modern theocratic rule, a kind of borderland theocracy. Legitimacy and power depends solely on the *trust* in the monk, his charisma and his decisions, as well as on individual allegiance to him. This kind of local governance leads to sectarianism as demonstrated above.

Although in 2017 he had limited armed backing and dwindling administrative control, U Thuzana still exercised considerable spiritual influence and awe among authorities and other monks. The government did not dare stop his pagoda invasion on other denominations. The state *sangha* council will only act with the consent of the government, although U Thuzana infringes on religions land and religious rights. His former ally, the Tatmadaw, secured dominance of the BGF through Bamar officers and used the monk's influence, but they did not stop him either. He and other monks who pursue political goals with religion may inhibit democratization by generating new local and national conflicts and violence. If monks can grab land, solicit money, and infringe on individual civil rights, such actions may also harm the status of monks and Buddhism in the future.

[65] Scott, 2009.

Figure 6

U Thuzana lying in state at Myaing Gyi Ngu (two photos). (Photo by author.)

Postscript: the Departure of a Major Patron

In 2018, U Thuzana died in Bangkok. Several years before, I had enquired if I could meet him. But he did not want to talk to a person who wrote about him, I was told. After death, he was brought to Myaing Gyi Ngu and laid in state at his monastery before the funeral on 27 November 2018. With my research team, I was allowed to visit and pay respect—perhaps the only foreigner to do so. Later, I learned that only Buddhists were allowed to attend the funeral. A strict ban on eating meat and fish was issued and armed soldiers guarded the large funeral site.

The committee supervising Myaing Gyi Ngu gave permission for my visit. During a meeting, they explained how the monk had organized the evacuation of 5,000-6000 Karen people fleeing fighting between the military and the Karen National Liberation Army. The military had constructed roads in connection with the Hat Yai dam and violated the ceasefire agreement. U Thuzana had opposed the construction. He organized a convoy of about 200 cars to bring the internally displaced people (IDPs), who had walked to the Mae Tha Wau area, close to the Thailand border. He also collected donations of food from the military, and one crony, for the IDPs. Since then more fights occurred and more refugees came. After the 2021 military coup, it must have become difficult to feed all these Karen IDPs.

The Border Guard Force (BGF) commander Chit Thu announced U Thuzana's funeral in military uniform. This offended the community. In 2010, Chit Thu had not followed the monk's advice against transforming the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) into a Border Guard Force, as was ordered by the Myanmar military. (After the main part of the DKBA transformed into the BGF, the remaining part, Brigade 5, was renamed Democratic Karen Benevolent Army by its late commander Saw Lah Pwe. He told me this was to avoid mixing Buddhism and armed forces. A small faction loyal to the monk continued in the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army.) Chit Thu later attended the funeral in civilian clothes (see figure 4).

Other generals came to the funeral. The most prominent was Khin Nyunt, also seen in a photo with BGF soldiers paying him respect (see figure 2). His right-hand man of the local Military Intelligence (MI) group, a Pghà K'Nyaw (S'gaw) Karen man from the Ayeyarwady Delta, also came. He was in contact with the monk before the split from the KNU in 1994. Another prominent guest was U Khin Shwe, a former MI officer, now a local powerful and wealthy crony in Karen State.

The scene at the funeral was impressive. The pyre was inside a pagoda-like construction formed like Mount Meru. Karen people danced and there was music. Thousands of followers gathered, and the prominent guests lit fire to the pyre. Amongst these were U Aung Ko, Minister of Religious Affairs, and other generals. The total cost of the constructions, dance and food, among other things, amounted to the equivalent of more than USD $467,000.

The monk's Thai mentor, the owner of the Saha Company, contributed a donation in Thai Baht. He sent his son with a Thai delegation to the funeral. Saha Company had constructed a large Buddhist meditation center in Chonburi, Thailand, for the monk, where many of his Karen followers came to ceremonies.

The monk was praised as a peacemaker and for having constructed 930 pagodas; some in a huge park outside Myaing Gyi Ngu with marble slates inscribed with all the Buddha's sermons written in the monk's script. After libation water was poured at the end of the funeral ritual, popcorn and money was thrown out to the large gathering of followers. U Thuzana's ashes were kept in three urns, one big and two small, to be placed within stupas.

I learned that the BGF officers were ordered to collect money from soldiers, a total of about 500-1,000 lakh in Myanmar Kyat (USD $36,000-$73,000) with contributions according to rank, in order to cover a huge debt the monk had accumulated from his pagoda constructions.

The event was a public display of a crucial part of the military patron-client network, which the generals had used to undermine both KNU and NLD government influence. This

network included the Interfaith Dialogue Group (IDG) with representatives of Buddhists, Christians, Muslims and Hindus, but dominated by Buddhists. The leader was a Phloûng (Pwo Karen) and former member of the Burma Socialist Programme Party, U Pho Nyi. He was also a prominent civilian member of the Joint Ceasefire Monitoring Committee (JCMC), appointed by the military. The strong Karen State chapter of Ma Ba Tha was an important part of this network and also supported U Thuzana. The IDG did not prevent U Thuzana from constructing pagodas inside Muslim and Christian religious compounds and the JCMC did not stop incursions into KNU areas by the military.

Since the military coup in 2021, the BGF has supported the military's actions against the KNLA and People's Defense Forces, while its commander Chit Thu seems to have become more engaged in the Chinese-run scam and casino town Shwe Koko. The BGF had already been deeply involved in the Asia Highway One road project from Myawaddy to Hpa-an towns, creating conflict and corruption. The Democratic Karen Benevolent Army's commander Saw Steele came to meet Min Aung Hlaing for peace talks in Nay Pyi Taw in September 2022. On the same day, the military entered his headquarters in San Si Myaing. In June 2021, the DKBA had a firefight with the Burmese military in Palu, south of Myawaddy. The commanders were fired from the DKBA. On 27 April 2022, 300 DKBA soldiers and the fired commanders were reported to have joined the KNU's Karen National Defense Organization to fight the military.

U Thuzana was considered an arahant (saint) in possession of supra-normal powers of a Buddha (dagò Gyai', a Mon word for the Buddha used by Buddhist Karen) by his followers. He was a main promoter of Buddhism (thathana pyu). Without the charismatic monk, Myaing Gyi Ngu may dwindle in following; or perhaps the current times of civil war will see a new Karen prophet rise?

Figure 7

Khin Nyunt in front of members of his Karen State MI team at the funeral site. (Photo by friend of author.)

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