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“Historical leaders that I admire”

Themes of religion and ethnic unity in the public primary school curriculum in
Myanmar.

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Abstract

This thesis is written to provide an understanding of how themes of religion and ethnic unity are addressed to children in the Burmese primary schools. By analysing the curriculum texts from three different grades teaching the subject 'Sociology', I have analysed the presentations of historical leaders in these textbooks. My research question is: **How are themes of religion and ethnic unity (re)presented in primary school textbooks in Myanmar?** My aim is to further understand how these themes are present in the presentation of historical figures, leaders whom are presented as admirable, in Burmese history. Myanmar has a complicated history, and a complicated political situation. Its population spans many different ethnic groups and several religious traditions, yet the curriculum does not reflect this diversity. By conducting a discourse analysis, I have looked at how religion and ethnic unity are present, or if they are absent from the curriculum texts. In order to conduct my analysis, I have used four different theories: 1) *Formatting religion*, to understand how the content and understanding of religion may change by the way it is presented, 2) *hidden curriculum*, in order to look at underlying ideas and norms that are not a part of the 'official' curriculum, 3) *theory on the use of images* to explain how meaning is conveyed through images used in the text, and 4) *Myanmafication/Burmanisation*, in order to further understand the theme of ethnic unity and how it relates to the Burmese military. My conclusion is that there are plenty of references to the religion and ethnic unity in the curriculum texts. However, each of the references to religion addresses Buddhism alone, while ethnic unity is only presented from the perspective of the majority group where a monarch or general is honored for his or her ability to unite all the ethnic peoples. Other religious views and ethnic groups are omitted from the text, and in this way the textbooks present Buddhism and the incorporation into the majority ethnic group as ideals and accomplishments to be admired.

List of terms and abbreviations

CBS	Community Based Schools.
CCA	Child Centered Approach – a pedagogical approach to be used in schooling.
CDNH	Center for Diversity and National Harmony.
CREATE	Curriculum Reform at Primary Level of Basic Education.
Dhamma	The teachings of the Buddha.
JICA	Japanese International Cooperation Agency.
Ma Ba Tha	“ <i>Ma Ba Tha</i> is an acronym for <i>Ah-myo Batha Thatana Saun Shaung Ye a-Pwe</i> , or ‘Organization for the Protection of Race and Religion’.” (Frydenlund, 20.03.2018). The organization is commonly known as Ma Ba Tha.
MoE	Ministry of Education.
MRA	Ministry of Religious Affairs.
Sangha	The Buddhist monastic order.
Sasana	The Buddha’s dispensation. Referring to the Buddhist tradition as a practice. When used in this thesis it refers to “Buddhism”.
SLORC	State, Law and Order Reconciliation Council.
SPDC	State Peace and Development Council
Tatmadaw	The name of the Burmese military forces.
Thatnabain	A title following the head of the monastic order, the Sangha.
Theravada	A school of Buddhism largely practiced in South-East Asian countries, for example in Myanmar.
UNDP	United Nation Development Programme.

UNESCO The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

UNHCR United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

USDP Union Solidarity and Development Party.

YMBA Young Men’s Buddhist Association.

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1 Introductory chapter

1.1 Topic and Research question

The majority population of Myanmar¹ today professes Buddhism as their religion. Apart from a few defining themselves as non-religious, the rest also profess other religions like Christianity, Islam or animism (Carstens, 2018, p. 127). In Myanmar, religion plays an important role in society, both in the smaller local communities, as well as the larger scale religious orders. Religious symbols are present on many street corners, whether it is stupas, pagodas, churches or mosques, and a large majority of the people in Myanmar practice and identify with a religious tradition. However, religion is not taught as an official part of the public-school curriculum. Education in public schools takes on a supposedly religiously neutral, or a secular, profile, and it is not taught in an instructive or informative form. Religious education is present only in schools run by private institutions, religious communities, or the Sangha, the Buddhist monastic order.

As education in Myanmar does not officially cover religion as part of their primary education, this excludes the majority religion of Buddhism, as well as any other teaching on world religions. Different countries follow different models for how religion and schooling relate, Norway for instance has a separate subject for religion, whereas France exemplifies another country that refrain from introducing religion in school. Though religion is not an official part of the public school curriculum, my argument is that it still holds some position in the primary school of Myanmar.

I suggest that though the content presented in the allegedly religiously neutral curriculum, themes of religion are present, both explicitly and implicitly through stories of Burmese history. I will be looking at the curriculum from the primary school subject *sociology*, and more specifically a chapter called “Historical Leaders that I admire”, and my argument is that the text and pictures presented here represent religion in several instances. In addition to the

¹ In 1989, the country formerly known as the Union of Burma, changed its name to the Union of Myanmar (Aung-Thwin, Aung & Steinberg, 2019) commonly just referred to as Myanmar. In this thesis, I will generally refer to the country by its official name since 1989; Myanmar, though when writing about events occurring before the change of name I will be referring to the country as Burma.

theme of religion, I will be looking at the theme of unity, and how the two relate to each other. Unity is a theme that, along with religion, has been occurring several times through my research, and I have found that it plays an important role in the Burmese primary school education.

I have chosen some texts from the official curriculum taught in the first three years of primary school, which I will present later.

My research question is:

How are themes of religion and ethnic unity (re)presented in primary school textbooks in Myanmar?

1.2 Why write about the Burmese primary school?

Challenges of a post-colonial state are still present in Myanmar today. Civil wars, refugee crises and growing nationalistic sentiments have demonstrated the complexity of Myanmar's political situation. Many conflicts in Myanmar involve various ethnic groups, and some also involve different religious groups in one way or another. Analysis of current conflicts and political disputes, or whether or not the conflicts are essentially about religion or simply involving religious actors, is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, I will give a brief introduction to some of these matters later on, as it is a part of the public discourse the curriculum texts I will analyse have been created in. In this thesis I will analyse about the role of religion and themes of unity the way they are presented in the first, second and third grade of sociology. Is religion discussed, in what way is it discussed, and which religious views are represented? How is Myanmar presented as a unified country through the curriculum texts? How are children taught, formed and 'instructed' from a young age, in how to relate to people of other religious and ethnic backgrounds? I have chosen to write specifically about primary school curriculum as it is the part of Burmese schooling with the highest attendance, and therefore also the part of the school system that reaches the highest number of children and citizens of the country.

As I have been studying the curriculum from the primary schools, and not been in classrooms to observe and partake in other ways, I have not gotten to speak with anyone currently working in, or enrolled in the public school. However, I spent one month in Myanmar in October 2019, to learn about the education system, the country and to retrieve my primary material for my analysis. I will elaborate on my experience in Myanmar later, but while in the city of Yangon I got to talking with some locals who shared some of their own experiences and memories from primary school, though this was not in any formal interview. From their experiences I learned that religion was in fact not taught in primary schools in their areas, though some told me of how there was still a presence of religion in the classroom. In some cases, I was told about teachers that started their classes with the class reciting a Buddhist prayer or text. These stories are examples of how religion has been present in the classroom, though it was not something that happened everywhere, it depended on the schools and the teachers. What then is the official policy on religious content in the public schools? How are conflicts regarding religion and ethnicity affecting the view of religion in school, or the presentation of the curriculum? How does this tie together with themes of unity, or national unity? Does the curriculum make room for diversity?

These are the kind of questions that got me interested in the field of religion in primary school curriculum; the desire to understand more about how attitudes towards religion may be shaped by implicit and ‘unseen’, maybe even hidden, religious content. In Myanmar, there are 135 recognized ethnic groups (Schober, 2017, p. 163), representing different religious beliefs. According to the census conducted in 2014, there were only 0.1% non-religious people in Myanmar. This leaves a vast majority of the population in the religious category, where around 89.8% of these are Buddhist, and the rest are scattered over a few other religions such as Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Animism and the category ‘other’ (Department of Population, 2014, p. 3). When a nation is comprised of such a large majority of people professing a religious conviction, is it possible that there is no religious content in the school curriculum?

1.3 Relevance of thesis

The state recognizes 135 different ethnic groups, many different languages, local cultures, and religious traditions. Myanmar has had many conflicts regarding ethnicity and religion, been through dramatic changes in leadership, nationalist movements setting out to defend Buddhism, military regimes. My question of how religion and unity are presented through the curriculum is motivated by such conflicts, and the desire to understand more of the religious aspect of what is taught to children in school. By understanding how religion is presented to children through the curriculum, it may become possible to take action to change or shape narratives for the future, opening up to a form of education catering to understanding other worldviews than one's own. The school is an important part of the socialization of children, and the way topics are spoken about and taught have an effect on how coming generations will meet those of other backgrounds than themselves.

On this basis, I will analyse the language used to describe religion, and the meaning attributed to religion in primary school, and how historical figures and events are used to present themes of unity. To my knowledge, there has been little attention devoted to the work on 'religion' in public schools in Myanmar. There are, however, examples of those who have written about primary school textbooks in the context of "Legitimizing the union of Myanmar" (Nick Cheesman, 2002), "The reconciliation of ethnic conflict" (Rosalie Metro, 2011) or "Teaching citizenship under an authoritarian regime" (Brooke Treadwell, 2013), all of these analyse public school textbooks, though with different aims than I have chosen for my thesis. For this thesis I will be analysing textbooks from a different subject (sociology), and the curriculum I have worked with is the new curriculum that was rolled out in the past couple of years, 2018 and 2019, though not all of the new curriculum from other subjects and grades have been published yet..

This thesis is therefore a contribution to the field as there has not been conducted a lot of research on the new school curriculum in Myanmar so far, seeing as it was rolled out as recently as in 2018 - 2019, though several of the articles and papers written about the former curriculum are still relevant. However, as I will discuss in the next chapter, new curriculum for primary and secondary school was rolled out in 2019 in part to further promote critical and independent thinking, while continuing to support the nation-building of Myanmar (JICA, 12.06.2017). It is therefore important to examine what the new curriculum looks like, in what

way they contribute to the nation-building of Myanmar, and whether or not they are able to accommodate their goals of challenging the student to think critically.

I have primarily analysed two themes, religion and ethnic unity, as they are introduced through the curriculum texts, and these themes have been looked at both separately and together. Other themes occur as well, and among other things, I have discussed the role of the state in relationship to the curriculum texts. My aim is to understand how these themes are presented in various ways to children in Myanmar, and what meaning the textbooks convey. Before presenting my primary material for the analysis, I will present the theoretical framework and some background information on the education system in Myanmar today, some social context, and relevant information of Buddhism as it is needed to understand certain aspects of my analysis.

2 Theoretical framework

For my analysis, I have chosen some theory which I will apply in order to better understand elements of religion and unity as they are presented through the curriculum texts.

I will be using theories on *formatting religion* to see how the role of religion may change through the way it is presented. Then I will look into some theory presented by Philip Jackson (1968), among others, on *hidden curriculum*, which speak of potential underlying ideas and norms not committed to the official curriculum, but rather as something hidden and unofficial. The third theory I will draw on speaks of the role of images in communication, and the role of images in curriculum texts, which will be applied in order to see how the images and the texts in our primary school curriculum relate to each other, and may be interpreted by primary school students. Lastly, I will look into the term and theory referred to as *Myanmafication*, or *Burmanisation* to some. This theory is applied to understand the role of the Burmese military forces, the *Tatmadaw*, in relation to the content of the curriculum texts, and to further understand the theme of unity as it is presented.

2.1 Formatting religion

Religious education is discussed in many different countries, the main topic being what role religion should or should not have in the basic education of a child. Though the discourse on religion in public school speaks of religion as a non-present element in the basic education, both the inclusion and exclusion of religion contributes to the discourse on religious education in Myanmar. *Formatting religion* describes the construction and changing of the way religion is understood, for instance by means of mediatization and political discourse (Mjaaland, 2019, p. 4), but in this case, it is about the formatting of religion through the primary school textbooks. Applying the theory of formatting religion may allow us to see how an understanding of religion is constructed, and whether or not the content of the term is transformed in the process of formatting. Marius Mjaaland describes the term ‘format’ as “the way in which something is arranged or set out” (Mjaaland, 2019, p. 4), and in this way addresses the outset and structure of religion in the way it is presented in a discourse, thereby emphasizing the way religion is represented and understood through its formatting (Mjaaland, 2019, p. 4).

Trine Anker and Marie von der Lippe present the formatting of religion as a process taking place in the classroom as religion is represented through the different actors present, whether it is teachers, students, or others, aiming to see how the events of a classroom contribute to the construction of religion (Anker and von der Lippe, 2019, p. 142).

Formatting religion can also be seen as a tool that may allow one to understand “recent, modern processes of standardizing the shape and content of religion” (Mjaaland, 2019, p. 8), putting an emphasis on how the content of religion is standardized and given a specific meaning. For instance, how is the content of religion standardized through texts presented in a primary school textbook, through a public speech made by a famous monk, or the way religion is spoken about in media. Speaking about religion in different contexts, with different emphasis, provides an understanding of religion that contribute to formatting the content and the shape of religion. In the case of Myanmar, the formatting of religion can for instance be seen in the government’s relationship to religion. For instance, the constitution does not recognize any state religion, though it gives Buddhism a special role in as the religion of the majority ethnic group (Frydenlund, 2019, p. 40). Religion is also prohibited from politics and

elections, in line with pre-colonial understandings of Theravada Buddhist ideology, where the monastic order was supposed to separate itself from politics (Frydenlund, 2019, p. 41).

2.2 *Hidden Curriculum*

Fulya Damala Kentli (2009) describes *hidden curriculum* “as the socialization process of schooling”, where the children through education meet with certain norms telling them what to think, and how to relate to the topics discussed. Hidden Curriculum theory focus largely on the activities and social interaction in a classroom or institution, seeking out the practices that teach an unofficial curriculum. According to Margolis, hegemonic structures play a part in a schooling system, and state power and its cooperation with schools become a relevant matter (Kentli, 2009, p. 84). Henry Giroux presents hidden curriculum as theory on the way in which a student learn in school, aiming at the principles and norms of the school, and the way these are communicated and understood through education (Kentli, 2009, p. 84).

The recurring theme among hidden curriculum theorists is looking at what is implicitly taught in school. Though many of them focus on classroom activities and social interaction, this also leaves room for studying other elements involved in education, for instance textbooks. Reproduction of knowledge in light of various social and cultural norms is at the center of hidden curriculum theory. Some of this hidden curriculum, the implied curriculum, may present itself by way of language, presentation and prioritization of certain parts of the curriculum (Kentli, 2009, p. 85), giving a lot of power to teachers and those in a position of authority. The way Giroux presents hidden curriculum also emphasizes the political aspect of education, ascribing schools a role of power in both mediating and legitimizing social and cultural reproduction of knowledge (Kentil, 2009, p. 87).

In hidden curriculum theory both the role of the teacher and the role of the learner is emphasized. Philip W. Jackson, in his book *Life in Classrooms* discusses some aspects that can influence the learner’s understanding of what is being taught. Uniformity and conformity among students are addressed as possible outcomes of a school’s way of teaching and communicating with the students, that schools have the platform to steer the students into thinking a certain way (Jackson, 1968, p. 5), trying to create the ‘model student’. A student’s ‘success’ is therefore measured by his/her ability to understand both the hidden and the

official curriculum, more than their ability to, for instance, think critically or pursue knowledge (Jackson, 1968, p. 34). Receiving praise from a teacher or a school is therefore linked to a student's understanding of what s/he is supposed to think and how s/he is supposed to behave and act. Being a so-called 'model student' does not entail being a *good* student, it means understanding what the authority wants to see (Jackson, 1968, p. 35). Hidden curriculum therefore addresses, in large part, what happens in the classrooms, the interaction between students and teachers, the relationship between learners and learning authorities. In researching the role of religion in primary school textbooks, hidden curriculum may be applied to further understand what is expected of a student to learn. What expectations to behavior and thinking can we find through the textbooks, how do they present the 'model student', or better yet, the 'model citizen' through the primary school textbooks? Is general understanding and acceptance sought after, or is the ideal to think in a certain way? Jackson exemplifies the expectation placed on the students by using terms such as "test-wise", "school-wise" and "teacher-wise" to show how success is not necessarily measured by intellect but by following a given recipe, which begs the question of whether or not intellectual achievement and institutional expectations are opposites, or if they can be equated to some extent (Jackson, 1968, p. 35). Is an ideal student also a docile student? Jackson continues by presenting methods of reforming some of these challenges by altering the curriculum and make changes to engage students further, mobilize them in the classroom, and develop a sense of critical thinking (Jackson, 1968, p. 107).

2.3 On the use of images

Images and pictures are a big part of the curriculum being analysed, as these texts are meant for first, second and third graders. Therefore it may be useful to understand more of what role images play in the learning process, what they communicate and how they may be used.

"Both language and visual communication express meanings belonging to and structured by cultures in the one society" (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 19). Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen explains how visual communication and language both represent some meaning established in the society they were developed in, and though the forms of expression are different, there is bound to be some congruence between the two. In this way, Kress and van

Leeuwen links the use of visual communication, e.g. images in a primary school curriculum, to the use of language, e.g. written text in a primary school curriculum, as two means of communication that may contribute to the understanding of the other. They are, however, different means of communication, and may therefore be understood somewhat differently. For example in a written text, subjectivity and objectivity may be presented by using words to elaborate, such as saying you ‘believe’ something to be the case, rather than making a factual statement saying something ‘is’ the case. This works a little differently when using images, as perspective is gained by the ‘angle of vision’ (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 19).

This relationship between text and image can be seen from a few different perspective. Images may communicate a number of different meanings, and in this way may be in need of something to fix this meaning, a job suited for language, e.g. written text accompanying the picture (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 18). Image-text relationships are further described as complementing and extending the meaning of each other. An image may contribute meaning to a text, and likewise, the text accompanying a picture may define and/or expand the meaning conveyed through the picture as a way of ‘completing’ the message (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 18). The tools for understanding visual communication can only be found in context of the public communication in the given society, how means of communication are used, and the value attributed them. It is explained by comparison to a landscape scene, where the history and environment of the landscape is the context that makes the objects in said landscape make sense (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 35). For example, if you are presented with a picture of a pine tree, it would not make much sense if this tree was placed in the middle of a desert. On the contrary, it would make sense if it was found in a forest or other natural environment where such a tree can be expected to be found. In the same way, a public discourse is the landscape and environment creating the context for visual communication to be understood, as it represents the way of communication in the given society. “Visual language is not [...] transparent and universally understood; it is culturally specific” (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 4).

Regarding the image-text relationship, as presented by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006, p. 187), value can be attributed to the organization of a page. If the image is placed at the top of the page, with the written text below, they argue that meaning is defined visually through the image itself, causing the text to elaborate on what the image shows. The same could be said

the other way around, if the text was at the top of the page, the image would be a further elaboration of what the text already reads. If placed at the top of/first on the page, it is deemed the primary source of information, whereas what is placed below will function as an elaboration (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 187). Kress and van Leeuwen draw on an example, in their book, of a picture of a bathroom accompanied by a text, where the text aids in defining what you see in the picture. Written text, or language, (authoritatively) imposes meaning on the image, telling you what you see and possibly even how you see it (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 26). In this line of argument, images and texts not only elaborate on the meaning conveyed through the other, but the written text defines, even imposes meaning onto the picture. In this way, the narrative of the picture may be controlled by the accompanying text.

Ane Malene Sæverot and Marit Ulvik (2018) wrote a paper on the use of images in teaching, where they among other things address the role of emotion. Images may represent something new and different that words may not be able to cover, something that may speak to the emotional side of the beholder (Sæverot and Ulvik, 2018, p. 36). In this interpretation of the use of images, the observer, e.g. a student in a Burmese primary school, interprets an image or illustration in light of how it speaks to them specifically, meaning their interpretation will likely include seeing the picture through the lenses of their own background and experiences.

2.4 *Myanmafication (Burmanization)*

*Myanmafication*² is a term coined by Gustaaf Houtman in order to describe a process that begun with the development of nationalistic and anti-colonial sentiments in response to being subjected to British rule, as well as being the ideology of the Tatmadaw, the Burmese military, in a post-colonial era. Nationalistic sentiments rising from the anti-colonial struggle can be exemplified with for example the organization YMBA, and their slogan “To be Burmese is to be Buddhist” (Schober, 2007, p. 4), making connections between a Burmese form of nationalism, and a Buddhist form of nationalism. When the YMBA has presented

² Gustaaf Houtman introduced the term *Myanmafication*, though it is synonymous with the term *burmanization* which was first used by J. Lewis in 1924, as well as being used by others, such as Matthew Walton whom also is referred in this text (see Walton 2013, 11). Both names build on the Burmese words *myanma* and *bama*, which are the names for the majority ethnic group in Burmese.

Buddhism in close connection to what it means to identify as Burmese, it paints the picture of a universal identity applicable to all citizens and locals, where one of the unifying factors is religion. Schober (2007) describes the role of religious discourse as something that “taps into sentiments associated with cultural symbols and social memory that together powerfully evoke the past.” (Schober, 2007, p. 11). These sentiments draw on the experiences, emotions and memory embedded in culture, and depending on its usage, it may be looking to the future through the eyes of the past; how the future may be different from past experiences of oppression. All of this contributes to establishing connections between national identity and Buddhism, where unofficial rules for what it means to be a ‘proper Burmese’ are defined.

British forces colonized Burma in the 1800s, and as the British ruled in Burma, they relied on the Burmese military to maintain internal security (Walton, 2013, p. 8). From the ethnic majority group, the Burmans, this resulted in growing resentment towards the ethnic minorities as well, as they became associated with colonial rule and oppression, even seen as ‘servants’ of the British (Walton, 2013, p. 8). British involvement in national administration was to the Burmans perceived as a threat to their identity, both politically and culturally, and by association the threat of the British was projected onto Burmese ethnic minorities. Burman cultural and political identity started to form as a separate identity from that of other ethnic minorities, and eventually nationalistic Burmans started to equate their ethnic group with a national identity, where Burman and Burmese were presented as interchangeable (Walton, 2013, p. 8).

Burmanisation³ is therefore a term that has been implemented with reference to the nationalistic stance of the Burman majority, where Burmanisation is described by Walton (2013, p. 10) as “processes of cultural assimilation [...] that reinforce Burman cultural identity as the norm of Myanmar national identity.” In other words a process of making one specific culture the norm for all other cultures and subcultures in the nation to follow. In Walton’s presentation of the term here, it addresses more of the nationalistic aspects than what Houtman describes as the ideology of the Tatmadaw, called myanmafication. When Burma was liberated from colonial rule in 1941, led by General Aung San and Japanese

³ I have used the term Burmanisation here as it is the term used by Matthew Walton whom I have referred to in this sentence, however I will use myanmafication for the remainder of this thesis.

forces, they were opposing the British forces which was comprised of large numbers of Indians and non-Burman minorities (Walton, 2013, p. 8-9). This only helped reinforce the impression of ethnic minorities siding with the British, rather than the Burmese. The general Aung San was later assassinated, and is remembered as a wartime hero who played a vital role in the liberation from colonialism.

The concept of myanmafication is, however, not limited to anti-colonialism, but is also attributed to the Tatmadaw and their process of legitimizing their own authority. Myanmafication is exemplified through acts such as renaming the country, cities, and so on, and making attempts to limit foreign influence with the aim of preserving Myanmar as a 'Burmese' land that belongs to its 'indigenous' people (Houtman, 1999, p. 48), whereby the indigenous people in this case is a reference to the army. Houtman continues to describe myanmafication as "a response to losing Aung San as a support for their actions" (1999, p. 48), and therefore sought to find other ways of legitimizing their authority. The point was to distance oneself (the country) from foreign influence, whether it is culture or value-systems, and keep the 'Burmese' way of life intact (Houtman, 1999, p. 48). Nationalistic sentiments, and a need for legitimization, therefore becomes the basis for reinventing a new national identity to represent 'the Burmese'.

This process of myanmafication, as conducted by the Tatmadaw, can be seen as building on some of these anti-colonial and nationalistic sentiments described above. The Tatmadaw did, in the newly liberated state, start to answer the question of what, or rather who, this new and independent country was. As the country was no longer governed by royalty, and the British were gone, the Tatmadaw took to start shaping a (new) national and cultural identity, while in the process also presenting themselves in a specific way. Myanmafication therefore becomes an attempt by the Tatmadaw to establish and legitimate their own rule and authority, while simultaneously reinventing the national identity. The country was eventually renamed, from 'Burma' to 'Myanmar', and the renaming process also reached several cities in the country. This new identity of the people has been presented, by the Tatmadaw, as a united people and a united nation under one rule, entailing a degree of the 'official' culture moving towards that of the majority group Bamar. Centering the country around this group included challenges for some religious minorities, as well as the official language taught in schools became Burmese, which as I explained earlier is simply one of many languages in Myanmar.

In this process of myanmafication, the Tatmadaw has actively been claiming the legacy of general Aung San as their own. By presenting themselves as continuing in the footsteps of the general, they are attempting to rebrand his legacy as their own. Aung San is known as a freedom fighter who played a vital role in liberating Burma from colonial rule. Though the Tatmadaw had been presenting themselves as the continuation of Aung San's promises, this view has been challenged by another's claim to the same legacy, namely Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of general Aung San. Along with the National League for Democracy (NLD), Suu Kyi have been championing a democratic rule in Myanmar, and acted as the opposition to the military regime of the Tatmadaw, causing them to do their best to delegitimize Suu Kyi in order for their own legitimacy to remain intact (Houtman, 1999, p. 28). Myanmafication is therefore an ongoing process of the military where they present themselves as the unifiers and defenders of the country, in an attempt of establishing a new national identity and most importantly legitimizing their own authority.

As we now know, the political situation in Myanmar when these textbooks were written has had its tensions, the country was led by a military regime for decades, though eventually their authority has been challenged by Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of independence hero general Aung San, as she became state counsellor. This brought on a challenge in the Tatmadaw's process of myanmafication as they were attempting to claim general Aung San's legacy as their own, a claim that would be challenging to maintain as Suu Kyi's claim is strong. In all of this, the process of myanmafication moved forward. International media have provided some coverage of events happening in Myanmar, foreign perspectives have influenced political thought, and most of these factors outside of Myanmar seemed to rally with Aung San Suu Kyi. The best defense of the military was therefore to assume a position of defending 'the Burmese', to emphasize that they wanted to keep their culture and way of life purely Burmese, not something to be sullied by foreign ideas. Houtman even describes the defense of Burmese culture as a substitute for the Tatmadaw in how they presented themselves after they lost the claim of Aung San's legacy to Suu Kyi (Houtman, 1999, p. 61). Attempts of finding a common term to include all national ethnic groups have been made since the early 1900s, and eventually the terms *Myanma* and *Bama* have become the terms to address the ethnic groups collectively, however Gustaaf Houtman (1999, p. 49) points out how both terms always have been strongly associated with the Burmese language, the language spoken by the ethnic majority. An act of establishing terms to refer to the ethnic

groups collectively, as well as to use these terms *Bama* and *Myanma* to create a new official name for the country, poses a challenge to those not identifying with the majority ethnic group or their language.

3 Schooling in Myanmar: background and context

I have categorized relevant background information in three sections; *Public schools*, *private schools* and *monastic schools*, and I will first present these three in order to further understand how schooling and religion relate to each other in Myanmar. Then, in order to understand some of the social and cultural context, I will also present some of the current challenges with education, as well as some basic understandings of Buddhism and models of kingship founded in the Buddhist tradition.

3.1 Public schools

The high literacy rate of Myanmar can be accredited to both the monastic involvement in education and the public school system (Lall, 2011, p. 221). At a primary level, Burmese public schools have a very high attendance, giving an overall basic education and literacy to Burmese children, making the first few years of schooling the years where most people are reached by a school curriculum. The organization of the state schools divides it into three subsections. First there is the primary education going from grade 1 through 5 (which can also be divided into lower, grades 1-3) and upper (grades 4-5) primary level. Secondly there is the secondary education going from grade 6-11, whereas grades 6 through nine makes out the lower secondary and grades 10 and 11 is considered upper secondary (UNESCO, 2011, p. 6-7).

Due to the on-going military conflicts and lack of infrastructure, many areas in Myanmar are without schools, and some of the schools will have to cater to larger areas if possible. Along with this challenge comes the challenge of providing teachers for the existing schools. Lack of funding may be one of the causes for the lack of teachers in rural areas, that they get higher salaries in the cities, and that the effort of travelling to the districts for work is too great. For a time, the government built schools and expanded their network, but faced a challenge in employing teachers for all the schools, leaving many of the buildings abandoned or

understaffed. Some cases show there is only one teacher working in some of these schools, dividing their attention to a large number of pupils, making the follow-up of each student a big challenge. Along with these challenges, there are those concerning resources, outdated learning material and under-educated teachers. According to Jasmine Lorch, the Ministry of Education has expressed concern regarding the education of the teachers in public schools, something they identify as a weakness in the state-run programs (Lorch, 2008, p. 155). Though the state school faces the challenge of further educating their teachers, it ought to be mentioned that they generally have the most educated teachers in comparison to other educational institutions. Pedagogical methods are somewhat outdated, and the main strategy for most teachers is rote learning – learning by memorization. Memorization is a tradition dating far back in many Asian countries, especially in the context of monastic education as a way of learning sacred texts and prayers. There has been a fair amount of critique towards this method of learning as it does not teach and train pupils in thinking critically and asking questions. Outdated materials and resources, as well as the teachers' motivation to further develop their profession can be among the reasons why the pedagogy of rote learning is still going strong (Tin, 2008, p. 118). It leaves the question of what the aim of education is, to retain a lot of information in order to pass their exams, or to develop the skills of thinking critically and asking questions.

The reach to the rural areas of the nation is not only limited by the number of physical school buildings, but also by the number of teachers available to provide education for local children. On top of this, there is a high dropout rate for a number of reasons. Expenses for parents get too high for many, though schooling is meant to be free, the practice of it varies, and parents may end up having to pay for uniforms or sometimes donate money to ensure the teacher's salaries (Lall, 2011, p. 222).

In the Basic Education Law of 1973, objectives for education were defined, describing the aim of education and the framework for schooling. Among the things defined in this law, was the core subjects of basic education, namely language, math, the study of nature and social studies, though social studies were not included in secondary school curriculum until the 1990s. Both Burmese and English are included as the languages in the core curriculum. No official curriculum on religious education was defined as part of the core subjects in the public school (UNESCO, 2011, p. 11).

As a response to the lack of schools in the districts and rural areas of Myanmar, the government has encouraged the local communities to build new schools to expand their network. One could make the argument that these schools are run by the local communities as they are the ones providing salaries for the teachers, and running the schools both financially and practically, but the Ministry of Education (MoE) gives their encouragement for the further development of these schools with the promise of making them so-called ‘branch schools’ of the government in the districts (UNESCO, 2011, p. 12). In this way the government has made an attempt to delegate the responsibility of furthering their network, by promising to partner with the local communities to help the state school system reach the different parts of the nation, though it remains uncertain what this looks like in practice. Primary schools administered by the MoE had just over 4.9 million children enrolled in the schoolyear 05/06, while the monastic schools catered to roughly 160 000 (UNESCO, 2011, p. 12).

As the state school has the most pupils, it caters to children of various backgrounds, ethnicities and beliefs, and maybe there are tensions that may arise when the different ethnic and religious backgrounds meet in the same classroom in the different parts of the country. As language is one of the core subjects in the state school curriculum, many children do not learn their own mother tongue in school. Therefore, ‘Mother Tongue Based’ teaching is an issue raised by many from a minority background, adding to the political tensions between ethnic groups. Provision of teaching in local languages, as well as the teaching of a local language, may be perceived by minority groups as a shortcoming of the state schools as they only teach Burmese and English. Whereas governments see education and language as part of the idea to create a unified national identity, they are overruling the voices of many minorities, causing dismay, discrimination, and even conflicts (South and Lall, 2016, p. 3). The matter at hand is in many ways a matter of identity and belonging, where the lack of representation from local ethnic minorities makes the experience of belonging to a unified nation a far-fetched idea

3.2 Monastic schools

During the rule of Buddhist kings in pre-colonial Burma, the field of education was operated by the Sangha. During this time, religion, that is Buddhism, and education were tied closely together, giving Buddhism a strong position in both education and society.

At the turn of the 20th century, the country experienced challenges to their educational system as a result of the processes of colonization, modernization and western influences. As the monasteries did not provide a ‘modern’ education, modern here being associated with western influence and curriculum such as English and mathematics, the king thought out an alternate plan to educate the people. Many scholars and academics were sent to other countries, many western countries, so that they would receive a ‘better general education’. Another plan implemented by the king, was the establishment of more school that did not necessarily have any connection to the monastic order, but were established to provide a broader education than what had been accessible through the present school system (Dhammasami, 2007, p. 11).

As monastic schools in both Burma and Thailand had difficulties in providing a broad enough education, King Mindon implemented some new initiatives to meet these challenges. Students and scholars were sent to other countries, often in the West, to partake in studies abroad, schools were established independently of monastic schools and the Sangha, and in this way, he opened up to influences of modernity and secular education (Dhammasami, 2007, p. 11-12). In the same way that monastic schools have exemplified the involvement of religious institutions in the provision of schooling, Christian missionaries were encouraged to establish schools as well, with the aim of providing a secular and western education to the people. A British missionary established the first school for the laity that was not run by the Sangha (Dhammasami, 2007, p. 12). In this way, King Mindon also contributed to the establishment of some Christian churches and schools, as he provided funding as well as land for the missionaries to build on (Dhammasami, 2007, p. 12).

Many of these developments following the 1890s implied dramatic changes in the educational system in Burma, with the introduction of a secular curriculum came western ideologies, sciences and other topics that were new to most monastic schools. As the government took over the responsibility of education from the Sangha in the 1890s, the Sangha’s responsibility for teaching lay people was less emphasized. Previous resistance to so-called ‘secular schools’

in areas where a monastic school already existed did not matter as much, and the pressure on the Sangha to teach a modernized curriculum was lessened. (Dhammasami, 2007, p. 12). An outcome of this transition of control was that the Sangha could do what many of them initially wanted: to dive deeper in religious teachings and texts, studying the teaching of the Buddha rather than secular curriculum (Dhammasami, 2007, p. 13). However, the Sangha still engaged in education, largely focusing on religious teachings, though they were also asked to teach some secular subjects, also to the laity, as the government needed the monastic network to be able to reach throughout the country, especially to the rural areas. Secular subjects were not immediately incorporated in the monastic school curriculum, even though requested by the government (Dhammasami, 2007, p. 13-14).

According to Dhammasami (2007), there were two main reasons for the reluctance to teach secular subjects: The first was that they did not want monastic schools teaching secular subjects but wanted to continue their own ways. The second was that the idea that student monks would be taught by lay teachers. Fearing these two developments was to many monasteries not unfounded as the *sangharaja*, the head⁴ of the Sangha in Burma, had issued a statement in the 1890s that those embracing these new, secular approaches to education would risk excommunication from the order (Dhammasami, 2007, p. 14). Even though the requests of the government to have secular curriculum in the monastic schools were denied, the government continued make the same request.

After Burma gained their independence in 1948, Prime minister U Nu encouraged the monasteries to open primary schools, giving them grants and funding to do so, and these school were intended to accept girls and boys alike, and classes were mainly to be taught by the monks (Dhammasami, 2007, p. 14), and though U Nu intended to open thousands of these schools, his rule did not last long enough for these tasks to be completed. In 1962, under the leadership of general Ne Win, the military took control of the government, and ended U Nu's school-building program (Dhammasami, 2007, p. 14). The post-colonial state of Burma got a new military government in 1988, who reversed the actions of Ne Win, and once again the

⁴ Sangharaja is one of several terms used for the head of the monastic order, the Sangha. The role of the sangharaja is the same as that of the *thatnabain*, only here ven. Khammai Dhammasami refers to the position by using the term *sangharaja*. As I have come across this title referred to as both Sangharaja and Thatnabain, I will use the same name as the one referred in the text I am referencing.

Sangha was asked to open schools in and through their monasteries to teach lay students (Dhammasami, 2007, p. 14). As we can see, the matter of education and religion is also a matter of secularism. Changes in government have shifted the role of education, as well as the role of monastic involvement back and forth, and secular subjects was a hot topic in shaping the direction of the school system and its connection to the Sangha. On one side, military involvement has dictated what should and should not be taught in primary education, while the sangharaja, as stated above, represented the religious order's desire to remain separate from the secular.

The Sangha has continued their role in education, providing schools and teaching to the people. The monastic institution has proved a valuable ally in educating the people. Though their influence in education was far greater in the past, they still provide a network and presence in different communities that other schools might not reach. As previously noted, the high literacy rate Myanmar has been known for in the South-East Asian area can in part be owed to the monastic community (Lall, 2011, p. 221). The monastic schools have catered to a different demography than most of the public schools and have been able to reach the poorer and rural sections of society (Lall, 2011, p. 219). That being said, the quality of the education provided may vary, and though they provide an arena for education the teachers are less educated themselves. Nonetheless, the monastic schools contribute to providing a basic education to the people of Myanmar. Since the Bagan era (849 – ca. 1300)⁵, the monastic institution has had a role as educators of the people, as mentioned above, though colonization proved to be a challenge to the way the system worked, and the arrival of the British brought about change in the way education was provided in colonial Burma. In doing so, the role of the Sangha was severely weakened. After Burma gained independence from the colonial rule, new challenges for the monastic schools occurred as the new government nationalized the education system. The monastic schools' position was weakened, but the state system also faced challenges when it came to matters of reach. The reach of the state-run schools was limited, leading to the reintroducing of monastic schooling as the monasteries provided a network to several of the remote and rural areas of the country (Lall, 2011, p. 222). Monastic education has been considered an informal education, but is increasingly being referred to as a

⁵ The Bagan kingdom is in the curriculum texts represented by king Anawratha ("Mon Kingdom", 2012) in the first grade curriculum.

formal form of education (Lall, 2011, p. 223). The Sangha has had an emphasis on teaching of morality, though Dhammasami describes a transition around the 1890s where the emphasis was put on two things: serving the *buddhasasana*, ‘The Buddha’s Religion’, and serving the society (Dhammasami, 2007, p. 11).

At the turn of the 21st century, a thirty-year plan was laid to ensure the development of education in Myanmar. The aim of this plan was to develop a so-called “learned society” for this age, and the prioritization in this system is the expansion of schools. In this way the monastic schools have more than just a supplementary function, but the state has a dependency upon the monastic system in order to reach all of Myanmar – that is including the rural and remote areas of the nation as there are monasteries in almost every village of the nation, so the network is already established (Lorch, 2008, p. 156).

Jasmin Lorch points out three different types of monastic schools: 1) those that emphasize Buddhist teachings and focusing on the purely religious aspect, 2) the schools that consider teaching the Buddhist tradition their main and most important function, and 3) the schools that teach a governmental curriculum, adopting and adapting to a more secular content in their teachings. The latter are also those that may be considered formal education as they are recognized and registered by the MoE and the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MRA), also making it possible to transfer from one of these monastic schools to government-run schools. This gives this bridging function: bridging non-formal and formal education. Many monasteries who provide *dhamma* education do so to novices and lay people alike, in the same classes even, and many are said to teach regardless of a student’s ethnicity or religion. However, there are cases where children of different backgrounds and religiosities are encouraged to become Buddhist, in the same way that some churches provide school for local neighborhoods and encouraging them to become Christians (Lorch, 2008, p. 156-157). In this way, the monasteries function not only as a conveyer of their religion, but also as a preserver of the Buddhist tradition, in some cases strategically missionizing to the students in their schools. Walton (2013) explains how missionizing is a strategy implemented also by the government as a way of cultural assimilation. An example of this can be found by looking at the monasteries that also function as orphanages, where the children living there are required to wear the same robes that a Buddhist novice would, regardless of what religion the children

confess. There has also been reported cases, or accusations, of forced conversions to Buddhism (Frydenlund, 2019, p. 42).

Although many monasteries are independent, there are some that have a connection to the state. The larger monasteries may have a connection to the state through monks in leading roles in government and ministries, who have received their own education from a state-run university. It can be argued that the government has an agenda of controlling the narrative of religion and the relationship between state and religion. An example of state-interference can be found as government officials donate money to the monasteries, as many lay people do, though Jasmine Lorch consider this to be a way of publicly showing their engagement and support (Lorch, 2008, p. 157). In this way, we often see that the bigger monasteries have more connections to the state than the smaller monasteries. The monastic education system in Myanmar shows that shifting priorities from the state has affected the role of monastic, and thereby religious involvement in education. As the question of secular subjects was raised also in the context of monastic education, the question of secularism was addressed as well, and the role of monastic involvement shifted from what it was in precolonial Burma, to present day Myanmar.

3.3 Private schools

One of the responses to the challenges of education in Myanmar is the emergence of the private sector. In the private sector there has been an increase of NGOs and INGOs providing education, both for humanitarian purposes as well as business. Both profit and non-profit providers of education facilitated opportunities for basic education, though the status of such institutions has not always been recognized as an official education. Instead, many private schools were considered supplementary to state schools, at times the pupils would be expected to attend the state school as well (Lall et al., 2013, p. 9). The private sector differs from the state schools in whom they cater to, and most of the private schooling sector caters to the middle and upper class as these schools are not free like the state schools. These schools are more often than not found in the urban areas of Myanmar, rather than the rural areas, which in turn does not help the access to schooling in the districts. The so-called 'socialist era' from 1962 to 1988 brought about a lot of change in Myanmar. Educational

sectors were directly affected by some of these changes, as the government started pursuing a nationalized education system. Private schools were shut down, and the process of nationalizing education meant focusing on the state-run system. This would eventually become a challenge to the capacity and reach of the state schools as they nearly became the sole provider of education. Myanmar also faced other challenges during this time, such as an unstable economy, which in turn became a challenge as there was a lack of funding for state schools. The private sector was therefore allowed back, and in 2011 The Private School Law strengthened the private sectors role in education.

Community Based Schools (CBS) have the tendency to appear in rural areas of the country. As mentioned above, the government expanded their network by building schools all over the country, though it became a challenge to run all these schools, and many were abandoned. However, the buildings remained, and the CBS are examples of how these already existing school-buildings have been used by the local communities to teach. Through local funding and participation, a platform for basic education has been established, where teachers are either provided or hired by the local community. The CBS are also found to establish their own school-buildings where there are none to be found, and if possible, a teacher from a nearby state school is hired to teach. In some of these cases, the government has been referring to these schools as an extension of the closest government school, though much of the funding and work that goes into running the schools is still provided by the community (Lorch, 2008, p. 162). In this way, there is a partnership of some sort with the state schools, though it is not uncommon for these schools to operate under the umbrella of a religious institution as well, for instance a Buddhist monastery or a Christian church, depending on what faith communities are to be found in a given area (Lorch, 2008, p. 162).

The private sector spans over a few different types of schools, whereas the CBS provide one example. Another example showing a more direct involvement of religion is the so-called *dhamma schools*. The dhamma schools can be compared to the Christian tradition of ‘Sunday school’. These schools are not mandatory, but they offer schooling in Buddhist teachings and practices, as religious education is not covered by the state school curriculum. Dhamma schools therefore provide an informal education for children looking to learn more about

Buddhism. Among the organizers of the dhamma schools are the Ma Ba Tha⁶, and the Dhamma School Foundation. In the same way that the CBS sometimes hire government teachers, so do the dhamma schools, but the dhamma schools remain under the private sector as they are operated by private institutions (Schontal & Walton, 2016, p. 88).

3.4 Buddhism in Myanmar

The topic for this thesis is the role of religion in primary school curriculum. As I have now presented some background information on the various ways of schooling in Myanmar, it is relevant to understand more about the religious landscape in Myanmar as well. Earlier I showed how the census of 2014 showed a vast majority of Buddhism among the population of Myanmar, which is easily understood when walking through the streets of Yangon, for example, seeing pagodas, monks and nuns on practically every street. Other religious symbols are however not as present. This section here will present basic knowledge of Buddhism and the role of kings in a Buddhist tradition, as it is a prerequisite understanding to my analysis of the curriculum texts. Most of the historical leaders I will present from the curriculum texts are presented with a connection to the Buddhist tradition, certain concepts, such as merit-making and restoration of religious sites, will therefore be explained here as they are actions found in the curriculum and deemed an important aspect of the Buddhist tradition. The religious buildings and symbols found around cities and rural areas in Myanmar are predominantly Buddhist, though there are other religious traditions present as well, for example mosques and churches. However, these other religious symbols are overshadowed by Buddhist buildings, and as the curriculum texts will show, the only religious buildings and people described are in the Buddhist tradition.

Buddhism is often divided into two main categories, or traditions: Theravada Buddhism which is the most common form in the South/South-East Asian region, for countries such as Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Thailand, while the other tradition is called Mahayana and is more common in for instance China and Japan (Keown, 2013, p. 13). Damien Keown describes

⁶ “Ma Ba Tha is an acronym for Ah-myo Batha Thatana Saun Shaung Ye a-Pwe, or ‘Organization for the protection of Race and Religion’ ” (Frydenlund, 20.03.2018)

these two traditions of Buddhism as conservative (Theravada) and what he calls “doctrinally innovative” (Mahayana). In the Buddhist belief, the goal is to reach Nirvana, a state of self-realization where a person reaches the potential for goodness and happiness (Keown, 2013, p. 48). It is said that in a Buddhist understanding, life is seen as full of suffering and ailment, whereas the goal is to put an end to all suffering by escaping the continual cycle of rebirth and attaining Nirvana (Keown, 2013, p. 47-48). In Buddhism, the understanding that each individual is responsible for their own good or bad experiences is referred to as Karma, and it focuses on what good or bad moral actions an individual does – it is about a person’s moral actions, and the consequences following those actions. When the phrase ‘good Karma’ is used in the context of Buddhism, it speaks of what is called *merit*. Merit is the good karma attained from doing a morally good act or making a morally good choice, which in turn will give you ‘good fortune’. In the same way one can be demerited by making morally bad choices (Keown 2013, p. 40; 43-44). Melford Spiro (1982, p. 94) explains how merit in a Burmese context can be acquired in three different ways: 1) by charity, for instance donating food to monasteries or other charitable acts, 2) morality and 3) meditation. As I will present later from the curriculum texts, there are examples of how donations to pagodas and restoration of religious sites has been a common way for kings and other leaders to contribute to the strengthening of religion, and a way of acquiring merit.

Buddhist understandings of kingship.

Buddhist tradition is seen in many aspects of Burmese culture, and understanding Buddhism can contribute to a deeper understanding of the culture. There is one aspect I will present here that may prove a useful tool in understanding some of the curriculum texts and the monarchs presented in these texts, and that is an understanding of kingship in the Buddhist tradition. Three models for kingship are associated with the Buddhist tradition, and I will present an overview of these three. As I will later expand on, the curriculum texts present Burmese historical leaders with a few themes recurring, some of which can be linked to these traditional Buddhist models for kingship, and in this way show how there is a presence of Buddhism both explicitly and implicitly in the curriculum.

The first of these three models is known as *Mahasammatha*, and he is described as the ‘original’ ruler. He is presented as exemplary due to his ability to govern according to the *dhamma*, being an example in morality and ethics as he has a great understanding of the five precepts⁷ of Buddhism (Hayward, 2015, p. 26). The emphasis of his role being that he was a righteous ruler much because his rule was in accordance with the *dhamma*, ensuring the righteousness and goodness of his rule.

The second of these three is the role of the *cakkavattin*, also known as the ‘wheel-turning king’. I refer to the *cakkavattin* as a role because several successive kings may be a *cakkavattin* king. It is therefore different from the other two kingship models, as they both present personified leaders who set examples to be followed, whereas the *cakkavattin* can be seen as a political ideal. The role of the *cakkavattin* existed from the very beginning, when the world existed in peace and harmony. When the story of the *cakkavattin* is told, it speaks of a king named Dalhanemi who had a wheel, which represents the *dhamma*, appear as if suspended above his palace. The wheel remained above the palace for the following kings, until eventually one would come along who did not rule in accordance with the *dhamma*, so the wheel disappeared. As a result of this last ruler, social and political conflict broke out (Hayward, 2015, p. 26). When reading the story of the *cakkavattin*, it tells the story of a universal ruler whose governance will bring about peace and harmony in the world as a result of his understanding and observance of the *dhamma*, whereas distancing oneself from the *dhamma* would cause the world to descend into chaos. Both *Mahasammatha* and the role of the *cakkavattin* are models of kingship based on the Pali text *Agganna Sutta*, meaning the “sermon of origins” (Huxley, 2007, p. 28).

The third and last ideal for kingship that I will address, is exemplified by emperor Ashoka, referred to as a “model king of the Buddhist literacy tradition” (Leider, 2009, p. 349). Using the model of emperor Ashoka has been an understanding of kingship that has, according to Hayward (2015, p. 27), been more common to associate with kingship in Burma/Myanmar. Ashoka was an emperor and a conqueror in India during the Mauryan dynasty (Sen, 2020),

⁷ The five precepts of Buddhism are: 1) to refrain from taking a life, i.e. killing any living creature; 2) to refrain from taking what is not freely given, i.e. theft ;3) to refrain from misuse of the senses or sexual misconduct, i.e. overindulgence in sex or committing sexual offenses; 4) to refrain from wrong speech, i.e. lying or gossiping; 5) to refrain from intoxicants that cloud the mind, i.e. drugs or alcohol (BBC, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/zkdbcj6/revision/5>)

who turned away from violence and bloody conquests, and committed himself to non-violence and religious tolerance (Hayward, 2015, p. 27), or as Chandra Sen (2020) describes it; he committed to “conquest by dharma”.

What these three models for kingship have in common is placing the dhamma not only as central to their administration, but as a starting point and directive for how to govern. The ideals represented by these examples are those of upholding peace and harmony, social concern, and observance of ethical principles in order to be a righteous ruler. It should be noted that though there are sources such as paracanonical texts telling the stories of these rulers, many years of retelling such stories have also contributed to romanticizing these stories, and possibly ascribing these rulers characteristics that would further legitimize their importance and rule (Hayward, 2015, p. 27). However, the ideals they represent, especially that of emperor Ashoka, is representative of an understanding of kingship in a Buddhist tradition, an understanding that has also been used in a Burmese context.

When we are approaching the curriculum texts looking for themes of ethnic unity and religion, some of the leaders and their actions may be seen as comparable to some of these ideals presented above, or at least the textbooks present them in such a way. Not only do they provide information useful in understanding the role of religion in the curriculum, but it sheds light on what is seen as ideal leadership. I will also argue later that the way certain leaders are presented in the curriculum texts is intended to reflect some of the ideals of the Tatmadaw and some of these leaders are also presented as leaders whose legacy is carried out by the Tatmadaw.

Some Buddhist and Burmese terminology

Buddhism has a central role in this thesis as I am studying the role of religion through primary school curriculum, as well as holding a big position in Burmese society as the majority religion. As I will present and analyse the curriculum texts, I will be using certain terms and phrases from the Buddhist tradition that are useful to have an understanding of.

Dhamma is the Pali word equivalent to *dharma* in Sanskrit. The dhamma is often referred to as “the teachings of the Buddha”, or as the Collins dictionary present it: “the ideal truth as set forth in the teaching of Buddha” (“Dhamma”, n.d.). Dhamma, when it refers to the teachings of the Buddha, also refers to a cosmic law or law of nature (Gyallay-Pap, 2007, p. 77).

Batha and *Sasana* – As I have analysed the role of religion, there is a need to clarify some terminology. when religion is addressed in Burmese, it may either be as *batha*, meaning religion as a general concept, whereas the word *Sasana* means the Buddha’s dispensation, and therefore is used when referring to Buddhism. From the curriculum texts I have analysed, I will show some examples of how these words are used in the curriculum texts.

Merit can be described as good karma, which I showed above. When analysing the curriculum texts presenting historical leaders, I will make an example of how **merit-making** helps us understand some of the actions of the leaders presented. Merit as a motivation and possible result of the historical leaders’ actions, may also contribute to an understanding of religion as a integral part of the lives of the historical leaders presented, emphasizing the role of Buddhism as not only a side-effect of the stories in the curriculum, but rather as an

3.5 Current challenges and social context

In 2015 there was an interesting development in the field of religious education. The Centre for Diversity and National Harmony (CDNH) published primary school textbooks about so-called “world religions”. By providing general information about world religions, these books were perceived to be highlighting religious diversity in its presentation of different faith communities. However, the response to such material was not positive and met a lot of opposition. Creating an uproar, it resulted in the textbooks being recalled. U Wirathu, known nationalist monk and one of the leading monks associated with the Ma Ba Tha, called it an attempt of Islamization, and said there is no need to include religion in the curriculum, if it were to be added it should only be Buddhism (Paing, 2017). The Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) gave a statement saying that religion and education ought not to be mixed (Paing, 2017). However, these textbooks on world religions were not made as a part of any official curriculum, but presented as a supplement to those wanting to provide some knowledge of some of the world’s biggest religions as part of the subject called ‘civic education’. Criticism was directed at the MoE, who denounced any relationship with the publication (Phyu, 2017).

In 2017, new curriculum was rolled out for some of the primary school grades. An organization by the name ‘Japanese International Cooperation Agency’ (JICA), whom aided

in the production of the new curriculum, issued a press release on June 12th, 2017, where they explain how they promote a Child-Centered Approach (CCA) in order to challenge the children to further develop independent thinking, and to stimulate curiosity. This is intended as a way of transitioning from rote learning, which is widely practiced in Myanmar and relied on by the former textbooks (JICA, 12.06.2017). At the end of their press release, JICA states that they “will continue supporting the nation-building of Myanmar through improvement in quality of education, including the curriculum revision.” (JICA, 12.06.2017). A process of renewing the teaching material has begun, and is still ongoing. These are the textbooks I learned about on my trip to Yangon. JICA was brought into the process in 2014, as part of the Project for Curriculum Reform at Primary Level of Basic Education (herby referred to as CREATE) (JICA, 27.07.2017). On their webpage, CREATE presents the scheduled release-dates for the rest of the new curriculum, and also some of the key points for the new textbooks, one of them describing the textbooks as “considering diversification such as gender, ethnicities, disabilities, etc.” (CREATE, 2020).

Given the Sangha’s was in a central position in monarchial Burma, they had a lot of influence over matters of education. During the colonial period, the British wanted to separate politics and religion, resulting in a weakened position of the Sangha in official matters, including education. Among the changes following the rule of the British, the Sangha lost its leading role as the British did not want to name the new leader which traditionally was done by the monarch. This gave the impression that the Buddhist institution was weakened, as a central leading role in the Sangha was not present (Walton & Hayward, 2014, p. 10). All these changes, seen together with a growing Christianity as the Christian missionaries were given room to expand, laid a foundation for Burmese-Buddhist nationalistic sentiments to grow (Walton & Hayward, 2014, p. 10).

As Myanmar has been through different transitions in leadership, from monarchical to colonial rule, and subsequently decades under military regimes, the role of religion in society has varied and its position has shifted. In part, this can be seen as a result of a modernizing of the country. Western influence, business and cooperation with other nations, and other international matters have affected the way matters of religion and politics are understood in Myanmar. As we will discover later as I present the curriculum text on king Mindon, this text exemplifies how he sought to modernize the country of Burma by sending some of his

officials to receive their education abroad. In this way, when they returned, they brought with them new ideas on government, the role of the military, politics and religion.

The role of religion in Myanmar can be understood through its people, culture and traditions, while the role of religion in Burmese society must also be seen in the context of the constitution. In the 2008 constitution, religion is addressed in a few different ways. For instance, a member of any religious order is not allowed to be in the *Pyithu Hluttaw*, the house of representatives, (Art. 121). The same article also bans citizens of foreign countries, those pledging allegiance or covered by the rights of a foreign government, from the *Pyithu Hluttaw*. In this way it also addresses a theme of belonging. In Article 348, the constitution states that “The Union shall not discriminate any citizen of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, based on race, birth, religion, official position, status, culture, sex and wealth” (Constitution, 2008, Art. 348). The constitution of 2008 recognizes various religious traditions, e.g. Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Animism (Art.362), however, it gives a special position to Buddhism as the religion “professed by the great majority of the citizens of the Union” (Constitution, 2008, Art. 361). In other words, Buddhism holds a favoured position in Myanmar simply on the basis of its numerical majority (Frydenlund, 2017, p. 60). Other religion are also recognized, though Buddhism holds precedence. Constitutional articles therefore gives Buddhism a stronger position, while not recognizing it as a state religion⁸ (Frydenlund, 2017, p. 59). Article 362 addresses other religions, and gives them recognition, though not in the same way as Buddhism, and it can be argued that Buddhism, though not officially or constitutionally, acts as a state religion (Frydenlund, 2017, p. 60).

“[...] the Constitution expresses an ambiguity between strict secularism and Buddhist constitutionalism; the former implying limitations on civil and political rights for religious clergy, the latter potential discrimination of religious minorities.”

(Frydenlund, 2017, p. 60)

As stated by Frydenlund in the quote above, there is an ambiguous relationship between religion and secularism in Myanmar. This ambiguity is found also in the Burmese

⁸ Buddhism was for a period in 1961 recognized as a state religion, however this was overturned after the military seized power in 1962 (Hayward & Frydenlund, 2019, p. 6)

constitution, where religious freedom is on paper a given right to the citizens of Myanmar, but a secularist position is also represented and imposing limits on the rights of member of religious orders. This exemplifies the tensions between the secular and the religious in Myanmar.

Burmese society, as we now know, consists of a number of religious and ethnic groups. When we look at the curriculum texts I have analysed, I will argue that these texts present history from a majoritarian perspective. History is told from the perspective of the majority ethnic group, as well as from the perspective of the majority religion. Constitutionally, several religions are recognized in Myanmar, but as we see from Article 361, Buddhism holds a strong position in the constitution as the religion of the majority. When the discourse of curriculum texts describing the greatest historical leaders in history and the public discourse on secularism, and the role of religion in society, are seen together, it may affect how the texts are understood in light of the public discourse. The position of Buddhism in the curriculum texts, which I will discuss later, reinforce the strong position of Buddhism as it is presented in the constitution, and emphasize the importance of Buddhism specifically in Burmese society. The constitution of 2008 also puts restrictions on members of religious orders in participating in politics (Art. 392a).

The military government known by the names State Law and Order Reconciliation Council (SLORC) and State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), whom held the power from 1988 to 2011, has been considered to promote Buddhism and a relationship with the Sangha as a means of finding legitimacy for their rule (Foxeus, 2016, p. 199). As Niklas Foxeus points out, the military government took a step away from their secularist position by doing so, and their way of now addressing Buddhism for their own legitimacy can be seen as an act of presenting themselves as the ones restoring the country to its former monarchical Buddhist ways, whereas the military themselves sought to be seen as the absolute leaders (Foxeus, 2016, p. 199). During transitions in government in Burma/Myanmar, the role of the religious and the secular has been defined and presented differently at different times. As Foxeus (2016) points out, the military, whom had a secularist and socialist ideology where religion had little room, decided to go in the direction of drawing on religion for their own benefit and legitimacy. Constitutionally, the role of religion is limited by various articles as shown above, though religion is not absent from the constitution. In all of these processes secularization is

an important topic as it discusses what role religion should or should not have in a society where the majority of the population practice religion.

4 Discourse analysis as methods.

4.1 What is discourse, and why discourse analysis?

I have chosen to answer my research question by use of discourse analysis, to analyze discourses on religion identified in primary school textbooks from Myanmar. In October 2019, I went to Yangon as part of my research for this thesis, and I will share some of my experiences and reflections in this chapter. I will also write about some of the challenges, limitations and considerations that I had to take into account as I worked on this thesis.

Discourse can be defined as ‘a collection of statements in a given social context – both written and unwritten rules for what can and cannot be said in the given context’ (Bratberg, 2017, p. 29, my own translation). As I approached the curriculum texts for my analysis, I have looked at what language is used to (re)present religion, and what context it is written and read into. This understanding of discourse puts emphasis on the relationship between content and context. Combining this with definitions of discourse that emphasize language gives us several building blocks for analysis. It will provide some tools to see how a set of statements and the language being used, in a given context or social setting, create meaning. ‘By way of language, we create representations of reality that are never simply mirroring an already existing reality – they are a part of creating it’ (Bratberg, 2017, p. 32, my own translation). This definition, as I have translated it, emphasizes the role of discourse as not simply explanatory, but constitutive. Constitutive of the reality as we understand it, and the glasses through which the world is perceived and understood. In the case of religious content, or lack thereof, in the primary school textbooks, I will argue that the presentation of the curriculum is partaking in constituting an understanding of religion by the way it is included or excluded from the text.

The primary purpose of language can be understood as that of creating meaning. Discourse analysis can therefore be seen as an analysis of language as a system, as it thereby looks at the meaning conveyed and systemized through the language in a discourse (Olsen, 2006, p. 54).

Building on this idea, Margareth Wetherell emphasizes the production of meaning in social interaction. Wetherell therefore operates with a framework of social contexts in the process of understanding the meaning that is communicated and created through language (Olsen, 2006, p. 54). These understandings of discourse, language and the way it is systematized, are part of the methods I have used to understand the role of religion in the primary school curriculum. I will be analyzing the language used to present texts that either convey religious content explicitly, or refer to religion implicitly by way of stories, historical examples, poems and so on. By looking at the text from the curriculum, I will be looking for how meaning concerning religion is produced in the texts. Whether the discourse is isolated to one topic, there are subcategories, or a case of intertextuality where the curriculum texts and language draws on other texts, written or spoken, produced by someone else (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 73), one need to understand the social, cultural and historic context surrounding the discourse. Giving a proper analysis of the discourse means understanding what is happening in the text, as well as the external factors that may provide a basis for understanding the discourse (Olsen, 2006, p. 52). These external factors may help understand the meaning of the language being used and the meaning of text that may also have appeared or originated from other discourses.

4.2 Discourse analysis as methods.

Discourse analysis looks at a discourse, in the case of this thesis it looks at a collection of texts, where what is said is seen in the context of social, historical and situational factors. As a part of a discourse analytical process, I will be looking at a set of ‘nodal points’ to conduct my analysis. Nodal points are described by Jørgensen and Phillips (2002, p. 26) as points, signs or moments in the text where meaning is fixed. Their description of nodal points is in comparison with a fishing net, where the knots in the net represents the nodal points in the text – points where meaning is fixed, as well as points connecting to each other throughout the net.

Norman Fairclough (2010, p. 133) presents discourse and discursive practice as a three-part process, where a discourse always includes these three elements: In this process one looks at the sociocultural practice (e.g. societal, historical or situational context), the discourse practice (e.g. the process of production and interpretation), and the text itself. The text is in this way analyzed in the context of these other two parts of the process as well, and so one must also take into consideration some external factors in order to gain perspective and understand more

of the meaning conveyed through the text (Fairclough, 2010, p. 133). Background knowledge of the school system as well as the political system and the role of religion in society therefore becomes highly relevant for our understanding of the context the texts are written into.

4.3 Gathering the material

In 2017 I spent a couple of weeks in Yangon partaking in an intensive course on Myanmar. Building on this, I decided to go back for one month of fieldwork in Myanmar, which proved very valuable as it helped me gain more understanding and perspective on the social context and background for the school system in Myanmar, to better understand some of the processes going on in Myanmar today, and how these discourses relate to the discourse on religion and ethnicity in schooling. Most of my time in Myanmar was spent in Yangon, one of the country's largest cities and former capital city.

To begin my research for this thesis, I travelled to the city of Yangon in Myanmar, where I stayed for one month. My fieldwork did not entail the collection of data in the form of interviews or observation in the schools, but it was focused on retrieving literature that could be found only in Myanmar. Initially, my plan was to look for some different textbooks from Burmese schooling, and I was quite open to what grade and even subject the textbooks would be from, though I imagined something along the lines of a history curriculum. As I was in Myanmar and learned more about the education system and the subjects taught in the public schools, I started looking at three different subjects – *Sociology*, *Burmese language* and *Civic Education* – before landing on the subject of sociology. As I researched the education system more, I learned about how high the attendance rates were in the first few years of primary education in comparison to later years of primary or secondary, and altered my search thereafter. My search for material therefore became focused on the subject of sociology, and the first few years of public education as I wanted to look at the curriculum that would reach the largest amount of citizens.

Gathering material in a different country, while speaking a different language, can be a challenge, and it would have been a great advantage to know some Burmese in order to both get around easier and speak to people on their own language. Upon arrival in Myanmar I discovered that the intensive language course I was going to attend for the following three weeks had been cancelled, and I was not able find another language course to enroll on short

notice. My Burmese language skills are therefore very limited, though I learned some of the basics and the language through independent studying. Without proper language skills, I made contact with a freelance translator in order to get the material I needed for this thesis translated, and to help me identify what material is relevant. I found the materials I need through the help of local teachers in Myanmar, whom helped my find the correct set of books.

My material was gathered in two rounds. Initially I obtained the textbooks for what was presented to me as a history subject, from primary level and secondary level. Through conversations with local friends I did however discover that there is an ongoing process of renewing the primary school curriculum, and the new textbooks for the subjects I had started looking for (in this first round it was the three different subjects mentioned above: sociology, civic education and Burmese language) had already been published. The search for all three subjects was an attempt to find material where was present, through for instance the ‘civic education’ class which I have also heard a local Burmese teacher translate into ‘Morality and citizenship’. As I later then went for a second round of gathering material, I retrieved the books from all three of these subjects in order to learn more about the different classes, though I did eventually narrow it down to the subject of sociology as I discovered a recurring chapter in the curriculum of each of the first three grades called “Historical Leaders that I Admire”. One of the things I was looking for was the presentation of religion in what was intended to be a non-religious curriculum, and to see if religion would be present in any way, explicit or implicit. While in Myanmar, one of my contacts introduced me to the concept of hidden curriculum, which I earlier presented as a part of my theoretical framework, and when looking for themes of religion in the texts my search was also for any sign of a so-called hidden curriculum, a more discreet and implicit way of addressing themes of religion. The relationship between the government and the content of the curriculum was also interesting, leading me to look at these textbooks in light of some theories on Myanmafication.

Formal interviews were not the aim of my trip to Myanmar. However, spending a month in the country presented many opportunities to talk to and learn from, hear their experiences from schooling in Myanmar, and to better understand the system of education in Myanmar. I also met with some people working for NGOs focusing on education, who provided me with useful information on recent events of schooling in Myanmar. Among other things, I learned about how the CDNH once attempted to publish texts on the world religions, for educational

purposes, as a supplement to those who wanted to teach some of the basics of the world religions in school.

As I started working on this project, I had ideas of what I might find. Some of my expectations and presupposed ideas when approaching the texts were that there would be a stronger presence of Buddhism than other religions, also in light of the discourse on nationalism in Myanmar. The Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA), an organization founded in 1906, coined the expression "to be Burmese is to be Buddhist" (Schober, 2012, p. 15) during the colonial era, establishing a foundation for soon to be rising nationalistic sentiments that also would involve a form of Buddhist nationalism. I did however expect there to be some mention of other religions and ethnic groups, though I was not sure what it would look like. I also expected to find more religious material in the pictures used in the curriculum textbooks, such as images of religious sites, buildings and people. Several of my presuppositions were confirmed, or so I will argue here, whereas others were proven wrong. For instance, I did not find any mention of other religious traditions, neither positive or negative, they were simply excluded. These were, however, some of the ideas and thoughts I had going into this project.

4.4 Choice of text, methods, and translation

When doing a discourse analysis, the discourse being analysed will also be seen together with other discourses regarding, for example, politics, history, etc., as they contribute to the understanding of the texts being analysed. The texts to be analysed in a discourse analysis needs to be selected, and for this thesis I chose to look at some curriculum texts from the first, second and third grade from the primary school level of the Burmese public schools. As I chose the class "sociology" as the subject for my analysis, I decided to narrow it down from the entire book, to a thematized chapter that occur in all of the first three years of schooling, namely the chapter called "Historical Leaders that I Admire". The intention behind the choice was to see how important historical persons and events may reflect religious content in the way they are presented, and in what way themes of religion and unity are conveyed through a supposedly non-religious curriculum. In these texts I searched for any religious content, which religions are represented, if any, and in what way they are presented. Absence of

religion, meaning lack of representation, or exclusion from the texts have also been taken into consideration. When it comes to the theme of unity, the same methods have been applied to see how unity is spoken about, what it means, and how a primary school student may experience their meeting with these texts, also based on their own ethnic or religious background. As part of the discourse analytical method, I have tried to understand these texts as something that came to be in a specific historical and political context, and how this may have affected the curriculum. The choice of texts has been made out of a desire to see how the past acts as a tool for the present day first-, second-, and third graders to understand the meaning or concepts of religion and unity.

As previously mentioned, I did not get to attend the planned language course in Myanmar, so a limitation in my thesis is that I do not speak, read or write the language myself, and therefore I have used a Burmese translator to help me get the selected texts translated into English. I met with my translator where we went through the texts together, and he was able to answer some of my questions and explain some of the texts to me, so that I was able to narrow down the selection of texts to the ones I have used for this thesis. The actual translations were sent to me after my departure from Yangon, and further communication between the translator and myself have been digitally through videocalls and e-mails, where we have gone through more of the material. To the extent of my knowledge, the translations are thorough and somewhat direct, though it must be taken into consideration that there are elements of interpretation involved in translating text from one language to another, be it intentional or not.

My position as a researcher is that of an outsider, one observing these curriculum texts from an outside perspective. I have had some preconceived ideas that in a nation where most of the population identify with one or another religion, and the majority religion represents such a vast number of the population, the chances of finding religion in some shape or form in the curriculum is quite big. A classroom, however religious neutral it is intended to be, is filled with different actors representing their own ethnic or religious belonging, and whether or not religion and ethnicity is discussed, it is present through the people representing it – students and teachers alike. That being said, I have approached the curriculum texts as balanced as I can, and my aim has been to uncover more of the role of religion and ethnic unity in the written text rather than through classroom interactions, as I have not observed any.

I was able to find the textbooks I have analysed in a local bookstore in the markets, and these books were publicly available in every bookstore on practically every street corner. While I did not conduct any interviews, I have gotten the needed approvals from the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) just in case an opportunity would have presented itself.

5 Presentation of material

The following texts I will present have been chosen from Burmese primary school textbooks presenting different historical leaders. These textbooks are from the new and official curriculum in the first, second and third grade of Burmese public school, and therefore are intended for pupils of a young age. As beforementioned I have chosen these grades as the highest enrollment rate in the public school is in the first few years of schooling, therefore these are the textbooks reaching the most pupils. As a result of these books being intended for children, the different texts are not very long, but every page of the original texts contain one to two sentences, and a lot of pictures describing the scenes and stories told. Full text will be written into the paper without citation to each specific side from the original text, but the full texts and references to the pages are found in the appendixes at the end of the very end. My presentation of the texts will therefore also address some of the pictures presented through the stories of historical leaders. The texts chosen for this analysis are from three different textbooks, whereas each of these textbooks include a part titled “Historical leaders that I admire”. These recurring parts in the curriculum of the first three years of primary school education are therefore the chosen texts for this thesis. In combination in each of the textbooks, these pages are filled with pictures and images that communicate with the written texts. Therefore, I will present some of the images from the curriculum after first having presented the written texts. The next part will be present the primary material one grade at the time (first, second then third), as well as one leader at the time (seven leaders in total). For example, the first text will be about king Anawratha, followed by some of my findings in the curriculum text, before proceeding to the next curriculum text presenting another leader, followed by some of my findings in the text, and so it continues through the rest of this chapter.

Sociology, 1st grade.

In the ‘opening act’ of the historical leaders presented through the first grade curriculum, we are situated in a room where a grandfather is telling his grandson stories of admirable leaders from the past, starting with king Anawratha:

Every night my grandpa tells me a story of the lives of interesting leaders. Among them I will share some stories of the admirable historical leaders with you my friends.

A Bagan king has a son called Anawratha. Since childhood, the boy was known to be a brave one and endowed with the qualifications of a great leader.

When King Anawratha ascended to the throne, his first initiative was to establish a strong kingdom. He focused on agriculture to improve the economy of the kingdom. He built [new] dams around Kyaukse area. He tried to improve agriculture as well as commerce.

King Anawratha’s second initiative was an attempt to distribute Buddhism in the first kingdom of Myanmar. With the assistance of Ashin Arahana, Buddhism spread throughout the Bagan kingdom.

King Anawrahta was the first monarch who could unite the small and scattered kingdoms. The first kingdom of Myanmar, founded by the King Anawratha, was a large and prosperous kingdom.

(Government of the Union of Myanmar, Sociology 1st grade, p. 44-53)

King Anawratha’s reign was marked by three great initiatives; the first being his effort in promoting agriculture and economy, the second being his distribution of Buddhism in the Bagan Kingdom. Thirdly, the text mentions Anawratha’s impact on national unity. In a discourse analytical process, nodal points are points in the text fix meaning and connect a network of these points that fix the meaning within the discourse. For the sake of further analysis, I will identify certain nodal points found in this text about king Anawratha, and in the curriculum texts to follow, such as “Buddhism”, “unity” and “admirable” , that contribute to the way this text may be understood. According to the text, Anawratha was the first

monarch to unite the smaller kingdoms, bringing the topic of unity to the reader's attention. These three main topics are all interesting, especially since the same three themes will be presented with most of the leaders in these chapters. However, the most interesting and relevant to this thesis is the role of religion during the rule of king Anawratha, seen also in the context of national unity as king Anawratha established. This text presents Buddhism and national unity as tied closely together, giving the impression that one benefits the other. However, there is no mention of other ethnic groups, their response to the unification of the kingdoms or the distribution of Buddhism.

The second leader introduced through the first grade curriculum, is king Bayinnaung:

When Bayinnaung was young, he was called Shin Ye Htut. He was a strong, healthy and smart boy. Bayinnaung masters using the weaponry like sword and spear, and riding elephant and horse. Bayinnaung served as a brave general under the king Tapinshwehtee. Among the battles he fought, Naugyoe-battle was the most famous.

After the death of king Tapinshwehtee, Bayinnaung became the king and was known to be the founder of the second kingdom of Myanmar.

Bayinnaung was adored and admired by all ethnic peoples, as he forged unity among them.

Bayinnaung supported agriculture to enhance the economy of the kingdom.

During Bayinnaung's reign, goods were imported by the ships to foreign countries.

Bayinnaung was a monarch devoted to Buddhism. He built a grand palace called Kambawzathardi in the royal capital of Hantharwaddy.

Thanks to the efforts of Bayinnaung, Myanmar became of the prominent kingdom in Southeast Asia.

(Government of the Union of Myanmar, Sociology 1st grade, p. 54-63)

Like Anawratha, he is presented as a great man with great skills in combat, as well as being an overall healthy and good man, reiterating the importance of the monarch as a person to be admired. Bayinnaung is here presented as a likeable man, ever since his childhood, and the topic of (national) unity is once again present as even the ethnic peoples admired king Bayinnaung. This is also one of the few mentions of ‘ethnic peoples’ in the selected curriculum texts, leaving out any names of specific ethnic group, contributing to the understanding that either you are represented as one of the Burmese, or as one of the ethnic peoples being united into one people by and with the Burmese. What specific ethnic groups are represented seem less relevant, as the aim here is to point out the newfound unity forged by the king. Among nodal points represented through this text are those of “Buddhism”, “adored”/”admired” and “unity”, linking the main themes of unity and religion to this specific part of the country’s history, and to the role of a leader admired for his ability to achieve such things.

A third and final leader is introduced in the first grade curriculum as part of the chapter on “historical leaders that I admire”, namely Alaung Mintaya:

Alaung Mintaya was a villager of Moksobo. As a child he was named Maung Aung Zeya. Since his young age he had been brilliant and righteous. So, he was trusted and admired by other people when he became a grown-up.

U Aung Zeya built a fortress with the trunks of palm trees around the village of Moksobo. He fought back the enemies who came to attack him from his fortress.

U Aung Zeya rewarded and promoted the ones who fought for the kingdom sacrificing their own lives.

U Aung Zeya built his village a royal city and renamed it as Yadana Theinkha Konbaung. And he reigned and resided in this city.

He took the title called Alaung Mintaya. Alaung Mintaya was able to unite the whole country and defended Myanmar from the threat of the invasion of foreign countries.

Alaung Mintaya worked hard to promote economy and *Sasana*. He had dug the lake of Maha Nanda to help the agriculture succeed.

Alaung Mintaya was known as the founder of the third kingdom, which was very huge, in the history of Myanmar.

(Government of the Union of Myanmar, Sociology 1st grade, p. 64-71)

Alaung Mintaya is presented with characteristics associated with a good and trustworthy leader. During his rule he promoted the *Sasana* and he defended the country from foreign invasion. He is presented therefore as a protector, a defender of the nation, and the promotion of the *Sasana* plays an important role in this. The information provided about king Kyansittha is that he was a leader trying to defend the country from a foreign invasion and that he was able to unite the country against a common enemy. The text does not say much about what he was uniting the country under, what identity the united people now hold.

These notions of defending the nation and religious views from foreigners can be seen in recent history as sentiments similar to that of nationalistic sentiments whereas the defense of country and religious tradition is argued to legitimize drastic measurements against those perceived to be challenging this way of life.

After the three leaders are presented, the textbook provides questions to the student in order for them to reflect upon and repeat the material they just went through. The questions are listed below, note that they are called “Activity 1), Activity 2)”, and that the restart from Activity one several times as they have been listed as activity 1-3 (5) for each of the leaders they are about.

Activity (1) Tick (✓) the quality of Anawratha you admire and explain why.

Qualities of Anawratha	
Being brave	

Being able to lead	
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Activity (2) Tick (√) the initiatives of Anawratha that you like.

Activity (3) Explain why you like the initiatives that you ticked (√) in activity (2).

Activity (1) Tick (√) the quality of Bayinnaung you admire and explain why.

Qualities of Bayinnaung	
Being healthy	
Being courageous	
Being smart	

Activity (2) Tick (√) the initiatives of Bayinnaung that you like.

Activity (3) Explain why you like the initiatives that you ticked (√) in activity (2).

Activity (1) Tick (√) the quality of Alaung Mintaya you admire and explain why.

Qualities of Alaung Mintaya	
Being righteous	
Being smart	

Activity (2) Tick (√) the initiatives of Alaung Mintaya that you like.

Activity (3) Explain why you like the initiatives that you ticked (√) in activity (2).

Activity (4) What is your most favorite among (3) lessons in Chapter (6)? Please explain why.

Activity (5) Tell us about someone among those who live in community or whom you know of.

(A) Who is he/she?

(B) Why do you like him/her?

Activity (6) Explain the qualities of a good leaders.

(Government of the Union of Myanmar, Sociology 1st grade, p. 72-75)

The activities provided for the children here emphasize a style of teaching focused on repetition rather than reflection. Its primary focus is to repeat and learn the most admirable traits of the leaders presented. The questions are formulated in a way where all options are good options, so the student may have their pick of great qualities possessed by a leader. One activity I would like to emphasize a little more is activity 6), the last activity presented. “Explain the qualifications of a good leader”. This question has the opportunity to leave room for reflection and analysis, for the student to contemplate for themselves what characterizes good leadership. However, having gone through the material from the chapter, it makes sense for a student to attempt to solve this activity on the basis of information provided in the given chapter, that is after all what the activity aims to do. By reviewing the material, the student may come to the conclusion that bravery, courage, intelligence and righteousness all are great features of a leader. These are, after all, the qualifications presented time and time again in the given text. If a follow-up activity were to be added, it could be useful to ask the question “why?”. Why these qualities define good leaders, and why this is relevant for these specific leaders. It is imaginable that a student would attempt to answer such a question by addressing the deeds of these admirable leaders. Thereby a connection can be drawn from memorizing certain qualifications of so-called great leadership to creating an association from the qualifications to the result of the leader’s actions. Morality is not the question here, but rather if these leaders are great due to their personal traits or their accomplishments in for instance development of religion, warfare or agricultural achievements.

Sociology, 2nd grade.

In the 2nd grade curriculum for sociology, another three leaders from Burmese history are introduced, namely king Kyansittha, queen Shin Saw Pu, and general Maha Bandula. The first leader presented is king Kyansittha:

King Anawratha of Bagan had a very capable warrior. His name was Kyansittha. He was righteous, brave and interested in fighting.

When Kyansittha became a grown-up, he acquired a high skill at using sword, spear, archery and riding elephants and horses. Thanks to being endowed with physical skills and mental attributes he came to be known as a famous warrior in Bagan.

When Kyansittha became a king, in order to found the solidarity in the kingdom, he forged unity among Mon and Burmese. He gave ranks and titles to the Mon learned men with capacities accordingly.

He had fixed and built dams, irrigations, reservoirs and creeks to enhance the agricultural activities.

King Kyansittha had completed the construction of Shwesigone temple, which was left unfinished during the reign of King Anawratha. He had built Anada Stupa too.

Anada Stupa, built by King Kyansittha, and Myasedi stone inscription, erected during his reign, are well known not only in Myanmar, but also to the world.

King Kyansittha had supported solidarity among ethnic nationalities, agriculture and *Sasana*.

The first kingdom of Myanmar, under the reign of King Kyansittha, was prosperous and progressed.

(Government of the Union of Myanmar, Sociology 2nd grade, p. 28-37)

“King Anawrahta of Bagan had a very capable warrior. His name was Kyansittha. He was righteous, brave and interested in fighting.” This is the first description given of king Kyansittha. In this brief presentation, some key features of leadership, in the eyes of the textbook authors, are listed. Among these features, fighting is one. Among the credentials of Kyansittha, is his connection to the former king Anawratha, whom Kyansittha previously fought for, possibly implying that Kyansittha picked up the torch from king Anawratha, one of the greatest kings of the Bagan empire, and continued some of his works. Being a great warrior is one of Kyansittha’s merit, being under the former reign of Anawratha is also attributed positively, and lastly, he is not merely a capable warrior, but a righteous and brave one at that.

“When king Kyansittha became a king, in order to found the solidarity in the kingdom, he forged unity among Mon and Burmese.” (Government of the Union of Myanmar, 2nd grade, p. 32). Kyansittha sought after solidarity among the people. his way of approaching prosperity and peace, is by way of forging unity between the different peoples in the country. Specifically, the unity achieved by Kyansittha is between the Mon and the Burmese. Unity is here on the curriculum agenda, and it is a theme of national harmony achieved at the hands of their king. The topic of national unity and harmony is here addressed, putting it on the agenda as an important accomplishment in his rule, as well as emphasizing the topic of unity as an agenda through the curriculum. It is the same way with agriculture, as it is presented as an important part of his administration.

Finally, the third focus point of king Kyansittha’s administration is his commitment to religion, more specifically to Buddhism. Reiterating the royal line of succession, Kyansittha is said to have “completed the construction of the Shwesigone temple, which was left unfinished during the reign of king Anawratha” (Government of the Union of Myanmar, 2nd grade, p. 34). As mentioned earlier, the association between Anawratha and Kyansittha almost becomes a part of Kyansittha’s credentials, something that is reiterated and further specified in this sentence. Both Anawratha and Kyansittha have been working for the development of Buddhism in the kingdom.

“King Kyansittha had supported solidarity among ethnic nationalities, agriculture and *sasana*.” (Government of the Union of Myanmar, 2nd grade, p. 36).

Once more, Kyansittha's contribution to national unity is stated, along with his support of agriculture and religious involvement.

The second leader presented in this the second-grade curriculum is Queen Shin Saw Pu.

Shin Saw Pu was the daughter of Razadarit the king of Hanthawaddy. From a young age, she was a strong devotee to the religion.

When she became the queen Hanthawaddy kingdom, she appointed her son-in-law Dhammasadi as a crown prince.

During the 15-year reign of Shin Saw Pu, Hanthawaddy kingdom had attained prosperity and growth.

People's wellbeing was achieved. Old and ruined temples, monasteries and public rest houses were reconstructed.

After the throne was transferred to her son-in-law, Queen Shin Saw Pu had moved to Dagon (nowadays Yangon) and founded a new kingdom at the southwest corner of Shwedagon Pagoda.

While residing in Dagon, Shin Saw Pu visited to Shwedagon Pagoda every day. She had renovated the entire pagoda [from top] to its bottom and glided with gold. Gardens were created at the surrounding of the Pagoda.

Under Shin Saw Pu's reign, Hanthawaddy was in peace. And there was no war. Gold, silver, gems and jewelries were abundant [in the kingdom.]

Shin Saw Pu was a great monarch and known as the only queen in the history of Myanmar.

(Government of the Union of Myanmar, Sociology 2nd grade, p. 38-45)

Shin Saw Pu was the daughter of King Razadarit. The textbook presents her as a "strong devotee to the religion" since her youth, and depicts her and another man, likely her father, along with a Buddhist monk on the first page. Religion is in this way established as a part of the queen's personal life from the very beginning, and as the rest of the text reads, she gave

religion a priority through her reign as queen, and in the time after. From the texts I have selected, queen Shin Saw Pu is the only female leader out of the leaders presented through these texts, and she is presented as the only female monarch in Burmese history.

The life of queen Shin Saw Pu is depicted as a life centered around religion. Temples and monasteries were restored, and after her arrival in Dagon, the city today known as Yangon, she got involved in the renovation of Shwedagon Pagoda. Unlike other leaders presented in the sociology curriculum, the textbooks do not address all of the same topics in their presentation of queen Shin Saw Pu. She is presented first and foremost in connection to religious involvement. National and ethnic unity is not emphasized as part of her rule, the only references to the people is that “their wellbeing was achieved”. She did have her impact on cultural life by way of restoring buildings and landmarks, but her accomplishments are recognized mostly in the context of economic prosperity and religious devotion.

Maha Bandula is the last of the three leaders presented in the 2nd grade. The text reads:

Maha Bandula was called Maung Yit as he was a young boy. He was born in Ngapayin village, Budalin township.

When he was old, he went to Amarapura and served in the palace.

As he worked hard for the kingdom, Maung Yit was awarded the title named Maha Bandula and governorship of Alone city. He was promoted as a general as he successfully suppressed the rebellion in Assam.

Maha Bandula was ordered to march when Shin Ma Phyu island, belong to Myanmar’s territory, was invaded by the British. He fought and won Shin Ma Phyu Island battle.

Maha Bandula’s troops continued to march to Panwa, belonged to British colony. Maha Bandula’s troops gained the victory again in Panwa battle. Panwa battle was the victorious event where Burmese can show their courage and capacity.

Due to Assam and Panwa battles, Maha Bandula's fame was widely spread.

(Government of the Union of Myanmar, Sociology 2nd grade, p. 46-51)

Maha Bandula, formerly known as Maung Yit, was most known for his accomplishments as a warrior, bringing military strength and leadership to the reader's attention. Being from a small village, Maha Bandula was not born into royalty as many of the others, but rather went to the palace of Amarapura to work. He was later promoted to general as a reward for his service in the army, and bestowed with the governorship of Alone city. Among his military accomplishments, he was known for defying colonial forces and defeating the British in several battles. His role in the texts is not as connected directly to a theme of unity among ethnic groups, but rather he represents a military answer to foreign invasion, establishing a sense of "us against them", which may be interpreted as describing some rising nationalistic sentiments as he represents a perceived united people referred only to as "the Burmese". The theme of religion is not as present in the text about Maha Banudla, as it is with many of the other leaders, rather his text emphasizes territorial disputes and the Burmese taking a stand against a foreign invasion. As well as leaving out words and terms concerning religion, it leaves out various ethnic groups, only mentioning the people as one unity called 'Burmese'.

Sociology, 3rd grade.

From the third-grade curriculum, I will look at how religion and ethnic unity are presented through stories of king Mindon.

King Mindon is the son of King Thayarwaddy. As a young boy his name was called Maung Lwin. When he was old enough to go to school, his father, King Thayarwaddy, sent prince Mindon and prince Kannaung to Ven. Thaeinn Sayadaw for their study.

When he became a King, he resided in the royal city of Amarapura and appointed his younger brother, Kannaung, as a crown prince. He established a new city, Mandalay Yadanabon.

During his reign, he work out to modernize the country. With the council of his brother, prince Kannaung, he selected 90 brilliant young men and sent them to Britain, France, Italy and India etc. These young men studied industrial management, military arts and governance.

Upon their return, they founded over 50 factories including glass factory, Press machine, coin factory and arms factory as a contribution to the modernization process.

King Mindon fixed the dams, cannels, reservoirs, and creeks [throughout the kingdom] to improve agriculture. To facilitate the commerce, he molded and circulated the peacock coins [as currency.] He had successfully managed to improve the administration by inventing a salary and payment system for the courtiers. A new taxation system called *thathameda* was also adopted to have a more systematic revenue collection.

As a peace-loving king, he worked hard to maintain the friendship between his kingdom and Britain, France and Italy. He sent Burmese emissaries to European countries to establish the diplomatic ties. Trade treaties were also able to be signed [with them.]

King Mindon had respected and supported the Buddhism. He donated the new umbrella for the Shwedagon in Yangon. For the longevity if Buddhism, he had organized the fifth Buddhist Synod. He had made the stone inscription of Tripitika and erected the tablets in Maha Loka Marazein Temple compound. These tablets have become to known as the world biggest book.

Furthermore, to improve the wisdom, information and knowledge of the people, he established Yadanapon Naypyidaw newspaper. Due to his initiatives and hard works, the country gained peace and prosperity in all aspects.

(Government of the Union of Myanmar, Sociology 3rd grade, p. 52-59)

King Mindon, formerly known as Maung Lwin, grew up studying under ven. Thaein Sayadaw, connecting Mindon to the Buddhist tradition as he studied under the tutelage of a

Buddhist monk. In other words, religion is in the text connected to king Mindon from the first page. Among his initiatives were that of attempting to modernize Burma and focus on international relations. In the context of king Mindon's dealings with other countries, particularly some in the west, the text emphasizes an education in military arts and governance as prioritizations of king Mindon.

Some of the initiatives of king Mindon, and his administration, were in the area of agriculture and economy, as other kings before him have emphasized as well, though king Mindon is presented with a strong connection to Buddhism. In this text, religion is present through the works of king Mindon in the form of donations to Shwedagon pagoda, organizing the fifth Buddhist synod, and making the Tripitika inscriptions which are still to be found in Mandalay today. The text explicitly states that Mindon was a supporter of Buddhism, working for its 'longevity' through his actions done in the name of Buddhism. In this way, the text has a clear mention of religion, but the only religion mentioned is Buddhism, Buddhist events, and places important to Buddhism in the country.

5.1 On the use and meaning of images in the curriculum

In the analysis of these curriculum texts, the role of religion and unity, and so forth are presented through the various texts in the first, second and third grade curriculum. However, given that these textbooks are created for the first few years of primary school education, the books are designed for children. Pictures are displayed on every page, communicating to the readers of the text what is happening in the written text, and what things may look like in the stories told. For instance, the picture below is taken from the third grade curriculum, describing the initiatives of king Mindon. On the left there are stone tablets in the making, presenting king Mindon's dedication to Buddhism.



(Government of the Union of Myanmar, Sociology 3rd grade, p. 58-59)

In the curriculum for the third grade, King Mindon is introduced. After declaring his royal lineage, accomplishments, and initiatives to modernize the country, the book addresses his devotion to Buddhism on page 58. On this page (to the left on the image above) there are stone inscriptions at the making. These stone inscriptions are the *Tipitaka* tablets, and can be found in Mandalay, as they were erected in the city after king Mindon made it the new royal capital (Government of the Union of Myanmar, 3rd grade, p. 53). Writing down the *tipitaka*, also known as the Pali cannon, is an act reiterating king Mindon’s dedication to the Buddhist religion, and Mindon also donated to the Shwedagon pagoda. These acts can be seen as a classic royal Buddhist practice (Harris, 2007, p. 7).

These texts of the accomplishments of king Mindon contributes to the understanding of religion, as presented in the textbooks, is with a strong emphasis on the importance of Buddhism as part of the country’s history. A central part of their history is here written as King Mindon is portrayed as a king accomplishing great things for the sake of religion. In the way the text speaks of king Mindon’s respect and support for Buddhism, and his way of

working for “the longevity of Buddhism” (Government of the Union of Myanmar, 3rd grade, p.58), these adjectives and descriptions describe the Buddhist religion as a great asset, and in line with the hidden curriculum theories, the readers of these texts may read that Buddhism has a special role in society as it has been supported by multiple of the country’s former leaders. As one of the main accomplishments of so many kings is to establish and strengthen Buddhism, the role of Buddhism may be perceived as beneficial for society at large.

အခန်း(၆) ကမ္ဘာ့နိဂုံးအားကျရသော သမိုင်းဝင်ခေါင်းဆောင်များ

လေ့ကျင့်ခန်း (၃)

လုပ်ငန်း(၁) အလောင်းမင်းတရားရဲ့ အရည်အချင်းတွေထဲက အားကျတဲ့ အရည်အချင်းကို အမှန်(✓) ခြစ်ပါ။ ဘာကြောင့်အားကျရသလဲ ပြောပြပါ။

အလောင်းမင်းတရား၏ အရည်အချင်းများ	
မြေငှက်မတ်တည်ကြည်ခြင်း	
ညောင်ရည်ထက်မြက်ခြင်း	

လုပ်ငန်း(၂) အလောင်းမင်းတရားရဲ့ လုပ်ဆောင်ချက်တွေထဲက နှစ်သက်တဲ့ လုပ်ဆောင်ချက်တွေကို အမှန်(✓) ခြစ်ပါ။







လုပ်ငန်း(၃) လုပ်ငန်း(၂)တွင် အမှန်(✓) ခြစ်ထားတဲ့ လုပ်ဆောင်ချက်တွေကို ဘာကြောင့် ကြိုက်နှစ်သက်ရသလဲ ပြောပြပါ။

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(Government of the Union of Myanmar, Sociology 1st grade, p. 74)

On the page shown in the picture above, there are some exercises presented to the children regarding the leaders they have learned about in the “Historical leaders that I admire” chapter.

One page is presented for each leader, the one above here asks the student some questions about Alaung Mintaya. The first exercise, at the top of the page, asks the student to choose qualities of Alaung Mintaya that they admire, and further to explain why. Their options are that Alaung Mintaya's qualities were "being righteous" or "being smart". This way of presenting, or rather reviewing what they have learned about Alaung Mintaya, is indicating that he was overall a good leader who was both righteous and smart. In the textbook this is underscored by the following exercise where three small pictures present the so-called initiatives of Alaung Mintaya, with the question of which initiative the student liked the most. It can be argued that these kinds of questions are not contributing to the development of critical thinking. As stated earlier in this thesis, there has been an explicit declaration that religion should not be taught in public schools. By making such a decision, it also means that religious education is intended for other sectors of the education system. In the case of Buddhism, the religious teaching is intended to be through the monastic schools, or private institutions. In the same way, Christian teachings are outsourced to the private sector and school operating out of churches and local communities. Religious doctrine or scriptures may therefore not be taught in the public school system, however, religion holds a central position in the curriculum as it is presented as one of the most important initiatives in the rule of each of the consecutive kings, generals and the queen. Seeing as these textbooks are intended for children, they only contain a few sentences on each page in addition to the images, and in making the decision on what is important to present in order to understand both the leader and the history, there has been a clear choice to have religion as one of the important aspects of their rule.

In the text about Alaung Mintaya, we are also introduced to examples of name-changing, which can be seen as a form of reiterating and shaping a national culture and a national identity, such as the process of renaming the country. Aspects of national identity involve a sense of unity that is further established in this text when it says "Alaung Mintaya was able to unite the whole country, and defended Myanmar (မြန်မာနိုင်ငံကို) from the threat of the invasion of foreign countries" (Government of the Union of Myanmar, 1st grade, 69). Unity, shaping a sense of national unity and thereby also a national identity, can be seen as part of the agenda of military, and the textbooks also give the impression that this is an agenda in the curriculum as well, a part of the hidden curriculum. Note that the name for the country used in

the text is “Myanmar” (မြန်မာနိုင်ငံကို) and not Burma (ဗမာ), reinforcing the establishing of a ‘new’ national identity as a part of the Tatmadaw’s process of myanmafication.

Nick Cheesman, while researching the contribution these textbooks bring to the legitimization of the Union of Myanmar, argues that the state is directing the learners attention to what they want the learner to observe and learn. In the case of legitimization, he argues the primary school student’s attention is directed towards something of a greater entity that may contribute to the presentation they desire of nationality, unity, and a united people (Cheesman, 2002, p. 1), and he goes on to identify this “greater entity” as the personification of certain ideals and values in someone representing a specific set of characteristics (Cheesman, 2002, p. 1). these kinds of characteristics may be religious identity, ethnic belonging, and so on, and the exemplary citizen representing these ideals may for instance be that of a former monarch of military leader of the country. Ideals of bravery, righteousness and strength are repeatedly presented in the curriculum texts, and often connected to themes of religious advancement or to the establishing of notions of national unity and harmony among the actors featured in the curriculum texts. This idea used by Cheesman (2002) that the personification of certain characteristics are intended as a form of legitimization for the Tatmadaw can therefore also be applied when looking at themes of unity and religion in the textbooks. How are these themes personified in the text? The images of the texts present monarchs both positioned at the throne, as well sitting before a Buddhist monk or in front of a pagoda. Devotion to religion is in this way lifted up as an ideal, and in every case of religious devotion presented in the texts, it is devotion to Buddhism. Religion is presented as one of the most central aspects of Burmese society, and in the words of Michael Aung-Thwin: “The ideal man in classical Burma was the dynamic king, yet it was the king who bowed down (kodaw) to the monk, not vice versa” (Aung-Thwin, 1985, p. 44). Images of monarchs interacting with Buddhist practice are visual representations of the relationship between highly esteemed kings and queen of Myanmar, and the ‘correct’ religion as it is the one followed by all the heroic leaders presented. Narratives in the primary school curriculum can be argued to be under the control and influence of the state, as a platform for the state to project their own identity as comparable to history’s greatest leaders (Cheesman, 2002, p. 3-4). The state does acknowledge religion, Buddhism especially, though it can be challenging to properly

understand the state’s view on religion. They both present the role of religion as essential in many stories of what they deem great historical events and leaders, as well as there are limitations placed on religious actors in the constitution as I previously showed.



(Government of the Union of Myanmar, Sociology 1st grade, p. 64-65)

These pages introduce the king Alaung Mintaya, and much like the other leaders presented, his story is presented with a couple of pages representing his childhood. On page 65 (on the right in the image above), Alaung Mintaya is described with characteristics we already know to be valued in the Burmese curriculum texts. He is presented as a “brilliant” and “righteous” from he was young, laying the foundation for his adult life. The sentence on page 65 also presents the grown-up Alaung Mintaya as “trusted and admired by other people”, and it is presented as a consequence of the characteristics he has been known for since childhood. By describing Alaung Mintaya in this way, the curriculum text plays right into the role of Alaung Mintaya as a highly respected and admired actor in the text, representing a personified ideal

of state leadership. Much like Cheesman (2002, p.3-4) argues that the personification of exemplary citizens in the curriculum texts contribute to the legitimization of the Union of Myanmar, these presentations of Alaung Mintaya are creating an image of ideal leadership that is personified through the choices made in the retelling of his story. Certain parts of Alaung Mintaya's life and leadership are highlighted, and it is possible that the selection of characteristics and perspective given on his accomplishments represent a carefully selected set of ideals and characteristics.



(Government of the Union of Myanmar, Sociology 1st grade, p. 58-59)

In the first grade curriculum, as previously mentioned, king Bayinnaung is introduced to us. Much like Alaung Mintaya, his capabilities were, since childhood, that of a “strong, healthy and smart boy” (Government of the Union of Myanmar, 1st grade, p. 54). Further, Bayinnaung's role as a military leader serving under the king is emphasized, until he eventually becomes king himself of page 58, on the left of the two images shown above,

accompanied by the text that he founded the second kingdom of Myanmar (Government of the Union of Myanmar, 1st grade, p. 58). On the picture to the right, king Bayinnaung is depicted riding a horse and leading an army. Among the armed forces following the king, we see people in different kinds of clothing, seemingly from different ethnicities, an interpretation reinforced by the accompanying text describing the king as “adored and admired by all ethnic peoples, as he forged unity among them” (Government of the Union of Myanmar, 1st grade, p. 58). In this way, the images provide new information, expanding on the information given in the written text, exemplifying the importance of images in communicating meaning to the children. The image depicts a military leader, who is also a king, leading an army consisting of a newly united people potentially meant to represent every ethnic group in Myanmar. Several aspects of this is something we have seen before. It is the presentation of a leader whose greatness is found in his abilities to unite the people, no matter what ethnic belonging they previously had. A leadership ideal is once more presented as the role of uniting a divided nation under one rule, even under the rule of a king also characterized as a military leader. It is described as an event, or a process, which is cause for celebration. In this way of presenting king Bayinnaung, any information on how unity was attained is left out, and it is difficult to know to what extent the people really was united, who was included/excluded in this unity, and what role the ‘other’ ethnic groups than the king’s own had in their society. These things are not addressed in the text, and therefore the content is limited in its presentation to the readers in the Burmese primary schools.



(Government of the Union of Myanmar, Sociology 3rd grade, p. 64-65)

The third grade sociology curriculum does not only introduce king Mindon as one of the important historical leaders. In this textbook, we are also introduced to general Aung San as we can see on the pictures above (pages 64 and 65 from the third grade curriculum text, as well as page 66 and 67 from the same textbook, images shown below). Aung San played the role of freedom fighter and hero in the process of attaining freedom from the British colonizers, and he is also seen as a unifier of the country as he united the people against a common enemy. I was unable to receive the translations from this section of the curriculum textbook, however I was talked through these pages by my translator, as well as I will address the role of images in conveying the story of general Aung San, as well as the emphasis the textbooks may present. Every picture of Aung San shows him as a military leader. His role as a hero is in these pictures connected to his role as the leader of the Burmese military forces, and on the two pictures shown below he is shown signing the Panglong agreement, an agreement made between different ethnic groups of what was then called Burma discussing the role of the different groups in the country that was about to gain independence (Walton, 2008, p. 889).

Aung San played a large role in liberating Burma from the British forces, and can be seen as a historical figure giving promises of a great future for many. However, as the images below shows (page 66-67 from the third grade curriculum), Aung San would not himself get to see all these promises carried out. As Walton (2008, p. 889) points out, these promises to the ethnic groups remain unfulfilled and conflict is not uncommon. This begs the question of why this is an episode from the life of Aung San the publishers of the textbooks have chosen to present? On one hand, the event has historical importance and value, however, it can be interpreted as the curriculum presenting Aung San, ethnic unity (or promises of) as something that has been accomplished, and accomplished at the hand of a military leader nonetheless. As we know from the theoretical framework on Myanmarification, the role of Aung San has at times been an important building block for the Tatmadaw to (re)assert their authority and power as leaders of the people. When the curriculum texts present the Panglong agreement, it can be argued that it is not as much about the agreement itself as it is about the role of presenting the illusion of ethnic unity.



(Government of the Union of Myanmar, Sociology 3rd grade, p. 66-67)

The role of assignments/activities in the curriculum texts.

At the end of the chapter from the curriculum, both in the first and second grade, some activities and assignments are presented to the students. On page 52 in the second grade curriculum, the textbooks ask some questions to the students as a way of reviewing the chapter and what they have learned about the leader(s) presented in the chapter. The first exercise goes as following:

Qualities of King Kyansittha	
Being righteous	
Not being brave and brilliant	
Being a master at riding horses and elephants	
Not having physical skills and mental attributes	
Not having mastery in archery	

Activity (1) Among the qualities of King Kyansittha tick (√) the correct ones and cross (×) the incorrect ones.

(Government of the Union of Myanmar, 2nd grade, p. 52)

As we can see, there is little room to think anything but great things about King Kyansittha from the way these questions are asked. There is a clear impression of what is the “correct” answer, which can be seen in light of the theory on hidden curriculum as the text guiding the student to conclude with the desired answer. The characteristics presented in the text about Kyansittha are repeated here, where both the positive and ‘negative’ statements are essentially a way of underscoring that this indeed was a great and admirable leader. In this way, the admirable traits of Kyansittha are reiterated. The following question does however open for more constructive thinking, as the questions opens for the student to think for him/herself:

Activity (2) Examine the (3) initiatives done with the historical leader and express your opinion.

Activity (3) Tell us about one historical leader you admired among the ones you learned about and explain why.

Activity (4) Is there anybody, in your surrounding or among your acquaintances, who would contribute to the interest of the community? Who is he/she? What has he/she been doing?

Activity (5) What kind of leader do you want to become when you grow up? Why?

(Government of the Union of Myanmar, 2nd grade, p. 52).

In the activities shown above, the textbook asks questions that have the potential to open more to reflective process around the texts. The second activity asks the student to express their own opinion about the initiatives of a leader, giving the student the opportunity to express their own views. This can be argued to be in favour of developing the students ability to reflect, maybe even think critically. However, it can be argued that reflective and critical thinking is not facilitated in the other texts, and the previous exercise emphasizes repetition in a way that highlights what the authors and publishers of the textbook wants the student to remember.

Activity (3) asks the student to elaborate on which leader s/he admires, and why, again emphasizing the concept of admiration in the text, the idea that one should be looking to these historic figures with reverence. In activity (4) things get more interesting from the perspective of challenging the student to think for themselves by exploring people in their own surroundings, and their role in improving their community. Most of the exercises so far address only the 'admirable leaders' of Burmese history, this exercise challenges the student to make connections between what they read and learn in school and their own personal lives. Though this exercise opens to a new way of thinking, one that has not been present in the other texts I have analysed, it still begs the question of what the texts teaches the student.

How is the knowledge of these historical leaders affecting the student's outlook on friends, family, religious leaders or people of authoritative positions? What they have learned about the historical leaders in the texts are not simply fact, it is also a way of understanding and interpreting a person's acts and life, it presents the student with a guideline for attributing value to experiences and choices made in their own lives and of those around them.

Lastly, this page provides the student with activity (5) asking them what kind of leader they want to be, and why. Again, the question itself can be interpreted openly, though the question must be seen in the context of what the students have been learning so far. Great leaders have been presented in the curriculum the students have recently gone through, where they are told which of the accomplishments and choices of former kings and queens are most valuable, therefore it stands to reason that their answer will be somewhat affected by what they until now have been told are great qualifications, great priorities, and effective government. Among the priorities, as previously stated, the textbooks present religion and unity among some of the most central aspects government.

As shown in the questions asked to the children at the end of the chapter on historical leaders in the second-grade curriculum, the questions are designed to have the children repeat what they have learnt in the chapter they just completed. However, the theoretical framework provided by Robert Jackson (1968) addresses the matter of what it means to do well in school, what it is like to answer correctly and succeed. Questions like these do not reflect learning goals such as critical thinking or understanding another person's point of view. Rather it seems intentional in addressing the themes deemed important by the textbooks, or rather the authors and/or publishers of the textbooks. The intent of the textbooks 4 may be perceived to highlight certain key aspects of leadership, of (national) harmony and unity, as well as admiration and obedience to ruling authorities as they work towards the best for the country. While I do not doubt that leaders work towards what they themselves perceive to be the best course of action, there is not left a lot of room for the readers of these texts to think differently. Pedagogical methods of rote learning seem to lie underneath the texts as its questions aim to repeat and remember what the different leaders did, rather than their impact. By using these theories on hidden curriculum, the texts can be understood as trying to convey an understanding of what is 'the correct way of thought' rather than to challenge mindsets and worldviews.

Bringing this back to the matter of religion, opinions are formed as the children are influenced both by classroom activities, teachers, and the curriculum they study. All of the most admirable leaders in history are presented as religious. Most of them also contributed to national culture and heritage by restoring Buddhist temples, Buddhist religious sites, and spreading Buddhism throughout the nation. There are therefore plenty of text and pictures establishing religion (Buddhism) as invaluable in both the personal lives of national leaders, as well as national and cultural heritage.

6 Analysis and discussion

As we have seen in the material presented in chapter three, themes of religion and unity are represented in most of the texts through words like “Buddhism”, “Religion”, “Unity”. However these themes are also represented by reference to pagodas and religious texts (representing religion) and battles defending the nation and stopping rebellions (unity). Another theme, or word, that I would like to address is the overarching description of these leaders as “admirable” and leaders “that I admire”, according to the chapter headlines in the curriculum text. For the analysis and discussion that follows in this chapter, I will be treating these words as nodal points for the texts. Nodal points are the words and phrases used to fix meaning in the text, through the language being used. I will also look at the texts in light of the theoretical framework presented in the previous chapter, and have chosen to divide this chapter according to the theories presented in chapter four. I will also include some of the pictures and illustrations found along with the material presented in chapter three, and see how they relate to the text, and the stories being told. Three of the overarching themes I would like to emphasize are: religion (Buddhism), unity, and admiration.

In the texts presented, there is little explicit mention of the different ethnic or religious groups, we only read about Buddhism and the ruling ethnic groups, the Bamar. Myanmar’s vast majority of Buddhists are therefore represented through almost all the texts selected from the curriculum, first, second and third year, and each of the leaders presented represent the same religious tradition. In this way, the role of religion is addressed through the personification of leaders presented as admirable and heroic – they identified with the Buddhist tradition, and so all other religious traditions seem to be unimportant as they are not represented in the

curriculum texts in any way. Each of the historical leaders presented therefore share some similar features: belonging to an ethnic majority group, and belonging to the majority religious group, namely Buddhism. Representation of the students reading these texts in primary school may therefore vary, where those who find ‘their own’ traditions and people represented most likely belong to either a religious or ethnic majority. Also some minorities may find themselves represented in a different manner; as the people being conquered, or somehow brought into the greater fellowship that is referred to as the “Burmese” without any details of how their unity was attained, but more on that later.

The narrative of these textbooks presents these leaders as people possessing great qualifications, characteristics and leadership abilities. Granted, it is not uncommon for a nation to present its historical leaders as heroes and examples to be followed. However, when these leaders are given praise in the manner these texts do, it may present them as ideals people ought to aspire to be more alike. This may pose a challenge to those of various ethnic and religious minority backgrounds, as they read a recounting of history that only presents the great leaders of their nation as leaders from a majority background. How then are children from a minority background, religious or ethnic, understanding the role of religion and ethnicity in connection to leadership? They are presented with reverence and admiration, and may even be presented as someone whose lives ought to be imitated in actions and values (Treadwell, 2013, p. 120). Maybe several aspects of these leaders’ lives are indeed admirable, however, these traits of leadership are not nuanced, or challenged in any way, leaving primary schoolers to possibly accept the information provided without question. The narrative has already been decided, and neither texts nor images goes much into depth about historical events presented. History is recounted briefly, probably with the intention of giving a brief and general education on certain leaders and events deemed important by the government. However that simply ascribes each of the texts more value as they are the only texts provided. This may pose a challenge to those who come from a different religious and ethnic background, seeing as the presence of religion is only in the form of Buddhism, which is presented as an important part of history and culture.

Peace and prosperity are also addressed as a theme in the material texts. However I would describe this theme as more of a consequence or result of transpiring actions and events in the texts.. At the end of the text in the third grade curriculum, the text regarding king Mindon, it

says that “due to his initiatives and hard works, the country gained peace and prosperity in all aspects” (Government of the Union of Myanmar 3rd grade, p. 59). In a similar way it is said about king Bayinnaung that Myanmar’s prominence in Southeast Asia is thanks to his works (Government of the Union of Myanmar 1st grade, p. 63), and that due to the reign of queen Shin Saw Pu the kingdom of “Hanthawaddy was at peace” (Government of the Union of Myanmar 2nd grade, p. 44). In each of the material texts, the final sentences explain how the kingdom gained either peace, prosperity or prominence in the region, due to the efforts and initiatives of the ruler of the kingdom. Among these initiatives, much of the emphasis is placed on actions resulting in unity among the peoples or the advancement of Buddhism. For example when it says about king Mindon that his initiatives brought about prosperity in all aspects, one of the initiatives was an historic event in not only Burmese, but Buddhist history, by organizing the fifth Buddhist synod (Government of the Union of Myanmar, 3rd grade, p. 58), as well as donations to temples and pagodas, and the making of stone inscriptions.

In the curriculum, the texts are presented leader by leader, addressing historical events through the life of a specific leader from the time. The different leaders are therefore presented with a number of initiatives and accomplishments to sum up their reigns, as well as historical events during their reigns that are deemed important to the history of Myanmar. Such acts may involve defending the nation against foreign invasions or local rebellions, spreading Buddhism throughout the kingdom, and improving the conditions for agriculture, ensuring a stable economy, all for the betterment of the kingdom. In some cases, this curriculum is presented with a narrative that seems to tell the reader what to think and how to feel about the events that transpired. Continuous reminders of the greatness of the monarchs and military leaders ensure that the reader see them in a specific way. What was good, what was bad, what was admirable – these things were also addressed in the activities presented at the end of both the first and the second grade curriculum, which I will address further later in the discussion. The activities, as well as the texts, may give the impression there is a ‘correct’ way to think about both the events and leaders presented. The curriculum texts give the impression that it is not hard to know what is valued most, seen as the most important, in the texts, which leads to the idea that these values are intended to reflect those most important in Burmese society. In this chapter I will look at and analyse the correlation between the material and my findings from chapter five, and the theoretical framework, starting here with the theory on Myanmafication.

6.1 Myanmafication and the presentation of historical leaders.

Myanmafication is a process that speaks of the active role of the Tatmadaw in rebranding the country. Nationalistic sentiments such as anti-colonialism and the slogan “to be bama is to be Buddhist” are a part of it, but in the post-colonial era, the Tatmadaw has been attempting to claim general Aung Sans’s legacy as their own in order to legitimize their own authority. Houtman (1999, p. 61) describes Aung San as the symbol of unity in Myanmar, his role in liberating the country and uniting the people against a common enemy has made him the symbol of unity itself. He is even addressed as the fourth great unifier of Myanmar (Houtman, 1999, p. 61), the first three being the kings we know from the first grade curriculum: Anawratha, Bayinnaung and Alaung Mintaya. Myanmafication therefore takes on the form of the Tatmadaw’s ideology of reinventing themselves as the legacy of one of the great unifiers of the country, as well as a (re)inventing a united Myanma culture, identity and sense of belonging. By doing so, the Tatmadaw aims to solidify their own authority by carrying on the works of the great unifiers who have gone before.

An interesting comparison between the Tatmadaw and the leaders in the curriculum can be found in the textbooks when the text continues to present the leaders as great through their roles as military leaders. This can be exemplified through the text about Maha Bandula in the second grade curriculum. It says about Maha Bandula that “he was promoted to general as he successfully suppressed the rebellion in Assam” (Government of the Union of Myanmar, 2nd grade, p. 48) and further that he “was ordered to march when Shin Ma Phyu island, belonging to Myanmar territory, was invaded by the British. He fought and won Shin Ma Phyu island battle” (Government of the Union of Myanmar, 2nd grade, p. 49). These excerpts from the text shows how the curriculum places value on military leaders and their ability to challenge opposing forces, which in the case of Maha Bandula was the colonial forces. The text also glorifies Maha Bandula’s battle in Panwe, where he again opposed the colonizers (Government of the Union of Myanmar, 2nd grade, p. 50), as it became an arena for the Burmese to “show their courage and capacity” (Government of the Union of Myanmar, 2nd grade, p. 50). Maha Bandula is presented as a leader that aided in opposing the British colonial rule, and he did so heroically. Though this is a story of liberating the country so as to make it an independent nation, it is an example of how value is placed in military strength to fight for its people, and as it said on page 50, the “Burmese” got to show their bravery in

opposing the colonizers. The point I am trying to make is that although the content of the text speaks of national liberation, the presentation of ‘the nation’ comes through the word “Burmese” (မြန်မာတို့ရဲ့) (Government of the Union of Myanmar, 2nd grade, p. 50) to speak of the people of Myanmar, as if addressing the people from the territory then known as Burma as one people. It implies a unified people under one unified rule, in this battle led by general Maha Bandula. In this example from the text on Maha Bandula, the actors involved are referred to as “the Burmese”, spoken of as if it was one (unified) people. This case shows how the process of myanmafication is present by the perceived unity of the Burmese in the text. As we know, the ideology of the Tatmadaw involves them being presented as unifiers defenders of the country. Claiming the legacy of Aung San was a challenge for the Tatmadaw as his daughter Aung San Suu Kyi presented herself on the political stage with a stronger claim, so the Tatmadaw sought to find legitimacy in other military heroes, for example Maha Bandula (Houtman, 1999, p. 27).

It is the view of the military that that ethnic minorities are a security threat, seeing as different ethnic and religious minority groups have either shaped their own identity in resistance of the Tatmadaw, e.g. the Karen, Chin and Kachin where there are large numbers of Christians, or the Muslims whom are considered to stem from Indian migrations under the support of the British colonial rule (Hayward and Frydenlund, 2019, p. 3). Their ideology of uniting the country is an ideology underscoring their ambition of making a ‘new’ cultural identity centered around Burmese language, Burman ethnicity (the ethnic majority) and Buddhism as the main religion. When the curriculum texts describe particular events in connection to the different monarchs and rulers, it seems as though the essence of the texts is categorized as bringing unity among ethnic groups, and spreading the Buddhist tradition. These two factors, unity and Buddhism, are both contributing to the understanding of an intended common dream or vision for the nation that seems as an end goal for the curriculum. The role of religion and harmony plays a part in being ‘gathered’ under one king and one rule. Given the recent history of authoritarian regimes in Myanmar, the gathering of the ethnic groups can easily be associated with the assimilation from minority groups to the majority, making it a matter of Buddhist majoritarianism.

By only addressing one religion as representative of Myanmar and its history, e.g. “Bayinnaung was a monarch devoted to Buddhism” (Government of the Union of Myanmar, 1st grade, p. 62) or about queen Shin Saw Pu that “she was a strong devotee to the religion” (Government of the Union of Myanmar, 2nd grade, p. 38), the texts are equating religion and Buddhism, making other religions irrelevant. In this form, the curriculum text has an opposing function to that of recognizing diversity as all other ethnic and religious groups, which we know have been present in the country, are left out of the curriculum. It promotes conformity into what can be seen as the ideal citizen with all that it entails, whether it is religion, ethnic belonging or political standings. Conflicts regarding ethnicity are raging in Myanmar in the present. Echoes of the past can be found in these textbooks as we see how the various leaders defend the nation against foreign invasions, deal with civil wars and solve continue to strive for prosperity of the kingdom. For example through the case of Maha Bandula defending Burmese territory against British invasion, or Alaung Mintaya whom defended united and defended the country against foreign invasion.

The references to unity in the curriculum are plentiful, often accompanied with words such as ‘harmony’ and ‘peace’. Every mention of unity helps establish a picture of a united Myanmar people, ever since the country was first united by king Anawratha (Government of the Union of Myanmar, 1st grade, p. 52), some of the texts even specify how it is a unity among ethnic groups, or that it is a national unity. When these things are being addressed in the text it echoes some of the recent military government’s ideology of unity. After the death of general Aung San, known for his role in liberating Burma from British rule, there was a question of who would carry on his legacy. As we know from the theory of myanmafication, the Tatmadaw has had an ideology where they attempt to legitimize their own authority by presenting themselves as those carrying on the torch of Aung San (Houtman, 1999, p. 26), a claim they would later abandon as Aung San Suu Kyi came along and presented a stronger claim. General Aung San is a part of the sociology curriculum, though he is not introduced until the third grade curriculum as I presented in chapter five, in the section not translated. However, the pictures from his pages are shown in the previous chapter as the use of images can be considered a valuable tool in communication. The Tatmadaw first attempted to discredit Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of Aung San, as a foreigner who allegedly allied herself with the west, even married a European (Houtman, 1999, p. 30), and in this way the

Tatmadaw started reinventing themselves as those representing the Burmese and promoting national unity.

Alaung Mintaya, as he is called in the text, though he is also known as Alaungpaya, is considered one of the great kings of the Konbaung dynasty (Alaungpaya, 2020). The curriculum text presents him as a leader who was “able to unite the whole country and defended Myanmar from the threat of foreign countries” (Government of the Union of Myanmar, 1st grade, p. 69). First of all, foreign countries are in this context associated with the words “threat” and “invasion”. By association, foreign countries and foreigners are at risk of becoming something negative, and a distance is created between “us” and “them”. Possibly this can also affect the view of people who are different in other ways than national identification, it can also be transferred to cultural identification. As Alaung Mintaya is honored for uniting the country, the textbooks do not present any information on how he accomplished his goal. History teaches us that the war between the Mon and the Burmese was ongoing for hundreds of years, and eventually under the leadership of Alaung Mintaya⁹ (Alaungpaya, 2020) the war ended. Further, the unity he forged between the Burmese and Mon have recently been referred to as Burmanisation (Houtman, 2019, p. 3), and without reading it elsewhere, or being taught this aspect of the historical events that occurred, the students have little direct access to understanding how this so-called unity was forged on the basis of the text they are presented with in school. It should be noted that the territory today known as Myanmar has never had a unified political rule, so this notion of unity presented through these texts can be considered fiction. In this way, the process of myanmafication creates a backstory of a formerly united nation as a footing for presenting themselves as the new rule whom also have been capable of forging unity among the people.

According to Harris (2012), Alaung Mintaya claimed to be the “embryo of the Buddha in possession of all of the weapons of a cakkavatti” (Harris, 2012, p. 181), aligning himself with the Buddhist model for kingship known as the *cakkavattin*, or ‘the wheel-turning king’. By doing so, Alaung Mintaya legitimized his own rule by building on the stories of a universal ruler, one who ruled in accordance with the dhamma. In addition to ascribing himself the role of *cakkavattin*, he may also present himself in connection to another king who is said to have

⁹ In the cited text he is referred to by the name Alaunpaya.

adopted the kingship model of the *cakkavattin*, namely king Ashoka (Harris, 2012, p. 178). Alaung Mintaya places himself in the footsteps of iconic kings in a Buddhist tradition. Governing in accordance with the dhamma, as these traditional kingship models emphasize, can also be argued that was an important aspect of Alaung Mintaya's own rule, as he himself "worked to promote the [...] Sasana" (Government of the Union of Myanmar, 1st grade, p. 70). How then are the claims of burmanisation affecting the way we read the curriculum text where Alaung Mintaya is honored for uniting the country? This same event referred to on the one side as burmanisation, whilst being honored as an event uniting the nation at the same time, exemplifies how the curriculum texts do not properly address the circumstances surrounding many of the events being portrayed. The process of burmanisation, which I have mostly referred to as myanmafication, may also be seen as exemplifying the role of the state and its leaders as that of uniting the country, though it is not in the curriculum text with an emphasis on the myanmafication process. However, if these events can be seen in connection to a process of myanmafication, it may also reflect what the state seeks to convey through the same texts – that their role as unifiers of the country can be seen as legitimizing of their authority.

Myanma has in this way become a concept that represents the illusion that Myanmar is one unified country, by encompassing five different meanings: language, peoples, nationality, country, and the ethnic majority unified by royalty (Houtman 1999, p. 53), all of this being what Houtman refers to as the process of *Myanmafication*, a new way for the army to use a theme of unity as part of their agenda. Knowing about the process of *Myanmafication*, a different light is shed on the texts depicting royal history as unifying for ethnic groups and the nation at large. The primary school textbooks repeatedly address the role of the leaders as admirable due to their accomplishments which normally involve uniting the ethnic groups, and fighting off foreigners. These texts glorify the role of defense in a way that creates a distinction between "us" and "them", separating those belonging to the ethnicity of the monarchs from the rest, be it international or domestic. Reading these texts in light of the last few decades of various leadership in Myanmar, one might ask the question of whether or not the military is using these texts as a form of legitimizing their own authority. Presenting themselves as the legacy of Aung San proved a challenge, and it would seem that in light of these texts that the legacy of former monarchs are presented in a way appealing to many of the ambitions of the military, functioning as a different source for legitimization. Great

historical figures are presented as uniting and gathering the various ethnic groups under their rule, resulting in harmony and prosperity, much like the military's ideology on unity and the process of *Myanmafication*.

Themes of unity and the role of the state.

As discussed above, there has been a process of renaming the country, as well as cities and places within the country's borders. Why is renaming the country seen as so important? A part of the answer to this question is that it touches on the matter of belonging, of identity and ethnicity. Houtman calls it a "singularization and simplification of the country from a Burman centrist point of view" (1999, p. 53), essentially calling it a matter of Burman majoritarianism, and seeing as the word *Myanma* (which the name Myanmar comes from) in the Burmese language is strongly linked to the ethnic majority, the Burmans, it also causes dismay for other ethnic groups (Houtman, 1999, p. 53). While presenting the theoretical framework for understanding *Myanmafication* (or *Burmanisation*), I showed how the term can be applied to matters of identity and cultural assimilation. Reading about these texts on how different leaders have changed the name of the country, names of cities, and forged so-called unities between ethnic peoples, may present an opportunity for the reader to see these events as part of a Burman majoritarian agenda. It may cause an effect of seeing historical events such as these as a part of an assimilation process into the majority groups, both ethnic and religious, and a part of constructing the illusion of a united Myanmar.

The theme of unity is discussed as a theme of unity amongst the people, as well as a theme of unity between the people and their ruler. Historically, this unity has been addressed as the unity between the king and his people, and this unity has often been on certain premises defined by the king or ruling authority. Some of these themes of unity between the people and their ruler can be transferred to present day and a more recent history, in the sense that historical events are being used as legitimizing tools for the present. The transferability between past historical events and ongoing, or at least recent, historical events fathoms nationalistic sentiments by way of themes of unity, as well as religious unity. Cases of plurality and diversity seem less important, and the central themes center around conformity to guidelines presented by ruling authorities, rather than openness to new ways of thought.

These texts on historical leaders suggest that the role of a nation's leaders is to protect the land, its culture, and to bring prosperity. Implicitly these texts also suggest that the cultural aspect is in need of both protection and advancement of religion for the sake of welfare and for the sake of unity. Every ruler is presented as a religious devotee working for the prosperity of the country as a whole by uniting the people, and they are admired for doing so.

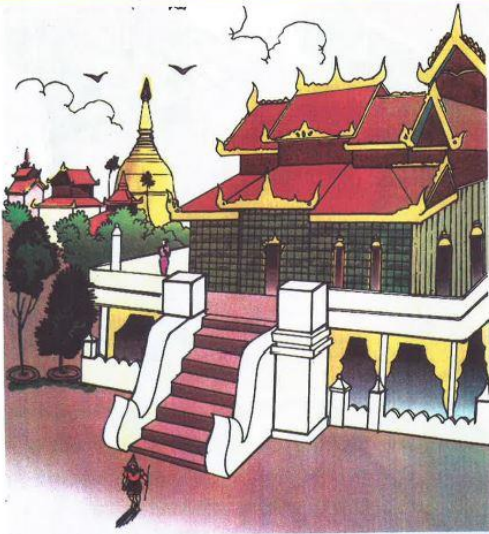
Renaming the country on one hand has the function of taking distance from colonizing forces, while on the other hand it provides an illusion that the country is unified. Examples of renaming can be found in the early descriptions of many of the leaders presented as they are known by different names as children than later in their lives, as well as through the changing of names of places in the texts, e.g. Dagon to Yangon. In the language used by the State Peace and Development Council in 1989 (SPDC) the term *Myanmar* combines two understandings of the word: it joins together Burmese, which refers to language, ethnic groups and nationality, with Burma, referring to the country (Houtman, 1999, p. 52). In this way the army is establishing an association between language, ethnicity and nationality by using the name Myanmar which has so strong connections to one specific ethnic group. The way Houtman presents it, the term *Myanmar* is even used to describe the matters of the Union as a whole, pointing out how the Burmese word for *Myanma* leaves very little room for diversity (Houtman, 1999, p. 53). Than Tun, a Burmese historian, makes an interesting observation in his writings on the role of the word *Myanma*¹⁰, when he points out its associations to the country's royal history, as the first one to use this term was king Kyansittha, who we are introduced to in the second grade curriculum. Three uses of *Myanma* in royal history are presented: 1) Kyansittha uses the term "to describe how the palace was built", 2) it is later used to describe the town the king resided in, rather than the country as a whole, and 3) a comparison is made to how king Alaung Mintaya¹¹, whom we are introduced with in the first grade curriculum, gave the city of Dagon the name "end of strife" (Yangon) as a means of marking how he conquered the enemy (Houtman, 1999, p. 53).

When Foxeus (2016) discusses the role of the SPDC in Myanmar, he points out how their attempt of presenting an authoritarian form of state Buddhism, to draw on the pre-colonial

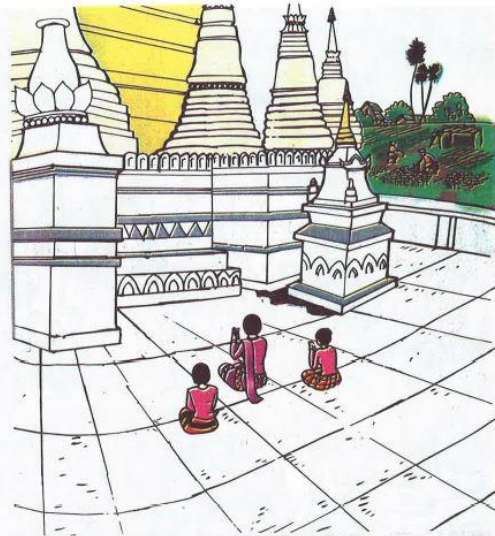
¹⁰ According to Gustaaf Houtman, the method used by Than Tun in his transcriptions uses the word *Mirma*.

¹¹ Houtman uses *Alaungphaya*

forms of Buddhism as it was during the rule of former monarchs, it resulted in a Burmese Buddhist nationalistic thought that spread throughout the country (Foxeus, 2016, p. 202-203). Nationalistic sentiments such as these were intended to promote a sense of a united Myanmar, where the people stood together centred around Buddhism, even as “obedient subjects” (Foxeus, 2016, p. 203). What Foxeus addresses here is along the same lines of Myanmarification. It talks about the military government’s desire to shape a Myanmar identity around certain key points, unity and Buddhism, though not for the sake of unity and Buddhism itself, but for the sake of their own legitimacy. In their attempts to present a united Myanmar, they can be seen to seek after obedience among their subjects. Cheesman wrote in his dissertation that “schooling in Myanmar aims unequivocally to produce citizens who will benefit the state” (Cheesman, 2002, p. 1). Following the line of argument presented by Cheesman here, the primary school textbooks can be seen to aim towards educating citizens in a manner desired by the state. Considering this and Foxeus’s argument that obedient subjects were prerequisite to the military’s attempt of presenting a united people with Buddhism as an important factor, even presenting their unity as a desire to remain ‘Burmese’ while keeping all foreign and western influence at bay (Foxeus, 2016, p. 203). When the curriculum texts from the sociology curriculum I have analysed present these stories of great and admirable leaders whom united the peoples, for example in the case of Bayinnaung in the first grade curriculum is described as a great unifier of the ethnic peoples (Government of the Union of Myanmar, 1st grade, p. 59) or Alaung Mintaya is honoured for his ability to fight off foreign invasions (Government of the Union of Myanmar, 1st grade, p. 69), these presentations contribute to the idea the military has wanted to implement: that the country is united, and the Myanmar identity is (re)invented with Buddhism, unity and separated from foreign influence. However, the aim of establishing this form of Myanmar identity can be seen as an act seeking to legitimize the authority of the state.



ဘုရင်မကြီးရှင်စောပုဟာ သမင်တော်ကို ထီးနန်းလွှဲအပ်ပြီး ဒဂုန်မြို့(ယခု ရန်ကုန်)ကို ထွက်တော်မူခဲ့တယ်။ ရွှေတိဂုံစေတီရဲ့ အနောက်တောင်ထောင့် အရပ်မှာ မြို့သစ်၊ နန်းသစ် တည်ပြီး စံတော်မူတယ်။



ဒဂုန်မြို့မှာ စံနေတော်မူစဉ်အတွင်း ရှင်စောပုဟာ ရွှေတိဂုံစေတီကို နေ့စဉ် သွားရောက်ဖူးမြော်တယ်။ စေတီတော်ကြီးကိုလဲ အောက်ခြေအထိ ပြုပြင်မွမ်းမံပြီး ရွှေသတ်နိုး ကပ်လှူခဲ့တယ်။ စေတီပတ်ဝန်းကျင်မှာ ဥယျာဉ်တွေ ပြုလုပ်စေခဲ့တယ်။

(Government of the Union of Myanmar, 2nd grade, p. 42-43)

In the two pictures shown above, page 42 (left) and 43 (right) from the second grade curriculum, queen Shin Saw Pu is shown on one of her daily visits to the Shwedagon pagoda, as the text below reads. The text also describes the queens efforts in renovating the pagoda, gilding it with gold from top to bottom, and creating gardens around the entire pagoda. Her contributions to one of the most central Buddhist sites in Myanmar is in this way shown. The story of queen Shin Saw Pu is, as most of the other leaders, a story of a great monarch. However, the emphasis in the story of the queen can be seen to be primarily on her contributions to Buddhism by way of donations, as well living a life dedicated to religion. The text primarily presents how she restored “old and ruined temples, monasteries and public rest houses” (Government of the Union of Myanmar, 2nd grade, p. 41). She was from a young age devoted to Buddhism, her reign is summarized with words like “prosperity and growth” (Government of the Union of Myanmar, 2nd grade, p. 40), but unlike the other leaders she is not presented in association to any military strength. Her reign was good and led the kingdom to prosperity, but half the text presenting Shin Saw Pu talks about her life and devotion to religion, and the transference of the monarchical role to her son in law. The only place in the

curriculum texts that speaks of a kingdom, or reign, free of war, is under the rule of Shin Saw Pu. “Under Shin Saw Pu’s reign, Hanthawaddy was in peace. And there was no war.” (Government of the Union of Myanmar, 2nd grade, p. 44).

This way of using terms and names associated with specific ethnic groups or events, sends a message to others that this is what ought to be emphasized, this language, culture and history. However, Houtman makes one very interesting point that sheds a new light on the understanding of both naming and royal history – these things emphasize underlying statements of historical events explaining how monarchs in the past have triumphed over both other ethnic groups and foreigners, and by implementing these changes in language all other languages bear constant reminders of defeat (Houtman 1999, p. 53). In the curriculum texts, both Kyansittha and Alaung Mintaya are celebrated for their acts of uniting the nation and defending it against foreigners. The primary school text says that king Kyansittha “supported solidarity among ethnic nationalities” (Government of the Union of Myanmar, 2nd grade, p.36) and about Alaung Mintaya that he “was able to unite the whole country, and defended Myanmar from the threat of invasion from foreign countries” (Government of the Union of Myanmar, 1st grade, p. 69).

Unity as a theme is clearly addressed, though the curriculum texts do not provide much information on the circumstances surrounding this perceived unity. The history taught in these curriculum texts are presented from a majority perspective, describing these events as glorified parts of the history of a majority group, where unity is achieved through the diligence and greatness of certain leaders. Unity is also presented as a result of war, often in the form of defense against rebellions and foreign invasions, rather than as conquests. Reading through the curriculum may therefore be perceived different from student to student, based on their own background, religious or ethnic. For instance, from the perspective of ethnic minority groups, these stories may speak of assimilation into the majority group. In the case of religious minorities, it may mean religious conversion in order to belong. The Arakanese provide an example of the challenge in reading these texts from a Buddhist minority perspective – their religion may be the same as that of the majority, but their view on the history told may be challenging as a part of their cultural and religious heritage was taken from them.

However unity was attained must be learned from other sources, as these texts mainly present unity as a result of a king's leadership abilities, and possibly war in order to defend the country. Many wars have taken place, and the uniting of all ethnic groups may also include the assimilation of ethnic minority groups into the majority group – or at least the governing group. Multiple kingdoms and multiple rulers were spread throughout the country, and these textbooks present us with some of these stories of multiple kingdoms gathering under one king. However, the texts do not speak of the means by which the kingdoms and its peoples are united and seem to not emphasize the role of conquerors when presenting the historical leaders. An example of this can be found when looking at Rakhine, formerly known as Arakan, which was conquered by the Burmese army in 1785 (Leider, 2009, p. 334). In this instance we see how the Arakan kingdom, which had been known as an independent Buddhist kingdom for centuries, was conquered by the Burmese. The Arakan kingdom had a very strong connection to Buddhism, and the most well-known symbol of their connection to the Buddha was the Mahamuni statue. During the conquest of Arakan, this statue was taken from Arakan, and brought to the royal city of Amarapura, today known as Mandalay (Leider, 2009, p. 342). All of this happened under the rule of king Bodhawpaya of the Konbaung dynasty, the son of king Alaungmintaya whom we read about in the first grade curriculum. Arakan represents an independent kingdom with Buddhist traditions, which was then conquered by another Buddhist group – the Burmese. It tells the story of a Buddhist minority group being conquered by a Buddhist majority, providing us with an interesting point of view when reading the school texts than often present a Buddhist majoritarian perspective. In losing the Mahamuni statue, the Arakan lost the religious symbol they valued the most, the sign of their connection to the Buddha, a symbol which was then erected in the royal capital of their conquerors. Arakan, or Rakhine as it is commonly called today, is referenced in one of the texts from the primary school curriculum, in the story of general Maha Bandula. As we now know, Maha Bandula was famous for his victories in battles where he suppressed rebellions (Government of the Union of Myanmar, 2nd grade, p. 48) and took a stand against the British (Government of the Union of Myanmar, 2nd grade, p. 49-50) in the first Anglo-Burmese war. As we remember, one of his battles against the British took place at Shin Ma Phyu island, which according to the curriculum text belonged “to Myanmar's territory” (Government of the Union of Myanmar, 2nd grade, p. 49), where he fought the invasion. Shin Ma Phyu island

is in this text presented as belonging to Myanmar territory, though the island is situated in the state of Rakhine, the Arakan territory conquered in 1785 by the Burmese.

6.2 *Hidden curriculum and the curriculum text.*

The theoretical framework provided on the concept of hidden curriculum (Jackson, 1968, p. 34), show how there are official and unofficial parts of the curriculum being taught to the children. What has not been accounted for in this thesis, seeing as this is primarily a textual analysis, is the role of the educator in conveying the content of the textbooks to the students. How their attitudes, personal beliefs, practices, pedagogy, and so forth, affects the perception and understanding of the material being taught. In regards to an official versus an unofficial curriculum, this understanding aims to look at what the student *should* learn as opposed to what s/he is *supposed to* be learning. The official curriculum may involve learning about historical leaders who have had an impact on Burmese history, while the unofficial part of the curriculum is understanding the aspect of history emphasizing specific ethnic and/or religious majorities, and their role in attaining peace and prosperity under the different monarchs through history. My argument is that there are potential elements of teacher preference as well as multiple meanings within the official textbooks. For instance, there is little to no mention of any ethnic minority groups in the texts. Some are mentioned, though it is in the context of being at war or reconciled with the ruling majority, and it is presented as a unification by the hand of the king. Whereas religion and ethnicity in many cases are connected but? not spoken of, neither are the various religious groups. By mentioning only Buddhism, emphasis is placed on the role and importance of this one religion. As a student from a minority religion or ethnic group it poses a challenge to their understanding of society to see how Buddhism is the only religion explicitly connected to the nation's most important leaders. Repeatedly, the kingdom prospers and advances under the rule of the leaders presented in the textbooks, and though their merits are presented heavily through agricultural and economic advancement, it also adds the religious component as a part of the prosperity of the country and as a reason for them to be admired.

As discussed previously, the textbooks analysed here are not part of a religious education curriculum, meaning they are not meant for religious instruction. However, what I want to

address is the presence of religion in so-called secular subjects. Robert Jackson points out the role of religious education as an aid in learning how to reflect upon diversity, to attempt to understand lifestyles and worldviews that differ from one's own (Jackson, 2019, p. 91). Granted, these text about historical leaders are not religious texts in the sense that they derive from the Pali cannon, give any obvious instructions into religious practice, or other religious texts for that matter. The presence of religion in these texts is through the stories told of the nation's most esteemed leaders throughout history.

Content and curriculum may be seen as one of the challenges facing the Burmese educational system, and another challenge is pedagogical methods. Myanmar and its methods of pedagogy is transitioning from being largely built on a system of rote learning to a system influenced by other pedagogical methods used in, for instance, western countries. The emphasis of rote learning is not necessarily to focus on a learner's understanding of the material being studied, but can be seen as a method to get a student 'through' their education. Rote learning as a method was and is commonly used in religious contexts, in memorizing religious texts, passages and prayers. It resembles a ritualistic form of behaviour, not saying it has no value or benefits, but it is a method primarily focused on learning material by heart. Modernization and western influence poses challenges to this system as it emphasizes a student's ability to reflect and deconstruct arguments, it attempts to teach critical thinking, whereas most in Myanmar are more familiar with methods of rote learning. With limited knowledge of the former curriculum from this subject, the statements provided by JICA are helpful in shedding some light on the aims of the new curriculum. As referred to earlier in this thesis, they state that the aim of the new curriculum was partly to accommodate new ways of teaching, such as critical thinking (JICA, 12.06.2017). Accommodating new pedagogical approaches would come at an opportune moment as new curriculum was rolled out, however, not all the curriculum texts here show that this was done to a very large extent. As pointed out earlier, some of the questions at the end of the chapters opens up for the children to reflect on the stories they just read and heard about, though a lot of the questions also imply what the student ought to think before they have the chance to reflect on it themselves. There is a correlation between the curriculum texts and what happens in the classroom, and changing learning methods from one (rote learning) to another (accommodating critical thinking) therefore needs to happen in correspondence with how the new teaching methods and curriculum are implemented in the classroom.

The very first sentence in two of the texts presented, are at the beginning of the chapter called “historical leaders that I admire”. The first two lines of the first-grade curriculum reads “Every night my grandpa tells me a story of the lives of interesting leaders. Among them I will share some stories of the admirable historical leaders with you my friends” (Government of the Union of Myanmar, 1st grade, p. 45). Three things to make note of from these lines are i) “Grandpa, ii) “admirable historical leaders” and iii) “share some stories [...] with you my friends”. The story told here is presented through the interaction between the boy and his grandfather. I will not argue that there is much hidden meaning behind the word “grandpa”, however, the grandfather does symbolize the elderly. In Brooke Treadwell’s dissertation on the civic education curriculum in Myanmar primary schools, she addresses respect of the elderly as one of three main overarching themes in the civic duties education, as it reflects some of the more central values represented in civic education (Treadwell, 2013, p. 117). The way respect of the elderly is presented through the civic education curriculum, it is with a notion of “profound admiration” (Treadwell, 2013, p. 120), and this notion of admiration is also mimicked in the way historical leaders and heroes are featured in the text. Admiration is not only described in the context of presenting the historical leaders in the sociology curriculum, it is even a part of the overarching headline of the chapter in the first grade, and each of the successive textbooks. In light of the relationship between most of the leaders presented, and Buddhism, the introductory sentence of the chapter speaking of sharing these stories with friends can be seen as a missional act, though not necessarily only as representative of the religious aspect of these leaders. Sharing the stories of these leaders as a way of furthering their fame and glory helps in establishing them as admirable, taking on the same function as that of “elders” which ought to be revered, even to be seen as examples to follow. If hidden curriculum theory speaks of guidelines and understandings of a ‘correct’ way to think, which is often exemplified through classroom interactions, I would argue that the idea of the ‘right answer’ is represented here by creating associations between the historical leaders and their role as admirable and righteous leaders.

The second of these three addresses the “admirable historical leaders”, and when looking at the way these leaders are presented as admirable, we can see how their actions and different historical events are promoted as great through the mere fact that they are done by admirable leaders. In the texts, the historical leaders are presented as admirable and worthy of reverence, and the textbooks are establishing the narrative from which the students will understand these

historical figures and their deeds as something good. An interesting aspect is to see how it is not merely the way these leaders are presented that may reflect the narrative the state is attempting to establish, it is also the selection of leaders, seemingly there are some criteria being considered in finding out which leaders to present. Anawratha, Kyansittha, Bayinnaung, and so on, are all important monarchs in the history, but along with other of the leaders presented (e.g. Maha Bandula) they are warriors and conquerors. As pointed out earlier, Maha Bandula became the new 'representative' of the Tatmadaw in presenting themselves as the legacy of great military leaders (Houtman, 1999, p. 27). The presentation of these leaders are also a presentation of their military might, as one of their most important features. When the Tatmadaw want to present themselves as defenders of the nation, liberators even, these curriculum may contribute to an understanding of the Tatmadaw as the continuation of their legacy. Granted, this interpretation may be projected onto the head of state, whomever it may be, but the choice in presenting military force along with economic stability, religious development, prosperity and peace, paints the picture of a vital role in government filled by a military leader, a role that possibly is continued by the Tatmadaw. One reason for reading these curriculum texts and the ideology of the Tatmadaw together is to see how these textbooks published by the Government of the Union of Myanmar possibly represent some of the themes represented in theories on myanmafication. Cheesman (2002, p. 121) mentioned the state's monopoly on producing the curriculum for education in Myanmar, and while we know JICA has had some involvement in the newly rolled out curriculum, the textbooks are still published by the government of Myanmar. Therefore it may be useful to understand how some of the ideology represented by the Tatmadaw may be reflected through these textbooks.

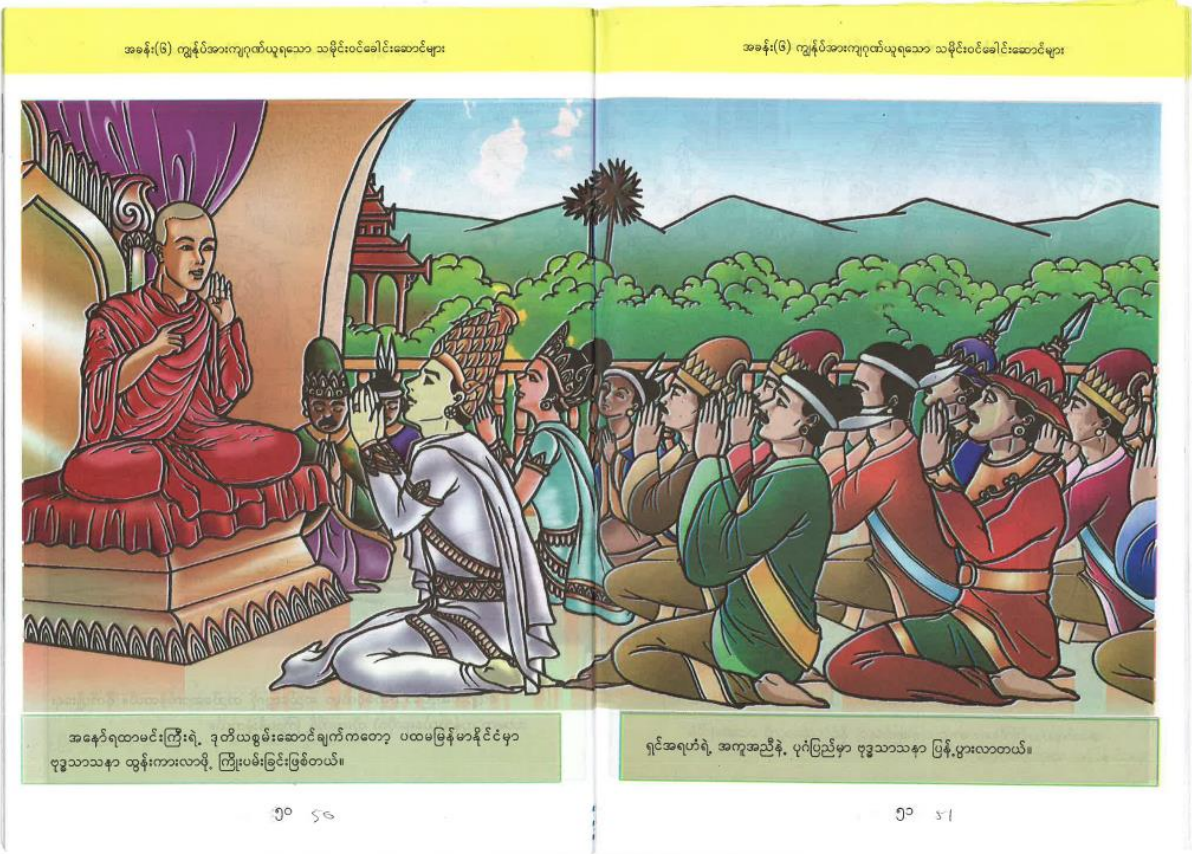
6.3 Themes of religion

"How are themes of religion and unity (re)presented through primary school textbooks in Myanmar?" is the question presented at the beginning of this thesis. Formatting religion was presented as a part of the theoretical framework as a means to seeing how religion as a concept is presented, understood, and formatted through primary school education.

Religion is under the protection of the monarch or other roles of leadership. Religion is spread, supported and protected by Burmese monarchs as they work to defend the country

from foreign forces, and dedicate their time and resources to the promotion of Buddhism. By presenting religion as a part of their personal lives as well as a focus point in their administration, religion can be seen as giving a special role in both leadership and ideal ways of life. Had there been an element of religious diversity in these texts, the ideal way of life would not be associated with being Buddhist in the same way, but the way religion is exclusively mentioned in the context of Buddhism also makes it the ideal religion to follow. For example, it reads that “Bayinnaung was a monarch devoted to Buddhism” (Government of the Union of Myanmar, 1st grade, p. 62).

Some of these texts address religion in a manner that speaks to its political involvement, by using religion or religious language for political purposes. By doing so, the process of formatting religion may involve the politization of religion. One of the themes involved in the politization of religion is unity and nationalistic sentiments. As we have already seen, the process of unity is lifted up as one of the key accomplishments of all the leaders. Unity can of course be a good thing, there is however a story not told here, a story of whose worldviews or religious beliefs are being compromised in the name of unity, seeing as unity is somewhat equated with conformity. Recent years have been marked by the military regime in Myanmar, and some of the parts of their political agenda has been presenting themselves as the defenders of Myanmar as a Buddhist country, e.g. by fighting armed forces to ensure a peaceful Buddhist state (Houtman, 1999, p. 100), as well as those seeking to present a united nation. One could however argue that the unity they speak of is conformity among the people into some sort of a ‘model citizen’. The notion of the appropriate way to behave and a right way to think characterizes the role of the model citizen. Ethnic belonging plays an important part in this understanding, and in some cases the role of the Buddhist tradition may be included as part of being a model citizen. Needless to say, Buddhism in itself is not the challenge, neither are those defining themselves as Buddhists. The problem is how the politization of religion enables the military regime, or other rulers to use religion as a means to an end, as a means to maintain power and support.



(Government of the Union of Myanmar, Sociology 1st grade, p. 50-51)

These two pages of the first grade curriculum depicts Ashin Arahan, Buddhist monk and religious advisor to king Anawratha, who is sitting before him dressed in white. Below the pictures, the text speaks of king Anawratha's attempt to spread Buddhism (ဗုဒ္ဓသာသနာ) throughout the Bagan kingdom, which was accomplished with help from Ashin Arahan (Government of the Union of Myanmar, 1st grade, p. 50-51). The picture depicts the same as the text below: during the reign of king Anawratha, Buddhism held a central position, and governing the country was done alongside the promotion of Buddhism in the country. Both the text and the picture speaks of the relationship between religion and the monarch of the time, and it can also be seen as Buddhism being regarded as higher than political authority, giving Buddhism a prominent position in the Bagan kingdom. When the text and the picture both show king Anawratha and his devotion to Buddhism, it can to the readers be interpreted as an example to follow seeing as king Anawratha regarded Buddhism highly in his personal life as well as his administration.

In light of these things, one can argue that the chapters on “historical leaders that I admire” are presenting similar notions of politicized religion, a religion tied closely together with a ruling authority, a prosperous and ‘ideal’ country and over the whole what is presented as a better life. Religion, along with some other key themes in these texts, is used to solidify leadership. Recent events in Myanmar has shown cases of religion being used to legitimize violence and drastic measures against minority ethnic and religious groups. These text do not, in my opinion, have the same function, rather they are used to solidify the former rulers as great men and women, ensuring that they are presented as good rulers of the people, likeable, admirable, and in many ways leaders most Burmese children should aspire to be. When religion so frequently connected to the heads of state, it opens up for questions regarding religion as a political tool, as part of a political agenda. How is religion influencing or influenced by political trends and power struggles? How are students in primary school understanding religion as a part of a monarchical or ruling authority’s agenda in leading the country?

As mentioned in the background chapter of this thesis, there are some classical understandings of kingship in the Buddhist tradition, some which are also common in a Burmese understanding of kingship. Emperor Ashoka, the Indian conqueror who later committed himself to a so-called ‘conquering by dhamma’ may be compared to the presentation of some of the leaders from the curriculum texts. Ashoka’s conquering by dhamma is in reference to his acting in accordance with moral and ethical principles, and furthering the Buddhist tradition. When king Anawratha is presented in the first grade curriculum, he is presented as a promoter of Buddhism, resembling the role of Ashoka as one who ruled in accordance with the dhamma.

Secularism can be seen as an overarching theme regarding these texts as well. As mentioned before, the role of religion in society may be contested, and there are limitations and freedoms found in the constitution of 2008. Whereas Myanmar officially has freedom of religion, the constitution also recognizes Buddhism in a special position as a result of it being the majority religion (Constitution, 2008, Art. 361). An understanding of Buddhism as especially important to the Burmese society is, in light of an understanding of Buddhist constitutionalism, affecting the way a student may read these curriculum texts. Preconceived ideas and understandings of the societal importance of Buddhism is reiterated through the way

Buddhism is promoted, respected and sustained throughout the curriculum text. Modernization has of course had an impact related to this, as a part of the modernization has involved the separation of different sectors, whereas an example is the divide between religion and education, intending to make the public schools, and possibly the public discourse, religiously neutral. The role of religion in society has therefore shifted as the leadership of the country has, and the role of increased modernization has had its effect on religion and secularization. The way Niklas Foxeus describes modern projects is by how they encounter the past, whereas he presents some examples of modernity in the context of Buddhism in colonial Burma (Schober, 2017, p. 159). Two of his examples are how colonialism introduced western knowledge and practice to Burma, and how certain nation-building projects in the newly liberated nation made connections between the process of modernization and Buddhist soteriology (Schober, 2017, p. 159). Examples such as these provide grounds for understanding a changing culture and changing world as a result of colonial and foreign influence where modernity and Buddhism are not mutually exclusive.

A formatting of religion?

Marius Timman Mjaaland (2019, p. 8) described formatting religion as “processes of standardizing the shape and content of religion”. In light of this definition, how can we see a process of formatting religion in for instance the text describing king Anawratha’s rule? First of all, the curriculum describes king Anawratha as one who established a strong kingdom (Government of the Union of Myanmar, 1st grade, p. 48), where the spread of Buddhism was one of the central aspects of his administration. The strength of a kingdom is therefore not completely separated from religious involvement. Secondly, the picture of king Anawratha and the monk Ashin Arahan not only describes the spread of Buddhism in the kingdom, as the text reads (Government of the Union of Myanmar, 1st grade, p. 50-51), but it places the king in a position of personal devotion to Buddhism, leading the people in religious devotion. What then do these two interpretations of the text and image of king Anawratha mean in terms of formatting religion? Religion is standardized as something primarily concerning Buddhism, existing for the betterment of society. As Buddhism also is presented as the religion spread throughout the country, it emphasizes the role of Buddhism in Bagan as the de facto religion. When the texts reads that Buddhism spread throughout the country, followed

by the next page reading “king Anawratha is the first monarch who could unite the small and scattered kingdoms.” (Government of the Union of Myanmar, 1st grade, p. 52), it is possible to understand the people shown in the image as representative of the people at large with their various clothing and headdresses.

Robert Jackson (2019, p. 91) wrote that “one of the key aims of religious education is concerned with helping pupils to reflect on their studies of ways of life that are different in some respects from their own”. By saying so, Robert Jackson points to religious education as a subject designed to help a student reflect and learn about diversity in some way. The Burmese primary school, as we know, does not have its separate subject teaching religion, and has even stated that religion should not have a place in the public school. Myanmar classrooms has representatives from various ethnic and religious backgrounds, and in this way represent a diverse group of students representing different ways of life. Without any official subjects or curriculum to help teach a student about different views on for example religion, how will a primary school student learn to reflect and think critically about matters of religious or ethnic diversity? Jackson makes the argument that in a multicultural classroom, a benefit of understanding other cultures and religiosities may challenge “unquestioned presuppositions” (Jackson, 2019, p. 91).

6.4 Buddhism: the ‘right’ religion?

My findings from the 2019 Sociology curriculum corresponds to what Brooke Treadwell (2013) observed in her research on the curriculum from the *civic* education class in Burmese primary school. Her observations regard the role of religion and representation of religion:

“The repeated emphasis the textbooks place on Buddhism implies that it is the one and only ‘true’ religion of Burma and suggests that if a person is not Buddhist, they are not a truly integral part of Burma in all aspects of their lives. The absence of Christian, Muslim and other non-Buddhist practices and beliefs from the textbooks suggests that students from these religious backgrounds are outsiders, in a sense, who are learning about the ‘real’ Burmese religion from the Myanmar readers.”

(Treadwell, 2013, p. 163)

As we can see, there are similarities between the observations made of the civic education curriculum, and what I have presented from the sociology curriculum. Religion is only present in the curriculum texts in the form of Buddhism, none of the other religious minorities are mentioned, and this way of excluding certain parts of the population from the retelling of important historical events suggests that Buddhism is an essential part of what it means to identify as a 'Burmese'.

In the past, monarchs have ruled with advisors and help from Buddhist leaders, as the example of Anawratha and Ashin Arahana shows. Thatnabain is what the head of the monastic order has been called (Dhammasami, 2007, p. 17), and it represented an influential role in society as the head of the Sangha, and therefore worked closely with the monarchs ruling the political sphere. In this way, the intention was for the political to be administered by the monarch while the religious domain remained under a religious leader working with the king. With the help and influence of monarchs, Buddhism spread throughout the country as the dominant religion. Later, the torch of leadership was carried on by 'secular' governments without the same ties to religion as the monarchs in Burma's royal history. Cases of religious involvement in the administration therefore looked different as the rulers politicized religion, helping them to legitimize their own authority. By going against certain ethnic and religious groups, they play with the sentiments on anti-colonialism in the sense that they are protecting their own people, their own culture, from the foreign. In this way, they are taking on a role as the defenders of religion, more precisely the defenders of Buddhism, legitimizing their own rule as the defense of Buddhism is presented as a defense of a cultural identity they deem to be a national identity, creating a narrative of what it really is to be Burmese. This opens up for the question of whether or not the government was really secular, though as I have already pointed out, the motivation for defending Buddhism is intended as a political act aimed towards their own legitimacy, rather than for the sake of the religion. In the paragraphs discussing *myanmafication* and the military's agenda of presenting themselves as unifiers of the nation, we see how religion in these texts may be formatted to fit their agenda. The formatting of religion happening in the process of myanmafication can also be a process of tying together themes of religion with themes of unity, national identity, as we can see signs of in the texts when monarch after monarch is presented as defenders and supporters of Buddhism. This type of presenting state leaders uniting and defending the nation, and together with religion may also represent an ideal that the Tatmadaw may want to connect to their own

leadership, drawing on the historical leaders presented in the curriculum and their role as exemplary.

Approaching these curriculum texts from the theoretical perspective of formatting religion, we see that these texts do not address religion in a manner of confessional education, but it presents the relationship between former administrations in the Myanmar history, representing the state, and Buddhism through the lives and presentations of various monarchs and other leaders. If a process of formatting religion addresses the outset and arrangement of religion and how it is connected to the understanding of religion, these curriculum texts provide sources for the students to understand religion in a specific way. As the official curriculum in the public school does not teach religion in a confessional form of education, the source for children to understand religion is through their classroom experiences. These sources can be through the way religion is presented in other curriculum texts where religion appears almost as a bi-product of what the text initially addresses. Of course, this is not including experiences and knowledge of religion gathered outside of school, for example in the home or local religious community. It does however mean that unless a student has access to other sources of knowledge about religion, religion will be formatted through the sources at their disposal, where these curriculum texts on historical leaders may contribute to the formatting of religion in the eyes of a student. Formatting speaks of the way something is arranged, structured, whereas the formatting of religion then speaks to the way the understanding of religion is constructed or being changed through its presentation in different discourses. Most of the arguments I make above about the role of religion in the curriculum address the lack of representation from religious minorities, and the lack of representation also applies to ethnic minority groups.

In the curriculum texts I have presented, six out of seven of the leaders are presented with a strong connection to Buddhism. Either they worked hard to promote and expand Buddhism in the country, or they devoted themselves to the religion, donated to religious buildings and communities and restored religious sites. The overarching headlines of these chapters from the primary school curriculum says “historical leaders that I admire” (Government of the Union of Myanmar, 1st grade, p. 44; 2nd grade, p. 28; 3rd grade, p. 52), whereas the translator has translated the headline in the second grade curriculum with “Historical leaders that I admire, and aspire to be”. These historical leaders are presented as examples to be followed,

what then does this mean for the understanding of religion, and the relevance of having a religious life?

Formatting religion is an interesting theoretical concept to draw into a discourse analysis as it also looks at the language and the context it is said or written in. The role of religion in the primary school curriculum, and the formatting of religion, therefore needs to be seen in the context of other factors attributing meaning to the concept of religion, providing means for how religion is to be understood. Religion was never intended as a part of a public school education, at least that is what has been said in former press releases regarding the topic (Paing, 2017), though religion is present on every street corner in Myanmar, in the form of religious sites or religious people. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the representation of religion in the classroom can be found in the different actors present in the classroom, meaning students, teachers, or others. In this way, the same thing happens in the classroom as it does elsewhere in society: religion is represented through those who practice it, whether or not the practice takes place in the classroom. In the curriculum texts, religion is formatted in a way more or less equating it with the Buddhist tradition, all other religious traditions are simply left out of the texts. The way religion is arranged or constructed is solely by expanding on the presence of Buddhism, and the people's (and leader's) dedication to the Buddhist tradition. This shapes the view of religion as something often concerning Buddhism both in the lives of individual, but almost as something society at large is built upon. Understanding religion can therefore be seen as the understanding of the importance of Buddhism. Though the state has claimed a secular position in the past, there are many signs pointing to the involvement of religion in more ways than one. As previously mentioned, the representation of religion through the constitution is within a very specific framework defining what religion (or religious actors) may or may not do, even declaring the special position of Buddhism. Religious buildings and people on most of the pages of the curriculum texts, as well as statements declaring that public schooling ought to be 'non-religious', reflect the contradicting roles of religion and secularism in Myanmar and the state.

Another aspect to consider in these texts is the understanding of how the Tatmadaw, the Burmese military forces, view religion. How may this be expressed and/or reinforced through the curriculum texts? For instance, there are several policies by the government, under the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MRA), giving Buddhism a favored position on the basis of

being the largest religion by numbers. This favoritism can for example be seen in the form of Buddhist missionary activities being conducted around the country, also in areas largely consisting of minority religious groups (Frydenlund, 2019, p. 41). Outside the curricula and the schoolground, Buddhism may be perceived as favored by the authorities, both in areas with many of religious minority backgrounds, as well as other places. When reading the curriculum texts on historical leaders, I have argued that there is a sense of Buddhist favoritism simply by the exclusion, the leaving out, all other religious traditions in the texts. A student may therefore be inclined to find Buddhism in a stronger position in the text itself, but also in light of external knowledge of how the government relate to religion in their policies, and presentation of religion in a public discourse.

Overarching themes of religion and ethnic unity have been corresponding with the theme of secularisation. The role of religion in the curriculum texts is also a matter of the role of religion in Burmese society and public discourse. In contemporary Myanmar, the question of secularism is also the question of what part religion should have in primary schooling, a question not uncommon in other countries as well. Buddhism, which I have argued is the predominant religious tradition in each of the seven curriculum texts I have analysed is largely an integral part of Burmese society also outside of school. When the curriculum presents Buddhism and ethnic unity as two of the main accomplishments of the nation's foremost historical leaders throughout history, it is hard to argue that schooling in Myanmar is in fact non-religious. From a minority perspective, the curriculum texts do not necessarily speak negatively about various ethnic groups or religious traditions, but it is as if they are ignored. Attempting to understand curriculum regarding Burmese history is, from the perspective of a child from a minority background, challenging as each of the stories told have an aspect of glorifying Buddhism, by way of excluding all other religions, and telling history as it is seen from a majority perspective.

7 Concluding remarks.

I started this thesis with the research question: How are themes of religion and ethnic unity (re)presented through the primary school curriculum in Myanmar?

Both of the themes I have looked for in the curriculum is present in several of the texts analysed. It was formerly said that religion should have no place in the primary school curriculum, my findings do however show that this is not correct. Religion and ethnic unity recur in every story told, though not in a manner teaching religious doctrine. The way these themes are represented is a) as a part of the personal lives of historical leaders in Burmese history, and b) as a central part of their accomplishments as rulers, and a part of their administration. Both images and texts confirm that themes of religion and ethnic unity are recurring themes in these texts, though diversity is not. When religion is spoken of, or depicted in the images following the texts, it is exclusively speaking about Buddhism. No other religious view is represented or mentioned in the texts, only Buddhism. In the same way there are hardly any references to diversity among ethnic people. Each of the cases referring to the ethnic groups refer to them as those being united by a ruler representing the majority, both ethnic and religious. The roles of the monarchs are presented as closely connected to religious advancement, spreading Buddhism throughout the kingdom. The way this is presented in the curriculum texts opens for the interpretation that the ‘correct’ religion and the ‘correct’ ethnic group are Buddhism and the majority ethnic group, the Bama. My findings back up the thought that Buddhism holds a special position in Myanmar, even in the eyes of the state, whether or not their motivation is advancing religion or rather legitimizing their own authority through religion. Likewise, themes of unity are presented only with reference to how monarchs and military leaders united the people as one Burmese people. Myanmar, which we now know has 135 recognized ethnic groups, is represented only by the common term ‘Burmese’.

These themes of unity and religion tie together with the Tatmadaw (the Burmese military forces) and the so-called process of myanmafication. This process, referring to the military’s regime attempts of legitimizing their own authority also involves aspects of presenting themselves as those continuing the work of many former great unifiers of the country.

From the perspective of a child attending the public school in Myanmar, matters of representation provides an interesting aspect in understanding these texts. The public school system have kids from a multitude of backgrounds, ethnic and religious, though most of them are not represented through the retelling of history. Reading history from the perspective of a minority, even in the cases of Buddhist minorities, many of the stories presented may be stories about how their own culture and even religion has been trampled on or ignored. Through the textbooks analysed, one might wonder if there is an element of 'hidden curriculum' telling the students that the Burman majority group and the Buddhist tradition are the 'correct' ones. In a discourse analysis, meaning is established through language, and can be understood when seen in its sociocultural context. Meaning that the way the curriculum texts are to be understood is in light of other public discourses in Myanmar, regarding religion and unity.

Every leader presented through the curriculum are presented as admirable and highly esteemed. They are seen as heroes who has shaped the country, and are presented as those laying the foundation for the unity of Myanmar. King Anawratha, Bayinnaung and Alaung Mintaya are presented as the great unifiers, whereas Anawratha is considered the first to ever unite all the peoples into one kingdom. Through the curriculum texts, unity is presented as something that has been present through many different rules, though as I argued earlier, research shows that Myanmar has never had a united people, and every presentation describing the newly forged unity among the people is presenting an illusion of an ideal world. Ethnic and religious conflicts have raging in various parts of the country for a very long time, and when unity is 'forged' in the curriculum texts it leaves out all the information on how it was achieved, though likely it is by means of war and battles. Nonetheless, there is a presentation of unity as something that has been accomplished several times before, and it contributes to the reinvention of the Tatmadaw as those uniting the people now.

Religion in education may contribute to understandings of other view on life. As mentioned early in the thesis, there was an attempt of distributing textbooks giving a basic teaching of the world religions. Causing an uproar, these textbooks had to be retracted. Religion in public education is therefore also represented through the people in the schools, e.g. teachers and students, though I argue that the curriculum texts provide a big source of representing a specific religious and ethnic view. What I have analysed in this thesis is the role of religion

and unity as themes presented through the sociology curriculum. As there are no textbooks presenting religious education in the public school system, the knowledge of religion provided in the public school is through these other so-called non-religious subjects. In light of modernization and secularism, the religious education was largely placed under the responsibility of monastic schools especially, though other private schools also provide religious education. Therefore, the representation of religion in the subject of sociology becomes a source of information for the students to learn about religion. Based on my findings from the curriculum texts, I would argue that religion is most definitely present, both as a somewhat hidden curriculum, but also quite explicitly. It is clear what religion and ethnic group is presented as the ideal, posing a challenge for those from minority religions and ethnic groups in reading history from a perspective different from their own.

8 Bibliography

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