

Religious nationalism: Myanmar and the role of Buddhism in anti-Muslim narratives

An analysis of Myanmar's ethnic conflicts through the lens of Buddhist nationalism



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Abstract

In contrast to the Western ideal of secularization, religion has in some cultures maintained its important role in nationalist undertakings. This is the case in Myanmar, a country that is currently in the midst of a state transformation towards democracy after more than fifty years of authoritarian, military rule. This religious nationalism has been taken to a higher level of chauvinism and violence between the Buddhist majority and the Muslim minority, in particular towards the Rohingya minority from Rakhine state. In order to understand why and how Theravada Buddhism's ideas, discourses and practices have been interpreted for political and nationalist purposes, this thesis will make use of nationalism theories, in relation to religion, and understand how the merge of those two concepts has led to the current ethnical clashes. The research aims at assessing the role and power of Buddhism in the context of Burmese nationalism through a narrative analysis of sources such as NGO reports, newspaper articles, academic writings and second-hand interviews. The analysis concludes that it is not so much Buddhism in itself that has led to the current anti-Muslim narratives and inter-religious clashes, but rather the use of its teachings and symbols, by the monkhood and the state, to gain legitimacy and to justify vehement discourses and actions.

Key words: Buddhism, nationalism, Myanmar, Rohingya, narrative

Words: 17'580 (excluding abstract and appendices)

List of Abbreviations

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BIA	Burma Independence Army
NLD	National League for Democracy
OHCHR	Office of High Commissioner for Human Rights
SLORC	State Law and Order Restoration Council
SPDC	State Peace and Development Council
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
USDP	Union Solidarity and Development Party

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1. Introduction

1.1 Context

In a world dominated by the occidental ideal of secularization and modernization, religion is increasingly regarded as an element that ought to be separated from politics, from economy and from anything that has to do with the nation-state in general because of its history of irrational and conflictual tendencies (Friedland, 2001). However, this perspective is not universally shared, as the relationship between nation, more particularly nationalism, and religion has either re-emerged or been strengthened over the past years in certain parts of the world. In fact, countries experiencing a shift in their organisation, functioning and structure often need elements allowing a strong nation building around common ideals, and among the list of tools reinforcing a nation's identity such as education, folklore and communication, we find religion. The combination of two strong and deep concepts such as nationalism and religion is an effective way of creating movements of unity, faith and security (Kinnvall, 2004), but it can also have devastating effects by nourishing hatred and violence on a fragile, unstable and ethnically diverse country.

In former Burma, now known as Myanmar, Buddhist nationalism is a growing issue that results from a longstanding history of colonisation and military dictatorship in a context of ethnical – and thus religious – diversity. In fact, despite Myanmar's recent democratic and economic development, violence and instability are still inherently present across the country, especially in Rakhine (previously named Arakan) state. Over the course of the past years, the tension between Buddhist nationalists and Muslim minorities, the Rohingya in particular, has grown into a dangerous strain of racism and intolerance. Despite the 2008 Burmese Constitution, which supposedly provides religious freedom, there is an underlying recognition of the special position of Theravada Buddhism as the faith professed by the great majority of the citizens (89%), thus providing the majority with a numerical advantage that has turned into a moral authority. The limits of religious freedom are perfectly illustrated in the oppression and prejudice

conducted against Myanmar's Islamic faction, which are keeping the country from attaining a stable and democratic situation, but they also shed light on an unknown face of Buddhism. In fact, what started as a process led by the former military dictatorship is now carried-out by high-ranked Buddhist monks, who act out of fear of losing racial and religious purity (Zarni, 2013). Thus, Myanmar's President Thein Sein's suggestion to expel the Rohingya to other countries in order to get rid of them once and for all is greatly supported by the country's religious elite, who openly expresses their aversion, which results in ethnical clashes, population displacements and inevitably death (Human Rights Watch, 2013). The violence is not always direct however, but is also expressed in other forms such as social and economical pressure. One of them is the 969 Movement, an islamophobic nationalist effort encouraging people to avoid engaging in any Muslim-run businesses. The movement and the contiguous rhetoric is lead by radical Buddhist Monks who are militating against the Muslim minority that they accuse of being a threat to the country's culture and religion (Beech, 2013).

This clearly contradicts the Western popular image of Buddhism as a peaceful, humanistic and nonaggressive doctrine, immune to vehemence and violence, as well as it upends conventional stereotypes of conflictual Muslims on the one side, and Buddhists as emissaries of peace on the other (Malik, 2013). In the assessment of religious extremism, Buddhism has largely been set aside due to its image of nonviolence, empathy and loving kindness promulgated by Siddhartha Gautama (known as the Buddha). However, from the Emperor Ashoka's violent empire on the old Indian subcontinent, to the Buddhist monarchies of pre-colonial Sri Lanka or the Khmer kingdom, Buddhism has a long history of warfare and violence (Marni, 2013) which proves that no faith is immune to politics and radicalism, features often anti-ethical to its foundations (Beech, 2013).

1.2 Research question

What are the reasons for the religious xenophobic rise in Myanmar? And to what extent is Buddhism being used to justify this nationalist violence and intolerance

towards the country's Muslim minorities? Finally, how do the ongoing actions in Myanmar reconcile with Buddhist teachings?

The reconciliation of Buddhism as a philosophy of peace and the ugly reality of faith-led pogroms is one of the country's biggest challenges, and this paper will seek to understand how and why Buddhist teachings and scripture are used as a support for Burma's nationalism.

1.3 Previous research

For a long time, research and media coverage on Myanmar has focused on Aung San Suu Kyi and her political struggle for democracy, which has shadowed the ethnical and humanitarian issues the country has had to deal with. However, over the past few years, there has been a notable growth of interest in Myanmar and the nationalist driven conflicts that are taking place on its territory. Authors such as Ian Holliday (2010), Mary Kate Long (2013) and Maung Zarni (2013) have been giving much importance to the tension between Muslim minorities and the Buddhist majority, just as NGO's such as Human Rights Watch have tried to attract attention to an often-neglected humanitarian issue. Other authors, such as Tessa Bartholomeusz (2002), Michael Jerryson and Mark Jurgensmeyer (2010) or Laksuri Jayasuriya (2009) have engaged in the analysis of Buddhism as an originator of violence and conflict, thus revealing the frequently shadowed side of the faith. Such authors will be very helpful in assessing the motivations and thoughts behind vehement Buddhists in Myanmar, even though their take on Buddhism in relation to Just War will not be considered in this thesis. Moreover, the study of nationalism in a Buddhist context has been reviewed by authors such as Catarina Kinnvall (2002, 2004) or Gorski and Türkmen-Dervisoglu (2013), who provide with an important basis for this research. Finally, recent articles discussing the specific issue of Buddhist nationalism in the Burmese context have been written by, amongst others, Mikael Gravers (2013), Hannah Beech (2013) or Tatsushi Arai (2013), which all provide with an stimulating and useful analysis of the situation.

1.4 Importance and aim of study

The expansion and urgency of Myanmar's situation, particularly regarding Muslim minorities such as the Rohingya, make it necessary to shed light on the humanitarian crisis that is taking place in the region. In fact, the fragility of the country's political situation, the destructive consequences of the clashes as well as the imminence of a spill-over to the neighbouring Southeast Asian countries (Coates, 2013) makes investigations – and more importantly actions and engagements – necessary and irrefutable. In fact, not only does this make it a highly topical matter for social studies and political science in particular, it is also imperative that academics and researchers highlight the gravity of the situation so that the international community can speak up and take the necessary measures to stop the current disaster. In order to do so, this paper will seek to distance itself from the traditional religious warfare study, stereotyping Islam as a faith impregnated with violence and either neglecting Buddhism or putting in a category full of peaceful, positive and non-violent stereotypes. Thus, by focusing on a faith that has been overlooked in the Western conflict literature, this thesis will attempt to highlight the limits of religious nationalism as well as the use and interpretation of a faith for political and nationalistic purposes.

1.5 Key concepts

1.5.1 Nationalism

In order to make use of religious nationalism as a theoretical framework for this case study, it is necessary to specify the terms in which nationalism is defined. Drawing on Friedland's (2001:137) designation, nationalism is "a form of state representation (...) grounding the identity and legitimacy of a state in a population of individuals who inhabit a territory bounded by that state". Moreover, nationalism, as the political procedures ordered through the state in the name of the nation, creates the nation, not the contrary. Hence, it is a discursive habit "by which the territorial identity of a state and the cultural identity of the people whose collective representation it claims are constituted as a singular institutional fact" (Friedland, 2001:138), thus joining together state, territoriality and culture.

In addition to that, this thesis will make use of Benedict Anderson's (1991) famous work on "Imagined Communities", in which nationalism is defined as an element that constructs the nation around the link between each members of the country, who will most likely never meet each other, but are related through a shared history, kinship, culture and religion. It is the belief and shared identity of those members that create a community, as the force of ethnicity is found in the significance attached to our own identities and the ones of others. Individuals thus seek to secure a sphere where they can freely and commonly express their identities, practice their cultural habits, sustain their beliefs and educate the future generations in a common and shared time and space (Anderson, 1991).

1.5.2 Ethnic minority group

According to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (2014), the definition of ethnic minorities is based on "national, ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic identity". Despite the fact that there is no universally agreed listing of which groups constitute minorities, it is stressed that any definition of the latter must include both objective factors relating to shared identity, language or religion, as well as subjective factors that embrace the individuals feeling of belonging to the said group. The difficulty in defining clearly who constitutes a minority lies in the important variety of situations and contexts in which individuals live and what ties them together. Every state has one or more minority groups, and according to the United Nations Minorities Declaration of 1992, it is the state's responsibility to protect them. The Rohingya, despite their non-recognition by the Burmese state, fall into the almost all points of the definition offered by Francesco Capotori, Special Rapporteur of the United Nations Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities in 1977, which states that a minority is "a group numerically inferior to the rest of the population of a State, in a non-dominant position, whose members – being nationals of the State – possess ethnic, religious or linguistic characteristics differing from those of the rest of the population and show, if only implicitly, a sense of solidarity, directed towards preserving their culture, traditions, religion or

language” (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2014). In fact, the non-recognition of the Rohingya as Burmese citizens makes the situation complex, but the group is however legally considered as a Muslim Minority in Myanmar (Human Rights Watch, 2013a).

1.5.3 Conflict

“Conflict” is a wide and complex notion that could be debated over and over without reaching any final conclusive definition. For the purpose of this study, it is important to stress the fact that the term takes into account both “direct” and physical conflict such as the actual clashes between Rakhine Buddhists and the Rohingya, but is also embraces moral and ideological conflicts that arise through narratives, campaigns or other nationalistic and xenophobic conducts. To define what constitutes a conflict, this dissertation will be based on Johan Galtung’s (1996) description, which states that conflict can be defined as an incompatibility in attitude, a behaviour and a contradiction. The first designates what is rooted in a society or in the individuals constituting it, thus it is related to a certain culture as well as the perception people have of themselves and of others. The second is comprehended in relation to the reaction the individual and/or a group towards its environment, which can be either violent or nonviolent, but is always visible. Finally, a contradiction is an issue that goes against the beliefs and ideas of a group, or that challenges the usual way things go.

It is commonplace that researchers in contemporary conflict studies view conflict as a challenge in relationships between the factions. In contrast, in interviews carried out by Arai (2013), Burmese Buddhist’s take on conflict places inner attributes such as greed, wrong view, anger, etc. in the centre of their conflict assessment while placing the resulting human relationships in the background. In other words, Buddhist practitioners take into account “the source, nature and perceived effect of social conflict as a subjective, experiential process that is internal to their mind, while interpreting the resulting relationships as an externalized effect of what the view as an essentially internal process” (Arai, 2013: 8).

1.6 Limitations

The fact that this paper's subject is quite recent and topical makes it hard to find revised and detailed analytical literature. Despite the growing number of newspaper articles, NGO reports, and conferences discussing Myanmar's actual ethnic conflicts, the amount of academic research assessing the matter is still quite limited. Considering the controversy of the matter, the information and material related to the conflicts and convoluted ideologies are rarely completely neutral and objective as they are frequently emanating from interviews, speeches and newspapers. Consequently, since the relevant authors are often taking position, the analysis could be exposed to a certain lack of impartiality, which will however be avoided at best with the use of analytical academic literature and official reports. Moreover, the influence of Western perspectives and concepts (such as secularization, Buddhism as a pacific faith, colonial remainders, etc.) could disturb or misrepresent the actual discourses, ideas and events taking place in former Burma. In order to prevent this, much attention will be given to a diversity of local authors and media, so as to try to grasp different angles and viewpoints of the situation.

Because of very limited amount of narratives and testimonies stemming from the Rohingyas and other Muslim minorities, this study will mainly be centred on official religious and governmental viewpoints. Even though it would be enriching to include the minorities' stance and views about the current situation, this thesis seeks to understand the issue from a Buddhist nationalist perspective, and hence the lack of those narratives does not weaken the study in any substantial way. Also, the literary, practical and doctrinal manifestations of Buddhism are too complex to be fully grasped and made justice to. In order not to make any confusion or to draw any drastic conclusion, this paper does not pretend to analyse and argue on any particular element of the Buddhist faith, neither does it go too deep in any purely spiritual discourse. Also, it is worth noting that first of all, this thesis' arguments might not be transferrable to other cases, since Myanmar's situation is unique. Also, one should not be tempted to generalize the

narratives put forward for the study's purposes, as the narratives expressed by Wirathu, its followers or the Burmese government are not always supported inside the country.

Finally, it is important to keep in mind that the conflicts in Myanmar are going on as this thesis is being written, and that the situation on the ground is rapidly changing. This makes it difficult to give a definitive oversight of the conflict and to elaborate conclusive remarks about the conflict in itself. Nevertheless, whatever events might occur after the completion of this dissertation, the essential original sources and justifications for the conflict will remain the same no matter the outcomes, thus the light will be put on those.

1.7 Thesis structure

After this brief introduction, a factual presentation of Myanmar as well as a glance at its historical background will be provided, in order to easily comprehend the current context and happenings. Due to the conflict's deep historical, political and social roots, it does in fact seem indispensable to draw a timeline with the different key dates and events that have shaped the country's present structure. Because of Burma's rich and long history the account has to begin at a certain point of reference, and for practical and logical reasons it will start in 1923, date of the commencement of the British occupation, and go through the succession of military juntas, dictatorships and other political, social and religious events that have taken place until today.

Second, a presentation of the study's theoretical framework, namely religious nationalism, will be given. Moreover, the combination of two broad and comprehensive concepts such as religion and nationalism combined require some deepening such as an outline of the concepts of nation-building, national identity or the Self and Other dichotomy, but always in relation to religion.

Finally, after laying down the abovementioned fundamentals for a holistic understanding of the matter, the analysis in itself will be done and discussed. The latter will treat the problematic, starting with an assessment of the different

narratives, claims and goals put forward by the issue's central actors –the nationalist monks, the lay people and the Burmese government– as well as their actions. Those will be scrutinized in relation to Buddhist scripture and teachings, in order to highlight not only the use of religion in the various declarations and activities, but also the discrepancies between the theory and practice, and their alignment with the faith's dogmas. Finally, an estimation of the looming spill-over effects caused by the clashes will be given, as well as a presentation of occurred events showing that the fear and hatred has already spread beyond the Burmese borders.

2. Presentation of Myanmar and Historical Background

This chapter will bring out the necessary factual data and historical information for the understanding of Myanmar's current situation, as well as recapitulate the ethnical clashes since their upsurge in June 2012.

2.1 Factual presentation

Myanmar – officially called Republic of the Union of Myanmar - is located in South-eastern Asia and shares borders with Thailand, Laos, China, India and Bangladesh. It is formed along the coasts of the Andaman Sea and the Bay of Bengal (see map in Appendices). It's population is composed of 8 official ethnic majority groups, with 68% of it being Burman, 9% Shan, 7% Karen, 4% Rakhine, 3% Chinese, 2% Indian, 2% Mon and 5% other. Almost 9 out of 10 people belong to the Theravada Buddhist community, and 4% are Christian, 4% Muslim, 1% Animist and 2% other (World Factbook, 2014).

Since March 2011, Myanmar is a presidential republic and the government form is a Parliamentary one, with President Thein Sein at its head. Legislative authority is conferred to a bicameral Assembly of the Union (*Pyidaungsu Hluttaw*), which consists of a 224-seat House of Nationalities (*Amyotha Hluttaw*) and a 440-seat House of Representatives (*Pyithu Hluttaw*). Three-fourths of the members of each chamber are directly elected, as the residual quarter is appointed by the military, which keeps a substantial level of influence. The 2008 constitution provides the

president with executive authority, and the latter is elected to a five-year term by the House of Representatives and heads the National Defence and Security Council (NDSC) (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2014).

2.2 Historical background

The present situation in Myanmar stems from complex social and political roots that need to be understood in order to fully grasp the extent of the issue. Even though Burma has a long and rich history that started way before the British colonisation, the current issues are to some extent the result of the colonial rule; hence it seems relevant to start the historical review from that period – which serves a point of reference only – and forward. In fact, before the colonial rule the Burmese king detained the role of primary protector of the country and Buddhism was depicted as the symbol of cosmological stability and harmony. When the British entered the country and established imperial control they deposed the king, and inevitably neglected its institutional task of supporting and protecting the monkhood. From that moment, many Burmese Buddhists claim that a deterioration of monastic rules and traditions followed, resulting in a decline in Buddhist morality in the country. As a consequence, a quest for the protection and the propagation of the faith became democratized with an increase in monastic groups as well as lay people that organized politically on behalf of their nation and religion. This represents the basis for our analysis, and the following pages will add some historical facts about Myanmar's history that will allow a better understanding of the current concerns (Walton, 2013).

2.2.1 From 1823 to 1948: Colonial occupation and Burmese independence

Like previously mentioned, much of what happens in Myanmar today can be traced back to the British colonisation that started with British-Burmese wars in the mid-1820s, even though official ruling began in 1885 only. At that time, the country had no modern state, no frontiers, and was thus quite easy for the British to take over. They did so in ways that did not fit the rules of tenable nation building, because the colonial project was motivated more by imperial control than by national development. During their stay, the British decided to eliminate

the Monarchy and to dissociate the government from religion, thus stripping the monkhood (*Sangha*) from its traditional prestige and official benefaction. In parallel, the forced demise of the monarch added up on the devastating effects of the colonial period. In response, many resorted to guerrilla warfare to fight back against the imperial occupation, which was led by former officials, royal princes, former officials of the royal army, etc. but most of them were punished and executed for their opposition (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2014).

Moreover, the British imposed divergent modes of ruling across the country, exercising direct rule in central Burma and indirect rule in the surrounding state, thus creating a “patchwork of governance arrangements” (Holliday, 2010: 117) with catastrophic consequences on the country’s ethnic relations – a recast of ethnicity and identity in Burma. Furnivall (in Holliday, 2010) indeed identified the Burmese society during the colonial period as a “medley of people that are mixed but do not combine”, due to the fact that the four main racial groups – European, Chinese, Indian and native – were held together not by social or cultural ties, but only by an economic nexus. By the time Burma gained independence in 1948, the country was deeply divided, not only into the four aforementioned groups, but also by the ethnic varieties inside those factions. The decolonisation was rushed, shadowed by the Indian independence, and done with no concern for ethnic relations. As a result, soon after the communist revolt in April 1948, ethnic tensions exploded and uprisings took place in the country (Holliday, 2010).

It is during this period that the tensions between the Buddhist majority and the Muslim minority arose. In fact, during World War II, the predominantly Burmese Burma Independence Army (BIA) militarily supported the Japanese forces against the British, while some ethnic minorities – including the Rohingya – fought in support of the British. This inevitably led to violent clashes, especially in Arakan (now Rakhine), between the Burmese majorities and minorities, and it is in this context that a Muslim armed rebellion began in the region. The latter claimed the creation of an independent Muslim state within Burma, in the northern part of

Arakan state, a request answered to with violence and repression (Human Rights Watch, 2013).

2.2.2 From 1948 to 2011: Military Dictatorship

In response to the abovementioned violence, military as well as civilian leaders saw no other solution than to reinvigorate and redeploy the colonial security tool in order to reinforce the disintegrating country during this important phase of postcolonial state transformation. Despite U Nu's efforts to institute a democratic system, the nationalist Burmese army rose as the critical institution within the state (Holliday, 2010). By 1962, the ethnic divisions were still deep and vivacious. Taking advantage of the country's fragility, General Ne Win's army seized power in a coup that ceased the Burmese democracy and further reinforced the pre-existing issues. A new constitution released in 1974 established a configuration – that persists to this day – of seven Burmese divisions and seven ethnic states in order to facilitate the control over the country. Later on, a national citizenship law established in 1982 identified 135 ethnic groups located within eight major national races (the Burmese majority, and seven minorities). According to this law, there are three categories of citizenships: citizens, associate citizens and naturalized citizens. The first are descendants of residents who lived in the country prior to 1823 (start of the British colonisation) or were born of two citizen parents and belonging to one of the eight “national races” (Human Rights Watch, 2008: 111). The second represents those who acquired citizenship through the 1948 Union Citizenship Act, meaning that individuals who could not provide proof of any settlement before 1823 could still be eligible for citizenship. Finally, the third category consists of individuals who lived in Burma before 1948 and applied for citizenship after 1982, when conclusive evidence needed to be provided regarding their previous generations living in the country prior to independence in 1948. Naturalisation is also possible under certain circumstances, such as age (minimum 18 years old), language (fluency in one national language at least) and particular personal characteristics (Kipgen, 2013). Thus, this law denies citizenship to Muslim minorities such as the Rohingya, who are considered

as immigrants from Bangladesh and whose language is not recognized as an official national language. Also, without citizenship status, the Rohingya have no rights to property, are restricted in their movements, have limited access to education and are not allowed to marry and/or have children without governmental permission (Long, 2013). This is an important basis for the anti-Rohingya narratives throughout the country, not only for the nationalist monks but also for the government and the lay people.

Throughout the military rule, numerous clashes between Buddhists and Muslims followed in Rakhine state, in which the government led campaigns against the Rohingya population as well as it adopted laws and policies resulting in their discrimination and segregation (Human Rights Watch, 2008). One of the national operations, called *Naga Min* (Dragon King), was designed to “scrutinize each individual living in the State, designating citizens and foreigners in accordance with the law and taking actions against foreigners who have filtered into the country illegally” (Human Rights Watch, 2013:n.p). In Rakhine State, this program turned into a campaign aiming at the expulsion of the Rohingya Muslims through brutal mass arrests, killings, raids, and so on. As a result, more than 200’000 Rohingya fled to Bangladesh, where humanitarian access was denied and food aid was voluntarily withheld in order to force back the refugees to Burma. Thus, in 1979, Burmese President Ne Win agreed to a repatriation program, forcibly returning Rohingya to northern Rakhine, which has since then become an area of religious and ethnic concentration. The second military operation, *Pyi Thaya* (clean and beautiful nation) was launched in 1991 for the same reasons – expelling the Rohingya – and had equal humanitarian consequences on the minority.

26 years after the coup, in 1988, a series of widespread pro-democracy manifestations took place due to indignation over economic mismanagement and political oppression, known as the 8-8-88 uprisings. As a result, the government established plans for elections in 1989 and in June, it changed the country’s official English name from the “Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma” to the

“Republic of the Union of Myanmar”. The first elections in almost 30 years were won by 80% by the National League for Democracy (NLD) – the party of Aung San Suu Kyi – but the military junta refused to cede authority and continued to rule the country without respect to the society’s demands. In fact, a formal military directorate, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) – later to be renamed in 1997 the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) – was prompted to confiscate power from Ne Win’s military-backed regime and take over the country’s authority (Cline, 2009). In the early 1990’s, the military dramatically increased their presence in northern Rakhine State, forcing Muslims into labour, confiscating land and property, and forcibly deporting Rohingyas – once again – to Bangladesh. Moreover, more symbolic persecution was conducted, with the ban of any religious Muslim activities or the demolition of mosques, which were sometimes replaced with Buddhist temples. In 2007, anti-government protests, also known as the Saffron Revolution, led by thousands of Buddhist monks, finally resulted in the SPDC government crackdown. The manifestations resulted in demonstrators being beaten (ca. 200 people) and killed (30 to 40 monks and 50 to 70 civilians). However, after these uprisings, the government announced a referendum for the Constitution and elections for 2010 (Booth, 2007).

2.2.3 From 2010 to present: Governmental reforms

The implementation of a new constitution in 2008, followed by parliamentary elections in 2010 and the opening of the Parliament in January 2011 have shifted Myanmar’s political situation from a military junta to a presidential republic with multi-party elections. In fact, as part of a transformation of the political system, the *Tatmadaw* (the Myanmar Armed Forces) transferred formal authority, after more than 20 years of direct rule, to a nominally civilian government following Myanmar’s first multi-party election since 1990 (Macdonald, 2013). However, the electoral manipulations and other constitutional stipulations have given office to a government largely consisted of former military officers who are closely aligned with the *Tatmadaw*, thus transferring the ruling regime from a military one to an

Electoral Authoritarian form and ensuring a certain primacy of the old order. More precisely, the *Tatmadaw* exists beyond government supervision and has a noteworthy representative body in Parliament through the ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), which mainly consists of former military/junta officials (Guilloux, 2010). As Adam Macdonald (2013) describes it, there has been a change *in* but not *of* the ruling regime, thus still favouring the military establishment and their allies. Nevertheless, the opening of the political sphere and civil society opens up doors and gives space for new actors, identities and relationships. The transition to a civilianised government has also given birth to a series of political, social and economic reforms, which will need to respond to the many issues that have been raised by the civil society and the international community (Pedersen, 2013).

2.3 Conflict recapitulation

Even though the ethnic and religious tensions between Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims have been going on for decades, the wave of violence took another level in June 2012. In Rakhine State, where the conflict began, the majority of the population are Burmese, mostly Buddhist. The minor Muslim population of the State is primarily made up of two groups, the first being the Kaman, which is part of the 135 officially recognized ethnic groups in the country. The second is the Rohingya, who claim to be indigenous to the Rakhine state in spite of the government's contrary claims. In fact, because of the lighter demographic pressure in Rakhine state, many of the early Muslim migrants arrived in the region from Bengal in the context of the Bay of Bengal trade before the thirteenth century. Slowly, Bengali Muslims came to represent a substantial minority of Rakhine's population, which increased during the British occupation and encouraged South Asian migration into the region. In spite of this long-lasting presence on Myanmar's territory, the government and Myanmar's population still refute any bond between the Rohingya and the Burmese territory (Coclanis, 2013). This might also be due to the fact that the ethnic group's religious beliefs, social customs and physical features are different from those of the native

Burmese, which increases their marginalisation and the violations of their rights (Human Rights Watch, 2013).

The Rohingya accuse the Rakhine state government as well as the central government of deliberate attempt to eliminate them and thus defined the violence as a state-encouraged ethnic cleansing – a statement which is supported by NGO's and other members of the international community (Human Rights Watch, 2013). The government refutes such accusations, but has nonetheless failed to come up with concrete solutions (Kipgen, 2013). The tensions thus transformed into actual clashes in June 2012, after the alleged rape and assassination of a Buddhist Rakhine woman by three Muslim men, in Rakhine State. Ten Muslim men were killed on a bus by a mob of retaliating Rakhine Buddhists, and the fighting spread to a larger scale with casualties on both sides – even though observers agree that the Rohingya suffered a greater loss of life and property due to poor preparation and material. In response to criticisms from the international community and various rights groups towards the Myanmar government for not taking the necessary measures, Thein Sein formed a 16-member committee to investigate the case. The committee concluded that the violence was a consequence of mutual distrust and religious differences, which generated hatred and vengeance between Buddhists and Muslims. After the report, relief camps were set up to accommodate both Rohingyas and Rakhines with the help of both national and international funding (Kipgen, 2013).

In October 2012, despite the declaration of a state of emergency in Rakhine state, the tension lead to a second violent outbreak, which caused the death and injury of 200 and the displacement of approximately 100'000 Rohingya (Walton, 2013). Moreover, almost 3000 homes were destroyed, and 14 religious buildings were set on fire (Kipgen, 2013). The violence soon spread across the country, involving not only Rohingya, but also Muslims in general. In particular, Kaman Muslims from southern Rakhine were victims of Buddhist attacks, even though they are part of the 135 recognised ethnic group with full citizenship rights. For instance, in March 2013 the town of Meikhtila gave place to islamophobic riots that lead to

dozens of deaths as a consequence of Buddhists burning Muslim homes, schools and mosques. The uprisings were a response to a jewellery store quarrel and the assassination of a Buddhist monk by Muslims. In spite of the – minimal – measures taken by the government, violent incidents of this sort have kept on, as the vehemence between the two factions grows and the humanitarian implications keep on getting bigger (Human Rights Watch, 2013; Walton, 2013).

3. Theoretical Framework

As a case combining nationalism and religion, the study of Myanmar's uprising conflicts between Buddhists and Muslims needs to be analysed through the theoretical lens of religious nationalism. More specifically, this paper will seek to understand and grasp the symbolic dimension of the ongoing violence through a rationalist approach in an attempt to explain the movement claiming the purity of the Burmese nation in terms of religion (Gorski and Türkmen-Dervisoglu, 2013).

Barker (2009) defines religious nationalism as a sentiment occurring when a specific faith is “central... to conceptions of what it means to belong to the given nation” (Barker, 2009: 13), which is accurate in the case of Myanmar's Buddhist nationalists, who identify their nation in terms of ethnicity and religion. In fact, despite the contradiction that might come to one's mind when thinking about religion and nationalism due to the western association of modernity with secularity (Friedland, 2001), religion and nationalism can in some cases – like Myanmar – be tightly interrelated. Using religious nationalism – and what derives from it, such as, among others, national identity building – as a framework will also be useful in analysing and explaining the sources of the Buddhist nationalism itself, by questioning the conditions and reasons behind the violence induced by nationalist mobilization for religious means (Gorski and Türkmen-Dervisoglu, 2013).

3.1 Religion & Nationalism

When thinking of nationalism, the Western perspective is usually related to modernity and to a separation of the religious and the political. In fact, during the

late eighteenth century's Enlightenment and onwards, the ideals of a nation-state revolved around models of rationalism, materialism, universalism and secularism (Kinnvall, 2002). Knitting a country together was then done through education, economical development, the construction of roads and the improvement of transportation and communication. Religion's role was decreased and even excluded from the process, as secular nationalism was seen to be primarily political and economical, but also universally applicable and morally right. The detachment and differentiation of religion within the public sphere was considered as the modern way of constructing and organizing the state (Friedland, 2001). In fact, like Alexis de Tocqueville argued, secular nationalism would counter religion and "like Islam, overrun the whole world with its apostles, militants and martyrs" (de Tocqueville, 1955: 13), making it the natural and ideological way towards a successful nation-building.

However, just as many occidental scholars have relied on a reality based on an evident separation between the nation and religion, many civilizations such as Myanmar tend to maintain the importance of religion in their political claims. In fact, religion has, in many parts of the world, maintained its status of evident framework for social order competing with secular nationalism, the former allied with ethnic communities and the latter with the nation state. One can thus consider secularism as a predominantly Western and Christian form of political culture, which is seen by the occidental society as the way to modernity. On the contrary, other cultures see religion, Buddhism in this case, as a provider of images and precepts for society, for the foundations of the state and for the regulation of social life. In those situations, the divine laws are inseparable from the ones of the state, because of the governing guidelines they provide (Friedland, 2001). Religious nationalism is then even stronger and deeper, as the intertwinement between the two is clearly rooted and transcendent in social, political and religious life. Hence, it is important to acknowledge the different insights and practices between scholarly perceptions and the Burmese reality regarding the matter, and without claiming any objectivity or truthfulness, trying to take into consideration those dissimilar cultural roots. As a result, the twentieth

and beginning of the twenty-first century have been open to new possibilities of order which take into account a synthesis of both currents, making them not only rivals but also allies for social order (Jurgensmeyer, 2010).

But how can religion and nationalism be associated and used simultaneously for one and the same purpose? First of all, both consist of a discursive, often essentialist, view of their nature and existence as a whole. In order to maintain themselves, especially their identity, both have to claim their superiority through a particular notion of truth and justify their traditions and resultant actions by rational and thought-through stories. Thus, both nationalism and religion evolve around imaginations of ordering power and considerations of how one should relate to those (Friedland, 2001). Moreover, institutionalised religion, in a similar sense to the nation, is territorially bounded as it relates to a consistent structure and defined entities such as a national territory, churches, groupings and organisations that indirectly supply answers and comfort to individuals or groups in search for a sense of unity, wholeness and belonging (Kinnvall, 2004). Both are thus intertwined, as religious elements are turned into national symbols and national events and locations are used in religious myths, all combined in order to create a common identity (Kinnvall, 2004).

Like Jurgensmeyer (2010) notes, the best-known cases of religious conflict in the contemporary world have taken place in regions where it is difficult to define or accept a particular idea of nation state. Myanmar is a perfect example of this statement, since it has for many decades been victim of irregular extremist politics based on uncertainties on the form that the state should take, and what components of society should lead it. Religion, specifically Buddhism, has provided the “basis for a new national consensus and a new kind of leadership” (Jurgensmeyer, 2010: 268). Adding up on this, Catarina Kinnvall (2004) argues that individuals – as well as the groups in which they belong – tend to “become more ontologically insecure and existentially uncertain” (p.741) due to the general globalization of economics, politics and human affairs. In order to seek support and reaffirmation of one's self-identity, parties approach collectives that reinforce

the feeling of security and comfort, which is often found in the combination of religion and nationalism. The latter do in fact prove relevant for providing reassurance and security compared to other identities such as language, race, gender or sexuality, in a time when increasing demands on the individual are being made (Kinnvall, 2002). This identity construction is particularly true in times of rapid readjustment and delicate future, like it is currently the case in Myanmar, since it allows unconditional constructs and selected traumas in ways that the other identity signifiers might not. This phenomenon explains why leaders (political, religious, economical, and so on) tactically use simple causes to unite the people around a common ideology. As previously mentioned, nationalism provides a particularly strong foundation for triggering images of unity, security and power, but so does religion. Both are imaged as elements reflecting reality as it is, but also as resting on solid ground and most of all, as being “true”. In order to rally individuals around religion and nationalism – also called “identity signifiers” – the latter are linked to chosen histories, both good and bad, and to various symbols, memories or myths, thus tracing the constructed lineage of the particular identity group back to a common and specific time and place that will be used as a guide for future actions (Kinnvall, 2004).

Moreover, religion and nationalism both suggest that there are levels of meaning underneath the everyday world that give consistency to untouchable effects, as well as they offer the necessary authority that provides the political and social order with their reason for being. They define the right way of behaving in society, and link individuals together by tying them to a larger collectivity associated with particular places and histories. The latter is important, as going beyond the function of moral order, the sense of location – historical or practical – provides individuals with a sense of belonging to a larger, national embrace (Jurgensmeyer, 2010). Furthermore, both religion and nationalism respond to questions of identity but also to interrogations about the existence of the Other, as well as they provide order in times of chaos and uncertainty. They also introduce clear and holistic notions of “truth”, including the people who adhere to the given

answers but also excluding those who reject them, which prepares the ground for positions of intolerance and marginalisation (Kinnvall, 2004).

3.2 Identity & Nation Building

Nation building seems to be an obligatory and inevitable undertaking for all states around the world, but it has been particularly strong in ancient colonial regions such as Asia, where cultural and linguistic differences have been repressed in order to build single national frameworks often inherited from imperial rulers (Holliday, 2010). As Benedict Anderson famously describes, nations are “imagined communities” (Anderson, 1991), which suggests that nationalism inevitably precedes the nation and that both are deliberately constructed around specific lines and features. Myanmar is no exception, since the junta has for several decades echoed one-nation strategies found in countries like China and has tried – and to a certain degree succeeded – to establish a form of harmonious nationalism constructed around the foundation of Bamar Buddhism, thus rallying the Burmese people around a single language, identity and religion held in an ideal harmony by all major ethnic groups (Holliday, 2010). Considering the great ethnic diversity and disputes in the country, as well as the inter-cultural mixes resulting from marriage leading to hyphenated identities, the success was quite narrow, thus failing to build a modern nation state has been a major cause for the collapse of democracy and the difficulties to restore it.

3.3 Self & Other

The abovementioned construction of the Other leads to a distinctive definition of who belongs to the national territory, of who is “pure”, both nationally and religiously. The construction of self and Other is always done in an attempt to create positions of inferiority and superiority, the latter being represented by the ones inside (in this case inside both the nation and the religion) who represent truth, good, purity, while falsity, bad and dirtiness is descriptions stuck on the ones on the outside. The Other is then seen as despicable and worth less than the self, and the transformation of the Other as the enemy justifies acts to maintain boundaries between the two (Kinnvall, 2004). This phenomenon is undoubtedly

present in Myanmar. In fact, the essentialist ideas of both the nation (Myanmar) and the religion (Buddhism) have been interpreted in ways that justify the exclusion and/or segregation of minorities such as the Muslim Rohingya.

This adds a third notion to the nation/religion relation, which is racism. In fact, stemming from a need for separateness and exclusivity, racism is often constructed and disguised in discourses of simple cultural, religious and/or ethnic differences. In fact, like Kinnvall (2002, 2004) explicates, there is a predisposition in racism to reject the Other based on religion and culture instead of race, and to exclude the Other because of incompatibility rather than of fear and xenophobia. In the case of Buddhist nationalists, the Muslims living in the country are described as “dangerous”, based on religious, cultural and even economical differences but it is seldom admitted that there is a hinge of racism in the hatred. There is in fact a “reduction of identity to a number of cultural characteristics” (Kinnvall, 2002: 84), which encourages a certain in-group essentialism, a demonization of “them” as compared to a sacralisation of “us” that will in turn serve as a justification for acts of protection and defence. Essentialising the Other is part of the process aimed at constructing its integral and singular identity in parallel of a harmonious one of the self (Kinnvall, 2002). Religious nationalism often becomes, particularly in this case, a movement aiming at the defence of a particular group identity – here Bamar Buddhists – based on specific attributes, which in the case of Myanmar are race and religion (Friedland, 2001). This might in fact be one of the most salient ways of constructing and defining the feared Other by answering existential questions and providing essentialised notions of truth and totality (Kinnvall, 2002).

Moreover, according to Gorski and Turkmen-Dervioglu (2013), there seems to be an acknowledgment among scholars that national identities tend to be constructed along religious cleavages, like it can be exemplified with the clashes between Muslims and Buddhists in Myanmar. Indeed, despite the fact that the country’s 2008 constitution includes provisions providing religious freedom for all faiths, Buddhism still holds a special position, as it is the faith professed by most – 89%

– of the citizens. Since religious nationalism only seems viable when there is a common religious basis to found the ideology around (Friedland, 2001), Buddhism serves as a source for a nationalist authoritarian regime as well as for the violent struggles taking place today, since the cleavages between the two religions, mixed with nationalist extremism, lead to inevitable vehemence. This difference in ethnicity and religion has helped to reinforce the Self/Other duality around a Buddhist/Burmese identity, while at the same time neglecting and marginalizing the Muslim/Minority ethnicity, which serves as a justification for violent discourses and behaviours.

Hence, the merge of religion and nationalism might first of all provide religious legitimacy to the state, as well as give nationalist ideologies a transcendent force (Jurgensmeyer, 2010). In doing so, Myanmar's leaders have borrowed numerous features of Buddhist culture, but Buddhist frontrunners have also given nationalistic arguments for their religious objectives. From those perspectives, both religion and nationalism can be seen as the glue that holds communities together through a shared tradition, a specific view of the world and reality, which are all described in particular and characteristically cultural terms. However, considering the process of “othering” and like it will be explained in the analysis, the relationship between the two has been irregular and quite problematic regarding issues such as the ones concerning minorities such as the Rohingya.

As a final remark for this chapter, it is important to note that the religious nationalism taking place in Burma does not seek control over material resources or the state machinery, but it is rather directed towards the promotion of the Buddhist cosmology and code of values, the maintenance of its purity and the preservation of the Buddhist Burmese state. In fact, Keddie (in Friedland, 2001) makes a distinction between two types of “new religious politics”. On the one hand, she categorizes the “fundamentalists” who are driven by an ideal conformity of governmental policies and religious dictates, and the “religious nationalists” on the other, who follow more communitarian and territorial logics. The Burmese monks thus fall into Keddie's second category, since their

discourses and actions do not aim at taking over the country's authority and ruling, neither do they seek broader propagation beyond the state borders. On the contrary, they make use of a certain politicized religion that utilises faith as the basis for the national identity, as well as the source for ultimate values and authority. Like abovementioned, the criterion of judgement is racial and religious purity, beyond the compelling interest of the state (Friedland, 2001).

3. Methodological approach

This chapter describes the methodological considerations that have guided the thesis. Ontological and epistemological reflections are presented in order to understand what constitutes reality in this study, and how the latter will seek to explain and understand it. Moreover, this section will outline the material used as well as the framework employed to analyse it. Finally, the different methodological limitations will articulated, as well as eventual solutions to overpass them.

3.1 Ontological and epistemological considerations

As previously mentioned, this research paper is an exploratory qualitative inquiry, based on the illustrative case study of Buddhist nationalism in Myanmar. The use of a qualitative method seems the most convenient because of the more realistic and flexible outcomes and perspectives of the actual context and events it provides (Marshall and Rossman, 1999). The constantly changing nature and the plurality of narratives on the subject makes it essential to approach the matter from an ontological perspective portrayed as constructivist, which implies that social factors and properties are resulting from the interactions between individuals, and thus acknowledges the existence and influence of ethics, culture, ideologies and altering relationships (Bryman, 2012). In fact, social constructivism suggests that reality and social interactions are shaped by factors that cannot be fixed, meaning that questions related to religious nationalism do

not have one answer but rather a multitude of interpretations based on different contexts, past experiences and even individual considerations (Cresswell, 2009).

In order to get a holistic and detailed justification for the use of social constructivism as a research framework, some central and major elements drawn from Gergen and Gergen's contribution to *The SAGE Handbook of Social Science Methodology* (2007) need to be specified. First of all, the social constructivist dialogue emerges from the idea that what we take to be knowledge of the world finds its sources in human relationships, thus our perceptions on things and matters is shaped by historically and culturally situated social processes. This means that there is no transcendent truth, no conclusion or idea that is more objective or accurate in its depiction of the world because accuracy is usually achieved inside specific communal traditions. Second, the replacement of truth and objectivity by interests with what research brings forth emphasizes the implications for cultural life that follow from taking any truth claim seriously. In fact, what matters is not as much whether an account is commonly true, but rather the implications for society – or at least for a certain group – that result from taking the said assertion seriously. This concern with consequences leads the specific research community – here social scientists – to place value on their particular meta-theory of knowledge as well as practices and views of the world, meaning that this study will inevitably evolve around certain specific constructions and customs and bring interest to a more or less definite group of individuals. In fact, the methods and presumptions used in this study are specific to the field of social science, political science in particular, meaning that the concepts and paradigms utilized to come to a certain conclusion will all be relevant to the said field but might not be seen as true or relevant to either another scientific field, or to the Burmese society itself. This removes the privilege of any group to establish any claim of “objective knowledge”, of any path to truth, but rather attest of one's commitment to a particular community and its guidelines. Finally, the fact that constructivist thought gives attention to coordinated relationships rather than to the individual actor unsettles the long-standing Western tradition of focus on the individual. In fact, social constructivism sees all

we take to be rational and real as emerging from a process of coordination. What is considered important is not the addition of individuals coming together to create relationships, but the relationships in themselves who are responsible for the formation of the individual (Gergen and Gergen, 2007: 461-479). Thus, this research will focus on the actual relationships between Myanmar's Buddhist nationalists and the Burmese minorities, between the monks and the lay people, between the state and the international community, and so on. All the abovementioned factors give place to an open field of possibilities by relinquishing any defined road to truth and giving voice to alternative ideas and explanations, which represents an important value when assessing an issue such as religious nationalism.

The epistemological position of the research is interpretivist, meaning that rather than adopting a natural scientific model like in a quantitative (post-) positivist research, the stress is put on the acknowledgment and assessment of the social world and the studied matter, through an examination and interpretation of its actors (Bryman, 2012). This implies that the research is influenced and shaped by pre-existing theories and worldviews of the researcher, meaning that not only the analysed subject – the reality – but also the research itself is a socially constructed activity. In fact, from an interpretivist stance, there is no truth in any absolute sense but only conclusions and hypotheses emerging from shared beliefs and expectations used to understand a particular context (Willis, 2007: 95-147). As argued by Smith (1993: 120), “there is no particular right or correct path to knowledge, no special method that automatically leads to intellectual progress”, which highlights the importance of the understanding of a particular situation or context rather than the discovery of any universal law or rule. This intersubjectivity, and the assumption that knowledge is a compilation of socially constructed factors makes it even more important to incorporate data and sources from different backgrounds and collection methods.

3.2 Material and data

In order to grasp a wide enough perspective of the matter, this research will attempt to take into account a broad variety of material such as media reports, official discourses and interviews, but also sources such as academic articles and theoretical writings, with a particular attention given to the need to encompass different voices and perspectives. Moreover, considering the fact that the studied subject is quite recent, thus constricting the relevant academic literature, the analysis will have to focus on non academic and rather subjective work such as newspaper articles, reports from NGO's and personal testimonies from central actors such as monks or lay people (which are considered second-hand sources since they have been collected by journalists or researchers). All those texts and documents are not meaningful individually, but need to be considered through their connection with each other but also by the nature of their production, meaning in which contexts they are created and received (Phillips & Brown, 1993).

Multiple forms of data will thus be gathered, which will all be made sense of by a review followed by an organisation into themes that cut across all of the sources (Cresswell, 2013). Hence, the used data will mostly be second hand sources that will be evaluated in-line with Scott's (1990) four criteria for the assessment of secondary sources which are; (1) authenticity of the document, (2) credibility of the source, (3) representativeness of the sampling and (4) meaning and accuracy of the document. The choice of an interpretative story is primarily motivated by the use of descriptive data to improve, illustrate, support or challenge theoretical suppositions made when beginning the study in order to understand the intricacies of the analysed situation.

3.3 Case selection

As mentioned above, this paper will focus on a particular context and thus make an intrinsic case study of Myanmar in order to get a better grasp of religious – Buddhist in particular – nationalism. The selection of Myanmar for a situational analysis case study is determined by, first of all, the great illustration it provides

to the global issue of religious nationalism and secondly by the little amount of previous research regarding the matter. Moreover, the urgency of the situation makes it necessary to shed light on one of the country's major problems and to attempt to explain the causes and consequences of the current troubles. The focus on Myanmar allows a more in-depth response to a very broad and topical question, despite the fact that it does not seek to provide a case for generalisation. In fact, a matter such as this one has very unique and subjective paths and incentives and makes it impossible to simplify. This makes the use of an unstructured approach more convenient, because it allows a focus on a particular phenomena, thus facilitating the understanding of the processes and impulses leading to the actual outcomes of our issue by "trading generalizability and comparability for internal validity and contextual and evaluative understanding" (Maxwell, 2014). This represents a strength, but it also constitutes a weakness since it does not facilitate the assessment of cause and effect relationship, thus it might not be representative of the larger problem being investigated (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). For example, despite the universal issue of both nationalism and religion, the reasons, causes and consequences of Buddhist nationalism in Myanmar can not be transferable to another country with similar concerns, such as Sri Lanka or India, and it is most certainly not possible to generalize those to other religious nationalisms such as the ones linked to Islam, Judaism, etc. However, the results and conclusions of this paper will seek to fill a gap in the current academic literature and hopefully open up doors to further research regarding the matter.

3.4 Data analysis

The data will mainly be assessed using a narrative framework. This approach will allow an analysis in line with the constructionist incline of this study, as well as a holistic study of different viewpoints, claims and stories from a vast range of voices (lay people, politicians, monks, journalists, etc.). In its simplest definition, a narrative is a story, a "spoken or written account of connected events" (Oxford English Dictionary, 2014) which may occur in material such as films, textbooks,

media, speeches, educational material, conversations, personal life accounts, and so on (Hammack & Pilecki, 2012). Narratives are produced through the cultural constructions of societies, and additionally to the abovementioned, they include collectively composed stories such as myth and commemorative practices in which individuals engage through their own cultural partaking. In other words, they are stories that structure the collective memory of a group or a wider population, as “they navigate the process of identity development in the midst of intractable conflict” (Hammack & Pilecki, 2012:76).

The choice of using a narrative analysis was made because of the importance it gives to context, by providing a sense of the relation between people, settings and behaviours. In fact, narratives have the advantage of offering both individuals and collectives with an awareness of purpose and place, giving space for shared stories in a particular culture, which provide grounds for common understandings and interpretations (Patterson & Monroe, 2012). Moreover, the assumption that people – may they be governmental officials, religious personalities or regular citizens – reason, perceive, imagine and make moral decisions according to these narrative constructions (Hammack & Pilecki, 2012) makes the understanding of an issue like ours, drawing from ideological identification and collective beliefs, highly compatible with a narrative analysis.

The relation between shared narratives, national identity and history is a corner stone in the development of nationalist movements such as the one taking place in Myanmar. Indeed, like mentioned in the previous chapter, the use of folk narratives, common history or ideological identities to modify and/or challenge interpretations of history and the relationships among people has been largely accepted in the country in order to reinforce and consolidate the nation. Stories about the origin, the development and the future of a nation-state provide a common sense of identity (who we are, where we come from, how we fit together), thus playing a central role in popular culture, in education, and in politics in general (Patterson & Monroe, 1998). In fact, the idea of nations being “imagined communities” (Anderson, 1991) is illustrated in the case of Myanmar,

where storylines of Buddhism and national identity are highlighted in order to create a sense of collective purpose and “purity”. The groups at various levels – regional or national – actively construct and reconstruct their identities, the meanings revolving around them; they interpret their own past, present and future through narratives.

Moreover, like Hammack & Pilecki (2012) argue, there is also a close relationship between national and personal identity, and individuals tend to construct personal storylines that often mirror larger national narratives. This provides a sense of personal coherence that is created through the integration of elements of the national and collective narratives into the private, which explains the fact that individuals respond to the threat of identity uncertainty and fragmentation by defending their religion, race, sex, etc. with the help of story making, national discourses and imagined collectivity (Anderson, 1991). All those elements, central to the establishment and reinforcement of national identity but also of narratives like the ones expressed against the Rohingya, need to be scrutinized and assessed in order to understand Myanmar’s actual situation.

In order to do so, this study will draw upon Elliot Mischler’s (in Stalker, 2010) argument that narratives should be considered as praxis. When doing so, we are assuming that there is a “dialectical relationship between individual’s position as both subjects (active agents) and objects (adaptation to social structures)” (Mischer in Stalker, 2010: 595). Narratives are thus social actions that represent adaptation, defiance and adoption of a certain set of norms. They are situated in time and place, and represent an answer to a socially posed question, that in our case lies in the nature and place of minorities like the Rohingya in the Burmese society. Furthermore, Mischler also asserts that they constitute identity performances, a way of presenting who one is and what one believes in.

In regard to the reading, interpreting and analysing of the narratives, a more holistic approach seems appropriate for this study. In fact, in contrast to the categorical perspective of content analysis, which dissects the narratives in different units belonging to specific categories before analysing them, the holistic

method takes the story as a whole and sections of the narrative are interpreted in the context of other parts of the story. Another dimension that needs to be taken into account for the assessment of information is the distinction between content and form. In this case study, the attention will be given to the content of the account/speech/text, etc., might it be explicit – what happened, why it did, who was involved, and so on – or implicit, meaning that is conveyed, the motives displayed, the symbolic behind the narrative, and so on (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber, 1998). Thus, the form, in other words the structure of the story, its complexity and coherence, its style or the choice of words, will be set aside, even though some elements of form analysis might interfere in the content scrutiny. Moreover, due to the fact that no field-study will be done for this research, a secondary analysis of a set of existing data will be conducted in order to find answers to the research question.

All those elements make narrative analysis a methodology – not only a method – that perceives the world from a social constructivist perspective, which fits into the overall framework of this research. In fact, the latter is interested in how the concept of Buddhist nationalism came about in Myanmar, which is essential to understanding the particular meaning it has today and why it has been maintained. In order to do this, the influence of Foucault (1978) will be taken into account, thus the aim will be to reveal the ways in which meanings serve particular interests, since we cannot embrace language as neutral towards political and historical forces, but we need to think of it as embedded within a context of power and domination. Hence, the purpose of the analysis will be to depict the ways in which leaders – political or religious – use narratives to frame particular issues and to motivate support and adherence to the Burmese agenda.

3.5 Limitations

This research would undeniably have gained depth and validity from a field-study, but due to time and budget constraints the focus will be put on secondary sources. Those will be taken into account in relation to each other, and as a whole, in order to get the general impressions on the situation. According to Hinds,

Vogel and Steffen (1997), two general methodological issues are present when conducting a secondary analysis. First of all, the degree to which the data generated by individual qualitative methods are appropriate to a subordinate analysis can be questioned, and second, the extent to which the research purpose of the latter can diverge from that of the initial study without invalidating its effort and findings.

Moreover, it is important to note that a significant part of the material used for this paper have been developed in a Western context, thus relying on concepts and understandings that might be different from what is perceived by the actual actors in the matter. This issue is strengthened by Burmese media censorship, which makes it hard to get a full grasp around the actual feelings and perceptions of the local people, whether monks, Muslim minorities or government officials.

5. Discussion

All religions have a relatively important political dimension, just as many political institutions are impregnated, to some extent, by a particular faith. Due to western stereotypes of Buddhism as “other-worldly” (Max Weber in Harris, 2007), little attention has been given to the religion’s intertwinement with state matters and the consequences Buddhist nationalism has on state transition, ethnic interactions and globalisation. In Myanmar, Buddhism has until today exercised a significant role in the country’s history, culture and political processes. In this final chapter, an analysis will be made of religion’s role and power in the Burmese nationalist movement, as well as its use for political purposes and the respect of its teachings in doing so. First, the claims, goals and actual actions of Myanmar’s main religious nationalist actors – the monkhood, the laity and the government – will be assessed in order to consider how the three construct and make use of this dynamic. In parallel, the actual use of religion for political and nationalistic purposes will be presented, as well as the different interpretations on the consistency between the Buddhist teachings and the actual narratives and following actions. Finally, because of the imminence of the conflicts that are

taking place between Buddhists and Muslims, the broader implications of these ethnical and religious clashes will be presented.

5.1 Analysis of narratives, actions and role of Buddhism

Based on claims that the Rohingya are descendants of the Bengali migrant population and putting forward the 1982 Burman Citizenship Law, which refuses to recognize the Rohingya as an ethnic group within the country, a growing number of Burmese Buddhists legitimise and even encourage discrimination against the said minority. Three main groups compose this nationalist framework: the monkhood, the state and to a smaller extent, the laity. Together, they have shaped Myanmar's current politico-religious landscape and have contributed to form a unique and powerful nationalist dynamic infused with religion (Long, 2013). This part of the study will first assess each group's claims and actions, in order to subsequently examine how they are intertwined and what dynamics exist in their relationships.

5.1.1 Burmese monks with nationalist ambitions

The marginalization – and to some extent detestation – of the Rohingya has been pushed to another level by a section of nationalist/racist monks, led by Ashin Wirathu, who are re-igniting that sentiment by expressing open hatred and propagating a sentiment of fear for Muslim minorities – and Islam in general – to the society. In fact, the monkhood (also called the *Sangha*), as Buddhism's traditional guardian of morality, has the responsibility to protect the religion (the *Śāsana*) in accordance to the *Vinaya* (the monk's code of discipline). This is what they are supposedly doing through various acts of violence and the propagation of hate-speeches across the country (Long, 2013).

The first argument supporting this intolerance lies in the idea of an Islamic invasion and menace, and in the need to protect Myanmar's Buddhist heritage (Arai, 2013). In fact, there is a deep running fear of a Muslim demographic explosion, which might disrupt the Burmese Buddhist identity. According to the Buddhist Rakhine State government spokesperson, the Rohingya are trying to

“Islamise Buddhists through their terrible birth rate” (Coates, 2013), which is, as said by the same person, ten times higher than native Buddhists’. Additionally, according to testimonies and interview reports collected by Tatsushi Arai (2013), Bamar Buddhists explain their apprehension by the fact that many Rohingya seem to fail to assimilate Burmese customs and way of life and instead impose their culture and overwhelm the natal Buddhist traditions. In many interviews and speeches, both monks and lay people have expressed their fear of losing their Buddhist heritage and exemplify their anxiety with the case of Bangladesh, Malaysia or Pakistan, which used to have a large proportion of Buddhist population but are now majorly Muslim. This argument is not unique to Myanmar, as it has been expressed on a more global level in different circumstances. For instance, in Europe, the political neologism “Eurabia” designates an Islamic conspiracy theory forecasting an Islamised and Arabised Europe that will undermine the existing European culture and traditions (Ye’Or, 2005). This islamophobic theory emerged in the aftermath of the 9/11, as well as in parallel with the increasing number of immigrants from Arabic countries and is used by far-right activists in countries with high immigration rates such as the UK or France (Kuper, 2012). Such thoughts have been strengthened over the years and the theory has received a wide media coverage following the 2011 Norway attacks by Anders Behring Breivik, who includes an intense supporting discussion on the Eurabia theory in his manifesto *2083: A European Declaration of Independence* (Fekete, 2012). However, in the case of Myanmar, specialists and economists argue that there is no clear evidence of any superior Muslim birth rate or even an augmentation of the latter, but rather a net outflow of the Rohingya to Bangladesh and other neighbouring countries since 1950.

The second narrative on which the said nationalists base their viewpoint is that the Rohingya “started it” by attempting to take over the Buddhist lands of Myanmar. According to several narrative testimonies, this belief is shared by many Buddhist monks or lay people, who focus on past events of separatist or sedition movements from the Rohingya. This argument has its roots in events that occurred after the country’s independence in 1948, when the minority formed a

guerrilla-fighting Mujahideen for a separate Islamic state or a merge with the current Bangladesh (ancient East Pakistan), leading a 13-year rebellion seen as a great betrayal by the Burmese Buddhists. Despite the fact that the movement ended up being defeated, the movement still brings out resentment because of the eventual threats it posed to the country's recent sovereignty (Coates, 2013).

The two aforementioned discourses are part of a wider attempt to build a national identity around a shared fear for the Other (Kinnvall, 2002), i.e the Muslims. By putting the fault on the Islamic part of the population – especially the Rohingya – these narratives demonize the Other, which serves as a justification for the schemes and acts targeting the “enemies” of the pure nation. Moreover, by focusing on a common factor, namely the lack of citizenship of the Rohingya that depicts them as foreigners as threats to the nation, the narratives on exclusion and marginalisation are reinforced and have factual, “valid” foundations.

A third argument explaining Buddhist fear towards Muslims is the need to defend Myanmar's Buddhist nation against the spread of globalization. What many Burmese nationalists argue is that today's globalized world leans towards an increasing interaction between religious communities, and thus there is a danger of one religion taking over the others. Consequently, the fear of losing any supremacy in the country and the will to protect the Burmese race and religion pushes nationalist monks to reinforce the sense of in-group cohesion among Buddhists, and to defend themselves from the perceived threats posed by out-groups that include Muslims, but also foreigners or the media (Arai, 2013). Additionally, as an outcome of Myanmar's opening and government reforms, there has been an increase of international business interest in the country. Global capitalist giants are seeking to put their hands on the Burmese oil and natural gas reserves, which further divides the population. The fact that the speculating companies are either coming from, or in concurrence with, Middle-Eastern Muslim countries (Thompson, 2013) only increases the antipathy and controversy, as well as it intensifies the aforementioned idea that Islamic civilisations will take

over not only Myanmar, but the world as a whole, and that there is a need to prevent such an incident from happening.

Like it has been expounded in chapter 3 (Theoretical Framework), the effect of globalisation and the country's shift towards a certain modernization creates insecurity and uncertainty among its population, who, as a result, search for some sort of reaffirmation by drawing closer to elements that might reduce stress and apprehension. Like Kinnvall (2004) explicates, the combination of nationalism and religion is a powerful response to such uncertainties and anxieties, and the case of Myanmar illustrates this quite evidently. Without shadowing evident traits of chauvinism and racism in the Burmese nationalists' discourses, it is necessary to make space for deeper explanations for the current happenings. It is also essential to remind that such changes in context, might they be political, economical and/or social, do in fact impact on the interactions between defined groups of people, thus challenging the perception of reality and the construction of identities. It is easy to denounce and criticize Myanmar's Buddhist majority and the violence some of them are carrying out against the country's Muslims, but it is important to take into account the context and the challenges that they face in their everyday life. In fact, after many decades of military rule and isolation from the external world, 30% of Myanmar's population lives in poverty with many more on the verge of it. More than a third of the people are unemployed, and many Buddhists fear that even this number will escalate for their people, as many businesses are Muslim-owned. Even though this does not provide necessary justifications for the promotion of hatred, denigration and massacre, those aspects facilitate the understanding of how difficult and pungent the conditions are in the developing Myanmar, and how easily average Buddhists can be enrolled in nationalistic and chauvinist propaganda. Moreover, Burmese monks' high and respected social status makes it difficult to formulate any reproaches towards them and insulates them from any criticism or hindering in their sayings and actions (Thompson, 2013).

Based on those arguments, Ashin Wirathu and his followers have spread a nationalistic powder calling for the unity of the Buddhist community against the common enemy that they feel menaces them of loosing their religion and race (Pinnock, 2013). The open resentment against Islam, and the Rohingya in particular, is not recent. In fact, Wirathu began preaching against Myanmar's Muslims in 2001, but was arrested two years later and sentenced to 25 years of prison for handing out anti-Muslim pamphlets inciting communal riots, which resulted in the death of at least 10 Muslims by a Buddhist mob (Marshall, 2013). The monk was released in 2010 along with other political detainees as part of a general prisoner amnesty (Hodal, 2013). Since his liberation, Wirathu has been actively operating different nationalist campaigns and programs, such as the 969 movement and legislation proposals.

5.1.1.1 The 969 Movement

One of the concrete actions taken by nationalist Buddhist monks is the 969 movement, a Buddhist-led campaign intended to, on the one hand, build unity among Burmese Buddhists and on the other to marginalise Muslims. Lead by Ashin Wirathu, the movement's stated goal is to stress the need for joint support among Bamar Burmese to patronize Buddhist-held businesses, and in the same time to boycott those owned by Muslims. Another justification lying behind the establishment of the 969 Movement is to "create a common symbol that enables all Buddhists to readily pay respect to the Triple Gems – the Buddha, the *Dhamma* (the teachings) and the *Sangha* (the community of monks)" (Arai, 2013: 12). In fact, the 969 logo displays a Buddhist symbol illustrating an ancient pillar that King Ashoka – a famous Buddhist ruler – constructed during his ruling to promote unity among his subjects, as well as the Burmese numerals 969 and a chakra wheel (Arai, 2013). This religious unity goes along with the patriotic union that is intrinsic to nationalism, because by uniting Buddhists the Movement automatically sets aside the other religious minorities, and creates some sort of nationalism "undercover".

The numbers 969 each represent the number of virtues associated with attributes of the Buddha, his teachings and the monkhood: the first 9 symbolises the nine special attributes of the Buddha, as the 6 represents the ones of the *dhamma* and the 9 stands for the *sangha*'s (Bookbinder, 2013). Stickers with the logo – one of the country's most recognizable – are distributed and stuck on shops, homes, taxis, and other national businesses, and are at the same time signs of Buddhist cohesion but also of political and racial unrest (Marshall, 2013). Wirathu's main argument for boycotting Muslim-owned businesses is that when buying a good from a Muslim commerce or production, the “money doesn't stop there... it will eventually be used against [Buddhists] to destroy their race and religion”, which once again illustrates the important fear of being overwhelmed and Islamised (Bookbinder, 2013).

Some argue that the 969 Movement is only a response to a Muslim method used to boycott Buddhist businesses, namely the 786 symbol. The latter is often adorning South Asians Muslim's homes and businesses, as it is a numerical representation of the Islamic blessing “In the name of Allah, the Compassionate and Merciful” (*bismillah-ir-rahman-ir-rahim*). As numerology detains an important place in Burmese Buddhist culture, the 786 symbol is seen by many as a Muslim plan for world domination in the 21st century (Marshall for Reuters, 2013) since $7 + 8 + 6$ is equal to 21. The number 969 is intended to be the latter's cosmological opposite, and seems to have originated from a functionary in the ministry of foreign affairs, U Kyaw Lwin, a specialist of traditional numerology whose book was written in the late 1990s. However, U Kyaw Lwin's ideas really emerged in November 2012, when a religious order began to invoke them in local anti-Muslim campaigns (Coclanis, 2013).

The 969 movement illustrates how the use of a religious symbol – here the triple gems – is used to enhance the unity and force of an identity, with the objective of providing a particular ideology and a guide for future actions (Kinnvall, 2004). In addition, the amplification of a chosen distress such as Islam's potential overwhelm of the world or the 786 symbol becomes a basis for the use and

respect of the particular emblem, which has been facilitated by mass media and empiricist verifications of the mentioned “facts” (Aggestam & Kinnvall, 2002).

5.1.1.2 Legislative propositions

In line with the fear of being overwhelmed by Islam and additionally to the 969 movement’s boycotting of Muslim businesses and hate speeches, Wirathu and his supporters are also gathering signatures for a petition called “Safeguarding the National Identity”, aimed at prohibiting interfaith marriage (Kyaw, 2013). This nationwide campaign encourages the public and the national parliament to adopt a proposed law on interreligious marriage. According to the initiators of the law, many cases of matrimonies between Buddhist women and Muslim men oblige the wives to convert to their husband’s Islamic faith. The law also seeks to manage population growth through the imposition of monogamous marriage, in an attempt to tackle what many Buddhists interpret as a social problem caused by Islamic practices menacing the moral character of their Buddhist-majority homeland (Arai, 2013). The proposed law amends that any Buddhist woman who wishes to marry a non-Buddhist man needs to get a written permission from her parents and show the document to the local authorities. Moreover, the future groom should convert to Buddhism, as failure to comply with these conditions could lead the husband-to-be to face prison (10 years) and property confiscation (Human Rights Watch, 2014a).

The proposal has lead to controversial debates and has been denounced by several human rights organisations and women’s rights groups because of its infantilising and biased character. Despite the fact that the law’s instigators claim that the proposal aims at protecting Buddhist women, it on the contrary restricts their rights as well as it discriminates religious and ethnic minorities. If fact, the proposed legislation violates fundamental rights to liberty and religious belief as well as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights’ prohibitions against discrimination. Furthermore, it is contrary to article 16 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, which Myanmar has ratified, just as it is against the country’s constitution which 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” (Kayshap, 2014). In spite of this, President Thein Sein proposed that the marriage law ought to be drafted by the Nation Assembly in order to “preserve race and religion” (Human Rights Watch, 2014).

Like it will be further argued below, this law proposal by nationalist monks and its support by the government shows the complex intertwinement of religious and state affairs in Myanmar, all embedded in a nationalist dynamic that aims at protecting the Burmese Buddhist identity by discriminating and “demonizing” the Other, i.e. the Rohingya.

5.1.2 Governmental use of religion for nationalist purposes

Given the fact that religion occupies an inherent place in the national heritage, its teachings, symbols and teachings have often been used as effective ways of communication and of legitimizing governmental actions (Jurgensmeyer, 2010). Religion’s prominent position in Burmese state affairs was first institutionalised in 1057, when Theravada Buddhism was adopted as a spiritual guide for the state. During the British and Japanese occupations, there were irregularities in its use and presence in the state affairs, even though it has always remained present in the background. Since the nation’s independence in 1948, the different national leaders have either endorsed Buddhism as a state religion, or otherwise utilized a spiritual discourse to legitimize their political status. Either way, Buddhist ideals have inspired the country’s governance, at the cost of relegating and disregarding the religious minorities, especially the Muslims (Arai, 2013).

The relationship between state affairs and religion has always been tight, and the regime has since the country’s independence sought to pervade political beliefs with Buddhist value. For example, under U Nu’s ruling, democracy was advocated by naming it “Burmese Buddhist Way to Socialism” (Long, 2013), which combined the post-colonial nationalist ideology with a Buddhist connotation. U Nu went even further, when in an attempt to gain even more support from the *Sangha* he institutionalised Buddhism as the state religion.

However, this focus on Buddhism reinforced the tensions between the Buddhist majority and the non-Buddhist minorities, and disabled U Nu from answering the country's demands for economic and infrastructural growth. This opened the door to Ne Win's military and more secular power with a coup d'état in 1962 (Schober, 2011). Ne Win strategically kept Buddhism in order to preserve the nation's access to merit, but converted it to a civic religion, which would eventually benefit the government's welfare programs. During this military regime, the non-Buddhist minorities were depicted as impediments to a homogenous Burmese Buddhist laity, as they were seen as obstacles to a common national identity. This contributed to the general internalisation of the country's nationalistic xenophobia (Long, 2013). The Rohingya's position as the Other was doubled because, on the one hand they had rallied with the British during WWII they were associated with the destructive colonisation, and on the other they also differentiated from the majority because of their non-conformity to the Buddhist faith. Those two elements brought justification not only to the public perception of difference and the need to dissociate from the Rohingya, but also to the two cleansing operations (*Naga Min* in 1978 and *Pyi Thaya* in 1991) since they aimed at protecting the Burmese Buddhists as well as the *Śāsana* from a supposed threat (Schober, 2011).

Even though the couple of past years have witnessed certain reform policies by the government as well as an opening of the country's relations with the West, there has been recurring and rising violence against other Muslim communities (Akins, 2013). According to Zarni, (2013), the Burmese state has mobilized the society's Islamophobia through various institutional mechanisms such as state media and social media sites (the president's Facebook page for instance), but also by supporting – or at least allowing – different nationalist and even xenophobic undertakings (laws, speeches, clashes, etc.). For instance, Thein Nyun, chair of the New National Democracy Party, openly defended the 1982 citizenship law by asserting that the latter “is intended to protect the Burmese Buddhist race; by not allowing those with mixed blood from making political decisions for the country, so the law is very important for the preservation of our country” (Democratic Voice of Burma, 2013 in Green, 2013).

Furthermore, governmental reforms have to some extent facilitated the spread of nationalistic speeches. Unlike the strict military rule held on the Burmese population during the junta's period, the propagation of narratives has been facilitated by a new found freedom of speech that allows Buddhist monks such as Wirathu to spread ideas of Islamophobia and religious intolerance across the country (Coates, 2013). In fact, another active monk named Wimala claims that by permitting the 969 movement and allowing people to give speeches about religious and racial protection, a certain governmental support – and even encouragement – is assumed (Marshall, 2013). Moreover, government officials such as the minister of religious affairs Sann Sint, tend to deny any violent and xenophobic aspect of nationalist movements such as the 969 boycotting, and the latter has claimed that those sermons are “about promoting love and understanding between religions... It is impossible that he (i.e Wirathu) is inciting religious violence” (Marshall, 2013).

What can be concluded from this sub-chapter is that there is a mutual support between nationalist monks and certain government officials, who pursue the same goal of getting rid of the Rohingya and other Muslim minorities in the country. Not only does the government stay silent on many aspects of the conflicts or on nationalist narratives, but the President Thein Sein has asserted that legally, the Rohingya were not citizens of Myanmar and that he wished to hand over the group to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees in order to settle them in a different country than Myanmar, a proposal which is obviously encouraged by Buddhist monks (Akins, 2013). Indeed, a certain number of Buddhist monks showed their support by marching down in the streets in October 2012 with banners and t-shirts displaying pictures of the President as the protector of Myanmar (Long, 2013). As they both seem guided by nationalistic motivations, the cooperation between state officials and the monkhood is thus expressed openly. In fact, it appears that Myanmar's political authority and legitimacy is inherently based on religious elements, just as the spiritual cosmology shaping the country's beliefs and traditions has political features. The state has used the *Sangha's* moral authority, especially in the country's emergence from the British

colonisation, to increase its own legitimacy. Likewise, it has allowed the latter to maintain its strong position by the nature of their affiliation.

Like Jurgensmeyer (2010) argues, including religion into nationalism and state affairs kept the monkhood from building its own anti-national power, at the same time as it helped to provide a transcendent aura to nationalism. Similarly, the laity has, within the Buddhist cosmology, reformulated and used traditional responsibilities and roles in order to structure their everyday life in the contemporary reality. Buddhism has in fact incorporated itself in the social and political landscape in a complex net of authority, power, patronage and legitimacy. Together, institutional and spiritual policies have interacted and consequently shaped the country's history and culture (Long, 2013). Religious nationalists have, and still do, read religious texts politically, which produces a new level of values based on those sacred writings (Friedland, 2013). This triangular relationship inserts itself perfectly in the nation-building process, which incorporates a reconstruction of a national and individual identity around shared fears and traumas as well as common motivations and values. Those revolved around the rejection of the British at first, but also of anything foreign like the Rohingya, who became targets of both anxiety and aversion (Long, 2013).

Finally, it is important to stress that there is an evident division and inequality of power between those producing the Burmese nationalist discourse and those affected by it. In fact, prominent monks like Wirathu as well as government officials have the power to make the discourse "true" and to frame it in a particular way, a way that suits them and their interests best (Foucault, 1978). As it is the case in Myanmar, the power of the majority, who detains more resources and freedom than Muslim minorities, gives the former the "right" to dominate and marginalise the latter through a discourse of exclusion, since it is the Other (Kinnvall, 2004).

5.2 Discrepancies with Buddhist teachings

Like Beech (2013) writes in her article, "every religion can be twisted into a destructive force poisoned by ideas that are antithetical to its foundations". In fact,

even though Wirathu argues that he is able to reconcile the peaceful sutras of Buddhism with the anti-Muslim violence he promulgates by the assertion that he is only protecting and defending his community, thus not being offensive but only defensive, there are some points that need to be highlighted in order to get a more critical grasp of the issue.

First, it is important to note that the opinion regarding the consistency of the current nationalist narratives and ethnical clashes with Buddhist teachings has two sides. The outlook shared by the advocates of the 969 movement and the intermarriage law argue that if the intentions that stimulate and guide Buddhist social action are genuine and consistent with Buddhist teachings, then they will inevitably engender social impact that is harmless and beneficial to everybody in society. In regard to this, a national leader of the 969 Movement claimed that:

“All acts under Buddhism are harmless to everybody. Buddhist acts performed with good intentions are like a train moving on a railway. If a dog crosses the railway and is run over by the train, that’s not the train’s fault. That’s the dog’s fault” (in Arai, 2013: 15).

This contrasts with the opposite view among practitioners, who contend that there is a social responsibility for removing the suffering of others, without taking into account the goodness of their intentions associated with the causal chain of events that have generated the suffering. The Buddhists interviewed by Arai (2013) thus assert that:

“The Buddha taught that we must take responsibility for the situation of suffering which we think we have caused. Buddhist teachings also encourage us to think that even if we haven’t caused particular situations of suffering, we should take action to remove the suffering. If you know the situations that cause the suffering, you have to take responsibility... The Buddha taught that our Buddhist consciousness must be able to see our deep bonds to our families, friends, nations, and the whole world” (in Arai, 2013: 16).

Second, Alan Strathern (2013) argues that the promise not to kill is one of – if not *the* – most important moral precepts infused in Buddhist monks, and the principle of non-violence is known as having a larger place in Buddhism than in any other major religion. In fact, the emphasis on *karma* and *samsara* – meaning that the cycle of birth and death is ruled by one’s individual actions – is contradictory to killing or any other immoral action, because of the negative karma that will inevitably follow, by coming back at one in their own lifetime or in following reincarnations. Hence, aggressive thoughts are opposed to any Buddhist teachings, as practical ways such as meditation are developed to eliminate them and give place for compassion and calm. Of course all religions have pacifist precepts, like the well-known Christian precept encouraging its followers to “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (in Strathern, 2013: n.p), but however good-intentioned a faith is, “sooner or later it enters into a Faustian pact with state power” (Strathern, 2013: n.p) and violence is used in the name of a spiritual, greater good. Buddhism is, despite its positive image of peaceful and passive dogmas, not an exception. In fact there is a quite long history of Buddhist-related acts such as torture, suicides, flagellation and wars. According to Jurgensmeyer and Jerryson (2010: 226), there are over sixteen hundred years of Buddhist violence on the Asian continent, many of them being contrary to the original guidelines.

Furthermore, Buddhism, as a religious and philosophical system, should not be intertwined with political, economical or racial organisations such as nation states. In fact, According to the *Vinaya* – the monastic code of conduct – monks are not allowed to engage in any public, governmental affairs but for one exception: when the *Śāsana* – the dispensation of the Buddhist religion – is menaced. If that is the case, the *sangha* is collectively allowed to issue what is perceived as the ultimate moral reproach. This was the case when 20’000 monks, backed up by 100’000 lay people, demonstrated silently in Myanmar’s cities during what is commonly called the Saffron Revolution in September 2007. During the latter, the *Sangha*

marched with their alms bowls turned over, which indicated that any alms from the government and the military – or anyone associated with it – would be refused, thus depriving the regime of any eventual merit and delegitimizing its members (Long, 2013). Moreover, the Buddhist and Burmese academic Maung Zarni (2013) explains that Buddhism is “not about people imagining a national community predicated upon adversarial relations but rather about using one’s own intellectual faculties to see through the non-existent core-essence of the self” (n.p). Yet, this humanistic precept seems to have been forgotten and put behind by many of those who profess their adherence to Buddhist faith in Myanmar, and has thus been incapable of guarding against overarching societal prejudices and nationalist proponents. In fact many Burmese who consider themselves guardians of the faith, who practice religious rituals and patronize Buddhist institutions do at the same time profess hate-speeches and even commit violent acts against anyone or anything they see as enemies of Buddhism as well as its wealth, its followers, and in this case: its land. Zarni (2013) further claims that the latter do not reconcile with Buddhism’s guiding principles of tolerance, non-discrimination and inclusion, but instead clearly contradicts with their image of wardens of security and purity. So how can this discrepancy be explained? How come some of Buddhism’s core principles have been forgotten in favour of chauvinistic and nationalist ideologies?

One explanation lies in the fact that one should not see the anti-Rohingya pogroms as a religious war, as inter-religious confrontations, but rather as an exploitation of religion and its identities for political and social purposes (Malik, 2013). In fact, religion does not create the tension as much as it helps to establish chauvinist identities through which certain factions are demonized and immoral actions justified. This means, according to Malik, that “the importance of Buddhism in the conflicts in Myanmar (...) is not that the tenets of the faith are responsible for the pogroms, but that those bent on confrontation have adopted the garb of religion as a means of gaining a constituency and justifying their actions” (n.p). Gravers’ (2013) argument supports the latter, by claiming that Buddhism itself is not the source of the violent confrontations in Burma, but is rather a

medium of politics, might it be against a repressive regime, as a basis for nationalist authoritarian regime, or even as part of violent xenophobic struggles against minorities.

A parallel answer might be the universal rhetoric, irrespective of religion, of violence for the sake of peace, as a defence and as an inevitable act for better ends on the long term. In the case of Buddhism in Myanmar, Michael Jerryson asserts that even though violence and hatred is seen as an infraction and results in bad karma, the vehement and ferocious actions are done for the greater good, which is more important than the individual well being (Jerryson in Shadbolt, 2013).

Despite those attempts at explaining the current confrontations, it seems important to underscore the fact that the Dalai Lama has, in a speech done in May 2013, spoken out against Wirathu's actions and the 969 Movement by arguing that a true practitioner of Buddhism would not tolerate such violence and hatred. In fact, while some of the spiritual discourses might be complete and coherent with the Buddhist belief system, they lack concrete answers that address the structural inequity and the humanitarian consequences that their actions – direct or indirect – produce through the complex chain of globalisation, state transformation and modernisation.

5.3 Broader implications of the conflicts

The religious tensions that first started in Rakhine state have spread more generally in Myanmar, and might now threaten the whole regional security with a spill-over to the neighbouring countries. The inter-religious violence taking place in various parts of the country has in fact provoked tensions between Buddhists and Muslims in Malaysia, Indonesia or Thailand – all three having large Rohingya refugee communities – and there are apprehensions that the clashes inside the country may spread to Muslims and Buddhists outside Myanmar, which could lead to a rancorous cycle of reprisals and counter-reprisals in the Southeast Asian region. Surin Pitsuwan, former head of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has already warned the regional government officials about the imminent spill-over effects of the violence caused by the increasing religious and

nationalist radicalisation (Zappei, 2014). In fact, Buddhist nationalism and radicalism is increasing in other parts of Southeast Asia, with nationalist groups composed of, among others, monks who orchestrate the destruction of Muslim or Christian property in Sri Lanka or monk-military cooperation for defensive – and even offensive – measures, which increases the alienation felt by minority Muslims (Beech, 2013). For instance, retaliatory attacks have occurred between Muslims and Buddhists in Kuala Lumpur, and there are concerns about radical Muslims outside Myanmar exploiting the situation to recruit followers and support their extremist narratives. This might in turn feed the nationalist Buddhist discourses deeming that foreign radicals support and influence Muslim ethnic groups such as the Rohingya (Coates, 2013).

It is thus an important security concern for the region to hinder the rise of radicalism, because of its possible evolution into terrorist threats or actions against a government of a specific group. Some incidents have already occurred, like an attempt of assault on the Myanmar embassy in Jakarta by Islamist extremists, or the bombing of a Buddhist site in India (International Crisis Group, 2013). It is important to note, however, that such actions have not always been recognised by Islamist groups, but might be organised by other Buddhist factions only to incriminate the Muslim side and thus justify any violent actions towards them. In fact, certain Muslim groups abroad claim that the Buddhist nationalist community stage drama in order to gain sympathy ahead of the general election in Myanmar in 2015 (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2014). However, some threats are openly recognized, like the one sent by the Indonesian radical cleric Abu Bakar Bashir – now imprisoned – who wrote a letter to President Thein Sein where he threatens of violent jihad against Myanmar justified by the persecution of the Rohingya (Coates, 2013).

Another broader issue derived from the Buddhist-Muslim conflicts is the increasing number of refugees. As the hatred, tension and conflicts get more intense, the number of Rohingyas seeking asylum in the bordering countries explodes, which leads to further violations of human rights by both state and non-

state actors. In fact, because of their lacking citizenship, the Rohingya are often labelled as illegal economic migrants, and thus have to face arrests, deportation or labour exploitation instead of the needed protection. Moreover, the legal framework regarding the issue is quite inefficient and even lacking in the Southeast Asian region, despite international pressure and civil society advocacy. In fact, only two out of ten members of ASEAN – Philippines and Cambodia – have ratified the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol attached to it (Asia Pacific Refugees Rights Network, 2013). Important destination countries such as Malaysia, Bangladesh or Thailand are thus short on adequate legal measures to identify and protect Rohingya refugees and asylum seekers, which has led to irresponsible government policies and practices such as arbitrary arrests, deportations and detainments which violate many obligations and rights stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Also, the demographic side of the matter should not be neglected. In Bangladesh for example, the massive flow of refugees – mostly from the Rohingya community – has had an important impact on the demographic profile of southeast Bangladesh. With approximately 29’000 Rohingya refugees within the UNHCR registration system, added to the 200’000 ones residing in the country as illegal migrants, the pressure on Bangladesh is critical (Refugees International, 2011). Being one of the less developed countries of the region with an important population density of more than 900 per square meter, the pressure on essential resources such as land and water is high. This resource scarcity, coupled with the demographic pressure and the somewhat unstable internal security has led the country to close its borders to more refugees, despite repeated requests from several human rights groups, the UNHCR and numerous countries. However, the border with Myanmar being 271 kilometres long makes its management quasi-impossible, which creates opportunities for increased transnational crime such as human trafficking or drug and arm smuggling (Bashar, 2012).

6. Conclusion

As a conclusion to this case study, it seems important to stress the complex and transcendent intertwinement between religion and nationalism in Myanmar. The arguments exposed in this thesis go against the traditional Western scholarship's tendency to be impregnated with an "orientalist" view of Buddhism, suggested by Max Weber's perception of it as an "other-worldly" spiritual system functioning apart from social and political dynamisms. In fact, the abovementioned arguments show that Buddhism is, like the other world religions such as the Abrahamic faiths, linked to politics and other state affairs (Long, 20143).

First, this research has stressed that the use of religion for nationalistic purposes can be presented as a way of binding the Burmese population together around a shared identity – Bamar Buddhism – but also through common fears and insecurities. Because of the important place detained by Buddhism in the Burmese society, its teachings and symbols have in fact been adopted as a way to unify the people around a common identity and a transcending "truth". Religion has accordingly helped to reformulate and structure Burmese narratives in uncertain times, by inserting itself in the social and political landscape, in a setting filled with power, authority and a quest for national purity.

Second, Theravada Buddhism seems to be the link that holds the triangular relationship between the monkhood, the laity and the state. Spiritual, societal and institutional features have in fact interacted and shaped the country's political and cultural landscape in complex dynamics, which have always been more or less influenced by religion. Religious texts are read politically, just as political narratives are infused with religion, which inserts itself neatly – but dangerously – in the nation-building process of this transforming country. Despite the debate around the consistency of these narratives and actions with Buddhist teachings, what is certain is that in the context of the current tensions and conflicts occurring in Myanmar, it is not as much Buddhism in itself that has lead to the actual situation but rather its use to establish chauvinist sermons towards the Muslim minorities. In other words, the faith's teachings and symbols are not

fundamentally preaching violence or hatred, but have been utilised to gain constituency and to justify vehement discourses and actions (Zarni, 2013).

Finally, it is necessary to mention that Myanmar's ethnic and inter-religious tensions might represent one of the country's biggest challenges to a full democratization, not only because of the biased elective representation, but also because of the terrible humanitarian consequences this religious nationalism has on the country's relegated minorities. Also, the imminent spill-over effects that threaten the rest of the Southeast Asian region are not to be neglected, as they might create turbulence between the interested governments and increase the human casualties. To resume, as Myanmar is emerging from half a century of authoritarian, military rule, a new era towards democracy, globalisation and innovation is being opened and we ought to hope that it's leaders will find a way to use Buddhism in its most constructive, fruitful and tolerant ways.

Appendix 1 - Map of Myanmar



Source: Outside Online. Available at <http://www.outsideonline.com/adventure-travel/asia/myanmar/The-Jesus-Kissed-War-Fringed-Love-Swirled-Rangers.html> Accessed 01 May 2014)

Appendix 2 - Map of Rakhine



Source: Radio Free Asia. Available at: <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/violence-10252012182913.html> (Accessed 25 April 2014)

Appendix 3 - Table of casualties and injuries in Rakhine

Summary list of casualties and injuries in townships of Rakhine state caused by clashes between Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims (as of 30 July 2012).

Township	Casualty			Injury		
	<i>Rakhine</i>	<i>Rohingya</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Rakhine</i>	<i>Rohingya</i>	<i>Total</i>
Sittway	11	23	34	35	22	57
Ponnagyun	-	-	-	-	-	-
Myauk U	-	-	-	-	-	-
Kyauktaw	-	4	4	-	-	-
Pauktaw	-	3	3	6	10	16
Rathedaung	10	4	14	3	26	29
Buthidaung	-	1	1	-	-	-
Maungdaw	10	10	20	6	-	6
Yanbye	-	1	1	-	-	-
Minpyar	-	-	-	-	1	1
Total	31	46	77	50	62	112

Source: Kipgen (2013)

Appendix 4 - 969 Symbol



Source: Courrier International Online. Available at <http://www.courrierinternational.com/article/2013/07/25/birmanie-moines-et-militaires-meme-combat?page=all> (Accessed 25 April 2014)

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