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Religious Donations, Ritual Offerings, and Humanitarian Aid: Fields of Practice According to Forms of Giving in Burma[1]

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Abstract

In this paper, the religious donation–meaning oriented interactions that occur between a lay donor and his or her monastic recipient or between laypeople and religious institutions as a whole–is first examined in the Burmese Buddhist context, in regard to the Maussian theory of the gift. The formal analysis of 'serving rice' to monks during their daily alms tour, the main form of religious donation, demonstrates that it is in keeping with the definition of a free gift rather than involving reciprocity, although it is supposed to be rewarded by merit through an impersonal process. Then, moving from a formal analysis of the ethnography of religious donation (*ahlu*) to the contextual analysis of the differentiated uses of various forms of giving in contemporary Burma, the discussion aims at highlighting differences with practices of 'ritual offering' (*kadaw bwe*) and 'humanitarian aid'(*ke hse yay*) showing how these different forms of interaction shape contrasted fields of practice. The transaction occurring in religious donations then emerges as setting into motion a crucial social process, the enactment and reproduction of the difference in status between monastics and laypeople that is one of the main social processes contributing to the differentiation of a Buddhist-defined 'religious field'.

Mauss's famous *Essai sur le don* has had tremendous impact in portraying the gift as a total social fact and thus making it an object of social analysis. In subsequent analyses, the 'Maussian gift' has been construed as establishing relations through the obligation to reciprocate within a system of exchange. In Buddhist societies, particularly in those identifying themselves as Theravadin, *dâna* (Pâli)[2]—the giving of wealth or food to sustain religious institutions—lies at the heart of Buddhist life and actions. However, in the field of Buddhist studies, religious donations have not played a pivotal role in understanding the social processes.

In the wake of Stanley Tambiah's new perspective on Theravada Buddhist sociology based on ethnography in North-Eastern Thailand (Tambiah 1970), Ivan Strenski makes an interesting attempt at addressing the question in a paper published in 1983. In his paper, Strenski reframes the question of the transition of the early renouncer community to a national, political and social Buddhism. Following on from the work by Carrithers (1979), he calls this question the 'domestication' of the Sangha[3] and critiques the often prevalent idea that the domestication of the Sangha has been its downfall. Strenski's aim is rather to describe this process as shaping the social fabric. In doing so, he decisively places the 'gift'—understood as the Maussian gift—at the core of his picture of the relationship that links monastics to the laity, phrasing his argument in the words of Lévi-Strauss's theory of generalized exchange. Indeed, in Theravadin societies at least, religious donations are seen and practiced as an oriented interaction in which 'monks are always receivers and laypeople always givers' (470). Through this practice, a crucial distinction is made between monks and laypeople that is constitutive of the hierarchical relationship that binds them together.

With the major social partition in Theravada Buddhist societies opposing Buddhist monastic status to lay status, religious donations may indeed be regarded as a crucial process for society itself and for the social order. Strenski's paper has therefore contributed to reorienting the then dominant Weberian perspective of viewing as decay the process of transformation of the pristine north-Indian groups of wanderer ascetics into a socially integrated Buddhist community. This vision, prevalent at Strenski's time, had originated in Buddhist communities as well as among the first orientalist commentators.

However, Strenski's use of the term 'exchange' in this context needs to be reexamined. One weakness of his approach lies in the inappropriate way that he applied Lévi-Strauss's theory about groups exchanging women to the interactions between religious and lay people in a Buddhist society.[4] Juliane Schober has commented that 'placing the *samgha* within the exchange networks of lay society at large, as Strenski proposes, is mixing apples and oranges' because 'ordination into the *samgha* constitutes rebirth in another kind of existence' (Schober 1989, 119). On the one hand, underlying this comment is the implicit premise that, because of the vow of renunciation taken during the ordination process, a monk's existence is not subject to social analysis at all, a premise that is hardly sustainable as demonstrated by the author herself throughout most of her work.[5] On the other hand, however, the question may be raised as to whether Lévi-Strauss's theory of exchange aimed at understanding the workings of social groups based on the exchange of women adequately describes the distribution of social roles between ordained members of the Sangha and laypeople in a Theravadin society.

More to the point, what needs to be questioned here is the nature of the interaction that serves as the basis of the relationship: Should the transaction that occurs in the context of a religious donation be analyzed as an exchange at all? This previously debated question needs to be reexamined today with regard to critiques of the Maussian theory of the gift. Marshall Sahlins's contribution, 'On the sociology of primitive exchange' (Sahlins 1972), has been especially useful in challenging the readily made equation between exchange and reciprocity. Sahlins identifies reciprocity as one of two kinds of transaction present in primitive societies, together with redistribution. He then analyzes reciprocity as a continuum depending on social distance and oscillating between 'generalized reciprocity' or the one-way flow of goods between closely related persons and 'negative reciprocity' between strangers, 'balanced reciprocity' being an intermediate form that is only observed in a few cases. Pierre Bourdieu, for his part, has highlighted the importance of the lapse of time that separates the gift from its return and which serves to conceal the reciprocal nature of gift exchange (Bourdieu 1998). However, more recently, Alain Testart (2007) and Florence Weber (2007) have argued for a more rigorous use of terminology to restore the common meaning of gift as 'free of any obligation either to give or to reciprocate', as opposed to the Maussian use, and to qualify as an exchange any transfer of goods that is followed by a return when it is done out of mutual obligation. Exchange should in turn be qualified as market or non-market exchange, according to the relationship that is or is not established between the giver and the recipient, the form of the transaction and the nature of the goods exchanged. These contrasted theoretical stances are also determined by the level of analysis: particular transactions or systematized sets of transactions as analyzed by Strenski when he argues for generalized exchange.[6]

In this paper, I suggest that the societal import of the Buddhist religious donation also concerns the framing of 'religion' as a separate field of practice and is constitutive of Buddhist hegemony. More specifically, I propose to look at the religious donation in the Burmese context as one of the social processes contributing to the differentiation of a Buddhist-defined 'religious' field—what the Burmese would call *thathana* (from the Pâli *sâsana*). Here, 'religious' refers to the Burmese Buddhist view that delineates 'religion' by assessing various fields of practice according to positions on the Buddhist scale of orthodoxy.[7] In Burmese use, *thathana* only

refers to the Buddhist dispensation even though it provides for different levels of teaching and practice. It corresponds roughly to an emic concept of religion.[8] However, it cannot be used for other religious denominations and therefore the Burmese-defined religious field of practice tends to merge with the Buddhist one.

The way that Buddhist religious donation contributes to differentiating between various fields of practice will be examined by analyzing transactions regarded as 'religious' and the way they are contrasted with and kept separate from other kinds of interactions, namely ritual offerings and humanitarian aid.[9] There will thus be a shift from a formal analysis of the ethnography of religious donation to the contextual analysis of the differentiated uses of various forms of giving in contemporary Burma. In my formulation, I have chosen to keep the label 'religious donation' for oriented interactions that occur between a lay donor and his or her monastic recipient or between laypeople and Buddhist institutions as a whole. In so doing, I translate the Burmese expression *ahlu* that is a nominalization of the verb *hlu-*, meaning to give as a Buddhist meritorious act,[10] and I also intend to render the distinction made in Burmese between this term and formulations for 'ritual offering' (*kadaw bwe*) and 'humanitarian aid' (*ke hse yay*). I regard these different forms of interaction as highly meaningful practices that have come to be sites of contestation in Burma and I look at the way these forms have been articulated in discourses and practices by people in different positions in the Burmese contemporary religious scene, thus revealing its present dynamics. In doing so, I focus more on the formal interactions involved in particular acts of giving than on the aggregate level, showing how these daily transactions shape fields of practice.

The Debate Concerning the Buddhist Gift in Burmese Studies

Generally speaking, situating at the core of our analysis interactions that take place in the religious field represents a departure from the approach adopted by Melford Spiro, a famous author on Burmese Buddhism, whose main book: *Buddhism and Society. A Great Tradition and Its Burmese Vicissitudes* (Spiro 1970), has become a work of reference although it has also been criticized. In this book, Spiro classifies Burmese Buddhist religious practices and ideas into three different systems. The first of these he labels nibbanic; he glosses it as 'purely' Buddhist because it is oriented toward the ultimate goal of liberation from samsara, or the cycle of life, death and rebirth. The second, kammatic, is lower on this Buddhist scale because it is directed toward mundane aims and dominated by the pursuit of merit, a kind of spiritual reward occurring mainly through Buddhist religious donation. And the third he qualifies apotropaic to express its motivations. The nibbanic and kammatic systems correspond to the archetypal roles of monastic and laypeople respectively, as ideally conceived by the Burmese. Spiro's identification of a split in Buddhism and his interpretation of the kammatic system as a Burmese vicissitude reveal his inclination toward Weber's interpretation of Buddhism being on the decline. Spiro insists that kammatic practices often imply orientations obverse to nibbanic 'inwardness', in particular, meritorious action that represents according to his words 'a general change in soteriological action from meditation' (104).

Examining transactions between monks and laypeople prompts us to consider their respective paths as mutually constituted in a more positive light. Yet, no matter how mutually constituted they are, the relationship of interdependency on which monastic and lay paths depend at the aggregate level implies no obvious reciprocity. Indeed, this subject is a question of debate. Strenski, generalizing Tambiah's statement, has popularized the view that in Theravada Buddhism the monk is supposed to be a 'paradigm of non-reciprocity'.[11] In actual practice, a monk receiving a gift is not prompted to give in return and no debt is involved on his part. What returns to the lay donor is merit, a spiritual reward that translates into social prestige and social

status in this life and that determines future rebirth in a specific plane of existence, according to karmic law.[12]

The received Buddhist theory of merit, which is recognized in Burma as in other Theravadin countries, holds that this reward is inherent in the act of giving and that monks do not return anything. Monks merely represent the occasion for meritorious action, a fact encapsulated in their common qualification as 'field of merit'.[13] Strenski therefore needed to look at religious donations from a broader perspective to show that these transactions are occasions for sharing merit with a larger community of laypeople through the intermediacy of the monk, to foster generalized exchange.

Schober, who carried out field research around Mandalay in Upper Burma at the beginning of the 1980s, also focused on exchange in her analysis of Buddhism. Arguing against Strenski's position, however, she clearly states that: 'The necessary reciprocation of dâna through merit constitutes the basis for Theravada Buddhist ritual exchange' (Schober 1989, 113). Instead of the generalized exchange model, she suggests understanding the relationship between a monk and his donor as a case of restricted exchange in which the reciprocation of merit is indicated by the merit-sharing ritual marking the closure of a primary exchange transaction (117–118). G. Rozenberg (2004), who examines giving in the processes for producing sainthood in Burma, insists on the automaticity of the return and argues that the relationship established through a gift from laypeople to monks should be seen as a form of asymmetrical reciprocity reproducing their difference in status. Finally, H. Kawanami (2013) adopts Sahlins' model of reciprocity based on social distance with regard to interactions with nuns who have an intermediate status.

For authors who situate the Theravadin religious donation within the framework of the Maussian theory of the gift, reciprocity depends first and foremost on the merit the lay donor is rewarded through the monastic recipient's mere acceptance of the donation. In sum, the debate revolves around the qualification of merit, whether it should be regarded as being produced by reciprocity (Schober and Rozenberg) or not (Strenski), given the difference in nature between what is given and what comes in return and the circuitous ways this return takes.

The question of the return is indeed complex, given the variety of forms religious donations take in a Theravadin context and the ubiquity of merit as a common reward in the different cases.[14] This is what appears implicitly when, examining the ritual procedures for giving, Schober notes that interaction with laypeople always implies some other return on the part of the monk, either delivering precepts or preaching (Schober 1989, 112). She thus seems to vacillate somewhat between looking for reciprocity in the meritorious reward or in the religious service rendered to the laity by monastics. However, while Schober's remark is true of many types of religious donation, this is not the case of the most prevalent form of religious donation, giving cooked food to monks during their daily alms rounds.[15]

'Serving Monks Rice' (Hsun kap-), the Core of the Buddhist Religious Donation

Giving prepared food to monks during their daily alms rounds differs from other meritorious occasions by the absence of 'merit sharing', the ritual through which good deeds are publicly acknowledged. Nevertheless, almsgiving is considered to be the most accessible meritorious occasion in Burma where its performance is part of behavioral ethics and bears a specific name (*hsun kap-*, to serve monks rice). An important dimension of this kind of donation is that it is both public, in the sense of being performed in the public space, and impersonal.

In daily alms collecting, saffron-clad[16] monks wander along a supposedly anonymous road showing no interest in any particular house, merely stopping for a moment in front of doorways to allow the inhabitants to pour rice and curry into their alms bowls. In return, the monks say nothing and show no gratitude for these repeated donations on the part of laypeople. In fact, a

strictly impassive bearing is required of monastics in order for their behavior to convey a sense of detachment from the transaction.

The lack of any religious service provided by the monks in return—precept, preaching or recitations—marks the specificity of this form of religious donation when compared to other kinds in a Theravadin context. On the one hand, serving rice to monastics pertains to laypeople's moral obligation to sustain the Buddhist religion and is supposed to be performed on a voluntary basis, although it may be organized collectively. On the other hand, daily alms collecting is one of the prerogatives and duties of members of the Sangha, thus allowing the laity to generate merit. Serving rice to monks is so emblematic of monastic-lay interdependency in a Theravadin context that it has become a tourist attraction, particularly at Luang Prabang, which has led to controversial commodification issues.[17]

It is worth noting that, in order to generate merit, a religious donation has to fulfill certain conditions, mainly that the monk is a duly ordained member of the Sangha and obeys monastic rules, and that the laypeople give purely out of generosity or goodwill (*saytana*). In fact, daily alms collection takes place in a framework that is very familiar to any Burmese Buddhist, which thus goes to show the specificity of the interaction. To begin with, this framework is determined by a set of monastic rules. The monks' rice has to be served at a given time, before noon because a monk will not eat any later, and presented with the appropriate items (i.e. no uncooked food or money), in a proper respectful manner. This framework is so simple that the mere sight of a saffron-clad monk wandering around in the morning with his bowl prompts laypeople who have already cooked their meal to go out, remove their shoes and serve him rice in the appropriate way.

Although simple, this framework allows for some variation in the way monks collect alms, either individually or collectively, according to a planned or random route. Nonetheless, the interaction between monastics and the laity during alms collection must always be extremely sober. More to the point, there must be no ritual expression of meritorious results.[18] Although laypeople often voice their highest expectations, they also express their awareness of the doctrine that giving must be a disinterested act in order for it to be meritorious. In the case of daily alms giving, no sign is given that merit will come in return even though devotees expect such a return deep down inside them. Finally, as 'fields of merit', monks represent the land tilled to produce spiritual rewards, whereas laypeople portray themselves as working toward their own salvation through meritorious actions. A lay ethic of responsibility for oneself underlies the practice of serving rice to monks. More than establishing a relationship based on exchange, this level of interaction that is kept to a minimum seems to display a clear distance between the two statutory groups.[19]

In this case, generating merit appears to correspond to its definition in the Buddhist theory of merit as an 'impersonal process' (N. Sihlé), which does not fit in with the concept of reciprocity. The framework for alms collection—clearly set to show that monks do not pointedly ask for food and that donors do not expect any return from them—has to be recognized as a non-reciprocal type. Besides this conspicuous non-reciprocity, this framework contributes to maintaining the anonymity of the donation while ensuring the worthiness of the recipient.

In her detailed analysis of the status of nuns in Burmese Buddhism, Carbonnel (2009) shows how their position, alternating between lay and monastic frameworks, is established mostly in the course of the various interactions that take place during alms collection. By analyzing these transactions in minute detail, she shows that 'the duty to guarantee the monks' daily subsistence through the giving of food is one of the fundamental sources of differentiation … between monks and lay people' (Carbonnel 2009, 267). Through this interdependency, the respective paths of monastics and laity are mutually constituted and hierarchized, hence the reason for examining what is implied through the daily performance of alms collecting by monks and lay people.

In trying to characterize this form of religious donation as a transaction, we see that it takes the form of a simple transfer with no materialized or ritualized reciprocation and no sense of debt owed on the part of the monk. It is ideally conceived of as the offering of prepared food to monastics in order that they may free themselves of the constraints of material life. This transaction takes place between anonymous agents who belong to each of the two main statutory groups constitutive of society without any personal relationship having to be established. In other words, serving rice to monks is in keeping with the definition of a free gift, on condition that it is performed in an impersonal context. However, through its character of public non-reciprocity, the transaction sets into motion a crucial social process, the enactment and reproduction of the difference in status between monastics and laypeople. Finally, daily alms collection turns monks into mendicant renouncers and situates them in the Buddhist-defined 'religious' domain.

Could it be that serving rice to monks is an extreme form of religious donation in which the exchange dimension of the interaction is hidden under a veil of pure generosity? Conversely, could dhamma—Buddhist teachings that monks represent as 'curators' of the historical Buddha's legacy—be regarded as unperformed reciprocation to the laity? Or should we consider these transactions for what they actually do; mark the difference as statutory through non-reciprocity?

Merit Sharing as a Mark of Religious Donations (Ahlu)

One characteristic of the interaction played out in almsgiving and that marks its difference from other Buddhist religious donations is the absence of any merit dedication ritual. A dedication ritual consists in declaring that a person shares the merit involved in the donation with all sentient beings; this supposedly conditions the acquisition of merit by the lay donor in most Buddhist religious transactions called *ahlu*. It serves to declare ritually[20] that these actions of giving to the Buddhist religion (*thathana*) are meritorious and discriminate them from the other ritual actions encapsulated in the Burmese category of 'ritual' (*pwe*).

Merit sharing can be said to be specific to Buddhist religious donation rituals and to highlight the importance of the spiritual reward on these occasions.[21] The absence of merit sharing reveals conversely the low level of ritualization in the case of almsgiving, the simplest kind of Buddhist religious donation, although it may be considered as the commonest occasion for meritorious action. In this sense, daily almsgiving may be regarded as a pure form of donation—which is not even shown to be meritorious as if it were not needed to display this dimension of the action.

In Burmese, merit sharing is called 'water pouring' (*yay sek kya-*) in accordance with the donor's gesture of pouring consecrated water into a cup in order to summon the Earth Goddess to witness the meritorious action. This gesture that completes the donation ritual is performed before seated monks after they have recited the dedication formula for merit sharing. It sets the framework for meritorious occasions linked to a transaction between laypeople and monastics, underlying once again the interdependency of the two statutory groups. Yet, merit does not emerge from this ritual situation as having been produced by the monastics for the laypeople in return for the donation. Instead, the presence of monastics allows merit to circulate.

Merit sharing is common in a variety of religious donations classed as *ahlu*. On these occasions, whether private or public, collective or individual, donations may be dedicated to the monastic order (*thanga*/P. *sanghâ*) or to various assets belonging to the Buddhist institution (*thathana*/P. *sâsana*), such as pagodas or images of Buddha. These events may be conveniently classified according to their location (the donor's house, the monastery for novicehood, or the pagoda) and to their temporality (exceptional occurrences like the building of a pagoda,

calendrical rituals like the annual offering of monks' robes at the end of the Buddhist Lent, or life-cycle rituals such as noviciations or funerals). Depending on the case, the goods presented differ, whether they are food or other commodities that monastics are allowed or objects of devotion such as images of Buddha or Buddhist sanctuaries. The character of the event may vary greatly, from an intimate meal offered to a monk by a householder to a huge gathering of various communities of devotees for the inauguration of a pagoda, for instance. In most cases, the donation framework tends to be less anonymous, more complex, and to allow for more personalized links than the simple serving of rice to monks during alms collection.

All these ceremonial occasions, which may display tremendous complexity, are marked by a merit dedication ritual and, as observed by Schober, often imply some sort of religious service on the part of the monastics involved, either chanting protective verses (*payeit*/P. *paritta*), delivering precepts (*thila*/P. *sîla*), a call to meditate, or else preaching. In some cases, this religious service that monks perform on laypeople's invitation is central to the event, as at funerals or during the performance of public sermons, for example. The whole transaction sequence is of particular interest because the lay donor first invites the monastics to perform their service and then, only when the service is over, is the religious donation offered to the monks. They can then proceed with merit sharing. The religious service can therefore hardly be regarded as a way of reciprocating the lay donor's donation. Conversely, in these cases, religious donations mainly take the form of envelopes containing money that are distributed to the monks seated for the merit dedication, which appears to be similar to a remuneration. This does not preclude these occasions from being considered meritorious by laypeople. This is demonstrated by the merit-sharing performance that ritualizes the transaction and by its emic categorization as a religious donation (*ahlu*), in addition to the distinctive value and function of these occasions as religious services. It is worth noting that it would make no sense for a Burmese Buddhist to talk of these offerings of money as payment (*hka*) for a service. They are supposedly made out of the free will of the donor although it is difficult to imagine dispensing with them. Here, the religious construction of the transaction as *ahlu* entirely obscures its economic and contractual dimension.

Public sermons deserve special attention. They are not commonly qualified as *ahlu*, contrary to other meritorious occasions. Instead they are called 'feast of Buddhist teachings' (*taya bwe*) in common language and are described in religious discourses as monks' 'gift of Buddhist teachings' (P. *dhamma dâna*).[22] These teachings—which, as Buddha's heirs, monks represent—are heralded in public on these occasions as the exemplification of the monk's worthiness as religious beneficiaries of lay support. Conversely, there appears to be no mention of Buddhist teachings during alms collections. The most famous predications given by preachers have proved to be strong incitements to make religious donations. They serve as an effective means of raising religious funds, as demonstrated by the growing commodification of mass public sermons observed in Burma as well as in neighboring Theravadin countries.[23] Besides their didactic functions, *dhamma* talks are also greatly appreciated meritorious occasions, as demonstrated by the amount of public donations.

Another dimension of *ahlu* ceremonial religious donations is that a number of them involve complex redistributions of food to laypeople. In the case of lifecycle rituals, such as sons entering the monastery for novicehood, the meal served to monastics is followed by the hosting of the assembly of guests. During ceremonies to inaugurate a pagoda or to renew its ornamental finial, the local community is offered a meal that turns the celebration into a huge collective feast. The various processes of redistributing food and merits that occur on such occasions highlight the social implications embedded in these religious donations.

Schober (1989) provides a clear explanation of religious giving on these ceremonial occasions by making a distinction between primary exchange, or the first phase of interaction between a lay donor and a monk, which entails no further obligations, and secondary exchange, or the phase of redistributing the merit and food. This second phase creates an obligation for the guests

and sentient beings involved either to reciprocate the donation or to enter into a relation of dependency with the main donor who is the master of the religious donation (*ahlu shin*).[24] Following on from Kris Lehman's statement that 'merit is power', Schober has duly contributed to the understanding that religious donations create social obligations in the lay realm in the form of spheres of power controlled by the main lay donor.[25] This line of analysis regarding the Buddhist gift may also be in keeping with authors who have developed a social analysis of Buddhist religious transactions in the conceptual framework of economies of merit.

Schober's distinction between primary exchange and secondary exchange may further serve to categorize meritorious occasions created by donations from the laity to monastics. In this respect, almsgiving stands out from all other occasions because it only involves primary exchange. Whereas almsgiving occurs in a framework characterized by anonymity, public non-reciprocity and no disclosure of the spiritual rewards supposedly gained from laypeople's actions, other religious donations are entrenched in the laity's social world and display merit rewards through the dedication ritual. This display exemplifies the social dimension of merit at the same time as it re-situates the event in the 'religious' realm.

A final distinction between almsgiving and more complex ceremonial events is that transactions in the former case take place between lay and religious realms and in the latter between these realms and within the 'secular' world. In other words, there is a difference between the 'religious' and the 'non-religious' according to the Buddhist Burmese conception.[26] One might wonder whether the social import of more complex transactions is what makes it necessary to ritually acknowledge that they are in fact 'religious' through the performance of merit dedication rituals and by classifying them as *ahlu*. Donation is such a powerful, discrete tool delineating the 'religious' from the 'non-religious' that *ahlu* transactions have come to demarcate Buddhist rituals as 'religious' compared to other rituals encapsulated in the *pwe* category, which emerge contrastingly as 'non-religious'.

More complex interactions between laypeople and ordained members of the Sangha commonly imply a more public mutual relationship than in the case of almsgiving. Nevertheless, the donation is not reciprocated by the monks. They merely ensure the circulation of merit as passive recipients of the donation. Merit can hardly be taken for reciprocation of the religious donation (*ahlu*). It remains essentially unforeseeable and volatile even though, in the case of large donations to material religious institutions, it at least acquires a form of materialization in being publicly announced on billboards, or written on buildings or on certificates delivered to the donors.

In almsgiving and more complex religious donations, interactions between laypeople and monastics do not therefore correspond to the definition of exchange as a bilateral transfer of goods or services between two parties (Testart 2007). We have seen that the donations following services at the more complex occasions are not conceived of as remuneration. They are considered by Burmese Buddhists to be religious donations (*ahlu*). In this regard, the religious donation framework of these transactions may be said to conceal the service dimension of monks' role.[27] At the ideological level, making donations to maintain religious institutions (*thathana*) appears as a lay practice in which free gifts are offered, with no obligation to reciprocate on the part of monks, even though they may initiate complex social relationships and define fields of power in the social world.[28] Laypeople continue to generate merit with an allegedly karmic benefit and possibly tangible social results through specifically oriented donations—renouncing wealth in order to maintain the religious institutions and to preserve Buddhist teachings. The service performed by the monks for the lay communities are concealed in this ideological construction. Buddha's teachings, which are transmitted through the Theravada canon, may be said to be—in Bourdieu's wording—the 'religious' capital that monks monopolize and cultivate through learning and through their specific lifestyle that is conceived

of as an embodiment of these teachings. Religious donations effectively enact the statutory distinction between ordained members of the Sangha and laypeople, thus contributing to the differentiation of a highly valued Buddhist-defined 'religious' domain as separate from the lay domain.

Gift-Giving Practices Versus Religious Donations

Religious donations thus function to set boundaries that serve to discriminate between 'paths' (*lam*) or ways to be taken to reach salvation from the life cycle (*thandaya*/P. *samsarâ*), according to the Buddhist model. Different paths may be followed according to one's karmic status. According to the Burmese point of view, monks, for example, attain their high status or 'religious' status thanks to their karmic achievements in previous lives. Laymen, on the other hand, remain laypeople because of their own karma. Thus, according to this view, the monastic way of life is not primarily a matter of choice but of karma.

As regards gift-giving practices, other contrasted paths may be identified in the Burmese social world, namely, spirit possession, esotericism, and humanitarianism. To follow one path means to belong to a particular network of specialists, practitioners, or devotees, to share the same conceptions of the world and to ignore the others, with in principle no passage from one to the other. Looking at gift-giving practices in paths located at the periphery of the Buddhist-defined 'religious' field will allow us to contrast these practices with religious donations and to highlight their relative specificities.

More specifically, to 'give to religious institutions' (*hlu-*) is different from 'presenting ritual offerings' (*kadaw bwe sek-*) to spirits belonging to the Burmese pantheon of Thirty-Seven Lords.[29] *Kadaw* refers to the tribute that local chiefs and princes used to pay to Burmese kings when kingship still existed. In the contemporary language, it designates every expression of respect to high-ranking beings (whether spirits, parents, teachers, elders, or even monks) and could be translated as 'paying homage'. *Kadaw bwe* is used for standard offerings consisting mainly of coconut and banana, placed on a plate and made to pay homage to such high-ranking beings. Ritual offerings made to spirits (*kadaw bwe sek-*) are determined by previously established relationships and the donor receives protection in return, hence these transactions may be regarded as exchanges. During spirit possession séances, the protection granted by the spirit in return for the devotees' *kadaw bwe* offerings, to which various goods and money are added, is materialized by the redistribution of part of the offerings, which are then considered to be loaded with the 'power' (*tago*) of spiritual agency.

For instance, while embodying a spirit, the medium may use some bank notes from among the offerings to wipe away sweat before giving them back to the devotees who keep them to buy lottery tickets at some point in the future. The sweat of the possessed medium makes the bank notes special. Any money won using these notes is then considered to be the result of the spirit's benevolence. The devotee is therefore indebted to the spirit, who becomes his 'master of debt' (*kyayzu shin*). Finally, any wealth that is offered to the spirit is considered to be an investment, any return on which is considered as granted by the spirit and benefits the whole ritual community. The economic metaphor fits this case perfectly and suggests that the transactional framework is designed to allow intense exchanges. The belonging of spirit devotees to ritual networks is grounded in these exchanges and is conceived of as belonging to the 'spirit path' (*nat lam*).

In other words, devotees present ritual offerings as repayment to the spirit for the blessings they were granted. The interaction that takes place during ritual offerings and which is expressed by the verb *sek-* is asymmetrical, playing on the giver's statutory inferiority and the interdependency that links the latter to the recipient, as is the case in religious donations (*ahlu*). However,

ritual offerings differ from religious donations in the way they are determined by established relationships that are conceived of in terms of debt (*kyayzu*). It is said that protection and largesse of the spirit are 'given' in return (*pay-*) by the spirit embodied in its medium.

Pay- is the most versatile verb to express the act of giving in general. In this case, *pay-* mirrors *sek-* and refers to a unilateral transfer from a hierarchically superior donor to a dependent recipient. However, to 'give a gift' (*lekhsaung pay-*) does not imply any statutory distinction between the giver and the recipient if the act is freely performed and if it is not bound by a specific social relationship. Similarly, 'humanitarian aid' (*ke hse yay*)—a realm that has recently become more visible in Burma but based on Buddhist charitable practices, as we shall see—relies on free will and does not imply any social differentiation if an impersonal dimension is maintained.

To sum up, three verbs essentially structure the Burmese semantic field of giving: *hlu-*, *sek-* and *pay-*.[30] The first two are used to indicate a one-way directional flux and the higher status of the recipient from the respective Buddhist religious and spirit-cult ritual points of view. However, *pay-* may occur bilaterally and be reciprocated, or it may mirror the first two actions and signal a return by a higher-ranking recipient. Comparatively speaking, ritual offerings appear to be different from religious donations mainly because they are conceived of as obligations. The belief is that in the event of non-performance, a spiritual sanction will be imposed. Conversely, religious donations mainly rely on the conspicuous free will of the donor.

However, the values attributed to different gift-giving practices may vary with changes in the sociopolitical context. Recent developments experienced in Burma over the last decade or so have proved that religious donations may become a locus of contestation over the respective limits of lay and religious domains of action, and that these contestations also involve practices of ritual offerings and humanitarian aid. Investigating these variations in practices and conceptions of giving according to the overall situation in Burma allows us to better understand how they are constitutive of the evolving definitions of different fields of action.

Religious Donations as a Locus of Contestation in Recent Events

In Burma, a new situation of democratic transition has recently changed the whole configuration of the social realm by creating a new arena of political action, even though its effectiveness still has to be proven. People have at least started to believe that something can be done about the situation and to express their ideas about the moralization of public life, starting with their own moral stance. The stance against the religious legitimation policy on which the military rulers, the SLORC and the SPDC,[31] drew heavily between 1990 and 2007 is particularly important in my eyes. This multifaceted policy had built both on the embellishment and the increasing wealth of Buddhist monuments as material artifacts of the Buddhist presence in Burma and on the funding and control of the Sangha.

The erection of new pagodas in recently developed areas, thanks to donations by major investors, and lavish offerings to honored monks were two ways of demonstrating the SLORC's authority over the national 'field of merit' (Schober 2011). It goes without saying that both these ways of securing a position on the Burmese Buddhist scene are characteristic of former Burmese kings and reproduce the ideal societal divide between those who struggle in this world as they progress along the karmic path and those who renounce the world with the hope of escaping the karmic cycle.

As already argued, in Burma as in other Theravadin societies, religious donation creates a hierarchical differentiation between laymen and monks, a differentiation that sustains the hegemony of the Buddhist-defined 'religious' field. During SLORC rule, ostentatious religious donations (*ahlu*) from the military were made to enhance their prestige and their claims to a spiritual status. At the same time, their religious donations demonstrated the extent of their power, whereas

for monks, who came to be seen as 'government monks' (*asoya pongyi*), they led to suspicions of self-interestedness and raised doubts about their spiritual purity.

By 2007, before the incidents that led to the monks' movement known as the 'Saffron revolution', the collection of religious donations among the general public both for the embellishment of Buddhist monuments and for collective donations to the Sangha had become a line of business run by groups organized under the government's umbrella. This gave rise to much discontent and numerous complaints about the fact that the 'donation path' (*dâna lam*) had been destroyed.[32] In other words, the junta's overuse of religious donations had created a situation in which the main way for the Buddhist laity to progress along the karmic path had allegedly been spoiled. In the eyes of most of the public, religious donations had become blurred with the predatory system through which official authorities harassed private individuals.

These circumstances prefigured the protest that erupted in September, with monks marching in thousands holding their alms bowls upside down. Since alms collecting is the main framework of interaction between laymen and monks, the latter have been contesting 'unfair' rule by refusing donations and turning their bowls upside down since the first protests against colonial rule in the 1930s. Whereas their passive acceptation of alms makes monks into mendicant world renouncers, their refusal is a powerful stance in society thanks to their religious status.

By protesting in this way, monks push the limits of their religious status as far as possible, verging on the point returning to the lay world. In 2007, pro-government voices criticized this 'politicization'. It was argued that monks meddling in politics were taking a step back from their renouncer status, and were thus no longer truly 'religious' and therefore liable to repression. Conversely, most of the general public believed that the monks were still playing their role of preserving the Buddhist order by asserting a distance with government religious politics. In fact, the so-called Saffron revolution can be seen as a movement through which part of the Sangha took action in the world, using their religious status to contest the junta's overuse of religious donation, which was jeopardizing this status.

The Meritorious Dimension of Humanitarian Aid

Six months later, the Nargis cyclone provoked a major natural disaster in Lower Burma. Not only was the government slow in taking appropriate measures to cope with the situation but international aid was also prevented from reaching the numerous victims. Humanitarian aid (*ke hse yay*) immediately became a bone of contention between the military government and various humanitarian aid agencies. Some famous monks, whether linked or not to exiled government opponents, took an active part in the rescue operations. More importantly, the general public rallied behind the cause within various sociological frameworks (familial, neighborhood, occupational…) to send help to the devastated areas in the delta.

Sending aid, which is a traditional response in Burma in the case of massive destruction, is motivated by compassion (*thana*) and is considered to be meritorious. However, in the Nargis context, public generosity made civil society visible and was qualified as political by the authorities. It led, for instance, to the arrest of famous movie stars who had joined the cause. For most of those taking part, giving to the populations affected by the cyclone in the delta was first of all a moral obligation, a matter of solidarity. In this context, to take part in the rescue operations also became a way for the public to voice an opinion against the government for lack of any other way of expressing itself. The civil population was accomplishing tasks that the authorities were said to be unable to assume and at the same time condemning government officials' uselessness (Brac de la Perrière 2010).

Ke hse yay calls upon the virtue of generosity (*saytena*). It relies on the donor's free will and does not create any obligation when taking place in an impersonal context. No statutory distinction between the giver and the recipient is encapsulated in the gesture of helping a totally unrelated

person. Yet, it is still considered to be meritorious as the practice of a Buddhist virtue. In this sense, Nargis prompted the emergence of humanitarian aid as an alternative moral way of acting in this world in order to progress along the karmic path; a way distinctive to that of government politics. Since then, charitable work has provided Burmese laypeople and monks with opportunities to develop their agency in the Burmese social world. Even USDP, the political party that has emerged from the former government mass organization, has stepped into this field of action, setting up free dispensaries and schools in late 2011 to compete with its opponents in this field.

Religious Status, Reform and Social Activism

The case of the abbot Udu Mingala exemplifies the potentiality for social action that charity represents for monastics in a period of intense competition for religious donations as a resource.[33] In an interview at his monastery North of Yangon, in November 2011, Udu Mingala explained to me that his aim was to preach Buddhist truths to the greatest number of people and to cope with what he saw as the 'destruction of religion' (*thathana pyek*) for which he blamed the military government's religious policies. His undertaking, he said, was to interpret Buddhist teachings for the general public.

To achieve his aim, he developed a unique preaching program for very large audiences throughout the Yangon vicinity, linked to his own charitable foundation that has branches in each district. He started preaching to raise funds for humanitarian aid after the Nargis disaster when he moved to Yangon to take part in the rescue operations. Since then, he has continued to combine his conventional monastic activity of preaching Buddhist teachings with the funding of social work and has opened a free boarding school for novices and has been very active in social work.

Interestingly enough, thanks to his charitable foundation, Udu Mingala does not have to rely on daily alms collection for sustenance and is therefore relatively independent—materially speaking—of monastic institutions. Although he strictly obeys most rules governing the Sangha, dressing and behaving as a monk, he has chosen to dispense with alms collecting in order to focus on preaching and social work. However, the abbot still acts within a monastic framework and is answerable to monastic institutions; his way of life is recognized as being unquestionably monastic and his religious status is maintained.

As a reformist and social activist, however, Udu Mingala holds a rather special position within the Burmese Sangha. His involvement in social work has finally been criticized by the monastic authorities as breaching the ban on monastics working 'in the world' at large. As a consequence, he has had to abandon his large public sermons and to content himself with preaching inside his own monastery or on various invitations from his followers. As the leader of a religious network that focused on the 'gift of Buddhist teachings', when preaching, he competed with the state religious funding networks linked to Buddhist sanctuaries, and all the more so given that his audiences were enormous.

Udu Mingala's aim, as mentioned earlier, is to restore 'religion' (*thathana*), that is, Buddhism, by reforming the morality of people at large. He urges his followers to obey Buddhist precepts, and in particular, those forbidding the drinking of alcohol, gambling and so forth, and also to abandon spirit worshipping. The reform is essentially implemented by the setting up of a distinctive donation network: funds are raised thanks to a special dispensation of the Buddha's teachings and they are redistributed via specific social work in such a way that religious donations once again delineate a reformed field of Buddhist action for the people involved. In this way, some charismatic monks channel religious donations from laypeople in order to act upon the world.

'Rescuing' (ke-) the Buddhist World as Opposed to Religious Donations and Ritual Offerings

Following the thread of recent events, I have looked at how humanitarian aid has constituted a way to renegociate the religious domain of action through different gift-giving practices.

Another domain involving such a reconfiguration of the monastic-lay partition of action is that of esoteric Buddhism. 'Esotericism' is a convenient though expedient way of mapping a complex domain of multiple practices. In its present manifestations, in Burma, it is mainly a lay domain combining esoteric practices with practices of the Buddhist defined 'religious' domain, such as meditation and adherence to a varying number of Buddhist precepts (*thila*/*P. sîla*). The ban imposed on monastics, during the 19th century, of a number of esoteric knowledge prohibited by monastic rule (Spiro 1970, 369) such as astrology, alchemy, medicine and more, partly explains why esoteric practices are now mainly located in the lay domain. These practices also represent for those involved a way to assume the responsibility of preserving Buddhist teachings, a development that has its roots in the authority crisis caused by colonial breakdown.

This Burmese Buddhist esoteric field is known as the *weikza* path (P. *vijjâ*) in reference to the *Pâli* word for the specific knowledge that the adept strives to master. The mastering of esoteric knowledge associated with strict Buddhist practices is supposed to develop special powers (long life, ubiquity, and so on). Those who become a virtuoso in their esoteric practice may ultimately leave the karmic cycle. However, without disappearing completely, they then join thousands of their congeners in an invisible realm where they are supposed to help living beings in this world and wait for the reunification of Buddha's relics to reach nirvana. These spiritual figures are called *weikza*, after the esoteric knowledge they master.

The esoteric field of practice is complex because it encompasses various isolated types of itinerant ascetics, groups of devotees whose leaders claim to have direct access to a *weikza* (mainly Bo Min Gaung) depending on the *weikza* medium's charisma, as well as structured congregations of exorcists amounting to thousands of members. Interestingly enough, *weikza* practices, particularly those of exorcist groups, are also a locus of active campaigns against spirit cults.

Most exorcists are organized into structured associations, contrary to other followers of the *weikza* path, and some are readily recognized as congregations of healers. The patients often become adepts of their exorcist's organization in the process of their cure. In the Manaw Seittaw Pad congregation, they often undergo an 'initiation' ritual called 'to take knowledge' (*pinnya yu-*), which consists in a ritual tattoo of 'medicine' (*hsay*) supposedly produced by *weikza*. Patients are also asked to renounce any devotion to traditional spirits. Exorcists go to their patient's houses to 'clean' all the spirits. When asked about their attitude toward the spirits, the masters of these congregations reply that they are not against the spirits but that *weikza* medicine is stronger than a spirit's protection.

With regard to the pervading idea of *weikza* 'rescuing' (*ke-*) Buddhism in the world, and particularly Buddhism in Burma, it is worthwhile noting the position of cult group leaders regarding religious donations (*ahlu*). In the interaction with their followers, there is no question at all of religious donations (*ahlu*). This is coherent with the fact that the esoteric field is a lay field and that alms collection is a prerogative of monastics. Although leaders of weikza cult groups are indeed supported by their followers, they systematically deny the real nature of these allowances, privileging a discourse about rescuing the world.

Given the heterogeneity of the esoteric milieu, only a sense of the various ways the adepts of the *weikza* path support their leaders can be conveyed. In one such group, at a meeting once a week in private homes, a collection is made, each participant contributing the same amount in a seemingly egalitarian way. Exorcists in the Manaw Seittaw Pad congregation heal patients in their own homes during private consultations and initiate them through a tattoo ritual at the annual meeting of the congregation at Pegu. Nothing is overtly asked of the patient at the consultation, even though a bowl is conveniently placed there to receive a standard sum of money. Fees for the initiation rituals that are held in public among the congregation, on a yearly basis, are set according to the adept's level of practice and displayed on a notice board where they are qualified as 'devotional offerings' (*puzaw bwe*). Although this qualification is indeed very similar

to 'ritual offerings' (*kadaw bwe*) made to the spirits or other high-ranking beings, they differ essentially in the way the payment is made to look impersonal. Not only is it undertaken in all transparency but it is also performed almost inconspicuously, egalitarian in spirit, avoiding any ostentation, not addressed to the healer, nor claimed by the *weikza* through possession. In other words, what distinguishes *weikza* path specialists from those of the spirit cult is they refrain from requesting any ritual offerings and, instead, assert a discourse about rescuing the world.

Finally, *weikza* specialists distinguish themselves from contiguous Buddhist defined 'religious' field and spirit ritual field by the fact that they are not valid recipients of religious donations and do not openly ask for ritual offerings through possession by a spiritual agent or otherwise. Contributions made by followers are not conceived of as generating a meritorious result nor as a gift-giving practice. If entering an esoteric field of practice may ensure protection from the *weikza*, it is not a result of one's contribution but thanks to one's own deeds and reformed behavior. In this context, generosity appears on the side of the weikza rescuing the world (*ke*) and spreading their own particular effectiveness—which is equated with energy (*dat*)—through their representatives 'in this world', who are practitioners of the esoteric field.

Helping people progress in the lay world along the karmic path is the general objective of *weikza*-path adepts. This brings to mind the bodhisattva figures of the Mahayana branch of Buddhism, although no historical link can be proven. What is of interest here is that this *weikza* action in the world is expressed using the same word—'to rescue' (*ke*)—as the compound formed to refer to humanitarian aid (*ke hse yay*). Significantly, the reconfigurations implied in the democratic transition make the *ke* esoteric discourse reverberate with new discourses about social action and moralization.

Through their deliberate avoidance of ritual retributions, specialists of the esoteric field take up a moral stance against spirit mediums as well as against monks. This comes across as particularly important at a time when religious donations that are managed through official networks may be resented for being a predatory system. From a wider perspective, their position with regard to this point is similar to that of reformist monks, adding their voice to the latter's critiques of the official misuse of the donation line and rejection of spirit cults.

Concluding Remarks

At the level of both representation and practice, the forms of transaction carried out within specific fields of action which have been examined here—humanitarian aid, ritual offerings to spirits, and devotional offerings to the *weikza* healers—are all contrasted with the religious donation model.

A one-way transfer to supposedly anonymous monks defines the religious donation of wealth or food (*ahlu*), without any obligation for monks to reciprocate, even though laypeople expect that, from their good deeds, merit rewards (*kutho*) occur through an impersonal process. In spirit cults, devotees present offerings of wealth or food (*kadaw bwe sek-*) to their protective spirits (*nat*) through the intermediary of possessed spirit mediums who reciprocate with parts of these items now imbued with the protective power (*tago*) of the spiritual agency. Any subsequent benefit is regarded as having been 'given' (*pay-*) by the spirit and makes the devotee indebted it. Obligation binds spirits, their mediums and their devotees together in a ritual network. As for the *weikza*, they rescue (*ke-*) the Buddhist world (*thathana*) by diffusing energy-like agency (*dat*) toward their followers. The esoteric field is shaped as a reformed lay field of Buddhist practice, distinct from the monastic one as it is not concerned with religious donation or with a meritorious reward.

The following table maps the contrasting transactions that take place in the different realms:

	"non religious"		"religious"
Agent 2	Weikza ⇩	Nat* ⇩	Monk ≠
Object	*dat*	*tego*	merit
Action	*ke-*	*pay-*	✖
Action	✖	*sek-*	*hlu*
Object	*puzaw bwe*	*kedaw bwe*	*ahlu*
Agent 1	≠ follower	⇧ devotee	⇧ layBuddhist

*Nat is the Burmese word for spirits.

While spirit (*nat*) worship, in the middle column, appears to be a transactional framework design for intense exchanges, this table clearly shows that this is not the case in the monastic and the weikza fields, since they have both reversed one-way transaction frameworks. On the other hand, the transfer of goods to weikza specialists or to spirit mediums produces a return of some kind of spiritual substance, energy (*dat*) or power (*tago*), transmitted through the weikza or the spirits (*nat*), respectively. Contrastively, merit (*kutho*) does not appear to be given in return by monks. Hence, the non-reciprocity of religious donations (*ahlu*) appears to be just as distinctive as the monks' passive receipt.

At this level of analysis, exchange models do not succeed in portraying the social import of religious donations from laypeople to monastics in Burmese Buddhism. Even though religious donations may be of major economic importance, far from initiating an exchange, they contribute to the daily setting of boundaries between what is 'religious' and what is not, according to the Burmese Buddhist view. Monks' passive receipt of donations contributes to their higher 'religious' status and ensures the hegemonic position of Buddhism within the whole Burmese religious field.

From a more systemic point of view, followers of the lay, *weikza* or *nat* paths may all be seen as supporting the specialists of their respective fields of action. However, the transactional frameworks in which they operate display specificities contributing to their formal differentiation. Compared to transactions that occur in other domains that might be included in Burmese religion when examined from a broader analytical perspective, the kind of interaction that religious donations generate looks unique and contributes in this way to the hegemony of the Burmese Buddhist-defined 'religious' field of practice (*thathana*).

Short Biography

Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière is an anthropologist attached to the CNRS, Paris. Since 1981, she has been traveling almost on a yearly basis to Burma, conducting research focusing first on spirit possession cults and rituals, second to esoteric Buddhism, and lately on contemporary religious phenomena. She authored the book *Les rituels de possession en Birmanie Du culte d'Etat aux cérémonies privées* (Paris, ADPF, 1989) and edited together with Alicia Turner and Guillaume

Rozenberg *Champions of Buddhism. Weikza Cults in contemporary Burma* (Singapore, NUS press, 2014).

Notes

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[1] Many thanks are due to Bernadette Sellers, Nicolas Silhé, and Jane Caple who helped me a lot in the writing of this paper.

[2] In this paper, all the vernacular terms are in Burmese and transcribed according to John Okell's chart, without diacritics, with the exception of Pâli religious terminology signaled hereafter by the mention (P.).

[3] Sangha (P. *samgha*) refers to the Buddhist monastic orders.

[4] Unfortunately, Strenski's use of Lévi-Strauss's terminology of *generalized exchange* reinforces the possibility of confusion with Sahlins's category of *generalized reciprocity*, although they do not refer to the same type of reciprocity, as underlined by Sahlins (1972, 193, n.4). In Sahlins's use, *generalized reciprocity* refers to transactions occurring between closely related people in which a gift is not necessarily reciprocated.

[5] See particularly her last book, Schober (2011).

[6] See also Sihlé in this issue.

[7] My own analytic delineation of religion would encompass fields of practice that might or might not be included in the Burmese emic definition according to these relative positions.

[8] *Thathana* does not fully correspond to the Western concept of religion but, in Burmese usage, roughly means the institution of Buddhism or the Buddhist dispensation. Other words could be used for different aspects of the concept of religion such as *dhamma*, for the doctrinal content of Buddhism, and the more recent *batha*, used since the mid-19th century for religion, any religion, as a professed confession that constitutes part of a person's identity. For the Burmese concept of *thathana* (P. *sâsana*), see Houtman (1990) and Kirichienko (2007).

[9] For the heuristic benefit of considering these various kinds of transaction as 'one single realm of giving' defined by particular social logics, against academic use, see Bornstein (2012, 12–13).

[10] *Ahlu* is made up of the verb *hlu-* with the mark of nominalization *a* whose vowel emission is preceded by a glottal stop. While the Burmese expression *ahlu* is used by laypeople when referring to their practice of giving to Buddhist religious institutions (*thathana*) or ordered monastics (*thangha*), the Pâli *dâna* refers also to the Buddhist religious donation but is mainly used at a higher 'religious' level of speech. A Burmanized combination of the two words *ahludan* exists and refers to the general practice of religious giving. Significantly, the uses of *ahlu* and *dâna* to refer to practice of religious donations by lay donors or in religious contexts, respectively, may express asymetric perspectives on the interactions as demonstrated by materials presented in this issue by Céline Coderey. For the terminology of the gift, see Denise Bernot (1992).

[11] (Strenski 1983, 472). See Sihlé in this issue, who points out the difference between Strenski's quotation of Tambiah and the latter's statement that 'in philosophical Buddhism… the meditating monk becomes the model of non-reciprocity' (Tambiah 1970, 68).

[12] 'Field of merit' is a literal translation of Pâli *punnaketta*. About this notion, see particularly the volume edited by Kamerer and Tannenbaum (1996).

[13] Note that, in addition to the ubiquity of merit through religious transactions between laypeople and monastics, laypeople may generate merit through proper Buddhist behavior, particularly by obeying Buddhist precepts (*thila*/P. *sîla*) and cultivating Buddhist virtues such as generosity.

[14] Kawanami, the Japanese anthropologist and specialist of Buddhist nuns in Burma, makes the same observation about monks who 'normally repay the gift by preaching or performing a ritual' in her chapter about transactions between nuns and society (Kawanami 2013, ch.5, 134). By contrast, nuns recite blessings when receiving alms, which is not the case of monks, and this is a mark of their different status (138).

[15] The color of the religious robe is darker in Burma, almost brown, than in neighboring Buddhist societies where the usual designation 'saffron robe' comes from. However, Burmese Buddhists speak of it as yellowish (*wa*) rather than brownish (*nyo*) so I have called it saffron.

[16] See Holt (2009) and Scott (2009).

[17] In her ethnography of female ascetics in Thai Buddhism, Falk refers to laywomen who perform the merit-sharing ritual at home after having served food to monks or female ascetics (Falk Lindberg 2007, 153–155). While it is difficult to affirm categorically that no Burmese would perform the ritual privately after almsgiving to monks, I never came

across such an instance. The point is that, whatever the frame of mind of the layperson who gives alms, merit sharing is not outwardly expressed by lay Burmese Buddhists by performing the ritual, as it is in the cases documented by Falk.

[18] This analysis of the formal framework does not preclude the possibility of more personalized relations often developing between a lay donor and his monastic recipient, as pointed out by the Japanese anthropologist, Hiroko Kawanami, who observes in this regard a difference between rural and contemporary urban settings (Kawanami 2013, 154). See also Coderey in this issue.

[19] For the conceptualization of rituals as a form of practice distinguishable according to shifting lines of differentiation, or *ritualization*, see mainly C. Bell (1992).

[20] While merit is indeed central to religious donations in Burma as in other Theravadin polities, the accent in the *ahlu* categorization is on the act of giving to the Buddhist 'religion' (*thathana*). By contrast, in Thailand, meritorious occasions are literally called to 'make merit' (*tham bun*, Thai) (Tambiah 1970 and Bowie 1998), laying emphasis on the reward expected by the donors.

[21] The primary meaning of *taya* in Burmese is 'law', and it is used more specifically for 'Buddhist teachings', which corresponds to Pâli *dhamma*. The semantic field covered by *bwe* is very large, ranging from 'plate' to 'feast' and specifications are therefore required when translating it. *Bwe* can be rendered as 'offerings' in some cases, as we will see below, but not in association with *teya*. The Burmese expression designating public sermons is therefore different from the Pâli one.

[22] On the development of public preaching in Sri Lanka and its implications, see Deegalle (2006).

[23] Other expressions that pertain to different speech levels designate the lay donor of a religious donation. *Dâyakâ* is the Buddhist Pâli word for lay donor that monks commonly use. Schober (1989) refers mainly to *kutho shin* meaning the master of merit (from the Pâli *kusâla*), an expression that is not common in the Lower Burma contexts I have come across.

[24] Redistribution also exists in the religious domain, as exemplified by Rozenberg in his paper, 'How giving sanctifies' (Rozenberg 2004), where he builds his argument around the case of a monk who redistributes surplus donations to other monks in order to attain sainthood. For other cases of monks redistributing surplus donations, see below.

[25] In fact, this opposition between 'religious' and 'non-religious' fields of action has its equivalent in the Pâli terminology the Burmese use to oppose 'in-this-world' (*lawkíya*) to 'out-of-this–world' (*lokuttarâ*). A rough equivalent would be the religious/secular opposition inasmuch as the differentiation of a 'religious domain' within society pertains to the complementary process of secularization. However, in Burma, the 'non-religious' or mundane domain is indeed different from the Western notion of secularity.

[26] Spiro comments on conflictual cases in villages he has investigated showing villagers actually expecting from the monks a ritual service as a counterpart for their support (417–421) and thus demonstrating at this practical level a degree of reciprocity in the monks' relation to the laity.

[27] Note also that the amount of wealth transferred from the lay to the monastic sector may be so great that it can affect the general economy, as argued by the historian Michael Aung Thwin (1979) regarding the Pagan period in particular.

[28] About spirit possession practice, see mainly Spiro (1967) and Brac de la Perrière (1989).

[29] The Burmese terminology of giving is actually even more diverse but I believe that the link between these three verbs structures the semantic field. For a more detailed presentation of this vocabulary, see Bernot (1992).

[30] State Law and Order Council (SLORC) and State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) are the two government military organs that exercised power over Burma (Myanmar) from 1990 to 2011.

[31] This complaint was made by many of my informants during my stay in Burma in 2007–8.

[32] For a detailed analysis of this monk's 'career', see Brac de la Perrière (2015).

[33] About the esoteric field of practice known as *weikza*, I am using my own observations. See also the recent book edited by Brac de la Perrière *et al.* (2014).

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