

Ruins, Rituals and Sunset Sacrifice: The contesting values of Bagan in Myanmar

Anne Laura Kraak

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Introduction

Buddha travelled to the hill overlooking Bagan on the opposite bank of the Ayeryawaddy River. He saw a white heron, a black crow, a lizard and a frog in a tree and prophesied that at this site the city of Bagan would arise 651 years after his death (Tin and Luce 2008: 29). This prophecy is an important foundation myth of the kingdom of Bagan, which was at its height between the 11th and 13th centuries in what is now Myanmar¹. During this time, over 4,000 Buddhist pagodas were constructed. The motivation behind this patronage of religious buildings lies in the concept of merit making: the belief that the construction of Buddhist temples is a good work that accumulates merit and ensures a good rebirth or even nirvana for the donor (Spiro 1982: 109). Today, over 2,000 monuments remain scattered over a plain of around 110 square kilometres. It is an impressive site of archaeological and architectural as well as spiritual and religious significance.

In August 2015, unusually heavy rain led to the collapse of one of the thousands of Buddhist temples. Although the weather conditions were uncommon, the incident led



Figure 1 The plains of Bagan (Photo: Anne Laura Kraak)

to speculations that the collapse can be explained by the poor restoration work of a decade earlier (Thein 2015). In the 1990s and 2000s, the military regime in Myanmar led a major renovation campaign for the monuments of Bagan. The campaign was criticised because internationally accepted standards of architectural conservation were not taken into account and reliable archaeological evidence was lacking. However, this was not of much concern to most Buddhist devotees, support the renovation of Buddhist temples as an important act of merit making. These different views on the renovations reflect the relative value attached to two different stories that can be told about Bagan. One story is based on what we know about the past from disciplines such as archaeology, epigraphy and architecture. The other story is based on myths, legends and spirituality.

This paper will introduce both stories to show the challenge of reconciling two different sets of values attached to the fabric of a cultural heritage site in a context where both archaeologists and Buddhists have to grapple with the increasing influence of a third type of value: economic. Recently, Bagan has seen significant increase in tourism and associated development, which threatens both the archaeological and spiritual values attached to the monuments. To this background, preparations are made to nominate Bagan for recognition under UNESCO's World Heritage Convention². Based on preliminary findings of my on-going doctoral research, I aim to expose some underlying hierarchies of value that influence how heritage conservation in Bagan is being negotiated.

Ruins: A story of archaeology and architecture

There is a long gap between the legendary founding of Bagan alluded to in Buddha's prophecy and the first historical records. The earliest date attested by an engraved stone is 1113 AD and the earliest ruler of Bagan for which there is concrete evidence

is king Anawratha (r. 1044-1077). This king is credited with unifying and creating a kingdom roughly the size of contemporary Myanmar and votaries bearing his name can be found throughout much of the country (Stadtner 2013).

The repair of religious monuments in Bagan had long been part of royal patronage in Burma, but archaeological documentation and conservation were not included in local custom (Moore 2013: 247). Efforts to conserve Bagan's monuments started after the British annexation of Burma in 1886. Initially, Burma was ruled as province of British India and Bagan came under influence of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI). After independence in 1948, the Archaeology Department of Burma continued the work initiated by the ASI and retained 'a focus on texts and strongly empirical recording' (Moore 2013: 249). Following a major earthquake in 1975, UNESCO and the United Nations Development Programme provided aid for the repair of the significant damages to the monuments. The work included seismological investigations, training, equipment purchase, documentation and continued repairs and conservation. Architect Pierre Pichard went to Bagan in 1978 and began an inventory, which ended up consisting of 2,157 monuments and was published in a nine volume collection. It included information about geography, architecture, photographs, and references to epigraphic and historical sources. It is still the most complete inventory in existence today (Chapman 2013: 181-182; Hudson 2008: 555; Messeri 2007; Pichard 2013: 238). However, it does not elaborate on the spiritual significance of the monuments.

Archaeologist Elizabeth Moore points out how the 'application of India-developed norms in British Burma created parallel worlds of empirical archaeology and religious sustenance' (2013: 250). In Bagan, this meant that European attention and efforts were primarily directed to epigraphy, archaeology and architecture, while there was a

‘lack of British engagement with the conceptual significance of the pagodas’ (Moore 2013: 250). Contemporary dilemmas with regard to the conservation of the monuments of Bagan and their religious significance can be seen as a legacy of these parallel worlds.

Following civil unrest and a change of military regimes in 1988, the Myanmar government became increasingly distrustful of foreign involvement and worked outside of UNESCO’s recommendations. Over the next 20 years, a series of controversial developments took place at Bagan. This included the forced relocation of a community living in the centre of the site, the construction of a huge new museum, a viewing tower, golf course, the conjectural reconstruction of a Bagan-era palace as well as the reconstruction and renovation of thousands of monuments without any archaeological or architectural evidence. These developments led to much international critique and have been disapproved as ‘a Disney style set on a historic-religious site’ (Messerli 2007). The activities of the military regime in Bagan often been considered as part of a larger nation-building exercise in which Buddhism was appropriated to seek legitimacy (Houtman 1999, Philp and Mercer 1999, Philp 2010). Such activities were not limited to Bagan, but took place throughout the country. Moreover, there have been accusations of the use of forced labour in the name of Buddhist merit making practice (Houtman 1999: 123) and there are concerns about the safety of the new constructions. The recent collapse of a monument after heavy rainfall is a sign that at least the latter concern may be justified. However, I would like to stress that international conservation standards do not represent local values or interests any more than the questionable work of the former military regime. If anything, they represent them less. Yet, it is those standards that have recently been prioritised again.

In 2011, Myanmar started transitioning to a more democratic form of governance. Reforms and social transformations involved an increasing engagement with the international community and its standards, including UNESCO's World Heritage Convention. UNESCO provides support for Bagan's World Heritage nomination as part of the project *Capacity Building for Safeguarding Cultural Heritage in Myanmar*, which involves the invitation of leading international and national experts to consult on the process, the facilitation of capacity building activities, technical assistance and training (see Unakul and Rellensmann 2013). With the aim of a World Heritage status, the government's approach to its heritage shifted. Reconstructions and renovations without archaeological evidence are no longer allowed, despite a continued interest of Buddhists in such merit making activities. During my fieldwork in Myanmar last year I found that although some lip service is paid to the religious significance of the pagodas, technical matters with regard to the conservation of archaeology and architecture dominated the nomination process. Recent reports by the Japan Consortium for International Cooperation in Cultural Heritage (2011) and UNESCO (Unakul and Rellensmann 2013) with regard to heritage conservation in Myanmar reflect this emphasis on technical matters and the limited attention to the spiritual significance of Bagan by these international experts.

Although the adoption of international conservation standards can hopefully prevent the collapse of temples as a result of weather conditions in the future, I argue that archaeology and architecture only tell one part of Bagan's story. In the next section, I will introduce some aspects of a different story.

Rituals: A story of merit making and spirituality

The prophecy of Buddha is popularly known and can also be found in the *Glass Palace Chronicles*, which were compiled in 1829 and are based on earlier chronicles



Figure 2 Alodawpyi Pagoda: completely renovated (Photo: Anne Laura Kraak)

(Tin and Luce 2008 [1923]). Countless other myths and legends play important roles in contemporary Bagan. These myths are often dismissed or ignored by historians and archaeologists. However, I argue that the power of such myths should not be underestimated. They are key to understanding the contemporary significance of the heritage site to locals, pilgrims and tourists. The myths not only move people around and guide which monuments are visited, but also influence which monuments receive attention and resources from Buddhist donors and are considered appealing places for merit making or other spiritual activities, which include reconstructions and renovations as well as various other popular religious practices that may impact the fabric of the monuments. I will illustrate this with a few examples.

Alodawpyi Pagoda is known as the wish-fulfilling pagoda because according to the legend, king Kyanzittha used to pray at this temple before going to war and his wishes were always fulfilled. The pagoda was neglected for centuries, but in the 1990s a charismatic monk and General Khin Nyunt started to actively promote the temple.

Rumours circled that army staff obtained promotions after praying at this pagoda and soon it became a key pilgrimage site with various associated rituals. Moreover, the monument has now a board of eight trustees who organise one of the largest pagoda festivals in Bagan. People from everywhere in Myanmar attend the festival and its popularity is partly due to the connection with the famous monk. Alodawpyi Pagoda became the only monument in Bagan that is air-conditioned and brightly lit.

Not all myths and legends are appealing. The legend associated with the largest temple in Bagan, Dhammayangyi Pagoda, is dark and mysterious and no donor has been willing to renovate it. Very shortly, the story is about a cruel king who murdered his wife, son and uncle and built Dhammayangyi Pagoda because he was concerned about his karma. Contrary to pagodas like Alodawpyi, there are no golden Buddha statues adorned with colourful electrical lights and umbrellas in Dhammayangyi Pagoda. While some monuments in Bagan contain shrines full of fresh flowers and incense, the Buddha statues in Dhammayangyi are covered in bat droppings, the temple being home to dozens of bats.

These stories are more important to most visitors than the typology of temple architecture. The difference between the current state of Dhammayangyi and Alodawpyi has not much to do with how old the monuments are and what historical events may have taken place. Myths and legends have influenced their relative contemporary spiritual significance and state of renovation. Simply dismissing or ignoring myths and legends misses a significant part of Myanmar's living heritage.

In the last decades there has been an increased interest in living heritage and scholars such as Denis Byrne (1995, 2009, 2012, 2014), Anna Karlström (2005), Maurizio Peleggi (2012) and Neel Kamal Chapagain (2013) have examined the relationship

between Buddhism, popular religious practice and heritage conservation. They have pointed out how the concept of impermanence, circular perceptions of time, the symbolic significance of Buddhist architecture and the importance of merit making all create an uneasy relationship between Buddhist philosophy and heritage conservation. The controversy around the reconstructions and renovations in Bagan is an excellent illustration of this uneasy relationship. While some have argued that 'by all accounts Pagan has been systematically archaeologically ruined' (Houtman 1999: 92), a different perspective suggests that the junta continued Myanmar's cultural practices. Reconstructions and renovations of the pagodas by the rulers of the country, as means of merit making, have been continuous throughout the centuries – if not at this scale. Conserving the Buddhist monuments in a way that is deemed internationally appropriate could even be considered an interruption to this form of intangible heritage. A continued interest in renovating the pagodas for merit making purposes today indicates the tension between international conservation standards and living or intangible heritage practices.

Although alternative approaches to heritage conservation have increasingly been recognised through various charters, declarations and conventions³, arguably the Western paradigm still dominates and this can be seen in the current World Heritage preparation for Bagan with its emphasis on archaeology and architecture. Anna Karlström has warned that even if 'intangible heritage is taken into consideration and conservation strategies are formulated in consultation with indigenous groups, the fundamental aim and necessity of preservation is still unquestioned' (2005: 352). Diversity and alternative approaches are only accepted if they fit into the existing paradigm. For example, during a recent research project in Phnom Rung Historical Park in Thailand, Alexandra Denes found that the Historical Park staff would state

that local communities have the right to ‘use and access the site according to their beliefs and traditions’ (2012: 202), but when those beliefs and traditions (for instance, touching artefacts and using paraphernalia such a candles, incense and other offerings) could harm the physical fabric, they could not be allowed (Denes 2012: 202).

Staff of the Department of Archaeology in Bagan has expressed similar concerns and locals are often prevented from having a say, not being ‘educated’ enough. Such an approach could lead to people’s exclusion from their own cultural heritage. However, the reality is that giving locals a say is unlikely to provide easy solutions. My informants had widely differing opinions on the extent to which popular religious practices and the reconstructions and renovations of the ancient monuments are appropriate. Moreover, many of my informants were equally or more concerned about the threat of tourism development. This presents a third type of value attached to Bagan and in the following section I will introduce the kinds of challenges it presents to both the archaeological and spiritual significance of the site.

Sunset Sacrifice: A story of tourism and development



Figure 3 Dhammayangyi Pagoda (Photo: Anne Laura Kraak)

Shwesandaw Pagoda is a monument from which you can enjoy spectacular views over the plains of Bagan. In the East, monuments scatter the landscape as far as you can see. In the South, Mt Tuyin is crowned with the shiny golden spires of its pagoda. In the North and the West, the silver glittering of the meandering Ayeryawaddy River can be detected with on the opposite bank Mt Tangyi, from where Buddha supposedly made his prophecy about Bagan. The sun sets behind Mt Tangyi and on a clear day fantastic colours surround the mountain and a mystic light spreads over the plains of Bagan, casting long shadows behind the countless pagodas. It may be one of the most photogenic places in the world. However, if you want to take this photograph today you will have to show up two hours before sunset, otherwise you may have to queue behind the tourists spilling out of the dozens of tour buses. In any case, you will have to negotiate your way through dozens of hawkers selling any imaginable souvenir before you can start climbing Shwesandaw Pagoda.

Today, it is no longer possible to climb many of the main monuments of Bagan. The Department of Archaeology and the Boards of Trustees of the temples have closed off passages to the higher levels in order to prevent deterioration. However, there is no control over smaller and more remote temples and locals often happily lead tourists to these places. Moreover, there is a selection of pagodas, such as Shwesandaw, that have purposefully been sacrificed for tourists to climb and watch the spectacular sunset. The staff of the Department of Archaeology and temple trustees I interviewed both have their reasons to not be very pleased with this situation. From the archaeological and conservation point of view, the climbing of pagodas may lead to wear and tear while some Buddhists are concerned about the lack of respect for their religion. Nevertheless, I found that these reservations about climbing pagodas are not necessarily shared among all the Burmese, Buddhists or Bagan locals. Pilgrims and



Figure 4 Tourists on Shwesandaw Pagoda (Photo: Anne Laura Kraak)

locals mingle with international tourists to enjoy the undeniably stunning views from the tops of temples. Moreover, the staff of the Department of Archaeology and temple trustees acknowledged that tourism is a key source of income for most locals and there is a degree of willingness to accommodate their demands, even if this counters some of their values.

Tourism is often considered a double-edged sword in heritage conservation contexts. While on the one hand it could provide the necessary income for the maintenance of the site, on the other hand, an uncontrolled influx of tourism and associated development can irreparably damage the heritage. In poor, developing countries, such as Myanmar, tourism could potentially provide a means to overcome poverty. However, the experience in places such as Angkor in Cambodia has shown that the trickle-down effect is often disappointing and international tour companies or those who are already well off are able to benefit most from tourism (Winter 2007, Timothy

and Nyaupane 2009). As a result of Myanmar's decades-long isolation, the economic potential of Bagan has only been discovered relatively recently. Yet, there have already been a series of conflicts and demonstrations with regard to the rapidly developing tourism infrastructure – the access and use of the monuments by tourists and pilgrims being one such issue – and this signals the challenges that lay ahead for Bagan.

Addressing contesting values

At least two different stories can be told about Bagan. To some, the monuments of Bagan are unique archaeological and architectural treasures, potentially of outstanding universal value to humanity. According to this point of view, international conservation standards form the most appropriate guidelines for protecting the monuments for future generations. To others, Bagan's pagodas are of spiritual significance and myths, legends and popular religious practices are central to their engagement with the monuments. Bagan is a potential site for merit making – one of the most important activities of Theravada Buddhism – and international conservation standards are at best irrelevant and at worst contrary to activities that are deemed important. These different stories and different ways of valuing Bagan lead to significance tensions, particularly in the context of a World Heritage nomination.

While negotiations take place about the extent to which reconstructions and renovations of Buddhist pagodas will be allowed, the recognition of their potential as an economic resource for exploitation is a powerful force that threatens to overshadow other forms of significance.

In order to address such contesting values, various approaches to heritage conservation have been suggested over the last decades, including human rights, community- and values-based approaches (e.g. ICOMOS Australia 2013, Avrami,

Mason and de la Torre 2000, de la Torre 2002, Ekern et al. 2012). However, I believe that none of them can adequately address the challenges facing Bagan. Human rights language is too politically sensitive for such an approach to be effective in Myanmar (Kraak 2015) and the difficulty of identifying the interests and values of heterogeneous and internally divided communities makes a focus on community participation problematic. Moreover, as Ioannis Poullos (2010) has pointed out, values-based approaches tend to prioritise the values of the most powerful actors. In the context of Bagan, these are the archaeologists and architects as well as the (semi) military government. In the 1990s and 2000s, the junta sought legitimacy with their Buddhist population through merit making campaigns. With a change of government in 2011, their strategy changed and legitimacy is now sought with the international community by respecting international conservation standards. Meanwhile, the tourism industry is allowed to exploit Bagan in the name of development while there are several signs that the government profits more from this than the local population (Lwin 2015, Lynn 2015). In Myanmar, a lack of capacity, a poor enforcement of the rule of law and ingrained corruption make it challenging to balance the different value sets. As heritage scholars and practitioners, we need to be vigilant and critical of the unequal power relations in and around heritage sites and this includes our own agendas and biases.

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¹ In 1989 the military regime changed the name of the country from Burma to Myanmar and Pagan was changed to Bagan. I follow David Steinberg (Steinberg 2010) and use the terms Burma and Pagan when I refer to the country before 1989 and Myanmar and Bagan for the period after. ‘Burmese’ refers to all inhabitants and is also used for the language and as an adjective. I do not intend to make a political statement with this usage.

² United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation, Convention Concerning the Protection of the World’s Cultural and Natural Heritage (1972)

³ Such as the Nara Document on Authenticity (1994), China Principles (1998), Shanghai Charter (2002), Yamato Declaration (2004), Okinawa Declaration (2004), Xi’an Declaration (2005), Hoi An Protocols (2005) and Seoul Declaration (2007)