

Khin Yi

THE DOBAMA
MOVEMENT IN
BURMA (1930-1938)

Monograph

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Southeast Asia Program
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To my parents
U Ba and Daw Nyo
to whom I owe everything

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*These Appendices, which are written in Burmese script, form a separate volume: Southeast Asia Program Monographs No. 2A.

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FOREWORD

THE "DOBAMA ASIAYONE" IN BURMA'S POLITICAL HISTORY

The Dobama Asiayone was the central organization in the fundamental transformation which occurred in the nationalist movement of Burma during the decade prior to the Second World War. Before then, Burmese nationalist groups, represented first by the Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA) and subsequently by the General Council of Burmese Associations (GCBA), had remained constricted between the contradictory concepts and terminology of, on the one hand, the Burmese Buddhist political tradition as represented by the defeated monarchical state and the Theravada Buddhist *sangha*, and on the other, the definitions of modernity and progressiveness as presented by the British colonial state with its emphasis upon rationality, productivity, and instrumental power. The leaders of the nationalist groups were pulled between these two ideals, one learned from Burma's 1,000 year old culture and the other from the institutions of British science and imperialism. When the YMBA and GCBA political leadership moved toward the ideals of the past through the use of indigenous symbolism and devotion to the ethical principles of Buddhism, they received the support of wide sections of Burmese rural society. When they moved toward the realities of the British presence through their roles as lawyers, journalists, and elected politicians, they lost touch with their political supporters while, ironically, gaining access to positions of influence and wealth in the capital.

The success of the early Dobama Asiayone which Daw Khin Yi graphically describes in this volume, stemmed from its attempt to overcome this contradiction rather than being torn between the two seemingly opposed ideas. Symbolic of the radical difference between it and its predecessor organizations, which were better known by their English initials than their Burmese name, the Dobama Asiayone was and is best known by its full Burmese title.¹ Use of this title was an attempt to

1. The Burmese name for the Young Men's Buddhist Association was Buddha Batha Kalyana Yuwa Athin (Association to Care for the Well Being of Buddhism) but it was commonly referred to in Burmese as the YMBA. Similarly, the General Council of Burmese Associations was normally referred to as the GCBA in Burmese rather than by its indigenous name, Myanma Athin Chok (Supervising Burma Association). The attempt by European writers to refer to the Dobama Asiayone by its initials failed but not before causing a good deal of confusion. In older writings the organization is usually referred to as the DAA. British police records followed this practice. The use of these initials reveals a confusion about the Burmese spelling of the name. *Do* stands alone signifying "We" but is often written and pronounced in the possessive form *Do* and then means "Our." *Bama* means either "Burman," "Bur-

find a way of fusing the power of what was believed to be Western technique with the essence of what it was to be Burmese. Out of this effort would arise a new man and a new set of political ideals, capable of coping with the British on their own terms while, at the same time, retaining the support of the broad mass of the people. The founders of the Dobama Asiayone intended that it would address the fundamental political problems of colonial Burma and would ignore the divisive political issues that the British created, such as the question of Burma's separation from India in 1932, in favor of the overriding political question of the period, the achievement of independence. In so doing, however, the leadership was forced to confront, in both theoretical and practical terms, the question of whether class or race provided the most appropriate category for analyzing Burma's economic and political situation. In this regard, the formation and development of the Dobama Asiayone was a part of the strengthening class and ethnic consciousness of late colonial Burma.

The idealistic intentions of the founders of the Dobama Asiayone and of their successors soon came up against the realities of the colonial politics which they were helping to recast. But despite its shortcomings, the Dobama Asiayone's attempt to reform the nature of political thinking in Burma was sufficient to reshape the prevalent assumptions for political action of a generation of nationalist students and union leaders. In the best tradition of Burma's historians, Daw Khin Yi reveals the mistakes and shortcomings of the individuals involved in the making of history without denigrating the importance or sincerity of their actions.

The history of institutions is normally less tidy than the history of ideas. There were no winners or losers in the internal history of the Dobama Asiayone in Daw Khin Yi's account. There were important consequences flowing from their actions. The split within the leadership which Daw Khin Yi examines was a result of the inability of old and new Dobama leaders to agree on how to overcome the contradictions of Burma's colonial political dilemma. An internationalism which pulled toward a broad nationalist orientation and emphasized the common class interests of Burma's Indian and Burmese workers and peasants struggled against a narrow nationalism which sought to define the dominant political problem in terms of race alone. The positions of the leaders were not absolutely fixed on these points, but the underlying dilemmas which they faced as political leaders forced them to think in these terms. The new intellectual contradiction which arose as a result of the Dobama leaders' attempt to surpass the early colonial political contradiction remained unresolved at the time of the Japanese occupation in 1942. The question was overtaken by events and did not recur in outward form again until independence was achieved ten years after Daw Khin Yi's history concludes.

mese," or "Burma," thus Do Bama can be either the more narrowly nationalistic "We Burmans," the broader "We Burmese," or the most encompassing "Our Burma." *Asiayone* stands as one unit meaning "association," "organization," or, more precisely, a "tightly bound group of men." Properly, therefore, any attempt to provide English initials for *Do Bama Asiayone* should have been DBA.

The critical place of the Dobama Asiayone, and the larger Thakin movement which it represented, did not become apparent to observers of Burma's politics until after independence. J. S. Furnivall's classic *Colonial Policy and Practice*, written a few years after the events described in this volume, apparently mentions the Dobama Asiayone only twice. Dobama is referred to as a "patriotic group" noted for its campaign to boycott foreign goods and foreign styles. Furnivall also finds the patriotism of the group significant when he records that among the few members of the House of Representatives opposed to political corruption were "adherents of the *thakin* (extremist) party, and it is interesting to note that it was the extremist party, most keenly opposed to foreign government, which was the most solicitous for pure administration."² But Furnivall at that time foresaw no particular future for the Dobama members in government after the war. When, however, many of them became the first rulers of independent Burma, he served as an adviser to them.

Those historians and political analysts who wrote after Burma achieved its independence were able to see more clearly the crucial place of the Dobama Asiayone in the shaping of Burma's nationalist politics. Professor John Cady, in his standard history of modern Burma, devotes a four page section to the "The Thakin Party or Dobama Asiayone." He noted that the founding of the organization was at the time "seemingly unimportant but potentially significant."³ Frank Trager's political analysis written in the mid 1960s devotes more than twice as many pages to the Thakins as did Cady but his analysis is one-sided and ignores not only the founding of the movement which Daw Khin Yi describes, but underplays the personalized factionalism and intellectual disputes that divided the movement.⁴ Curiously, Donald Eugene Smith's valuable study, *Religion and Politics in Burma*, almost ignores the Dobama Asiayone and when it is briefly discussed, many of the statements concerning it are misleading or false, as Daw Khin Yi's work demonstrates.⁵ Other authors have merely ignored the significant

2. J. S. Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice* (New York: New York University Press, 1956; first published by the Cambridge University Press, 1948). Neither *Dobama Asiayone* or *Thakin* appears in the index. The quotations come from pp. 166 and 171 respectively.

3. John F. Cady, *A History of Modern Burma* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1958), pp. 375-78, quotation on p. 375; activities of the Thakins, both as an organization and as individuals after the period Daw Khin Yi describes are noted on pp. 417; 419-20; 448; 471-74; and 528.

4. Frank N. Trager, *Burma: From Kingdom to Independence* (London: Pall Mall; New York: Praeger, 1966), pp. 44, 53-63, 82, 95, 130-31, 150-51, and 167.

5. Donald Eugene Smith, *Religion and Politics in Burma* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), pp. 115-16 and 118-19. On p. 115, for example, Smith states that the *Dobama* was founded in 1935 and he accepts uncritically a claim by Aung San that, despite its origins, it was "the only non-racial, non-religious movement that ever existed in Burma." On the next page he confuses the continuing role of many

role of the Dobama Asiayone in creating much of the spirit and ideas of the late colonial nationalist movement and their impact on subsequent events.⁶ The only major published study of Burma's politics devoted to the period which included the foundation and growth of the Dobama Asiayone, Albert D. Moscotti's *British Policy and the Nationalist Movement in Burma, 1917-1937*, mentions the Dobama Asiayone and Thakin only three times.⁷ My own study of Burma's elite politics between 1937 and 1942 failed to relate the growth of the Dobama Asiayone and its own politics to the larger political world.⁸

To begin to understand the importance of the Dobama Asiayone in modern Burma's politics, one has to turn to Burmese scholarly writing in English. In Dr. Maung Maung's *Burma and General Ne Win*, although the main protagonist, Ne Win, plays only a marginal role in the founding and leadership of the Dobama Asiayone other than through his association with his uncle, Thakin Nyi, the author devotes nearly the whole second chapter to the growth and development of the Thakin movement and the role of students in it.⁹ The most complete discussion

prewar Thakin in politics with an unfounded implication that this group remained united around previously held secular nationalist goals. By positing a Buddhist nationalism against a putative Thakin secular nationalism on pp. 118 and 119, Smith creates a degree of consistency for Thakin thought which never existed in the clarity which his argument requires.

6. Professor Josef Silverstein in the discussion of the "Sources of Burmese Political Culture" in *Burma: Military Rule and the Politics of Stagnation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977) does not refer to the organization, but later identifies it in a footnote as a "movement . . . launched by young Burmese in the early 1930s as a way to recapture pride and to enlist Burmese in a truly nationalist movement." See p. 45, fn. 20. The movement is not listed in the index of David I. Steinberg's *Burma's Road Toward Development: Growth and Ideology Under Military Rule* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1981).

7. Albert D. Moscotti, *British Policy and the Nationalist Movement in Burma, 1917-1937* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1974), pp. 56, 65-66, and 120.

8. Robert Henry Taylor, "The Relationship Between Burmese Social Classes and British-Indian Policy on the Behavior of the Burmese Political Elite, 1937-1942" (Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell University, 1974). See the account on pp. 181-205. This is based almost entirely on British police and political reports. The events Daw Khin Yi describes in her chapter 3, "The Year of Strife," are told from the perspective of the government in my chapter 5, "The Fall of the Ba Maw Ministry," pp. 289-369. Accounts in Burmese include Ba Tin, *1300 Pyi Ayeidawbon Hmattan* [Record of the 1300 Revolution] (Rangoon: Myawadi, n.d.) and Kyaw Win Maung, *Mandalei 1300 Pyi Ayeidawbon hme Nechet Towhlaneyi Tho* [To the Anti-Imperialist Revolution, the Mandalay 1300 Revolution] (Rangoon: Banmaw Sapei, 1984) as well as the volume noted in fn. 11 below.

9. Maung Maung, *Burma and General Ne Win* (New York: Asia Publishing House, 1969), "Chapter 2, The Struggle Gathers Momentum," pp.

of the organization and its genesis and development before the publication of Daw Khin Yi's study is U Maung Maung's *From Sangha to Laity: Nationalist Movements in Burma 1920-1940*.¹⁰ However, the Dobama Asiayone is not the focus of this study, though the organization does play a crucial part in U Maung Maung's implicit thesis about the rise of new secularist political forces as the population became disenchanted with the religious hypocrisy and political inconsistency of the older leaders of the GCBA generation.

It is when Burmese are writing in their own language that full attention has been given to the development of the Dobama Asiayone in both its intellectual and institutional forms. Popular magazines and newspapers carried many articles on the role of the Dobama Asiayone in the nationalist period, and politicians were reluctant to abandon the Thakin title, but no full study of the organization was published until 1976 when *Do Bama Asiayone Thamaing* [History of the Do Bama Asiayone] appeared.¹¹ This two-volume study, prepared by a committee working in the late 1960s and based on interviews with Thakin activists and on collections of Dobama Asiayone documents, is an example of the encouragement given by the government of Burma in the 1960s and 1970s to the study of nationalist history. Daw Khin Yi had the use of some of these materials, as well as the draft of this history, when she was preparing her Masters thesis which forms the basis of this present monograph. Stylistically her work is also similar to the authorized Burmese version, and it has the flavor of much contemporary Burmese historiography. Subsequently, in 1980 a biography was published of the founder of the organization entitled *Myanma Naingnganyei hnit Thakin Ba Thoung* [Burma's Politics and Thakin Ba Thoung], by Myan Alin [*Light of Burma*] journalist Tin Htun Aung.¹² These works reprint the original "National Building" tracts translated in Daw Khin Yi's Appendices I and III as well as the conference resolutions to which she refers in the main text. Later tracts by members of the majority faction after the split in the organization in 1938 are collected in Thein Pe Myint's *Bun Wada Hnit Do Bama*.¹³

The story of the initial eight years of the Dobama Asiayone which Daw Khin Yi recounts is, in broad outline, a familiar one in colonial

30-61; there is also a discussion of the later Dobama ideology on pp. 65-67 and mentions elsewhere.

10. Maung Maung, *From Sangha to Laity: Nationalist Movements of Burma 1920-1940*, Australian National University Monographs on South Asia No. 4 (New Delhi: Manohar, 1980).

11. Do Bama Asi Ayun Thamaing Pyuzuye Ahpwe, *Do Bama Asi Ayun Thamaing* (Akyinchok) (Do Bama Asiayone History Preparation Group, *History of the Do Bama Asiayone* [Abridged]) (Rangoon: Sapei Biman, 1976), two volumes.

12. Tin Htun Aung, *Myanma Ngannnganyei hnit Thakin Ba Thauung* [Burma's Politics and Thakin Ba Thauung] (North Okkalapa: Sapei-u, 1980).

13. Thein Hpei Myint, ed., *Bun Wada hnit Do Bama* (Rangoon: Baw-sado Sapei, 1967).

Southeast Asia.¹⁴ A small number of men and women, well educated in comparison with the majority of the population, at home in both their own and a major European language, living in a major cosmopolitan commercial city, and familiar with political, economic, and social movements in other parts of the world, especially within the colonial empire of which they were a part, felt a strong sense of dissatisfaction with the behavior of the indigenous political leaders who had been cooperating with the colonial rulers. They sought a new departure in politics and morality, condemning the past as both defeatist and corrupt. Initially much of their inspiration came from the intellectual excitement that accompanies the reading of radical critiques of Western civilization and then attempting to apply these to their own situation.¹⁵ The moral aspect of their effort drew in some members who otherwise believed that purely political action held little immediate promise of solving social issues. In the case of the Dobama Asiayone, many of the members who became active from this basis came from the All Burma Youth League and similar organizations, such as the earlier Youth Improvement Society.¹⁶ In later years, many of these leaders, such as former Prime Minister U Nu and his close adviser, U Ohn, would reject outwardly political solutions for social problems and would launch religious appeals to improve the moral tone of society.

The intellectual energy of the Dobama Asiayone derived from the wide variety of political views espoused by its members, definable in terms of their origins from forms of "National Socialism" on the right to "International Communism" on the left. The social origins of the leaders provided them with no firm class perspective from which to view these doctrines, though over time the more established members of society came to distrust the more ardently socialist ideologists. But none of the leaders were able to grasp in a politically effective manner the profound consequences that colonial rule was having on the position of the workers and peasants. When worker and peasant movements arose, they did so usually without the leadership of the Thakin, and the peasant and labor union leaders were often distrustful of the urban and theoretical biases of the ideologically motivated intellectuals. As Daw Khin Yi shows, in the case of both the Saya San peasants revolt and the 1300 *Ayaydawbon* (Revolution) of 1938, the leaders of the Dobama Asiayone were often found wanting. On the other hand, the leaders recognized that without a clear understanding of the actual political situation and a progressive leadership, peasant revolts and urban strikes would always be defeated by the colonial government.

The split in the Dobama Asiayone which occurred at the end of the 1300 *Ayaydawbon* was in part motivated by disagreements as to how

14. It has its parallel in the Partai Nasional Indonesia (PNI) founded in 1928, the Vietnamese Revolutionary Youth League founded in the late 1920s, and the Kesatuan Melayu Muda (Young Malay Union) founded in 1938.

15. Thakin Ba Thaug was much influenced by the philosophy of Nietzsche and the nationalism of Mazzini and the Sinn Fein movement. Marxist and socialist thought more generally came in the later 1930s.

16. See the discussion in Maung Maung, *From Sangha to Laity*, pp. 74-79.

the urban radical nationalists could provide leadership for the workers and peasants without, at the same time, becoming enmeshed in the political machinations of political party leaders like Dr. Ba Maw and U Saw. A resolution of the meaning and consequences of the 1938 split was soon overtaken, however, by other issues including the position of Burmese nationalists on the question of collaboration with Japanese fascism. That story is beyond the history Daw Khin Yi has written, but it too was eventually overtaken by events during the subsequent anti-fascist resistance and post-war independence struggle against the British. But the 1938 split, and those that followed, have their roots in the development of the Dobama Asiayone and the legacy of these splits has shaped Burma's post-independence politics.

During the 1950s and early 1960s, it was commonly recognized that many of the individuals in top positions in the ruling Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL) and its major armed and unarmed opponents had been active Thakin in pre-war nationalist politics. General Aung San himself was a Thakin and had been a secretary general of the Dobama. Prime Minister Nu, Deputy Prime Minister Ba Swe, and other leading officials in the government, as well as underground Communist leaders such as Thakin Than Tun and Thakin Soe also play prominent roles in Daw Khin Yi's account. But it was not until the establishment of the Revolutionary Council government following the March 1962 military coup that some of the ideas of the Dobama Asiayone were implemented and its symbolic legacy was renewed by the state. The Revolutionary Council's Burma Socialist Programme Party was founded on July 4, 1963, thirty years to the day from when Thakin Ba Thoung, with about eight others, established the first Dobama Asiayone organizing committee.¹⁷ Later the Revolutionary Council government erected statues to Thakin Po Hla Gyi along with those of Saya San to commemorate the workers' strikes and peasant revolts of the 1930s. The constitutional structure of the state since 1972 is near in form to that of the pre-war Dobama Asiayone manifesto issued soon after the 1938 split. Since 1980, surviving members of the Dobama Asiayone have been given state awards and political pensions for their dedication to the nationalist cause. The ambivalent attitudes of the government about class and race in its policies and in its statements regarding entrepreneurial and alien groups reflect the legacy of the 1930s and the origins of the Dobama Asiayone. It is therefore useful to have Daw Khin Yi's history of the organization up to 1938 available to a wider audience.

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March 24, 1987

17. Maung Maung, *From Sangha to Laity*, p. 120.

CHRONOLOGY
1930-1939

May 10, 1930	Telegu Dock Workers' Strike
May 26, 1930	First Indo-Burmese Riot
June 1930	Publication of <i>The Dobama Sadan</i>
July 15, 1930	First statement issued by the Dobama
July 19, 1930	Dobama Song sung at the Thaton Hall
July 20, 1930	Dobama Song sung at the Shwedagon pagoda
September 1930	Formation of the All Burma Youth League (ABYL)
December 22, 1930	Outbreak of the Peasants' Rebellion
January 2, 1931	First Sino-Burmese Riot
January 1931	Formation of the Yetat
January 21, 1933	Launching of the <i>Dobama News Weekly</i>
July 4, 5, 6, 1933	"Conference" of the Six
November 1933	By-election at Shwebo
September 1934	Formation of the Temporary Central Executive Committee
March 30, 1935	First Conference of the Dobama and the ABYL
June 27, 28, 29, 1936	Second Conference of the Dobama and the ABYL
July 19, 1936	Formation of the KMKG
January 28, 29, 1937	First Conference of the ABC
January 29, 1937	Draft Constitution of the Dobama approved
March 25, 1937	Launching of the <i>Dobama Bulletin</i>
April 1, 1937	Anti-Constitution Demonstration
September 4, 1937	Formation of the Bama Latyone Tat
January 8, 1938	Outbreak of Oilfield Strike
January 30, 1938	Resolution passed to give support to the strikers
February 3, 1938	Strike Relief Committee formed
February 5, 1938	Formation of Strike Enquiry Commission by Governor of Burma
February 13, 1938	Protest against Strike Enquiry Commission