Myanmar's Mountain and Maritime Borderscapes

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Burman Territories and Borders in the Making of a Myanmar Nation State

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How do Burman people perceive and live the borderlands? It has been a few decades since academics started working on Burmanization to explain the national construction of the Union of Myanmar's "geo-body" — the search for a homeomorphism between a territory defined by national borders and a national "identity" (Thongchai Winichakul 2005) — and notably the power struggles between the central state and ethnic areas partly under the control of insurgent armed groups. Walton (2013) even recently discussed the "wages of Burmanness", an ill-defined national Burman identity resulting from the Burmanization process that, if substituted for the creation of an inclusive national identity, could hinder the development of a democratic Union and the place of ethnic minorities within it.

Nonetheless, only a few studies deal with the perception of a Burman identity by the Burmans themselves, or at least Burman discourses of identity relative to their relationship with other minorities (see Boutry and Ivanoff 2008; Boutry 2015). How do Burmans represent their geographic or imagined territories and define their borders? It seems "easier" to find strong identity markers defining "limited social spaces" (for example, the Moken or Khumi social space) than "extended social spaces", such as the Burman or Tai ones.[1] Among other reasons, extended social spaces tend to be assimilated to structures of a larger scale such as kingdoms or states, while limited social spaces are deprived of such power structures. The fact that limited social spaces are mainly viewed as in danger of being assimilated by extended ones (Moken assimilated by Burman through Burmanization,

for example) explains the greater focus given to studying "disappearing" or "changing" identities on the part of minorities. Yet, nobody seems to find interesting the possible changes occurring within the majority in contact with minorities. Numbers lay down the law. Yet, is it not necessary to try understanding Burman identity when talking of Burmanness or Burmanization? Or are these concepts only political constructions aimed at controlling populations?

From some examples taken along the Myanmar littoral zone, I would like to draw attention to how borders (administrative but also based on identity as we will see) contribute to the different facets of Burman identity.[2] Firstly because expressions of this identity may be easier to spot when in tension with other environments (ecological, cultural, linguistic, etc.) and secondly, because this may alert us to where homeomorphisms between a dominant Burman identity and the conception of a national territory are possible.

BUDDHISM AND TERRITORY IN BURMAN REPRESENTATIONS

Besides Burmese language, the easiest statement about Burman identity may be the practice of Burman Buddhism.[3] From the narratives of the intrinsic link between the Burman "race" and Buddhism (Rozenberg 2008, p. 36) to the specificities of Burmese practices of Buddhism (Brac de la Perrière 2006), this is the most obvious marker among the Burman and at the same time serves as a field for making Burman identity and Burmese nationhood tally with each other through the territorialization process — that is the Burmanization of Myanmar. Hence, U Nu's policy of instituting Buddhism as the national religion (Lehman 1967, p. 96) and the Buddhization effort targeted at the Union's borderlands (Holmes 1967, p. 137).

The question to ask is whether Buddhism is sufficient to explain Burman identity. What are the discourses produced around this and lived through Buddhism when interacting with the "other"?

The long conflict between Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims and the way it has grown since June 2012 into a generalized Muslim-Buddhist animosity throughout the country is enough to question the capacity Buddhism has to bond Burman and other borderland populations. Buddhist principles definitely unify the Burman. The answer "I'm a pure Buddhist" (*but-da' bha-tha sit-sit*) is the most common response to the question "from which race are you?" Yet, Buddhism in practice also divides the Burman: in every village where there is more than one monastery,

villagers are generally divided into equivalent competing groups. Hostile discourses toward other Buddhist populations, especially Rakhine, but also Mon (and Thai) abound, despite their shared histories, religion or language.[4] "If you cross the path of a Rakhine and a snake, kill the Rakhine first" is a well-known saying among the Burman. Or another saying of the mother of one of my male assistants: "you can marry any girl from any origin or religion but don't fall in love with a Rakhine." Indeed, the Arakanese and Burmese kingdoms were regularly in conflict, the latter often having tried and succeeded at different periods to expand its influence over Rakhine, especially by King Bodaw Hpaya in 1785 not long before the British annexed it in 1826. It was at that time that Buddhism came to be endorsed by the Burmese kingdom, following the way paved by Alaung Hpaya, Burmese king of the eighteenth century, who projected himself as an "Embryo Buddha" whose fate was to unify all Buddhist territories (Lieberman 1978, p. 475). Even if other historians (see Leider 2011) contest Lieberman's theory on the "Embryo Buddha" concept, the intrinsic relationship underlined between Buddhism (as part of a cosmological order), kingship and territory remains a daily reality. Interestingly, Bodaw Hpaya, whether a universal ruler or not, hastened to bring the then symbol of Arakan's sovereignty, the Maha Muni Buddha, to the Burmese capital of Amarapura with 20,000 prisoners in 1785. This enduring symbol (the statue is still in Mandalay) of animosity between Burman and Rakhine still comes up in Rakhine discourses, notably through the popular belief that the true Maha Muni Buddha statue is still in Rakhine, and more exactly in Kyauk Taw (a Rakhine town) as the Burmese king could not simply have moved it from its plinth. To build further on this argument, I say that the conception of an endangered Buddhism partly unifies Burman and Rakhine against Myanmar's Muslims — notably through religious movements like the "969" — only because it is linked to a perceived threat against their respective territories.[5] This appears quite clearly in the simplifications brought by the Rakhine conflict in categorizing its diverse populations: many Kaman, a Muslim population recognized as a Myanmar ethnic group and whose common language is Rakhine, have been relegated to the Muslim category and share the same internally displaced persons (IDP) camps in Sittwe township. Mara Ma Gri, another ethnic group practising Buddhism but whose physical traits as well as language (a Chittagonian dialect) are similar to the Rohingya, are now emphasizing amongst themselves the necessity of speaking Rakhine even at home in order to be integrated into the sole emerging legitimate population on Rakhine territory, the Rakhine.[6] Finally, Hindus living in

the few Rakhine IDP camps around Sittwe have been told to integrate into their Hindu divinities' altar a Buddha statue, distributed by local Buddhist religious groups (interviews with Hindu households in IDP camps 2014).[7] The current conflict created the opportunity of a Rakhinization of Rakhine State in the same way that the Burman government tried to Burmanize Myanmar national territory. This Rakhinization process characterized by the equation "Rakhine identity = Rakhine language + Buddhism + Rakhine State" is explicit as can be seen by the August 2014 request by Rakhine leaders to the Union to study a law aimed at gathering all Rakhine State Muslims (even those who have not yet been displaced by the conflict) in a temporary Muslim area awaiting relocation to a third country (*Irrawaddy Magazine* 2014).

I have dealt mostly with Rakhine representations of the conflict so far to better emphasize the resemblances it has with their Burman neighbours, those resemblances that keep them apart. Indeed, when looking at how the long-standing conflict between Rakhine and Rohingya has been revived, how it has spread to other, mostly Burman, parts of Myanmar and how previous conflicts between the Burman and Muslims in Myanmar occurred, one common pattern emerges. In 1997, anti-Muslim riots in Mandalay began after reports of an attempted rape of a girl by Muslim men, although this was later disproved and led to speculation that the regime may have orchestrated the incident. On 28 May 2012, the brutal rape and murder of a Rakhine woman by a group of "illegal Bengalis" (as qualified by the government) led to recurrent conflicts between the two communities all over Myanmar. In late April 2013, anti-Muslim rioting broke out in Okkan, a city about 100 kilometres from Yangon, after an altercation between a Buddhist monk and a Muslim woman. On 28 May 2013, the Shan town of Lashio was the theatre of another conflict after a Muslim man had become embroiled in a dispute with a female petrol vendor, a twenty-six-year-old Buddhist. Finally, in August 2013, a similar conflict occurred in Htan Gone village after rumours circulated that a young Muslim man had attempted to rape a Buddhist woman. The gendered representation of the conflict is striking and it may not be a coincidence. The threat to Buddhist women — whether Burman or Rakhine — represented by Muslim men is closely linked with the unavoidable religious conversion of women marrying Muslims. I assert here that rather than a threat to Buddhism — which is the message conveyed by the 969 movement — it is perceived as a threat to the Burman and Rakhine hegemonies on their respective territories, a view that will be explained in the following paragraphs.

THE GENDERED REPRESENTATION OF TERRITORIALIZATION

My argument builds on the gendered differentiation made during the Burman territorialization process by which female identity is socialized by males. Buddhism operates a gendered differentiation within the religious order and in everyday life. Nash (1962, p. 290) remarked the "favored place of the male in Buddhist doctrine [who] have *pon* (in this case a sort of glory) just because they are men, and women do not or almost do not." Besides, Rozenberg (2004, p. 513) notes that "strictly speaking, women who adopt a religious life in Burma or elsewhere cannot be called 'nuns' since they do not receive any valid ordination, though the term is widely used for lack of a better way of referring to them." In fact, as Than Myint-U (2004, p. 34) remarked about Burmese kingdoms, this gender differentiation operates in the wider Burman social order, whose key pillars, the Army and the Buddhist Sangha, "were all male". While talking about social order, cosmological representations reinforce the gendered relationship between socialization and the territory, where the guarantors of social order would be male, while the appropriated territory would be female. This is what Sortho (1967) recalls in his analysis of the origins of the *dewatau sotāpan* cult — a Mon cult resembling the cult of the Thirty-Seven Lords — where the chthonic deities are always female:[8]

> The Indian earth-god Visundhara reached South East Asia as a goddess, Visundharior Dharani, whom the Mons call a bau: literally a 'grandmother' or 'ancestress'. The term recurs as the designation of one of the two principal classes of spirit which current reckoning acknowledges: the male kalok or lineage spirits, ancestral house-protectors whose cult descends in the male line, and the bau, village spirits who convey the right to territory (Sortho 1967, p. 132).

In Burman society, very close to Mon, this would translate into the spirit *Min Mahagiri* who, despite not being a lineage spirit, is indeed the male guardian of the household (*ein-twin" nat*), while *shin-ma* (literally, owner/lord — female) are female protectors of the territory. Other famous deities are *Popa Medaw* (guardian of the Popa Mount), *Naing Karaing Medaw* also called the Lady of Pegu (the last capital of the Mon country), or locally acknowledged *nat* such as *Ma Shin Ma* worshipped in the Tenasserim region (at the extreme south of Myanmar), whose shrine is in the town of Tenasserim. In Rakhine as well, "where most of the *nat* connected with the

territory are female" (de Mersan 2009, p. 311). Other *shin-ma* thought to control the land are *Kra Zam*, "the lady guardian spirit of Mrauk U" and her sister *Mra Swan*, "the guardian of Parein", both "considered as superior *nat* of the territory" (de Mersan 2009, p. 315).

Regarding "Burmanization", the Burman territorialization process, Buddhism and spirit cults work on building the same representation. The Burman king, as in other Hinduized states, was regarded as a *cakravartin* (universal ruler) and incipient Buddha (Hall 1960, pp. 93–94; Leach 1960, p. 7; Sortho 1967, p. 135). As Hall (1960, p. 41) puts it, "he aspired to become a Buddhist Saviour, a Maitreya, who would extend the blessings of the Law to the whole world, and restore the Golden Age." Hence, the chief or king's task was to bring social order in his realm, to which rights had been acquired as "dowry from his spouse" (Sortho 1967, p. 133). Looking again through the lens of the cult of the thirty-seven *nat*, the king's alliance to his enemies' sisters is a recurrent strategy for taming external elements and appropriating territories. For example, in the myth of Min Mahagiri, a Pyu spirit, or in the myth of Ko Thein Shin, a Shan prince, the Burman king marries the sister of each hero, either in order to kill him (Min Mahagiri) or to subjugate him (Ko Thein Shin). This always results in the king's spouse's inability to survive her brother's death and her consequent death (Brac de la Perrière 2002, pp. 31–48). Yet the cults of the dead heroes, whose legends all make them sons of *naga* females (de Mersan 2009, p. 313) instituted by the king, remain to legitimate his sovereignty over the conquered territories. Indeed, in most of Southeast Asia, ophidian beings "are a representation of autochthonous principles and, as such, symbolize legitimate sovereignty over the land for the kings who marry them" (Brac de la Perrière 2002, p. 49). The royal features characteristic of the *cakravartin* status also authorized royal polygyny (Leach 1960, p. 57), which, from the perspective of acquiring new territories, would have been necessary.

Interestingly, Burman society in its reproductive ideal is mainly endogamous, a principle probably inherited from the Indian culture of castes repudiating an alliance with inferior groups (Leach, op. cit., p. 66). As noted by Than Myint-U about Burman society, historically, "marriage tended to be endogamous within the circle of one's *a-myo*. … Marriage outside of one's group was permitted, but often actively discouraged, both by royal decree and probably as well by local custom" (Than Myint-U 2001, p. 29). This partial rule regarding alliances, where exogamy is the privilege of the king, is in fact a distinct characteristic of Burman identity. For Brac de la Perrière (2002, 2007 and 2008), Burmanization as the elaboration

of Burman hegemonic identity through the cult of the thirty-seven *nat* (directly linked to monarchy), serves to localize particularisms for the purpose of subordinating them. This forms part of the Burman process of ethnicity itself. My argument here is that this process of stretching Burman identity over territories is not only the privilege of the kings (or the modern rulers) and that the cult of the thirty-seven *nat* is not only a symbol of the hegemonic and legitimate Burman rule over their territory but also takes place at the edges of Burman territory whose borders move in time and space.

TERRITORIALIZING BORDERLANDS

The transition process between a *mandala* pattern, with the borderlands shifting in tandem with its ruler (Leach 1960, p. 52; Lieberman 1987, p. 186) and according to allegiances to other societies, and the state where new forms of hegemony are reorganized within the geographically defined borders on the map, really began with British colonization. Later, with the post-war emergence of the region's nation states, borders emerged more widely as geographical lines, replacing frontier zones between "interpenetrating political systems" (Leach 1960, p. 50). In these inter-penetrating zones, populations on both sides manipulated identity traits. Lieberman (1978, p. 457) suggests that the most visible traits (such as hairstyle, dress) were manipulated by the Mon and Burman, for example, depending on whether they wanted to be assimilated into the coastal or interior realms. Similarly the Burmese king Tabin Shwei Hti used to dress in a Mon fashion, and was considered as such by his subjects, to follow the prophecy that only Mon kings could rule Pegu. However, in the new era of nation states, borders are defined in order to separate geographic entities, forging new differences between social, cosmological, cultural, ethnic and national entities in the borderlands, even though these dimensions have traditionally overlapped. The post-colonial process of nationalization generated new spaces within these different borders, changing the character of borderlands: some were left almost "virgin" to Burman colonization dynamics, such as the Ayeyarwady Delta under British rule or, more recently, the Tanintharyi Region. Others were subjected to the reaffirmation of the local population's identity, as in Kachin, Shan or Mon States, notably in a resistance process against coercive military rule spanning the past fifty years. Such a historical process impacted the way the Burman (attempted to) undertake the assimilation of their borderlands.

PATRON-CLIENT NETWORKS AND THE TERRITORIALIZATION OF BORDERLANDS

As a corollary of the economy-oriented policies of the British, the Ayeyarwady Delta underwent a period of intense exploitation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, drawing millions of Burman from central Myanmar to the delta, to what was still a "rice frontier" (Adas 1974). The gradual populating of the Ayeyarwady Delta took place in three stages from 1858 to 1941 (Adas 1974) and was mainly initiated by the British who wanted to develop the production of this area. As explained by O'Connor (1995, p. 971), in the early era (AD 700), Mon, Khmer, Cham and Pyu ruled the southern part of mainland Southeast Asia. These ethnic groups were garden-farmers in the highlands or flood-managing farmers in the lowlands. People living in the northern part of Southeast Asia, such as the Thai, Vietnamese and Burman specialized in wet rice agriculture and were known to be skilled irrigators. These peoples expanded southward and conquered three of the largest rice bowls of Asia: the Mekong, the Chao Phraya and the Irrawaddy River deltas. During the first stage of the Burman conquest of the Irrawaddy Delta, the rice economy of Lower Burma grew rapidly, thanks to the existence of large areas of virgin land and to the great number of migrants from Upper Burma. It then became an expanding pioneer front, to which Dao The Tuan and Molle's description about the Chao Phraya Delta (Thailand) applies perfectly:

> As a consequence of [the] gradual colonisation and 'artificialisation' of the region, the delta society has much of the features attributed to frontier societies: a certain degree of independence from the grip of the central state, a propensity to evade social conflicts or responding to bankruptcy by moving further away, and the formation of villages with migrants from different origins and backgrounds, therefore with little 'social glue'. At the same time, the integration to the wider economy and national sphere was provided by the marketing of the rice production surplus (Dao The Tuan and Molle 2000, p. 17).

In other words, the deltaic pioneer fronts were a place of migration, without sufficiently developed traditional villages or kinship units to bring social control and means of empowerment to individuals in these "loosely structured" societies. However, as further pointed out by Dao The Tuan and Molle on the Chao Phraya Delta:

> While the … society can be considered loosely structured with regards to corporate communities, it is not deprived of strong 'structural regularities'

> centred on flexible, voluntary patterns of relationships between individuals. Social control is apparent in issues such as money borrowing or land rental contracts (Dao The Tuan and Molle 2000, p.17).

The establishment of strong patron-client relationships among new villages correlates with the pioneer front's development in terms of production as well as referring spatially to what is called the "rice frontier" (Adas 1974). Scott notes the main preconditions for promoting the patron-client network in three points: the persistence of marked inequalities in wealth, status, and power which are accorded some legitimacy; the relative absence (or collapse) of effective, impersonal guarantees — such as public law — for physical security, property, and position, often accompanied by the growth of semi-autonomous local centres of personal power; and the inability of either kinship units or the traditional village to serve as effective vehicles of personal security or advancement (Scott 1972, p. 8).

Patron-client networks arose in a structurally loose social context, far from the state's control, meaning that the patron could seldom rely on outside support to maintain his power and wealth and thus relied mostly on his local clients' networks, peasants or fishermen. Because Burman society is a Hinduized one, building its political organization on "charismatic kingship" personified by a "divinely inspired monarch" (Leach 1960, pp. 56–57), local patron-client relationships may be considered a key social institution (Scott 1972, p. 13; Lieberman 1987, p. 187). Social bonds are embedded in this relationship and elites may be considered the guarantors of social integrity and identity, and at the same time, the main vectors of territorialization. The critical role of patrons in Burmanizing new spaces lies in the intrinsic relationship between social position and religious accomplishment which characterizes Burman society: the greater the merit a lay person is believed to have acquired through religious exchange, the greater his influence (*oza*), the greater the respect due to him and the greater his social standing (Schober 1989, p. 103).

The relationship between social position — inducing a social order — and religious accomplishment — base of a cosmologic order — is generated through the offerings made to

> beings who belong either to the sacred domain beyond the social hierarchy of lay people or to individuals thought to be superior to the person making the offering. … On the other hand, food given to those below one's own station in life, even if it is given in a ritual context, is considered an expression of one's loving kindness (*metta*) and compassion (*karuna*) for less fortunate ones and dependents. In return for this kindness, obligations

> must be repaid. On account of the dependency thus created, the recipient comes under the influence and power of his benefactor whom he owes gratitude (*kyei: zu: shin*) and in whose dominion of power he now exists (Schober 1989, p. 105).

As such, patrons are also the instigators of the Buddhization of new spaces — carried out by erecting pagodas as well as building schools and monasteries in new settlements. I would even say that patron-client networks represent a minimal unit of territorialization and that, in order to do so, have the same privilege as kings in the matter of "taming" this territory whose female character (symbolic or actual) needs to be won over.

The Ayeyarwady Delta was mostly unpopulated so the Burman populations had to "create society from nothing". It begs the question: how do patron-client networks operate in other, already populated, borderlands?

Leaving the old delta borderland, now fully integrated into the territory of Burman hegemony, I shall go further south, where another pioneer front is still in the process of being Burmanized: the Tanintharyi region and the numerous islands of the Myeik (Mergui) Archipelago. The Myeik Archipelago lies along the southern part of the Tenasserim coastline, on a north-south axis. It extends in the north to the littoral town of Dawei and to the south as far as Phuket in Thailand. Its islands are inhabited, and have been so since at least the seventeenth century, by the Moken, a population of sea nomads of Austronesian origins. Despite the current international border administratively separating the twin towns of Kawthaung (Myanmar) and Ranong (Thailand), the Myeik Archipelago can be incorporated into the wider Malay Peninsula region, including the southern provinces of Thailand and the north of Malaysia. Geographically, the Tenasserim marks the fusion between Myanmar and Malaysia, according to its ecological similarities to the latter country (White 1997, pp. 27–28). Ethnically, the Malays were, besides the Moken, in the majority of those frequenting the islands of the Myeik Archipelago. Even though the border was negotiated between Siam and the British Empire in the nineteenth century (*The Geographer* 1966), the entire region remained a transnational borderland with limits situated inside the national territories that designated cultural and geographic elements more than administrative ones. Consequently, a cultural border existed between paddy states and thalassocracies (maritime realms), rice culture and commerce as well as continental and insular Southeast Asia. This border separated central and lower Burma from the Malay Peninsula, including the south of Moulmein and the Myeik Archipelago, this in spite of the national official border.

Since the beginning of the 1980s, however, the Myeik Archipelago has become a refuge for numerous Burman, mostly coming from Lower Burma, and thus the theatre of an appropriation process of the marine and insular environment, involving both the Burman and the Moken. The main migration of the Burman toward the Tanintharyi Division occurred in the 1990s during a politically tense era, just after the 1988 protest and the elections of 1989. The remote archipelago, despite the hundred-year-old administrative border, was still out of the sphere of control of the Burman central government. On the continent, the Karen were struggling to protect their sovereignty over an imagined Kawthoolei and the Mon were also involved in conflicts with the central state (South 2003, pp. 36, 198).[9] The hundreds of islands composing the Myeik Archipelago offered a way to escape from state control. But the Burman colonization of this region has been shaped in great part by economic issues and state affairs: the Thai fishing industry, also profiting from the remoteness of the archipelago, was exploiting much of its marine resources, and most of the goods produced in the region were going directly to Thailand's economy without benefiting Myanmar. Thailand had already started to "fill" its peninsular borderland (from Kra Buri to Sungai Kolok) with workers from the northeastern part of the country (Isaan) in order to develop copper mining and fishing industries, and rubber and palm oil plantations. In doing so, the Thai nation state was stretching control over its borderlands in the same way Myanmar would soon do. Indeed, in the 1990s, the Myanmar Government under Prime Minister Khin Nyunt decided to privatize the fishing industry (Boutry 2007, p. 393) in an attempt to boost exports and take back control of its own resources, especially in the south. Myanmar realized the potential of the border as a politico-economic source of services such as according fishing rights to a Thai trawling fleet in reward for the return of some students who had fled repression in 1988 to take refuge in south Thailand.[10] The international border had to become effective and so was begun the Burmanization of the borderland.

When the Burman first came to settle in the islands in the 1980s (see Boutry 2014, pp. 154–57) to take advantage of the products found in the archipelago (pearls, birds nets, fish) they were another "minority" among ethnic minorities. Despite being at the forefront of the dominant colonizing population of the country, they could not behave as such but rather had to appropriate the necessary know-how, cultural, mythical and ritual elements in order to adapt to an insular way of life — far from the landmarks of a sedentary, paddy cultivating society. Beginning with the move of a few pioneers coming from Lower Burma (Moulmein notably) in the 1980s,

Burman entrepreneurs went through the city of Myeik and progressively penetrated the archipelago towards the southern islands. While the Moken preceded them, fleeing the first Burman settlements, the nomads' insular territory began to shrink, reduced to a corner at the international border in the south. Added to other factors — such as a deficit in Moken men, the Burman advance into the archipelago led to mixed Moken and Burman settlements.[11]

I have already analysed elsewhere the pioneering processes which led to the creation of these communities (Boutry 2014, 2015) and the resulting implications in the making of a Burman insular identity, halfway between "social segmentation" and ethnic differentiation (Boutry and Ivanoff 2008, p. 30). Here I will retain only the most important facts. The Burman progressively took the place of the traditional *tokè*. *Tokè* is a term of Chinese origin employed from south Myanmar to Indonesia, including Thailand and Malaysia, which designates a patron-entrepreneur relationship. Traditionally, the *tokè* has been central to the preservation of the Moken nomadic way of life. The relationship between the *tokè* and his Moken group lies in the necessity of the nomads in acquiring rice, the basis of their diet and the paradox of an insular population that only cultivates the cereal for ritual purposes (Ivanoff 2004). So the Moken exchange their products collected on the strands or by diving (for pearls, Mother-of-pearl and shells) with the *tokè* for rice, clothes and other consumable goods. The founding myth of the ethnic differentiation of the Moken is the Gaman epic poem (Ivanoff 1985). Gaman is the Malay civilizing hero who will lead the transition from yams to rice for the Moken.[12] The epic poem conveys Islam's beginnings in Southeast Asia that, linked to slavery, will lead to the "nomad choice" (Ivanoff 1998, p. 337): to "roam" in the islands, "eat and spew out the sea" on board the *kabang* (the traditional Moken boat) and to be eternally dependent upon sedentary societies to supply rice in exchange for their products. So the *tokè* is the organic link connecting the Moken to the "rest of the world". Practically, the *tokè* was more often of Chinese origin, of Sino-Burman or Sino-Thai origins.

Starting from the 1980s, the Burman progressively replaced the former *tokè* and took this pivotal role in the relationship between Moken flotillas and the "outside" world. At this time the alliances contracted by the Burman with the Moken were as much opportunistic as strategic for the Burman. Indeed, a Moken group traditionally gives away one of its girls for marriage to the *tokè* to ensure his fidelity. However, from the Burman perspective of profiting from insular resources, it was also a way to acquire, on the one hand, legitimacy in the insular territory and its resources and, on the other,

better knowledge of this new environment. These intermarriages between Burman men and Moken women are significant enough to consider in the Burmanization process of borderlands, given the proportion of these alliances in the different settlements of the Myeik Archipelago and, above all, the critical role of the Burman-Moken households in shaping insular social space.

"Marrying" a New Territory

Prior to Burman migration toward the Myeik Archipelago, most of the Moken intermediaries, the *tokè* to whom they used to give a wife, stayed on the littoral and only a few moved with the Moken flotillas. Along with Burman migration, the first islands to be colonized in the north (near the city of Myeik) presented much of the characteristics of the littoral: relatively flat, suitable for agriculture (paddy, rubber plantation) and principally sheltering communities practising coastal fishing (with traps and small nets). Further to the south, the topography is quite different as the islands become hilly, left unprotected from the heavy winds and waves of the monsoon, leaving only narrow beaches to settle down in. In this totally estranged environment, the Burman needed to rely on a knowledge they could only acquire from the Moken. Despite the fact that most of the Burman pioneers who settled in the southern half of the archipelago had a Burman wife on the continent, they contracted alliances with the Moken. These alliances were facilitated by the fact that the Moken traditionally give a wife of their subgroup to their intermediary in exchange for their fidelity and protection. Thus, Burman pioneers implicitly became Moken *tokè*, while still acting as patrons or *kye'zu'shin* since *metta* (loving kindness) can be dispensed to any interlocutor independently of his religion (Morgan 1965; Nakamura 1968, p. 19). The Burman pioneers, in their role of patron transformed into *tokè* for the Moken, initiated a cultural exogamy first seen as a strategic necessity to appropriate the know-how and acquire legitimacy on the islands, while indirectly aimed at Burmanizing the territory. Indeed, most of these Burman entrepreneurs built pagodas and schools, primarily in order to legitimize their settlements in the eyes of the regional authorities. With an acknowledged Buddhist marker on the territory and a school diffusing the Burman language (to Burman and Moken children), the authorities from the Tanintharyi Division see clear markers of Burman appropriation of the territory they can transform into officially administered settlements, hence extending the geo-body of the nation.[13] However, what allows us to characterize these alliances as a pattern of cultural exogamy is that intermarriages induce a hierarchy among the insular Burman (based

notably on their potential to enlist the Moken workforce in their business), profitable for the one married into the Moken founder ancestor's lineage (Boutry 2011, p. 118).

Traditionally, Moken society is divided into subgroups identified with a couple of founder ancestors who were linked to the main island of residence during the monsoon.[14] These ancestors (male *ebab* and female *ibum* in Moken) are materialized by two spirit poles (*lobung*), renewed at each passage between the dry season and the monsoon during the *bo lobung* ritual. These spirit poles (together with other ritual elements such as cemeteries, spirit houses) mark out the archipelago. Thus, the Moken relationship to their territory is intrinsically linked to the couple, a structure that is transposed to the relationship between the Burman *tokè* and their Moken wife, hence the Moken group. Moreover, in the settlements of the south of the Myeik Archipelago, village headmen are, with no exception, Burman men married to Moken women. Those are also the main drivers for the migration of whole Burman families to their villages, who generally begin to work for these patrons. In this particular situation, exogamy becomes a deontic structure of Burmanization.

CONFLICTING IDENTITIES IN IDENTIFIED TERRITORIES

I now turn to the fate of the Burman living in Mon State, so as to compare the Burmanization process in places that have already been territorialized.

Out-migration is affecting Mon State, as has been the case for decades in many other borderlands. It is difficult to obtain reliable figures, but among the estimated 2.3 million Myanmar migrants in Thailand, people coming from Mon State would amount to around 600,000 individuals (International Office for Migrations 2013, p. 8). The fact that out-migration is so widespread in the region results in a lack of a viable local workforce: rubber tappers, miners, paddy field labourers, fishermen, etc. Hence, absentee Mon labour is replaced by a Burman workforce (and marginally by the Mon coming from other areas such as those surrounding Bago town) coming mainly from the Bago and Ayeyarwady regions, and to a lesser extent from the Dry Zone and the Sagaing Region. Wages offered to labourers in Mon State (around 4,000 kyat (US$3)/day) are at least twice the wages a daily worker may earn in the Ayeyarwady Region or the Dry Zone. Yet it is not enough for Mon workers compared to the wages they earn in Thailand (around

300 baht/day, which is 9,000 kyat/day for unskilled jobs). In Ye township alone, at least fourteen migrant clusters are recorded, mainly composed of Burman but also of Mon and Kayin ethnic groups, representing a total population of approximately 10,000 individuals.[15]

Only a few in-migrants who arrived many years ago settled in Mon villages and eventually married Mon or Kayin women. In-migrants generally have restricted access to resources. First, most of them cannot obtain a family list (*ein-htaung-su" sa-yin"*), which is necessary to obtain an identity (ID) card.[16] Besides, the need to obtain authorization from local landowners and authorities to settle is also a way to limit the clusters' expansion. Second, they generally do not have access to land ownership in the region, which is partly related to the first point. Only a few in-migrant settlers have been able to buy residential land in their cluster even though it is less likely to happen given the skyrocketing land prices in 2014. This strategy of limiting access to regional resources (administrative, economic) seems to be a way of regulating the necessary influx of in-migrants to Mon country.

Intermarriages between the Mon and the Burman are uncommon despite the intermingling of communities because even though both populations share the same identity markers, they have different notions of "imagined territory". Also, the Burman cannot understand Mon Buddhism, which differs in its pronunciation of Pali. As in the case of Burman social space, Mon Buddhism refers to a territory, a link explicitly made as in the commemoration held in most Mon pagodas in 2014 for the 200th anniversary of the collapse of Hamsavati/Hanthawaddy (Bago), the last Mon capital. To understand its importance, it is worth noting that all the *hinta* statues — or *hamsa*, the mythical goose of Hindu mythology — found in the pagodas or at the entrance of Mon villages and symbolizing the late Mon capital, are oriented in the direction of Bago.

Relying on Burman monks to hold Buddhist ceremonies is widespread in the migrant clusters. However, the impossibility of penetrating the Buddhist sphere of the Mon continues to relegate the Burman to the impermanent status of guest in this region. Burman people interviewed in migrant clusters often feel like "lower-class citizens" and the Mon consider the "Burman […] good to use [at work]" (*khaing lop kaung"-de*), as they are more "submissive" and "cheaper" than Mon workers (interviews with Burman migrants and Mon patrons in Ye township 2014).[17] Otherwise, interactions between the two communities are strictly restricted to the economic sphere. Burman workers work for Mon patrons but these Mon patrons are unwilling to let their daughters marry Burman men.

CONCLUSION: PLURAL BORDERS IN THE MAKING OF A UNIFIED MYANMAR NATION STATE

My point is not to state that identity is bound to a territory, but that identity is fluid and expressed differently in relation to territory. Hence, the actual borders of Myanmar for the Burman may not be the national borders, but the borders of an imagined territory where Burman identity is hegemonic. Yet, these imagined territories within the state also affect the construction of a unified Myanmar nation state since it is almost impossible for most Burman migrants in Mon State, for example, to obtain identity papers.

On the contrary, Burman pioneers who started to exploit the Myeik Archipelago's resources, by interacting with the Moken and intermarrying with them found a way to extend their hegemony on the islands through integrating the nomads' imagined territory, where lands (the sea strands where villages are built) are a female domain, while the sea and the forest are the domain of the Moken males. In terms of identities, while the Burman migrants in Mon State see themselves as "invitees" (*ei'-the*), the Burman in the Myeik Archipelago often refer to themselves as Burman "islanders" (*bama kyun"-tha"*). This comparison shows explicitly the difference between an identity border acting as a limit for the Burman in Mon State but working as a catalyst for Burman "islanders" to stretch Burman identity over Myeik insular territory. In other words, Burman migrants and the Mon have competing representations of territorialization (as a construct of a "male" hegemonic identity over a "female" territory) while Burman "islanders" and Moken could negotiate their own imagined territories through intermarriage. In practice, while Burman migrants in Mon State do not have access to citizenship, Burman "islanders" have managed to obtain family registration lists (the most important document needed to obtain national registration cards and other official papers) produced in the nearest township (Kawthaung for instance) in which their Moken wives and mixed children are listed.

Here again the Myanmar populations' representations of territories — that is, a space in which they consider themselves hegemonic — have an actual impact on the construction of the Myanmar nation state. In the case of the Tenasserim, the rising concern over the Thai-Myanmar border and access to the marine resources fostered the integration of the Tanintharyi region into the confines of the Union of Myanmar, notably symbolized by its new function within the international economy, and defined as "the new oil bowl of Myanmar".[18] However, these events revealed a second kind of border, a Burman cultural border between two ways of life: a continental

paddy cultivation-centred sedentary one, and an insular maritime and nomadic (or at least highly mobile) one. By integrating this border, the Burman pioneers of the Myeik Archipelago both succeeded in stretching Burman social space and national Burmese territory. Intermarriages with the Moken became even more "acceptable" — given the endogamous tendency of Burman society — since it "affects" only a small number of Burman fishermen. A few pioneers "sacrificed" Burman sociocultural markers (endogamy and purity) in order to integrate the territory into the Burman sphere of influence — through a developing fishing economy and an administrative network — that eventually serves to reinforce the international border with Thailand through transborder trade. And as discussed above, the few Burman pioneers married to Moken women are the first drivers of an all-Burman migration to the islands. Thanks to these pioneers, the Burmese nation state managed to stretch its geo-body to the south more effectively during the past twenty years than the two-and-a-half centuries the region has been officially within the country's administrative borders. The Burman are now always more numerous than before on the islands, coming as whole families (working in fisheries and developing parallel commercial activities such as supplying the villages with provisions, selling alcohol and even proposing karaoke in the islands for the fishermen).

However, this particular case cannot be used to resolve the wider national construction process. Indeed, how would diverse populations share a national territory — even in a federal structure — if rights to citizenship depend on the relationship between ethnic identity and territory? Similarly, it is unlikely that the Burman and Rakhine, despite their alliance against the Muslim threat, would consider themselves as belonging to the same national territory, an opinion reinforced by the current Rakhinization process of Rakhine State.

Notes

1. Limited social spaces referring here to the concept of «espace social restreint» developed by Condominas (1980). The Moken are an Austronesian population of sea nomads living between southern Myanmar and southern Thailand. Their population size is around 3,000. The Khumi are part of the Chin family, and represent a small population living in the south of Chin State, in the vicinity of Paletwa township. They have a relatively small population of between 50,000 and 80,000 individuals.
2. The findings in this article are based on fieldwork conducted at different times in various locations, starting with a four-year study on the populations in the Myeik Archipelago between 2003 and 2007, regular fieldwork in the Ayeyarwady Delta

since 2008, some fieldwork in southern Thailand from 2007 to 2009, in Mon State in 2014 and in Rakhine State between 2012 and 2014.

3. It is difficult to make rational use of the English terminology regarding this country and its dominant population. As pointed out by Houtman (1999, p. 53), "though the regime ostensibly claims to distinguish [through the use of Myanmar] between Burmese [nationality] and Burman [ethnic belonging], this distinction only works in the English language, but in Burmese it in fact ends up saying that Burma and Burmese are Burman". In this chapter, I opted for functional reasons to use the term Burman when dealing with ethnic groups (and identity) and use Burmese when talking about historical, political and religious processes. Therefore, the government is termed Burmese for it is composed mainly of the Burman. The spirit cult comprising of the thirty-seven *nat*, is also termed Burmese so as to keep the sense that most worshippers are Burman but the cult itself has various influences (Mon, Karen, etc.).
4. The Thai are also historical enemies of the Burmese due to the attack of the Burmese King Hsinbyushin (1736–76) on the Thai capital Ayutthaya in 1767 (Sunait Chutintaranond and Than Tun 1995, p. 58).
5. The 969 movement, led by the monk U Wirathu, arose in the aftermath of the Rakhine conflicts in 2012. The core message of this virulent strain of religious nationalism is that Buddhists must unite against a growing Muslim threat.
6. Mara Ma Gri is the Rakhine exonym for the Barua population that can also be found in Bangladesh.
7. Interview with Hindu households living in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps by Maxime Boutry, Sittwe Township, Rakhine State, Myanmar, 25 January 2014.
8. A Burmese spirit (*nat*) possession cult.
9. In June 1949 the Karen National Union (KNU) declared to the world the formation of the Karen Free State of "Kawthoolei". However, from this period until 1995 and the taking of KNU's headquarters at Manerplaw, the entire Karen region has collapsed, "quashing dreams at independence of a prosperous free-state of Kawthoolei" (Smith 1994, p. 44).
10. This happened between 1988 and 1991 under the Thai prime minister's new political orientations toward Myanmar, known as "Chatichai's buffet (i.e., eat all you want) government" (Pavin Chachavalpongpun 2005, p. 65), which favoured loose forms of control over the borderland since the Burmese Government was in negotiation with its Thai counterpart to profit from this resource-laden region.
11. One of the main reasons of this deficit is the employment in the 1980s of Moken men on compressor diving boats which resulted in many deaths. Other risky work commissioned by Chinese and Burmese entrepreneurs such as the use of fishing explosives contributed to deaths in the Moken male population.
12. Gaman provoked the Moken flight toward the sea by committing adultery with the queen's younger sister, Ken. The queen condemned Ken and her people to be drowned (*lemo* in Moken), giving the ethnonym *(le)mo ken* (Ivanoff 1985, pp. 97–124).

13. Regions were called Divisions prior to 2010.
14. While the Moken roam the islands, living on their boats during the dry season (approximately from October to April/May), during the monsoon they settle in temporary villages based on the islands of their ancestors.
15. Data from fieldwork by the author in Ye township, May 2014.
16. Even if the Burman (whether in the Ayeyarwady Delta or in the Dry Zone) can legally obtain an identity card, most farmers living in the countryside never undertook the registration process. Many individuals also lost all their papers during cyclone Nargis which struck the delta in May 2008.
17. Interviews with Burmese migrants and Mon patrons in Ye township by Maxime Boutry, Mon State, Myanmar, May 2014.
18. The hinterlands of the Tanintharyi Division are mainly exploited by Myanmar joint-ventures operating with Thai investments in producing palm oil.

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