

THE CONCEPTS OF
DOBAMA ("OUR BURMA")
AND THUDO-BAMA ("THEIR BURMA")
IN BURMESE NATIONALISM, 1930-1948

Kei Nemoto*

This article attempts to demonstrate the interdependent operation of the term dobama ("our Burma") and its opposite, thudo-bama ("their Burma"), in the minds of members of the Dobama-asiayoun ("Our Burma Party"). From the party's very beginning in 1930 to the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League's struggle against Japanese rule and subsequently for independence from the British from 1944 to 1947, Dobama party members, known as "thahkins," avoided being identified as thudo-bama, meaning "the Burmese of their (the British or Japanese) side" or "the Burmese people who collaborated with the colonial regime." Instead, they invariably identified themselves as dobama, or "our Burmese." The thahkins preferred to define themselves in negative rather than positive terms. In other words, they chose to identify themselves by describing what they were not rather than what they were, and by attacking their imagined enemies, the thudo-bama, rather than attempting a clear definition of dobama.

Introduction

The members of the *Dobama-asiayoun* ("Our Burma Party") first introduced the use of the term *dobama* ("our Burma") in 1930. The present paper sketches the history of this term in relation to its opposite, *thudo-bama* ("their Burma"). Although the party's ideological basis has been analyzed at length, there has been little discussion of how these two key concepts functioned

* Kei Nemoto specializes in the history of modern Burma. He has occupied his current post of associate professor of history at the Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa (ILCAA), Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, since 1995. He earned his B.A. and M.A. degrees at International Christian University in Tokyo. Dr. Nemoto conducted research in Rangoon from 1985 to 1987, and from 1993 to 1995 he resided in London as a visiting research fellow at the School of Oriental and African Studies. His book on the Burmese patriot leader Aung San, written in Japanese, was published in 1996 by Iwanami Shoten Publishing in Tokyo.

interdependently in the minds of party members to help them distinguish between their enemies and their allies.

Benedict Anderson has described the nation as an imaginary concept connoting such notions as “limited,” “sovereign,” and “community.”¹ In his analysis, Anderson emphasizes the perception of “us-ness” that underlies the common identity of compatriot groups. However, if there is such a thing as “us-ness,” surely there is also a “them-ness” (i.e., “enemies”) operating in close interrelation with it. One case-history that bears out the truth of these speculations is that of colonial and early post-independence Burma, where pronounced racial divisions existed between indigenous populations and colonizers, the former being generally thought of as *dobama* and the latter as *thudo-bama*.² Of particular interest is the fluidity of these identifications: as colonial rule neared its end, for instance, conflicts over issues of independence became ones not so much between indigenes and colonists as between the nationalists and the collaborators among the Burmese themselves.

Initial Concepts of *Dobama* and *Thudo-bama*

As is well known, the *Dobama-asiayoun* was formed in 1930 by a young generation of urban elites who had become disaffected by the factionalism they perceived in the nationalist movement as well as by the dominant status enjoyed by various offshoots of the GCBA, the General Council of the Burmese Associations.³ The members of the nascent party affixed the title *thahkin* (“master”) to their names in order to assert the idea that the Burmese people and not the British were the rightful masters of Burma. More significant than the *thahkin* affix, however, was the party’s official name: *Dobama-asiayoun*. According to the party’s official history, the *Dobama Asiayoun Thamain* (also Thahkin Thein Maung Gyi’s autobiography), the word *bama* was chosen rather than *myanma* because the latter term referred

¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1991), 5(7).

² Robert Pinkney, *Democracy in the Third World* (London: Open University Press, 1993), 40–48, presents a discussion of democracy that includes a classification of relations between colonizers and indigenous populations.

³ The *Dobama Asiayoun* membership consisted mainly of the offspring of landlords, landed farmers, merchants, free-lance professionals, and civil servants. See Robert Taylor, *The State in Burma* (London: C. Hurst and Company, 1987), 124–125, and Kei Nemoto, “The Acceptance of Socialism by Burmese Nationalists during the 1930s: Dobama Asiayoun’s Ideological Formation” (in Japanese), *Tonan Ajia Kenkyu* (Kyoto University) 27(4):428–429 (March 1990).

to the Burman people in a narrow sense that excluded other indigenous ethnic groups such as the Karens and the Shans.⁴ *Bama* had been in colloquial use since the dynastic period and in fact embodied the same narrow connotations in its orthodox sense, but the thahkins decided to redefine it to denote all indigenous people living in British-dominated Burma.⁵ Although these ideas became fully materialized only later, they nonetheless reveal a long-standing effort to reconceptualize the Burmese nation in significantly progressive ways.⁶

Thahkin Wa Tin, one of the oldest of the thahkins, told the author that the term *dobama* carried much profound meaning. For one thing, it invariably implied the contrary notion of *thudo-bama*, which could mean variously "Burma dominated by the Burmese of their (the British) side," "Burma ruled by the British together with those Burmese who collaborate with them," "the Burmese people of their (the British) side," or "the Burmese people who helped and collaborated with the colonial regime." Thahkin Wa Tin says that the use of *dobama* therefore reflects the thahkins' identification of themselves as distinctly different from and opposed to those Burmese who stood on the side of *thudo-bama*. In other words, the British were not the only enemy: the *thudo-bama* were, too, and the thahkins were greatly concerned with how best to confront them.⁷

Although the first party pamphlet, distributed in 1930, does not include the term *thudo-bama*, it does strongly imply it, as in the following lines taken from an early party slogan (italics and bracketed interpretations added):

Burma is *our* [not their] country
Burmese literature is *our* [not their] literature
The Burmese language is *our* [not their] language

⁴ Hkin Maun La', ed., *Midou'Thahkin Thein Maun Gyi i bawa hnin nainngan-yei hlou' shahmu mya* (Rangoon: Sapei Bei'man, 1987), 54, and the Dobama Asiayoun Thamain Pyusuyei Ahpwe (Dobama Asiayoun Historical Compilation Committee), *Dobama Asiayoun Thamain*, vol. 1 (Rangoon: Sapei Bei'man, 1976), 133.

⁵ Hkin Maun La', ed., *Midou'Thahkin Thein Maun Gyi*, 54, and Dobama Asiayoun Thamain Pyusuyei Ahpwe (Dobama Asiayoun Historical Society), *Dobama Asiayoun Thamain*, 133. An explanation of the original difference between the terms *bama* and *myanma* is given in the entry for *bama* in the *Myanma Abidan* (Rangoon: Pinnyayei Wungyihtana Myanma Sapei Ahpwe, 1979).

⁶ See my discussion of this in "The Acceptance of Socialism by Burmese Nationalists."

⁷ Interview with Thahkin Wa Tin, at his house in Rangoon, October 18, 1986.

Love *our* [not their] country
Praise *Burmese* literature [not theirs]
Cherish the *Burmese* language [not theirs]⁸

The pamphlet follows this slogan with an indictment of the “smart Burmese” who blame the Indo-Burman riot of May 1930 on such “stupid Burmese” as bus drivers and young monks. It praises these same so-called “stupid Burmese” for remaining in Rangoon during the riot and courageously defending their ethnic Burmese compatriots against the Indians. The party pamphlet admonishes the Anglo- and other mixed-blooded Burmese to identify themselves as Burmese citizens at that propitious time when Burma is to realize its destiny as a strong and fully independent nation. However, it makes no direct accusations against the British. The pamphlet’s accusations were focused instead on the snobbish or mixed-blooded Burmese who did not respect the Burmese language and culture and who denigrated the lower-class Burmese who had acted so commendably in the riots. Though the pamphlet did not use the term *thudo-bama*, its implication was clear.

“Thudo-bama” and the 1936 General Election

Although the term *thudo-bama* rarely appeared in printed documents of the *thahkin* party, it was explicitly used during the 1936 general elections and at that time became more clearly defined than before. The elections were held to select members for the new House of Representatives, to be convened for the first time in April 1937 as stipulated in the 1935 Rule of Burma Act. Except for the bye-elections of Shwebo in 1933, the *Dobama-asiayoun* had shown little interest in earlier elections. This time, however, it decided to take a serious part by forming a subsidiary party, an anti-Rule of Burma Act party, named *Komin-kohkyin Ahpwe*.⁹ The party distributed leaflets and pamphlets in each constituency in which its candidates stood. The passage cited below, which serves as an example of the

⁸ Translated from *Nainngan-pyu Sasu ahma’1*, 1930 (Rangoon: Dobama Asiayoun, 1930), p. 1.

⁹ In regards to the Shwebo bye-elections of 1933, see my “The Doudama Asiayoun and the Shweibou Bye-Election (1933),” in *Burma and Japan: Basic Studies on Their Cultural and Social Structure*, Burma Research Group, ed., 247–255 (Tokyo: Office of the Burma Research Group, 1987). As for the whole discussion of the 1936 elections, see my “The Acceptance of Socialism by Burmese Nationalists,” 437–442, and “Burmese Nationalists’ Attitudes towards the General Elections of 1936 and 1947” (in Japanese), *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 48–49(2): 84–94, 106–108 (1995).

rhetoric used, conveys a clear idea of how the thahkins perceived the *thudo-bamas* (the Burmese text uses *thumya-bama* rather than the synonymous and more common *thudo-bama*; for the sake of consistency I have adopted *thudo* in the English translation):

If there exist *dobamas*, there also exist *thudo-bamas*.
Be aware of them.
Thudo-bamas do not cherish our Buddhism, do not respect it,
They go into the councils,
They try to dominate monks whether directly or whether indirectly,
They take advantage of the law, accept bribes,
They pretend towards voters as if they are good citizens. . . .¹⁰

Another good example of the thahkins' conception of *thudo-bama* is a cartoon printed in the pamphlet that became in effect the *Komin-kohkyin Ahpwe's* founding manifesto.¹¹ The cartoon satirically shows the candidates of all parties except the *Komin-kohkyin Ahpwe* grouped together in an Englishman's boat, from which they angle for fish (votes) using bank notes for bait. In contrast, the *Komin-kohkyin Ahpwe* candidate angles from atop a nearby rock, using a tag inscribed "*komin-kohkyin*" as bait. The scene implies that the ex-GCBA-related party candidates are all *thudo-bama*, namely, Burmese who collaborate with the British, while the *Komin-kohkyin Ahpwe* candidate is a true patriot.

Here again the thahkins were greatly influenced by prevailing politics. They took a firm stance against ex-GCBA party candidates (e.g., Ba Maw, Chit Hlaing, and Ba Pe), insisting that victorious candidates must reject all appointments to ministerial posts in order to paralyze the House and thus destroy the new regime created by the 1935 Constitution.¹² The dissenting slogan "Reject ministerial posts!" constituted a direct challenge to the ex-GCBA candidates, whose main purpose was invariably to obtain such posts and amass as much political power as possible in anticipation of Dominion status, which the British were expected to introduce in the near future.¹³ Thus, the thahkins discerned two categories of nationalists:

¹⁰ Translated from a pamphlet distributed for Thahkin An Kyi, candidate in the Pakou'ku South constituency (available in document number DR-4681 of the Defense Services Historical Research Institute [Rangoon]).

¹¹ The title of this 1936 pamphlet is *Komin-kohkyin Tihdaunhmu Sasu ahma' l*.

¹² This is quite clear according to the pamphlets distributed by them during the election, which are included in DSHRI, DR-4681.

¹³ See my "The Acceptance of Socialism by Burmese Nationalists" and "Burmese Nationalists Attitudes towards the General Elections of 1936 and 1947."

those who sought to secure their political future under the expected Dominion status, and those who not only refused ministerial service but also struggled for complete independence. The former corresponds to *thudo-bama* and the latter to *dobama*.

***Dobama wada* and Socialism**

In February 1937 the *Dobama-asiayoun* adopted a party constitution, the *Dobama-wada* (*wada* = "ideology").¹⁴ In this document, *dobama* was redefined as "the class of poor people living in Burma according to the *dobama wada*." The term *thahkin* was defined as one who endeavors to attain equal rights for people and improve their living standard. Although the constitution included the party's earlier nationalist slogans ("Burma is our country," "Burmese literature is our literature," and "the Burmese language is our language"), the basic tone was very socialistic, there being demands for the elimination of capitalism and imperialism, the nationalization of private enterprises, the equal distribution of wealth, and the formation of a government sympathetic to the needs of peasants and laborers. The term *komin-kohkyin* is used, but not as it was during the 1936 election campaign, when it meant vaguely "the idea of having hopes of living decently in one's own country forever, with dignity and splendor, with our royal umbrella, our palace and our king."¹⁵ Rather, it is employed more specifically to signify an amalgamation of doctrinal socialism and Burman-centrism.¹⁶

Although the leftward shift in the *Dobama-asiayoun* coincided with the introduction of imported strains of socialism in the later 1930s, the real impetus of change stemmed from the thahkins' long-standing and now more acutely felt need for self-definition. After its general defeat in the 1936 elections (of 28 candidates only 3 won), the party must have realized the futility of soliciting popular support by simply attacking its political opponents (mainly ex-GCBA nationalists) and asserting itself as something vaguely the opposite. They had, they now knew, to define explicitly in a written constitution what they stood for—what, in other words, the self-referential label *dobama* really meant. They saw socialism, which had

¹⁴ *Dobama wada* (Rangoon: Dobama Asiayoun, 1937). The following citations (direct or indirect) are from this work and are translated by me.

¹⁵ *Komin-kohkyin Ahpwe i Simyin Upadei ahkyi* (Rangoon: Komin-kohkyin Ahpwe, 1936).

¹⁶ For a full discussion of the relation between socialism and the term *komin-kohkyin*, see my "The Acceptance of Socialism by Burmese Nationalists."

of late come into vogue, as a convenient means of achieving this end, and so with little preliminary theoretical study they promptly wrapped it up in Burman-centric anti- *hudo-bama* slogans and touted it as the official party platform.

The 1938 Split

It has been said that the introduction of socialism into official *Dobama-asiayoun* philosophy aggravated pre-existing tensions between the old guards (Ba Sein, Tun Ok, and others) and such newcomers as Aung San and U Nu and led eventually to the party split in 1938.¹⁷ In a personal interview, Khin U Sein, daughter of Ba Sein, explained to me that although her father and his colleagues considered socialism an effective weapon against the British, they believed it was neither essential to nor inherent in the party and should therefore be only temporarily adopted.¹⁸ On the other hand, the *Htana-hkyouk* ("headquarters faction") *Dobama-asiayoun* to which Aung San belonged included many confirmed socialists and communists for whom the old guards' dismissive attitudes toward socialist doctrine was little short of blasphemy. These differences between the two factions proved irreconcilable, and the party broke apart. We might note here that although the honorary leader of the headquarters faction, the philosopher Thahkin Kawdaw Hmain, was not a socialist in the formal sense, he *was* decidedly Burman-centric. His presence therefore strengthened the anti-*thudo-bama* posture that the headquarters faction directed toward the old thahkins as political rivals in the nationalist movement.

That the two factions never tried to reunite shows their antagonism to have been that of *dobama* versus *thudo-bama*. When the headquarters faction joined with Ba Maw's party to establish the anti-British Freedom Bloc coalition in 1939, they sought the membership of almost all other political organizations except Ba Sein's. When the *Minami-kikan* (the Japanese Army's secret military

¹⁷ There are two views on this, however. Khin Yee asserts that the split was caused not so much by the introduction of socialism as by antagonism between the old and the new thahkins. See Khin Yee, *The Dobama Movement in Burma* (Ithaca: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program, 1988), 133–134. On the other hand, Jan Becka holds with the view that the split was caused by the introduction of Marxist socialism, which was opposed by such conservative thahkins as Ba Sein. See Jan Becka, "The Ideology of the Dou Bama Asi j Ayoun: A Study of the Evolution of Burmese Nationalism (1930–1940)," *Archiv Orientalni* (Academia Praha, Prague) 54:350–352 (1986).

¹⁸ Interview with Daw Khin U Sein, at her house in London, June 15, 1994.

agency) intervened and gathered the so-called “Thirty Comrades” in 1941, the two factions faced one another with undisguisable reluctance and mutual distrust.¹⁹ Even when they were forced to join with Ba Maw’s *Hsinyetha Wunthanu Ahpwe* to form the new *Dobama-Hsinyetha Asiayoun* in August 1942, the two groups of thahkins were not truly reunited. In effect, the newly formed party served only as a vehicle through which the Burma Communist Party (BCP) and the People’s Revolutionary Party (PRP), two underground offshoots of the ex-headquarters faction of *Dobama-Asiayoun*, could recruit a younger generation of adherents.²⁰

Japanese Occupation and the Birth of AFPFL

During the Japanese occupation, the thahkins of the ex-headquarters faction made a dazzling appearance on the political stage. They had never been recognized by the Japanese as a mainstream political party, but they nonetheless had gained valuable experience in government as a result of Ba Maw’s having appointed some among them to important posts in the occupational administration.²¹ In addition, they deftly channeled political wherewithal to themselves through other organizations, including not only the BCP and the PRP but also the Burma National Army (BNA, successor to the BIA, the Burma Independence Army), the East Asia Youth League, and the *Dobama-Hsinyetha Asiayoun*, the former two of which were officially sanctioned by the occupational regime. In the meantime, the Ba Sein-Tun Ok partisans became weakened and nearly lost their influence within nationalist circles, especially after the two leaders were deported to Singapore in August 1943.²²

¹⁹ See Kei Nemoto, “Burma—Occupation, Collaboration, Resistance, and Independence,” in *1945 in Europe and Asia*, Monographien Herausgegeben von Deutschen Institut für Japanstudien der Philipp-Franz-von-Siebold-Stiftung, Band 19, G. Krebs and C. Oberlander, eds. 286–290 (Munich: Indicum, 1997). Tatsuro Izumiya, *Biruma Dokuritsu Hishi* [A secret history of the independence of Burma] (Tokyo: Tokuma Shoten, 1989), also offers a vivid account of this event.

²⁰ Kei Nemoto, “A Study of Anti-Japanese Struggle in Burma” (in Japanese), in *ILCAA Southeast Asian Studies 2: Southeast Asian Nationalist Movements in Urban and Rural Areas* (Tokyo: Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 1991), 154–158.

²¹ Nemoto, “Burma—Occupation, Collaboration, Resistance, and Independence,” 292–295.

²² Japan deported them because of Ba Sein and Tun Ok’s anti-Ba Maw posture, which was at the same time related to the factional antagonism inside the Japanese Army (interview with Daw Khin U Sein, June 15, 1994).

The thahkins of both factions initially recognized Japan as a *dobama* ally but changed their allegiance when it became apparent that Japan, rather than preparing Burma for independence, had alienated the entire population through harsh rule. The birth of the thahkin-dominated Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL) in August 1944, through an alliance of the BNA, the BCP, and the PRP, marked this change. The inclusion of *anti-fascist* ("Japan" = "fascist") in the league's name reflects the thahkins' *dobama*(*anti-thudo-bama* mentality and explains why their manifesto, though vague on the issue of independence, waxed explicit in its attacks on the "fascists": they wanted to emphasize their *anti(thudo-bama* attitude rather than hazard a political agenda they would be held accountable for in the very uncertain future.²³ In fact, other than simply to demand complete independence, the League may have been incapable at the time of articulating clearly what kind of future it envisioned for the country.²⁴

Following the birth of the AFPFL, the thahkins sought help from the British, the former *thudo*, though they considered them just "an enemy's enemy" with whom they would have either to fight or resolutely negotiate after the war.²⁵ At the same time, the *thudo* recognition might have been operating between the two underground parties, the BCP and the PRP, where competition among the leadership resulted in disaffection.²⁶ Besides their ideological differences, the communists and the socialists must have

²³ In this manifesto, the AFPFL mentions 27 objectives, 15 of which relate to "the new constitution." Eleven of the objectives, however, concern the securing of human rights (which were completely ignored by the Japanese Army), and others only vaguely mention economic, social, and labor equality and the status of ethnic minorities. It is difficult to know from this declaration what kind of new independent nation the thahkins wanted, as there is no reference to any future AFPFL government. (The manifesto is included in Tin Mya, *Hpe'his' Tohlan-yei Htanahgyou' hnin Tain Hse-dain* (Rangoon: Mya Sapei Htai', 1968), 2–8.

²⁴ It may be, however, that they were so eager for help from the Allies that they refrained from any specific demands that might have caused misunderstandings among the Allies (especially the British).

²⁵ The thahkins were nervous about this, especially after the British apprehended the anti-Japanese guerrillas in Arakan in January 1945. See Kei Nemoto, "A Study of Anti-Japanese Struggle in Burma," 163–166, 170–176.

²⁶ The BCP and the PRP declared their merger and the birth of the new Revolutionary Front in October 1944, but the Front soon collapsed. See Tin Mya, *Hpe'his' Tohlan-yei*, 9–10; Jan Becka, *The National Liberation Movement in Burma during the Japanese Occupation Period (1941–45)* (Prague: Academia Praha, 1983), 172; and Nemoto, "A Study of Anti-Japanese Struggle in Burma," 170–172.

felt each other to be an incarnation of *thudo-bama* that might jeopardize the prospect of full independence.²⁷ This disaffection remained benign throughout the Japanese occupation, but in post-war Burma it grew into a serious antagonism that created serious social and political problems.

The 1947 Election: *Dobama* Supported by the British

By the time Britain returned to Burma, the thahkins had decided to attempt a truly united national front by asking ex-GCBA-related politicians (e.g., Ba Pe) and representatives of the Shan, Karen, and Arakan minority groups to join the AFPFL. They remained uncompromising in their demand for full independence as early as possible and condemned as backward-looking the policy provisions in the colonial government's May 1945 "White Paper on Burma," which called for three years' direct rule by the colonial governor followed by a revival of the Rule of Burma Act (1935) and, ultimately, concrete negotiations for the establishment of Dominion status.

In order to further their cause, the AFPFL petitioned Governor Dorman-Smith to accept eleven members of AFPFL *en bloc* into the fifteen-member Executive Council, but the petition was rejected on grounds that the League had little legitimacy in Burmese politics. In fact, although the colonial government made a pretense of leniency and of dealing with all political parties equally, including allowing politicians who had collaborated with Japan to re-enter Burmese politics,²⁸ it was clearly suspicious of the AFPFL and its leader,

²⁷ The Revolutionary Front's declaration also implies that the socialists were nationalists that lacked political thought and training while the communists lacked nationalist zeal altogether. See also Nemoto, "A Study of Anti-Japanese Struggle in Burma," 171.

²⁸ Two such were U Saw and Ba Maw. U Saw had been detained in the small town of Bombo in Uganda from April 1942 to January 1946 because his secret contact with a Japanese diplomat in Portugal while returning from a friendship visit to the U.K., the U.S.A., and Canada was made known to the British by the Americans, who had deciphered the Japanese codes. See Kei Nemoto, "Burma" (in Japanese), in *Japan and Southeast Asia in the Modern History*, T. Yoshikawa, ed., 239–244 (Tokyo: Tokyo-Shoseki, 1992). Ba Maw went into hiding in a rural village of the Nigata prefecture in Japan in August 1945 but surrendered to GHQ, Allied Command, in January 1946. After six months detention at Sugamo Prison, he was released on July 31, 1946. The British did not intend that U Saw and Ba Maw should become anti-AFPFL politicians, but U Saw and Ba Maw themselves believed they were released for that purpose (see India Office Library and Records, IOR-M-101 and IOR-M-4-2600). See also Nemoto, "Burmese Nationalists' Attitudes towards the General Elections."

Aung San. The thahkins' pro-Japanese posture early in the war may have been pardonable, but their strong anti-British stance during the 1930s stigmatized the AFPFL in the immediate postwar political environment. Not surprisingly, the League gained no role in the interim government leading up to the new elections. A few non-AFPFL, ex-GCBA-related politicians (excluding those of Ba Maw's former party) were given posts, but the British overwhelmingly favored those Burmese members of the Indian Civil Service (ICS) who had followed the colonial government to Simla in 1942. The thahkins interpreted these events as a British attempt to weaken both the AFPFL and the leadership of Aung San.

Although the thahkins had perforce welcomed all parties and politicians into the League, they seem to have considered those that were pro-British as *thudo-bama* and to have harbored animosity against them, especially during the first half of 1946 when U Saw appeared to have gained the favor of Governor Dorman-Smith. In the latter half of that year, however, changes in the international sphere, and in the political situation in India in particular, prompted the British to shun the communist *thahkins* and to transfer power instead to the moderate socialists, meaning principally the AFPFL and its leader, Aung San, whose evident sincerity had of late impressed the British authorities.²⁹ Although the AFPFL rejected Dominion status in favor of full independence, Aung San and the moderate socialists of the League received the government's sanction, and negotiations went forward at an increased pace. Under newly appointed Governor Rance, the AFPFL garnered a majority in the Executive Council reshuffle of September 1946. When Thein Pe, a communist *thahkin*, resigned his seat, the BCP itself was expelled from the AFPFL, and the influence of the moderates further increased.

The signing of the Aung San(Attlee Agreement in January 1947 made it quite clear that the AFPFL would win control of the

²⁹ For Aung San's attitudes see India Office Library and Records, IOR-M-4-2602, which includes a cipher telegram, dated May 16, 1946, and addressed to the Secretary of State for Burma, in which Governor Dorman-Smith says, "I could not fail to be impressed by his [Aung San's] sincerity. He spoke very openly and did not try to hedge. I have no doubt whatever that most of our many difficulties would be solved if he and a few of his colleagues were to join us." The change in the political situation in India and its influence on the Burmese question are discussed in Robert Taylor, "Burma in the Anti-Fascist War," in *Southeast Asia Under the Japanese Occupation*, A. McCoy, ed. (New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asian Studies, 1980), 161-163

Constituent Assembly in the elections later that year and that Aung San would become the nation's leader. While the colonial government took steps to assure the British Parliament that the AFPFL truly represented the wishes of the Burmese people, the AFPFL moved to assure the Burmese people that it was the only real *dobama* party, a claim the thahkins' close association with and endorsement by the British left increasingly open to question. No serious difficulties arose on either front, however. Following the Panglong Agreement of February 1947, which assured the Shans' and Kachins' participation in the future Union, the election was set for April and (despite a British pledge not to involve themselves) became little more than a political formality to confirm Aung San as Burma's leader and the AFPFL as the principal party. All other parties except the BCP boycotted on the grounds that an AFPFL victory was assured,³⁰ and even the communists fielded only 22 candidates in 14 general constituencies, compared to the AFPFL's 182 candidates in all 91 general constituencies.³¹

In fact, the most revealing aspect of the elections was the general lack of opposition. Forty-five general constituencies (49.5% of the total number) went uncontested as opposition candidates withdrew en masse, most of them under pressure from the AFPFL.³² Altogether, 102 candidates withdrew, leaving a field of 278, including independents.³³ Of the 182 AFPFL candidates, 90 were elected without contest and 86 won in contested elections; only 6 were defeated by BCP candidates. Significantly, voter turnout was but little greater than in 1936 (approximately 1,375,000 versus 1,235,297), despite this being the first exercise of universal suffrage in Burmese history.³⁴ Indeed, the claim might be made that the AFPFL's overall monopoly in the campaigning effectively deprived more than 3.1. million constituents (52% of the whole) of the opportunity to choose their officials in government.³⁵

³⁰ See Nemoto, "Burmese Nationalists' Attitudes towards the General Elections."

³¹ These numbers are from India Office Library and Records, IOR-M-4-2605.

³² India Office Library and Records, IOR-M-4-2605.

³³ India Office Library and Records, IOR-M-4-2605.

³⁴ As for the basic records relating to the 1936 elections, see Ganga Sing, *Burma Parliamentary Companion* (Rangoon: British Burma Press, 1940), 341–367.

³⁵ See Nemoto, "Burmese Nationalists' Attitudes towards the General Elections." These numbers were calculated according to the records indicated in India Office Library and Records, IOR-M-4-2605.

Following the elections, the AFPFL set about drafting a new constitution. As before, the thahkins said little in the way of plans for post-independent Burma other than to reaffirm their previous demand for complete independence. A group of moderate thahkins actually had favored Dominion status as the means of maximizing economic and political stability in the post-war period, but the AFPFL could not possibly make this view official. By now everyone except the Karens were rallying to the cause of full independence, and should the AFPFL waffle on the issue now, it surely would incite popular criticism of itself, not to mention direct political attacks from the BCP opposition in the Constituent Assembly. Without serious discussion, therefore, full independence became the ultimate objective of the newly formed government.

Conclusion

The thahkins of the *Dobama-asiayoun* and, even more so, of the later Anti-Fascist Peoples' Freedom League kept it always in mind to avoid being identified as *thudo-bama* or "the Burmese of their (the British or Japanese) side." They therefore invariably identified themselves as *dobama*, or "Our Burmese," and attacked the implied opposite—the *thudo-bama*—in whatever form they found it and at every available opportunity. Although an early party pamphlet included an explicit statement of what the party stood for, this manifesto, such as it was, comprised little more than the then-popular tenets of socialism wrapped in popular Burma-centric rhetoric. The party split in 1938 revealed not only how poor was the thahkins' understanding of formal socialist doctrine but also how much they preferred to define themselves in negative rather than positive terms by emphasizing what they were *not* and labeling that "other" with the derisive appellation *thudo-bama*. In such a *modus operandi*, the terms *dobama* and *thudo-bama* operated interdependently, the latter always informing the former and vice-versa. When the thahkins later prepared their official declaration announcing the formation of the AFPFL, they again avoided clear prescriptions for an independent Burma, relying instead upon anti-Japanese rhetoric. Even in the 1947 elections, a positive program for the post-independence period gave way to the negative strategy of pressuring non-AFPFL candidates to withdraw from the elections. This is not to say that the thahkins had neither a clear concept of an independent Burma nor any standards of nationalism; it means, rather, that in their public rhetoric they simply chose to identify

themselves by describing what they did not want to be rather than what they were, or, in other words, by attacking their imagined enemies, the *thudo-bama*, rather than by striving for a clear and complete articulation of *dobama* and of what that concept meant for the country's future.

References

Anderson, Benedict

1991 *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Rev. ed. London, Verso.

Becka, Jan

1983 *The National Liberation Movement in Burma during the Japanese Occupation Period (1941-45)*. Prague: Academia Praha.

1986 "The Ideology of the Dou Bama Asi j Ayoun: A Study of the Evolution of Burmese Nationalism (1930-1940)." *Archiv Orientalni* (Academia Praha, Prague) 54:336-358.

Defense Services Historical Research Institute, Rangoon

1936 War Library Document DR-4681.

Dobama Asiayoun

1930 *Nainngan-pyu Sasu ahma' 1*. Rangoon: Dobama Asiayoun.

1937 *Dobama Wada*. Rangoon: Dobama Asiayoun.

Dobama Asiayoun Thamain Pyusuyei Ahpwe (ed.)

1976 *Dobama Asiayoun Thamain*. Vol. 1. Rangoon: Sapei Bei'man.

Hkin Maun La' (ed.)

1976 *Midou' Thahkin Thein Maun Gyi i bawa hnin nainngan-yeihlou'shahmu mya*. Rangoon: Sapei Bei'man.

Hkin U Sein

1994 Interview with the author, Rangoon, June 15.

India Office Library and Records, London

1946a IOR-M-5-101.

1946b IOR-M-4-2600.

1947a IOR-M-4-2602.

1947b IOR-M-4-2605.

Izumiya, Tatsuro

1989 *Biruma Dokuritsu Hishi* (in Japanese). Tokyo: Tokuma Shoten.

Khin Yee

1988 *The Dobama Movement in Burma*. Ithaca: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program.

Koumin-kohkyin Ahpwe

1936a *Koumin-Kohkyin Ahpwe i Simyin Upadei ahkyi*. Rangoon: Koumin-kouhkyin Ahpwe.

1936b *Koumin-Kohkyin Tihdaunhmu Sasu ahma' 1*. Rangoon. Koumin-kouhkyin Ahpwe.

Nemoto, Kei

1987 "The Doubama Asiayoun and the Shweibou Bye-Election (1933)." In *Burma and Japan: Basic Studies on Their Cultural and Social Structure*. Burma Research Group, ed. 247-255. Tokyo: Office of the Burma Research Group.

1990 "The Acceptance of Socialism by Burmese Nationalists during the 1930s: Dobama Asiayoun's Ideological Formation" (in Japanese). *Tonan Ajia Kenkyu* (Kyoto University) 27(4):427-447.

1991 "A Study of Anti-Japanese Struggle in Burma" (in Japanese). In *ILCAA Southeast Asian Studies 2: Southeast Asian Nationalist Movements in Urban and Rural Areas*. T. Ito, H. Kurihara, S. Nakano, and K. Nemoto, eds. 151-207. Tokyo: Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa; Tokyo University of Foreign Studies.

1992 "Burma" (in Japanese). In *Japan and Southeast Asia in the Modern History*. Toshiharu Yoshikawa, ed. 229-271. Tokyo: Tokyo Shoseki.

1995 "Burmese Nationalists' Attitudes towards the General Elections of 1936 and 1947" (in Japanese). *Journal of Asian and African Studies* (Tokyo) 48-49(2):81-109.

1997 "Burma—Occupation, Collaboration, Resistance and Independence." In *1945 in Europe and Asia*. Monographien Herausgegeben von Deutschen Institut für Japanstudien der Philipp-Franz-von-Siebold-Stiftung, Band 19. Gerhard Krebs and Christian Oberlander, eds. 283-305]. Munich: Indicum.

Pinkney, Robert

1993 *Democracy in the Third World*. London, Open University Press.

Pinnyayei Wungyihtana Myanma Sapei Ahpwe (ed.)

1979 *Myanma Abidan*. Rangoon: Pinnyayei Wungyihtana.

Sing, Ganga

1940 *Burma Parliamentary Companion*. Rangoon: British Burma Press.

Taylor, Robert

1980 "Burma in the Anti-Fascist War." In *Southeast Asia under the Japanese Occupation*. Alfred McCoy, ed. 159-190. New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asian Studies Program.

1987 *The State in Burma*. London: C. Hurst and Company.

Tin Mya

1968 *Hpe'hsi' Tohlan-yei Htanahgyou' hnin Tain Hse-dain*. Rangoon: Mya Sapei Htai'.

Wa Tin, Thahkin

1986 Interview with the author, Rangoon, October 18.