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# The flower, then the sword: The militarisation of Burma's most beautiful book

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*This article examines the highly ornamented Burmese manuscript known as the Kammavāca to understand what its luxurious materials and distinctive illustrations reveal about Buddhist practice and politics in Burma's last kingdom, the Konbaung dynasty (1752–1885). This article shows that the illustrations on Kammavāca manuscripts transformed during the Konbaung dynasty to feature new sword-wielding guardians. This article argues that this militarisation was part of the Burmese kingdom's increasing reliance on ritual practices and religious materials to fortify a kingdom at war with the British and threatened by ethnic divisions.*

In Burma's final kingdom there was one mass-produced ritual manuscript that was crafted with precious materials and illustrated lavishly with Buddhist symbols: the Kammavāca. This highly adorned book of monastic formulas circulated widely during the Konbaung dynasty (1752–1885), and hundreds of versions are preserved today in archives, museums, and monasteries in Myanmar, Europe, North America, and beyond. The text it contains is rather fixed—each manuscript reproduces the exact language of between one and nine of the nine major monastic rituals established by the Pali Tipiṭaka. Yet in dramatic contrast to the consistency of its canonical language, the opulent visual and material features of the Burmese Kammavāca varied greatly over the course of the dynasty. During the reigns of the first Konbaung kings who quickly expanded their empire it seems that these ritual manuscripts took shape through highly valued substances. Among the most rare

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extant Konbaung Kammavācas, we find folios sculpted from ivory, crafted from silver, and inlaid with mother-of-pearl script. We also find a dynamic range of images, including scenes from the life of the Buddha, geometric and floral patterns, and auspicious or mighty animals such as birds and lions. The Konbaung Kammavāca's variegated styles and substances are inscribed with the empire's multi-front campaigns to take over Mon, Thai, and other communities and their artistic and religious traditions. By the end of the dynasty, when the Buddhist realm was shrinking from the losses of the Second Anglo-Burmese War of 1852 and the Third, and final, Anglo-Burmese War of 1885, it seems that most newly produced Burmese Kammavācas were made of matching pages of lacquered palm leaf that were painted in gold with standardised spirit figures who often carry swords.[1]

This article examines the process through which the late Konbaung Kammavāca emerges as a standardised ritual object in order to ask what this process can show us about the religious imagination of Burma's last kingdom. I argue that the guardian figures who emerge on this precious Buddhist book in the kingdom's final decades are militarised spirits, perhaps *nats,* who the royal court and affiliated sangha networks called upon as part of their strategy to draw on religious resources to consolidate power internally and externally fight off the British. By focusing on the materialisation of these invisible beings on the pages of the Kammavāca manuscripts, this article provides an in-depth case study of the prominent role Burmese political projects have given to Buddhist ritual objects, monastic networks, and local spirits.

The word 'Kammavaca' is the Pali name for these ritual texts, and its literal English translation is 'the saying (P. vācā) of the act (P. kamma)'. Non-illuminated manuscripts known as Kammavācas and containing the same extracts (P. *khandakā*) from the monastic code (P. *vinaya*) section of the Pali Tipiṭaka are common to monastic ceremonies in all Theravada[2] countries, especially Sri Lanka and Thailand, but it is only in Burma that these otherwise plain, palm-leaf texts are rendered in gold, ivory, silver, or pearl, illustrated with auspicious designs, Buddhas, and spirits, and produced in significantly large numbers.[3] Both the 'non-illuminated and

1 The First Anglo-Burmese War was waged between 1824–26.

2 The term 'Theravada', which means 'the doctrine of the Elders', was not widespread until the 20th century. The 19th-century communities that used Kammavācas used 'theravāda' in some contexts but were much more likely to use the more general Pali term 'sāsana' (B. 'thathana') to describe the Buddha's teachings in India, preserved in Lanka, and then adopted and promoted in Burma. See Peter Skilling, 'Theravāda in History', *Pacific World* 3, 11 (2009): 61–93; and Peter Skilling, Jason Carbine, Claudio Cicuzza and Santi Pakdeekham, eds., *How Theravāda is Theravāda? Exploring Buddhist identities* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm, 2012). On how the English term 'religion' came to be used in colonial Burma alongside 'sāsana', see Alicia Turner, *Saving Buddhism: The impermanence of religion in colonial Burma* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014).

3 Kammavāca in other Theravada settings with simple, incised palm-leaf folios will occasionally feature illustrated cover boards. There are some rare examples of illustrated manuscripts from other Theravada countries, namely Thailand, where there are painted Kammavāca from the 19th century. These Thai manuscripts have expertly illustrated margins, but they do not use lacquered cloth pages or the special script that distinguishes the Burmese Kammavāca.

While the geographic extent and premodern history of Kammavāca texts are outside this article's scope, we also know of early Sanskrit versions, Karmavācanā, and versions in other languages found throughout Asia, with fragments found in places as far-flung as Maral-Bashi in Xinjiang, China. See for example, H.W. Bailey, 'The Tumshuq Karmavācanā', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 13, 3 (1950): 649–70.

illuminated manuscripts are used as a script for the ceremonies required for the most important monastic rituals. This Pali-language script is carefully excerpted from the Tipiṭaka, and all Kammavāca manuscripts reproduce extracts from the Tipiṭaka's set of ritual formulas for the following monastic ceremonies: 1) higher ordination (P. *upasampadā*); 2) the annual presentation of monastic robes (P. *kaṭhina*); 3) the ceremony following the marking of the territory (P. *sīma*) for the purpose of releasing the monks within the territory from having to be with their basic set of three robes at dawn (P. *ticivarena-avippavasa*); 4) the marking of the area where *uposatha* rituals take place (P. *uposathāgāra*); 5) the election of a senior monk (P. *thera-sammuti*); 6) the assignment of a monk's name (P. *nama-sammuti*); 7) the dedication of a place in the monastery where food can be stored (P. *kappiya-bhūmi-sammuti*); 8) the acquisition of monastery land (P. *kuṭī-vatthu-olokana-sammuti*); and 9) the release of a monk from the need to stay with his teacher (P. *nissayamutti-sammuti*).[4] These crucial ritual formulas and their careful ceremonial pronunciation link the communities conducting the ritual to a Theravada lineage that claims to be the oldest, purest Buddhist order in the world. The Theravada community's claim to authority depends on its treatment of the Pali Tipiṭaka as the most faithful record of the Buddha's teachings. That the Pali text in Burmese Kammavācas is unchanging and matches Kammavāca texts throughout the Theravada Buddhist world is used to support a Burmese assertion that their country preserves and protects a pure form of Buddhism.

In addition to being an authoritative ritual text for Theravada communities, the Kammavāca is also the book that brought Europe one of its first, if not its very first, Pali texts. In 1776, a Barnabite missionary to Burma, Father John Mary Percoto, translated portions of the Kammavāca into Italian. In the early 1830s, a British Wesleyan missionary in Ceylon, Benjamin Clough, published an English translation with such an abundance of didactic footnotes that it is clear that Clough's audience of philologists, antiquarians, and Westerners specialising in Asia still knew little about Buddhist canonical texts in general. For example, in the beginning of Clough's translation, when he is translating the first part of the higher ordination (*upasampadā*) section of the Kammavāca—which prescribes the assembly of the sangha, the appointment of a head monk to lead the ritual, and the opening dialogue when the head monk asks the candidate if he has his requisite begging bowl and robes—Clough adds lengthy footnotes explaining what the sangha is, why Buddhist monks beg for their food, and that monastic robes are comprised of three garments.[5] In 1875, J.F. Dickson published his own English translation of the Kammavāca's

4 Theravada rituals in Burma place great importance on the ritual use of Pali, although they regularly employ Burmese language pieces as well. As Jason Carbine has shown, higher ordination rituals among the Shwegyin, the second largest monastic order in Burma, are mostly conducted in Burmese, but key portions are always in Pali because, those texts are 'considered to be the very words of the Buddha himself […] so they must be recited with precision in Pali. Ritual continuity with the teachings and practices of the Buddha is thus predicated upon certain types of linguistic fidelity to him. The ritual process allows for deviation from direct usage of the Pali, but only up to a point.' Jason A. Carbine, *Sons of the Buddha: Continuities and ruptures in a Burmese monastic tradition* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2011), p. 118.
5 Benjamin Clough, 'The ritual of the Budd'hist priesthood, translated from the original Pali work, entitled Karmawakya', *Miscellaneous Translations from Oriental Languages Published for the Oriental Translation Fund of Great Britain and Ireland* 2 (1834): 1–30.

higher monastic ordination text because, he explained, neither the Pali language text nor a complete translation was easily available to his fellow scholars. Dickson first gave the Pali text in Roman characters, and then gave his English translation, indicating that knowledge of Pali was widespread enough at that point that some of Dickson's readers would want to read the Kammavāca in that Asian language.[6]

Since this initial European interest in the Kammavāca, however, very little academic attention has been paid to these texts. Scholar of Theravada Buddhism Charles Hallisey bemoans the loss of interest in the Kammavāca in his well-known article 'Roads Taken and Not Taken in the Study of Theravada Buddhism'. Hallisey connects the loss of interest in the Kammavāca to the loss of interest in Theravada ritual in the academy at large. The fact that Kammavācas were 'the first texts which Europeans were given in their encounter with the Buddhist world' indicates, according to Hallisey, 'that whoever gave those texts thought that ritual was key for understanding the Buddha's message'. But soon after this initial interest in the monastic rituals described in the Kammavāca, Hallisey explains, Orientalists such as Rhys Davids worked to exclude ritual from the history of early Buddhism in their attempt to 'uncover' a rationalist—and therefore ritual-free—core of Buddhism. Hallisey calls on contemporary scholars not only to recognise how Davids' neglect of ritual has distorted the field of Buddhist studies, but also to revisit ceremonies such as those described in the Kammavāca in order to understand the important place ritual action has had in Buddhist communities.[7]

While scholars have responded in various ways to the manifold critiques in 'Roads Taken and Not Taken', few have answered Hallisey's call to revisit the Kammavāca.[8] This article aims to shed light on this still little-studied tradition, but rather than studying the text in order to understand an ancient ritual it might plot, this article scrutinises the manuscript object itself. Instead of asking about the meaning of Buddhism's oldest monastic ceremonies, it asks: What do the visual and material features of this embellished object say about the practice and politics of Buddhism in Burma from the late eighteenth century through the nineteenth century, the time when the vast majority of the extant Burmese Kammavācas were crafted and circulated? Hallisey suggests that Southeast Asian people gave Kammavācas to

6 John Frederick Dickson, 'The Upasampadā-Kammavācā: Being the Buddhist manual of the form and manner of ordering of priests and deacons', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 7, 1 (1875): 149–59. For more on how these translations fit into the history of Buddhist studies, see Jan Willem deJong, 'A brief history of Buddhist Studies in Europe and America', *Eastern Buddhist* 7, 1 (1974): 55–106.

7 Charles Hallisey, 'Roads taken and not taken in the study of Theravada Buddhism', *Curators of the Buddha* (1995): 46.

8 Sinead Ward has extensively researched Burmese Kammavāca in Asian and Western collections. See S. Ward, 'Stories steeped in gold: Narrative scenes of the decorative Kammavaca manuscripts of Burma', in *From mulberry leaves to silk scrolls: New approaches to the study of Asian manuscript traditions*, vol. 1, ed. Justin McDaniel and Lynn Ransom (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), which analyses narrative scenes in 10 of the 440 manuscripts she surveyed. See also Christian Lammerts' overview of the Burmese Kammavāca tradition as part of his larger survey of styles of ornamentation in Burmese Buddhist manuscripts. Dietrich Christian Lammerts, 'Buddhism and written law: Dhammasattha manuscripts and texts in premodern Burma' (PhD diss., Cornell University, 2010); and Dietrich Christian Lammerts, *Buddhist law in Burma: A history of Dhammasattha texts and jurisprudence, 1250–1850* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018).

Europeans because their ritual programmes were crucial to understanding the dharma; however, this supposition elides the local context and consequential power dynamics through which Kammavācas ended up in Western hands. Perhaps the South and Southeast Asian people who gave, sold, or surrendered these manuscripts to Westerners wanted to communicate the value of the rituals they dictate. Unfortunately, we do not have records of them expressing their intentions. What we do have records of, though, are the political contexts of the Burmese circulation of these manuscripts. If we try and cast the acquisition of these Kammavācas in terms of the transmission of ancient Buddhist messages, then we risk obscuring the contemporary and local economic, political, and cultural practices shaping the manuscripts and their circulation. These social practices are the chief concerns of this article.

There are two main reasons to focus on the visual and material features of Burmese Kammavācas in order to understand the social practices that shape them: 1) while these manuscripts are careful to keep the textual programme consistent, a new illustration programme featuring royally-costumed, sword-bearing spirit lords curiously emerges toward the end of the Konbaung dynasty; and 2) these striking illustrations and the valuable materials used to craft the pages and cover boards make these Kammavācas a unique form of Burmese manuscript. No other Burmese Buddhist manuscript was adorned with precious substances, painted with powerful symbols, mass produced, and known to have circulated widely in the pre-colonial period.[9] From the many extant copies of Konbaung-era Kammavācas throughout Burma and in international collections, it is clear that this type of manuscript was created for monastic rituals throughout the Southeast Asian country in the nineteenth century. Manuscripts would have been commissioned by lay people with some means, such as well-off villagers, urban merchants, and royalty, including kings. These lay donors would gift the hand-crafted manuscripts to monasteries as an act of merit-making, as a way of improving their own current and future lives as well as the lives of whomever they shared their merit with, such as family members. The monasteries would then store the manuscripts in book chests, many of which were crafted with splendid substances and illustration programmes resembling those on Kammavācas.[10] On the occasions of special monastic rituals such as ordination, the prized manuscript would be taken out of the book chest and employed by a senior monk who presided over the ceremony.[11]

9 There are many other types of Burmese Buddhist manuscripts with adorned cover boards, and certain manuscript traditions, such as astrological texts, regularly feature illustrated folios, but there are no other manuscript types whose folios and covers are consistently constructed with precious substances and illustrations and that were distributed widely in the kingdom. For more on the range of manuscript ornamentation in premodern Burma, see Lammerts, 'Buddhism and written law', pp. 214–23.

10 An exquisite example of a lacquered Kammavāca box with inlaid glass is featured in Than Htun, *Lacquerware journeys: The untold story of Burmese lacquer* (Bangkok: River, 2013), p. 171.

11 While we cannot know for sure that every commissioned Kammavāca manuscript was actually used in a monastic ritual, we do have written accounts of Burmese communities employing these manuscripts during ceremonies. As I discuss later, Ledi Sayadaw emphasised the importance of using highly adorned Kammavāca so that the manuscript itself scared away troubling spirits before the monastic specialist began to read the text during the ritual. We also have British records of these special manuscripts' use, such as British travel writer Alice Hart's description of the use of a manual with 'lacquered, gilded, and illuminated leaves' in a monastic ordination in Mandalay's Dragon Pagoda. See the photograph of

This monk would recite the ritual formulas recorded in the Kammavāca, turning over each lacquered and painted folio as he moved through the ritual. The attendees, including the lay people who sponsored the ritual, would be able to see the animation of this large, glittering book and its central place in the important Buddhist ceremony. The merit generated by continually maintaining the sangha through these rituals was understood to accrue, in part, to the donors of the manuscript, who, if publicly known, would also gain increased social standing. Clearly, there is something powerful about these ornamented books and their place in the Buddhist community. This article, therefore, looks at the very elements that mark its particular prestige in order to ask: What emergent communal concerns can we see expressed on this prized Buddhist book?

To answer the question about what the materiality of the Kammavāca can tell us about its meaning in Burma's last kingdom, I examined over four dozen Burmese Kammavāca manuscripts—published and unpublished, from Burmese and international collections, dating from the earliest extant eighteenth-century fragments[12]

one such Kammavāca in Alice Marion Rowlands Hart, *Picturesque Burma, past & present* (London: J.M. Dent, 1897), p. 281.

12 The longer history and speculation about the origins of this manuscript tradition are not only beyond the scope of this article, but also quite impossible to uncover given the lack of pre-18th century evidence. I have only found one reference to this tradition in a Konbaung Buddhist chronicle (B. *thathanawin*) in the final chronicle of this textual tradition, the *Sāsanavamsa*, composed by Paññasāmi in 1861, which briefly notes the unique Burmese practice of preparing polished books adorned with red and gold paint. Paññasāmi dates this practice to the reign of King Siripavaramahārājā, who, he writes, ruled from years 1035–60 of the Kali age. Paññasāmi writes:

> Kaliyuge pana aṭṭhatiṃsādhike vassasahasse sampatte vesākhamāsassa kāḷapakkhaaṭṭhamito paṭṭhāya lokasaṅketavasena uppajjamānaṃ bhayaṃ nivāretuṃ navaguhāyaṃ tena devacakkobhāsattherena kathitaniyāmena paṭhamaṃ marammikabhikkhū paṭṭhānappakaraṇaṃ vācāpesi. Tato pacchā jeṭṭhamāsassa juṇhapakkhapāṭipadadivasato rāmaññaraṭṭhavāsike bhikkhū paṭṭhānappakaraṇaṃ vācāpesi. Mahāchaṇañca kārāpesi. Raṭṭhavāsinopi bahupūjāsakkāraṃ kārāpesi. Tassa kira rañño kāle potthakaṃ aṭṭhibhallikarukkhaniyyāsehi parimaṭṭhaṃ katvā manosilāya likhitvā suvaṇṇena limpetvā piṭakaṃ patiṭṭhāpesi. Tato paṭṭhāya yāvajjatanā idaṃ potthakakammaṃ marammaraṭṭhe akaṃsūti.
> (Vipassana Research Institute, 'Pāḷi Tipiṭaka', https://www.vridhamma.org/Tipitaka-Propject; Paññasāmi, 'Sāsanavaṃsappadīpikā', Mandalay, 1861)

Here is B.C. Law's translation of this passage:

> In the year of one thousand and thirty-eight of the Kali age, in order to remove a fear that arose through common disturbance, the monks of the Maramma country first recited, according to the manner spoken by that Elder Devacakkobhāsa, the Paṭṭhānapakaraṇa in the Nava cave beginning from the eighth day of the dark half of the month of Vesākha. Thereafter the monks of the Rāmañña country recited the Paṭṭhānapakaraṇa beginning from the first day of the bright half of the month Jeṭṭha. He caused a great festival to be held. He also caused the inhabitants of the country to be much honoured and respected. At the time of that king, they say, when he had polished a book with bones and the juice of the Bhallika tree and had written on it with red arsenic and smeared it with gold, he established the Piṭaka. From that time up to the present day, they adopted this method for the preparation of books in the Maramma country.
> (Bimala Churn Law, *The history of Buddha's religion (Sāsanavaṃsa)*, Calcutta: Sri Satguru, 1952, p. 123)

Law's translation of 'aṭṭhi' as 'bones' here is exciting because this could refer to the use of cremation ashes in the manuscript preparation, a practice known to happen in the creation of 20th century

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through the nineteenth-century production boom. These manuscripts come from the most prominent Burmese manuscript collections such as those held in the National Library of Myanmar and the British Library, as well as those held in smaller collections, such as the Mon State National Museum and Library and university collections in the United States. I examined many of these manuscripts in person between 2012 and 2018. I have also included manuscripts that I have not examined myself but that have been published in museum catalogues, such as Sylvia Fraser-Lu and Donald Martin Stadtner's *Buddhist Art of Myanmar,* which comes from a 2015 exhibition at the Asia Society in New York, and Forrest McGill and M.L. Pattaratorn Chirapravati's *Emerald Cities: Arts of Siam and Burma, 1775–1950*, from a 2010 exhibition at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco.[13] In what follows, I begin with an overview of the Konbaung dynasty in which the manuscripts were produced. I then examine some of the rarest, and likely oldest, extant Kammavācas to show the wide range of precious substances and illustrations that Konbaung artisans have used to craft these special objects. The diversity in materials and iconography, I argue, reflects the expansionist successes of the dynasty's early imperial campaigns. It also contrasts dramatically with a standardised Kammavāca manuscripts that appears to emerge toward the end of the dynasty, when, I hypothesise, the Buddhist book becomes conscripted into the successive Konbaung military campaigns of the 1850s to 1880s against the British. A sword-bearing spirit lord appears to take over the manuscripts' visual programme and turn this prized Burmese object into a weapon against the British as the Konbaung kingdom collapsed between the Second and Third Anglo-Burmese Wars, wars which ended in total British colonisation in 1886. While the Burmese kingdom and its Buddhist sources of authority ultimately failed to fend off the Western empire, we can still imagine Burma's most beautiful book trying to prevent this outcome by conjuring belligerent spirit lords.

## The Konbaung Dynasty and Kammavāca manuscript variety

The Konbaung dynasty was the third and last imperial establishment in Burma's history. The first, the empire of Pagan, reigned from the middle of the eleventh century to the fourteenth, and is credited with formally installing Theravada Buddhism in Burma by bringing that religious school's canon, the Pali Tipiṭaka, from Sri Lanka and establishing it as the country's supreme collection of holy texts.[14] The Taungoo dynasty, which ruled Burma from the mid-sixteenth-century,

Kammavācas, but that term could also be referring to the nuts of the Bhallika tree, leading to the revised translated phrase: 'the juice from the nut-Bhallika tree'.

13 Sylvia Fraser-Lu and Donald Martin Stadtner, *Buddhist art of Myanmar* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015); Forrest McGill and M.L. Pattaratorn Chirapravati, *Emerald Cities: Arts of Siam and Burma, 1775–1950* (San Francisco: Asian Art Museum, 2009). I also engage cautiously with Noel F. Singer, 'Kammavaca texts: Their covers and binding ribbons', *Arts of Asia* 23, 3 (1993): 97–106. While Singer's article does not provide detailed source material, it surveys a large collection of Kammavācas.

14 Buddhist activity in Burma dates to at least the 5th century, when the Pyu people began to establish the country's first urban centres near modern-day Prome. The Pyu were in contact with peoples in south-eastern India and built stupas featuring Pali and Sanskrit inscriptions. The height of medieval Buddhist culture in Burma was during the Pagan period, which peaked in the 11th–12th centuries. Buddhist

was one of the largest and richest empires in Southeast Asian history.[15] At its peak it encompassed all of modern Thailand and much of Laos, what is now the northeastern Indian state of Manipur, and the Shan regions of southwest China. In 1752 this empire was toppled by a village chief who would be called Alaungpaya when he became the first Konbaung king. In addition to ambitious kings, the Konbaung dynasty featured an influential monastic and lay literati whose control, creation, and circulation of texts fabricated the images of prestige that kings used to maintain the power they had captured.[16]

The Konbaung dynasty quickly activated apparatuses of empire that allowed it to control diverse groups; they particularly exploited the prestige accorded to sacred books.[17] As their imperial predecessors had done, the Konbaung dynasty secured its rule by promoting itself as the protector of the true Buddhism, a claim it supported by its fidelity to the Pali Tipiṭaka. The most spectacular display of this fidelity is the 1868 inscription of the entire Tipiṭaka on 729 marble tablets, with each tablet standing 1.53 metres tall, 1.07 metres wide, and 13 centimetres thick, crowned with a precious gem and installed in its own shrine (B. *kyauksa gu*) in Mandalay. This massive book shrine still stands as testament to the hugely important place of the Buddhist, Pali-language book in the Konbaung dynasty.[18] And while this site was a prized

communities practised both Mahayāna and Theravada traditions, but by the end of this period, royal support went exclusively to Theravada communities. Following the Pagan period, a lineage of kings ruled out of Pegu and included Dhammaceti (r. 1472–92), a famous reformer of Theravada Buddhism. The kings at Pegu were subjugated by kings based out of Taungoo, who then moved their courts to Pegu and then Ava. This second major lineage of Burmese kings—most famous for the foreign campaigns of Tabinshweti and Bayinnaung—was overthrown by Mon rebels, who were then deposed by the first king of the Konbaung dynasty, Alaungpaya. See Ralph Isaacs and T. Richard Blurton, *Visions from the Golden Land: Burma and the art of lacquer* (London: British Museum Press, 2000). See also Fraser-Lu and Stadtner, *Buddhist art of Myanmar*; Alexandra Green and T. Richard Blurton, *Burma: Art and archaeology* (London: British Museum Press, 2002); and Alexandra Green, *Buddhist visual cultures, Rhetoric, and narrative in Late Burmese wall paintings* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2018).

15 Victor Lieberman examines the Taungoo kingdom as part of his inquiry into how only three centralised Southeast Asian kingdoms emerged in 1830 when there were numerous small polities throughout the same region in 800. He views the consolidation occurring through religion, culture, demographics, agriculture, and climate change. Lieberman shows how concurrent temporal patterns in these areas led to a relatively synchronised shift toward integration in the region. Victor Lieberman, *Strange parallels: Southeast Asia in global context, c. 800–1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). My analysis here suggests that part of this move toward consolidation included centralised religious book and ritual practices.

16 Michael Charney argues that it was the literati in the Lower Chindwin Valley, not Burmese kings, who created myths of legitimation that Konbaung rulers used to maintain their power. Michael W. Charney, *Powerful learning: Buddhist literati and the throne in Burma's last dynasty, 1752–1885* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Center for Southeast Asian Studies, 2006).

17 Many of these ethnic groups, including the Shan, Lao, Mon, and Arakanese practised forms of Theravada Buddhism as well as spirit worship, making religious activity key for political control. Juliane Schober, *Modern Buddhist conjunctures in Myanmar: Cultural narratives, colonial legacies, and civil society* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011), p. 16.

18 These inscribed marble slabs were installed by King Mindon. Kuthodaw Pagoda's Tipitaka is still called the 'world's largest book' by travel websites and databases like Atlas Obscura, which use a common definition of a book as a material base that humans have marked to record and communicate information. Joshua Foer, 'World's largest book at Kuthodaw Pagoda', in *Atlas Obscura* (Brooklyn, NY: Workman). The Kammavāca largely fits this definition. Scholars have long questioned the limitations


**Figure 1. Ivory Kammavāca folio, Yangon University Library. Photo by author.**

jewel in that last royal city, another book circulated power from royal centres into far-flung regions of the empire. This other text, the Kammavāca, coursed through Burma more robustly than any other in this period and throughout the duration of the dynasty.

Extant Konbaung Burmese Kammavāca manuscripts reveal a rich range of visual and material presentations. The most rare feature precious substances, such as ivory and pearl, as well as a range of illustration types, scripts, and formatting that testify to a varied aesthetic vocabulary. With their multiple influences from the different regions that the Konbaung conquered, the manuscripts speak to the multi-ethnic reality of the Konbaung empire.[19]

An extraordinary Kammavāca thought to be rather old is an ivory manuscript held in Yangon University Library (fig. 1). This manuscript is striking for the thin ivory plates pasted to pages of lacquered palm leaf, each painted with four lines of a special script known as tamarind-seed script (B. *magyi-zi*), a squarish and thick writing system that is rarely used in the Konbaung period and later, except for on Kammavāca manuscripts. This ivory manuscript is flanked with small margins featuring a lacquered gold and red cinnabar design resembling monastic ceremonial fans. There is no date inscribed on the folios, but the Library's curator has estimated that they were created sometime between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. My research suggests that this Yangon University Library ivory Kammavāca cannot be reliably dated to the seventeenth century. In fact we do not have any strong evidence of this type of Kammavāca manuscript from before the eighteenth century.[20]

of this definition of the book. See for example, D.F. McKenzie, *Bibliography and the sociology of texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 13.

19 The notion of ethnicity is not a fixed category, but rather changing and permeable. See for example, Jane M. Ferguson, 'Who's counting? Ethnicity, belonging, and the national census in Burma/Myanmar', *Bijdragen tot de taal-, land- en volkenkunde* 171, 1 (2015): 1–28.

20 Singer has suggested that Burma's oldest dated ornamented manuscript, a *Pañcanipāt aṅguttuir aṭṭhakathā* from 1683, features a title page adorned in Kammavāca style. Singer, 'Kammavaca texts', p. 99. But, as Lammerts writes, 'we should be cautious about attributing a Kammavāca 'style' to the 17th century, as few (if any other) securely-dated decorated manuscripts from this era survive, and thus it is impossible to know whether Kammavāca comprised a model for manuscripts ornamented in this way'. Lammerts, 'Buddhism and written law', p. 215.

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**Figure 2. Ivory Kammavāca folio (Or. 12010h, f.1r). Photo courtesy of the British Library.**

The British Library holds a similar Kammavāca folio (fig. 2) that also features gleaming, translucent ivory folios with four lines of tamarind-seed script which it dates to the nineteenth century, although there is no donative record on the manuscript confirming this dating.[21]

While these rare ivory Kammavācas are among the most precious of the extant folios, pride of place belongs to another Kammavāca, made with mother-of-pearl. Folios of this manuscript are held in the British Library, the Royal Asiatic Society, and the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin. Each institution holds one folio and dates it to the eighteenth century.[22] The finely carved, iridescent pearl forms not only the four lines of tamarind-seed script occupying the centre third of the folio, but also the designs in the large margins. Intricate flame-like shapes blaze out into the margins of the British Library folio. The pearl figures on the Chester Beatty Library folio form four stupas, a sprinkling of flowers, and two fan-like designs (fig. 3).

The mother-of-pearl designs are placed against a dark purple-black cloth that forms a dramatic background for the shimmering pearl and may have come from a garment worn by royalty or a monk. The artist or artists who crafted this manuscript first lacquered the cloth, and while the lacquer was setting, they inlaid the carved pearl characters and design elements. Noel F. Singer suggests that the flame motif suggests that this rare manuscript is the result of Thai artists who visited the Burmese kingdom.[23] This suggestion is persuasive, although the hypothesised Thai craftsmen were just as likely to be captives of, rather than visitors to, the Konbaung realm, taken during one of the Burmese–Siamese military conflicts, such as the siege of Ayutthaya during the Burmese-Siamese War of 1765–67.[24] A Thai imprint on what became a predominantly Burmese tradition of sponsoring highly ornamented

21 Examined by the author on 7 June 2018.
22 Isaacs and Blurton, *Visions from the Golden Land*, p. 138.
23 Singer, 'Kammavaca texts'. Isaacs and Blurton, *Visions from the Golden Land*, p. 15, also connects Burmese warfare and Thai artisans, although this catalogue does not offer a full elaboration of this connection.
24 For more on slave gathering in the region, see Bryce Beemer, 'The creole city in Mainland Southeast Asia: Slave gathering warfare and cultural exchange in Burma, Thailand and Manipur, 18th–19th C' (PhD diss., University of Hawai'i, 2013).

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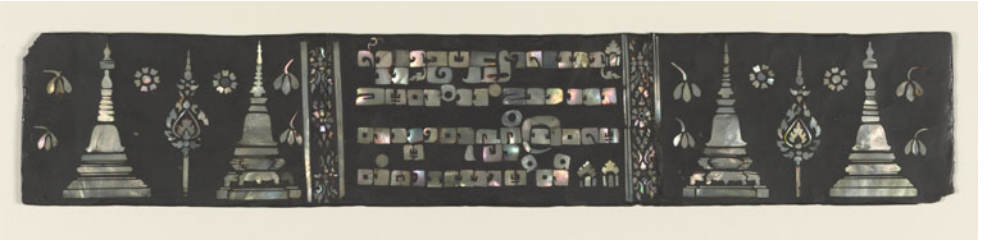

**Figure 3. Mother-of-pearl Kammavāca folio, held in the Chester Beatty Library (CBL Bu 1248.5) © The Trustees of the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin.**

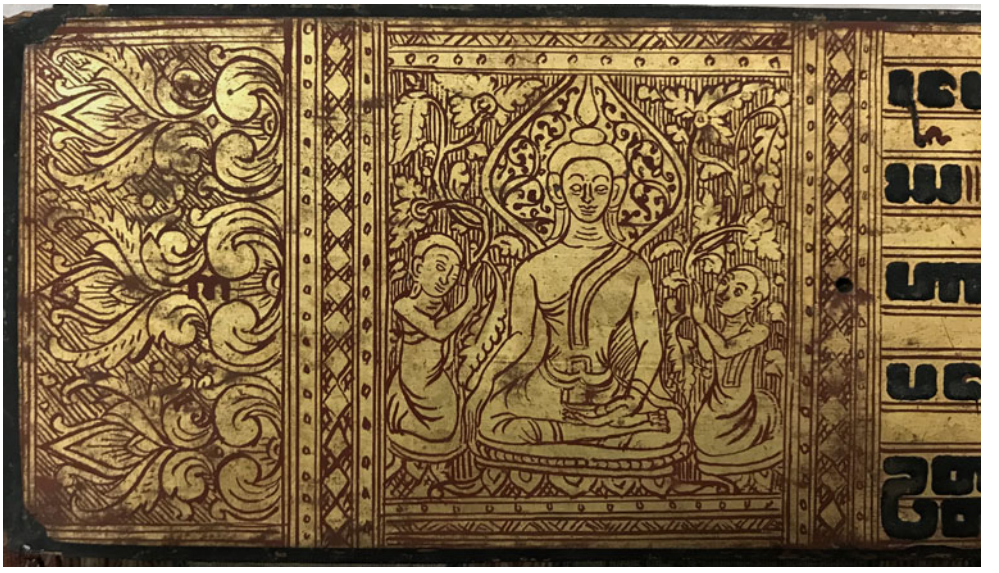

**Figure 4. Detail of the 1792 Kammavāca held in the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland (RAS Burmese 86). Photo by author.**

Kammavācas presses us to think about the relationships between artistic practices, Buddhist rituals, and military operations. Whether collaborative and consensual or fraught and violent, these relationships remind us that these religious expressions always had a political dimension.

One manuscript that bears an exact eighteenth-century date is a gilded, lacquered, five-lined, tamarind-script Kammavāca commissioned in the Burmese year 1152, or 1792 CE (fig. 4), and held in the Royal Asiatic Society collection.[25] This Kammavāca features the Buddha in the *bhūmisparś-mudrā,* his most common gesture in Burma. The Buddha is flanked by his disciples Sāriputta and Moggallāna, who

25 Examined by the author on 8 June 2108. The folio with the Buddha illustrations was previously published in Singer, 'Kammavaca texts', p. 100.

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kneel and hold up their hands together in an *añjali-mudrā*. These disciples are on lotus thrones that complement the Buddha's, and all of the space encompassing this noble triad is sumptuously illustrated with vibrant leaves. Another illustrated folio from this manuscript features a fire-breathing *chinthe*, a special guardian lion depicted protecting Buddha imagery and shrines. The *chinthe* showcased in this Kammavāca is in an octagonal frame and next to a marginal panel featuring three fine-feathered birds.[26] This richly populated Kammavāca was created during the reign of King Bodawpaya (r. 1782–1819), the Konbaung monarch who made his mark on the religious-political order of the dynasty by carrying out the Sudhammā Reformation, a campaign to purify the sangha that involved the exile of problematic monks and the forced disrobing of independent communities of monks who were then re-ordained into a single monastic institution under a newly centralised ordination procedure.[27]

The 1792 Kammavāca's scene of the Buddha in the *bhūmisparś-mudrā* with Sāriputta and Moggallāna kneeling with their hands in the *añjali-mudrā* resembles a folio from an early nineteenth-century Kammavāca published in Wladimir Zwalf's *Buddhism: Art and Faith*.[28] The fine rectangular golden and cinnabar painting of these figures shows the decorated hems of their monastic robes and the wonderful singular lotus blossoms that serve as small thrones for the disciples. The chipped edges of the folio reveal the palm leaf underneath, showing that this manuscript was not made with sections of a monastic robe or royal garment. Zwalf dates this folio to the early nineteenth-century, perhaps because of the Buddha motif, and we can see that the red-and-gold ornamentation and the six lines of tamarind-seed script with interlinear floral illustrations closely resemble the standard nineteenth-century Kammavāca we will examine in the following section.

A third Kammavāca manuscript showcasing the Buddha is a striking golden and black Kammavāca crafted before 1826 that features the rounded Burmese script instead of the square tamarind-seed script (fig. 5).[29] The Buddha is alone here, as he is said to have been on the night of his enlightenment. His right hand reaches down, calling on the earth to witness his extraordinary realisation. Large leaf-like illustrations fill the top corners, perhaps suggesting the Bodhi tree that hosted this

26 For a well-preserved example of an earlier *chinthe*, see the 1628 bronze Buddha sculpture protected by four *chinthes* in Fraser-Lu and Stadtner, *Buddhist art of Myanmar*, p. 156. An important related majestic creature in Burma is the *galon* or *garuda*, a kind of half-man, half-raptor. As Maitrii Aung-Thwin has shown, during the British period, the *galon* emerged as a representation of the Burmese peasantry's desires to overthrow the British and restore the monarchy. Aung-Thwin's work details how followers of the rebel leader Saya San (who became known as the *Galon King*) would tattoo themselves with the *galon* symbol. This protective practice of marking the fighters' bodies with this image associated with Burmese royalty mirrors the practice this article analyses of marking Kammavāca manuscripts with powerful, regal illustrations. Maitrii Aung-Thwin, *The return of the Galon King: History, law, and rebellion in colonial Burma* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2011).

27 As Patrick Pranke's study of monastic accounts of the Sudhammā Reformation shows, what was at stake in this conflict between King Bodawpaya's and the Burmese sangha were perceptions of legitimacy, the role of the sangha to bring salvation to the world, and the prerogatives of the relationship between the sangha and the state. Patrick Pranke, '"Bodawpaya's madness": Monastic accounts of King Bodawpaya's conflict with the Burmese sangha', *Journal of Burma Studies* 12, 1 (2008): 1–28.

28 Wladimir Zwalf, *Buddhism: Art and faith* (New York: Macmillan, 1985), pp. 167, 72.

29 This folio was published in Isaacs and Blurton, *Visions from the Golden Land*, p. 140.

**Figure 5. Pre-1826 Kammavāca folio. © British Library Board (Add. 15290, f.1v). Photo courtesy of the British Library.**

amazing event. And prominent halos and golden flames encircle him, celebrating the brilliance of the newly awakened one. Six leaves of this manuscript survive in the British Library, and we know that they must have been crafted before 1826 because they were acquired by Captain Frederic Marryat during his participation in First Anglo-Burmese War.

The Asian Art Museum in San Francisco holds another Kammavāca that features images of the Buddha, but this piece does not show the enlightened Buddha; rather, it features a scene of Prince Siddhartha renouncing his life in the palace to become an ascetic. Forrest McGill provides an excellent analysis of the illustrations on this rare manuscript, which is dated to the first half of the nineteenth century. A similar scene is painted on the first and last leaves of the British Library Kammavāca Or. 13896. Most relevant for the analysis of this article is the royal dress and sword donned by Prince Siddhartha, which resemble the costuming and weaponry on the guardian figures examined in the following section. The sword in this Siddhartha Kammavāca is carried by the prince as part of his royal apparel and becomes important when he cuts off his hair, the gesture most symbolic of his and his disciples' monastic renunciation of worldly life. This scene would obviously resonate for the community performing ordination rituals in nineteenth-century Burma, reminding them that the men shaving their heads and taking vows were following in the Buddha's footsteps.

This manuscript, then, suggests an alternative meaning to swords found in other manuscripts: the swords held by the guardian figures might have been meant for the tonsure of those being ordained in the Kammavāca rituals. In other words, perhaps we should see them as tools rather than weapons, as ritual devices rather than displays of courtly power. But I think that to make this distinction between religion and politics, to put Kammavāca manuscripts into a sacred sphere separate from the messy, mundane matters of the court, is to miss the opportunity Kammavāca offer us to glimpse how the religious and the royal were so entwined in this period.

Five other manuscripts add to this varied repertoire which I will show contrasts with the standard, sword-bearing manuscript that seems to have been more mass-produced in the later Konbaung period. Imprinted on these manuscripts are the variegated marks of early Konbaung expansion and adoption of the artistic and religious practices of the people it conquered. In addition, the motifs on these manuscripts emphasise the sacred nature of the monastic rituals scripted in the Kammavācas. Floral and geometric motifs invoke the lay practices of making offerings to renunciants and creating ornamented spaces honouring the Buddha and his path. I will show that the reverent tone of these early Kammavācas clashes starkly with the martial tenor of the standardised Kammavācas.

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A silver Kammavāca that Singer writes comes from the early eighteenth century—a very early date for this manuscript tradition—has cover boards that feature ringed blossoms.[30] Singer writes that the use of silver and of the rounded Burmese script on this manuscript suggests Mon influence.[31] It is possible that this tradition began among the Mon, but then was taken over by the Burmese at the outset of the Konbaung dynasty, an example of the Konbaung's eagerness to include local expressions in an effort to create a unified kingdom. Unfortunately, we do not have enough extant Kammavāca with Mon influence to further support this hypothesis of a Mon origin to this manuscript tradition.

Another example of an early Kammavāca with blooming, circular illustrations that also uses the round, Burmese script, is an ivory Kammavāca published by Pratapaditya Pal and Julia Meech-Pekarik in *Buddhist Book Illuminations* and dated to sometime between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[32] *Buddhist Book Illuminations* includes an additional ivory Kammavāca with encircled flowers, although this example is written in tamarind-seed script.[33] This design approach of featuring flowers tightly framed in distinct geometric shapes is also seen on two British Library Kammavāca dated to the eighteenth century, both of which play with octagonal shapes resembling the *chinthe* scene discussed above on the 1792 Kammavāca. These are an ivory Kammavāca (fig. 6) that uses nested octagons to

**Figure 6. Ivory British Library Kammavāca detail (Or. 12010h, f.1r). Photo courtesy of the British Library.**

30 Singer, 'Kammavaca texts', p. 100.

31 Another early 19th-century Kammavāca that incorporates silver is held in the Harvard Art Museum. This manuscript features silver folios that also have golden gilded margins on which illustrations of nats have been painted. Unlike the silver manuscript considered above, this manuscript has six lines of tamarind-seed script, not the rounded Burmese script. It is also worth noting that the nats in this manuscript resemble the nats of the late Konbaung style with their royal costume and headdress, but they do not carry any weapons. Instead they hold their hands together in *anjali*. Harvard Art Museums/Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Gift of Philip Hofer, object no, 1984.421, 19th century; ibid.

32 Pratapaditya Pal and Julia Meech-Pekarik, *Buddhist book illuminations* (New York: Ravi Kumar, 1988), pp. 190–91.

33 Ibid., p. 192.

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**Figure 7. British Library Kammavāca with Octagons, Add. 15289, F.1, 18th century. British Library.**

showcase an extraordinary fanned flower and a gilded and lacquered palm-leaf manuscript whose octagonal designs contains flowers similar to those seen encircled above (fig. 7).

The floral imagery on Kammavāca evokes the gesture of generosity embodied by the manuscripts themselves. These manuscripts were special offerings that lay people made to the Buddhist order, a more extravagant (and expensive) version of the simple flower donations commonly made to Buddhist images. To offer something beautiful is to show reverence toward and support of the three jewels of Buddhism. These flower paintings complement the paintings of the Buddha and his disciples, which similarly celebrate the noble act of renouncing lay life. The centrality of devotional images on these manuscripts throws into stark relief what we see in the standardised manuscripts to which I now turn.

### Standardised Konbaung Kammavāca

Keeping in mind the artistic range and ornamental focus of the Kammavāca we have considered, let us now examine a sample set of the standardised Kammavāca that demonstrates their royal and martial character. From the mid-nineteenth century onward, it seems that Kammavācas were less likely to be rendered in lustrous pearl or gleaming ivory and rarely had margins and cover boards featuring the Buddha calling the earth to witness his enlightenment. Instead, we discover a Kammavāca that was seemingly mass-produced, with each manuscript featuring folios of lacquered, gilded palm leaf or cloth with red paint, six lines of tamarind-seed script per page, and distinctive guardian figures fortifying folios and covers. Likely because of their mass-produced look, these Kammavācas are less common in museum exhibitions. The majority of manuscripts I will focus on are unpublished, although I should note that some of them are held in elite institutions like major university and national

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libraries, including the National Library of Myanmar in Yangon and the British Library. While there are dozens of very similar manuscripts held in other collections, I focus on examples from the American Baptist Historical Society, Yale University, British Library, and the National Library of Myanmar manuscripts because those are the artefacts I have been able to examine most carefully in person and about which I have been able to attain the most acquisition information.

I will use these examples to hypothesise that this standardised Kammavāca is a later development of the Konbaung manuscript tradition, and I will suggest that its spirit lords and weapon imagery came to dominate this prized manuscript tradition in the period between the Second Anglo-Burmese War of 1852 and the collapse of the last Buddhist kingdom in 1885. I will venture further that this standardised manuscript tradition comes specifically from Mandalay, the royal city built by King Mindon in 1857. And I will argue that the newly militarised visual programme expresses a larger anxiety about protecting Buddhism and Burma at the end of its last kingdom.

The three decades before the Third, and final, Anglo-Burmese War of 1885 saw an insurgence of royal support for Buddhist institutions as well as a heightened sense of political danger. This danger was felt in three concentric ways: 1) Within the Mandalay royal court itself, there was concern over who would succeed King Mindon since he had over seventy legitimate heirs and no set plan for passing on the crown;[34] 2) Within the independent kingdom, there were various minority groups who were at odds with the Bamar majority and who were seeking autonomy through strategic forms of alliance with the British or distance from both the Burmese and the British; and 3) On the borders, the British were moving into position to take over the last remaining independent domain of the Konbaung kingdom. In each of these nested realms, the Burmese authorities were concerned about losing power. The most visible response to this anxiety was King Mindon's lavish material support of Buddhism. As Myo Mint demonstrates in *Confronting Colonialism: King Mindon's Strategy for Defending Independence 1853–1878*, a key part of Mindon's campaign to fend off the British was to stage a lavish Buddhist revival. This revival included the restoration of pagodas throughout the country (including parts of the country controlled by the British, such as Rangoon), substantial donations to monasteries, and the construction of new shrines and institutions. The Burmese landscape was dramatically transformed through glittering new golden pagoda spires, bamboo-scaffolded monasteries, and massive Buddha statues wearing fresh paint and new robes. This renovated Buddhist horizon expressed to all who gazed upon it that the Burmese were the righteous defenders of a vibrant, independent Buddhist realm.[35]

King Mindon's Buddhist revival inlaid political concerns within religious ones and cultivated a confidence in Burmese power at the same time as it revealed an anxiety about its surrender. As Alicia Turner and Erik Braun have shown, in the second half of the nineteenth century, there was a pervasive sense among the Buddhist peoples of Burma that when the kingdom fell, the *sāsana* (the Buddha's dispensation) too

34 See also Alexandra Kaloyanides, 'Buddhist teak and British rifles: Religious economics in Burma's last kingdom', *Journal of Burma Studies* 24, 1 (2020): 1–36.

35 See Myo Myint, *Confronting colonialism: King Mindon's strategy for defending independence 1853–1878* (Yangon: Ministry of Religious Affairs, 2012), pp. 190–241.

would fall.[36] The Burmese worried that without a devout king to sponsor the monastic order, textual traditions, ritual practices, and objects of veneration crucial for the continuation of the Buddhist tradition, the end of Buddhism would soon be upon them. In the Burmese reading of canonical texts and commentaries, the Buddha foretold that the *sāsana* would last 5,000 years in this world at most, but could become extinct far sooner. Throughout Burmese Buddhist history there have been periods of concern about the acceleration of these end times, but in the second half of the nineteenth century, when Burma was falling, piece by piece, into the hands of the British, the Buddhist apocalypse seemed even more imminent.

In contrast to the threatened Buddhist king at the centre of the Burmese kingdom, the British were commonly seen as a people without noble religious feelings or reverence. For example, in the *Kon-baung-zet Maha Ya-zawin-daw-gyi,* the Burmese chronicle account of the 1826 Treaty of Yandabo that ended the First Anglo-Burmese War, the king's ministers explain that the British are 'a people who show no respect for our faith and are devoid of reverence and religious feelings'.[37] Thus, in their military and political negotiations, the Burmese felt compelled to establish that the British did not respect the Buddha, his teachings, or his community. The 'white foreigners', as they were often called, were marked as a people who did not support Buddhism and were therefore categorically different from the other people that the Burmese had recently come into conflict with, such as the Thai and the Mon mentioned above. Whereas the kingdom's earlier warfare was with other communities committed to the *sāsana* and included an absorption of their people and forms of their Buddhist material culture, the wars with the non-Buddhist British were different. The Anglo-Burmese wars were a matter of defending Buddhism itself. It seems that in the religious imagination reflected in and shaped by the Kammavāca tradition, Buddhist symbols, objects, and rituals had effectively brought into the fold neighbouring Buddhist regions. But when it came to clashes with a non-Buddhist people, those glimmering ivory, gold, and silver manuscripts with their sublime scenes of the Buddha's enlightenment and floral offerings would no longer work to empower Burmese kings. This new clash of empires called for weapons.

One well-preserved Kammavāca that displays the tradition's turn to weapons in the Anglo-Burmese War period was taken from the chest of the last Burmese king, Thibaw (r. 1878–85) by the American Baptist missionary Marilla Baker Ingalls. The archives of the American Baptist Historical Society now house it with a note that explains that Ingalls took the manuscript 'by permission of the Court Minister', which seems somewhat suspicious given how much looting there was of Thibaw's palace after the British defeat in the Third Anglo-Burmese War.[38] Still, archival records of Ingalls' long and extraordinary career working as a solitary missionary

36 Alicia Marie Turner, *Saving Buddhism: The impermanence of religion in colonial Burma* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014); Erik Braun, *The birth of insight: Meditation, modern Buddhism, and the Burmese monk Ledi Sayadaw* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

37 Anna Allott, *The end of the First Anglo-Burmese War: The Burmese chronicle account of how the 1826 Treaty of Yandabo was negotiated* (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press, 1994), pp. 6–8.

38 The American Baptist Historical Society Thibaw Kammavāca was examined by the author on 19 June 2014 with the help of archivist Jan Ballard. For more on the looting of Thibaw's palace, see Terence R. Blackburn, *The British humiliation of Burma* (Bangkok: Orchid, 2000).

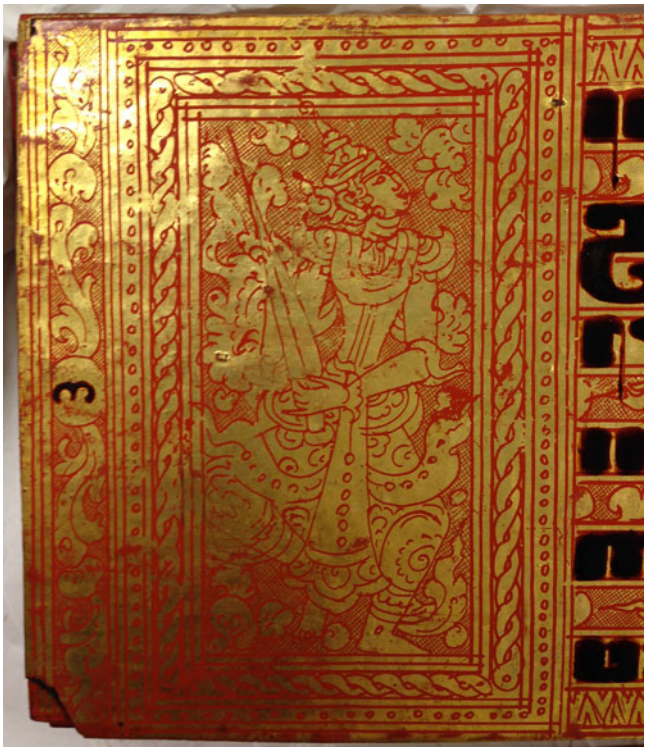

**Figure 8. American Baptist Historical Society Kammavāca detail. Photo by author.**

in a Burmese community in Thonze describe cordial visits Ingalls made to various royalty in Mandalay, so it is possible that she was on good enough terms to allow her to obtain this manuscript with official Burmese royal permission before Thibaw was deposed.[39] If this were the case, Thibaw and his ministers may have seen some advantage in circulating an impressive Buddhist object out into Western communities as something that could concretely communicate the power of Burmese Buddhist traditions. On the American Baptist Historical Society manuscript this power appears in the form of two types of guardian figures: one who wears a tapered head piece, large shoulder accents, and billowing pants (fig. 8); and another winged creature with similar clothing, but whose headpiece is turban-like (fig. 9). Both figures carry swords.[40]

39 Alexandra Kaloyanides, '"Show us your god": Marilla Baker Ingalls and the power of religious objects in nineteenth-century Burma', *Religions* 7, 7 (2016): 1–19.

40 Ingalls is also the author of an early English-language description of Burma's book practices, including the maintenance of Kammavācas. In a vignette titled 'A morning visit to a monastery, or kyoung', Ingalls writes that 'The sacred books were written in a Pali (sometimes written Bali) character; the letters square and angular. The books were composed of the Palmyra leaf covered with gold and black varnished letters, or painted black and lettered with gold. These were kept together by a string, and then placed between two boards richly covered with figures in gold.' This description begins a longer section detailing a range of the book types and practices she encountered at this monastery, including common palm-leaf manuscripts with Burmese script, *parabeik* account books, and practice slates. Ingalls listens to a star

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**Figure 9. American Baptist Historical Society Kammavāca detail. Photo by author.**

A similar turbaned, sword-wielding figure appears on the cover boards of one of the two Kammavācas housed in the storage facility for the Yale University Art Gallery (fig. 10).[41] The cover boards also feature painted birds—like those in the British Library's ivory Kammavāca with the octagonal designs—as well as winged, weaponless spirit lords. The second Yale Kammavāca also employs red and gold paint and has six-lined pages. It is ornamented with similarly costumed figures—visual features further illustrating how these manuscripts all fit a standardised aesthetic programme (fig. 11).[42]

One final example of this standard late-Konbaung era manuscript from a Western collection comes from the British Library and features a standing guardian figure in royal clothing, two celestial wings, and a large sword whose pointed tip breaks through the painting's border to nearly touch the shiny, lacquered text

student read loudly for her and then tells the novices and monks that in America, the schoolrooms are, by contrast, very quiet. Before leaving, Ingalls distributed Protestant tracts to a few of the students and one of the old priests. Marilla Baker Ingalls, *Ocean sketches of life in Burmah* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1857), p. 149.

41 Examined by the author on 14 Mar. 2012.

42 Examined by the author on 14 Mar. 2012.

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**Figure 10. Yale University Art Gallery Kammavāca detail (manuscript 2007.145.15). Photograph courtesy of Yale University Art Gallery.**

(fig. 12).[43] This manuscript was donated in 1895 and clearly resembles the other Kammavāca considered in this section with its lacquered and gilt palm leaf folios, each with six lines of tamarind-seed script per page. Comparing this manuscript to those held at Yale University and the American Baptist Historical Society, we can clearly see that all of these late nineteenth-century ritual objects are following a standardised material and visual programme.

Myanmar's state and national libraries and museums also feature Kammavāca of this standardised late Konbaung-style. The Mon State National Museum and Library, for example, showcases an encased collection of folios from at least four Kammavāca manuscripts (fig. 13), and the Kayin State Cultural Museum displays a very similar collection. The majority of folios in both of these state collections are of this late Konbaung style, with royally costumed guardian figures. It is worth noting that both of these collections belong to museums in states with large non-Bamar populations showing that minority communities on the periphery of Bamar centres of power came into possession of these objects and showcase them in their nationalised

43 Examined by the author on 7 June 2018.

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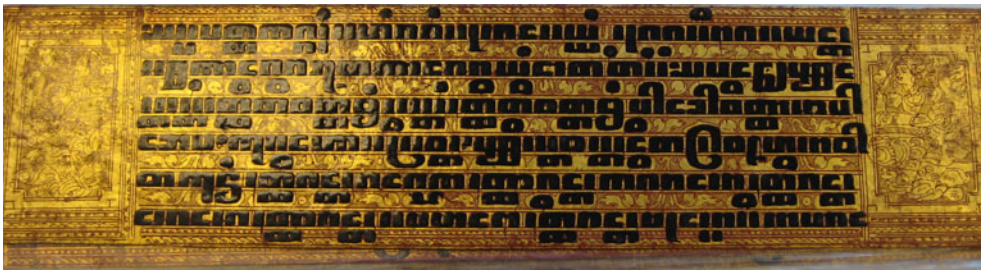

**Figure 11. Yale University Art Gallery Kammavāca folio (manuscript 2010.93.1). Photo courtesy of Yale University Art Gallery.**

**Figure 12. British Library Kammavāca detail (Or. 4949). Photo by author.**

museums. The most informative Kammavāca collection I examined in Myanmar was that held in the National Library of Myanmar. I was granted access only to two Kammavāca of this style, although the Library's director, Daw Mya Oo, said there are three others like it. The guardian figures on the National Library of Myanmar manuscripts resemble the elaborately costumed figures above, and one type holds a

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**Figure 13. Mon State National Museum and Library Kammavācas. Photo by author.**

sword (fig. 14).[44] These Kammavāca do not have dedicatory text recording their provenance, but Daw Mya Oo said they came from Mandalay Palace. Perhaps this standardised style was established after King Mindon moved the Kobanung court to Mandalay in 1857.

Than Htun, a specialist in Burmese lacquer, explains that King Mindon's Mandalay 'provided quarters for diverse craftsmen including the lacquer artists of Yundan, 79th Street', which ran along the moat of King Mindon's palace. According to Than Htun, these craftsmen produced great quantities of lacquered Kammavāca folios and boxes, though they did not seem to produce much in the way of other fine lacquer works. Than Htun suggests that Mandalay lacquer craftsmen did not want to compete with the fine lacquerware that came out of Bagan, the top lacquer producer of the time. Than Htun adds that King Mindon sponsored Mandalay's lacquer industry and its primary product, Kammavācas, 'by donating many of them to thousands of monasteries across Myanmar'.[45] It is quite possible, then, that the Konbaung manuscripts considered in this section come from the Mandalay-lacquer Kammavācas that King Mindon distributed throughout the country. The question this raises, then, is: Why did the Kammavāca that King Mindon sent out from the centre of power to its peripheries feature weaponised spirit lords instead of floral arrangements or Buddha scenes? Who are these particular figures and how should we understand their rise to prominence on the kingdom's most beautiful mass-produced book?

The guardian figures that take over late-Konbaung Kammavāca could be devas of a more general order or they could be the more specific *nats,* spirit lords closely

44 Examined by the author on 29 Aug. 2013.
45 Than Htun, *Lacquerware journeys*, p. 136.

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**Figure 14. National Library of Myanmar Kammavāca folio. Photo by author.**

connected to the protection of Burma and the history of monarchies in the country. As Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière has shown, the foundation myth of Burma's pantheon of thirty-seven nats asserts that the cult of these nats began with the first Burmese king to reign over the Irrawaddy River Valley, King Anawratha (r. 1044–77). According to this myth, the local population refused to do away with their local religious practices and adopt an orthodox form of Buddhism, so King Anawratha installed thirty-six statues representing local religious devotions as well as a statue of the king of the gods, Thi'dja (the Burmese version of the Indian god Indra) around his newly constructed royal pagoda. Since then, Burmese kings have been thought of as actively harnessing the power of these local spirits and subordinating them under Burmese Buddhist institutions. Burmese legends about the nats feature stories of their human lives when they were threats or rivals to kings and, as a result, suffered a horrible death. The violence of their demise keeps them from the standard reincarnation process and forces them to haunt the earth. Kings would appease these spirits by elevating their status to that of a nat, which was achieved through rituals involving sculpting a statue of the spirit and installing it in a new temple. This was akin to a royal coronation in which the spirit would receive a royal title, a palace temple, and a dominion. Burmese kings would then revise the official list of the nats they kept to accommodate newly crowned spirits, but they seem to have kept the total number of nats in the pantheon at thirty-seven.[46]

46 Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière, 'The Burmese nats: Between sovereignty and autochthony', *Diogenes* 44, 174 (1996): 45–60.

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Brac de la Perrière writes that the strength of Burmese royal power 'lay in the concentrated ritual activity—as much centred on Buddhism as on the cult of the nats—in regions subservient to the king. The *nats* thus seem not only to be tied to but are an actual expression of the process of Burmese unification.'[47] Thus the nats were seen as powerful because of the material ways they influenced local communities and because of the ways they consolidated and extended Burmese political power. Furthermore, she argues that scholarship on Burma should take care to consider the role nats have played in Burmese history and lived religion rather than give excessive attention to the place of Theravada Buddhism in the country.[48]

This work of using religious material culture to consolidate and extend Burmese political power was particularly important during the Konbaung dynasty when competing groups—such as the Thai and Mon previously discussed as well others such as the Shan and Karen—tried to assert their independence of Burmese rule. The Burmese responded to these internal and bordering threats by mobilising local spirits along with Theravada ritual practices. This was part of a well-established tradition in the region in which kings modelled themselves after classical South Asian and Southeast Asian emperors who used royal patronage of Buddhist institutions, rituals, and objects to amalgamate territorial power of the court. The power of Burmese authority was regularly renewed by court-ordered reforms of the monastic hierarchy. The Konbaung lineage elaborated on this tradition, actively defining Theravada orthodoxy as Bamar and promoting Burmese communities over neighbouring groups. In her study of modern Buddhism in Myanmar, Juliane Schober writes about how 'ethnic vassals were mobilised through the ritual theatre of the court and through the construction of religious monuments and works of royal merit'.[49] The commissioning of Kammavāca texts likely became one such merit-making, minority-absorbing activity, with the Burmese court extending its influence by inserting itself into powerful Buddhist ritual objects put to work throughout the realm. Furthermore, the Konbaung kings did not limit their political-religious arsenal to orthodox Buddhist tools. These manuscripts suggest that by the end of the dynasty they grew increasingly dependent on the power of local spirits.

The spirits' rise to prominence on Burma's prized Kammavāca tells of a larger effort of this lineage of kings to use the power of books to subsume religious ritual activity under Burmese royal aegis. As a weakening country at war with the British, the Burmese court must have found it strategic to tighten the bonds between their political institutions and religious materials and beings. Of course, this kind of political-religious partnership has a long and storied history in the larger Buddhist world. Examining this specific Konbaung manuscript tradition allows us to study closely one example of that alliance in its particular Burmese, ritual, and material forms.

While court practices carried a lot of weight, we should also keep in mind that monks with a range of relationships to royalty also advocated for the commissioning

47 Ibid., p. 49.

48 See Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière, 'An overview of the field of religion in Burmese Studies', *Asian Ethnology* 68, 2 (2009): 186. See also Alexandra Kaloyanides, '"Intercultural mimesis", empire, and spirits', *Journal of Global Buddhism* 22, 1 (2021): 125–31.

49 Schober, *Modern Buddhist conjunctures in Myanmar*, p. 16.

and circulation of Kammavāca. In one piece of evidence of monastic attitudes toward these special manuscripts' material and visual features, Ledi Sayadaw, the famous Burmese founder of the modern insight meditation movement, advised the ritual specialists who recited Kammavāca texts to use highly adorned versions. As Erik Braun writes in his study of Ledi Sayadaw and the insight movement, this prominent Burmese Buddhist figure understood that 'the sight of such aesthetically impressive dhamma texts would scare away many troubling spirits before one had even begun to read'.[50] For Ledi Sayadaw, the richly ornamented and illustrated Kammavācas were important for purifying the ritual spaces in which the texts were recited. Perhaps for King Mindon and other Konbaung court figures, the spirit lords on impressively adorned Kammavāca were meant to scare away troubling beings both invisible and visible.

I have argued here that Kammavāca design became royally branded and militarised in the late Konbaung period and have suggested that this was part of the dynasty's campaigns to use spirits and Buddhist rituals to consolidate its power within the realm and defend itself from the British. By considering dozens of Kammavāca manuscripts from Burmese and international collections, I have shown how this royal stamp on Burma's most precious manuscript was likely part of a larger effort of Konbaung kings to use Buddhist ritual networks and material culture practices to politically unite a country with competing ethnic groups and threatened borders.[51] At the end of the dynasty, when Konbaung kings were fighting for their shrinking independence out of the royal city of Mandalay, the Kammavāca recruited local spirits with ritual ties to the dynasty. When flowers no longer worked, they took up swords.

50 Braun, *The birth of insight*, p. 83.

51 Material culture has played an important role in marking distinct groups and forging political alliances in related Southeast Asian contexts. For example, Susan Conway has shown how female court dress displayed the identities of a princess' homeland and signalled the extensive influence of the prince she was married to. Conway considers marital alliances in Lan Na, the Shan States, and Siam by focusing on the textiles princesses wore in intermarriages among royalty in valley and hill regions. Susan Conway, 'Power dressing: Female court dress and marital alliances in Lan Na, the Shan States and Siam', *Orientations* 32, 4 (2001): 42–9.