

The Burmese road to Israeli-style cooperative settlements: The Namsang project, 1956–63

Magdalena Kozłowska and Michał Lubina

This article deals with the Namsang project in Burma, run in the late 1950s and early 1960s to engage demobilised soldiers in establishing a series of cooperative villages modelled on Israeli settlements with Israeli technical and other assistance. The article explores the Burmese modernisation project in the context of the unification of the country and the birth of the Non-Aligned Movement. In its examination of the Namsang project, this article offers a microscopic view of the translation of planning practices to other contexts in general, but also asks some more specific questions, such as how Burmese and Israeli national identity, memory, and history defined the project agenda, what the planners' ambitions were, and why the project failed.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the ethnically diverse region of Namsang (Nansang) in southern Shan State, Burma (Myanmar), was chosen as the location for a 'model settlement'. The project was intended as a symbol of Burma's modernisation. The aim of the project was to engage demobilised soldiers in establishing a series of cooperative villages modelled on Israeli *moshavim* — cooperative agricultural communities based on the principles of private landownership, avoidance of hired labour, and communal marketing; unlike in the *kibbutz*, members of the *moshav* preserve a relatively large degree of economic autonomy.

In its examination of the Namsang project, this article offers a microscopic view of the translation of planning practices to other contexts in general, but also asks some more specific questions, such as how Burmese and Israeli national identity, memory, and history defined the project agenda, what the planners' goals were, and why the project failed. It shows the impact of the intellectually eclectic Buddhist socialist ways of thinking of the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL) elites that were so characteristic of 1950s Burma. It is precisely this 'worldly nirvana' intellectual tradition of mixing Buddhism with socialism that explains the rationale behind developmental projects such as Namsang.

The article explores the Burmese modernisation project in the context of the unification of the country and the birth of the Non-Aligned Movement. Against the

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background of the intellectual atmosphere of the 1950s as well as other developmental projects of that era, it claims that Namsang — just like other projects — was conceived by the Burmese as a talismanic, almost miraculous, answer to their developmental conundrums, that is, how to become a modern, non-Western developed nation; socialist, but non-Soviet. Using personal accounts, press coverage, and archival documents, it investigates the planning history of the Namsang project from both the Burmese and the Israeli angles. This micro case study exemplifies why the ‘third way’, neither Western nor Soviet, failed to bring about substantial development for this Global Southern country.

Knowledge transfer

A closer look at Southeast Asia in the 1950s challenges popular opinion on the history of globalisation. It was at this time that the transfer of knowledge and expertise ceased to depend on the colonial powers and the West in general, and multiple and varied centres of knowledge production flourished. Planning historians have shown that the late 1940s to the mid-1970s was a period of transition. Newly independent states were seeking diverse partners and striving to strengthen their own planning capacities. These moves were supported by both international organisations (above all the United Nations) and a range of directed technical aid projects run by several countries.¹

The new lines of knowledge transfer ran not only along the centre–periphery axis (that is, transfer from the two superpowers of the day: the United States and the USSR), but also in various periphery–periphery directions. The most iconic facilitator of these new connections was the Greek planner Constantinos Doxiadis, who acted as a consultant on development projects in many countries including Ghana, India, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Pakistan, Syria, Sudan, and Venezuela.²

Such periphery–periphery transfers were also possible thanks to the ‘Bandung spirit’ of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), which had a clear message at its core. According to NAM, the economic underdevelopment caused by colonialism could be tackled with political instruments, and could thus be addressed by large-scale investment programmes. Likewise, political processes and investments were considered to be a means of bringing prosperity and attaining Western-style living standards while guaranteeing independence from the former colonial powers.³ This translated into policies promoting exchanges of experience and knowledge among the countries of the Global South (then called the Third World).⁴ Their leaders believed that not

1 Stephen V. Ward, ‘Transnational planners in a postcolonial world’, in *Crossing borders: International exchange and planning practices*, ed. Patsy Healy and Robert Upton (London: Routledge, 2010), p. 47.

2 Hashim Sarkis, ‘Dances with Margaret Mead: Planning Beirut since 1958’, in *Projecting Beirut: Episodes in the construction and reconstruction of a modern city*, ed. Peter G. Rowe and Hashim Sarkis (Munich: Prestel, 1998), pp. 87–201; Ray Bromley, ‘Towards global human settlements: Constantinos Doxiadis as entrepreneur, coalition-builder and visionary’, in *Urbanism — imported or exported: Native aspirations and foreign plans*, ed. Joe Nasr and Mercedes Volait (Chichester: Wiley, 2003), pp. 316–40.

3 Jurgen Dinkel, *The Non-Aligned Movement: Genesis, organization and politics (1927–1992)* (Leiden: Brill, 2018).

4 An example of this thinking in Burmese–Israeli relations can be seen in the statement made by David Ben-Gurion during his trip to Burma in 1961: ‘I have often asked myself what is this thing so special

only was there a third way of development, without the vices of capitalism and Soviet socialism, but there were also other centres of ideas and concepts than the United States and the USSR, and the exchange of ideas was possible on the basis of reciprocity, without neo-colonial exploitation.⁵ They believed that together they could make a difference. Today it is easy to dismiss this idealism out of hand — for the third way failed — but it is fair to say that it produced a partial non-US, non-Soviet form of globalisation, albeit a flawed one.

In studies on knowledge transfer, several researchers have pointed to the hidden neo-colonial dimension of this issue: that transfer of knowledge from Western centres to non-Western peripheries often unintentionally followed colonial patterns.⁶ Consequently, the results of the transfer process were mixed: some countries accepted this as an unavoidable price to pay, while other, more nationalistic states rejected it, either openly or covertly.⁷

After regaining their independence, the Burmese, who had experienced immense suffering during their devastating colonial experience and thus had a tradition of caution towards foreign influences,⁸ a wounded national pride, and high hopes for indigenous postcolonial success,⁹ were keen to avoid any colonial or neo-colonial dependency. Their neutral foreign policy was born out of a belief that abstaining from involvement would guarantee state security better than siding with either the United States or the Soviet Union.¹⁰ More important here, however, was the fact that the Burmese elites faced a developmental conundrum: they wanted to ‘capture modernity’, that is ‘to show that Burma could do a better job of being modern than the modern West’, yet they understood that their precolonial traditions were unsuited to postcolonial realities; there was ‘no clear blueprint in Burma’s recent past ... which could be used to create a modern Buddhist republic’, whereas to associate ‘too closely with the Soviet or American “blueprint” was to be captured by their

about our relationship with Burma (...) I believe that the main line of reply would refer to the intrinsic character of Burma–Israel relations; these have been centred from the first moment of their inception not on the ordinary field of politics and international affairs but on the fruitful fields of social, economic, cultural development to the betterment of man’s lot. The quality that has always struck me as the strongest tie between your leadership and our country is the common refusal to take nature as it is, to accept poverty and ignorance and disease as given and ordained and unchangeable, this resolve that it is man’s duty on earth to build and to develop and to change this country into a better one, richer one, one more enlightened, to eradicate poverty and unhappiness’. ‘Israel premier feted’, *The Nation* (Burma), 7 Dec. 1961, p. 1.

5 See, for example, ‘President Sukarno of Indonesia: Speech at the opening of the Bandung Conference’, 18 Apr. 1955; available at <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/1955sukarno-bandong.asp> (last accessed 12 Jan. 2020).

6 Michal Frenkel and Yehouda Shenhav, ‘From Americanization to colonization: The diffusion of productivity models revisited’, *Organization Studies* 24, 9 (2003): 1537–61.

7 Matthias Kipping, Lars Engwall and Behlül Üsdüken, ‘The transfer of management knowledge to peripheral countries’, *International Studies of Management & Organization* 38, 4 (2008/2009): 13.

8 Aung San Suu Kyi, ‘Intellectual life in India and Burma under colonialism’, in *Freedom from fear and other writings*, ed. Michael Aris (London: Penguin, 2010), p. 100.

9 ‘Burma, it was believed, would take its rightful place in the modern world [...] the Burmese would achieve even higher levels of technological and economic achievement.’ Melford E. Spiro, *Buddhism and society: A great tradition and its Burmese vicissitudes* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 183.

10 Robert H. Taylor, *The state in Myanmar* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2009), p. 265.

universalism'.¹¹ Moreover, the harsh reality was that given the damage caused by the Second World War and the state's empty coffers, the Burmese leaders were left mostly with a rice-dependent economy: 'any country that was ready to buy, or even better, to barter rice with Burma, was wooed'.¹²

Their answer to this conundrum was threefold. Firstly, they tried to balance sources of foreign assistance. In various periods of the 1950s they received aid and loans from both blocs while being careful not to fall into dependency on either side. From the West, it was not only the United States and institutions under its control (the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund [IMF]), but above all the United Kingdom and other Commonwealth countries (Australia) under the Colombo Plan that supported Burma: the Burmese found the United Kingdom's aid preferable to that of the United States as it had fewer political strings attached.¹³ From the Eastern Bloc, the USSR helped to build a technological institute, a hospital, a hotel, and irrigation dams in return for rice,¹⁴ while Czechoslovakia sponsored an educational project (scholarships), provided assistance, and became economically active in Burma (for example, successfully selling its beer there); later, East Germany, Hungary, and Romania would engage, too. Following the same logic as with the West, the Burmese preferred to deal with Moscow's satellites than with the USSR itself (they limited the scope of their cooperation with the latter in the late 1950s): Soviet assistance to Burma was worth roughly one-tenth that of other Eastern European states.¹⁵

Secondly, the Burmese adopted and implemented the *Pyidawtha* national development programme, which was intended to combine tradition with modernity. With this programme, Burma dreamed of constructing a kind of 'tropical variant' of the Scandinavian welfare state,¹⁶ undertaking ambitious developmental, welfare, social and educational initiatives.

Thirdly — and most importantly here — they actively sought out non-Western, non-Soviet role models. For this reason they forged close cooperation with Japan, accepting Tokyo's war reparations in 1954, which facilitated the building of the hydro-electric plant and dam at Baluchaung and provided Burma with Japanese technological equipment,¹⁷ and further major assistance. Japan remained Burma's top donor until the 1990s. Despite their complicated relationship with India (and the Indians) they accepted Indian aid, too (the situation was similar with Pakistan). Importantly for South–South cooperation, they developed comprehensive cooperation with Yugoslavia. Belgrade provided Rangoon military equipment with no political strings attached; Yugoslav guns significantly helped the Burmese army in their clashes

11 Jordan Winfield, 'Buddhism and the state in Burma: English-language discourses from 1823 to 1962' (PhD diss., University of Melbourne, 2017), pp. 107, 179.

12 Renaud Egreteau and Larry Jagan, *Soldiers and diplomacy in Burma: Understanding the foreign relations of the Burmese praetorian state* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2013), p. 90.

13 John H. Badgley, 'Which road for Burma?', *Challenge* 11, 9 (1963): 26–9.

14 'Burma drops Soviet "gift" project half-way', *The Guardian* (Burma), 26 Oct. 1959, p. 1.

15 Leszek Buszynski, *Soviet foreign policy and Southeast Asia* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), p. 2.

16 Frank N. Trager, ed., *Marxism in Southeast Asia: A study of four countries* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 1959), p. 299.

17 *Area handbook for Burma* (Washington, DC: US Govt. Printing, 1971), p. 200.

with the Kuomintang.¹⁸ Beside arms, Belgrade also offered technical assistance and military technical know-how. The Burmese repaid it all in rice, and this barter mechanism was important as it ‘served as a template for future South–South cooperation helping the non-aligned countries overcome the perennial obstacle to economic cooperation between them: their inability to finance mutual trade.’¹⁹ By the same token, this is also how the Burmese found Israel.²⁰ Although Namsang was not the only Israeli project in Burma — Israeli assistance was provided for the construction of ceramic, glassware, and rubber tyre factories; paint and varnish plants; a US\$30 million agricultural (irrigation) project in Shan State; the pharmaceutical industry; and nurse training²¹ — it was unique in a sense. It shows the agency of Burma in its own modernisation and globalisation process.

In later periods, Israeli experts worked extensively on transnational projects in sub-Saharan African states,²² Iran,²³ and Crete,²⁴ but the Burmese project was one of the very first they agreed to take on. As Łukasz Stanek observes, foreign experts had to adapt projects

to conditions differing from the geographical, social and cultural context in which they had been introduced and to which they had answered. Accordingly, foreign experts were dealing with a range of challenges specific to post-colonial countries: questions of the appropriate pace of modernization, patterns of consumption, the balance between foreign and local expertise and resources, and professional education.²⁵

For the Israelis, this encounter with Burmese culture was something new and unexpected. It was their very first lesson in working on these types of projects.

Israeli–Burmese relations

Initially, diplomatic relations between Burma and Israel were characterised by Israel’s eagerness to gain legitimacy in Asia, and by caution on the part of the

18 Jovan Čavoški, *Arming nonalignment: Yugoslavia’s relations with Burma and the Cold War in Asia (1950–1955)*, Wilson Center Working Paper no. 61, Cold War International History Project (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Centre, 2010).

19 Svetozar Rajak, ‘No bargaining chips, no spheres of interest: The Yugoslav origins of Cold War non-alignment’, *Journal of Cold War Studies* 16, 1 (2014): 172.

20 Jacob Abadi, *Israel’s quest for recognition and acceptance in Asia* (London: Frank Cass, 2004), pp. 117–18.

21 Chi-shad Liang, *Burma’s foreign relations neutralism in theory and practice* (New York: Praeger, 1990), pp. 192–3; Ruth F. Cernea, *Almost Englishmen: Baghdadi Jews in British Burma* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2007), p. 123.

22 See for example, Daniel K. Heller, ‘Israeli aid and the “African woman”: The gendered politics of international development, 1958–73’, *Jewish Social Studies* 25, 2 (2020): 49–78; Ayala Levin, ‘Exporting architectural national expertise: Arie Sharon’s Ife University Campus in West Nigeria’, in *Nationalism and architecture*, ed. Darren Deane and Sarah Butler (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), pp. 53–66; Ayala Levin, ‘Haile Sellasie’s imperial modernity: Expatriate architects and the shaping of Addis Ababa’, *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 75, 4 (2016): 447–68.

23 Neta Feniger and Rachel Kallus, ‘Israeli planning in the Shah’s Iran: A forgotten episode’, *Planning Perspectives* 30, 2 (2015): 231–51.

24 Rachel Kallus, ‘The Crete Development Plan: A post-Second World War experience of transnational professional exchange’, *Planning Perspectives* 30, 3 (2015): 339–65.

25 Łukasz Stanek, ‘Introduction: The Second World’s architecture and planning in the Third World’, *Journal of Architecture* 17, 3 (2012): 302.

Burmese, which evolved into enthusiasm. Burma recognised Israel on 7 December 1949 (the second Southeast Asian country to do so after the Philippines), while official state-to-state relations were established in January 1953,²⁶ after Israel's foreign minister (later prime minister), Moshe Sharett, visited Rangoon for the Asian Socialist Conference in 1952 and held talks with the Burmese government.²⁷

From the very beginning Sharett pushed for further development of relations: he wanted to secure the establishment of a Burmese permanent mission in Israel. The Burmese, however, were unwilling to take this step, citing financial problems.²⁸ Above all, they were anxious about the reaction of the Arab states, especially Syria and Egypt; the Arab world had recently supported Burma at the United Nations in the delicate case of the Kuomintang presence in Burma, and Rangoon did not want to seem ungrateful.

The attitude of the Burmese shifted gradually as they began to appreciate Israel's developmental achievements. In October 1954, U Nu, after hearing the positive comments of the Burmese military mission sent to Israel,²⁹ asked Sharett for assistance in the form of know-how in forest industries, and the latter acceded, on condition that Burma opened a diplomatic legation in Israel.³⁰ Rangoon conceded, but took great pains to establish missions in Tel Aviv and Cairo simultaneously (the Burmese were extremely cautious in announcing the appointment of their envoys, and subsequently even ordered their diplomats to arrive in Israel and Egypt at exactly the same time).³¹ From this point on, Burma–Israel relations developed steadily, with Burmese

26 As for predating activities, Jews from Burma were invited to join the World Jewish Congress (WJC) in 1947, and did so on 24 March 1949. Some individuals in Burma's Jewish community at that time felt the need to establish some kind of official Jewish presence in Burma (unlike other foreign nationals, the Jews did not have a foreign government to protect them). This indeed suggests the possibility that a request for an Israeli diplomatic presence may have been made at the WJC session in 1950. Soon, however, the issue became moot, as most of the Jews emigrated from Burma (Cernea, *Almost Englishmen*, pp. 105–6). The Jewish community in Burma had little to no influence on the Namsang project or on Burma–Israeli relations in the 1950s.

27 Correspondence from the PM's Secretary: d.o. letter no. 287CM54/7 (07.8.1954), in 'Establishment of diplomatic relations between Burma and Israel', p. 7, accession no. 98, 1952, box 5, MFA 15_3 (9), National Archive in Yangon.

28 'Establishment of diplomatic relations between Burma and Israel', pp. 5–31, accession no. 98, 1952, box 5, MFA 15_3 (9), National Archive in Yangon; 'Appointment of Mr. David Hacohen', pp. 1–11, accession no. 121, 1953, box 6, MFA 15_3 (9), National Archive in Yangon.

29 As Ben-Gurion later recalled: 'there was a big mission from Burma and it was received here with an enthusiasm that they did not find among Asiatic countries. By the African countries they were not received in such a way It made a tremendous impression on them that in Israel they were received with more friendliness than in any other country'. Excerpt from 'Knesset minutes', 31 Jan. 1962, p. 119, accession no. 527, box 55, 1961, MFA 15/3 (21), National Archive in Yangon.

30 Sharett wrote: 'I was somewhat taken aback at the complex and highly specialised character of the tasks you thought we might be able to undertake on Burma's behalf.' 'Letter from U Nu to Sharett', 7 Oct. 1954, 'Correspondence from Sharett to U Nu', 11 Nov. 1954, in 'Establishment of diplomatic relations between Burma and Israel', pp. 14–15, 30–32, accession no. 98, 1952, box 5, MFA 15_3 (9), National Archive in Yangon.

31 'Letter no. 287CM54/7', in 'Establishment of diplomatic relations between Burma and Israel', pp. 8, 5–31, accession no. 98, 1952, box 5, MFA 15_3 (9), National Archive in Yangon. Extracts from 'Cypher Telegram No. 155', 26 Apr. 1953, Burmese Embassy, Washington; 'Cypher No. 197', 25 May 1953, Burmese Embassy, Washington; 'Cypher No. 311', 29 May 1953, Burmese Embassy, Washington; 'Cypher No. 214', 9 June 1953, Burmese Embassy, Washington; and 'Cypher no. 394', 2 July 1953,

missions sent to Israel,³² trade agreements,³³ Israeli architects, engineers, and various industrial and agriculture experts working in Burma,³⁴ arms purchases, and Israeli inspiration for the reorganisation of the Burmese army.³⁵ A ‘honeymoon’ in bilateral relations ensued.³⁶ Visits by top-level politicians bore witness to the growing ties. Burmese prime ministers visited Israel twice: U Nu in 1955 — this visit was particularly important, as it was then that U Nu was won over by Israel — and Ne Win in 1959, while Sharett visited Burma in September 1956, followed by Israeli chief of staff Moshe Dayan in January 1958, president Ben-Zvi in October 1959, and prime minister Ben-Gurion, who made an extended, 16-day visit to Burma in December 1961 (he travelled to Namsang and praised the project there;³⁷ the year after, foreign minister Golda Meir also went to Namsang).³⁸ Burma became one of Israel’s then relatively few friends worldwide;³⁹ U Nu tried (in vain) to help the Israelis open a diplomatic mission in India,⁴⁰ pleaded in Moscow for the release of Russian Jews

Burmese Embassy, Washington, all in: ‘Appointment of Mr. David Hacohen’, pp. 21–3, 29–31, accession no. 121, 1953, box 6, MFA 15_3 (9), National Archive in Yangon.

32 The first was the military mission sent in 1954: ‘Study and observation mission of the Defence Services to Israel’, pp. 2–7, accession no. 70, 1954, box 3, MFA 15_3 (31), National Archive in Yangon.

33 Burma exported mainly rice and other foodstuffs (beans, maize), as well as rubber, oil, metal ores, and silver, while Israel exported building materials, machinery, chemicals, textiles, rubber and leather goods, and other products. ‘Trade Agreement between Burma and Israel’, pp. 1–5, accession no. 13334, 1956, Printed archive/ministries 4/20 (23), National Archive in Yangon. Burma also provided Israel with rice (e.g., 10 tonnes in 1955): ‘Gift of 10 tons of rice to Israel’, pp. 1–9, accession no. 33, 1955, box 2, MFA 15_3 (27), National Archive in Yangon.

34 The first five experts arrived in 1954: ‘Recruitment of five industrial experts from Israel’, pp. 6–7, accession no. 40 (1954), box 3, MFA 15_3 (25), National Archive in Yangon. Burma requested more in 1955: ‘Cypher 415’, Foreign Office, Rangoon U.O.Np.25Q-CM55, in: ‘Sale of Burma’s rice to Israel on barter basis’, p. 4, accession no. 191, 1955, box 14, MFA 15_3 (27), National Archive in Yangon. In 1961 there were 25 altogether: ‘Minutes of official talk between Hon’ble U Nu’, p. 19, accession no. 527, box 55, 1961, MFA 15/3 (21), National Archive in Yangon.

35 Israel was an important destination for the Tatmadaw’s ‘shopping missions’ in 1950; the Tatmadaw drew on Israel’s civil defence plan and the structure of its women’s auxiliary force; Israel also served as a model for ‘two contradictory thrusts in reorganizing the Tatmadaw — one drawing on the guerrilla warfare skills acquired by army leaders in the wartime resistance, and the other emphasising the construction of coordinated standing formations capable of withstanding foreign aggression.’ Mary P. Callahan, *Making enemies: War and state building in Burma* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), pp. 176–7. Israel trained Burmese pilots and established a munitions factory in Burma (Abadi, *Israel’s quest for recognition*, p. 119). ‘General Ne Win is believed anxious to have a first-hand look at Israeli armed forces and to see how a small country tries to digest the latest modern weapons and train large number of immigrants from underdeveloped countries in their use.’ Subject discussed by U Kyaw Nyein and the Israeli PM, ‘Discussion by U Kyaw Nyein and the Israeli PM’, pp. 1–2, accession no. 99, 1959, box 9, Office of the PM 12_9, National Archive in Yangon.

36 Abadi, *Israel’s quest for recognition*, p. 118.

37 He said he was ‘deeply impressed’ by it, and remarked that the Burmese soldiers called their project *moshav*, ‘Correspondence of Ben-Gurion to Cabinet, Cairo communique unpleasant surprise’, p. 20, accession no. 527, box 55, 1961, MFA 15/3 (21), National Archive in Yangon.

38 ‘Proposed visit of Mrs Golda Meir Israel FM to Burma’, pp. 11–13, accession no. 144, 1961, box 8, MFA 15_3 (31), National Archive in Yangon.

39 As the British Ambassador in Tel Aviv commented, U Nu was ‘Israel’s lone champion in the Asian world’; ‘Correspondence of British Ambassador in Tel Aviv to Macmillan’, PRO FO/371, 164305, VR10379/3, 7 June 1955, quoted in: Abadi, *Israel’s quest for recognition*, p. 120.

40 Correspondence of U Nu to Sharett, 24 June 1954, ‘Question of opening diplomatic mission of Israel in New Delhi’, pp. 1–7, accession no. 269, 1954, box 17, MFA 15_3 (21), National Archive in Yangon.

to Israel,⁴¹ and defended Israel in Bandung.⁴² On several occasions Rangoon also expressed its readiness to mediate between Israel and the Arab states.⁴³ The Burmese, however, continued to take care that their relations with Israel did not upset Burmese–Arab relations⁴⁴ and vice versa,⁴⁵ though Rangoon’s balancing skills were not always equal to pursuing this policy, especially in the early 1960s.⁴⁶ Despite occasional misunderstandings, relations flourished until the mid-1960s, when Burma shut itself off from the world, though even afterwards Rangoon–Tel Aviv relations remained positive, albeit much less dynamic.

In the initial period, the decisive factors driving Burmese–Israeli relations forward were the impressions of the Burmese elites during their visits to Israel: they were impressed by the country’s modernity and development, which dispelled the original reserve the Burmese had had towards developing relations with Tel Aviv. In the mid-1950s the Burmese elites came to believe that Israel — a country outside the Cold War blocs, and thus acceptable to neutral Burma — possessed know-how that Burma desperately needed in order to modernise.⁴⁷

41 U Nu, *Saturday’s son: Memoirs of the former prime minister of Burma* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1975), pp. 275–7.

42 Abadi, *Israel’s quest for recognition*, p. 118.

43 ‘Subject discussed by U Kyaw Nyein and the Israeli PM’, p. 1, ‘Discussion by U Kyaw Nyein and the Israel PM’, pp. 1–2, accession no. 99, 1959, box 9, Office of the PM 12_9, National Archive in Yangon.

44 For example, they rejected the Israeli proposal to establish a joint shipping line that would ply the Suez Canal under the Burmese flag, thus circumventing the Arab boycott on Israeli ships: ‘Proposed Burma Israel shipping line’ (pp. 2–12), accession no. 205, 1956, box 12, MFA 15_3(28), National Archive in Yangon; and vice versa: Egypt proposed to raise the status of the legations in Cairo and Rangoon to ambassadorial level, so Rangoon agreed, but in order not to endanger relations with Tel Aviv, it also raised the rank of Israel’s legations (on 5 Dec. 1957): ‘Question of elevating status of Burmese and Israeli legations in Tel Aviv and Rangoon respectively’, pp. 1–17, accession no. 171, 1957, box 9, MFA 15_3 (9), National Archive in Yangon. Another example was Burma’s refusal to participate in the military parade held to celebrate the tenth anniversary of Israel’s foundation: ‘10th anniversary independence celebration of Israel including military parade in Jerusalem’, pp. 1–20, accession no. 281, 1958, box 15, MFA 15/3 (18), National Archive in Yangon.

45 ‘Israel representation on the Afro-Asian Conference at Cairo on 8th December 1958’, pp. 18–20, 26, accession no. 356, 1958, box 24, MFA 15/3 (21), National Archive in Yangon.

46 The most significant incident in Burma–Israel relations occurred in early 1962, when Israel reacted negatively to the U Nu–Nasser Cairo Declaration of January 1962; as this happened just after Ben-Gurion’s return from Burma, he was, according to Burmese diplomats, ‘deeply wounded’ (‘Letter from Maung Maung to James Barrington’, 26 Jan. 1962) and ‘his immediate reaction was one of personal hurt’ (‘Letter from Maung Maung to James Barrington’, 11 Jan. 1962): ‘Israel reaction to U Nu–Nasser communique’, pp. 79, 86, accession no. 527, box 55, MFA 15/3 (21), National Archive in Yangon.

47 For example, the visiting premier (Ben-Gurion) was asked how the phenomenal success of socialist construction in Israel had come about: ‘Under your leadership, Israel, a barren desert land, had been transformed in the course of a few years into a highly advanced industrial country’. ‘Premier Ben-Gurion meets Burmese Socialists’, *The Nation* (Burma), 7 Dec. 1961, p. 1. U Nu commented: ‘My visit to Israel some six years ago left a deep impression on me. It was inspiring to see a modern nation springing out of the desert. It was impossible not to be stirred by the justifiable sense of achievement which permeated all the people’; ‘Israeli premier feted’, *The Nation* (Burma), 7 Dec. 1961, p. 1. To U Nu, Israel ‘was the quintessential example of the egalitarian social and economic order that he wished to establish in his country’ (Abadi, *Israel’s quest for recognition*, p. 118). As former Israeli ambassador to Burma Ben Horin recalled, ‘To U Nu’s mind, there was almost nothing Israel could not do’, *Jerusalem Post*, 16 Sept. 1988, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 120.

The Namsang project

The history of the Namsang project began with the first Burmese visits to Israel in 1954. After this series of meetings, Ze'ev Weil, a member of a *kibbutz* (collective settlement in which all wealth is held in common) called Ma'ayan Tzvi, and a recognised expert in agricultural mechanisation, was charged, along with a number of other people, with a mission to help the Burmese government roll out the use of similar machinery in their country.⁴⁸ It may seem surprising that a rank-and-file member of a settlement was sent on an international mission, but apparently Israel was not the only country to have such an idea. Later, Weil noted: 'Most of the load of all activities, up till then, was on me, as my co-workers, both local and expatriate, did not have the experience nor the knowledge of the relevant subjects.'⁴⁹ It soon transpired that the mechanisation project was not the only one he was involved in. At the turn of May and June 1955, U Nu, the prime minister of Burma, visited Israel. The visit seems to have marked a watershed in U Nu's perception of the young country. In his farewell speech at the airport, the Burmese premier said:

One of the things that strikes me the most is the development of new forms of rural life, expressing themselves in entirely new types of rural society — the kibbutz and the moshav. The people of Israel are building a new way of life and the results so far achieved have been most encouraging. The people young and old, are moulding a progress, and healthy bodies, and happy faces I saw everywhere are standing testimony of this grave and far-sighted experiment. I have a feeling that the spirit of the kibbutz will extend beyond the frontiers of Israel and contribute towards the building of a peaceful and progressive society.⁵⁰

He also mentioned that the idea of shared property was ideally suited to Buddhist teaching, and that he would love to adopt the way of life encouraged in Israeli rural areas in certain parts of his country.⁵¹ Before long this dream began to come true.

In September 1955 Ze'ev Weil was again asked for help:

As I was about to leave, I was requested to discuss a certain subject with a small group: The Burmese army consisted of volunteers, a large part of it had already joint [sic!] up during the British occupation, before or after 1945. Almost all of them came from villages, where their standard of living was quite low. Their standard of living and their education had been considerably raised during their army service. Besides, they had been taught to use weapons. In the meantime, large numbers had reached the age of 30 or even 40 and the defence forces were thinking of their future. To release them and send them back to their villages, would mean to lower their standard of living and being able to use weapons, there was the danger of highway robbery and or joining

48 At the time other missions were also in train. A small group of experts in vocational education was sent from Israel to Burma to study the problems in situ and form an opinion about the kind of assistance that Israeli technicians and specialists could provide in developing technical education in Burma. See: *Final report on technical education in Burma prepared by Israel mission* (Jerusalem: State of Israel, Ministry of Labour, 1955).

49 Zeev Weil, ME 949, Leo Baeck Institute Archives, New York, p. 6.

50 *Prime minister's goodwill visit to Israel: A pictorial* (Rangoon: Director of Information Government of the Union of Burma, 1955), p. 5.

51 *Prime minister's goodwill visit to Israel*.

insurgents, of both of which Burma was plagued in any way. On the other hand, Burma had huge empty areas, mainly along its eastern border, with Thailand, Laos, and China, where, specially from the latter, there was an intensive population pressure. The idea of these officers was to settle the discharged soldiers in agricultural settlements with modern advanced practices, similar to Israeli border settlements. Would you help us, Mr. Weil?⁵²

Weil's description well sums up the whole project. At the time, most of the people of Burma were farmers, but only a small percentage of the land was cultivated. The farmers lived in very poor conditions. What is more, the border areas were inhabited in part by non-Burmese nations who did not recognise the central government and posed a constant potential danger to Burma's integrity, especially in the provinces bordering Communist China, where approximately 12,000 Kuomintang (KMT) troops had withdrawn to Burma after the civil war, posing a serious political threat to the Rangoon government.⁵³ Finally there was the problem of former soldiers returning to their villages and becoming frustrated with their post-demobilisation lives. The idea to solve several of these issues at once by settling the army veterans in the border settlements, giving them a higher standard of living, and the same time using them as a military reserve when necessary, seemed perfect. Implementation of the idea would help to strengthen the Rangoon's government's grip on places distant from the centre. Shan–Burman dynamics was an important factor here. In precolonial times Shan State had been a patchwork of small territories governed by local hereditary chiefs, *saophas*, who owed allegiance to the Burman kings but de facto governed independently. During the colonial period Shan State had not been subject to the same type of colonial administration and intensive territorialisation as Burma proper.⁵⁴ After independence Shan State retained much of its autonomy, including the right to secede from the Union, under the terms of the 1947 Constitution, which was viewed with suspicion by Burmans. This autonomy was gradually curtailed, however, first by the introduction of martial law in 1952 (due to the incursion of KMT forces), and subsequently by enforced agreement with the *saophas* in 1959; Shan State lost its autonomy altogether after 1962.⁵⁵ Against this background, bringing retired soldiers (mostly Burman) into Shan areas might be considered an internal colonialist move (from the Shan perspective) or a means of reinforcing the nation-building process (from the Burman perspective).

The project objectives, above all the issue of the national identity of the territories, were familiar topics to planners from Israel, who had had experience of such

52 Zeev Weil, ME 949, Leo Baeck Institute Archives New York, pp. 7–8.

53 The KMT was, if not the primary danger, at least one of the major threats to the newly independent Burma; according to Mary Callahan, the Tatmadaw generals' response to this threat was to transform themselves from military leaders into state builders and take power, which they retained for decades. Callahan, *Making enemies*, pp. 5, 12, 17–18, 173–84.

54 The British divided Burma into the directly governed 'Burma proper' (mostly lowlands) and the indirectly administrated (at minimum cost and with little interference) Frontier or Hill Areas (mostly inhabited by ethnic minorities), where the grip of central government was weak; Taylor, *The state in Myanmar*, pp. 89–99. In Shan State, which was one of these excluded areas, this led to a 'state of sleepy isolation' and increased the power of the *saophas*. Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the politics of ethnicity* (London: Zed, 1999), pp. 41–3.

55 Sai Aung Tun, *A history of the Shan State: From its origins to 1962* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm, 2009).

planning in the nation-building process. An important feature of the ideas underpinning the project was that, as mentioned above, they could be presented as ones which harmonised perfectly with key Buddhist teachings and tenets, such as the impermanence of all things (the socialist rejection of private possession), equality (egalitarianism), and rejection of the profit motive (collective ownership). This nativisation, or domestication, of socialist ideas well suited the ideological climate of 1950s Burma: for the Burmese postcolonial elites, socialism was not only a modern ideology offering the potential for development without neo-colonial dependence,⁵⁶ but also a complementary form of Buddhism.⁵⁷ Consequently, many Burmese political thinkers⁵⁸ found socialism reconcilable with Buddhism, with one Burmese prime minister, Ba Swe, even declaring in 1956 that Marxism and Buddhism were ‘the same in concept’,⁵⁹ and his predecessor and successor, prime minister U Nu, attempting to establish ‘Buddhist socialism’.⁶⁰ In this ‘sort of synthesis’ between Buddhism and socialism,⁶¹ the socialist means were conceived as a practical solution to Buddhist ontological anxieties, such as suffering and inequality: socialism was a practical implementation of immemorial Buddhist truths.⁶² This was best encapsulated in the slogan of ‘worldly nirvana’: a Buddhist-inspired, perfect socialist state where every need would be met by a perfectly and justly organised society. The Burmese elites tried to bring about this vision with their *Pyidawtha* national development plan, a kind of indigenous welfare state programme along socialist lines,⁶³ but failed due to lack of funds and incompetence.

Before long, the Namsang project started to take shape. The training farm was established in 1956, 50 kilometres from Rangoon.⁶⁴ The government then set about looking for a suitable site for the settlement, and even before 1956 was out, Shan State was established as its preferred choice.⁶⁵ The economic cooperation agreement between the Government of the Union of Burma and the Government of Israel was

56 Winfield, ‘Buddhism and the state in Burma’, p. 26.

57 ‘The socialist concept of ownership by and for the people seemed the right and only possible answer to Burma’s problems.’ Kyaw Thet, ‘Continuity in Burma: The survival of historic forces’, *Atlantic Monthly*, ‘Burma’, special issue, Feb. 1958.

58 Among them Kodaw Hmaing, Soe, Than Thun, Ba Swe, U Nu, and Chit Hlaing.

59 U Ba Swe, *The Burmese revolution* (Rangoon: Information Department, Union of Burma, 1952), p. 7.

60 Emanuel Sarkisyanz, *The Buddhist background of the Burmese revolution* (Dordrecht: Springer, 1965), pp. 171–2.

61 Winston L. King, *In hope of Nibbāna: The ethics of Theravada Buddhism* (LaSalle, ILL: Open Court, 1964), pp. 231, 243.

62 Matthew J. Walton, ‘Politics in the moral universe: Burmese Buddhist political thought’ (PhD diss., University of Washington, Seattle, 2012), pp. 129–38.

63 *Pyidawtha: The new Burma. A report from the Government of the People of the Union of Burma on our long-term programme for economic and social development* (Rangoon: Economic and Social Board, Government of the Union of Burma, 1954), pp. 1–2.

64 Zeev Weil, ME 949, Leo Baeck Institute Archives, New York, p. 10.

65 *Ibid.*, p. 13. The decision to choose Namsang must be seen against the background of the Tatmadaw’s ‘land reclamation’ policy: the Burmese army wanted to take control of lands that were not generating revenue for the state, or from people considered its opponents, and reallocate them to its own soldiers; labelling the designated lands as ‘waste’ helped to achieve this purpose; for more about this ‘waste land’ policy, see Jane M. Ferguson, ‘The scramble for the Waste Lands: Tracking colonial legacies, counterinsurgency and international investment through the lens of land laws in Burma/Myanmar’, *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 35, 3 (2014): 299–307.

signed on 5 March 1956. One of its clauses stated that a joint, detailed feasibility study on the project to cultivate an area in Shan State would be conducted. The project to undertake a joint venture between Israel and Burma presupposed the implementation of Israeli know-how in the relevant field. The agricultural produce it generated was to be bought by the Israelis pursuant to conditions and prices subsequently to be agreed upon. The development was intended to serve as a model farm.⁶⁶ The future project was to be based in the Namsang region, in the district of Loilem. About 100,000 acres of land were allocated for the Resettlement Project, of which 30,000 acres were available for new settlements (the rest was either unsuitable for farming or already under cultivation by local people).⁶⁷ The decision was taken that the project should be supervised by the Burmese Ministry of Defence, which shows that its main objective was to control the country's borders and minorities. The turbulence that accompanied General Ne Win's succession of U Nu as Burma's prime minister in 1958 did not affect the project, which was perceived positively by the new head of government.

For the Israeli side the project was led by Amiram Sprinzak, a member of the Jewish Agency's Land Settlement Department. He arrived in Rangoon on 21 August 1959 and met Brigadier Aung Gyi,⁶⁸ Air Commodore Tommy Clift,⁶⁹ Lieutenant Colonel James Barrington,⁷⁰ and Captain Myo Aung. This is a clear indication that the Burmese authorities were taking the Namsang project seriously: Aung Gyi and Clift were high-ranking commanders in the Burmese army (the former was one of prime minister Ne Win's closest confidants), while Barrington was Burma's most senior diplomat. The Israeli side, however, had again sent rather second-class specialists.⁷¹

In the document which he wrote after the meeting, Sprinzak listed Burma's motives for developing the Namsang area as follows:

1. The Army intends to demobilize quite a number of soldiers after periods of 10–12 years in the service, and is anxious to secure those who are willing to become farmers who will have a good livelihood in advanced modern agriculture.
2. The Government of Union of Burma is very interested in increasing the population of Namsang area and to develop it.

66 'Misrad ha-bitakhon: skira al Burma' (no pagination), 6 Dec. 1957, 5569/16, Israel State Archives, Jerusalem; '4 mumkhim haklaim leBurma', *LeMerhav*, 31 Jan. 1957, p. 3.

67 *The Namsang resettlement project: A pioneering task of the defence series* (Namsang: 2–3 Resettlement Unit, 1961), p. 3.

68 Aung Gyi was one of Ne Win's key 'lieutenants'; in the 1950s he was the founder of the commercially successful DSI (Defence Service Institute) scheme, and he was also the co-architect of the 1958 coup d'état. He played a key role in the military caretaker government (as its top economist), only to lose his influence after the second coup of 1962 (which he defended as military spokesman); he resigned from the Revolutionary Council in 1963 in protest at the council's leftist policies. Later, in 1988, he became involved in the opposition movement (as the co-founder of the NLD), but lost the power struggle with Aung San Suu Kyi, and thereafter much of his political influence.

69 Tommy Clift was the Anglo-Shan commander-in-chief of the Burma Air Force and later a member of the Revolutionary Council and president of the Ex-Services Personnel Resettlement Board. He left the army after the council's policies shifted to the left, went abroad, and had a hand in U Nu's short-lived attempt to regain power in 1969.

70 James Barrington was an Anglo-Burmese diplomat, deputy foreign minister, and ambassador to the United States and United Nations in the 1950s; he was one of the architects of Burma's non-aligned foreign policy.

71 Abadi, *Israel's quest for recognition*, p. 122.

3. The Government of Burma, within its wide development schemes of the country, is anxious to pursue ways which will be in accordance with the free will of the people and progressive organization on cooperative and collective lines.
4. By creating a progressive project as this, to influence the existing farmers to improve their systems of cultivation, their ways of organization and marketing by example and instruction.⁷²

These four motives in fact seem to have been rather secondary to the real reasons for the project, but they fit perfectly with the contemporary Israeli narrative of progress and modernisation and are sure to have been welcomed by the Israeli side. Interestingly, the minutes of the meeting show that the Burmese were relatively open about the fact that their country's eastern frontier region was underdeveloped and populated mostly by the Shan and Palaung ethnic minorities,⁷³ and that it was thus essential that no vacuum developed and that these sparsely populated areas be settled by either ex-servicemen or even civilians from other parts of Burma.⁷⁴ This attitude on the part of the Burmese may well have been an example of subliminal condescension towards the non-Burman inhabitants of the frontier region,⁷⁵ or perhaps even indicative of an ulterior motive: to Burmanise the Shan, Palaung, and other non-Burman populations of this region.⁷⁶ They also claimed that they wanted to raise the standard of living of the ex-servicemen⁷⁷ though not to such high standards as those enjoyed by Israeli or Dutch farmers (which Sprinzak implied).⁷⁸

After a month-long field study, Sprinzak prepared 21 recommendations which in his opinion had to be implemented if the project was to be successful.⁷⁹ Most of them

72 'Settlement of Namsang Area', by A. Sprinzak (no pagination), 2030/3, Israel State Archives.

73 The political situation in Shan State was very complex in this period, with three overlapping administrations functioning at various points in the 1950s (and not cooperating effectively): the traditional form, under hereditary rulers, or *saophas*; the civilian Shan State government; and the military administration that came to power in the 1950–54 state of emergency. For more on the complex political situation in Shan State, see: Sai Aung Tun, *A history of the Shan State*, pp. 327–64. As one anonymous reviewer indicated, the people of Namsang in this period were under the semi-autonomous authority of the *saophas* of Mong Hsu and Mong Pan.

74 The Burmese press reported in a similar vein: 'One of the aims of the Resettlement scheme was to improve the social conditions of the Shan cultivators ... and to provide examples of successful co-operation between them and the retired Defence Services personnel.' '83 more ex-servicemen resettled at Namsang', *The Nation* (Burma), 27 Aug. 1962, p. 1.

75 Burmans (Bamars) are often accused of patronising ethnic minorities and of enjoying a privileged position in Burmese society; in this view Burman-ness is 'a form of institutionalized dominance similar to Whiteness'. Matthew J. Walton, 'Wages of Burman-ness: Ethnicity and Burman privilege in contemporary Myanmar', *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 43, 1 (2013): 16.

76 The Burmanisation — later Myanmarification — of Burma's ethnic minorities is a term frequently cited by minority groups (see e.g., Smith, *Burma*, pp. 34, 205), who claim that Rangoon/Naypyidaw wants to assimilate non-Burman territories and their inhabitants by means including their colonisation by Burmans. The term 'Burmanisation' is disputed, however, and the Burmans themselves refute these accusations.

77 *The Guardian*, a major pro-military Burmese newspaper, emphasised these aspects, see: 'Land settlement', *The Guardian* (Burma), 18 Nov. 1958, p. 4.

78 'Minutes of the meeting held at National Defence College on 21 Aug. 1959 at 1400 hours regarding the agricultural development of Namsang Area with Israeli assistance' (no pagination), 2030/1, Israel State Archives.

79 'Settlement of Namsang Area', by A. Sprinzak (no pagination), 2030/3, Israel State Archives. These recommendations were as follows:

were very technical, but three were clearly cultural in character. He stressed that it was vital that the responsibility for the farm be passed on to the settlers themselves as soon as possible, that the villages should be run on cooperative principles, and that the cooperative spirit should be promoted. In this he was evidently drawing on the Israeli experience with *moshavim* and *kibbutzim*. The very first of these, established in the 1910s and 1920s, were places where the principles of independent work and collective living were implemented. For a long time they managed to offer an alternative lifestyle to idealistic people. Nevertheless their mission became increasingly difficult as doubt surrounding the staying power of these small-scale utopias grew. The generations born in the settlements were not always eager to follow in their parents' footsteps, and the higher standards of living within the settlements gave the impression to outsiders that the movement was shedding its pioneering spirit.⁸⁰

The differences between the *moshavim* and *kibbutzim* on the one hand and the Namsang project on the other were clear, however. The first *kibbutzim* and *moshavim* were grassroots projects implemented by settlers who wanted to work independently and on their own responsibility, and themselves laid the foundations for cooperative settlement. Project Namsang, by contrast, was clearly a top-down idea initiated by the

1. It is essential to pass the responsibility for the farm on to the settlers themselves, and as soon as possible;
2. There should be formed Mechanized Operation Units to clear and prepare the land for cultivation and this at a suitable speed;
3. A thorough survey of the area should be carried out by the Land Use Bureau and topographic maps also be prepared;
4. To plan villages in groups of 3–5 with a common centre for them and these according to the ground and types of farming;
5. The villages should be based on the co-operative principles and these should be obligatory;
6. It is necessary to build up a suitable administration with proper sanction and freedom of action either in the centre or in Namsang;
7. It is essential to start building the first village to equip the settlers with everything needed. To pursue the land and give every family its plot. To assist in every way to make this an example village;
8. It is essential to start building the first village to equip the settlers with everything needed. To parcel the land and give every family its plot. To assist in every way to make this an exemplary village;
9. It is important to form a committee which will be empowered to approve the candidates for becoming members in a village;
10. The new village will use the same tools and equipment which are common in the country. Machinery will be coming into use organically with the development of farms future;
11. Special care should be given to the marketing and supply facilities. The promotion of co-operative spirit will depend much on the efficiency of marketing and supplies;
12. To prepare administrative staff to serve in the fields of administration, farm management, marketing and co-operation;
13. To start immediately to build the water supply system according to Mr. Dvir's report. In the first stage lifting water from Namsang stream, and in the second stage to bring the water by gravity from the spring on the road to Loilen;
14. To allot an area of 100–200 acres for continued experiments on various kinds of field crop, testing sowing dates, varieties, fertilizers and systems of cultivation and plant protection measures;
15. This area should become a centre for extension to the whole area including existing local farmers;
16. To take census of local farmers and to decide what amount of land should be allotted to them. At the same time to explain to them the purpose of the project and what benefits they could have from it;
17. To build immediately a good school for the settlers children and a health centre;
18. Arrangements should be started for signing contracts with the settlers which all their responsibilities and rights will be set forth;
19. To start building roads from main roads to centres of villages;
20. To plan Namsang village as the centre town for the whole area with an estimated population of 5,000–8,000 inhabitants. To allow areas for industry, commerce, services and residential purposes;
21. The Israeli team proposed will consist of: 1. Head of team, 2. Agricultural adviser, 3–4. Planners (physical and agricultural), 5. Agricultural – Machinery engineer. In later stages of the development some more experts may be required.

80 For more on the kibbutz movement, see, for example: Ran Abramitzky, *The mystery of the kibbutz: Egalitarian principles in a capitalist world* (Princeton, NJ: University of Princeton, 2018).

Burmese government, whose primary aim was to control the country's borderlands. Nevertheless, Israel participated eagerly in the project because it was a way of helping to establish its position as a leader of the developing world and the author of a model worthy of being reproduced. Israeli politicians believed that running programmes in new post-colonial states would help them to find supporters in the United Nations, distract international public interest from the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, and boost the Israeli economy.⁸¹

The minutes of the meeting concerning the agricultural development of Namsang Area held at Israel's National Defence College on 2 November 1959 confirm the cultural misunderstanding. Sprinzak once again stressed the need to hand over the buildings and land to the settlers as rapidly as possible. According to him, 'only by standing on their own feet will the settlers learn to work properly and accept the responsibility'.⁸² Colonel Kyi Win responded to this by explaining that the farmers were being moved from one district to another. He said that the Burmese were very attached to their homesteads and it was difficult to force them to go and to settle in areas far from their native regions. Since many of them were unhappy with the situation, the government had to subsidise them and could not leave them on their own.⁸³ The Israelis present at the meeting must have been surprised by that response. They stressed that the settlers should be volunteers with a pioneering spirit who were willing to go. They also emphasised that the settlement of border areas needed to be sold to the settlers as an ideological move, so that they would be eager to go. They also criticised the idea of subsidising the farms, arguing that it would be much better to give the soldiers a chance to start on their own, so that new ways of thinking and the spirit of living together could germinate in them.⁸⁴ The Burmese side clarified that most of the settlers were indeed volunteers and pioneers, above all those in the very first Resettlement Units, which had worked very hard to clear the jungle and set up camps. It was worth trying to give them properties and land, yet they still felt that the subsidies were necessary. In the end the parties left this issue aside and proceeded with the implementation of the project. The next phase involved study trips to Israel and implementation of the scheme in Namsang.⁸⁵

Since Burma was a union, in addition to the implementation agreement with the Israeli government, agreements with the Shan State government also had to be signed.⁸⁶ This, however, was only a formality needed to satisfy the sensibilities of the Shans, whose significant autonomy existed on paper only.⁸⁷

81 Leopold Laufer, *Israel and the developing countries: New approaches to cooperation* (New York: Twentieth Century Fund, 1967); Shimeon Amir, *Israel's development cooperation with Africa, Asia and Latin America* (New York: Praeger, 1974). For a more critical approach see e.g., Anat Mooreville, 'Eyeing Africa: The politics of Israeli ocular expertise and international aid', *Jewish Social Studies* 21, 3 (2016): 31–71.

82 'Minutes from the meeting held at National Defence College on 2nd Nov. 1959 at 1400 hours regarding the agricultural development of Namsang Area with Israeli assistance and also regarding training of Burmese Services Resettlement in Israel' (no pagination), 2030/1, Israel State Archives.

83 Ibid.

84 Ibid.

85 Ibid.

86 'Frontier admin. agreements to be signed between Union & State govts.', *The Guardian* (Burma), 17 Dec. 1959, p. 1.

87 The administrative division of Burma was based on the 1947 Constitution (itself modelled on largely

Study groups: Model of cultural exchange?

Even as the Sprinzak team was working in Burma, the very first study group, comprising Burmese soldiers under the supervision of Major Tun Shwe, arrived in Israel for a 14-month stay.⁸⁸ The group, numbering some twenty people, arrived in late 1958. Some of the soldiers were single and some went with their wives and children.⁸⁹ They spent the first month studying Hebrew in Netanya on an intensive course (*ulpan*) designed for immigrants to Israel. In December they were split up and sent to three places: the Ayelet ha-Shachar kibbutz, the Kfar Hess *moshav*, and the Kfar Hittin *moshav shitufi* (semi-cooperative village).⁹⁰ The kibbutz brochure summed their arrival up in the words: ‘There is no doubt that this absorption will raise all sorts of questions that have not yet been answered, and will add an exotic body to our settlement.’⁹¹

The Israeli national press covered this event with great interest and little anxiety. They were impressed by the project and stressed the shared interest in work: ‘the first contact was created not with questions but when one of the men took a shovel in his hand and began to clear the weeds outside the house given over to the Burmese’.⁹² According to the journalists, the members of the study group also readily accepted the status quo in the kibbutz, where all residents were equal and army ranks were of no significance.⁹³ One of the Ayelet ha-Shachar kibbutz members, Shalom Israeli, recalled that the Burmese worked hard and were used to doing so: ‘Sin Kyi [one of the soldiers who worked at the breeding pond] worked alongside us every day. He was a very nice guy, who worked with us manually. They weren’t born in big cities, they were people from villages, who wanted to learn in a practical way.’⁹⁴ The group knew no English and only a few basic words in Hebrew, so the only way to communicate was to show them the work.

Israeli recalls that the group was invited to all the community’s festivities, and attended them, though clearly they had only a very limited understanding of what was happening. Work stopped on Shabbat, so that also had to be explained to the

verbal agreements between ethnic minority leaders and the father of Burmese independence, Aung San, reached at the Second Panglong (Pinlon) Conference in 1947). The Constitution was a misleading document. On the one hand, it appeared to be federal in nature (without using the word), with its division of the country between ‘Burma proper’ and the ethnic regions; of the latter, Shan State had the most far-ranging powers, up to and including the right of secession. On the other, the Constitution laid the foundations for a centralised system of power in which the ethnic states had few legislative powers and little control over taxation or their own finances; thus the relationship between Shan State and Burma proper was similar to that of Scotland and England prior to 1999. See: *The Constitution of the Union of Burma*, 24 Sept. 1947, Articles 154–65, 201–6, *Burma Library.org*; Taylor, *The state in Myanmar*, p. 229.

88 ‘Second resettlement study group to Israel’ (no pagination), 28 Mar. 1960, 2030/1, Israel State Archives.

89 The gender aspect of the study groups was highlighted by the Burmese press: ‘Too often in our planning we tend to ignore the feminine angle or element but this time we hope that our women will like the Israeli idea and come back to fashion their own regarding the army settlements already in progress and those that are projected.’ ‘Land settlement’, *The Guardian* (Burma), 18 Nov. 1958, p. 4.

90 “‘Derekh Burma’ be-Ayelet ha-Shachar’, *LeMerhav*, 13 Feb. 1959, p. 7; ‘Klitat anshei Burma leshana’, *Yoman Ayelet ha-Shachar* 463, 19 Dec. 1958, p. 4.

91 ‘Klitat anshei Burma leshana’, *Yoman Ayelet Ha-Shachar* 463, 19 Dec. 1958, p. 4.

92 ‘Derekh ha-Burmanim ba-kibbutz’, *Davar*, 20 Feb. 1959, p. 19.

93 *Ibid.*

94 Interview with Shalom Israeli, Ayelet ha-Shachar, 4 Feb. 2019.

newcomers. The life of the kibbutz and Jewish tradition was something very distant from the Burmese experience, but they made an effort to comprehend it.⁹⁵

However, the cultural differences were very obvious and the adaptation was not without its difficulties. For instance, the Israelis had not been informed about the culinary habits of the Burmese. They only discovered them in the course of the visitors' stay, on noticing that they did not eat bread or porridge but longed for rice and sweet tea.⁹⁶ Most importantly, the Burmese did not express these wishes themselves; they did not complain about anything, even the food, so the Israelis had to deduce what they were experiencing.

Shalom Israeli, asked about the cultural differences, recalled one scene when his Burmese companion took a fish, cut it in half, salted it, and left it in the sun to dry. Apparently that was the way they prepared fish in Burma, but Israeli never discussed this with the Burmese soldier. Neither did he learn a single word in Burmese or find out anything about Buddhism from his co-workers.⁹⁷

The Burmese were so reserved that they did not ask for heaters in their apartments, even though it was too cold for them in Galilee. After some time the Israelis realised that they were shivering.⁹⁸ The only ones who had fewer problems with the adaptation process were the children who attended the local kindergarten, who quickly became fluent in Hebrew.⁹⁹

The members of the resettlement group did not stay in close touch with the Israeli hosts after their return to Burma. However, two Ayelet ha-Shachar kibbutzniks, Pinchas and Aza Ben Ari, went to Burma in 1961 to help with the development of the Namsang project.¹⁰⁰

The harsh (and sometimes Orientalist) words of the member of the Ayelet ha-Shachar kibbutz who summarised the visit in the kibbutz brochure seem to describe well how the simple Israelis who served as the hosts perceived the results of the exchange:

In terms of agriculture, most of the members of the group had very little knowledge and were unable to derive the maximum benefit from their teachers, though some were very interested in the various branches in which we worked, and progressed considerably. Of course, there was also a difficulty in the fact that the conditions in Burma are completely different from ours, and each one of us had to make concessions ... and it was not easy for the unskilled to understand.

As for studying the forms of settlement and the co-operative culture that is the source of our settlement, this was not easy to comprehend for a man of mediocre sophistication from a distant land, who in many cases needed double translation (from Hebrew to English and then to Burmese), which disrupts the spoken language.

The leaders of the delegation were people with education and perception, but there were other difficulties. First of all, most of the leaders thought that in the future they

95 Ibid.

96 'Derekh ha-Burmanim ba-kibbutz', *Davar*, 20 Feb. 1959, p. 20.

97 Interview with Shalom Israeli, Ayelet ha-Shachar, 4 Feb. 2019.

98 'Derekh ha-Burmanim ba-kibbutz', *Davar*, 20 Feb. 1959, p. 20.

99 Interview with Shalom Israeli, Ayelet ha-Shachar, 4 Feb. 2019.

100 'Shaliahenu kotvim', *Yoman Ayelet ha-Shachar* 505, 3 Mar. 1961, p. 12.

would retain their high ranks and not live the lives of simple farmers; at most they would engage in the project as managers. ... They did not understand that kibbutz life involves a certain human levelling and a personal willingness to live in this way, and that because of these conditions, kibbutzniks, even in Israel, have remained but a minority.

Another thing is that life in Burma in general and in the army in particular is based on the principle of hierarchy.¹⁰¹

Their Orientalism aside, the commentator deserves credit for noticing the predilection for hierarchy, a noticeable feature of Burmese social life,¹⁰² especially in Burmese administrative policies.¹⁰³ Once again, such cultural differences, neglected by both countries' leaders, were to play a crucial role in the Namsang project. The two sides knew little about each other, and the whole idea seemed very utopian, even to non-policymakers. Nonetheless, a second resettlement study group was sent to Israel in 1960.¹⁰⁴

Implementation

The regional plan for Namsang comprised an administrative town (developed from a Namsang village) and between 25 and 30 settlers' villages, alongside a further 30 or so existing Shan villages. The master plan for Namsang and the layout of its villages was drawn up according to the regional planning principles in the Lachish area of Israel.¹⁰⁵ The target population of the area was between 15,000 and 20,000. The project also involved the development of a community with democratically elected internal committees.¹⁰⁶

The administrative town was to have administrative offices, cooperative shops, a tractor station, a workshop, a market, schools, a hospital, an agricultural institute, a research laboratory, a post office, an agricultural bank, a police station, a cinema, and the electricity and water supply bases. Its satellite villages were planned on a basis of 48 family units, with room for expansion to 72. The suggested model was what in Israel was called *moshav shitufi*, which meant that all the settlers would work and live independently, but all buying and marketing was done cooperatively. Settlers were to be provided with 1 acre of land as their home plot, a house and a latrine, and 15 acres of land to cultivate. Any other buildings they wanted or needed, such as poultry sheds, they were to build themselves. They were also to be provided with various carts and tools, as well as seedlings, fruit trees, and poultry. This was

101 'Im tsat kvutsat ha-Burmaim', *Yoman Ayelet Ha-Shachar* 483, 19 Feb. 1960, p. 3.

102 As Ward Keeler describes, 'Hierarchical considerations inform all social interaction among Burmans' (p. 4) and 'hierarchical understandings pervade all social relations' (p. 26) in Myanmar. Yet, he cautioned that hierarchy 'should be understood as a system of exchanges' (p. 10), within which people play constantly on the constraints and opportunities that any given situation presents them with, and 'act with varying, but in the same cases considerable, degrees of autonomy' (p. 26). W. Keeler, *The traffic in hierarchy: Masculinity and its other in Buddhist Burma* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2017), pp. 2–26.

103 Maung Maung Gyi, *The Burmese political values: The socio-political roots of authoritarianism* (New York: Praeger, 1983), pp. 157–64.

104 '2nd resettlement study group to Israel' (no pagination), 2030/1, Israel State Archives.

105 'Final report: Resettlement at Namsang', p. 4, 1912/15, Israel State Archives.

106 'A short introduction into Namsang resettlement project' (no pagination), 2030/5, Israel State Archives.



Figure 1: Preparations for Ne Win's visit to Ayelet ha-Shachar in 1959 (Courtesy: Ayelet ha-Shachar archive).

treated as a debt to the country, which they were to repay within 30 years.¹⁰⁷ By 1960 three settler villages had been built.

After the first study group returned from Israel, the Israeli team, headed by Sprinzak, went to Burma. Sprinzak wanted to clarify whether the returned settlers were indeed allocated their promised 15 acres of land and released from the army, or were to stay on as soldier instructors. He preferred the former solution, since in his opinion they would serve as good examples of pioneers. The Burmese had other plans, however. They claimed that the settlers would be so taken up with tending their land that they would have no time to give instruction to others. Moreover, it was also the case that anyone who was sent abroad had to sign an undertaking to serve

107 Ibid.

the government for at least five years after their return.¹⁰⁸ This may be seen as a reflection of a traditional Burmese policy style that tends to focus on control and is suspicious of individual agency as a potential threat to unity, the principal moral value in the Burmese Buddhist universe.¹⁰⁹

But the Burmese approach was not welcomed by the soldiers themselves either. A letter sent to the Ayelet ha-Shachar kibbutz by one of the first study group members, Tun Shin, shows this clearly. In it, he wrote:

We already have three moshav villages here. I wanted to join one of them and be an individual farmer but the commander, Major Tun Shwe, didn't agree, and told me that I had to work in the cowshed. I worked better in Israel. Our people here don't know how to work at multiple jobs. Everyone wants to do just one job all the time. But we are learning a lot and I hope that in five years everything will be good.¹¹⁰

The Israelis believed that the settlers had insufficient agency in the project. The team noted that: 'It is very important that the settlers will occupy the new house some months before the agricultural season.'¹¹¹ Unfortunately not all of the houses were occupied in that time frame.

The criteria imposed by the Burmese for soldiers wishing to apply for resettlement were as follows: over 30 years old with 10 years' service, married with a family, healthy and fit for farming, with an enthusiasm for the farming life, a pioneering spirit, good character, willingness to cooperate, obedient to village regulations, and observant of contractual obligations.¹¹² It is hard to say how the 'pioneering spirit' or 'enthusiasm for the farming life' were verified. The main obstacle to the project, however, appears to have been the cultural differences between the Burmese and the Israelis. The pioneering spirit stressed so many times by the Israelis was their national ideology at the time, with agriculture and manual labour viewed as vital for developing the land. This had its roots in the pre-state period, when civil commitment among pro-socialist incomers to Palestine was crucial for accomplishing the national goal of sovereignty.¹¹³ For the Burmese the project was a new undertaking, which involved implementation of almost unknown concepts. Culturally speaking, in Burma there was little tradition of individual agency and almost no tradition of collective action outside the religious sphere. In pre-colonial times people were attached to their communities, controlled by headmen (*thugyi*), and bound by patron-client

108 'Minutes of the meeting held at National Defence College on 25th Feb. 1960 at 1400 hours regarding the agricultural development of Namsang Area with Israeli assistance' (no pagination), 2030/1, Israel State Archives.

109 The traditional paradigm in Burmese political thought ('the argument of order'), derived from a fatalistic view of human nature as fundamentally flawed (any freedom given to people ends in chaos, anarchy, and moral trespass), and sees strong political authority as necessary for control and to enforce law, order, discipline, and consequently unity. Walton, 'Politics in the moral universe', pp. 18, 67, 81, 83, 107.

110 *Yoman Ayelet ha-Shachar* 500, 21 Sept. 1960, p. 22.

111 'Report to the Directorate of Resettlement Ministry of Defence on the work in Namsang resettlement project (Mar. 1960 – Feb. 1961)' (no pagination), 2030/2, Israel State Archives.

112 *The Namsang resettlement project* (no pagination).

113 Anat Helman, *Becoming Israeli: National ideals and everyday life in the 1950s* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2014).

relationships, and they operated under the local equivalent of the social contract, which mandated for the average citizen the abandonment of ‘all his rights to the state in exchange for total protection’.¹¹⁴ Individual activity was neither advocated nor even tolerated (in a society where bondage was valued and anarchy feared more than tyranny, a ‘free thinker’ literally meant ‘someone who had no respect for the law’).¹¹⁵ Individualism was considered something dangerously close to ‘wrong views’, and as such threatening to unity, the ultimate moral value. In colonial times individualism came to be associated with colonial exploitation, greed, and egoism at the expense of the community. Hence, if there was a tradition of pro bono publico action, it was only collective, and only in the religious, not the secular sphere (unsurprisingly, Aung San, the Burmese national leader, invoked the example of the joint building of Shwedagon -- the holiest Burmese pagoda -- as an example of unity).¹¹⁶

The U Nu government, at least at the rhetorical level, tried to change these attitudes. The *Pyidawtha* programme was billed as a project to ‘create the “new man”’, that is: ‘a responsible citizen who will participate actively and constructively in government’.¹¹⁷ The Prime Minister himself appealed to the strong social tradition of charity (*ahlu*) by hoping ‘to persuade the people that merit can be acquired through devoting their resources and their energies to the building of works of social benefit’,¹¹⁸ while his right hand man, the future United Nations secretary general U Thant, hoped to ‘build “a new nation” ... to educate people long held down by colonialism in the ways of democracy and self-development’.¹¹⁹ These ideals went no further than slogans. The few projects initiated by the central authorities (including model farms)¹²⁰ failed to produce ground-breaking results in the long term. The internalised long-term cultural patterns¹²¹ proved resistant to top-to-bottom calls. The Burmans saw no reason to leave their privileged nucleus zone (‘Burma proper’) and go to what were the traditionally despised dependent peripheries (ethnic lands). Pioneering there, conquering virgin land on their own,¹²² and bringing about change

114 Taylor, *The state in Myanmar*, p. 55.

115 Michael Aung-Thwin, ‘Hierarchy and order in pre-colonial Burma’, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 15, 2 (1984): 226–31.

116 Ibid.; Gustaaf Houtman, *Mental culture in Burmese crisis politics: Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy* (Tokyo: Tokyo University for Foreign Studies, 1999), p. 62.

117 Maung Maung, ‘Pyidawtha comes to Burma’, *Far Eastern Survey* 22, 9 (1953): 119.

118 Hugh Tinker, ‘Nu, the serene statesman’, *Pacific Affairs* 30, 2 (1957): 129.

119 U Thant, ‘Building a nation: Goals for the future’, in *Burma*, special issue, *Atlantic Monthly*, Feb. 1958.

120 Hmawbi farm produced fowl and eggs on a commercial basis, while the Myitkyina settlement was designed to specialise in land clearance and cultivation: ‘Land settlement’, *The Guardian* (Burma), 18 Nov. 1958, p. 4. After initial enthusiasm, both projects failed to produce tangible results.

121 Maung Maung Gyi, *Burmese political values*, pp. 170–71.

122 Ben Gurion, during his talks with U Nu in 1961, mentioned that a ‘strong pioneering spirit’ was the key to turning inhospitable areas into acceptable living environments. This might have been understood as indirect criticism of the Burmese attitude: ‘Minutes of the official talks between the Hon’ble U Nu Prime Minister of the Union of Burma, and His Excellency Mr. David Ben-Gurion, Prime Minister of Israel, held at the official residence of the Prime Minister, 6 Dec. 1961’ (p. 20), accession no. 527, Box 55, 1961, MFA 15/3 (21), National Archive in Yangon. Ben-Gurion was even more frank during his public speeches: ‘if socialism is to work, the people must be taught to believe in the dignity of labour. Their standard of living must be raised in accordance with socialist principles. If a socialist party succeeds in

by themselves were clearly not on the mental maps of the 1950s Burmese. They had to be forced to do so,¹²³ which condemned the Namsang project to failure from the very beginning.

In 1962 another two villages were handed over to the settlers.¹²⁴ The Burmese were also seeking new funds to develop the project. The Israelis agreed to help.¹²⁵ Burma drew up a *Proposal for the establishment of the agricultural multi-purpose centre at Namsang (Shan States – Burma)*, which was submitted to the United Nations. Its authors stated that they envisioned a total of 17 settlements in Namsang, that is, fewer than previously planned, and that they wanted the subsidies to help with the training of 200 new settlers and also of previously settled women and young people. The UN project was scheduled to start in June 1963.¹²⁶ However, previous assumptions about the form of the settlements were now called into question. As Fritz (Peretz) Levinger, the head of the Israeli team of experts at the time, wrote in December 1962: ‘The experiment of the “moshav shitufi”, which was in reality a mechanised farm managed on account of the unit, was a *predictable failure and should be discontinued*.’¹²⁷

In January 1963 the first materials for the Namsang water supply system arrived. It was provided to Burma by a grant from the United States Agency for International Development. Aid was also provided via the Colombo Plan (launched in 1951), originally an Asian (mini-) equivalent of the Marshall Plan, conceived as a Western-backed initiative to counter communist influences in Southeast Asia by providing technical and financial assistance for development projects in the region; in later periods the plan lost its anti-communist appeal and diminished in importance. In March 1963 a 17-member team left Burma for two months in Japan to undergo practical training in agriculture and animal husbandry.¹²⁸ Japan also established an experimental agricultural station for the villages.

doing these, it will enjoy the confidence of the people and will forever remain strong.’ According to Ben Gurion, the key to success is ‘to teach the people to believe in the dignity of labour. They must be made to love to work’. ‘Premier Ben-Gurion meets Burmese socialists. Tells them how to make socialism work and win the people’s confidence’, *The Nation* (Burma), 7 Dec. 1961, p. 1.

123 For example, General Clift, the president of the resettlement board, encouraged the soldiers in the following manner: he ‘concluded by urging’ the ex-soldiers ‘not to cease to be patriotic because they [had] left the Defence Forces but to show the same enthusiasm for service to their country’. ‘83 more ex-servicemen resettled at Namsang’, *The Nation* (Burma), 27 Aug. 1962, p. 1.

124 Ibid.

125 ‘Notes of Agreement on Burmese/Israeli cooperation on Namsang project’ (no pagination), 2030/6, Israel State Archives.

126 *Proposal for the establishment of the agricultural multi-purpose centre at Namsang (Shan States – Burma)* (Rangoon: Government of Burma, 1962).

127 Emphasis ours. ‘Letter from Fritz (Peretz) Levinger to the Directorate of Resettlement’ (no pagination), Ministry of Defence, Namsang, 17 Dec. 1962, 2030/5, Israel State Archives. As Namsang was chosen as the site of the resettlement scheme for various policy reasons and not because it had the best farming conditions, agriculture there was more challenging and required a longer time to achieve a good income. Even in 1962 only 5 of the over 20 villages planned had been established, and the target number had been reduced to no more than 9. Only in that year did the team establish the best crops to plant in the area. The Israelis also claimed that the settlers’ income was too low, and also that not all of the people who were trained in Israel actually went to Namsang on their return; some were retained in administrative positions. See: ‘Final Report: Resettlement at Namsang’, 1962, 1912/15, Israel State Archives.

128 ‘17 member plan to study agriculture in Japan’, *The Guardian* (Burma), 16 Mar. 1963, pp. 1–2.

These were the last undertakings in connection with the Namsang project. In 1962–63 the political situation in Burma changed exponentially, and attitudes towards foreign investments became less and less welcoming. On 2 March 1962 the *Tatmadaw* (the armed forces) staged its second coup d'état in Burma and a period of military rule began that would last until 2015. Initially the Revolutionary Council -- the military-led governing body, under Ne Win -- continued many pre-1962 policies, including economic ones. Unfortunately, in mid-1962 the faction under Aung Gyi (who had greeted Sprinzak in 1959), which favoured moderate means, lost the power struggle within the council to the radical faction controlled by the left-wing 'red brigadier', General Tin Pe. From late 1962 to early 1963 Tin Pe embarked on the total nationalisation of the economy, including rice distribution and private enterprise, even shops, which was soon to ruin Burma.¹²⁹ This, combined with full censorship of the press from March 1963 and the council's xenophobic policy of expelling all foreign influences from 1963, sealed the fate of the Namsang project. Foreign advisers were fired and aid agencies closed down, as were foundations, universities, and even language schools; scholarships were ended; foreigners were either ordered to leave or restricted from entering Burma for longer than 24 hours, while Burmese were either banned or severely restricted from going abroad. With the council's nationalist policies adversely affecting Israeli companies and their chances of competing on the Burmese market, growing pressure from Arab countries to isolate Israel, and Ne Win's first signs of paranoia (he accused the Israelis of betrayal and even espionage), the 'mild socialism practised in Israel ceased to be appealing to the Burmese regime'.¹³⁰ Consequently, Israeli projects were discontinued or minimised, and in 1964 Israeli experts were asked to leave.¹³¹ With Burma effectively having hung a big 'Do Not Disturb' sign on its front door,¹³² and reverting to being a hermit country, it was no longer open to learning anything from any foreigners, including the Israelis.

We have examined the Namsang project (and the reasons why it failed) as a micro case study as to why the Burmese modernisation project of the 1950s failed.¹³³ The Burmese elites were not technocrats or other experts, but a 'heaven-born'¹³⁴ class of politicians and civil-servants who did little beyond elite policymaking. With some notable exceptions, they knew little about agriculture, industry, or any other areas of

129 Michael W. Charney, *A history of modern Burma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 120–25.

130 Abadi, *Israel's quest for recognition*, p. 126. Ne Win 'said that he had decided to pursue his style of socialism and no longer wanted to cooperate with any country in the world. Moreover, he argued that he had been betrayed by the Israelis who, in his view, came to Burma for the sole purpose of profitmaking. He even went to the extent of accusing the Israelis of espionage'; 'Correspondence of Lewin to Shimoni', 15 Dec. 1963, Israel State Archives, 3392/36, quoted in *ibid.*

131 However, as Moshe Yegar recalled afterwards, 'both embassies were kept open and continued to function under a low profile'. Joe Freeman, 'In Israel's earliest days, the place its leaders felt compelled to visit was Burma', *Tablet*, 29 May 2014, <https://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-news-and-politics/174234/israel-and-burma> (last accessed 7 Apr. 2019).

132 Thant Myint-U, *The river of lost footsteps: A personal history of Burma* (New York: Farrer, Straus & Giroux, 2006), p. 292.

133 For more information on the failure of highly modern development projects in a broader context, see: James Scott, *Seeing like a state: How certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999).

134 Maung Maung Gyi, *Burmese political values*, pp. 157–9.

the economy. They patronised and neglected the peasantry — who in turn became more and more disillusioned and disinterested in national politics, turning instead to local leaders and village issues.¹³⁵ The elites were interested almost only in the cultivators' paddy: they bought it from the peasants for an administratively set, low, fixed price, and sold it abroad at much higher market prices, thus making profits that allowed the state to function and them to live off it. In a way, the behaviour of the 1950s elites emulated that of the pre-colonial monarchs, whose interest in matters outside the capital was often limited to calls 'on the people of the countryside to live in peace and prosperity',¹³⁶ and not upset important palace affairs.

The 1950s Burmese elites believed in grand plans rather than details and expertise: for them, 'planning became a talisman' — one leading Burmese politician of that era even argued that 'the plan itself would create power for the state'.¹³⁷ This was why their 'plan of plans', *Pyidawtha*, failed, as it did not prioritise agriculture, which was the bulwark of the Burmese economy,¹³⁸ and did not take into consideration civil war or fluctuating global rice prices. The latter two buried *Pyidawtha*.

Namsang failed due to a similar type of wishful thinking. When the Burmese leaders saw Israel's success in the *kibbutzim* and *moshavim*, their only thought was to copy and paste it to Burma. But they did not take important details into consideration. The ancient Burmese social structures resisted this new form of land management, while deeply rooted cultural patterns proved impossible to change by means of officially decreed plans. Consequently, instead of miraculously taking Burma into modernity, Namsang became a disappointment, and was forgotten.

Conclusion

Israel's nation- and state-building processes undoubtedly fascinated the Burmese elites of the late 1950s, whose understanding of Burma's underdevelopment and ambition to restore the country's greatness was coupled with their unwillingness to fall into neo-colonial dependency on the way. This led them to seek out non-Western, non-Soviet paths of development. They accepted Japan's reparations and were fascinated by Yugoslavia's socialist progress, as these had no political strings attached. Using the same strategy, they found Israel.

They chose the Israelis as partners for the Namsang project believing that they would bring expertise and knowledge. The implementation process revealed the tensions between the different founding concepts of the *moshavim* in Israel, rooted in its national ideology, and those in Burma. The planning experts tried to graft cultural concepts such as pioneering onto the Burmese reality, but with no great success. After a while they realised that:

Land Resettlement is not only an Agricultural experiment, it is also a social experiment. In a Project of this nature it is the success of the Settlers Villages which is the primary

135 Ardeth Maung Thawngmung, *Behind the Teak Curtain: Authoritarianism, agricultural policies and political legitimacy in rural Burma/Myanmar* (London: Kegan Paul, 2004), pp. 60–65.

136 Thant Myint-U, *The making of modern Burma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 75.

137 Taylor, *The state in Myanmar*, p. 256.

138 David Steinberg, *A socialist country in Southeast Asia* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1982), p. 67.

objective. And for a Settlers Village to succeed, the biggest factor is the human one. Unless the Settler and his wife are prepared to adjust themselves to their new surroundings, and to work hard, and are prepared to accept a certain amount of hardship in the first few years, and unless they co-operate with their neighbours and give mutual aid when necessary, and unless the pioneering spirit is kept alive, a scheme of this nature has little hope of success.¹³⁹

Another aspect that contributed to the failure of the project was the ultimate goal of the Burmese authorities, who, beside the desire to control their borders, also wanted to keep tabs on the country's ethnic minorities. This agenda was not overtly voiced to the Israelis, but it was present from the very beginning, and was the reason why the Burmese army decided to settle soldiers in the region. It was also the source of the military's reluctance to give the settlers too much freedom, in opposition to Israeli advice. The Israelis maintained that the settlement should replicate an egalitarian society, with no ranks and no orders. The project was one of the Israelis' very first major transnational projects and the lessons learned affected and prompted the modification of approaches that they incorporated in other projects.

To the Burmese this project seemed the perfect answer to a developmental conundrum. The Israeli model looked tempting because Israel was not only successfully modernising without being perceived as imperialist, but more importantly it was socialist. And this was precisely what the Burmese wanted to achieve: to become modern in a non-Western, socialist, but non-Soviet way. Unfortunately, these hopes were dashed in the late 1950s, when it transpired that Burma's economic situation (even before the second coup) was a 'disaster', characterised by 'industrial failure and agricultural stagnation'.¹⁴⁰ The Burmese elites were unable to make the economy competitive, to modernise the country; they were intellectuals, not technocrats: 'the only thing[s] they could build ... were ivory towers; intellectual edifices that failed to provide concrete outcomes'.¹⁴¹ The accuracy of this diagnosis can be seen in the Namsang project case study. The failure of this and other projects was among the reasons why Ne Win shut off the country, which dealt the final blow to hopes of copying Israel's success.

139 'A short introduction into Namsang Resettlement Project' (no pagination), 2030/5, Israel State Archives.

140 Spiro, *Buddhism and society*, p. 183.

141 Winfield, 'Buddhism and the state', p. 191.