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**Title** Articulating Secularism in Religious Paradigm: A Study of Theravada Buddhism in Contemporary Myanmar

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***Articulating Secularism in Religious Paradigm: A Study of Theravada Buddhism in Contemporary Myanmar***

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**Abstract**

*This research intends to examine the intersection of secularism and traditional religion in the lives of Buddhist people of Myanmar who revere a proclaimed secular leader Aung San Suu Kyi as Bodhisattva. It suggests that Aung San Suu Kyi is a unique instance of personality cult where a secular leader attracts followers with her charisma without calling off their traditional religious affiliation. It employs the model suggested by Sarah Hunter which ascribes six traits to the personality cults including ideology (nationalism), the ideal leader (closeness to masses), frequent communication through media, relating oneself to great men in history through lineage or political legacy, Naming places after the leader's name, life of cult after death of founder etc. It concludes that her charisma was created because of her heroic struggle in the chaotic situation of Myanmar in the twentieth century. Her selfless struggles and the ideology of liberation of her people portrayed her as personification of wisdom and hope quite like a goddess in the traditional religious theology. Despite being a secular nationalist leader, she managed to attract her followers from a traditional religious setting because she laid the foundations of her cult ideology on nationalist cum religious grounds.*

**Keywords:** Personality Cult, Political religion, Religion in Myanmar, Secularism and Buddhism.

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### Introduction

This research intends to examine the intersection of secularism and traditional religion in the lives of Buddhist people of Myanmar who revere a proclaimed secular leader Aung San Suu Kyi as Boddhisatva. Since 1988, Aung San Suu Kyi has emerged as a very substantial political figure in the history of Myanmar. She is the daughter of Aung San, the great national hero, leader of Myanmar Independence Army (BIA) and Anti-fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL). She returned to Myanmar after the death of her father and resisted against the oppressive military forces. She unceasingly raised her voice to support democracy, human rights, and non-violent protest. She has been kept under house arrest for almost 15 years and tortured by military government. Her children grew up thousands of miles away, her husband died during her house arrest far away. Suu Kyi has sacrificed her life in the struggle against the military government which made her popular among people of Myanmar.

Myanmar is situated in Southeast Asian region, sharing borders with India, China, Laos and Thailand. There were dozens of different racial and ethnic groups in early civilization of Myanmar; most of them dominated a certain region of the country historically. The people of Myanmar are divided into Burmans, Mon, Shans, Kachins, Rakhine, Chins and Karen. Myanmar is the only Theravada Buddhist state as approximately 87% of people in Myanmar are Buddhists and almost all of them practice Theravada Buddhism.<sup>1</sup> Burma's historical tradition is closely related with Buddhism which got transmitted from India and Ceylon with kingship and merchants. Before colonization of Burma, the king was the supporter and protector of the Buddhist faith. The canon language of Buddhism Pali, had strongly influenced Burmese language. Burmese acquired education through monks thus monastery was not only the center of religious activities but also social ones. In short, all religious and social activities happened around the monastery so Buddhism was part and parcel of private and public life of masses. It continued until the Buddhist Sangha was worn down due to colonial rule after Anglo-Burmese war in 1824-1826 and two subsequent wars.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>[https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Census%20Main%20Report%20%28UNION%29%20-%20ENGLISH\\_1.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Census%20Main%20Report%20%28UNION%29%20-%20ENGLISH_1.pdf) accessed on December 22, 2020

<sup>2</sup><https://www.hrw.org/report/2009/09/22/resistance-monks/buddhism-and-activism-burma> accessed on February 21 2021

## **Literature Review**

In pre-modern academic discourses, religion has been perceived to be comprising of practices and beliefs that furnished answers to the essential questions regarding the origin, purpose, and destiny of human existence and its relationship with supernatural forces, realities or principle. In the 18th century, when scholars started studying diverse expressions of religion academically for the first time, “religion” was usually conceived to be revelation based.<sup>3</sup> In the 19th century, most of the attempts to define religion revolved around identifying the essential qualities of religion and the common substratum of the various forms of religion. The scholarly study of religion in the advent of 20th century represents the shift of emphasis from the historical and rational dimension to the recognition of spiritual and transcendental aspects of religion. Twentieth century scholars, who were more seriously confronted with the issue of pluralism and the rise of New Religious Movements, realized the problems inherent in the definition of religion essentially revolving around the idea of sacred/holy. Consequently, they developed definitions based upon other dimensions of religion, thus broadening the category of religion. Primarily Wittgenstein’s idea of “family resemblance” influenced the philosophers of religion. The definitions coined by Fredrick Stereng, Eric J. Sharpe, Charles Glock, Ninian Smart and Frank Whaling reflect this influence. The most significant development in the conceptualization of religion occurred when Wilfred Cantwell Smith suggested the bifurcation of religion and religiosity thus emancipating religion from the boundaries of sacred or supernatural. This shift in conceptualization helped the scholars of religious studies to analyse the newly emerging trends of religiosity such as civil religion, political religion and cults etc.

Rousseau’s concept of civil religion was a pioneering work which sacralised politics and presented it as a substitute to traditional religion. Hence political religions are phenomena of the modern era, ‘developing only after the construction of a political sphere independent from religion and after religion had been turned into a private matter, relegated to a private dimension’.<sup>4</sup> Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce sees religious belief as fundamental to human existence and argues that, “when formal religion is

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<sup>3</sup> Erick J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion A History* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1975).48.

<sup>4</sup>Todorov, Tzvetan, J. L. Talmon, Nathan Rotenstreich, and Yehoshua Arieli. "Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions." (2001) pp. 1–18, p. 2.

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suppressed, people will try to form a religion of their own”.<sup>5</sup> The concept of political religion revolves around the figure of a charismatic leader and phenomenon of personality cult is closely knit with political religion as Anita very aptly noted that “the term ‘cult’ derives from a specifically religious connotation, and personality cults surrounding political leaders share much common ground with religious worship.”<sup>6</sup>

The phenomenon of the personality cult has been researched from different theoretical orientations across the variety of academic disciplines and fields. It has been analysed as an outcome of mass media revolution<sup>7</sup>, as an expression of politics as religious faith<sup>8</sup>, from a historical perspective<sup>9</sup>, as a manifestation of political hegemony<sup>10</sup>, and as a case study of psychology of followers of personality cult<sup>11</sup>. These diverse perspectives of analyses have taken following factors into account; the personality of the leader; the shared traits of the followers; the nature of the relationship between the leader and cohorts; the mechanisms that operate to create and sustain the personality cult; the factors contributing to rise of the cult; the impact of the cult; and the artistic as well as aesthetic features of the societies where personality cults exist.

Historically, the most famous personality cults studied have been Vladimir Lenin and Joseph Stalin of the Soviet Union, Mao Zedong of Communist China, Chiang Kai-Shek of the Chinese Nationalist Party, Kim Il Sung of North Korea and Kamal Atatürk of Turkey. All of these political leaders fit into the standard theorization of political

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<sup>5</sup>Benedetto Croce, ‘Per la rinascita dell’idealismo’, cited in Gentile & Mallett, *The Sacralisation of Politics*, 2000, p. 31.

<sup>6</sup>Pisch, Anita, *The personality cult of Stalin in Soviet posters, 1929–1953*. Archetypes, inventions and fabrications. Anu Press, 2016, P.54.

<sup>7</sup>Hans Speier, ‘The truth in hell: Maurice Joly on modern despotism’, *Polity*, 10:1, Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1977, pp. 18–32.

<sup>8</sup>Peter Lambert & Robert Mallett, ‘Introduction: the heroisation–demonisation phenomenon in mass dictatorships’, *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 8:3–4, 2007, pp. 453–63.

<sup>9</sup>Jost Dulffer, ‘Bonapartism, fascism and National Socialism’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 11:4, 1976, pp. 1109–28.

<sup>10</sup>Deanne N. Den Hartog, Robert J. House, Paul J. Hanges, S. Antonio Ruiz Quintanilla, ‘Culture specific and cross-culturally generalizable implicit leadership theories: are attributes of charismatic / transformational leadership universally endorsed?’, *Leadership Quarterly*, 10:2, 1999, pp. 219–56.

<sup>11</sup>Josep R. Llobera, *The making of totalitarian thought*, Oxford, Berg, 2003; Bruce Mazlish, ‘Group psychology and problems of contemporary history’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 3:2, 1968, pp. 163–77.

religion and subsequent rise of personality cult because they eradicated the traditional forms of religion altogether and promoted antireligious sentiments or supported secular deification of their personalities replacing the traditional theistic beliefs. The current study is different from these historical models because Aung Saan Suu Kyi did not abolish traditional Buddhist tradition rather stood at the intersection of religion and secularity thus providing a unique instance of personality cult where a secular leader attracts followers with her charisma without calling off their traditional religious affiliation. So, this study is novel both in its content and theorization both.

There are many books written about the socio-political history of Myanmar and Aung San Suu Kyi's struggle for the country. Gustaaf Houtman, in his book *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics*, has analysed the chaotic context of Burmese political affairs which made people upset, and they looked for ways to liberate themselves from oppressive failed state institutions. According to him, the courageous charismatic leadership of Aung Saan Suu Kyi at the critical moment of nation's history won the hearts of people and she rose as a personality cult.<sup>12</sup>Judy L. Hasday's *Modern Peacemakers Aung San Suu Kyi* is a remarkable biography of Aung San Suu Kyi and a well-documented source of her political struggles but it has not dealt with rise of cult or emergence of political religion etc.<sup>13</sup>Petter Popham authored a comprehensive book with the title *The Lady and the peacock* and portrayed Aung Saan as a renowned human activist. He wrote her life history and discussed her personal life in depth. A brief history of Myanmar and the mentality of Burmese nation, their traditions and culture are also part and parcel of the book but the author does not allude to the phenomenon of convergence of secularism and religiosity in the personality of Aung Saan Suu Kyi. <sup>14</sup>

In the light of the literature reviewed above, it may be stated that the academia has researched on the political as well as socio-historical aspects of Aung San Suu Kyi's life and achievements but none of the scholarly works explored the connection between the secular personality orientation of this great political leader and her staunch Buddhist

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<sup>12</sup>Gustaaf Houtman, *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics*, (Japan: Tokyo university of Foreign Studies, Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, 1999) p.1-392.

<sup>13</sup>Judy L. Hasday, *Aung San Suu Kyi: ctivist for Democracy in Myanmar*, (New York: Chelsea House An imprint of InfoBase Publishing, 2007) p.1-129.

<sup>14</sup>Petter Popham, *The Lady and the peacock* (London: Rider books an imprint of Ebury Publishing, 2011).

followers. So, it would be interesting to know that how a secular leader can motivate religious people and incorporate elements of political religion into the standard religious set up and thus may lead to the formation of a cult as suggested by Stark and Bainbridge<sup>15</sup>.

### Theoretical Framework and Research Methodology

This paper suggests that Aung San Suu Kyi is a charismatic personality that is venerated by the people of Myanmar and represents a personality cult. "Personality cult is a condition in which people are encouraged to show extreme love and respect for a famed person, specifically a political leader".<sup>16</sup> The term 'cult' came to be coupled with the term 'personality' in modern European languages in the first half of the 19th century. Historian Jan Plamper starts with tracing the history of the word 'cult', from its roots in both religious and ritualistic context, in Ancient Roman times, to the semantic shift in meaning when coupled with secular referents during the modern age of enlightenment. He sees the Romantic era's 'cult of genius' as being the closest predecessor to the 'cult of personality', manifesting in acts of appreciation, such as the erection of public statues of Johann von Goethe and the holding of a Friedrich Schiller festival in 1839.<sup>17</sup> Pao-min Chang<sup>18</sup>, Árpád von Klimó<sup>19</sup> and Plamper<sup>20</sup> agree on the fact that personality cults have inevitable connection with glorification of political leader and creation of god-like image thus utilizing religious concepts in the formation of secular structures.

A personality cult differs from a dictatorship and a monarchy because of the reverence for the person, rather than respect or fear of the position, which becomes irrelevant.<sup>21</sup> Personality cults emerge due to weakness in the prevalent socio-political

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<sup>15</sup>Stark, Rodney, and William Sims Bainbridge. *The future of religion: Secularization, revival and cult formation*. Univ of California Press, 1985.p.119.

<sup>16</sup>Sally Wehmeier, Colin McIntosh, Joanna Turnbull and Michael Ashby, *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of current English*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1127.

<sup>17</sup>Jan Plamper, 'Introduction', in Klaus Heller & Jan Plamper, *Personality cults in Stalinism* (eds), Goettingen, VandR(Unipress, 2004). p. 22

<sup>18</sup>Pao-min Chang, quoted in Jeremy Taylor, 'The production of the Chiang Kai-shek personality cult, 1929–1975', *The China Quarterly*, 185, 2006, pp. 96–110

<sup>19</sup>Árpád von Klimó, "'A very modest man": Béla Illés, or how to make a career through the leader cult', in Apor et al., *The leader cult in communist dictatorships*, p. 47.

<sup>20</sup>Plamper, in Heller & Plamper, *Personality cults in Stalinism*, p. 33.

<sup>21</sup>Hunter, Sarah Gail. "Love and exploitation: Personality cults, their characteristics, their creation, and modern examples." PhD diss., University of Georgia, 2012. P.3

system particularly when state institutions fail to deliver, they become vulnerable to radical change. At this moment of history, a visionary leader with a charismatic personality rises in the political arena and fights for liberation and salvation of the masses. Thus, a political leader gets turned into a personality cult attracting a large number of followers; proclaiming and exercising absolute authority. This is how, political leader, although secular in approach and outlook, succeeds in attracting masses adhering to traditional religious traditions otherwise. The same may be applied to the rise of Aung Saan Suu Kyi as personality cult in contemporary Myanmar where the military setup failed people in many ways and the chaos in the country paved the way of liberation of people at the hands of Aung Saan Suu Kyi whose strong political legacy added to her charisma. As a result, Buddhists of Myanmar incorporated a secular political leader into the traditional sacred circle of Bodhisattvas.

This analysis employs the model suggested by Sarah Hunter which ascribe six traits to the personality cults including ideology (nationalism),<sup>22</sup> the ideal leader (closeness to masses), frequent communication through media, relating oneself to great men in history through lineage or political legacy, Naming places after the leader's name, life of cult after death of founder, erosion of institutions in favour of the personality.<sup>23</sup> Hunter is of the view that not necessarily all the traits exist in every personality cult rather the presence of most of these, may lead to the identification of a political charismatic leader as a personality cult. So, we will evaluate the life of Aung Saan Suu Kyi and her relationship with Buddhist people of Myanmar in the light of the abovementioned variables to see how far she has been able to inspire people as a personality cult.

### **The Roots of Phenomenon of Cult in Buddhism**

The most striking feature of this case-study is the rise of personality cult among Theravada Buddhists of Myanmar who gathered around a secular political leader. This behaviour indicates that either Theravada Buddhism or Burmese nation has the tendencies to embrace or nurture the cult phenomenon in history. In order to probe this

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<sup>22</sup>Nationalism is more about the exclusion of others and is associated with more war-like tendencies. Druckman, Daniel (1994). "Nationalism, Patriotism, Group Loyalty: A Social Psychological Perspective." *Mershon International Studies Review*, Vol. 38, No. 1

<sup>23</sup>Hunter, Sarah Gail. "Love and exploitation: Personality cults, their characteristics, their creation, and modern examples." PhD diss., University of Georgia, 2012. p.15-18

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hypothesis, one has to go through the history of Buddhism in the land of Myanmar previously known as Burma. There were different traditions in Myanmar, but after the introduction of Buddhism, it became the majority religion throughout the country. It was recognized as official state religion in the eleventh century when the King Anawaratha embraced Theravada Buddhism. Despite the popularity of Buddhism, primitive religious cults did not get annihilated completely rather got merged into the Buddhist tradition; the most famous and the most vital of which was *Nat spirit*. Nats were the local deities, worshipped by specific tribes or villages, considered to be responsible for well-being and security of their worshippers.

In the beginning, the worship of Nats was region-bound and native but with the passage of time, the cluster of thirty-six national Nats was consolidated, who were believed to possess particular divine attributes and were worshiped by the whole country. According to the legend, in the ninth century they were considered to be the guardian gods of the country and its kings. With the rise of Buddhism and its increasing popularity among the masses, the king Anawrahta was compelled to embrace Theravada Buddhism and declare it as the national religion of the country. With this radical change in the imperial clan, all images of Nats were abandoned by the state and consequently all pre-Buddhist cults were abolished by the imperial orders. However, it was really hard for the common people to completely withdraw from the inherited customs and practices, and recourse to stratagem. This gave rise to the convergence of Theravada Buddhist ideologies with the native inherited religious elements in the daily lives of Burmese Buddhist laity.<sup>24</sup>

The most visible manifestation of this convergence was the decision of King Anawrahta who declared to add Sakka, the king of the gods and guardian of Buddhism, to the already existing cluster of Nats as the Chief God<sup>25</sup>. With this declaration, Nat cult was authorized and became a variant of mainstream Theravada Buddhism. It also indicates how, in the past, a monarch was able to manipulate the religious elements with

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<sup>24</sup>“Folk-Elements in Burmese Buddhism - The Atlantic.”3-4Accessed on October 28, 2018.<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1958/02/folk-elements-in-burmese-buddhism/306833/>.

<sup>25</sup>S. Ikehata, “Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies,” *Southeast Asia: History and Culture*, no. 23 (1994): 135–36, <https://doi.org/10.5512/sea.1994.135>.

his political hegemony and this sheds light on the behaviour of acceptance and conformity exhibited by Burmese people back then. The monarch used his political authority to manipulate religious ideology in order to gain a socio-political aim of uniting Buddhists and followers of native traditions by creating a unified pantheon.<sup>26</sup> Not only the ideological dimension but also the cultural and ritualistic dimensions of primitive religions were incorporated into Buddhist tradition.<sup>27</sup>

Apart from Nat cult, other cults also emerged as a result of the syncretism of local traditions and Theravada Buddhism. For instance, the alchemy cult which promoted the primitive techniques to change the body and claimed to fulfil the Buddhist philosophy of flux, and declared that they wanted to live till the arrival of the next Buddha. Another example is of the astrology cult whose adherents pitched a layer of Buddhism during the nine ceremonies of God, where the gods of nine planets guided Buddha and his eight disciples.<sup>28</sup> These cults did not cease to exist even in contemporary times as lots of Burmese still access the astrologers and pay their offerings to the Nats, without terminating to be good Buddhists. On the other hand, these practices and beliefs could not overpower Buddhism because interestingly, the people of Myanmar recourse to alchemy, astrology, and Nat worship for the protection and prosperity in their worldly life and perform Buddhist rituals so that that they could achieve salvation in religious terms.<sup>29</sup> This very phenomenon indicates that these people have learnt to discern between this worldly and that worldly affairs long before the modern disparity of religion and secularity hence they had the inherent tendency to follow a personality cult converging secular values with Buddhist faith.

## **The Rise of Aung San Su kyi as a Cult**

We find an interesting rather paradoxical amalgam of religiosity and secularism in the personality of Aung San Suu Kyi as she has consistently emphasized a spiritual cum ethical approach to political leadership in vein of Buddhist ethical principles despite proclaiming herself to be a secular person. She proposed that liberation of the country can

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<sup>26</sup>Bénédict Brac de la Perrière, "An Overview of the Field of Religion in Burmese Studies," *Asian Ethnology* 68, no. 2, (2009):197-199. Accessed 4/4/2018.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25614538>

<sup>27</sup>"Folk-Elements in Burmese Buddhism - The Atlantic."3-4

<sup>28</sup>Folk-Elements in Burmese Buddhism - The Atlantic.3-4

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.3-4

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be found through personal moral training and criticized the military government for not reforming itself in the light of Buddhist morality. These ideas lead to a personality cult which gathered Buddhist masses under the charismatic leadership of Aung San Suu kyi and despite her statements of detachment from spirituality or religiosity; she was declared a female Boddhisatva. Some of her followers refer to her as “angel of Universal Avenue” or the “angel of democracy”, while, others have elevated her as a brave woman symbolizing the fantastical mother goddess of the earth who can bring freedom from the evil military dictators for them. She once said, “Don’t consider I will be capable to provide you freedom, honestly I will convey you, I am not a charmer, I am not a diviner nor have a special power that will allow me to give you democracy, I can tell you honestly democracy will be attained by you, by the determination, discipline, bravery of the people. If you have all these qualities then you can achieve democracy easily. I can only guide towards the path of democracy through my experiences which I gained from foreign country, research, and my father’s works.”<sup>30</sup> Her statement delineates the distinct traits of her personality cult which may be elaborated as follows;

### **Ideology**

The first and the foremost characteristic of a personality cult is the specific ideology which attracts people around the charismatic leader and connects them with each other as a unified whole. In case of political religions and subsequently rising cults, this ideology is nationalistic in character. Since the case of Suu kyi represents the unique instance of articulating religiosity in a secular paradigm her ideology is twofold as well. Her manifesto was not only centralized on the liberation of Burmese nation from the military oppression but she made sure to include Buddhist worldview as an essential contour of her ideological framework. She had charismatic power to unite all citizens into an entity that got identified as a collective whole and her charisma was an outcome of her political vision enrooted in the Buddhist moral ideals and her courageous leadership to execute that vision. She appeared as the saviour and symbol of hope for her people in the times of distress and turmoil; she personified hope for betterment in future and ambition for nonviolent democratic change.

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<sup>30</sup>Lintner and Human Rights Watch (Organization), *The Resistance of the Monks: Buddhism and Activism in Burma*.pp57 (Acceded on 19, September2018).

Burmese were patriotic in nature and had strong nationalistic sentiments. This strong sense of national identity made them connect deeply with Aung San Suu Kyi when she got Noble peace prize as it elevated the status of Burmese nation. Moreover, Burmese nationalistic sentiment was also touched by the democratic struggle of Aung San Suu Kyi in 1988, when military force crushed the democracy in the country. Burma gained significant consideration by international media and human rights organizations due to the initiation of new military government and an indigenous opposition movement led by Aung San Suu Kyi.<sup>31</sup> It added to her popularity among the masses. Along with a promising nationalistic ideology and religion-oriented framework of Buddhist values, she proved herself capable of confronting all the challenges and sacrificed her personal relations, family life and golden years of her life for the sake of transforming the ideals of democracy and liberation into reality.<sup>32</sup>

The military government and its proponents tried to propagate the view that political freedom is an idea alien to Buddhist worldview and community. They argued that according to Buddhist philosophy of life, everything is in flux and socio-political system is no exception to that. The basic faith of Theravada Buddhist is that all living things have to undergo through the wheel of rebirth and the only way to escape that and get freedom is by accepting the four noble truths, attachment, suffering, escape and impermanence and the way of salvation, eight-fold path. Therefore, the dictatorial rulers tried to make people believe that the socio-political system could not affect them, everything and everyone was subject to the law of change and impermanence so they needed not speculate political forms in earthly world.

On the other hand, Aung San Suu Kyi claimed that the idea of freedom has its roots in Buddhism in the history of Burmese nation. She brought instances from history that Burmese tradition got integrated and unified under the leadership of a strong monarch. The moral values, given by Buddhism worked for the people when they valued the rights of others and performed their duties consciously but with the passage of time, their behaviour collapsed to chaos and terror and particularly in the reign of oppressive military government, the moral training and mental culture of people totally ceased to exist. Hence, at this stage the nation needed a truthful leader who could enforce laws and

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<sup>31</sup>Herbert, "Review Reviewed Work(s): Freedom from Fear, and Other Writings by Aung San SuuKyui and Michael Aris."187.

<sup>32</sup>Herbert, 187.

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maintain order in the state. In order to ground her vision of an ideal leader in the native minds, she fetched the ideals from Buddhist moral principles and stated that an ideal ruler should be humble, nonviolent, patient, sacrificing by nature, morally strong, benevolent, harmless and fair. Loyalty and submission to such a leader then becomes the part of the religious duties of the subjects. This is how, Aung San Suu kyi combined the political nationalistic motives with the staunch Buddhist ideologies and became a secular personality cult for a religious people.

### **Inheritance from History**

The second most significant trait of a personality cult is its legitimization from the historical precedents. This may occur either through portraying oneself as an intellectual heir to the successful heroic people in the history or through carrying forward the legacy of blood relations. Both of these ways add to the charismatic aura of the leader of the cult. Aung San Suu kyi had a strong leverage in this regard as her father was deeply revered by his nation due to his struggles for freedom. Her father was deemed to be the saviour of his people as he sacrificed his career, his family and even his life fighting against the British colonizers. He pushed the nation towards independence and although he got assassinated before independence yet he had created awareness among people. Soon after the independence from British, military took over Burma again and it remained under control of military for almost 62 years. People of Burma were in distress and they were striving for their independence when in 1988 Aung San Suu kyi accidentally came back to Burma to look after her ill mother. When she saw the miserable condition of the country made her upset and she decided to fight for the sake of her people imitating the example of her father. She started exploring her father's life through books and chronicles and idealized him by all means. Then she resumed his mission of liberating her nation from military rules. She followed her father's footsteps and started to coordinate with the struggle of Burmese people towards their independence against military rule. At the time of her arrival Burmese were in restlessness as they were waiting for any saviour and she was the only hope they had so they followed her.

Aung San Suu Kyi had a charismatic personality which attracted people. Her charisma increased her due to her sympathetic nature and passionate love for them. The major reason for her attraction was her father's resemblance, her face structure, her ambition, her sacrificing and patriotic nature reminded people of her father and she

always used to refer to her father's memories in front of public. So, people of Myanmar unintentionally gathered around her because she reminded them of her father who was a symbol of hope, struggle and sacrifice. When Aung san was gone, people of Burma did not forget him and never wanted to forget him. Consequently, when his daughter appeared with dark eyes, dark hair and a smile like her father, people welcomed her wholeheartedly as the only daughter of martyred leader.

Aung San Suu Kyi's father worked really hard to combat colonization and liberate his people. For this purpose, he frequently travelled all over the country; delivering speeches and attending meetings with different ethnic groups inside the country. At that time, she was too young to understand her father's struggle and long-lasting impact; that would come later in her life. But her father's vision and struggles earned her a lot of support from different ethnic groups and leaders of religious denominations.<sup>33</sup>

In 1988, when she returned to her native homeland, she stepped forward in the centre of the peaceful revolution and soon became the leader who organized, persuaded and compelled people for their future aspirations and mission for democracy and freedom. Since that time she has moved into the political field, she raised voice for the rights of her people and spoke bravely in front of the government due to which people of Burma fully supported her in her struggle of asserting their rights and national identities. As the daughter of Burma's martyr leader, Aung san, who pushed the nation closer to the independence in 1947 but got assassinated before succeeding that objective. She appeared to lead Burma's second struggle for freedom by her father's ideology.<sup>34</sup>

### **Naming Places after the Cult Leader**

The people commemorate the sacrifices and struggles of their cult leaders by naming the events and places after their names. This commemoration makes the memories of national heroes an integral part of the lives of the upcoming generations thus keeping the leaders of cults alive after their death. Since Aung San Suu kyi is still alive and she inherited her charisma and legacy from her father it would not be out of place to mention that people of Myanmar have kept her father's memories alive through

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<sup>33</sup>Hasday, 34-36

<sup>34</sup>Josef Silverstein, "The Idea of Freedom in Burma and the Political Thought of DawAung San SuuKyi," *Pacific Affairs* 69, no. 2 (1996): 211, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2760725.112>.

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exhibiting this trait of personality cults. A Street of a city lies on his name, which leads to a market where everything from clothing to handicraft, jewellery and food are sold. In Myanmar, there is also a Park and a Museum that bears Aung San name situated on Natmawk road. The museum was built at the place where Aung San and his wife shared a house in 1920s in the past. There is a national holiday in the honour of his sacrifices for the country, on the day he died.

### Leadership Qualities

When it comes to leadership qualities in a personality cult it essentially refers to the capabilities of the cult leader to relate to the problem of people and empathize with them in the truest sense. Aung San Suu kyi proved herself to be a selfless person who struggled for the sake of liberating her people and owned their problems rather preferred the collective cause over her personal comforts. She was house arrested for a long period of time and lost her husband during that time. Despite that when military government offered to end her house arrest in case, she leaves the country and halts the movement of democratic rights for her people she refused to accept the offer. She remained symbol of freedom for oppressed Burmese during her house arrest. She always demonstrated bravery, fearlessness and patriotism, faced many difficulties and fought strongly and never retreated. She proved that if you are determined then nothing is impossible. She promised her people that she would fight for their rights until her last breath; her sacrifices showed that she loved the country and countryman very much. She always remained with them and ignited the flame of freedom among them and decided to stand up and raise voice in front of military dictatorship for their rights, her self-sacrifices and willingness have awakened the desire for social sincerity in her country and people were inspired by her nature.<sup>35</sup>

Apart from her political ambitious struggle, she equally respected and related herself with the religious dispositions of her people. Despite being raised in a secular environment and declaring herself to be a person with no religious affiliation, she used to deliver those ideas that are acceptable for Buddhist community in Myanmar. She adopted Buddhist dressing, started learning Buddhist meditation and often visited their temples.

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<sup>35</sup>Taigen Dan Leighton, *Faces of Compassion: Classic Bodhisattva Archetypes and Their Modern expression –an introduction to Mahayana Buddhism*(United States of America: Wisdom publications, 2012):156

In this way she articulated herself among Buddhist community successfully. She provided political ideals to the people inspired from their religion and personified herself as a manifestation of those ideals.

## **Deification of Secular Leader**

Due to the subscription of Aung San Suu kyi to the prevalent Buddhist practices and teachings, her Buddhist followers tried to incorporate her into the sacred domain of Bodhisattvas. In other cases of personality cults all over the world, secular leaders were deified by construction of godless theologies but rarely did it happen that leader of a personality cult was so fondly venerated by the cohorts of a tradition religion. This uniqueness owes itself to not only the love of Buddhists of Myanmar for Aung San Suu kyi but also to her considerate behaviour towards the national religion of Burmese. When she got back to Burma to take care of her mother, she was received like a saint and she behaved like one as well. She visited Saya daw pagoda and met the Highest Monk there. Her visit and meeting were followed by the spread of mythical stories which included miraculous acts of Suu Kyi. These stories added to her popularity among the laity as she was portrayed by Buddhist monks to possess saint like qualities.<sup>36</sup>

This supernatural attribution to Aug San Suu Kyi was further reinforced by Buddhist clergy when the SLORC refused to hand over power to her in August and September 1990. After that refusal the swelling of the left breast of Buddha statues and the bleeding of their eyes was reported by Buddhists of Myanmar and the clergy interpreted it as indication of Aung San Suu Kyi's imminent rise to power soon. The swelling of the left breast was related to Aung San Suu Kyi's nurturing characteristic quite like the Buddhist goddesses.<sup>37</sup>

Some of her followers mention her as "Angel Nat" and "female Bodhisattva". Burmese women referred her as 'Burma's woman destiny'. According to Buddhist tradition, a Bodhisattva has a kind heart always ready to help others; not for the reason that it is somehow "better" way to live rather for them, it is the only way to be fully alive and awake. The term bodhisattva is used for Gautama Buddha because he was a compassionate king with giving nature. When he became a bodhisattva, he played an

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<sup>36</sup>Lintner and Human Rights Watch (Organization), *The Resistance of the Monks: Buddhism and Activism in Burma*.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>37</sup>Gustaaf Houtman, *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics*, p282.

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important role to release all the sentient beings from suffering due to compassion. Likewise, when Aung San Suu Kyi came to Burma, she found Burmese in trouble hence she became a saviour and took them out of suffering because of compassion. This is why the Buddhists feel it justified to call her bodhisattva. The stance of Aung San Suu kyi does not align with the beliefs of Buddhist laity in this regard as she clearly declared it while talking to Alan Clements, an American Buddhist Monk that she had no spiritual/religious dispositions at all.<sup>38</sup>

### Conclusion

We can conclude that the case of Aung San Suu Kyi represents a unique instance of personality cult and her charisma was created because of her heroic struggle in the chaotic situation of Myanmar in the twentieth century. Her selfless struggles and the ideology of liberation of her people portrayed her as personification of wisdom and hope quite like a goddess in the traditional religious theology. Despite being a secular nationalist leader, she managed to attract her followers from a traditional religious setting because she laid the foundation of her cult ideology on nationalist cum religious grounds. She possessed most of the traits of personality cults including ideology, strong leadership, heir to a charismatic personality, deification of secular leader etc hence she can be legitimately characterized as personality cult. Although she did not subscribe to any religious denomination or spiritual order yet she never stopped her veneration as Bodhisattva. She incorporated Buddhist ideals into the political framework of a secular nationalist state thus articulating religiosity in a secular paradigm.

### Recommendations

This paper has dealt with the rise of Aung San Suu kyi as a personality cult and gathering of traditional Buddhists around her on nationalist cum religious grounds. Further studies in this regard maybe recommended by incorporating the following dimensions;

1. The teachings of traditional Buddhism revolve around non-violence and peace but this newly rising cult has adopted a rigorously violent policy towards Rohingya Muslims of Burma. What could be the possible reasons behind that? How this phenomenon can be interpreted in the light of traditional Buddhism?

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<sup>38</sup>Ikehata, “*Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa*, (Tokyo University of Foreign Studies).”282-283.

2. Aung Saan Suu Kyi proclaimed herself to be the ideal of Buddhist ethics and fighter of human rights with a secular identity. She should have stopped her fanatic Buddhist followers from Muslim genocide but she refrained from doing so even when her Nobel Peace Prize was stripped off. It would be interesting to know the dynamics of this controversial behaviour.

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