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**Special Focus: Buddhism and Young People**

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## **Nationalism and Buddhist Youth Groups in the Japanese, British, and American Empires, 1880s–1930s**

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In the decades around the turn of the twentieth century, Buddhists in imperial Japan, the British Raj, and the American empire developed lay-oriented youth groups. These groups' members developed intertwined ethnoreligious and national identities informed by Buddhists' relative status in these three empires. This article describes the trans-imperial development of early Buddhist youth groups, examines how these groups developed nationalist politics that were often intertwined with ethnic identity, and considers how the concept of "Buddhist youth" flattened differences unite lay Buddhists across various divides.

**Keywords:** Buddhist nationalism; British Burma; Ceylon; colonialism; ethno-nationalism; Hawaii; Japan; trans-imperial; United States; YMBA

Historians of modern Buddhism have become highly attuned to the impact of transnational exchange and colonial politics in shaping the dynamics of religious practice and ideology. There is growing recognition of the extent to which Buddhist networks exchanged knowledge, ideas, materials, practices, and support (both material and moral) not only within but also across geographic, political, and linguistic boundaries, as well as across divisions between different Buddhist schools. Such exchanges existed throughout Buddhism's history. Still, they increased exponentially in the late nineteenth century due to the rise of several social, cultural, and technological changes. These changes included the appearance of the steamships that conveyed Buddhists' bodies, artifacts, and publications across the Indian and Pacific Oceans, travels that rapidly impacted Buddhism's development in this period (Blackburn 2010, Jaffe 2019, Kemper 2015, Snodgrass 2003).

One powerful idea that spread throughout the Buddhist world at this time was that of the lay-oriented youth group. Around the turn of the twentieth century, Buddhists established youth groups in Japan (1886), Ceylon (1898), the US (1898), Burma (1904), and Canada (c. 1905), often using the

English name Young Men's Buddhist Associations (YMBAs).<sup>1</sup> As suggested by the mimesis of the YMCA's title, these groups were part of broader Buddhist efforts in this period to resist Christian missionization by co-opting its practices, including tract societies, religious schools, Sunday schools, social welfare programs, and public morality campaigns.<sup>2</sup> Previous scholarship has largely assumed that YMBA groups were local responses to YMCA groups in their respective societies. However, as detailed below, YMBA organizers in Ceylon, Burma, and North America were likely aware of earlier Japanese examples, and organizers in Burma also likely knew of the Ceylonese and American groups. While further research is needed to fully understand the extent of their early-twentieth-century exchange, they formed a loose network that lasted decades, culminating in a series of Pan-Pacific Young Buddhist Association conferences in the early 1930s, discontinued due to the start of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937.

Although YMBA groups were in communication with one another, they were not uniform in composition, activities, or ideology. Some were more “youthful,” including high school and university students, while others were chiefly composed of members in their twenties and thirties, with leaders ranging up into their sixties.<sup>3</sup> Some chapters were primarily composed of middle-class students or educated elites, while others were primarily made up of laborers or subsistence farmers. Some were more explicitly political, organizing direct actions like strikes and sit-ins, while others' politics were more limited to discussion. As detailed below, some accommodated the colonial politics of their time while others were ardently anti-colonial.

Despite their differences, all of these groups organized their members around three powerful, intertwined forms of identity: *ethnoreligious*, *generational*, and *national*. The idea that these disparate individuals—from urban intellectuals to plantation workers—were united as “Buddhist youth” was a powerful means of flattening their differences through emphasizing their shared religious and generational identities. Paradoxically, their international solidarity was linked to the generation of distinct ethnic and nationalist identities, each infused with colonial politics tied to Buddhists' respective positions in the ethnoracial hierarchies of the Japanese, British, and American empires. YMBA members in all these settings considered themselves part of an international alliance helping foster a new, global Buddhist age, but the Japanese and Japanese Americans sought to achieve world peace working within their nations' imperial systems, while those in the British Raj saw colonialism as an impediment to peace and positioned themselves at the vanguard of anti-imperial resistance. Thus, as with terms like “socially engaged Buddhism” (Main and Lai 2013) or “Buddhist nationalism” (Schonthal and Walton 2016), using “Buddhist youth groups” as an analytical category highlights trans-local connections and commonalities but occludes differences among individual groups.

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<sup>1</sup> Despite this gendered term, some of these groups included women prior to the creation of YWBA groups in the 1910s and 1920s, and many transformed into gender inclusive YBAs in subsequent decades. Also, while this article does not address Canadian YMBAs in this period, I plan to write another that does.

<sup>2</sup> In British Ceylon, this phenomenon dates to at least 1862, with the establishment of the Society for the Propagation of Buddhism and the Lankopakara Press in Galle (DeVotta 2007: 14; Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988: 203–205). In Japan, it began in the mid-1880s (Snodgrass 2003: 126–127; Yoshinaga 2009: 120–122).

<sup>3</sup> Some groups' memberships aged significantly over time, producing (especially by the postwar period) humorous disconnects between the members' actual ages and their gathering as “young Buddhists.”

This article presents a history of Buddhist youth groups in the Japanese, British, and American empires of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with one eye on trans-imperial connections and the other on empire-specific characteristics. The following section examines how YMBAs began in imperial Japan and how this concept spread to the American empire and the British Raj. The subsequent section explores how, in each setting, YMBA groups developed distinct nationalist politics informed by social position and ethnic identities. Despite their shared goal of spreading the Dharma to bring about world peace, Japanese and American Buddhist youth groups largely accommodated imperialism, while those in British colonies became fiercely anti-imperialist. The conclusion ties together these themes and considers new directions in which to extend this research.

## Early Buddhist Youth Groups

### *The Birth of Buddhist Youth Groups in Japan*

The rise of Buddhist youth groups in all these societies occurred in the context of Buddhist-Christian relations, particularly concerning Buddhist resistance to and emulation of Christian missionization. In modernizing Japan, many youth converted to Christianity in the 1870s and 1880s as part of a “Westernization” trend (Snodgrass 2009: 121–122). Around 1880, a group of Christians in their early to mid-twenties gathered in Tokyo to found Japan’s first YMCA chapter, often referred to simply as “Youth Group” (*Seinenkai*). This chapter was influential not only as a youth-oriented lay religious organization, but also in forming the Japanese conception of “youth” (*seinen*) as a period between childhood and adulthood.<sup>4</sup> These young Christians seem to have been inspired by stories they heard about American YMCA activities from Kanda Naibū (1857–1923), recently returned to Japan after eight years of studying in the US, where he graduated from Amherst College. They inherited a library from an informal YMCA club that some European businessmen had recently disbanded, and founded a magazine, *Rikkugō zasshi* (*The world*). *Rikkugō zasshi* published rebuttals to anti-Christian critiques leveled by prominent intellectuals and became among the leading intellectual journals of its time (Ballhatchet 1988: 352; Davidann 1998: 56; Ion 1990: 89; Murakami 1980: 47; Thelle 1987: 55).

In 1885, Buddhist sects and lay Buddhists began to open Western-style schools teaching Buddhist subjects, and organizations affiliated with these schools produced periodicals espousing reformist ideas (Yoshinaga 2009: 121). This “New Buddhism” (*shin Bukkyō*) reform movement was sometimes referred to as “the young Buddhists” (*seinen Bukkyōto*) because it was “dominated by young and restless Buddhist reformers” (Thelle 1987: 195). Many of the most influential figures in this movement were affiliated with the Nishi Honganji<sup>5</sup> Normal School (Futsū Kōkyō), especially a student group founded there in 1886 called the Temperance Association (Hanseikai).

<sup>4</sup> Wasaki Kōtarō (2016: 47) identifies Youth Group (also called Christian Youth Group [Kirisutokyō Seinenkai]) as the first such usage of *seinen* in Japanese.

<sup>5</sup> Nishi Honganji is one of the two dominant branches of Jōdo Shinshū, Japan’s largest Buddhist sect.

The Temperance Association was at a Buddhist university, but students at Japan's new or newly-reorganized non-Buddhist schools also formed Buddhist clubs. The earliest documented case seems to be a Buddhist club (*dōkōkai*) started in 1886 at Tokyo Specialty School (*Tōkyō Senmon Gakkō*), later Waseda University (Tatsudani 1987: 318).<sup>6</sup> Many others followed in universities, high schools, and senior middle schools, so members ranged in age from their mid-teens to early twenties. These groups became known as *Bukkyō seinenkai* (Buddhist youth groups, abbreviated as *busseikai*), suggesting awareness of their precedent Christian analogues. The formation of these student groups influenced sectarian institutions to create their own youth groups. Thus, the movement began as a bottom-up phenomenon, organized by Buddhist youth and schoolteachers, but within a few years caught the attention of priests and sect administrators (Tatsudani 1987: 318–319).

One vocal advocate for these new youth organizations was Imamura Yemyō (1867–1932), editor of the monthly *Temperance Association Journal* (*Hanseikai zasshi*). In its August 1888 issue, Imamura wrote an article in which he proposed all sects create alliances between young priests and young lay Buddhists to “reform an already-decaying old religion and set up a fresh new religion” (Imamura 1888, cited in Moriya 2000: 15). A decade later, when Imamura and other Shin priests ministered to Japanese laborers in the US and the US Territory of Hawaii, organizing YMBA chapters was among their first actions.

#### *Buddhist Youth Groups Spread to the American Empire*

Beginning in the late 1840s, tens of thousands of Chinese laborers emigrated to the newly annexed western US. Japanese began arriving two decades later and, after the racist Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, demand for Japanese labor increased in the western states. Similar dynamics existed in the Hawaiian Islands, where first Chinese and then Japanese contract laborers came in the late nineteenth century to work in sugar plantations; Japanese immigration increased after sugar interests impelled the US military overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy in 1893 and the annexation of the archipelago in 1898 (Nishimura 2008: 90–91). Most of these East Asian migrants initially intended to come for just a few years but many ended up settler-colonists themselves, albeit racialized minorities who struggled to receive equal rights under American law.

In July 1898, about thirty male Japanese immigrants in San Francisco formed a YMBA group that may have been the first explicitly Buddhist organization in the United States.<sup>7</sup> The idea to start a youth-oriented lay Buddhist organization was not a spontaneous formation inspired by local YMCA groups, as has been frequently asserted,<sup>8</sup> but was rather a product of dialogue between Japanese immigrants and representatives of Nishi Honganji, which had already been overseeing YMBA chapters in Japan for a decade.

<sup>6</sup> Many have credited Henry Steel Olcott's 1889 lecture tour with inspiring the formation of Japanese YMBA groups. See Kasai 2012: 442; Kim 2018: 76–77; Prothero 1996: 125–126; Prothero 2005: 6816; Satō 2008: 262. While such groups became more numerous after Olcott's tour, the following section details how Olcott's accounts acknowledge the role of Japanese Buddhist youth organizations in organizing his tour.

<sup>7</sup> This disregards the many Chinese institutions that enshrined Buddhist figures alongside spirit tablets and folk gods.

<sup>8</sup> Becker 1990: 150; Goldberg 2006: 295; Morgan 2004: 113; Nishimura 2008: 93–94; Ogawa 1978: 53.

In 1896, two lay Shin Buddhists returned to Japan from San Francisco and held an audience with priests at Nishi Honganji headquarters in Kyoto requesting an organized mission to the US. Two years later, Nishi Honganji sent Honda Enryū and Miyamoto Ejun (1853–?) to San Francisco to study the religious conditions of Japanese immigrants and the possibility of missionization. Honda and Miyamoto arrived July 6, 1898, and eight days later they helped form a YMBA chapter in the home of a local Japanese doctor, who became the group's first chairman. Within two months, the fledgling YMBA chapter sent a petition asking Nishi Honganji to support building a local branch temple. This pattern of lay groups of young Buddhist immigrants leading to the formation of branch temples continued in other regions of the western US and, by 1903, YMBA chapters had been established in Sacramento, Fresno, Vacaville, Seattle, San Jose, and Oakland (Kashima, 1977: 16–17; Munekata, 1974: 45–49). Hawaii, in contrast, was more top-down, as Imamura Yemyō described the organization of a YMBA chapter in Honolulu in July 1900 as his “first step” as the second “bishop” (*kantoku*) of the Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii (Imamura 1918: 2).<sup>9</sup>

#### *Buddhist Youth Groups Spread to the British Empire*

As Buddhist youth groups spread among Japanese American communities, they also became important organizations for lay Theravada Buddhists in the British Raj, specifically in Ceylon and Burma. In January 1898, twenty men gathered at the Buddhist Theosophical Society (hereafter BTS) headquarters in Colombo, the capital of British Ceylon, to found what appears to be the first YMBA outside Japan, predating the San Francisco group by six months. Its first president (and future Ceylonese statesman) D. B. Jayatilaka (1868–1944) and other important early members, like Curuppumullage Jinarajadasa (1875–1953) and A. E. Buultjens (1865–1916), were all English-educated, upwardly-mobile, and involved with BTS's schools. These schools provided Buddhist alternatives to British mission schools, training students not only in the English language necessary for social mobility in the Raj, but also making training in Pali, Sanskrit, Sinhala, and the suttas accessible to non-monastic youth. Jayatilaka (general manager of BTS's schools) and Jinarajadasa were both protégés of the English Theosophist Charles Webster Leadbeater (1854–1934). Leadbeater, in turn, was the first principal of the English Buddhist Academy who expanded it into Ananda College, where Jinarajadasa served as vice principal. Buultjens helped organize and served as the first Sri Lankan principal of the first Colombo Buddhist school for boys (Bartholomeusz 1998: 172; Deegalle 2010b).

As in San Francisco, these founders were likely informed by Japanese Buddhist youth groups as well as by the local YMCA, although previous scholarship has only mentioned the latter influence (Borup 2004: 457; Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988: 205; Grant 2009: 57; Human Rights Watch 2009: 28). One possible early conduit for Ceylonese knowledge of Japanese Buddhist youth groups was the English-language periodical *Bijou of Asia*, published by Matsuyama Matsutarō's Buddhist Propagation Society (Kaigai Senkyōkai) from 1888 to 1889, which specifically targeted readers in the British Raj.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Imamura and his YMBA chapter were also in close contact with the short-lived IBYMA of Takanawa University described below. See *Bankoku Bukkyō Seinen Rengōkai kaihō* 1 (April 1903): 6–10, 21–23.

<sup>10</sup> *Kaigai Bukkyō jijō* (*News of Buddhism Abroad*) reported eighty-six copies of *Bijou*'s inaugural issue were sent to British India. It lists the total number of overseas copies as two hundred and seventy, but this is likely a typo as the numbers

The *Bijou* didn't refer to Japanese YMBA groups by that name, but it frequently described Buddhist organizations in high schools and universities, especially the aforementioned Temperance Society of the Nishi Honganji Normal School.

It is possible the founders of Ceylon's YMBA heard of similar Japanese groups via the six Jōdo Shinshū students studying at the Vidyodaya Piriveṇa around 1890 (Jaffe 2019: 69), though it is more likely the source was Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907)—co-founder of the Theosophical Society and president of the BTS—and his protégé Anagārika Dharmapala (1864–1933), who accompanied Olcott on an 1889 lecture tour of Japan. Olcott's English-language memoirs recall two Buddhist youth groups helping with his tour: a “Young Men's Committee,” probably associated with Oriental Hall—an English-language school for young Buddhists in Kyoto founded by Hirai Kinza (1859–1916)—that funded the tour's initial leg, and “a Society of young Buddhists” who served as Dharmapala's nurses in Kyoto when he took ill with neuralgia (Olcott 1975: 106, 118). Furthermore, a Japanese account of one of Olcott's speeches reports that he called the formation of Buddhist youth groups by Japanese middle-school and high-school students and teachers, “among the greatest activities of Japanese Buddhist society” (Yamada 1898: 38).<sup>11</sup> Thus, the Ceylonese BTS leaders who founded the Colombo YMBA were likely well-aware of the YMCA, founded in 1882, but they, like the Americans before them, were likely also informed by earlier Japanese examples.<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, when Burmese lay Buddhists formed their own YMBA organization in 1906, they were also aware of Japanese, Ceylonese, and American precedents, which previous scholarship has largely overlooked, again emphasizing inspiration from the YMCA (see Jang 2010: 182 n. 3; Sarkisyanz 1965: 128–129; Taylor 2009: 163). The British colonized Burma through a series of wars spanning most of the nineteenth century, with armed resistance continuing in waves into the Second World War. As in Ceylon, Buddhist elites with Western-style educations formed social organizations to counter Christianization and promote Buddhism. Three Rangoon College graduates—U Ba Pe (b. 1883), Ba Yin, and Maung Gyi—formed the Burmese YMBA (*Kalyana-yuwa-botdabada-athin*) in 1906,<sup>13</sup> as a more inclusive organization for young lay Buddhists than their earlier Rangoon College Buddhist Association (Yangon-koleik Botdabada-athin), founded 1904 (Takahashi 2017: 92–93). Alexey Kirichenko asserts that these founders were “emulating the Sinhalese example,” but he does not explain how these students knew of their Ceylonese counterparts (Kirichenko 2009: 34).

English-language correspondence and publications from Ceylon, Japan, and the US appear to have helped convey the idea of the Buddhist youth group to Burma. Under the Raj, English-language materials connected upper-class lay Buddhists across the Bay of Bengal as Pali had done for centuries

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add up to two hundred and seven. Either way, “British India” (including Ceylon, but not Burma, which is listed separately) represented roughly one-third of the total international distribution, with the US (sixty-five copies) and England (thirty-three) ranking second and third, respectively. Nakanishi and Yoshinaga 2015: 71–72.

<sup>11</sup> This article is published under a pseudonym, but the author's name is clarified in the subsequent issue.

<sup>12</sup> Despite claims that Olcott helped found or lead the Colombo YMBA (Barua 2014: 203; Borup 2004: 457), he seems to have just influenced its founders.

<sup>13</sup> Although the group also went by the English name “Young Men's Buddhist Association,” its Burmese name literally means “Association to Care for the Wholesomeness of Buddhism.”

of monastics before. For example, cosmopolitan Burmese Buddhists like U Ba Pe and his associates learned about Ceylonese Buddhist revivalism through the Theosophical Lodge in Rangoon and English-language publications by Dharmapala's Maha Bodhi Society (Takahashi, 2017: 93, 130; Turner, 2014: 18). A Tokyo-based group called the International Buddhist Young Men's Association (IBYMA, described in the next section) sent an English-language announcement of its founding to the Society for Promoting Buddhism in Mandalay, and its Honorary Secretary Maung Thaw replied, asking to become a member.<sup>14</sup> Another English-language conduit for information about Buddhist youth groups was *Buddhism: An Illustrated Review* (1903–1908). This Rangoon-based journal, edited by Bhikku Ananda Metteyya (born Charles Henry Allan Bennett, 1872–1923), reported on activities across the Buddhist world, including the Ceylon YMBA, the IBYMA, and the San Francisco YMBA. It also carried advertisements for these organizations' English-language publications such as *The Buddhist* and *Light of Dharma*.<sup>15</sup> As Metteyya (who also became an IBYMA member in 1903) lectured at the first general meeting of the Rangoon College Buddhist Association shortly before its English-educated members founded the Burmese YMBA, he and his journal are likely links.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, the Irish-born monk U Dhammaloka (c. 1856–1914) spoke at the founding of the IBYMA in Tokyo in September 1902 and promoted the IBYMA throughout Southeast Asia in the years that followed (sometimes representing himself as its founder and president; see Bocking 2010), so, like Olcott and Dharmapala in Ceylon, the trans-imperial movement of individual Buddhists likely also played a factor here.

### **Buddhist Youth Groups, Nationalism, and Empire**

Despite the trans-imperial connections outlined above, YMBA groups developed distinct nationalist identities informed by Buddhists' social position in their respective empires. The following three subsections provide brief overviews of these complex subjects before the conclusion engages in comparison and suggests avenues for future research.

#### *Buddhist Youth Groups and the Japanese Empire*

In the early decades of Japanese Buddhist youth groups, "New Buddhist" progressives like Iwamura saw their potential for social and sectarian reform. Still, their efforts gained institutional traction because sect administrators considered them ways to prove Buddhism's usefulness to state interests. The rise of "patriotic Buddhist youth groups" around Japan from 1889 was part of a broader reactionary movement that pushed back against the New Buddhists and advanced "national

<sup>14</sup> Maung Thaw's English-language letter is reproduced in *The Report of the International Buddhist Young Men's Association* no. 1 (April 1903): 30–31. An excerpt is translated into Japanese on p. 23.

<sup>15</sup> *Buddhism: An Illustrated Review* vol 1, no. 1 (September 1903): 4, 170–172; vol. 1, no. 2 (December 1903): 4, 6; vol. 1, no. 3 (March 1904): 2, 526; vol. 1, no. 4 (November 1904): 2; vol. 2, no. 1 (October 1905): 2. My gratitude to Alicia Turner for making the bulk of this journal available through her website, *Buddhism Across Boundaries*. <https://digital.library.yorku.ca/yul-buddhism-across-boundaries/buddhism-across-boundaries> (last accessed April 21, 2019).

<sup>16</sup> *Buddhism: An Illustrated Review* 2 (1) (October 1905): 117. For Metteyya's IBYMA membership, see *Bankoku Bukkyō Seinen Rengōkai Kaihō* 2 (October 1903): 31.

interests” (*kokueki*) through youth groups, prison ministries, military chaplaincy, and foreign missionary work (Davis 1989: 324). Thus, the rise of Buddhist youth groups can be said to have occurred in tandem, even cooperation, with the concurrent growth and governmentality of the Japanese empire.

As Japan rose as an imperial power, gradually colonizing Taiwan, Korea, the South Pacific, and Manchuria,<sup>17</sup> Japanese YMBA groups accommodated Japan’s growing nationalism and imperialism, evoking the slogan “protect the Dharma, love the nation” (*gohō aikoku*). As they considered Japanese Buddhism to be the pinnacle of Buddhist development, they supported its promotion in Japan’s colonies (Tatsudani 1987: 321–322). The Nishi Honganji sect with which many, if not most, prewar Japanese YMBA groups were affiliated, had internal struggles between progressive and conservative factions. However, even the progressives who hoped to foster international, pan-Buddhist harmony and helped establish a transnational network of YMBAs largely did so under the aegis of Japanese nationalism and colonial apologetics. That said, a few prewar Japanese Buddhist youth groups did criticize Japanese imperialism, with political repercussions.

One (short-lived) group that demonstrates how even progressive YMBA organizations accommodated Japanese imperialism is the aforementioned International Buddhist Young Men’s Association (Bankoku Bukkyō Seinen Rengōkai, hereafter IBYMA), affiliated with Takanawa Buddhism University (*Takanawa Bukkyō Daigaku*, hereafter TBU). This Nishi Honganji institution operated in Tokyo from 1902 to 1904. The university faculty—made up of many of the Temperance Association’s chief members, including Takakusu Junjirō (1866–1945), Sakurai Gichō (1868–1926), and Umehara Tōru (1865–1907)—organized the IBYMA soon after the university’s founding (Iwata 2016). The IBYMA president Shimaji Mokurai (1838–1911) was a generation older than this faculty. Still, he was another progressive Shin leader who, like many of them, had been involved with other Shin youth groups in the 1880s and 1890s (Tatsudani 1987). “New Buddhist” youth leaders like Shimaji and Takakusu were progressive in terms of their internationalism and promotion of separating religion from the state. Still, they drew on ethnonationalist visions that equated Buddhist authenticity with Japaneseness and presented Shin Buddhism as essential for the promotion of Japanese civilization (Deneckere 2016: 232; Klautau 2014: 60–62; Shields 2017: 99–101). Despite TBU leaders’ commitment to advance Japanese Buddhism and the Japanese empire on the world stage, conflicts between the relatively progressive university leadership and the conservative sect headquarters led to the university being shut down after only two years (Iwata 2016).

As the Japanese empire descended into fascism, a few Buddhist youth groups sharply broke from the colonial accommodation that marked most pre-war Japanese Buddhist youth groups. The best known of these is the Youth League for Revitalizing Buddhism (Shinkō Bukkyō Seinen Dōmei, hereafter Youth League), founded by the idiosyncratic Marxist Nichiren Buddhist Seno’o Girō (1889–1961). Seno’o founded his first nationalistic youth group, the Greater Japan Nichirenist Youth Corps (*Dai Nihon Nichiren-shugi Seinendan*) in 1919, and it soon had chapters at different universities and

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<sup>17</sup> More research is needed on Buddhist youth groups in these colonies, where both pro-colonial and anti-colonial Buddhist youth groups existed in the 1920s and 1930s (Hur 2010: 92–94).



members from Taiwan and Korea. However, the rise of nativist anti-Korean violence and violent fascist Nichiren-affiliated organizations such as the Blood Pledge Corps (*Ketsumeidan*) caused Seno'o to create his new Youth League with the mission of creating an anti-imperialist, anti-fascist, anti-capitalist, anti-war Buddha Land on earth. This group grew dramatically until 1936, when it was disbanded and Seno'o was arrested and charged with treason (Shields 2017: 205–215). This unusual outcome highlights how much of an outlier Seno'o's Youth League was among prewar Japanese Buddhist youth groups.

Most Buddhist youth organizations accommodated, if not promoted, their nation and its imperial projects. The Japan Young Buddhist Association (*Zen-Nihon Bukkyō Seinenkai Renmei*, hereafter JYBA)—founded in 1931 as an umbrella organization to unite Buddhist youth groups and organize events such as the 1934 Second General Conference of Pan-Pacific Young Buddhists' Associations (hereafter PPYBA)—is much more representative of its age than Seno'o's contemporary Youth League. Yet, it is much less studied (particularly in English-language scholarship). The PPYBA conference was held in the wake of Japan's withdrawal from the League of Nations amidst international opprobrium regarding Japan's invasion of Manchuria and establishment of a puppet government in Changchun. Japan's military incursions in China and the JYBA's treatment of Manchuria as an independent nation for the conference (in contrast to Korea, Taiwan, and the South Pacific Mandate, which were treated as part of Japan), made it difficult to recruit Chinese delegates (Hironaka 2009, Tsurimura and Sueki 2002).

The JYBA representative responsible for recruiting Chinese delegates, Fujii Sōsen (1896–1971), wrote an article in the Kyoto-based, religion-oriented newspaper *Chūgai nippō* about his frustration with the JYBA's leadership. He characterized them as reactionary elders who “instinctively dislike youth movements” and unconsciously refuse to relinquish their control of the organization; he also accused them of a kind of “self-glorifying belligerence” that he says is typical of many Japanese, who seem themselves as the “leader of Asia” or the “leader of people of color,” but prefer the “bayonet” to the business of “properly guiding the people of developing nations” (Fujii 1934, cited in Hironaka 2009: 122). Fujii's words illustrate how, although there may have been a generational divide within the JYBA, even younger “progressives” saw Japanese Buddhists as having a crucial role to play in guiding the development of Japan's neighbors. These progressives contrasted their vision of benign imperialism with their compatriots' zeal for crude colonization through military force.

Thus, while youth groups were often considered progressive in contrast to the conservative sect administrators, even relatively progressive youth leaders supported promoting Japanese Buddhism overseas as a crucial activity for building world peace. Such missionization efforts worked hand-in-hand with the overseas spread of the Japanese Empire and with the formation of ethnonational identities that equated being Japanese with being Buddhist. They believed that Buddhism could create solidarity between colonizer and colonized, easing their union as fellow imperial subjects.

### *Buddhist Youth Groups and the British Empire*

In the British empire, in contrast, Buddhism was generally considered a means of resisting imperial power and policies. The early-twentieth-century Ceylonese YMBA, in coordination with the BTS, established a national network of Buddhist Sunday schools (Dhamma schools or *daham pāsala*), administered examinations of Buddhist learning, and took over the BTS's English-language journal *The Buddhist*. In 1919, YMBA members created a new organization—the All-Ceylon Young Buddhist Congress (ACYBC, *Samasta Lamkā Taruna Bauddha Samiti Sammēlanayē*)—to harmonize the YMBA chapters and unify their social and religious activities. The Ceylonese intellectuals in the ACYBC (later the All-Ceylon Buddhist Congress) engaged in educational, social welfare, and religious activities, including constructing schools, dormitories, and vocational training centers for Buddhist youth. YMBA and ACYBC leaders engaged in anti-colonial political activism beyond their Buddhist schools and publications; many went on to serve in the Ceylonese legislature, the Sri Lankan independence movement, and the postwar government. They constituted a core part of the elite, institutionalized resistance to British colonialism that transitioned into independent Sri Lanka's leadership (Bond 1988: 63–67; Deegalle 2010a, 2010b).

Like its Ceylonese equivalent, the Burmese YMBA was a product of cosmopolitan elites and the emerging middle class, centered on issues of education and promoting social causes such as temperance, which eventually became a force for ethnonationalist identity. The Burmese YMBA not only promoted the Pali canon, but also Burmese language literature, which had suffered under British colonialism and the decline of monastic schools. It was a crucial organization in developing and promoting Burmese national identity, which it tied to Buddhism and Bamar ethnicity. Like the Sinhalese in Ceylon, Bamar Buddhists were the most populous ethnicity in their multi-ethnic colony and they dominated the early post-independence government. Despite growing Bamar ethnonationalism, in the period through World War I, the YMBA was a pro-colonial institution that functioned as something of a social club for young Bamar elites: the organization explicitly pledged loyalty to the Crown, opening meetings with the imperial anthem, “God Save the King,” later performed as “Buddha Save the King.” Much of the leadership and membership were laypeople, but the YMBA also gained the support of prominent Buddhist reformers, including international-minded monks (Schober 2007: 53, 63–64; 2011: 56–58, 65–68; Takahashi 2017: 90–99; Turner 2014: 19, 102).

In the interwar period, Burmese YMBA chapters became “inseparable from a burgeoning Burmese nationalism,” opposing British imperialism and engaging in more direct action than their Ceylonese counterparts (Kirichenko 2009: 34). They fought unequal conditions in segregated railroad cars and Westerners' failure to remove their shoes before entering pagodas. In 1920, they were involved in a massive student strike protesting proposed changes to universities, such as the exclusion of the Burmese language. Hundreds of university students camped at the Shwedagon Pagoda in Rangoon, the country's holiest site, and urban high school students went on strike as well. That same year, the younger, more radical YMBA members founded an explicitly political group called the General Council of Burmese Associations (GCBA, *Myanma Atkinchokgyi*). Despite being largely led by urban middle-class laypeople, the GCBA gained membership in the conservative and more ethnically diverse northern regions, built alliances with political monks, and took on an

explicitly anti-colonial agenda. Several of the militant revolutionaries who fought the British in the 1930s and 1940s came out of the GCBA and continued emphasizing their debts to Buddhism, even when also promoting ostensibly secular socialism (Human Rights Watch 2009: 30–33; Jang 2010; Schober 2011: 75; Taylor 2009: 164–165, 178ff.; Turner 2014: 138).

As in Japan, YMBAs in the British Empire were sites for ethnonationalist identity formation, but these identities became explicitly anti-colonial, especially after World War I. In Ceylon, the YMBA and the ACYBC were proving grounds for young Sinhalese Buddhists whose ethnonationalism would inform the independence movement's politics and, thus, independent Sri Lanka's early leadership. The Burmese YMBA slogans "Race, Language, Religion, Education" and "To Be Burmese is to be Buddhist," both of which continued to be used after independence, tie national belonging to Burman ethnicity and Buddhist religion. These YMBA groups' ethnonationalism fueled independence movements and shaped the postcolonial ideologies of these Buddhist-majority nations.

### *Buddhist Youth Groups and the American Empire*

Early YMBAs in North America's Japanese communities were committed to fostering Buddhism while also creating spaces for moral, physical, and intellectual training. Like the YMCA, formed in mid-nineteenth century London to provide low-cost housing and wholesome recreation to rural youths migrating to the city to work, the YMBA in the US was designed to maintain morality and reduce drinking, whoring, and gambling among Japanese immigrant laborers. Also like the YMCA, as YMBA chapters developed, they deepened their commitment to physical education. Mirroring "muscular Christianity" trends in Victorian Protestantism, early YMBA chapters in Hawaii and North America offered judo, jujitsu, kendo, and karate classes and sponsored sumo competitions; in following decades, they opened baseball and basketball leagues ("New Club of Japanese"; Nishimura, 2008: 100–101). Furthermore, while early YMBA chapters taught English to first-generation immigrants, in subsequent decades they trained second-generation (*Nisei*) in Japanese language and culture, as well as moral education.

In the interwar period, when assimilationist pressures of Americanization campaigns contributed to what was widely known as "the Nisei problem," the aforementioned Imamura Yemyō, bishop of the Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii (HHMH), published books on "Buddhist democracy" and "Americanism." In these books, he strategically praised the US for its inclusivity of diverse peoples and religious creeds, stating that "one of the final aims" of the HHMH is to impress the "true American spirit . . . firmly upon the hearts of the Japanese youth of this Territory" (Imamura 1918a, 1918b). Imamura's Japanese American Buddhist nationalism culminated in his 1930 address to the first Pan-Pacific YMBA Conference in Honolulu, in which he presented American Buddhism as the apotheosis of the Dharma's world-historical development into a form that could unite the globe under the universal love of "our Savior, the Lord Buddha." In this speech, he reproduced settler colonial narratives about the "inexhaustible natural resources" of America's "virgin land," and described how "racial domination" in America was melting away into an age of "universal cooperation" among people "from every corner of the world" (Imamura 1930). Imamura's rhetoric depicting America in general, and Hawaii in particular, as an empty land waiting to be filled by

multicultural settlers, occluding dispossession of indigenous people, is particularly notable as the conference was held on land he had personally solicited and been granted for the Hongwanji Mission by Mary Foster (1844–1930), a Native Hawaiian with ties to the deposed royal family (Tabrah 1989: 42).<sup>18</sup>

Buddhist youth on the US mainland echoed Imamura. For example, in a 1934 issue of *Bhratri*, the Berkeley (California) YMBA publication, Buddhist Nisei spoke of their unique position to help harmonize the “material and dynamic civilization of the West” with the “spiritual and static quality of the East” to establish a new “Pacific Era” (Kubose 1934); their responsibilities ranged from propagating Buddhism to “other nationalities” to explaining “Japan’s position in Manchuria” (Muramoto 1934). Thus, Japanese American YMBA groups adopted a nationalism intertwined with ethnic exceptionalism in which they, as racialized minorities on land that the American state had recently seized from indigenous peoples, had a special role to play in world history, a role that united and justified both American and Japanese imperial expansion.

### Conclusions and Avenues for Future Research

Around the world, the interwar period was marked by justifications of ethnonationalist projects—both imperial and anti-imperial—with the Wilsonian language of self-determination (Doak 1998, Manela 2007). While youth group leaders and members across the Buddhist world engaged in forms of nationalism, often ethnonationalist in tone, their diverse social positions led to very different stands on colonialism.

Prior research on prewar Japanese Buddhist youth groups primarily focused on one group that resisted Japanese imperialism in the 1930s. Still, most such groups mobilized their religious identities and values to justify Japan’s colonization of East Asia as promoting the spread of the Dharma. As Hwansoo Kim (2018) has shown, even Korean Buddhist nationalism was employed (ambivalently) to help defend and further Japan’s imperial project. Future research must examine how Buddhist youth groups throughout the Japanese Empire understood their Buddhist, national, and generational identities vis-à-vis imperial politics.

In the British Raj, the Ceylonese and Burmese YMBAs were founded by English-educated elites. While the Burmese initially accommodated British colonial rule, both eventually formed political groups to promote Buddhist nationalism and self-rule. These forms of ethnonationalism, which originally proved useful ideologies used to oppose the brutalities of British colonialism, also have dark sides. The Burmese YMBA tied national belonging to ethnoreligious identity in a way that continues to resonate in violence by the *Tatmadaw* (Burma’s Armed Forces) against the Rohingya and other ethnoreligious minorities. Similar patterns can be seen connecting Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism, which equates Sri Lankan identity with Sinhala-Buddhist identity, to anti-Tamil and anti-Muslim violence in twentieth- and twenty-first century Sri Lanka. Further comparative work should address in greater depth the “symmetries and specificities” (Schonthal and Walton 2016) of

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<sup>18</sup> Foster had given generously to other Buddhist causes, notably Dharmapala’s Maha Bodhi Society. See Masters 2018.

Buddhist nationalism in the British Raj in the generation that came of age in the early twentieth century and moved from YMBAs to the independence movement to the postcolonial leadership.

In the United States and its territories, where Japanese American Buddhists were racialized minorities engaging in their own forms of settler colonialism, YMBA leaders adopted a very different kind of Buddhist nationalism, which naturalized the American occupation of what had recently been sovereign indigenous lands as well as the immigration and settlement of Japanese in these places. As young Japanese American Buddhists, they considered themselves to have unique, consequential roles in Buddhism's world-historical development and in justifying Japan's imperial expansion to their fellow Americans.

Across these three empires, YMBAs focused on Buddhist identity formation. As with other Buddhist education movements, this was often tied to Buddhist leaders' anxiety about young people's susceptibility to Christianization. Hirai Kinza, who invited Olcott to Japan in 1889, founded his Oriental Hall in 1885 to teach English to young Buddhists to compete with the Christian Dōshisha University. The summer seminars held by the Greater Japan Buddhist Youth Association (*Dai Nippon Bukkyō Seinenkai*) beginning in the mid 1890s were direct responses to a popular YMCA program (Akai 2009: 188; Thelle 1987: 111). The founders of the Colombo YMBA were all involved with the BTS's Buddhist schools to provide alternatives to Christian missionary schools, and some of their earliest programs were to establish Buddhist Sunday schools (Dhamma schools) and an examination system on Buddhist teaching. Similarly, the early Burmese YMBA groups engaged deeply with education, made clear by their slogan "Race, Language, Religion, Education," and American YMBA members were typically graduates of the temples' Japanese-language schools. Youth represent future-oriented temporalities, as these YMBAs strove to sustain the traditions of the past while also improving upon tradition to realize its full potential.

The international, pan-Buddhist appeals in the term "Buddhist youth" also flattened differences of generation and class. YMBA groups in Japan and Ceylon included student members in their mid to late teens, but their leadership tended to be at least in their twenties or thirties. Some were even much older, like Shimaji Mokurai: sixty-four when elected IYMBA president in 1902. YMBA members in Japan and Ceylon were largely middle-class laypeople but included some young monks and priests. YMBA members in British Burma and the American empire were primarily laypeople in their twenties and thirties, but of quite different class positions. Until the early 1920s, Burmese YMBA members were middle-class graduates of elite universities, fluent in English. By contrast, the first-generation members in the US were largely migrant workers from rural Japan, most of whom never gained English fluency; the Hawaii YMBA newsletter only added an English section, aimed at second-generation youth, in 1932. The politics of "youth" were also contested, as older generations hoped to instill younger ones with "traditional" practices and values, and the youth themselves pushed for changes to the status quo; these contests grew in strength over decades as aging Buddhist youth leaders maintained organizational control.

YMBA leaders' attempts to use the concept of "Buddhist youth" to forge international and Pan-Buddhist bonds were, at best, incomplete successes. One wonders what the anti-colonial Ceylonese and Burmese delegates to the 1934 PPYBA conference thought of the welcoming address by Japan's

Foreign Minister Hirota Kōki (1878–1948), one of the key figures in Japan’s withdrawal from the League of Nations and establishing its puppet state of Manchukuo. Further archival work should help discover what these anti-colonial British subjects (and the Chinese delegates in attendance) thought of the expanding Japanese Buddhist Empire.

Subsequent work must also unpack how gender impacted these prewar groups. Despite the use of “young men” in many of their official English titles, women participated and even serving in (limited) leadership roles. Female participation began at the turn of the twentieth century, with a handful of female members of the IBYMA,<sup>19</sup> but most Buddhist youth groups in this period were gender-segregated, as were most schools. In general, the female equivalents to the YMBA groups in early-twentieth-century Japan and the Japanese diaspora were called Wives’ Associations (*fujinkai*), but Buddhists in Hawaii and Burma founded YWBAs the 1910s and Buddhists on the US mainland founded YWBAs in 1927. YWBA groups were temporary, as Buddhist youth groups eventually became mixed-gender, first called YMWBA and then simply YBAs (Ama 2011: 66–67; Kurokawa 1920: 70; Taylor 2009: 179; Yoo 2000: 46–47). By the 1930s, women were highly involved in American Buddhist youth group activities, including conferences and publications; the women who attended the 1934 PPYBA conference as part of the American delegation complained they felt “ignored” by the Japanese organizers (ZNBSR 1935: 78).

Further research is also needed into the scale of Buddhist youth movements elsewhere at this time and possible interconnections. Buddhist youth groups only gained momentum in China in the 1920s, with the Buddhist New Youth Society (*Fóhuà Xīnqīngnián Huì*, active 1922–1926) being the most prominent of a few short-lived groups that formed prior to the Second Sino-Japanese War,<sup>20</sup> and they do not seem to have appeared in Siam or French Indochina until the 1930s.<sup>21</sup> The networks that connected the young Buddhists of the British, Japanese, and American Empires likely had weaker links to the French Empire, independent Siam, and Republican China, although there may were likely stronger linkages within this region.<sup>22</sup> The stronger ties between Buddhists in Japan and the British Raj may be partly a legacy of Theosophical networks. For example, Olcott’s 1891 attempt to unite Northern and Southern Buddhism with a fourteen-point platform focused on Ceylon, Burma, and Japan, with no mention of China, Siam, or French Indochina (Kemper 2015: 140–144).

Overall, modern Buddhist organizations’ mobilization of laypeople’s religious identities and practices toward the goals of education, political activism, and social welfare is part of a more global trend that Charles Taylor calls “the age of mobilization.” In the nineteenth century, ordinary people mobilized new political, social, and ecclesial structures into existence; in religious movements, this

<sup>19</sup> Out of about five hundred member names that appear in the two extant volumes of *Bankoku Bukkyō Seinen Rengōkai kaihō*, fewer than ten recognizably female names appear (including three foreign women).

<sup>20</sup> See Lai 2013: 161–164; Pittman 2001: 50–51, 102; ZNBSR 1934: 15; 1935: 113.

<sup>21</sup> A Bangkok YBA chapter was founded in 1933, with Siam’s former Railways minister, Phya Srishtikar Banchong as its president; the following year they reported five hundred members. Their constitution required both men and women to serve on their executive board (ZNBSR 1934: 6; 1935: 53 [English section]). For Vietnam, see McHale 2008: 153; Raffin 2005: 112–113.

<sup>22</sup> For example, McHale (2008: 153) mentions a Vietnamese journal named *New Buddhist Youth* (*Phật hóa tân thanh niên*), corresponding to the Chinese characters *Fóhuà Xīnqīngnián*

was often achieved by “the organization of laypeople in new bodies” (Taylor 2007: 445). While Taylor did not connect the rise of mobilization to the rise of youth culture in the late nineteenth century, they both draw on democratic “modern citizen imaginaries” to enlist today’s youths to devote their energies toward realizing hopeful tomorrows (Taylor 2007: 457). The rise of youth-oriented Buddhist organizations is part of this broader rise of lay-driven, ecumenical, voluntary religious organizations, which became tied, in different ways, to nationalist identities across three empires.

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