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Commercial Burmanization: two adverts by Burmah Oil Company in postcolonial Burma

Burma gained independence on 4 January 1948. Immediately after independence, Burmese media launched a campaign to ‘resurrect’ the country’s ‘lost’ culture. *Bamakhit* newspaper argued that the building of a new nation must be based upon customs, religion, and traditions that were indigenous.¹ The new Burma needed to be built upon the foundations of Buddhism and cultures unique to the country. Indeed Burma not only had to recover its own customs, but also needed to distinguish, with the aim of discarding, cultures that were foreign to the country. In this article, I discuss how the (British-owned) Burmah Oil Company (BOC) used ‘authentically’ Burmese images in postcolonial Burma to promote their products.

Tharapi Than



MANY NATIONALISTS UNDER THE NU-LED GOVERNMENT appear to have felt that now that the British were gone and resistance against imperialism was over, only the battle against ideologies that threatened the Burmese way of life could unite the different political groups and the people in general. Indeed, public reformers voiced their concern that since the physical enemy, that is the colonial government, was gone, the people would relax and could be taken by surprise by the moral enemy, that is modernity.² The physical challenge that had dominated the struggle against the diminishing British presence in the period 1945-48 was now substituted by an ideological struggle against Western moral influence.

One of Burma’s finest poets and writers, Zawgyi, has argued that during colonialism, some Burmese regarded their culture as the only identity that the British could not steal, and therefore a determination to defend and promote Burma’s cultural distinctiveness inspired nationalist literature.³ Such a determination continues in postcolonial Burma. And the tendency to promote Burmese culture spills over to the commercial world. Many businesses – both local and foreign – began to use ‘uniquely’ Burmese symbols and pictures to represent and promote their goods.

The advertisement (figure 1) promotes different types of oils from Burmah Oil Company, and the advertisement appeared in *Bamakhit*, a Rangoon-based newspaper, in 1953. Using the sketch of a female farmer or *ကောကျိတီ* (ကောကျိတီ) wearing a traditional bamboo-woven raincoat (ပတ်ကလာ), the company not only ties its business to the main economic sector of the country, i.e., agriculture, but it also ties its image to the traditional, hardworking and innocent symbol of rural Burma: a farm girl.

1(left): Burmah Oil Company (BOC) Advertisement, *Bamakhit*, 4 Sept. 1953, p.13.

2(right): Burmah Oil Company (BOC) Advertisement, *Bamakhit*, 19 Nov. 1953, p.13.

The ad reads “Burmese rice industry and our oil distribution industry are always interconnected. As kerosene is used for lighting on the farm, our engine oil and lubricating oil are used by the rice mills and rice cargo ships.” Unlike the rice industry, the oil industry is essentially the preserve of European interests,⁴ and to promote the British company’s interests with an entirely Burmese image, including terms provoking friendship, was a clever promotional tactic of BOC.



The wording suggests that the two industries share the same interests – the interests of Burma’s rice industry and therefore the interests of the Burmese themselves. The title of the advertisement, *Burma’s Grace*, is also striking, promoting BOC alongside a happy farm girl as Burma’s grace. Whether the creative idea behind the ad was the imagination of the BOC,⁵ or the artist himself raised another question. The ad seems to have responded to the popular message, at least in the media, to promote Burmese culture and traditions. By using the innocent image of the farm girl as well as linking the company’s interest closely to Burma’s interests, BOC was also able to circumvent a rising tide of economic nationalism in the 1950s, during which foreign owned companies and foreigners were blamed for Burma’s economic woes.

Another advertisement by BOC (figure 2), using a female weaver, also captured the postcolonial imagination, i.e., to reclaim the Burmese culture. The second ad reads: “As Amarapura near Mandalay distributes delicate and beautiful (like formations of clouds) silk fabric, BOC, from centrally located Mandalay, distributes kerosene, petroleum, engine oil and candles nationwide including Chin, Kachin, Pa-lao and Shan.” In this ad, BOC provokes the cultural reminiscence of the last Kingdom of Konbaung – Mandalay – and even included different minority groups in its ad. The title of the ad is the same as the first one: “Burma’s Grace”. These two ads were both part of BOC’s advertising campaign in 1953. More research is needed to ascertain who commissioned the BOC advertisement campaign and what the rationale was behind these ‘Burmanized’ ads.

After independence, a reverse cultural reclamation process started taking shape. During the early colonial days, the Burmese saw the British flag substituting the Burmese King’s peacock banner in official buildings; missionary schools and Anglo-vernacular schools instead of monasteries becoming the centres of learning; Chinese and Indians catering the needs of the Burmese; Indian labourers cleaning the streets of Rangoon and toiling across the agricultural districts – these scenes dominated the Burmese minds from 1824 (the end of the first Anglo-Burman war, after which Arakan and Tennesarim were annexed to India as part of the British Empire) to independence in 1948.

Perhaps the government felt that strong counter-cultural forces were needed to help instil a sense of ownership, not least the cultural ownership, of the country. And many newspapers and magazines rallied around this cause. The commercial world seemed to have joined this cause, as shown by the adverts of the BOC company. Independence also reignited hostility towards foreign culture, and heralded the reconstruction of racial and class barriers.

“No Burmans”-signs were binned at the social clubs; British civilians were encouraged to leave despite the serious lack of local skills in administration; and Chinese and Indian businessmen were branded opportunists and exploiters. A vision was promoted of a society that was economically self-sufficient, with natives enjoying the fruits of their hard work. It was also a vision of a country that was culturally independent, promoted especially by nationalist writers who strove to inculcate the same vision in their readers. To such writers, Western culture was not needed to ‘modernize’ Burma, since the country had its own ways to participate in modernity. A new nationalist movement was embodied in the progress of ‘Burmanization’, undertaken by the state. BOC advertisements clearly showed that foreign businesses participated in this ‘Burmanization’ project, perhaps under the threat of losing sales and revenues if they could not attract state support, and more importantly, Burmese customers.

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Notes

- 1 *Bamakhit*, 13 July 1955, p. 3.
- 2 *Bamakhit*, 13 August 1956, p. 3.
- 3 Zawgyi. 2004. ရာဇဝင်အဖွဲ့ချုပ် [Introduction to Literature], 2nd edition, Rangoon: Hnin Oo Lwin
- 4 Ian Brown. 2009. ‘British Firms and the End of Empire in Burma’, *Asian Affairs*, 40: 1, 15-33.
- 5 In the mid 1950s, the British and Europeans owned only 60% of the company before it was completely nationalized by the Burma Socialist Programme Party Government, led by Ne Win, in 1963.
- 6 The initials B.K. at the lower right (first ad) and left (second ad) hand corners of the ads, suggest that the artist for the ad series could have been Ba Kyi, one of the well-known artists trained in Paris and Pennsylvania. He was well-known for his paintings of *Jataka* and life histories of Buddha. BOC could not have commissioned a better artist to capture the Burmese culture in arts, again suggesting that the company thought carefully of making ‘Burma’ and ‘Burman’ the overriding message of their ads, promoting their ‘Burmese-friendly’ image more than their products.
- 7 A columnist of *Bamakhit* argued that every Buddhist Burmese woman should scrutinize her lifestyle closely, and by doing so, pay respect to their own religion, custom and traditions. *Bamakhit*, 10 October 1955, p. 3.