Uncanny Parallels: Tourism and the Continuity of Images in Myanmar

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This paper presents a visual and textual analysis of the images projected by Myanmar’s State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) and highlights the uncanny parallels between the representations propagated by the military junta and the depictions presented by British colonialists. Although the SPDC continues to rail against colonialism and frames the actions of the United States as neocolonialist (not without cause), it uses the language and images established by British colonialists to represent itself to the world. One could argue that the SPDC is cleverly employing the vocabulary set forth by the British, one that westerners can better understand, to lure in tourists, but a careful reading of Myanmar’s tourism literature reveals a relationship to colonialist conceptions that goes beyond the merely instrumental. This relationship and resulting self-conception is complex to say the least but shows that colonialist values have been adopted and naturalized as desires for development and modernization and the need to be known as a unique and sovereign nation, equal in global politics.

The national characteristics emphasized by the SPDC are the very same as those accentuated by the British—the abundance of natural resources, the exoticism of ethnic peoples, the beauty of Buddhist architecture, and the contentment of the Burmese people. These portrayals were used by the British to assert their superiority and right to rule and are similarly employed by the SPDC as a source of national and international legitimacy. This willful manipulation of images to obtain and maintain power is hardly unusual, but the continuity of colonialist values is noteworthy because in the SPDC’s attempts to assert independence from colonialism and neocolonialism, it has entangled itself further in the colonialist worldview.
Burma still struggles under the colonial shadow, unable to shake free of the value system imposed by the British. One solution that has been pursued with unbound enthusiasm is tourism, with its promise of high returns for low capital investment. Myanmar is not the only country to fall prey to this tourism myth. Like all other developing nations that have adopted this shortcut to development, the ruling elite of Myanmar have and continue to perpetuate the images established by the powerful west and replaced the inherent value of nature, culture, people, and artifacts with its monetary equivalent. In this process, the “unspoiled” Myanmar that the SPDC is so fervently proclaiming and “protecting” is being brought ever closer to the image of the exotic other constructed by the British colonialist imagination.

“(T)he imperial gaze prefigures the tourist gaze” (Rodriquez 2003:188) but that gaze can come from within.¹ In the pre-colonial era, Burmans saw the upland peoples as savages. Today, they are the colorful, uneducated ethnicities that practice slash and burn agriculture, “a highly destructive method”² that impairs the environmental conservation measures undertaken by the SPDC (Maung Kyaa Nyo 2000:135). “Tourism and the state are two major forces that underwrite, justify, and perpetuate ethnoracial difference.” (Rodriguez 2003:191). Differences and inequalities have existed in all cultures throughout history. Tourism magnifies those differences and exacerbates those inequalities by enabling different peoples to interact without taking responsibility for the power disparities.

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¹ In this case, “within” means the peoples within the boundaries of modern day Burma. In pre-colonial Burma, this adverb would not work as the different ethnic groups had not been inscribed into a geopolitical body. They would have been gazing from the outside or as neighbors.
² Although this is a common perception, more recent research has shown that slash and burn agriculture as practiced by indigenous people did not lead to extensive deforestation. Deforestation resulted from over-intensive use of particular plots resulting from the encroachment of development.