

Country Studies--Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos

Objectives

At the end of this unit, you will

Be aware of the following

- Theravada Buddhist practice in the area
- Similarities of major ethnic minorities within the theater
- Limiting nature of the word "animist"
- Continued Hindu impact of religious thought and practice
 - Impact of Communist government on Laotian Buddhist practice

Identify

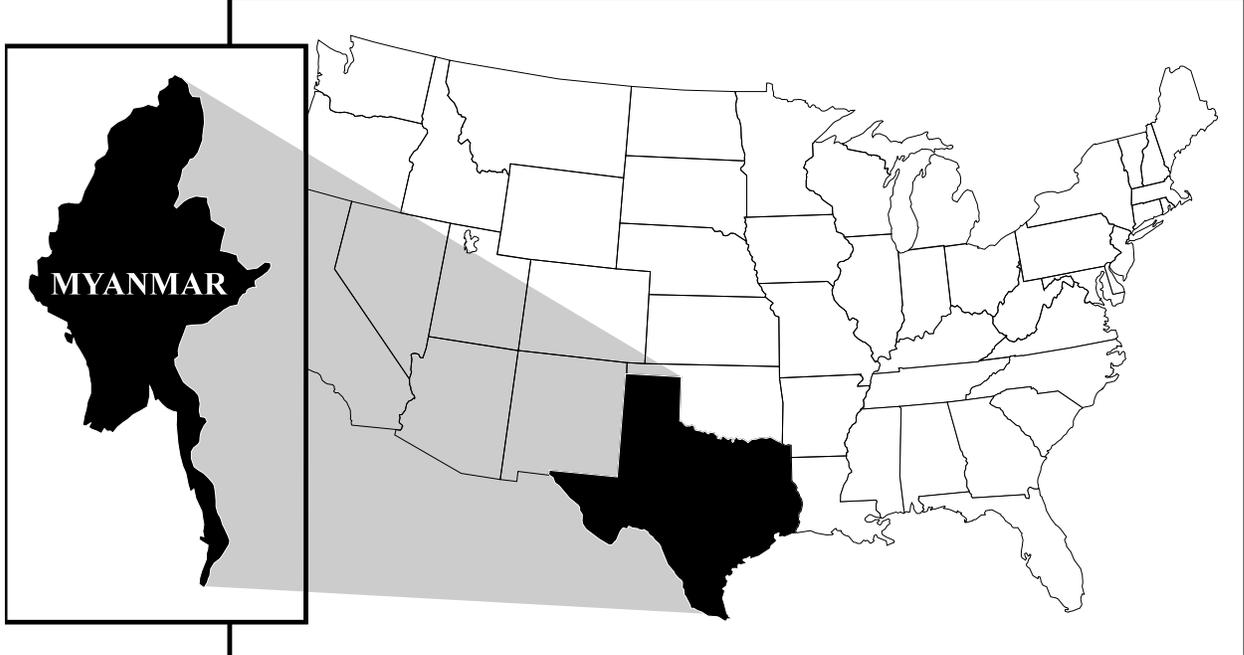
- Nonattachment, merit, demerit
- Anade, Karen
- U Thant, Aung San Suu Kyi
- Bonze, Bhikkhu
- Genocide Day, Pol Pot and Khmer Rouge
- Temple of Angkor
- Prince Norodom Sihanouk, Wat
- Lao People's Democratic Republic
 - Shaman, Hmong

Realize

- Place of giving (merit) to Buddhist causes in Burma
- Respect given monks in Theravada Buddhism
- Traditionally high status enjoyed by women in Burmese and Cambodian society
- Khmer Rouge genocide in Cambodia
- Extent of disabled people in Cambodia
- Hindu/Buddhist influence on Cambodian art and architecture
- Prevalence of spirit world in Laotian, Burmese and Cambodian religious practice

Myanmar (Burma)

(MIHN-mahr)



<u>Population</u>	45,103,809
% under 15 years	37%
<u>Commo</u>	
TV	1:45
Radio	1:14
Phone	1:501
Newspaper	no figure
<u>Health</u>	
Life Expectancy	Male 58 Female 63
Hospitals	1:1,586
Doctors	1:3,306
IMR	62:1,000
<u>Income</u>	\$950.00 per cap
<u>Literacy Rate</u>	78%

1. Religious Groups

a. Buddhist 89%

(1) Theravada Buddhism *"In strict orthodox Theravada Buddhism, Gotama was merely a human being; he does not exist anywhere to hear people's prayers. His words are left in the sacred books and can be learned from his 'sons,' the living Theravada monks, who exist today as the Buddha once instructed the first monks to live. All Burmans share in this heritage and follow some semblance of the strict orthodox teachings. The Buddhism of the Pali scriptures, however, often differs from actual religious beliefs and practices in modern Burma."* (Unless stated otherwise, all quotations are from the Library of Congress Country Studies/Area Handbook--Burma [Myanmar])



(2) Nonattachment *"In terms of each persons' daily plan and lifelong ambition, a major quest is for nonattachment to the sensate world, which everyone must quit eventually."*

In the early ears and in the flush of adulthood, attachments to kin, sensate pleasures, career, society, and self are seen as naturally strong; nonetheless, one should try to lessen the bonds. Rational thought should conclude in harmony with the Buddha's teachings that the stronger the attachment, the worse the eventual suffering when all must be released at the end.

Each person will vary tremendously in the ability to control desire, and human weaknesses undermine many sincere efforts. For example, because the Buddha condemned alcohol as a substance that prevented rational thought, Buddhists try not to drink alcohol, but some lack the will to avoid it, though they usually are the first to explain that they are wrong to indulge. The more sensate pleasure a person can deny, the more Burman Buddhists honor that person. Slaves to attachments, however, are merely normal humans, not sinners."

(3) Rebirth, Giving, Merit, and Demerit

"Burmans believe that the best way to ensure a better future life is to give as generously as possible to Buddhism rather than to secular charities or causes. Buddhist giving is noted in golden books kept by heavenly beings and is called 'merit.'

The more merit earned, the better the rebirth. The more one has, the more one should give, but intent is very important, and a simple flower from a sincere poor farmer is said to earn more merit than a disdainful cash donation by a rich merchant. Merit is usually shared or can be entirely transferred. When a boy enters a monastery for the first time, he traditionally transfers the merit he earns to his mother. It is customary to share merit with all beings in this world, in hell or in heaven.



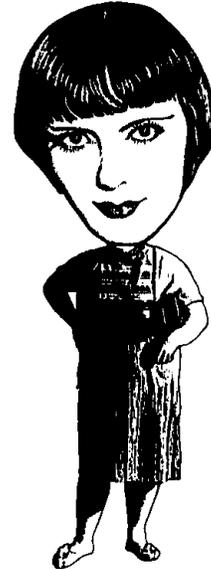
Each person, poor or rich, sick or healthy, intelligent or otherwise, is the product of whatever merit or lack of it was earned in previous lives. Each is, in a sense, spending in this life the fruits of merit earned previously. There is no one to blame if this life is difficult; each deserves what was earned before.

Others will feel compassion for another's suffering, but ultimately each is responsible for one's own fate. Under such a system, riches are one's just reward; poverty, conversely, is the just consequence of what is called demerit.

Demerit is recorded on dog-skin books by supernatural beings, and the record may include the killing of a mosquito as it bit, a drinking party, or perhaps adultery. The standard five precepts include not lying, not taking intoxicants (including alcohol and narcotics but not tobacco or coffee), not committing adultery (some exclude males who use prostitutes) not killing any creature, and not stealing.

The orthodox maintain that each demeritorious act must be paid for first in one of the eight hells before moving on to one of the heavens to delight in the rewards for the worthy, but others lull themselves into believing that demerit can be reduced by application of merit earned or transferred. The human wish to use an accounting system explains the sudden, conspicuous religiosity of some notoriously wicked individuals in Burma."

(4) Meditation and truth "One way of seeking nirvana is through an inward exploration of consciousness known as meditation, which helps to confirm the belief that what is conveniently conceived of as self or person is actually a coalition of parts creating the illusion of existence. Burmans follow particularly a form of introspection and insight that stresses components of consciousness, such as breathing. Some monks specialize in this search for ultimate truths, and in modern times lay persons join centers that teach the arts of meditation in peaceful settings.



Burmans in meditation seek not only Buddhist paths to truth but also the benefits of mental and physical health that accrue from the process, for tensions are reduced at many levels.

Buddhists also believe that in the process of discovering inner truths through meditation, a person, particularly a monk, gains supranormal power, such as the ability to see and hear things far away or the power to travel in air. A monk must not claim such powers, nor is he to use them, but his lay followers may let it be known that indeed he has them, and many stories are told of remarkable disclosures made by meditating monks about matters that Western science cannot explain.

Burmans will often deny to outsiders that they believe in psychic or magical phenomena, but many, if they meet with an understanding listener, will be quite willing to explain how supranormal powers are manifest."

(5) Prophecy and hope "In Burma some hill Karens and many Burmans share hopes that someday a leader will come to prepare the world for the next Buddha. The last Buddha lived 2500 years ago, and life is believed to become worse as more and more people forget the last Buddha's teachings. Life will deteriorate further, so the prophecy goes, and then a charismatic king will come to Burma (or to the Karens if they express the hope), and under his reign there will be a paradise on earth in which the next Buddha will preach, and all who hear him will be assured of nirvana."

(6) Spiritual power as national treasure "The village pagoda may be much smaller and the monastery inhabited by one or only a few adult monks, but the meaning and importance are the same.

With much effort and pride, the teachings of the Buddha are honored not because he was a god but because he was a deeply respected, very wise human being. The more one donates to Buddhism, the more one demonstrates that respect, and the more others in the society respect the donor.



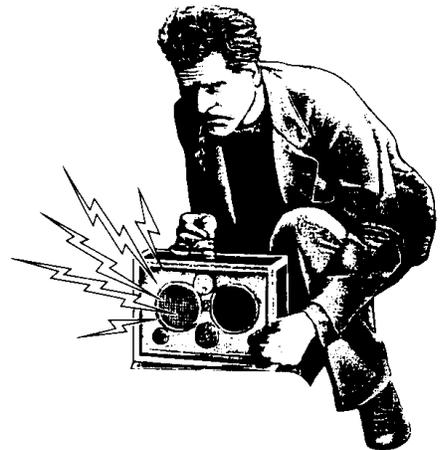
No matter what the standard of living may be in Burma in comparison with other countries, the society never fails to give generously to its religion. The thousands of ancient pagodas around the countryside built in honor of the Buddha's memory are never torn down for a hotel site or building materials. They remain as testimony to the spirit of Buddhist giving, as do the massive buildings at Pagan. Such is the Burmans' national treasure, preserved and honored through the ages."

(7) Men of prowess "Leaders, therefore, are watched carefully for merit balance indications. Neither king nor military hero is expected to be able to defeat the law of impermanence. Those who rule by force, especially through war, are amassing great quantities of demerit, but their success is nevertheless heralded as proof of a previous good life. Kings, the rebel Saya San, the martyred general

Aung San, and General Ne Win are examples of men who clearly had a massive merit balance. Such secular men of prowess are also expected to continue to work on their cosmic merit balance by giving to Buddhism at some point."

(8) Social status (monks) "In any Theravada society, the highest deference is given to Buddhist monks; even a mother bows deeply to her young son, who may be just a novice in the order, for in his orange robe he has become a living symbol of the Buddha. One's head must be kept below that of a monk. Upon entering a monastery, one bows three times deeply to the statue of the Buddha, then to the presiding monk. When leaving, one bows to the monk first and then to the image. The highest ranking military officer or politician in the country must so behave, for monks are even more respected than kings. In Thailand, for example, the king ritually bows to his head monk.

If a monk is especially revered by the people because of his nonattachment and character, women, to show their respect, may bow in the street so that he walks on a 'carpet' of their hair. Respect often involves an emotional feeling akin to love. Monks so revered may be honored with gifts, which they are too nonattached to use, thus inspiring still further gifts, which are usually given to the needy.



Because anyone who is mentally and physically sound and who is not a fugitive from legal responsibilities may join the sangha, any male may become one of the most highly respected members of Burman society. Consequently, the sangha becomes a vital ingredient in social mobility. Because monks move about the country seeking new teachers, a country boy from a poor home has the same basic options as does his opposite."

b. Hinduism A "substantial number of adherents."

c. Islam Primarily found within the Rakhine State.

d. Christian Many Chins, Kachins, Karens and others (see below).

2. Ethnic/Racial Groups

a. Ethnic Burmans 68%

b. Shans (shahns) 9% *"Once the masters of the Burmans when they ruled after the collapse of the Pagan-based monarchy, the Shans have no historical inferiority complex. In the centuries after the Pagan period, the Shans developed their own monarchies where Shan mandalas of power oscillated constantly as more powerful Burmese and Thai kings contested each other. Deference to outside royalty was a small price to pay for considerable Shan independence internally."*



The Shans in 1983 were basically rice farmers, skillful traders, and a valley people. In matters of governance, historically they have allowed an aristocratic elite to rule them."

c. Rakhine 4%

d. Karen 7%

"It has been fashionable to call the traditional religion of people like the Karens a form of animism, or 'spirit worship.' The word never does justice to such beliefs, which may be as complex and lofty as those of the major religions of the world. Traditional Karens, like so many other peoples, believe that both matter and spirit are realities, each possibly inhabiting the same entity at a given time or perhaps later separated but still linked. There are Karen gods, rituals, and oral religious traditions so impressive that early missionaries toyed with the belief that the Karens were a lost tribe of Israel."

No matter where Karens live, they characteristically have a strong sense of ethnic pride."

e. Kachin *"Of all the minorities in Burma, the Kachins have the greatest reputation for resorting to arms to assert what they believe are their rights."*

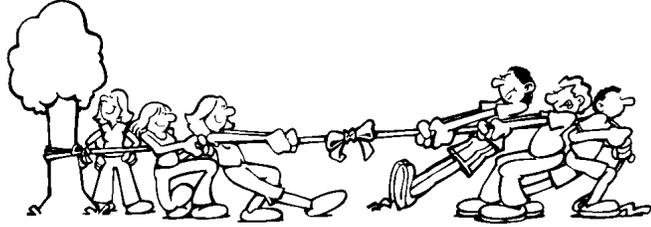


The traditional Kachin religion is deeply related to their intimacy with the mountains and a combination of their hunting concepts and hill agriculture. The religion also provides a symbolic explanation of their complex kin, marriage, and feasting systems in which those who aspire to the most status have to validate themselves by giving elaborate feasts at which wealth is redistributed for increased prestige."

f. Chin (JIN) *"Turbulent, competitive, legalistic, and yet very social, the Chins did not take to Christianity as well as did the Karens. Like the Karens, those who are Christians (possibly one-quarter of the population) have hoped to use their new faith to link with outside powers to protect their people from being engulfed by Burmans. Chin religion, in which the door to paradise is opened by hinting done in the proper way to honor and contend with the spirits of what is killed, can be seen in contrast to the Buddhism of their neighbors, where taking life is normatively scorned. Animal sacrifice, so common among hill peoples, is likewise condemned by valley Buddhists."*

g. Chinese, Indians, and other minorities *"The historically porous border between Burma and Bangladesh and India has been the source of perpetual movement of Muslims back and forth in response to their various political fortunes. Although the potential was always there for Buddhist-Muslim confrontation, in general the two groups have managed to live peaceably side by side but without much interaction."*

3. Gender Issues



a. Domestic violence *"Violence against women, including spousal abuse, is infrequent. Married couples often do not live by themselves but rather in households with extended families, where social pressure tends to protect the wife from abuse."* (Unless stated otherwise, quotations which follow come from the Report on Human Rights Practices for 1996--Myanmar, U.S. Department of State)

b. Prostitution *"Trafficking in women and girls remains a serious problem. There were reliable reports that many women and children in border areas, where the Government's control is limited, were forced or lured into working as prostitutes in Thailand. It is unknown how many young women have been deceived into working as prostitutes, but a common practice is to lure young women to Thailand with promises of employment as a waitress or domestic servant (see country report for Thailand). In addition, the military forces continued to impress women for military portorage duties, and there were many reports of rape of ethnic minority women by soldiers."*

c. Equality *"In general women have traditionally enjoyed a high status, exercising most of the same basic rights as men and taking an active role in business. Consistent with traditional culture, they keep their own names after marriage and often control family finances."*

However, women remained underrepresented in most traditionally male occupations, and a few professions continued to be entirely barred to women. The burden of poverty, which is particularly widespread in rural areas, fell disproportionately on women."



4. Conflicts No international disputes

5. Holidays and Festivals (The following material, adapted from Holidays, Festivals and Celebrations of the World Dictionary, compiled by Sue Thompson and Barbara Carlson, [Detroit: Omnigraphics, 1994], is instructive.)

a. Watering the Banyan Tree (Apr/May)

- Most important of the twelve Burmese festivals
- Kasone (Full Moon Day — sometimes known as Buddha Day) celebrates birth and enlightenment of the Buddha at the foot of the Banyan tree.
- Buddhists gather at monasteries and precept halls to practice meditation, to make charitable donations, and to observe the precepts of Buddhism.
- Pouring of water celebrates the preservation of the Banyan tree.
 - Sometimes fish are transferred during the hot month of celebration, from streams, ponds, and tanks to places where there is more water.

b. Tazaungdaing (October-November)

- Pre-Buddhist festival. Honors God of Lights, an awakening of the Hindu God Vishnu from his long sleep.
- Buddhism sees date as night that Siddhartha's mother wove traditional yellow robes for him.
 - Some commemorate return of Gautama Buddha from visit to his mother's reincarnated spirit. Monks light candles to illuminate his path to earth.



c. Thingyan (9-12 April)

- Three-day feast of the New Year known as the Water Festival
- Pots of water are offered to monks to wash or sprinkle images of Buddha.
- On the final day, birds and fish are set free, and young people wash the hair of their elders.

- Water-splashing custom originated with the idea that bad luck and sins of the old year were washed away.

d. Waso (June/July-September/October)

- Festival of Lights. Homes are lit with paper lanterns, all-night weaving contests take place.
- Young unmarried women weave robes, and at dawn offer them to images of the Buddha at the pagoda.

6. Customs

a. Anade (*an-ah-deh*) "Accompanying the traditional system has always been an aspect of the Burman mentality for which there is no adequate English term. The behavior pattern or emotion is called anade by Burmans.



Rather than suffer a direct affront or embarrassment, Burmese prefer to withdraw or avoid a situation entirely. Rather than cause such a feeling in another, a Burman may completely avoid an encounter. Among good friends or family, expected behavior is that a person will never bring up matters that would bring shame or reduction of status to another.

The concept of anade is so broad that it can also refer to reluctance to enter a relationship that creates a debt one does not wish to have. Thus, offered kindness can be rejected by a person not willing to reciprocate. If anade is pleaded as an excuse for inaction, others are always expected to honor it.

Most importantly, anade implies a superior-inferior relationship that does not harmonize well with democratic

social machinery. To vote down a minority in a committee is not allowing for any face-saving, whereas in a hierarchical

order the person in the inferior position is not necessarily made to feel inferior. Knowing where one stands, one can avoid demeaning confrontations with authority, but if everyone is made equal and forced to interact through committee structure, then individuals will publicly risk embarrassment if they lose. Representative government becomes a dangerous business where the traditional harmony of anade observance contends with the conflicting demands of constituents. For these reasons a 'committee' of monks or party members seldom resembles democracy or socialism in action but more likely a dutiful group of followers doing what their leader expects them to do.

Keeping the appearance of harmony is an important goal that anade serves, and debate is neither encouraged in the typical education process nor common in public life. Politeness is to be maintained by avoiding direct expression of disagreement." (Country Study)



b. Cultural uniqueness "When Western nations proudly acclaim some new achievement, the Burmans often point out that they have been doing the same thing for centuries.

A case in point involves the Western women's liberation movement. Burman women have always been powerful. By remaining close to their mother, female relatives, and daughters, they always have a strong support team. Equal inheritance of land and wealth with brothers gives them financial power, which is often enhanced by their managing family finances or carrying on a business. Although Buddhism assigns superiority to males, the powerful female is quite often aware that the superiority is a token that men seem to need for self-esteem. As one very successful Burman lady explained, 'Let him go first. That is where the snakes are.'

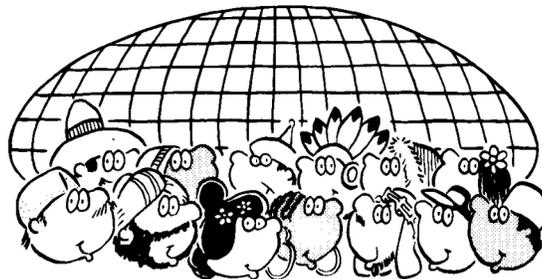
When a woman wished to divorce a man, the proverbial story was that she put his things outside the house for him to see when he came home. By feeding the monks, women were

their real supporters and thus have always had much social influence and power. Although seldom given as much formal education as a man, they predominate in chanting Pali responses on holy days because they often have formed their own study groups. They may treat their husbands with the greatest deference, keeping their heads below their husband's, walking behind them, eating after males have finished, or following other ancient customs, but they are in actuality still very dignified and formidable beings.

A man may strut as he plays his part on a stage that makes him superior, but the woman is so powerful she needs no theatrics. Some women who have been educated abroad may feel that some improvements in their status should be made, but most are proud and satisfied to be what they are."



c. National/racial/ethnic minorities "Since only people who can prove long familial links to Burma are accorded full citizenship, ethnic populations such as Muslims, Indians, and Chinese, continued to be denied full citizenship and to be excluded from government positions. People without full citizenship are not free to travel domestically and are barred from certain advanced university programs in medicine and technological fields. Anti-Chinese and anti-Muslim sentiment remained pervasive."



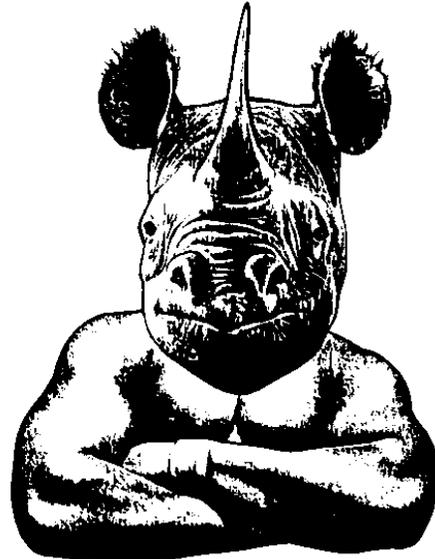
"Minorities in Burma face a Buddhist majority, and Christianity remains an option for asserting one's

distinctness, not only for the Karens or Chins, for example, but also for those who have had a genuine Christian conversion and for others who retain a fierce loyalty to all things British. On a visit to Mandalay, a visitor attempting, however ineptly, to speak Burmese should not be surprised to have an impeccably dressed older man watch for a while with a smile and then speak in exquisite English with a perfect Oxford accent. The same elderly gentleman will finish his days as an ardent Christian. No revolution will convert him into either a Buddhist or a socialist.

Mosques are found in Arakan, Rangoon, and in all areas where the Muslim community is strong, some of these groups having established themselves in Burma centuries ago. Like the Hindu and Chinese populations, Muslims have to keep a low profile in terms of asserting their ethnic identity in order to avoid the racial antagonism that has often flared up in the past." (Human Rights Report...)

d. Freedom of religion "Adherents of all religions that were duly registered with the authorities generally enjoyed freedom to worship as they chose, although Buddhists continued to enjoy a privileged position. In recent years, the Government made special efforts to link itself with Buddhism as a means of asserting its own popular legitimacy.

The Muslim and Christian religious minorities continued to be regarded with suspicion by authorities. Moreover, there is a concentration of Christians among the particular ethnic minorities against whom the army has fought for decades. Religious publications, like secular ones, remained subject to control and censorship. Christian bibles translated into indigenous languages could not legally be imported or printed. It remained extremely difficult for Christian and Muslim groups to obtain permission to build new churches and mosques."



e. People with disabilities *"Official assistance to persons with disabilities is extremely limited."*

7. Cultural Literacy Concepts/Terms The following terms, adapted from The Dictionary of Global Culture, (edited by Kwame Appiah and Henry Gates, Jr., NY: Alfred Knopf, 1997), apply to Myanmar. Consult this helpful dictionary for further information.

a. Aung San Suu Kyi (oung-sahn-soo-chee)

- Key opposition leader to Burmese military rule
- Awarded Nobel Peace Prize in 1991
 - Held under house arrest from 20 Jul 1989 to 10 July 1995

b. Kachin

- Ethnic group located in Northeast Burma, living under a system called Gummtsa. A chief owns all the land, his people pay tribute.
- The Kachin have never been subjugated by any of the local empires.

c. Karen

- Collective of ethnic groups living in southern and eastern parts of Burma.
- Pro-British with over 30% converting to Christianity
 - Resisted annexation to Burma and today still protest.

d. Kyanzittha (c.1084-1113)

- Burmese king who set tradition of kings being chosen for ability rather than divine right.
- Strong patron for the arts and supporter of Buddhism.
- Built the Ananda Temple, the oldest structure remaining in Pagan.

