
Original Article (Special Theme)

Organization Imagined and Created through “Good Deeds”:
A Case Study of Thabarwa Meditation Center in Myanmar

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Purpose of this paper

What kind of society do the gifts of Indian religions imagine/create? This paper examines this question using the case of the Thabarwa Meditation Center in Myanmar. The purpose of this paper is to shed light on the structuring processes of the kind of organization imagined or created through the Buddhist concept of “good deeds (ku suil koñ mhu).” The paper will also elucidate the mutually constitutive relationship between religious concepts and organizations.

For this paper, I define an organization as “a collaborative system coordinated to achieve some purpose”. In other words, an organization is considered as a society formed by various stakeholders – in the case of a company, the shareholders, investors, customers, consumers, employees, traders, competitors, government entities, and
administrative agencies, etc. So how does a society/organization form? Chester Barnard, an influential author on organizational theory, argues that an organization as a collaborative system depends on the voluntary motivation of stakeholders to contribute something to the collective. Therefore, organizations can only be formed and survive by providing incentives that can satisfy certain key motivations of the stakeholders, or, if this is not possible, by persuading them to change their motivations altogether. Bernard then divides organizations into two broad categories according to the types of incentives they can provide: industrial organizations (such as private companies) that attract the contributions of stakeholders primarily through material incentives (e.g. salaries), and political and religious organizations that attract the contributions of stakeholders primarily through non-material incentives (e.g. sense of achievement) (Barnard 1968: chapter 11). The latter would include organizations that would now be called NGOs, non-profit organizations, and social and economic bodies.

This paper reads Bernard’s theory of organizational incentives from a gift theory perspective. In other words, the contribution by stakeholders is considered as a gift of resources such as people (labor), goods, and money. The organization can be seen as a society made up of a variety of gifts from various stakeholders. Therefore, in order to clarify the characteristics of an organization, it is necessary to analyze what kind of gifts are given, and how these gifts are coordinated to form a collaborative system.

In this regard, religious organizations require a soteriological analysis. This requirement is because religious norms grounded in soteriology characterize the gifts of people. As such, I call such bodies, where religious norms characterize people’s contributions (gifts), religious organizations in this paper. In other words, a religious
organization can be defined as “a collaborative system formed by the mutual coordination of diverse gifts influenced by religious norms”. How, then, are religious norms related to giving specifically interpreted and understood? What kind of giving do these norms bring about? What is the nature of an organization imagined/created as a result? The purpose of this paper is to confront these questions through the case study of the Thabarwa Meditation Center in Myanmar. By doing so, I hope to help unravel the overall question of this special issue, “What kind of society does the gift of Indian religion imagine/create?”.

Perspectives of this paper and an overview of the chapters

In the Thabarwa Meditation Centre, the concept of “good deeds”, which is grounded in Buddhist doctrine, is a key factor driving the act of organizing. Therefore, the main purpose of this paper is to identify how the concept of “good deeds” guides the contributions (gifts) of stakeholders and shapes the kind of organization that is created as a result of this concept. However, the meaning of the concept of “good deeds” is not fixed. New meanings are explored (extrapolated, concretized, elaborated, etc.) as the organization transforms. To explore the meaning of “good deeds” is also a matter of imagining the ideal organization. And this imagining leads to the re-creation of the organization itself. By analyzing the process of formation and transformation of the center, this paper shows that religious norms and the organization are in a mutually constitutive relationship, i.e., that the exploration of the concept of “good deeds” ((re)imagining the organization) and the (re)creation of the organization are inextricably linked.

The structure of this paper is as follows. Chapter II, “The Center as an ‘Association’,” summarizes the characteristics of the “association”
as the institutional foundation of the center. It is shown that an “association” is an organization that collects donations from society and offers them to Buddhist monks/socially vulnerable people, developing its techniques for acquiring, managing and using the various resources needed by the organization separately from those techniques of NGOs of modern Euro-American origin. Chapter III, “Establishment of the Center,” reviews the Buddhist doctrinal interpretations of the sayadaw, the center’s founder (Ashin Ottamathara 2018). At the heart of the center is the concept of “good deeds”. In other words, I demonstrate that the center was established to provide all people with the opportunity to perform good deeds, and as a result of that good deed, to help them realize the truth and promote salvation. Chapter IV, “The Center as a Community of Practice,” analyzes the concept of the “community of practice” (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder 2002) that emerged as the center grew rapidly and became a social welfare body. In this setting, the heterogeneous existence of volunteers and meditation practitioners is imagined/created as becoming conducive to the proficient performance of “good deeds” by individuals in the course of their interaction. Moreover, this proficiency reveals that the concept of “good deeds” functions as a legitimizer of the participation of a variety of heterogeneous actors as a result. Chapter V, “The Center as a spontaneous order,” analyzes how organizational management policies, which can be called “anti-management” based on the concept of “good deeds,” on the one hand, drive organizational “becoming” (Deleuze & Guattari 1980) and, at the same time, bring about “obduracy” (Hommels 2005). Based on these discussions, the final section (Chapter VI) summarizes the characteristics of organizations shaped by Buddhist gift-theory and the mutually constitutive relationship between religious norms and organizations.
Conclusion and Discussion

In the Thabarwa Meditation Center, the concept of “good deeds” rooted in Buddhist doctrine has had a profound impact on the way stakeholders contribute (give) and, therefore, on the way they are organized. In essence, the center’s characteristics can be summarized as an “association,” a redistribution system centered on a charismatic monk, a heterogeneous mixture of diverse people, goods, and money, a “community of practice,” and an “obduracy”. But such labels only capture one aspect of the center. What is important is the process of organizing and why it appears as it does, while obsessing over labels rather obscures the dynamics of the process itself. The significance of analyzing the center from the point of view of “organization” is that it enables us to describe the subject without reducing it to a definitive, discrete label. How then to analyze the process of the organization? Concerning this question, the present paper focuses on the mutually constitutive relationship between religious norms and organizations. That is to say, I examine the question of how the concept of “good deeds” grounded in Buddhist doctrine facilitates the imaginative/creative process of the center and, conversely, how the concept of “good deeds” is transformed in that very process. The discussion so far on this point can be summarized as follows.

First, the concept of “good deeds” does not directly dictate the way people give (contribute) to the organization. The ideal of “good deeds” does not mean that people are committed to giving without asking for anything in return. In this sense, the giving of Indian religions does not make a utopia beyond reciprocity in this world. Yet, certain realities are created from out of the ideal of good deeds. The center only persuades and encourages people with the saying, “if one performs good deeds, there are good fruits. One will realize this fact
as one acts, so let us act together. Acting as such, will save oneself and the world.” There is no coercion whatsoever in this statement. The concept of “good deeds,” therefore, inspires the intention to be skilled at “good deeds” but it can also be a cover to justify diverse actions (often against this very ideal). Due to this fact, the tension between “good deeds” and “bad deeds,” with the latter seeming to exploit the former, is constantly witnessed at the center. This tension can be said to cause the transformation of the organization, such as the formation of redistribution systems around the sayadaw, the social welfarization of the center, the accumulation of interracial people, goods, and money, and the spontaneous development (becoming and obduracy) of organizational structures. Hence, the process of the organization continues at the center with the words of the sayadaw expounding “good deeds.”

Secondly, as the concept of “good deeds” is refashioned based on such a transformation of the organization, the meaning of this concept itself is expanding. According to the sayadaw, “good deeds” is the practice of “donation, precepts, and practice (meditation),” and is a means to realize the truth (of impermanence, suffering, and non-self). This rendering is a common interpretation in Myanmar generally. Yet, the center is unique in its elevation of the concept of “good deeds” over other Buddhist concepts and in its attitude of reframing every transformation of the organization according to this concept. Thus, as the organization changes, the concept of “good deeds” expands to include the new meanings of “accepting whoever at any time”, “communities of practice”, and “anti-management.” Or the way of explanation itself begins to shift. It is a process of reimagining what the ideal of the center should be each time. As a result, the concept of “good deeds” expounded by the sayadaw has become inseparable from the nature of the center. Put another way, if
the nature of how the center is organized is not understood, the sayadaw’s concept of “good deeds” cannot be understood. In this sense, the creation of the organization is inextricably linked to the exploration of the concept of “good deeds” (imagining the organization).

This mutually constitutive relationship between religious norms and organizations has more general implications when religious norms are viewed as doctrine and organizations are viewed as institutions. One of the central problems in anthropological studies of institutional religions with established scriptures and doctrines, such as Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism, is the gap between what is said and what is done, that is, the gap between doctrine and actual institutions. As we have seen in this paper, the relationship between doctrine and institutions can be viewed as mutually constitutive.

The doctrine is not something that is shoved into the Scripture or into an individual’s head. It is embedded in our interaction with others and our connection to the environment that surrounds us, that is, in institutions. Therefore, their meanings are not fixed or immutable, but are constantly “explored” (extrapolated, concretized, elaborated, etc.) in the institutionalizing process. Such exploration is to imagine ideal ways of living and social relations and could be an important opportunity to create institutions by producing new semantic linkages and influencing acts such as giving and their evaluation. The creation of institutions thus always unfolds in parallel with the exploration of doctrine. One of the challenges for the anthropology of institutional religions is to find part of that imaginative/creative process on the micro-ground. The case study presented in this paper should be considered an attempt to meet this very challenge.
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