

<b>Institution: Lancaster University</b>
<b>Unit of Assessment: 33: Theology and Religious Studies</b>
<b>Title of case study: Buddhism and Women's Empowerment in Myanmar</b>
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b></p> <p>Research by Dr Hiroko Kawanami into the religious and social standing of nuns in Myanmar has helped to empower women in that country by guiding the work of what is now Myanmar's most prestigious Buddhist nunnery school, [REDACTED], which Kawanami co-directs. By raising the standing of nuns in Myanmar, the school has expanded opportunities for the country's women and girls. Since 2008 the school has grown to provide a model of indigenous development, a space for civil society discussions, and a feature in Myanmar's emerging tourist itinerary. The school is informing the community-level capacity-building work of major non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as ActionAid, Oxfam, and UNICEF. Representatives of 20 NGOs convened at the school in 2013; thus, Kawanami's impact is spreading internationally.</p> <p>This case study contains politically sensitive material given the still-volatile situation in Myanmar. For this reason, Lancaster University prefers that Kawanami's impact not be publicised widely.</p>
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b></p> <p>Kawanami's world-recognised body of work on the religious standing of Theravada Buddhist nuns in Myanmar, crystallised in her 2013 monograph, spans outputs from 1996 onward, all produced at Lancaster University.</p> <p>Kawanami's research focuses on Myanmar (Burma), a country which until recently was tightly controlled by the military regime. It is highly religious: 85% of its population of over 60m are Buddhists, with half a million vocational monks and 50,000 nuns. At 1% of the total population, this is the largest concentration of monastics in any Buddhist country, depending entirely on lay donations (made within the country). Kawanami's research shows that the monastic community is pivotal for the socio-religious life of the Buddhist population, operating through a network of monks, nuns and lay supporters extending to the remotest villages.</p> <p>Numerous as Myanmar nuns are, Kawanami finds that their progress and unity have been hampered by their lesser status compared to monks, which has assigned nuns a half-way position between pious laywoman and religious mendicant. Kawanami examines different strategies for improving nuns' religious and social standing and advocates that, instead of simply pursuing either ordination or secular education, nuns should deepen their scriptural education to become more credible monastics and thereby enhance their social and religious capital.</p> <p>As Kawanami shows, the historic difficulty that nuns have had doing this is that, unlike monasteries, nunneries have tended to decline and fragment after two generations of abbesses, struggling to pass on their institutional and educational heritage to the next generation. Based on study of the developmental cycles of 200 formerly existing nunnery schools, conducted over 25 years, Kawanami ascertains that this happens because nunneries tend to become infiltrated by nuns' families and kin, compromising nuns' religious position and producing tensions between institutions' collective, academic and religious ideals and the private interests and kin ties of resident nuns (see Kawanami 2013 for her definitive account). Historically the tensions intensify when the transfer of authority within a nunnery school takes place, often producing institutional turmoil and collapse. This problem, Kawanami finds, is connected with the traditional Myanmar system that accommodates separate households on the common nunnery premises (called <i>ò kwe-sà-thi</i>, 'eating from separate pots') – implying that a nunnery is a confederation of many independent households that convene only on ceremonial occasions. Kawanami's proposed solution is that nunneries should instead employ a 'one-pot' system that pools and shares all resources.</p>
<p><b>3. References to the research</b></p> <p>1. Kawanami (1997) Buddhist nuns in transition. In <i>Indian Insights: Studies in Brahmanism, Buddhism and Bhakti from the Spalding Seminars on Indian Religions</i>, ed. S. Hamilton and P.</p>

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Connolly, pp. 209-224. London: Luzac Oriental. ISBN-10: 1898942153. ISBN-13: 978-1898942153. 2\* evidence: an early article on this topic, since accepted and used by other scholars, e.g. Gutschow, *Being a Buddhist Nun* (Harvard University Press, 2004); Ho, Representing Burma, in *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association* 126 (3) 2011.

2. Kawanami (2000) Patterns of renunciation: the changing world of Burmese nuns. In *Women's Buddhism, Buddhism's Women: Tradition, Revision, Renewal*, ed. E. B. Findly, pp. 159-171. Boston: Wisdom Publications. 2\* evidence: included in one of the first major volumes on Buddhist women in the contemporary world; endorsements: 'This is the book that every course on Buddhism and gender needs: it's a well-balanced blend of historical studies with contemporary pieces on modern women's contributions to the changing face of Buddhism' (Karen Lang, Professor of Buddhist Studies, University of Virginia); an 'excellent, thematically arranged collection of essays' (James R. Kuhlman, University of North Carolina).

3. Kawanami (2007) The *bhikkhuni* ordination debate: global aspirations, local concerns, with special emphasis on the views of the monastic community in Burma. *Buddhist Studies Review* 24 (2): 226-244. 2\* evidence: fully peer-reviewed article in an important journal of Buddhist studies.

4. Kawanami (2010) The politics of gender identity amongst Buddhist nuns in Myanmar. In *Contested Spaces*, ed. Meenakshi Thapan, pp. 212-229. Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan. ISBN: 978-81-250-4092-7. 2\* evidence: long-standing, respected Indian publisher; endorsements, e.g.: 'an important source material for the study of tribal people, because the issue of contestations on spaces, territories, and resources is of serious concern to them' (Srivastava, *The Hindu* 26/4/2011).

5. Kawanami (2013) *Renunciation and Empowerment of Buddhist Nuns in Myanmar-Burma*. Leiden: Brill, xii + 258 pp. ISBN: 978-90-042-3440-6. 2\* evidence: peer-reviewed monograph with respected academic publisher; the culmination of 25 years fieldwork and analysis by Kawanami, this monograph brings together insights previously scattered across shorter pieces and disseminated in various fora.

6. Kawanami (1996): Film: *Keepers of the Faith: the Buddhist Nuns of Sagaing Hills*, directed and produced by Kawanami, accessible via the British Film Institute: <http://ftvdb.bfi.org.uk/sift/title/597864>

First shown at Freiburg Film Forum, Germany (1997): <http://www.freiburger-filmforum.de/fifo97/>; screenings at, e.g. Polish Anthropological Society, Canadian Anthropological Society.

The above are indicative of Kawanami's extensive body of research, the quality and reputation of which is borne out by esteem indicators such as her Numata Visiting Professorship in Buddhist Studies at McGill University, Canada (2009), and being selected and commissioned to host an international workshop for NGOs on gender, Buddhism and civil society (2013).

#### 4. Details of the impact

While the impact of Kawanami's research has increased greatly since 2008, the process leading to this impact goes back to her Vice-Presidency of Sakyadhita International (International Association of Buddhist Women) from 1990-1995. This high-profile organisation ran effective campaigns for nun ordination, successfully re-established in Sri Lanka (1998) and Thailand (2002). The opportunities for disseminating her research that Kawanami thus acquired established her as a world-leading authority on Buddhist nuns in Myanmar. This gave her the opportunity – in Myanmar's highly religious, scripture-centred context in which academic authority is highly valued – to collaborate with three senior nuns in founding (1998) the nunnery school, [REDACTED], one of Myanmar's monastic educational centres.

Kawanami's research has guided the school in several ways. (i) Kawanami's historical research enabled the co-directors to refound the school on an ancient site of nun education. (ii) The co-directors were convinced by her research (on the historical problem of the penetration of kinship) to base the school on a 'one-pot' (*ta-ò*) system. This brings all resident nuns into the 'pot'

regardless of their kin relations, curbing worldly and individualistic tendencies and reducing time on chores, enabling nuns to concentrate on scriptural study. (iii) Based on Kawanami's historical research on why nunnery schools have often declined, the directors since 2008 have instituted a legal constitution to select executive members by merit, not by family or kin connections.

Since 2008 especially, this nunnery school has grown and become a role model for Buddhist nuns in Myanmar. It has developed an outstanding reputation for academic excellence, in which the nuns excel due to Kawanami's 'one-pot' system, which has enabled increasing numbers of nuns (currently around 20 each year) to pass the state scriptural exams. With many lay donors coming to see the beneficial outcomes, the school is now self-sustaining, entirely supported by lay donations within Myanmar. As of 2013 there are 200 resident students. The school's graduate students have opened two branch nunneries since 2008, and the school is affiliated with an orphanage. Altogether, 500 noviciates have trained at the school between 2008 and 2013.

The principal beneficiaries of Kawanami's research are (1) these nuns and trainee nuns, for whom the school offers a safe single-sex environment for studying the scriptures, pursuing a religious vocation and affiliating with lay supporters. Further beneficiaries include (2) Myanmar's 50,000 nuns more broadly, whose spiritual standing and so also financial and social support has been enhanced by the reputation, growth and financial success of the [REDACTED] school. More broadly still, the beneficiaries include (3) girls and women in Myanmar, for whom monastic life increasingly provides an opportunity for education and a career as nunnery schools gain in status and financial sustainability.

Thus, Kawanami's engaged research has led to improvements in nuns' and women's status. According to Dr Elizabeth Harris (Associate Professor, Religious Studies, Liverpool Hope University), who has visited the school, 'Kawanami's contribution to the advancement of Buddhist nuns in Myanmar is considerable' (Ref. 1). Evidence of the school bringing this benefit to girls across Myanmar comes from, e.g. Dr. Sik Fa Ren (teaching consultant, Centre of Buddhist Studies, University of Hong Kong) who in 2011 escorted 30 Buddhists (from Dharma Nature Preaching Hall, Ching Fat Buddhist Lotus Centre and other Buddhist circles) to visit the nunnery. Fa Ren reports that: 'Children have aspirations to study the Buddhist teaching and even become a monastic when they are young. We saw young nuns ... It turned out that it was (they) who insisted to become a nun and it was their goal to attend the nunnery school. ... The nuns told us that it was competitive to get into the nunnery school and it was like a dream come true when they were enrolled' (Ref. 2). Blogging in 2012, visitor Dianne A confirms the importance of this opportunity to the girls, for a well rounded education as well as for Buddhist study: 'We met the youngest nun – a nine-year-old girl ... She had come to the Nunnery to learn to speak Burmese fluently as she only spoke Shan. She said she was happy to be there' (Ref. 3).

The school now also contributes significantly to Myanmar's cultural life and to tourism. This is shown by large attendance figures at regular ceremonies at the school (e.g., 1000 monks and nuns attended a ceremony during Fa Ren's 2011 visit) and from tourism. Although the military regime controlled tourism tightly until recently, the Sagaing Hills complex of monasteries and nunneries features highly on the now-developing tourist itinerary. Operators whose tours now feature visits to [REDACTED] the school include Travel IndoChina, World Expeditions, Wandertours and, especially, Cardinal Photos, which has run regular photographic tours to the school since 2005, bringing new financial benefits to this developing country. A documentary about the school aired on Sky Net television in Myanmar in September 2013.

There is a high level of international interest in the school, evidenced by audience figures for Kawanami's recent media broadcasts on the topic – e.g., on Radio National (Australia), 4/11/2008, audience c. 250,000 plus 10,000 podcast downloads; BBC World Service 10/4/2010, audience c. 1.5m; *Sunday Morning* on Radio Scotland 11/3/2012, audience c. 300,000) (source: Radio Joint Audience Research). The school was recently the subject of a substantial feature in *Elle* magazine (Belgium and France) (Ref. 4), which discusses Kawanami's research. Further evidence of international recognition is the regular visitor groups (such as Fa Ren's in 2011) from various countries and their donations (e.g., c. US\$30,000 from the Hong Kong group alone). The school is thus raising Myanmar's cultural profile and reputation internationally.

Also, the school is contributing significantly to the growth of civil society in Myanmar, which is currently undergoing a process of opening and reform that began in 2010 with the release of

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opposition leader Aung San Su Kyi from house confinement. In this period the school has provided a public venue for Myanmar people to meet and participate in religious activities, and even to discuss politics and social affairs in a safe environment, because the political authorities regard Buddhist nuns as non-political in contrast to monks. Thus the school is contributing to the process of creating a public sphere free of government control.

Finally, due to the school's success in becoming financially self-sustaining, numerous international NGOs regard it as a model of indigenous capacity building. For instance, in 2008 the Unitarian Service Committee, Boston, visited the school. Increasing NGO interest and recognition of Kawanami's research and role resulted in her being asked to host an NGO workshop at the school in Feb 2013: *Gender, Buddhism, INGOs and Civil Society*. Representatives of twenty aid agencies and NGOs – including Oxfam, UNICEF, and the Gender Equality Network Myanmar – participated to learn how to take forward this model of development. Further NGO interest resulted in a follow-up workshop held with ActionAid in Yangon in March 2013. These NGOs in international development and the communities with which they work are thus beneficiaries of Kawanami's research and the developments that it has enabled. As NGOs learn from the model of the [REDACTED] school, the impact of Kawanami's work is extending beyond Myanmar.

### 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

1. A statement from Associate Professor, Liverpool Hope University is available which endorses Kawanami's contribution to the advancement of nuns in Myanmar.
2. Corroboration may be obtained from: Teaching consultant, Centre of Buddhist Studies, University of Hong Kong.
3. Blog by Dianne A. about her visit to the school as a tourist and lay donor:  
<http://womenandpower2012.blogspot.co.uk/2012/09/the-road-to-mandalay-in-mandalay-and.html>
4. Caroline Chapeaux, 'La vie en rose: Nonnes en Birmanie', *Elle* Belgique Aug 2013, France Sept 2013. A copy of the article is available which cites and draws on Kawanami's research.
5. Sites at which images of the school can be viewed include:  
<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Sakyadhita-Thilashin-Sarthintike/343348135720916?sk=photos>  
<http://www.carolinechapeaux.com/nuns/> (photographs taken by the *Elle* journalist)

Further sources who can corroborate the impact:

6. Assistant Professor in Buddhist Studies, Department for the Study of Religion, University of Toronto (recent visitor to the school).
7. Learning Manager, Earthwatch Institute (formerly Associate for Rights in Humanitarian Crises, Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, USA) (NGO practitioner who has visited the school).
8. Vice-Director, Centre for East and South-East Asian Studies, Lund University (participant in the recent NGO workshops).