CHAPTER XVI

BURMA'S IDEOLOGICAL CRISIS IN THE BRITISH CONQUEST

In reality, the Burmese empire had not been prevented by its Buddhism from the pursuits of active military expansion. But Buddhism did prevent Burma from manipulating the destructive powers of nature that could have assured the success of such expansion. Pre-modern Buddhism (like medieval Christianity) did not promote curiosity about nature and the empirical world, just as Gautama Buddha had held aloof from such "low" arts and sciences as were not directed towards his goal of deliverance from Suffering. The intellectual achievements of traditional Buddhist Burma were directed mainly towards the single purpose of liberation from Impermanence; intellectual will was directed towards the overcoming of transitory phenomena and deliverance from them. Indifference towards the transitory world of the senses was the ideal. Buddhism's rationality principle of Causality emphasized the subjective sphere. The subjective world was conceived as calculable and thereby thought more predictable if not more manipulatable than the world of physical relationships. [What was thought predictable in nature, like natural harmony and natural calamity, was attributed to causation from the sphere of the ethical Law (cf. p. 49).] Insights into mechanical manipulatability of nature were not developed. Such manipulatability or domination of nature was obstructed by the Buddhist pursuit to realize the all embracing unity of life, the pursuit of that which Max Scheler has called "the Democracy of Being," the unity of man with all beings, the union of man with nature. Human control over the phenomena of nature presupposes man's consciousness of separation from it; in Burman monistic or pantheistic attitudes, affected by the pre-Buddhistic animism of Southeast Asia, militated against the scientific observation

of nature, and thereby delayed technological achievement. Therefore the Burmese Empire lacked a basis for technization and ultimate effectiveness of its military power. Many of its soldiers were armed with ... knives "bent double under moderate pressure." 1 The management of its artillery depended upon the corps of Christian descendents of foreign, chiefly Portuguese and French, captives of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries respectively. 2 It was a Catholic College of Missionaries in Rangoon that trained (besides ecclesiastics and physicians) also Burma's engineers and pilots in the late eighteenth century. 3 Not only did whatever there was of mechanical training in eighteenth century Burma depend on Catholic missionary instruction, but Burmese authorities usually attempted to utilize the skills in cannon production that were attributed to every Englishman who happened to come to Burma. 4 After Burma's defeats in the first Anglo-Burmese war, Bogyidaw's uncle, the Mekhara Min, had scientific articles translated from an English encyclopaedia, being greatly interested in physics and mathematics. But even then the lack of contacts limited scientific borrowings. 5 Probably such borrowings of modern natural science remained limited before the loss of Rangoon (1852) and thereby of direct overseas contacts.

The chief Burmese negotiator of the Anglo-Burmese arrangement of 1853, the Magwe Min-gyi, Burma's highest minister of his time, still clung to the semi-Ptolemaic view of the world with Mount Meru as axis of the sun and center of the "Continent". 6 As the Burmese throne was to be an image of this cosmic center, an axis of the astral firmament (cf. p. 82), even the later Konbaung kings of the last dynasty had difficulties in conceiving Burma as a state among a multiple power system. (Even the enlightened king Mindon allegedly became indignant when the limited size of Burma was pointed out to him in correct proportions on a globe.) Their clinging to their traditional "semi-Ptolemaic" image of the earth obstructed much of the diplomatic

1 Grattan Geary, *Burma after the conquest, viewed in its political, social and economic aspects from Mandalay* (London, 1886), p. 93.
2 Sangermano, *A description of the Burmese Empire*, p. 76.
3 Ibid., p. iii (N. Wiseman's Preface).