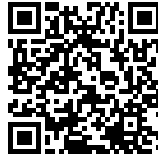




AND THE WEST INVENTED BUDDHISM

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In 2012, a group of English-speaking scholars published a book with the austere title, [*How Theravada is Theravada? Exploring Buddhist Identities*](#). This was the first time that an epistemology of Buddhism was presented that was so historicized and documented, and remarkably coherent. In 2014, the French orientalist, Gregory Kourilsky, wrote a review of this work with an incendiary title, at least for those who have a sense of what is at stake: "Le 'bouddhisme theravāda,' cette autre invention de l'Occident" ("Theravada Buddhism, Another Invention of the West"). France, which prides itself on bilingualism to the point of now broadcasting commercials in English (with French subtitles in some cases), only put this remarkable synthesis [on the Persée website](#) in February 2019.

What is established in Kourilsky's work can be summarized in a few lines: The expression "Theravada (or Theravadin) Buddhism" is an invention of twentieth-century European orientalists, which was gradually adopted in Asia by the Buddhists themselves.

The questioning of these concepts which have filled entire libraries is not so new. Already back in 2004, Peter Skilling, one of the authors of the book, had thrown a stone into the pond of Buddhist studies by questioning the relevance of the usage that establishes a necessary link between "Theravada" and the Pali Canon. He established that this usage is the product of norms established in Europe from the end of the nineteenth century to the middle of the following century and that this reinvented Theravada, mainly English-speaking, had progressively gained an international influence, including in the Buddhist communities of Asia.

In early academic publications, "Theravada" referred to the canonical corpus itself before designating a religious trend. Today, the term refers to the form of Buddhism systematized on the island of Ceylon during the first centuries of the Christian era, transmitted to Southeast Asia through its texts and its language, Pali. Although now universally accepted, the term appears in this sense only in Western sources, and not before the end of the colonial era. It is never used in the sense of "sect" or "school" in the religious texts of South, East and Southeast Asia. One would look in vain throughout the [*Tipitaka*](#) (the supposed Buddhist canon) for a single occurrence of this term and at most a dozen times in the Commentaries, and again never in the sense of "school" or "sect". Theravada is only used to underline a symbolic link with the "elders" (*thera* in Pali), i.e., the five hundred disciples of the historical Buddha, and thus to claim the authenticity of their teaching).

A researcher from Manitoba, David Drewes, has [recently established](#) that three centuries of research

have never been able to "scientifically" establish the Buddha's embodied existence.

[Todd LeRoy Perreira](#) then examined the terminological uses to which scholars and observers have resorted to, to designate religious practices. He traced the history of these practices in Ceylon, Burma and Siam, which is already a key discovery. He examined in detail the orientalist works published over the previous two centuries and drew up a semantic history, from the first appearance of the term (in 1836) to its "official" adoption on the occasion of the Colombo Resolution in 1950; and he has gone so far as to tackle (or to focus on) other expressions familiar to the Buddhologist but which turn out to be just as much the fruit of academic constructions. For example, Hinayana.

The term Hinayana ("Small Vehicle") only began to circulate at the very end of the nineteenth century, when a rivalry arose between the proponents of the Mahayana ("Great Vehicle") and those of Pali Buddhism, whose reputation for authenticity they wished to delegitimize. At the time, the Sinhalese school was considered to be the purest expression of the Doctrine, and Mahayana was seen by Europeans as a degenerate form of Buddhism. As exchanges between Buddhists multiplied on an international scale, those who claimed to be followers of the Great Vehicle - the Japanese in the first place - were anxious to restore the reputation of their dogma, which they did by winning what Kourilsky describes as a veritable war of terminology.

This ideological opposition was superimposed on another which, although older, was no less artificial - that which opposed "Southern Buddhism" to "Northern Buddhism," proposed by [Eugène Burnouf](#) and adopted by most Orientalists, although it referred to a somewhat simplistic geographical division.

In fact, Burnouf, an honest researcher who was considered the founder of Buddhology, had worked more or less alone, exploring a field of the history of religions about which little was known at the time. The conventional character of these designations did not prevent them from making their way into the Buddhist communities of South and Southeast Asia, whose members, receiving the growing influence of the West, appropriated them to the point of claiming to be "Theravada" Buddhists.

Thus, the nomenclatures that have been legitimately used are not based on vernacular sources but, to a large extent, on assertions imposed by the scientific community. The term "Buddhism" itself was challenged by a Sinhalese exegete as nonsense invented by Europeans.

Certain events constitute key stages in this process: the Orientalist Congress of Chicago, organized in 1893, and that of Colombo, in 1950. But before that, there were those ardent English, German, and Australian proselytizers, whom Pereira calls the "Europeans of zeal." Renowned orientalists such as Eugène Burnouf, Thomas William Rhys Davids (founder of the Association for the Pali Language, a questionable researcher whose article modestly hides the fact that he was accused of embezzlement in Ceylon, where he was stationed and had to leave after a trial, and whose wife was a theosophist); the Russian [Hermann Oldenberg](#); improbable theosophists like [Henry Steel Olcott](#).

And there were also Buddhist monks whose European origin was hidden under a locally colored conventual name, the most representative of whom were [Nyanatiloka](#) (alias Anton Walther Florus Gueth) and [Ananda Metteyya](#) (alias Charles Henry Allan Bennett, the same one who imposed the expression "Theravada Buddhism" with the meaning we know today). Forgotten in this list is the most ardent propagator of Buddhism, [Sylvain Lévi](#), who gave French Indianism all its weight, and whose disciple [Jean Filliozat](#) contributed to extinguishing the new breath of air brought by [Daniel Schlumberger](#), who dared to question the dogma of the birth of Buddha.

The categorization of Buddhism into two "vehicles," Mahayana and Hinayana, directly borrowed from European typology, was unknown in Siam before the second half of the 19th century. No Buddhist in Siam, before Chulalongkorn, could have defined his religious practices as belonging to one or the other of these two "schools." It was under the influence of Europeans that [Mongkut](#) (who was to ascend the throne as Rama IV, then wearing the yellow robe) undertook to invent a Pali alphabet (called the Ariyaka) which he wanted to be universal, with the aim of interacting with his co-religionists in Burma, Ceylon, or other countries that shared with the Siamese this "authentic Buddhism" based on the Singhalese Tipitaka.

The adoption of a language (in this case, Pali) and a phraseology does not de facto imply an adequacy with the dogma usually associated with it. The Burmese ruler [Kyansittha](#) invoked [Śāsana](#) and [Dharma](#) not so much to affirm his fidelity to a "religion" (the modern meaning of which is unknown in Bagan) as to instrumentalize a rhetoric on which he could base his disposition of power and establish his legitimacy. This opened up a new research perspective for the [King Ashoka](#), whose Buddhist character appears today as a dogma in the same way as the birth of the Buddha at [Kapilavastu](#), never scientifically established, not even archaeologically.

(Note that the translation into English by T. Rhys Davids' [*Dialogues of the Buddha*](#) was published under

the patronage of His Majesty [Chulalongkorn](#), King of Siam).

Whether one refers to the primitive texts or to the practices, whether one places oneself from the point of view of Asian Buddhists or European Orientalists, whether the methodology is that of the philologist or the epistemologist, the conclusions of the articles of these Anglo-Saxon researchers all lead to the same observation: "Theravada Buddhism" is indeed the product of an arbitrary taxonomy imposed for practical and, above all, ideological reasons.

In all this, the French colonial period is obscured, and consequently the geographical areas of the regions formerly administered by France (Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam) omitted. But this is rectified by Grégory Kourilsky, in his review, when he reminds us that "the process that led to the adoption in these regions of modern terminologies (Hīnayana, Theravada) is indebted to the initiatives taken by the administration of French Indochina to make Buddhism a vehicle for the unification of these states, redrawn by political contingencies. The Buddhist Institute, set up in Cambodia and Laos under the patronage of certain members of the École française d'Extrême-Orient (Louis Finot, George Coédès, Suzanne Karpelès, Pierre Dupont), was one of the main tools of this dynamic, and the sources highlight the efforts made by the colonial authorities to assert the unity of "Hīnayana Buddhism" with a view to federating the Khmer and Lao peoples.

"This book," concludes Gregory Kourilsky, "is proof that primary sources speak, to anyone who will listen, better than many of the self-sustaining theories that flood the current literature on Buddhism... In Buddhist studies, there will undoubtedly be a before and after How Theravāda is Theravāda?"

This makes perfect sense. Having said that, apart from specialists who are fluent in Pali or Sanskrit, who has access to the primary sources? A few months ago, the magazine, [l'Histoire](#), was interested in the art of Gandhara. It was happy to reproduce, with a certain brilliance, [Alfred Foucher's](#) thesis, which however has been revised by Daniel Schlumberger, and which recent works (especially those of the Russians) have made somewhat obsolete. It is that French Orientalism, dying, is now only represented by a few pundits who live off an intellectual heritage that has never been re-examined, and for the most part, is sclerotic. And it is these researchers who write in specialized journals for a so-called cultivated public.

But then, if these researches are so revolutionary, why don't we abandon terms that do not correspond to the reality of what is called "Buddhism?" Why are we still happy to use them, despite our greater

knowledge and caution? Why not give up these terms if they are wrong?

Because the consequences would be far-reaching. A whole bunch of charlatans living on the credulity of poor, spiritually lost and empty people would lose their golden goose. Most of the Buddhist or transcendental meditation institutes which claim to have a totally imaginary knowledge of Buddhism would have to be closed down. We would be freed from a whole bunch of scholarly chatter, including on the Catholic channels and [Le Jour du Seigneur](#). Libraries would have to be emptied of the chattering and pedantic theses which clutter them up. It would become necessary to urgently inform [INALCO](#) and [Pierre-Sylvain Filliozat](#), whose father, Jean Filliozat, was the gravedigger of the idea supported by Daniel Schlumberger in 1962, and his new thesis on the date of birth of the Buddha, not to mention all the priests who have risen to the top of their rank and who strut and repeat pompous and vain ecumenism, fed by all the apparatus of a hollow erudition.

What a job!... So, on second thought, let's not give up on these terms – not to mention the fact that were the research to be renewed, there would be a lot of unemployed people lining up at job centers. It would also make a lot of people worry about the only really important question when you take your nose out of your library – who do I believe in?

As for all those prelates who claim to educate the little people of God, it could lead them to ask themselves an even more decisive question: Who do I serve?

Marion Duvauchel is a historian of religions and holds a PhD in philosophy. She [has published widely](#), and has taught in various places, including France, Morocco, Qatar, and Cambodia.

The [featured image](#) shows the head of a Bodhisattva, Gandhara region, 3rd–4th century AD.

