

Elite Continuity and Capital Conversion in Colonial Mandalay: The Case of U Lay

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Abstract

After the British annexation of Mandalay in 1885, Wekmasuk Wundauk U Latt lost the economic capital and official positions he had held under the monarchy. He nonetheless rebuilt other forms of capital during the colonial era. He accumulated cultural capital by collecting, copying, and distributing Buddhist literature, old Burmese folk songs, and Vedic texts. He cultivated social capital by preserving pre-existing Burmese customs and sustaining networks among the royal families and nobles. He also pursued pragmatic collaboration with British officials—not by accepting a low-status colonial post for himself, but by strategically adapting to ensure the survival of himself and his generation: teaching his son Maung Ba English, helping him obtain positions in the city government, and enlisting the help of both British and Burmese officials. Using U Latt as a case study, this paper examines how an elite from the old Burmese royal order negotiated elite continuity after 1885 by setting aside open resistance and acting as a converter of capital to survive under British rule. The study situates U Lay's strategies within broader patterns of elite adaptation and capital conversation in colonial Mandalay.