

SOCIO-POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION OF MYANMAR SOCIETY (EVOLUTIONARY ANALYSIS OF THE BRITISH COLONIAL ERA)

Hasti Sulaiman^{1a*}, Mohamad Zaitun^{2b}

^{1,2}Universitas Flores

aE-mail: hastiariswan@gmail.com

bE-mail: mohzaitun589@gmail.com

(*) Corresponding Author

hastiariswan@gmail.com

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received : 20-06-2026

Revised : 13-07-2026

Accepted : 30-07-2026

KEYWORDS

*Socio-political transformation;
Myanmar;
British colonialism;
Modernization;
Nationalism;
social change;*

ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the socio-political transformation of Myanmar society during the British colonial era by employing an evolutionary analysis approach. It seeks to analyze the process of societal transformation in Myanmar—shifting from a kingdom-based system rooted in monarchical power and traditional hierarchies toward a more bureaucratic and integrated colonial governance structure. The study utilizes a literature review method with a critical-historical approach, analyzing various scholarly sources regarding Myanmar's socio-political development under British colonial rule. It proposes the concept of "Hybrid Political Evolution" as a model explaining that Myanmar's socio-political transformation during the British colonial era was not a process of total replacement (a replacement model) of the traditional Konbaung Kingdom political system; rather, it was a process of integration, adaptation, and institutional reconstruction that resulted in a hybrid political structure. The results of this study indicate that the socio-political transformation of Myanmar society during the British colonial era unfolded through significant changes in power structures, administrative systems, social stratification, and state-society relations. This transformation was marked by the abolition of the Konbaung monarchy and the replacement of royal authority with a centralized colonial bureaucracy. In the socio-economic sphere, colonial policies fostered the commercialization of agriculture, the implementation of a land ownership system based on colonial law, and the expansion of international trade—developments that gave rise to a new middle class, a landowning class, and a colonial bureaucratic elite. Politically, the transformation did not entirely eliminate local institutions; instead, it produced a hybrid political structure that combined elements of colonial administration with traditional local governance practices. This hybrid political order became a colonial legacy that influenced state-society relations, reinforced the centralization of power, and shaped the dynamics of ethnic conflict and political instability in post-independence Myanmar.

This is an open access article under the CC-BY-SA license.



INTRODUCTION

Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, is a country located in Southeast Asia. It shares borders with Bangladesh to the west, India to the northwest, China to the northeast, Laos to the east-central, and Thailand to the south. The country's capital is Naypyidaw, while its largest city is Yangon (Rangoon). Myanmar is home to a diverse range of ethnic groups, with the Bamar forming the majority.

Historically, Myanmar had deep roots in a strong monarchical civilization before the arrival of Western powers. For centuries, its social and political order revolved around the absolute authority of the king, who was regarded as the protector of Buddhism. However, the course of the nation's history changed dramatically when Britain began establishing its dominance through three successive Anglo-Burmese Wars (1824–1885). The fall of Mandalay to British forces in 1885 not only marked the end of the Konbaung Dynasty but also served as the starting point of structural transformation that reshaped every aspect of life in Myanmar (Sudharmono, 2012)

Sociologically, this transformation forced the people of Myanmar to undergo a complex evolution of identity. On one hand, Western education gave rise to a new intellectual class; on the other hand, colonial pressure sparked the emergence of national consciousness rooted in local religious and cultural identity. This paper aims to examine how these dynamics of change unfolded gradually—not merely as a shift in power, but as a process of reconstructing the national identity of Myanmar, caught between the traditions of the past and the modernity imposed by colonial rule. Understanding this period is crucial, because the socio-political transformation during the British colonial era holds the key to comprehending the roots of conflict and the political dynamics in modern Myanmar today.

The arrival of British colonialism introduced a new, mechanistic and bureaucratic framework, replacing the traditional patronage-based system of governance. The British abolished the institution of the monarchy and reduced the role of local leaders, gradually creating a vacuum in traditional leadership. Furthermore, administrative policies that separated the central region (Burma Proper) from the ethnic minority areas (Frontier Areas) sowed the seeds of political fragmentation, whose effects are still felt to this day."

Economically, Myanmar's opening to the global market triggered a massive influx of foreign labor, mainly from India, which altered the social demographic landscape and created class tensions among the indigenous population. The socio-political transformation of Myanmar's society under British colonial rule stands as one of the clearest examples of how Western imperialism reshaped the traditional order of a post-colonial society—yet without delivering equal benefits to all segments of the population. Viewed through an evolutionary lens, the transition from the absolute Konbaung monarchy to a modern colonial bureaucratic structure proceeded in a highly uneven manner, creating structural gaps across ethnic groups, social classes, religions, and geographic regions (M.C. Ricklef et al., 2013)

Sociologically, this transformation compelled Myanmar's society to undergo a complex evolution of identity. On one hand, Western education gave rise to a new intellectual class; on the other, colonial pressures sparked a surge in national consciousness rooted in local religious and cultural identities.

The advent of British colonialism introduced a new, mechanistic, and bureaucratic paradigm that supplanted the traditional patronage-based system of governance. The British abolished the monarchy and diminished the role of local leaders, thereby creating a vacuum in traditional leadership. Furthermore, administrative policies that separated the central region ("Burma proper") from ethnic minority regions ("Frontier Areas") sowed the seeds of political fragmentation—the repercussions of which are still felt today (Heri Susanto, 2016)

Within the framework of socio-political evolutionary theory developed by Talcott Parsons, Samuel Huntington, and Karl Wittfogel, societal transformation typically unfolds gradually through institutional adaptation to external and internal pressures. In the case of Myanmar, however, British colonialism imposed specific evolutionary stages while suppressing indigenous forms of social organization, resulting in a systematic dislocation that persisted into the post-independence era (Talcott Parsons, 1937)

While there are various studies on colonial Burma from Marxist and postcolonial perspectives, no research has yet systematically applied a socio-political evolutionary framework to explain how the institutional transformations imposed by British colonialism generated multidimensional structural dislocations. In particular, the interplay of economic, religious, and ethnic factors in shaping new social hierarchies remains largely unexplored. Furthermore, the perspectives of marginalized groups—such as women, displaced peasants, and urban workers—and empirical examinations of the causal link between educational disruption and political radicalism represent gaps that have not been adequately addressed. This research aims to fill these voids.

The gap between Daniel Finneholm's previous research on Theravada Politicized (2017) focused on the religious politics of Theravada Buddhism in colonial and postcolonial Burma. However, this study did not address the interaction between religious transformation and economic factors and class stratification. This study attempts to analyze the evolution of the socio-political transformation of Myanmar society during the British colonial era. Finneholm reveals that British colonialism not only altered the structure of governance but also drove a shift in the status of the Sangha (monastic community), transforming it into a political actor that played a role in fostering Burmese nationalism and influencing the

state-building process in the post-colonial era. Nevertheless, Finneholm's research remains focused on the political dimensions of religion—specifically how Theravada Buddhism was harnessed as an instrument for political legitimization, the construction of national identity, and resistance against colonialism. The study has not comprehensively examined how religious transformation unfolded alongside changes in the colonial economic structure and the emergence of new social stratifications. In other words, religion is positioned as the primary factor, while economic, social, and class-based factors have not been analyzed as part of an interconnected process of transformation.

A research gap is evident in the lack of analysis regarding the impact of British colonial economic policies on changes in Myanmar's social class structure. British colonialism introduced a capitalist economic system, the commercialization of agriculture, land administration reforms, the expansion of international trade, and the migration of labor from India and China. These transformations gave rise to new social classes, such as the colonial bureaucratic elite, an educated middle class, landowners, merchants, and migrant laborers. These shifts also altered social relations, the distribution of power, and the role of religion in societal life. However, the connection between these economic changes and religious and political transformations has not been a primary focus of Daniel Finneholm's research.

Furthermore, previous research has not fully explained the evolutionary dynamics of this socio-political transformation. The transformation of Myanmar's society was not merely a consequence of the politicization of religion; rather, it resulted from a complex interplay of factors—including colonial policies, administrative modernization, economic development, the adoption of Western-style education, bureaucratic reorganization, and the emergence of a new elite that subsequently drove the nationalist movement. Thus, the transformation of Myanmar's society unfolded as an evolutionary process involving the gradual adjustment of various social institutions, rather than a change confined solely to the religious sphere.

This study seeks to address this gap by employing an evolutionary analysis approach to provide a more holistic explanation of the socio-political changes within Myanmar society during the British colonial era. The evolutionary approach views social change as a gradual process unfolding through the interaction of various societal elements—including political, economic, legal, educational, and religious systems, as well as social structures. Consequently, this research goes beyond examining shifts in the political role of Theravada Buddhism; it analyzes how colonial economic policies, legal reforms, labor migration, changes in land ownership, and the emergence of new social classes interacted to shape the modern social order in Myanmar. Thus, the study's novelty lies in its examination of Myanmar's socio-political transformation through an evolutionary lens—viewing societal change as a process of gradual adaptation to colonial pressures rather than merely the result of British domination or local resistance. This approach distinguishes itself from the majority of studies that emphasize colonialism, nationalism, or ethnic conflict in isolation. Furthermore, the study's primary contribution is the introduction of the "Hybrid Political Evolution" concept, positing that Myanmar's socio-political transformation during the colonial era was not a complete replacement of traditional systems by colonial ones, but rather the result of a fusion—or hybridization—involving Burmese royal institutions, British colonial administration, local societal dynamics, and the influence of global capitalism.

This study views Myanmar's socio-political transformation as a multidimensional process shaped by the interplay between British colonialism, changes in social institutions, colonial economic development, the emergence of new social classes, and shifts in the political identity of the populace. This approach aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the historical background behind the formation of Myanmar's contemporary socio-political structure and to explain why various ethnic, religious, and political conflicts persist to this day. These changes created a complex historical framework and shaped the characteristics of Myanmar's society and state in the post-colonial era. The societal changes in Myanmar during the colonial period were not merely economic or political in nature; they also entailed profound transformations in daily life and cultural identity. This study examines: 1. The mechanisms behind the transformation of Myanmar's traditional socio-political structure (from a monarchical system to a centralized British colonial administrative system); 2. The long-term impact of colonial-era socio-political transformation on Myanmar's political stability in the post-independence period; and 3. The extent to which British economic and legal policies influenced social stratification and class evolution in Myanmar during the colonial era (focusing on the emergence of a new middle class and a landowning class, as well as the impact of labor migration from India).

This article aims to dissect the evolutionary dynamics of this change—viewing it not merely as a transfer of power, but as a process of reconstructing Myanmar's national identity, caught between past traditions and the modernity imposed by colonialism. Understanding this period is crucial, as the socio-political transformation during the British colonial era holds the key to comprehending the roots of conflict and the political dynamics of modern-day Myanmar.

RESEARCH METHOD

The research method employed in this study is the literature review method. This method involves collecting, examining, analyzing, and interpreting various written sources relevant to the research topic. These sources may include books, scholarly journals, articles, research reports, theses, dissertations, official documents, archives, and credible electronic sources. The primary focus of this research is not on field data collection, but rather on analyzing existing information to gain a deep understanding of a specific phenomenon, concept, theory, or event.

According to (Abdul Rahman Sholeh, 2005), library research is a method of data collection that utilizes library resources—such as books, magazines, documents, and historical records—or relies on existing literature directly related to the research subject. Similarly, the article on the socio-political transformation of Myanmar society gathers its data through library research methods.

The literature search process was conducted systematically in several stages to identify sources relevant to the research focus: the socio-political transformation of Myanmar society during the British colonial era. The first stage involved identifying the study's focus. Key themes serving as the basis for the literature search were established, including the history of British colonialism in Myanmar, socio-political structural transformation, colonial policies, changes in government institutions, colonial economic development, social stratification, Indian labor migration, Burmese nationalism, Theravada Buddhism, and social evolution theory as an analytical framework. The second stage was the literature search itself. Materials were sourced from various academic outlets, including reputable national and international journal articles, scholarly books, conference proceedings, dissertations, theses, research reports, and historical documents and colonial archives related to Myanmar. Searches were conducted via academic databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus, Taylor & Francis, SpringerLink, Sage Journals, and ScienceDirect using keywords—such as "Myanmar colonial period," "British Burma," "social transformation in Myanmar," "political transformation," "colonial administration," "Theravada Buddhism," "social evolution," and "ethnic conflict in Myanmar"—along with their Indonesian equivalents. The third stage involved selecting literature based on inclusion and exclusion criteria. Materials were selected if they were directly relevant to the research objectives, addressed the British colonial period in Myanmar, examined social, political, economic, religious, or institutional aspects, and were published by academic publishers or journals with scholarly credibility. Sources that were popular in nature, lacked academic rigor, or were not directly related to the research focus were not used as primary references.

The fourth stage involves evaluating the quality of these sources. Each piece of literature is analyzed based on the author's credibility, the reputation of the publisher or journal, the research methods employed, the consistency of arguments, and its contribution to the discussion regarding Myanmar's socio-political transformation. This stage also encompasses a comparison of studies to identify similarities, differences, and research gaps requiring further investigation. The fifth stage involves data extraction and categorization. Information obtained from the literature is classified into several themes: (1) Myanmar's socio-political conditions prior to the British colonial era; (2) British colonial administrative and legal policies; (3) changes in social structure and class stratification; (4) Indian labor migration and its impact on Burmese society; (5) the transformation of political and governmental institutions; (6) the development of nationalism and Theravada Buddhism; and (7) the dynamics of Myanmar society's socio-political evolution during the colonial period (Muhammad Haramain, 2023).

The final stage involves the synthesis and analysis of the literature. All selected literature is subjected to descriptive, comparative, and synthetic analysis to construct a comprehensive understanding of the socio-political transformation of Myanmar's society. The analysis employs an evolutionary perspective to elucidate the relationships among British colonial policies, changes in social structure, economic development, institutional dynamics, and the emergence of new socio-political configurations that shaped the evolution of Myanmar's society into the post-colonial era. Through this systematic literature review process, the study aims to produce a comprehensive scholarly synthesis, identify gaps in existing research, and offer a conceptual contribution to understanding the socio-political transformation of Myanmar's society during the British colonial era from an evolutionary analytical perspective. (Jim Hoy Yam, 2024)

This study employs a critical historical approach to analyze the socio-political transformation of Myanmar's society during the British colonial era. This approach goes beyond the chronological arrangement of historical facts; it examines cause-and-effect relationships, power dynamics, and the shifts in social, political, economic, and religious structures that occurred throughout the colonization process. The analysis is conducted through the following five stages: Source Identification

The first stage involves identifying various documentary sources relevant to the research focus. These sources include books on Myanmar's history, international journal articles, British colonial documents, government archives, research reports, and scholarly works addressing British colonialism in Burma (Myanmar), the development of Theravada Buddhism, Burmese nationalism, Indian labor migration, colonial economic policies, and political institutional transformations. Source identification also focuses on literature discussing theories of social evolution and institutional change, enabling an explanation of the links between colonial policies and the transformation of Myanmar's society. At this stage, each source is categorized based on its theme, time period, and contribution to the research problem.

Evaluation of Source Credibility

Once sources have been identified, a critical evaluation of the quality and credibility of each reference is conducted. This evaluation considers several aspects: the author's reputation, academic affiliation, the credibility of the publisher or journal, the research methods employed, and the consistency of arguments with the presented empirical evidence. Furthermore, external and internal critiques of the sources are performed. External critique aims to verify the authenticity and authority of the source, while internal critique assesses objectivity, content consistency, potential colonial or nationalist biases, and the alignment of historical interpretations with available evidence. This process is crucial given that most colonial documents reflect the British administrative perspective, whereas some of Myanmar's domestic literature tends to emphasize nationalist narratives. Consequently, this study integrates diverse perspectives to produce a more balanced interpretation.

Thematic Categorization

Literature meeting the credibility criteria was subsequently grouped according to key research themes. This categorization aims to facilitate the analysis of relationships between historical phenomena. These themes include: a) the socio-political conditions of Myanmar prior to British colonialism; b) British colonial administrative, legal, and governmental policies; c) the institutional political transformation from a monarchy to a colonial administration; d) changes in social structure and class stratification resulting from colonial economic policies; e) Indian labor migration and its impact on the society's social composition; f) colonial economic shifts and the emergence of a middle class and new elites; g) the role of Theravada Buddhism in shaping socio-political identity; h) the development of Burmese nationalism and anti-colonial movements; and i) the long-term impact of colonialism on the evolution of Myanmar's society. Such grouping allows each reality to be analyzed as part of an interconnected transformation process rather than as an isolated event.

Historical Interpretation

The historical interpretation stage involves integrating the categorized historical facts to explain the trajectory of Myanmar's socio-political transformation. The analysis goes beyond a mere chronological account, tracing the relationship between British colonial policies and the evolutionary transformation of the social structure. From an evolutionary perspective, colonialism is understood as a catalyst for institutional change, driven by the dismantling of the traditional royal system, the establishment of a more centralized colonial bureaucracy, the implementation of modern legal systems, the development of a market economy, and Myanmar's integration into the international trade system. These policies gave rise to a new social order characterized by the emergence of an educated middle class, a landowning class, migrant laborers, and a colonial bureaucratic elite. Historical interpretation also positions Theravada Buddhism not merely as a religious institution, but as a social force that preserved cultural identity while serving as a foundation for nationalist mobilization. Thus, the socio-political transformation of Myanmar is understood as the outcome of interactions among political, economic, and religious factors, as well as social dynamics that evolved gradually throughout the colonial era.

Drawing Conclusions

The final stage involves synthesizing all interpretations to address the research problem. Conclusions are drawn inductively by integrating various historical findings to provide a comprehensive overview of the socio-political transformation and evolution of Myanmar's society. The findings demonstrate that British colonialism not only restructured the traditional system of governance into a modern colonial administration but also transformed the society's social structures, economic relations, class stratification, and political organization. These changes unfolded gradually through the interplay of colonial policies, population migration, capitalist economic development, Western education, and the revitalization of Theravada Buddhism. Collectively, these processes established the historical foundation for the political dynamics, nationalism, and social conflicts that continue to shape Myanmar's development into the post-colonial era. (Eko Haryono et al., 2024)

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

The Mechanism of Transformation of Myanmar's Traditional Social and Political Structure (Kingdom System) into a Centralized British Colonial Administrative System

In the early 19th century, Great Britain began to consolidate its dominance in Southeast Asia, including Myanmar. This began with the First Anglo-Burmese War in 1824 and continued with the Second Anglo-Burmese War (1852) and the Third Anglo-Burmese War (1885). After the Third Anglo-Burmese War in 1885, all of Myanmar fell under British control. This transfer of power ended the last dynasty in Myanmar. Great Britain exercised direct rule in Myanmar, directly controlling political, economic, and social policies. Colonization led to the exploitation of Myanmar's natural resources, including agricultural products, timber, and oil. This exploitation led to economic and social inequality. A Western education system was introduced, creating a new intellectual class that played a significant role in the nationalist movement and modern politics. (Brahmantyo & Soeparyo, 1977)

Prior to the arrival of the British, Myanmar was governed by a feudal, absolute monarchical system characterized by the following: 1) The absolute monarchy served as the center of legitimacy; the king was viewed as the embodiment of moral virtue (*dhamma*) and the protector of Theravada Buddhism, with the legitimacy of his rule derived from a combination of military power and the support of the Sangha (monastic community); 2) A symbiotic relationship existed between the state and the Sangha; the king held the right to appoint the supreme abbot (patriarch), oversee ecclesiastical lands, and maintain the registry of monks. Religion was not merely a spiritual matter but a primary pillar of the socio-political order; 3) An agrarian-based, redistributive economy; the state set prices for key commodities, and agricultural self-sufficiency formed the economic foundation—while trade remained secondary and the populace did not rely on global markets; 4) Local decentralization; village heads and local officials exercised customary authority in managing daily community life, even while operating within the hierarchy of the royal bureaucracy (Sudharmono, 2012)

As a result of British colonial intervention and domination in Myanmar, the social and political structures underwent significant changes. The transformation of Myanmar's traditional socio-political structure occurred gradually after the region was conquered by Great Britain through three major wars known as the Anglo-Burmese Wars. This change ended the traditional monarchy and replaced it with a more centralized and bureaucratic colonial administration.

From the perspective of social evolution theory, change is not understood as a sudden event but rather as a gradual process that transforms the order, functions, and interrelationships of social institutions, leading toward more complex and differentiated forms. The Anglo-Burmese Wars, culminating in the occupation of Myanmar in 1885, marked a turning point in the evolution of the socio-political order, shifting it from a traditional monarchical system to a modern colonial administrative system.

Abolition of the Traditional Monarchy

Before colonization, Myanmar was ruled by a monarchy centered on the king as the supreme power. The king served not only as a political leader but also as a protector of Buddhism and a symbol of social unity. The government structure was hierarchical, with regional officials directly loyal to the king. After the defeat of the Konbaung Kingdom in the Third War in 1885, the British overthrew Thibaw Min and abolished the monarchy. With the end of the monarchy, Myanmar's traditional source of political legitimacy was lost (Michael Aung-Thwin & Maitrii Aung-Thwin, 2012)

Centralization of Colonial Administration

The British colonial government then established a more centralized administrative system based on a modern bureaucratic model. Myanmar was part of the British colonial administration in India until 1937. Power, previously distributed through networks of local aristocrats, was replaced by colonial officials appointed directly by the British government. Administrative regions were divided into districts, sub-districts, and villages, which were under the supervision of the colonial bureaucracy. Thus, decision-making was no longer based on royal patronage relationships, but rather on uniform administrative rules.

Changes in the Political and Social Elite

The nobility and royal officials lost their political standing. In their place, the British recruited administrative staff from certain groups deemed more loyal to the colonial government. Many bureaucratic positions were filled by Indians and ethnic minority groups such as the Karen, Kachin, and Chin. Consequently, there was a shift in the power structure from the traditional Burmese elite to a colonial bureaucratic elite dependent on the British government. This also gave rise to ethnic and social tensions that persisted into the modern era.

Transformation of the Legal System and Local Government

Under the monarchy, law was heavily influenced by customs and Buddhist teachings. The British replaced this with a more formal and written colonial legal system. Modern courts were established to enforce colonial law, while the authority of traditional leaders at the local level was increasingly restricted. Village government remained, but its function was more as an extension of the colonial administration, collecting taxes, monitoring the population, and maintaining order (Michael Aung-Thwin & Maitrii Aung-Thwin, 2012).

Economic Integration into the Colonial System

Political transformation was also accompanied by economic changes. Britain developed rice production for the world market and built infrastructure such as ports, roads, and railways. These policies strengthened the colonial state's control over society and connected Myanmar to the global capitalist economy. The people's dependence on colonial markets indirectly strengthened the centralization of power, as the colonial government controlled trade, taxation, and resource distribution.

The Emergence of Modern Nationalism

The modernization of the colonial administration produced a new, educated group that began to criticize British rule. This group later gave birth to the Burmese nationalist movement in the early 20th century. Thus, the transition from a monarchy to a colonial administration not only transformed traditional power structures but also laid the foundation for the emergence of the modern Myanmar nation-state.

From the perspective of social evolution, increasing societal complexity gave rise to new forms of collective consciousness. Administrative modernization, Western education, the growth of print media, and the emergence of intellectual groups created an educated elite that began to develop a shared political identity as the Burmese nation. Modern nationalism represented a form of societal adaptation to the changes in social structure brought about by colonialism. Thus, social evolution in Myanmar did not stop at institutional changes; it also produced transformations in values, political identities, and patterns of social mobilization, which subsequently formed the foundation for the struggle toward a modern nation-state.

Viewed comprehensively, Myanmar's socio-political transformation during the period of British colonial rule exhibited the key characteristics of social evolution theory: structural differentiation, the specialization of institutional functions, increasing complexity in government organization, and societal adaptation to changing political and economic environments. British colonialism acted as an external factor that accelerated this evolutionary process through the abolition of the traditional monarchy, the establishment of a modern bureaucracy, shifts in the political elite structure, legal reforms, economic integration into global capitalism, and the emergence of modern nationalism. Consequently, the changes occurring in Myanmar were not merely a transfer of political power but a process of social evolution that transformed the social structure—shifting from a traditional monarchical system to a more complex and differentiated colonial society—while simultaneously laying the groundwork for the formation of the modern state of Myanmar (Michael W. Charney, n.d.).

In addition to the aforementioned theories of social evolution, there is other research relevant to this sub-theme—specifically, the work of Robert H. Taylor in **The State in Myanmar** (2009). Taylor's study outlines the development of Myanmar's political institutions from the monarchical era to the modern state, highlighting continuities and changes within the system of governance. However, the primary focus of Taylor's research is the evolution of the state and political institutions, rather than the mechanisms of social structural change as part of the evolution of the social system as a whole.

There is a distinction between Taylor's research and the present study. This study views the transformation from the monarchical system to British colonial administration as a mechanism of social evolution, consistent with the framework proposed by Talcott Parsons. This change is understood not merely as a shift in the form of government, but as a process of structural differentiation—specifically, a transition from a traditional socio-political structure centered on the monarchy to a colonial administrative system characterized by a more complex division of institutional functions. Furthermore, this study analyzes how these changes influenced institutional adaptive capacity, patterns of societal integration, and the formation of a new socio-political configuration that laid the foundation for Myanmar's subsequent state development.

The Long-Term Impact of Colonial-Era Socio-Political Transformation on Myanmar's Political Stability in the Post-Independence Period

The socio-political transformations that occurred during the British colonial period (1824–1948) had a significant impact on Myanmar's political development after independence. Colonial policies not only changed the traditional governmental structure of the Kingdom of Burma but also created various issues that continue to affect the country's political stability to this day.

The Emergence of Prolonged Ethnic Conflict

One of the most significant impacts was the escalation of tensions between the majority Bamar ethnic group and minority ethnic groups such as the Shan, Karen, Kachin, Chin, and Mon. The British colonial government implemented a divide-and-rule policy, granting different administrative treatment to Central Burma and border areas inhabited by ethnic minorities. Consequently, after independence in 1948, various ethnic groups demanded autonomy or even independence, sparking a civil war that lasted for decades. This conflict became one of the main causes of Myanmar's political instability.

Weak National Integration

During the colonial period, the British failed to establish an inclusive national identity. Instead, society was divided along ethnic, religious, and regional lines. After independence, the Myanmar government faced difficulties in uniting the various groups into a single nation-state. This situation gave rise to separatist movements and armed rebellions, which hampered the process of national political and economic development.

Military Dominance in Politics

The colonial legacy also contributed to the military's strong role in Myanmar's political life. Ongoing political instability and ethnic conflict encouraged the military to portray itself as the guardian of national unity. This culminated in the military's seizure of power in a 1962 coup under the leadership of Ne Win. Since then, the military has been the dominant actor in Myanmar's politics and has repeatedly intervened in the civilian government (Taylor R.H., 1982)

Weakening Democratic Institutions

The centralized colonial administrative system did not provide a strong democratic experience for the people of Myanmar. After independence, existing political institutions were not yet mature enough to manage complex social and political conflicts. As a result, democracy in Myanmar developed unstably and frequently suffered setbacks due to military intervention, coups, and internal conflict.

Changes in Social and Economic Structure

Myanmar's social and economic structure underwent major transformations, particularly during the British colonial period (1824–1948), when the traditional royal system was replaced by a more modern, market-oriented colonial administrative system. These changes created new social classes, altered land ownership patterns, introduced a capitalist economy, and transformed relations between ethnic groups and society. The impact of these changes continued to influence Myanmar's social, economic, and political life well into the post-independence period (Sudharmono, 2012). British colonialism created a new social class consisting of bureaucrats, merchants, and educated groups. However, these changes also gave rise to economic and social disparities. The dominance of certain groups in the economy fueled social jealousy, which was then exploited in political mobilization after independence. This disparity intensified public dissatisfaction with the government and undermined national political stability..

Rise in Ethnic and Religious Nationalism

During the colonial period, large-scale migration from India and other areas under British rule changed Myanmar's social composition. After independence, strong nationalist sentiments based on ethnic identity and Buddhism emerged. The rise in ethnic and religious nationalism in Myanmar had a significant long-term impact on the country's social, political, and security development. This nationalism developed during the British colonial period, when Myanmar's social, political, and economic structures underwent changes due to the influx of immigrants, colonial administrative policies, and the formation of distinct group identities. After independence, tensions between the Bamar (Burmese) majority and various ethnic minorities intensified, affecting the country's stability (Michael Aung-Thwin & Maitrii Aung-Thwin, 2012).

Based on the facts outlined above, there is a clear relevance to Talcott Parsons' theory of social evolution. Parsons posited that societal development proceeds through processes of structural differentiation, adaptive upgrading, social inclusion, and value generalization. Social evolution is characterized not only by changes in institutional arrangements but also by the social system's capacity to establish coordination among increasingly differentiated elements. Social and political integration is achieved when structural changes are accompanied by integration mechanisms capable of harmonizing the interests of the various communities within society.

British colonialism in Myanmar indeed brought about structural differentiation through the transformation of the monarchical system into a more centralized colonial administration, the establishment of a modern bureaucracy, the development of a market economy, and the emergence of new social classes. From a Parsonian perspective, these changes reflect an increase in social system complexity—a characteristic of societies evolving toward more modern forms of organization. However, this evolutionary process was incomplete, as institutional changes were not accompanied by the development of adequate social integration mechanisms. The British colonial government implemented administrative policies that distinguished between "Burma Proper" and the Frontier Areas, favored specific ethnic groups, and created divisions within the bureaucracy, military, and economy. Consequently, this structural differentiation exacerbated social, ethnic, and political fragmentation rather than fostering the systemic integration predicted by Parsons' theory of social evolution.

Furthermore, the process of social inclusion remained limited. Opportunities for education, bureaucratic positions, and access to economic resources were not evenly distributed among ethnic groups; some groups secured strategic positions within the colonial administration, while others were marginalized. This inequality hindered the formation of an inclusive social system and diminished the society's capacity to develop a national political identity. From the perspective of value generalization, British colonialism also failed to foster collective values capable of integrating Myanmar's multi-ethnic society. Public loyalties remained centered on ethnic, religious, and local community identities. This situation demonstrates that institutional changes were not accompanied by the internalization of collective values that could serve as a foundation for national integration following independence.

The impact of this incomplete social evolution is clearly evident in the post-independence era. Myanmar inherited a modern bureaucracy and a relatively complex administrative system, yet it lacked the level of social integration necessary to sustain political resilience. Armed conflict between the central government and various ethnic groups, weak democratic consolidation, military dominance in politics, and recurring political crises are manifestations of a failed integration process—one that should have accompanied structural differentiation. Thus, drawing on Talcott Parsons' theory of social evolution, the long-term impact of colonial-era socio-political transformation on Myanmar's political stability demonstrates that institutional modernization does not automatically yield political stability. Social evolution produces a stable system only when structural differentiation is balanced by enhanced adaptive capacity, expanded social inclusion, and the generalization of values capable of integrating all segments of society. In Myanmar's case, British colonialism succeeded in transforming political and administrative structures but failed to establish the requisite mechanisms for social integration. Consequently, the political instability of the post-independence period can be understood as the result of an unbalanced social evolutionary process—specifically, structural change that outpaced the development of integrative functions within the social order.

Another study relevant to this research is Michael W. Charney's **A History of Modern Burma**, which outlines Myanmar's political changes from the colonial era to the post-independence period, focusing on the dynamics of nationalism, colonialism, and modern state formation. That study provides a historical account of Myanmar's political transformation. In contrast, this research examines the long-term impact of colonial socio-political transformation, specifically focusing on the evolutionary mechanisms of the social system that influenced long-term political stability.

British Economic and Legal Policies Influenced Social Stratification and the Evolution of Social Classes in Myanmar During the Colonial Period (Focus on the Emergence of a New Middle Class, Landowners and the Impact of Labor Migration from India)

Economic Policy

British colonial economic policy in Burma (1824-1948) fundamentally transformed the structure of the local economy and society. Britain made Burma an integral part of the imperial economy, specifically as the "rice bowl of the world." Rice exports became the backbone of the Burmese economy, with large-scale irrigation in the Irrawaddy Delta expanding paddy fields and the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 driving a surge in global market demand. In addition to rice, the teak, petroleum, and mineral mining industries also developed rapidly. However, this export economy was a double-edged sword: while the colonial government and foreign companies reaped enormous profits, most Burmese peasants suffered from structural poverty due to their dependence on fluctuating global commodity prices.

Furthermore, British companies dominated many strategic industrial sectors. Rice trading, teak sawmills, oil mining, and transportation were controlled by British business interests. This extractive economic structure ensured that wealth flowed out of Burma into the empire rather than building a domestic industrial base.

The Emergence of a New Middle Class

One of the greatest impacts of British legal policy was the emergence of an educated middle class. The British needed administrative staff, legal clerks, teachers, and bureaucrats, so they opened modern schools and Western-style educational institutions. The colonial government and Christian missions established English-medium schools, including Rangoon University, founded in the 1920s. These high-quality schools produced a Western-educated Burmese elite. This group had a broader perspective because they lived and worked in urban centers like Rangoon, where government, commerce, and education were active, and they interacted with various ethnic groups and foreigners. They were also politically active, engaging in political activities to advance the interests of the Burmese people. They founded organizations, wrote in the media, formed nationalist movements, and demanded local community involvement in government. One example is the emergence of organizations like Dobama Asiayone, which championed Burmese national identity and opposed British colonial domination. A prominent example is U Kyaw Min, a prominent member of cosmopolitan clubs such as the Orient Club, Pegu Club, and Rangoon Golf Club. This educated middle class later played a key role in the Burmese national movement (Anggraini M., 2008).

The Limits of the Middle Class

Despite the emergence of a new middle class, they faced significant obstacles. High-level administrative positions remained held by British civil servants. Burmese were almost completely excluded from key decision-making positions, resulting in the middle class growing frustrated and more radical over time.

The Formation and Role of the Landlord Class

Colonial economic policies also produced a group of large landowners with strong influence in rural areas. Previously, land was largely managed based on local social relationships between kings and individual owners, who could be bought and sold. As a result, investors purchased land from farmers experiencing economic hardship, leading to the emergence of landlords who controlled large agricultural areas and farmers became tenants with the obligation to pay rent. This group of landowners held a higher social position due to their wealth, control over agricultural production, and local political influence. Meanwhile, most Myanmar farmers experienced a decline in social status due to economic dependence.

The Impact of Labor Migration from India on Myanmar's Social Structure

Indian migration to Myanmar is not a new phenomenon. Massive migration flows occurred during the British colonial era (19th century to 1948), when Burma was a province under British administration alongside India. The British colonial government brought in many Indian workers to fill various roles in the economy and bureaucracy. This migration occurred especially after Britain integrated Burma into its colonial administrative system in British India. The movement of Indians to Myanmar was driven by the need for labor for plantations, agriculture, trade, administration, and urban development. This migration changed the composition of the population and created new social stratifications within Myanmar society.

Migration from India led to the growth of Indian communities in major cities such as Yangon (Rangoon), which became the center of the colonial economy. Many Indian migrants worked as government officials, traders, dockworkers, railway workers, and professionals. The presence of this group created a new social class distinct from the traditional structure of Burmese society. Previously, Myanmar society was dominated by the royal family and local nobility, Buddhist religious leaders (sangha), and farmers, the majority of the population.

This migration resulted in major changes in Myanmar's social composition, accelerating urban economic development; increasing trade; and providing labor for the agricultural and industrial sectors. Furthermore, Indian migration also created economic competition with the local Myanmar population. Several Indian groups succeeded in dominating certain sectors: Indian traders controlled trade, Indian financial institutions provided loans to farmers, and Indian labor was largely employed in the agricultural sector. During the economic crisis of the 1930s, many Myanmar farmers lost their land because they were unable to repay their debts to Indian lenders. This situation intensified anti-colonial sentiment and tensions between the Burmese and Indian communities (D.G.E.Hall, 1988).

The economic and legal policies implemented by the British colonial government in Myanmar accelerated structural differentiation through the introduction of a market economy, the commercialization of agriculture, the establishment of a land ownership system based on colonial law, and the creation of a modern bureaucracy oriented

toward colonial administration. This transformation shifted the traditional social order—previously dominated by royal patronage relations—into a social system increasingly differentiated by economic function, capital ownership, and bureaucratic position. According to Parsons, these changes demonstrated an increase in adaptive capacity, as society began to adjust to the modern economic institutions introduced by the British colonial government. Groups of merchants, administrative staff, educated professionals, and local entrepreneurs emerged, subsequently giving rise to a new middle class. The presence of these groups reflected the development of more specialized social functions resulting from the growing complexity of the colonial economic system (Teras Adas, 1974)

On the other hand, the implementation of colonial land laws fostered the emergence of a landowning class that profited from the system of individual ownership and the commercialization of agricultural produce. Conversely, many farmers lost access to land due to debt burdens and unbalanced market mechanisms, thereby shifting their status to that of tenant farmers or agricultural laborers. This situation illustrates that structural differentiation resulted not only in functional specialization but also in the formation of increasingly complex social classes defined by asset ownership, access to capital, and economic opportunities.

Furthermore, colonial policies that brought in labor from India to meet the needs of the administrative, commercial, and plantation sectors further widened social disparities. The arrival of Indian migrants introduced a more diverse division of labor and heightened the complexity of the colonial economic system. However, the unequal distribution of economic opportunities and administrative positions fostered competition among social groups. From a Parsonsian perspective, these conditions indicate that the process of social inclusion did not unfold optimally, as not all social groups enjoyed equal opportunities to participate in the new economic and political systems.

Furthermore, the economic and legal changes introduced during the colonial era were not accompanied by a generalization of values capable of fostering a shared value system within an increasingly diverse society. Each group clung to its own ethnic and economic identities and interests, preventing these differences from evolving into robust social integration. Consequently, the social classes that emerged under British colonial rule exacerbated economic disparities and deepened inter-group disintegration. Thus, applying Talcott Parsons' theory of social evolution, British economic and legal policies accelerated the evolution of Myanmar's society through structural differentiation, increased economic diversity, and the emergence of new social classes. However, this evolution was unbalanced, as the growth in adaptive capacity was not matched by adequate social inclusion, value generalization, or integration. Therefore, the sharpening of social stratification, the rise of new middle and landowning classes, and the impact of labor migration from India were consequences of a social evolutionary process that produced a modern economic system yet failed to create the social cohesion necessary to sustain long-term systemic equilibrium.

CONCLUSION

The transformation of Myanmar's traditional socio-political structure from a monarchical system to a centralized British colonial administrative system was a process of structural change that unfolded gradually through colonial control over political institutions, the bureaucracy, the economy, the legal system, and social relations. The abolition of the Konbaung monarchy following the expansion of British power not only ended the legitimacy of traditional authority—which was rooted in the interdependence of the king, local elites, and the Sangha—but also replaced it with a colonial administrative system characterized by a modern bureaucracy, centralized governance, legal codification, and the rationalization of territorial management. These changes were accompanied by economic restructuring through Myanmar's integration into the global market economy, the expansion of rice production, infrastructure development, and labor migration from India; this process shaped a new social configuration marked by the emergence of a middle class, professional groups, and urban laborers. Analyzed through Talcott Parsons's social evolution approach, the mechanisms of this transformation reveal that Myanmar society underwent structural differentiation—a shift from a relatively simple social system to a more complex one with increasingly specialized institutional functions. Political, economic, legal, and administrative institutions that were previously integrated under royal authority evolved into subsystems with distinct functions within the framework of colonial governance.

The socio-political transformations that occurred during British colonialism left a decisive, long-term impact on Myanmar's political stability following its independence in 1948. The restructuring of political institutions—through the abolition of the monarchy, the implementation of a centralized colonial bureaucracy, and the shift to a colonial capitalist economic system—fundamentally altered the social and political order of Myanmar society. These conditions hindered the formation of an inclusive national identity and weakened the consolidation of democratic institutions, leaving

Myanmar to grapple with persistent issues such as protracted ethnic conflict, governmental instability, military dominance in politics, and recurring political crises that have persisted into the contemporary era.

From the perspective of Talcott Parsons' social evolution, the changes experienced by Myanmar demonstrate that the process of social evolution is determined not only by increasing institutional structural complexity but also by the social system's capacity to foster integration and maintain equilibrium among societal elements. Colonialism indeed brought about structural differentiation through the establishment of a modern bureaucracy, a formal legal system, more rational government administration, and economic integration into the global market.

The economic and legal policies implemented by the British colonial government were pivotal in shaping new social classes and driving the evolution of Myanmar's class structure during the colonial era. Myanmar's integration into the capitalist economic system—facilitated by agricultural commercialization, the expansion of rice exports, the introduction of colonial land tenure systems, and trade liberalization—transformed social relations that had previously been dominated by feudal ties and royal patronage. Changes in property rights and land administration fostered the emergence of a landowning class that controlled economic resources, while the growth of the colonial bureaucracy, the commercial sector, and Western education gave rise to a new middle class comprising administrative staff, professionals, teachers, merchants, and the educated elite. Simultaneously, labor migration from India to meet colonial economic demands deepened social differentiation through the creation of new economic communities that played key roles in trade, administration, and finance. However, these developments also engendered economic competition, unequal resource distribution, and a widening social divide between indigenous and migrant groups. Viewed through the lens of Talcott Parsons' theory of social evolution, these changes reflect a process of structural differentiation, characterized by the development of economic, legal, and bureaucratic institutions into increasingly specialized subsystems. Myanmar's society underwent a transition from a relatively homogeneous traditional social structure to a more complex one, marked by an increasingly diverse division of economic and social roles.

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, it employs a library research method with a critical historical approach; consequently, the entire analysis relies on secondary sources—such as books, scholarly articles, published archives, and historical documents. Second, the study focuses on the British colonial period, specifically from the full occupation of Myanmar in 1885 to the eve of independence in 1948. Therefore, pre-colonial socio-political dynamics—including the legacy of the Konbaung Kingdom's political structure—and post-independence political developments are discussed only as context to illustrate the continuity of change, rather than as primary objects of analysis. Third, the study utilizes Talcott Parsons' approach to social evolution as its primary analytical framework. While this approach explains structural differentiation, institutional adaptation, and increasing social system complexity, it does not fully account for dimensions such as power relations, colonial economic exploitation, public resistance, and conflicts that emerged during the colonization process. Consequently, the interpretation of the findings remains confined to a functional-evolutionary perspective and lacks integration with other theoretical approaches that could offer a more comprehensive explanation. Given these limitations, future research is encouraged to expand the use of primary sources—such as British colonial archives, colonial administrative reports, legal documents, census data, contemporary newspapers, and local Myanmar archives—to enable a more comprehensive historical reconstruction of socio-political transformation with greater historical validity.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author has successfully completed this article entitled "Socio-Political Transformation of Myanmar Society (Evolutionary Analysis in the British Colonial Era). The author expresses his deepest gratitude to: 1) Those who have helped provide literature sources, including books, journals, historical archives, and other information, so that this article can be compiled comprehensively, 2) Fellow lecturers who consistently provided moral support and discussions regarding the history of Myanmar and the socio-political changes of Myanmar during the British colonial era. The author declares that this article was compiled independently and is the result of hard work. Throughout the writing process, the researcher has made every effort to avoid potential conflicts of interest. All sources used have been clearly stated, and any suggestions from other parties have been filtered and adjusted according to the purpose and intent of the writing. The author acknowledges that this article still has shortcomings. Therefore, constructive criticism and suggestions are highly appreciated for the improvement of this work in the future. Hopefully, this article can provide benefits and increase insight into the Socio-Political Transformation of Myanmar Society in the history of the Southeast Asian region.

REFERENCES

- Abdul Rahman Sholeh. (2005). *Pendidikan Agama dan Pembangunan Watak Bangsa*. PT. Raja Grafindo Persada.
- Anggraini M. (2008). *Perjuangan Anti Kolonialisme Birma*. UI.
- Brahmantyo, & Soeparyo. (1977). *Sejarah Asia Tenggara Jilid II*. Ikip Malang.
- D.G.E.Hall. (1988). *Sejarah Asia Tenggara*. Usaha Nasional.
- Eko Haryono, Siti Suprihatiningsih, Damar Septian, Joko Widodo, Ali Ashar, & Sariman Sariman. (2024). New Paradigm Metode Penelitian Kepustakaan (Library Research) di Perguruan Tinggi. *An - Nurr The Journal of Islamic Studies*, 14(1).
- Heri Susanto. (2016). Kolonialisme dan Identitas Kebangsaan Negara-Negara Asia Tenggara . *Sejarah Dan Budaya*, 10(2), 144–153.
- Jim Hoy Yam. (2024). Kajian Penelitian: Tinjauan Literatur Sebagai Metode Penelitian. *EMPIRE: Jurnal Manajemen Dan Bisnis*, 4(1).
- M.C. Ricklef, Bruce Lockhart, Albert Lau, Portia Reyes, & Maitrii Aung-Thwin. (2013). *Sejarah Asia Tenggara dari Masa Prasejarah Sampai Kontemporer*. Komunitas Bambu.
- Michael Aung-Thwin, & Maitrii Aung-Thwin. (2012). *A History of Myanmar Since Ancient Times*. Reaktion Book.
- Michael W. Charney. (n.d.). *A History Of Modern Burma*. Cambridge University Press.
- Muhammad Haramain. (2023). *Metodologi Penelitian Kepustakaan*. Nusantara Press.
- Sudharmono. (2012). *Sejarah Asia Tenggara Modern (Dari Penjajahan Ke Kemerdekaan)*. Ombak.
- Talcott Parsons. (1937). *The Structure of social action* .
- Taylor R.H. (1982). Perception Of Ethnicity In The Politics Of Burma. *Southeast Asian Journal Of Social Sciences*, 10(1), 7–22.
- Teras Adas, M. (1974). *The Burma Delta: Economic Development and Social Change on an Asian Rice Frontier, 1852-1941*. University of Wisconsin.