

# The Name Theravāda in an Eighteenth-Century Inscription: Reconsidering the Problematization of the Term

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*I do not propose that we abandon  
the use of the term Theravāda  
- that would be absurd ...  
(Skilling 2009: 80)*

## **Abstract:**

An inscription from the eighteenth century appears to testify to the usage of the name Theravāda as a marker of Buddhist identity. This puts into perspective a tendency of problematizing the contemporary usage of the name Theravāda, current among some scholars in the field of Buddhist studies. Close inspection of relevant textual evidence makes its usage appear considerably less problematic than has sometimes been assumed and the already established usage may in the end still be the best choice.

## **Keywords:**

Ānanda Metteyya, Burmese murals, G. P. Malalasekera, Hīnayāna, Jātaka, Sāsana, Sthavira, Theravāda, Theriya, Theravaṃsa, Vamsadīpanī, World Fellowship of Buddhists.

## **Introduction**

In the first part of the present article, I take up an eighteenth-century inscription related to a Burmese mural depiction of a tale relating a past life of the Buddha, qualified to be a ‘Theravāda’ *Jātaka*. Then I turn to research by Gethin (2012) regarding occurrences of the Pāli terms *theravāda*, *theriya*, and *theravaṃsa* in pre-twentieth century Pāli texts. This then leads me in the third part of my exploration to a critical evaluation of the position taken by Perreira (2012) that a reference to the Theravāda school in Western writings in 1907 constitutes the point of origin of the contemporary usage of the term.

## **I. The Inscriptional Evidence**

In the course of a survey of *jātaka* depictions in Burmese art, mainly related to the tale of *Vessantara*, Handlin (2016: 180) drew attention to the inscription under discussion as

the first time the term *Theravāda* appears in the public domain. The donor of a 1761 endowment whose *Vessantara* narrative features a labyrinthine Wingaba Hill inscribed another image with the hitherto not encountered title *Theravāda Zaq (Jātaka)*, the image relating a previous Buddha life, of unknown origin.

In what follows, I will first explore the image depicting the *jātaka* in question and then turn to the corresponding inscription. In the final section of Part I, I contrast the resulting evidence to a tendency to problematize the name Theravāda in some scholarly writings.

### **I.1 A ‘Theravāda’ Jātaka**

The inscription in question accompanies a mural in a shrine of the Shwemutaw compound, located in upper Myanmar. In a detailed study of such Burmese Buddhist wall paintings during the period from the late seventeenth to the early nineteenth century, Green (2018: 11, 24, 17, and 169) explains:

By presenting Buddhist biography, the murals bridged the gap between the Buddha’s presence and absence ... To enter temples of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries was to enter a cohesively articulated and represented Burmese Buddhist world to which the devotee belonged by performing ritual activities within it. The iconographic program and disposition of the imagery together produced a space that was religiously and socially effective ... The majority of the wall painting’s subject matter would probably have been accessible to Burmese society due to literary developments, particularly the public narration of religious stories ... [and] the push towards translating religious texts into the vernacular that strengthened in the seventeenth century... The popularity of translating Pali texts into Burmese during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the importance of religious material, particularly stories of the Buddha and his previous lives, as well as the focused subject matter of the contemporaneous wall paintings, were related phenomena.

Regarding the target audience of these murals, Green (2018: 16) notes: “Viewers would have included the local community, both lay and religious, although the extent of visitation is unknown.” In terms of the history of Burmese art, the image under discussion shows several of the features identified by Green (2018: 46f) as characteristic of a style of wall painting employed during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, distinct from styles of painting that came into use in the course of the eighteenth century and persisted into the nineteenth century. The relevant part of her description of this style provides the following indications, which can be read in comparison with the actual image found below on plate 1:

Proportions are not realistic, with people and animals disproportionately large compared to the landscape and buildings ... people are mostly illustrated in three-quarter profile with broad faces, large eyes, wide noses, thick lips, large ears with plug earrings, and three lines on their necks. They are clothed in textiles elegantly decorated with geometric patterns that can be seen on Indian trade textiles in Southeast Asia. Men are portrayed with a large lump in their cheeks, possibly representing a betel quid, and the women have their hair pulled up and bound by a ring on top of their heads. Colors are bright. There is usually a red background.<sup>1</sup>

Several features found in the mural under discussion disappear from use during the second half of the eighteenth century, which shows a tendency to shift from frontal view to bird’s-eye view and to employ multiple perspectives, allowing the viewer to see different areas in a compound simultaneously. Pictures overall appear more realistic, and figures are more to scale with the environment. People are depicted with oval faces, the lumps in the cheeks of men have disappeared, and women wear their hair tied up in buns or semi-elaborate

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<sup>1</sup> On the significance of the red background see also Green 2018: 156 and 159.

coifs (Green 2018: 49f). In sum, the painting style used for the image under discussion concords with the dating of 1761 mentioned by Handlin (2016: 180), derived from two donative inscriptions featured on the door jambs of the shrine.<sup>2</sup>

Turning to the actual narrative presented in the mural, the left part of the painting features a male reclining on his side on a low platform and with his head and one shoulder supported by two pillows. He wears a long white shirt marked with black arrow-type symbols and underneath a pair of trousers marked with thick red circles. His eyes are closed, and his hands are placed on his stomach. The image suggests that he is taking a rest, perhaps after partaking of a heavy meal.

To his right, the next narrative segment shows a young woman seated on the ground with her back turned towards him. Her dress is made of the same white cloth marked with arrow-type symbols, with the trousers worn below marked with red circles. The visual similarity between her clothes and those of the reclining male could be meant to convey the impression that the two are related to each other. She is gesticulating, with her left arm raised, in the course of a conversation with a young male seated next to her. He is bare-chested and wears a green sarong. With his right arm raised, presumably to make a point, he is gazing at her.

Further to the right two similarly bare-chested males wearing sarongs can be seen walking away. Each of these two males carries a pole on the left shoulder, with a basket on each end. Comparable to the case of the visual similarity between the reclining male and the woman in matters of dress, the similarity resulting from these two and the seated male being bare-chested and wearing just sarongs could be intended to communicate that these three in some way belong together.

## I.2 The Inscriptional Reference to Theravāda

The inscription below the image provides the following information:<sup>3</sup>

When the future Buddha was a thief, the wife of a rich man felt attachment to him and wanted him to engage in wrong behavior. He did not do it and had her keep the precepts. He was given some of the rich man's wealth and released. A Theravada *jātaka*.<sup>4</sup>

Based on the summary of the tale provided in this way, it seems fair to propose that the image is meant to show the rich man reclining while his wife is in conversation with the thief. The two carriers do not correspond to anything mentioned in the inscription, leaving their role uncertain. Nevertheless, it would seem possible that these two are collaborators of the thief with the task of carrying away whatever he was planning to steal. Presumably on realizing that he has been discovered, they would have decided to leave.

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<sup>2</sup> Lilian Handlin, personal communication, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> I am deeply indebted to Lilian Handlin for providing a photograph and translation of the inscription, as well as other information. Without her kind and generous help, the first part of the present article could not have reached its present form.

<sup>4</sup> The actual spelling used in the inscription is *theravāta*. The use of *t* instead of *d* appears to reflect a not uncommon type of spelling mistake, recognized on p. 2 of Vol. 1 of the *Concise Myanmar Dictionary*, first published 1992 by The Myanmar Literary and Translation Commission, Ministry of Education (I am indebted to Bhikkhu Aggacitta for this reference). An example of the same type of error appears to occur in another eighteenth-century inscription, figure 4.7 in Green 2018: 182, which refers to the Buddha's pre-awakening teacher Rāmaputta as "Uttaka" instead of Uddaka.

Whatever the role of these two may have been, the explicit indications that the inscription does provide can be appreciated in the light of the explanation by Green (2018: 167) that “the writing derived from the paintings and was ... a device to enhance the reception of the visual narratives.” The story line provided in the inscription indeed brings to life the depiction in the mural and thereby substantially enhances its reception. The function of the final remark that this is “a Theravada *jātaka*” in enhancing the reception of the visual narrative is not as self-evident, requiring further exploration.

Now, the tale as such, in the way it emerges from the inscription, appears to serve as an illustration of the importance of keeping the third precept. This would presumably have been of particular appeal to the donors, whose status as lay disciples is evident from statements that record the reasons for two generations to part with some of their wealth in order to perform the meritorious deed of constructing the shrine and meticulously decorating its interior.<sup>5</sup> The circumstance that in this tale the one who shows such high regard for refraining from sexual misconduct is a thief enhances the main message. In this way, someone adopting wrong livelihood that involves intentionally breaking the second precept against taking what is not given still has such high regard for the third precept that he refrains from the opportunity to engage in sex with the wife of the rich man.

Since from an emic perspective *jātakas* serve to illustrate the perfections acquired by the future Buddha during his various previous lives, the present tale would have functioned as an exemplification of the second in the standard listing of perfections: morality (*sīla*). Above the present image, the same wall shows scenes from the past life of the Buddha as Vessantara,<sup>6</sup> illustrating the first perfection of generosity (*dāna*). This other *jātaka* illustration provides an important visual reference point for the story under discussion. Green (2018: 111 and 66f) explains:

The organization of the wall paintings, vertically, horizontally, and from periphery to center provides strong evidence that the imagery was conceived of as a cohesive entity with a systematic meta-narrative ... the murals formed a programmatic whole where each of the sections was not only cohesive within itself, but also related to the other groups of images ... The *jātakas* perform as a group in the murals.

The tale of Vessantara is the last member of the *Mahānipāta*, the final ten stories in the classical *Jātaka* collection, which have been of particular appeal in the South and Southeast Asian Buddhist traditions. Regarding Burmese murals of the period in question, according to Green (2018: 66) “the *Mahānipāta* was the dominant group of the *jātaka* narratives in most of the temples.” From the perspective of *jātaka* tales performing together, combined with the central role of the *Mahānipāta* in such wall paintings in general, an obvious choice for illustrating the perfection of morality would have been the narrative of the *nāga* Bhūridatta from the *Mahānipāta*.<sup>7</sup> Yet, this choice was not adopted and instead the mural shows a tale

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<sup>5</sup> Lilian Handlin, personal communication, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Jā 547; For a comparative study of this tale see Anālayo 2016b.

<sup>7</sup> Jā 543, which in its conclusion at Jā VI 219,23 places a particular highlight on keeping the *uposatha* (a closely similar main plot in Jā 506 ends with the same highlight at Jā IV 468,20); see also the correlation of the *Mahānipāta* tales with the perfections in Appleton 2010: 75. In relation to another past life of the Buddha as a robber, Jā 279 at Jā II 389,5 explains that even *bodhisattas*, although they are such great beings, nevertheless at times take what belongs to others, quoting a statement that attributed this to a fault in their horoscope, *nakkhattadosenā ti*. The interjection of this strained explanation into the midst of the narrative reflects

that is not even part of the classical *Jātaka* collection. Regarding such non-classical *jātaka* tales in general, Jaini (1990/2001: 391) reasons:

It is true that these tales could not be traced to the canonical *Jātaka* book itself ... Notwithstanding the diverse sources from which these tales drew, because the spirit of their teachings remained distinctly Buddhist, they were acceptable as complements to the canonical *Jātakas* ... as long as the hero of the tales remained the Bodhisatta, and as long as nothing blatantly contrary to the Buddha's teachings was allowed to corrupt the message, their value in the edification of devout laypeople remained unchanged.

At the same time, however, alongside such reasoning there is also room for the existence of awareness among Buddhists of the fact that certain texts could not have been part of what according to tradition was recited soon after the Buddha's final Nirvana at the first "communal recitation" (*saṅgīti*).<sup>8</sup> In the case of a well-known assembly of non-classical *jātakas*, the *Paññāsa-jātaka*, according to an unverified tale a Burmese king considered these tales to be apocryphal and ordered the collection to be burnt.<sup>9</sup> Whether this ever happened or not, the circulation of such a story reflects the possibility of misgivings regarding such *jātaka* tales. This could also have been relevant to the past life of the Buddha as a thief who keeps the third precept, as this is not even one of the *Paññāsa-jātakas* in the Burmese collection of these tales.<sup>10</sup>

In general, the construction of such shrines during the period in question appears to have been fairly regularized. Green (2018: 94) reports, regarding the superstructure of receding and concentric roofs:

Sumptuary regulations controlled the use of such structures, and the number of layers permitted to each person accorded with his or her rank ... The incorrect use of ... architectural features, and other adornments could bring heavy punishment to offenders.

Regarding the effect of a tendency toward standardization on murals of the period under discussion, according to Green (2018: 36 and 59)

artists and donors drew upon a stock body of material for representation, depicted in formulaic manners ... The stability of the subject and organizational structure in turn enabled the interpolation of variations precisely because it was possible to insert them without disturbing the foundations.

In such a setting, a need to validate the "interpolation," if it can be called such at all, of a past life of the Buddha that is not part of the classical *Jātaka* collection could have led to an explicit assertion that this does not result in "disturbing the foundations."

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awareness within the tradition of the difficulties involved in the *bodhisatta* adopting such a type of wrong livelihood. From this perspective, a *jātaka* in which the future Buddha is a thief or robber would share with the tale of *Vessantara* an ethically complex presentation, differing in this respect from the fairly straightforward conduct of the *nāga* Bhūridatta.

<sup>8</sup> Skilling 2006: 167 reports that "the *Piṭakamālā* described the *Paññāsa-jātaka* as 'outside the *saṅgāyana*,' but late Theravādin works accept certain works, such as the *Nandopananda-sutta*, as 'Buddha-word,' even though they were not included in the council (*samgītiṃ anāropita*). That is, 'Buddhavacana' and 'Tipiṭaka' are not necessarily coterminous."

<sup>9</sup> Prince Damrong, quoted in Skilling 2006: 159; see also Jaini 1981: vf and 1990/2001: 376.

<sup>10</sup> The text has been edited by Jaini 1981 and 1983.

Alternatively, perhaps the qualification as a Theravāda *jātaka* simply served to name an anonymous narrative. Since a *jātaka* is obviously Buddhist,<sup>11</sup> the specification Theravāda may have been meant to convey that this tale belongs to the same tradition as the Pāli version of the Vessantara *jātaka*. Given that the Vessantara narrative can be considered to be “*the Theravāda Jātaka*,” in view of its immense popularity and appeal among the Buddhist populations of South and Southeast Asia,<sup>12</sup> it does not seem too far-fetched to introduce its companion on the same wall as “a Theravāda *jātaka*.”

Whichever of these interpretations may appear preferable, the designation applied in this way as such does seem to reflect a self-understanding or sense of identity shared by those involved in one way or another in the production of the mural as well as those expected to view this inscription, expressed through the name Theravāda. It would follow that already in the mid-eighteenth century the use of the name Theravāda to convey a specific Buddhist identity was sufficiently well known to be employed in this way in an inscription. As far as I can see, this employment would be in line with the way the term is used nowadays. When introducing the tale of the thief who kept the third precept to an audience in the twenty-first century, it would be quite natural to refer to this tale as “a Theravāda *jātaka*.”

### **I.3 Problematizing the Name Theravāda**

The apparent use of the name Theravāda to convey a specific Buddhist identity already in the eighteenth century invites a reconsideration of a tendency to problematize the usage of this term. In some recent scholarly publications, this tendency finds expression in replacing the more commonly used Theravāda with the names Theriya and/or Theravaṃsa, apparently based on the perception that the usage of the name Theravāda to refer to South and Southeast Asian Buddhism(s) is an innovation stemming from the early twentieth century. At times such replacements are simply adopted without further discussion. Fortunately, however, in the introduction to a posthumously published monograph that employs the alternative name Theriya, Cousins (2022: 1) provides information that helps appreciate this type of choice:

Southern Buddhism is often referred to as Theravāda Buddhism, although the ancient term ‘Theravāda’ has only relatively recently been adopted as a collective name for this tradition. The first person to utilize the term appears to have been the British monk Ānanda Metteyya (Alan Bennett, 1872–1923), the first Western-born monk to visit Europe. We cannot, however, rule out the possibility that it was already in use in Burma and adopted by him from his sources there. In any case, it is now widely used to refer to that form of Buddhism whose monastic order derives from the lineage of the ancient Theriyas in Ceylon and elsewhere and whose texts have been preserved by that lineage in the Pali language.

The reference to Ānanda Metteyya comes with an endnote in support, which mentions: “Perreira 2012. See also Gethin 2012.” By way of exploring this reference, in what follows I take up the contributions by these two authors in turn, beginning with the latter.

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<sup>11</sup> Skilling 2006: 113 explains about *jātaka* that “[a]s a genre it is unique to Buddhism.”

<sup>12</sup> Collins 2016: vii even speaks of it as “indeed *the* central text in the Theravāda Buddhism of South and Southeast Asia.”

## II. Theravāda and Related Terms in Pāli Texts

The second of the above two references is to an article with the tantalizing main title “Was Buddhaghosa a Theravādin?,” offering an informative survey of occurrences of the relevant terms in Pāli texts. In full acknowledgement of my indebtedness to this detailed research, on the results of which I simply rely for my present exploration, there are a few issues of interpretation regarding these results where I venture to see things in a different way. In what follows, I begin by exploring the Pāli term *theravāda*, then compare its usage to that of the alternative Pāli terms *theriya* and *theravaṃsa*, and finally turn to the contemporary usage of the name Theravāda.

### II.1 The Term *theravāda* in Pāli Texts

Based on identifying two main meanings of the term *theravāda* in Pāli commentaries and chronicles, Gethin (2012: 14) explains that, unlike the term’s usage in the commentary on the *Kathāvatthu* (and in Sri Lankan chronicles):

As for the Pali *aṭṭhakathās*, the term *theravāda* is not used to refer to a school or Vinaya ordination lineage at all;<sup>13</sup> it is used to refer to a general body of received interpretation of the canonical texts, which is distinguished from the earlier traditions of interpretation thought of as deriving from the 500 arahats present at the first council.

This finding raises the following question for me: Could there be some relationship between the two senses of the term *theravāda* attested in Pāli texts, that is, between the textual body of commentaries and the ordination lineage? For the purpose of exploring this possibility, in what follows I briefly present ideas that I have elsewhere discussed in more detail.<sup>14</sup>

Considering the issue of distinct monastic lineages (conventionally counted as eighteen *nikāyas*)<sup>15</sup> from the viewpoint of how this would have impacted the actual lived experience of Indian monastics, a key element must have been the fortnightly recitation of the code of rules (*pātimokkha/prātimokṣa*) by those who have received full ordination. Participation in this observance serves as an expression of communal harmony and commitment to following a

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<sup>13</sup> The formulation adopted here summarizes the preceding assessment in Gethin 2012: 10 that “outside the *Kathāvatthu-aṭṭhakathā* there is little evidence for the use of the expression *theravāda* in the *aṭṭhakathās* as the name of a particular school or lineage of Buddhism contrasted with other schools or lineages of Buddhism.” My introductory phrasing is meant to bridge these two formulations, as occurrences in the *Kathāvatthu-aṭṭhakathā* would pertain to “the Pāli *aṭṭhakathās*,” so that, strictly speaking, at least in this instance of a Pāli *aṭṭhakathā* the term *theravāda* is used to refer to a school or *Vinaya* ordination lineage.

<sup>14</sup> Anālayo 2022; see also Anālayo 2020 for similar points in relation to Mūlasarvāstivāda *Āgama* and *Vinaya* transmission, as part of a critical assessment of a problematization of the name of this monastic lineage, which has found expression in the usage of the term “(Mūla)-sarvāstivāda.”

<sup>15</sup> Bechert 1993: 12 explains: “A *nikāya* has nothing in common with a ‘sect’ in the accepted understanding of this word, if used in the context of the history of Christianity. A *nikāya* is a group of monks [and nuns] who mutually acknowledge the validity of their *upasampadā*, and consequently, if staying within the same *sīmā*, can commonly perform *vinayakarmas*.” In full appreciation of his clarification of the significance of the term *nikāya* in general, it does not seem to me that the remainder of his discussion has successfully settled the problem emerging from the research by Gunawardana 1979 regarding how to relate the prominence in the actual constitution of the *Saṅgha* in mediaeval Sri Lanka of eight *mūlas*, apparently none of which can be definitely traced to the Mahāvihāra, to the common notion of the absolute centrality of the Mahāvihāra for Theravāda monasticism subsequent to the unification of the three Sri Lankan (sub-) *nikāyas* during the reign of Parākramabāhu I; see also Skilling 2009: 71.

specific set of rules. The same principle stands in the background of the first *saṅgīti*. Rather than adopting the common but problematic rendering as a “first council,” following clarifications offered by Tilakaratne (2000) this event can preferably be understood to represent a “communal recitation.” In other words, just as the narrative of the first *saṅgīti* serves to communicate agreement on the teachings believed to have been given by the recently deceased Buddha, expressed through the undertaking of a group recitation, so the fortnightly recital of the code of rules serves as an expression of harmony in matters of conduct among the participating monastics.

For that to work, however, the participating monastics need to rely on the same code of rules. Although minor variations may go unnoticed, substantial differences in the formulation and import of rules no longer provide the needed foundation for group recitation. This appears to be a key element in the background of the emergence and consolidation of distinct monastic lineages.

The recitation of the code of rules does not stand in a vacuum, of course, but is part of larger patterns of oral recitation and transmission at work during this period. Those who memorize and recite together the same code of rules will tend to do so also for other texts. Although this need not result in an absolute watertight separation, the general situation must have been for monastic ordination lineages to converge with oral transmission lineages.

Returning from this brief excursion into early Buddhist orality to the question of the two meanings of the Pāli term *theravāda*, it seems to me that it is indeed reasonable to envision a relationship between the monastic lineage responsible for textual transmission and the transmitted texts, namely the texts believed to have been recited at the first *saṅgīti* together with a body of commentaries on these. In fact, neither the monastic lineage nor these commentaries can come into being or continue existing on their own, as both depend on the actual existence of the same monastics. The very monastics belonging to the ordination lineage in question have either expressed their opinions in the form of the commentaries under discussion, or they play an active part in the transmission of these commentaries, or else they consider these opinions, voiced by their more knowledgeable companions, as an important reference point for understanding the teachings.

In sum, the monastic lineage can be viewed as the container for the textual transmission and the textual body of commentaries as pertaining to the content of the same transmission. In this way, the two meanings of the Pāli term *theravāda* can be viewed as two sides of the same coin. If this much is granted, it becomes possible to perceive a continuity between the textual body of commentaries and the monastic lineage as the two senses of the Pāli term *theravāda* attested in what Gethin (2012: 7n13) counts as 229 occurrences of the term in 37 pre-twentieth-century Pāli texts.

## **II.2 The Terms *theriya* and *theravaṃsa* in Pāli Texts**

Gethin (2012: 12) notes that “the Pali *theriya*, corresponding to the Sanskrit *sthāvirīya*, is itself extremely rare” in Pāli texts. Regarding its import, Gethin (2012: 14) further explains that “the name of the school contrasted with the Mahāsaṅghikas is variously given in the early Pali sources as simply Thera or Theriya.” In addition, a second type of usage appears to be identifiable in a reference in a sub-commentary that probably intends the distinction



between the four *mahānikāyas* recognized in texts from the Indian mainland,<sup>16</sup> which comprise the Sarvāstivāda and the Sāṃmitīya in addition to the two already mentioned.<sup>17</sup>

Unfortunately, both usages appear to my mind to be problematic as a substitute for Theravāda. This can be illustrated with a study by Dhammawasa (2021) of the first *pārājika* of the “Theriya Vinaya.”<sup>18</sup> The topic is clearly the *Vinaya* extant in Pāli, as the article has repeated citations of Pāli phrases from this work and its commentary. However, the term “Theriya” could equally well apply to the Dharmaguptaka *Vinaya*, for example. The Dharmaguptaka tradition belongs to the Theriya tradition as distinct from just the Mahāsāṅghika tradition and also as distinct from the other three *nikāyas* recognized in the listing of four *mahānikāyas*. In other words, neither the first nor the second of the above-mentioned usages of the Pāli term *theriya* are sufficiently specific to fulfil the function of clearly designating which *Vinaya* is intended.

The usage of Theriya *Vinaya* would become particularly problematic if, instead of studying the first *pārājika* just based on Pāli texts, one were to undertake a comparative study of this rule.<sup>19</sup> To avoid confusion, this would require some clarification to the effect that, even though one has decided to use the name Theriya, the reader should keep in mind that this does not mean the Theriya traditions as per the use of the term in Pāli texts, as it instead should be understood to convey the more restricted sense of the Theravāda monastic lineage. Such complications are better avoided by using both terms in accordance with their respective meanings attested in Pāli texts, that is, by using Theriya when the intended meaning is in line with the above two usages and instead adopting the common usage of referring to the Theravāda tradition when doing a comparative study of the different extant *Vinaya* traditions, and by extension also when just studying a Pāli text like the Theravāda *Vinaya* on its own.

Following the already established usage in this way would be in line with the sense conveyed by the term *theravāda* in Pāli texts. As a textual body of commentary that is seen as distinct from the texts believed to have been recited at the first *saṅgīti*, the term does function as a specific designation of the Pāli Buddhist traditions that evolved in South and Southeast Asia. It can be understood to combine the container provided by the monastic reciters responsible for the formation and transmission of this specific textual body of commentaries as well as its content. This content comprises opinions voiced by these monastic reciters, documented in this specific body of commentaries, which in combination result in particular doctrinal positions and understandings of the texts (including those on monastic discipline) believed to stem from the first *saṅgīti*. This is precisely what enables distinguishing Theravāda from, say, Dharmaguptaka or any other *nikāya*. When viewed from this perspective, the name Theravāda emerges as a choice preferable to Theriya. In sum, I have difficulties to see the advantage of using a term of rare occurrence whose employment in the Pāli texts does not match the required meaning particularly well.

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<sup>16.</sup> Gethin 2012: 53. The reference in Gethin 2012: 4 to “the specifically Mahāvihāra claim to be the only true Theriyas in Laṅkā” and the similar header in Gethin 2012: 47, announcing the topic to be “The *Mahāvamsa*: ‘The Mahāvihāravāsins are the only true Theriyas in Laṅkā’,” do not reflect a third type of occurrence, as the actual term in the relevant *Mahāvamsa* passage is not *theriya* but *theravāda*.

<sup>17.</sup> For the spelling of the latter, I follow Skilling 2016: 46n1.

<sup>18.</sup> This case is interesting, as it shows that by now the new usage has begun to spread to Sri Lanka.

<sup>19.</sup> For a comparative study of the narrations purporting to explain the circumstances of the promulgation of the first *pārājika* see Anālayo 2012a.

Turning to the alternative Pāli term *theravaṃsa*, according to Gethin (2012: 19n43) “[t]he term *vaṃsa*, however, is not used as an equivalent to *vāda* or *nikāya* in the discussions of schools in the Dīp, Kv-a and Mhv,”<sup>20</sup> that is, in those Pāli texts that reflect a concern with the topic of *nikāya* affiliation. This would put the choice of *theravaṃsa* at a disadvantage compared to *theravāda*, which does occur as the name of a *nikāya* in these Pāli texts.<sup>21</sup> In fact, the general trend among scholars who wish to avoid the usage of the name Theravāda appears to be to opt for the alternative Theriya, rather than Theravaṃsa.<sup>22</sup>

Now, the broad understanding of the Pāli term *theravāda* proposed above still has the monastic lineage as its core element, additionally including the texts originating from and transmitted by its members in the scope of meaning of the term. Given the centrality of the monastic lineage, it is still striking that this sense is not more prominent in *aṭṭhakathā* literature. This can be explored further in relation to the history of the monastic tradition to which we nowadays refer to as Theravāda given in the first part of the *Vinaya* commentary, the *Samantapāsādikā*, which shows little interest in *nikāya* affiliation. Gethin (2012: 30) points out: “If we only read the *Samantapāsādikā* account we would learn nothing about the split between the Theriyas and Mahāsaṅghikas, nor of any other splits in the ordination lineage of the Saṅgha.” As rightly noted by Gethin (2012: 32): “The concern was simply to demonstrate that what was introduced to Laṅkā was in itself authentic and significant.”

This could indeed be the key function of this narrative, which is perhaps best understood against the background of a pervasive concern of any *nikāya* to be heir to an unbroken lineage of correctly carried out ordinations. Kieffer-Pülz (2010: 219) explains that an ordination’s “legitimacy depends on an uninterrupted ordination lineage going back to the time of the Buddha.” However, as noted by Hartmann (2010: 26), an obvious problem is that such unbroken continuity “cannot be reliably and convincingly established over a long period of time. This holds true for any given lineage,” even though, of course, “each of them takes the integrity of its own lineage for granted.” This basic pattern of a felt need to view one’s own *Vinaya* lineage as the authentic one can safely be assumed to have been common among different *nikāyas*.<sup>23</sup> Yet, precisely because it is challenging to establish an uninterrupted lineage, successfully promoting one’s own *nikāya* and its ordinations requires providing as much information as possible to make the claim of an uninterrupted lineage appear convincing. In such a context, references to splits in the monastic community are not of comparable relevance. In the words of a comment by Gethin (2012: 10n19) on a commentarial reference related to the succession of *Vinaya* teachers starting from the Buddha, “what

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<sup>20.</sup> On occurrences in other Pāli commentaries see Gethin 2012: 16.

<sup>21.</sup> Gethin 2012: 11n22 explains that “the terms *vāda* (‘exposition’ or ‘doctrine’), *kula* (‘community’), as well as *ācariyavāda* (‘teachers’ [tradition of] exposition’) and *ācariyakula* (‘community of teachers’) all seem to be used in the introduction to Kv-a as equivalents of *nikāya* (‘group’).”

<sup>22.</sup> Gethin 2012: 2n4 offers a suggestion along such lines in relation to *theriya* and not for *theravaṃsa*, reasoning that, as far as the monastic ordination lineage is concerned, “it might be better to use ‘Theriya’ than ‘Theravāda’ in this context.”

<sup>23.</sup> The basic attitude can be exemplified with Dīp 5.51, Oldenberg 1879: 37,26: *sattarasa bhinnavādā eko vādo abhinnako*. From the emic viewpoint, it must have been the others who broke off to form distinct monastic lineages, and who also made changes to the texts; see Dīp 5.43+49, Oldenberg 1879: 37,10+25: *aññaṃ akamsu*. It seems probable that similar ideas were held by other *nikāyas*, even though perhaps not always voiced as openly as here, as a basic part of their belief in the authenticity of their own monastic lineage. Once the validity of ordination is held to require, among others, reliance on the ‘correct’ text, it follows that variant versions of this text have to be viewed as inauthentic.

seems to be the focus here is being able to legitimize one's ordination by being able to point to a specific lineage, rather than contesting the legitimacy of rival lineages."

Once a central aim is to make one's own lineage appear as authentic as possible, it would suffice to provide a spotlight on the key monk responsible for its transmission from India to Sri Lanka, Mahinda, for having learned the whole of the *theravāda*, presumably in the sense of the relevant textual body.<sup>24</sup> In other words, when viewed from the perspective of what the *Samantapāsādikā* must be trying to achieve, it seems quite understandable if during the oral period of its formation the main purpose was perceived by the reciters to be the establishing of the authenticity of the *Vinaya* lineage to which this commentary belongs.<sup>25</sup> Relating Mahinda to *theravāda* suffices in this context as a marker of a sense of identity.

The same *Samantapāsādikā* reflects awareness of a version of the *Dīpavaṃsa* and thus quite probably of the *nikāya*-related information found in this text.<sup>26</sup> In fact, as duly noted by Gethin (2012: 42), "Buddhaghosa and his fellow monks on Laṅkā in the fifth century CE certainly knew of the split between the tradition of the Theras and the Mahāsāṅghikas, and also of subsequent splits." This makes it perhaps understandable why such matters are taken up in detail only in the commentary on the *Kathāvatthu* and in the chronicles, whose orientation naturally calls for such information. Moreover, Tilakaratne (2021: 443) reasons:

why the tradition was not called by a specific name has something to do with the location of Sri Lanka as an island without rival ... Buddhist schools. There was not any particular need for the Sri Lanka Theravādins ... to assert themselves as Theravādins ...

Confirmation for this assessment can be found in the introduction to the *Jātaka* collection, which employs the term *vaṃsa* to designate *nikāya*-affiliation, although here used for a monastic ordination lineage distinct from the Theravāda. According to the relevant part, the compilation of the *Jātaka* collection was undertaken in response to an invitation by the Thera Atthadassin, Buddhamitta, and Bhikkhu Buddhadeva, who is qualified as a member of the Mahiṃsāsaka lineage.<sup>27</sup> Gethin (2012: 18) comments that "in designating Buddhadeva a Mahiṃsāsaka it is implied that his school is different from Atthadassin and Buddhamitta's. Yet the author does not reveal what name he would use to designate this school."

It seems fair to propose that there may not have been a felt need to designate the school of Atthadassin and Buddhamitta, as that much would have been obvious. In the narrative setting, they will naturally be assumed to be members of the tradition to which we nowadays refer to as Theravāda, wherefore only the differing *nikāya* affiliation of Buddhadeva merits explicit designation. The case of Atthadassin and Buddhamitta conveys the impression that the absence of an explicit *marker* of *nikāya*-identity does not imply the absence of a *sense* of *nikāya*-identity. In line with the well-known saying, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24.</sup> Sp I 52,7: *sabbattheravādaṃ tiṇṇaṃ vassānaṃ abbhantare uggahetvā*.

<sup>25.</sup> On the sources of the introductory narration in the *Samantapāsādikā* see Frauwallner 1994: 10–15.

<sup>26.</sup> Sp I 74,18 and 75,14, noted by Gethin 2012: 43n87, who also points out that the sub-commentary supplements the narrative given in the *Samantapāsādikā* with *nikāya*-related information taken from the commentary on the *Kathāvatthu*. This probably reflects the circumstance that, by the time of its composition, there was less a need to affirm the authenticity of the by then well-established monastic lineage, leading to a broadening of the scope of the narrative.

<sup>27.</sup> Jā I 1,17: *mahiṃsāsakavaṃsamhi ... buddhadevena*.

<sup>28.</sup> For what appears to be a similar case, also concerning conclusions drawn based on the absence of explicit

In sum, based on the above survey it seems to me that the name Theravāda, understood as representative of a textual body of commentaries *and* the monastic lineage responsible for the formation and transmission of this textual body, emerges as a preferable choice over the alternatives Theriya and Theravaṃsa for usage in scholarly writing such as, for example, when needing to refer to the *Vinaya* extant in Pāli.

### II.3 Usage of the Name Theravāda

The broad conception of Theravāda suggested above, comprising both of the main meanings that have been identified in Pāli texts, helps to contextualize an occasional polemic usage of the term, resulting in claims that are not compatible with historical facts. Such usage is certainly problematic, but fortunately it occurs only rarely compared to the vast majority of usages of the term in pre-twentieth century Pāli texts. It follows that an employment of the name Theravāda in scholarly writing does not amount to an endorsement of such polemics, simply because the most frequent usage of the term is not polemic. In this respect the name Theravāda differs from its predecessor in scholarly writing in Hīnayāna, which is a derogatory term too deeply entangled in polemics to allow for a value-free usage to categorize the Buddhist traditions of South and Southeast Asia.<sup>29</sup>

Besides, a mere change of terminology by replacing the name Theravāda with another one would not offer an effective way of responding to the problem of the superiority conceit underlying such polemics. In case this change is carried out successfully, the same superiority conceit could simply transfer to the new term. In other words, a mere change of terminology will quite probably not suffice to address this type of problem. In case there should be a wish to address it, instead of resorting to mere cosmetic measures this could take the form of exposing shortcomings of the premises on which the underlying attitude relies.<sup>30</sup>

An occasional polemic usage is not the only type of problem related to the notion of Theravāda. Another problem identified by Gethin (2012: 2) is the following:

we tend to retreat to the certainties of such categories as ‘Theravāda’ and ‘Mahāyāna.’ Yet as soon as we do so we create of Theravāda a constant and enduring tradition to which Buddhists, both lay and monastics, in different times and places have belonged and continue to belong; a tradition that is moreover rather more than a simple ordination lineage.

The delusive certainty potentially resulting from such generalizing categories is indeed problematic. However, such repercussions are not just a problem for the name Theravāda, as any general category, be it Mahāyāna or Buddhism or what not, can have such a deluding effect on those who are not sufficiently aware of the limitations of language. Once again, the cure for this problem is not a change of terminology, because the same type of misunderstanding can recur with a different term. For this reason, this type of problem much rather calls for inculcating awareness of the limitations of concepts.

As regards the more specific case of Theravāda, the usage of the term in Pāli texts does point to “more than a simple ordination lineage.” This in turn helps to settle another problem identified by Gethin (2012: 14) in regard to the second part of the Pāli term, as “*vāda* here

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references to the Theravāda, see Abeysekera 2018: 350f.

<sup>29</sup> See in more detail Anālayo 2014.

<sup>30</sup> See Anālayo 2021: 73–104.

seems to be an alternative to *nikāya*, and to talk of the ‘Theravāda school’ is like saying the ‘Thera school school.’” A solution here would be to understand *vāda* in a broader sense as a “doctrine,” as suggested by its most frequent usage in Pāli texts, rather than relying on the restricted sense the term carries in the introduction to the commentary on the *Kathāvattu*.<sup>31</sup> This would also offer an appropriate solution for the designation of the Sarvāstivāda and Mūlasarvāstivāda *nikāyas*, as here, too, equating *vāda* with *nikāya* would result in the same type of problem.

Yet another problem identified by Gethin (2012: 2) is a simplistic contrast sometimes made between Theravāda and Mahāyāna as the two main divisions of Buddhism, the problem being that “there is an imbalance of terminology: the term *theravāda* should strictly refer to one of several ancient monastic ordination lineages, whereas the term *mahāyāna* refers to a particular orientation in Buddhist practice.”<sup>32</sup> Once again, given that the attested usage of the term in Pāli texts is not confined to a monastic ordination lineage, there is no need to limit its current usage to that meaning. Without in any way intending to promote the adoption of the simplistic Theravāda–Mahāyāna contrast, it also needs to be kept in mind that, from a historical perspective, this contrast derives from the earlier Hīnayāna–Mahāyāna contrast, a topic to which I turn in the next part of my exploration. Before doing that, however, I need to conclude my exploration of the Pāli term *theravāda*.

Closer inspection suggests the possibility of viewing the Pāli term *theravāda* as undergoing an organic process of evolution in meaning. This has a starting point in an occurrence in Pāli discourses describing the Buddha’s pre-awakening apprenticeship with two teachers,<sup>33</sup> where the term might stand for a textual body of oral teachings and comments related to the meditative attainments taught by Āḷāra Kālāma/Ārāḍa Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta/Udraka Rāmaputra respectively. The sense of a textual body of oral comments continues prominently in Pāli commentarial literature, with the obvious difference of having as its reference point instead the teachings held to have been given by the Buddha and his disciples, in the way these were believed to have been recited and commented on at the first *saṅgīti*. During the oral period, the transmission of this textual body of oral commentaries must have been intimately related to those responsible for its transmission, namely the monastic lineage of reciters. Of these two sides of what appears to be basically the same coin, the content of this transmission naturally features prominently in Pāli commentarial literature, probably reflecting the circumstance that the absence of competition with other *nikāyas* would have encouraged such emphasis. In turn, the container for this transmission, the monastic lineage, naturally comes more to the forefront in the Pāli chronicles and in the commentary to the

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<sup>31</sup>. See above note 21.

<sup>32</sup>. Gethin 2012: 2 continues: “Ordination lineages pertain to the specific tradition of the monastic rule (*vinaya*) that an individual monk follows; they do not pertain to whether his goal is to become an arhat or to become a Buddha.” It could be added that the situation here is somewhat complex, as in the Chinese Dharmaguptaka traditions, for example, the taking of the bodhisat(t)va vow has become part of the ordination procedure. Bianchi 2019: 153 explains that in this type of procedure “a monk or nun must participate in three different ordination ceremonies (novice, complete, and bodhisattva), which are held together in one place and within a specific period of time.” According to the detailed study of the actual ordination procedure by Orsborn 2021, not only the last, but all three of these ordinations are pervaded by a distinct Mahāyāna spirit, so that employing the appellation “Mahāyāna ordination” would actually be adequate. On the relationship between the bodhisat(t)va vow and monastic ordination in the Tibetan Mūlasarvāstivāda traditions see Sobisch 2002.

<sup>33</sup>. MN 26 at MN I 164,5 and MN I 165,25 (the whole narrative recurs in MN 36, MN 85, and MN 100); see also Anālayo 2013: 215–217.

*Kathāvatthu*. In this way, although certainly never representing a monolithic entity that has remained unchanging throughout time, the Pāli term *theravāda* can be seen to follow a meaningful trajectory of evolution in meaning.

With due recognition granted to the inevitable limitations that go with any attempt at definition, usage of the term in scholarly writing could be grounded in the notion of a tradition of religious practices, rituals, and thought that has and still is dynamically evolving, due to continually responding to whatever the perceived needs of the historical moment and location may be (and precisely for this reason not being a monolithic entity). This tradition, or better these traditions, have as their core points of reference the Pāli texts (together with relevant vernacular texts) and the corresponding monastic lineage (together with its lay followers). Such a working definition would hopefully be sufficiently specific to avoid confusion with Buddhist traditions based on other monastic lineages and at the same time be sufficiently broad to include the lay and monastic domains together with their corresponding texts and beliefs.

Although it is impossible to isolate a particular moment of time as *the* ‘point of origin,’ for conventional purposes the arrival of Mahinda and his sister Saṅghamittā in Sri Lanka can be taken as a reference point. Their arrival stands representative for the transmission of the texts, the ordination lineages of the two orders (*bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunīs*), and ritual practices reflected in the arrival of relics and the planting of a seedling of the *bodhi* tree that had reportedly been brought by Saṅghamittā. Indian antecedents to this transmission would then still fall within the scope of the preceding period of early Buddhism,<sup>34</sup> representative of the shared heritage of all Buddhist traditions.

Now, even with the testimony provided by the eighteenth century inscription, the name Theravāda in the proposed sense is not necessarily as early as the phenomena it describes. Once this is clearly acknowledged, however, it need not be considered an obstacle to actual usage. As explained by Collins (2017: 17f), regarding such usage:

It is necessarily retrospective, a term of art in modern historiography. When we use the term of any premodern time and place what we mean is something, or some things, which can be seen, or argued, to be genealogically related to what we now call ‘Theravāda.’

### **III. The Myth of Western Origins**

In addition to examining historical antecedents in Pāli literature, an evaluation of what led to the popularity of the term Theravāda also needs to take into account its role in replacing the earlier usage of the derogatory term Hīnayāna to designate the Buddhist populations of South and Southeast Asia. This leads me to the other of the two references mentioned above in Part I.3, namely the study by Pereira (2012) of the coming into vogue of the usage of Hīnayāna in public and scholarly discourse after the World’s Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, lasting until its eventual replacement by the term Theravāda around 1950. In the present case, I am once again indebted to the wealth of detail provided in his contribution. At the same time, however, as already expressed in a criticism of his research in Anālayo (2013),<sup>35</sup> I find

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<sup>34</sup> Regarding the usage of this term, Griffiths 1983: 56 explains: “By ‘early Buddhism’ we mean, broadly speaking, pre-Aśokan Indian Buddhism,” mainly accessed through textual “material largely shaped within the first two centuries of Buddhist history.” On the historical value of the relevant textual material see Anālayo 2012b and on the processes responsible for its shaping Anālayo 2022.

<sup>35</sup> A republication of the same in Anālayo 2016a: 509 also takes into account the reference to inscriptional

his conclusion regarding the ‘origin’ of the contemporary use of the name Theravāda unreliable. My exploration begins by critically examining the main proposal by Perreira (2012), followed by turning to a comparable argument made in relation to the term ‘Buddhism.’ Then I take up the promotion of the name Theravāda that started in 1950 with the founding of the World Fellowship of Buddhists.

### III.1 The Name Theravāda in the West

Perreira (2012: 549f) reports that the Buddhist Society of Great Britain and Ireland was formed in 1907 in preparation for a visit by the British monk Ānanda Metteyya, who in 1902 had taken higher ordination in a Burmese Theravāda tradition and was now about to visit his home country to teach Buddhism. An announcement of the formation of this society appeared in the same year of 1907 in the *Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient*, featuring a reference by Ānanda Metteyya to the “Bouddhisme de l'école Theravada.” Based on identifying this reference as the first occurrence of the name Theravāda to designate the Buddhism of South and Southeast Asia, Perreira (2012: 554) then suggests that Ānanda Metteyya “was himself the source of our modern use of ‘Theravāda’ – and not a Burmese text or Burmese informant.”

The central role attributed in this way to Ānanda Metteyya rests on two planks, each of which is indispensable for upholding it. One of the two planks is that the 1907 announcement marks the first appearance in Western writing of the name Theravāda as a referent to the Buddhist ‘school’ found in South and Southeast Asia; the second plank is the attribution of this usage to an innovation by Ānanda Metteyya himself, rather than reflecting an already existent notion that was merely adopted by him.

Regarding the first of these two planks, as already noted by Bretfeld (2012: 290), “the word Theravāda in the sense of a parental branch of monastic lineages was already known since 1837, when George Turner [sic] published his translation of the ‘Great Chronicle’,” that is, of the *Mahāvamsa*.<sup>36</sup> Awareness of the name Theravāda in this work can be seen reflected in the Pāli dictionary by Childers (1875/1993: 545), who discussed it under his entry on “*vādo*,” taking care to alert his readers to misunderstandings of the term he identified in Turnour’s translation of the *Mahāvamsa*. In a discussion of the “Sinhalese church” a few years later, Oldenberg (1879/1997: xli) mentioned “the name Theravādī ... which the followers of this school applied to themselves.”<sup>37</sup>

According to Perreira (2012: 466), in such references, published before 1907, the term is just “used as a technical term signifying the teachings and precepts propounded by the Buddha and subsequently gathered, transmitted, and recited by its original depositories, the Theras.” This is not quite correct, as the sense of a Buddhist tradition or school is already evident. It follows that these publications prevent considering the 1907 reference by Ānanda Metteyya to the Theravāda ‘school’ as having broken entirely new ground in the West.

Regarding the attribution of the usage of the name Theravāda to an innovation by Ānanda Metteyya himself, Perreira (2012: 553) duly notes that the term occurs frequently in the *Vamsadīpanī*, an eighteenth-century work providing a history of the tradition from the time of the Buddha to Burmese Buddhism at the time of its compilation. In terms of genre, the

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evidence that in the meantime had appeared in Handlin 2016: 180.

<sup>36.</sup> The publication is actually dated to 1836 and gives the name of the author as George Turnour.

<sup>37.</sup> An edition and translation of the *Dīpavamsa* was published in the same year by Oldenberg 1879.

*Vaṃsadīpanī* stands in a continuity of monastic law books with historical introductions produced since the twelfth-century in Sri Lanka. A few selected occurrences of the term in this work can help to ascertain its usage.

In relation to the first *saṅgīti*, the *Vaṃsadīpanī* explains that the “doctrine of the teachers who held this recitation of the Dhamma and Vinaya is called Theravāda,” followed by depicting the arising of different *nikāyas* in terms of other schools that “separated from the Theravāda.”<sup>38</sup> In accordance with its Pāli precedents, the *Vaṃsadīpanī* thereby combines the two main meanings of the term (discussed above in section II.1). Such combining continues in later parts of the same work. The sense of a textual body underlies a reference to a senior monk who “taught disciple-monks the Piṭakas of the Blessed One, along with their commentaries, so that [these monks] would become [true] Theravādins.”<sup>39</sup> The sense of a monastic lineage becomes apparent in the indication that “to practice as true disciples in the Theravāda lineage of the ancient masters” is to act “in accordance with the rules of training and the duties [enumerated in the] Khandhaka” of the Pāli *Vinaya*.<sup>40</sup> In this way, the disciple-monks who learn the Piṭakas, including the *Vinaya*, will for that very reason be well equipped to follow the rules of training and the monastic duties. The interrelationship that emerges in this way confirms the impression that it probably does better justice to the actual usage of the term *theravāda* in Pāli sources if these two meanings are considered as interrelated, that is, as two sides of the same coin.

Regarding Soṇa and Uttara, believed to have brought Buddhism to the region, from “those noble lords, the Elders Soṇa and Uttara, there descended a unified lineage of Vinaya masters and teachers of Scripture who never broke with the Theravāda.”<sup>41</sup> This is thus a counterpart to the report of the transmission of ‘Theravāda’ to Sri Lanka by Mahinda. A close relationship between the resultant traditions emerges in the report of a visit paid by monks from the region to Sri Lanka, resulting in the members of the two monastic lineages deciding to give ordination together. The *Vaṃsadīpanī* reports the following reasoning expressed by the Sri Lankans:<sup>42</sup>

We are the spiritual successors of the Elder Mahāmahinda who established the Sāsana on Sīhaḷa Island. You, sirs, are the spiritual successors of the great Elders Soṇa and Uttara who founded the Sāsana in Suvanṇabhūmi. We therefore are not different. Let us then conduct ecclesiastical ceremonies as one.

Independent of whatever historical value one may be willing to accord to the reported episode,<sup>43</sup> the description does reflect an emic perception of a shared sense of *nikāya*-identity, common to the relevant populations in South and Southeast Asia and distinct from the other ‘seventeen’ *nikāyas*. It is precisely this sense of *nikāya*-identity that the *Vaṃsadīpanī* evokes

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<sup>38.</sup> Vṃs I.11 and I.15 (pp. 13 and 19), after the translation given in Pranke 2004: 50 and 57, which is based on the 1967 edition published by the Hanthawaddi Press, Rangoon. My ignorance of Burmese prevents me from trying to consult the original.

<sup>39.</sup> Vṃs III.83 (p. 98), Pranke 2004: 164. Here and below, supplementations in square brackets are found in this way in Pranke 2004.

<sup>40.</sup> Vṃs IV.110 (p. 140), Pranke 2004: 236.

<sup>41.</sup> Vṃs III.63 (p. 70), Pranke 2004: 133.

<sup>42.</sup> Vṃs III.73 (p. 84f), Pranke 2004: 149.

<sup>43.</sup> At least the basic attitude communicated by this episode would be in line with instances of exportation and importation of ordination lineages between Sri Lanka and Myanmar or Thailand; see Panabokke 1993.



in support of the particular monastic observance it wants to promote, namely the proper way for novices to wear their robes when being outside of the monastery and thus in front of laity. The issue appears to be not just the need to follow the example of fully ordained monks and cover both shoulders with the outer robe, but the need to manifest in public that the two dimensions of Theravāda—the monastic community and the body of teaching—are in alignment with each other.

The gravity of the issue, from an emic perspective, is that those who do not follow the proper monastic protocol have thereby departed from the whole ancient tradition of Theravāda, seen as stretching all the way back in time to the first *saṅgīti* and established in different parts of South and Southeast Asia. The reason is that, from the viewpoint of the *Vaṃsadīpanī*, covering both shoulders is in accord with the pertinent indications in the textual body of Theravāda, as evident in particular in the relevant regulations in the *Vinaya* and its commentaries. Hence, even though it is deemed possible to conduct ordination together with Sri Lankans, the same is no longer considered viable with those from one's own country if these have adopted a form of behavior that is seen as not being in accordance with the Theravāda.

The sense of identity that emerges in this way should, according to the *Vaṃsadīpanī*, not be seen as relevant only to a monastic dispute. Instead, it features as a matter of general concern, with the king taking a personal interest in the contested mode of conduct and reportedly also the laity in general. The last finds explicit expression in the report in the *Vaṃsadīpanī* that a congregation of male and female lay disciples submitted a petition requesting that the disaccord regarding this monastic observance be resolved and the division between the different monastic factions be overcome. According to the report of their concern, in the present situation, “even while we are duty bound to give donation, our property and goods will be expended without [spiritual] benefit [accruing to us].”<sup>44</sup> Being unable to discern which of the contending factions acts in accordance with the rules of discipline, the lay disciples are worried about a loss of merit accrued through gifts made to unworthy recipients.

Needless to say, in a traditional setting the offering of *dāna* is central to lay practice, leading naturally to an interest regarding the worthiness of those who receive one's offerings. An important dimension in this traditional practice is the role of the monastic recipients in inspiring through their appearance and conduct.<sup>45</sup> From this perspective, the monastic observance under discussion, regarding the ‘proper’ way of wearing robes when being visible to laity, can indeed become a matter of public concern. In fact, in the course of her study of Burmese wall paintings Green (2018: 35) reports:

Another facet of the murals is the fact that they were produced during the ‘robe-wrapping’ dispute that divided the Sangha from the late seventeenth to the early nineteenth century ... The flurry of temple construction and embellishment during the late seventeenth to early nineteenth century ... suggests an anxiety regarding the continuation of the *sāsana* in the face of religious schism and dynastic change.

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<sup>44</sup>. Vṃs IV.123 (p. 171), Pranke 2004: 272.

<sup>45</sup>. On the importance of inspirational aesthetics in Theravāda monastic culture (studied in relation to Sri Lanka) see Samuels 2010.

In sum, the *Vaṃsadīpanī* does appear to testify to a usage of the name Theravāda that could indeed have provided a fitting precedent for Ānanda Metteyya’s employment of the term. However, Perreira (2012: 554) considers it unlikely that Ānanda Metteyya could have been acquainted with a manuscript of the *Vaṃsadīpanī*, an edition of which was only published in 1916. Yet, the question is not so much whether Ānanda Metteyya had personal access to a manuscript of this work, which in the absence of any reference by him to the *Vaṃsadīpanī* can at present no longer be verified. The point is rather that the *Vaṃsadīpanī* testifies to awareness among the Burmese of the name Theravāda as a Buddhist school. This thereby concords with the indications to be gathered from the inscription discussed in the first part of this article, testifying to a usage of the name Theravāda to designate a sense of Buddhist identity that is not confined to the local tradition(s) and thus relevant for both South and Southeast Asia.

Besides textual and the earlier discussed inscriptional usage reflecting the currency of the notion among Burmese Buddhists in the eighteenth-century, Ānanda Metteyya could also have come to know of the name Theravāda during his previous stay in Sri Lanka, where he apparently had learned Pāli.<sup>46</sup> In fact, Perreira (2012: 551) quotes the following statement published by Ānanda Metteyya in 1908:

The word Theravāda really means ‘The Tradition of the Elders,’ and it is very clear from the way in which this word is employed in ancient Commentaries and in the Sinhalese Chronicles that it was used by the early writers to mean the School ...<sup>47</sup>

The relevance of the Sri Lankan chronicles for the notion of Theravāda employed by Ānanda Metteyya can also be seen reflected in the colophon to the *Vaṃsadīpanī*, which explicitly refers to the *Mahāvamsa* as a source of authority—in fact, this is the only source text mentioned here by name—employed for the purpose of recounting “the lineage of Theravāda luminaries who propagated the noble Sāsana.”<sup>48</sup>

Once Ānanda Metteyya in the above quote explicitly indicates the sources for his usage and correctly sees the function of the name Theravāda to designate a school already evident in the Sri Lankan chronicles, a function similarly evident in the *Vaṃsadīpanī*, which reflects notions that must have been in circulation at the time of Ānanda Metteyya’s stay, there seems to be hardly any room left to consider his 1907 reference to the Theravāda ‘school’ as an innovation.

In this way, each of the two planks needed for conferring a central role on Ānanda Metteyya in the genesis of the notion of a Theravāda ‘school’ do not stand scrutiny. Instead, his role in this respect seems to have been considerably less dramatic, and the way he has been presented seems to owe more to the influence of what I would refer to as the ‘myth of Western origins’ than to the actual evidence.

In an introduction to a symposium on Theravāda studies, Kaloyanides and Walker (2021: 196) report that recent years have seen “a greater sensitivity to the history of the term ‘Theravada’ itself,” in fact, “the field underwent a critical realignment centered on this dominant term.” Such greater sensitivity is an important improvement. At the same time, however, the assumption that the research by Perreira (2012) “makes plain that the widespread

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<sup>46.</sup> See Harris 1998.

<sup>47.</sup> The quote continues with the untenable claim that this school has remained “faithful to the *ipsissima verba* of the Buddha, as handed down from teacher to pupil in direct succession.” The very nature of the early Buddhist oral transmission definitely undermines such beliefs; see Anālayo 2022.

<sup>48.</sup> *Vṃs* (p. 177), Pranke 2004: 279.

use of the term ‘Theravada Buddhism’ is a specific twentieth-century development heralded by the writing of the English monk Ananda Metteyya” is problematic, as his research is unreliable in this respect. Besides exaggerating the importance of Ānanda Metteyya and not giving adequate room to conflicting evidence, an additional problem is that the role of Asians in this twentieth-century development has not received the recognition that I believe it deserves. Before turning to that role, however, in what follows I first provide another example of the ‘myth of Western origins,’ so as to clarify what I mean with this phrase.

### III.2 The Term Buddhism

The basic pattern underlying the attribution of a central role to Ānanda Metteyya in the contemporary usage of the name Theravāda has a precedent in another instance following a similar pattern. This is the claim that the very notion of “Buddhism” is a recent construction, dating from the start of the nineteenth century when the eminent French scholar Eugène Burnouf (1801–1852) gave coherence to the bits and pieces of knowledge of the tradition that by then had reached the West.<sup>49</sup> The assumption that this marks the construction of the notion of Buddhism itself has already been critiqued by von Hinüber (2002: 267), who pointed out that this “does not do justice to Indian literature, where ‘Buddhism’ as a concept was always present,” citing as an example a drama from the eleventh century. Elsewhere I have presented additional arguments,<sup>50</sup> allowing me to be fairly brief in the present context.

The notion of Buddhism has a precedent in the Pāli term *sāsana*, more specifically the *sāsana* of the Buddha, his “teaching” or “dispensation.” In a way comparable to the Pāli term *theravāda*, the term *sāsana* can be seen to evolve in meaning from representing Buddhism just in the sense of a body of teachings during an earlier period of its usage to eventually coming to represent the container for the transmission of these teachings: Buddhism as an institutional entity. The latter sense can already be identified in a verse in the *Theragāthā*, where the speaker refers to his going forth in the Buddha’s *sāsana*.<sup>51</sup> Since one cannot go forth or ordain in a teaching but only in some form of religious institution, here the Buddha’s *sāsana* conveys the nuance of an institution. This sense becomes more pronounced in later texts, such as when a verse in the *Mahāvamsa* considers the expulsion of an invading Tamil army from Sri Lanka to be an act that will bring glory to the *sāsana*.<sup>52</sup>

The apparently first reference to Buddhism in Western writing occurs in the second century, in the form of a report by the Christian Church Father Clement of Alexandria that some Indians follow the precepts of the Buddha.<sup>53</sup> In addition to monastic ordination, this reference could also comprise the taking of precepts by lay followers. In any case, it does reflect the existence of a Buddhist religious institution, membership in which involves adopting a set of precepts.

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<sup>49.</sup> Batchelor 1994: 227–249; see also the way Almond 1988: 12 presents the results of his research on the reception of Buddhism in the West (especially in Britain): “I have tried carefully to avoid giving the impression that Buddhism existed prior to the end of the eighteenth century: that it was waiting in the wings, so to say, to be discovered; that it was floating in some aethereal Oriental limbo expecting its objective embodiment. On the contrary, what we are witnessing in the period from the later part of the eighteenth century to the beginning of the Victorian period in the latter half of the 1830s is the *creation* of Buddhism.”

<sup>50.</sup> Anālayo 2021: 108–113.

<sup>51.</sup> Th 181: *yato ahaṃ pabbajito sammāsambuddhasāsane*.

<sup>52.</sup> Mhv XXV 2.

<sup>53.</sup> Stromata I.15.

Gunawardana (2005: 56f) marshals inscriptional and other evidence testifying to what in contemporary parlance could be called a “World of Theravāda Buddhism” already in existence since the fifth century, being part of a global Buddhist identity “kept alive throughout history by movements of religious, texts, relics and images from one centre to another.” Such a sense of shared institutional identity that goes beyond the confines of a particular country or local culture appears to be also evident in the *Vamsadīpanī*, discussed above.

An example illustrating that such a sense of common religious identity—whatever conceptual label may have been used for it—was not confined to Theravāda countries or even to shared *nikāya* affiliation would be the case of the Chinese pilgrim Fāxiǎn (法顯). At the end of the fourth century, he set out to India and eventually even went to Sri Lanka in search of *Vinaya* texts to be brought back to this home country for translation.<sup>54</sup> His very undertaking must have been based on a sense of collective Buddhist identity, in this case between Chinese Buddhist monastics and their Indian and Sri Lankan brethren. This has a complement in the early fifth century travel of Sri Lankan nuns to China in order to enable Chinese women, who up to that point had been ordained by monks only, to receive ordination (and quite probably also personal training and advice on monastic conduct) directly from other nuns.<sup>55</sup> Two nuns died on the way and an additional group of nuns had to come from Sri Lanka to fulfill the quorum needed for granting ordination. The motivation of these two groups of nuns to undertake such a challenging journey must have been grounded in a sense of Buddhist fellowship, based on a perception of ‘Buddhism’ that goes beyond the confines of any particular local tradition.

Given that there is an ancient Indian precedent for the term Buddhism, and that the sense of a religious institution beyond the confines of a particular locality is also evident long before the nineteenth century, the claim that the construction of Buddhism took place in the nineteenth century in the West is a myth. The basic recipe in this instance of the myth of Western origins appears to be the same as for the name Theravāda: Overlooking Asian antecedents, an appearance of the respective term in a Western publication—in both cases by coincidence in French—is viewed as heralding the birth of the relevant construct in its contemporary use.<sup>56</sup> Asian Buddhists are relegated to the role of passive recipients of the ready-made constructs originating in Western publications. In this way, ‘Theravāda’ and ‘Buddhism’ as notions central to contemporary Asian religious identity are effectively trademarked as ‘made in the West.’

The basic attitude underlying the construction of such instances of the myth of Western origins can also be seen at play in contemporary US-American Buddhism, whenever

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<sup>54.</sup> T 2085; on Fāxiǎn’s quest see also Anālayo 2010.

<sup>55.</sup> T 2063 at T L 939c12; on this remarkable undertaking see Guang Xing 2013.

<sup>56.</sup> Judging from the discussion in Crosby 2004, another comparable case could be the usage of *pāḷi* as a language name rather than just conveying the meaning of a “text,” although here suggestions of a possible European influence on such usage in Asia are worded considerably more cautiously (note that, here, too, the first occurrences in Western writing are in French; see the detailed survey in Pruitt 1987). In fact, the identification of the other two cases as instances of the ‘myth of Western origins’ is not just about envisaging that the West may influence the East, which of course has happened and still happens (see above note 18 for an example). Instead, the point is to highlight when obsession with origins results in claims apparently held with such inner conviction that conflicting evidence is ignored or dismissed—in short, when confirmation bias overrules scholarly sobriety.

publications tend to celebrate the contributions made by Americans of European descent but ignore the contributions made by Asian-Americans, whose forms of practice are at times dismissed as outdated or somehow irrelevant.<sup>57</sup> Throughout, there seems to be too little room left for acknowledging Asian agency.

### III.3 From Hīnayāna to Theravāda

The question of Asian agency is directly relevant to the shift from Hīnayāna to Theravāda. This shift seems to be indeed the key element, rather than any particular moment in the evolving trajectory of meaning of the Pāli term *theravāda*, such as an appearance in Western writing in 1907, as constituting the ever so elusive ‘point of origin.’ Instead of trying to pinpoint an exact moment of time for that, perhaps a better question to be pursued would be if anything can be identified that had a decisive influence on the current popularity of the term, comparable to the effect of the World’s Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 on the popularity of Hīnayāna to refer to the South and Southeast Asian Buddhist traditions. On pursuing this question, the pivotal event leading to the widespread adoption of the name Theravāda appears to be the founding of the World Fellowship of Buddhists in 1950, an event located in Asia and expressing Asian agency.

In this way, the spotlight could shift from the British monk Ānanda Metteyya to the eminent Sri Lankan scholar and diplomat Gunapala Piyasena Malalasekera (1899–1973). Central here is his role in conceiving of the idea of an international meeting of Buddhists from all over the world and then successfully convening such a meeting in 1950 in Colombo, apparently attended by 129 Buddhist delegates from 27 nations, leading to the founding of the World Fellowship of Buddhists, of which he became the first president. One of the resolutions formulated in 1950 by this newly founded organization was precisely the decision to abandon the derogatory term Hīnayāna as a referent to the Buddhist populations of South and Southeast Asia and to adopt instead the name Theravāda. For the trajectory of the name Theravāda, this is a considerably more significant episode than the appearance in French of an announcement by a British monk that a Buddhist society has been founded in the West.

Regarding the shift from Hīnayāna to Theravāda, according to Guruge (2012: 175f) “it took quite some time before the Buddhists of South and Southeast Asia reacted to the intrinsic disparagement with which their form of Buddhism was designated.” But once “more and more nationals of the region had access to the writings of Western scholars, the term ‘Hīnayāna’ was found unacceptable as a designation for the form of Buddhism they practiced.” Guruge (2012: 177) further explains the reasoning for the shift in terminology by way of abandoning the use of Hīnayāna: “It is not only disliked but also incorrect to use it today to refer to the school of Buddhism obtaining in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, etc.” These traditions “also include a Bodhisattva Path; so it is incorrect to see them as purely Śrāvakayāna in nature.”<sup>58</sup> He concludes his survey of the relevant reasoning by noting: “This is how the current use of the term Theravāda has come into existence.”

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<sup>57.</sup> This type of attitude tends to rely on what Hickey 2010: 10 refers to as “the assumption that ‘white Buddhism’ is authentic American Buddhism, and that ‘Asian Buddhism’ is an essentially foreign thing that happens to reside on American soil.” See also Han 2021 for a collection of Asian-American perspectives on this issue.

<sup>58.</sup> For a survey of relevant publications, including inscriptional evidence, concerning the bodhisat(t)va ideal as an integral part of Theravāda doctrine, followed by some of its members up to the present day, see Anālayo 2014: 22n51.

In other words, from this perspective the adoption of the name Theravāda features as a reflection of an increasing awareness of the discriminatory and misleading nature of the appellation Hīnayāna, previously imposed on the tradition. In my own field experience in Sri Lanka, I encountered the same perspective; more than once I witnessed expressions of resentment at having been labelled Hīnayāna, combined with taking pride in having successfully resisted such discriminatory usage through affirming a ‘Theravāda’ identity. Regarding such adoption of the name Theravāda, Perreira (2012: 561) reports:

the dismantling of the British Empire ... meant that former colonies could now articulate a new path toward independence and self-determination ... Among Buddhist nations, the newly independent Sri Lanka led the way when its leaders decided that the first major international event it would host as an independent country would be a World Fellowship of Buddhists ... [and] ‘Theravāda Buddhism’ ... would, in 1950, become the official designation for the Buddhists of South and Southeast Asia.

In other words, emergence from colonial oppression and related attempts to undermine Buddhist practices and beliefs finds expression in an affirmation of a global sense of Buddhist identity, as part of the formation of modern nation-state and transnational identities. A central element in this affirmation is the rejection of the derogatory name Hīnayāna that has been imposed on South and Southeast Asian Buddhist traditions during the colonial period. The gaining of freedom from colonial rule leads to the decision that the name Theravāda should be used from now on for referring to these Buddhist traditions.

In view of this historical background, there is unfortunately a risk that attempts to replace the name Theravāda may be experienced by some members of the population affected by this alteration of their self-chosen appellation as standing in continuity with past instances of disrespect and discrimination toward their religious tradition(s)—in short, as a form of neocolonialism. In view of this risk, I believe we need to combine our postmodern predilection for terminological problematization with an awareness of the potential harm that replacement attempts might unintentionally cause, due to the history of power relationships that stands in the background of the contested usage.

### **Conclusion**

As exemplified by the eighteenth-century Burmese inscription, it seems to me there may not be a really pressing text-historical or religio-historical need to find a substitute for the name Theravāda as a way of designating the Buddhist traditions of South and Southeast Asia. Moreover, it would be preferable if the rights of the Asian Buddhists in question to self-determine their name could be respected. It would follow from the above that continuing to use Theriya and/or Theravaṃsa to replace Theravāda may require arguing the case afresh, in dialogue with the problems identified here and in Anālayo (2013).

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## Abbreviations

Dīp	<i>Dīpavaṃsa</i>
Jā	<i>Jātaka</i>
Kv-a	<i>Kathāvatthu-aṭṭhakathā</i>
Mhv	<i>Mahāvaṃsa</i>
MN	<i>Majjhima-nikāya</i>
Sp	<i>Samantapāsādikā</i>
T	Taishō
Th	<i>Theragāthā</i>
Vms	<i>Vamsadīpanī</i>

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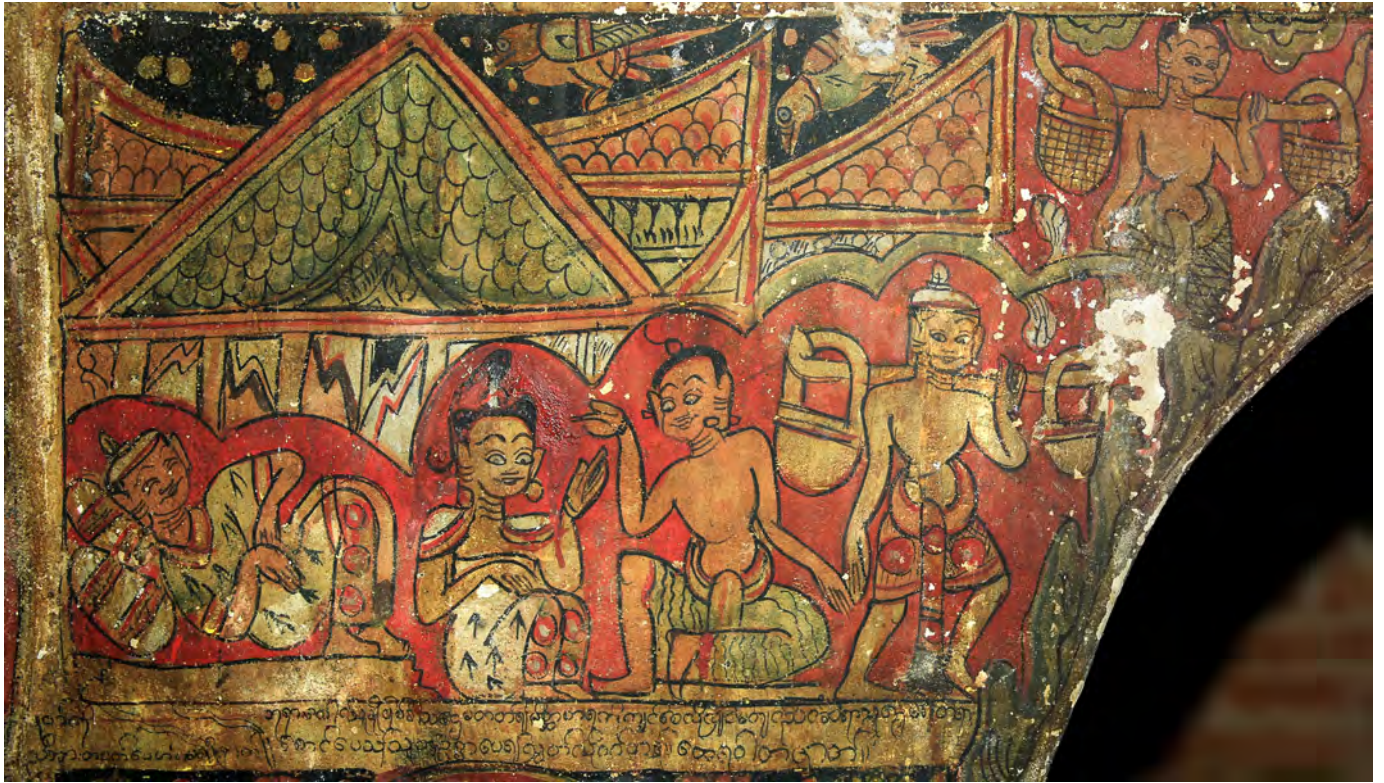
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Figure.



Inscription thereof.



A Theravāda *jātaka*, courtesy Lilian Handlin.