



DANGEROUS DISINFORMATION: A BUDDHIST MONK'S FAKE RENDITION OF THE MUSLIM CALL TO PRAYER

by Dangerous Speech Project

While delivering a sermon in the Taunggyi Township in the Shan State of Myanmar, Ashin Ka-U Nawbata, a Buddhist monk, taught his followers to fear their Muslim neighbors by falsely translating the Islamic call to prayer that they hear five times a day from local mosques, but cannot understand as it is in Arabic. The monk said that the call to prayer tells Muslims to destroy all non-Muslims and raze their cities and villages. In fact, the call is a reminder to Muslims to stop, listen, and pray. This dangerous speech is one of many examples of similar rhetoric from religious and military figures of authority in Myanmar, portraying the country's tiny Muslim minority as a terrifying, powerful threat to its Buddhist majority and Myanmar's existence as a Buddhist nation. Such messages were spread offline and online and were widely believed. Violence broke out against Muslims in 2012 and 2013, and in late 2016 the Burmese military began to drive hundreds of thousands of ethnic Rohingya Muslims from their homes, raping and killing many of them en masse. It was genocide, independent investigators concluded, since it was committed with intent to wipe out the whole group.¹¹

DATE

Uploaded to YouTube on January 4, 2014. The date of the sermon is unknown. It was probably given between 2012 and 2014 since that was when the nationalist movement with which this monk is associated (called 969) was most active.

LOCATION

Taunggyi Township in Shan State (Muang Tai), Myanmar

LANGUAGE

Burmese (officially, "Myanmar language")

MESSAGE

After greeting the crowd, Ashin Ka-U Nawbata told them that he was about to deliver a sermon different from the ones monks from their town normally give, which focus on Buddhist scripture. He also reassured them, saying that although his sermon was different, "it is not against Buddha's teachings." He started with a story about a time where he explained to another senior monk that Buddhism and Islam could not coexist. He then told the crowd that he would introduce them to the teachings of Islam, and began to mimic the Muslim call to prayer, chanting it as if in Arabic, to laughter from the audience. Then he falsely translated it line by line. He told them it means:

Oh almighty Allah / Destroy all other religious believers except Muslims / Eradicate all institutions and religious buildings of those other religions / Break the foundations of those religions. / Raze and demolish the villages and towns of other religious believers except for Muslims / Those who don't obey Allah or evils or non-believers shall be punished severely.

In truth, the Muslim call to prayer makes no mention of other religions or violence. It says this:

God is Great / I bear witness that there is no god except the One God / I bear witness that Muhammad is the messenger of God / Hurry to the prayer (Rise up for prayer) / Hurry to salvation (Rise up for Salvation) / God is Great / There is no god except the One God¹²

The video of the sermon can be viewed here, starting at 10:40. A full translation of the speech into English is here.

HALLMARKS

Accusation in a mirror.

The monk's sermon contains a hallmark of dangerous speech known as accusation in a mirror. This means that a speaker attributes to the audience's perceived enemies the very acts of violence that the speaker hopes to convince the audience should be committed against them. The monk claimed that Muslims were being instructed to destroy non-Muslims and raze their villages, when in reality, non-Muslims were burning the homes and mosques of Muslims during the same period.¹³ To predict that another group will commit violence against the in-group is especially powerful since it makes violence against that group seem not only acceptable but defensive and necessary.

TARGET GROUP

Muslims in Myanmar

SPEAKER

Buddhist monk Ashin Ka-U Nawbata spoke to the crowd as a representative of the Buddhist faith, and also as a member of the "969 Movement," a nationalist group opposed to the perceived expansion of Islam in Myanmar.^[4] 969 is led by a monk named U Wirathu, who is well-known and notorious for ranting against Muslims, describing them as mad dogs^[5] who will take over Myanmar if Buddhists do not prevent that.^[6] Ashin Ka-U Nawbata echoed the famous monk's claim in his own sermon. Burmese Buddhists are taught to respect and obey monks, so Ashin Ka-U Nawbata had strong authority over his Buddhist audience.

Leaders of the 969 Movement became especially influential in Myanmar, in part thanks to their education and social service programs. They drive animosity against Muslims by arguing that Islamic culture is incompatible with what they deem Burmese culture and religion.^[7] When this sermon was delivered, the group enjoyed wide-ranging support, including from government officials and from establishment religious figures.^[8] This made 969 monks' speech more dangerous.

AUDIENCE

A crowd of Buddhists at a monastery in Taunggyi, a town of 381,639 people in 2014^[9] one of only three towns of significant size in the largely rural Shan State.^[10] As noted above, this audience would see a monk as an authoritative figure, to be deferred to and obeyed. The audience members were also clearly aware – as their reactions to the sermon illustrate – of conflicts between Buddhists and Muslims in Myanmar.

CONTEXT

Myanmar's population is about 90 percent Buddhist. Fewer than five percent are Muslim, and about half of those are Rohingyas,^[11] who have long been disparaged by Burmese political and religious leaders as foreigners from Bangladesh.^[12] though most Rohingyas are from families that have been in the country for generations. Myanmar's 1982 Citizenship Law denied most Rohingyas citizenship, creating the largest group of stateless people in the world – more than one million.^[13]

In 2012 and 2013, influential extremist monks and other Burmese leaders incited Buddhists against Muslims, especially Rohingya, in sermons and in innumerable posts on social media, for example by asserting that Muslim men had raped Buddhist women. This led to attacks, and then a coordinated campaign of violence.^[14] Many Rohingya and other Muslims were killed, and about 125,000 were displaced from their homes.^[15]

Since the period when Ashin Ka-U Nawbata delivered his sermon, violence against Muslims has continued. In the past five years, the Burmese military attacks on the Rohingya have fueled a refugee crisis in which hundreds of thousands of Rohingya people have been forced to flee to neighboring countries or internal displacement camps.^[16]

MEDIUM

Ashin Ka-U Nawbata spoke in person at a monastery. The sermon was filmed and the video was uploaded to YouTube. The monk also mentions that audience members may have seen him on CD – this is a very common way for monks to get their messages out to wide audiences in Myanmar, especially in rural areas.

REFERENCES

[4] In 2018, for example, the UN Human Rights Council's international fact finding mission on Myanmar recommended that top military leaders in Myanmar be tried for genocide and crimes against humanity.

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[11] Kwaw Ye Lynn. 2016. "Census data shows Myanmar Muslim population has fallen" 44 <https://www.aa.com/tr/en/asia->

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^[12] "Myanmar Rohingya: What you need to know about the crisis." 2020. BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-41566561>

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^[16] UNHCR. 2020. "Myanmar: Key Figures." <https://reporting.unhcr.org/node/2541#:~:text=The%20total%20estimated%20population%20of,in%20Kachin%20and%20Rakhine%20>