Burma gained independence on 4 January 1948. Immediately after independence, Burmese media launched a campaign to ‘resurrect’ the country’s ‘lost’ culture. Bamakhit newspaper argued that the building of a new nation must be based upon customs, religion, and traditions that were indigenous. The new Burma needed to be built upon the foundations of Buddhism and cultures unique to the country. Indeed Burma not only had to recover its own customs, but also needed to distinguish, with the aim of discarding, cultures that were foreign to the country. In this article, I discuss how the (British-owned) Burmah Oil Company (BOC) used ‘authentically’ Burmese images in postcolonial Burma to promote their products.

The wording suggests that the two industries share the same interests – the interests of Burma’s rice industry and therefore the interests of the Burmese themselves. The title of the advertisement, Burma’s Grace, is also striking, promoting BOC alongside a happy farm girl as Burma’s grace. Whether the creative idea behind the ad was the imagination of the BOC, or the artist himself raised another question. The ad seems to have responded to the popular message, at least in the media, to promote Burmese culture and traditions. By using the innocent image of the farm girl as well as linking the company’s interest closely to Burma’s interests, BOC was also able to circumvent a rising tide of economic nationalism in the 1950s, during which foreign owned companies and foreigners were blamed for Burma’s economic woes.

Another advertisement by BOC (figure 2), using a female wearer, also captured the postcolonial imagination, i.e., to reclaim the Burmese culture. The second ad reads: “As Amarapura near Mandalay distributes delicate and beautiful (like formations of clouds) silk fabric, BOC, from centrally located Mandalay, distributes kerosene, petroleum, engine oil and candles nationwide including Chin, Kachin, Pa-lao and Shan.” In this ad, BOC provokes the cultural renaissance of the last Kingdom of Konbaung – Mandalay – and even included different minority groups in its ad. The title of the ad is the same as the first one “Burma’s Grace.” These two ads were both part of BOC’s advertising campaign in 1953. More research is needed to ascertain what the rationale was behind these ‘Burmanized’ ads.

After independence, a reverse cultural reclamation process started taking shape. During the early colonial days, the Burmese saw the British flag substituting the Burmese King’s peacock banner in official buildings; missionary schools and Anglo-vernacular schools instead of monasteries becoming the centres of learning; Chinese and Indians catering the needs of the Burmese; Indian labourers cleaning the streets of Rangoon and toiling across the agricultural districts – these scenes dominated the Burmese minds from 1824 (the end of the first Anglo-Burmese war, after which Arakan and Tenasserim were annexed to India as part of the British Empire) to independence in 1948.

Perhaps the government felt that strong counter-cultural forces were needed to help instil a sense of ownership, not least the cultural ownership, of the country. And many newspapers and magazines rallied around this cause. The commercial world seemed to have joined this cause, as shown by the adverts of the BOC company. Independence also reignited hostility towards foreign culture, and heralded the reconstruction of racial and class barriers.

“No Burmans”-signs were binned at the social clubs; British civilians were encouraged to leave despite the serious lack of local skills in administration; and Chinese and Indian businessmen were branded opportunists and exploiters. A vision was promoted of a society that was economically self-sufficient, with natives enjoying the fruits of their hard work. It was also a vision of a country that was culturally independent, promoted especially by nationalist writers who strove to inculcate the same vision in their readers. To such writers, Western culture was not needed to ‘modernise’ Burma, since the country had its own ways to participate in modernity.

A new nationalist movement was embarked in the process of ‘Burmanisation’, undertaken by the state. BOC advertisements clearly showed that foreign businesses participated in this ‘Burmanisation’ project, perhaps under the threat of losing sales and revenues if they could not attract state support, and more importantly, Burmese customers.

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Notes

1 Bamakhit. 13 July 1955, p. 3.
2 Bamakhit. 13 August 1956, p. 3.
5 In the mid 1950s, the British and Europeans owned only 60% of the company before it was completely nationalized by the Burma Socialist Programme Party Government, led by Ne Win, in 1963.
6 The initials B.K. at the lower right (first ad) and left (second ad) hand corners of the ads, suggest that the artist for the ad series could have been B.Kip, one of the well-known artists trained in Paris and Pennsylvania. He was well-known for his paintings of jutikoe and life histories of Buddha. BOC could not have commissioned a better artist to capture the Burmese culture in arts, again suggesting that the company thought carefully of making ‘Burmese’ and ‘Burmese’ the overriding message of their ads, promoting their ‘Burmese-friendly’ image more than their products.
7 A columnist of Bamakhit argued that every Buddhist Burmese woman should scrutinize her lifestyle closely, and by doing so, pay respect to their own religion, customs and traditions. Bamakhit, 10 October 1955, p. 3.