

K. M. Y. KHAWSIAMA

# TOWARDS A *LUDU* (လူဝှေ့) THEOLOGY

A Critical Evaluation of *Minjung* Theology and  
its Implication for a Theological Response to  
the *Dukkha* (Suffering) of People in Myanmar (*Burma*)

PETER LANG

This book attempts to develop a theological response to the suffering of people in Myanmar (*Burma*). For this purpose, a Burmese word *Ludu* is used to indicate the common people and a Buddhist term *Dukkha* will be employed to refer to their suffering. We can see the *Ludu* as a *dukkha*-ridden people in Myanmar context. Why do they suffer? Is their suffering the root cause of sin or the consequence of *kamma* — one's deed, word or thought? As a Buddhist-dominated country, how do Buddhists respond their suffering? What about Christian minority's response to this harsh situation? Can the *Ludu*, both Christians and Buddhists, see how God is revealed in the midst of their suffering?

In terms of suffering under oppression, *Minjung* (people/mass) in the Korean context is somewhat similar to the situation of the *Ludu* in Myanmar. In the 1970s, *Minjung* theology emerged during the era of military dictatorship in South Korea. How can *Minjung* theology be relevant for evolving a *Ludu* theology in Myanmar?

"Khawsiamia's book can be regarded as an innovative achievement for Asian theology, a challenge for further discussion not just in the field of theology and — hopefully — a starting point for a new critical discourse on the contextualisation of the Christian faith in its intellectualised form vis-à-vis society and other religions."

*Dr. Hans-Bernd Zöllner*

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Dedicated to  
The People of Myanmar



## Foreword

1. A semester of teaching at The Divinity School of Chung Chi College, The Chinese University of Hong Kong brought me close to a group of students from Myanmar who were pursuing graduate studies there. One among them was the author of this work, Khawsiamia. He was writing a Doctoral Dissertation and he wanted me to read through a draft of his Thesis.

2. The interaction with Khawsiamia and other students deepened my understanding of the economic hardships and political oppression of people in Myanmar. The military rule has resulted in a blatant disregard of democratic rights and paved the way for economic dominance of the elite. The Church is called upon to articulate its faith and to minister to the people. In this situation of hopelessness and misery, the church has not abandoned its hope in a God who liberates the poor and the oppressed. Their theology takes root at the interaction between their pathos and hope. Pathos generating hope for a Liberated Myanmar was characteristic of the theological reflection of the students studying theology there. This is contextual theology that is rooted in the political and social realities of Myanmar.

3. In articulating this way, all of them and Khawsiamia in particular is helped by many men and women of faith elsewhere: Germany, Latin America and very specially by 'MINJUNG' theologians in South Korea. Theology that comes out of these situations is not only contextual but also liberative. Latin American Theologians under their leadership of Gustavo Gutierrez have helped them to provide a general frame work to their theological construction. Of course they have tried to articulate their theology with their own variations.

4. In fact theology in Myanmar has to respond to the challenge of religious pluralism. Christianity is a minority religion and the formidable edifice of the Buddhist religion and culture and its influence is

considerable. To do theology in the situation is to respond to the challenges of the majority religion. Thus, a situation of extreme poverty and human rights violation and the dominant religion constitute a formidable challenge to Christian Theology. Both these elements are clearly discernable in the present work and any student of theology can profitably learn new insight from this work and I commend them to all theological students, especially those in Asia.

5. The Myanmar situation is changing, thanks to the courageous stand of Aung San Suu Kyi and others. But I understand that it is too early to make a definitive statement about the change. But many hope that a new Myanmar is in the offing and in some of the analysis in the book will have to change. We wish that 'that time' will come soon. In any case, the basic stance taken on theology in this book will continue to hold true and that is the value of the book. I sincerely hope that many students after reading this book will have greater clarity on the task of theologising.

Rev. Dr. K.C. Abraham

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# Chapter I

## Introduction: The Situation of Myanmar and Searching for a Relevant Theology

### *The Plight of Burmese People*

Gone with the wind,  
Countless numbers of lives.

Numb with tears,  
This indescribable feeling of pain.

Faced with fear,  
The possibility of lost future.

Grappling with darkness,  
A chance to see a glimpse of light at the end.<sup>1</sup>

This poem articulates the feeling of *Burmese*, particularly the common people or the *Ludu* of Myanmar, formerly *Burma*<sup>2</sup> under a long period of authoritarianism. The term *Burmese* is used to refer to the people that include all ethnic groups in the country. In order to see the life reality of Burmese people, we have to identify the problems and to consider profoundly their suffering. As a minister having served for fifteen years in the rural area church in Upper Myanmar, I have observed the reality of people's lives.

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1 Thway Ni, "The Plight of Burmese People," *Sone Sea Yar*, <<http://sonesea.yar.blogspot.com/2008/06/plight-of-burmese-people.html>> (accessed April 20, 2010).

2 In this study, the names of the country *Burma* and *Myanmar* are used interchangeably to express its political situation.

## Identifying the Problem

The people of Myanmar have been suffering for almost half century after independence. It is needed to identify the problems of the country that affect in the lives of *Ludu*.

### *Myanmar: A Country in Crisis*

The *Ludu* of Myanmar have faced one socio-politico-economic crisis after another. They have suffered throughout different historical periods. Burma gained independence on January 4, 1948 and was a parliamentary democracy until 1962. For a time, the *Ludu* had great hopes for a better life. However, they lost their hope due to a downward turn in political circumstance.

The Union of Burma has been controlled by a military regime since 1962. The first spanned twenty-six years (1962–1988). Nonetheless, it failed in leading the country forward. Since 1989, the second military government have been in control of the country. In the year 1989, Burma was renamed *Myanmar*. It was only a political ploy. The lives of people remain unchanged. The *Ludu* are still suffering.

There are no human rights in Myanmar due to “systematic violation of human rights in the country which has been in place for many years and still continues.”<sup>3</sup> Burma’s democracy leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991, had been under house arrest for more than a decade. In Myanmar, there are “political arrests and detention, extrajudicial killings and sexual violence against

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3 “UN Burma Human Rights Expert Backs UN Commission of Inquiry into Abuses,” *Burma Digest*, <<http://burmadigest.info/2010/03/11/un-burma-human-rights-expert-backs-un-commission-of-inquiry-into-abuses/>> (accessed April 20, 2010).

women, the use of forced labour including child labour, and violations against religious and ethnic minorities [...]”<sup>4</sup>

The *Ludu* are economically poor. Generally, the economic situation of Myanmar is below the poverty line. As a result of economic mismanagement for decades by the government, Myanmar’s economic situation is as one of Asia’s worst performers.<sup>5</sup> The Saffron Revolution occurred in September 2007 because of socio-economic problems. This remarkable revolution was the liberation movement led by Buddhist monks in Myanmar.

Ethnic conflict is a big issue in Myanmar. There are over 100 national ethnic groups in the country. The dominant ethnic group is the *Bamar* or *Burman*. The other main ethnic groups are the Shan, the Chin, the Kachin, the Karen, the Kaya, the Rakhine and the Mon. Ethnic relations in the country are hugely complicated.

Myanmar is a Buddhist-dominated country with approximately ninety percent of the population Buddhist. The Christian population is around five percent. Christians belong to a number of ethnic minority groups, mostly the Chin, the Kachin and the Karen. Christianity can be considered as the identity of these ethnic minorities. Although the number of Christians is not large, it is the second largest religion in the country. What can Christians in Myanmar do for the *Ludu*?

### *The Crisis-Induced Suffering*

The *Ludu* suffer and feel pain in their lives under the military dictatorship. Their suffering is not because of physical sickness, but because of socio-politico-economic crises. They are oppressed and made poor by those who hold power. The crises make people feel fear, anxiety,

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4 Minh Nguyen, “View on Burma/Myanmar,” *Jesuit Social Justice Centre*, <<http://www.uniya.org/research/viewburma.html>> (accessed April 20, 2010).

5 Larry Jagan, “Second Wave of Economic Crisis in Myanmar,” *Asia Times*, <<http://www.atimes.com/atimes/SoutheastAsia/JF03Ae01.html>> (accessed May 12, 2010).

ambiguity, uncertainty and distress. Economic hardship affects moral and ethical values.<sup>6</sup>

The crisis-induced suffering can be understood as *dukkha*, which is a Buddhist term. In ordinary usage, *dukkha* means suffering, pain, sorrow or misery. *Dukkha* is the First Noble Truth in Buddhism that expresses the people's burden and various other sufferings in their lives.<sup>7</sup> The *Ludu* is considered as a *dukkha*-ridden people in the Myanmar context.

## The Need for a Theological Response to The Suffering People of Myanmar

Let's consider why we need to develop a theological response to the suffering people in the Myanmar context.

### *A Brief Observation of Myanmar Theology*

Christians in Myanmar have lived an individual witnessing life for nearly four decades as a result of socio-political realities. Gospel Hrilvelthanga points out what Simon Pau Khan En, one of the leading Burmese theologians, found in his study that their theology is a silent theology. In the field of theological education, scholars imported various theologies from abroad.<sup>8</sup> They adopt western theologies dealing

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6 Samuel Ngun Ling, "A Burmese Christian's Responses to Social Values of Work, Consumption, and Economic Options in Myanmar," in *Theological Themes for Our Times: Reflections on Selected Themes of the Myanmar Institute of Theology* (Yangon: Judson Research Center, 2007), 180, 235.

7 Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* (London and Belford: The Gordon Fraser Gallery Ltd., 1967), 16–28.

8 Gospel Hrilvelthanga, *God, Christ and Religious Pluralism: A Comparative Study of the Theologies of John Hick and Karl Rahner with reference to Christi-*

with doctrinal issues. K. Zau Nan who critically studies Myanmar theology also found that “the Christians in Myanmar still do not have any substantial theological voice.”<sup>9</sup> As far as I have found, there is no specific theological response to the suffering of *Ludu* in Myanmar.<sup>10</sup>

My observation is that most, if not all, Burmese Christian leaders and scholars focus much on theology of mission and evangelism, resulting in a dichotomy between the secular and the sacred. Their exclusive object is soul-winning only. More than that, the churches in Myanmar have been influenced by the revival and charismatic pietism to the extent that even many mainline churches have changed their worship and preaching style. Furthermore, though we often hear countless sermons from pastors, evangelists and lay preachers that God has unwavering concern for the suffering people, they hardly go beyond the biblical story. In this connection, the main reason is that separation between church and state is one of the basic principles of Christians in Myanmar.

Let us look at some Christian scholars’ views in Myanmar. There are a few scholars who noticeably deal with church and state or religious and political issues of Myanmar, such as Tun Aung Chain,<sup>11</sup> Kanbawza Win,<sup>12</sup> and Pum Za Mang.<sup>13</sup> They give emphasis to the

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*anity in Myanmar* (Mandalay: Rev. Dengkunga Memorial Foundation, 2010), 115–116.

- 9 K. Zau Nan, “Towards a Substantial Myanmar Contextual Theology: A Proposal for Contents and Framework”, ed. Department of Theology, Myanmar Institute of Theology, *Our Theological Journey 2* (Insein: Department of Theology, Myanmar Institute of Theology, 2008), 110.
- 10 We can see that Burmese theologians have contributed to Christian-Buddhist dialogue, religious pluralism, mission and evangelism, and some doctrinal issues. See John C. England and others, eds., *Asian Christian Theologies: A Research Guide to Authors, Movements, Sources*, vol. 2 (Delhi: ISPCK, 2003), 25–107.
- 11 See Tun Aung Chain, “Religion, Politics and State,” *Thamar Alin* [Baptist Theological Journal] 2, no. 2 (1996): 3–7.
- 12 Prof. Kanbawza Win, a layman Myanmar Christian scholar, contributes a number of articles in *Asia Journal of Theology*. He examines the situation of the people in Burma from the political and religious view. See Kanbawza Win,

political situation of the country and the church. Among them Mang strongly challenges the church to involve actively in people's struggle for a better life. Samuel Ngun Ling, a contemporary leading theologian in Myanmar, attempts to make a theological response to the suffering of the people.

In his book, *Communicating Christ in Myanmar: Issues, Interactions and Perspectives*, Ling writes about the socio-politico-economic situation of the country. To him, in the Myanmar context, any theological reflection needs to be an inclusive critical learning or theologizing not only from the Bible, traditional teachings of the church and theological sources, but also from the non-biblical, non-church traditional and non-theological sources. Dialogue with the Buddhist and other faith traditions is essential to doing theology in the Myanmar context.<sup>14</sup> Certainly, it is important for peaceful co-existence and joint social movement for social justice, peace, and freedom in a multi-religious, multi-cultural, and multi-ethnic context of Myanmar. In the national level, political dialogue is also essential.

According to Ling, Christians in Myanmar need to change themselves by the transforming power of Christ in order to take a new form of living harmoniously and responsibly with the community of other faiths who are their neighbours. In his several works, Ling points out how the people in Myanmar have suffered under oppression. However, he does not further explore a theological response to the suffering of the *Ludu* in Myanmar.

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"Refugees, Human Rights and the Christian Response in Southeast Asia: A Burmese Perspective," *Asia Journal of Theology* 6, no. 1 (1992): 83–87. See also Kanbawza Win, "Are Christians Persecuted in Burma," *Asia Journal of Theology* 14, no. 1 (2000): 170–175.

- 13 Pum Za Mang, a lecturer of Myanmar Theological College in Mandalay contributes several articles concerning church and state and Buddhist view of human rights, and so on. See Pum Za Mang, "Separation of Church and State: A Case Study of Myanmar (Burma)," *Asia Journal of Theology* 25 (2011): 42–58.
- 14 See Samuel Ngun Ling, *Communicating Christ in Myanmar: Issues, Interactions and Perspectives*, revised edition (Yangon: Association for Theological Education in Myanmar, 2010).

Joel Tin Moe deals with Burmese people's suffering in his M.Th. thesis entitled "Korean Theology of *Han* and Its Relevance to *Pyithu Dukkha* Theology of Myanmar".<sup>15</sup> He examined the concept of *han*, the wounded heart of Korean Minjung, and its connection to *dukkha*. This idea is very valuable for my *Ludu* theology. Moe developed a theological response to the suffering of *Pyithu*, which refers to "citizen of the country."<sup>16</sup> To some extent, *Pyithu* and *Ludu* can be used interchangeably to indicate "people". Nevertheless, the term *Pyithu* does not indicate a particular suffering people because it includes both power holders and powerless people. I found that a Burmese word *Ludu* is more suitable rather than *Pyithu* to develop a credible theological response to the suffering of the Burmese oppressed people. It is also needed to explore the concept of *dukkha* from a Buddhist-Christian view. Is there any theology that can help to construct a *Ludu* theology?

### *Introducing Minjung Theology*

I have considered the liberation theology of Latin America, which was birthed by Father Gustavo Gutierrez and other scholars in 1960s–1970s. Theology of liberation signifies the movement to save the life of 'grassroots', i.e. the poor, oppressed and marginalized. It offers a new understanding of faith and a theological view of suffering. However, it has strong Roman Catholic roots. The religio-cultural background of Latin American is very different from the Asian context. Latin American liberation theology does not deal with interreligious dialogue. Thus, I look into some Asian theologies, such as Aloysius Pieris' Asian liberation theology, Dalit theology of India and Minjung theology of South Korea.

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15 See Joel Tin Moe, "Korean Theology of *Han* and Its Relevance to *Pyithu Dukkha* Theology of Myanmar," (M.Th. thesis, Asia Pacific Graduate School of Theological Studies, Hanil University and Theological Seminary, 2000).

16 I will discuss this point in chapter six.

In terms of religious background, the theology of interreligious dialogue of Aloysius Pieris, a Sri Lankan Jesuit Priest and a legal scholar of Buddhism, could be relevant to the Myanmar context. His Christian-Buddhist view of liberation in his well-known *An Asian Theology of Liberation* is very significant and remarkable.<sup>17</sup> In this particular book, nevertheless, he does not speak about *dukkha*, which I want to take up as a theological issue by expressing the *Ludu*'s suffering in Myanmar. In his book, *Love Meets Wisdom: A Christian Experience of Buddhism*, Pieris deals with the concept of *dukkha* in Buddhism. He defines *dukkha* in Buddhism. However, he does not look further into the theological view of it from the suffering of oppressed people.<sup>18</sup> In his writings, Pieris emphasized religio-cultural factors rather than socio-politico-economic aspects of life in Asia.<sup>19</sup>

Dalit Theology emerged in the 1980s in India. It is a branch of liberation theology. The Dalit experience of suffering and pain is one of the major Dalit theological resources. At this point, I have no doubt that Dalit theology is helpful to formulate a *Ludu* theology. We obviously see that the term "Dalit," which means "the broken, the oppressed,"<sup>20</sup> is used in the construction of a theology to refer to the outcasts and untouchable people in India. Jesus is seen as Dalit. However, I do not see Dalit theology as an appropriate model for developing *Ludu* theology in Myanmar categorically because we have no caste system. That is the reason why I approach Minjung theology of South Korea.

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17 See Aloysius Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988).

18 See Aloysius Pieris, *Love Meets Wisdom: A Christian Experience of Buddhism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990).

19 See James M. Cone, "Asian Theology Today: Searching for Definition," <<http://www.religion-online.org/shwarticle.asp?title=1236>> (accessed November 2, 2011).

20 Monica Jyotsna Melanchthon, "Dalit Readers of the Word: The Quest for Hermeneutics and Method," in *Frontiers in Dalit Hermeneutics*, ed. James Massey and Samson Prabhakar (Bangalore: BTESSC/SATHRI & Delhi: CDSS, 2005), 45.

What is Minjung theology? To me, Minjung theology is a theological response to the suffering of oppressed people. I have chosen Minjung theology because it was born during the military dictatorship era in 1970s of South Korea. It is also known as people's theology, liberation theology and political theology of South Korea developed by Korean Christian scholars. *Han*, the wounded heart of Korean people, is the main issue of Minjung theology, and *dukkha* is also at the heart of people's suffering in Myanmar, implying that we have, to a certain degree, a similar theological context. Korean Minjung theology is viewed from a politico-religio-cultural perspective.

I presume that Minjung theology, especially its view of suffering and methods, is relevant to formulating *Ludu* theology. Therefore, I found that the Minjung theology can be used as a model for developing a *Ludu* theology. We should, however, keep in mind that the Korean context is not exactly the same as the situation of Myanmar. A Minjung theology for Myanmar still needs to be reconstructed.

### *Minjung and Ludu: Comparing and Contrasting*

“Minjung” and “Ludu” can be described as “people, or masses.” They are the oppressed, the poor, the marginalized and the alienated people. The *Ludu* are considered as the Minjung of Myanmar.

Both Minjung and *Ludu* suffer under military dictatorships. They feel pain in their lives. While the Minjung are seen as the ‘*han*-ridden people,’ the *Ludu* are considered a ‘*dukkha*-ridden people’. The Korean term *han* refers to the painful feeling, resentment, or wounded heart of the Minjung. The *Ludu* are also troubled by *dukkha*. The *dukkha* is understood as the *han* of the *Ludu* in Myanmar.

There are, however, dissimilarities between the Korean Minjung and the *Ludu* of Myanmar. As a Buddhist-dominated country, we see that the *Ludu* are influenced by Buddhist culture. The Korean people are influenced by Confucianism. But Korea used to be a Buddhist country in the three kingdom era.

The political context is also different. The entire land of Korea became a Japanese colony from 1910 to 1945. Shortly after her independence, the country was divided into two parts – North<sup>21</sup> and South. South Korea was supported by the American military and became a democratic country. The people of Myanmar experienced colonialism under the British and the Japanese and have been controlled by a military regime since 1962.

## The Scope of the Study

The term *Ludu* includes all ethnic groups in Myanmar. They share the same socio-politico-economic reality. The scope of this study is the *common people's* experience of suffering and its negative consequence in their lives. Their suffering experiences have been rooted in the history of Burmese people. I shall adopt the analytical tool of the Minjung theological view of suffering – *han*, the wounded heart of Korean people. In Myanmar, a Buddhist term *dukkha* can be used to refer to the *Ludu's* suffering. This study, therefore, tries to pursue a theology of suffering with the concept of *han* and *dukkha*.

## Resources and Limitation

This study focuses on the story of *Ludu* or the socio-biography of the people, which can be found in Myanmar history. We see Buddhists' participation and involvement in *Ludu* liberation movements. Some Buddhist monks committed their lives and led the movements, e.g., U

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21 North Korea has followed Marxism-Leninism. We can also see that North Korea associated with the Soviet Union and China during Cold War (1947–1991).