

Research Article

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*Indigenizing or Adapting? Importing Buddhism into a
Settler-colonial Society*

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Indigenizing or Adapting? Importing Buddhism into a Settler-colonial Society

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Abstract

In this paper I problematize the phrase "indigenization of Buddhism" (Spuler 2003, cf. Baumann 1997) through an investigation of a Buddhist project in a settler-colonial society. An international organization called the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT) is constructing a forty-five-meter high *stupa* in rural Australia with the intention "to provide a refuge of peace and serenity for all." In 2003, a woman of Aboriginal descent met with the *stupa* developers to express her concern about the project. While her complaint does not represent local Aboriginal views about the *stupa* (other Aboriginal groups expressed support for it), it illustrates how in settler-colonial societies, Buddhist cultural imports that mark the land can have unexpected implications for indigenous people. This paper offers a glimpse of the multi-layered power relations that form the often invisible backdrop to the establishment of Buddhism in settler-colonial societies and suggests that we need to find terms other than "indigenization" when analyzing this.

Introduction

On a low hill fifteen kilometers from the Australian city of Bendigo, an agricultural region scarred by mine tailings, an edifice described as "the largest *stupa* in the western world" is taking shape. Its English name is "The Great Stupa of Universal Compassion." (1) At forty five meters high it will be visible over treetops and be the focal point for Atisha Center, a Buddhist retreat center in the region of northwest central Victoria. Its developers and supporters envisage it becoming an international pilgrimage and tourist site. The organization under whose

auspices the *stupa* project is proceeding is the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT), a worldwide network aligned to the Gelugpa sect of Tibetan Buddhism of which the Dalai Lama is the figurehead. Lama Thubten Yeshe founded the FPMT in 1974 and when he visited the newly founded retreat center in 1981 proposed that a *stupa* be built at the site. Lama Thubten Zopa has been the spiritual director of the FPMT since Yeshe's death in 1984 and Zopa chose the fifteenth century terraced *stupa* at Gyantse in the south of Tibet to serve as prototype for the Australian *stupa*. The promotional website (2) describes the *stupa* in characteristic Buddhist terms:

the most sacred monument in the Buddhist world. It is a symbolic representation of the fully Enlightened mind and the path to Enlightenment. As the sacred texts are the verbal expression of the Dharma, so the *Stupa* is its architectural expression.

The website then lists several objectives for the *stupa*, the first of which is to "inspire people to seek a peaceful and spiritual path."

In 1999 the *stupa* developers had applied to the City of Greater Bendigo council and the Bendigo for permission to proceed with their planned building. As well as placing public notices in the local newspaper, they had consulted Aboriginal elders and the District Aboriginal Co-operative (BADAC) and they did not object. An archaeological survey found no material of Aboriginal significance on the property. The earthworks that radically re-shaped the hill in preparation for the *stupa* site were done in 2000. (3)

Aunty Lynne, an elder representing BADAC, has given "welcome to country" speeches at *stupa* events and Uncle Brien Nelson and others of Jaara ancestry participated in welcoming ceremonies when the Dalai Lama visited the *stupa* site in 2007 (McAra forthcoming). Their roles suggest a degree of support for the *stupa* project.

However, during my six month stay at Atisha center in 2003, the compassionate aspirations of Tibetan Buddhism became entangled in local Australian power relations when an objection to the siting of the *stupa* emerged, well after the public consultation period had passed. The contention was that if the *stupa* were to be built on this site, it would block an Aboriginal songline (see below) that ran through the area. In

essence about who has the authority to influence and interact with local spiritual forces in the land, the complaint marked a critical moment in which several worldviews and ways of relating to land intersected in intriguing ways. Despite differing views about sacrality in the land, a meeting was held and the two parties arrived at a tacit agreement to allow the *stupa* project to continue, with a renewed commitment to dialogue about creating a tangible acknowledgement of the land's traditional owners at the *stupa* site.

The story highlights the differential access to the various forms of capital (in Bourdieu's [1986] sense of economic, symbolic, social and cultural capitals) between the two parties. Lest I be misunderstood about my position on this, I do not wish to favor either party in this analysis, or to oversimplify a complex situation. (4) Instead my intention is to elucidate the causes and conditions in which the unusual objection arose.

"Placing" Buddhism in a settler-colonial society

Efforts to adapt and localize Buddhism in new lands have become the focus of recent research. For example, in a survey essay on Buddhism in the West, Martin Baumann (1997: 205) calls for more research into "the vast field of adapting and making Buddhism indigenous." Picking up on his lead, Michelle Spuler (2003: 99) uses the term "indigenization" in her exploration of theoretical models of adaptation in Western Buddhism in Australian branches of the Diamond Sangha, an international Zen organization. Both authors use the phrase to mean "make Buddhism local." (5) But the term carries problematic connotations when discussing Buddhism in settler-colonial societies. Alan Barnard (2006, cf. Kuper 2003) argues for the specific use of the notion of "indigenous peoples" to highlight the political and legal situation of colonized indigenous people as original owners of land taken by later settlers. Further, most anthropological studies of the indigenization of religions have focused on how colonized indigenous peoples take an introduced religion (usually Christianity or Islam) and make it their own. This usage evokes the power relations between colonizing and colonized and thus when considering a settler-colonial society, the phrase "indigenization of Buddhism" implies that the Buddhists in question are indigenous peoples (in Barnard's sense) or are settlers who seek that status out of a wish for a stronger sense of belonging. In this paper my focus is on how the Anglo-Australian

Buddhists negotiated with "Aunty Paula," (6) a woman with indigenous ancestry who objected to what she felt was an imposition on the land.

In the case of the Great Stupa, there are three factors that are salient with regard to the potential for indigenous objections. First, it required such major earthworks in a rural area of regenerating bush and will be a highly visible structure when completed (see McAra forthcoming).

Second, the Buddhists building the *stupa* are Anglo-Australian and thus part of the settler-colonial society from which Aboriginal activists are seeking redress. (7) In Australia, Anglos and other immigrants often explore ways to identify with the land in attempts to develop a stronger sense of belonging and an affective connection with the land (e.g., Read 2000, 2003). However when members of the colonizing settler culture develop a sense of spiritual custodianship (see also McAra 2007), the result is an unintended but nonetheless real undermining of indigenous efforts to use their status as spiritual custodians of the land in their efforts to seek redress for their dispossession under colonization (Ellemor 2003: 246). Because of this, Buddhist practices involving spirit beings associated with the land in Australia have potential to arouse controversy.

Third, Tibetan Buddhist traditions emphasize the propitiation of local deities and spirits when building new religious structures; again, in places like Australia, this tradition may need to negotiate how it is to interact with indigenous traditions of local spirits (cf. Kolig 1997). The FPMT has produced a two-volume manual on the traditional ritual requirements for *stupa* construction and this includes extensive instructions on how to request permission from resident spirits (FPMT Inc., 2003, 2006). Elsewhere, a ritual expert warns:

If one does not vigorously apply oneself to the examination, testing, appropriation and taming of the land, no matter how one proceeds there will be the danger of obstacles and obscurations. Hence, bearing in mind the many histories of temples built in the past, it is right to devote great attention to the ways by which shrines come into being (Gyatsho 1979:30-33, quoted in Powers 1995: 206).

The "histories" to which Gyatsho refers are those of the founding narratives of Tibetan Buddhism. In preparing the Australian *stupa* site,

ritual experts conducted several ceremonies directed at the spiritual forces in the land, enacting the taming of the spirits recounted in these narratives.

One preparation ceremony in 2003 entailed the offering of four treasure vases to the resident spirits. A treasure vase is a sealed vessel decorated with auspicious symbols and containing offerings deemed pleasing to resident deities and spirits. Buried in building sites before construction, the offering creates an alliance with the spirits and deities, so that they aid rather than hinder the construction project. Khensur Rinpoche, (8) a high-ranking retired *lama* living in Adelaide, performed the ceremony. After the vases were buried, Ian Green, the director of the *stupa* project, explained to the audience that the vases "enrich the earth." The Rinpoche, he said, had summoned up the *nagas* (nature spirits) to partake of the treasures and asked that they become protector-guardians of the *stupa* and the land it is to be built on. (9)

The burial of the treasure vases, an act of "planting" Buddhism in the very soil, was an attempt to influence the chthonic forces; thus I wondered how this, the previous two points raised above, would appear to those Aborigines who are aggrieved by colonization. Would Aborigines and ethnic Tibetans express a spiritual commonality in their respective political situations as dispossessed peoples (cf. Kolig 1997)? And could they collaborate in rituals addressing local spirits or would this be a case of competing expert knowledges about local spirits?

The treasure vase ceremony needs to be placed in the context of the cult of chthonic spirits that pervades Tibetan Buddhist narrative and ritual practice (Samuel 1993: 220). In this narrative, the conversion of local deities and spirits precedes the conversion of the people and the newly imported religion adopts pre-existing local deities (Samuel 2001). Buddhism arrived and became established on the Himalayan plateau in the seventh and eighth centuries C.E. and a founding narrative from the *Mani Kabum*, a fourteenth century text (see Mills 2003: 12), says that the spirit forces opposing it were "a maelstrom of negative geomantic elements, arranged like a she-demoness lying on her back, thrashing her arms and legs to repel the new arrival" (Aris 1980:13, quoted in Mills 2003: 13). These forces were subdued by the construction of twelve temples across the land to pin the demoness down (Stein 1972: 38-9, cited in Mills 2003: 13).

Few Western Buddhists are familiar with this narrative, but another much more widely known story shows how spirit resistance was overcome when Padmasambhava (Guru Rinpoche) converted local spirits to become protectors of the *Dharma*. In either instance, the Tibetan term *dulwa* refers to these acts of converting, taming and civilizing (Huber 1999: 219, 220). What is tamed is forces hostile to the *Dharma* and their energies are channeled for its service. In a psychological interpretation that many Western Buddhists favor, it is the human mind that needs subduing and training (p. 220; cf. McAra 2007: 92-100; see also J. Gyatso 1989). The FPMT's stupa-building instructions (FPMT Inc 2006: 260) use similar language, emphasizing the importance of requesting "permission" of the local spirits and the Earth Goddess when "taking possession of the building site." After this the "evil spirits and demons ...who cause hindrances" are offered ritual cake and commanded to leave.

While there are many possible interpretations besides these (10), people whose culture has been devastated by colonisation may be uncomfortable with the idea that an imported religion can assume control of local spirits. While the Buddhists did not intend for it to be interpreted in this way it was, in large part because of Australia's history of colonization, which I now discuss.

Settler-colonization in central Victoria

Scholars have noted a mindset of "manufactured ignorance" (Hattam and Atkinson 2006: 691-692) and "amnesia" (De Lorenzo 2005) in Australian settler-colonial society with regard to the settler-colonial dispossession of Aboriginal people. Some Anglo-Australians seek to overcome this ignorance, for instance through participating in the reconciliation movement (11), and the first evidence I saw of this at Atisha center was the sign at the gate, which acknowledges Djadja Wurrung as "the traditional owners of the land." (12) Besides this, many people who attended Atisha center expressed awareness and regret about the devastating impact of European colonization on the local Aboriginal people. However, some of these people placed the harm done firmly in the past (cf. Hattam and Atkinson 2006: 691-693). With the exception of a number of people who were involved in reconciliation groups, education or social work, it seemed to me that most felt unable to do anything that might help to redress this national problem.

Bendigo and Atisha centre are towards the eastern end of Djadja Wurrung (also known as Jaara) country. Prior to European arrival in the region in 1836, Djadja Wurrung country was around 2500 square kilometres (Attwood 1999: 1-3). The combination of European-style pastoral farming and the influx of immigrants with the gold rush (beginning in 1851) brought disease, environmental damage and dispossession. The Europeans' "invisible luggage" (Attwood 1999: 11) of racist ideas and the belief that the "Aborigines had no rights to the land on the mistaken basis that they had not 'worked' it" exacerbated the violence of interactions between the two peoples. By 1863 the Djadja Wurrung population consisted of thirty one adults and seven children (p. 41).

I do not have a comprehensive picture of the Djadja Wurrung or Aboriginal organizations in the vicinity of Bendigo today, but about 2500 people claim descent from the Djadja Wurrung. Other Aboriginal groups also live in the region, including Wotjobaluk. (13) The Bendigo and District Aboriginal Co-operative (BADAC) is intended to be inclusive of all such groups and was established after factional problems in a previous organization. It works within the governmental system for social welfare and health issues.

The meeting

I first heard mention of Paula and her objection to the *stupa* from a Buddhist living at Atisha center. I made inquiries about what people thought of her and learned that she was an activist who said she had Djadja Wurrung ancestry (14) and who had led protests at various sites about the illegal European invasion and the genocide that resulted. In Bendigo, some people considered her a troublemaker and others said she bore a heavy burden of anger. I was unable to find out about how she heard about the stupa project, or why she chose this among many issues as a matter for complaint.

In the winter of 2003 Paula called for a meeting with Ian Green and visited the stupa site accompanied by around twelve supporters, including a white barrister and several young white adults with dreadlocks and strong convictions about the environment and reconciliation. Fred, an Aboriginal man from a regional organization, facilitated the first part of the meeting where we all sat around a table. Taking the role of mediator, he began by explaining that there was no

Native Title claim since the site was not Crown land. His manner was conciliatory; for instance he said that Atisha center is a place of peace and that this was a concept that the Djadja Wurrung should embrace - providing there is dialogue. Ian explained that the FPMT was an organization to teach Buddhism to Westerners and that the land was given to the FPMT by his family. He outlined Lama Yeshe's vision for creating a "harmonious" Buddhist community there.

Paula expressed anger at the fact that the whole system in Australia is "illegal because we've been through 200 years of undeclared war and there is no peace treaty." She rhetorically asked "How can the Buddhists support us (Aboriginal people)?" and "Why is the government supporting every other culture except us?" She reported that when she first visited the stupa site she had felt "devastated": the site, she felt, was a powerful one, she could feel the energy there; she felt there was a songline running through the site. But it had been "desecrated" by the massive earthworks in preparing the ground for the building. Indeed, she was not the only one to feel upset at the way a large amount of bush had been cleared and the top of a low hill flattened; I have also heard an Anglo-Australian Buddhist expressing regret that regenerating bush had been cleared. Paula said that the Freemasons are "into ley lines", and that they "try to block the energy" of the songlines, inferring that a stupa could also block this energy.

Ian showed the party around the *stupa* site, Atisha center and the monastery. At the *stupa* site, he indicated where the treasure vases had been buried and explained that they enriched the land. Paula asked "Why did the Lama choose this site?" Ian explained how when Lama Yeshe visited in 1981, he and Ian and a friend walked about the land and Lama said this is the site for the town, the *stupa*, the monastery and so on. Paula said she could "feel the energy here." Fred asked whether environmental impact reports and archaeological surveys had been conducted at the site. Ian said he had checked all this with the city council and was told there was nothing of significance in the area.

Up the hill at the monastery, Ven. Gyatso, an Australian monk who had been instrumental in constructing the rammed earth buildings a few years prior, showed them around and explained that the large statue of the Thousand-Armed Chenrezig represented universal compassion. One of Paula's young Anglo-Australian supporters, Jane, interrupted him in

an emotional tone, as if verging on tears of anger: "How do you justify the desecration of sacred, sacred land?"

Gyatso was taken aback and replied: "Desecration is a big word. We see it as an offering. The *stupa* is an extremely powerful form of compassion."

Jane persisted: "It's in the land, how can you imprison it with buildings?"

Gyatso replied, "Spirituality is in the mind [not in the land]. The idea is to benefit all sentient beings." (15)

"But you're destroying Jaara land!"

The non-Buddhists at this meeting viewed the *stupa* and other Buddhist buildings with suspicion for an array of reasons. For Jane, they were yet another instance of the destruction wrought by the colonists, about which she appeared to feel deep pain. From the strong emotions she expressed about the situation, I infer that she was attempting to distance herself from what she perceived as white exploitation of Aborigines, expressing an "ecospiritual indigenous" discourse that romanticizes indigenous peoples. She was also expressing a Western countercultural criticism of instrumentalist concepts of land as an inert and alienable possession.

Paula had a slightly different stance. Like Jane, she associated the project with colonization, exploitation and insensitivity to the land, but she was also concerned with indigenous empowerment. Twice she made the point that the Buddhists seemed to have no trouble getting government permission to build all these structures. She looked around the monastery shrine room and exclaimed at how beautiful it was, adding "You have a great support network here; hopefully we can all do this one day; I really like what you have done; I can't even get permission to build a *maimai* or a *humpie*." (16) Paula was in effect pointing out that while she was impressed by some of what she saw, she lacked the social and financial capital necessary to realize anything comparable because of dispossession her people have suffered through colonization. Yet she seemed torn; while she hoped that "we can all do this one day" she was also suspicious of the amount of money that the *stupa* project required. Several times, she said, "Money is the root of all evil," and she blamed greed for the damage that gold mining had done to

the region. In response, Gyatso tried to sympathize:

"In Tibet, gold was seen as belonging to the local spirits and now the Chinese are coming in and removing it." He then added, "We haven't gone into this without thinking. We've done invocations of the spirits---"

He did not seem to realise that the claim to have influence over the spirits presented a challenge to Aboriginal claims about the spirits and Paula interrupted him, "You don't know our ancestors!"

Gen-la (the resident monk/teacher at Atisha center, who is Tibetan) arrived with his interpreter Noel to participate in the meeting. Noel said that "Gen-la apologizes for not speaking English" and that he was happy to meet them; it was the first time he had met the indigenous people of this area.

I'm just a Buddhist monk, so I can just talk to you from that angle. Normally I'd be speaking to people who want to practice the Mahayana Vehicle -- the things that they try to do are of maximum benefit to every living being. So possibly due to the fact that the building of the *stupa*, you see it as quite strange perhaps, you aren't aware of the motivation; perhaps there are some doubts in your mind about it.

Noel added that Gen-la was aware that around the world, indigenous people have suffered because of colonization, adding that "[t]here's no fault whatsoever in doubt arising in this way due to the fact that you've had to experience trauma for so long." At this point I should clarify that Tibetan Buddhists consider that criticizing a *stupa* is a karmically negative activity because it is equivalent to criticizing the mind of the Buddha. As I understand it, in assuring them that because of their conditions and lack of understanding of the motivation for building the stupa, their criticism was understandable, Gen-la was fulfilling his role as a Buddhist teacher. He continued:

And so the reason for building a stupa goes back to Buddha Shakyamuni himself. The *stupa* represents the mind, the heart center, of the Buddha himself. A great deal of work goes on before anything is built. One must collect positive energy.... Relics from Buddhas who are very highly realized will be placed inside the *stupa*. This empowers it. A building like this is so sacred and has the ability to benefit beings, not only

humans, that inhabit the area. Necessary rain will fall when it's needed. It is good for the overall health of the area and diseases will not befall people living around the area. In the beginning of the process a precious Lama [Khensur Rinpoche] came to this land in 1994 and performed the ground breaking ceremony to bless the land and invoke the spirits, the resident spirits, to ask for their help.

Here Paula again expressed her concern at the mention of spirits, asking: "Who are those resident spirits?"

Gen-la's reply was scholarly: "In the Tibetan tradition they refer to the gods and a class of being called a *naga* -- they reside in the animal realm. They are the non-visible (at least to us) residents of anywhere." But the *lama* who performs the ceremonies addressed to the spirits is qualified to do so, Gen-la maintained, through his lineage of the Buddha's teachings. He continued:

This particular area has been abused for quite some time; the people with gold digging have disturbed the land, degenerating it, this [ceremony] is also to regenerate the energy of the land. To try to establish a structure like this: it's to avoid any kind of problems and trouble and harms coming to the area in the future. Implicit in this is the wish to bring benefit to beings in the area. This is the crux of why we do this. When you weigh up the points, please consider this. Ask if it is going to be harmful or beneficial.

At this Paula replied

We want to support this, but there's such a conflict between our spiritual beliefs and those of the temple. When I walked up there [to the *stupa* site] I felt my guts being ripped out. This land is connected to my mother and her mother and her mother before that.

Noel stopped her so he could translate. Gen-la's reply was that "I don't think our two spiritual traditions are in conflict here. Because whatever Buddhists undertake it has to proceed with a motivation to be of benefit to everybody else."

Paula replied, "We don't think it [the *stupa*] is harmful, we just don't

want it built on that particular area." At some point she also said, in response to the mention of the authority of the *lamas*,

We are oracles ourselves, very spiritual, we can feel the damage that's been done to our mother earth. If the Tibetan *lamas* are clairvoyants, can they say what are the Dreaming totems, the Dreaming animals there?

This exchange between a scholarly monk and the agitated visitors highlighted the problems of the overlaps and disjunctures in their respective traditions. Gen-la demonstrated no knowledge of Aboriginal spiritual traditions, and since he had lived in Australia for less than four months at the time of this meeting and had limited English, this was to be expected. Paula spoke about the oracles among her own female ancestors, emphasizing spiritual perceptiveness and connection with land, as if intuiting the masculinist imagery of the founding story outlined earlier. It is important to note here that while many Western followers of Tibetan Buddhism are aware about the idea that local spirits should be befriended when a *stupa* is built, they are generally unaware of the more violent images such as the story outlined above and certainly in this case they were unaware of the resonance such images might have for colonized peoples. Despite the fact that it is unlikely that Paula had heard the stories about Tibetan spirit pacification, another image of violence presented itself to her in that the land was stripped of bush and reshaped by the earthworks for the *stupa* foundations. It is an odd juxtaposition: while Gen-la was talking about healing the land after the abuses of the Gold Rush, Paula said she felt pain at the destruction wrought by the newer earthworks.

Paula also expressed her concern about the \$10 million that was required to build the *stupa* and Gen-la assured her that Buddhists who wished to make "positive energy" donated the money. She elaborated, but spoke too fast for Noel to translate and, in any case, he and Gen-la were about to depart the monastery for an appointment, so Gen-la wrapped up his part in the meeting by reiterating: "Please, there is no way that building a *stupa* can be of harm to anything. Please try to analyze more. It's not going to harm ... please offer your support." In reply, Paula sounded as if she was becoming conciliatory: "We need to both support each other's spiritual beliefs." Gen-la responded,

Of course, 100 percent! There's no way that one spiritual

tradition can satisfy everyone on the planet, which is the reason we have so many religions. This is to satisfy different kinds of people so all spiritual traditions should back each other up.

Some of the Buddhists later expressed puzzlement that they were singled out for criticism, since they regarded their own project as entirely benevolent and well-intentioned, "for the benefit of all sentient beings." They had also had the idea of repairing or healing the decimated songlines, as I show below. And the name of their stupa, "the Great Stupa of Universal Compassion" – surely this expressed their good intentions?

It is clear from the interchanges described at this meeting that Paula considered the term "spirits" to refer to the ancestral Dreaming beings and totems particular to the descendants of those beings that are bound up with "country," which itself is a "conscious entity" (Rose 2004: 163) that cannot be cut up into pieces. As I understood it, Paula's position was that the invisible ancestral beings in country could be intuitively sensed by "oracles" and that if anyone not descended from these ancestral beings sensed anything there then their intuition could be tested because they would recognize particular totems. On the other hand, the Buddhists used a Mahayanist discourse of "benefit for all." For them, the spirits were guardians of places that could be persuaded to support the establishment of the Dharma and this would result in benefits to the whole region. The two parties did not explicate these differing understandings about land and the meaning of songlines to one another so I now attempt to do this.

Songlines, totems and country

The pan-Aboriginal notion of songlines, otherwise known as ancestral Dreaming tracks, needs to be understood in the context of their concepts of Dreamings and place. Anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose (2003: 166) writes that the Dreamtime ancestral beings who emerged from the earth and moved about the land, leaving their essences in significant places. As they moved about they left tracks connecting sacred sites that crisscross the continent. Rose says that "one's country is a 'nourishing terrain,' a place that gives and receives life." Paula's distress at seeing the hill leveled for the *stupa* foundations and her use of the word "desecrated" to describe this suggested that she wished to emphasize this

understanding of country as sacred.

With regard to Anglo-Australian notions of songlines, Julie Marcus (1988: 266) notes that New Age writings portray the world as being encompassed by a magnetic grid of spiritual energy. (17) Power places are the "powerful access points" where the grid lines intersect and supernatural powers can be accessed at such sites (Samuel 2001: 412). Marcus notes that New Agers regard Ayers Rock (Uluru) as a power place on this grid, which in the Australian setting is interpreted as songlines. Marcus is concerned about the cultural appropriation of Uluru by settler Australians, because New Age universalizing discourses appropriate Aboriginal cosmologies into their own notions of a "transcendent unity" that decontextualizes specific Aboriginal social structures and politics and homogenizes Aboriginal cultures. The New Agers appropriated Dreamtime language to enrich their own identities and sense of place. These depoliticized New Age concepts inform popular Anglo-Australian notions of songlines.

Intriguingly, the Anglo-Australian Buddhists also talked about the songlines at the *stupa* site, although their understanding was that the *stupa* would be beneficial to them as well as to land and all its inhabitants. When I asked people there about Aboriginal matters, they referred me to Ross, an Anglo-Australian, who, they told me, had an understanding of Aboriginal spirituality and was friends with several Aboriginal elders. Ross said to me that the *stupa* was on the point where two songlines crossed. This, he said, was not problematic because the Tibetan rituals conducted at the nearby monastery and retreat centre would help to keep the songline alive, just as elders of the Djadja Wurrung had done so with their own songs in the past. Some years before Paula's visit, Atisha center's newsletter, *Chorten* ([c. 1998-99] 9:3), printed an unattributed article about the songlines running through the *stupa* site, which cites Ross. The article stresses their importance in Aboriginal culture and then asserts that:

[I]t is only through a subtle perception and deep intuitive knowing that a Songline becomes alive. Songlines are heard by the mind not the ear. They are created by what might be called an "ethereal wake." Aborigines believe that anyone walking over land leaves a trail of a sort. Indeed it is said, if you walk the same path, singing the same song or chant with

a concentrated mind for many years, you will create your own Songline.

This implies that the Buddhists' presence on the land, because of their chanting and their concentrated minds, will affect the place and could even potentially create new songlines. The article then goes on to point out that songlines are indicative of specific tribal custodianship:

[t]raditionally, Songlines are created by chants of the local custodians of the tribal land. As each tribe had different chants, each Songline has a different song or chant to it. By recognizing these songs you are able to know which tribal land you are walking through. ...

This recognizes that there is a dimension of political identity and boundary marking in songlines. The article then announces that there is a songline "pathing" through the *stupa* site. After talking about how the songlines were identified, the article concludes:

[t]he Aborigines have created these Songlines over thousands of years, but since the coming of the white man the Songlines have been decimated and are in need of repair. Perhaps a role of the *Stupa* will be to repair the fragile existence of a Songline.

The idea that the *stupa* could play a role in repairing a songline is intriguing, because it suggests that the Buddhists believed they could take over as its custodians in place of the Aboriginal people of the past.

At Atisha center, then, there were various ideas about what a songline is and what it does. Many of these ideas combined Aboriginal concepts with notions interpreted in much the same way as the New Age understandings, equating songlines with ley lines. Their Buddhist understandings of *stupas* influenced them: the *stupa* would in some way tap into the power of the songline, while enhancing or healing the power of the place. They thus expressed the belief that this was a suitable site to build a *stupa* and that Lama Yeshe must have known this clairvoyantly when he had first told Ian that a *stupa* should be built on this hill.

Clearing obstacles

As the founding hero of Tibetan Buddhism, Padmasambhava has become an important figure not only in Tibet, but as a kind of patron saint of the establishment of new Tibetan Buddhist centers. Lama Zopa instructed Ian Green to have a statue of Padmasambhava built. Announcing this, *Chorten Stupa Edition* says that Padmasambhava "was able to pacify the wild spirits of [Tibet]" (Dec 2003-Jan 2004, p. 3). When the 3.9 meter (12 ft) high statue arrived in July 2005, a message to the e-mail lists for benefactors of the Great Stupa and members of Atisha center announced the arrival of the statue and quoted Lama Zopa as saying "This Padmasambhava statue will be extremely important for overcoming obstacles to the speedy construction of the Great Stupa, the Maitreya Project and all FPMT projects." (18) It continued with the explanation that Padmasambhava "established the wisdom of Buddhism in the Himalayas by creating harmony with the pre-Buddhist beliefs that were part of the Tibetan world at that time." This turn of phrase, like "pacify," implies that the problem lies with an unharmonious locale, rather than with those imposing their own order on that locale. Later the same month, the Bendigo *Advertiser* (27 July 2005) ran an article using similar language, adding that the statue has the "power to bring peace and goodwill." Phrases like these may be because of a judicious avoidance of terms that would require an in-depth understanding of Tibetan Buddhism and it is fortunate, given the bitter irony that the term "pacification" had historically for people on the receiving end of colonization.

The Buddhists, I have suggested, asserted religious power in two ways: first, through Padmasambhava's powers to overcome obstacles to the *stupa* project. Second, in the *Chorten* article they proposed that the *stupa* might be able to "repair" the "decimated" Aboriginal songlines at the *stupa* site. Despite the Buddhists' stated intention to bring benefit to all beings, their wish to control numinous entities (spirits) and energies (songlines) in the land had the unintended effect of challenging the method by which Aboriginal people claim the original spiritual connection with the land.

Grounds for reconciliation

When the two parties reassembled around the table after the visit to the monastery up the hill, Fred said that the meeting was about agreeing to a "process" and that they would love to bring some Djadja Wurrung elders

here. He also announced "we are satisfied as to your integrity." The group left, promising to be in contact, but when I visited Bendigo again in 2004, Ian told me he had not heard from them.

Just after Paula's visit, Ian said that he and Fred had discussed two options for acknowledging the Aboriginal owners of the land: one involved planting a "Jaara garden" of local flora and the other was to put a hole through the sides of the stupa, once built, to allow the songline to travel through. Although Ian did not express firm commitment to these ideas, he was enthusiastic about the possibilities, saying that "It's got potential for quite an amazing sort of meeting of ideas and sharing cooperative thing." A month later Ian again expressed hope for some kind of collaboration with Aboriginal elders, saying he would be "proud to be involved" in doing something that recognizes the indigenous people and their "spiritual beliefs" "for as long as the *stupa* exists." He also expressed sympathy for the things that Paula's anger about the dispossession of Aboriginal people and Jane's anger about what she called "desecration." He respected her concerns, he said, saying that she was seeking a spiritual path "that was based on some sort of spiritual understanding of what's a natural environment and spirituality within that environment, and yeah, which definitely has some connection with the Aboriginal people." He also said that although their approach was misguided because most of their energy came from anger, he felt their intentions were better "than a lot of other people who couldn't care less what happened, a lot better. [... I think their] intentions are mightily honorable, really."

In 2004, *Chorten Stupa Edition* (no. 19) announced that discussions were being held with Aboriginal elders "to find ways that Aboriginal culture and spirituality can be recognized in the Great Stupa." The following year, the *Advertiser* (27 July 2005) announced that "Bendigo's Aboriginal elders yesterday endorsed a golden statue built to bring harmony to central Victoria," evidence that further meetings had indeed taken place. The article cites Ian Green as saying that Atisha center "is built on Aboriginal ground" and quotes: "[w]e try to have a close connection with local Aboriginal people; we were honored they could come." The *Advertiser* continues that "Mr. Green said the elders were excited by the design and its status."

By the time this article was published I was back in New Zealand and I

wondered why these elders visited the Padmasambhava statue. I was unable to find out more, but the point here is that it is clear that the *stupa* developers considered it worthwhile to demonstrate their willingness to engage with the Aboriginal peoples of the region. I suggest that there are two reasons for this: concern about reconciliation issues and recognition of the need to demonstrate that the *stupa* has Aboriginal endorsement. The fact that there was no unified Aboriginal community in the region has made this difficult. More importantly for the Buddhists, their efforts towards engagement with both local Aboriginal representatives and spirit beings of the land is consistent with their religious ideal that the successful establishment of the *Dharma* and hence the *stupa* is dependent on the support of the inhabitants of the locale.

At the risk of conflating Aboriginal and Tibetan Buddhist notions of spirits and connectedness with land, I have discussed them together because of the ways that these concepts were brought into close proximity in this meeting. On the one hand, following their own founding narratives, Buddhist ritual specialists sought influence over resident spirits. On the other, Paula questioned their right to exert this influence. Perhaps she sought out the *stupa* site as an arena to reassert her Aboriginal status as a primary spiritual custodian of the country (in the Aboriginal sense of the word), in an attempt to access moral and legal legitimacy (cf. Moran 2002: 1017-18).

While from Buddhists' perspective, linking their Great Stupa of Universal Compassion and colonization misreads their intentions, the history of Australia has led to the differential empowerment of the Anglo-Australians and Aboriginals regardless of religious orientations. The Buddhists do not intend to undermine Aboriginal claims to the primary spiritual relationship with country - rather, recognition of those claims falls outside both the Tibetan/Anglo-Australian Buddhist founding narratives. The meeting I have discussed sits somewhere inside the invisible architecture of power at the level of the Australian settler-colonial nation, a society that was built on dispossession of Aboriginal people and that continues to render present-day Aboriginal struggles invisible. This is ironic given that the Tibetans themselves are subject to colonization and often build empathetic relationships with indigenous peoples around the world because of this. Despite the Anglo-Australian Buddhists' emphasis on peace and compassion and their status as a religious minority, as white Australians they share in the social capital

that is largely inaccessible to those whom Australian society marginalizes.

Allaine Cerwonka (2004: 29) considers Australian nation-building and territory-claiming through various spatial practices and observes that:

d]emarcated "national" spaces miniaturize the nation, so that it can be experienced as something tangible and concrete. ... Monuments and other spaces demarcated as "national" [...] mediate the gap between national spaces as an imagined or abstract idea and an individual life.

The site of the *stupa* has also, in moments such as the meeting described here, briefly miniaturized the nation for an alternative contestation and re-negotiation of settler-indigenous relations. Her objection highlighted the colonizing nature of most if not all major building projects in settler-colonial contexts. The meeting also highlights the radical difference in forms of capital accessible to each of the two parties, a reality that indigenous people live with daily but that few settlers recognize. Paula and her supporters brought what the white Buddhists had regarded as a tragic but distant and irredeemable past into the present.

Although the *stupa's* planners had not anticipated Paula's readings of their project, the degree of accommodation the two parties reached is noteworthy. The fact that Ian and Fred discussed the idea that they could make a hole in the *stupa* to allow the songline to pass through demonstrated the potential for a Buddhist accommodation of indigenous concerns.

The Great Stupa of Universal Compassion has had unanticipated effects even before it is finished, showing that its intended symbolism of enlightened consciousness is not self-evident to all. My intention here has been to call attention to the need for scholarship on the expansion of Buddhism in "the West" to take into account the multi-layered local sociocultural and political complexities. As discussed at the outset, in anthropological usage, the term "indigenous" stands in a different relationship to colonization than its unproblematized usage in literature on convert Buddhists in settler-colonial societies implies. Perhaps then, in the Australian setting it would be more appropriate to refer to the "settler-colonial localization of Buddhism." The terms localization, adaptation and, since it is an exercise of cross-cultural translation,

vernacularization (translation into a local language) provide suitable alternatives.

The notion of taming the spirits in the land through another, newly-imported ideology re-enacts the colonization of the red continent -- and although there have been changes to the cast and stage-set, the country remains in settler possession. However, in this southern Australian setting, Aboriginal concepts of land-based spirituality and Tibetan Buddhist strategies for establishing the *Dharma* in new places momentarily came into an unusual relationship.

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Footnotes

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1. The Dalai Lama provided the name "Tse-Chen Cho-Khor Ling" ("Dharma Wheel of Great Compassion"), which was adapted to "Great Stupa of Universal Compassion." [Return to Text](#)

2. See <http://www.stupa.org.au> (accessed 7 April 2007). [Return to Text](#)

3. I discuss the two formal objections presented by non-Aboriginal locals that arose from the public notification elsewhere (McAra forthcoming). [Return to Text](#)

4. While I am a Buddhist, Buddhism has many diverse strands and I am not a member of the FPMT; I thus consider myself to be partly insider, partly outsider. My background as an anthropologist and Pakeha (white New Zealander) makes me conscious of the consequences of colonisation for indigenous peoples. This paper stems from my concern to understand how a newly-arrived form of Buddhism impacts on settler-indigenous relations.[Return to Text](#)

5. I have previously used the term interchangeably with "localization" (McAra 2007).[Return to Text](#)

6. I have used pseudonyms for Paula and the others in her party since I was unable to contact them after this event. I have little information on her background or the people she came with. I am grateful to Ian Green and "Fred" (who chaired the meeting) for permission to attend. I use the title "Aunty" as this is common usage in Aboriginal English for people positions of responsibility, dropping it after first use for brevity.[Return to Text](#)

7. I use the term "Anglo-Australian" and /or "settler" loosely to include people of British descent who are the dominant ethnic group in Australia and who are the principal beneficiaries of European colonisation there. To refer to those who were dispossessed during colonisation I use the word "Aboriginal" rather than "indigenous Australians" or "Koori" (a southeast Australian term for indigenous people). While neither of my choices account for local complexities, I use them here because they retain relevance with regard to colonisation of Australia.[Return to Text](#)

8. Khensur [Kangur Lobsang Thubten] Rinpoche was born around 1925 in Eastern Tibet and was ordained in 1945. He served for a number of years at the FPMT's Buddha House in Adelaide and conducted the first site blessing for the stupa in 1994, long before the land was cleared.[Return to Text](#)

9. Various people said that the vases would be a blessing for the whole area and bring better rainfall and considered the rain showers that followed that weekend as evidence of the success of the ritual.[Return to Text](#)

10. For some, the twelve temples myth has an uncomfortable resonance with European colonization and with male domination of land and women. As two readers (my colleague Hadas Ore and an anonymous

reviewer) reminded me, the image of a male Buddhist institution pinning down a female spirit evokes images of gendered violence.[Return to Text](#)

11. There are several organizations established for settler-indigenous reconciliation in Australia, e.g., Reconciliation Australia (<http://www.reconciliation.org.au/i-cms.isp>, accessed 7 April 2007) and Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (ANTaR) (<http://www.antar.org.au/about/>).[Return to Text](#)

12. This sign comes from a reconciliation group that makes these acknowledgment signs. Other forms of acknowledgement to local spirits and the Aboriginal traditional owners have emerged in Australia: Shiva Vasi (2006:48) writes that the Cambodian Buddhist Association of Victoria created a structure in one corner of their temple land where they make regular offerings to acknowledge the traditional owners.[Return to Text](#)

13. The Wotjobaluk is a regional group composed of descendants of several related central and western Victorian peoples devastated by European settlement (ATNS website n.d.).[Return to Text](#)

14. There was no consensus among her critics as to her ancestry: one person told me she was from South Australia not Victoria. One Aboriginal elder told me Paula had no right to criticise the stupa.[Return to Text](#)

15. Tibetan Buddhists consider that holy objects such as stupas play a vital role in cutting out the root causes of suffering: because the stupa represents the enlightened mind, seeing it plants the seed of enlightenment in the mind of any observer (human or otherwise), which ultimately ripens as spiritual enlightenment. They also maintain that holy objects bring about peace, prosperity and well-being.[Return to Text](#)

16. Both terms refer to makeshift shelters or huts.[Return to Text](#)

17. By New Age I am referring to an eclectic individualist spirituality that draws on the religions of the world. This approach often romanticizes indigenous spirituality. Marcus uses the term "Aquarian" but I prefer "New Age" because its use in scholarship on new religions is more widespread.[Return to Text](#)

18. The FPMT is attempting to build a 152 meter high Maitreya statue in

Kushinagar in Uttar Pradesh, India.[Return to Text](#)