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“Show Us Your God”: Marilla Baker Ingalls and the Power of Religious Objects in Nineteenth-Century Burma

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Abstract: This essay examines the unusual evangelical work of Marilla Baker Ingalls, an American Baptist missionary to Burma from 1851–1902. By the time of her death in Burma at the age of 75, Ingalls was known as one of the most successful Baptist evangelists among Burmese Buddhists. To understand the extraordinary dynamic of Ingalls’ expanding Christian community, this essay focuses on two prominent objects at the Baptist mission: A life-sized dog statue that Ingalls kept chained at the edge of her property and a massive banyan tree covered with biblical illustrations and revered by locals as an abode of divine beings. This essay argues that these objects transformed Ingalls’ American Baptist Christianity into a kind of Burmese religion that revolved around revered objects. Through an examination of the particular shrine practices that pulled people into the Baptist mission, this essay reflects on the larger context of religious encounter, conflict, and representation in modernizing Burma.

Keywords: Christianity; Buddhism; missions; Burma; United States; visual culture; material culture

1. Introduction

Over three hundred feet tall and covered in gold, Shwedagon Pagoda is the most famous religious monument in Burma. The massive shrine glitters atop a hill in the port city of Yangon, attracting locals and tourists to circumambulate the central structure said to house sacred Buddha relics. When American Christian missionaries began journeying to this Southeast Asian country in 1813, the towering pagoda and its swirling pilgrims captured their attention even before they were ashore. The evangelical Baptists had heard that this kingdom across the Bay of Bengal from India was full of what they called “heathen superstition,” and when they finally arrived and saw the countless pagodas and Buddha statues that filled the land they began to name the country’s religion “Buddhism.” By identifying it as such, the Baptists categorized Burma’s royally-sponsored religion as a part of the larger Asian tradition starting to be understood in the West as a phenomenally popular world religion.

For these American missionaries, Shwedagon Pagoda quickly proved a powerful symbol of the rival religion. But the monument was not simply an emblem of the strongly held beliefs of the Burmese, it was also an active object, continually animating religious practice. This practice was particularly problematic for the Christian evangelists, who saw it as idol worship. Because the people of Burma were so devoted to the Buddha, whose relics are said to be enshrined in this pagoda, and to the merit-making practices performed at this sacred site, the Baptists declared that they were constantly committing the sin of worshipping a false god. The Protestant operation sought to bring the country’s people toward the teachings of Christ by turning them away from pagodas and Buddha statues.

Shwedagon Pagoda is “one of the proudest monuments of superstition in Burmah,” ([1], p. 78) exclaimed Marilla Baker Ingalls, an American Baptist missionary to the country from 1851–1902. Ingalls

worked as a single female missionary in a remote region without any American male missionaries, an unprecedented arrangement in the Baptist mission.¹ Whereas her colleagues in large, urban mission stations interacted with people from a variety of the country's ethnic groups as well as from British colonial society, Ingalls became immersed in a community of Burmese people, that is, a community comprised of people from the country's Bamar majority population.

Ingalls' 1857 book on her adopted country, *Ocean Sketches of Burmah*, described the "long-established sway of the Burmese religion" ([1], p. 77). Ingalls explained that the pervasive power of Burmese Buddhism was evident in how "the Burmans have filled the land with idol gods, Pagodas, and temples, served by their yellow-robed priests" ([1], p. 77). Like the country's multitude of Buddha statues and monasteries, pagodas proved to the American how the Asian religion had "interwoven itself with political and civil life" ([1], p. 77). And the magnitude and prestige of Shwedagon Pagoda represented how resistant Burmese Buddhism was to rival theologies. For missionaries "to assail such a system with mere arguments," Ingalls contended, "would have been like attempting to overthrow that solid Pagoda itself" ([1], p. 78). Tried as it might, the American mission to the Burmese could not topple Buddhism with its Christian theology. After the first few decades of the Baptist mission to Burma, so few Burmese had converted that the mission shifted their resources away from that dominant population. They turned instead to ethnic minorities in the country—especially the Karen—who had shown much more interest in joining Christian communities.²

Even after the American mission began reallocating resources to Burma's minority groups in the mid-nineteenth century, Ingalls remained committed to converting the Burmese. In 1859, Ingalls settled in Thonze, a remote village in southern Burma where she worked as a single female missionary until her death at the age of 75 in 1902. After over forty years of evangelical work, Ingalls was said to have converted more than one hundred Buddhist priests.³ These unmatched numbers earned her a reputation as America's most successful evangelist among the Burmese. Given the Baptist mission's failures among Burma's majority group, how are we to understand Ingalls' extraordinary conversion record?

This essay argues that Ingalls' career was distinguished by creative responses to her realization that Burmese Buddhism would not be overcome by "mere arguments." To bring about religious change in Burma, Ingalls turned to objects that had material strength, objects that were just as solid as Yangon's Shwedagon Pagoda. To make Christianity appeal to the Burmese, Ingalls created idols of her own.⁴

There were two key objects that dominated Ingalls' work: A life-sized dog statue that she kept chained at the edge of her property and what she called her "great sign tree," a large banyan covered with pictures and revered by locals as the abode of divine beings. The cast-iron canine attracted visitors every day to Ingalls' mission, and some days the visitors numbered in the hundreds. Her nearly as famous sign tree fascinated the local community with the Biblical illustrations, photographs, and American medicinal advertisements that hung on its massive trunk.

¹ Women were leaders in the Burma mission from the time of its inception, but their role was seen in the early period as primarily that of wives of male missionaries. After the first wave of missionary couples and single men settled in Burma, single female missionaries were occasionally appointed to the country with the expectation that they would marry an American missionary working in the country, often a widower. For more on the role of women in the Burma mission, see [2].

² During the first two decades of the Burma mission, the entire operation focused on the Burmese majority group. By the 1840s, only about half of the staff was dedicated to the Burmese. Even with so many resources going to the Burmese, the mission was far more successful among the Karen. For example, in 1836, the mission recorded a total of 729 baptized Karen as compared to 207 Burmese since the inception of the mission ([3], pp. 129–32).

³ The *Baptist Missionary Magazine* obituary for Ingalls provides an example of how the Baptist community celebrated Ingalls as having converted over one hundred Buddhist monks. In that obituary, Reverend Edmund F. Merriam wrote that "Mrs. Ingalls was particularly successful in her labors among the Burman priest, who are a class of people extremely hard to reach by the influences of Christianity; but by her tact and enthusiasm, aided largely by her ingenuity of approach, she was permitted to see more than a hundred of these bigoted priests throw off the yellow robe and become humble and faithful followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, many of them becoming preachers of the gospel. This must be considered one of the most prominent features of Mrs. Ingalls' work" [4].

⁴ I am using the term "idol" here in the lexical sense of "images that represent superhuman beings." I include Burmese spirits (nats) in this category of "superhuman beings."

This essay examines the role these objects played in Ingalls' career not only to understand the work of an exceptionally creative missionary, but also to consider the larger dynamic of religious confrontation in the American Baptist mission to Burma. To tell the story of Marilla Baker Ingalls is to tell a story about a more pervasive atmosphere of religious encounter, exchange, representation, and conflict in colonizing Burma. In addition, this story of objects-based evangelism suggests that among the most powerful catalysts of religious change in the Christian-Buddhist encounter were objects themselves. While Ingalls continued to incorporate theology into her religious discussions and to distribute tracts that made arguments against Buddhism, her most popular methods relied on the metal dog she called "America" and her adorned tree shrine. By examining these two objects and the work they did for (and perhaps to) Ingalls, this essay argues for the power of "things" in the religious life of nineteenth-century Burma.⁵

This investigation into the central objects in Ingalls' missionary work asks: To what extent did this American evangelist adopt local material culture and its attendant practices to promote Protestantism? And, to what extent did local religious practices convert Ingalls? In other words, did Ingalls use Burmese-style objects as a kind of gimmick to draw people into Christianity or did the country's popular, image-based practices transform Ingalls' Christianity into a Southeast-Asian "religion"?⁶ This investigation finds that while Ingalls saw her work as a kind of gimmick in the service of God, the extraordinary popularity of her mission station was the result of her ideas- and texts-based evangelism changing into an evangelism of multi-sensory communal activities. Ingalls' mission transformed to become more familiar and attractive to those who affiliated themselves with it. In this way, Ingalls' Baptist Christianity became a kind of Burmese religion.⁷

1.1. Marilla Baker Ingalls, 1827–1902

Marilla Baker (pictured in Figure 1) was born in Greenville, New York on 25 November 1827. She came of age during a time when Protestant newspapers and magazines all over the northeast were publishing regular accounts of foreign missions. Stories of pioneering evangelists, exotic landscapes, and foreign cultures filled front pages and sparked imaginations.⁸ Among the home and foreign missions in operation in the first half of the nineteenth century, the Baptist mission to Burma was one of the most, if not *the* most, publicized on account of being the very first intercontinental mission, featuring the celebrity missionary couple Ann and Adoniram Judson. The Judsons initially gained attention by establishing the mission in 1813 after being turned away from India; they came to fame in the 1820s through stories of Adoniram's imprisonment during the First Anglo-Burmese War of 1824;

⁵ This essay's attention to the power of objects is informed by scholarship on visual and material cultures of religion—specifically the work on American religious history by Sally Promey and David Morgan and the work on Asian religions by John Kieschnick and Richard Davis—as well as by Arjun Appadurai's scholarship on things as social networks. See [5–8].

⁶ The Burmese language has no direct equivalent to the term "religion." The language of the country's sacred Buddhist texts, Pali, has the term "*sāsana*," which is often translated as "religion," but as Alicia Turner's study of religion in colonial Burma shows, the two terms "were distinct, if overlapping, categories operating at the same time." Turner defines *sāsana* "as the life of the Buddha's teachings after he is gone...the condition of possibility for making merit and liberation." By focusing on this Buddhist term, Turner is able to demonstrate how, in colonial Burma, "religion as a category was not static but a moving container for a variety of discourses and projects that was itself undergoing continuing redefinition" ([9], pp. 1, 9, 10).

⁷ This argument for the combinatory nature of Ingalls' missionary methods builds on the work of Catherine Albanese, a historian of North American religions who argues that religious Americans have always been practitioners of changing religions that combine elements from earlier traditions with those adopted through contact with new forms. See her essay "Exchanging Selves, Exchanging Souls: Contact, Combination, and American Religious History" in [10].

⁸ The most prominent Baptist newspaper in the first half of the nineteenth century was *The Macedonian*, a publication dedicated to the coverage of missions, especially the Burma mission. *The Macedonian* not only featured columns on Baptist efforts and foreign religions, but it also showcased illustrations of various religious cultures that foreign missionaries encountered. For an analysis of *The Macedonian's* illustrations, see ([11], pp. 85–109). For more on the broader landscape of print technology and American evangelism, see [12].

and their deaths—Ann’s in 1826 and then Adoniram’s in 1850—were mourned in print by Baptist and mainstream publications.⁹



Figure 1. Marilla Baker Ingalls, 1827–1902 [4].

Around the time of Adoniram’s highly publicized death, Marilla Baker met Reverend Lovell Ingalls, a colleague of Adoniram on furlough in the States. Reverend Lovell Ingalls had returned from Burma after his first wife’s death, and he met Marilla at a missionary gathering in Racine, Wisconsin. “At that time,” remembered Rev. Edmund Merriam, a prominent Baptist writer and editor, Marilla “exhibited all the characteristics of personality which all who knew her so well remember. She was vivacious and enthusiastic, and it was remarked that she seemed the last person in the world fitted for the exacting duties of a missionary. But,” Merriam continued, “her very buoyancy and vivacity were in a large degree the qualities which made her missionary career so eminently useful and successful” [4]. The ebullient Marilla was only twenty-two when she married the then forty-two year old Lovell. Seven months later, in July 1851, the couple set sail for Burma, where Marilla would begin her study of Burmese religion and culture. Close, sensitive, and creative participation in local communities combined with her lively personality would come to distinguish her in the missionary field. In a photograph of Marilla (Figure 1) featured alongside Merriam’s obituary, she is portrayed with a steady gaze and modest dress, suggesting her maturation from a young missionary’s wife into a dignified missionary in her own right.

After only five years of being married to Marilla and working with her as a Rangoon-based missionary, Lovell died. Lovell left behind a school-age daughter from his first wife, and so Marilla returned to the States to arrange for the girl to have an American education. During her time aboard *The Hornet*, the ship that took her from the Bay of Bengal to the English Channel over the course of three months, the newly widowed Marilla Ingalls wrote the book that would become her first published account of the peoples of the Southeast Asian country: *Ocean Sketches of Burmah*.¹⁰ Over three-hundred pages long and exhibiting forty-two illustrations, *Ocean Sketches of Burmah* gives lively accounts of Burmese and Karen culture that speak to how much she had learned in her first years of field work. Ingalls addressed the book to her “dear young friends” and presented it as a collection of colorful children’s tales. But its rich descriptions of Buddhist philosophies and practices, its insights into Burmese court intrigues and British colonial politics, and its celebration of the virtues of Burma’s newly converted Christian communities appear constructed to appeal to adult readers. Using the frame of a children’s book, Ingalls managed to showcase a sophisticated portrait of a complex Buddhist society with scarce, but hopeful, opportunities for Christian conversion [1].

⁹ For more on the Judsons and their relationship to American Protestant print culture, see [13].

¹⁰ *Ocean Sketches of Burmah* was the first of many texts Ingalls published. In addition to English-language publications, Ingalls also published in Burmese, including an 1883 Burmese-language book on the life of Christ with the English title *Narrative of Jesus* [14].

During her 1857–1858 trip back to the States, Ingalls made arrangements with the American Baptist Missionary Union to go back to Burma, this time as an independent missionary. Ingalls returned to Rangoon in 1859, but rather than stay at the large urban mission station there, she decided to venture to the remote village of Thonze, on the border of the Tharawaddi District. At that time, Thonze could only be reached by a two-day boat trip from Rangoon along the Hlaing River. Baptist authorities in the Burma mission discouraged Ingalls from going to such an isolated location without a husband or American male colleague. However, Ingalls went anyway, and stayed there working as an independent missionary for forty-three years. During her life in Thonze, Ingalls cultivated a large Christian community that produced Burmese preachers and missionaries, but she never had any American male missionaries in residence.¹¹ It was in this unorthodox arrangement in far-flung Thonze, that Ingalls' unique objects-based evangelism emerged.

In addition to her relative missionary sovereignty, the national conditions in Burma shaped Ingalls' distinct methodology. Over the course of her long and storied missionary career, Ingalls watched as Burma transformed from a Buddhist kingdom into a British colony. When she first arrived in Burma, the country was on the brink of the Second Anglo-Burmese War, which resulted in the British occupation of all of Lower Burma and in the newly crowned King Mindon building a new capital city in Mandalay. Three decades later, in 1885, the Third Anglo-Burmese War delivered the final blow to the Konbaung Dynasty and subsumed the entire country into British India.¹² These wars do not simply mark Burmese military and political history; they are also significant for Burma's religious history, as the country had, up to this point, a millennium-old tradition of Buddhism being dependent on a patron king. As the Burmese kingdom became weakened over the course of the nineteenth century, the Buddhist people of Burma were concerned with how the Buddha's teachings would survive without royal support for monks and the maintenance of shrines. Once the final Konbaung king was deposed by the British, lay communities began taking over the religious work previously assigned to royalty, thereby transforming the dynamic of patronage and practice in Burmese Buddhism. As Alicia Turner has shown, the shifting of religious responsibility from kings onto non-ordained men and women gave rise to the development of new technologies—such as print media and voluntary associations—which helped promote the classic Buddhist traditions of preserving the Buddha's teachings and regulating the ethical conduct of monastic and lay communities [9]. In addition to these changes to Burmese Buddhist culture, the empowerment of the British in Burma lent new political and economic value to Christian affiliation. The British Raj, for example, began military recruitment in Christian Karen communities. And those educated in mission schools learned English and the etiquette of Western society—skills attractive on the new colonial job market.¹³

The colonization and modernization of Burma was most visible to Ingalls and her fellow townspeople when the British laid the country's first rail line through Thonze in 1877, turning the village into a bustling station town. Once Thonze became a stop on the Irrawaddy Valley State Railway, it was only a few hours from Rangoon. The new train line quickly connected Thonze to the urban centers powering the British occupation. Sir Dietrich Brandis, the renowned German tropical forester who worked with the British Imperial Forestry Service in Burma and elsewhere in colonial India,

¹¹ Rather than posing a threat to the male leadership in the American Baptist mission to Burma, Ingalls' work as an independent female missionary seems to have served as a model for single women in the field. In a letter to the Executive Committee of the American Baptist Missions held in the archives of the American Baptist Historical Society, Abram Rose—a leader in the mission to the Pwo Karen—wrote, "If young ladies wish to be independent like Mrs. Ingalls and do as they like, I have not the least objection. Only but they like Mrs. Ingalls go by themselves to a new field and carry on the work as does Mrs Ingalls..." [15]. Rose is using the example of Ingalls to respond to the development of organizations dedicated to the support and promotion of female missionaries. Clearly, there was a concern among the American Baptist male leadership about women's missionary work. Ingalls, however, did not seem to compound that concern, but rather she was an example of what the male leadership saw as acceptable work for single women: solitary labor in a new mission field.

¹² For more on the religious influences on Burma's last kingdom, the Konbaung Dynasty, see [16].

¹³ An example of British colonial strategies regarding the Karen is found in a text published right after the Third Anglo-Burmese War by Donald Mackenzie Smeaton of the Bengal Civil Service that argues why the Karen are suitable British allies [17].

recalled how Ingalls responded to the arrival of the railway by creating “two circulating libraries, with their reading rooms well supplied with the latest literature” [18]. Brandis remembered how she had “arranged for lectures to them, delivered by missionaries and others,” and wrote that her circulating libraries “remain as monuments of her loving interest” in the “English and Eurasian station masters, guards and other employees of the railway” [18]. Brandis concluded that Ingalls was “greatly missed and mourned by the railway servants of Lower Burma” [18]. His remarks hint at Ingalls having taken the new British railway and transformed it into a missionary machine with the same evangelical drive and creative approach that reshaped her Thonze mission into a popular center of powerful religious objects.

1.2. *Situating Ingalls in an Academic Landscape*

The story of Marilla Baker Ingalls and her objects-based evangelical work is a part of larger story of encounter told by scholars of the religious histories of North America and Burma. While no other historian of American religion or Burmese Buddhism has studied Ingalls’ legacy, work in these fields has explored important related issues such as the appeal of Buddhism in nineteenth-century America, missionary theories of Christ and culture, and religious developments during Burma’s transition from a Buddhist kingdom to a British colony. Before diving into Ingalls’ writings, I pause here to reflect on the important scholarship on which this paper builds and to suggest how Ingalls’ story contributes to, and occasionally challenges, that scholarship.

North American communities first started learning about Buddhist teachings and history in the mid-nineteenth century through academic reports on Asian texts and popular writing enchanted by Indian religions. The groundbreaking study of this earliest period of interest in Buddhism is Thomas Tweed’s *The American Encounter with Buddhism, 1844–1912* [19]. Tweed reveals how Americans who favored Buddhism saw themselves as dissenting from American culture, but that their engagement with the religion ultimately consented to basic Victorian values such as individualism, optimism, and activism. Tweed’s study dismisses missionaries outright because he contends that that missionaries, unlike the Buddhist sympathizers and adherents at the center of his study, produced almost entirely hostile interpretations of the Asian religion. While it is certainly true that many missionaries, including Ingalls, penned antagonistic descriptions of Buddhist practices and philosophies, this is only part of the story. As the first Americans to spend time in Buddhist cultures and observe living Buddhist practices, missionaries expressed a wide range of attitudes toward the Asian religion. Ingalls’ writings about Buddhists peoples and practices form a case study in which a foreign evangelist develops keen knowledge of Asian religions and in which an Asian community transforms an expression of American Christianity.¹⁴

Whereas the study of Buddhism in nineteenth-century America has not yet taken missionary materials into full consideration, these materials have been explored by scholars of American evangelism. Foremost among them is William Hutchison, whose *Errand to the World* analyzes debates about Christian missions and their attendant cultural transmissions [21]. Hutchison shows how the nineteenth-century missionary movement was driven by both a passion for Christian expansion and a zealous belief that Americans had a distinct responsibility to save the world. Hutchison focuses on theoretical debates among American-based, male theologians and omits analysis of the writings of foreign missionaries. When we begin to explore writings of American missionaries in the field—writings that circulated widely through the popularizing Protestant press—we see that foreign evangelists’ approaches to promoting Christianity vibrantly engaged the discussions about

¹⁴ At the same time as the Americans in Tweed’s study were encountering Buddhism in scholarship and popular writing, Europeans were working to define “Buddhism” as a world religion alongside Christianity. As Tomoko Masuzawa has demonstrated, Europe’s discovery of Buddhism was primarily through texts and their attendant philological labors. Masuzawa argues that the form of Buddhism that was constructed during this encounter was caught up in Europe’s concern for its “own standing in the spiritual topography...of the world” ([20], p. 143).

methodology at the center of Hutchison's study. Furthermore, by taking seriously the work of female missionaries like Ingalls, we see that women in Burma were at the forefront of the exploration of evangelical possibilities that Hutchison casts as the work of male, home-based promoters.

The final area of scholarship upon which this article builds is the area covering religious innovations in Burma around the turn of the twentieth century. This was a time of great cultural change as the country navigated its new colonial situation. Two recently published monographs have significantly opened up this area—Alicia Turner's *Saving Buddhism* and Erik Braun's *Birth of Insight* [9,22]. These works reveal how Burmese leaders and communities drew on Buddhist traditions to renegotiate the conditions of British rule and create new religious resources suited to modernizing Burma. *Saving Buddhism* and *Birth of Insight* form a part of a growing field of scholarship on Burmese Buddhism that has focused on politically influential documents such as royal chronicles, monastic productions, and urban newspapers.¹⁵ There certainly remains important work to be done with these documents, but the American Baptist mission to Burma offers a previously unstudied wealth of evidence of other forms of religious activity in the country. This evidence provides rare glimpses into everyday life not seen in court histories or colonial records. Missionary archives have preserved an abundance of detailed accounts of cultural interactions at far-flung Baptist posts and along itinerant preaching tours. These conversations feature elderly village women with strong Buddhist convictions, young city men curious about white foreigners, and families on their way to make merit at local pagodas. We must keep in mind that the vast majority of these missionary interactions were translated into English and further filtered through the process of their American authors penning them for diaries, letters to friends back home, or official accounts to be published in Baptist periodicals. Even with this Protestant rendering, this large collection of social history documents still contains evidence of how religious ideas and practices were expressed by the peoples of Burma who interacted with the Baptist mission. Ingalls' writings are a prime example of a missionary archive revealing a unique perspective on religious conflict, collaboration, and change in nineteenth-century Burma.

Let us now turn to those writings and the story they tell about how the Baptist mission celebrated as the most successful converter of Buddhist monks relied on an enshrined dog statue and a worshipped sign tree.

2. Ingalls' Dog Statue

On festival days, Ingalls' dog statue would have hundreds of visitors. Even on regular days, the dog was bound to attract at least a few passersby who had come to see the strange creature at the edge of the American religious woman's land. The way Ingalls told it, the life-size dog statue would gather people around it because it seemed, at first glance, to be real. The missionary would stand by as new visitors recoiled in fear or approached the dog to offer food. When they got close enough to see it was made of cast iron, they would ask Ingalls why she kept the dog. This was when the Baptist missionary would launch into a lesson on the folly of idol worship. Just as her dog statue could not chase away thieves, Ingalls argued, lifeless Buddha statues could not help devotees who came to the statues with prayers and offerings. She called the dog her "dumb teacher," because, she said, it wordlessly instructed countless Burmese visitors on the uselessness of venerating images [25].

Ingalls' writing about her dog statue can read like a stereotypical evangelical tale of a Christian missionary enlightening ignorant heathens about their superstitions. However, when we study her accounts in the religious and political context of her Burmese mission, a more complex story emerges. This story tells of the power of religious objects to attract attention and inspire activity in nineteenth-century Burma. While Ingalls presented the dog statue as a device to demonstrate the

¹⁵ This field of scholarship on Burmese Buddhism includes key works such as Patrick Pranke's study of Buddhist history writing, Michael Charney's work on the Buddhist literati in the Konbaung Dynasty, and Jason Carbine's analysis of stability and disruption in Burmese Buddhist monasticism [16,23,24].

powerlessness of idols, her essay also reveals how local image practices became a part of Ingalls' missionary work, transforming it from aniconic, text-based evangelism to religious activity that centered on venerated objects. While Ingalls may have intended for her dog to teach people to stop worshipping false gods, the dog seems to have also joined a local pantheon of religious figures.

To investigate the work the canine did for Ingalls and for its Burmese visitors, let us turn to "My Dumb Teacher," Ingalls' most detailed account of her famous dog and the only publication that included a photograph of the statue (Figure 2). In this essay for the May 1896 issue of the *Baptist Missionary Magazine*—the premier publication of the American Baptist Missionary Union—Ingalls wrote about a day when she was at her home in Thonze and heard outside a half-dozen people approaching her dog. She recognized one of the men, so she invited the group onto her land. The man she knew, another man, and a woman accepted her invitation. As they got closer to the dog, they exclaimed "He haw!" [25]. the woman "seemed timid," so Ingalls told her, "though he is chained up to that post, give him something to eat and he will not harm you" [25]. Ingalls then wrote that the woman, who was carrying a tray of dried meat and vegetables, "walked up and put down the tray at the feet of the dog, but then she crouched back and looked up into the face of the dog and saw that it was a dumb image and picked up her tray" [25]. The Burmese visitors asked why the dog was there, and it was at this point that Ingalls "put questions to them" about the power of statues. Here is their exchange, according to Ingalls:

"Is he not here to guard me from thieves and *dacoits*, and help me in various ways?"

"But he cannot do anything," they replied.

"Don't deride my American dog," I continued. "See, he has ears and eyes and feet," and then we got up and peered into those ears and eyes. It all came back to me. They smote upon their breasts a little and put up their hands to me in a respectful attitude.

"We do not like to dispute the great teacheress but it is impossible for this dumb image to hear you or see you, or do anything for you." [...]

"I am only following out your customs if I trust in a dumb image, and you are right. It cannot hear me when I ask for protection and it cannot guard me while I sleep."

"Ah! That is good," said the man, "your words are now true and wise and good."

I continued "It cannot do anything for you or any other person," and then I told them that I had brought it here to show up their false customs of making an idol, calling it a god and trusting in it for help. They said their god was consecrated, but I told them it was not changed in power after it came from the maker's hand, and that my old dog passed through a *fire-consecration* when he was made, but he had no life or power [25].



Figure 2. Ingalls' Dog Statue [25].

We can see how this episode might have amused the American readers of the *Baptist Missionary Magazine*. The anecdote depicts unnamed Asian individuals being tricked into thinking a cast-iron

dog is real. Readers also might have delighted in the image of Ingalls craftily suggesting the protective power of the dog, thereby putting her visitors in the position of explaining that a statue cannot hear commands or chase away thieves. From this point of view, Ingalls cleverly got the Buddhists to make the very argument that Christian missionaries were making against treating Buddha statues as though they were mighty beings able to respond to prayers.

Another point of view, however, is glimpsed by the story's inclusion of the Burmese explanation of the difference between her dog statue and their enshrined Buddhas. The visitors told Ingalls that their statues were consecrated, by which they meant that their Buddha images had gone through a special ritual in order to bring the power of the Buddha into the objects. This consecration argument draws from a Buddhist understanding of what makes an object sacred: a special ritual process executed by a religious specialist that infuses the statue with the extraordinary capacities of the Buddha.¹⁶ This Burmese explanation of how statues that begin as mundane sculptures become sacred objects counters the Baptist's equation of her dog with their Buddhas. It also suggests that there is more going on in their way of approaching the dog than a simple mistake. Specifically, it pushes us to ask why the woman might have gone to place dried meat and vegetables in front of the dog in the first place and then decided against it.

Ingalls suggested that the Burmese woman really believed her statue was a living, breathing, dangerous dog that she could pacify with something to eat. But then when she got close enough to see it was made out of cast iron instead of flesh and bones, she knew it would be pointless to feed it. But what if we posit that the woman knew that the dog was metal the whole time? What if she was not so easily fooled into thinking that a dog statue was a real dog? In that case, what would be the point of offering real food to a dog statue? Ingalls' typical American reader may not have understood this as anything besides ignorant superstition, but those with knowledge of Burmese culture would have immediately recognized this action as a common ritual.

Throughout the country, Buddhist statues and shrines to the local spirits known as "nats" continue to attract edible offerings. It is an especially common tradition to present food to nats because they are understood to cause mayhem when upset. Nats are said to do things like flood a village's crops if its villagers fail to show signs of respect as they pass the nats' abode.¹⁷ But regular offerings of food and signs of respect are meant to pacify nats and coax them into helping their devotees by doing things like bringing about good fortune or curing an illness. Even when we put to the side questions of how much these Burmese people really believed in spirits, it is important to keep in mind how their community had a tradition of presenting food to images and objects recognized as special. This act of generosity and sacrifice is a venerable and well-established practice in Burma and in other cultures with Buddhist traditions. One gives up a portion of one's possessions in order to benefit the larger Buddhist tradition, the local community, one's family, or oneself. The common Burmese practice of making offerings at holy sites is understood as a wholesome ("kusala" in Pali, "kutho" in Burmese) act that generates merit ("puñña" in Pali, "pon" in Burmese). Americans in the nineteenth-century mission were especially interested in this particular offering practice and often asked Burmese people about it. The most common response Burmese informants gave was a simple explanation that they

¹⁶ Kate Crosby's overview of Buddhist consecration practices in Theravada cultures summarizes the practice of consecrating a Buddha statue as one in which the statue "is empowered not through the Buddha himself being immanent in the statue, but through a process of empowerment, in which the Buddha's powers are transmitted into the statue" ([26], p. 53).

¹⁷ One of the most famous nat stories in Burma is about Min Mahagiri, a renowned blacksmith in the Pyu kingdom. In this story, the Pyu king marries Min Mahagiri's sister, Taunggyi Shin, so that he can lure the famous blacksmith to enter his city and then have him executed by fire. Taunggyi Shin is so upset when this happens that she throws herself onto the flames engulfing her brother's murdered body. Their angry spirits then live in a tree, so the king orders that tree cut down and thrown in the Irrawaddy River. The tree trunk washes up in the kingdom of Pagan, and the Burmese king there—inspired by a dream—carves their images onto the trunk and establishes the trunk on the sacred Mount Popa so that the nats can be appeased there. For more on this particular nat story and the Burmese nat tradition at large, see [27].

were performing these image-focused acts because this is what their ancestors did. Presenting food at shrines, they told the Americans, is understood to be traditional, virtuous, and meritorious conduct.¹⁸

Returning now to the Burmese woman's behavior in front of the dog statue, let us consider a scenario in which she goes to present food because she thinks it is a kind of nat shrine. In this mindset, the woman sees a statue at the edge of the land belonging to a religious leader and determines that she should make an offering there as she would at other sacred shrines. But once she gets close enough to see that the statue does not have other food offerings in front of it, she realizes that it is not sacred and therefore not fit for an act of sacrifice.

Unlike her American readers, Ingalls would have been familiar with this scenario of a Burmese person offering food to a statue. She even gave explicit evidence of her knowledge of the particularities of Buddhist image worship when she said that her dog "passed through a *fire-consecration*" [25]. By using Buddhist ritual terminology, Ingalls worked to equate her dog to Burma's sacred Buddhas.¹⁹ She then tried to contend that even after going through a fire ritual, her dog did not have any agency. Burmese Buddha statues, Ingalls wanted to demonstrate, are just as powerless as a metal dog, and therefore people should stop worshipping them and become followers of Jesus Christ. However, is this the only message coming across? Was Ingalls not also posing her dog as an enlightened being with an extraordinary way of connecting people to a powerful god? By resembling Burmese shrines and being said to have gone through a fire-consecration, was the Baptist's dog proving idols powerless or was it taking on the power of an idol?

Ingalls added one more detail that exhibited her extensive knowledge of Burmese religious traditions and her recognition that her dog had become a kind of local shrine. Ingalls wrote that the dog stood "in front of a group of crotens and roses, sun or rain, night and day" [25]. We might dismiss this mention of the roses and the flowering shrub more commonly spelled "croton" as a simple literary technique meant to enchant readers with a colorful picture of the Southeast Asian landscape. However, the juxtaposition of the religious authority's statue with a collection of flowers mirrors Burmese image practices. Just as Ingalls would have been very familiar with Burmese food-offering rituals, she also would have known that the other common ritual offerings are flowers. Buddhist sacred spaces have been marked by blossoms as far back as the historical record will take us. Early Buddhist texts regularly describe the pilgrimage sites housing the Buddha's relics as adorned with flowers, and anthropological evidence features artwork illustrating Buddhist statues in front of flowers.²⁰ By putting flowers in front of her dog statue in this Burmese Buddhist context, Ingalls must have known the dog appeared as an adorned, venerated image.

What was the result of all this religious mimicry? Ingalls wanted to say that it ultimately led to Burmese people abandoning idol-worship and converting to Christianity. She wrote that "God, the living God, is able to use various means to bring light to his creatures" [25]. Here she suggested that she was serving this God by means of the dog statue. In this kind of ends-sanctify-the-means argument, Ingalls presented her unconventional evangelical work as eventually resulting in Christian conversion.

¹⁸ For more on moral conduct and merit-making in Theravada Buddhism, see Kate Crosby's chapter "The Good Buddhist" in her book on Theravada Buddhism [26].

¹⁹ Just as Ingalls was familiar with Buddhist fire consecrations, Ingalls also knew about the lowly status of dogs in Burma, and therefore how insulting it would be to compare the Buddha to a dog. Ingalls wrote that "the name of 'dog' is a little offensive to the Burmans, so I often qualify and explain the comparison used" [25]. Ingalls is not only telling her readers something about this relevant point of Burmese language and culture (that the Burmese term for dog, "hkway," was used derogatively), but she is also explicitly saying that she does more to contextualize her methods and tailor them for the Burmese community than the example in her essay might suggest. Ingalls therefore makes sure to publicly acknowledge that the exchanges she reports omit parts of the interaction between her and her Burmese interlocutors. This point about Burmese attitudes towards dogs also raises the question about how the Burmese identified the statue. Perhaps those that performed reverential acts toward it saw the cast-iron creature as something other than a common canine. Perhaps it looked to the Burmese like a more esteemed animal, such as a tiger or a lion. Unfortunately, we do not have the evidence necessary to support this hypothesis.

²⁰ Bilinda Devage Nandadeva's study of Sri Lankan manuscript covers, for example, demonstrates the importance of flower offerings in Theravada ritual traditions [28].

Indeed, her essay features a follow-up scene in which the man from the group returns to Ingalls' property to "show up the dog and convince his other friends of the folly of idol-god worship" [25]. Ingalls reported that the man told her "that he and the other couple had never gone to the idol-god since that day" [25]. Ingalls was clearly suggesting that the Christian teachings she gave with the aide of her dog statue eventually led people to abandon idol worship.

However, rather than leave it to Ingalls to tell us the meaning of her work, let us look again at the evidence of the religious encounters embedded in the essay. In the follow-up scene with the man described as trying to persuade his friends of the foolishness of image veneration, that man accepted a few theological leaflets from Ingalls and then made a telling exclamation: "*That* has done more for me than these kinds of books!" [25].

Ingalls replied to the man's praise for the dog statue by inviting him back to "get lessons from the dumb teacher" [25]. The man said he would accept her invitation and stated that "at the great festival last year I heard the dog had over three hundred visitors, men, women and children" [25].

"This was true," Ingalls told her readers. "On great occasions, many of the district people come in to look at him, and there is not a day but what he has some visitors" [25].

In the end, the man seemed most impressed with the hundreds of people who came out to visit the dog. It was the dog's power to attract visitors that helped win the man over. To understand more about why the popularity of a statue on a religious site would have been so impressive to the local Burmese community, we must consider the larger context of Baptist encounters with Burmese image practices.

Ingalls and the Headless Buddha

Ingalls' famous dog and its messages about idols were the result of the missionary's decades of interactions with Buddha images and their worshippers. Like other American evangelicals in the country, Ingalls went to popular gathering places such as bazaars and pagodas to distribute texts and discuss religion. Her essay "My Dumb Teacher" opens with a scene of Ingalls out at a pagoda conversing with people about the statues occupying the shrine grounds. "I found that everyone believed in idols," Ingalls wrote [25]. At the pagoda, Ingalls read Christian material aloud and talked for a long time about its messages, "but," she concluded, "they were joined to their idols" [25]. Ingalls felt "tired and hoarse" and sat down on a bench in front of a niche [25]. When she saw that there was a locked door in front of the alcove, she asked about it. Her interlocutors explained that "a crazy man had knocked off the head of the god" [25]. This prompted a discussion about what Ingalls described as "the dumb idol" [25].

The Buddhists "insisted that although it was not Gautama himself, it was a holy object, and must be ranked as a god" [25]. Ingalls said that she "tried to tell them of Jesus the Savior, but it was no new story to them, and they only listened to [her] out of respect" [25]. A woman explained to Ingalls that "you are our old friend, and we know that you love us and believe what you say" [25]. The woman then "looked into a niche, and her eyes brightened with pride, and she continued: 'Our forefathers called these *gods*, and in some way or other they must be sacred'" [25]. Ingalls responded to the woman's insistence on the sacredness of the statues by arguing, that "they cannot do anything for you" [25]. In this account, the Buddhist woman politely assured the American of the community's affection for her and respect for her Christian convictions. She then gazed at the holy statue and explained how her ancestors had designated the statues divine, which meant that the statues were also divine for this woman and her community.

After her day of talking about Buddha statues at the pagoda, Ingalls finally got up to leave, taking one last look before she left. She saw "the proud woman...saying her prayers before the locked-up door of the headless image" [25]. Ingalls explained that she had "talked with this woman very much for over twenty-five years" in an effort to convert her, and therefore when Ingalls "sat down to rest in [her house,] [she] meditated and was very sad" [25]. However, while she "was sitting there, [she] heard a jabbering and looked out and saw half a dozen men and women looking at [her] New York

dog” [25]. Ingalls then followed this story of being sad about the venerated headless Buddha with her story of being gratified by her popular teaching dog.

Ingalls reported these scenes of religious statues for the *Baptist Missionary Magazine*. We can imagine how, writing for that particular American Protestant audience, she wanted to stress the Burmese people’s love for her and portray them as somewhat simple in the way they followed the religious habits of their ancestors. With those readers in mind—readers interested in missionary work and targeted for financial and political support of foreign evangelism—Ingalls may have revised the exchange to make herself look hardworking and respected and the Burmese look ignorant and clearly in need of the teachings of Christ. I intend to suggest here that I do not think we can take missionary accounts as missionary fact. Scholars working with missionary materials should always take care to examine evangelical accounts for the ways they might have been manipulated to promote missionary concerns, such as the concern with portraying the Burma mission as a noble operation worthy of financial support. But this does not necessarily mean that the Burmese people depicted in this exchange are fictional characters created out of some evangelical fantasy of rescuing heathens with the message of Christ. We should recognize that there were real Burmese people that engaged missionaries and influenced the way the Americans understood Asian religious practices. These people were not in the habit of keeping journals, writing letters, or publishing essays, so, unfortunately, we do not have their versions of these exchanges. But even through the filter of Ingalls’ writing, we can detect expressions of resistance, debate, and edification on the part of the Burmese.

When we look for those Burmese expressions in Ingalls’ essay on her dog statue, we learn something about the ways that people who engaged with Ingalls’ mission understood the American, how they related to her methods, and how they challenged her assertions. Her kind of ethnographic reporting allowed for expressions of dispute from the people she was trying to convert. Ingalls tried to equate her dog statue to their Buddhas, but her Burmese interlocutors explained the crucial ritual process that their Buddha statues had gone through in order to be channels to the power of the Buddha. Ingalls replied by suggesting that her dog, too, was consecrated. She did this to try to diminish the power of the consecration ritual. Perhaps this line of argumentation worked for some people. Indeed, she told the story of the man to show how he gave up his practices of venerating Buddha statues. But we must also ask how the suggestion of the dog’s consecration helped infuse her dog with power rather than disempower the revered Buddha statues. Furthermore, the dog’s extraordinary popularity seems to have been the most impressive thing about it. By being the center of so much attention, the dog attracted unprecedented numbers of people to the Christian mission. But by using a statue to assemble a religious community and connect it to a higher power, Ingalls transformed her foreign American Baptist religion into a more familiar form—a religion of fascinating objects that pulled devotees together onto a holy site.

Thus, when we return to the central questions of this article—when we ask again why Ingalls was considered such a successful converter of Burmese Buddhists and what that teaches us about religious life in nineteenth-century Burma—we begin to see that Ingalls’ success was linked to the way her religion was reshaped into a kind of Southeast Asian religion with its powerful objects and associated practices. But it was not just the famous dog statue that helped reshape Ingalls’ mission station. A large and elaborately adorned banyan tree also rooted the Christian site in a tradition of Burmese shrine practices.

3. Ingalls’ Sign Tree

Ingalls called it her “great sign tree.” It was a massive banyan tree on the missionary’s property in Thonze. Tacked all around its wide, ropey trunk were biblical illustrations. One featured a tall, bearded Jesus standing next to his disciples in bright-white robes. Alongside these Christian visuals, Ingalls hung other images, including advertisements for American medicines and portraits of Queen Victoria. Passersby, noticing the adorned tree, would approach it to find a black-and-white photograph of that Empress of India in profile, wearing a voluminous gown, medals of honor, a white lace veil, and

a miniature diamond crown. Next to her was a Burmese translation of John 3:16: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” [29].

Before Ingalls’ sign tree showcased biblical quotations about everlasting life and Christian imagery, it was revered for the great spirits who were said to live in its branches. Locals coming to pay homage to it explained to the Baptist that “this tree was more than a hundred years old; that the great *nats* (spirits) had their headquarters up in the tree, and if they did not revere them and present offerings, they would send great calamity upon them” [29]. This banyan tree, like so many trees, rivers, and rocks throughout the country, was treated as an abode of spirits and a place to propitiate them. According to Ingalls’ 1897 essay on the tree, entitled “Our Great Sign Tree” and featuring a photograph of the banyan (Figure 3), the Burmese people who approached the tree had always, “taken off their sandals, closed their umbrellas, and had their heads bowed down in the attitude of Buddhist worshippers” [29]. It was not just their bared feet and respectful postures that signaled to Ingalls that they treated the tree as a sacred object. They also “emptied their trays of rice under the tree,” making the kinds of offerings Ingalls had seen in front of spirit shrines [28]. In her earlier essay on her dog statue, published a year before “Our Great Sign Tree,” Ingalls omitted mention of this food offering practice even as she described Burmese people giving dried meat and vegetables to her “dumb teacher.” Ingalls seems to have wanted to keep the image of Burmese people giving food to a cast-iron dog comical, to keep it a scene of ignorant Asian people mistaking a statue for a living being. But in her later essay, Ingalls shared her knowledge of Burmese food rituals to illustrate the tree as a non-Christian religious site about to be dramatically transformed into a Christian object. By examining the origin story she tells in “Our Great Sign Tree” and then investigating particular signs she featured on the tree’s trunk, we will consider how the shrine might have attracted Burmese people to the Baptist mission because it was adorned as a conduit to the divine powers of a foreign god. And we will also reflect on how much of Ingalls’ appeal as a religious leader may have come from her possession of magical things.

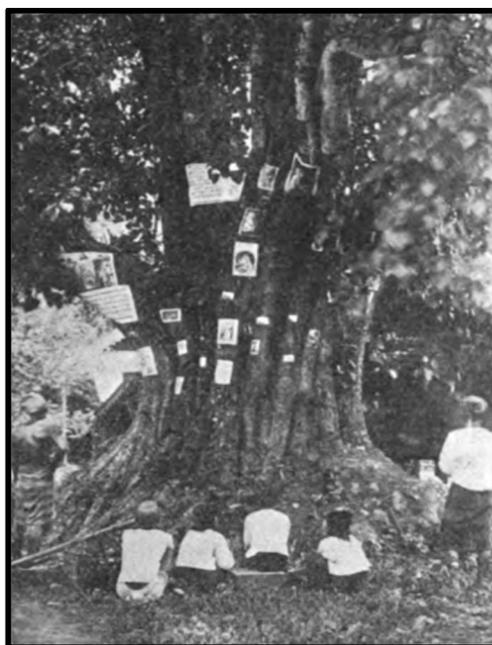


Figure 3. Ingalls’ Decorated Banyan Tree [29].

Ingalls’ encounters with the tree and its worshippers started with her using it to wager theological arguments for Christianity. Ingalls wrote how she “began to tell them about the holy and good God who created the tree, when [she] heard ‘Ahem!’ and ‘Ahem!’” [29]. She was interrupted by the Buddhist monk who ran the adjacent monastery. He was old and blind, but aware enough to notice

Ingalls at the base of the banyan tree, talking to local people about Jesus Christ. The very name of this foreign god was “an offence to his ear,” Ingalls explained, and caused a “scorn on his face” [29]. But “Our Great Sign Tree” depicts how the intrepid evangelist Ingalls boldly followed the disapproving monk back into his monastery. Ingalls wanted to assure him she was a friend, so she reached in her bag for a gift. All she had were her smelling salts. She gave them to the monk to sniff until tears came to his eyes, and he asked if the salts might be able to cure his blindness. Ingalls explained that she “cannot do what Jesus Christ did while he was here on earth” [29]. The monk was not interested in hearing about Christ, so she told him instead about her grandfather who had gone blind in old age.

Ingalls vividly described how her grandfather would find pleasure through his working senses by petting his dog and cat, playing with his grandchildren, eating sweet apples, walking amongst singing birds. Into this scene of sensory pleasure, Ingalls incorporated Christian teachings. She added that she read to her grandfather “out of a good book which had a gold edge and beautiful pictures” [29].²¹ The monk asked about the words in the adorned book, so Ingalls made a deal with him: if he would stop handling his Buddhist prayer beads, she would tell him. The monk agreed, and Ingalls proceeded to recite Romans 5:7–8, “for scarcely for a righteous man will one die, yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. But God commendeth his love toward us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us” [29]. First, she recited the verse about her foreign god dying for poor wrongdoers in the Buddhist canonical language Pali and then in Burmese. Ingalls wrote that the monk “was too proud to say he liked to hear the text,” but as she continued to visit him over the course of the year he would ask her “to ‘repeat [her] Pali,’ and would then add, and ‘now the Burmese’” [29].

Although this monk enjoyed hearing her recite scripture in Burma’s sacred Buddhist language and in the common vernacular, he never became one of Ingalls’ converts. Ingalls wrote that she “had no evidence that he felt that he was a sinner. He was a Buddhist priest, and rested on that” [29]. Ingalls may not have gotten him to think of himself as a man in need of Christian salvation, but she did earn his affection. Ingalls’ visits to the monk and his spirit tree continued until the elderly monk’s remaining senses finally gave way and he prepared to die. Ingalls wrote that “as he knew the Christians needed a better ground for [her] house, he called up witnesses and made his monastery and place over to [her]...the head man of [their] village came and planted the flags at the four corners, and this was how [she] came into possession of this tree and the land for [their] chapel and mission house” [29]. Ingalls took care to note the flag-staking process by which land was measured and transferred to a new owner in Thonze, implying that she only ended up with the nat tree because it happened to be within those property lines. Perhaps she wanted to assure readers that she did not actively acquire a local spirit shrine. However, we should also recognize that she explicitly states that the monk never converted to Christianity. Surely she could have suggested as much if she was interested in recasting the story to improve her reputation as a successful converter of Buddhist monks. If the story is not designed to spotlight Ingalls transforming dedicated Buddhists into enlightened Christians, how else might we read it?

As with Ingalls’ writings about her dog statue, we can see how the account of her tree works to entertain the American audience that supported foreign mission work—the readers whose donations and public encouragement of international evangelism allowed the Burma mission to continue through the hardships of the American Civil War and Reconstruction.²² Ingalls’ essay complements the

²¹ By describing the bible as a book with “a gold edge and beautiful pictures” Ingalls may have been intentionally drawing a comparison to the Burmese *Kammawa* (“*Kammavāca*” in Pali), a Theravada Buddhist ritual text that has a tradition in Burma of being highly ornamented with lavish elements such as gold paint and exquisite illustrations. The American Baptist mission to Burma collected several Burmese *Kammawa*, including one that Marilla Baker Ingalls obtained from the chest of King Thibaw, the last king of Burma. That *Kammawa* is held in the American Baptist Historical Society and features the gold paint, red lacquer, and nat illustrations emblematic of Konbaung-era *Kammawa*. An attached note explains how Ingalls took the manuscript from the king’s chest with “permission of a Court Minister” [30]. For more on the Burmese *Kammawa* see ([11], pp. 52–72).

²² For more on the history of the Baptists in the United States, see [31].

mission's claim that the Burmese are in need of salvation and that the Americans there are uniquely suited to help them find it. The old, blind monk and the tree-worshipping locals are presented as almost comically ignorant. However, while her writing does not deviate from the ways in which the Burma mission justified its presence, we also see a kind of carefree delight in the way she tells her stories. Ingalls, after all, turned seventy years old the month "Our Great Sign Tree" was published. She was a renowned senior missionary, a woman who had spent over four decades living an extraordinary life in Asia and had the stories to prove it. Like her dog article, Ingalls' tree essay is one of these stories. It therefore offers less guarded glimpses of the strange religious transformations happening in Thonze. Two glimpses are particularly illuminating: Ingalls's gift to the monk and the medicinal advertisements her tree showcased.

Let us look again, then, at the exchange about the smelling salts. How might her gift of the pungent compound hint at other assumptions at play in the relationship between the missionary and the monk? Ingalls may have included the monk's question about curing blindness with a substance used for far simpler conditions like faintness to help caricature the Buddhist as naive. But we should also question why else this monk would think that Ingalls would have a powerful medicine in her bag. Did Ingalls have a reputation as a purveyor of curative substances? Ingalls took care to add that she told the monk that she could not do what Jesus had done. She surely did not want her readers to think she was going around Burma claiming the ability to cure blindness. Yet her writings do depict her telling Christian miracles stories and charming people with her foreign ways and adventurous spirit.²³ Furthermore, why were smelling salts the only thing she had in her bag? Did she have a fainting problem? Or did she find that they worked to both help people with alertness and to get their attention?

We know that Ingalls used other medicines in this way—to bring people physical relief and to attract them to Christian evangelism. She even hung advertisements for the specific medicines that missionaries would hand out alongside Christian texts. She wrote how the trunk of her banyan tree featured "the bright, flashing notice of the Perry Davis Pain Killer, and...the more modern one of Dr. Jaynes' medicines. They are a blessing to Burma, and go packed off with our Bible and tracts" [29]. Both Perry Davis's Pain Killer and the medicines of Dr. Jayne would have been familiar to Ingalls' readers, as they were popular remedies in North America. Dr. Jayne brand medicines were common treatments for a range of conditions from tapeworm and goiters to coughs and bruises. But even more popular, especially in Ingalls' mission, was Perry Davis's cure-all drug boldly called "Pain Killer."

Pain Killer was an analgesic made with opiates and ethyl alcohol. The medicine was common in North American pharmacies and homes and also with American foreign mission movements in the mid and late nineteenth century. Perry Davis' Pain Killer had multiple print ads, including text-only ones that ran in *The Baptist Missionary Magazine* declaring Pain Killer "The Most Popular Medicine Extant" [33]. Among the most popular of the medicine's illustrated advertisements at the time of Ingalls' sign tree, and the one that seems to match Ingalls' description of it as "bright" and "flashing," was an advertisement that showed a fleet of six fair-skinned cherubs carrying a brown glass medicine bottle over the globe. The largest ad copy reads "Joy to the World" above smaller type branding it "Perry Davis' Vegetable Pain Killer." The message is obvious: this medicine from Providence, Rhode Island (the only place marked on the map) delivers heavenly relief the world over. We also find a similar visual in a common advertisement for Dr. Jayne's medicines in which a porcelain-skinned boy angel carrying a white lily leans through a window into an advertisement for "The Best Blood Purifier for Scrofula, Cancer, Epilepsy, Dropsy, Skin and Liver diseases." Chubby baby angels were a visual

²³ One of the more charming of Ingalls' accounts is her journal entry from her visit to the royal city of Mandalay. There she visited the women's quarters of the palace and befriended a queen and a princess. Ingalls writes about their interest in her as a white woman who could speak Burmese and who possessed such curios as a stereoscope and geographies. In particular, her conversation with the queen (who was clearly well educated in Theravada scriptures) gives us a specific image of the kind of attraction Burmese people had to this odd Christian woman [32].

trope in nineteenth-century medicinal advertisements in the U.S., but what could these images have signaled to a Burmese audience?

I would like to suggest that the figures on the medicine advertisements appeared to Burmese visitors as a kind of foreign nat. Nats are commonly depicted in Burma as winged creatures, and Ingalls was certainly familiar with this key feature of nat iconography given how much time she spent evangelizing in places like pagodas that housed nat sculptures. It is possible, then, that Ingalls intentionally made the visual connection between the cherubs and the nats that the Burmese told her had resided in the venerable banyan tree. Ingalls' shrine tree, her professed connection to a foreign god, and her possession of powerful medicine may have positioned her as a kind of holywoman with extraordinary powers.²⁴ This is just conjecture, as we do not have any evidence of local people describing her posters in terms of nat imagery or explicitly saying that Ingalls wielded magical objects. Unfortunately, we do not have any records of anything that people thought about Ingalls' shrine other than Ingalls' own accounts of what brought people there and what they said about it.

In one of these accounts, there is a comment attributed to a Burmese woman that connects Pain Killer to the images on Ingalls' tree. This account suggests a link between the medicine Ingalls distributed and the way the posters on her tree brought about religious transformation. In an 1877 essay, "A Morning at Thongzai," Ingalls strung together a series of vignettes showing various people discussing religion with the missionary [35]. In one, a woman approaches Ingalls to ask, "Have you any Pain Killer? My boy has cut his foot; your medicine once cured my brother in two days so that he went about his work. I came for this, but I want to see those big pictures. The women who came the other day say they understand your doctrines much better since they saw Jesus and the man out of the grave, and those blind and deaf people" [35]. The Burmese woman's point here about visuals being more effective than doctrine echoes the argument made in Ingalls' dog shrine article by the man who said that the dog had done more for him than all of the texts he had received from the missionaries. By publishing two stories in which Burmese characters state that images are more persuasive than theology, Ingalls worked to demonstrate to her readers how valuable her religious objects were. To be sure, her cast-iron dog and her decorated banyan tree might have seemed like strange—perhaps even inappropriate—gateways into the Baptist mission, but Ingalls indicated that she had ingeniously used these objects to bring the Burmese to a Christian god. Harder to determine, though, is what all of this combinatory, objects-based evangelism meant for the Burmese who visited the mission and for those who joined its Christian community.

What we do know is that Ingalls' sign tree, just like her dog statue, developed a reputation in the local community, attracting people to gather at the mission station. These material and visual religious objects animated Ingalls' Christian community, making it known as a site of more converted Burmese Buddhist monks than any other Baptist mission station in the country. Certainly Ingalls' unique, ebullient personality and extraordinary commitment to a Burmese community were partially responsible for the expansion of Thonze's Christian population. The history of evangelism is replete with portraits of especially capable missionaries. Ingalls' writings beg alternative readings for her success, however. They suggest that her famous dog and decorated tree were catalysts for religious change in the Baptist mission that were even more powerful than her particular gifts of personality.

4. Conclusions

The Baptist mission to Burma always had an image problem. In a land densely populated with Buddha statues, spirit shrines, and ornamented pagodas, American evangelists struggled to draw attention to a god that could not be pictured. This contrast between the aniconism of Baptist

²⁴ Ingalls may even have been seen as a kind of *weikza-do*, a Burmese wizard. Patrick Pranke defines the Burmese *weikza-do* as "a master of esoteric arts and possessed of extraordinary magical potency," ([34], p. 467) who "can be supplicated for protection, for spiritual advice, and for mundane boons as well" ([34], p. 474). The key difference, however, is that *weikza-do* are considered Buddhists, whereas Ingalls explicitly identified as a Christian.

Christianity and the abundance of Burma's Buddhas was a persistent issue for the Protestant operation. The pioneering missionary Edward Stevens described this concern as one of the top three Burmese objections to the Baptists' religion. The primary objection, according to Stevens, was "the recent appearance of Christianity" in Burma; the second objection was "the invisibility of God, while their objects of worship are before their eyes;" and the third was that Christianity permits "killing animals for food," a stark contrast with the Buddhist vow to refrain from killing all beings, including those slaughtered for meat [36].²⁵ As Stevens pointed out, the number one argument Burmese missionaries heard against Christianity was that it was the religion of newly arrived foreigners whereas Buddhism and nat worship were the long-established traditions of their ancestors. Second to the problem of being alien was Christianity's problem of centering on an invisible god.

Protestantism's image problem was so pervasive that we even find it highlighted in one of the few extant accounts from the point of view of one of Ingalls' converted Buddhist monks. When this man was baptized into Ingalls' Christian congregation in Thonze in 1892, he spoke about his journey from Buddhism to Christianity. While he was sharing his experiences with those gathered for his baptism, Ingalls "abridged them down," on a bit of paper she found in her bag, and then sent that text to the *Baptist Missionary Magazine* [37]. Taking on the first-person voice of the convert, Ingalls' article tells how he had encountered Christians and their theology at several points throughout his life, but that he had always argued against Christianity. This account specifically notes that his most successful argument was that the Christian god was invisible, whereas Burmese gods and Buddhas could be seen everywhere in the form of sacred statuary and other artwork. As the convert put it in the article, he "could always bring the people to [his] side by the question, 'Show us your God'" [37]. This man continued to encounter Christian communities and teachings, but it wasn't until he joined a Baptist prayer circle after the death of his Christian brother-in-law that he said he put himself "in the hands of Jesus Christ" [37]. This conversion story is distinct in its scene of religious surrender during a funeral service, but it is familiar in its emphasis on the predicament Protestants faced when they could not show their god to the Burmese.

Like her fellow missionaries and those they sought to convert, Ingalls was well aware of the problem of proselytizing for an invisible god. She knew that Buddhist statues and nat shrines helped bind Burmese communities. But rather than simply sound arguments against idol worship, Ingalls found objects of her own to form her alternative Christian congregation. With its famous statue and adorned banyan tree, this congregation, then, must have seemed both familiar and new, both a religion with revered images *and* a religion of recently arrived and increasingly powerful foreigners.

After Ingalls' death in 1902, the American Baptist mission to Burma continued for another half-century. The British occupation that Ingalls witnessed winding its way through Burma along new rail lines, economic networks, and military campaigns lasted until the country gained independence in 1948. Christian evangelists continued their operations under British rule and into independence, but in 1966 the Socialist Republic of Burma expelled all foreign missionaries. Even after the Americans were sent home, Baptist communities carried on. Today, Baptist Christianity is one of the, if not *the*, most popular religions in Burma outside of Buddhism.²⁶ The country's Baptists, however, are almost entirely found among ethnic minorities, underscoring how extraordinary Ingalls' effect was on a community from the Burmese majority. During her forty years in Thonze, Ingalls' cast-iron dog and

²⁵ This does not mean that Burma's Buddhist communities were vegetarian. Animals, especially fish, were (and still are) common in Burmese diets, and monks are not forbidden from accepting offerings of prepared meat. But many Burmese Buddhists vow to refrain from killing animals themselves and instead buy butchered meat and previously caught fish.

²⁶ The World Religion Database counts 74.4% of Myanmar's population as Buddhist, 8.2% as Christian, 3.8% as Muslim, 1.7% as Hindu, 1.5% as Confucianists, and 9.5% as Ethnoreligionists [38]. The majority of the country's Christians are Baptist, but reliable demographic studies detailing the country's various Christian denominations do not exist. The "The World Factbook" published by the Central Intelligence Agency of the United States of America calculates a relatively low estimate for Myanmar's Christian population, 4%, and breaks that population down into Baptists, which it counts as 3%, and Roman Catholics as 1% [39].

sign tree drew many Burmese into her Baptist mission. However, in the end, there proved no way to compete with Shwedagon Pagoda and its Buddhism. The golden shrine still towers above Yangon, reflecting the persistent power of the country's religious objects.

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