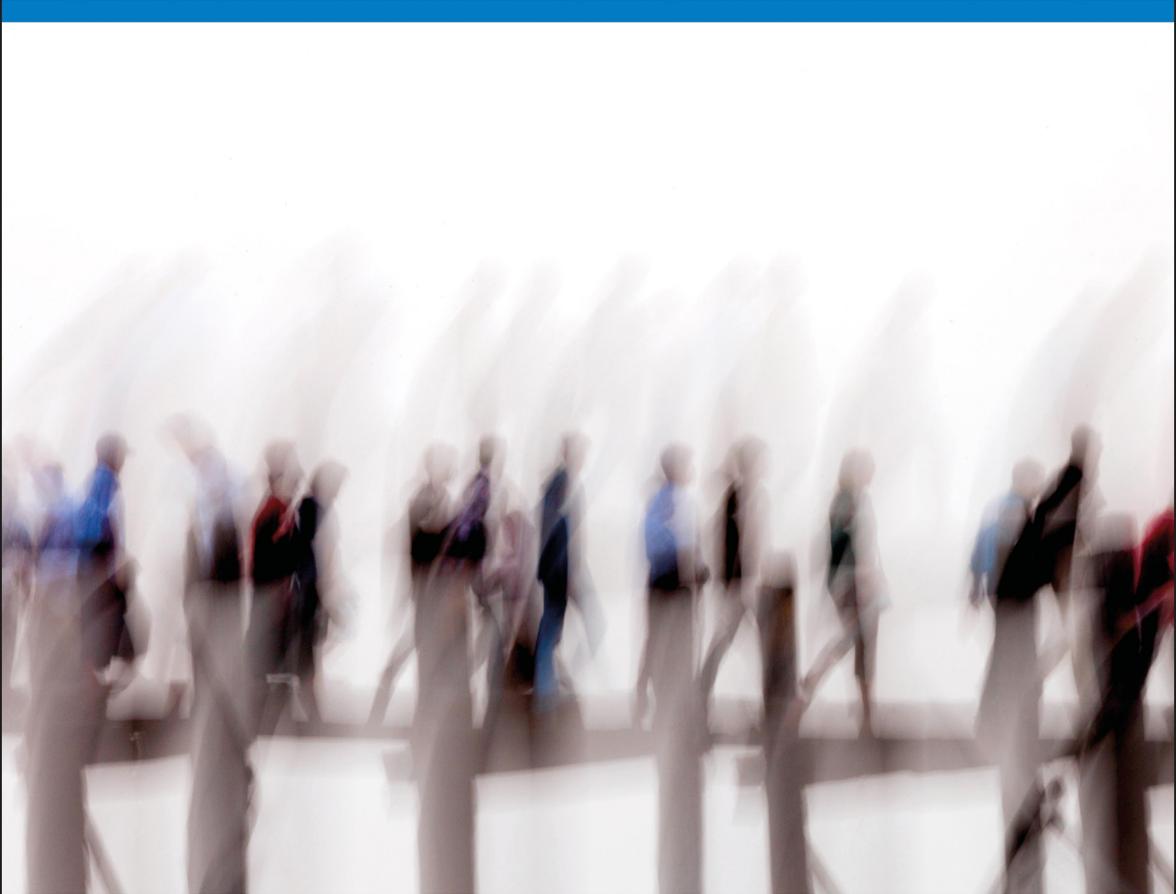


ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY IN MYANMAR

Contested Identities



EDITED BY
PERRY SCHMIDT-LEUKEL, HANS-PETER GROSSHANS & MADLEN KRUEGER

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in memoriam
Nehinpao Kipgen (1978–2021)

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Introduction

Madlen Krueger and Perry Schmidt-Leukel

News from Myanmar has often come as a surprise or even shock to those in the West. Apparently, such news falsifies one of the West's cherished romantic ideals: that among all the world religions at least Buddhism is indeed peaceful, tolerant and non-violent, not merely in theory but also in practice. 'Chosen for Peace: only the Buddhists' was the assessment of Johan Galtung, the nestor of Western peace studies (Galtung 1997–8: 440). In 2021, the military coup and its dreadful consequences dominated the news. Yet, many people know little about the background of the coup, its endorsement by nationalist monks and the larger context in which it is situated. Before the coup, the Western world was surprised to learn from the news about the ideological involvement of some nationalist Buddhists in the atrocities against Myanmar's Rohingya Muslims. That the Rohingya are not the only Muslims in Myanmar usually causes astonishment even among educated people, as does indeed the fact that the conflict between Buddhists and Muslims is only one strand of a complex web of tense and recurring violent conflicts between various ethnic and religious groups living inside the borders of this highly diverse country – a nation that came into existence in 1948 after more than sixty years of British colonialism and a brief, but cruel, Japanese occupation between 1942 and 1945.

Many of the tensions in Myanmar can be analysed in terms of different ethnic and religious identities woven into a fateful net of domination and defence, alleged and real threats, humiliation and distrust. Moreover, in this complicated fabric, the borderlines between different religious and ethnic identities are far less clear-cut than one might assume and some like to pretend. People belong to the same ethnicity but to different religions, or to the same religion but different ethnicities. And neither the religions nor the ethnicities are homogenous, stable

and neatly sorted entities but are also internally diverse. The construction of, and struggle for, one's own identity, as much as the construction of and struggle against the identity of the 'other', belongs to dynamic processes shaped by past memories and present experiences which often testify primarily to persistent political power games. Concluding that politics in Myanmar simply instrumentalizes religious and ethnic diversity would be too easy, since politics is itself a manifestation and part of the dangerous and frequently disastrous potential of contested identities, of a society in search of a way to live in and with its own diversity, a way that all of Myanmar's diverse people can at least accept or, ideally, benefit from.

One factor in Myanmar's conflict-laden search for its own multifaceted identity is the persistent attempt by powerful forces to establish a hierarchical model of diversity, that is to make the culture of the majority ethnic group, the Bamar (or Burman), the nation's dominant culture, and its religion, Buddhism, the nation's dominant faith – the latter being implemented in Myanmar's constitution of 2008. In practice, even the type of Buddhism that enjoys the privilege of the 'special position' granted by the constitution turns out to be that version of Theravāda Buddhism as practised by the Bamar people. Naturally, the process of Burmanization or Bamanization of the whole country meets with resistance from people of other faiths and ethnicities. So far, the mixed government of Aung San Suu Kyi's elected National League for Democracy (NLD) and the constitutionally empowered military (*Tatmadaw*) had not produced significant corrections to the direction of this process. Democracy thus turned into 'majoritarianism'. Aung San Suu Kyi already argued in one of her early essays that 'rulers must observe the teachings of the Buddha' even in a democratically elected government (Aung San Suu Kyi 1991: 177) and manifest the qualities of a traditional Buddhist monarch (*ibid.*: 170–3).

To analyse this complex web of diverse identities that are 'dependent upon religio-ethnic-cum-political interests and prerogatives' (Holt 2019: xi), we require a multi-perspectival approach that takes into account various disciplines such as history, political science, social anthropology, religious studies and the theologies of the actors. In a number of cases, the contributors to the current volume employ a combination of several such perspectives in their assessment of the situation and their efforts to envision possible solutions. Hence, the book includes both insider and outsider perspectives.

Part 1 of the book comprises three essays dealing with the close entanglement of ethnic and religious identities on the one hand, and the political development of Myanmar on the other. Mikael Gravers (Chapter 1) underlines the imagined

and politically driven nature of 'ethnicity' as a concept in the context of social categorization. He presents an analysis of the political conjunctures which had an impact on ethnic and religious identification, such as colonization and its divide-and-rule administration (showing, for example, that Muslim-Buddhist tensions have some of their roots in this period), Christian mission, Indian immigration, the anti-Indian riots of 1938, racial categorization after independence, the 1982 citizenship law introduced by Ne Win, and the 1978 Rohingya crisis. In his case study, Gravers focuses on Karen State and the effects on Karen Muslims and Karen Hindus of identity politics, nationalism and an ethno-religious hierarchy. Nehginpao Kipgen (Chapter 2) then provides a four-stage overview of the relation between the central government led by a Burman majority and the ethnic groups: from the country's independence to the first military coup in 1962; the years of military rule to the introduction of the seven-step roadmap towards democracy in 2003; the events leading up to the formation of a quasi-democracy in 2011; and the transfer of power to a civilian-led hybrid regime in 2016. As Kipgen argues, addressing the demands of ethnic minorities is not merely important but essential for peace, stability, development and the consolidation of democracy. This is supported by Saw Eh Htoo (Chapter 3), who analyses the principles of Ne Win's politics of Burmanization in more detail. Identifying the foundations of Ne Win's idea of a Burmese nation and his strategies of assimilation, accommodation and alienation, he underlines Ne Win's fateful legacy, which still functions as the main barrier to the development of a stable peace in Myanmar.

The chapters in Part 2 focus on Buddhism as a lived spiritual resource on the one hand, and as both an instrument of the Burmanization agenda as well as an expression of a distinct local ethnic identity on the other. It begins with two case studies on Buddhism in Shan State. As Klemens Karlsson (Chapter 4) shows for the Eastern Shan region, the Burmese military government tried, even in an area with its own specific Buddhist culture, to Burmanize the region by imposing symbols of a culturally Burmese version of Buddhism and rewriting history through Burmese sculptures and architecture. It emerges from his discussion that the struggle for and negotiation of identities does not always run in strict parallel to larger religious boundaries. Even internal forms of religious diversity, in this case regional ones, are exploited for political claims to power. The Southern Shan religion is at the centre of Jane Ferguson's chapter (Chapter 5). She introduces and explores the meaning of the exceptional figure, Sao Myat of Mōng Pan, who is revered by many Shan people and especially by Shan separatists. Sao Myat incorporated symbolic elements of Tantrism yet kept

his status as a Theravāda Buddhist monk. To what extent does reverence for such unorthodox figures reflect an insistence on the need to be and remain different in the face of outside pressures? Through Sao Myat's exceptional biography, Ferguson weaves together two tapestries of meaning: spiritual systems and ethno-national histories. Buddhist doctrinal perspectives on identity are taken up in Perry Schmidt-Leukel's contribution (Chapter 6). After presenting Theravāda Buddhist canonical discourses on individual, collective and religious identity, he discusses the tension between Buddhist nationalism and Buddhist religious exclusivism on the one hand and the traditional Buddhist Not-Self teaching on the other. Drawing on the Buddhist critique of the idea of fixed identities, he points out the doctrinal potential for self-critical Buddhist reflection. Alexander Horstmann (Chapter 7) explores the ambivalent role of Buddhism in Myanmar's development towards a democratic and pluralist society. He evaluates the fateful role of ultranationalist Buddhist movements such as 'MaBaTha' and '969', and their interplay with a political agenda that rejects instead of accepts religious and ethnic diversity. He underlines processes of 'othering' in the context of Buddhist protectionism and examines the impact of such protectionism on categories of religion and boundaries of belonging. Yet, his chapter also points towards various initiatives, including Buddhist ones, that deal with diversity in more peaceful and constructive ways.

The contributions in Part 3 problematize the relation between Christian identity and belonging to an ethnic minority in the multi-ethnic and multi-religious society of Myanmar. Marja-Leena Heikkilä-Horn (Chapter 8) provides an overview of Christianity in Myanmar with a particular focus on its Indian roots and the ways in which various forms of Christian identity are negotiated in relation to their ethnic dimension. She emphasizes the difference between the Christian churches among Myanmar's ethnicities and the churches of the Tamil immigrants who assimilated well, while at the same time preserving their identity of belonging to a larger Tamil cosmopolis. Samuel Ngun Ling (Chapter 9) discusses the situation of Christianity in Myanmar from the perspective of the society's various problems and challenges, in particular its religious and ethnic conflicts being in part created by Buddhist nationalism. He pleads for a theology that empowers Christians to participate actively in the development of a democratic society that is genuinely hospitable to diversity. Layang Seng Ja (Chapter 10) exemplifies the problems of Christian minorities through a case study of the Kachin community. With her overview of the conflict since 1948, she depicts the economic, social and political aspect of Burmanization (or, as she prefers to say, Bamanization) that led to Kachin being a region of crisis and

recurrent fighting. As a Christian Kachin theologian, she offers her view of an interfaith theology for conflict-solving and better mutual understanding in Myanmar.

The chapters in Part 4 turn to the Muslim communities of Myanmar and the particular challenges that Muslims are facing. Myint Thein (Chapter 11) outlines the different Muslim communities in Myanmar, their history and the massive discrimination to which they are exposed. He describes in detail the numerous problems that confront Muslim communities on a daily basis in relation to their religious practice and identity. In view of the fact that Muslim communities have supported the Myanmar State throughout history, he calls for unification through diversification to achieve peace and national unity. Myo Win (Chapter 12) deals with Myanmar's complicated system of citizenship and citizenship documentation. Drawing on empirical studies from 2016 and 2017, he demonstrates how the issuing of citizenship documentation has developed into an instrument of discrimination particularly, but by no means exclusively, against Muslims living in Myanmar. Given that the loss of citizenship means being deprived of common rights and social services, he underlines the urgency of a serious reform of the current practice and discusses means of how ethnic and religious minorities may better cope with the situation. Madlen Krueger's (Chapter 13) case study of ethnicity and religion in Mon State deals with the intersection of different ethnic and religious identities. She analyses how the construction of a Buddhist Mon identity, in distinction from Buddhist Bamar, impacts on the perception of the Muslim community and the Buddhist-Muslim tensions.

Each of the four parts combines chapters that give a more comprehensive overview with others that provide particular case studies. Given the complexity of the entanglement of religious and ethnic diverse identities in Myanmar within the changing political context, the volume inevitably remains sketchy. In such a situation, the combination of papers by competent outsiders and informed insiders provides a fuller picture and better understanding of what is going on in Myanmar and points out perspectives that each of the groups involved have on finding more suitable ways of coming to terms with or even benefitting from the nation's diverse nature.

Though all chapters in the main parts of this volume had been completed before the coup d'état of February 2021, they elucidate the broader context of the coup. In the postscripts, Mikael Gravers analyses the military coup, its immediate background and its consequences as of March 2021. Hans-Peter Grosshans offers a conclusion to the volume from the perspective of coexistence and

constitutional frameworks in contemporary multi-ethnic and multi-religious contexts. He broadens the view by looking beyond Myanmar and highlights the role of religion within the often tense relation between social cohesion, collective identities and vital group interests.

Initial drafts of the contributions were jointly discussed by all contributors at an academic consultation in Yangon in February 2019, which was part of a larger research project on religious diversity in Myanmar sponsored by the German Research Foundation (DFG) and led by Hans-Peter Grosshans and Perry Schmidt-Leukel, both from the University of Münster, in cooperation with Samuel Ngun Ling from Myanmar Institute of Theology (MIT). The fieldwork for this five-year project was carried out by Madlen Krueger, who also designed and organized the 2019 meeting. We are grateful to David West for his assistance with linguistic copy-editing, to the anonymous reviewers who recommended the book for publication with Bloomsbury Academics and (not least) to Lalle Pursglove, Lily McMahan and their team for their support and commitment throughout a highly professional publication process.

On 2 May 2021, the pandemic tsunami that swept over India claimed the life of our contributor, Professor Nehginpao Kipgen. Editors and authors dedicate the volume to the memory of this highly esteemed scholar and political analyst.

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Part 1

Politics and Identities

The making of a fixed national hierarchy of ethnicity and religion in Myanmar

Mikael Gravers

Introduction

Three important dimensions characterize the current political situation in Myanmar: (1) nationalism, (2) categorization of ethnic differences and (3) categorization of religious differences – all three generated in a long historical and political process. These three dimensions often amalgamate in the political rhetoric and in administrative practices. They are also dimensions of conflicts and violence since 1949. The aim of this chapter is to explain *the historical process of ethnic identification* and how the three dimensions determine citizenship for those who are excluded, particularly Hindus and Muslims. This is illustrated by examples from the Karen State. However, it is important to underline that conflicts and violence labelled ‘ethnic’ and ‘religious’ are fundamentally political. They do not originate from Myanmar’s ethnic and religious diversity but from identity politics during and after colonial rule. Colonial administration created a major cleavage between ‘native races’ and ‘Indian races’ in censuses since 1891.¹

Many have criticized the reproduction of reified ethnicity during colonial rule in analyses of present-day ethnic diversity, as for example Taylor (2004), which is a relevant critique. However, the present ethnic hierarchy and reification of ethnicity are not merely a colonial heritage but embedded in the current strong Burman nationalism, which has further ingrained this categorization into the present social order as discussed below. Nor is reification of ethnic categories merely an anthropological ‘invention’, although anthropologists were used by British colonial rule.² Ethnic categorization became part of the process of making ethno-political boundaries and were internalized by the different ethnic groups. In this chapter, it is argued that the role of nationalism is crucial in

this process. The aim of nationalism is to defend a *reified primordial essence* of the national identity often involving not only ethnic identity but also religion. Thus, the analysis has to consider this crucial function in order to understand reification of identities.

Ethnic difference is a political criterion as seen in the official rhetoric in today's Myanmar discourse on ethnicity and peace and in the debate on the term 'Rohingya', a term rejected as ethnonym by the government. Moreover, ethnic armed organizations insist that ethnic groups are termed 'ethnic nationalities' – and not 'ethnic minorities' – signifying that they can claim a state function in a future federation. Still, the core of an ethnic nationality is an imagined common ethnic cultural identity and includes political unity.

This function of ethnicity can be illustrated by the author's personal experience from a conference in Chiang Mai (Thailand) in 2004 on a future federal constitution in Myanmar for the opposition to the military rule.³ Representatives from all the ethnic armed organizations were invited, and I suggested they should look beyond ethnicity and singular ethnic issues and claims and instead into common democratic principles and common laws in order to argue for a federal constitution – that is, placing democratic principles and social rights before ethnic claims. The naïve anthropologist was kindly instructed about his failure to grasp the importance of ethnicity: 'How can we return to our ethnic constituencies and tell them that ethnicity does not matter?' This shows how ingrained the notion of ethnicity is in the historical and political process. It has become *reified as a political substance*, and this is difficult to contradict after sixty to seventy years of armed struggle. Thus, an anthropological critique of reification easily fails to grasp the situation. As Martin Smith writes with reference to Edmund Leach's study of Kachin, 'ethnic identities should not be considered primordial or innate' (Smith 2018: 28). Leach (1964: 281) wrote that it was futile to record the stereotyped variations because they were almost numberless. This anthropological 'truth' of primordial stereotypes, however, is often surpassed by identity politics.

Critics of reified identities often forget that modern ethnicity and religion have become attributes like *natural and essential properties* of social existence, which have to be defended. This happens in a political process of boundary making. Ethnic stereotypes often become important political means – with references to culture, language, custom, dress, myths, rituals – all the *givens* that can be imagined, endangered and lost. In order to understand why ethnic markers appear as primordial and endangered, I argue that the present ethnic diversity has been absorbed in ethno-nationalism and a hierarchy during a

historical process of ethnic categorization. It affects the rights of groups and persons who cannot obtain full citizenship.

Theoretical concepts

'Ethnicity' is an imaginary of the world consisting of diverse ethnic cultures and identities, which are divided by imagined boundaries. Thus, it is not about cultural entities but the differences between cultures that matter, according to Barth (1969) and Jenkins (2008). Ethnic groups need not be homogeneous although conceived as such, and they may live dispersed and mixed as in Myanmar. Thus, ethnicity is not a substance of a group but formed in a complex process of boundary-making that entails fission and fusion, inclusion and exclusion in which we attribute specific cultural and political characteristic to others as a group as well as to its individual members. In other words, instead of studying identity as a cultural substance, we must study the *process of ethnic identification* – both the premises for self-identification and for categorizations made by others (Jenkins 2008). As Roger Brubaker (2004: 41) writes, this invites us to specify the agents that do the identification. Moreover, the process of identification changes direction and elements during different social and political conjunctures.

The process of political categorization of ethnic and religious differences appears as an important global tendency in the twenty-first century and is related to the growing nationalism and populism. Immigration – past and present – and major demographic changes have often fuelled nationalist sentiments and resulted in political violence (see Tambiah 1996, 1997). Immigration often sharpens the laws of citizenship – as in the EU and in Denmark in recent years. In this context, states increasingly apply fixed bureaucratic categorization of people according to ethnicity and nationality, as in Myanmar's official definition of eight 'national races' and '135 indigenous groups' (*taing-yin-tha*). Public categorization is important because it legitimizes identification by state authorities and thus becomes a powerful mechanism. Individuals often internalize such categorization in coping with discrimination and domination (Jenkins 2008). Moreover, state categorization often entails a subjugation, as we shall see in the following.

The imaginary of a nation often contains the same mechanisms as ethnicity. However, nation also refers to a sovereign territory.⁴ It includes the primordial facts of people who not only share culture, myths, language and religion but

also appear like kindred and blood related. These elements combined with relations to territory, a 'sacred' land, constitute crucial primordial attachment.⁵ Sometimes racial logic enters as a dimension arguing that blood and race have to be protected. Moreover, historical memory of a common past, sometimes heroic, is a crucial ingredient. The same communitarian ideology is used in the process of ethnic boundary making. As we shall see, nationalism and ethno-nationalism become instrumental in naming potential enemies and those not belonging to a nation and those who deserve a citizenship. Citizenship is not a general obtainable social right but decided by a national system of ethnic categorization. Administrative practices are marred by a mechanism of exclusion and a 'preventive repression' of claiming citizenship according to Balibar (2015: 66), discussed at the end of this chapter. However, we must maintain that ethnicity and nationalism are not a 'natural' human mode of distinction but a political mode of defining unity, differences and boundaries. A major difference in the way ethnicity and nationalism are perceived now as compared to the past is not only that they attribute a specific substance to persons but also that ethnic categorization is sometimes directly used to specify legitimate rights in relation to a state.

While ethnic categorization is used to generalize all members of a group, ethnic conflicts are rarely seen involving entire ethnic groups. Many remain 'quiet' and avoid involvement in the violent struggle, as Thawngmung (2013) has demonstrated in her analysis of Karen who avoided the long civil war between Karen National Union and the Burmese army. Still, 'ethnic' conflicts involve ethnic armed organizations, who claim to represent the entire group in negotiation of a future state formation as in Myanmar.

Ethnicity and nationalism in Myanmar's history

In this section, I briefly outline seven significant political conjunctures, which have had an impact upon the process of ethnic and religious identification up to the present:

- colonization,
- Christian conversion,
- Indian immigration and anti-Indian riots 1938,
- divide-and-rule administration and racial categorization,
- the Panglong conference 1947 and independence,

- 1982 Citizenship Law and Ne Win's rhetoric, and
- the Rohingya crisis since 1978.

The Burmese monarchy depended on hereditary local leaders and administrators and never had direct control of the hill populations. The kingdom was a galactic polity in which the royal centre depended on tributary alliances, and ethnic identity did not matter as long as tribute was paid and loyalty persisted. In 1740, Mon and Karen rebelled against exorbitant taxes and re-established a kingdom in Bago (Pegu). In 1757, Burman King Alaunghpaya conquered the Mon kingdom, and his conquest sent thousands of Mon and Karen into Thailand as refugees. Although it was not an 'ethnic' or 'racial' war as such since some Mon were loyal to the Burman king, ethnic differences were involved. Mon language and culture came under pressure (Adas 1974: 19). Today, Mon and Karen perceive the conquest in ethnic terms. The Pwo Karen, among whom I have worked in Thailand, have narratives about having to flee when Burmese armies came through the present Karen State and how they allied with the Siamese king who gave them permission to settle in the western mountains. Those Pwo Karen in Thailand, whose ancestors fled from the Burman, still mistrust 'Bamar who have a crooked heart' as do some elder Karen in Myanmar. Burman kings regarded the Mon and Karen as rebels and not as loyal tributary allies. Nevertheless, if ethnicity was not the reason for the conquest, Alaunghpaya mobilized Burman people in upper Burma against Mon and their Karen allies. It seems as if a Burman ethnic identity evolved during the Kònbaung dynasty (1752–1886), Burma's last dynasty, and that a process of Burmanization began according to Thant Myint-U (2001: 88–92; see also Lieberman 1986: 209). Tributes were not higher for Karen because of their ethnicity but because they did not have stable patron–client relations. The main source of ethnic reification, however, was colonial administration in its divide-and-rule policy.

Colonialism focused on ethnicity in its administration and introduced nationalism. Christian missionaries in Burma relied on colonial protection and mostly converted ethnic minorities, such as Karen, Chin and Kachin. In 1881, missionaries assisted in forming the Karen National Association in order to unite 'all Karen clans' in one national unit. However, one consequence of conversion was that the Burman kings perceived the change of faith as a total conversion of Karen identity to become British or *Kalar*, 'foreigners', as exemplified in the following complaint by a Burmese official to a missionary in 1839: 'This is the way you do to get away the hearts of my subjects, is it? You came and fight us,

and get away part of our country, and now you wish to turn away the hearts of the poor, ignorant Karens' (Baptist Missionary Magazine 1839: 105). The result was that 'in the opinion of the Burmese, they had embraced the religion of the Kalas [Kalar] and had become bonâfide strangers, having lost their nationality' (Bishop Bigandet 1887: 4). In my opinion, the reasoning in this citation is crucial for our understanding of ethnic, religious and national identification up to the present time. Thus, to be a Buddhist was to be loyal to the monarchy as the primary political identification. Some Karen assisted the British conquest in 1852. Likewise, missionaries and Christian Karen actively participated in what the British called *the pacification* of Burma against rebels, including monks, from 1886.⁶ I suggest this signifies that ethno-religious boundaries of identification began to imply violence.⁷

Immigration from British India is another important factor in relation to ethnic identification. After 1870, British census shows an increased immigration of labourers to work in the harbour of Yangon and on railways, as well as an increase in the unpopular moneylenders of the Chettiar caste who came to control large agricultural areas in the Delta (Taylor 1987: 142). The latter were one of the reasons for the widespread rebellion in 1930 when former monk, Saya San, mobilized angry Burman peasants. Harvey (1974: 55) writes that Chettiars were depicted as the 'public enemy no. 1' in Burma, and much of the violence was directed against this group. The Burma Census from 1931 (pp. 224–32) registered an increase of Indian immigrants since 1921 of 17 per cent in Arakan but 33.1 per cent in the Delta – and of more than one million migrants of whom only 28 per cent were women. Thus, male Indian migrants often looked for Burman wives. The descendants of 'mixed race' marriages were called Zerbadis (pp. 122, 705 in the 1931 Census) – a term resented by Muslims.⁸ These migrants were described as 'Indian races' comprising Chittagonians, Bengalis, Cholas, Hindustanis and Tamils, while local Muslims were categorized as 'Arakan Mohammedans'. Interestingly, 565,609 of the immigrants were Hindus and 396,594 Muslims during this period.⁹

In the 1930s, Indian migrants constituted about 5.4 per cent of the total population (Taylor 1987:126). While many migrants returned to India, others settled permanently. In Karen State, Tamil Hindu and Bengali traders and farmers have integrated in Karen communities along the Thanlwin River since the 1890s. Today many Karen Muslims only speak Pwo Karen. However, in Rangoon over half of the population (63 per cent) around 1930 were Indian immigrants (ibid.: 127; Yegar 1972: 31). The Burman majority perceived them as taking their jobs. In the 1930s, anti-Indian riots occurred as part of the Burman

nationalists struggle against colonialism, for example, strikes in the oil district of Yanyaungung (see Yi 1988). The Thakin ('Master') nationalists shouted slogans such as this: 'Revenge for all sacrileges to religion. Master race we are, we Burmans' (Yi 1988: 58).

In 1938, a book published by a Muslim, said to contain critical comments on Buddhism, was reprinted, and the All Burma Council of Young Monks mobilized 1,500 monks and thousands of lay people in Rangoon to stage a protest. The riots left 181 dead, of these 139 Muslims (see Smith 1965: 110–11).¹⁰ During the 1930s, riots began as anti-Indian and had underlying economic grievances. As Harvey (1974: 69) admitted, 'there were one million Indians in Burma. They constituted an acute problem, and it was our doing. There had always been Indians, but never in such numbers until we introduced them.' Then religion also became a nationalist issue, and Muslims were named as 'the enemies of Buddhism' while monks became increasingly aggressive (Mendelson 1975: 211–13). In 1939, after a public focus on mixed marriages, the British issued the Buddhist Women Special Marriage and Succession Act in order to secure Buddhist women married to Muslims inheritance and right to their children in case of divorce or death (Yi 1988: 96; Berlie 2008: 23).¹¹ These events seem almost parallel the situation in 2012–15 when the 'four race protection laws' were promoted by monks and adopted in order to protect Buddhist women against polygamy. However, the basic issue in the 1930s was immigration from British India.¹²

It is important to note that this historical conjuncture in itself *does not explain* the current anti-Muslim and anti-Hindu feelings and discrimination. However, these feelings of resentment were formed at that time and have been ingrained and sustained within Burman nationalism. They were evoked during U Ne Win's and the ensuing military rule; hence these events can be considered as the foundation of current identity politics. The identity of the migrants became reified as 'foreigners' and 'enemies' but first a brief outline of the colonial categorization.

British administration – divide and rule by racial categorization

British colonial administration adopted the anthropological categorization used by British evolutionary anthropologists, such as James Frazer and Edward Tylor. The Ethnographic Survey of Burma applied the questionnaire from the book *Notes & Queries on Anthropology* (1874) widely used by anthropologists

in revised editions until the 1960s. Besides 'racial names', the questionnaire of 402 items began with questions based on biological criteria such as physical appearances and temperaments of races, as well as their moral habits, kinship, customs and so on (see details in Boshier 2018: 300–25). Ethnographic race research and categorization was also used by the army to recruit soldiers from the hills, for example, from Kachin, one of the 'martial races', many of whom served in the Middle East during the First World War (see Sadan 2010: 48).¹³ Following the ethnographic surveys, colonial governance came to focus on collective ethnic identities and on customary laws mentioned above as much as on common law.¹⁴ This is an important turn in the process of reification.

British census made a crucial distinction between 'Indian Races' and 'Indigenous Burmese races – Buddhists and others'. The term 'tribe' was used to designate the hill minorities who were considered less developed. From 1922, the colonial government divided the territorial administration in Ministerial Burma (lowlands) and Frontier Areas (hills). The Frontier Areas Administration (FAA) included Chin Hills, Naga, Kachin, Shan States, Kayah (defined as independent 'native states') and Salween District. The FAA was a restricted area for Burmans and directly under the governor's control. FAA's administrator in 1945 was the anthropologist Noel Stevenson who had studied the Chin. He organized a large federation from village tract councils to a federal council for the whole FAA and prepared the Panglong conference in 1947. Churchill's war cabinet had prepared to keep this area as a dominion in case of Burma's independence. Thus, Aung San did not trust Stevenson and his activities. He forced the new Attlee government to retire Stevenson in January 1947 before Panglong convened.

Before independence, the British Burma Army was organized in ethnic battalions of Chin, Karen and Kachin, mostly Christians, and included only a few *Bamar* soldiers. Moreover, Burma's discussions of independence were embedded in a discourse of race/ethnic categories and ideas of ethnic autonomy. Meanwhile, Aung San and the Burman nationalists worked for the unity of the country and its ethnic diversity, while Shan, Kachin, Kayah, Karen and other groups looked for independence or self-rule and opted for the Frontier Areas to be confederated with Ministerial Burma with the right to secession. However, the Panglong conference was for the delegates from the FAA area – not from Ministerial Burma. The Karen from Salween District did not arrive, and only four Karen observers from the newly formed Karen National Union (KNU) arrived on the last day without giving their opinion. A major part of the Karen population lived outside the FAA and were not

directly involved in the Panglong discussions. Most delegates seem to have been Shan *saopha* (princes) and Kachin *duwa* (chiefs) from Stevenson's administrative system – as well as a few Chin. Pa-o, Naga, Lahu, Wa and other minorities did not have delegates. The complex situation cannot be described in detail here, but it is important to note that the only paragraph in the Panglong Agreement which deals with the main issue is §6 stating that 'full autonomy in internal administration of the Frontier Areas is accepted in principle'. Although most delegates came from Stevenson's administrative system, they had different opinions on independence either as a dominion or within a Burma confederation. As for the Karen, the Christian dominated KNU wanted an independent state, while the Burma Karen National Association (Buddhist) and the Karen Youth Organization, affiliated with Aung San's political alliance the Anti-Fascist Peoples Freedom League, looked for a state within a united Burma. The British were puzzled by this diversity of political opinions and what they perceived as lack of leadership of Karen. The reason for this perception was the colonial perception of race/ethnicity as constituted of a homogeneous culture, a common leadership and the same political aims.¹⁵ In 1931, the colonial category 'Karen' comprised fifteen different Karennic speaking groups (today twelve groups are listed), which were further divided in subgroups, sometimes united but often divided politically. Today only Sgaw and Pwo are categorized as Karen, but they are two different groups with different languages. However, the KNU used the reified colonial category 'Karen' in one of the memorials their delegation presented in London 1946 and emphasized, 'It is a dream that Karen and Burman can ever evolve a common nationality ... We are a nation with our own distinctive culture.'¹⁶ Thus, ethnicity and ethno-nationalism became dominant features of independent Burma.

The colonial rulers never understood that their own ethnic categorization had divided Burma: 'There is a division of labour along racial lines – they mix but they never combine', as John S. Furnivall wrote (1956: 304). KNU's and Kachin's rebellions and fear of Shan and Kayah's rights to secession after ten years, which were outlined in the constitution of 1947, were the main reasons for General Ne Win's military coup in 1962. It was a conjuncture dominated by fear of disintegration of the union state and of an endangered national identity. Interestingly, during the census in 2014, Karen organizations opposed the use of the Burmese word 'Kayin'. Its connotation of 'wild people' is resented. They asked to be termed 'Karen' – the English translation of Kayin – thus emphasizing the pan-Karen identity above subgroups.