

# Current Myanmar Studies



# Current Myanmar Studies:

*Aung San Suu Kyi,  
Muslims in Arakan,  
and Economic Insecurity*

Edited by

Georg Winterberger and Esther Tenberg

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# EDITORS AND CONTRIBUTORS

## Editors

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**Georg Winterberger** is a social anthropologist working as a lecturer and executive director at the Department of Social Anthropology and Cultural Studies. He was the main organiser of the Interdisciplinary Myanmar Conference 2015 in Zurich. He carried out research in Myanmar and Cameroon. Currently, he is working on livelihood strategies in Mawlamyine, Myanmar. He is the author of *Myanmar: Through the lens of people* (2017) and *Ethnographie des Spitals Manyemen: Eine Untersuchung zur Nutzersicht bezüglich Qualität der Pflege in Kamerun* (2015). He has edited the special section *Myanmarforschung im deutschsprachigen Raum (Asiatische Studien, 2017)* and has recently published *The Point of View Makes the Difference: Explaining the Position of Women in Myanmar (Asiatische Studien, 2017)*. Winterberger is a founding member of the Myanmar-Institut e. V. and a member of its board, occupying the position of treasurer.

## Contributors

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**Jella Fink** is currently researching female agency and economic participation as Myanmar is facing change both politically and economically. She focuses on contemporary hand-weaving practices collecting data from 2014–2016 in Amarapura and the area around Kengtung. Fink holds a Master's degree in Cultural Anthropology and History of Arts from Goethe University Frankfurt, Germany. She is a founding member of the Myanmar-Institut e. V. and a member of its board.

**Uta Gärtner** studied at the Karl Marx University in Leipzig, Germany, initially in Sinology and later in Myanmar Studies. She graduated in 1966 as a “Diplom-Burmanist”. Gärtner started her postgraduate studies at the Yangon University in 1967 and completed her PhD in 1978 in Myanmar Studies at the Humboldt University, Berlin. From 1990 until her retirement in 2007, she was a lecturer in Myanmar language and civilisation at the Humboldt University, Berlin. Her publications include two textbooks on Myanmar language (*Myanmar verstehen*, 1998 and *Myanmar in 20 Tagen*, 2009). She is the author of several papers, among the latest are: *The Legacies of Military Rule in Myanmar* (*International Quarterly for Asian Studies*, 2017), *Nay Pyi Taw: The Reality and Myths of Capitals in Myanmar* (*Southeast Asian Historiography*, ed. by V. Grabowsky, 2011) and *Über die Sprachen des Landes und Erzählkunst in Myanmar* (*Myanmar. Von Pagoden, Longvis und Nat-Geistern*, ed. by D. Schäfer et al., 2014).

**Sina Hardaker** is a postdoctoral researcher at the Department of Economic Geography at the Julius-Maximilian-University in Würzburg, Germany. She is currently conducting research on special economic zones (foreign trade zones/enterprise zones) in Myanmar, the USA, and Great Britain. Hardaker received her doctorate for research on the internationalisation of China's grocery retailing market. Her research interests lie mainly in transformation processes, emerging markets, and economic development as well as grocery retailing and digital market entry. She is the author of several papers, the most recent including: *The Emerging Retail Market in Myanmar—An Institutional Perspective of Foreign Retailers' Market Entry Decisions* (*International Business Research*, 2018), *Retail Revolution in China—Transformation Processes in the World's Largest Grocery Retailing Market* (*Die Erde*, 2018), and *Retail Format Competition—The Case of Grocery Discount Stores and why they haven't conquered the Chinese market (yet)* (*Moravian Geographical Reports*, 2018).

**Laura Hornig** is a PhD Candidate at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle, Germany. With a focus on economic anthropology she conducted fourteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in Myanmar between 2015 and 2018. Her research interests include livelihood strategies and links between moral concerns and economic action. Hornig previously worked on ethnicity and belonging among Karen refugees in the Thai-Myanmar border area. She holds a Master's degree in Social/Cultural Anthropology from the University of Hamburg. Hornig is also a founding member of the Myanmar-Institut e. V.

**Michał Lubina** is Assistant Professor at Jagiellonian University, Kraków, Poland. His research interests are in the fields of Burma/Myanmar and Russia-China relations. His publications include six books, the most recently published monograph being *The Moral Democracy. The Political Thought of Aung San Suu Kyi* (2018). He is the author of the first history of Burma/Myanmar in Polish as well as the only biography of Aung San Suu Kyi also in Polish. Currently he is preparing the English version of his political biography of Aung San Suu Kyi.



# INTRODUCTION

GEORG WINTERBERGER  
AND ESTHER TENBERG

Myanmar shifted into the centre of international attention with its transformation from a country ruled by a restrictive military government to a country with a civilian and democratic government. There was no long term research possible for decades. Therefore, this opening not only attracted countless international investors, journalists, and politicians but scientists and researchers, too. The media's attention in 2011 was on the transition from a military to the civilian government under Thein Sein. In 2015, the landslide election victory of the opposition party NLD (National League for Democracy), which is led by Nobel Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, caught the attention of the international community. A democratic state seemed to be within reach. And now in 2018 and 2019, the attention on Myanmar did not decrease with the crisis in Rakhine State, where hundreds of thousands of mainly Muslims are fleeing into neighbouring Bangladesh.

From the perspective of research, the situation is still—and will be for some years—not understood in depth across the whole country. Researchers are entering in still small but increasing numbers into the country to do research, set up collaborations with local research institutions, and publish their results. There were only a very few established networks of researchers and scientists working on and in Myanmar. The situation started to change with the increasing number of researchers. One of the newly established networks is the *Myanmar-Institut e. V.* This association was founded on December 10<sup>th</sup> 2016 in Berlin by a number of German speaking researchers and persons interested in Myanmar. The aims of the *Myanmar-Institut* are networking and exchange amongst the researchers from German speaking countries working on Myanmar. Another important goal is the re-establishment of the possibility of a systematic study of the language and society of Myanmar at one of the higher education institutions in the German-speaking world. In addition, the association provides information and

inside-knowledge to the public. For this reason, the members of the *Myanmar-Institut* present their area of expertise on the website as being open for inquiries (Myanmar-Institut 2017).

The most important tool to achieve the association's aims is the annual Myanmar conference in one of the German-speaking countries. Actually, these conferences were carried out before the founding of the association, and the idea and decision for establishing a formal network like the *Myanmar-Institut* first came up at the 2015 conference in Zurich—organised by one of the editors of this volume, Georg Winterberger (2016). A more detailed description of the conferences, which were carried out before the founding of the association, is found in Uta Gärtner's contribution in this volume. The first Myanmar conference under the *Myanmar-Institut's* aegis—and the sixth gathering of Myanmar scholars in German-speaking Europe since the founding of WiMya—was the one in Bonn in 2017—organised by the other editor of this volume, Esther Tenberg.

In the subsequent section, we will report on this conference in Bonn followed by an overview of the contributions in this volume.

## Conference 2017

The Interdisciplinary Myanmar Studies Conference 2017 in Bonn was organised by a team of motivated Master and Bachelor-Students of the University of Bonn from various disciplines, under the supervision of the chair of Prof. Antweiler. The conference would not have been possible if not for the generous financial support of the “Universitätsgesellschaft Bonn” (UGB), and the help and involvement of other students of the Department of Southeast Asian Studies Bonn, who contributed their labour to make the conference a success. The *Myanmar-Institut* contributed by spreading the word about the conference in its network and provided feedback and support in organisational matters. The first annual general assembly of the *Myanmar-Institut* took place during the conference.

Continuing the endeavour to strengthen the network of German-speaking researchers focused on Myanmar from different disciplines, it moreover attempted to include Anglophone scholars, affiliated to European Universities and Institutes, into the conference. The somewhat paradoxical decision, to conduct a conference for a network of German-speaking scholars in English was partly guided by the motivation to approach and include more international scholars. There is a generational-gap in

German-speaking Myanmar studies where most motivated young scholars (MA, PhD) of different disciplines often lack supervisors with expertise in Myanmar Studies. By strengthening ties with centres of Myanmar-research in Europe, the organisers aimed at providing a route to rectify this. The conference announcement was met with enthusiasm from scholars all over Europe, and also reached scholars in Myanmar, which indicates that opportunities for closer engagement in these trajectories are available. With the participation of Alexandra de Mersan from INALCO in Paris, the German-speaking network was able to connect to one of the primary centres of European (mostly francophone) Myanmar research. Other participants came from Norway, Poland and England. Bonn, which hosts the UN, the German Academic Exchange Agency (DAAD) and many development agencies, proved to be advantageous as a venue, as students/trainees, employees, and diplomats were able to drop in at the conference amidst their other engagements in Bonn. The conference was also attended by a delegation of scholars from Kokang University, Thailand, who altered their schedule of a visit to the Department of Southeast Asian Studies to be able to listen to presentations and meet participants.

Despite the broadening of the recruitment-base of possible speakers, the organisers aimed at keeping all the presentations accessible and opted for single presentations per time-slot, as opposed to overlapping presentations. Of the chosen speakers, six are pursuing or have attained their Master's (of Arts/of Science), ten are pursuing or have attained a PhD and four are junior, associate or full professors. This reflects the above-mentioned generation gap. The presentations were thematically grouped around common aspects or themes addressed in different presentations. The conference was opened by Prof. Dr. Christoph Antweiler, head of the department of Southeast Asian Studies Bonn, and Johanna Neumann, president of the board of the *Myanmar-Institut*. In the following report, there will be a short introduction of the titles under which the presentations were grouped, after which a brief overview of each presentation will be given.

### *Development*

Development, which is the headline under which the first two presentations were placed, is an all encompassing issue in discourses about Myanmar. Human rights, political, economic, legal and other reforms are often discussed under the development-paradigm, implying that the current state of affairs is wanting, and on the route to improvement.

Although less prominent in recent months, reforms in Myanmar were labelled as “transitional”, implying the same trajectory of going from bad to better. The two presentations positioned themselves differently with regard to the paradigm. Ahm Abdul Hai considered international cooperation in the media sector in light of diverging expectations; Hessler took a more external approach to development by asking about the impact of localised practices and frameworks of Buddhists organisations on social development.

Ahm Abdul Hai, who is doing a PhD at the Department of Southeast Asian Studies in Bonn, presented his work on media development and international co-operation. Considering the changes in the media sector since 2011, he discussed the disparate expectations of local media organisations and international media development organisations (IMDOs). Highlighting the shortcomings of the current legal framework for media activities, he recommended legal reforms for its improvement, such as a constitutional amendment to guarantee freedom of expression, the Right to Information Law (RTI) or legislation to protect journalist’s sources. He further opted for trainings and programs to increase media sensitivity with military and police and for programs that enhance outreach and partnership with ethnic communities.

The second presentation was from Felix Hessler, a PhD student at the Department for Religious Studies at the Leibniz University in Hannover. He concentrated on three Buddhist organisations, a big monastic education organisation, a monastic network engaged in humanitarian aid and the (in)famous *Ma Ba Tha* (Association for the Protection of Race and Religion) to assess the role of monks in contemporary Myanmar society and the spectrum between reformism and (re-)traditionalisation in which they are involved. He discussed localised practices and their frameworks to gain an understanding of similarities between the seemingly disparate groups and argued for a broader perspective to inform the discourse about chances and impediments Buddhist organisations pose to social development.

### ***Rural Transformations***

The second set of presentations combined three presentations making rural transformations the subject of discussion. With talks and discussions about food sovereignty in Shan State, customary land rights struggles in Chin State, and the role and perspectives of a village headman in central Myanmar, a large ground was covered giving the audience insight into

important developments concerning this vital sector of Myanmar's economy, in which about 70 per cent of the population work.

Annapia Debarry, who is a researcher at the Centre for Developmental Research (ZEF), evaluated the position of small-scale farmers within the broader framework of politically induced agrarian transformation. By employing a food sovereignty (FS) approach, she conducted fieldwork in two villages in northern Shan State using methods from the *Participatory Rural Appraisal* toolbox. She showed that amidst pro-business land reforms and foreign investments in export-oriented, large-scale agriculture customary land rights are undermined. This keeps small-scale farmers in a "circle of poverty", forcing them into wage-labour and migration. The FS-approach aims at countering such processes by contributing to radical thinking on development centring on small scale-farmers and their struggles.

Rainer Einzenberger, PhD candidate at the Department of Development Studies at the University of Vienna, enlarged the perspective on this topic by presenting struggles around customary land tenure in Chin State in the context of recently passed discriminatory legislation against upland dwellers. Land conflicts are a widespread issue amidst Myanmar's economic and political transition, particularly affecting the ethnic states where the issue is exacerbated by historical and partially on-going armed struggle and very specific historical, political and economic contexts. Einzenberger outlined that despite assurances from the government to recognise ethnic and customary land rights, this is not met by practical realisations on the ground. He discussed opposing strategies of local civil society actors, who engage in emerging transnational discourses on indigenous rights to defend customary land rights.

Stéphen Huard is a PhD candidate at the University of East Anglia and a PhD affiliate at CASE (Southeast Asia Centre, EHESS-CNRS in France). His presentation concluded the discussion of rural issues by turning to central Myanmar's inner-village politics. Building on an eighteen month fieldwork in the village GawGyi, located near Monywa in Sagaing Division, Huard illustrated the strategies a headman in village Myanmar uses to navigate disparate tasks and the positions he adopts in his double role as headman and villager. He showed how the familial background of the headman, his own reputation and a connection to the *lu-gyi* (influential people) were instrumental for his election as village headman. Once elected, he functions as a broker between villagers and government agencies, including in the management of land conflicts, as well as other

outside actors, such as NGOs. Huard's presentation contributed not only to a better understanding of decision making processes and power structures in rural areas but also of how local relationships with the state are conceived and practised.

### ***(Re-)presentations***

This set of presentations discussed three very different topics: Yangon's depiction as a city in need of rescue in coffee-table books, the transformation of Aung San Suu Kyi's image in international discourse and *zat pwe*, a traditional, popular form of entertainment. What these have in common is that they all take modes of representation as a lens through which discourses, perspectives and social or cultural change can be made visible.

Dr. Felix Girke, who is currently engaged in leading a project researching Myanmar heritage regimes at the University of Konstanz, considered coffee-table books about Yangon, which present the city as crumbling, timeless and in need of rescue as opposed to a future oriented, modern centre. By addressing the use of rhetorical figures and tropes, Girke illustrated how past and present are actively conflated by the authors. He inquired into their motivations by embedding the books into a wider discourse of nostalgia, neo-colonial imagination, and the Western-gaze. He concluded with the thesis that the production and consumption of such books indicates a mode of coping for the expatriate community within a changing host-city.

Michal Lubina, Assistant Professor at the Institute of Middle and Far East at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow, presented on the continued gender-bias that influences the media reception and presentation of Aung San Suu Kyi in the context of her entering "realpolitik". His paper is included in this publication.

Johanna Neumann, a PhD-Student at the Institute for Asian and African Studies at the Humboldt University in Berlin, used *zat pwe*, a popular form of performance art in Myanmar, as a tool to identify issues of importance for society. In her fieldwork she found the perception of change as a national dilemma with possible positive and negative outcomes. Her data suggests that the way of coping with change, as it is dealt with within *zat pwe*, is different for men and women: women are tasked with conserving national identity, culture and tradition while men try out new and foreign concepts.

### *Merit Making*

About 90 per cent of Myanmar's population consider themselves to be Buddhist. This makes Buddhist belief, practices, institutions and representatives a central aspect of Myanmar society, well worth closer inspection. After the presentation by Felix Hessler on the social engagement of Buddhist organisations, this set of presentations revolved around the Buddhist concept of merit and the practice of merit making. Thomas Bruhn gave a comprehensive description of this practice and the doctrinal background of it. Clara Rellensmann assessed the impact of its continued application in Bagan regarding endeavours to gain World Heritage Site status.

Thomas Bruhn, who holds a diploma in education, introduced the concept in his presentation and discussed merit making in the context of tradition and modernity. He illustrated the three grounds for merit making which are generosity, moral behaviour and meditation. He asked whether the praxis of generosity, mostly in the form of alms giving, can be misused. Because Buddhist religious practice and its effects on karma are ultimately dependent on the intent with which an action was carried out, Bruhn concluded that misuse, in the form of compensating for criminal actions with meritorious actions, cannot be performed within the Buddhist logic.

Clara Rellensmann, with her presentation "How to make merit in modernity? Authenticating Bagan's rebuilt landscape" centred on Bagan as a site of past and present meritorious acts. Bagan's sacred landscape spans about 25 square kilometres and comprises some 3000 Buddhist monuments, most of which were built during the 11<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> century. Many of the stupas and temples have since fallen into disrepair, some have been maintained. Between 1995 and 2010, the Myanmar government introduced a program during which some 1000 of them were reconstructed, sometimes according to hypothetical designs. In lieu of the attempt to achieve a nomination as a World Heritage Site, a discourse about the authenticity of Bagan sprang up, which questions the authenticity of the archaeological site. Rellensmann's research project attempts a nuanced assessment of the aims to authenticate the praxis of reconstruction as a form of merit making, which as a recent time layer in Bagan's planning and construction history, is presented as a manifestation of on-going religious praxis.

### *Identity*

In the current political climate in Myanmar, identity-politics have evolved as one of the prime determinants of political decision-making. With the Rakhine/Rohingya-conflict on-going, the question of who belongs or does not belong to the Myanmar “nation” is closely interwoven with the granting or denying of basic human rights to individuals and groups. The discourse revolving around “identity” is multi-layered and complex, which is reflected in the three presentations of this set. Discussing identity on the meta-level, Phuong Le Trong introduced his observations of this discourse and offered interpretations of certain tropes and their meaning. Judith Beyer took the topic to a sub-national level with a case study about the effect of rumour on inter- and intra-group processes of community making. Jella Fink exemplified the (re-)production and negotiation of identity with the production of hand-woven fabrics. These three perspectives on “identity” as a continually contested category demonstrate interconnected spheres in which individuals, communities and the nation create and recreate reference points of belonging. This set of presentations is closely related to the set “Othering”, which zooms in on the Rakhine-conflict.

Phuong Le Trong, a sociologist at the Department of Southeast Asian Studies in Bonn, talked about “Ethnicity-based Narratives and Identity Politics”. He argued that Myanmar politics are defined by the praxis of power allocations of prominent individuals and groups, which creates asymmetric relationships. The powerful can extort influence on the popular interpretation of what constitutes “national identity”. Ethnic groups are simultaneously an object of discussion and reference communities. By analysing recurring narratives, Le Trong discussed the effects of political culture on identity politics. He aimed at illuminating how ethnicity-based/nationalist narratives influence the construction of relations between people(s) and the state and their contribution to the creation or diffusion of tensions between citizens and state since the reform.

Judith Beyer, professor of Anthropology at the University of Konstanz, outlined disputes which sprang up around the hoisting of Shia-Muslim flags during *ashura*, to illustrate the function of gossip and rumours in community-making. She detailed how the hoisting of a flag and its negative reception by Buddhists and local newspapers spurred internal gossip about matters of administration and representation, and external rumour reflecting widespread fears of the Buddhist majority about Islam. Beyer observed that in contemporary Myanmar the function of “rumour”

and its use in inter-communal disputes does not correspond with the current academic understanding of the concept. Rather than being a “weapon of the weak”, rumours are used by the majority and result in further marginalisation of a minority.

Jella Fink, currently a PhD student at the Seminar for the Cultural Anthropology of Textiles in Dortmund, engaged a micro-perspective of locally negotiated change in her presentation “Reproduction Required: Textile Production as a Floor of Negotiating Ethnic Identity in Contemporary Myanmar” (compare her contribution in this volume). Focusing on textile artisans, the production of hand-woven and hand stitched fabrics was analysed as a process of negotiation of identity. Fink argued that fabrics serve as objects that can be part of visually expressing one’s individual identity, and thus provide an anchor of stability in the form of group-specific knowledge and its material realisation. As such, fabric produced by textile artisans in Myanmar is closely related to ethnic belonging. The makers of fabric employ strategies for accommodating various identities of themselves as individuals and group members and consider the identity of the receiver or buyer of the fabric.

### *Activism*

In the wake of the political reforms of the Thein Sein legislation, rights to protest have been reinstated after decades of restrictions to rights of assembly. Since then, activism and protest have been repeatedly featured in news articles. Amidst garment workers strikes, protests opposing forced relocation or resource extraction, youth protest groups involved in peace protests or student activism, have been prominent. With a film about one segment of the young generation’s involvement in politics, and a presentation by Carolin Hirsch, who builds her research project around the activist endeavours of Yangon’s punks, the set “activism” explored this topic.

The film “My Buddha is Punk” by Andreas Hartmann follows a member of the punk community in Yangon. Without an external narrator, the film takes on an almost ethnographic perspective. By following Kyaw Kyaw, a 25 year old punk and central figure of the punk scene, the viewer is introduced to his views on contemporary issues related to his identity and can observe strategies for content dissemination and internal dispute-settlements. Taking into account a former documentary about Yangon’s punk scene from a different director, the development of Kyaw Kyaw’s personality and role and the self-conception of his group of punks become

visible. While previously mainly engaged in their own position vis-a-vis mainstream society, they developed a sense of social obligation and engaged in help projects and demonstrations, guided by their own philosophy of “common street”.

Carolin Hirsch, a PhD-Student in the research project “Activist Becomings” in Konstanz, presented a first outline of her research project “Activist Becomings—From critical songs to feeding hands”. She focuses on the political and food activism, in which the young men from the film “My Buddha is Punk”, members of the Yangon based punk band Rebelriot, engage in. Her interest lies in how activism is evolving and manifesting on the individual and collective level, and how the members of the “Food not Bombs” (FNB) group link the political with food activism. She aims at understanding how the musicians became activists and how their activism is integrated into everyday life, and how their collective effort tries to shape the social and political environment in urban Yangon. Her research will span over three dimensions: activist life worlds, learning with contemporary forms of knowledge and exploring the political dimension of infrastructure and is thus located at the nexus of individual experiences in a changing political environment prior to and after the 2015 elections.

### *Economy*

This set of presentations was supposed to focus on economy as a common denominator of the research presented. Unfortunately, Sina Hardaker, currently employed at the geographical institute of the Julius-Maximilians-University in Würzburg, had to cancel her participation. Her presentation would have been about special economic zones (SEZ), providing a macro-perspective on economic reforms and plans in Myanmar. Luckily, she could contribute her paper to this volume.

Laura Hornig, a PhD candidate at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle, looked at informal credit arrangements in the urban informal sector of Patheingyi (this publication). She analyses how people use these arrangements to respond to everyday demands and financial emergencies. Besides explaining the economic conditions, Hornig also includes social and moral aspects in her analysis. While access to credit is often crucial to respond to emergencies, indebtedness comes with stigmatisation and people remain trapped in a downward financial spiral.

### *Othering*

Closely related to the set “Identity” the day before, the presentations given under the heading “Othering” discussed the marginalisation of Muslims from Myanmar society. Alexandra de Mersan, building upon fifteen years of research experience in the area, discussed the impact of colonial administration on the establishment of racial signifiers. Esther Tenberg linked the Othering of Muslims and Women in Myanmar by asking whether both forms of social exclusions are telltale signs of Buddhist masculinity in crisis.

Alexandra de Mersan, Associate Professor at the Centre for Southeast Asian Studies (INALCO) in Paris, asked how Muslim’s in Arakan came to be regarded as foreigners in Myanmar. In her presentation (this publication) she stressed that understanding the recent inter-communal violence as well as prior versions of it, requires reviewing colonial sources and the colonial terminology used for defining groups and populations. Her presentation detailed how the colonial process of population differentiation resulted in the establishment of race, defined by language and religion, as a decisive aspect of Burmese national identity. In focusing on processes of localisation and appropriation in Arakan, de Mersan clarifies how the Muslims of Arakan (*kala* in the vernacular) became progressively marginalised until they presented a, if not the, figure of the foreigner in contemporary Myanmar.

Esther Tenberg, a MA-Student at the Department of Southeast Asian Studies in Bonn, proposes a gendered reading of anti-Muslim narratives, which fuel current animosities in Myanmar. She outlined how traditional ideas about femininity and masculinity, which portray women as immoral, untrustworthy and ultimately dangerous, are still shaping contemporary understanding of gender in Myanmar. In this vein, (ideal) masculinity is thought of in terms of the celibate monk who is moral, detached and non-violent. Tenberg compared the structure of these gendered narratives with anti-Muslim narratives, which ascribe Islam attributes similar to femininity and Buddhism attributes similar to masculinity. Placing this observation in the context of Myanmar’s recent political and social changes, Tenberg argues that there is a gendered aspect of the Rakhine-conflict, which might be interpreted as a Buddhist-masculinity-crisis.

### *Local Perceptions*

In many of the presentations, international perspectives and local perspectives, or inside and outside views of communities within Myanmar, do not align. This creates tensions, which sometimes exacerbate the actual problem at hand and can only be resolved by self-reflection and communication. This set of presentations highlighted two instances in which inside and outside perspectives clash.

Steffen Schödwell presented the findings of a qualitative pilot study, which investigated explanatory models of depressive disorders among Myanmar health-professionals and their patients. On the basis of an in-depth analysis of six problem-centred interviews, as well as data gained from collected psycho-educational material and participant observation, three conceptualisations of depression were differentiated amongst the professionals: a Buddhist conception—depression as a contaminated mind, a contextual conception—depression as consequence of stress and a biomedical conception—depression as a psychiatric disease. Concerning their patient's view, the professionals mentioned somatic, religious and supernatural explanatory models. Religious practices, mindfulness and Vipassana meditation were named as major self-help or help-seeking behaviours of Myanmar patients. How professionals deal with their patient's efforts depends on the professional's conceptualisation of depression. It was concluded that by taking a purely biomedical perspective on depression professionals risk neglecting their patient's needs and resources.

Khin Nyein San, a MA-Student at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) researches the impact of residents on natural conservation efforts. Her presentation "Human Perceptions on their Own Impacts on the Biodiversity by Living Inside the Protected Area in Natmataung National Park, Myanmar" presented the findings obtained by field research conducted in eleven villages inside and outside the National Park. Protected areas (PA) are often located in remote areas, where local populations often have poor social status and are dependent on the natural resources of the area. A majority of the participants (two-thirds) was aware of their impacts on the biodiversity in the park. They identify logging, hunting, and fuel wood collection amongst others as impacts. Participants suggested measures to fulfil basic needs and increased cooperation with local people. Khin Nyein San concluded that in order to achieve long-term sustainability of the Natmataung National Park, improvement of park and people relationships is needed.

### ***Politics and Policies***

The set “Politics and Policies” looked at processes surrounding political decision making from two very different perspectives. Johanna Götz examined water governance and the strategies, spaces and scales in which stakeholders act, providing insight into local decision-making processes and power relations at the nexus of national-level policy-making and local visions. Felix Siebert monitors motorcycle helmet usage in the context of a global initiative to improve road safety.

Johanna Götz, an MSc-Student in Geography at the University of Bonn, presented preliminary results of recently conducted fieldwork in Karen State, which she undertook for her Master’s thesis. Her presentation “The Politics of Water Governance in Myanmar/Burma” illuminated how water governance is discussed in contemporary Myanmar. Her research builds on data obtained through semi-structured interviews with stakeholders, document analyses and media discourse. She analyses the production of scales around water governance. Using the Salween Peace Park in Mutraw (Papun) District in Karen state as an example, Götz illustrated how scale production in water governance can be a meeting point of national-level water policy making and localised hydrosocial visions. Götz argued that the current contestation of scales of water governance can be seen as a key battleground for future decision-making and the power relations of actors involved.

Dr. Felix Wilhelm Siebert, a visiting scientist at the Technical University (TU) in Berlin, introduced the audience to the topic of motorcyclist’s helmet use in different regions in Myanmar in his presentation “Traffic Safety in Myanmar: Challenges in the Decade of Action for Road Safety.” We are currently in the “Decade of Action for Road Safety”, proclaimed by the United Nations in 2010, which aims at counteracting the expected global increase of road traffic fatalities by 2020. In Myanmar the number of motorcycles has increased six-fold since the lifting of import restrictions on motor vehicles, which led to an increase in traffic accident fatalities, now estimated to be over 10,000 every year. With this development, Myanmar plays a special role in the UN statistics. In collaboration with the local NGO “Myanmar Organization for Road Safety”, Siebert, as a member of the TU Berlin collected data on motorcycle helmet use. The results show that during six weeks in 2016, of 120,000 motorcycle riders filmed, only about every second rider wore a helmet. In rural areas, the number of people with helmets on motorcycles is significantly lower than in urban areas. Drivers are more often equipped

with helmets than passengers. Possible reasons for the low incidence of using helmet protection are lack of police enforcement, lack of knowledge about the effectiveness or possible negative effects of helmet use on comfort or social status among peers. The research project will continue with plans to investigate more regions in Myanmar, adding a questionnaire survey and investigations of helmet quality.

## Current Myanmar Studies

We named this edited volume *Current Myanmar Studies: Aung San Suu Kyi, Muslims in Arakan, and Economic Insecurity* because it gives an admittedly focused but important insight into the works of current Myanmar researchers in Europe. Uta Gärtner starts with a concise review of the history of worldwide Myanmar studies with due consideration given to German traditions in this field. Thereby she focuses on institutions that follow a holistic approach combining research and teaching. Emphasising the need of language proficiency for acquiring authentic information she advocates the re-establishment of a permanent base, which comprises of language instruction as well as area studies and can promote the coordination of research work.

Michal Lubina focuses on the leader of the former opposition party and actual head of the current government, Aung San Suu Kyi. He argues that she was able to break the glass ceiling in Myanmar with impressive persistence and tremendous personal cost. She outwitted the ruling generals and escaped the double bind and other systemic obstacles they constructed to block her from ascending to power. In the West, she achieved the celestial position of a “democracy icon” and had been universally acclaimed. Yet after 2012, she has been almost equally strongly criticised for an alleged betrayal of democratic values and has experienced a spectacular degradation. The changing discourse on Suu Kyi in the Western media has, however, one permanent feature: the continued gender bias. Before 2012, the Western media discourse feminised her: Suu Kyi was presented as a stereotypical endangered woman: nascent, feminine and in need of someone masculine, strong to protect her. After 2012 that turned upside down: feminisation gave place to masculinisation: Suu Kyi in the Western media became a Lady Macbeth-style shrewd politician. Thus, both discourses are suffering from gender bias and as such do not present Suu Kyi the way she is: a strong, rational, feminine, realistic stateswoman. Thus, it comes out as a paradox that although Suu

Kyi was able to successfully challenge the double bind in Myanmar, she has yet to do so in the West.

Since the outbreak of murderous violence between the Buddhist population groups and Muslims in 2012, Rakhine State has come into the focus of international media. Alexandra de Mersan argues that the situation in this western borderland region needs to be understood in the region's specific social, economic and political context, which the "religious" interpretation of events tends to conceal. Her intention is to shed some light on the mechanics of the marginalisation of the Muslims in Arakan (Rakhine State)—especially in how it is expressed in social terms. De Mersan questions the evolution of concepts regarding groups and frontiers in the historical process of appropriation of Western concepts of nation and race. The general perception of Islam as foreign to the Burmese nation can be traced back to the colonial period. A careful examination of texts produced during this period shows in particular a process of racial categorisation—especially the construction of the Arakanese race—and the resulting marginalisation of Arakan's Muslims that occurred during the colonial period, which was reinforced after the country's independence.

With the transition from junta rule to constitutional government in 2011, came a dramatic change in the political and economic mindset of the Myanmar government. One main objective of the reforms was to bring about structural change and enhanced economic development. The efforts to push forward several of these reforms and objectives culminated in the development of three special economic zones (SEZ): Thilawa Port and the SEZ on the outskirts of Yangon, the Dawei SEZ near the Thai border, west of Bangkok and the Kyaukphyu SEZ near the border with Bangladesh—in collaboration with the respective governments of Japan, Thailand and China. In her paper Sina Hardaker examines in detail the remarkable development plans of the SEZs in Myanmar. Discussion of the economic context is initiated by addressing the main features of the economy, highlighting current performances and key issues. With the development of the three SEZs, she draws attention to questions as to why the establishment of SEZs has been chosen and whether economic development can be achieved through their instalment. Hardaker argues that Myanmar's recent SEZ policy has the potential to reduce trade expenses, activate productivity enhancements, and push-start manufacturing activity. However, it is reasoned that despite the likely encouragement of foreign direct investment (FDI), the development of SEZs entails a number of risks and the quality of employment opportunities being created is questionable.

Laura Hornig looks at informal credit arrangements in the urban informal sector of Patheingyi. In the absence of a state-run social security system, most people have no choice than to take out a loan if they have larger unforeseeable expenses, for example for an urgently needed health treatment. Easy access to credit can thus be crucial for survival. People get credit from a range of different providers, including kin, friends, moneylenders or microfinance institutions. Some of these credit arrangements are examples of community based mutual support while others are rather exploitative deals with high interest rates. Hornig analyses these different credit options with regard to the social relations they are embedded in. Taking out a loan always establishes a relationship, a commitment that involves aspects of support, but also pressure. Besides explaining the economic conditions behind debt relations, Hornig also includes moral factors surrounding these money transfers in her analysis. In many cases, people get trapped in debt circles that not only lead to personal distress, but can also lead to stigmatisation and conflicts within communities. To disentangle the moral ambiguities surrounding such situations, Hornig explores how indebtedness is judged with reference to Buddhism. Her analyses show that moral judgments of indebtedness are contextual: They depend for example on reasons for taking out a loan and his or her willingness and effort to repay it. She also includes attitudes concerning the lending side, for example how the taking of interest is justified. Hornig's study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how people in urban Myanmar navigate everyday financial challenges—economically, socially, and morally.

Jella Fink states that several methods of weaving can still be found in contemporary Myanmar. However, in more remote areas of the country it is hand weaving that is predominantly found. In her paper she refers to products from the periphery, especially the hand woven fabrics of ethnic Ann in eastern Shan State, a group that has seldom been referred to in the academic discourse on Myanmar fabrics. By giving a deeper insight into current hand-weaving practices and their meaning, Fink emphasises aspects of textile material culture related to individual and ethnic identities. Changes of the political and the economic situation play their part in weaver's strategies. She argues that the making of textiles can be understood as directly connected to these processes and they come into existence as a result of negotiations of the present and the practice of hand weaving. Weaving by hand allows for certain alterations in terms of colour range and patterns, so that the method itself is to some extent a limiting frame.

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