

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Reassessing Reification: Ethnicity amidst “Failed” Governmentality in Burma and India

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Abstract

In part because a single colonial project eventually formally incorporated Burma as an appendage to British colonial rule of India, Burma scholars persistently draw on historiography and anthropology of India to assert that ethnic categories in Burma were “reified” and hierarchized by colonial governmentality and ensuing postcolonial statecraft. This article disputes such assumed equivalences, re-theorizing “reification” through the concept of governmentality to distinguish modes of regulation and the kinds of social responses incited, suggesting that India and Burma stand as respective exemplars of distinct governmental forms. Specifically, scholarship represents Indian population groups (of caste, tribe, ethnicity, etc. permutations) as being reified by dense and reinforcing applications of knowledge/power. Even when these various and interlinking regulatory apparatuses “fail” to accurately describe social reality, they interpellate a response from subject populations, a process that operates to dialectically reinforce the categories. Conversely, similar governmental apparatuses desultorily implemented in Burma have operated differently. While they have succeeded in making South Asian and Muslim subjects into Burma’s self-perceived constitutive outside, governmentality has “doubly failed” on its *taingyintha* (indigenous) subjects. Poor knowledge of these Burmese peoples has foreclosed intensive projects of knowledge production, leading to “misinterpellation,” a form of metapragmatic awareness in which subjects recognize that discourses misdescribe them, and then strategically maneuver with(in) those labels. Ethnic emblems become hollow integuments navigable with comparative ease, as individuals modify their particular bodily and dispositional indices. The article concludes by encouraging comparative postcolonial governmentality studies that would delineate particularities in a concept (governmentality) that often remains unnuanced.

Keywords: Burma; India; governmentality; misinterpellation; ethnicity; reification; colonialism; postcoloniality

Introduction: Proposing a Comparative Postcolonial Governmentality Studies

Though Burma was governed as a province of British India until 1937, its incorporation came late: only by 1886 was conquest completed, and pacification

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came much later still (Callahan 2002). The two entities, Burma and India, were hence beset by discursive and administrative distinctions that kept them paradoxically bound yet separated. As a result, Burma has maintained an awkward position vis-à-vis the Indian colonial project, constituting what Saha (2016) has called a perpetual “problem” for South Asian history: Burma is both part of South Asia and a constitutive outside.

The same can be said for how India is viewed from Burma. On one hand, many scholars, influenced by the “unusually widespread impact” of South Asian history and anthropological theory (Mathur 2000: 90), have transposed models developed in South Asia onto Burma, advancing the argument that Burmese subject populations were re-subjectivized by dint of the same governmental cunning that enrolled Indian subjects (Turner 2014: 13, 81; Aung-Thwin 2011: 29–31). These accounts cite scholars such as Dirks, Cohn, and Chatterjee to assert that regulatory apparatuses such as the map, census, and museum constructed Burmese populations into legible objects of regulation, thereby reconstructing their worlds. Yet other Burma scholars have denied any substantive connection with India, asserting that as a mere appendage (Chit Hlaing 2008: 241) meant for resource extraction (Englehart 2011) Burma was governed through the blunt force of martial violence (Aung-Thwin 1985: 253; Callahan 2002) rather than subtle governmental incitement.

Yet, now that boundaries dividing area studies disciplines have begun to break down (Amrith 2013: 245) and scholars have started to more systematically examine Burma-India connections (Kirichenko n.d.; Osada 2011; Bowser 2020¹), we are encouraged to cease “rel[ying] upon a homogenizing representation of the state in colonial India, one that fails to recognize the diversity of administrative structures present across the Raj” (Saha 2016: 25). Rather, we should understand British Burma as neither precisely mimicking India nor completely diverging from it. Indeed, statecraft was refracted in its transposition from India to Burma, spawning mutations that generated different postcolonial political trajectories.

Such an examination can illuminate the vexing politics of ethnicity that have played out with bloody consequences in Burma over the past century. Vexing because, first, many presume that whether it is the protracted borderland wars against ethnic minorities, genocide against the Rohingya, or daily prejudice against non-Bamar individuals, the ethnic tension that has seemed to define Myanmar’s postcolonial politics derives from the existence of a deeply stratified ethnocentric system, one that has rigidly hierarchized the country’s ethnic groups (Walton 2013). This conclusion follows from a Burma studies literature that identifies ethnicity as having been “reified and bounded, based on absolute differences in race, religion and mentality” (Gravers 2007: 14), an effect first wrought by colonial knowledge/power apparatuses (Turner 2014; Aung-Thwin 2011; Li 2017: 19; Ferguson 2021: 48–49) and then carried over by a postcolonial military state devoted to domination by the majority Bamar ethnic group. The scholarly agreement on this general outcome is so complete (see Taylor 1982: 7–8; Aung-Thwin 1998; Callahan 2004; Gravers 2007: 14; Walton 2013: 8; Ferguson 2015: 5–10; Cho 2018: 43–45; Gravers 2021) that it has become conventional wisdom, as Thawngmung explicitly claims (2022).

And yet, simultaneously, lived realities of “ethnicity” in contemporary Burma complicate this tidy description of ethnocracy. Dissonance emerges in several ways:

¹Much of this literature itself borrows from Mahajani (1960) and Chakravarti (1971).

not only do people inhabit multiple “ethnic” identities at once, and shift and move between them, but *lumyo* (the Burmese word translated as “ethnicity” but which also retains shades of its literal meaning: “type of person”) maintains a broad semantic range. It permits identifications such as Muslim-*lumyo* and Buddhist-*lumyo* that contest the common definition of ethnicity as an overarching form of group affiliation meant to “subordinate” affiliations such as religion (Andaya 2008: 6). Further, the state is often woefully incapable of, and even disinterested in, knowing let alone regulating these identities. This means that specific ethnicities cannot be easily ascribed to individuals (Jap 2021: 56). Moreover, the state’s ability to govern *through* ethnic categories is so weak that it cannot intervene against such emic understandings of *lumyo*.

I will argue here that by examining particular failures in colonial and postcolonial governmentality we can perceive how both accounts just described can accurately describe Burma—how ethnicity can be real enough to fight for and die by, even as it conflates with other categories of identity, eludes clear definition, and fails to act as an ascriptive category through which tokens (individuals) can effectively be linked with type (ethnicity). The comparison with India may illustrate why this is the case. Specifically, ethnographic and historical literature presents India as installing dense and multiplex (Milroy and Milroy 1999: 46–49) applications of knowledge/power, deployed through various and interlinking regulatory apparatuses, to reify legible population groups, with permutations of caste, tribe, ethnicity, and so forth. These “top-down” apparatuses (census, map, and museum) generate effects that are both “vertically” reinforced and “horizontally” co-produced by the subjects who internalize their logics and then reproduce them in themselves and others (Hacking 1999). Consequently, even when these processes “fail” to accurately describe social reality, they interpellate a response from subject populations, dialectically reinforcing the categorization project. Or so, as I interpret it, the literature claims.

Conversely, however, those same apparatuses, casually implemented in Burma, “doubly fail” in the sense that poor knowledge of Burmese peoples has foreclosed more intensive projects of knowledge production. The “top-down” apparatuses not only barely function (censuses go untaken; ID cards undistributed; welfare services—particularly those based on differentiated sub-populations—undelivered), but when they do function, their obtuse knowledge produces “misinterpellation” (cf. Martel 2013), what I theorize as a form of metapragmatic awareness in which subjects identify the fact that discourses gratuitously misdescribe them, a recognition that gives them wherewithal to strategically maneuver with and within those labels. Here, rather than exceptions proving rules, they break them: whereas with interpellation any exception works to ultimately reinforce categorization, as the system “learns” by assimilating material that does not fit original definitions (the category may broaden, or subjects may come to live comfortably with evidence that does not fit), with misinterpellation exceptions are not incorporated, but rather they undermine (however mildly) the categorization project. In Burma, this leaves ethnic labels reified only to the extent that they are hollow integuments which subjects can navigate between with comparative ease, by modifying their particular bodily and dispositional indices (clothing, language/accent, or religious performances).

Given that ethnicity is overdetermined—as Shneiderman (2014: 280) delineates it, ethnicity is objectified by states and markets, but also localized cultural fields—this article thus does not purport to advance a unified theory of ethnogenesis. Rather, it

seeks to challenge conventional wisdoms that focalize certain aspects of state power—particularly governmental regulation. It instead foregrounds the *interaction* of state power (in both its regulatory and coercive aspects), with markets and cultural forces. By asking what happens to ethnicity within contexts of weak governmentality, we can refine analytical tools for conceptualizing categorization projects more generally.

The article proceeds first by theorizing a comparative postcolonial governmentality, the two kinds of “failure” that it produces, and the “misinterpellation” that it can generate. It then shows how the colonial encounter played out differently in India and in Burma, before describing how particularly relevant effects of governmentality—ethnogenesis—took on radically different systemic expressions in the respective postcolonies. Because my long-term anthropological fieldwork is in Burma, my critique of scholarly treatments of the situation there is buttressed by ethnographic descriptions of lived experiences with ethnicity. Hence, while I critically read scholarly literature on India, I acknowledge that the article leaves open questions about how governmentality has played out differently there, for specific populations. I therefore ask, although I do not address, whether contemporary India might appear different when compared with Burma rather than implicitly with the West—a project that, nevertheless, the comparative method enables.

Governmentality Synthesized

Foucault articulated governmentality as a form of highly mediated power. The actions of subjects and the dispositions of populations are not directly coerced, and particular ends are neither violently demanded nor even necessarily enforced. Rather, behaviors, habits, and orientations are subtly conducted—induced, incited, and potentially effected. Where sovereign power operates directly through the sword-wielding king (Foucault 1977: ch. 1), and disciplinary power operates similarly on the body that becomes habituated to specific actions through panoptic surveillance (*ibid.*: *passim*), governmentality is distantiated, operating on populations, but also on environments, dispositions, and relationships, so as to condition possibilities (Foucault 2003; 2007). Governmentality focalizes not only the multiple apparatuses acting as sites and relays of power flows but highlights the reactions of those subjected to these flows, hence emphasizing both *action* and *outcome*: the set of forces that are applied and the effects that are created (Foucault 1982: 797). In this sense, governmentality is both the apparatuses of regulation and the results that they produce.

While this simultaneous focus on the overarching regime and its effects on subjects is central to understanding governmentality, emphasis on the apparatus often displaces focus on how subjects, and the populations they constitute, respond. More specifically, the focus on the system in theorizations of governmentality often elides a second key mediation, between system and subject. Tania Li critiques a scholarly tendency to endorse “the study of governmental rationalities” while explicitly advocating “*against* ... [studying] the ways in which rule is actually accomplished” (2007: 278). The irony here is that, as Lemke’s synthesis of Foucauldian governmentality shows (2019), the relationships between apparatuses and subjectivities were fundamental to Foucault’s project. Governmentality “functions as a ‘hinge’ between different aspects of” Foucault’s conceptualization of power, thereby making “it possible to investigate how processes of domination are

linked to ‘technologies of the self’ and how forms of political government are articulated with practices of self-government” (Lemke 2019: 47).

What does this mean in practice? The literature applying governmentality is vast (*inter alia* Bröckling, Krasmann, and Lemke 2012; Wallenstein and Nilsson 2013), but much of it does not interrogate the relationship between governmental forces (biopolitical technologies operating on populations) and governmental outcomes (the way subjects constituting population groups are interpellated as such). For instance, one stream of governmentality perceives totalizing regimes that preempt subjective response. Take, as the example par excellence, the putative construction of ethnicity through apparatuses of governmentality. As Anderson famously elaborated, when administrations “organized ... new educational, juridical, public-health, police, and immigration bureaucracies,” ethno-racial hierarchies identified and established through such apparatuses (such as censuses, courts, and clinics) came to life as real social categories as those newly identified “subject populations [flowed] through the mesh of differential schools, courts, clinics, police stations and immigration offices” (2006: 169). Much of the literature on Burma describes conditions in the country thusly, even when evidence demonstrates that governmental interventions are refracted, perverted, undermined, or ignored by their objects. Specifically, this literature invokes “reification,” a concept developed by Lukács (1971[1922]) to describe the way commodification under capitalism restructures entire social systems. For Lukács, the dominance of the commodity, and the way it stands as a thing (*res*) that conceals as it congeals the human labor power that created it, transforms all relations in capitalist society into exchange value. Likewise, proponents of the ethnic reification thesis describe a social system in which every subject’s value is given by how they fit into the scheme of ethnic hierarchy. As one Myanmar studies scholar applies this to Burma, “This kind of ethnic/racial categorization means that every individual belonging to a category is ascribed a specific ethnic essence of identity” (Gravers 2021: 19).

On the other hand, a converse stream of scholarship asserts the *opposite* subjective response, as objects of regulation completely evade governmental ambitions (Cepek 2011: 501–5). Gupta repeatedly critiques the postcolonial Indian state’s forms of enumeration and regulation, arguing that without “reliable, trustworthy, accurate statistical data on the population that is to be managed ... it is doubtful if it makes sense to even talk about biopolitics” (2012: 228). He also avers that “knowing the population to manage it better was deeply compromised by the methods used to collect such data” (*ibid.*: 43; see also Legg 2006: 715).

Only by synthesizing both interpretative streams here can we understand how governmental assemblages operate. This is best perceived through the productivity of governmental failure.

Two Kinds of Governmental Failure: Dialectical Resolution versus Disjuncture

Governmental forces that “fail” often nonetheless generate responses on their own terms and terrain. For example, Legg identifies a productive failure when highlighting how, “Indian nationalists criticized the government in political society, in the very space created by the Government of India itself” (2006: 715). Such failures become “successes” in the sense that they interpellate subjects into recognition of themselves

as part of populations, to see their groups in relation to apparatuses such as the state, and to then mobilize as such (Hacking 1999: 168).

Conversely, Redfield, writing about colonial penal colonies as the contemporary but disavowed double of the Benthamite panoptic prison, explores failures in governmentality that seem to go beyond the standard biopolitical dialectic between regulatory project and subjective response just described: “Rather than governmentality we have something like its negative impression: a deployment of the possibility of government without its fulfillment ... where governmental norms are suggested but not applied” (2005: 65). As Foucault took Bentham’s panopticon as not simply a technology defining the nineteenth-century prison but as generalizable, Redfield asks whether the penal colony constitutes an alternative generalizable model, in which “failure” becomes “reinscribed” as definitive of governance: “It is clear to all involved in its operation that the gap between the stated goals of behavior for its denizens and the conditions they inhabit is large” (*ibid.*).

Redfield makes two important observations here. The first is that some governmental milieus are structured, whether intentionally or not, to *not* guide people towards correct conduct. Second, those subjected to these forms of governance are permitted to *realize* the brazen mendacity of their symbolic order: penal colony misinterpellation (modifying Martel 2013) takes the form of subjects being permitted to perceive how they are implored to live, even while being denied conditions conducive to life. Such accounts direct our attention to the “double-failure” of certain kinds of governmentality, and the perverse subjective responses that may follow (see, relatedly, Dullely 2022).

Applying this model of double-failure to Burma, I ask what happens when British Indian models were transposed into a project—Burma’s colonization—devoted to different ends? What happens when rather than deeply knowing the populations it regulates, a regime largely rejects, or absorbs in a disinterested manner, the tools of knowledge/power that would make its populations legible? Specifically, what happens in a system that foregrounds specific categories, such as ethnicity, in a citizen’s identity—by, for instance, requiring that every subject have their ethnicity inscribed upon their citizenship card—but does *not* seek to know “the ratio of births to deaths, the rate of reproduction, the fertility” (Foucault 2003: 243) of those sub-populations? What happens when a system reliant on ideologies of ethnic differentiation nonetheless does not regularly conduct censuses, lacks systems for checking, verifying, and ascribing specific identities? I suggest, inverting Martel’s definition (in which unintended subjects are interpellated), that subjects are misinterpellated when they come to metapragmatic recognition—awareness of the effects of discourse—of how a term fails to describe them. This awareness allows them (varying degrees of) freedom to dis-identify with that object, enabling actors to stand astride labels and navigate strategically with and within them.

Colonial Governmentalities: Synthesizing South Asia

Chatterjee stresses, in his exploration of Indian postcoloniality (2004; 2011; 2019), that, “Technologies of governmentality often predate the nation-state, especially where there has been a relatively long experience of European colonial rule” (2004: 36). In British India what Chatterjee calls “the rule of colonial difference” (1993), defined as “the preservation of the alienness of the ruling group” (*ibid.*: 10),

structured the contours of that governmentality. Generally, this meant that “the forms of objectification and normalization of the colonized had to reproduce . . . the truth of the colonial difference” (ibid.: 20). Specifically, this played out in a knowledge/power project in which difference was formed through the construction of population groups, both creating the structure of politics and investing those population groups (particularly castes, ethnicities, and tribes) with substantive content.

This was enacted, first and most fundamentally, by a biopolitical governance regime that took *masses* of subject populations rather than individuals as rights-bearers as its basic unit of rule (Foucault 2003: 243). Second, even as subjects were so massified into population groups, they also were not only tokens of a common type (the colonized) but disparate tokens of multiple types (various groups of colonized populations) (Chatterjee 1993: 223). The iconic case of this double move of massification and sub-division is exemplified in the way that, as Dirks argues, British knowledge/power succeeded in transforming caste into a single term “capable of expressing, organizing, and above all ‘systematizing’ India’s diverse forms of social identity, community, and organization” (2001: 6).

Crucially, various forms of accumulated knowledge reinforced one another. Ancient textual exegesis (recovering India’s “true” past) correlated with the ethnological survey (determining its “true” present) (Cohn 1996). Censuses and ethnological surveys examined similar objects (the caste, the tribe) from different perspectives: one focusing on enumeration and aggregation, the latter on exploration and discovery of distinguishing features (Saumarez Smith 1985: 162–70), producing ethnological knowledge ready for use.

But what quality of knowledge was produced? Colonial apparatuses that “required an unambiguous classification of caste to locate and fix the identity of the colonial subject” would encounter “ambiguities” that were “literally endless” (Chatterjee 1993: 220). Indeed, even as colonial apparatuses proceeded in their data accumulation and attendant ordering of bodies, they often encountered unruly and unwilling subjects, ones who (strategically and consciously, or otherwise) evaded these apparatuses, obfuscated the data their bodies presented, or otherwise adulterated the data amassed—a process of confounding that has defined the colonial era (Chatterjee 2002) to the present (Abraham 2018).

And yet, the cunning of colonial governmentality proceeded not through perfect identification, but rather by interpellating subjects into regimes of truth they were incited to navigate. This navigation generated ethnic, class, and social categories that became sociologically real, inhabited by those subjects. “Indians,” Bayly notes, “were increasingly producing their own knowledge from reworked fragments of their own tradition melded with Western ideas and conveyed through Western artefacts” (1999: 371).²

A critical consequence of this thick field of knowledge, as Chatterjee shows, is that these populations were not simply administered, made into objects, by the colonial government; they mobilized political demands, made claims, and fought about representation *as* those population groups (1993: 223). Hansen likewise argues,

²Dirks overstates the way the colonial regime produced caste, since population genetic research suggests that caste endogamy was enforced for millennia (Reich 2019: 140–43; see also Guha 1997: 93–94). Yet caste remained relevant even in “modern” bourgeois mobilizations against the British, such as the Swadeshi Movement, which operated through caste logics (Guha 1997: 111–14).

“The colonial enumeration of communities [was] a constant reference in the subsequent struggles over the production of the Indian people” (1999: 37). And while the penetration of governmentality into subaltern domains and onto subaltern subjects must not be overstated (Guha 1997; Chatterjee 2019: 75), it established a paradigm able to expand its incorporation of additional Indian subjects in the postcolonial era, as we will see.

Burma’s “Doubly Failing” Governmentality

Burma, by contrast, was governed as part of British India as “a sort of amorphous appendage ... within the Indian Empire” (Chit Hlaing 2008: 241). As an accessory, Burma was governed in fundamentally divergent ways to India. Perhaps because the British saw the two entities as different territories populated by different races (Osada 2011), in contrast to the strain of liberalism that in India arguably attenuated the bar of colonial difference (Scott 2005) and allowed governance to become gradually “more inclusive and more open to conflict and compromise,” Burma “was the one part of the colony where political reforms were unthinkable” (Callahan 2002: 514). Classified as a “non-regulation” province, Burma was not subject to acts passed by British Parliament but was instead governed under the Governor-General’s authority. This meant military officers were recruited into Burma’s civil administration—something not otherwise permitted—and “tended to dominate, especially in the early years,” its administration (Englehart 2011: 766). They governed “unhindered,” “dispens[ing] justice on horseback,” “unchecked” by other authorities (ibid.: 766–67), even as they learned little about Burma amidst drastic understaffing (ibid.: 770). Englehart shows that by the time administrators trained in more progressive ideas arrived, they had to maneuver within a machine whose despotic elements had already ossified.

Even so, the British administrators “reflexively [turned] to Indian models and precedents in dealing with Burmese problems” (ibid.: 765; see Sadan 2013: chs. 3, 4), in part because most began their careers in India (Englehart 2011: 764; cf. Li 2017: 5–6). Turner (2014: 83) implicitly draws upon this connection when she cites Dirks’ and Cohn’s respective studies of colonial India to argue that the British administration “sought to intervene to improve the welfare of the population,” by developing “projects in agriculture, sanitation, education, and public health” (ibid.: 13). This “new machinery for empire” of “schools, universities, community organizations, awards and honors, pageants, and libraries” was intended “to train new Burmese colonial subjects in the correct introspection and self-governance” (ibid.).

Taking these two strains together, what did this mean for governance? What did it mean that the British deployed only some of the same tools on drastically different populations to try to achieve different objectives (to use Burma as an extractivist zone and buffer state [Sadan 2013: 161])? What were the consequences on, and then of, knowledge/power—for the relationships between the peoples “known” (or left mostly unknown) and on the ways their conduct could be effectively conducted?

Let us begin by examining specific colonial interventions: in Burmese education and religion. First, the British tried to co-opt Burma’s extant monastery-based education system but, as Turner finds, this “was destined to fail because officials misunderstood the purposes of Buddhist education” (2014: 53). Monasteries would submit to neither the curricula, the pedagogical discipline, nor the conceptual

separation of “religious” from “secular” affairs on which the British insisted. The British were then compelled to set up their own parallel education system, which displaced the educational role of monasteries. And yet, while Burmese participated in colonial education (being taught “Buddhism in 30 minutes a day,” as Turner puts it), rather than succumbing fully to the colonial endeavor, “Buddhist associations’ projects for preserving Buddhist knowledge expanded to include the creation of schools that could ensure the future of Buddhism in the hands of the next generation” (ibid.: 46). Hence, they co-opted British methods to promote a Burmese Buddhist imaginary of modernity.

This may seem consistent with the story of productive failure described above in India, but the last key aspect—re-subjectivation—seems absent. This is especially true given the reform project’s meagre reach: “As late as 1920 the government had managed to extend public instruction to less than a third of rural Burma” (Ikeya 2011: 34). Kirichenko concludes, “Despite all pronounced social changes of colonial times and dissolution of traditional social structure ... Burmese tradition faced no challenge at the level of values and perception of reality” (n.d.: 7).

Rather than the administrative channel creating new ontological realities through wily governmentality, it was political economic forces (of what Chatterjee [1993] would call the “material” kind) that, as Turner brilliantly describes (2014: 64), put Burmese Buddhists in a “double-bind”: If their children eschewed colonial institutions, they would not be able to succeed economically, and would hence not be able to support Buddhist monks, spurring the religion’s decline. If, conversely, children participated in colonial schools, then they would likely turn away from Buddhism, resulting in the same obsolescence for the religion. Turner presents these Buddhist subjects as cognizant of this double-bind, and we might then suggest that they did not internalize the colonizer’s ontologization of religion as a circumscribed set of practices. Rather, the coercion of the colonial project—both from subtle economic forces that rearranged space and hence social relationships (Li 2017: 46, 51–52; Brown 2013; Lieberman 2021) and the violence experienced in the daily life of a racially divided colony (Ikeya 2011)—permitted Burmese critical distance to assess and maneuver.

This explanation finds support when we attend to how the entire governmental assemblage deployed in Burma was, pace Turner, one beset by an absence of both will and capacity to know and govern. In comparison with India, the British in Burma suffered a “virtual information famine,” which threatened to “put the whole edifice of their power in peril” (Bayly 1999: 97). Many British colonists appeared ideologically committed to a belief that there was just much *less to know* in Burma: an 1826 report writer declared that the “mass of intelligence and knowledge possessed generally by the Burmans [Bamar] as a people appears to me greatly less than what belongs to the people of [India]” (ibid.: 115). This allowed Bayly to conclude, “British material on the language, literature, ideology and motivations of the Burmese remained strikingly meagre into the later nineteenth century” (ibid.: 128). Perhaps this explains why British destroyed rather than worked through extant institutions that made Burmese knowable, such as village governance structures (Taylor 2009: 105ff) and a sophisticated legal system (Lammerts 2018; for British destruction of it, see Huxley 1998: 9).

Even by the turn of the century, the British administration in Burma remained “dysfunctional, understaffed” (Saha 2013a: 6), run by “bureaucratic despots” (ibid.: 9), a regime Saha describes elsewhere as “bio-politics on a budget” (2013b: 409).

Boshier finds the British authorities not only incurious about Burma's past, but largely disinterested in knowing its present (2018: 17–18, 172): apathy toward ancient monuments and “Burma's heritage overall” (ibid.: 17) manifested in, *inter alia*, shuttered museums (ibid.: 17–18).

Nowhere is it clearer that lack of knowledge entails, generates, and incites further lack of knowledge than in the failures of ethnic classification. Edwards notes that Burma's twenty-one census categories “paled in contrast to the 1901 Census of India [s] 2,738 listings of main castes and tribes” (2002: 285). Boshier's research helps explain this informational dearth, citing how “lack of funding, military resources and available skilled manpower had hindered the development of a professional surveying and mapping service” (2018: 207). As a result, as McAuliffe's study illustrates, even those few extant census categories continually changed, as the administration stumbled from one incoherent scheme to another. For instance, in 1881, race was adduced from birthplace and language, but “Birthplace did little to differentiate the indigenous population as the majority of individuals were born in the provincial boundaries of Burma” (2017: 39). A decade later those categories were replaced with “race” and “nationality,” although there was no way to infer these from objective data; hence, the 1901 census returned to language until officials “could find a ‘scientific’ method to determine the biological, or hereditary, distinctions between groups” (ibid.: 40). Despite this reliance on language, the British never conducted a linguistic survey (Callahan 2003: 147). To supplement these useless data, the British even “attempted to use birthmarks” to discern race; they ended up, unsurprisingly, “frustrated with the results” (McAuliffe 2017: 49). As Ferguson puts it, wryly, the “data did not always readily make sense” (2015: 7). Administrators themselves identified the failure to link on-the-ground knowledge (records) with the analytical descriptions (reports): “The census takers themselves disputed their accuracy, citing personal experience over their scientific enumeration methods” (Turner 2014: 47; see also Ferguson 2015: 6).

And even though the British themselves recognized that “Burma had been left far behind in [ethnicity] research” when compared to neighboring colonial projects (Boshier 2018: 91), when the British administration in India undertook a vast ethnological survey that took thirty years to complete and filled eighteen volumes, it did not extend the survey to Burma. Instead, and directly contradicting contemporaneous discourses on Burma's putative simplicity, it declared Burma's ethnolinguistic terrain too complex. The apparent contradiction can only be resolved through assessment of Britain's project: Burma was simple enough to dominate and extract from, too complex to sophisticatedly govern. And so lack of knowledge again begat further lack of knowledge. Boshier finds that the decision not to pursue the survey derived from the fact that “administrative control had only recently been established over the more remote regions of the province and they considered that there was little preliminary knowledge upon which to base the survey” (ibid.: 198). Instead, the British used proxies, such as missionaries (Tinzar Lwyn 1994) and amateur anthropologists (e.g., Enriquez 1924) to discern Burma's peripheries. What little knowledge these amateurs acquired lacked both quality (Boshier 2018: 207) and “guidance from any overarching frameworks of knowledge or methodologies of interpretation” (ibid.: 206).

The Burma Research Society (BRS), a mixed-race knowledge society incorporating colonial and local researchers, was formed in 1910, at least in part as an institution meant to compensate for inadequate colonial knowledge. In the face of

official state neglect, and “although an amateur group, with no official status within the Government,” the BRS was perceived “as the only competent and reliable source of much needed knowledge about Burma’s minorities” (ibid.: 214). Yet when BRS member Leslie Taylor began a full ethnological survey in the 1920s, the Society undermined his proposal. While the quality of Taylor’s research “was never in question” (ibid.: 222), the BRS leadership succeeded in getting the Burma Government not only to order Taylor to quit the work but to forbid him from pursuing it even on his own time (ibid.: 225). This seemingly bizarre decision was made because BRS’s membership, dominated by Brits and Bamar, “did not wish to embark on any detailed enquiries or surveys which might destabilize the dominant Burman-Buddhist ethos that was central to their conception of cultural nationalism” (ibid.: 17). Despite common presumptions that British “divided-and-ruled,” here the opposite method was used: massification without differentiation.³

As these examples suggest, one key consequence, qua governmentality, is that whereas *delineation* (by ethnicity, class) produces opportunity for varied tactics that differentially conduct conduct, *massification* of “the Burmese” as unknowable object suggests the opposite: the impulse to securitize that mass. Mairii Aung-Thwin’s study of the brutal British response to the Saya San peasant rebellion perhaps best illustrates this point, showing how the British repeatedly not only pursued responses against masses (in the form of collective punishment in burning entire villages [2011: 97]), but relied on techniques that took indices with polysemous meanings (having tattoos, wearing amulets, worshipping spirits [ibid.: 102]) as revelatory of a sole type: the “singular image of a Burmese rebel” (ibid.: 108). So much did the rebel figure exhaust the semantic field that “many of the accused were tried as a group, suppressing the possibility of detecting difference” (ibid.: 109). Relatedly, the British constructed Saya San as a distillation of all Burmese culture, making him a synecdoche that subsumed other expressions: even “urban political models ... [were] nothing more than a front” for traditionalist visions (ibid.: 143). Hence, Aung-Thwin suggests that all “Burmese culture was on trial,” hill societies and lowlands alike (ibid.: 12–13). Ultimately, while Aung-Thwin establishes the rebel as an epistemological analogue to caste in India (ibid.: 211), the two actually operate in opposite ways: the Burmese were massified for securitization while the Indian was (also) sub-divided for regulation.

Reified Ethnicity in Burma?

What were the effects on subjectivity? My theorization of misinterpellation suggests that the existence of significant gaps between lived reality and discursive representation allows for, even induces, subjective reflection not just on the gap but on the categorization project more generally. We can examine ethnicity through this paradigm, asking whether it was truly “reified” by colonialism, as per conventional wisdom, or whether the identification of ethnic terms and the regulation of subjects through them created contestable categories and impelled an ambiguous engagement with categorization projects.

³While Aung-Thwin (2005) reads an attempt to “divide-and-rule” from a British historiography that emphasized both Mon ethnic distinctiveness and its cultural primacy over Bamar’s Pagan kingdoms, Lieberman disputes this conclusion (2007: 383).

Take “Bamar.” The reification thesis holds that colonial governmentality affixed this signifier irrefragably onto an identifiable group: the majority ethnicity. Yet, exploration of 1930s-era vernacular literature challenges this assertion. Kei Nemoto (2000) shows that the radical anti-colonial association Doh-Bamar Asiayoun did not take “Bamar” as a narrow ethnic label, but as an overarching quasi-civic emblem. Moreover, the group divided “Bamar” in a revealing way: *Doh-Bamar* (“we Burmese”) were committed to independence through proletarian struggle; *Thudo-Bamar* (“those Burmese”), by contrast, were comprador imperialist collaborators. Bamar was encompassing of a mass only then divided: the side on which a subject fell (“we Burmese” or “those Burmese”) was not externally ascribed as an ethnic/racial identity but made as a political choice.

Another popular text from this era, *Population Problems* (Kan Gyi and Ko Lay 1939: 25) identifies “foreigners” and “guest” races as those who would adulterate the collective *amyo* (“lineage,” “kind,” or “race”). But whose *amyo*? The collective bearers of *amyo* were Burma’s *taingyintha* (“sons of the soil”)—all of the native peoples of Myanmar: “Impure blood may shatter unity. Therefore, so that *taingyintha* with pure *amyo* are bound together, this should not be forgotten” (ibid.). Pace the “divide and rule” insisted upon by the reification thesis, this text does not internally delineate *taingyintha*. The same held for non-Bamar majorities, if Mandy Sadan’s research on Kachin can be taken as representative: in her extensive corpus of intra-Kachin conversations, she does “not find the term ‘Kachin’ at all” (2013: 335), showing that state naming projects were ignored. Moreover, it was not that the socio-political community now known (to some) as Kachin simply used an equivalent indigenous idiom; the functional equivalent for “Kachin”—*Jingpaw Wunpawng*—had to be later refined to *Wunpawng*, broadening the term to incorporate other groups and meanings not included during the colonial era.

Returning to lowland texts, the even more popular *Mixed-Race Problems* (Pu Kalay 1939) implicitly makes a similar point about *taingyintha*. In identifying miscegenation as a central threat to the Burmese nation, the text focuses uniquely on couplings between *taingyintha* and “other races.” As Hla’s (1939) introduction highlights, the book only examines South Asians ostensibly imported by the British (see Phyo Win Latt 2020 for other vernacular texts that also stressed the Burmese/Indian schism). And yet the first line of *Mixed-Race Problems*’ epigraph declares that “it is very rare that a person is not *kabya* [mixed race]” (Pu Kalay 1939: 11). It warrants noting here that Yi Li finds that progeny of Burmese Chinese couplings were in this period free to choose their affiliation, whether as Burmese or as Chinese (2017: 222). Consistent with these examples of identity as political choice rather than only administrative dictate, *Mixed-Race Problems*’ epigraph declares, “It is worse to be *kabya* in mind than to be *kabya* by blood,” indicating that this was not a theory in which biology equated to destiny.

The nebulous nature of identities and signifiers meant to have been reified is particularly apparent in two 1941 articles in the left-wing *Nagani* journal. Uut’s (1941) argument that the British had overstated differences between Burma’s *lummyos* in Burma, and that a class-based struggle against underdevelopment (*auq-cha-nauq-cha*) of the non-Bamar regions could be forged is interesting in its own right. But the editor’s introduction to Uut’s piece is suggestive regarding ontologies of naming. Indeed, although the British census had counted lowland Burma dwellers as *Bamar*, this editor at times uses instead *Myanmar* to describe what some would now call Bamar ethnicity, while using Bamar as a common term that could be shared by all

taingyintha: “‘Doh-Bamar’ is not just for Myanmar, but for Shan, Kayin, Kachin, Chin, Danu, Palaung, Taungthu and so forth. So that all *taingyingtha* call themselves this, all *taingyintha* issues should be *Myanmar* issues” (Nagani 1941). Later in the text, the signifier Bamar is used in two different ways in the same sentence, first, narrowly as the *lumyo* and then as a supra-ordinate category for all the peoples of the country (like the civic identity marker *Burmese*). “All the Bamar, Shan, Kayin, Kachin, Chin, Palaung, Taungthu, et cetera who are called ‘Bamar *taingyintha*’ are our siblings with the same blood and flesh.” Hence, *contra* reification, we observe in a single text two different understandings of the signifier “Bamar” (indexing ethnic and civic identities) and two different signifiers used for the concept of the ethnic group that we now call Bamar, making us question whether these distinctions were effectively drawn for the people of that era.

To explain why “Bamar” (and other *lumyos*) resisted reification, we can look to previous sociological reality: the persistence of a plurality of categorization modalities. Candier’s recent review of Burmese precolonial conceptions of *lumyo*, a term she translates as “categories of people” (2019: 347–51), provides evidence. Candier adduces a number of people-labeling typologies circulating in eighteenth-century Burma that appear divergent from the conceptions ostensibly brought during colonialism: whether the 101 *lumyo* that drew upon Buddhist cosmology and remained nebulous; to administrative distinctions that divided Burmese subjects into four key divisions—kings (lord-warriors), priests, wealthy, and peasants; to the upland/lowland distinction described by Leach (1959) and Lieberman (1984: 136), the coexistence of multiple categorization projects militated against categorical fixity. In part because a king did not seek a “common identity among his followers” (Lieberman 1978: 459) and rather even “gloried in [his subjects’] diversity as a validation of his universal political pretensions” (ibid.: 477), names that today suggest bounded ethnic groups (Bamar, Mon) at that time “described regional loyalties” (ibid.: 458). Precolonial elites themselves downplayed divisions. According to Charney, Bamar-ness was “an assimilationist product of borrowing” from others (2006: 140).

How did this system function vis-à-vis so-called ethnic groups? In his famous definition of ethnicity, Barth (1969) stressed that groups of people identified boundaries between each other, focusing on distinctions and differences over essences and substances. Lehman (1967), writing about Burma, went further, identifying ethnicity as “reticulate,” meaning that any ethnic group’s identity is defined not just by its dyadic differences with an alter group, but in how it relates to the entire system (see also Robinne 2009). Because any given group relates to relationships between other groups, dynamic evolution is axiomatic, as a ripple between two proximate groups will affect the relationship between a third and a fourth, impacting in turn a fifth further afield.

But what allows for such ripples? Leach argues that social actors’ misrecognition (and differential misrecognition) of both the workings of the social system and their respective places within it (1959: 4; also Lehman 1967: 105) allows evolution. Myths and rituals are malleable enough to allow different groups to reinterpret stories to serve their objectives (Leach 1959: 265), manipulations that can alter the entire system (ibid.: 8). If identity shifts rely upon the vague definition of both molar identities and the social systems in which they exist, we can extrapolate that the weaker the governmental assemblage, the less explicitly defined the ethnicities. Concomitantly, the less those definitions are objectified, re-embedded in

institutional structures, and woven into daily life, the more flexibility will exist around identities.

We can return now to the point about multiple categorization projects existing concurrently. While Lehman's genius was to analyze ethnicity as reticulate, he still emphasized "ethnicities" as being the units of interaction, which was a proxy for elite negotiation (1967: 99). Despite describing the reticulate system as needing to incorporate other "scales" of group identification (*ibid.*: 101–2, 107), his focalization of elites and ethnic groups (who never, it warrants mentioning, make decisions as groups; see Brubaker 2004) obscures the double transformation necessary in a reification project. The reification thesis presumes a revolution in the logics of multiple systems: molar ethnic forms (Shan, Karen, Kayah) but also local affiliations such as kin, clan, or village identities would be radically rearranged such that (1) local affiliations would be subsumed beneath, or eliminated by, those molar ethnic identities, and (2) the networked web of reticulation that had linked those ethnicities would dissolve, giving way to a hub-and-spoke system in which the spokes' relationships to one another become mostly irrelevant, displaced by their relationship with the center (the Myanmar state/Bamar ethnos). Did this actually transpire?

Lehman endorses this shift, declaring that an accurate understanding of reticulate relations was corrupted after the "importation of very explicit European ideas about nations, societies, and cultures" (1967: 103; see also Taylor 1982: 10). Yet, Lehman does not explain how these European ideas diffused. Candier (2019: 358), making a similar diffusionist argument, attributes the shift to the outcome of international relations in the context of transnational commercial exchanges, but she likewise provides no rationale for why such ideas became hegemonic. It is here that the governmentality argument emerges, since it at least provides a mechanism for reification: revolutions in categorization reinforced by extensions of governance *through those categories* was meant to have made those categories real. The question is whether this occurred.

Zeroing in on the Kachin, and consistent with the theme of ethnicity as a shell, existing as a label but devoid of substantive knowledge, the "official designation of territories under the Kachin Hill Tribes label" took the exonym "Kachin"—"what had begun as something of a linguistic and orthographic confusion"—and made it "ever more fixed as a political and ethnographic fact" as local elites were forced "to talk back to officials in the language that they applied and understood" (Sadan 2013: 176). And yet, Sadan stresses that the relevance of supraordinate identities "becomes difficult to gauge the closer one gets to the ground," and indeed "less relevant compared with other forms of identification" (*ibid.*: 181). For instance, lineage-based groupings cut against the organization of people into ethnicities. Even when "proving demographic weight of numbers became ever more important ... for determining communal status and rights in the new colonial state" (*ibid.*: 195–96), Sadan stresses how that biopolitical governmentality did not interpellate subjects *as Kachin*, but in fact did the *opposite*: it "ultimately fed into the creation of an indigenized ethnonym, *Wunpawng*, to contest the hegemony of the term Kachin as a political referent" (*ibid.*: 200). Returning to the theme of misinterpellation, Sadan describes how despite, or rather *because*, the colonial machine knew little about them, some "Kachin" subjects were able to "take control of and address all its inaccuracies of understanding and related superficialities of meaning" (*ibid.*: 251). Able "to understand very deeply the physiology of the colonial beast" (*ibid.*: 252), seeing its

presumptions and its internal misunderstandings, they resisted its declarations about them and its demands for their loyalty. Sadan's critique of simplistic presumptions about colonial "divide-and-rule" and that project's presumed interpellative effects—where so-called "martial races" such as Kachin blindly followed the colonial state (ibid.: 260–68)—stands as a lodestar that can guide revisionist historiographical endeavors elsewhere in Myanmar. Taken together, this evidence suggests the British in Burma crafted a simulacra of India's "ethnographic state" (Dirks 2001: ch. 3) by pursuing mimicry without substance, ethnographic statecraft without ethnography.

4. Postcolonial Governmentality and Ethnicity

Expansion and Intensification in India

How did these legacies play out after independence? Let us examine India first. India's postcolonial state gradually advanced significantly from its colonial predecessor—going from a distant colonial state to a "tactically extended" one (Chatterjee 2019: 75), which seemed to broaden and deepen the relevance of governmentality through population groups rather than liberal citizenship.

Upon independence, India's postcolonial developmentalist state "chose to retain in a virtually unaltered form the basic structure" of the colonial one (Chatterjee 1993: 204). It therefore preserved the same categories of difference, using them "as convenient descriptive categories for classifying groups of people into suitable targets for administrative, legal, economic, or electoral policy" and hence "shaping the forms of both political demands and developmental policy" (Chatterjee 2004: 37). The ethnological catalogue persists today, as "India has actually identified and described a total of exactly 4,635 communities that are supposed to comprise its population" (Chatterjee 2011: 199). Mukharji (2017) traces how India's postcolonial state intellectuals have incorporated and expanded colonialism's categorization project, developing the "biometric nationalism" that now defines the Indian state. Critically, even though state elites were "devoted to refuting" the specific conclusions of British racial categorization efforts, they ended up deepening the project by "work [ing] within the same anthropometric tradition" (ibid.: 456). For example, Taylor, Gulson, and McDuie-Ra (2021), in elaborating the genealogy of statistical classification procedures, show how one of these intellectuals—Mahalanobis—drew on recorded biometric differences between caste groups to develop the precursor to contemporary racialized biometric facial recognition technology.

Further, Chatterjee (2019) shows how, unlike the Western neoliberal austerity state, India's postcolonial state has not retrenched but rather *extended* its commitments to care for and support India's masses. The form of governmentality instituted in the colonial era has become foundational to contemporary politics, and is continually reinvested by state and subjects alike. Gupta bears these points out ethnographically in *Red Tape* (2012). While he repeatedly stresses the "failure" of governmental projects (in terms of enumeration, aggregation, and then intervention), if we read Gupta's work deconstructively, the failures become *successes*, in particular as population groups and the state repeatedly co-constitute each other through processes of mutual recognition that multiply across various zones of encounter: voting rituals, daily service delivery, planning operations, and developmental projects that have since independence saturated life (Sinha 2008;

McLaughlin 2022). As Gupta acknowledges, “It would be difficult to imagine a more extensive set of development interventions in the fields of nutrition, health, education, housing, employment, sanitation, and so forth than those found in India” (2012: 23), a fact that has led to “a pervasive, sometimes subtle bureaucratization of daily life even for the poorest segments of the population, people who are considered the farthest removed from state bureaucracies” (ibid.: 32).

Here we should recognize how in India the effect of knowledge/power apparatuses is not about denotational content (the specific referential values expressed by data, such as the number of people “Below the Poverty Line” that Gupta so frets about being miscalculated). Rather, governmentality establishes a relay between the state and population group that reifies both—the state interpellates individuals as subjects (ibid.: 70) even as “the state [is represented] as an entity to the people who are defined by those categories” (ibid.: 58). Moreover, through their dialectical mutual recognition, governmentality generates a common ground (Kockelman 2005) on which those reified objects can enjoy continual reiteration, and hence perpetual vivification. For instance, Gupta’s ethnography demonstrates how everyone recognizes the existence of a “poverty line”; a population, however nebulous and shifting qua constituents, below it; the responsibility of the state to address this population; the “rights” of this population to demand that the state do so; et cetera. As agencies identify recipients, distribute resources, and monitor results, politicians in turn highlight their commitment to these groups as a way to solicit votes. What we see is “a relationship of reciprocal dependence between these marginalized groups and the state” (Gupta 2012: 99).

Gupta also notes how the program generates *subjectivizing effects* on its objects (ibid.: 251). Most noteworthy here is a vast state program to “empower” poor low-caste women. While this may evoke neoliberal governmentality—blaming the poor for their plight—Gupta shows that these programs are designed “as a means to enhance the ability of poor women to access services and programs already in place” (ibid.: 277). This tightening of the state-population group dialectic through multiplication of governmental relays is breathtaking: here a state program exists to induce the population to interpellate the state into interpellation—to recognize the heretofore excluded population (see also McLaughlin 2022: 254–44 for a similar example).

Consider now how this system functions in the realm of ethnicity. In the 1980s and 1990s, the Mandal Commission report expanded an affirmative action system that was already “one of the oldest and most robust ... anywhere” (Shah and Shneiderman 2013: 5). Symbolic and material incentives provided therein induced applicant groups to submit their “total ethnographic material” (Shneiderman 2014: 283) for recognition as Scheduled Tribes. Applicant groups have thus enrolled anthropologists to build their cases (ibid.) prior to Indian state anthropologists’ assessment visits. Middleton’s ethnography of these encounters illustrates how the ethnological paradigm incites both official ethnographers and the tribes alike to conform to the paradigm’s categorical presuppositions about ethnicity. Indeed, state ethnographers attempt to discern tribal essence by descrying diacritics of difference (2011: 259), while tribal elite organizations embrace and then mimic the structure of the governmental apparatus to correspond to how it sees ethnicity (ibid.: 262).

We can assess these processes in terms of interpellation and its various degrees of failure. Even though the interface between state and appealing ethnic subject is recognized by all parties as farcical and contrived (first-level failure), Middleton

describes ethnic communities' "autoethnology" and the "cultural purification" it entails as not pursued simply instrumentally (not evincing the second-level failure characteristic of misinterpellation). Rather it is done with a commitment that has "created rifts within ethnic communities, where bitter disputes over what constitutes 'authentic culture' have sent schisms racing through the social fabric" (ibid.: 262). While not every subject comes to smoothly align with the reified ethnic definition, "For the average person, 'categorizing back' against this discursive juggernaut and its local agents may be neither possible nor desirable" (ibid.: 263).

What is more, even as the state extended categorization to new subjects (in tribal areas) and deepened its commitments to differential policies for backwards castes (through Mandal), these processes spurred reactionary mobilization from upper-caste members. Subramanian, calling it a "striking instance of the social life of governmental classification" (2019: 222), illustrates how upper-caste narratives of victimization of "antimeritocratic populism" (ibid.) have "produced newly consolidated forms of upper-caste affiliation" (ibid.: 3). It warrants mention that such phenomena are not limited to India: in Nepal, high-caste Hindus responded to ethnic/indigenous mobilization by generating a new ethnic group for themselves (Shneiderman 2020: 205–6).

Burma's Desultory Governmentality

Conversely, if India's substantive developmentalism depended on knowledge of its governed, Burma's developmentalism was mostly rhetorical (Tharaphi Than 2013) or deferred (Aung 2019), making knowledge of the population irrelevant. Myanmar's rentier state was dependent on natural resource extraction, not tax revenue, and thus it delivered few services to its masses (Prasse-Freeman 2012; Jap 2021: 88). By outsourcing development and survival to the private sector (McCarthy 2016) and to those masses themselves (Prasse-Freeman 2012), the state forfeited the opportunity to generate knowledge about its subjects.

This is born out in examination of its administrative apparatuses. Myanmar simply stopped enumerating its population from 1983 to 2014, and the censuses taken in 1973 and 1983 neglected significant areas outside of government control (Ferguson 2015: 12–15). Burma lacks not only a biometric identification system but even a centralized database for those who hold its rudimentary card. Moreover, a third of the population lives without this card (Myanmar Census 2014), and while such cards are necessary for accessing *formal* sectors—tertiary education, finance, and employment (Roberts and Rhoads 2021)—these sectors' substantive inaccessibility to millions is a function of poverty rather than regulatory exclusion. Further, the state has not standardized the use of surnames (a prerequisite of state-ness, according to Scott, Tehranian, and Mathias [2002]), meaning that nicknames and *nommes de guerre* proliferate (Selth 2010), which allows activists to evade state security (Houtman 1999: 29). Consequently, such activists were the only sub-population the state has sought to know (Selth 2019). While the state's formal spheres (courts, administrative offices) require Burmese language, its agents have been ignorant of non-Burmese languages, and so even under Myanmar's authoritarian censorship regime, "non-Burmese-language texts could manipulate the system" (Sadan 2013: 380 n60).

Because it accumulated so little knowledge, Myanmar's state had little material with which to inculcate its populations. There was no dialectic in which garnered knowledge would be redeployed (through better census questions or more sophisticated educational curricula) to be reproduced by governed subjects. Instead, discourse that came from the state was monologic: it neither acknowledged its citizen-subject audience when it spoke, nor did it attend to that audience's response by refining and adjusting forthcoming messages. Anthropologists have identified that in everything from war films (Thurein Naing 2021), to official propaganda (Leehey 2010: 28), to schooling (Treadwell 2013), Burmese audiences were unpersuaded by state (dis)information. Treadwell's ethnography of schooling, for example, reveals that Myanmar state ideology was not transmitted through pliant mediators (teachers) to docile recipients (students). Leehey even argues that state elites did not mind such "failings," and asserts their propaganda was not intended to persuade (2010: 52–53). Nowhere was this clearer than in regard to ethnicity, where the postcolonial state persistently did not deploy the will to know/instruct, and instead obtusely asserted homogeneity and elided difference in everything from state decrees, to laws, school curricula, ethnology, and museums.

It is ironic, given these features of Myanmar's postcolonial governance, that ethnicity has become dominant discursively. Especially because, as suggested earlier, Burma at independence may not have been as ethnically divided as is often suggested. Many from this era asserted that "existing differences" among Burma's ethnicities were "only expressions of the same culture at different stages of development" (Po Latt quoted in Ngun Ling 2021: 166), an assertion also expressed through school textbooks of that era (Myo Oo 2017: 151–61). Yet, central state leadership, epitomized by Nu, Prime Minister from 1948 to the 1962 military coup, was not sensitive to demands for economic redistribution and autonomy made by upland/non-Bamar dwellers (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2007: 158; Sadan 2013: 275, 290, 315–22). The Myanmar military instead waged wars across a half-century that undermined potential inter-ethnic solidarity that could have been fostered under a shared developmentalist idiom. Consequently, lowland discourse obscuring ethnic difference smacked of cultural erasure rather than socialist liberation. Relatedly, the reification thesis, by foregrounding ethnic conflict, elided these material concerns of non-Bamar peoples (from then until today), and filtered conflict through an ethnic grievance lens, when it was overdetermined by additional material and cultural concerns.

Yet, the ostensibly reified ethnicities remained poorly defined. The 1962 military coup installed a pseudo-socialist ideology that espoused proletarian equality while intensifying demonization of Indians and Chinese. Texts from that period, such as the 1960s-era children's book featured in [image 1](#), often stressed the similarity of Myanmar's races. The Burmese caption reads: "In fact, all these people dress the same in daily lives. Although the names of their ethnic identities are different, they all are Bamar. Thus, we call the country consisting of all as the Union of Burma [Bamar]. Take note of that."⁴ We can also take note of "Bamar" continuing to operate here as a supraordinate category incorporating all *taingyintha*.

⁴Thanks to Phyo Win Latt for this source, and for input on its sourcing from the *Sabay Beikman Children's Book* series: <https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.1091122474627225&type=3>.



Image 1. Author U Ba Kyi in *Shwe Thway*, a BSPP-era weekly journal for children published in Yangon (ca. 1960s).

Robert Taylor has complicated this account by pointing to the opening of the University for the Development of National Races by the Burmese Socialist Programme Party (hereafter BSPP), which produced “multi-volume studies on the major ethnic minorities,” which “were apparently intended to widen the understanding of cultural differences within the polity” (2005: 281). This intent may have existed, but an examination of those texts demonstrates that state will was highly circumscribed. These “studies” contain very little ethnological content and merely enumerate, *ad nauseum*, supposed traditional territories of respective sub-groups (BSPP 1967), while asserting the common ancestor theory—slightly modified to assert that all *taingyintha* are Tibeto-Burman (Saw Eh Htoo 2021: 61)—and that the “backward” *taingyintha* required development (ibid.: 58).

That the Burmese state did little to know ethnicity is supported by comparative evidence drawn from the experience of non-Bamar ethnics. Sadan, studying the “Jingpaw nexus” of Kachin peoples that proliferated across three (eventual) national boundaries, finds that whereas Chinese (Jingpo) and Indian (Singpo) iterations were integrated into those respective nation-states through administrative regulation and ideological incorporation, in Burma the central state not only remained willfully and otherwise ignorant of Kachin underdevelopment concerns, but it also provided no ideological narrative of inclusion (Sadan 2013: 302–5). Seemingly in response to this absence, in 1960 the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) engaged in a project of auto-ethnology, taking “a compendium of information on traditional cultural practices” (ibid.: 335) including origins, cultural features, and legal norms. The KIO also broadened its self-description to incorporate more sub-groups (ibid.: 340–41). These endeavors appear to have been more attempts at “horizontal” legitimation vis-à-vis local constituents than “vertical” appeals to a central Myanmar state.

While an intra-military coup in 1988 ended the BSPP era, cultural texts and state policies around ethnicity remained consistent afterwards. Houtman identifies a prevalent discourse from this period asserting that all native peoples of Myanmar

share a common “Mongoloid” ancestor (1999: 71–72). Salem-Gervais and Metro’s brilliant study of Myanmar school textbooks illustrates a systematic pruning of content about non-Bamar peoples. As the authors put it, acidly, “Since the national races are portrayed as being completely unified politically, one may begin to wonder what differentiates them at all” (2012: 52). Relevant for our purposes is that the lack of precision regarding identificatory emblems (“Myanmar” operating both as an ethnonym and a supra-ordinate category) persists even in these texts (e.g., *ibid.*: 50).

Blurriness Three Ways: Token, Type, and Categorization

Where does this leave ethnicity as lived reality in Myanmar today? I observe Myanmar’s obtuse knowledge/power projects producing ambiguity around identity classification in three domains: at the level of *type* (ethnic category), *token* (individual-as-ethnic), and *categorization* (the overarching meaning of categories such as *taingyinthā*, *lūmyō*, and *Myanmar*). This section will show how these domains interact.

Type and Token

Myanmar’s state apparatus is incapable of establishing markers of identity that differentiate groups. Not only does its categorization system lack clarity, but it is not able to enumerate, inscribe, and circulate substantive information about those included in the system.

Let us start with the state’s official list of the 135 *taingyinthā*. The number itself was subject to revision for decades—Myint Thein (2021: 195) shows that while the 1973 census form listed 144 ethnicities and the Immigration Department listed 143, by 1990 a list of 135 had been promulgated. Examining the list’s contents, Burmese critics have dismissed it as risible, beset by duplication (exonyms and endonyms), elimination, and mis-categorization (e.g., the Austronesian *Salon* listed under the Bamar supra-category) (Gamanii 2012; Sai Latt 2013; Sai Wansai 2017).

Regarding circulation, we have already observed the absence of ethnological content in schools. Museums are also bereft of information. The National Museum in Yangon has a dusty corner of its fifth floor devoted to a meager collection of ethnological *taingyinthā* artifacts (the museum’s first floor is devoted to Bamar regalia and archaeology). The “Taingyinthā Village” on the outskirts of Yangon is similarly thin and largely populated by young paramours evading urban surveillance (Girke 2013). The state never even released ethnicity data gathered during its 2014 census, foreclosing an opportunity to directly govern through ethnicity. And while Burmese people are consequently exposed to ethnicity mostly through non-state sources, this has indeterminate effects: Ferguson identifies how postcolonial popular films present Shan (and by extension other ethnic minorities) not as subjects but as *settings*, as not even objects of knowledge but props mediated by the Bamar gaze (2012: 36).

At the individual (token) level, because the penetration of state-backed knowledge/power governmentality into everyday life has been absent, there has been space for individuals to strategically choose their identities, suggesting that ethnicity has in many contexts remained nebulous, lived less as a pseudo-scientific

blood-based racial imaginary and more as a set of practices actively produced by one's environment.

For instance, an individual's own *lumyo* can change not only between generations but often within individuals over their lifetimes. For instance, a man described to me his father's complex, shape-shifting identity as follows: he was born Rohingya Muslim, but after refraining from Islamic worship practices, marrying a Rakhine Buddhist, taking on Rakhine modes of dress, drinking habits, and so forth he now is considered both Rohingya and Rakhine—despite the bitter conflict between members of those ethnic groups. Peace industry professional Aung Naing Oo describes himself, seemingly without recognition of any tension, as both “mixed blood” and Bamar simultaneously (2018: 164). A colleague who self-identifies as Mon was surprised to find that her cousin rejected that identity. Another described to me a similar phenomenon: “I am friends with a brother and sister of Karen and Kachin origin; the brother considers himself Karen and the sister considers herself Kachin.... It is a complicated situation.” Even so-called “ethnic armies” are not always so ethnic, as recent ethnographic work has highlighted: “Armies that have been labeled ‘Shan’ ... were never strictly composed of ethnic Shan people in either their leadership or their rank and file. They would often represent the diverse ethnic tapestry that is Shanland” (Ferguson 2021: 73). The same holds for the United Wa State Army, whose multi-ethnic ranks (including Shan, Akha, and Lahu soldiers) is obscured by its name (Ong 2023); the Kachin Independence Army sometimes welcomes Gorkhas and Chinese (Davey 2022).

Thawngmung (2011) describes the country's “quiet Karen” as deviating from stereotypes of armed resistance. Instead, they “liv[e] quietly and peacefully alongside the dominant Burman majority” (ibid.: xvii). Thawngmung also illustrates how some Karen individuals are not self-consciously aware of their Karen-ness as they navigate critical domains such as employment. Similarly, when Burmese writer Ma Thida reflects on her own “mixed identity” as Shan, Chinese, and Mon, she reports that over time her family “came to identify ourselves as citizens of Burma rather than as members of any ethnic group” (2014: 204), perhaps demonstrating that class privilege has allowed her to effectively pass as Bamar (Campbell and Prasse-Freeman 2022).

I adumbrate these data to show that social life in Myanmar is not determined by ethnicity in the ways reification proponents insist. But neither is ethnicity wholly absent. Instead, token and type intersect at certain state institutions, such as the Burmese Immigration Department, creating perverse outcomes that generate opportunities for subjective reflection and reassessment: misinterpellation.

Since 1982, all Citizenship Scrutiny Cards (CSC) have included its holder's race and religion. Yet closer examination reveals an inscription process that seems to defy governmental logic. Indeed, Anderson memorably described how colonial governmental apparatuses dreamt of obliterating “transvestite” ethnic identities: “No fractions” (2006: 166). Yet, on Burmese Citizenship Scrutiny Cards *lumyo* often pullulate; one can be India-India+Mon-India+Shan-Bamar / Islam (as in [image 2](#)), and so forth depending on mixed parentage (and state agent prerogative). Cards often contain four and five identities (Sai Latt 2013; Nyi Nyi Kyaw 2015: 52).

There is thus, pace Anderson, a profusion of fractions. As such, it is *not* an enumerative exercise: the India-India+Mon-India+Shan-Bamar-Islam are not logged and then aggregated in a database to later receive specific interventions that would help make India-India+Mon-India+Shan-Bamar-Islam more real. More

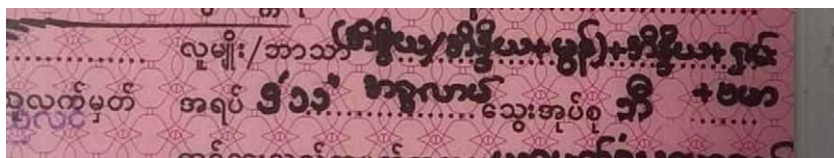


Image 2. An anonymous Burmese citizen's Citizenship Scrutiny Card with many *lumyo* inscribed upon it: "(India/India+Mon) + India+Shan+Bamar / Islam." Author unknown.

important still, it is also not particularly effective *discursively*, in the sense that it seems to focalize the messy reality of ethnicity much more than a state devoted to efficient management might want. Indeed, that **Image 2** is just one of many similar images that circulate on Burmese Facebook demonstrates an intra-Burmese discourse on the absurdity of the categorization process.

Moreover, the process through which ID cards are created suggests the limits of centralized state will in animating this process. Local corruption enables those who see an advantage in eliminating ethnic identification (and who also have money and negotiating skills), to purchase Bamar identities. Those who bear perceived markers of alterity—such as “looking” South Asian or Chinese—may have difficulty in so maneuvering, but a Chinese interlocutor emphasized the power of cash: “My grandmother cannot even speak Burmese. We are full Chinese. But we got ‘Kokang’ [a Chinese-speaking *lumyo*], no problem” (see also Ferguson 2016: 140). A Rohingya interlocutor described his father’s generation “getting Kaman” (the only *lumyo* constituted by Muslims).

Desires to “become” something besides “Chinese” or “Bengali” derives from how particular occupations (soldier, doctor, lawyer, judge) might be unattainable with the wrong identity (see Myo Win 2021: 224–25). As opposed to in India, where belonging to a category *burnishes* the ability to advance claims—at the least making one legible and in many cases providing a vehicle through which to demand resources—in Burma there is little incentive vis-à-vis the state to identify as one group or another, unless perhaps that ethnicity is Bamar. Moreover, because those with cultural and monetary capital can attain the “Bamar” appellation, and because the cultural markers conflate with class (Campbell and Prasse-Freeman 2022), Bamar identity retains its historical assimilationist tendency (Lieberman 1978), a fact enabled by the weak governmental apparatuses that cannot easily exclude certain tokens from the type through ascriptive distinction.

It is unclear whether the identity card acquisition process leads to a real abandonment of disavowed identities, or whether it reinforces them, as, through misinterpellation, individuals redouble their efforts to keep such identities alive. Interlocutors have expressed to me the latter sentiment. And Sai Kheunsai conveys how his active choice to identify as—to become—Shan after growing up de facto Bamar was a defiant response to the state’s coercion: “I started to learn Shan outside school hours and started wearing Shan pants, at every opportunity offered. To spite the rulers, if not for anything else” (2018: 191). Evoking a Burmese expression, *ah-yweht daiq*, in which one intentionally commits the prohibited act, Sai Kheunsai identifies how, had he encountered a more subtle and sophisticated mode of governmentality, he would likely have remained Bamar: “I have never stopped wondering: had successive Burmese governments been as enlightened and magnanimous with the upkeep of Shan literature and culture ... would I still choose to be Shan?” (ibid.: 192).

Complicating Categorization

Token and type ambiguities are somewhat related in that both presuppose that ethnicity is real, and the problem surrounds incomplete knowledge—that the Myanmar state lacks ways of differentiating types and identifying individuals. But confusion also exists at the level of categorization writ large, since the state apparatus controls neither its criteria for categorizing nor the categorization project (Prasse-Freeman 2017, 2). According to Ma Thida, “Myanmar people have lost their ability to think about their identity. A lot of people still cannot differentiate between race and ethnicity or between race and religion” (2015; see also Htet Win 2016).

Take the use of “Myanmar” to describe one’s ethnicity. My Burmese language conversations with many who self-identified as such revealed that “Myanmar” was synonymous for some with the Bamar ethnic group. Others, however, told me that “Myanmar” is a *civic* national identification while “Bamar” denotes race (these respondents are doubly interesting, we should add, given that they responded with a *civic* identification to a question putatively about race). Most interestingly, perhaps, were the few who described “Myanmar” as a way to *generally* define inclusion as one or many of the country’s “authentic inhabitants” (the 135 authenticated *taingyintha*). Callahan also found a lack of standardization in how the 2014 census recorded the term “Myanmar” (2017: 466), suggesting that categorical blurriness is not even being corrected in the census, the enumerative state project par excellence.

Other respondents described their *lumyo* as “Muslim,” “Buddhist,” or “Hindu-Buddhist,” thereby circumventing the question of ethnicity entirely. While they may have been strategically avoiding answering with their “real” ethnicity, they alternatively may have been reflecting a different way of conceiving of the very idea of *lumyo*—one that instead uses religious practice as the key marker of social identification.⁵ If *lumyo* can be made to mean religion, then the racial/ethnic component is displaced; if the racial/ethnic component is displaced, then religious identity can become more relevant. And this is in fact what we observe. Chu May Paing argues that recent nationalist monk movements have been able to intervene at the level of self-identification, prioritizing religion over ethnicity (2020: 45).

And yet, the inscription on the card may have dire, if secondary, effects. This struck home to me when, in 2013, Ma Ei, a Burmese Muslim colleague, relayed, “We have nowhere to flee ... it’s only a matter of time before they come for us.” Her comments came during outbreaks of violence against Muslim communities that were then emerging across Burma, in the wake of the 2012 mass violence against the Rohingya. What was particularly striking about Ei’s statement was the fact that she does not “look” Muslim. As a Panthay, an ethnic minority group of Chinese Muslims who settled around Mandalay after fleeing China circa 1856–1873 and have since integrated into Burmese society, Ei said that because she, like most Panthay, has lighter skin than typical Burmese, and because she dresses in the common style of the majority of Burmese women, no one can tell she is not Bamar.

Despite this apparent pass, however, Ei described a problem. While attempting to rent an apartment, she was shocked to be denied by three successive landlords; they examined her ID card and found that it betrayed her Muslim identity. Ei ultimately was forced to move into one of Yangon’s “Muslim areas,” created in part by entire

⁵See Salem-Gervais and Metro 2012: 46; McCormick 2014: 317; Boutry 2016: 100; Carstens 2018; and EMReF 2019: 12, for similar findings.

neighborhoods in Yangon excluding Muslims, priding themselves in only renting to Buddhists. She had become concerned that Buddhists would come to associate Panthay like her with *all* Muslims, perhaps seeing her as “choosing” to identify with a transnational Muslim movement, even though Ei had attempted the opposite: integration into Burmese society. More basically, given her new apartment’s proximity to a large mosque, Ei was afraid that when the violence came, it would spill over onto her as well. As if on cue, days later violence exploded in Lashio and mobs torched a Panthay Muslim cinema.

Critically, Ei’s prospective landlords did not necessarily deny her access to their properties because of bigotry, but rather because the necessity of registering a tenant with her identification card information prevents them from utilizing plausible deniability should bigoted partisans come to inspect new tenants. The state inscription of religio-ethnic identities on the card, and the requirement that it be presented to secure something as critical as housing, has created the architecture that allows for someone such as Ei to feel unsafe in her own home. Here we see a perverse effect of Burma’s polyvalently failing governmentality: even as it misinterpellates Ei, creating the space for reflection into how she mis-fits into the Burmese polity (second-order failure), it might work in the opposite way on Burmese who perceive an inter-ethnic Muslim community fortifying in Burma (first-order failure).

Ei’s experiences point to that fact that while ethnicity remains fuzzy *within* Burma’s *taingyintha*, the colonial census and postcolonial policies have succeeded in making South Asians and Muslims into Burma’s self-perceived constitutive outside (Kyaw Minn Htin 2017: 13–14). The populist vitriol leveled against the Rohingya bears this out, not simply for its insistence that the Rohingya are Bengalis, but in how that conflation indexes the lack of knowledge about the Rohingya. Burmese political cartoons often represent Rohingya as contour-less brown bodies (Prasse-Freeman 2021). Schissler (2015) has shown how Burmese nationalists have circulated visuals of mob justice in places such as Somalia or Afghanistan, rather than of images of Rohingya, to index how the latter would duplicate the former’s “global Muslim violence.” The Burmese state, for its part, has used photographs of Rwandan refugees to stand in for fleeing Rohingya (Reuters 2018). Consequently, Burmese publics possess stunningly little genuine information about the objects of their hatred.

This dovetails with an oft-repeated nationalist objection to Rohingya existence: that the name “Rohingya” does not exist since it has never circulated in the vernacular over the past decades. One of the reasons these claims persist is that the state has been too obtuse to know the Rohingya. A Rohingya interlocutor posted the following on 1 January 2021, which summed up the absence of knowledge operating on individual Rohingya subjects: “Most Rohingyas do not know any other date of birth apart from 1 January ... who would remember in the absence of a proper birth certificate? My mother did not have one, neither did I...”

Additionally, however, it seems this lack of knowledge has had effects on the Rohingya as well, in that they have maintained several ethnonyms. While there are many reasons for Rohingya actively avoiding the term “Rohingya” (Prasse-Freeman 2023), what is striking about the self-identifiers that have emerged in the wake of the ethnonym’s policing is that they have focused on regional distinctions within Rakhine state (Tharaphi Than 2022). While Rohingya elites have fought to qualify as ratified ethnicities in Burma (Cheesman 2015), average Rohingya continue to

deploy localized terms that stress relevant distinctions.⁶ Rohingya ethnicity has not been reified for all of those trying to survive genocide. Rohingya live both *as* and *astride* the name “Rohingya” (Prasse-Freeman 2023; see also Wade 2019: 239–40), something more possible due to the lack of governmental knowledge about them.

Conclusion

This article has focused on responses by those subjected *to*—but perhaps not subjectivized *by*—governmentality, to determine which kinds of failure define respective governmental regimes. While in India, failures in perfectly identifying and knowing the governed appear to nonetheless interpellate these subjects into responding within the paradigm of knowledge/power, in Burma, by contrast, governmentality often “doubly fails.” There, molar representations of ethnicity do not match up with the micro-political side of lived practices (McCormick 2014: 321). This has produced the apparently paradoxical situation in which ethnicity in Burma can appear reified when viewed “from above” at the level of symbolic representation articulated by interested elites, but which “from below” can be lived in wholly blurry ways: avoided, elided, and hybridized.

To advance this argument, the article has used comparison of statecraft and social practices in India and Burma to foreground a comparative method that insists that concepts such as governmentality be interrogated for their functions and effects. It has followed Candea’s endorsement of the importance of “lateral” comparison (between specific cases) rather than oft-implicit “frontal” comparisons in which a single case is set against the lurking but amorphously defined putative standard that is “the West” (2019: 119–32). Hence, this article has argued that rather than invoking critical concepts (such as Foucault’s governmentality) as universals, we should proceed by refining, innovating, and challenging the use of such concepts by showing how they work out differentially *in situ*.

A comparative postcolonial governmentality studies can emerge by examining state treatment of ethnicity in neighboring places—such as Thailand (Reeder 2022), Vietnam (Keyes 2002), Malaysia (Carruthers 2017), Nepal (Shneiderman 2013), China (Duara 1997; Mullaney 2011), Singapore (Ong 2016), and Bangladesh (Chowdhury 2019: 44–54), speaking back across borders to destabilize conventional wisdoms. It can also develop by zeroing in on critical variables which this article did not have space to explore: not just knowledge/power, but also respective states’ and polities’ biopolitical commitments to the promotion of life, and also their willingness to deploy violence against citizens, which in turn influences the particular regimes of governmentality (Prasse-Freeman 2023). Such attention can illuminate the improvisations in daily life lived by “most of the world’s people” (Chatterjee 2004: 3).

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⁶For a similar phenomenon in which elite use of ethnicity does not diffuse to non-elites, see Dunford’s discussion of Karen, Chin, and Naga (2019).

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