



# Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs

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Mischung, Roland (2009),  
Review: Mikael Gravers (ed.): Exploring Ethnic Diversity in Burma, in:  
*Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 28, 4, 138-144.  
ISSN: 1868-4882 (online), ISSN: 1868-1034 (print)

The online version of this article can be found at:  
<[www.CurrentSoutheastAsianAffairs.org](http://www.CurrentSoutheastAsianAffairs.org)>

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Published by  
GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Institute of Asian Studies and  
Hamburg University Press.

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Gravers, Mikael (ed.) (2007), *Exploring Ethnic Diversity in Burma*, Copenhagen: NIAS Press (= NIAS Studies in Asian Topics Series, 39) ISBN 9788791114960, 283 pages

In addition to being ruled by an extremely authoritarian military regime, Burma has over recent decades won a sad reputation as a country torn by almost continuous interethnic strife, with minorities engaged in an often violent struggle for independence, or at least some form of autonomy from the central government. Yet, despite the salience of the issue, there is a conspicuous lack of up-to-date scientific information on the background of these ethnic divisions in Burma; what we know is for the most part derived from a limited set of classic monographs published during the colonial era. Thus any publication offering fresh information on the topic is timely and highly welcome to specialists on Southeast Asia and ethnicity in general.

The nine chapters in this volume (several of which are revised versions of papers read at the International Burma Studies Conference in Gothenburg, Sweden in 2002) display a variety of disciplinary approaches, ranging from anthropology (five chapters) to political science, geography, history, and possibly theology. Some of the authors take considerable pains to fit their respective subject matter into elaborate conceptual frameworks, starting their contributions with sometimes-lengthy theoretical discussions. In my opinion, such theoretical framing is in most of the cases not really productive in the sense of generating insights that would not have been conveyed by a mere factual account. The renunciation of a theoretical superstructure (or a more modest and case-specific version) would not have engendered any loss of substantial content in these chapters. Therefore, I concentrate my review on important factual content and address theoretical issues only when they are of immediate relevance to the theme of the book. In doing so, I do not keep to the sequence of the chapters as they appear in the volume and, of course, the comprehensiveness of my summaries reflects in part my own fields of interest.

In his introduction, the editor sets the stage with a general discussion of the politics of ethnic identification, which, as he makes convincingly clear, entails basically finding and asserting a meaningful and satisfying position for the “we” group vis-à-vis significant and often dominating “others”. He concludes these considerations by formulating two interrelated questions that could have served as thematic guidelines for the following chapters: “Why did ethnicity acquire such an important role in Burma and Burmese post-colonial politics? And why has violence encompassed ethnic identification in such persistent and intransigent ways?” (p. 8). While these ambitious questions are hardly (and probably could not be) answered in most of the subsequent chapters, another goal postulated by Gravers for the research

presented here seems more realistic: to facilitate the critical reassessment of their own agenda on the part of “ethnic” elites in Burma through “thorough research of ethnic diversity, its history and ethnography” (p. 28). Of course, this would require that the results and arguments presented in the present volume find their way into political discourse in Burma. In view of the fact that the reception of earlier Western publications on Burma, however biased, has time and again played a considerable role in the construction of “ethnic” positions by local elites, such an expectation is perhaps not altogether idle. Besides such programmatic issues, the bulk of the introductory chapter consists of an eminently readable historical overview that contrasts the meaning of ethnic identification in pre-colonial times with the functions of ethnic labels imposed during the days of British colonial administration – a legacy that is still recognizable in present-day political processes.

Some important strands of Graver’s argumentation are elaborated, although not always in an affirmative sense, in the contribution by Chit Hlaing (probably better known within the scientific community by the name F.K. Lehman, *the* leading expert on the ethnography of Burma). This chapter is comparably short and straightforward. The author’s premise that “culture” or “ethnic identity” are not primordial givens has been a truism among social scientists for quite some time, yet he supports this point by unfolding such an impressive array of regional examples demonstrating the flexibility and context-bound use of ethnic labels or culture traits that the important message is conveyed in a uniquely convincing way. In the concluding section, Chit Hlaing rightly points out that ethnic categorization is not bound up with the existence of a hegemonic state or a colonial system – a conception that has become fashionable in the social sciences – but rather reflects a universal human tendency. In an extremely concise paragraph, he attributes this tendency to what I would call a principle of cognitive economy, that is, a shorthand device for assessing other people not personally known to ego. Of course, an implicit consequence of such an assumption is the inevitability of wholesale categorization and stereotyping among human groups. Therefore, a legitimate aim cannot be to abolish “ethnic” identification but rather to support a public consciousness of the underlying cognitive process which could eventually lead to more responsible ways of dealing with the “other”. Such a stance would be much in line with Gravers’ proposition referred to above.

The remaining seven chapters all deal with specific ethnic groups while setting their focus on different thematic aspects. The article by Karin Dean is an important contribution to the overall theme of the book. Arguing from the perspective of a geographer, she highlights the significance of space in the constitution of ethnic consciousness (a topic that has also become

increasingly attractive for anthropologists and some sociologists since the 1990s). Analysing Kachin social space, Dean shows that ethnic identity is not only constructed by drawing boundaries vis-à-vis “others”, but also filled with meaningful content regarding the inner constitution of one’s own realm. In this case, it is kinship and marriage ties that connect all Kachin no matter in which political domain they live, thus constituting one single field of (potential) social relations to which individual actors are emotionally attached. Beyond that, and in addition to important symbolic and religious landmarks mentioned by the author, the space thus demarcated will invariably contain a variety of economic, political and domestic settings that deserve further empirical investigation. Regarding the cognitive boundaries that surround this inner space, Dean provides interesting examples of qualities that are deemed to distinguish Kachin from non-Kachin. Based on the content of interviews conducted with 44 “ordinary” Kachin students in 2000 (and not on statements by political representatives or organizations, which other authors in this volume utilize), a number of clear and remarkably consistent interethnic stereotypes become visible: these are fairly positive in the case of the Shan, while, not surprisingly, the “Burman” finds himself at the negative end of the scale. In my opinion, Dean over-interprets some of these stereotypes by attributing them solely to the socio-political context. In fact, almost all of them are mirrored by similar categorizations of their respective neighbours among other minorities in the region, including some living under quite different political conditions.

The same ethnic group is also the subject of a chapter contributed by Mandy Sadan, which is an extremely thorough piece of academic work on the history and complexities of the ethnic category “Kachin”. Drawing on sources ranging from colonial records to an extensive compilation of Jinghpaw ritual texts collected by Kachin Baptists during the 1990s, Sadan skillfully analyses a number of general as well as context-specific terms that denote(d) either the whole of the present-day “Kachin” population or certain of its segments and have been partly used by outsiders (colonial administration, Burmese central government, regional neighbours) and partly by local or interest groups among the “Kachin” themselves. Being not particularly versed in the subtleties of the local situation, I must admit that I experienced reading certain parts of the text, overcharged with meticulous historical details, as quite a tiresome endeavour (for the specialist they no doubt contain a wealth of highly interesting data). In other paragraphs, however, the presentation is much easier to follow, and in its entirety this chapter clearly deserves careful study as the reader discovers a wealth of examples that reflect specific processes of collective social inclusion/ exclusion. Yet it remains unclear how far the analysis actually mirrors everyday percep-

tions among the Kachin because much of the data consists of fragments of elite or organizational discourses and thus may not be representative of the majority of ordinary villagers. In its final section this chapter offers a remarkable discussion of “primordial and mobilizational theories of ethnicity”, the conclusion being that the two should be seen not as opposed but rather as complementary. At some points, the author’s argument seems partly similar to Leach’s “as-if constructions”, which allow actors to take cultural principles (for example, statements of primordality) for granted notwithstanding the fact that these very principles are continuously and systematically neglected or overridden in everyday contexts.

The political science perspective is represented by Ashley South, who addresses the question of whether and how elements of civil society could develop under the adverse conditions of military rule in Burma. Based on extensive experience gained during long-term work for international aid agencies along the Thailand-Burma border, the empirical parts of this contribution focus on the Mon population and examine spaces for processes of self-organization opened up by ceasefire agreements in the 1990s. The general point that active local or regional non-state associations are a prerequisite for the development of a democratic structure at the national level is well made. The descriptive account, arranged into paragraphs dealing with subsequent stages in Burma’s modern history, reveals several remarkable developments among the Mon, one of them being the recent re-emergence of associations that pursue goals defined in terms of ethno-cultural distinctiveness (for the most part centred on language, literature and “culture” in general). One particularly interesting section (pp. 162-3) deals with the dialectics of organized resistance to political or cultural suppression: South points out that as a rule, in the “liberated zones” which they themselves control, the resistance organizations tend to mirror the political concepts and strategies of the nationalist central government, often violently suppressing persons and activities that do not conform to the essentials defined in the organization’s hegemonic discourse. Otherwise, the critical point made in respect of Sadan’s contribution could be repeated here: the account of the Mon case does not tell us anything about the realities at the grassroots level. It is useless to speculate whether this is due to a specific disciplinary perspective or to difficulties in obtaining relevant information. One sentence on page 162 suggests that the latter might be true: “The manner in which ‘ordinary’ Mon people have responded to the nationalist agenda is often unclear.”

Two further chapters deal with Burmese Shan (Takatani) and Karenni living in refugee camps in Thailand close to the Burmese border (Dudley). Both provide valuable information and are thus interesting for specialists on

Southeast Asia. But, frankly, their contribution to the issue of “exploring ethnic diversity in Burma” has remained somewhat unclear to me. Dudley is basically right in pointing out that refugee camps may provide a “fertile ground for the propagation of ideas” (p. 102) and promote a sense of being *one* people among camp inhabitants of heterogeneous local and (sub-)ethnic origin – a new self-awareness that could eventually feed back to their “compatriots” left back in the “homeland”. However, in order to gain relevance in the context of the present volume, this assertion should have been followed by an analysis of the specific contents of identity discourses among the refugees. Unfortunately the chapter remains more than vague in this respect, merely mentioning “impacts on constructions of Karenni-ness” (p. 99) through camp school education, indoctrination by the Christian-dominated Karenni National Progressive Party and limited interaction with the outside world. On the other hand, Takatani, a distinguished Japanese anthropologist, provides an extensive account of the diverse and sometimes confusing classifications of Burma’s Shan population, which display overlapping systems of historical, regional, cultural or political identification, both by Shan and others. In its final section the chapter describes attempts at a revitalization of “Shan-ness”, increasingly organized since the 1990s and largely limited to activities in the fields of literature, folklore, and religion tolerated by the central government. All of this information is highly instructive for area specialists but, compared to the corresponding sections of Sardan’s and South’s contributions, much less specific regarding concrete political or social-psychological context.

The volume concludes with two particularly interesting chapters that describe special cases in some detail. Dealing with the Chin and Karen, their common focus is on the role of religion in the process of ethnic (self-) identification. Both authors write from quite different perspectives. The first, Sakhong, is a Burmese Chin who holds leading positions in exile organizations representing Chin as well as “non-Burman ethnic nationalities in Burma” and seems also to be a devoted member of the Chin Hills Baptist Association. Notwithstanding his scientific training (Ph.D. from Uppsala University), his account is rather that of a committed insider. After taking considerable pains to establish that the ethnonym “Chin” is not derived from external categorization but is “Chin in its origin”, Sakhong goes on to demonstrate that the conversion to Christianity did not pose serious cognitive problems for members of his group: key concepts of traditional Chin religion were largely compatible with those of the new faith so that conversion required hardly more than a shift of emphasis. In its highly interesting final section, the chapter highlights the processes of structural transformation engendered by Christian practices and associations which resulted in the

overcoming of old internal divisions and the origin of an encompassing “Chin” identity. While all of this conveys stimulating insights, a more detached comparative stance would at some points have been helpful. For example, almost identical conceptual overlaps between traditional and Christian religion have been claimed (mostly by missionaries and educated converts) for many minority cultures of Southeast Asia, and so these correspondences can hardly serve as the only explanation of the extraordinary success of mission work among the Chin (more than 80 per cent are Christian!). Since the early twentieth century, conversion must have offered unique advantages for the majority of the Chin population in their aspirations to obtain a more satisfying position in the regional socio-political context.

The nature of such aspirations becomes clearly visible in the subsequent account by Gravers, “Religion and the Formation of Karen Ethnic Identity in Burma”. Drawing on literature and documents from the early nineteenth century until 2004 and using the concept of “conjunctures”, the author shows that for many Karen the conversion to Christianity was an attempt to gain access to superior knowledge which their tradition associated with otherworldly agents and which would give them an edge over dominant neighbours – a quest that had already motivated numerous religious movements, linked to both native and Buddhist eschatological concepts, among the Karen. However, depending on local conditions, this opportunity was only attractive for particular segments of the Karen population, so that only a minority among them (presently 15 up to 30 per cent according to different sources) actually converted. In the sequence of events, adherence to Christianity, besides fostering a sense of pan-Karen identity, produced a fundamental rift between Karen and Burmans that had not existed as rigidly before: in line with traditional perceptions, Karen converts tended to see themselves all the more in an ultimately superior position, sanctioned by divine will and legitimated through the possession of the “right” morality, while the Burman side increasingly associated Karen Christians with foreign neocolonial forces set on destroying their own national project. During the twentieth century, increasing discursive production of the concept of a geopolitically defined Karen nation provided a powerful general idea which was, however, in its concrete form contested by a multitude of local Karen factions whose heterogeneous agenda sometimes even blurred the underlying religious divide. The analysis of these processes is supported by a wealth of detailed evidence from numerous sources and constitutes, despite some irritating errors in the transcription of Sgaw Karen terms, a fascinating piece of scholarly work worth reading for anyone interested in the complexities of ethnic identification. Yet it seems as if, in the course of his argument, the author lost sight of his initial focus: in the final

parts of the chapter, religion no longer plays a recognizably active role. At the end we are thus surprised to read that for the younger generation of Christian Karen their religious affiliation is no longer an important dividing line vis-à-vis the Burman majority, without knowing why this is so and how it has come about.

Perhaps I have been a little overly critical in my comments on some of the chapters of this book. Given the still extremely difficult conditions for any kind of research concerning the actual situation in Burma, shortcomings of one kind or another should be accepted as inevitable. Bearing this in mind, the volume in its entirety is certainly a storehouse containing a wide array of mutually complementary information and thematic aspects that converge into a rich, multifaceted overall picture unmatched by any other recent publication on Burma. It is simply a must for scholars concerned with Burmese society as well as for anyone interested in the future of this country or the complexities of ethnic identification. I hope that the editor will forgive me one final critical remark: the readability of some chapters written by non-native speakers of English would have profited from more careful proofreading.

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