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Modern welfare and traditions of reciprocity: *Parahita* organizations and emergent ecologies of redistribution in rural Myanmar

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by

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## Abstract

Recent discourse on citizenship and identity in Myanmar has been dominated by practices of othering and exclusion, often amplifying historically constructed notions of ethnicity and belonging. Notions of citizenship, both in terms of the right to belong, and the performative role of citizens, remain contested. Despite a recent emphasis on poverty reduction in rural areas, climate change, inequitable market chains and an absence of effective welfare have contributed to a rural context in Myanmar best described as precarious. From within this context, there has been a (re) emergence of localized, self-organized community welfare associations. Although drawing on traditions of reciprocity which have long existed in rural Myanmar, these organizations represent an increasingly sophisticated iteration of self-help, frequently self-identifying with the concept of *parahita*-loosely defined as altruism. By occupying an operational space located between formal religious institutions, village administration and traditions of reciprocity, these organizations have in essence created a new, albeit contested space for interdependency, largely built around identity of place. Although modest in the scale of financial resource redistribution, these organizations nonetheless embody a peculiar emergent politics, generating new forms of citizenship, linked to performative action, in the form of participation in visible social works. The performative expectations are, however, in most cases linked strongly to Burmese/Buddhist identity, which raises a wider question as to whether these emergent social welfare movements are likely to lead to more inclusive forms of belonging, or be potential vehicles for more exclusionary, nationalist movements. This research, based on in-depth interviews with 12 community welfare organizations in central Myanmar, as well as data from large scale longitudinal studies of rural poverty, explores the nature of *parahita* claims, the

limits and boundaries of localized welfare arrangements, and the possibilities for articulation of citizenship which reside outside established boundaries of locality, ethnicity and religion.

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Elements of this thesis have been presented or published elsewhere over the past 2 years, providing a rich source of feedback essential to the refinement of ideas. I presented three papers at conferences organized in 2017 by the Asian Research Institute (ARI), National University of Singapore, which provided an excellent opportunity for critical discussion. A paper entitled ‘Emerging Co-dependent Networks: Precarity and Community Social Organizations in Rural

Myanmar’ was presented on 28<sup>th</sup> February 2017, , at a conference entitled ‘Living in an Age of Precarity’, and this paper was subsequently accepted for publication in a special issue of the Journal of Contemporary Asia, due for publication in 2019. Chapter 5 of this thesis draws on analysis from a paper ‘Building resilience in rural communities in Myanmar’ presented on 21<sup>st</sup> September 2017 at the ARI’s conference on Climate Change Governance, and the ideas described in Chapter 6 were initially presented on 16<sup>th</sup> November 2017 at a conference entitled ‘The Politics of Distribution’, also hosted by ARI. Issues of rural precarity, emergent responses and social protection were presented at the Myanmar Update conference organized by the Australian National University in Yangon in March 2017, and a paper I co-authored with Yawbawm Mangshang, entitled ‘Social Protection in Myanmar’ was published in ‘Myanmar Transformed: People, Places and Politics’ in October 2018. Parts of chapter 7 were presented at the 2<sup>nd</sup> International Conference on Burma/Myanmar studies held in Mandalay on 16-18<sup>th</sup> February 2018 in a paper entitled ‘Modern Welfare and Traditions of Reciprocity: *Parahita* Organizations and Emergent Ecologies of Redistribution’. That paper has subsequently been accepted for publication in the conference journal. Ideas for chapter 8 were explored in three papers presented in July 2018. Firstly, a paper entitled ‘*Parahita* and Democratization: The Political Economy of Self-help’ was presented on 4<sup>th</sup> July at the biennial conference of the Asian Studies Association of Australia in Sydney, and two further papers, ‘*Parahita* and Place: the boundaries of localized welfare’ and ‘A New Moral Economy of the Peasant: Welfare Politics and Pluralism in Rural Myanmar’ were presented at the second BRACIF conference in Nagoya, Japan, on 8-9<sup>th</sup> July. Finally, issues of citizenship and the links with *parahita* politics were presented in two papers presented at the 13th International Burma Studies Conference held in Bangkok, Thailand on 3-5<sup>th</sup> August 2018. These two papers, entitled ‘Furnival’s folly:



perspectives on youth identity construction in contemporary Myanmar’ and ‘*Parahita* and Place: the boundaries of localized welfare’ will contribute to a special issue of the Journal of Burma studies, planned for publication in 2019. Many thanks go to all who provided critical feedback on those papers.

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### Overview of the thesis: contested narratives of welfare and citizenship

Once rural economies break up and money [...] becomes the dominant means of exchange, societies have to make some collective provision in cash and kind unless they are prepared to let the weakest literally go to the wall (Timmins, 2001, p. 120).

This thesis is about the responses of communities in rural Myanmar to a context best described as precarious. It is about how communities have organized themselves around a well-known, relatively elastic, but culturally and religiously rooted concept of altruism called *parahita*. It is about how this self-organization claims and maintains a contested space within rural communities. The claiming and maintaining of that space is dependent on, and in turn influential on, performances of belonging and citizenship. These performances, taking place locally and usually remote from State power, represent an alternative expression of both welfare and of the assumptions of citizenship upon which redistribution depends. In considering these *parahita* based community organizations then, I pose three overarching questions. Firstly, what are the nature of the performances of belonging and citizenship? What are the understandings of identity, citizenship and belonging expressed in these performances? And what are the implications of these emergent forms of welfare for wider, national forms of both welfare and citizenship?

Community development represents a complex intersection of ideologies, interests and discourses (Chambers, 2012; McMichael, 2010), with contested notions of progress, rights, social identity, knowledge and agency. This is also evident in discourses around social protection and social welfare, where dominant narratives built around progress and universal human rights

jostle for space and relevance in diverse, localized contexts in which other narratives, informed by religious and other traditions, articulate social belonging in ways other than global or national citizenship (Cornwall, 2010; South & Lall, 2017). This thesis looks at a specific example of such a contested space, by studying a form of community welfare organization which is prevalent across much of rural Myanmar.

The focus of historical study of welfare reform has largely been concerned with State responses to societal changes, with an emphasis on centralized, institutionalized redistributive practice, and social contracts between individuals and the State (Devereux, Roelen, & Ulrichs, 2015b; Handler, 1990). There has been less focus on ‘emergent ecologies’ of welfare typified by grassroots movements of solidarity (Bartkowski & Regis, 2003; Smith, 2014; Ungar, 2012). However, four factors suggest the need for a renewed focus on emergent ecologies of redistribution: firstly, the political and economic costs of the welfare state have resulted in a critique, and in many cases a rolling back (or reform) of welfare regimes (Abrahamson, 2012; Atkinson, 1999; Vis, Van Kersbergen, & Hylands, 2011). Secondly, the assumptions underpinning welfare models appear increasingly unsound: for example, modes of employment based mainly on formal sector employment; aspirations to full employment, and sustained political consensus supporting redistribution (Ferguson, 2015). Added to this, thirdly, are the effects of increased rates of migration, both regionally and trans-regionally, on notions of eligibility and qualification for welfare, as evidenced by, for example, discussions around post-Brexit arrangements for UK-based EU nationals and eligibility or otherwise for State welfare (Bommes & Geddes, 2003; Hunger, 2000; Portes, 2016). Fourthly is the observation that, in increasingly precarious socio-economic conditions, the absence of State-led welfare, coupled with an erosion of older social traditions and solidarity arrangements, new associational forms

are emerging in response to precarity (Rigg, 2017). Significantly, some of these new associations may express positive forms of social capital, whilst others embody nationalist, exclusionary narratives to foster new networks of belonging (Portes, 2014).

The term precarity describes to the way in which vulnerability, risk and uncertainty are ‘produced’ (Waite, 2009, p. 17), and describe the consequences of economic and social policy on lived experience, where flexible labour policies, the roll-back of State welfare and migration lead to insecure employment (or unemployment), heightened economic uncertainty, the absence of safety nets, and the decline in the viability of traditional livelihoods such as subsistence agriculture (Arnold, 2013; Berckmoes & White, 2014; Horgan & Liinamaa, 2012). Studies of rural communities, which comprise 70% of Myanmar’s population, show conditions which are best described by the term precarity. Although recent reports describe increases in real-term incomes (Belton 2017), there is an overall declining viability of agricultural livelihoods through the effects of climate change and unfavourable market chains rapidly rising levels of unsustainable household debt (Griffiths, 2016c), increased levels of out-migration (Ito & Griffiths, 2016) and an absence of safety nets (Griffiths, 2016c). The absence of safety nets to mitigate for livelihood shocks and health crises, and increased demands for out-of-pocket payments for public services such as education result in substantial erosion of economic capital in rural households. Without safety nets, most households turn to borrowing, often at high interest and with high risk of asset forfeiture in the case of non-repayment (Griffiths, 2016d). A recent review of State-led social protection in Myanmar noted that

the lack of adequate formal social assistance mechanisms suggests that many households in the informal economy, in rural areas, disaster prone areas, and in the ethnic minority areas are at high risk of falling into poverty (Nishino & Koehler, 2011, p. 9).

Despite recent efforts to develop and implement a National Social Protection Strategy (DSW, 2015), implementation remains patchy due to budgetary constraints, limited institutional capacity for delivery (Schjoedt, 2014) and ongoing issues of political legitimacy (Yawbawm Mangshan, 2018). Funding remains a significant issue: despite recent attempts at tax reform, Myanmar has a low tax base (3.7% to GDP) (Aye Thida Kyaw, 2012) and more recent efforts to increase citizen-derived tax revenues have to date been modest (McCarthy, 2016b). The result is, at best, a patchy State presence with regard to welfare, with little evidence of expectations on the part of citizens of provision by the State (McCarthy, 2016c). Thus, a picture of rural precarity emerges as a confluence of declining viability, increased exposure to hazards and shocks, and limited options and resources with which to mitigate risk (essentially, limited options to build one's own resilience).

Faced with this increasing precarity, and in a context of increasing rural and urban transformation, what are the responses of rural communities in Myanmar? Whilst the nature and resilience of the 'moral economy' is much disputed, the widespread historical presence of redistributive welfare in various forms is well documented (Ferguson, 2015; Scott, 1976). As James C. Scott notes in 'The Moral Economy of the Peasant':

few village studies of Southeast Asia fail to remark on the informal social controls which act to provide for the minimal needs of the village poor (Scott, 1976, p. 41).

Recent research demonstrates the high prevalence, and considerable redistributive practice of localized, community-based organizations, typically organized around religious ideas of altruism (Griffiths, 2017b; McCarthy, 2016a). Not only are such organizations associated with lower degrees of inequality, and positive changes in terms of household resilience (Griffiths, *fc.* 2019), but they also represent a rich source of operational capacity for social welfare at community

level (Yawbawm Mangshan, 2018), suggesting that the discourse around welfare systems should include proposals for co-operative approaches to welfare. Studies of the welfare practice of community organizations suggest that their redistribution far exceeds government budget for social protection and welfare (Ei Ei Thu, 2013). However, despite such organizations being a near-ubiquitous part of rural life in Myanmar, and well known within local development and welfare discourse, their presence is barely acknowledged in either the official discourse on welfare reform (Infante Villarroel, 2015a) or in academic literature on civil society in Myanmar (Steinberg, 1999).

Part of the problem has been the lack of visibility of such organizations to international actors, largely due to the fact that much of the development and research discourse takes place in English, and hence is not typically inclusive of entities and concepts which are not normally expressed in known English terminology. The lack of adequate terminology is a significant barrier: if described as ‘traditional’ community organizations, assumptions are made both of the scope of the organization (limited), its nature (kinship-based reciprocity) and power dynamics (reinforcing the status quo, including gender roles and existing authority structures). Referring to ‘organizations of reciprocity’, whilst indicative of forms of risk-sharing or collective responsibility, again tends to lead to assumptions of limited risk pooling or gift exchanges, often with religious sanction. Thus, one of the aims of this research is to describe organizations in ways which are not limited by the assumptions of existing categories, and to make their alternative discourses of welfare more available to readers and practitioners unfamiliar with rural Myanmar life.

Another concern of policy makers is lack of information as to the nature of community welfare organizations<sup>1</sup>. What ‘space’ is occupied by these organizations? Are they primarily religious in nature, or do they function in ways more consistent with Civil Society Organizations (CSOs?)<sup>2</sup>. Who controls them? These questions, too, relate to concerns for groups which may be enablers of nationalistic, discriminatory or exclusionary practice, or which may promote modes of welfare which reinforce, rather than challenge, inequalities. In the current Myanmar context, where inequalities are growing (Griffiths, 2017d; Khine Win 2014), and where discriminatory expressions of social capital are widespread (McCarthy & Menager, 2017), there are valid reasons for concern as to whether nature of the social capital embodied in emergent welfare organizations tends to lead to more inclusive, or more exclusive expressions of plurality and solidarity.

This, then, represents a second purpose of this study; not only to describe the structure and practices of community welfare organizations, but by analysing the processes of their emergence, and the space in which the ‘performance’ of welfare takes place, to make some observations as to the nature of the social capital expressed in the organizations. These organizations themselves represent an alternative discourse of both welfare and citizenship, operating in a space contested by religious institutions, formal administrative structures and traditional practice. Rather than simply being seen as ‘traditional’, many of these organizations were formed only within the past

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<sup>1</sup> As in many ways distinct from what are considered ‘CSOs’ in the development discourses, community welfare organizations refer to organizations which are localized, self-organized and are typically referred to in Burmese language using different terminology than would be used for CSOs or NGOs. Later sections detail the terminology in Burmese language, which uses distinct terms to refer to social organizations, village welfare organizations, religious organizations, political organizations and organizations perceived to be more ‘external’ in nature, and which are then described in terms more akin to ‘NGOs’ or ‘CSOs’

<sup>2</sup> ‘Civil Society Organization’ represents yet another term which tends to flatten the nuance of more particular types of local organization, and assume a certain uniformity of organizational identity and structure, where in reality the different forms of organization are often described quite differently, with different terminology

decade, and thus represent a new emergent phenomenon, which nonetheless draws on religious ideas and customary practice for legitimacy.

The key animating idea for these organizations is the term *parahita*, which has strong Buddhist origins. *Parahita* is roughly translated as ‘for the good of the other’, describing a kind of disinterested altruism. *Parahita* acts as a boundary object, representing an idea and an ideal which embodies a morally and ethically superior virtue. By appropriating *parahita* in this way, the community organizations are not only able to establish and maintain an operational space and identity, but are also able to make sustained appeals to community members for contributions of time, money and valorisation.

The redistributive capacity of these community welfare organizations is not insignificant: perhaps up to 0.5% of the cumulative income of the households in the village is redistributed through these organizations, in the form of welfare payments to older persons, persons with disabilities, pregnant women and children, people with serious illness, and most importantly, assistance for funeral costs for poorer village members. The criteria for eligibility to receive assistance are linked to need, and to residence status as a member of the community or village. Likewise, eligibility for membership of the organization, giving a higher degree of status and more influence on the running of the group, is largely dependent on being a member of the community, and being able and willing to commit time in a voluntary manner. However, underlying these fairly inclusive-looking criteria are unspoken performative expectations: community members are those who do, in some way, meet the performative expectations of the community, which in the villages studied are typically shaped around Burmese Buddhist practices of donation (*dana*) and participation in festivals and religious events. Performative expectations act as a less visible influence on ‘eligibility’ in terms of who is considered to



‘belong’ to the community: merely living there, and sharing the same space, is not enough. This is significant when considering the ethnic boundaries of welfare models based on Buddhist-inspired ideas, such as *parahita*.

The Buddhist origins of *parahita*, and the extent to which it is described as a particularly Burmese/Buddhist ideal, suggest an unintentional self-limiting capacity of *parahita*, where the ‘other’ may be defined and delineated in terms of ‘worthiness’. There is also an iterative relationship between the practice of *parahita* in the form of self-organized welfare and the projection of a sense of ‘worthiness’ of the village where the organization is based, where the demonstration of *parahita*-based welfare often leads to preferential access to government development assistance. In that wider picture, villages demonstrating more virtuous behaviour and a sense of being more ‘organized’ and ‘self-organizing’ are favoured for development projects, illustrating the role of performativity and performative expectations in the relations between villages and the State. But again, if these performative expectations are shaped by Burmese/Buddhist ideals, what are the implications for villages whose identity and traditions are not shaped by Burmese/Buddhist ideals—a sizeable minority in rural Myanmar?<sup>3</sup> This draws closer to the key question of the thesis: are these organizations, framed as they are by the very plastic term *parahita*, more likely to be agents of plural forms of belonging, where the ‘other’ is delimited in terms of traditional identity markers and ethnically-bound performative expectations? Or do the Buddhist origins of *parahita* mean that the performative expectations are inevitably shaped by Burmese/Buddhist traditions? Does that then result in expressions of

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<sup>3</sup> This diversity is described in more detail in Chapter 2, in the section title ‘Heads that count’. However, census figures on reported populations of religious adherents mask a significant diversity even within those reported as Buddhist, Christian, Hindu or Muslim. In particular, whilst a somewhat conflated expression of Burmese Buddhism is, as described in Chapter 8 (Byamaso and the ethics of (not) being Burmese), is a dominant form in Myanmar, the Buddhism found in areas where other ethnic groups are more predominant, such as Mon, Pa-O or Shan, represents a visibly different performance and practice of Buddhism. Hence, the question of how *parahita* might be understood in contexts which are Buddhist, but less influenced by Burmese Buddhism, is highly relevant here.

community welfare which are selectively inclusive, but where redistributive claims are limited by performative expectations bounded by ethnic and religious norms?

This leads to a further consideration: whether local expressions of solidarity, expressed through redistributive practice, can contribute to wider processes of challenging ethnocentric modes of identity construction. On the surface, this seems unlikely: the localization of redistribution will tend to limit redistributive claims to those whose co-existence is more immediate and apparent, as elaborated by Judith Butler, who describes the valorisation of ethical responsibility based on ‘nearness as a condition for encountering and knowing the other’ (Butler, 2015, p. 100). In this way, ethical relations and obligations tend to be towards ‘those whose faces we can see, whose names we can pronounce, whom we can already recognize, whose forms and faces are familiar’ (Butler, 2015, p. 100).

This addresses bigger questions which roam at large in contemporary Myanmar: what ideas and practices may enable the establishment and maintenance of spaces where these kinds of altruistic ideals cut across traditional ethnic and religious divides? What kinds of ideas and practices would allow welfare organizations in Burmese/Buddhist communities to include those who are not able to meet the normative performative expectations of Burmese Buddhist community members? Are there possible interpretations of *parahita* which would enable such spaces to be developed and legitimized, where it is possible that the ‘Other’ who is worthy of my help, who is eligible for a redistributive share of my resources, is someone very different from me?

State-led welfare programmes operate on particular assumptions of citizenship (Dwyer, 2000), relying on appeals to a common national identity as sufficient grounds for redistributive welfare (Svallfors, 1997). In the Myanmar context, to date, such assumptions remain deeply contested due to concerns over the political and cultural hegemony of the majority ethnic Burmans

(Walton, 2013). The challenge remains, in the face of growing precarity and inequality (Griffiths, 2017d), of how to shape welfare approaches which are neither bound by ‘national, cultural, religious or racial belonging’ (Butler, 2015, p. 107) nor by the limits of localized ethical obligations, whilst at the same time recognizing the highly significant and valuable resource generated by localized, emergent modes of redistributive welfare. The more localized redistributive ecologies described in this thesis offer potential sources of grassroots legitimacy for the development of more regionalized and nationalized welfare programmes. Incorporating locally established social contracts into the wider discourse on welfare and citizenship thus potentially offers ways to address the chronic lack of trust in central government redistributive capacity which is considered a key factor in Myanmar’s low tax base.

In short, as argued by Yawbawm Mangshang (2018), a potentially viable approach to establishing a national social welfare system involves, firstly, building on what is already there (in this case, community led initiatives) and secondly, linking that process to regionally-managed welfare programmes which mobilize local and central resources to meet local needs and priorities. This, critically, can be a step in establishing a wider, plural ethic of obligation and collective performance, where a more inclusive sense of obligation is less bounded by locality or familiarity, and is maintained by interdependence. As Butler puts it:

We can approach a notion of plurality that is thought together with both performativity and interdependency (Butler, 2015, p. 151).

The criteria of being local, of being co-existent in a particular space, rather than one’s ethnic or religious identity, as a criteria for belonging in the redistributive community, may offer potential for more place-based definitions of identity, which in turn offer alternatives to the current modes of belonging, and of citizenship currently prevalent in contemporary Myanmar. This is to some

degree present in wider national welfare movements such as U Kyaw Thu's free funeral organization network (Wells & Kyaw Thu Aung, 2014, San San Oo, 2018), which provides assistance for families of deceased of different ethnic and religious backgrounds, mostly in urban areas.

It is here that the questions return to the contested narratives of development: the narrative of self-organizing, *parahita*-inspired welfare arguably runs on different tracks to the discourse on universal human rights (Wells, 2018), which seeks to build redistributive consensus on different foundations, assuming and articulating contrasting notions of citizenship. Nonetheless, both *parahita*-inspired and human rights-based approaches to welfare and development are subject to often contradictory discourses of politics, religion, ethics and human identity. Different welfare approaches, derived from different framings of citizenship, in turn influence the shape of citizenship and 'ways of belonging'.

In the end, two options emerge for future welfare provision in Myanmar: a more centralized and universalized approach which defines redistributive claims (and appropriative claims on those required to pay the tax) largely based on an assumption of a performance of citizenship defined by the State, or an approach whereby the State partners with more localized systems to develop an outward-expanding, increasingly plural framework of redistribution, in turn dependent on more plural forms of citizenship. Thus, this thesis, by way of conclusion, looks at the nature of citizenship and belonging which are expressed performatively by *parahita*-inspired community welfare organizations, and the ways in which these forms of citizenship may lead to more inclusive forms of wider citizenship and belonging in Myanmar.

## **Research in Myanmar: context and challenges**

The work presented here is the culmination of fieldwork undertaken between October 2016 and December 2017 primarily in the Central Dry Zone of Myanmar<sup>4</sup>. I have also drawn on findings from large-scale qualitative and quantitative surveys which I have conducted over the past 10 years, as well as from my own experience in being involved in community development work in rural Myanmar. This experience has been invaluable for the research undertaken for this thesis, which has attempted to describe and analyse a phenomenon (community welfare organizations) which is largely invisible in both research literature and development practice in Myanmar. The desire to challenge this invisibility, and to properly appraise the nature and value of self-organized welfare movements in rural Myanmar, are my key motivations for this research. There are several possible reasons for the relatively obscure status of community welfare organizations in current development and academic knowledge, and many relate to the challenges of doing development work and research in Myanmar. Myanmar represents both a fertile and challenging research context (Farrelly, 2016; McCormick, 2016). The obstacles to conducting research in Myanmar are numerous, but four are of particular relevance to this study. Firstly, there are numerous restrictions by government authorities on research activities, a persistent legacy of decades of authoritarian government (Farrelly, 2016). Opportunities for academic research linked to local institutions are limited, meaning that much research takes place in contexts funded and managed by international NGOs (Ardeth Thawnghmung, 2017). These restrictions frequently mean that researchers are rarely able to spend the requisite amount of time

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<sup>4</sup> The central Dry Zone refers to an area covering more than 50,000 square kilometers, and encompassing 58 townships, from southern Sagaing region, to the western and central parts of Mandalay region and most of Magway region. 'It is estimated that approximately one-quarter of the country's population live in this area [...] the Dry Zone receives limited rains compared to country averages [...] with conditions ranging from semi-arid (and even arid) in certain areas to semi-humid in others[...] The Dry Zone is particularly affected by food security issues.' (MIMU, 2018).

in the field, or immerse themselves in the linguistic and cultural milieu, which may exacerbate issues of language and translation. The consequence of this can be that researchers and development professionals, unaware of subtle differences in meanings, can confuse or be unaware of terms which carry specific meanings, and denote particular categories. A good example of this is found in the subject of our study: community organizations. Interviews I have personally conducted have asked the same question of communities, but using different terms. ‘Do you have an NGO<sup>5</sup> in your village?’ results in an answer referring to an external entity, like World Vision or the Maternal and Child Welfare Association. ‘Do you have a development organization<sup>6</sup> in your village?’ results in a reference to the Village Development Committee, which is often linked to government. Asking about a ‘social organization<sup>7</sup>’ generates a wide variety of responses, and often the lack of specificity means that communities would say ‘no, we don’t have one’. But asking about a *tha-ye na-ye* (grief and joy) organization<sup>8</sup> immediately describes a very specific category of social organization, well known in both rural and urban contexts.

Secondly, the lack of scope for research in the past has resulted in very limited availability of reliable secondary data, or of trained research personnel to act as local co-researchers (Schomerus, 2015). Whilst there is a wealth of raw data, frequently the organization and archiving of data, often buried deep within government administrative records, makes meaningful access difficult. Moreover, the privileging of certain types of research, and research

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<sup>5</sup> အစိုးရမဟုတ်သောအဖွဲ့အစည်း *A-soe-ya m-hout thaw a-pwe a-see*

<sup>6</sup> ကျေးရွာ ဖွံ့ဖြိုးရေးအဖွဲ့အစည်း *kye-ywa pwant pyo ye a-pwe a-see*

<sup>7</sup> လူမှုရေးအဖွဲ့အစည်း *lu-hmu ye a-pwe a-see*

<sup>8</sup> သာရေးနာရေးအဖွဲ့အစည်း *ba-tha-ye a-pwe a-see*

institutions, and research conducted in and published in English, has resulted in the marginalization of local research and knowledge.

Thirdly, a lack of exposure to research, and indeed wider concepts of informed choice, means that many research participants are unfamiliar with the idea of participation in research as a learning process, or with issues of informed consent. This required me to draw on previous experiences of qualitative research in Myanmar, where informed consent obtained and recorded orally as part of the interview process was viewed more favourably, and with less suspicion by participants than being asked to sign a form. The process employed in this research is described in more detail in chapter 4.

Fourthly, there is the issue of language, particularly for expatriate researchers such as myself, which is considered in more depth in chapter 4. As with any language, translation risks losing nuance and imposing a ‘re-narration’ onto respondents’ words. The complexity of Burmese language, with different grammatical forms for spoken and written language, coupled with a relative dearth of skilled translators and translation tools, exacerbates the effect of language issues in research in Myanmar. The use of translation and translators for research in Myanmar also represents a significant challenge to research integrity, particularly where a long history of colonial rule has left a legacy of privileged status of the English language. In practice, this means that much research conducted and published in English can remain largely unchallenged by the majority of Myanmar scholars. In this study, I addressed this particular issue in three ways.

Firstly, as a result of over a decade of study and practice, I have achieved a significant degree of fluency in the main language used in this research (Burmese) and was thus able to both conduct interviews and analysis in the language being used by participants. Nevertheless, a non-native speaker, however fluent, is prone to misinterpret at times. Thus, secondly, I adopted the practice

of collaborative analysis, where myself and a competent Burmese research assistant would jointly analyse and discuss the interviews and transcripts. Finally, for key terms and ideas, I consulted linguistic experts for clarification of the English translation of certain Burmese terms. This is described in more detail in chapter 4.

These and other obstacles have contributed to the relative paucity of theoretical perspectives in Myanmar research. Much social research conducted in, or about Myanmar pivots on one of three dominant discourses: colonial and post-colonial settlements (Charney, 2009; Steinberg, 2001; Turner, 2014); the effects of militarization and Burmanization, particular in light of ethnic settlements (Cheesman, 2017; Sadan, 2007; South, 2014) and contested narratives of Buddhism (Sarkisyanz, 1965; Schober, 2011; Walton & Hayward, 2014). These approaches seek to interpret contemporary issues, such as communal violence or political trends, through one or more of these lenses. Additionally, the bulk of current research on issues of rural development and social protection in Myanmar is largely funded by, and orientated towards, technical approaches to development, with limited space for critical inquiry into the social and anthropological context in which development is conceptualized and practiced (Schomerus, 2015; Ardeth Thawnghmung, 2017). Academic research into ‘civil society’ has perhaps only recently acknowledged the difficulties in appropriating terms like ‘civil society’ and ‘civil society organizations’ in a context where relations between State and non-State elements, between State politics, religious politics and everyday politics are organized in ways which do not neatly fit into categories of ‘civil’ and ‘non-civil’ (David Steinberg, quoting personal correspondence with Michael Aung-Thwin in (Pedersen, Rudland, & May, 2000)).

The category issue has bedevilled both research and praxis, resulting in development agencies establishing multiple new community organizations, such as village organizations for water and



sanitation, maternal healthcare, disaster relief, and other activities, on the assumption that none existed before (Griffiths, 2016b). This perhaps arises from a utilitarian approach to the analysis of community organizations, and particularly those practicing some form of reciprocity, which tends to make a distinction between ‘kinship organizations’ which are viewed to be unsophisticated, limited, uneven and ineffective (essentially a vestige of the ‘peasant’ economy), and modern social protection interventions, which are universal, efficient and effective (De Coninck & Drani, 2009; Devereux, Roelen, & Ulrichs, 2015a). As such, a critical element of the methodology utilized in this study is the use of narratives of formations of groups considered by those communities to be groups of significance.

The approach used in this study seeks to interpret the phenomenon of emergent community social organizations through examining the wider conditions in which the organizations have emerged, and to identify the ‘self-understanding’ of these organizations through the narratives of those who are part of them. In so doing, a reflexive approach is needed, enabling the identification and unveiling of ‘unthought categories of thought, which predetermine and delineate what is thinkable’ (Grenfell, 2014, p. 200). The literature cited in Chapter 3 describes the widespread presence of village-based welfare organizations in rural Myanmar; however, despite evidence pointing to long-standing traditions of reciprocity, the seemingly spontaneous emergence of more institutionalized forms of reciprocity appears to be both recent and rapid. This research, then, seeks to analyse the conditions associated with the emergence of community social organizations, the processes of validation and sustainability, and the nature of the claims to space, and redistributive economy.

Within this, four sub-questions will be considered:

- What conditions are associated with the formation of social organizations?

This will look at conditions of rural precarity, as a context in which organizations emerge in response to social conditions.

- How are the activities of social organizations sustained? This will look at the performative aspects of the organization and explore the ideas and symbols which animate and motivate organizational life and participation. In particular, the role of the concept of *parahita* as an animating idea will be analysed, where *parahita* has been identified in recent studies of urban welfare organizations as a key concept (McCarthy, 2016b).

- What is the redistributive nature of the welfare practices of social organizations?

This will look at the nature of the activities of the organization, and in particular examine what is being distributed, and how it is distributed, and to whom. Critically, this will also analyse power distribution, to expose the underlying politics of the redistribution which is taking place.

- What is the nature of the social capital which is generated by, and which sustains the social organizations? Here, following on from the analysis of performativity and redistribution, the study will turn back to the original issues of nationalism and populism, and seek to explore the potential future trajectories of the social organizations in a rapidly changing socio-economic context, and how these relate to wider national discourses on citizenship and belonging.

## Notes on nomenclature

The name of the country, as either Burma or Myanmar, is used in this thesis based on the official name of the country in common use during the time period being discussed. Whilst in Burmese language, the name of the country is Romanised to ‘Myanmar’ the country’s name reflected colonial usage (Burma) until 1989, after which the military government enacted the Adaptation of Expressions Law, which changed the pronunciation of many place names, roads and the country itself to reflect more accurately the Burmese spelling. Whilst the military government of the time suggested that the term ‘Myanmar’ was more inclusive than ‘Burma’ of all the different ethnic groups living in the country, this has been contested on historic-linguistic grounds (Dittmer, 2008; Seekins, 2006; Walton, 2013). The change was not without controversy (Banyan, 2013) and until recently, political opposition and supportive foreign governments have continued to refer to the country as ‘Burma’ and to the capital as ‘Rangoon’, rather than Yangon. However, after decades of opposing the military-led name changes, the recently elected National League for Democracy (NLD), led by Nobel Laureate Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, endorsed the acceptability of using the name ‘Myanmar’ for the country, and other place names which had been changed (Press Association, 2016). In this thesis, then, the country name and place names will be referred to as ‘Burma’ when discussing events prior to 1989, and thereafter, using names adjudged closer to the Burmese language pronunciation, including Myanmar and Yangon.

The names of Burmese persons are structured differently to Western forms (Seekins, 2006).

There is no ‘surname’, and a name typically consists of two or three syllables, the first normally starting with the syllable corresponding to the day of the week on which that individual was born. Names are prefixed by *U* (male) and *Daw* (female) although this varies depending on the relative age difference between two interlocutors: if a younger man is speaking to an older man,

he will prefix the name with *U* (Uncle) , and the older will refer to the younger as (*Ko*) brother; likewise an older women will be called *Daw* (Auntie) and will call a younger one *Ma* (sister). The exception is when speaking to or referring to someone of learning or authority, such as a monk, an official or a teacher, who will be called *Saya* (male) or *Sayama* (female). There are multiple variations of this, including different forms of address for different levels of seniority of monks, and forms of address for different levels of monks to address lay persons.

As there is no consensus on which of the many forms of transliteration of Burmese should be used (Seekins, 2006), where Burmese terms are discussed, these will be presented in Burmese script, with both a transliteration and a translation provided by myself, with advice and checking by U Nyunt Han, my former language teacher and until recently a special advisor to the Union Minister for Communication. Transliterations are presented in italics, with a translation included either in the text, or in the footnote. In some cases, where commonly used transliterations are available (such as those used regularly by Gustav Houtman, Matthew Walton, Gerard McCarthy and others), those transliterations are used, and presented in in italics in the text. Where religious terms, commonly expressed in Pali are used, the representation in Burmese script, together with the equivalent accepted transliteration is used, based on U Hoke Sein's Universal Burmese-English-Pali Dictionary (Hoke Sein, 1981).

Myanmar's administrative structure divides the country into 14 States and Regions, with several additional special zones. These are further divided into Districts and Townships; in rural areas, villages are organized into village tracts, which are then included in a Township. In this thesis, reference to a State as an administrative area of the country is prefixed with the name of that State (e.g. Mon State); likewise, reference to a Region is prefaced by the name of the Region (e.g. Yangon Region). Reference to States and Regions, or State and Regional governments,

refers to those 14 entities; where the word State is used without either a prefix, or not accompanied by reference to Regions, it is used to describe the State as a national entity.

### **Accents: a researcher's journey to (and through) Myanmar**

‘Situating the researcher, situating the research’ is inevitably a slanted process: why are certain narratives selected, and others (unknown) either consciously or unconsciously excluded? The framing of stories is bound to convey certain aspects in a favourable or unfavourable light. Thus, at the outset, the objective should be stated: in this case, describing key events which have given rise to this researcher’s particular interest in ‘local’ knowledge as a political stance, and the context in which that interest emerged, and is currently applied. In selecting the biographical narratives in this section, the key themes are, firstly: experiences which have given shape to a critical stance on international development; secondly, the role of language in the perception, categorization and utilization of knowledge; thirdly, experiences which have shaped the focus and direction of the research which I am currently engaged in. My extensive experience of working in rural communities in Myanmar over a 15 year period since 2003 has involved visiting over 100 different rural communities in all but one of the 14 States and Regions of Myanmar. This has shaped much of the focus on ‘local’ knowledge, and my position as a researcher could best be described as ‘critical-constructive’. Whilst placing a strong emphasis on local knowledge, and on studying local phenomena in the language used by the majority in the country, the privileging of (so-called) local knowledge does not confer any ‘sacred’ status to such knowledge, and neither does it dismiss ‘non-local’ knowledge simply because it is ‘foreign’. Rather, the critical constructive position attempts to ensure a more inclusive dialogue, which necessarily must address issues of power, which in many cases are intrinsically linked to language, and the language in which ‘knowledge’ is expressed and discussed. The critical element does not then

simply allow ‘local’ knowledge to be privileged without mature dialogue, and in the process, the hope is that mutual learning can occur.

Bald autobiographical facts serve as a framework: half of a childhood initially spent in rural East Asia, and half in the UK probably served to develop much of the affinity for ‘liminal’ spaces that I currently experience, and perhaps also the interest in facilitating genuine dialogue between different epistemologies. Following secondary education in the UK, I underwent training in clinical medicine in Birmingham, and worked for seven years in clinical practice and public health, mainly in deprived areas of the Midlands. In 2003, myself and my wife Jo, who is also from UK and who has a background in music and teaching, moved to Myanmar, initially to work as country director for the Leprosy Mission. As is common in many places where leprosy has been endemic, a significant proportion of people affected by leprosy live in several dozen so-called ‘leprosy colonies’: villages where, prior to the advent of curative treatment, affected persons would be made to live to prevent transmission. Despite public health campaigns, stigma persists, such that, although the majority of people living in these communities in Myanmar do not have leprosy, the lives of them and their subsequent generations remain affected by it. Much early work with the Leprosy Mission was spent improving clinical services, including surgery, but the developmental aspects were expanded with work on community development for persons affected by leprosy and their families.

Early efforts to implement more ‘traditional’ development projects, which focused on economic empowerment through provision of micro-finance, proved unsuccessful; no sooner had a ‘successful’ livelihood programme been established in communities with persons affected by leprosy, than a combination (or usually a vicious sequence) of natural disasters and economic downturns, such as the collapse of market prices for produce, would render all the ‘development’

useless. At the same time, observational analysis highlighted that some households were more vulnerable than others, and that some, for various reasons, were more quickly and easily able to restore economic activity. The broader background of economic instability in Myanmar also highlighted the importance of vulnerability and resilience, and how these relate to the context and capacities of households: not only their assets, or their skills, but the relation of these to markets; the connection of the households to social networks, and the impact that stigma, discrimination, gender and exclusion have on vulnerability and resilience.

These early experiences gave me insights into the complex relationship between exclusion and poverty, and the overlapping but different concepts of vulnerability and poverty. This in turn was the genesis of developing household vulnerability indicators with which to enable more detailed analysis of vulnerability and resilience. This has been used by a number of projects to identify specific issues which increased the vulnerability (or decreased the resilience) of a particular household or community, and thus develop interventions to address that, rather than simply rely on generic ‘development’ or ‘livelihood’ solutions.

The early days in May 2008 will always be remembered in Myanmar as the worst natural disaster on record, when Cyclone Nargis swept in from the Bay of Bengal and through a combination of high winds and tidal surges swept away thousands of homes, with up to a quarter of a million people reported dead or missing, and several more million homeless. The international perspective on this catastrophic event, focusing initially on the government’s refusal to allow international rescue missions, illustrates the degree to which any narrative of Myanmar (Burma) tends to be politicized, with events presented primarily as a commentary on the military regime. As is discussed in the next section, whilst the bald facts do indeed show that the initial government response was inadequate, the reasons behind that initial reluctance, and

the subsequent difficulties in co-operation with international actors, are deeply rooted in issues of history, power and language.

Our own experience of the Cyclone began with hearing the alerts on the radio. Although such alerts were not uncommon, by mid-afternoon on the Friday 2<sup>nd</sup> May, the winds and rain appeared unusually threatening, so I ordered our staff to return home early. After a lull, the winds picked up late in the night of May 2<sup>nd</sup> and early morning of May 3<sup>rd</sup>, shattering windows, and by morning, the full extent of the storm was visible, with fallen trees, fences and corrugated iron roof panels strewn across our yard, and into the road. By mid-morning the storm lulled, and we were able to survey the damage. Power cuts at that time were the norm, so we were well stocked with candles, but needed food supplies. That day, we also began the task of contacting staff, which required, where possible, physically traveling to their homes to locate them, as at that time cell phones were not available and phone lines were downed. The extent of the damage in Yangon itself illustrated the sheer potency of the storm, but as the days progressed, we began to hear reports of news from the Delta. There, whole villages were washed away, with a death toll expected to be in the thousands; no, tens of thousands, as the scale of the tragedy began to unfold.

Despite having a small team, and having no experience with disaster response, as one of the few International Non-Government Organizations (INGO) operating legitimately in Myanmar, the Leprosy Mission immediately engaged in relief efforts. These initial efforts were two-phased: sending in a small relief team within the first 10 days to provide access to potable water, emergency shelter and body disposal, and a later, more expanded effort to address the needs of persons with disabilities affected by the disaster. Leprosy Mission was later to take on the role for all disability work and policy in Myanmar, including writing the National Plan of Action for



Persons with Disabilities, leading the National Disability Survey, and forming the National Working Group for Persons with Disabilities. Post-Nargis, a further 15 Disability Resource Centres were opened nationally, vastly increasing the access to disability services in not only Cyclone-affected areas, but other parts of the country. The initial aid response provided relief and rehabilitation, including livelihoods, homes and community adaptations for over 10,000 people, and earned Leprosy Mission the ‘Humanitarian Organization of the Year’ award in 2009 from the Myanmar Government for efforts for Persons with Disabilities.

What was also evident during the response was the high degree of resilience present in many affected rural communities, and strong evidence of the self-help spirit. Due to significant delays in initial aid responses, in a large part due to the reluctance of the government to allow international humanitarian organizations access to affected areas, much of the initial relief was conducted by communities themselves, or by well-wishers from nearby towns and cities. Many of these risked arrest by traveling to affected areas to distribute food and other aid supplies. The self-help spirit was also evident in many of the villages where the Leprosy Mission worked, with communities prioritizing people with disabilities and older people for assistance. This gave me my first experience of what would become the subject of later research.

### **Word searches and the language of inquiry**

Historian Robert Taylor highlighted the role of language, and language competence in research:

We foreigners’ capacity to understand and analyse Myanmar politics are also limited by our linguistic capacities and immersion in the structures of the English language in which we reason, argue and write. Political thought in Myanmar is usually reasoned, argued and written in Burmese or one of the minority languages. Yet few students of Myanmar politics ever manage to learn even one minority language and those who tackle Burmese

quickly discover that the language is very different from English. The lack of ‘fit’ between Burmese and English makes accurate translation very difficult; there is often room for interpretation and this bedevils agreement (Taylor, 2008, p. 220).

The same may be said of international development. My own experience, as one who has made conscious efforts to learn and use Burmese language in both development and research work, has confirmed my own belief in the hazards of translation, and the enormous value of being able to converse in the language of the people you are working with. Above all, it is the first of many steps to gaining insights into local perspectives, through making conscious efforts to hear local voices. Without Burmese language, this research would not have been possible, nor would I have ever even considered why it might be valuable and worth undertaking.

Much has been made of the Myanmar government’s refusal to allow international aid in the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis in 2008, in keeping with the isolationist policies of the time.

Although subsequent reports indicate that the eventual relief and rehabilitation operation was well coordinated (especially compared with contemporaneous disasters such as that affecting Haiti) the initial processes were slow, mainly due to poor communication between the international community and the Myanmar government. Being one of a few development agencies active in Myanmar at that time, I attended the initial UN/INGO relief clusters, and also contacted the Social Welfare Department of the Government, which had been tasked with the overall co-ordination of the relief operations. Arriving at their office, I could see straight away the lack of equipment and organization, and one of our first tasks was to equip them with generators, laptops and copying machines. From our perspective, this meant that we needed to adopt a constructive position, working where possible to strengthen or contribute to a wider aid response, rather than highlighting any of our own achievements as an organization. At that time,

Leprosy Mission was asked by government to be the focal agency for disability inclusion in the relief effort, a role which the Leprosy Mission had never undertaken before (or since) in any other country. Co-ordination meetings were held by the UN to which government officials were invited. However, little effort was made to actively include government officials, for example, by using Burmese language and translation instead of English, or by actively seeking the input of government officials. What this experience told me was the importance of trying to understand the constraints within which mid-level officials were working, to assist them in delivering what their political masters required of them, and to avoid putting them in situations which would create conflict with their superiors.

Much of the success of the relief response of the Leprosy Mission, and subsequent policy initiatives can be attributed to the development of strong personal relationships and effective communication with government officials and community leaders. Further, a key element to that process has been the ability to communicate in the language and thought-patterns of the country, and to be increasingly able to identify and appeal to locally constructed knowledge in the process of policy development and community mobilization. Whilst English is spoken, to a certain degree, in official circles, and taught in schools (in essence a legacy of colonial education), the prevalence of fluent speakers is significantly lower than countries like Singapore or Malaysia. Mastering Burmese language requires a huge time investment: probably 4-5 years of more or less full-time study to master spoken language, and a further 3-4 years to master the written form, which is predominant in more formal discourses. Thus, during our time in Myanmar, recognizing both the importance of mastering the Burmese language, and the dearth of learning resources for foreign workers, I have been involved in establishing a training centre to provide Burmese language training, which to date has trained over 200 humanitarian workers. In the same vein, I

have been involved in organizing communication skills training for government officials of four different ministries, focusing on building confidence and competence in communication in both local and international settings.

The issue of not only language, but the cultural embeddedness of concepts such as disability and poverty, was crucial in my early experience of research in Myanmar. In the two years following Cyclone Nargis, between 2009 and 2011, the government initiated a process to conduct a nationwide disability survey, as no reliable statistics existed at that time on disability. As with many aspects of humanitarian and development work, definitions are crucial. The World Health Organization's definitions of disability, whilst acknowledging that the conceptualization of disability may vary according to culture and context, nonetheless advocated a definition of disability based on external measures of function, broadly following the social model of disability (Burchardt, 2004). Perspectives on disability in Myanmar are still to a significant degree shaped by cultural constructs linked to beliefs on rebirth and karma. Thus, disability tended to be viewed with a 'charitable' perspective: persons with disabilities were unfortunate victims of their (or somebody else's) bad karma, and thus worthy of assistance/charity (Tawngmai N Khum, 2016). The more 'rights-based' definitions of disability focusing on societal barriers to full inclusion, based on the assumption of a right to basic equality, were not well known at that time, and the interventions for disability, where available, were largely medical, aimed at 'fixing' the disability, rather than societal (aimed at removing barriers to inclusion). When conducting surveys, then, the definition is all-important: on what basis will somebody be included (or not) in the category called 'disabled'? How is disability defined, by whom, and for what purpose?

Our approach to the research involved a dialogue model, developing a locally situated definition of disability through interviews and surveys of disability organizations, persons with disabilities, academics and specialists from different fields, as well as with a sample of urban and rural Myanmar citizens selected through a randomized process. The dialogue model featured various pictorial and textual descriptions of disability and functional impairment, and through collating responses, a basic construct was developed.

This construct was then applied to the first ever national disability survey conducted in Myanmar (Khin Myat, 2010). What emerged was an understanding of disability which, whilst not being consistent with international norms, nonetheless was recognized locally as appropriate. The survey findings, and the framing of disability in more contextually relevant terms, enabled government and Disabled People's Organizations to further shape enabling policy, and finally, in 2015, to the first Law for the Protection of Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Survey data was also a significant factor in the successful lobbying for Myanmar to sign and ratify the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and in incorporating new, non-discriminatory language and definitions of disability into National Law in 2015.

Following the National Disability Survey, I formed the Social Policy and Poverty Research Group (SPPRG) as a consortium of development organizations and government, with the specific aim of developing local research capacity to inform policy development. One of my first tasks there was to lead a national survey looking to understand the definition and causes of poverty in rural areas, from the perspective of rural household members themselves. This project eventually surveyed 22,000 rural households across the entire country (Griffiths, 2016c).

For many years the word 'poverty' was not permitted in public discourse. However, the new government of President U Thein Sein inaugurated an ambitious programme of rural

development aimed at halving poverty by 2016, based on poverty figures collected by UNDP in 2011. Critics argued that poverty statistics, based on the UNDP Integrated Household Living Conditions Analysis (IHLCA) and the more simplified Poverty Scorecard have failed to reflect more locally derived dimensions of poverty. None other than the World Bank, in a report published in 2000, stated that ‘the poor are the true poverty experts [...] poverty strategies for the 21<sup>st</sup> century must be based on the experiences, priorities, reflections and recommendations of poor people’ (Narayan-Parker & Patel, 2000, p. 7). Despite this, the actual inclusion of local perspectives in poverty definitions remains scant. Recognizing this, the Department of Rural Development requested the newly formed Social Policy and Poverty Research Group to conduct a study which would, amongst other things, try to capture opinions and perspectives on poverty from the diverse rural populations of Myanmar.

Methodologically, using an initial qualitative interview approach followed by a wider, more structured questionnaire for the survey, we sought to capture information which could be used to develop ‘paradigms’ of poverty: ways in which rural communities themselves defined and conceptualized poverty in practical ways, which they then used to determine who the ‘poor’ are in their community. What was striking about the findings was the way in which local perceptions of poverty were more deeply rooted in livelihood status, rather than in income sufficiency or material possessions. Furthermore, this approach highlighted the way that different people define and determine poverty in different ways, capturing the variations in perceptions, often based on a person’s own situation and priorities. Based on this more nuanced understanding of poverty, developed through local voices, a different set of priorities for poverty reduction emerged, and these were presented and endorsed by the National Poverty Alleviation Committee on 30<sup>th</sup>

September 2015, recognizing the on-going need to shape policy in ways which incorporate more localized perspectives.

In the same vein, I have been involved in the development of social protection policy in Myanmar since 2008, in a process largely driven by UNICEF, and latterly by the ILO and the World Bank. Despite the purported inclusive nature of the forums, representation of local knowledge was minimal, and largely confined to pre-determined spaces, such as contributions from labour unions on worker's conditions. Likewise, despite the wealth of evidence concerning the presence and scale of activities of traditional social organizations, such local knowledge did not enter the discourse of social protection, either in the official forums or in the subsequent reports. The activities and scale of financial disbursements administered by these organizations, if extrapolated across the country, literally dwarf appropriations from government and international aid for social security related expenditure. Yet these organizations barely merit a footnote in internationally sponsored inventories of social protection in Myanmar (Infante Villarroel, 2015a), nor even in a review of community based social protection options for Myanmar (Infante Villarroel, 2015b). This exclusion is not the result of ignorance, as the authors of these and other reports have received numerous briefings on the subject; rather, the likely reason is that traditional social organizations simply do not 'fit' the development narrative, where only organizations which are linguistically and operationally compatible with the preferred development agenda are considered valid.

Thus, the objective of this research is to build a more complete, detailed picture of the nature and function of traditional village social organizations with sufficient rigour of method to allow policy-makers to appraise their place and worth, and potential role in the wider national development and social protection, and to do so by including and privileging local

epistemologies. Put simply: there is a story to tell from the other side of the fence, to bring into the wider policy discussions of social policy and poverty reduction some of the currently marginalized elements of local knowledge which require critical appraisal or at the very least to be acknowledged. This is not only for the sake of knowledge production, but in the belief that the appropriate appraisal and incorporation of this knowledge will contribute to better social policy.

## **Chapter Summaries**

The past 15 years have witnessed significant changes to the social, economic and political context of Myanmar, accelerating the processes of change which had stalled during the Socialist era (1962-1988). Myanmar's once-vibrant economy, fuelled largely by rice exports, declined during the socialist era, and despite stuttering economic and social reforms post-1990, Myanmar was largely left behind in the rapid economic development of the region during the past two decades. Those 'reforms', whilst presuming a predominantly rural economy, have led to significant changes in the rural economy, with high levels of migration, both domestic and international, reflecting the declining sustaining capacity of the rural economy. This thesis describes the interplay between moral and political economy, and as such **Chapter 2** describes the contemporary socio-economic and political context of Myanmar, with particular emphasis on the rural economy, and with reference to key movements and events in both pre and post-independence Myanmar (such as the Saya San rebellion of 1930-31) which have shaped the context for this research. The recent resurgence of Buddhist nationalist movements in Myanmar has significant parallels with nationalist movements in the 1920's, both drawing heavily on traditional rural communities for support by appeals to religious traditions. This chapter also gives background to the policy context of social protection to which this research is applied, in particular considering the contested narratives of 'protection'. Likewise, citizenship as a



contested discourse is introduced here, as the background to a more detailed discussion on performativity, welfare and citizenship in chapter 8.

Precarity is a term increasingly used to describe the conditions of uncertainty derived from ‘produced risk’, and which has been linked to emergence of populist movements in both European and non-European contexts. **Chapter 3** presents an overview of the key concepts used in this research, including populism and precarity, before presenting a brief review of the role of redistributive practice in welfare. The context from which community welfare organizations have emerged provides insights into the origins of key ideas and associational forms, and so I include a brief history of associational life in Myanmar, drawing mainly on the work of Kyaw Yin Hlaing (2007) and Gerard McCarthy (2016a). Performativity is used in this research as a theoretical approach to study the ways in which associational life creates and maintains particular spaces, and so a brief description of performativity, using mainly Judith Butler’s work on Performative Assembly (Butler, 2015), is included.

The methodology and methods used in this research are described in **Chapter 4**, with particular emphasis on the process of narrative research, as well as the challenges of conducting cross-language research, and reflexive approaches to issues of language, power and translation.

**Chapter 5** situates the research in rural communities in Myanmar, both in terms of more detailed descriptions of the research location, and in analysing the nature of the precarious living context of the rural communities being studied. By drawing on James C. Scott’s seminal work, ‘The Moral Economy of the Peasant’ (1976), comparisons are made between the precarious and unstable conditions found in rural communities in the 1930s in Myanmar, and contemporary conditions. In that era, the result was a surge in nationalistic fervour leading to a revolt, as the viability of rural life ebbed away. An assessment of the current state of the ‘Moral Economy’ of

Myanmar's rural community is made, providing a description of the conditions of precarity from which associational forms emerge. The process of emergence is the subject of **Chapter 6**, which first describes the structure and form of community welfare organizations, before analysing the operational space in which they operate. A crucial element in their emergence is the concept of ပရဟိတ (*parahita*), a Pali word meaning 'for the good of the other', and loosely translated as altruism. As a widely known, but plastic concept which is derived from, but not tethered to Buddhist teachings, *parahita* serves as a critical boundary object, enabling the legitimization of new operational spaces and practices by the community organizations. This results in a performative assemblage, where *parahita* plays a key role in the *interest* of group members. The nature of redistributive practice is described in **Chapter 7**, considering two main questions. Firstly, whether what is being practiced by the community welfare organizations can rightly be categorized as redistribution, or whether it lies more in the domain of the mutual reciprocity most commonly associated with kinship sharing practices. Secondly, looking beyond the immediate redistributive practices of the organizations, I consider the expectations of distribution by the State to communities which are demonstrating a greater 'worthiness' through self-organized welfare. Expectations of State redistribution go beyond simply preferential access to assistance funds, and may include more subtle distribution of forbearance, the wilful tolerance by the State of officially unsanctioned behaviour as a measure. **Chapter 8** looks in more detail at the religious and ethnic underpinnings of *parahita*, and of the mode of organizing of the community welfare organizations, asking what possibilities exist for newer iterations of national identity and belonging derived from *parahita*-inspired movements. This chapter revisits the notions of performativity and citizenship, analysing the kinds of performativity which are derived from *parahita*. Finally, **Chapter 9**, by way of conclusion, looks at the nature of the politics of the

community welfare organizations. On the one hand, the organizations themselves very specifically and vocally deny any sense of political activity; at the same time, the collective nature of their practice, and the implicit bargains with the State and with the community, embody a kind of politics of everyday life which gives rise to a very active model of citizenship. This leads to the final question, of the politics of the local. Where *parahita* is built on the premise of altruism, embodied by actions which are self-giving ‘for the good of the other’, the question remains: who is the other? And how are they defined? How does my self-identity construct the identity of the other? And how does a new definition of the other reconstruct my identity? This raises the possibility of *parahita*-inspired welfare groups not only contributing significantly to addressing issues of economic precarity, but also to social precarity, by providing a basis to challenge existing identity constructs which exclude, marginalize, and produce riskiness.

## Chapter 2

### **States of being: a brief background to contemporary Myanmar**

Outraged universities and rock stars stripped away awards, honorary degrees and removed portraits of democracy icon and de facto Head of State Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, in protest against government-led security operations targeting the largely Muslim population of northern Rakhine State in September 2017 (Boycott-Owen, 2017; Kelly, 2017; Sabur, 2017). The jubilation of November 2015, when her National League for Democracy party triumphed in national elections and stepped forward to form a new government, evaporated in confusion and disbelief. How could one of the world's most eloquent spokespersons for human rights, democracy and freedom, simply look the other way whilst hundreds of thousands fled into neighbouring Bangladesh?

In the plethora of political analysis that followed, many outside observers were perplexed and disappointed by the steadfast support for her and her policies from the vast majority of the population, coupled with the deafening absence of insightful critique from political analysts within Myanmar<sup>9</sup>. Yet perhaps none of the events should come as a surprise: one of the features of Myanmar's political history is the persistence of a limited, but powerful set of ideas which seek to determine and maintain both national identity, and the identity of the citizen, through a subtly choreographed dance between State, military and religious institutions, each of whom has a clear understanding of the constitutive performance. This interdependence between State, military and religious institutions should not be understood primarily in terms of balance of power: rather, it is that acquiescence to common ideas and ideals of each of these three entities

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<sup>9</sup> Perhaps with the exception of Thant Myint-U, whose piece in the Nikkei Index was re-worked into later, obtusely critical articles published in the Voice newspaper in October 2017 (Thant Myint-U, 2017)

form the basis for a constitutive performance, and perhaps what differs are the means by which they are expressed and achieved. At the core of this are contested and confused identities, of both Myanmar as a country, and the various ways in which citizen identity is constructed by different actors. At the heart of this research lies a potentially alternative narrative of individual and collective identity construction in the face of a common experience of precarity, and a shared animating idea: *parahita*.

This chapter seeks firstly to situate the research not only in contemporary Myanmar, but more specifically within the context of rural communities in the central part of Myanmar, the home of Myanmar's Burmese, Buddhist majority; and secondly to provide an account of the contested narratives of citizenship which provide the background to discussions on the nature of the social capital found in emergent welfare movements.

### **Rice bowls and tectonic plates: geopolitics of Myanmar**

Understanding contemporary Myanmar requires an understanding of the confluence of geography and history, and the dubious nature of being blessed with natural resources (Lujala, 2010; Ross, 2003). Although the focus of studies of the political geography of Myanmar have been largely on issues of central control and peripheral autonomy (Dean, 2012; Meehan, 2015), the geographical situation of Myanmar, both in its pre-colonial and contemporary forms, between China, India, and the trade routes around the Malacca Straits, continues to influence her economic and political state. Writing of the evolution of the State of Burma post-independence, historian Robert Taylor points to the influence of this geographical situatedness:

The contemporary state in Burma cannot be understood other than through an appreciation of the nature of the early modern precolonial state. Both the colonial state and the contemporary state developed and functioned in the same geographical and

ecological conditions as the precolonial state, and there are significant cultural continuities between the periods of the state's existence (Taylor, 1987, p. 5).

Running for nearly 1,000 miles through the centre of modern Myanmar is the Sagaing Fault, a tectonic fault between the Indian and Eurasian plates (Tectonics of Asia, 2017), rendering several major cities highly earthquake-prone. Myanmar's geopolitics in some ways resemble the tectonic architecture. Located in Southeast Asia, bordering Bangladesh to the West, Thailand to the East, India to the northwest and China to the northeast, Myanmar remains in a critical position in East Asian geopolitics, buffering two of Asia's superpowers (China and India) and providing a significant proportion of key energy resources to the economies of the region (IEA, 2013).

***Figure 1: Map of Myanmar (courtesy Myanmar Information Management Unit)***



The modern borders enclose a country once dubbed the ‘rice-bowl of Asia’ (Mya Than, 1990) and which now exports natural gas, seafood and agricultural produce such as beans and pulses (Belton et al., 2015; Myat Thein, 2004). Whilst much of the fertile lowland plains was the site of empires, the flourishing of Buddhism, and the emergence of a pre-colonial state, the more remote, upland, mountainous regions to the West, North and East of the central ‘Dry Zone’ remained peripheral to central control until the latter days of colonial rule - the ‘Zomia’ of James C. Scott’s study on ‘The Art of Not Being Governed’ (Scott, 2014). Geographical proximity to India made successive migrations feasible, both in pre-colonial and colonial days, leading to the much-contested narratives of heritage and citizenship now bedevilling Rakhine State.

Prior to the colonial era, the earliest settlers (Phyu people) migrated down the Ayeyarwaddy River in the first century AD, meeting with Mon and Khmer communities in the southern areas. Successive city-states formed centres of power, with the gradual emergence of a more established kingdom in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Aung-Thwin & Aung-Thwin, 2013). At its height, the Burman empire included significant territorial areas in what were parts of the Lanna Kingdom and Ayutthaya, which are located in northern and central Thailand (Sangermano, Jardine, & Wiseman, 1893). This also resulted in considerable population movements, both voluntary and forced (Beemer, 2009), which is a significant fact when considering subsequent claims to citizenship based on genetic heritage (Walton, 2013).

A succession of three Anglo-Burmese wars in the 19<sup>th</sup> century initially annexed Arakan (now Rakhine State, in the western part of Burma) and Tenasserim (now Tanintharyi, the southernmost area of Burma, bordering with Thailand to the East) as well as territories in Assam and Manipur previously under Burmese control. This was followed by the annexation of ‘lower Burma’ in 1853, effectively partitioning the country south of Pyaw in Bago Region, bringing the

fertile southern Delta regions under colonial rule (Charney, 2009). British interest in Burma was initially centred around securing access to trade routes between India and China, either by the northern route through Manipur, or from Moulmein in the south (Hall, 1964). Despite considerable pressure from the Government of India, at the behest of merchant organizations in Britain, the king of the time (Mindon) did not comply with British wishes (Hall, 1964). The third and final Anglo-Burmese war, of relatively short duration, saw the remaining territory in Burma annexed in 1885, partly in response to the then-rule of Burma, King Thibaw, attempting to establish treaties with the French (Thant Myint U, 2006, pp. 161-162).

This ushered in the colonial era, where Burma was administered by British rule as part of British India (Aung-Thwin & Aung-Thwin, 2013), and which is frequently used, along with the military takeover of 1988, as main the cipher to interpret current Burma/Myanmar issues of statehood (Fink, 2001; Ikeya, 2011). This is however, contested by a number of scholars, including Michael Aung-Thwin and Thant Myint-U (Aung-Thwin & Aung-Thwin, 2013; Maroya, 2003; Thant Myint U, 2006), who point to the pre-colonial modes of statehood, centred around the expectations of the king as a just ruler, as more significant influences on the emergent modes of statehood and nationhood in Burma/Myanmar. It was during this period, in the 1930's, that the so-called 'Saya San rebellion' mobilized large numbers of rural 'associations' (Maung Maung, 1980) linked to millenarian Buddhist beliefs. This will be discussed in detail in the following section of this chapter.

Colonial rule continued until the Second World War when, with the help of the Burma Independence Army headed by General Aung San, the Japanese Imperial Army gained control of most of Burma. General Aung San then switched sides, leading a revolt against the occupying Japanese forces, once again enabling British occupation (Slim, 2009). The British government



under Clement Attlee signed the document giving Burma independence on 27<sup>th</sup> January 1947 (Fifield, 1952; Trager & Maung, 1956), and although General Aung San was assassinated shortly before being able to take power after elections, democratically elected governments ruled Burma until 1962, except for a brief period of military rule between 1958 and 1960 (Aung-Thwin & Aung-Thwin, 2013). However, factional splits and armed insurrection by ethnic groups led to a second military government in 1962 under General Ne Win, who ushered in the ‘Burmese Way to Socialism’ (Revolutionary Council of Burma, 1962) which nationalized businesses, schools, hospitals and land, and undertook successive policies to drive out Indian and Chinese merchants and businessmen.

Previously considered relatively prosperous, the disastrous policies of the Ne Win era led to Burma being admitted to the ‘Least Developed Nation’ status in the late 1980’s (Aung-Thwin & Thant Myint U, 1992). Widespread unrest triggered by economic stagnation and currency devaluation led to the so-called ‘8-8-88’ uprisings in 1988, which were eventually suppressed by the military, who then assumed control under the new State Law and Order Committee (SLORC) (McCarthy, 2000). Elections held in 1990 were won by the National League for Democracy, headed by the daughter of General Aung San, Daw Aung San Su Kyi, but the military did not allow transfer of power (Guyot, 1991). Instead, military rule continued until 2010, with the SLORC changing its name to the State Peace and Development Committee (SPDC) in 1997 (Callahan, 2012). The SPDC pursued the policies of the Ne Win era in staffing government ministries with military personnel, so that most senior civil service positions, as well as the offices of Minister, were held by people transferred from military posts, usually according to their military rank (Englehart, 2005; Taylor, 2012).

The post-1990 government pursued a market economy, but with considerable State involvement, both officially (for example, Union of Myanmar Economic Holdings and Myanmar Economic Corporation) (Myat Thein, 2004) and unofficially through the ‘crony’ system, whereby non-military investors established monopolies through their ties, occasionally by blood or marriage, to senior military or government personnel (Global-Witness, 2015). Controversially holding a referendum only days after the country’s most devastating natural disaster (Cyclone Nargis) in May 2008 (Seekins, 2009a), a new constitution provided the framework for elections, held in 2010 (Cheesman, Skidmore, & Wilson, 2010). Boycotted by the main opposition National League for Democracy, the elections resulted in a landslide for the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), which was formed out of the Union Solidarity and Development Association, which in turn had been established as the ‘social’ branch of the State Peace and Development Committee in 1993 (Englehart, 2012; Trans National Institute, 2010).

The new government established a bicameral parliamentary system, in which 25% of seats in both upper and lower houses are reserved for military delegates appointed by the Commander-in-Chief, and established Regional Parliaments in each of the 14 States and Regions (Marston, 2013; Turnell, 2011b). Former Prime Minister General Thein Sein became President of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar in 2011, after which visits from the US president Obama and the Chairmanship of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 2014 signalled a transition to a more open international stance (Kruaechaipinit, 2014). Economic reforms, including partial liberalization of banking and foreign currency regulations, telecommunications and import/export licensing resulted in increased foreign investment as well as rapid expansion of both traditional and social media (Foster, 2013).

Despite the pace of reform being criticized, elections held in 2015 were widely perceived to be both free and fair (Moe Thuzar, 2015), and resulted in a landslide for the National League for Democracy (NLD), whose leader, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, exercised significant power despite being constitutionally barred from being President. By 2018, at the mid-point of the first five year term in office, the NLD government could claim a number of considerable achievements, including a steady crackdown on corruption, stabilization of an overheated property market, modest reforms of several key government ministries, and the introduction of more democratic and transparent governance in regional parliaments and local elections, and more technical reforms in the banking and finance sector. However, these were overshadowed by larger economic and domestic security issues (Ei Ei Toe Lwin, 2018). The pace of reform was widely considered to have slowed or stalled, with sluggish economic growth resulting from ambiguous economic policies (Economist, 2018), a stalled peace process taking place against a backdrop of escalating conflict in border areas such as Kachin and Northern Shan States (Ei Tu Hta, 2018; Keenan, 2015), and an increased crackdown on media freedom, including arrest and detainment of journalists, and extensive use of the existing laws to restrict the use of social media (MacLeod, 2018).

Most prominent has been the lack of progress towards national reconciliation and more inclusive citizenship (South & Lall, 2017). Despite attempts to foster a more inclusive character of government through appointing representatives from ethnic minority groups to senior positions, including Vice-President, issues of national reconciliation, both in terms of ethnic and inter-religious conflict, remained a major political challenge (Min Zaw OO, 2014; Pollard, 2015). This is evidenced by the complex and disturbing nature of both government and public responses to

the ongoing conflicts between Buddhists and Muslims in both Rakhine State, and in several major cities in Myanmar (McCarthy & Menager, 2017).

The blame for slow or stalled reforms has been laid at several doors. Firstly, the continued dominance of both the military as an institution, where it directly controls three key government ministries largely responsible for domestic security (Defence, Home Affairs and Border Affairs) and by retaining 25% of parliamentary seats, retains an effective veto on constitutional reform (Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2008; Banyan, 2014). The military is the de facto government in contested border areas, and retains the control of much of Myanmar's economy through close ties between current and former military officials and much of Myanmar's private sector business (Barany, 2018). A second reason cited for lack of progress was the perceived lack of experience and competence of the NLD's senior officials, considered a consequence of long periods of exclusion from active involvement in politics (Ei Ei Toe Lwin, 2018). Finally, perhaps the most complex issue of all is the pervasive influence of contested nature of citizenship and belonging, the consequence of decades, if not centuries, of an implicit policy of homogenization. To this I will now turn, to a complex web of politics, nationalism and religion.

### **Heads that count: religion, nationalism and contested identities**

Warfare has been a feature of the State's activities from Pagan<sup>10</sup> times and so have been the state's efforts-through the Buddhist religion, and later, education and ideology-to create a homogeneous population from ecologically and culturally variable human

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<sup>10</sup> Pagan times refers to the Pagan (sometimes spelled 'Bagan') era or dynasty, which is thought to have emerged as a significant political entity in the 9<sup>th</sup> century AD, and endured for four and a half centuries (Aung-Thwin & Aung-Thwin, 2013, p. 77). Today, a vast expanse of stupas and temples remain in the town of Bagan, remnants of what is often referred to as the 'Golden Age' in Burma/Myanmar's history.

settlements. From the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, homogenization of the population was a key feature of Burmese history (Taylor, 1987, p. 7).

The most recent national census, conducted in 2014, estimated the population of Myanmar at 51.4 million (Myanmar Population & Housing Census, 2015), with growth rates lower than average for the region (0.89% per annum). However, the final population estimates were lower than expected (Banyan, 2014), possibly due to high levels of out-migration (LIFT/QSEM, 2016) and the non-inclusion of hundreds of thousands of residents in Northern Rakhine State self-identifying as Rohingya, an identity category not accepted by the Myanmar government (Ferguson, J.M., 2015). Myanmar lays claim to extraordinary ethnic diversity: over 130 ethnic groups classified into eight ‘national races’ (Cheesman, 2017), with the Bamar (or Burman/Burmese) being the largest, followed by Shan, Karen and Rakhine. However, the sensitivity of ethnic designations is reflected in the fact that, even by 2018, despite numerous promises, data on ethnicity from the 2014 census had not been released (Myanmar News Agency, 2018a; San Yamin Aung, 2018). Data on religious affiliation has been released, confirming that the majority of the population (87.9%) adhere to Buddhism, with Christianity (6.2%) and Islam (4.3%) being the largest minority religions (Department of Population, 2016). Controversies surrounding the census, particularly in relation to enumeration of both ethnic identity and religion, illustrate the extent to which identity remains a deeply complex and contentious issue in Myanmar, where older identities have become more ‘plastic’ and ‘fluid’, as the eminent historian Robert Taylor points out:

Indeed, can one consider the proposition that Myanmar’s more than 50 years of independence and largely self-imposed – or most recently, externally mandated – isolation has created new identities that owe less to the past and more to the willing or

unwilling generation of a new focus for primary political identity for many (Taylor, 2005, p. 261).

The conspicuous ordering of Myanmar's population into constituent ethnic groups may seem at odds with Robert Taylor's assertions on 'homogenization': and yet Burmese-ness, as the culture of the majority Burman people, and Buddhism, as the religion of the majority of Burman, Shan, Mon and Rakhine, continue to be the major shaping force of both State and national identity in Myanmar (Walton, 2013). The lack of distinction between Buddhism as a category of religion and as a more encompassing way of life is acknowledged by King (1965) and Walton (2012) as a result of the different 'trajectories of development' (Walton, 2012, p. 11) and the 'flexible framework [of *Theravāda* Buddhism<sup>11</sup>] that has incorporated a number of traditional and animistic practices, including the worship of ancestors, natural spirits, and an officially recognized pantheon of thirty seven *nat* spirits' (Walton, 2012, p. 12). Thus, whilst retaining core *Theravada* Buddhist beliefs (the Four Noble Truths) concerning the nature of life as suffering, the doctrines of impermanence, attachment and non-self, and the essential value of moral and ethical discipline and practice (the Eightfold path) to progressively nullifying desire and realizing detachment as the pathway, through multiple rebirths, to the final state of Enlightenment (*nibbana*), Burmese Buddhism as practiced is best understood is an 'integrated religious system peculiarly Burmese and not readily identified by references to scripture' (Brohm, 1963, p. 156). Winston King, writing in the post-independence period, acknowledged that the popular practice of Buddhism in Burma (Myanmar) represents a contextually specific expression of Buddhism related to, but not bounded by textual traditions:

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<sup>11</sup> Buddhism is generally classified into several main types or 'vehicles', of which Mahayana (the great vehicle) and Theravada (the small vehicle) are the two main forms of Buddhism. Mahayana is the more commonly practiced form of Buddhism in China, Japan, Tibet and Mongolia, whilst Theravada is the predominant form of Buddhism in Myanmar, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Cambodia and Laos (Rāhula, 1974).

Is Burmese “Buddhism” a covering name for, or a thin veneer over, popular folk religion of pre-Buddhistic origin? Or is genuine Buddhism the essence, and *nat* worship only incidental to it? (King, 1965, p. 52).

Despite this, most Burmese would not only identify as Buddhist, but would place high emphasis on doctrinal purity and orthodox *Theravada* Buddhist tradition. This is evident in the popularity of books on Buddhist teaching, regular participation in meditation, attendance at Buddhist preaching events and regular columns on Buddhist teachings in most national newspapers. The everyday practice remains a highly contextual expression of Buddhism best expressed as ‘Burmese religion’:

There is only one religion practiced by the Burmese people about which we can legitimately speak. For want of an established term, we can only call it Burmese religion. The scriptural referents of Burmese religion are *Theravada* Buddhist, and Buddhism is unquestionably an important element in the larger system; but the characteristics of Burmese religious behaviour tend to be traditional and not necessarily scripturally derived. The symbols which Burmese associate with the supernatural may vary over time, but the patterns of behaviour and attitudes adopted toward those symbols will tend to remain the same (Brohm, 1963, p. 167).

None of this is to detract from the profound devotion to Buddhism observed across the heartlands of Myanmar: rather it is to avoid what scholars such as Brohm (1963) and Walton (2014b) warn of, in applying generalist categories of religious framing to a specific, contextually situated practice. Acknowledging local expressions better enables us to understand the ‘logical framework within which Burmese Buddhists reason about the world’ (Walton, 2012, p. 11). This ‘flexible framework’ and integration with Burmese identity is important in understanding

localized expressions of Buddhism in the political and social world: nationalism, and the subject of this research, welfare arrangements. The themes of nationalism, identity and Buddhism are explored in more detail in chapters 8 and 9, and so only briefly introduced here.

Forms of statehood in pre-colonial Burma were shaped largely by conceptions of a ruler in the Indic tradition, as both a patron of Buddhism and an embodiment of Buddhist practice (Sarkisyanz, 1965). Conquests by Burmese kings frequently involved the capture of Buddhist relics and clerics (Aung-Thwin & Aung-Thwin, 2013), and the centrality of Buddhism to the State, and the importance of patronizing, promoting and protecting Buddhism as the core duty of the ruler, was well established prior the *Konbaung*<sup>12</sup> dynasty, which lasted from 1752 until 1885 (Hall, 1964; Houtman, 1999, p. 7). This has shaped, and continues to shape, what Gustaaf Houtman calls the ‘mental culture’ (1999), and what Matthew Walton refers to as the ‘moral universe’ (2012) of Myanmar political thought. This roots both pre-independence nationalist movements (including the Saya San rebellion and various urban expressions of pre-independence nationalist movements) and subsequent iterations of the emergent State in a particular framework where Buddhist concepts elide with national identity as part of a homogenization project, under the guise of ‘independence’ or ‘national unity’ (Walton & Hayward, 2014).

Both Manuel Sarkisyanz, in ‘Buddhist backgrounds of the Burmese revolution’ (1965), and more recently Alicia Turner in ‘Saving Buddhism’ (2014), explore the religious ideas prevalent in pre-independence movements, and their role in shaping the identities of lay associations. These associations were animated by the threat of colonialism to not only the Buddhist way of life, or even the Buddhist religion, but to the very order of the cosmos:

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<sup>12</sup> The Konbaung dynasty was the last Myanmar dynasty, and the notion of kingship integrated two key elements of Burmese kingship: ‘the future *bodhisattva* who will save all humans’ and a current ‘*dhammaraja* (lord of morality) who will rule righteously’ (Aung-Thwin & Aung-Thwin, 2013, p. 156).



against the background of Buddhists concepts of history, the crisis of the traditional outlook and political order continued to mean a phenomenon of the inevitable decline of all things (Sarkisyanz, 1965, p. 9).

Under colonial rule, then, in the absence of a king to act as patron and protector, lay movements emerged to protect the *sasana*<sup>13</sup>. These were largely self-organized and local, rather than relying on any unified form of patronage, and as such gave rise to multiple expressions of what it meant to be a Burmese Buddhist:

locally organized and locally orientated Buddhist associations became the dominant and motivating force in Burmese society at the turn of the twentieth century. Buddhist associations became not just wildly popular [...] but offered mechanisms for innovation and intervention in Burmese society (Turner, 2014, pp. 18-19).

These took numerous forms based around different aspects of *sasana* propagation: education, and a growth in monastic schools; protest against colonial policies on adhering to religious customs<sup>14</sup> or organizations such as the *wunthanu athin*, rural village organizations devoted to preserving race and religion ‘out of a popular desire to see Burmese life purged of the corruption, drunkenness and crime into which it had fallen [...] and restored to good order, with a reformed Sangha able to take the lead in promoting moral and social welfare’ (Sarkisyanz, 1965, p. 84).

The term *wunthanu* is loosely translated as ‘loving one’s race’ (Tharaphi Than, 2015), and by 1924, organizations were to be found ‘in almost every village in Burma’ (Sarkisyanz, 1965, p.

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<sup>13</sup> Translated as ‘the life of the Buddhas teachings after he is gone’ (Turner, 2014, p. 1) but more broadly understood as the overall state of the propagation, promotion and practical expression of Buddhist teachings.

<sup>14</sup> Here the most famous example is the so-called ‘Shoe incident’ where colonial policy dictated that the required conduct of upon entering a religious site was determined by the ascribed religion of the individual, not the accepted customs of the religious site. Thus, Westerners were permitted to wear shoes when entering Buddhist religious sites, including the revered Shwe Dagon temple, a practice considered abhorrent by Burmese Buddhists. In colonial thought, ‘requiring a special mode of respect from all towards Buddhist monuments was [...] ‘an unfriendly act’. [...] The Burmese argued instead that Buddhist objects require specific rituals of respect regardless of the identity of the person demonstrating respect’ (Turner, 2014, p. 131).

84). These organizations were soon mobilized into nationalist movements resisting British rule, both before and after World War II, and mobilized rural women in great numbers (Carlson, 1991). By equating notions of being a true Buddhist woman with support for maintaining ethnic purity through supporting customary marriage laws, and prohibiting inter-marriage with non-Buddhists, leaders of *wunthanu* were able to mobilize significant support amongst rural women. Buddhist clergy took on the role of instructing women on how to behave in order to

protect the Burman race, and uphold their Buddhist identity[...] asking women to behave as true Buddhist women - that is, not to allow themselves to become ‘mistresses of a wicked race’ (Tharaphi Than, 2015, p. 18).

These narratives also highlight the expectation of women to be ‘protectors of culture’, described by Daw Pansy Tun Thein as part of a

resistance to cultural globalization and the reactivation of a cultural protectionist stance in which women are cast as the protectors of culture [...] a development [which] is further testament to the strength of patriarchal culture that claims its mission is women’s protection, but leaves women with fewer opportunities to participate in shaping the society they would like to see (Pansy Tun Thein, 2015, p. 14).

It was these movements, ‘especially those of peasants and others deprived of influence during the colonial state, which overwhelmed the state and severely limited its autonomy’ (Taylor, 1987, p. 11).

New forms of nationalism, resurgent since the 1990’s, have all drawn on Buddhism as a key mobilizer. Whilst in opposition, and after 2016, as the ruling party, the National League for Democracy has drawn on Buddhist principles to appeal to a better national ethic, defining citizenship values in ways framed around Buddhist ethics. However, radical nationalist groups,

such as the ‘969’<sup>15</sup> or *Ma Ba Tha*<sup>16</sup> movements, have utilized Buddhism as focal point for national identity, often with violent results (Gravers, 1999; Maung Zarni, 2013). These nationalist movements have significant parallels with early nationalist movements which began in the 1920’s, mobilizing rural communities through village associations (Tharaphi Than, 2015), and building huge support amongst rural women (Carlson, 1991; Maung Maung, 1980).

The *Ma Ba Tha* movement has, in a manner similar to the *wunthanu* movements, mobilized Burmese Buddhist women, mainly from rural areas, in huge numbers:

in the recent religious and sectarian violence, monks enjoyed immense support from their female following, particularly from the nationalist Arakanese (Rakhine) women. When *Ma Ba Tha* monks gathered signatures to support the four bills, Arakanese (Rakhine) women became a major force in this campaign. *Ma Ba Tha* was one of the leading organizations collecting signatures nationwide to support the ‘Race Protection’ bills, and their campaign ended with 1.3 million signatures (Tharaphi Than, 2015, p. 20).

In a manner similar to *wunthanu* movements, the framing of support for customary marriage laws and the protection of Buddhist women against corruption from marriage to non-Buddhist as symbolic of Buddhist piety and virtue were key factors in mobilizing women in support of these

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<sup>15</sup> 969 is a numerical symbol used to signify the ‘three gems’ of Buddhism (the Buddha, the Dhamma (teaching) and Sangha (Buddhist community)), it has been used more recently by some Buddhist groups as a signifier of Buddhist identity, placed on shops, stalls and doors to indicate that the shop owner or house owner is Buddhist, and hence it is ‘safe’ for Buddhists to buy, or enter. This was ostensibly in response to similar actions by Muslim shop owners to indicate that their shops were Muslim, or halal, and hence were ‘safe’ for Muslims to buy from, which also served to promote a segregation of commerce, such that Muslims would only buy from Muslims, Buddhists from Buddhists, as a way of expression religious solidarity. At the peak of the movement in 2013, 969 stickers were used as a protective symbol to prevent extremists from targeting shops, houses or cars which were not demonstrably Buddhist (Gravers, 2015).

<sup>16</sup> Ma Ba Tha is the shorthand for the now-renamed amytha-ba-tha-sasana saung shauk ye , translated as the Association for the Protection of Race and Religion, Organization for the Protection of Race and Religion. Although formally disbanded in 2017 and relaunched as the Buddha Dhamma Philanthropy Foundation, the movement and its politics continue to be referred to as *Ma Ba Tha* (Mizzima, 2017).

laws (McKay & Khin Chit Win, 2018; Tharaphi Than, 2015; Walton, McKay, & Mar Mar Kyi, 2015).

In both eras, the common enemy was framed as outsiders: in the movements of the 1920's, the British colonial masters and the Indian merchants who followed (Singh, 1980); in the 1990's onwards, resident non-Buddhist communities, particularly Muslim communities, and lately, political movements which were perceived to be beholden to foreign powers or modernity, and not sufficiently committed to maintaining traditional Buddhist values (Maung Zarni, 2013; Moscotti, 1974). In both cases, a key element of mobilizing support for nationalist movements has been the mobilization of rural community organizations, many of which were primarily social organizations, around issues of 'protection' and 'welfare'.

Huge gaps in welfare provision in rural areas, engendered by the absence of State welfare, and exacerbated by increasing precarity of rural livelihoods, provided fertile soil for emergent movements, both pre and post-war, and in the present day (Scott, 1976; Taylor, 1987). The following sections provide firstly a brief background of the rural context of Myanmar, followed by a brief account of social protection and social welfare arrangements in contemporary Myanmar.

### **Tightropes without safety nets: the life of the rural majority**

A more in-depth discussion of rural life and livelihoods is presented at the beginning of chapter 5; this section seeks to present a broad overview of the rural context in terms of population, economy, and the current challenges to rural development. Myanmar's administrative structure divides the country into States and Regions<sup>17</sup>, with States being named after the ethnic minority

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<sup>17</sup> Previously known as 'States and Divisions' and renamed under the constitution of 2008 (Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2008).

group presumed to be the majority population<sup>18</sup> (hence, Chin State, Kayah State, Kayin (Karen) State, Kachin State, Mon State, Rakhine State). Regions are presumed to have a majority Burman population (Yangon, Sagaing, Mandalay, Magwe, Bago, Tanintharyi, Ayeyarwaddy) (Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2008). The reality tends to be far more complex, with many States and Regions having a high degree of ethnic diversity. In addition, several Special Administered Zones (SAZs) are designated by the constitution, mostly located in Shan State, where a degree of administrative authority is granted to non-State organizations usually linked to ethnic militias. Nay Pyi Taw, the site of the capital since 2005, is also designated as a special zone (Nay Pyi Taw Council). States and Regions are further divided into districts, townships, and either village tracts/villages in rural areas, or wards in urban areas. Townships largely form the basis for election of representatives to the Lower House of Parliament; Districts for representation to the Upper House (Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2008).

Classified as a lower-middle income country, per-capita GDP was estimated at \$1,438 in 2017 (International Monetary Fund, 2017). Although unemployment levels are officially low at 4.04% (Ieconomics, 2015), underemployment and relatively low returns on employment, coupled with high levels of indebtedness and lack of access to technology contribute to higher levels of poverty in rural households, estimated to be 31.2% (UNDP, 2014; Asia Development Bank, 2018). Myanmar's GDP is derived primarily from agriculture, fisheries and natural gas, with industrial output a relatively small part of the economy (World Bank, 2013). The majority (70%) live in areas classified as rural, although the classification system is largely an administrative

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<sup>18</sup> As previously noted, the non-release of ethnicity data from the 2014 census relates in part to complex issues of federalism, representative arrangements in States and Regions where non-dominant ethnic minority populations may be granted special voting privileges to vote for ethnic parties, and to be represented by 'Ethnic affairs ministers' (South & Lall, 2017, pp. 113-139).

process, not necessarily representative of economic activity or population density. Rural includes both lowland central areas, such as the central Dry Zone comprised of Magwe, Mandalay, Bago and the Southern and Eastern parts of Sagaing Region; rice-fertile Delta areas (Ayeyarwaddy and parts of Yangon Region); more remote, hilly areas such as Chin, Kayah, Shan and Kayin States, and coastal areas such as Tanintharyi and Rakhine. Thus, the term rural also incorporates a huge diversity of livelihoods: various forms of rice-paddy growing in the Delta and hilly areas; beans, pulses and sesame in the Dry Zone; corn in the hills of Shan and Chin States; river fishing along the banks of the Ayeyarwaddy, Thanlwin and numerous tributary rivers; crab and prawn fishing in the fragile coastal ecosystems of Rakhine and Tanintharyi.

The UNDP's Integrated Household Living Conditions Analysis used a set of indicators to measure poverty in 2003-5 (UNDP, 2007), and again in 2009-10 (UNDP, 2011). These used a poverty metric based on required expenditure to meet calorific needs. In the 2007 report, the overall poverty headcount index was estimated at 32%, and poverty rates were estimated at 25.6% in the 2011 report. However, rural poverty rates were considerably higher: 36% in the 2007 survey, and 29% in the 2011 report (UNDP, 2007, 2011). Despite partial reforms under the current government, agricultural output has remained sluggish, with modest increases noted in 2015 (World Bank, 2015). The majority of poverty in Myanmar (85%) remains concentrated in rural areas (UNDP, 2011). Agricultural policies have been slow to recover from the exploitation of the Socialist era, where land reforms, ostensibly implemented to return land to peasants, placed all agricultural land into government ownership, and control of agricultural production in government hands (Taylor, 1987). Even after the repudiation of the 'Burmese way of Socialism' and incremental adoption of market economy principles, agriculture remained part of a command economy:

Even after 1988 farmers in Myanmar continued to be controlled by the ‘three internal major agricultural systems’ inherited from the socialist period, namely the procurement system, the planned cropping system and the state ownership of farmland (Fujita & Okamoto, 2006, p. 4).

Ironically, given the purpose of the reforms, landlessness remains a key challenge both for rural households, and for the wider rural economy as a whole, with landless rates as high as 90% in some areas (Haggblade et al., 2014). More recent surveys describe high rates of unsustainable debt, lack of livelihood opportunities for youth and unstable markets as key drivers for poverty in rural communities (Griffiths, 2015), with demand for low or no-interest loans, livelihood opportunities for youth and micro-enterprise as key priority demands for poverty reduction by rural communities (Griffiths, 2016c). Following the launch of the National Poverty Alleviation programme in 2011 (Kim, 2013; Myint, 2011b), increased focus was given to systematic and coordinated efforts towards rural development; however, rural poverty surveys demonstrate ‘a complex pattern of vulnerability in Myanmar’ (Nishino & Koehler, 2011, p. 9). Female headed households, households with persons with disabilities, households which are dependent on casual labour as their primary income source, landless households, and households in fishing communities all were found to have higher levels of vulnerability (Griffiths, 2016c; Kyaw & Routray, 2006; UNDP, 2013).

Later chapters will describe the rural condition in Myanmar as precarious, with coping strategies severely constrained by inequitable market chain arrangements, limited access to affordable finance, and a lack of insurance systems or social protection mechanisms. Despite high levels of need, less than 25% of rural households reported ever having received social assistance from a government or ‘formal’ source such as social insurance (Griffiths, 2016c), with informal

mechanisms, including social organizations, providing the majority of social assistance (Ei Ei Thu, 2013; Griffiths, 2016c). For many households, out-migration represents the only course of action either to ensure ongoing economic survival, or to provide a mechanism to finance education, livelihood investment, or develop future prospects of a younger generation (LIFT/QSEM, 2016). Although many rural communities experience in-migration, particularly for seasonal agricultural activities, out-migration, both internal and cross-border, is a growing phenomenon (Ito & Griffiths, 2016), with the majority of an estimated 2.5 million migrants working in neighbouring Thailand (UNICEF, 2015). Overall, one in five rural households have migrants (UNDP 2013), and for 2% of all rural households, remittances represent the main income source (Griffiths, 2016c). The social impacts of migration on receiving communities have been documented (Provencal, 2009), but less is known of the impact of out-migration on sending communities.

### **Contested narratives of protection: what do we mean by welfare?**

The lack of adequate safety nets for rural households in Myanmar is undoubtedly a key contributor to both poverty and precarity (Nishino & Koehler, 2011). Social protection is defined by Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler as follows:

All public and private initiatives that provide income or consumption transfers to the poor, protect the vulnerable against livelihood risks, and enhance the social status and rights of the marginalized; with the overall objective of reducing the economic and social vulnerability of poor, vulnerable and marginalized groups (Devereux & Sabates-Wheeler, 2004, p. iii).

Understood in these terms, social protection encompasses a broad range of initiatives, including health, education, livelihoods, social security, human rights and nutrition (Devereux et al., 2015).



Within this framework, social protection activities include everything from school feeding programmes to gender equality initiatives; from campaigns for minimum wages and workers' rights to social insurance (Conway & Norton, 2002).

However, narratives of social protection in Myanmar are complex and contested: linguistically, activities described as 'protection' are either derived from an etymology of defence, or of nursing care for invalids<sup>19</sup>. This linguistic provenance proved problematic in initial dialogues between international agencies and the military government of Myanmar in the aftermath of the devastating Cyclone Nargis (McLachlan-Bent & Langmore, 2011), where the military government assumed that issues of 'protection' of citizens were the responsibility of the military, not of external humanitarian organizations. Thus, the proposal by some Western governments to invoke the R2P or 'Responsibility to Protect' principle to force Myanmar to accept humanitarian aid was perceived as a threat (Barber, 2009; Özerdem, 2010).

Welfare itself, and the notion of welfare as part of the duties of the ruler, and the idea of some form of 'welfare state' is not a new concept in Myanmar. As well as copying the democratic forms of the Buddhist monastic order (*sangha*) from the Indian model, the influence of the emperor Ashoka's Buddhist welfare-state models appears evident in the social practices of pre-colonial Myanmar: 'the social ideal of lay Buddhism in the political Ashokan tradition was action to create the means for pursuit of *Nirvana*<sup>20</sup>' (Sarkisyanz, 1965, p. 37). Underscoring the religious element of social welfare activities, the *Jatakas* (accounts of the life of Buddha and his disciples) describe the story of 'a young man named Maga and his 32 comrades' who

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<sup>19</sup> လူမှုကာကွယ်စောင့်ရှောက်ရေး was eventually constructed as a new term to denote what Western experts termed social protection, by combining three Myanmar words: *luh hmu* (social, or literally 'pertaining to human'); *ka kwe* (defined, and a term usually used to denote military protection, as in the Ministry of Defence) and *saung-shauk* (a word used to describe caring for children or sick people).

<sup>20</sup> The Buddhist final state of 'non-being' achieved after multiple re-births.

‘voluntarily built rest-houses for weary travellers, dug wells, put up water-pots shelters for the thirsty, made and repaired roads’ (Hla Maung, 1962, p. 7). Thus, from an early stage there is evidence of close interplay between religion, social welfare and community life in rural Myanmar, built around ideals of welfare as a meritorious, moral action embedded in notions of patron-client relationships (McCarthy, 2017).

Colonial and post-war independence governments took initial steps to develop the welfare state (Trager, 1958), with the introduction of a social security law in 1954 and laws protecting persons with disabilities passed in 1958 (World Bank, 2002). Welfare was one of the ten sections of the *Pyidawtha* economic plan introduced by the government of U Nu in 1952; in fact ‘*Pyidawtha*’ is often translated as ‘welfare’ and the *Pyidawtha* Plan as the ‘Welfare Plan’ (Tharapi Than, 2013, p. 647). However, welfare took a different turn after the 1962 coup, after which narratives of socialism overlaid economic stagnation and an erosion of effective State policies of welfare and human development (Aung-Thwin & Thant Myint U, 1992). Social welfare policy under the military government post 1988 included the continuation of various social security and pension provisions for State employees, despite currency devaluations rendering them almost valueless, localized welfare projects by military commanders, often in the guise of religious motivations, and the emergence of government sponsored organizations such as the Maternal and Child Welfare Association, whose contribution to actual welfare is at best disputed (Kyaw Yin Hlaing, 2007).

Thus, despite the well documented link between social protection and poverty reduction (DfID, 2011), and a wealth of evidence demonstrating the consequences of a lack of social protection, social protection has not until recently, been part of ‘an explicit government strategy to address poverty, vulnerabilities and disparities’ (Nishino & Koehler, 2011, p. 10). Current research in

Myanmar confirms the lack of adequate social protection for vulnerable groups such as older persons, persons with disabilities, women (especially female headed households), migrants and other socially excluded groups (Griffiths, 2016c). Following the gradual opening of humanitarian space in the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis, and in the wake of the reforms of the 2012 government of President U Thein Sein, social protection and welfare reform has gradually gained acceptance and prominence, resulting in a National Level Social Protection Working Group, chaired by the Department of Social Welfare and UNICEF, drafting a National Social Protection Policy (DSW, 2015). The Plan is based around a cluster of ‘Flagship’ programmes to deliver cash grants to different categories of beneficiaries, such as pregnant women, older persons and persons with disabilities. However, despite the encouraging rhetoric, little if any meaningful action has been taken to develop more comprehensive social protection systems, and existing central government social protection policies are characterized as fragmented, underfunded and largely ineffectual (Nishino & Koehler, 2011; Koehler 2017).

Despite the emphasis in international discourses on social protection on national, universal mechanisms for social protection, evidence exists which validates the efficacy and efficiency of community based, community led social protection mechanisms (De Coninck & Drani, 2009; Habtom & Ruys, 2007). Such mechanisms reside in a contextual framework, rely on local resources, and are shaped to deliver locally appropriate solutions in the community setting. Potentially positive elements of working with these groups include lower cost, better screening and therefore more accurate need identification; increased accountability, empowerment of the disadvantaged, and harnessing and strengthening social capital (Cernea, 1985; Conning & Kevane, 2002). One challenging aspect of traditional social protection mechanisms, however, is that they do not easily fit with a modernization narrative, or with a universalizing agenda, and

hence their existence may be seen as an embarrassment to governments intent on modernization, and an inconvenience to international organizations keen to see adoption of instruments for social protection which have the potential for rapid upscaling (Barrientos & Hulme, 2009). The existence of these non-formal welfare organizations is far from secure: ‘many forms of informal social protection are breaking down due to forces of ‘modernization’ and globalization and are less equipped to address increasingly frequent covariant shocks’ (Devereux et al., 2015b, p. 17). Frequently cited concerns and criticisms of localized welfare arrangements include the potential increase in social divisions and exclusion of already under-represented groups; an inaccurate setting of community targets without the knowledge of donors/development actors (limited information flow) (Conning & Kevane, 2002), and the problem of ‘elite capture’ of benefits (Dasgupta & Beard, 2007). Some literature also points to the fact that community-based groups may vary in their interest to increase inclusion of the poor (Conning & Kevane, 2002; Gugerty & Kremer, 1999; Mohanty, 2011; Shigetomi, 2011). However, much of the research on community organizations focusses on the use of community based participatory processes which involve the organization of new community groups which are suggested or facilitated by NGOs and/or donors, rather than self-organized welfare practices.

Recent research in areas in Myanmar affected by Cyclone Nargis demonstrates that a multiplicity of groups has rapidly evolved, covering health, education, Disaster Risk Reduction, religious activities, village development, maternal and child welfare, environmental protection and poverty reduction (Griffiths, 2014). Community organizations providing some form of self-financed welfare to community members are estimated to exist in at least half of all rural villages in Myanmar (Griffiths, 2017b). Their presence provides the possibility of an alternative narrative of welfare and protection; one which is derived from more contextual conceptualizations and

resources (McCarthy, 2016a). However, their geographically and epistemologically remote situation maintains their obscurity. Situated as they are, deep within the language, culture and geography of rural Myanmar, these organizations are poorly understood, and frequently ignored by international actors and experts: hence this research, with its aim to analyse and present the nature of such organizations to a wider audience in translated and comprehensible terms and forms. Given the halting efforts to establish the requisite public consensus needed for nationally redistributive welfare, and the largely undocumented potential of non-State welfare arrangements to contribute to both welfare itself, and alternative narratives of citizenship and belonging, this research addresses a significant gap in the knowledge of the political economy of Myanmar.

## **Citizenship**

At the core of both recent and historic events in Rakhine State has been the issue of citizenship, and highly contested accounts of how citizenship had been defined by previous governments. There have been calls for citizenship laws, last reformed in 1982, to be reviewed or repealed both by those wishing to relax laws, and those urging for more restrictions (Aung Kyaw Min, 2017b). Much of the focus of recent debate has been on the provisions of the 1982 law which determine citizenship based on blood lineage and debates on what constitutes recognized ‘indigenous races of Myanmar’ (South & Lall, 2017, p. 14). Those of ‘native citizenship’, who are members of ethnic groups who have ‘been settled in the territory of Myanmar since 1823’ have the strongest claim to citizenship, whereas others, appealing to a second category (‘legal citizenship’) are required to demonstrate eligibility through documentation proving the citizenship status of their predecessors (South & Lall, 2017, pp. 14-15). However, the dubious foundations of claims to citizenship based on ethnicity are evident even during the reign of Alaungphaya in the 1700’s, who used a concept of

‘imagined ethnicity’ as a rallying cry for political and military purposes, as some of his most trusted followers were both Burmese and Mon speakers (Aung-Thwin & Aung-Thwin, 2013, p. 158).

Space does not permit a detailed analysis of the specifics of the current debates regarding Rohingya populations in Rakhine State. The intricacies and historical background to this debate are described in more detail by recent publications on citizenship by Ashley South and Marie Lall (2017), Matthew Walton (2013) and Nick Cheesman (2017). However, I wish to focus on a less well documented consequence of the debate, which is the obscuring of debates on the nature of citizenship in terms of active belonging. In other words, so long as the debate on citizenship focuses on *who* belongs, there is little space to debate *how* people belong, and *how* people participate and perform as citizens. When describing emergent expressions of collective welfare, as this research does in subsequent chapters, notions of citizenship as constituted ways of belonging form a significant element of the performativity of community organizations. As South and Lall point out in ‘Citizenship in Myanmar’ (2017), prior to the 2008 Constitution, there was an ‘absence of a social contract of any kind [..and a] lack of access to rights in general’ (South & Lall, 2017, p. 16), and in that context, ‘the right to live in one country [...] seems to have been a fundamental part of citizens’ identity’ (South & Lall, 2017, p. 16). Thus, beyond the politics of citizenship relating to ethnic identity, which will be described in more detail in chapter 8, are the everyday politics of being a citizen in a context. At least for the majority living in Myanmar, whilst the eligibility to be counted as a citizen may not be contested, modes of *being* a citizen may well be.

In its broadest sense, citizenship refers to ‘an individual’s membership of a political unit, often a nation-state, and the rights and duties that come with that relationship’ (Yarwood, 2014, p. 7).

However, despite citizenship typically being defined in relation to the State,

citizenship is increasingly organized and contested through a variety of non-state as well as state institutions. This extends citizenship in the cultural sphere, to describe people’s senses of belonging in relation to places and people, near and far; senses of responsibility for the ways in which these relations are shaped; and a sense of how individual and collective action helps to shape the world in which we live (Cook, 2008, p. 34).

In trying to envisage citizenship ‘beyond the state’, John Hoffman describes the importance of a ‘relational approach, which means we only identify ourselves through others, and when these others are deprived of their freedom, we have no freedom either [...] unless everyone is a citizen, no-one is a citizen’ (Hoffman, 2004, p. 9). This is a significant line of thought for considering the Myanmar context, but perhaps for different reasons than those envisaged by Hoffman.

For much of the past half-century, relations between the State and citizens have been defined by relations between the military and citizens (Ganesan & Kyaw Yin Hlaing, 2007), where the rhetoric of threats to national security and national solidarity formed the basis for the basic demands on citizens to comply with extended periods of direct military rule (Taylor, 2012).

Whilst the early post-independence government of Prime Minister U Nu appealed for active citizenry in the *Pyidawatha* (Tharapi Than, 2013), citizenship under both the Socialist era and military rule was reduced to models of submissive compliance to the State. This was vividly expressed by slogans such as the infamous white on red ‘Peoples’ desire’ signboards, calling on citizens to ‘Crush all internal and external destructive elements’ (Skidmore, 2003, p. 9). State intelligence agencies recruited large numbers of informers, creating an atmosphere of fear and

anxiety (Skidmore, 2003), where only family ties were considered safe, and the dissemination of rumours became a form of resistance (Skidmore, 2003). As Ganesan observed, during that period, ‘interaction between state and society in Myanmar [...] yielded negative results for society’ (Ganesan & Kyaw Yin Hlaing, 2007, p. 26). Expectations on the State by citizens, then, were also orientated towards narratives of protection, as well as towards self-sufficient modes of coping which minimized contact with government officials. Thus, the sluggish performance of the government in response to the devastation of Cyclone Nargis in 2008 was perhaps less surprising to ordinary citizens, whose penchant for self-reliance saw the emergence of local relief and civil society networks, often working in defiance of government restrictions (Seekins, 2009b).

This was the first widespread and visible expression of a different form of citizenship, self-described as apolitical largely due to the restrictions on any form of political expression, and instead drawing on religious motivation, and notions of civic responsibility (McCarthy, 2017). Lacking any central co-ordination, relief efforts instead were led by individuals, sometimes actors or businessmen, who were able to attract both funding and volunteers to make relief trips into affected areas. Many of these initial efforts developed into more coherent organizational forms in the following years, some persisting to the present day as local non-government organizations (McCarthy, 2017).

Whilst the constitutional referendum, the culmination of over a decade-long process of drafting the constitution, offered the first opportunity for citizens to participate in a vote, the process was widely considered to be coercive (Seekins, 2009a). Subsequent elections in 2010, and again in 2015, represented incremental steps towards greater citizenship participation in political processes. However, it is the more spontaneous, civic responses which illustrate the shape of



citizenship as it emerged from military rule, with an emphasis on relational responsibility towards other citizens, as well as an ability to undertake highly political performances of citizenship whilst maintaining a spectacular piece of misrecognition, the ‘fiction that these groups [which] eschew politics’ (McCarthy, 2017, p. 167) are not ‘political’. This skilful dance, practiced through the darker years of military rule, to some extent continues. What McCarthy warns of, though, are the potential dangers of a form of citizenship derived from a relational dynamic informed by religious principles and ethnic identity, rather than a broader sense of relations defined by common statehood:

these notions, institutions and practices [constitute] forms of ‘moral citizenship’. I argue that the exercise of this spiritually imbued citizenship is helping to generate political identities and frames of reference not just about entitlement to social assistance [...] but also about the need to assert and protect Buddhism at a time of rapid social and political transition in Myanmar (McCarthy, 2017, p. 168).

The practice of welfare, then, particularly in the context of a society emerging from authoritarian rule, represents a form of citizenship practice, and is part of the wider political economy of contemporary Myanmar. The following chapter outlines some of the key concepts used to describe the context into which welfare organizations in rural Myanmar have emerged.

## **Chapter 3**

### **The State of Welfare: precarity, redistribution and performativity**

The recent resurgence of ethnic violence and nationalist movements in Myanmar has alarmed political scientists and scholars, challenging the assumption that the ascendance of democracy would transcend factional politics (Kipgen, 2018; Suzuki, Miah, & Aung, 2017). A thin veneer of reform hides growing precarity (Ito & Griffiths, 2016), considered a key factor in the emergence of populist movements in other countries (Kioupkiolis & Katsambekis, 2018). This chapter examines the links between precarity and populist movements, before looking at the different forms of responses to precarity, particularly associational responses, and the animating ideas behind the plural performativity which claims and shapes the spaces of emergent co-dependence.

### **Populism**

Whilst much of the world looked on aghast at the mass exodus of over half a million people from Rakhine State, western Myanmar in 2017, in the face of the Myanmar government's 'security operation' (Simpson, 2017), public opinion within Myanmar was largely supportive of the military action (McCarthy & Menager, 2017). Large numbers of Myanmar's Facebook users uploaded a 'We Love Suu Kyi' sticker onto their home pages in the wake of State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's speech to the United Nations in September 2017 (McPherson, 2017). The tacit support for the military clearance operations has complex roots in both historical constructions of identity based on ethnicity and religion, against a background of increasingly precarious economic circumstances (McCarthy & Menager, 2017), and these will be discussed in more detail in chapter 5 (precarity) and chapter 8 (ethnic and religious identity construction).

These events indicate the nature of contemporary populist movements in Myanmar, such as the Buddhist nationalist movement *Ma Ba Tha* (protection of race and religion), which for several years have mobilized huge levels of support, mostly from rural Buddhist communities, for a range of actions targeting Muslims in Myanmar (McCarthy and Menager, 2017). Whilst even a cursory historical study reveals that such movements have proliferated in Myanmar's recent history, the current asymmetry between political and economic reform has again raised questions of why such movements gain momentum even in times of apparent progress and development. Populism and nationalist movements shaped by precarity and identity politics are not unique to Myanmar. Recent events in both the United States and Europe are suggestive of a resurgence of various forms of populism and economic nationalism (Alogoskoufis, 2017; Geiselberger, 2017; Sides et al., 2017), attributed in part to the electoral power of those feeling displaced by neoliberal economics (Fraser, 2017). Populist and nationalist movements appear to be regaining strength in Southeast Asia (Gross, 2017; Luke, 2018; Teehankee, 2017), often built around narratives of protection of racial and religious purity (Maung Zarni, 2013; Tharaphi Than, 2015). Intriguingly, many of these movements take place against a wider backdrop of economic growth (Case, 2017), such as that evidenced in Thailand and Indonesia, which have transitioned to middle income countries and seen a growth in the middle class (Rigg, 2016). Alongside economic inequalities and marginalization are frequently found feelings of cultural marginalization in the face of changes wrought by immigration, or perceived threats to values from cultural elites (Inglehart & Norris, 2016). These can powerfully combine to focus the attention of the precariat and the otherwise marginalized onto a constructed 'Other', often embodied by a particular group of people, such as asylum seekers, Muslims or immigrants. A common element of populism is this re-categorization of 'the people' and 'the other':

[The] identification of ‘the people’ stress[es] vertical cleavages/linkages versus a variously conceived and constructed ‘other’. ‘The people’ are portrayed as having been betrayed, deceived or exploited, often by an elite or by the status quo of the social, political and economic order. The result is that populists and their supporters declare the existing order in need of change (Hewison, 2017, p. 428).

A closer look at East Asia’s economic growth reveals increasing inequalities, societal fragmentation, competition for resources and both in and out migration (Rigg, 2016), creating ample opportunity for construction of oppositional ‘others’ and discontent with an unresponsive establishment, both by those at the sharp end of economic inequalities, and by those experiencing a sense of cultural displacement, or a threat to a known social ordering. Thus, in the Philippines, the recent ascent of populist strongman Duterte is seen as

not a revolt of the poor; it is elite driven. It is the angry protest of the wealthy, newly rich, well off, and the modestly successful new middle class (including call centre workers, Uber drivers, and overseas Filipino workers abroad) [...] instead of feeling better off, despite robust economic growth during the past six years of the Aquino presidency, the middle class have suffered from a lack of public services, endured horrendous land and air traffic, feared the breakdown of peace and order, and silently witnessed their tax money being siphoned by corruption despite promises of improved governance (Teehankee, 2017, pp. 72-73).

The gap between reduced poverty and increased well-being is emerging as a critical metric to account for the perceived limits to the success of economic growth orientated development strategies in Southeast Asia. The previous decades have seen many countries in Southeast Asia shift to ‘middle income’ status; hence, the majority of the poor in Southeast Asia now live in

middle-income countries<sup>21</sup> (Rigg, 2016). The issue then is about equal, or unequal, distribution of the benefits of growth, and the processes engaged to achieve growth, such as the expansion of outsourced factory work in countries like Cambodia and Thailand, which draw in millions of rural and transnational migrants (Walmsley, Aguiar, & Ahmed, 2017). Thus, economic growth in Southeast Asia has been accompanied by an increase in the numbers of people whose lives may be described as precarious (Platt et al, 2017; Rogan et al, 2017; Sumner, 2016). Viewing populist movements through the lenses of increasing precarity begins to address this puzzle of populism: that it is in many cases driven by something other than poverty, even taking place, as described earlier, where broader economic conditions are in fact improving.

The association between precarity and populism was the subject of a 2018 conference in Cordoba, Spain (Precarity, Populism and Post-Truth Politics). The conference sought to explore a new form of populism [which] has recently emerged, albeit not unprecedented in history, as a powerful social response, tainted by xenophobia, which emphasizes the need for protection against perceived threats to national security, health and well-being, employment and living standard (South Asian Literary Association, 2018 n.p.).

Populist movements may be classified as progressive or reactionary, perhaps depending on the political perspectives and allegiances of the observer. However, the trajectory and nature of the responses to precarity may well travel on different pathways:

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<sup>21</sup> Income status for a country is based on GNI (Gross National Income) per capita thresholds. In 2018, low-income economies are defined as those with a GNI per capita of \$1,005 or less in 2016; lower middle-income economies are those with a GNI per capita between \$1,006 and \$3,955; upper middle-income economies are those with a GNI per capita between \$3,956 and \$12,235; high-income economies are those with a GNI per capita of \$12,236 or more (World Bank, 2018b).

While shared identity can revolve around experiences of injustice and progressive attention to welfare and equality, it can also result in a dangerous rightist politics of nationalism, racism and extremism (Hewison, 2017, p. 429).

A significant question in discussions on the emergence and shape of populist movements asks what kinds of responses to precarity lead to positive and inclusive solutions to inequality and exclusion, and what kinds of responses result in forms of solidarity which exclude and marginalize.

Recent events in Myanmar illustrate the urgency of this question. Despite political and economic reforms and published data on GDP growth and reductions in poverty, the incidence and severity of communal violence has continued to increase, particularly violence targeted against Muslims both in Rakhine State and other parts of Myanmar (Simpson, 2017), as have populist sentiments largely framed around a constructed ‘other’ and shifting allegiances to establishment groups (McCarthy & Menager, 2017). The political consequences of this are a narrowing of space for dialogue, the entrenchment of fixed identity positions largely around constructed ethnic identity (Cheesman, 2017), and an over-arching narrative of political performance based on vaguely defined notions of national security (Cook, 2018). One of the central themes of this thesis is an examination of the conditions associated with the emergence of certain forms of collective public action, potentially representing a localized populism. In this chapter, the concept of precarity will be explored, followed by a historical review of welfare-based self-organized responses to precarity in different contexts. In particular, this chapter looks at the nature of reciprocity and redistribution, and how the performative aspects of this are a critical element of this.

## **Precarity: vulnerable bodies**

The term precarity is derived ‘from the Latin root *prex* or *precis*, meaning ‘to pray, to plead’ (Casas-Cortés, 2014, p. 207), and is more commonly applied to imply risky or uncertain situations. Although originally used to describe ‘the social divide separating permanent workers from contingent or casual workers’ (Bourdieu, Darbel, Rivet, & Seibel, 1963, p. 6; Waite, 2009) the term has also been used more widely ‘beyond the world of work to encompass other aspects of intersubjective life, including housing, debt, and the ability to build affective social relations’ (Neilson & Rossiter, 2005, p. 1). To what degree are vulnerability and precarity overlapping concepts? It is worth quoting Louise Waite at length here:

The conditions of precarity are arguably not substantively different from the conditions of risk and vulnerability [...], but the semantic distinctiveness comes from what is omitted from the terms risk and vulnerability and included in the concept of precarity [...] the socio-political framing and conceptual depth of the term precarity encapsulates both a condition and a point of mobilisation in response to that condition, whereas risk and vulnerability generally refer to just conditions. The analytical advantage of the concept of precarity, therefore, is that it more explicitly incorporates the political and institutional context in which the production of precarity occurs rather than focusing solely on individualized experiences of precarity. The potential of the term precarity over risk and vulnerability is thus in terms of what can be gained politically by adopting the term (Waite, 2009, p. 421).

In this sense, whilst precariousness describes the condition of vulnerability, precarity refers to ‘the specific way socio-economic and political institutions create unequal life conditions’ (Johnston, 2017, p. 3). Even if precariousness is a common human condition, nonetheless some

bodies are ‘more grievable’ (Butler, 2006, p. 32), and more prone to violence, and thus in this reading precarity is a function of asymmetric interdependence. Thus, a critical element of precarity is the attention to the political dimensions of how risk is produced, and where vulnerability is experienced as a consequence of structural or relational effects (Hardy, 2015; Waite, 2009). Precarity is linked to inequalities, and unequally distributed risk, defined by Butler as a ‘politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support more than others, and become differentially exposed to injury, violence and death’ (Butler, 2010a, p. 25).

However, precarity has been applied beyond economic inequalities to the wider experience of insecurity and the erosion, collapse or non-viability of previously reliable narratives and lived norms. Precarity, defined as ‘a life lived without predictability’ (Joy, Belk, & Bhardwaj, 2015, p. 1739) describes the experience of those at both ends of the socio-economic spectrum with relation to, for example, gender-based violence. In this reading, precarity is not collapsible into poverty, job insecurity, social exclusion, or vulnerability to violence (although all are relevant in any study of precarity); rather, precarity analyses ‘that dimension of politics that addresses the organization and protection of bodily needs’ (Puar, 2012, p. 170).

This describes two scholarly streams in precarity studies: one stream, perhaps most closely associated with the work of Judith Butler, explores precarity in more relational terms, using precariousness and precarity to animate questions of ‘what counts as human and of how vulnerability could form the basis for thinking ethical relationality’ (McCormack & Salmenniemi, 2016, p. 6). The fact that we are all born into contexts of interdependency (our ‘corporeal vulnerability’) reminds us of our own precarity, and this is the basis for ‘an ethical



indebtedness to others' (ibid). In this sense, precarious life is a shared human condition, a fact of our interdependence:

We struggle for autonomy [...] yet also consider the demands that are imposed on us by living in a world of beings who are, by definition, physically dependent on one another, physically vulnerable to one another? Is this not another way of imagining community, one in which we are alike only in having a condition separately and so having in common a condition that cannot be thought without difference? (Butler, 2006, p. 27).

Approaching precariousness from the perspective of inhabited space, responding (relationally) to the 'face of the Other' is to 'be awake to what is precarious in another life' (ibid, p. 134). Here, and in later work (such as *Notes Toward a Performative theory of Assembly*, 2015), the focus is less on the wider political and institutional context, but on the extent to which being present to others represents risk to them and us:

It is about a mode of response that follows having been addressed, a comportment towards the other only after the Other has made a demand upon me, accused me of failing, or asked me to assume a responsibility [...] the structure of address is important for understanding how moral authority is introduced and sustained if we accept not just that we address others when we speak, but that in some way we come to exist, as it were, in the moment of being addressed, and something about our existence proves precarious when that address fails (Butler, 2006, pp. 129-130).

A relational conceptualization of precarity, while not ignoring political realities, grounds broader structural and institutional concerns within webs of personal interdependency. This is a crucial move to avoid the trap of assigning collective 'Other' status to structures which perpetuate inequalities. Hence, this understanding of precarity connects vulnerability to ethical relationality

and obligation (McCormack & Salmenniemi, 2016), where ‘precarious life exposes the very ways in which we rely on, need and are dependent on others in a fundamental way, which necessitates a rethinking of our very relationality with others’ (McCormack & Salmenniemi, 2016, p. 6). Precarity is defined, then, beyond the conditions arising from labour and welfare arrangements, in ways which incorporate identity and sexual politics.

It is precisely by locating precarity within the nexus of relationships and obligations to the other, rather than as an existential quandary that hopeful solutions are rendered possible. Thus, Lauren Berlant, in the ‘Precarity Roundtable, describes precarity as ‘a rallying cry for a thriving new world of interdependency’ (Puar, 2012, p. 166).

### **Precarity: the shadow of capitalism**

If Butler and others describe precarity as an inevitability of being human, Guy Standing focusses much more closely on the way in which people are ‘precaritized’ (Standing, 2011, p. 19). In their special journal issue on ‘Precarity and Performativity’ Nicholas Ridout and Rebecca Schneider describe precarity as ‘life lived in relation to a future that cannot be propped securely upon the past’ (Ridout & Schneider, 2012, p. 5). This second stream of scholarship in precarity studies focuses more on the specifics of labour and welfare, and the effects of capitalism and neoliberal economics (Casas-Cortés, 2014; Harris & Scully, 2015; Standing, 2011). Standing, and others, have used the term to describe a class of workers whose existence is defined by precariousness—the precariat (Standing, 2013). In this reading, precarity is the product of three trends: the decline in more traditional manufacturing which in turn has seen a shift towards greater job insecurity, both in terms of employment opportunities and the security of employment in contractual terms; a commensurate decline in collective bargaining power through the increased fragmentation of workplaces, increased casual employment, globalization enabling easier outsourcing of work and

the dismantling of labour unions and labour laws; and the rolling back, undermining or absence of State-led welfare programmes (Standing, 2013). At its root is insecurity, produced by both a lack of labour security and a lack of social security. This results in a description of precarity as

a condition of dependency- as a legal term, precarious describes the situation wherein your tenancy on your land is in someone else's hands. Yet capitalist activity always induces destabilizing scenes of productive destructions - of resources and of lives being made and unmade according to the dictates and whims of the market. But, as David Harvey and many others argue, neoliberal economic practices mobilize this instability in unprecedented ways (Berlant, 2011, p. 192).

In this reading, precarity is produced both by the economic practices of corporate power, abetted or constrained by government regulation (Harvey, 1990, pp. 157-158), and the withdrawal of the State from its role to 'promote social protection, to preserve entitlement, and to foster a sense of belonging among its citizens' (Rigg, 2017 n.p.). Instead, those 'for whom the condition of precarity is most pronounced [...] are left to fend for themselves, bearing all the risks of impermanent jobs while receiving limited or no social benefits and statutory entitlements (ibid). Precarity 'undoes a linear streamline of temporal progression and questions 'progress' and 'development' narratives on all levels' (Ridout & Schneider, 2012, p. 5). The 'secure past' on which we based our security 'turns out not to have been [...] more [than] a brief respite from a precarity that is basic to capitalism as such' (ibid). Perhaps precarity is the embodiment of the 'cracks in the mirror' of the post-modern, post-Fordian arrangements described by David Harvey in 'The Condition of Postmodernity' (Harvey, 1990, pp. 357-358). The failure to recognize precariousness and vulnerability in broader political terms, and in particular the political nature of precarity, may well shed light on the problem of persistent poverty and economic inequalities

not only in the presence of economic growth, but of seemingly expanded welfare (Brady & Bostic, 2015; Korpi, 2000).

As with measures of growth, the key issue appears to be not so much the presence or absence of welfare, but the wider trajectory and nature of attempts to address inequalities and precarious life through economic growth and welfare: not welfare per se, but what kind of welfare. Not just social protection, but transformative social protection (Devereux et al., 2015b; Devereux & Sabates-Wheeler, 2004). Although the majority of scholarship on precarity is derived from European, and predominantly urban contexts, the concept has been usefully applied to non-European contexts (Platt et al., 2017; Rigg, 2016), and the lived experience of those engaged in the rural economy (Berckmoes & White, 2014; Horgan & Liinamaa, 2012). In such contexts, precarity has emerged as combination of ‘Insecure and uncertain waged work [...] the decline or elimination of social safety nets and entitlements [...] rising consumer prices because of inflation, and the gradual elimination of subsistence agriculture (Arnold, 2013, p. 468).

The notion of precarity as both a recent phenomenon, and one necessarily occurring in a post-industrial context, has been challenged, not least from a gender perspective (Betti, 2016), with studies illustrating the differential precarity of women both inside and outside the labour force. If precarity is defined as unpredictability and an absence of security, then precarity aptly describes the experiences of women for centuries (Neilson & Rossiter, 2005), with much of female labour arrangements being characterized by informality, flexibility, unpredictability and, critically, invisibility (Finetti, 2007). Part of precarity, of the process of precarization, linking back to Butler and a more relational reading of precarity, is a structural asymmetry of interdependence where the face of the ‘Other’ is simply not acknowledged, not counted (Neilson & Rossiter, 2008). Studies by Finetti (2007) and others of self-organized welfare organizations in post-war

Northern Italy illustrate the point of precarity as a condition of dependency which may be destructive or creative, exploitative or enabling, depending on how dependency, and interdependency, are performed (Hagemann, 2007).

These two streams of precarity scholarship are not mutually exclusive: if precarity is, by and large, a ‘produced’ vulnerability (Rigg, 2017), then of what is it the product? In this analysis, it is a failure to address, to acknowledge the ‘Other’ in both the private and public policy arena, as evidenced by the precarization of labour through the removal (or failure to provide in the first place) of social welfare, worker’s rights and meaningful, secure contracts, and through continued violence experienced by those whose claims to being are less likely to be validated: women and migrants, amongst others. Underlying this are the mechanisms through which the demands of the Other are potentially addressed: various expressions of politics. For Butler, this then links to the way in which performativity and public assembly intersect with the politics of presence: not simply public demonstrations, but the way in which the physical locating of bodies in a locality articulates the precariousness of life in ways which potentially address an ‘Other’ who is not merely local. Precarity ‘exposes our sociality, the fragile and necessary dimensions of our interdependency’ (Butler, 2015, p. 119). As Butler explains, that interdependency is not necessarily ‘a promising notion’ but entails risk and loss (Butler, 2015, p. 130). Underlying understandings of interdependency are, then, notions of belonging, citizenship and entitlement. This is where the responses to precarity by different stakeholders and actors can be explored. In the next section, two interlinked elements of responses to precarity will be considered: collective action and redistributive practice.

## **Emergent Associations: the assemblage of precarity**

A considerable degree of agency is required to build resilience in the face of precarious conditions. Such agency involves

organizing capacities [...] agency (and power) depend crucially upon the emergence of a network of actors who become partially, though hardly ever completely, enrolled in the projects and practices of some other person or persons. Effective agency then requires the strategic generation/manipulation of a network of social relations. (Long and Long 1992, 23).

This points to emergence, to self-organization, and to new forms of inter-dependent belonging. One of the paradoxes of precarity is migration: a greater precarization of life in rural settings, or urban settings of one place, frequently act as strong ‘push factors’ for out-migration (De Haas, 2010), both at times exacerbating the precarity in the community of origin, and by exposing the migrant to a different, but still precarious life as a stranger (Anderson, 2010). In the fragmentation of precarious life, where the old norms, ties and bonds are either absent, insufficient or irrelevant, new associational forms are a crucial response to precarity. Thus, whilst migrants are often considered to be a significant part of the ‘precariat’ (Standing, 2013), self-organization amongst migrants is also a common survival strategy (Neilson & Rossiter, 2008). A key focus of study at a 2017 conference at the Asia Research Institute, Singapore, entitled ‘Living in an Age of Precarity’, was the shape of new, emergent forms of belonging to replace dependence networks

which previously defined personhood and belonging [which] have collapsed and disappeared particularly in the Global South [and] have been replaced by atomized

individuals with little or no social attachments, giving rise to asocial inequalities in much of the Global South (Rigg, 2017 n.p.).

Key areas of inquiry for study included questions on space for ‘resistance/renegotiation/creativity/personal autonomy’ and ‘possibilities [...] for the return to co-dependent networks that are re-valourised and accepted as socio-economic mechanisms for staving off asocial inequalities’ (ibid). There is increasing evidence of emergent co-operative arrangements which enable surviving and thriving in the face of employment uncertainty and absent or inadequate welfare, such as the coping strategies of rural-urban migrant workers in Chongqing, described by Nick Smith:

The state-sponsored welfare offered through urban registration was perceived as a source of exploitation and precarity. In search of stability, Hailong residents developed informal welfare strategies, including mutual support networks and economic diversification (Smith, 2014, p. 369).

These adaptive responses, resulting in new forms of co-dependent networks, enable a resilience which is potentially more transformative in the face of growing precarity (Béné et al, 2014; Chandler & Reid, 2016). The existence or emergence of distinct social structures, organizations or practices based on mutuality and reciprocity may be in spite of State interference (such as the Chongqing migrants), or in response to State indifference. These are not necessarily a peculiarly modern phenomenon: Scott (1976), in his description of peasant life in Southeast Asia, described ‘an entire range of networks and institutions outside the immediate family which may, and often do, act as shock absorbers during economic crises in peasant life (Scott, 1976, p. 27). What is critical are the terms of association. What elements form, or reinforce the initial associational bonds in the face of the threat of precarity?

Studies to date, mainly amongst migrant populations, demonstrate the persistent strength of ethnic and religious affiliation (Castillo, 2016; Moya, 2005). However, work by Elaine Ho amongst Kachin refugees internally displaced to camps along the Myanmar-China border found significant amounts of assistance came from Chinese communities, who had no pre-existing natural affinity to the Kachin. The collective response to humanitarian needs of Kachin migrants by Chinese communities illustrates networks which ‘transverse essentializing categories of social difference and contribute to shared biographies that allow for cultivating emotional attachments to a place and its people’ (Ho, 2017, p. 84).

Her work underlines the importance of considering the socio-spatial context and local situatedness of both precarity, and the collective, associational responses to precarity. Thus,

within a geographical framework of precarity, experiences of precarity should be seen as intimately connected to socio-spatial contexts. [...] our understanding of the relational nature of space should be accompanied by perceiving identities as relationally constructed and spatially enacted (Waite, 2009, p. 427).

In most cases, then, associational responses to precarity take place locally, although technology has increased the ability for non-local networks. But what is the purpose of these associational responses? Associations range from those providing mutual welfare (which will be considered in the next section) to more activist models of association, to informational networks aimed at securing work and negotiating labour arrangements. Some associations focus on exposing the perpetrators of the conditions of precarity, such as protests by women in Kathikudam, Kerala Province, against the dumping of waste construction materials (Binoy, 2014). Well-known, but perhaps less well studied, are associations formed around illegal activities (Koff, 2009), which highlights the significant place of non-formal economies in both individual and collective



responses to precarity. Collective responses to precarity, in one form or another, centre on claims, claim making and distribution of information, rights, welfare, status, security or agency, in many cases to address needs unmet by State intervention:

Where the state is unresponsive, its institutions are undemocratic, or its democracy is ill designed to recognize and respond to citizen demands, the character of collective action will be decidedly different than under a strong and democratic system. Citizens will find their efforts to organize for civil ends frustrated by state policy-at sometimes actively repressed, at others simply ignored. Increasingly aggressive forms of civil association will spring up, and more and more ordinary citizens will be driven into either active militancy against the state or self-protective apathy (Foley & Edwards, 1996, p. 48).

Precarity, although frequently the consequence of the actions of non-local actors, is nonetheless experienced locally, in locally specific conditions; likewise, responses to precarity are shaped by local factors, including social, economic and political resources, culture and local institutions (De Peuter, 2014; Morris, 2013; Paret, 2016). What factors influence the shape and focus of collective responses, particularly those within the rural contexts of Myanmar? In other words, why do certain types of collective response emerge in certain conditions, and what are the conditions for their emergence? Chapter 5 will consider in detail the nature of precarity in rural Myanmar, and Chapter 6 will look at the socio-economic, cultural and institutional context from which particular collective responses to precarity have emerged, in which reciprocity and redistribution play a central role. The following section explores these two concepts in more general terms, before considering, in Chapter 7, the specific practices of reciprocity and redistribution of emergent community welfare organizations in rural Myanmar.

## **Reciprocity and Redistribution: interdependency in action**

At the core, individual and collective responses to precarity revolve around distribution, not only of material wealth, but of security, well-being and agency (Standing, 2011). This is best understood, following Butler, as the way in which interdependence, with its attendant risks, functions to enable, or to undermine the existence and well-being of others (Butler, 2006). Discussions of redistribution are thus located in the same framework as reciprocity, as underpinning every redistributive move is some form of transaction, whether voluntary or otherwise (Sugden, 1984). Reciprocal arrangements for community welfare, both in current and pre-modern eras, have been the subject of much anthropological investigation (Halstead, 1992). However, recognizing the relational and transactional nature of reciprocity and redistribution perhaps challenges the distinction articulated by Hettne, drawing on Polanyi (1957), where ‘Reciprocity refers to the typical forms of exchange in small-scale symmetric communities; while redistribution refers to the distribution in stratified societies marked by a centre-periphery structure’ (Hettne, 1990, p. 216).

In analysing the reciprocity and redistributive practices of city-States in Northern Italy in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, Bertazzo describes the activities of guilds and private welfare organizations acting on ‘the idea of reciprocity and the habit of redistribution’ to both provide for weaker, more vulnerable members and citizens as well as contributing to mutual survival (Bertazzo, 2007, p. 196). In this case, although there was no ‘straight redistribution of resources [...] the true redistribution of resources was carried out through transactions between private subjects, by means of charity, through private or religious institutions [...] and by support for indigent members of a guild’ (Bertazzo, 2007, p. 196). Examples of extensive redistribution, well beyond kinship networks, such as food redistribution amongst the Ache in Eastern Paraguay (Kaplan et

al., 1985) and the reciprocity networks of Andean civilizations (Murra, 2017) demonstrate the extent to which the modern welfare state ‘is thus but an example of a ubiquitous social form’ (Bowles & Gintis, 2000, p. 40) demonstrating continuity with widespread historical practices of redistributive welfare and reciprocity.

Comparative studies analysing differences in levels of volunteerism and charitable donation use these trends as markers of altruism in different countries (Future World Giving, 2016). However, many of these actions are focused locally, and within particular ethnic or religious arrangements; in other words, on a broader level, charitable giving and altruism may not necessarily be indicative of support for redistributive practice beyond one’s own. Experimental studies demonstrate that, paradoxically, individual willingness to provide support for weaker and more vulnerable members of society is weakened by the greater social distance effected by class and ethnic differences and income disparity (Bowles & Gintis, 2000). In their study of social determinants of public support for redistributive policies, Bowles and Gintis suggest that ‘people support the welfare state because it conforms to deeply held norms of reciprocity and conditional obligations to others’ (Bowles & Gintis, 2000, p. 35). Whilst finding overall high levels of support for redistribution, both in terms of personal practice and support for policies, these support levels were influenced by a number of factors, including social distance, where support for redistribution is highest in contexts of low levels of perceived social distance:

This [...] may help explain why inequalities are so readily sustained even among apparently generous publics. Economic inequality - particularly when overlaid with racial, ethnic, language, and other differences - increases the social distance that then undermines the motivational basis for reaching out to those in need. Indeed, surveys

consistently reveal that the support for those in need is stronger in societies who's before tax and transfer incomes are more equal (ibid, p. 45).

Where the lines between reciprocity and redistribution become clearer is when we consider redistributive claims, where an allocation moves from gift to right, and where the validation of redistributive claims becomes a test of self-interest, particularly in systems where recipients are perceived as 'an ethical [rather than] social category [...] affect[ing] the very ways in which help was given [...] tied to the worthiness or unworthiness of the needy person' (Bertazzo, 2007, p. 184). This raises critical questions of redistributive approaches, and the limits of redistribution. Who is entitled to a redistributive claim? To a claim of what? And what is their obligation should they make that claim? And who determines and validates claims?

In his study of redistributive practices in Southern Africa, James Ferguson acknowledges the range of redistributive claims made by some on others. These include informal welfare, marginal or non-formal work (such as cleaning car windows, begging, and sex work) and non-legal (criminal) means to fulfil a redistributive claim (Ferguson, 2015). This includes a broad sweep of claim-making: not simply claims to assistance from the State, but from family, neighbours, bosses, from those more privileged, and from the powerful. The basis and nature of the claims may vary: claimants may well press claims at different times, to different people, for different resources, for different reasons. Once the scope of redistributive claim-making is loosened from more straightforward, State-orientated transactions, we step closer again to the interdependency inherent to precarity and where reciprocity is less a choice, and more as an everyday reality, part of a 'give-and-take' economy where forbearance is a form of currency (Ardeth Thawnghmung, 2011).

This is brilliantly illustrated by Alisha Holland's work on forbearance as redistribution.

Analysing political processes in three South American cities (Bogota in Colombia, Lima in Peru and Santiago in Chile), she explores the ways in which politicians exercise forbearance as a means to substitute for the inadequacy of welfare support (Holland, 2014). This means selective non-enforcement of policies which would constrain the living or livelihood activities of poorer citizens, such as squatting and street vending:

Legal violations pop up where there are gaps left by welfare programmes. Second, social policy changes what the poor demand from the State. When states fail to provide goods for citizens, enforcement becomes a terrain of political contestation, leading citizens to mobilize around forbearance. Welfare bureaucracies are viewed as irrelevant and distant from the poor's' lives. Third, social policy provision changes how enforcement is interpreted in the political environment. Politicians fear being viewed as insensitive to local conditions if they enforce without alternative ways to meet the poor's' demands' (Holland, 2014, p. 23).

Holland argues that this kind of selective enforcement, adjusted to the perceived inadequacy of welfare and tied to the voting power of poorer constituencies, does contribute a significant redistributive effect: 'the resources at stake are publicly owned streets and land, and the harms that fall on the public at large in the form of clogged streets, increased infrastructure costs and insecure property rights' (ibid, p. 61). Here is the core principle of reciprocity and redistribution: the transaction between claimants and distributors, and the process of negotiating and validating claims. What is claimed, and what is transferred, may be a share of tangible resources, but the claim may equally be for the right to acquire resources by normally non-permissible means; for

protection, or for recognition. The success, in political terms, of such forbearance lies in the acceptability of this transaction both to the poor and to the non-poor.

Where much of the discourse on precarity revolves around labour, much of the academic response revolves around material redistribution, such as minimum basic incomes or Basic Income Grants (BIG) (Martinelli, 2017; Standing, 2017; Van Parijs, 2004). Advocates of income redistribution approaches to addressing an increasingly post-work/post-labour context highlight the merits of basic incomes as a necessary phase beyond work-based welfare approaches (Barchiesi, 2007; Smith, Blau, & Esparza, 2017). Others, such as James Ferguson, point to empirical evidence of Basic Income Grants in Southern Africa being associated with reductions in poverty (Ferguson, 2015). In Ferguson's argument, whilst the actual transfer undertaken by BIG is of cash, the transfer itself enables a degree of agency. By fulfilling certain basic needs, it allows/enables the recipient to engage in other activities with a range of financial and non-financial rewards. Thus, recipients of BIG are more likely to engage in other work, entrepreneurial activities, and to further redistribute income to others in need (Ferguson, 2015). More modestly, cash transfers, conditional or non-conditional, are increasingly used in welfare programmes (Devereux, 2006; DfID, 2011), typically paid from tax revenues, and aimed at improving maternal nutrition and reducing poverty amongst the elderly and disabled. However, the role of social payments in achieving effective redistribution and addressing income inequality remains contested (Wang, Caminada, & Goudswaard, 2012). Furthermore, wide-reaching redistribution requires sustained public consensus, a key concern for those advocating wider application of cash-based redistribution (Matisonn & Seekings, 2002).

For policy-makers considering welfare reforms, the critical question is, what builds, and sustains public consensus for redistribution? Myanmar, with one of the lowest tax bases in the world,

started in 2016 to embark on a number of social transfer schemes (DSW, 2015), at that stage largely funded by international assistance. Attempts to broaden the tax base focused on appeals to public-spiritedness and duty (Yazar, 2016), but commentators have pointed to a major deficit in public trust, and persistent factional claims for distribution of both power and resources based on perceived historical marginalization, rather than current inequalities (Griffiths, 2017d).

Yawbawm Mangshan and others (Yawbawm Mangshan, 2018; McCarthy, 2016b) have argued for the necessity of building smaller blocks of consensus, based around existing reservoirs of localized trust. This points us towards community organizations, and the role which they play in Myanmar's welfare.

### **Ghosts in the machine: associational life in Myanmar**

I have chosen to use the term associational life, as opposed to civil society, as a way to retain a broad spectrum of identities possible for the non-State organizations. Stepan (Stepan & Van Oystaeyen, 1988) differentiates between 'civil society' and 'political society', where civil society is described as 'the arena where manifold social movements [...] and civic organizations [...] attempt to constitute themselves in an assemblage of arrangements so that they can express themselves and advance their interests' (Stepan & Van Oystaeyen, 1988, pp. 3-4). By contrast, 'political society' is described as the 'arena in which the polity specifically arranges itself for political contestation to gain control over public power and the state apparatus' (ibid). Analysing civil society in Myanmar, David Steinberg defines civil society as 'non-ephemeral organizations of individuals banded together for a common purpose or purposes to pursue those interests through group activities and by peaceful means' (Steinberg, 1999, p. 3). In the Myanmar context, the inherently political nature of any collective expressions not sanctioned by the State

blurs the distinctions between ‘civil’ and ‘political’, a situation well described by Kyaw Yin Hlaing in his review of associational life in Myanmar (2007).

Associational life is both well-known and poorly understood in Myanmar, perhaps largely due to the fact that, for the majority of the past 60 years, emergent or non-government associations had been largely prohibited by the ruling authorities (Steinberg, 1999). At the same time, more recent commentary has noted an absence where associational life was in fact present, but not in forms recognizable to western scholarship (McCarthy, 2012). In reviewing associational life in Myanmar from pre-colonial times, Kyaw Yin Hlaing describes ubiquitous ‘community organizations that functioned like neighbourhood organizations [...] in almost every village in pre-colonial Myanmar’ (2007, p. 145). The advent of colonial rule not only introduced new ideas and tools for organizing, but new impetus for different forms of associational life. With its particular focus on replacing monastic education with State-led, western schools, colonial governance was perceived to not only threaten the Burmese Buddhist way of life, but in some readings, the future of the entire *sasana* (the propagation of the Buddha’s teachings and its social effects) and the cosmos itself (Turner, 2014). In this context, with its echoes of precarity in relation to risk and symbolic violence, associations appealing to Buddhist identity rapidly flourished, using new printing technologies to disseminate ideas. These voluntary associations ‘with membership dues, subscription journals [...] and recording secretaries, became a technology for rethinking identity and the relation of Buddhist laypeople to the problem of their world’ (Turner, 2014, p. 2). In essence, these were moral communities, forged out of a ‘collective ethnic project that orientated Burmese in Buddhist history and defined the importance of their actions in a changing world’ (ibid). Other organizations, such as labour and student unions, and more rural associations such as the *Dobama* (our Myanmar) and *wunthanu athin*



(nationalist associations) variously featured in anti-government demonstrations. The existence of community organizations around the time of the Saya San rebellion in the 1930's is evidenced by reports of their mobilization as *wunthanu* ('Loving Ones' Race') organizations participating in the nationalist cause (Maung Maung, 1980). According to Sarkisyanz, these organizations had originally arisen

out of a popular desire to see Burmese life purged of the corruption, drunkenness and crime into which it had fallen [...] and restored to good order, with a reformed *Sangha*<sup>22</sup> able to take the lead in promoting moral and social welfare (Sarkisyanz, 1965, p. 84).

By 1924, they were to be found 'in almost every village in Burma' (ibid). The nationalist movements of the 1920's and early 1930's were essentially deferred by the second World War, and post-Independence, welfare associations at township level appeared to flourish (Asia Development Bank, 2015). Whilst organizations of people from non-majority, non-Bamar ethnic groups, and particularly non-Buddhist organizations tended to operate with less freedom in the post-colonial period, Buddhist associations wielded considerable power in the post-colonial, pre-junta period (Kyaw Yin Hlaing, 2007). Post-1962, under the Ne Win government, official associational life declined, although local community organizations, and some organizations of ethnic groups, survived, frequently by adopting more informal structures and identities. Whilst civil society was widely considered to be moribund during this period of Socialist rule (Steinberg, 1999), official government policy, motivated by diminished resources, encouraged self-reliance organizations to be formed to provide educational and other social assistance<sup>23</sup> (Von

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<sup>22</sup> *Sangha* is the Pali term for the monkhood, or community of Buddhist monks, as both a more practical term indicating an order of persons, and a more metaphysical term indicative of the spiritual reality of the monkhood as one of the 'three jewels' of *Buddhism* (the others being the Buddha and the *Dhamma*) (Rāhula, 1974).

<sup>23</sup> These were often formed at Township level, to raise funds for schools and other public welfare and development projects (personal correspondence with Muang Maung Thin, 2016).

Der Mehden, 1963). However, restrictive laws prohibiting the formation of associations were sustained during the post-1988 military regime (Wells & Kyaw Thu Aung, 2014), resulting in the disappearance, at least from public view, of localized, self-directed organizations. During this time, organizations such as the Mandalay based *Byamaso*<sup>24</sup> Foundation, providing medical assistance and funeral expenses<sup>25</sup>, and the Free Funeral Service of Yangon, founded by retired actor U Kyaw Thu, were fairly isolated examples of prominent, emergent organizations which survived considerable scrutiny and harassment from the regime (Kyaw Yin Hlaing, 2007). Despite the unfavourable environment for associational life, informal associations still appeared to be widespread (Heidel, 2006). What appears to have persisted are values of reciprocity, practically expressed through the collection and redistribution of funds to cover funeral expenses (McCarthy, 2016a) and, in some cases, religious rituals and educational expenses. The apparent contradictory conclusions of Steinberg ('the future of civil society is bleak') (1999, p. 16) and the findings of Heidel (2006), who described over 200,000 CBO's operating after the year 2000, probably relate to the different definitions of 'civil society' used by the authors, describing a time and context where many of the community organizations at the time operated under restrictive conditions, and could perhaps then not be considered transformative agents (McCarthy, 2016a). Whilst there was limited scope for expression of such activities under the military regime, the emergence (or re-emergence) of more formal social organizations appears to have accelerated after the elections of 2011, where the government gave tacit approval to the formation of such

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<sup>24</sup> The term *Byamaso* is itself derived from religious terminology, where *Byama-So* is descriptive of a type of virtuousness embodying Buddhist teaching and ethics (Houtman, 1999).

<sup>25</sup> Kyaw Yin Hlaing (2007) describes the context where, due to inflation and new zoning laws, burials taking place several miles from the centre of Mandalay incurred huge costs for households, with the poor unable to meet the basic requirements, let alone the wider social requirements of a funeral. The significance of this assistance, both in terms of the social importance of ensuring that the rituals for final journey of a family member is appropriately and publicly undertaken, and of doing so in ways which did not result in economic ruin for the family, are discussed in more detail in chapters 6-8.

organizations. Recent research demonstrates that community organizations are both widely prevalent and diverse in Myanmar, with some rural communities having up to 8 different organizations (Griffiths, 2014).

Several large-scale rural surveys have found community organizations of different types in most villages in rural Myanmar (Griffiths, 2016c; LIFT, 2018). A socio-economic study conducted by the Department of Rural Development<sup>26</sup> in 2016 collected data from nearly 1,000 villages spread across all of the rural areas of Myanmar. The prevalence of different types of organizations were recorded, with organizational categories based on the description of activities given by the village respondents (Griffiths, 2016d). Although the typology is not uniform, rural surveys identified community organizations in most villages (Table 1).

*Table 1: Types and prevalence of village organizations in Myanmar rural communities (Griffiths, 2016d)*

Type of organization	% of villages reporting	Activities
Village development committee	64%	Village planning
Social organization	38%	Health, education, welfare
Religious organization	26%	Fundraising for monastic initiation, welfare
Maternal and child welfare organization	34%	Education, support to pregnant women
Political/representative organization	20%	Ethnic affairs representation/welfare, local political representation
Other	30%	various welfare, such as savings organizations, credit unions, women's welfare organizations
No organization	14%	

The boundaries between religious and social organizations are frequently unclear, with many social organizations appealing to religious traditions for legitimacy, and many religious

<sup>26</sup> The focal government department for implementing the rural development plan. This study was part of a baseline study for a large rural development project.

organizations providing social assistance and education. However, at community level, identities are usually clearer, where specific terminology relates to religious organizations as distinct from social organizations (often called *parahita* or *lu-hmu-ye apwe*), and maternal and child welfare organizations are considered in a separate category, as these were frequently considered government sponsored (as opposed to locally derived) organizations (Kyaw Yin Hlaing, 2007). There are estimated to be 1,700 monastic schools in Myanmar (Burnett Institute, 2014), educating between 2 and 5% of primary school aged children (Hayden & Martin, 2017). These were usually considered religious, rather than social organizations, probably due to the fact that they are usually administered by Buddhist monks.

Whilst the tradition of reciprocity for village funerals is widespread (McCarthy, 2015), newer iterations of social organizations based on traditional values feature a wider range of activities, from blood donation ceremonies to collective action for flood relief (McCarthy, 2016a). Perhaps less positively, one of the largest emergent associations in Myanmar today is the *Ma Ba Tha* (protection of race and religion) (Maung Zarni, 2013), which mobilizes large numbers of Buddhists, mainly from rural and peri-urban areas, to protest against the perceived threat of Muslims in Myanmar (Nyi Nyi Kyaw, 2016). Precarity, variously perceived and experienced, leads to different expressions of individual and collective responses. Much of this is derived from the perceived challenge, or threat, to self-hood and identity from the ‘Other’, either through intentional actions or neglect. How, then, can we view the process of emergence in response to precarity? In particular, what frameworks may be useful to analyse the emergent responses to precarity in rural communities in Myanmar? Here I turn back to Judith Butler, and notions of performativity.

## **Performativity and the altruistic self**

Going back to the earlier section on the assemblage of precarity, I noted that responses to precarity are, for the most part, localized. This is not to deny that membership of associations, and indeed transfer of resources do not take place across international borders and time zones. Rather, it is recognized that there is a ‘place’, or a ‘space’ in which association takes place, and to which it is in some way tethered. This is not, as we shall see, necessarily a physically bounded space; the space may be even the memory of common homeland. More than that, an associational response, as we have seen in the history of associational life in Myanmar, creates and claims space, often physically, and more often, politically. In ‘Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly’, Judith Butler considers notions of plural performative action in public, and assembled responses to precarious conditions (2015). Performativity was initially used to describe the capacity of speech to act, or consummate an action, which ‘challenges the representationalist belief in the power of words to represent pre-existing things’ (Barad, 2003, p. 802). Here, the performative ‘enacts or produces that which it names’ (Butler, 2011a, p. 23). In a performative understanding of gender, then, gender is understood not as ‘an expression of what one is, but [...] as an expression of what one does’ (Lloyd, 1999, p. 196). Performativity operates through ‘the reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains’ (Butler, 2011a, p. 2). This entails a redefining of space: from metaphorical to social, where the social space is the ‘symbolic realm in which subjects interpellate [...] other subjects, in which performative enactment [...] occurs’ (Lloyd, 1999, pp. 196-197). Looking at performativity in the plural sense, in relation to public assembly, there is then both the space as place, in which such an assembly takes place, and the ‘public space of appearing’ which is

constructed through plural performative acts; another iteration of the interdependency inherent to precarity:

Bodies are productive and performative [but] they can persist and act only when they are supported, by environments, by nutrition, by work, by modes of sociality and belonging. And when these supports fall away and precarity is exposed, they are mobilized in another way, seizing upon the supports that exist in order to make a claim that there can be no embodied life without social and institutional support, without ongoing employment, without networks of interdependency and care, without collective rights to shelter and mobility (Butler, 2015, p. 84).

Through this collective appearing,

a new space is created, a new ‘between’ of bodies, as it were, that lays claim to existing space through the action of a new alliance, and those bodies are seized and animated by those existing spaces in the very acts by which they reclaim and resignify their meanings (Butler, 2015, p. 85).

Here, performativity is rooted in collective identity, potentially re-enacting, potentially re-inscribing a wider shared identity within a claimed space. This perhaps illustrates the ambiguous nature of performative assembly: what are the scripts, and who writes them? (Butler, 2011b). As

Butler argues:

Their struggle is its own social form [...] an alliance begins to enact the social order it seeks to bring about by establishing its own modes of sociability. And yet, the alliance is not reducible to a collection of individuals [...] action in alliance happens precisely between those who participate, and this is not an ideal or empty space (Butler, 2015, p. 84).

Critics of Butler's approach to gender, and indeed to performativity, have highlighted the diminished role of the subject, and the role of agency (the absence of a performer who is performing) (Butler, Benhabib, Cornell, & Fraser, 1995), and from a human geography standpoint, perhaps also the role of place:

As these geographers recognize, if we reduce concrete subjects to compelled, unreflexive performers of dominant discourse(s) we miss the how and the why of human subjects doing identity, a process directly tied to their lived personal history, intersubjective relationships, and their embeddedness in particular historical moments and places (Nelson, 1999, p. 349).

Perhaps this is what Butler means when she describes the space of alliance as neither 'ideal [n]or empty'. To what extent is the performance, now plural, directed or shaped by a central animating idea of symbol-such as the umbrella movement in Hong Kong<sup>27</sup> (Ortmann, 2015) or the saffron revolution in Myanmar<sup>28</sup> (Schober, 2011)? To what extent is the animating idea or symbol already defined, or does it remain a plastic, malleable concept, a performative constitution much like the gender identity itself?

These movements are examples of populist movements in the face of political and economic precarity, where space was claimed and created by emergent associational forms in protest against government authorities. Yet other examples are equally numerous of emergent space-

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<sup>27</sup> The Umbrella Revolution was a series of protests, mainly by students, in public areas of Hong Kong in 2014. The protests were directed against the perceived lack of democratic process in the election and selection of Hong Kong's government, seen to be largely directed by the government of the People's Republic of China. The name arose from the use of umbrellas as a tool for resistance to the Hong Kong Police during the demonstrations and occupation, including protection from pepper spray.

<sup>28</sup> The Saffron revolution has been used to describe the events of 2007 in Myanmar, where inflation caused by the removal of fuel subsidies led to a spiral of unrest and protest, with large peaceful marches by Buddhist monks wearing their characteristic saffron coloured robes. They were accompanied by citizens linking arms to create a protective barrier. These protests were vigorously suppressed by the then military government, using military forces drawn from non-Buddhist ethnic army units. In the months after the uprisings, monasteries suspected of participating in demonstrations were purged.

claiming for protest against governments, animated by different ideas, such as the exclusionary ethnic symbolism used by *Ma Ba Tha* in Myanmar. Coming back, then, to precarity, questions can now be asked not only of the conditions which are associated with different collective responses to precarity, but also of the nature of the performativity found in different associational responses. In particular, what kinds of performativity, and what animating ideas, are associated with collective responses to precarity which feature reciprocity and redistribution, as opposed to other forms of associational response?

In ‘The Condition of Postmodernity’ David Harvey (1990) describes the nature and consequences of the insecurity arising from post-Fordian economic arrangements which are now more frequently described as precarity. The erosion of confidence in known certainties to secure future well-being tends to promote more retrospection:

It is at such times of fragmentation and economic insecurity that the desire for stable values leads to a heightened emphasis upon the authority of basic institutions - the family, religion, the state (Harvey, 1990, p. 171).

Precarity, both as a relational and economic condition, is politically produced, and responses to precarity are thus likely to be political in nature. However, the nature of the politics, and in particular the politics of emergent associational responses to precarity, is deeply rooted in both the local conditions of precarity and the resources and institutional forms available to individuals and communities, including the particularity of ideas to animate performativity in the face of precarity. The following chapters introduce the methodology, and then examine the nature of precarity in rural communities, asking questions of how the nature of the precarity experienced in the past two decades in rural Myanmar, as the ‘the historical and geographical embeddedness



of human subjects who perform' (Nelson, 1999, p. 351), influences the form of the collective and associational performances in response to that precarity.

## Chapter 4

### The Research Process

My research process probably started over 10 years ago, as a mixture of curiosity and frustration: curiosity at the dynamic presence of community social organizations I found in most of the rural villages I visited, and frustration at the marginalization of these and other local knowledges in the development sector. In the face of rapid and violent change, characterized by a growing precariousness of rural life, institutionalized approaches to development and social protection in Myanmar have, to a large extent, remained ignorant or ambivalent towards emergent, more localized ecologies of welfare. The official discourse of welfare is heavily tilted towards imported approaches which can be universally applied to subjects, rather than a polyvalent discourse which integrates diverse forms of knowledge and practice.

Having observed and practiced development, conducted research and taught in the Myanmar context, and using national language (Burmese) on issues of vulnerability, exclusion, resilience for those past 10 years, I have built up a substantial body of knowledge around these topics.

Thus, one of the underlying objectives of this research is to take much of this accrued knowledge and examine it more critically in the light of other research and different contexts, and to work through the key research questions in ways which demonstrate scientific rigour, and which allow for more detailed, nuanced and policy-relevant observations. As the late Michael Crotty observed, ‘there [are] no true or valid interpretation[s]. There are useful interpretations, [...] liberating forms of interpretation [...] interpretations that are fulfilling and rewarding’ (Crotty, 1998, pp. 47-48). This chapter first discusses issues of methodology with regard to research of social organizations, analysing available approaches before stating the key research questions. Given that this research has social organizations in Myanmar as the main focus of study, this

chapter will explore, firstly, methodological issues and possibilities for organizational research, followed by consideration of theoretical perspectives more commonly used by researchers studying the Myanmar context. This is followed by a discussion of the choice of methodology and underpinning theoretical perspectives, a description of the main approach (narrative research) and details of the methods used to conduct the research, whilst paying particular attention to issues of language and interpretation.

### **Methodological considerations**

This research has two main elements: the study of organizations, and the study of the emergence of the associational forms which are then viewed as organizations. The study of organizations may involve varied and often contradictory methodologies, based on different perspectives on the nature of organizations, and the aspect of organizational life which is to be studied (Symon, 1998). Schools of organizational thought include the ‘scientific management school’, which most often utilizes physical sciences to study shop-floor dynamics; the administrative school, with a focus on efficiency and management; the bureaucratic school, with a focus on power relations, the structural-functionalist school, which studied organizational roles ‘by analogy with biological sciences’; the group dynamics school which regarded organizational behaviour ‘as a function of the psychological relations between people and their environment’; the human relations school, with an emphasis on social solidarity; and other approaches incorporating historical, technological and industrial relations perspectives (Strati, 2000, pp. 34-37).

Likewise, there are numerous organizational theories: institutional processes (Selznick, 1948); Parson’s institutional approach (Parsons, 1956); the Carnegie School (Simon, 1965) and neo-institutional theory, with its variants (Scott, 2013). A constructivist approach views organizations as ‘the social reality which people construct in their interactions and in the connections they

establish within and without organizational boundaries' (Strati, 2000, p. 74). The concept of autopoiesis applied to organizations (Luhmann, 1986; Maturana & Varela, 1980) focuses on both the structure and the organization of systems, and in particular the way in which elements self-sustain, evolve and self-replicate. This approach pays particular attention to the interaction between systems and their environment, and the extent to which each mutually shapes the other ('structural coupling') (Seidl, 2005, p. 5).

Where the study of an organization has a particular focus on the social nature of the organization, the research questions demand critical examination of phenomena of the social life-world, such as beliefs, attitudes, relationships and values, which are acted out in the context of social interaction. Thus, whilst some dimensions of organizational life and function, such as the number of group members, group activities, operating budgets and redistributed funds can be categorized objectively, the nature, function and 'reality' of the organization are considered social constructs (Brewerton, 2001). These are necessarily viewed through a paradigm which 'looks for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world' (Crotty, 1998, p. 67).

Likewise, the history and origins of an organization, and its place in the community may well be recorded and chronicled, but the nature of the pressures, values and expectations which have shaped it and sustain it are also best understood as socially constructed. Again, even though, at one level, some aspects of the dynamics of the 'reality' of an organization and its impact on the life of the community may be measured in terms of tangible, measurable outputs such as cash benefits, participation of excluded minorities and frequency of meetings, the impact of the organization on social cohesion, attitudes, learning ability, worldview and beliefs are again best understood and analysed, as socially constructed phenomena. Finally, there is the acceptance that to a certain extent, an organization is an artefact, or at best has aspects which only have an

existence because of shared consent by participants, and thus ‘the task of an organizational analyst working within the constructivist tradition is not to search for the true organization but to inquire about the ways in which these ‘realities *sui generis*’ are collectively and socially constructed’ (Berger & Luckmann, 1991; Strati, 2000, p. 74).

With the explosion of possibilities of social networking enabled by information technology (Kilduff & Tsai, 2003), a range of methodological approaches to network analysis have been applied to the study of emergent organizations utilizing both qualitative and quantitative approaches (Martinez et al, 2003; Scott, 2017). The key methodological concerns are around structure and agency, both individual and collective. Drawing on complexity theory for the study of emergent associational forms presents a number of possibilities, as it assumes both the absence of any central organization or control as well as a highly iterative relationship between structure and agency (Byrne & Callaghan, 2013). Whilst structures play ‘a significant conditioning role upon the actors that tend to dispose them to particular courses of actions’ (Byrne & Callaghan, 2013, p. 119), structures themselves are subject to shaping and re-shaping by the actions of actors, such that ‘individual and collective agency [...] is in a continuing recursive relationship with structure’ (Byrne & Callaghan, 2013, p. 125). This draws on Pierre Bourdieu (1998) and Margaret Archer (2003):

Both Bourdieu and Archer would subscribe to a social sphere as a not necessarily planned or even wished for outcome of processes of struggle which include conflict and negotiation between individuals and groups in conditions of differential levels of power. Both would see structure as having emergent properties while at the same time emergence is also evident, for Bourdieu particularly, in collective as well as individual action (Byrne & Callaghan, 2013, p. 124).

Recognizing the emergent nature of organizations also draws attention to the issue raised earlier, in the introduction, of categorization. Just as definitions of civil society can include or exclude a wide range of associational practice depending on where boundaries are drawn, so organizational studies, particularly of community organizations which do not necessarily possess easily discernible organizational forms, need to recognize the limitations of fixed categories or definitions of organizations. A focus on the emergent nature of such organizations allows for study of the interplay between structure and agency, and between different agents in negotiating space and meaning as part of the performativity of associational life.

The nuanced and highly contextual nature of community organizations requires a methodology which acknowledges the constructed nature of knowledge about them, in a way which gives space for that knowledge to be constructed, and perhaps re-constructed. Narrative research, by retaining an openness to multiple avenues of inquiry, provides potential for co-construction of knowledge by different participants in the research process (Riesmann, 2008). Thus, narrative research is the main methodology used in this study, with additional analysis of contemporary records (such as organizational documents, records, booklets and posters). The following section will provide an overview of the research process, including sites and site selection for field research, followed by a more in-depth discussion of narrative research.

### **Overview of research process**

The widespread presence of community social organizations in rural Myanmar has been demonstrated in several large-scale surveys (Ei Ei Thu, 2013; Griffiths, 2016b; McCarthy, 2016b). In 2013, as part of the work of the Social Policy and Poverty Research Group

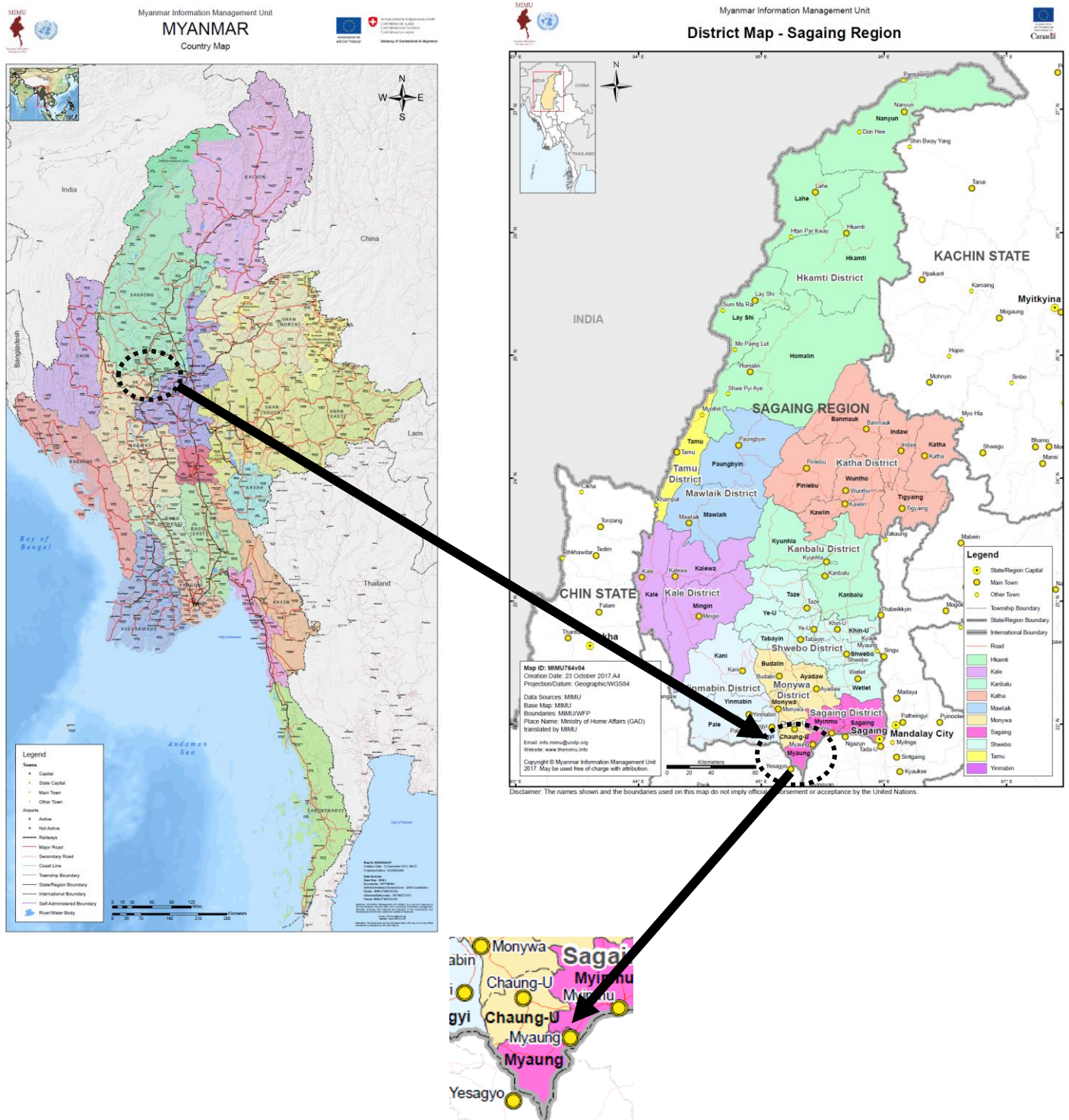
(SPPRG)<sup>29</sup>, I conducted a small-scale research project surveying rural community social organizations, which enabled an initial mapping of categories of organization (Ei Ei Thu, 2013). Following this, a small-scale pilot project, funded by a large, multi-national donor (Livelihood and Food Security Trust Fund<sup>30</sup>), enabled research into village based welfare organizations in two locations: Sagaing Region, in the central area of Myanmar, and Southern Shan State , and a more substantive, longitudinal study on community-led welfare was funded by the same donor between 2015 and 2018, covering 40 villages in Sagaing Region, central Myanmar (see Figure 2: Maps of research area). The overall purpose of this second study was to look at the efficacy of community based organizations in terms of welfare provision through their own, self-generated funds, and, as a second phase, the ability of community organizations to implement more complex, donor-funded welfare programme such as maternal and child cash transfers (the ‘1000 day project’) (Griffiths, 2016a).

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<sup>29</sup> The Social Policy and Poverty Research Group (SPPRG) is a Myanmar based, locally registered, independent research organization which specializes in social research and training on evidence-based policy. Recent work includes large-scale national surveys on poverty reduction and social protection, surveys on community organizations, panel studies on the socio-economic impact of involuntary relocation, and numerous studies on disability and inequalities. Whilst operating with donor funding, and providing training and input to government departments, SPPRG retains a self-directed stance through independent governance and a not-for-profit status.

<sup>30</sup> The Livelihood and Food Security Trust Fund is a multi-donor trust fund established in 2009 dedicated to sustainable rural livelihoods in Myanmar. Donors include Australia, Denmark, the European Union, France, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States of America, as well as, from the private sector, the Mitsubishi Corporation. LIFT is managed by UNOPS, who administers the funds and provide oversight and monitoring. <https://www.lift-fund.org/>

**Figure 2: Maps of research area (courtesy Myanmar Information Management Unit)**





The research for this thesis draws on narrative interviews conducted in 2017 with leaders and members of organizations in 12 of these villages, as well as utilizing data from the longitudinal study. This area, and the communities, were purposively selected on the basis that they had a ‘story to tell’ with regard to village social organizations. This area of Myanmar is known to be predominantly Buddhist, made up mostly of people of Bamar<sup>31</sup> ethnicity, and to have a strong tradition of local organizations. These communities were selected purposively by myself, based on my knowledge and existing connections with communities, which were known to have existing social organizations. Some had previously participated in action research processes around the development of community organizations, and I had visited each community several times previously. Prior to the visits for interview purposes, each community involved was requested to assemble key persons from the community social organization, such as organizational chair persons and patrons, as well as organization members and village elders and members. The research process was conducted in consultation with the village authorities after explaining the nature and purpose of the research.

The consent process was conducted orally, due to persistent issues of mistrust over signed documents, which are typically associated with ‘signing away’ some element of autonomy (Griffiths, 2007). Thus, consent was recorded verbally as part of the interview transcript on the basis of a standardized explanation of the research process. The interviews were recorded on portable digital recorders, and files were transferred to digitally secured (password protected)

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<sup>31</sup> The recent census recorded data on ethnicity, with Bamar referring to the ‘Burman’ ethnicity. It is acknowledged here that both the origins and terms of ethnic identity are highly contested. However, most of the participants in the study self-identified as Bamar, in a construction which conflates the ethnic identity with religious identity, and in turn with a wider sense of how that identity is the core of the national identity. This is considered in more detail in the final two chapters.

hard drives at the end of each day. Written notes were stored in locked storage, or, where digital, in password-protected domains.

The narrative interviews were conducted in May and October 2017, over two periods of three days, with the interview process typically lasting 2-3 hours per community. Long-standing government restrictions on travel by foreigners means that travel to any ‘project’ areas requires application to the concerned government Ministry for travel permission (McLaughlin, 2018), specifying the nature of the visit, the precise dates and names of who is travelling, and submission to relevant laws and guidelines. Thus, in order for me to have official permission to travel to the areas to conduct research, I applied for government permission through the Social Policy and Poverty Research Group (SPPRG), a local research organization which I founded in 2012. The initial entry into a community was facilitated by staff SPPRG, who introduced myself and the local researchers to the village authorities.

Interviews were conducted in Burmese language, with the lead researcher (myself) conducting a group interview with office holders of the community organization (such as chairperson, treasurer) and village elders, and three female research assistants (Daw Mya Thida Soe, Daw Aye Aye Myo and Daw Thinzar Phyo) conducting interviews with other group members, most of whom were female. This was a specific strategy employed in recognition of the subtle gender and hierarchical dynamics of social interactions in Myanmar. Where the interviewed is male, educated, and visibly foreign (as in my case), cultural norms of deference would potentially constrain the responses of female participants. Likewise, my presence as an educated, foreign male would, on the other hand, project a certain status to village elders, potentially increasing their confidence to speak freely and openly. These dynamics have been observed and tested by myself over numerous research projects, demonstrating the value of careful attention to issues of

status and gender in the interview process. The research assistants were trained by myself in narrative interview techniques, and in the process of obtaining consent. Interviews were conducted using an interview guide aimed at eliciting narratives on five main topics: the triggers and processes of formation of community organizations; the activities and member participation in community organizations; the essence and motivational nature of community organizations (specifically, what motivates people to give time and money?); the benefits and challenges of community organizations and the future of community organizations, including threats, opportunities and risks. These were organized into an interview guide, shown in Table 2:

*Table 2: schemata for different interview phases for community social organizations*

Narrative Topic	Dimensions	Process	Key questions	Key issues
Origin and formation	History, community, needs, leaders	Recollection, construction of meaning	How did this group come to be? What were the processes? Needs? What motivates the group?	Unmet needs, economic and political pressures, religion, governance
Process	Actions, decision making, inclusion	Description, negotiation of meaning	What does the group do? Why does it do it? How does the group sustain its identity?	Social cohesion, religion, inclusion, resource management, learned behaviour
Achievements	Changes, learning, attitudes, challenges	Reflection, interpretation of meaning	How has the group impacted the community? How has the group changed? What are the challenges for the future? How has the community become more resilient?	Learning and adaptive capacity, inclusion, gender equity, religion & extremism, resilience, governance processes

In total, 24 interviews were conducted in 12 communities listed in Table 3, resulting in over 360 pages of transcribed text. Analysis was conducted on the Burmese transcripts, with translation of key findings and text into English.

*Table 3: details of villages included in the research process*

<b>Community name</b>	<b>Township</b>	<b>Community type</b>	<b>Village size (households)</b>	<b>Notes</b>
Kyauk Phuu Kong	Myaung	Large village cluster	538	Arable land submerged for 6 months per year
Swe Le Oo	Myaung	Medium size village	220	
Shwe Pauk Pin	Myaung	Large village	516	Recently built flood barrier and road access
Chaung Ma	Chaung Oo	Medium size village	160	Good access to nearby town (Chaung Oo)
Ko Taung Kan	Chaung Oo	Medium size village	170	Poor road access, remote, materially poor
The Pyay Daw	Monywa	Larger village near town	180	Currently involved in dispute to reclaim land illegally seized by military
Hpwa Saw	Myaung	Large village	356	Significant proportion of male villagers are seasonal migrants, leaving women behind in the village for much of the year
Aung Chan Thar	Myaung	Small village	120	Isolated and near to river bank
Ywa Thit	Myaung	Part of small rural town	404	Growing peri-urban community
North Quarter	Myaung	Part of small rural town	550	Growing peri-urban community
Middle quarter	Myaung	Part of small rural town	346	Growing peri-urban community
South quarter	Myaung	Part of small rural town	424	Growing peri-urban community

## **Narratives as research**

A qualitative approach helps the researcher to ‘delimit the scope of the study to variables and relationships particularly salient to them in their lifeworld’ (Ungar, 2003, p. 94). In so doing, the researcher is able to ask of his or her data questions about patterns and trajectories which lead to better accounts of the experiences of participants. Whilst it may be possible to gain some meaningful insights through more direct lines of inquiry, narrative research is a useful approach for research focusing on lived experience (Clandinin, 2006; Kramp, 2004):

By collecting stories in a particular organization, by listening and comparing different accounts, by investigating how narratives are constructed around specific events, by

examining which events in an organization's history generate stories and which ones fail to do so, we gain access to deeper organizational realities, closely linked to their members' experiences. In this way, stories enable us to study organizational politics, culture and change in uniquely illuminating ways, revealing how wider organizational issues are viewed, commented upon and worked upon by their members (Symon, 1998, pp. 135-136).

Narrative research has been used to study organizations along different lines of inquiry: 'sense-making, communication, politics and power, learning/change, and identity and identification' (Rhodes & Brown, 2005, p. 2). Analysis of narratives in organizational research may be used to describe elements of organizational culture, reveal expressions of unconscious thoughts, attitudes or desires, expressions of political dynamics, and be used as vehicles for organizational communication and learning (Symon, 1998, p. 138). Because the 'starting point' of narratives is more open, the research 'exchange' has greater potential, by 'giving voice to alternative constructions of phenomenon' to become 'a fairer exchange in which participants benefit equally from the production of 'knowledges' about them' (Ungar, 2003, p. 94). The narrative approach is also useful when studying processes involving time and change: events of birth (genesis), illness (crisis), recovery (resolution), re-orientation (change and new status) and sometimes death (endings) and conflict are commonly woven into different narrative forms linked in some way or other by time (Ricoeur, 2010). Furthermore, analysis of these events, as they are told, may inform our understanding of underlying beliefs, values, fears, needs, influences, challenges, personalities and hopes which influenced, and continue to influence the formation and ongoing life of the organization. These may be voiced unintentionally by the narrator, as narratives are a 'creative re-description of the world such that hidden patterns and hitherto unexplored meanings

can unfold' (Kearney, 2002, p. 12). The power of narratives is that 'our sense of self, others, and social and organizational life emerges in our moment-to-moment, relationally responsive, talk-entwined activities, specifically, in oral encounters and reciprocal speech' (Shotter, 1993, p. 29).

Narrative analysis takes the whole narrative as the basic unit of data. Although placed within the interpretivist perspective, narrative analysis also draws on symbolic interaction. Symbolic interactionism, originating from the writings of George Herbert Mead in 1962 (Mead & Morris, 1962) works on the basis that 'social life is formed, maintained and changed by the basic meaning attached to symbols [...] social life is expressed through symbols [...] the purpose of social research is to study the structure, functions and meanings of symbols' (Sarantakos, 1998, p. 49). This perspective avoids the creation of a static cultural stereotype, and instead redefines culture as 'the result of people's creative ability to interact together and collectively arrive at a shared definition of a situation' (De Laine, 1997, p. 47). This is a crucial dynamic when considering the values, norms, beliefs, influences and traditions which result in forming organizations, sustaining organizations, defining organizations' objectives, and the issue of how religious and cultural values influence the nature of the group. When dealing with what can be described as 'imagined communities' which, whilst located in a 'place' may also transcend that 'place' in terms of their identity and inclusion (or exclusion), methodological approaches which enable the study of symbols, frequently expressed and given meaning through narratives, are essential (Anderson, 2006).

There are three key questions relevant to the data collection: who provides the narratives (choosing the storytellers)? How are the narratives are solicited (guiding the storyteller)? How are the narratives represented (translating the stories, and not just linguistic translation)? The 'who' of storytelling is crucial: if one considers the implications of microstoria analysis, with its

focus on ante-narrative and excluded voices, and plot analysis (looking at rights to ‘authorship’ of a story) then the selection of voices may bias the response before even beginning if certain narrators are not included (Riessman, 2008). But here, the researcher operates on presuppositions of who *might* be excluded and makes efforts to include them, which may then distort the process. Insightful selection, with a running commentary to justify selections, may counteract that bias, or at least provide information on why certain voices may be excluded.

Secondly, the ‘how’ of narrative gathering is also crucial: not just the mechanics of recording, but the process of consent, of explaining the nature of research, of providing the background to what the researcher is interested to hear about (else a thousand side-tracks), how the researcher uses probes and questions to prompt the narrator, and how the narrator in turn is able to exercise autonomy in the research process. This requires a considerable degree of reflexivity, around the question of who is constructing the narrative, for whom, and for what purpose? (Riessman, 2008, p. 11). This looks at the ‘how and why incidents are storied’, cultural and linguistic resources the stories draw upon, what the story ‘accomplishes’ as well as gaps and omissions: what may have been left out, smoothed over or obscured in a narrative re-telling (ibid).

Finally, the representation of narratives: when collected in another language, these are transcribed, verbatim, which preserves the original text, with notations for pauses, exclamations interruptions and other interjections or non-verbal communication. Ideally, analysis is conducted in the original language, but for publication, translation is needed. The cross-cultural nature of this research is significant, not only where the researcher (myself) is working in a different language and cultural context, but where a key objective of the research is to communicate to readers even further removed from the context of this research the nature of a phenomenon

(social organizations) deeply rooted in the local context. Thus, issues of conducting qualitative research in multi-lingual settings are discussed at the end of this chapter.

### **Analysing narratives**

Interpretation of narratives takes many forms, including deconstruction, which focusses on, amongst other things, potential absences from the narrative; the search for the ‘grand narrative’ and microstoria analysis, which focuses on ‘the excluded narratives of women, ethnic minorities, witches, day labourers, peasants, charlatans and other ‘little people’ [...] to create many histories from below’ (Boje, 2001, p. 48). Other approaches include story network analysis; intertextuality analysis; causality analysis; thematic analysis (deductive and inductive) and plot analysis, which is of particular relevance to organizational studies, as it asks ‘who gets to author the narrative plot of complex organization’ (Boje, 2001, p. 108). Considering the narrative within its spatial and cultural context is critical, as this allows analysis of immediate enablers or constraints on narrative performance, as well as identifying potential sources of narrative inspiration. For example, in the context of a rural community in Myanmar, with interviews being conducted, as is common, in the meeting hall of a Buddhist monastery, what effect does that location have on narrative forms and content? Another analytical approach strand occasionally utilized is discourse analysis, which focuses on the forms of speech which are used to convey ideas and thoughts, and how those forms are chosen and employed.

The interpretative process, critical in the analysis of narratives, focused primarily on 'coherence' on three levels: global, local and themal. Global coherence, where the goal of the communication by the narrator is analysed, is significant: what does the narrator hope to achieve through the telling of *this* story, using *these* words, in *this* way? Thus, a narrator has global coherence in terms of a goal of the communication, has local coherence in terms of particular linguistic



devices, and themal coherence in terms of repeated chunks of narrative relating to a theme. Key themes for analysis also relate to the key questions and issues, where the aspect of origins looks at the 'shaping forces' both internal and external (and which will incorporate elements of religious values, beliefs etc.), the aspect of process looks at the way in which the 'artefact' is sustained (and which will incorporate elements of how social cohesion is maintained, and also look for who is excluded) and the aspect of achievements, which looks at self-perception and reflections on how members themselves conceptualize the group and its links to resilience. Thus, the narratives are collected loosely around these three dimensions, which also are applied to the analysis framework, as many single narratives may in fact include all three dimensions.

Narrative analysis as an approach to qualitative research differs from many other forms of qualitative research in that, by seeking to elicit a whole narrative as the basic unit of data, the person being interviewed is less guided by specific questions from the researcher. This may help avoid the pitfall of the interviewee attempting to give the 'hoped for response' to the researcher. Moreover, by analysing whole narratives, this approach also takes note of data in the wider context of the 'story', both in terms of what else is revealed in the story, as well as the order and structure of the story itself. The nature of narrative research means that large volumes of data are gathered from a smaller sample size. With an emphasis on depth, rather than breadth, this form of research places value on openness, attempting to reduce responder bias often inherent to more closed inquiry techniques such as questionnaires. Where such open techniques are used, with such small sample sizes, critical questions need to be addressed regarding first the validity, and then the generalizability of the research findings. However, whilst there may be limits to the generalization to populations, there is the possibility of generalization to 'generalization to

theoretical propositions' (Radley & Chamberlain, 2001, p. 324) or 'conceptual inferences about a social process' (Riessman, 2008, p. 13).

In considering the issue of validity in narrative analysis, Catherine Riessman proposes four approaches. First is the criterion of persuasiveness. 'Is the interpretation reasonable and convincing?' (Riessman, 1993, p. 65). She posits that 'Persuasiveness is at its greatest when theoretical claims are supported with evidence from the informants' accounts and when alternative interpretations of the data are considered' (ibid). Secondly, 'an investigator can take results back to those studied' (ibid, p. 66), essentially 'testing' the hypothesis with the original researchee community. Thirdly, Riessman describes 'coherence' on the three levels described earlier: global, local and themal. Thus, a narrator has global coherence in terms of a goal of the communication, has local coherence in terms of particular linguistic devices, and themal coherence in terms of repeated chunks of narrative relating to a theme. Finally, there is the future orientated criterion of pragmatic use, whereby the validity of the interpretation is measured by the extent to which it becomes the basis for others' work. This criterion is 'socially constructed and assumes the socially constructed nature of science' (ibid, p. 68). In considering the validity of narrative research projects, ultimately it is the reader who, applying these and other criterion, makes a judgement regarding validity.

Based on the theoretical perspective and research questions, the same data may be analysed using different approaches. In this research, approaches which focus on excluded elements (microstoria), plot and theme analysis were considered likely to be the most fruitful. Analysis utilized elements of microstoria, plot and themal analysis to draw meaning from the data around the research questions. Initial coding was done using the transcribed Burmese text, and was done by myself and Daw Mya Thida Soe, who had also conducted a number of the interviews.

By coding and comparing our coding, we were then able to check and clarify our understanding of certain words and phrases, as well as to jointly develop categories and themes. Initial categories and themes were then applied to the coding of subsequent narratives, allowing themes to emerge. These themes were then analysed in relation to their occurrence in different village contexts, in relation to the identity of the narrator, and with reference to the narrative in which a particular theme was expressed. For example, the descriptive form of a particular reason for forming organizations may differ based on the context of the village, or whether the narrator is male, female, or has some form of authority in the village, and the narrative situation of their description of the organization's formation (e.g. in relation to assistance they received, or in relation to a village event).

### **Lost in translation: qualitative research in a multi-lingual setting**

With its focus on the entire narrative as a unit of data, and not only the 'voiced' elements, but the myriad unspoken elements of narrative telling (Cassell, Nakano, Bickmore, Sidner, & Rich, 2001), the issue of language is significant, more so in contexts where the research is conducted in a different language. Cross-language research 'describes studies in which a language barrier is present between qualitative researchers and their participants 'often involving 'the use of interpreters and translators to mediate a language barrier between researchers and participants' (Squires, 2008, p. 2).

Beyond the surface challenges of adequate representation of words and phrases (Larson, 1984), critical issues in multi-lingual research include power, gender and agency (Spivak, 2012). There is a relationship between 'social logic, social reasonableness, and social practice. People's lives and experiences inform their translation' (Temple, 2002, p. 846). In this case, 'Translators are active producers in research rather than neutral conveyors of messages' (ibid). The assumption

that because someone speaks a language, or is of the same ethnicity, that ‘he or she can represent a culture’ is challenged: ‘Speaking the language may not be enough’ (Temple, 2002, p. 848).

Where translators are used, it is important to consider the ‘embeddedness’ of the translators in the research processes and in their own context and culture. Drawing on research from a mental health project in northern England which utilized support workers in culturally sensitive contexts, Bogusia Temple writes of the way in which translators are both central and marginal:

[t]ranslators remain shadowy figures whose presence is usually not even mentioned. If the researcher and the research participants can have an influence on the research, then others involved, such as translators, must also be worthy of consideration. There is a need for some debate with translators in research and, by extension, workers employed to investigate the views of communities that do not use English as their first language. (Temple, 2002, p. 851).

This requires ‘that the use of translators during cross-language studies requires strategic advanced planning on the part of the researcher’ (Squires, 2008, p. 10), where translation, either oral, or of written transcripts, may represent an act of re-narration (Baker, 2014).

In the case of this research, language issues were present at three stages. Firstly, although I am fluent in both written and spoken Burmese, based on 15 years of study, there inevitably remain potential gaps in my understanding, particularly where colloquial or regional expressions are used. Thus, although I did not use translators in the interview process, I conducted interviews together with local researchers, and made audio recordings of the interviews to enable discussion and clarification at a later date.

Secondly, in analysis: I have considerable experience with collaborative analysis of narratives (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002) where narratives are analysed together with the research team,

rather than by a single analyst. This enables discussions of the text in their original language, and the emergence of themes, constructs and theories which are initially expressed in the language used by the research participants. Thus, as described at the end of the previous section, coding of interviews was done both by myself and a research colleague (Mya Thida Soe), whereby we coded independently and then compared and discussed our coding, developing categories and themes to use on subsequent interviews. Conducting initial coding using the original Burmese language transcripts also enabled ideas to be initially located in their language of expression. Subsequently we translated the categories, themes and texts into English, which meant that translation took place at the level of representing ideas and their supporting data into English, rather forming the ideas based on translated data, which leaves more room for mis-representation of data through mistranslation or misunderstanding of the meaning, or nuance of a piece of text or narrative.

The third area where translation issues arise is in the representation of research data and findings into English, whether of translated text, or representation of ideas. This becomes a challenge where certain words or concepts (including one such as *parahita*) have no easy equivalent. Here, again, the value of collaborative analysis is underscored: rather than focusing on translation of words, I discussed with Mya Thida Soe, and other Burmese language experts such as U Nyunt Han<sup>32</sup>, how to explain certain ideas using a different language, in a way which connects, as far as possible, the worlds of the reader and the research communities.

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<sup>32</sup> U Nyunt Han is my former Burmese language teacher, and more recently advisor to the Minister for Information, and on the editorial board of 'Myanmar Affairs', a bilingual publication of academic articles on the socio-political history of Myanmar.

## **Limitations of narrative research**

Given the large volume of data generated by the narratives, this research utilised a small sample size relative to other forms of research. Narrative research places emphasis on depth and values the 'innocence' of the respondent by not framing the question within a set parameter of questions. The usefulness of more qualitative research studies lies more in generalization to theory than generalizability to populations (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). However, a focus on story precisely enables the representation of potentially marginal perspectives. As Ungar explains: 'The deeper, or thicker, description of a particular reality construction, is more likely to produce data which reflects the standpoints of marginalized people, and their less privileged social discourses of social reality' (Ungar, 2003, p. 45).

Given the purposive nature of the sampling of both communities and respondents, the sample cannot be considered 'representative' of rural populations in Myanmar; however, as described above, the findings here are intended to provide 'thick<sup>33</sup>' descriptions to inform and shape understandings (Geertz, 1994), rather than purporting to be a representation of the experiences or perspectives of any particular group.

As with many different forms of research, narrative analysis, whilst seeking to reduce the power gradient between interviewer and respondent, nonetheless may still attract responder bias. This may be particularly true where the interviewers were perceived to be from, or part of, a non-governmental organization perceived to be providing material help to the community. However, the initial consent process, explaining the identity of the interviewers and the nature of the

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<sup>33</sup> Thick description is the description of a human behaviour, or a phenomenon in a way which describes not only the behaviour or the phenomenon, but aspects of its context, enabling it to be more meaningful to outsider not familiar with the context (Geertz, 1994).

research, coupled with the open nature of the interview process, with interviews focusing on the life story of the respondent, made it more difficult for the respondents to perceive what exactly the interviewers wanted. The interviews were collected in the context of a relationship between the participants and researcher. This raises the issue of bias where that relationship does not conform to the normally expected parameters of interviewer-interviewee relationship. As discussed above, issues of translation and interpretation relating to language, may also represent limitations to this research.

To some degree, the researcher bias present in question framing can be reduced by eliciting whole narratives, enabling the narrator more autonomy in the narrative telling. However, interpretation bias still remains an issue, and given the multitude of possible 'readings' of a text the opportunities to overlay a text with your own agenda are many. Rachel Redwood states: 'The form of [...] analysis depends largely on the researcher's views on the construction of knowledge (i.e. their epistemology)' (1999, p.674). In that sense 'an analysis of narratives cannot reveal what someone 'really' thinks or feels because any truth is simply a construction, and narratives are skilfully woven to bring into being versions of the self that serve specific purposes' (ibid). This rejects the neutrality of any narrative, or of any interpretation of a narrative.

In qualitative research, and particularly narrative work, the test of 'verity' is in the end the judgment of the reader of the texts and their interpretation, together with the researchers self-declared bias. It is, to some degree, an act of persuasion on the part of the researcher, as Chandler, Lalonde and Teucher describe in 'Culture, Continuity and the Limits of Narrativity':

We proceed in an effort to convince you that sometimes we are in possession of data that has a meaningful narrative structure and that profits from narrative analysis [...] what we

claim and mean to show is that what respondents say in response to this line of inquiry sometimes [...] deserve to be understood as having a narrative structure (Chandler, Lalonde, & Teucher, 2004, pp. 255-256).

This involves ‘interpreting one’s own interpretations, looking at one’s own perspectives from other perspectives, and turning a self-critical eye onto one’s own authority as interpreter and author’ (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000, p. iii). This permits multiple readings, and the bias of this research is that the narratives were reconstructed to demonstrate a particular aspect of the narratives, that which related to beliefs around identity, welfare and community. Whilst multiple reconstructions are possible, I also rejected numerous reconstructions where the internal consistency was minimal, or where the reconstruction, whilst reflecting internal consistency, was not relevant to the research question. This process was aided by seeking the interpretative opinion of the interviewers and transcribers, and by presenting my interpretation and findings to staff of the organization (SPPRG) who worked in the research area, as well as by discussing the findings with experienced Myanmar researchers at a number of research forums.

This last point also speaks to Ardeth Maung Thawngmung’s concerns at the co-location of academic and ‘consultant’ research (Ardeth Thawngmung, 2017), with attendant issues of methodological constraints and ethics. Whilst valid, her concerns need to be examined with reference to specific, rather than generalized contexts. This is perhaps where reflexivity is important: not as narcissistic self-referencing, but scrutiny of ‘the collective scientific unconscious embedded in theories, problems and categories of scholarly judgement’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 40). Beyond the issues already considered, such as language and translation, are issues of power dynamics, which are particularly relevant where research activities are co-located with development processes. This is true for this research, where the



research process was facilitated by SPPRG, a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO), which was also conducting research in the same areas on social welfare. This raises considerable questions of responder bias, where communities may select and shape narratives according to their perceptions of what the researcher wants to hear, and these questions were ever-present in both my interviewing and analysis, as well as an awareness of the particular influence of my own perspectives on the process of listening and understanding.

The political dimensions of any research, particularly research which has less apparent politics, relates to the details of power differentials between different persons and groups involved in the research process, the location of authority on what constitutes 'knowledge', and issues of how knowledge is constructed, owned and traded. It is perhaps the last points that are most salient with reference to Ardeth Thawnghmung's concerns: there are no clear distinctions between extractive and participatory research, only degrees of benefit.

However, in the case of this research, the specifics of the context, with close collaboration with a local NGO (SPPRG) which has a specific mandate for research, not only facilitated the research process in terms of enabling fieldwork, but enabled regular representations and exchanges with the communities concerned, and documentary evidence (in the form of a short film), at their request, to tell their 'story' to a wider national and international audience. That story, told in the following chapters, hinges on two pivotal terms: precarity, and *parahita*.

## Chapter 5

### **Precarity and the ‘moral economy of the peasant’ in rural Myanmar**

In terms of both rural population, which stands at 35 million people, or 70% of the population (Myanmar Population & Housing Census, 2015), and in terms of dependence on the agricultural economy, calculated to be 37.8% of GDP (FAO, 2018), Myanmar remains one of the most rurally distributed countries in the world (World Bank, 2018a; Worldatlas, 2018). Whilst successive governments have placed rural development and transformation of the agriculture sector as priorities for economic development (Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2012), progress has been patchy at best (Haggblade et al., 2014). One of the paradoxes of the development narrative in both Southeast Asia, and in Myanmar itself, is the co-reporting of positive indicators, such as GDP growth, asset ownership and reducing poverty (UNDP, 2015; World Bank, 2016) with a concurrent stream of negative indicators of well-being and vulnerability (Griffiths, 2017f; LIFT/World Bank, 2014a). Apart from issues such as inequalities, and the unequal sharing of resources (Griffiths, 2017d; Rigg, 2016), the ‘development gap’ between growth and development may be best understood using the concept of precarity.

In ‘The Moral Economy of the Peasant’ James C. Scott analyses two episodes of resistance or rebellion by rural communities to explore the moral content of the ‘subsistence ethic’ (Scott, 1976, p. vii) as a means to explore the roots of peasant behaviour in terms other than ‘calories and income’ (ibid). One of events used for his analysis took place in the Delta<sup>34</sup> and central areas of Myanmar. Between December 1930, and June 1931, over 12,000 ‘peasant rebels’ were either

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<sup>34</sup> The Delta typically refers to the low-lying, fertile areas of Ayeyarwaddy Region, and sometimes including villages in the southeastern parts of Yangon Region, irrigated by tributaries of the Ayeyarwaddy River. This area has traditionally been the main site of rice-paddy cultivation in Myanmar.

captured or killed by the colonial government (Scott, 1976, p. 149) in what became known as the Saya San rebellion. Policy changes, falling prices, unsustainable debt, an erosion of traditional welfare, and land forfeiture by smallholders into the hands of wealthier, often foreign merchants (Turnell, 2009; Wells & Kyaw Thu Aung, 2014) were the context for that uprising, reflecting conditions best described as precarious. Scott describes the paradox of ‘a booming export economy [and] growing concern with rural indebtedness and poverty’ (Scott, 1976, p. 10). The ‘moral economy’ described by Scott draws attention to ‘peasant conceptions of social justice, or rights and obligations, of reciprocity’ (ibid, p. vii). Nearly a century later, rural conditions in Myanmar are increasingly being described in the same paradoxical terms as Scott, suggesting the value, in both research and policy terms, of a re-examination of the contemporary ‘moral economy’ of the peasant.

This chapter will firstly look at the broader context of rural communities in Myanmar, and then more specifically at those in the central Dry Zone, the location of the fieldwork. The conditions of rural precarity will be explored, as a framing for the emergent responses to precarity epitomized by the community welfare organizations. As described in the previous chapter, both precarity and the responses to it are local. This chapter, then, will look firstly at the local conditions of precarity, and the following chapter will analyse the particular responses to precarity found in these communities.

## **Locating the rural**

Human geography has challenged the neat distinctions between urban and rural (Rigg, 2001), acknowledging the increasingly fluid nature of classifications, with significant ‘interpenetration of rural and urban’ (Rigg, 2001, p. 6), not only through increased mobility and access to technology, but through changes in livelihood practice within communities classified as rural

(Byres, 1986). Whilst formulations for classifying rural areas draw on a variety of approaches (Bengs & Schmidt-Thomé, 2006; Braga, Remoaldo, & Fiúza, 2016; Cloke, 1977), the definitions of rural utilized in the 2014 Census in Myanmar derive more from historical administrative classification than any contemporary assessment<sup>35</sup>. Moreover, rural life and livelihoods are extremely diverse: geographically, the term ‘rural’ is applied equally to a host of ecosystems (Rao & Ibanez, 2003), ranging from remote mountainous areas across the Western, Northern and Eastern borders, the flat, dry plains of Central Myanmar, the low-lying, rice-paddy rich Delta in the Southwest, riverine communities living along the 1,300 mile Ayeyarwaddy river, or other rivers running through the heart of the country, and to communities living on the 1,385 miles of coastline stretching from the mouth of the Naf River in Rakhine State to Kawthoung, the southernmost tip of Myanmar (Myanmar Population & Housing Census, 2015). Rural livelihoods range from lowland rice paddy farming to coastal fishing, aquaculture, goat and pig rearing, growing beans and pulses in the sandy soil of the Dry Zone, and rice, corn and other cash crops in upland areas.

Central to the organization of rural life is the village, which exists both as a physical entity defined by administrative boundaries, as well as ‘set of social norms, structures and processes that underpin the operation of the village as a social and cultural unit’ (Rigg, 2001, pp. 29-31). Besides this is rural life as ‘a loose ideological construct, sometimes encapsulated in the term rural/village ‘idyll’ (ibid). Rural life, imagined in terms of the ‘village’, is considered the idyllic ‘norm’ of Myanmar life, celebrated in poems in children’s school primers like *ဒု.ရာ* (*dot ywa*, my

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<sup>35</sup> ‘The Census used the Urban/Rural definition as classified by the General Administration Department (GAD), where Cities, State/Region capitals and Wards are considered urban and Village Tracts are considered rural’ (Myanmar Population & Housing Census, 2015) Although somewhat opaque, the definitions largely derive from classification as urban, after which everything else is automatically rural.

village) and popular films, where burnt-out movie stars fall in love with village life and village women. This means that the self-image of rural communities is derived from administrative, economic and social realities, as well as more idealistic, aesthetic notions of what a village *should* be like.

Although the sheer diversity of rural living prevents generalization, a number of common features of rural communities in Myanmar, even those which are becoming increasingly urbanized, are possible to describe, particularly in terms of spatial, social and cultural organization. Firstly, key elements to spatial organization of a community relate to livelihoods, common buildings and cultural norms of organization (Rigg, 2001). In most rural communities in Myanmar, livelihoods are proximate to living areas; even where fields or rivers were not close by, spare land is used for animal husbandry, food production (such as pounding small dried prawns into black, fermented fish paste in coastal areas) or storage and repair of livelihood equipment, such as nets and ploughs. Fencing of property, usually made of bamboo, sometimes incorporating thorn branches, mainly serves to keep domestic animals in, rather than neighbours out. Although there may be a diversity of roles within a community, often between wealthier, land-owning farmers and poorer day labourers, community life revolves around a main livelihood, and frequently, one or two main crops. Supplementary livelihoods, such as weaving or sewing, are also largely home based, and are frequently undertaken by women. However, urbanization has enabled access to a range of cash-based livelihoods, such as construction, or blanket sewing in villages in the Dry Zone, which tended to be done in common areas, under the management of local businessmen.

Most villages have at least one small village shop to sell daily necessities, such as salt and oil; a common water supply (either a well, or a village pond); at least one religious building, and sometimes a school. Religious buildings, typically a Buddhist monastery in majority Buddhist areas, function as a community centre and meeting place. The presence of a religious building is considered a sign of ‘development’, representing both evidence of surplus income and moral quality. On a research trip to Myepon in Rakhine State as part of another project, one village I visited measured their poverty by the fact that they had not been able to build a proper monastery for the Buddhist monks in their village. Likewise, neighbouring villages frequently compete to build the largest and most elaborate monastery, and the size of the monastic population supported is considered a sign not only of the wealth of the village, but also of the moral status. Golden stupas in the grounds of monasteries, or at key points in the village, are considered to provide spiritual protection for the village (Longhurst, 1995). Many monasteries occupy the physical high ground in villages, providing a place of shelter during floods or cyclones (Jaquet & Walton, 2013).

Official administrative arrangements include a village headman, who has at various times been selected, appointed or elected, depending on national politics. At the time of writing in 2018, a village headman is elected by the village, and assisted by an appointed official from the General Administration Department. Under the military government, village councils were organized under the State Peace and Development Committee, with the village head serving as the Chairman of the Committee. Currently, there has been a revival of sorts of the ‘village elders’, who are typically older men who have education or positions of power or wealth in the community, and many of whom have served in various committees in the past.

The degree of authority exerted by religious leaders in rural communities appears to vary, and this appears to have an influence on the form of community social organizations, which will be discussed further in subsequent chapters. Whilst village development, administration and more officially prescribed governance is generally delivered by the headman and village administrator, village elders and religious leaders-particularly if the religious leader is an abbot (senior monk) tend to exert an influence over major decisions, and are often called to adjudicate, or provide ‘moral guidance’ in cases of dispute or conflict.

All the villages selected for this research would self-identify as Buddhist. In Buddhist villages, the maintenance of Buddhist monks by donations (*dana*) is considered a corporate responsibility (Gil, 2008), both in terms of daily contributions of food, and frequent but irregular donations, particularly at festival times.

The daily dimensions of support are highly gendered: women in each household are expected to rise early and prepare food, as around dawn, monks will walk through the village, passing by each house in a silent line, with alms bowls to receive food. This is usually cooked rice, or curry, placed carefully into the alms-bowls by the village women, who stand in front of their homes, usually dressed with a brown sash across their shoulder to signify Buddhist devotion and virtue:

As a group they walk single file according to seniority, that is, ordination date. The robes are arranged formally, covering both shoulders. The monks walk barefooted into a village and then from house to house, not favouring rich or poor neighbourhoods, accepting, but not requesting, what is freely donated, that is, dropped into one’s bowl. Everything dropped into the bowl, according to ancient tradition, is simply mixed together, since monks are asked not to favour one food over another [...] Monastics are instructed not to endear themselves to the lay with the intention of improving their intake during alms

rounds, not to ask for anything directly except in an emergency, not to express thanks for donations received, and to receive without establishing eye contact. This ritualized behaviour can be seen every day in virtually any village or city in Burma (Bikkhu cintita dinsmore, 2010 n.p.).

Particularly in more close-knit, rural communities, the corporate performance of *dana* is expected of every household, even those with modest means<sup>36</sup>. More substantive contributions are made either at festival times, or self-initiated donation events, which are often accompanied by a ceremonial feeding of monks, after which the rest of the village is invited to join in the feast.

However, one of the common refrains in the interviews I conducted as part of a recent qualitative study of rural life in Myanmar (Griffiths, 2017f) was the perception of the decline of village life, largely as a result of the declining viability of rural livelihoods. Increased urbanization, a switch to non-agricultural livelihoods, the effects of technology in rendering generational gaps, and substantial out-migration of young people, with one in five rural households having at least one member who has migrated, have all contributed to a sense of rapid change in rural life (Ito & Griffiths, 2016; Myanmar Population & Housing Census, 2015).

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<sup>36</sup> *Dana*, or giving, is one of the central tenets of Burmese Buddhist practice. One of the triggers for the 2007 Saffron revolution was the consequence of rising fuel costs on inflation, and food costs, resulting in increased difficulty of households to provide daily alms to monks. However, this should not be then interpreted as a self-serving protest by monks deprived of subsistence. Rather, it needs to be interpreted in the light of the more complex relationship between donor and recipient in the practice of *dana*; a decline in the opportunity to practice *dana* denies the opportunity to donors to practice a key tenet of Buddhist life, and acquire *kutho* (good merit). Hence, the act of monks 'going on strike' is literally described as 'upturning the alms bowl' and in 2007 was directed at government officials as a deliberate act to deny them access to meritorious acts.



#### Four plagues: the changing rural landscape

Rural life, and rural identity is often described in relation to livelihood: thus, most people in rural communities would identify as လယ်သမား (*le-thama*, literally meaning field-worker, but sometimes used to distinguish between a farmer who works his own land တောင်သူလယ်သမား (*taungthu lethama*) and casual workers who do not work their own land). Agricultural work, the work of planting main crops (usually rice, or beans, pulses and peanuts in the Dry Zone) is described as လယ်လုပ်ငန်း (*le lautkan*) and carries with it a degree of assumption of more traditional agriculture, rather than newer cash crops, and what Rigg describes as a typically ‘safety-first principle where risk avoidance/aversion guides decision making’ (Rigg, 2001, p. 32). However, the assumption of rural life as an unchanging idyllic existence has been challenged at many levels (Rigg, 2001); likewise, rural life is always lived with a spectre of risk and uncertainty. R.H. Tawney, writing of rural life in China, wrote evocatively of the position of the rural population as ‘that of a man standing permanently up to the neck in water, so that even a ripple is sufficient to drown him’ (Tawney, 1937, p. 77).

Traditional construction of risk and disaster in Myanmar folklore alludes to the ‘four plagues’ ကပ်လေးပါး (*Gat Le Ba*). These are ‘King’, ‘Fire’ ‘Water’ and ‘Wind’, referring to both more naturally occurring, and more ‘produced’ risks relating to policies and governance. Indeed, the history of disasters in Myanmar is predominated by conflict and oppression, flooding and earthquakes (ReliefWeb, 2016). Climate change is increasingly acknowledged in connection with natural disasters in Myanmar, where changes in rainfall patterns-particularly shorter and more intense monsoon rains (Endo, Matsumoto, & Lwin, 2009; Sandar Lwin, 2011) have been associated with changes in crop yield, flooding and emergence of pests (Aye Sabay Phyu, 2010).

The reduced duration of the monsoon rain period over the past five decades, down from 179 days to 109 days, is nonetheless associated with higher volume of rainfall (Tun Lwin, 2002). Average temperatures, as well as the number of days of ‘peak’ temperatures are increasing (Zarni Minn, 2016), particularly in central areas. An analysis of narratives of risk in 5 regions in Myanmar noted a complex interaction between climate change and other more ‘inherited’ risks and various ‘risk enablers’, frequently linked to development (Griffiths, 2017f). Table 4 illustrates the commonly described climate change risks, risk enablers, livelihood risks and the commonly described consequences of these changes (Griffiths, 2017a).

*Table 4: summary of risk and hazards described in rural communities*

	<b>Climate change/risk</b>	<b>Risk ‘enabler/enhancer’</b>	<b>Livelihood risk</b>	<b>Consequence</b>
Chin State (Hilly area in West of Myanmar)	Heavy rains leading to landslides	Deforestation for road building	Change from subsistence to cash crops	Roads blocked by landslides, resulting in wholesale crop loss
Shan State (Hilly area in East of Myanmar)	Declining water table	Contamination of water from coal mine runoff	Over-use of artificial fertilizers	Health effects on residents, declining crop yields
Dry Zone (Central Myanmar)	Less predictable rain/unseasonal rain	Commercialization of seed purchase, usually with credit	Have to buy seeds at higher price as ‘out of season’	Increased debt, out-migration
Rakhine (Coastal area in West of Myanmar)	Changing weather pattern and temperature	Broker managed market and fishing equipment owned by brokers not fishermen	Lack of land for alternative livelihoods due to commercial logging concessions	Cyclical debt, out-migration
Delta (Coastal and lowland area in Southwest of Myanmar)	Unpredictable weather, new pests	Scarcity of labour due to out-migration	Increased/unsustainable cost of agriculture	Stop farming, further out-migration
All	Illness	Increasingly available but expensive healthcare	Borrowing, asset liquidation	Out-migration, children out of school, risky work

Of particular relevance to the geographical location of communities featured in this study (the Central Dry Zone) is the interaction between changing rainfall patterns and the commercial restructuring of agriculture. Changes in weather patterns, with shorter, more intense rainfall, and increasingly unpredictable season (rains are too early, too late, or too much), have resulted in a decline in crop yields. However, an increased reliance on purchased (rather than stored) seed, as well as fertilizers, has made out-of-season planting more expensive. As one farmer from Monywa, Sagaing Region put it: ‘When the rains come at the right time, we can [prepare] well [...] but when [intermittent] rains come, we don’t have seed in hand to plant, so have to buy at much higher price, and usually with debt’ (Griffiths, 2017f, p. 9). Whilst the Dry Zone is named as such, reflecting a history of water scarcity, deforestation, frequently by commercial logging, has further threatened water table levels (Lwin Maung Maung Swe, Shrestha, Ebbers, & Jourdain, 2015).

The introduction of new agricultural practices, ostensibly aimed at increasing livelihood diversity, may in turn introduce new vulnerabilities (Goletti, 1999). Greater global connectivity is blamed for the emergence of new pests, such as stem nematodes (Eleven Myanmar, 2017), avian flu outbreaks (Bernama, 2017) and other invasive alien species (Masters & Norgrove, 2010). Better market access may be a blessing and a curse: some farmers in Monywa, Central Myanmar two years ago switched to cucumber growing after developing links with traders who took produce to China. However, a wholesale shift by Chinese merchants to other markets, and in some cases ethnic conflicts resulting in road closures resulted in the loss of a whole years’ crop (Ko Ko Kyaw, 2017). For many, out-migration was the only way to repay the debt for seed, fertilizer and labour.

Second is the issue of market access. Whether for sale of crops, fisheries or livestock, most producers access markets only through a multi-layered network of brokers, which

exposes them to high transaction costs with low bargaining position. The majority of farmers [are] unable to receive a fair price as they have to sell their products soon after harvest when the price is generally low [..thus] the farmers cannot maximize profit which in turn affects the future investment of paddy farmers (Win Pa Pa Soe, Moritaka, & Fukuda, 2015, p. 535).

There is a frequent practice of pre-selling crops in order to access finance to afford seed and fertilizer: this entails the farmer agreeing to sell a proportion of the forthcoming crop to the broker, at a fixed price, essentially taking a loan against the harvest (Khin Moe Kyi, 2012). This increasingly takes place alongside growing debt, both relating to livelihood and other expenditure, such that Myanmar's agriculture-related debt represents a growing threat (Turnell, 2011a).

Conglomerate-led cash farming, such as that introduced over the past 20 years by Thai agro-giant Charoen Pokhpand (CP), whilst offering opportunities for additional income, also introduces new risks:

Contract farming arrangements occurring within a poorly governed agrarian context [...] generally instead brings about more negative impacts, particularly where market concentration, unequal bargaining positions and lack of information allow powerful firms and middlemen to off-load risks to smallholders. This forces down farm gate prices and brings about negative impacts - whether differentially or laterally - such as loss of access to village and household land, water, resources and other assets. Smallholders risk

becoming locked into debt, which can lead to loss of productive assets including livestock and land (Woods, 2015, pp. 5-6).

Changes in agricultural policies, particularly in the aftermath of the introduction of market reforms in the 1990's (Kurosaki, Okamoto, Kurita, & Fujita, 2004a) also have had a significant impact on the rural economy, which is increasingly described as 'debt-driven' (Griffiths, 2015; Turnell, 2011a). As indicated in the previous section, debt represents a growing and alarming trend in rural households: rural households report spending nearly 12% of all income on repaying debt with debt servicing representing the largest expenditure item in 7% of households (Griffiths, 2016c). Unsustainable debt is cited as a leading cause of poverty (Baker, 2016; Griffiths, 2015), with often catastrophic consequences (Griffiths, 2016c). Whilst the distinctions between vulnerability and precarity may be less clear in rural contexts, it is the degree to which risks are increasingly 'produced', and influenced by processes characterized as political, which make the application of the term precarity a more apt description of the rural context in Myanmar. The following section explores the 'produced' nature of risk in rural Myanmar, describing the nature of the precarity found there.

### **Rural precarity: 'between a rock and hard place'?**

In describing socioeconomic changes in rural Nepal, Rigg et al (2016) argue that the changing nature of vulnerability is best understood by articulating the difference between vulnerability 'as a reflection of a pre-existing state of marginality or exposure' and precarity as 'new, produced poverty' linked to development processes paradoxically aimed at reduced poverty and vulnerability (Rigg et al., 2016, pp. 63-64). Where more inherited forms of vulnerability derive from factors such as isolation, limited access to markets and credit, exposure to climactic and other hazards, and lack of political empowerment, the 'produced' vulnerability arises from

policies and processes, including land dispossession (and resettlement to less arable land), market dependencies, unsustainable debt, rising inequalities, out-migration and erosion of the ‘community covenant’ (Rigg et al., 2016, p. 66). To what extent, then, are the conditions in rural communities in Myanmar reflective of a trend towards more ‘produced’ risk and exposure? This section will examine four of the features identified by Rigg et al: inequalities, unsustainable debt, out-migration and the erosion of the community covenant, to explore the nature of vulnerability and precarity in rural Myanmar.

Recent research confirms that rural areas typically experience higher degrees of poverty (UNDP, 2007), inequality (Okamoto, 2008), conflict (Jolliffe, 2015), and out-migration (LIFT/QSEM, 2016). This is despite conditions of increased agricultural yield (LIFT/World Bank, 2014b) and glowing reports of rising levels of infrastructure development and living standards by the World Bank (World Bank, 2017). Whilst there has been some early success in terms of overall production and increased rural incomes, inequalities have risen in tandem with reforms (Kurosaki et al., 2004; Okamoto, 2004; Okamoto, 2008; Pyi Pyi Thant & Calkins, 2009). These are structured around the increased rural-urban disparity, around inequalities by administrative districts in Myanmar (Griffiths, 2017d), and the growing gap between wealthier (usually land-owning) and landless rural households (Griffiths, 2016c; Lwin Lwin Aung, 2016).

Although consistent data on rural incomes is scarce, recent panel surveys of rural livelihoods by LIFT demonstrate a trend towards widening inequalities at household level, with the share of reported income owned by the richest 10% of households increasing to over 40% in 2017 (LIFT, 2018). Inequalities due to landlessness also increase the precarity of a sub-set of rural households who are typically dependent on casual labour in the agricultural sector (LIFT/World Bank, 2014a). Thus, although wages, particularly day-labour wages, have increased, mainly due to

labour shortages caused by higher levels of migration, casual labourers in the agricultural sector increasingly report insufficient income due to the more volatile agricultural economy (LIFT/World Bank, 2014a).

The increasingly unsustainable household debt levels, described earlier, represent a genuine negative trend: previous household survey data from 1997, whilst indicating that household expenditure typically exceeded income in rural areas (Myint, 2011a), does not mention debt servicing and repayment as a significant household expense. Whilst the issue of rural debt is not new itself, newer and more dangerous pathways are contributing to a more rapid rise, including the practice of borrowing against crop yield, which is almost universally disadvantageous to farmers; the lack of low-interest, flexible credit; and the erosive impact of emergency borrowing for health and social crisis, often from high-risk, high-interest sources (Griffiths, 2016c).

The role of serious or sudden illness cannot be underestimated, with out of pocket health expenditure causing financial catastrophe in nearly a quarter of households (Inn Kynn Khaing, Amonov, & Hamajima, 2015). Thus, the impact of ill health is paradoxically exacerbated by the increased availability of healthcare. Where healthcare is available for previously untreatable illnesses, there is an increased expectation to obtain treatment, whatever the cost. Rural poverty surveys in Myanmar show that healthcare costs consume over 10% of rural incomes (Griffiths, 2016c), representing a leading cause of unplanned expenditure and unsustainable debt (Thant Zaw Lwin, Jutatip Sillabutra, & Sukhontha Kongsin, 2011). A typical story involves an illness; the procurement of expensive treatment, which involves borrowing at high interest rates, after which the debt cycle rapidly consumes assets and land. The sheer rapidity of the downward spiral illustrates the notion of being ‘one illness away’ from destitution (Krishna, 2011).

The ‘produced’ element appears significant: whilst improved access to healthcare would certainly provide material benefit, the proportional costs has changed. Surveys from 1997, which included urban households (which would tend to report higher levels of healthcare expenditure anyway) showed that healthcare accounted for less than 2% of all expenditure (Myint, 2011a), compared to 13% of all expenditure by rural households in 2015 (Griffiths, 2016c). Although some illness can be linked to ‘produced’ risks such as environmental hazards (see the examples in Table 4 of ill health due to contaminated water runoff in Shan State), the major ‘produced’ element of risk is, as shown in table 4, the disproportionate costs of healthcare, coupled with a lack of access to any meaningful social protection. This shapes the wider risks associated with illness, where unsustainable debt results in depletion of assets, including land, changing labour patterns towards riskier labour, often by younger household members, and in many cases out-migration.

Landlessness is another significant cause of vulnerability and precarity, and again is linked both to unsustainable debt and land tenure policy. Although intended to partially address issues of land-grabbing and insecure tenancy, new land laws have resulted in, on the one hand, more land transactions and registration, but on the other hand, displacement from land of farmers unable to undertake the registration process (Human Rights Watch, 2016). Forced displacement from traditional land to make way for industrial zones or infrastructure development is a significant contributor to rural precarity, often displacing communities to less fertile land, or peri-urban areas and lifestyles for which rural farmers lack the adaptive capacity and resources (Griffiths, 2018; Physicians for Human Rights, 2014).

Each of these risks is linked, directly or indirectly, to policy frameworks, even when those policies, or provisions, are designed to address risks, such as healthcare provision and land



reform. Thus, the rising costs of healthcare and education, and the absence of any residual crop assurances for farmers (Kurosaki, Okamoto, Kurita, & Fujita, 2004b) lead to an erosion of capital, a shrinking of the margins of ‘success’, such that the risks of using any (rare) surplus income to re-invest in livelihoods outweigh perceived rewards (Dercon, 1996; Griffiths, 2017e). Underemployment remains a serious problem in rural areas (Schmitt-Degenhardt, 2013). Recent studies, including the 2014 census, indicate that one in five households in rural communities has at least one adult member who has migrated for work (Ito & Griffiths, 2016; LIFT/QSEM, 2016; Myanmar Population & Housing Census, 2015), with migration rates higher in communities where the agricultural economy is declining (Ito & Griffiths, 2016). Perhaps reflecting a sense of the lack of viability of the rural economy, increasing numbers of young people and women are migrating (LIFT/World Bank, 2014a), both domestically and overseas. Migration studies describe the often limited choices available to rural migrants in Myanmar (Ito & Griffiths, 2016). Andrew Dorward (2009) categorized rural livelihood strategies into three main types: Hanging In (activities are engaged in to maintain livelihood levels [...] the face of adverse socio-economic circumstances), Stepping Up (current activities are engaged in, with investments in assets to expand these activities) and Stepping Out (existing activities are engaged in to accumulate assets which in time can then provide a base or ‘launch pad’ for moving into different activities, such as migration) (Dorward et al., 2009, pp. 242-243). In reality, migration frequently represents the only viable choice to ‘Hang In’ (Griffiths, 2017f). Localized risk taking, in the form of investing capital resources into different livelihood strategies, is either not possible, or represents an unacceptable risk. Migration, on the other hand, even when undertaken through relatively unknown pathways, may be viewed as a better, and less ‘risky’ choice. In reality, this may result in a simple transference of one kind of precarity for another, especially amongst younger

migrants, both within Myanmar (Chaw Chaw, 2003) and in common destinations such as Thailand (Eberle & Holliday, 2011; Myat Mon, 2010). In some cases, in order to facilitate the process of migration, the sale of assets or land, or high-risk borrowing is needed, resulting in a more precarious state (Si Thu & Ko Ko, 2015).

Is this description of rural vulnerability best described as precarity? I would argue so:

summarizing an in depth, qualitative study of socio-economic conditions in rural Myanmar, I concluded:

This study<sup>37</sup> [...] highlights firstly the changing nature of risks, with the emergence of new hazards and re-iterations of older threats [...] the complex association between development, and development interventions, and the reconfiguration of risks represent a huge challenge for many rural communities, whose existence is best described as precarious [...] A lack of access to information, technology, natural resources and appropriate finance, coupled with an absence of effective social safety nets results in livelihood strategies which are best characterized as risk-averse rather than resilience building (Dercon, 1996). Choices in the face of precarity [are] both complex and fluid, and frequently made with limited information and few realistic options. (Griffiths, 2017f, p. 2).

Reflecting on the Nepalese context, Rigg et al summarized in very similar terms:

Farming, in this way, was becoming riskier even for those few households with good-sized holdings [...] Farming was gradually losing its ability to deliver the income to

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<sup>37</sup> The study cited here is 'Resilience in Rural Myanmar: qualitative analysis of rural household narratives'. This was a study on resilience and coping strategies in rural Myanmar, commissioned by the Livelihood and Food Security Trust Fund (LIFT). The field research was conducted between October and December 2016, and findings published in 2017 as an internal publication. As the lead researchers of this study, myself and four colleagues interviewed 150 rural households across six different regions of Myanmar. The study explored exposure to risk, perception of risk, vulnerability and coping strategies.

support a socially acceptable level of subsistence. This was why people were looking to opportunities outside farming and beyond the local area. Farming, in other words, was changing from a way of life, with imbrications of social obligation, to a business where the profit motive was ascendant (Rigg et al., 2016, p. 71).

This points us to the fourth aspect of rural precarity, that of the ‘community covenant’, which refers to the elements described by James C. Scott (Scott, 1976, p. vii) as the ‘moral economy’: social justice, welfare and reciprocity. The next section considered the status of the ‘moral economy’ of rural communities in Myanmar.

### **Saya San Redux? The moral economy of Myanmar’s peasants**

Whilst appealing to millenarian Buddhist beliefs (Maitrii Aung-Thwin, 2011), what enabled Saya San’s movement to have mass appeal was ‘the subsistence crisis of the peasantry to which he appealed’ (Scott, 1976, p. 150), where a crisis of falling prices and unsustainable debt resulted in widespread land forfeiture: ‘a crisis [which] threatened to precipitate a large proportion of Lower Burma’s peasantry over social and economic thresholds from which a recovery was unlikely’ (*ibid*).

One critical element of the Saya San rebellion was the perceived decline in the moral economy of peasant life, which revolved around a failure on the part of the State to maintain two core conditions: limits to the legitimate claims on peasant incomes by moneylenders and the State, and distribution of the product of the land in a way which guarantees subsistence (Scott, 1976, p. 10). This defines reciprocity beyond localized, village-level mutual assistance. In Scott’s and Ferguson’s readings reciprocity also characterizes the expectations of distribution of goods, and in many cases forbearance, by wealthier community members, elites and the State, in order to

maintain the lives of other, usually poorer community members (Ferguson, 2015; Scott, 1976).

As Scott explains:


The norm of reciprocity and the right to subsistence are firmly joined. It is the right to subsistence that defines the key reciprocal duty of elites, the minimal obligation that they owe to those from whom they claim labour and grain (Scott, 1976, p. 182).

In contemporary rural life in Myanmar, which people are regarded as the ‘elites’, occupying a certain status of both power and responsibility, and from whom distribution would be expected?

These can be divided into perhaps four groups: more distant elites, such as the State; successful migrants who originated from the village, but now live abroad; businessmen and landlords in the village<sup>38</sup>, and authority figures such as village elders and administrators. Each would, to some degree, be expected to provide assistance, or protection to community members, and in turn expect some form of loyalty. However, these positions are not static: subject to changes in fortune, policy and out-migration (Kelly, 2011). To what extent, though, are these elites fulfilling the expectations of distribution to sustain life in rural communities?

The lack of welfare provision by the State, despite recent policy changes, is stark (Infante Villarroel, 2015a). A survey of over 6,000 rural households across 6 different regions found that whilst half of households had experienced a major shock or crisis, such as crop failure, illness, loss of livelihood, drought or flood in the previous 12 months, less than 1% of these reported receiving any assistance from government (LIFT, 2018). The majority of welfare assistance still comes from non-State sources, such as family, neighbours, village associations and religious organizations (Griffiths, 2016c). The most common coping response to a shock or crisis was borrowing money, with or without selling assets; over 60% of households engaged in primarily

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<sup>38</sup> The commonly used term is  *thu-htay* meaning ‘boss’ or ‘rich person’.

erosive coping behaviour in response to shocks, including borrowing, drawing down savings, selling assets or pre-selling seeds/crops. Even where households reported receiving some form of assistance, the main form received was loans (84% of all reported assistance), and the main source of assistance were relatives or neighbours (LIFT, 2018).

Assistance from more local elites, such as businessmen and authorities, also represents a mixed picture: a recent survey of poverty and vulnerability in rural Myanmar identified a lack of locally based employers<sup>39</sup> as a key contributor to community poverty. Although recent administrative reforms have resulted in somewhat more transparency, the perception of village administrators is frequently negative. They are seen as either hamstrung by conflicting administrative demands from higher level authorities, or prey to the corruption endemic within Myanmar's governance (LIFT/World Bank, 2014a). Either way, as a village elder interviewed for the long-term Qualitative Socio-Economic Monitoring (QSEM) study conducted in rural areas of Myanmar stated: 'Village heads are rarely good. And good village heads are really rare' (LIFT/World Bank, 2014a, p. 54).

Out-migration, whilst being intricately connected with the rural economy with its effects on seasonal agricultural labour, has in many cases had a negative impact on the viability of farming. Out-migration may make existing community arrangements, both for collective labour and welfare, unviable, and at the same time introduce new vulnerabilities, such as more isolated older persons (Knodel, 2014). At the same time, successful migrants, usually those who have migrated overseas, frequently contribute significant amounts of funding not only to their own family, but to their community (Rual Lian Thang, 2012). Recent research has shown how the presence of community welfare organizations is paradoxically stronger in areas of greater out-migration (Ito

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<sup>39</sup> The questionnaire used the specific term ဘုရား meaning 'boss' or 'rich person'.

& Griffiths, 2016), suggesting the presence and efficacy of ‘social remittances’ (Levitt, 1998, p. 927), including transfers not only of money, but of ideas and impetus from migrants, returning either permanently or sporadically (Levitt & Lamba-Nieves, 2011).

The role of religious institutions in the moral economy of rural villages in Myanmar is more problematic to assess. By using various indicators, such as participation in religious ceremonies, levels of financial contribution to religious institutions and the status, and indeed expansion of religious (particularly Buddhist) institutions, religiosity in Myanmar currently exhibits a strong upward trend (Future World Giving, 2016; McCarthy, 2015; McCarthy, 2016a). Recent surveys suggest that, whilst average household income levels remained stagnant or decreased, the proportion of income reported as donations had increased (LIFT, 2018), with nearly two-thirds of households reporting donating more than 10% of their income in the previous month in the form of charitable donations, mostly to, or through religious organizations (McCarthy, 2016c). At the village level, as described earlier, the Buddhist monastery functions as a community centre, as well as a focal point for the moral well-being of the community, both through formal means, such as festivals, initiating monks and teaching events by the clergy, and by less formal means, whereby villagers would seek the advice and guidance of Buddhist monks for disputes, marriages and social affairs. At another level, as with the Saya San context, nationalist Buddhist movements originating largely outside the rural context are nonetheless infiltrating rural areas, as evidenced by widespread support, mostly by women from central, rural areas of Myanmar, for new laws restricting marriage and religious conversion (Nyan Hlaing Lynn, 2017). Insightful analysis by Melyn McKay shows how support for such laws is not only grounded in perceptions of Buddhist female virtue, but out of a desire to protect the rights of women:

The ‘Race and Religion’ laws are thus seen [by the women who support them] as a means of elevating Burmese customary law and ensuring that Buddhist women who chose to marry non-Buddhist men understand the rights that they may waive by converting [...] this is [...] a concern [...] about protecting all Buddhist women in the country from anything that might curtail their religious practice or access to certain rights (McKay & Khin Chit Win, 2018, p. 2).

Here, issues of precarity and religious institutional influence intersect, as explained by Matthew Walton in his analysis of the role of women in the growth of the nationalist *Ma Ba Tha*<sup>40</sup> movement:

It is not unusual, as such, for the experience of ontological insecurity and precarity to generate social expressions of these anxieties, as well as culturally specific constructions of a dangerous and threatening ‘Other’<sup>41</sup>, which in turn serves to clarify expectations for moral behaviour (Walton et al., 2015).

The broader contours, then, of contemporary rural life in Myanmar strongly suggest both conditions of precarity and significant changes to the moral economy, and in patterns strikingly similar to those described nearly a century ago associated with the Saya San rebellion. How then, in the narratives of the communities participating in this research, located in Sagaing Region in the central Dry Zone, have conditions of precarity shaped the moral economy of their village? In short-what localized experiences of precarity are associated with localized responses to that

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<sup>40</sup> *Ma Ba Tha* is an abbreviated for အမျိုးဘာသာ which is commonly translated ‘protection of race and religion’. Laws were enacted in 2015 to restrict marriage between people of different religions, conversion from one religion to another, and polygamy.

<sup>41</sup> In case of *Ma Ba Tha* and similar movements, the ‘Other’ is constructed firstly as Muslims, and the anyone who in some way is seen to be supportive or protective of them.

precarity? The final section of this chapter will focus more specifically on data from the fieldwork conducted in the villages listed in the previous chapter.

### **In the heartland, on the edge: rural communities in Sagaing Region**

Sagaing Region, located in the northwest of Myanmar, has two distinct topographical areas.

There are the remote, mountainous and more sparsely populated areas to the north and west, and the flat, dry plains south and east of the Chindwin river which contain over half the population and the bulk of the agricultural output of rice, beans, pulses and groundnuts (Myanmar Population & Housing Census, 2015). In these low-lying areas, the site of my field research, the majority of the population are ethnic Bamar, and self-identify as Buddhist. Even where non-Buddhists live in the village, their identity was referenced to Burmese or Buddhist identity in some way, as one village elder reported:

We're all Burmese Buddhist here. Well, there is that one person who is Christian, but they're married to a Burmese, so it's OK (Male Village elder, Hpwa Saw village).

This conflation of ethnic and religious identity, and the framing of non-Bamar and non-Buddhists by their reference to Bamar and Buddhist norms, is a significant factor in the discussions in chapters 8 and 9 on the limits of localized welfare arrangements which are derived from Buddhist ideas and values. Further to the north, and west of the plains of Sagaing Region, the more sparsely populated mountainous regions are populated mainly by Bamar, Chin and Naga, and with sizeable Christian populations in both Naga and Chin communities.

As you drive into Sagaing Region, having turned west off the main Yangon-Mandalay Highway, the striking feature of the drive past village after village sited in the middle of dusty brown fields, are the pagodas. I counted, on left or right, around one per minute of driving, visible from the road. Most were in the standard golden stupa form, but a few more elaborate versions decorate



the horizon, and all are overshadowed by the 130 metre high standing Buddha at *Bodhi Tahtaung*, around 30 minutes' drive from Monywa town, at a site which also includes over half a million smaller Buddha images and a 95 metre long reclining Buddhist statue. This illustrates, firstly, not only the pre-eminence of Buddhism in the area, but to evidence of the use of surplus wealth for very visible, material expressions of devotion, not only to larger, public temples, but to the pagoda in each village.

At the same time, on the drive, agricultural practice is visible: whilst a few tractors and mechanized harvesters are visible, they are still vastly outnumbered by ox-carts, often seen with huge piles of harvested feed or produce. Small signposts stapled to every tree advertise various brands of fertilizer, and every roadside stall appears to be held together with plastic tarpaulin sheets advertising one of the three main mobile phone networks in Myanmar.

Turning off now towards villages in Myaung Township, the road goes southwards onto a small peninsular, at whose southern tip is confluence of the Ayeyarwaddy and Chindwin Rivers, and where the villages which form the bulk of this research located. This fact of geography shapes much of the experience of rural life in Myaung. For many of the villages, the seasonal rise of river levels means that for much of the year, arable land is submerged, and not only can farming thus not be done, but travel in and out of villages, normally possible on dirt tracks, is now possible only by boat. A small irony, then, that the words for 'boat' and 'cart' are distinguishable only by a minor inflexion of the vowel sound. Previously, some villages on the shoreline were frequent calling points for river boats traveling to and from Mandalay. However, the opening of the longest bridge in Myanmar, downstream in Pakokku, in 2012, signalled the decline of river transport, leaving many of the villages more isolated. Here, groundnuts, beans and pulses, and

some rice are grown when water levels recede, but as one male village elder put it: ‘for the rest of the year, it is hard to survive’ (Shwe Pauk Pin village).

In this area, traditional agriculture remains the norm: but as in other areas, unreliable rains, lower yields and unstable prices have severely undermined the viability of traditional agriculture.

We do traditional agriculture, but these days it is often not enough. We have to try and find work in nearby towns (Male group leader, Ko Taung Kan Village).

Even attempts at innovations and cash crops are risky: following a successful year of selling cucumbers to brokers from China, villagers in The Pyay Daw expanded their planting the following year, with good results. Unfortunately, the broker never returned, and in the absence of buyers, the crop was left to rot, resulting in huge losses. For younger village members, the only option is migration, either to Mandalay, or, via a network of brokers, overseas, either to Thailand or Malaysia, or increasingly, the Middle East, where jobs in construction create huge migrant labour demands.

As with other areas, health crises are perhaps the most tangible challenge. The need for emergency transportation for sick people to hospitals and clinics is a major part of the narrative of formation of welfare organizations, described in more detail in the next chapter. But whilst indicators of health themselves tend to show a picture of improvement (UNDP, 2007; UNICEF, 2012), it is the cost of healthcare, and the cost of death (funeral costs, essentially) which represents a threat to household security:

When there’s a funeral, they have to pay. For them, that’s like reaching the worst point, they just can’t manage, they just don’t have it, so all they can do is borrow (Female group member, South Quarter).

Whilst access to micro-finance has expanded, both through government led programmes and private providers, most either require significant collateralization or personal guarantees, and are almost exclusively limited to livelihood investment. Whilst they have reduced reliance on high-interest loans for livelihoods, it is the other crises for which localized loans provided by village-based money lenders are still needed. These are easily accessible through personal networks, but have higher interest rates, sometimes up to 15%. This type of loan requires significant collateral, which is at risk of forfeiture if the loan is defaulted. This kind of borrowing accounts for at least a third of all household debt in the study area and is an almost ubiquitous presence in the narratives of precarity. Debts following from a crisis tend to rapidly accumulate:

I haven't repaid all my debts yet. I borrowed money not only from my relatives but also from others. Also, we mortgaged some of our properties to repay the debt. I have a lot of debt to repay to others. When I failed to repay them, the debt increased. It is about more than 1 million [kyat]<sup>42</sup> at the current time (Female Household Head, Monywa Township).

It is against the backdrop of these conditions, then, that the emergence of new forms of village social organizations is taking place. However, I will argue here that the expressions of welfare are not simply collective responses to acute needs: rather, the emergent forms of co-dependence represent a form of politics, a form of defiance, rooted within the framework ideas of 'justice and legitimacy' (Scott, 1976, p. 188). As Scott suggests:

A central feature of the peasant's reaction to the violation of his rights is its moral character. By refusing to recognize the peasantry's basic social rights as its obligation, the elite forfeits any rights it had to peasant production [...] Defiance is now normatively justified. A peasant whose subsistence hangs in the balance faces more than a personal

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<sup>42</sup> Equivalent to around US\$750, and representing over 50% of the median annual household income for the area

problem: he faces a social failure [...] it confers on him [...] a history, a political consciousness, and a perception of the moral structure of his society (1976, pp. 188-189).

The rural communities in this study exist in conditions best described as precarious:

unfavourable agricultural policies and practice, an absence of effective welfare, rising debt, and significant levels of out-migration all eroding both financial and social capital. Whilst reciprocity is a key part of the moral economy, mutual assistance is limited by the failure of adequate redistribution from elites, such as the State. In the 1920's and 1930s', collective responses amongst rural communities to precarious conditions took the form of *wunthanu* associations, which addressed village welfare through various means, eventually becoming a key part of the nationalist movements of the Saya San rebellion. In 'Freedom from Fear', Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, now the State Counsellor for the new Government of Myanmar, but then writing as an imprisoned leader of a nascent democratic movement, wrote movingly of some of the early writings of the *Boh Tika* (On Europeans), which 'reflect [...] the early *wunthanu* awareness of the problems created by colonization and the desire to protect traditional Burmese values' (Aung San Suu Kyi, 1991, p. 149). Using vivid poetic language, the *Boh Tika* describes a wedding in Upper Burma:

Gifts of land, cattle, grain and household implements are showered upon the bridal couple [conjuring] a picture of rural abundance. But in spite of the early promise the couple fall into debt, not through improvidence, but through the onslaught of irresistible economic forces. They are rendered to selling their beloved pair of oxen as well as a plot of land. Thus debt [...] and land alienation are shown to be the destroyers of pastoral bliss (Aung San Suu Kyi, 1991, p. 149).

The same writings (the *Boh Tika*) express concerns over Burmese women marrying foreigners, a cause taken up by early nationalist movements such as the YMBA<sup>43</sup>, who shortly after the publication of the *Boh Tika* ‘passed a resolution against Burmese girls marrying foreigners’ (ibid).

As described in this chapter, the nature of precarity in contemporary rural Myanmar has many parallels with that found in pre-independence days, and the responses, including edicts forbidding marriage to non-Buddhists, are also a significant feature of contemporary nationalist movements expressing concern to ‘protect Buddhist values’. However, these are not the only responses available to rural communities in the face of precarity, and the following chapter describes the collective responses to precarity found in contemporary rural Myanmar, by analysing the narratives of the formation of community welfare organizations, and in particular looking at their critical animating idea: *parahita*.

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<sup>43</sup> Young Men’s Buddhist Association.

## Chapter 6

### **Emergent forms of co-dependency: formation of community welfare organizations**

The existence in Myanmar of long-standing practices of donations, support for the poor, elderly and infirmed are well documented (Hla Maung, 1962), embedded in both oral and written traditions of community ethics (Ashin Sandar Thika, 2014). However, as Scott noted, traditions of reciprocity may be embedded in different vehicles:

as we move to reciprocity among friends and to the village, we move to social units which may control more subsistence resources than kinsmen and are still part of the intimate world of peasantry where shared values and social controls combine to reinforce mutual assistance (Scott, 1976, p. 27).

Likewise, Kyaw Yin Hlaing (2007) described the long-standing and widespread presence of community organizations in rural Myanmar, although the associational forms, activities, and location within the socio-political ecology have varied. Whilst pre-independence<sup>44</sup> organizations were formed around issues relating to protest against colonial rule, post-independence organizations tended to be organized around labour unions or religious campaigns (Kyaw Yin Hlaing, 2007, pp. 145-155). Space for associational life was restricted during both Socialist and the period of military rule, with a growth of more localized organizations rather than larger national networks. However, during the period of military rule between 1988 and 2011, rapidly deteriorating economic conditions provided an impetus for new forms of associational life:

In conjunction with these neighbourhood organizations, numerous native-place and ethnic organizations as well social welfare organizations emerged in various parts of the country.

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<sup>44</sup> Independence from Britain was secured on the 4<sup>th</sup> January 1948.

The reason behind the widespread formation of various social welfare organizations in many major cities was born out of necessity. After 1988, the government opened up the economy and with that, the cost of living escalated, especially the cost of medical care and funerals. In fact, the cost of medical care and funerals increased by almost 300 to 400 percent (Kyaw Yin Hlaing, 2007, p. 162).

The organizations which formed in that context tended to be urban, formed by wealthier or well-connected persons such as retired actor U Kyaw Thu, whose free funeral service society remains strong today (San San Oo, 2018). Despite eschewing any overt political actions, both the Free Funeral Service and the Mandalay-based *Byamaso* organization attracted considerable attention from the military authorities, as well as huge popular acclaim (Kyaw Yin Hlaing, 2007), representing an iteration of collective social action which nonetheless embodied, at the time, a form of resistance to authoritarian rule (Wells & Kyaw Thu Aung, 2014). U Kyaw Thu's organization undoubtedly provided inspiration to rural communities facing the same social and economic challenges:

It would be good if there were *parahita* organizations across the whole country, like Kyaw Thu's organization [...] That is the Bamar ethnicity's compassionate attitude (Male village elder, The Pyay Daw village).

However, what a brief historical survey of associational life in Myanmar demonstrates is that, although co-operative assistance and localized organizations practicing reciprocity have been in existence for decades, if not longer (Kyaw Yin Hlaing, 2007), the associational forms have evolved and changed to meet both emerging needs and respond to new threats and opportunities. Thus, in the context of the precarity described in the previous chapter, what organizational forms have

emerged, and what are the factors which have contributed to their emergence in this form, in this time?

### **Introducing the organizations**

Meetings with the social organizations almost invariably take place in the village monastery, with or without the presence of the abbot. Conducting interviews with group leaders, group members and other village members, we would sit on the floor, in front of low tables usually piled high with locally-made snacks of peanuts, fried rice dumplings, bananas and green tea. Group members were usually easily identifiable, either wearing t-shirts with their organizational logo, or with rosettes or lanyards indicating they were a group member. Membership rolls, financial records, and annual reports summarizing income and expenditure were usually made available, along with pictures of recent group events. What radiated was a huge sense of pride in both belonging to the group, and in the sense of doing work which was voluntary, but also done in a systematic and transparent way: efficient altruism.



***Box 1: Tawara Metta Organization, Chaung Ma village***

Formed 10 years ago, in their village as a funeral co-operative in their village, the Metta organization now has over 100 members, a significant number of whom are young, and female. The organization has grown in size and capacity, and conducts a range of activities to raise funds locally to use for social welfare activities. Several years ago, they received a block grant from a donor, which increased their working capital, which they use to manage a micro-finance fund to raise income. They raise additional income by providing catering services at weddings and temple festivals, and the income is used for a variety of social welfare activities and payments. The group provides assistance for village members needing hospitalization, bi-monthly nutritional support for elderly, pregnant women and village members with disabilities, educational and health support, and funeral grants. In the past year, they have provided assistance of some form to over 100 persons. The organization, by mobilizing mainly youth members, has also contributed to greater harmony at village level, and a greater sense of belonging for younger village members who, in other villages, have tended to migrate away. The group name, a Pali word for ‘lovingkindness’ represents a key value and teaching of Buddhism, providing a source of inspiration for the selfless activity and reciprocity required of group members.



In a number of villages, such as Shwe Pauk Pin and Kyauk Phuu Kong, there were also organizations which had been formed for more religious purposes, such as provision of religious education, or organizing of religious festivals, and in a few, there were other, less formalized welfare organizations. In some cases, such as Shwe Pauk Pin, existing welfare organizations were merged into one more coherent and comprehensive organization. Where there were pre-existing religious organizations, such as those providing religious teaching, or ဝတ် (*wut*<sup>45</sup>) associations, which organize a range of religious activities such as the weaving of monks' robes, the tendency was to make clear distinctions between religious organizations and social organizations, enabling a more harmonious co-existence.

The establishment and maintenance of organizational self-identity was facilitated by the use of symbolic nomenclature descriptive of various expressions of virtue. This is evident in the organizational names shown in Table 5. Group names were chosen to reflect a particular virtue, often linked to Buddhist teaching, and using flowing, Pali<sup>46</sup> terms. Thus, the organizations are named for lovingkindness, benevolence, altruism, charity, all using words which exhibit superabundant, resonant symbolism, appealing to ideas and ideals deeply rooted in the consciousness of rural Burmese Buddhists. More generically, most of these organizations would self-identify as လူမှုရေးအကူအညီအသင်းအဖွဲ့. (*lu-hmu-ye-a-pye*, social assistance organizations) or ပရဟိတအဖွဲ့. (*parahita a-pwe*, *parahita* organizations), with the word *parahita* referring to a concept of virtuous altruism, which will be explored in detail in the next section. Self-identification around an organizational name, linked to notions of virtue, is highly significant, for three reasons: firstly,

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<sup>45</sup> Meaning 'duty' and in this case referring to the obligations of lay persons to the Buddhist Sangha or monk order.

<sup>46</sup> Pali is the language of the Buddhist scriptures used in Myanmar, and hence many religious, philosophical or ethical terms in Burmese language are in fact Pali loan words.

it differentiates between other organizations in terms of purpose: where others may exist for mutual business interest, religious events or political causes, *parahita* and its derivative names indicate a social concern. It would be possible, but not appropriate, for a business to feature some of the names shown in Table 5. Secondly, it provides a common identifier which explicates the nature of involvement for members: it will be voluntary, it will be charitable, it will involve giving of time, money and effort by members for the sake of others. Whilst the actual degree of disinterestedness may be variable and contested, the public face, at least, of the organizations, stridently purports to be motivated by noble sentiments. Finally, the naming differentiates between other similar organizations, both local and regional. The Myanmar proverb တစ်ကျောင်းတစ်ဂါထာ၊ တစ်ရွာတစ်ပုဒ်ဆန်း (ti kyaung ti ka-ta, ti-ywa, ti-bonsan, ‘one village, one style’) reflects a high degree of individuality, and organizations take huge pride in their difference, which in turn enables a stronger local identity.

*Table 5: Organization names, year of formation and leadership style*

<b>Community name</b>	<b>Organization name</b>	<b>Meaning of name<sup>47</sup></b>	<b>Year formed</b>	<b>Prior/other organizations</b>	<b>Leadership</b>
Kyauk Phuu Kong	Metta Shin	Benevolent one	2014	Religious organization for children's education	Male, abbot as patron
Swe Le Oo	Metta Shin	Benevolent one	2012	-	Male, monk as patron
Shwe Pauk Pin	Phyu Sin Parami	Pure virtue	2012	Organizations for religious teaching and religious events	Mixed, Buddhist clergy involved
Chaung Ma	Tawara Metta	Eternal benevolence	2013	Organization for village security	Mixed, lay leadership
Ko Taung Kan	Mudita	Altruistic joy	2013	-	Male, mostly young leaders
The Pyay Daw	Myat Su Mon	Noble wish	2011	-	Female, lay leadership
Hpwa Saw	Aung Sedanar Shin	Great charitable one	2015	Credit union	Female, lay leaders
Aung Chan Thar	Zeya Thukha	Triumphant happiness	2015	-	Mixed, lay leaders
Ywa Thit	Karuna Shin	Charitable one	2015	Social organization (youth)	Male, lay leaders
North Quarter	Thit Kwa	Orchid	2016	-	Male, lay leaders
Middle quarter	Ayearwaddy	name of the main river, signifying life and abundance)	2017	Educational sponsorship organization	Mixed, lay leaders
South quarter	Phyu Sin Metta	Pure benevolence	2012	-	Male, lay leaders

Leadership composition of the organizations showed an interesting trend whereby organizations with more lay leadership (where involvement of the Buddhist clergy was less active) tended to have a higher proportion of women in leadership positions. Over half of these twelve organizations had women either as chairpersons of the group, or as patrons, two of the most senior positions. This appears to be linked to norms of hierarchy and gendered roles with regard

<sup>47</sup> Translations taken from Myanmar-English Dictionary (2008) Myanmar Language Commission, Ministry of Education and Dr. U Nyanawara, Myanmar-English Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Buddhist terms (2015).

to Buddhist clergy, whereby, for example, only men are permitted to become monks, and female nuns are considered subordinate even to very junior male monks (Kawanami, 1990). This is accentuated in social or political hierarchy, where women are frequently expected to assume more service orientated, rather than leadership roles (Aye Nwe, 2009; Ikeya, 2005). The presence of more active involvement of Buddhist clergy seems to heighten concerns of hierarchy, as well as concerns regarding diminution of  $\text{ဆု}$  (*phon*), a term referring to the ‘glory’ or ‘power’ of men, and particularly monks, if women assume a position of leadership (Pansy Tun Thein, 2015). Likewise, in the absence of active involvement by monks, these concerns appear diminished, leaving more space for active female participation in roles of leadership.

Membership is demanding: not only do members pay annual, or monthly membership fees, but they are expected to contribute significant amounts of time to group activities. Whilst membership brings certain material benefits-such as eligibility to borrow from the organization’s micro-finance fund-the material benefits appear in most cases to be outweighed by commitments of time, money and labour by members. Despite this, half of the 12 organizations could boast that all households in their village had at least one person registered as a group member, and of the remaining 6 groups, over three-quarters of households in the village were members.

The legal status of the organizations reflects both the ambiguity of the legal context, and a long-standing resistance of citizens to accept any more bureaucracy and authority than is absolutely necessary. Of these twelve organizations, only two had formally registered as an organization. On the one hand, registration potentially offers a degree of legal protection and greater status in the eyes of potential financial donors. However, registration also requires a degree of financial commitment, and acceptance of a higher level of scrutiny from government officials. This

ambiguity of legal status is, at present, seemingly acceptable to both the organizations and to the government. I attended a workshop held in December 2017, of 40 community welfare organizations in Myaung Township, Sagaing region, which was attended by local members of Parliament as well as local government administration officials. There, the self-organized *parahita* organizations from 40 villages presented their work to the audience. The fact that only two of those organizations were officially registered did not result in any punitive action from the government authorities. Rather, they simply provided information and encouragement to register officially. This suggests an example of ‘forbearance’ by the State, in recognition of the obvious value of the welfare provision being made in the absence of any meaningful State welfare provision, as well as a reluctance of community organizations to accept State control.

***Box 2: Myat Su Mon organization, The Pyay Daw***

Formed in 2011 by two women, Myat Su Mon has over 70 members, and provides assistance to older people and people with disabilities, as well as nutritional support to children, and assistance for medical care and funerals. Operationally, they raise and redistribute nearly 3 million kyat (over \$2,000) in welfare each year, handling a capital fund of nearly 7 million kyat (US\$5,000). Despite this, the group has no clear legal status. There was an awareness of a subtle change in policy around 2012, whereby organizations would not be considered ‘illegal’:

back then, you had to get permission, or you’d be illegal. So we heard on the radio, and we heard some other villages were forming organizations. It seems like, now, if you want to register, it will cost between 5 lakh and 10 lakh (around \$400-\$800) [...] so we haven’t registered yet. But there’s no danger, we’re just doing it for our village, not doing any other things. So, we have formed it like that (Village elder, The Pyay Daw village).

Although some organizations have formally registered, Myat Su Mon remains a formal, but unregistered organization, occupying a space which is neither legal, nor illegal, and accepting a trade-off between the risks of State sanctions for being unregistered, and State control if they are registered.



An important question in this research is whether these organizations represent a new associational entity, or whether they are a modified form of pre-existing organizations. Much like the designation of something as traditional can be problematic (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 2012), discriminating between new forms or reiterations of old forms presents a challenge. Rather than attempt to make a distinctive classification, the next section will instead consider the operational space created and maintained by community welfare organizations, and the processes by which that space, occupied to some degree by religious organizations, traditions of reciprocity and other forms of social organizations, is both claimed and maintained.

### **Latent tradition, unmet needs and policy nudges: narratives of group formation**

Narratives of formation of social organizations in the post-socialist, military junta era, take place in a context of gaps and shortfalls in public services (Steinberg, 2006), and, ‘faced with conflicting demands to construct infrastructure whilst managing affairs, regional military commanders began to permit a liberalization of welfare groups and traditional civil society throughout the 1990s’ (Callahan, 2000; McCarthy, 2017), although the degree of liberalization was both limited and subject to sudden change. In more urban settings, organizations such as the Free Funeral Service (Wells & Kyaw Thu Aung, 2014; Zon Pann Pwint, 2013) and local chapters of the *Byamaso* Foundation providing funeral services, and a growth in social movements led by prominent Buddhist monks such as the သီတဂူဆရာတော် (*Sittagu Sayadaw*) who established a network of free healthcare clinics in Sagaing Region (*Theravada Dhamma Society of America*, 2018). The ‘space’ claimed by emerging welfare organizations relied on three enabling factors: firstly, a degree of forbearance (albeit limited) by the military authorities,



whose general policy towards any associational form was hostile<sup>48</sup>. This degree of forbearance was enabled by two factors: it provided a way to address gaps and needs which were unmet by State provision; more importantly, by linking patronage of welfare activities to notions of religious altruism, individual military and government figures could appropriate various forms of legitimization and accrue personal merit through donations to local religious or welfare organizations which were not legally registered (Jaquet & Walton, 2013).

Thus, the second enabling factor was the overt linkage of welfare to religion, drawing on key principles of ပရုတ္တိ (*parahita*), ဇေတနာ (*cetana*) and ဒနာ (*dana*) (Walton, 2016). *Parahita*, defined as ‘for the good of the other’, is dependent on *cetana*, a Pali term whose technical meaning refers to volition or intent, but which is practically used to describe charitability (McCarthy, 2017). *Cetana* can be applied to an attitude (*cetana seik*, meaning a charitable spirit), or even to describe volunteerism, where the purely voluntary *cetana wuntan* is differentiated from an ordinary *wuntan*, who is getting paid for their service. *Dana* is used to describe charitable donation, but is again a term with both profound meaning and variable application. *Dana* is considered a key element of Burmese Buddhism, and is both practiced extensively, and very publicly, with the name of the donor, and amount of donation announced over loudspeakers, or recorded on plaques.

However, the linkage between social generosity and religious merit was not a given, as the *Theravada* traditions practiced in Myanmar had placed a greater emphasis on religious donations

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<sup>48</sup> And indeed, organizations such as the Free Funeral Service were continually harassed during the period of military rule, as the authorities perceived them as a form of politics, and thus as a threat (Kyaw Yin Kyaw Yin Hlaing, 2007).

directed to ostensibly religious purposes, such as temple building<sup>49</sup>. The influence of prominent monks such as the *Sittagu Sayadaw* in providing both religious teaching and practical examples of social expressions of *dana* were critical in mobilizing public support for welfare, as well as providing a means of justification of their forbearance by State and military officials. This illustrates the plasticity of these terms:

The proliferation of these mechanisms of informal social protection from the early 1990's resulted in a gradual redefinition of the scope of 'work for others' (*parahita*) and giving (*dana*) within the Buddhist moral universe (McCarthy, 2017, p. 173).

The third 'enabling factor' was the way in which, by situating welfare organizations largely in the sphere of religion, a means for limiting political identity was established, given longstanding prohibitions on overt political activities by religious leaders (Walton, 2016):

As the scope of *parahita* within the Buddhist moral universe broadened, it provided fertile ideational and spiritual grounding for the emergence of what [has been described as] politically bounded though active forms of citizenship (McCarthy, 2017, p. 174).

As McCarthy argues, though, this does not then render these types of organizations 'apolitical', as the 'social obligation to co-produce welfare and local public goods should be seen [...] not just as a practical necessity [...] but essential to enacting a moral [...] vision of democracy' (McCarthy, 2017, pp. 174-175).

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<sup>49</sup> Indeed, U Nu, the first Prime Minister post-independence, specifically urged citizen's to redirect their religious generosity to social welfare in the *Pyidawtha* national development plan of 1953: 'An appeal has been directed to the strong Burmese tradition of charity (*akhu*) which, in the past, has been applied largely to religious ends: in particular it has been the aspiration of every well-disposed and wealthy Burman to be a *paya-taga* (temple builder). Now, it is hoped to persuade the people that merit can be acquired through devoting their resources and their energies to the building of works of social benefit' (Tinker, 1957, p. 129).

*Parahita* as a Pali word describing the concept of altruism (‘for the good of the other’) (Ashin Sandar Thika, 2014) is considered to be ancient (Karunadasa, 2001), and appears to have been applied as a descriptive term to welfare organizations before (Reddy, 1941). Although studies of social organizations have described village, or ward (urban residential area) based organizations self-describing as *parahita* organizations (McCarthy, 2016a; Thida Htwe Win, 2015; Zin Mar Latt, 2015), the widespread emergence of more organized units of welfare distribution in Myanmar self-describing as *parahita* appears to be more recent. Most of the groups reported being formed between 2011 and 2014, at or around the time of the first elected government since 1962, probably in part due to the transmission of subtle signals from the new government that, whilst organizational life was not deregulated, there would now be a much greater degree of tolerance extended by the State to non-government associations.

Prior to the formation of new organizations, however, there were a number of pre-existing, latent entities and practices which appear to have, to some degree, filled the ‘social organization’ space, albeit in a less organized way. Most villages described at least three different types of entities or modes of practice which preceded the formation of the group they now describe as a *parahita* organization.

Firstly, groups called *Kalatha Kaung Saung* (literally meaning young male leaders) existed (and still exist) in some form in each of the twelve communities in which this research was conducted (see Table 4 for the list of the community names and brief description), and in fact, in many if not most rural villages in Myanmar (Griffiths, 2016b). These groups were formed, usually under the auspices of the village elders, to organize the youth in the village to provide informal security, and to provide manpower for village events such as funerals and festivals. Although

male-led and usually male-dominated, women, often unmarried women, could also participate, sometimes as a distinct sub-group:

Previously, there was the *Kalatha Kaung Saung* to carry out the social activities of the village. People gathered to help when the [need] was announced with amplifier. If there was a funeral, they would organize it, and try to get donations to pay for hiring charges for the funeral activities. But it was just for that event, not any long-term future. But there was no organization (Male group leader, Chang Ma village).

In some villages, separate organizations already existed in some form for specific religious activities, such as religious teaching for young children, *wut* organizations for women, and monastery committees (*Kaw Pa Ka*). Additionally, some villages had already established organizations for village security, comprising able male village members.

Traditions of reciprocity, particularly around funerals and festivals, play a significant part in the ‘background narrative’ of the formation of organizations; in each village, one of the key ‘narrative turns’ is how the formation of *parahita* organizations consolidated and organized the voluntary contribution of time and money to village members in times of ‘grief and joy’ (*tha ye na ye*).

Before, if there was a funeral, you just arranged it with this one and that one, one, two, three people, but not well organized (Male group leader, Ko Taung Kan village).

What is of interest is the way in which, in the face of unmet needs, and at a time of increased political open-ness, villages turned largely to self-sufficient and self-organized modes of welfare organization, rather than looking either to State or external humanitarian sources for assistance.

Our village asked us to form the group (Female group member, Swe Le Oo village).

We formed the group because of so many health, social, funeral difficulties. We started mainly as the youth (Male group member, Ko Taung Kan Village).

However, a further ‘nudge’ was necessary to convert latent potential to address unmet needs; this appears to have come around the time of President U Thein Sein’s government in 2012. Prior to then, any form of association outside of the government’s administrative framework was frowned upon. However, a tacit, implicit message appears to have been communicated around 2012, giving more confidence to villages to form associations:

This kind of organization cannot be formed without permission. Our villages did not dare to form any organization. [But] we listened to radio, MRTV<sup>50</sup>. We listened to all the news. Some news said [you could form the organization]. Other news gave the information that you are not allowed to form it. You have to ask for permission to form it. So, we have not registered this organization yet. However, we formed it to do social work for our village as we are not committing crimes (Male village elder, Monywa Township).

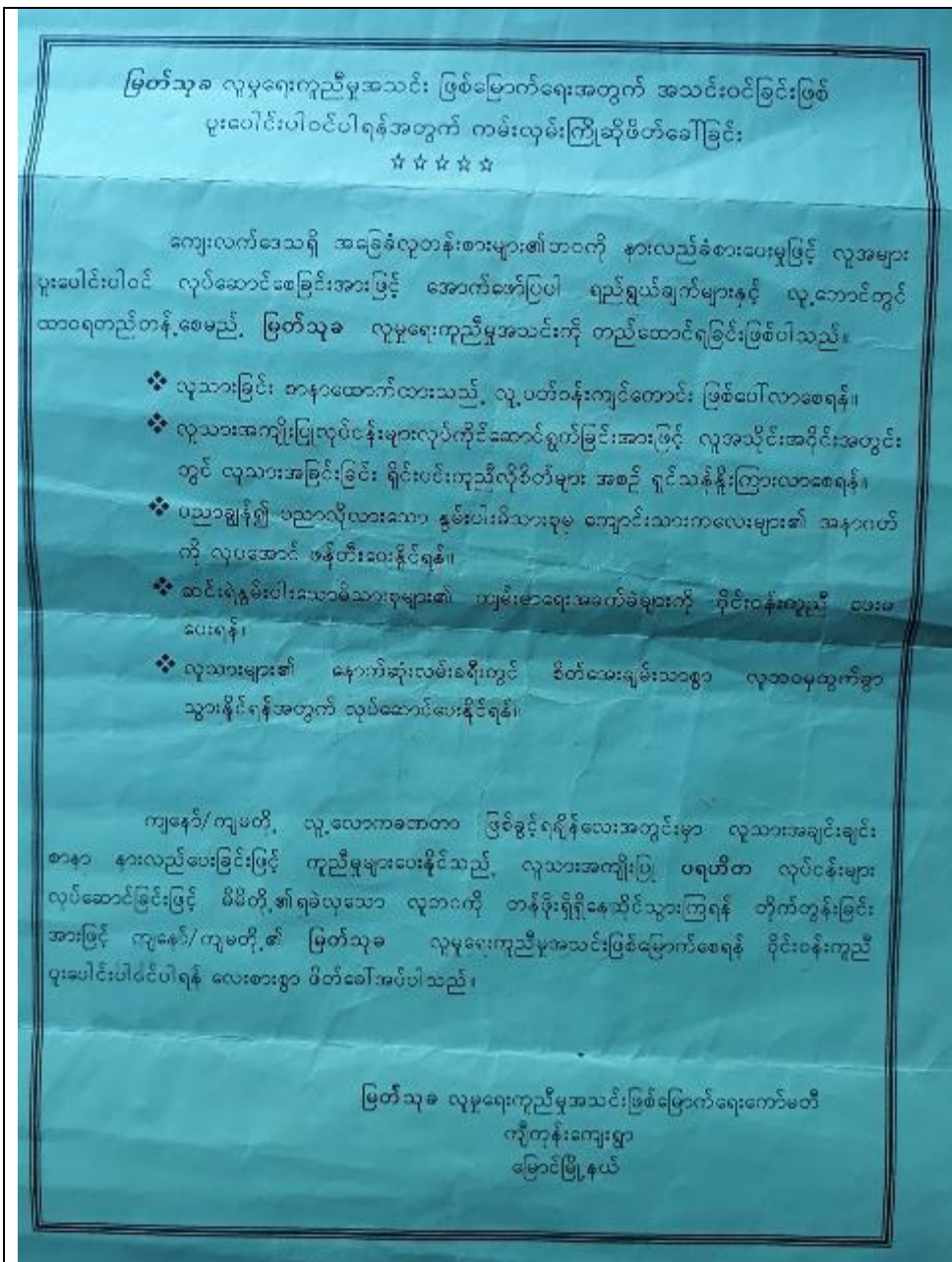
Box 3 is a translation of a public notice from 2012 for the formation of a social organization in Kyi Kon village, also in Myaung Township. This illustrates four common features of the organizations studied in this area: firstly, that although other organizations were more or less present in villages, as described above, there was nonetheless a definite process to form something more formal and more visible. Secondly, that the ‘call for participation’ very specifically locates participation and ‘ownership’ within the sphere of ordinary village members. The invitation was issued not by the religious leaders, or the village headman, but by the ‘committee for the formation of *Myat Thukha* Social organization’, illustrating the general

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<sup>50</sup> Main State-owned TV broadcaster.

tendency for these to be lay-led movements. Thirdly, the common themes of activities, revolved around promoting social solidarity, providing healthcare and education assistance, and the provision of funeral assistance. Fourthly, there are appeals to *parahita*, with *parahita* in this case used as an adjective to describe ‘*parahita* works’ as particular type of activities characterized not by the form of work, but by the motivation and ‘spirit’ of those actually doing the work ‘for the good of others’.

Box 3: public notice for the formation of a social organization in Kyi Kon village



Invitation to participate in the founding  
of the Myat Thukha Social assistance  
Organization

With these four objectives, and with  
participation from ordinary rural  
citizens, the Myat Thukha Social  
Assistance organization shall be  
eternally established:

- Establish a *cetana*-based community
- By conducting beneficial works for others, to promote a spirit of neighbourly assistance
- By providing assistance to poor families for children's education, to create better futures for children
- By providing health assistance to poor families, not excluding them
- By providing funeral assistance to those in life's last journey, to enable them to contentedly depart from human existence

I/we, in life's brief existence, by  
exercising *cetana* to others, by  
working for the good of others in  
*parahita* works, give value to our  
human life. Thus with this respectful  
invitation we urge you to participate in  
forming our Myat Thukha  
Organization.

Committee for the formation of Myat  
Thukha Social Assistance  
Organization, Kyi Kon Village,  
Myaung Township

Thus, by 2013, ‘most villages had already formed associations’ (female group member, Ko Taung Kan) despite, as we have seen, the existence of other religious and administrative organizations.

The narratives describe *parahita* organizations, in their current state, as occupying a social space located between three other domains: formal administration, organized religion, and traditions of reciprocity. By formal administration, I refer to the organization of the community for administrative, or protective purposes. This is where the community organizes with respect to externalities, such as the State, where State-appointed village administrators would assume a degree of responsibility for co-ordinating village development, and for providing information on general welfare to the local government. In some cases, self-organized groups, such as *Kalatha Kaung Saung*, were formed in response to perceived external threats, such as *dacoits*, a term used to describe armed bandits who were more widespread during the post-independence and Socialist era.

Organized religion refers to, in the case of the villages in this study, the institutions, organization and practice of Buddhist religion. Organized religion is represented in the Buddhist clergy (abbot, senior monks and others), in the role of religion in festivals, in the teaching of religion, and the role of religion and religious leaders in village organization and activities, such as, for example, education or welfare. A degree of distinction between organized religion and religious practice is useful, given the degree to which Buddhism and Burmese identity are considered almost indistinguishable (Walton, 2012). In terms of considering the performative space claimed by *parahita* organizations, religion plays a significant role, and at the same time, the space is to some degree contested by pre-existing religious institutions whose functions to some degree are overlapped, or usurped, by emergent *parahita* organizations.



Traditions of reciprocity relate to things which are done because they are expected to be done, and which tend to be instigated or co-ordinated by village members, rather than directly by religious or administrative institutions. This would be true, for example, of co-operative activity for funerals, which would often be led by lay persons. In practice, there is constant interplay between these domains, where traditions of reciprocity are influenced by religion, and where village administration would normally be involved in the organization of events of reciprocity, such as collective assistance for funerals. However, what the *parahita* organizations appear to have done is to inhabit and to some degree codify that interaction, such that, although the performance may be the same (collective action for a funeral) the location, and management of the performance are located in a new, and clearly identified space, which was formerly not permanently claimed.

Of interest, too, is the observation that most of the organizations described themselves as a new, emergent entity. In three cases, there were instructions from senior Buddhist monks to form the organizations, but in most cases, the impetus and idea to form the organization came from individuals reflecting on needs, and being inspired by examples such as U Kyaw Thu<sup>51</sup> and more local organizations. In this sense, there is very little evidence of a hierarchical process either to the formation or maintenance of the organizations; no central directive, no rallying call. This perhaps explains the similarities and differences between the organizations as they are found in different villages. Similarities arising from common appeals to animating ideas such as *parahita*; a generally common ecology in terms of ethnicity, religion and development state; but an

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<sup>51</sup> Founder of the Yangon-based Free Funeral Service, which uses donations to provide free funeral services to families of the deceased, regardless of their religion.

divergence forms being the result of an emergent process leading to a variety of organizational forms, expressions and practices.

Thus, the performative assembly (Butler, 2015) is in this case directed towards the claiming not of a physical space from which to articulate claims, but a moral and economic space whereby claims are considered on the basis of locally derived needs, resources and principles. What is of interest is, firstly, the moral/economic space which appears to have been claimed by community organizations; secondly, the sources of legitimacy for such organizations; and thirdly, the nature of the performativity which sustains them. In some ways, this space-claiming is a more localized expression of Benedict Anderson's description of the emergence of nation-states and nationalism, understood as something which is largely 'imagined' but which has its own 'self-evident plausibility' (Anderson, 2006, p. 12) such that they are assumed to be both natural and traditional. In the case of these organizations, this self-evident plausibility is enabled by the utilization of the concept of *parahita* as a key mobilizing and organizing concept.

### ***Parahita* as a boundary object**

*Parahita* as a concept is expressed in a Pali word, generally translated as 'for the good (benefit) of the other' (Ashin Sandar Thika, 2014, p. 11). The general expression is one of altruism: however, even official discourse warns of the need for 'balance' between pure altruism and caring for one's own needs (ibid). Whilst each organization interviewed self-identifies as a *parahita* organization, and describe their involvement as *parahita*, their members as volunteers motivated by *parahita* spirit, the definition of *parahita* is variable:

*Parahita* [...] according to the Buddha's teaching, we understand it to be 'for the good of the other' (Male village elder, Aung Chan Thar village).

It [*parahita*] is like this, you prioritize others, you put aside your own needs (Male group leader, Ko Taung Kan village).

The underpinning of *parahita* by Buddhist religious teachings also forms a key element of establishing and maintaining the legitimacy of the organizations, particularly as they formalize activities previously undertaken by religious institutions or non-formal arrangements:

Based on Buddhist teaching, it's good to have the attitude to help others. It's good to work for the good of others (Female group member, Kyauk Phuu Kong village).

The appeal to gaining religious merit, both individually and corporately, as well as the positive feelings generated by altruism, are also key elements of sustaining the motivation of *parahita*.

This will be explored in more detail in the next section, under *Parahita and merit: the interest of welfare*. At the same time, the appeal to *parahita* frequently draws on wider, more generalized ethical principles, as well as organizational principles such as transparency, equality and harmonious working:

Basically, *parahita* is 'people centred' [...] which means we work in a people centred way, having open discussion and transparency (Male Group member, Kyauk Phuu Kong).

*Parahita* means that we want everyone to be equal, on the same level (Female group leader, Ywa Thit).

*Parahita* means that we all work harmoniously for others (Female group leader, Chaung Ma village).

In this way, the *parahita* concept links existing traditions, ethical perceptions, administrative concerns, social needs and religious ideals, legitimizing a new form of organization as being, if not traditional, then a natural expression of what are perceived to be traditions and norms. This

suggests that *parahita* may function as a critical ‘boundary object’ enabling the establishment and maintenance of the space occupied by social organizations. Boundary objects are

objects which are both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites. They are weakly structured in common use and become strongly structured in individual site use. They may be abstract or concrete. They have different meanings in different social worlds, but their structure is common enough to more than one world to make them recognizable, a means of translation. The creation and management of boundary objects is key in developing and maintaining coherence across intersecting social worlds (Star & Griesemer, 1989, p. 393).

The validity of the concept of *parahita* is important in the emergence of organizations in a context where the space is potentially contested by three agencies: religious institutions, formal administration and existing, less formal organizations. By rooting participation and identity in religious (in this case Buddhist) terms, the organizations link participation in the group with wider motions of being a good Buddhist, and a good citizen. By referencing religious principles, by incorporating religious ideals within group names and objectives, and by reducing the demands on religious institutions to provide funding for rites such as funerals, the groups offer themselves in a complementary, rather than competitive, stance to religious institutions. As one group member put it:

Because we can do funerals properly, the monks [in our village] don’t lose face.

Honestly, the monks [in our village] really take a lot of pride in our *parahita* organization (Male group leader, Ko Taung Kan village).

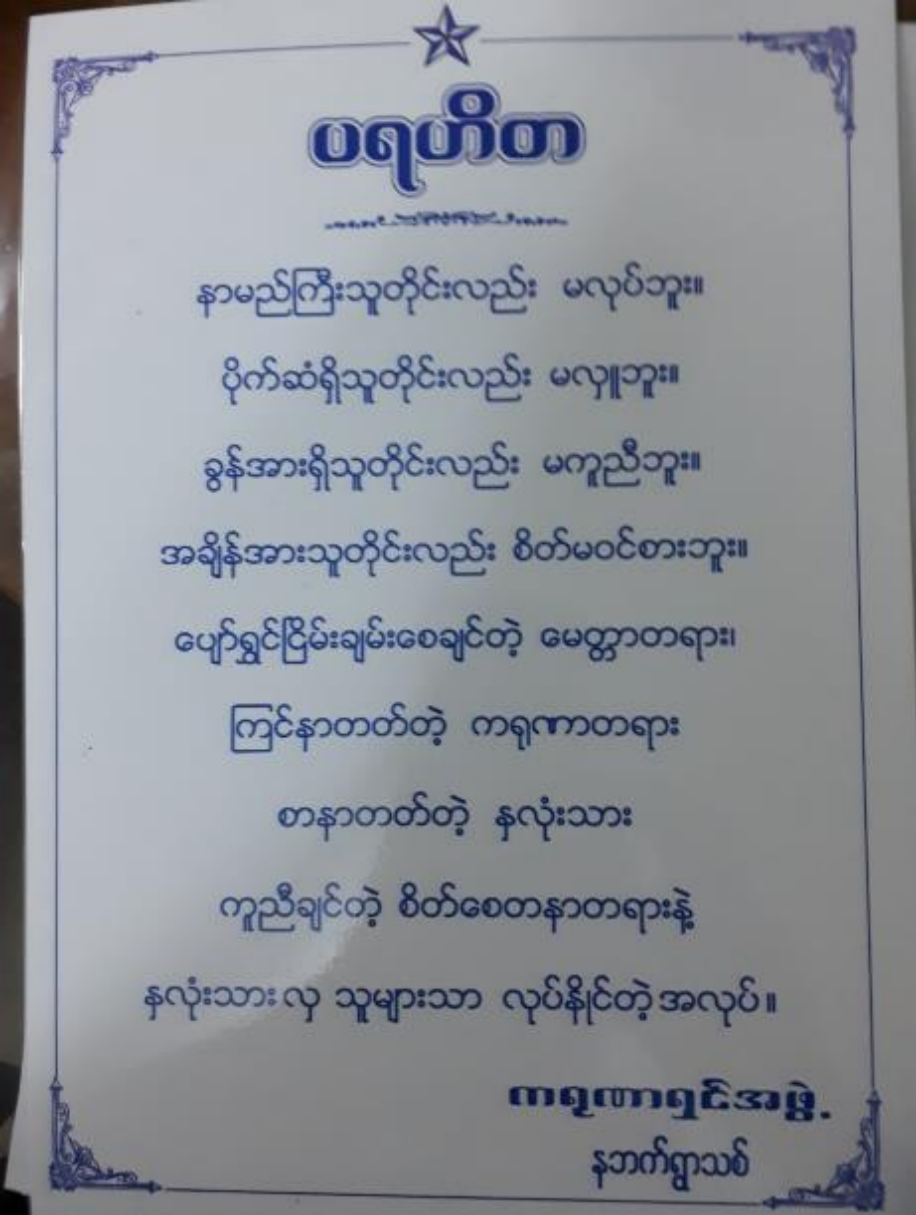
The influence or role of religious leaders in the initial formation and later maintenance of the *parahita* organizations is significant: in some cases, the initial formation was either initiated by, or strongly encouraged by, the village abbot (senior Buddhist monk), and in other cases, the tacit approval of the village abbot was needed where the initiative to start the organization came from village members. In most cases, too, the meetings of the organization are held in the Buddhist monastery, and in at least two of the organizations, the Buddhist abbot is the official patron of the organization. However, in several of the organizations, active involvement of the religious leaders in the activities of the *parahita* organizations appears minimal, and interestingly, these organizations have tended to be those with stronger female leadership and more youth participation.

The appeal to *parahita* enables a continuity with religious teaching, which has in most cases a strong emphasis on collective ethical behaviour. *Parahita* organizations, if they are seen to embody and sustain this, thus act with the ‘blessing’ of the religious institutions. Likewise, by establishing an ostensibly non-political identity, and by filling in crucial welfare gaps, the organizations also do not pose a threat to State-sponsored administration. Again, the role of *parahita* as a concept which can differentiate the social from the political is key:

*Parahita* spirit isn’t related to politics. *Parahita*, working for the good of others, that’s separate. Politics is separate (Group member, Shwe Pauk Pin village).

In fact, the presence of such organizations represents a source of pride and ‘face’ for villages, whereby villages without social organizations felt a loss of face, and rushed to form them. Box 4 gives a translation of a poem composed by the Karuna Shin organization of Ywa Thit, used as the basis for explaining to members the nature of ‘*parahita* spirit’.

**Box 4: Poem on ‘Parahita’ composed by Karuna Shin Organization**

 <p>ဝရဟိတ</p> <p>နာမည်ကြီးသူတိုင်းလည်း မလုပ်ဘူး။          ပိုက်ဆံရှိသူတိုင်းလည်း မလှူဘူး။          ခွန်အားရှိသူတိုင်းလည်း မကူညီဘူး။          အချိန်အားသူတိုင်းလည်း စိတ်မဝင်စားဘူး။          ပျော်ရွှင်ငြိမ်းချမ်းစေချင်တဲ့ မေတ္တာတရား၊          ကြင်နာတတ်တဲ့ ကရုဏာတရား          စာနာတတ်တဲ့ နှလုံးသား          ကူညီချင်တဲ့ စိတ်စေတနာတရားနဲ့          နှလုံးသားလှ သူများသာ လုပ်နိုင်တဲ့အလုပ်။</p> <p>ကရုဏာရှင်အဖွဲ့          နာဂါရွာသစ်</p>	<p><b>Parahita</b></p> <p><i>Not all famous people practice it</i></p> <p><i>Not all rich people donate</i></p> <p><i>Not all strong people help (others)</i></p> <p><i>Not all people with free time are interested</i></p> <p><i>Joyful, peace- building lovingkindness</i></p> <p><i>The charity shown by compassionate people</i></p> <p><i>The empathetic heart</i></p> <p><i>A generous spirit, willing to help</i></p> <p><i>Only can be done by the pure hearted</i></p> <p>(author’s translation)</p>
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In summary, *parahita* functions as a boundary object to legitimize the supplanting of some of these roles by a new organization. As a broad ethical concept with religious connotations, *parahita* is still able to appeal to religious beliefs and traditions, and purport to represent continuity rather than disruption, and thus the organizations can be seen to complement, rather

than threaten, existing institutions, structures and traditions. The overall result is an approach to organizing welfare which is viewed as traditional, and which can thus appeal to both traditions, and religious teachings as sources to validate its moral claims. This appropriation of culture and tradition is not new: 'Malinowski argues that the only reason for the survival of culture patterns from the past is that they do serve a function in relation to the existing situation' (Evers, 1980, pp. 99-101). Likewise, describing the heterogeneous forms of Javanese *desa* organizations, Jan Breman highlighted the interplay between colonial administrative policy and local power politics in shaping village structures:

under the cloak of village rehabilitation, so-called old customs and traditions were revived and new local institutions were introduced (Breman, 1980, pp. 17-18).

Where the institutions have a role in risk and burden sharing, the issue of mutual trust is significant:

This experience, then, provides the soil out of which grow peasant mores and the moral standards by which they judge their own behaviour and that of others. The essence of these standards is a crude notion of equality, stressing the justice and necessity of a minimum of land for the performance of essential social tasks. The standards usually have some sort of religious sanction, and it is likely to be in their stress on these points that the religion of the peasants differs from that of other social classes (Moore, 1967, pp. 497-498).

In the case of these community welfare organizations, *parahita* serves, firstly, as a means of building trust (Candland, 2001, p. 370); secondly, as a means of motivating behaviour and commitment; thirdly as a focal point for mobilizing collective action for the performance of *parahita*. The following sections will first look at the individual motivation for involvement in

welfare groups, followed by an analysis of the importance of performativity in the establishment and maintenance of the operational space of the organizations.

### ***Parahita* and merit: the *interest* of welfare**

The next chapter will look in more detail at what is done in the name of *parahita*: the welfare activities of the organizations. But here, it is worth considering the ‘why’, and more specifically, the motivations of individuals and collectives to contribute time and money to what is described as ‘for the other’. What takes place, in terms of the interest of individuals, cannot be reduced to mere ‘reciprocity of acts of exchange’ (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 94), even accepting time intervals between giving and receiving. The expected contributions from group members, in terms of volunteer labour, and money, in terms of donations, are not insignificant:

Sometimes, say for a funeral you have to give 5 days, 7 days

Q: Isn’t it hard, I mean, you can lose income from not working?

A: Yes, but *parahita* comes first [...] you do your own work later (Female group member, Ko Taung Kan village).

Analyses of contributions of time and money are better understood in terms of symbolic capital, which as Bourdieu states, only works if we recognize the ‘double truths’ of exchanges, and where the duality is ‘rendered possible, and viable, through [...] a collective self-deception, a veritable collective misrecognition’ (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 95). Here, misrecognition refers to ‘the systematic denial of the fact that symbolic capitals are transubstantiated types of economic capital’ (Grenfell, 2014, p. 101). It helps us, then, to understand how participants themselves view, and value, their contributions: in what ‘field’ do their contributions matter?

The denial of self-interest as a key element of *parahita* is repeatedly referenced by group leaders and members in interviews:



It's like this [...] if I am out walking, and I see someone drowning, can I just carry on walking? If I see a car or motorcycle accident, I wouldn't dare to help; I prioritize my own needs. But, if I act according to Buddhist teaching, if I see someone in need, I will help. In that attitude we organize our group (Male group leader, Swe Le Oo village).

At the same time, the appeal to gaining merit<sup>52</sup>, both individually and corporately, as well as the positive feelings generated by altruism, are also key elements of sustaining the motivation of members:

By enabling the well-being of others, you enable well-being in yourself (Female group member, Shwe Pauk Pin village).

When we work together to assist for a funeral [...] that's good merit for the whole village (Female group member, Shwe Pauk Pin village).

We collect donations for the group activities [...] 1000 kyat<sup>53</sup>, 1500 kyat<sup>54</sup>, every month [...] as a way of gaining merit, we do that every month (Female group member, Ko Taung Kan village).

When they come around, announcing they are collecting donations for the *parahita* organization, that makes me happy. I'm not sure how to say this [...] but when you put some donation into the plate, you're doing it for somebody else, so you get a real sense of well-being (Female group member, Shwe Pauk Pin village).

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<sup>52</sup> The word used by participants is ကုသိုလ် (*kutho*) which although commonly translated as 'merit' is again a word which lacks an adequate equivalent. Its opposite is အကုသိုလ်, (*akutho*) meaning non-meritorious deeds, and it is the balance of these two types of actions, conditioned by the intention by which they are done, which determine an individual's fate, both in the present life, and in the life to come. They are best described as the karmic, or cosmic consequences of actions, and a frequent depiction is of a man, crossing the threshold of life, with a balancing scales of good and bad deeds, which then determine his next rebirth.

<sup>53</sup> Around 75 cents at the time of interview.

<sup>54</sup> Around \$1.1 at the time of interview.

The intention (*cetana*) of the donor, rather than the amount, is considered critical to the meritorious value of a donation:

In this interpretation, the moral worthiness of the recipient affects the amount of merit generated by a donation. Others argue that *cetana* (intention) is of greater importance in generating merit. From this point of view, it is the selfless intention of the lay donor, along with the qualities of the monastic recipient, that determines the resultant worthiness of the donation (Jaquet & Walton, 2013, p. 61).

The declaration of some field of interest, then, is important, as it counters any notion of complete ‘disinterest’ but instead acknowledges the misrecognition involved, which is a crucial means of maintaining the virtuous nature of *parahita*:

Most human actions have as a basis something quite different from intention, that is, acquired dispositions which make it so that an action can and should be interpreted as orientated towards one objective or another without anyone being able to claim that that objective was a conscious design (Bourdieu, 1998, pp. 97-98).

The notion of acceptable, redefined self-interest is acknowledged by Buddhist scholar Ashin Sanda Dikka in his writings on *parahita*. He describes four types of person: firstly, one who only seeks the good of himself; secondly, the one who seeks only the good of others; thirdly, one who seeks neither the good of himself or others; and fourthly, the one who seeks the good of both himself and others:

Which of these four types of person is most superior [...] most would think the one who only seeks the good of others [...] in fact, that’s not right. The one who seeks both his

own good, and the good of others, is the highest (Ashin Sandar Thika, 2014, pp. 12-14, authors translation).

In common with religious enterprises, where there exists a ‘taboo of calculation’ (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 104), *parahita* defines an act as selflessly virtuous despite its inherent potential to confer material gain. Thus, ‘I undertake an economic act, but I do not want to know about it; I do it in such a way that I can tell myself and others that it is not an economic act-I can be credible to others’ (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 105).

The value, then, to the participants is threefold. The first is in terms of personally accrued, symbolic capital, in the form of religious merit, where the energy and money expended is converted into a ‘sacred task [...] where what is lost is recovered in another position’ (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 119). However, the value of the capital is clearly not limited to the afterlife: group membership, gives the ‘advantage of the label’ (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 118) and with that, status which confers social advantage. Additionally, the wider benefits of public charity relate to establishing or maintaining status, the fulfilment of expected roles (wealthier households, or those who have come upon good fortune, are expected to be generous), and hence the preservation of power relationships within a community. Conversely, charitable donations, accompanied by service to monks, often expressed as high levels of devotion to individual monks, is a pathway to establishing status for Buddhist women (Andaya, 2002), particularly those who are widowed, or have no senior male figure in the household.

The second value is one of mental satisfaction စိတ်ချမ်းသာမှု (*seik chanthar hmu*), which is a critical term in contemporary expressions of everyday Buddhism. Often used to differentiate between material and psychological well-being (where one can be poor but happy), it again

represents a word with hyper-abundant meaning. Thus, a group member can describe the sense of mental well-being when she sees poor villagers being able to conduct a funeral service properly for poorer village members:

Previously, it was more difficult [for funerals] because people had to do it on their own.

Maybe some people would contribute money. But it gives great satisfaction (စိတ်ချမ်းသာမှု)

when we can solve people's problems like this (Male group leader, South Quarter).

Thus, whilst the basic religious narrative of altruism and giving (*dana*) is rooted in the accumulation of merit, ensuring a more favourable rebirth, Buddhist teaching also emphasizes the existential aspects of altruism:

at the moment of presenting the donation, joy and delight should have reached their height, and one should think 'may this donation help me to attain Nibbana' [...] The moment of conceiving of the donation is like 'the joy of a thirsty man seeing a well in the desert'. The moment of making the donation as 'the quite desireless joy of the man who has reached the well and drunk his fill' (Kell, 1960, pp. 34-35).

Thirdly, however, is the considerable motivation of collective merit, which, although the same term for individual merit is used (ကုသိုလ်, *kutho*) the accrued benefits to the community of such good actions are considered to be more immediate and temporal: not only, potentially, better luck with rains and harvests, and protection from harm<sup>55</sup>, but also potential gain of 'face' both with

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<sup>55</sup> A common practice in rural villages is to conduct an annual ceremony, usually involving chanting of special prayers, or parading of village Buddha images, by which evil is banished and goodwill on the village is imprecated.

other villages, and with authorities, whereby villages demonstrating higher levels of organization and volunteer spirit are more likely to received additional development assistance:

The thing is, if we request development assistance from the government, they will look at our village. If we don't demonstrate *parahita* spirit, they won't give. Donors won't donate [...] but if we have high *parahita* spirit, even if our village is poor, they will give us opportunity (Male village elder, Aung Chan Thar village).

Thus, the value of the collective performance of *parahita* accrues materially to the village and its inhabitants-pointing to very tangible, economic interest alongside symbolic capital. What then, does the 'performance' of *parahita* entail?

### **Performing *parahita***

Given the plasticity of the term, how is the meaning of *parahita* communicated by group leaders and organizers to others? How, if you like, is the 'animating idea' of the welfare organizations made comprehensible in a way which then inspires and enables corporate action to create and sustain an operational space? Whilst some organizational leaders gave clear definitions and descriptions of *parahita*, the key process for creating and sustaining valid space was the *doing* of *parahita*:

How do we maintain the [*parahita*] spirit? Day after day we do it, and that way our enthusiasm doesn't drop (Male group leader, Ko Taung Kan village).

How do we encourage people to get involved? We demonstrate, by doing the work, the attractiveness of *parahita*. We do it practically (Female group member, Shwe Pauk Pin village).

*Parahita* does not only act as a framework for disinterested altruism. The performative element, by also linking to other notions of performativity associated with religious virtue (such as the Buddhist practice of *dana*), also provides ongoing legitimization for the ‘ritualization’ of a social action (Turner, 1975). The repeated and visible action (the performance) is a critical element, then, in sustaining legitimacy:

Social welfare organization stands for doing good things for the benefit of the public. We do not intend it for personal or political party. Therefore, public spirit is always alive in our hearts. We will carry out social work with that spirit (Male group member, Ywa Thit village).

Repeated and visible actions include three types of collective assistance which link with ritual behaviour: the honouring of the elderly, funeral assistance, and educational assistance for children. The redistributive elements of the various activities of the welfare organizations will be described in more detail in the next chapter, but here we will look at the performative elements of these actions, and the way in which they validate organizational identity.

The importance of honouring of the older persons draws both on traditional values and religious teachings, and the practice of elderly honouring takes on several forms. Most common is an event called အသက်ကြီးပွဲ (the *thet kyi bu zaw pwe*), a monthly or annually conducted event where elderly community members receive material gifts (money, food packages, toothbrushes, medicine, clothing) and homage (in the form of ကုသော်, *kudaw*), where younger community members bow or prostrate in front of the older person. All of the organizations interviewed conducted this type of event, which enabled public, visible actions to demonstrate the group’s intentions. This type of event was one of the important mobilizing tools in the early days of group formation:

Older person honouring is really important to maintain *parahita*. We would do it regularly, month by month, and people would see and become more interested. The children would get involved. ‘Where are you going tomorrow?’ you’d ask, and they’d say, ‘I’m going to honour [the elders]’ (Female group member, Yaw Thit village).

Public participation is encouraged through donation drives, and although the voluntary nature of donations is emphasized, there remains a strong implicit expectation to donate, as part of maintaining the corporate performance.

Corporate assistance for funeral rites plays an equally significant role in embodying the idea of *parahita*, providing a visible expression of *parahita*-inspired activities. Here, financial assistance is only one part: group members, usually with their identifying badges or T-shirts, also provide catering and logistical assistance for conducting funerals, including burial arrangements. This also provides an opportunity for corporate ‘face’ for the community:

Now we can do funerals properly with our *parahita* organization, we have no need lose face in front of other [villages] (Female group member, Hpwa Saw village).

A third and significant element of the performance is the management of associational life, referring more to the management of membership and finances, such as membership rolls, records of donations and records of expenditure. Several groups described how that visual display or harmony is sustained by specific practices in the way the group is run. In particular, an emphasis on transparency in both decision making and record keeping, decision making by consensus, and in active promotion of young people and women, appear to be significant contributors to both group harmony and effectiveness.

*Parahita* is people centred. We who give our time have no opportunity to profit from it.

We record all the expenditure publicly on a blackboard, so we show it all in a transparent way to the public (Male group leader, Kyauk Phuu Kong village).

We have monthly meetings, and we encourage everyone to speak openly, not to speak behind everyone's back. Transparency is really important [...] We make decisions by getting consensus (Male group leader, Chaung Ma village).

This extends even to some groups producing printed copies of annual reports, such as that shown in Box 5, to show financial and donation records, available to group members, donors and interested parties. Some organizations have written constitutions, and most have a written, agreed set of rules to which members assent when they join. This, in many ways, is what has set the organizations apart from more loosely-structured organizations such as *Kalatha Kaung Saung*.



*Box 5: Annual Report of Metta Shin Organization, Swe Le Oo Village*



This visible, collective participation is a critical element of demonstrating the moral character of the community itself, which in turn represents a wider demonstration of community ‘worthiness’, which is linked to a higher degree of perceived eligibility for State-funded projects (McCarthy, 2017; Walker, 2012):

[Many] government grants and rural development schemes explicitly stated in project guidelines or in workshops with prospective communities that villages willing to contribute funds or labour “voluntarily” [are] favoured over communities unwilling to make these contributions. [...] This criterion allowed government funds to ‘go further’

and have a wider impact [...] Communities that demonstrate a track-record of ‘self-reliance’ initiatives and a willingness to co-contribute to local improvement initiatives financially or in the form of ‘volunteer’ labour are thus justifiably favoured in selection for these [development] schemes (McCarthy, 2017, p. 21).

In terms of performativity, it is the embodying of the animating idea of *parahita* into visible, collective performances which gives meaning to the term, and which enables *parahita* as a concept to act as the legitimizing idea for the space occupied by the welfare organizations. However, in this reading, whilst *parahita* functions as a boundary object to legitimize space for collective action, it is in itself not stable, being ‘performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results’ (Butler, 2011b, p. 25). Certain performative acts are then characterized as demonstrating *parahita*, and at the same time, how *parahita* is understood and defined is influenced by those same practical expressions.

Performative theories of gender emphasize the constructedness of gender, where gender identity is constituted through performances of gender, rather than the performance deriving from a prior identity. In this case, gender is inscribed onto a body, rather than being dictated to by a body (Butler, 2011b). At the same time, the performance is not unconstrained: subtle expectations influence which performances are more likely to be convincing and compelling. Gender identity, then, is not stable, but rather ‘an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted [...] through the stylized repetition of acts’ (Butler, 2011b, p. 179).

In the same way as performativity ‘makes’ gender, and different performances constitute different expressions of gender, in the case of community welfare organizations, it is particular performances, or a plurality of performance, which then constitutes the operational space from which welfare takes place. Thus, in the case of emergent social organizations, we can ask what

type of performance is required, and what the performance needs to *do* in order to sustain the space for the organization to emerge and function. When considering gender performativity, the recognition of the gendered self as viable is the anticipated outcome of the performance:

Gender performativity and its materialization in the form of ‘bodies that matter’ is driven largely by the desire for recognition of the gendered self as a viable, intelligible subject.

In other words, underpinning our performance of gender is the desire to project a coherent and compelling identity, one that is recognized and valorised by others (Tyler & Cohen, 2010, p. 179).

The performance needs to enable sufficient recognition as to be acceptable or compelling: hence, the most successful gender performances tend to be those which conform to heteronormative forms (Tyler & Cohen, 2010, p. 179). In the case of these emergent responses to precarity, in the form of a welfare organization, the performance needs to be, firstly, visible; hence the value of public actions such as elder honouring ceremonies and funerals, and outwards symbols of identity such as t-shirts and logos. Secondly, it needs to be recognizable, in a way which appeals to a known form or idea. This is where the eliding of tradition and religion, through *parahita*, enables the essence of the group to be recognizable. Like new words sung to a popular tune, the organizations use known forms, inhabited in more contemporary ways. Thirdly, beyond recognizable, it needs to be compelling: the success of the organizations is based on almost universal involvement, so the group needs to demonstrate how being part of this group is what one does if one is part of this village; that it represents a mark of virtue. Here, the ability of *parahita* to transform contributions of time and money into symbolic capital, in a way which sustains a corporate misrecognition, is again crucial. It could be so different: a competing narrative argues for more specific focus on overtly religious acts, donating to monks and

monasteries, and devoting time to meditation and temple service. But the groups have managed to tell a compelling story; compelling enough to result in almost universal membership.

However, there is strong evidence that the compelling nature of the narrative is aided by two additional, perhaps hidden sub-narratives: firstly, the broader pressure to ‘perform’ as part of the wider expectations, and performative norms of community members (particularly women). This is likely to derive from expectations on women to act as protectors of culture (Pansy Tun Thein, 2015), but also, particularly at village level, of the link between the performance of ‘maternal nurturing’ of the *Sangha* and the meritorious, virtuous status of women:

When a boy enters the monastery as a novice, the merit accrues to his mother, and this rite of passage thus stands as a public acknowledgement of the lifelong obligation he has incurred [...] In reminding the community that the *Sangha*’s gain means a mother’s deprivation, such practices render the maternal relationship and the debts it encodes integral to the practice of *Theravada* (Andaya, 2002, pp. 7-8).

Secondly, the broader narrative which equates being altruistic and generous (having *parahita* spirit) with being Buddhist and Burmese. This potentially then locates the concept of *parahita* within Burmese, Buddhist identity, in a way which serves to establish self-identity, and contribute to the identity of Others. This will be explored further in Chapter 8.

In ‘Weapons of the Weak’ James C. Scott describes what he terms the ‘unwritten history of [peasant] resistance’, the ‘ordinary weapons of the powerless’ which may be violent, but often take the form of ‘passive non-compliance [...] evasion and deception’ (Scott, 2008, pp. 29-31). However, in the narratives of the twelve villages featured in this research, the responses to increasing precarity represent neither violent uprising of the Saya San rebellion, nor the ‘passive non-compliance’ described in Scott’s study of Malayan villages (Scott, 2008). Rather, energy has

been directed towards self-organization, drawing on the well-known, but plastic concept of *parahita* as a crucial boundary object to legitimize operational space for the emergent welfare organizations, and animate the performativity by which the organizations establish and maintain their identity.

The next chapter will describe in more detail the activities of the welfare organizations, in particular, looking at what is being distributed, to whom, on what basis of claim, and the extent to which the activities of these community organizations be said to represent redistributive practice.

## Chapter 7

### **Performing *Parahita* : ecologies of redistribution**

Much of James C. Scott's thesis on the 'Moral Economy of the Peasant' (Scott, 1976) revolves around the justice of distribution: not only of resources, but of access to resources, such as land, and of forbearance, in terms of rightful distribution (and avoidance of unjust appropriation) of the products of labour to enable subsistence. Whilst largely locating discussions of distribution in the sphere of State-peasant relations, Scott also acknowledges the role of reciprocal distribution in the peasant economy. Reciprocity is not only a crucial mechanism designed to express and maintain solidarity, but one which is interested by reproductive claims, whereby the failure of fellow farmers and villagers may also threaten the viability of the individual. This locates the interest in reciprocity beyond simple kinship loyalty, more in terms of the private gain derived from collective action (Friedman & McAdam, 1992).

When, however, does reciprocity begin to reflect redistribution? Although definitions vary, reciprocity is frequently described in terms of gift-exchanges between individual and groups, whereas redistribution involves a more centralized assembling of goods to be redistributed by some constituted authority (Bartels, 1988). Three features enable some distinction between reciprocity and redistribution: the nature and location of the interest of participants; the collective nature of pooling in redistribution, and the role of a designated authority to consider and adjudicate on redistributive claims. Additionally, in 'Give a Man a Fish', a study of new forms of redistributive politics in Southern Africa, James Ferguson argues that perhaps the differentiating characteristic between a more 'gift-based' reciprocity and 'grant based' redistribution is the way in which the resource is itself viewed: gratefully, as an underserved gift, or with equanimity, as a rightful share (Ferguson, 2015, pp. 178-179). What is the extent to which the contributions of

time and money made by some, and received by others, are considered as a gift, whether ‘pure’ or not (Argyrou, 2007; Derrida, 1992)? Situating the interest of participants in arrangements of reciprocity and redistribution is challenging. However, drawing on observations made in the penultimate section of the previous chapter (*Parahita* and merit: the *interest* of welfare), the concept of *parahita* locates the ‘strings’ and reciprocal expectations of gift-giving beyond straightforward obligations. The kind of exchanges taking place within these *parahita* arrangements do not meet Derrida’s conditions for a ‘free’ gift (Venkatesan, 2011, p. 52), as there is a recognition of the gift by the giver and by the recipient (although the giver is represented by the welfare organization), and there is to some degree an expectation of reciprocity on the part of the recipient of the ‘gift’. However, the reciprocal obligations are not symmetrical: the donor gives according to performative expectations, and likewise, those benefiting from the welfare organization themselves are not expected to reciprocate by giving an equivalent gift, at a later time, of labour or goods. The expected reciprocal obligations are performative. Recipients of welfare are expected to reciprocate in terms of conforming, performative behaviour in relation to the organization, expressing and embodying *parahita*. This leads to a complex inter-relationship between welfare and performative expectations, with significant consequences for the potential for wider application of *parahita* welfare in more heterogenous areas. This will be explored in the final chapters,

Critics of kinship-based welfare programmes highlight the inadequacy and ‘lumpiness’ of such programmes (Devereux et al., 2015), where the very poor may be excluded due an inability to reciprocate (Habtom & Ruys, 2007). Likewise, critics of larger-scale, cash-based income redistribution programmes, such as those advocated by Ferguson in Botswana and South Africa, point to the high levels of public trust required to establish and sustain such programmes, which

are often paradoxically lower in contexts of higher levels of income inequality (Kuziemko, Norton, Saez, & Stantcheva, 2015). As a form of collective action, requiring collective consent and participation, redistribution relies on robustly identifiable interest for participants, particularly where private gain may not be evident (Friedman & McAdam, 1992).

Given Myanmar's context of an extremely low tax base, low levels of public trust in central government as an institution of public good, and a legacy of both incompetence and corruption in public services and finance (Aye Thida Kyaw, 2012; Hook, Tin Maung Maung Than, & Kim Ngoc Bao Ninh, 2015), calls for extending cash transfers for social protection, whilst being endorsed, have to date met with little meaningful fiscal appropriation (New Light of Myanmar, 2017). The rhetoric of 'protection' is imbued with more militaristic and security concepts, such that it is debatable whether the majority of citizens actually expect the State to undertake social protection measures. Conversely, a low expectation of the State leaves space for non-State actors, where sufficient reservoirs of trust, aided by the moralization of reciprocity through appropriating the concept of *parahita*, enable the collection and distribution of funds and services.

In this way, redistributive practice not possible at a national level is thus possible in smaller, more local ecologies, suggestive of what Foucault calls a 'heterotopia', a counter space where

real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted (Foucault, 1986, p. 24).

Heterotopic spaces act as places for 'alternative orderings, which come to be seen in contrast to others.' They do not 'exist a priori but rather, they are constituted through the very ordering of the things they helped to create' (Uluorta, 2009, p. 94). Rather than being a 'heterotopia of crisis' per se (Foucault, 1986, p. 25), the spaces for welfare redistribution at a more national level, as a



place for a wider collective performance, are either neglected by the State or undesired by the majority of citizens. Alternative orderings of redistribution, therefore, are suggestive of a heterotopia of protest, in which an alternative ordering is required to address the crisis. This would seem an apt description of emergent forms of welfare, of arrangements of interdependency, which, whilst perhaps having some a priori existence in the form of community traditions of reciprocity, nevertheless represent a new or alternative ordering. Part of that ordering is the claiming of space, and re-framing of notions of local belonging.

What is of interest is why it is *this* form of alternative ordering, and not some other form, which has emerged. What are the different factors which have shaped the emergence and re-shaping of the space claimed by *parahita* inspired organizations? A key factor, surely, is absent or irrelevant State presence, and the way in which, emerging from a context of authoritarian rule and suppression of associational life, that State forbearance, is a critical element in the emergence of the organizations. The next section will describe in more detail what is being distributed, and to whom: both in terms of the more visible, tangible welfare activities, and the more nuanced distribution of forbearance and political privilege, from the State, and possibly even from religious institutions, to the social organizations. When looking at the types of activities undertaken by the community organizations in this study, the type of activities, the scale on which they are reproduced, and the modes of organization and control of redistributive claims suggest a move beyond the kinship-reciprocity model, and towards a localized ecology of redistribution.

## Unessential economics: what is being distributed?

Surveys of *parahita* organizations in central Myanmar indicate substantial levels of welfare provision, met almost exclusively through redistributive means. A 2013 survey from 50 community organizations from different regions of Myanmar indicated that a typical village organization collected and redistributed around \$2,500 worth of cash and in-kind assistance per year, based on a 100-household village (Ei Ei Thu, 2013). A more recent survey of the activities of 40 community organizations in Sagaing region showed that they had distributed 46 million kyat to over 3,000 beneficiaries in the previous year, all from funds which they had raised locally through different means (SPPRG, 2018). This equates to around \$1,000 per village per year<sup>56</sup>. Fundraising is typically from five main sources: monthly or annual membership fees from those officially joining the organization; interest from micro-finance loans made to group members<sup>57</sup>; periodic collection of donations locally, for specific activities such as festivals or the purchase of equipment; donations from private individuals, often villagers who have migrated overseas and wish to contribute to village development; and income from activities undertaken by the group, such as the facilitation of festivities at funerals, weddings and other events. Groups were raising, on average, 150,000 kyat per month<sup>58</sup>, and some larger organizations up to three times that per month.

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<sup>56</sup> There is a question here regarding the significant difference between the 2013 survey, which showed a distribution level of \$2,500 per year, and the villages in this study, where the distribution rate was \$1,000 per year. This is mostly due to two factors: firstly, the villages sampled in the 2013 survey were selected because they were known to have strong existing welfare programmes, and so were more likely to demonstrate higher levels of distribution. Secondly, that research included a significant amount of spending on infrastructure projects related to welfare, such as school buildings or clinics. If those were removed from the estimates of welfare, the estimated redistribution for the villages in the 2013 study is closer to \$1,200 per year.

<sup>57</sup> A key privilege of those who are fully paid up members is the right to borrow money, at reasonable interest rates. In most cases, the majority of village households are members of the organization, and so have that right.

<sup>58</sup> Around 110 US dollars.

Table 6 is a summary of information collected during the fieldwork from the 12 organizations who participated in the interviews. It shows the welfare assistance provided by the different organizations, together with rates of membership fees and interest on micro-finance loans which generate income for the welfare fund. Apart from financial assistance a high degree of ‘in-kind’ assistance-including catering and logistics for funerals, and assistance to transport emergency patients to hospital, are also provided.

*Table 6: income generation and welfare assistance of 12 community organizations, Sagaing Region*

Community name	Fundraising		Welfare/Assistance				
	Membership fee <sup>59</sup> (kyat) <sup>60</sup>	Micro-finance interest rate <sup>61</sup>	Funeral	Health	Older persons	Education	Other
Kyauk Phuu Kong	500	3%	70,000	50,000	Honouring, traditional medicine	Support village monastic school	Transport for sick
Swe Le Oo	2,000	3%	80,000	variable	Honouring	variable	
Shwe Pauk Pin	1,000	2%	30,000	10,000	Honouring	30,000 as merit award	
Chaung Ma	2,000	Initially 5%, reduced to 3%	30,000	30,000	Honouring, nutrition, medicine	variable	
Ko Taung Kan	1,000	2%	20,000	10,000	Honouring	variable	Transport for pregnant women to hospital
The Pyay Daw	1,000	Initially 5%, reduced to 3%	60,000	variable	Nutrition	variable	
Hpwa Saw	2,000	3%	70,000	20,000	Nutrition	10,000 merit award	20,000 for birthing costs
Aung Chan Thar	-	3%	variable	variable	Nutrition, honouring, health	Merit awards	
Ywa Thit	2,000	2%	150,000	20,000	Honouring	Nutrition	20,000 for pregnancy costs
North Quarter	-	2%	150,000	-	5,000	10,000 merit award	Low cost loan for health
Middle quarter	1,000	2%	variable	20,000	50,000 annual support	Nutrition	Transport for patients
South quarter	5,000	3%	20,000	20,000-40,000	10,000	variable	

<sup>59</sup> Fees usually paid either as a one-off membership fee, or annually.

<sup>60</sup> At the time of writing, exchange rate was 1,350 per US\$, meaning that 10,000 kyat equates to around \$7.50.

<sup>61</sup> Interest rate charged on the micro-finance loans used by the groups to raise income for welfare payments.

The welfare activities of *parahita* organizations, are, to a significant degree, similar from village to village, and reflect key concerns around sickness, death and ageing. Thus, all the organizations interviewed would take responsibility for providing financial support for families arranging a funeral for a deceased member, as well as practical assistance in arrangements such as catering.

This is considered a major contribution by *parahita* organizations:

Previously, people had so many difficulties with funerals [...] especially poor people. Our organization can help them (Female group leader, Tha Pyay Daw).

Again, the performative elements of this are also important: it is a matter of great shame if a village has to hire or borrow basic equipment for funerals, such as coffin stands and catering equipment, and hence a source of great pride if a village can do it by itself, ensuring a dignified ‘last journey’ for the deceased:

Previously, we had to go and hire everything [...] funeral platform, plates [...] now we can do it all on our own (Male group leader, Chaung Ma).

Whilst funeral reciprocity is not an uncommon practice (Jingwei, 2008; Johnson, 1974), the concerns here are threefold: ameliorative welfare to prevent excessive financial hardship on the part of the family of the deceased; collective responsibility for ensuring that rituals are adequately performed, including proper disposal of the actual body; and the concern to preserve the collective ‘face’ of the community as one which has sufficient unity and co-operative spirit to perform the required ceremonies properly. These in turn are linked both to more external interest, such as civic pride and the demonstration to State actors of a sense of worthiness to receive development assistance; but also to the field of collective interest in village welfare, whereby

failure to adequately perform funeral rites is may bring bad luck (De Mersan, 2012), or undermine the dignity of the abbot (senior monk) in the Buddhist monastery of the village.

Caring for the elderly is deeply rooted in tradition, and influenced by Buddhist principles. There is potentially an epistemological correlation between the strong focus on ill-health, ageing and death, and the stages of enlightenment of the Buddha, whose journey to enlightenment was informed by meditating on encounters with four people: an infirmed person, an ageing person, a dead or dying person, and an ascetic (Rāhula, 1974). Traditional and religious teaching emphasizes the honouring of older persons, teachers and parents, and a common, and significant event in many rural communities is the annual, and sometimes monthly honouring of the elderly, known as a *bu zaw pwe*, where a ceremony is conducted to pay homage to elders, practically expressed with gifts of soap, toothbrushes, clothing and food.

Again, the performative element is important; the more frequent and generous the event, the more prestigious for the village. Some communities, such as Chaung Ma, provided twice-monthly nutrition for all older persons (usually a particular type of noodles). Others, such as Kyauk Phuu Kong, provided regular traditional (herbal) medicine supplements for older people, and still others have specific budget allocations for elderly persons' healthcare needs. In fact, elderly care related spending represented nearly one-third of all reported expenditure by the 12 organizations surveyed as part of the fieldwork for this research.

Wider health needs are also a significant focus of *parahita* activity: most of the groups operated a system to provide cash assistance for villages requiring hospitalization. This ranged from 20,000 kyat to up to 200,000 kyat<sup>62</sup>, with higher amounts sometimes provided as short-term, low

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<sup>62</sup> Between \$15 and \$150 at the time of interview

cost loans. Another provision is for emergency transport: in rural areas, timely emergency medical care is dependent on transport, and it is the aspiration of most villages to have their own, dedicated ‘ambulance’, usually a modified pickup.

Think about it [...] a pregnant woman. It’s not appropriate to go by ox cart. We could use a trawlawgi, make it drive slowly. But there will still be problems (Male group leader, Ko Taung Kan).

Right now, most important is an ambulance. We have a light truck in the village, but sometimes it isn’t available. That’s a challenge (Male group leader, Chaung Ma village).

The focus of health interventions is mostly on providing either cash support or quick and cheap (or free) loans to meet healthcare costs; however, some villages, such as The Pyay Daw, Chaung Ma and Shwe Pyauk Pin also provided assistance to persons with disabilities, usually in the form of regular nutrition, or modest cash support, and several villages provided specific financial assistance for birthing costs for pregnant women.

One criticism of localized welfare arrangements has been that they are ‘insufficient to address the growing economic and social challenges that communities are facing’ (De Coninck & Drani, 2009, p. 18). In the communities included in this study, the total amount distributed in terms of cash amounts varied greatly, based on village size and the size of the working capital used to generate funds for social spending. Kyauk Phuu Kong, a large village with a well-endowed capital fund, distributed over 10 million kyat in assistance over 2 years, compared to Aung Chan Thar, which distributed less than 1 million kyat in a village of just over 100 households over the

same period<sup>63</sup>. These figures do not include the amount of in-kind provisions, or provision of labour.

Estimating sufficiency is not straightforward, mainly due to the paucity of data on household socio-economic status over a sufficient period of time. However, three approaches can give an indication of the degree of redistribution taking place, and its likely sufficiency. The first approach considers the amount of welfare provided against both the scale of need, and typical household income. Median household incomes for this area are estimated at 1.8 million kyat per year (around \$1,400), although the median for the lowest quintile is 545,000 kyat (\$400) (LIFT, 2018). Where the basic cost of a funeral may well exceed 200,000 kyats, and healthcare costs can cost anywhere between 50,000 and 5 million kyat (occasionally more)<sup>64</sup>, emergency and social needs, on the one hand, clearly outstrip both local incomes, and the amounts able to be provided by the organizations. However, using the welfare provision for health emergencies levels of Hpwa Saw village as an example, we can first estimate that healthcare costs would typically consume 10-15% of the household income, which in this case would be around 70,000 kyats per year for a poorer household. If, as in the case of Hpwa Saw, 20,000 kyat of that can be provided as assistance, the amount, although small, represents a significant percentage of the household income. The effect is probably magnified by being accessible in a timely way, reducing reliance on high-cost, short term loans. Likewise, when we consider that funeral costs could amount to several hundred thousand kyat, requiring the household to take out significant debt (and usually at high interest), welfare assistance of 70,000 kyat can significantly reduce the burden, especially on poor families.

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<sup>63</sup> 10 million kyat amounted to around \$7,400, and 1 million kyat to around \$740 at the time of interview.

<sup>64</sup> 200,000 kyats amounts to around \$150, 50,000 kyats is equivalent to \$37, and 5 million kyat equivalent to \$3,700 at the time of interview.



Secondly, by estimating the net amount of funds which are pooled and redistributed as a proportion of total village income, it is possible to make a crude estimate of the redistributive rate. Organizations in this study typically raised and redistributed an amount equivalent to around 0.5% of the total community income, using the median household income, multiplied by the number of households in the community, as the denominator. Whilst this sounds modest, this contrasts with the current social welfare allocation in the national budget of around 0.3% of overall government spending (New Light of Myanmar, 2017), which in turn is only a small fraction of Myanmar's GDP.

Thirdly, by way of demonstrating efficacy, evidence from a recent longitudinal study of community welfare in the same area of Sagaing Region revealed that households in villages with a community welfare were less dependent on short term loans for food shortages or health expenses after the establishment of the welfare organizations, suggesting a degree of sufficiency conferred by the welfare distribution (SPPRG, 2018). The description up to this point has demonstrated only that groups raise income, and use it for welfare purpose, with amounts based on eligibility criteria defined by need, and by category of persons (e.g. older persons), representing a significant degree of redistribution. However, redistribution relies on claims to redistribution which are located in a broader social ecology than kinship reciprocity. The next section will explore the nature of are redistributive claims; what claims are made, to whom, and by whom, and on what basis.

### **Recognition or redistribution? Claim-making and the roots of a moral economy**

Arguably, claims are made at four levels, as shown in Table 7 below, representing a gradual decrease in the explicit nature of claims. Firstly, there are the claims to welfare made by community members, directed towards the *parahita* organization. Secondly, there are the claims

made by the members of the *parahita* organization onto the organization itself. These are usually for the material benefits of being a committed member, such as access to micro-finance, as well as non-material benefits such as status. Thirdly, there are the claims made by the organization itself on the community: for recognition and valorisation, in return for sustained visible performance which benefits the community. Finally, there are the claims made by the community to external actors, principally the State, and which take the form of implicit demands for forbearance and preferential access to State assistance.

The claims of group members, and of the organization to the community, have largely been described in the previous chapter. Claims made by community members will be considered in this section, and the claims made by communities on the State, in the form of favour and forbearance, are considered in the next section, under *Absent State, Active Communities*.

**Table 7: summary of redistributive claims linked to community welfare (*parahita*) organizations**

Claimant	Claim (to what)	Claim (to whom)	Basis of claim	Reciprocal responsibility
Community members	Welfare	<i>Parahita</i> organization	Mutual co-existence Self-claims of <i>parahita</i> organization	Moral behaviour Valorisation of <i>parahita</i> organization
<i>Parahita</i> organization members	Benefits of membership (access to micro-finance; status)	<i>Parahita</i> organization	Contribution of time and money	Voluntary service
<i>Parahita</i> organization	Recognition and valorisation	Community	Performance for community benefit Manifestation of collective virtue ( <i>parahita</i> )	Transparency, visible performance of rituals
Community	Forbearance and preferential access to development funds	Local government	Fulfilment of welfare in the absence of the State; demonstration of 'unity';	Avoidance of politics

In kinship models of reciprocity, claims are made based within a framework of social relations (Bland, Harrison, Mort, & Weedon, 1978), where co-existence acts as the basis for the maintenance of claim-making (Murra, 2017). Kinship or co-existence, however, may not be enough: as Bruni (2008) states: ‘there are many reciprocities’ and even those considered ‘unconditional’ have at their heart some form of relational exchange based on conditions (Bruni, 2008, p. 12).

Most organizations in this study defined three conditions for claims to welfare assistance. Firstly, being a member (resident) of the community (but not necessarily a member of the organization). Secondly, having a category of need, or being a category of persons for which the organization has agreed to assist. Thirdly, whether the organization has the capacity to provide that assistance. This does mean that a community member who has not committed to be a member of the welfare organization may, nonetheless, make a claim for assistance, a position clarified and confirmed with each of the organizations. In general, the claim process works in two ways: one, initiated by the organization, represents a process of recognition, whereby individuals (in most cases, older persons or persons with disabilities) are automatically accorded a certain status, and provided with periodic assistance of a fixed form, such as the provision of nutrition, free medicinal supplements or small gifts of toiletries or clothing.

The second involves an individual community member approaching one of the leaders of the organization and expressing a need: usually financial, and most likely relating to a health emergency or a death in the household. In such cases, the organization would work through a decision-making process to approve the claim, based on the nature of the claim, the financial resources of the group, the established rules and regulations of the organization, and in some cases, some assessment of the claimant’s economic status.

We don't provide for those who can feed themselves (Male group leader, South Quarter).

It's part of our organization's objective really, to make sure the poor don't starve (Female group member, Ywa Thit).

Although some organizations had more explicit wealth criteria determining eligibility, there is little evidence that wealthier households made claims for welfare, most likely due to the implicit 'shame' factor of claim-making to deter fewer poor households from claiming.

The data from this study also did not reveal any expressions suggesting that the welfare assistance provided by the *parahita* organizations constituted a 'rightful share' of some resource in the manner of claims, say, on tax revenue. The claim is made on the grounds of being a community member who has a need, with the implicit understanding that, firstly, the community has the responsibility maintain life and the conditions of subsistence; and secondly, more specific to the welfare organization that, having proclaimed itself as virtuous and beneficent, and appealed to community members for resources in the name of *parahita*, it had better do what it says, or place itself at risk. A link is thus drawn between the claim-making and performance: having established a performative identity, the identity is only as stable as the performance is consistent: so, you'd better pay up. This is perhaps a more sophisticated rendering of what Ferguson describes as a claim of 'presence':

The force of 'demand' comes from a non-negotiable principle that presence itself brings with it a distributive entitlement [...] Anything else would be shameful (Ferguson, 2015, p. 214).

Thus, the redistributive claiming process is framed around not only being there (co-existing in the community), and being in need, but also being there and being in need in the presence of your community, and in the presence of a community organization that established itself, in no

small part, by appealing to the generosity of others in order to address needs like yours.

Redistributive claims are thus configured around the co-existence of people in the same space, and the existence in that space of an organization which represents the expression of a form of solidarity framed around that co-existence. This figure of the social is different:

Not the abstract membership, citizenship and social contract of the nation-state, but a concrete and embodied presence and the obligation it implies. This is an obligation that is neither a matter of charitable giving nor even of exchanging but rather of sharing-sharing within a community of responsibility that is not formed by free association, that is in fact involuntary, and within which co-presence, with all of its entailments, is not a political choice but simply the most elementary sort of social fact (Ferguson, 2015, p. 215).

In this way, the claimant and the organization are co-dependent: without claimants, there is no performance; and without performance, *parahita* is disembodied and inanimate.

This still, in the end, entails ‘recognition’, and locates the claim in geographical co-presence and the moral obligations engendered by localized economic inequalities. Is this a case of recognition required for redistribution (Ferguson, 2015), or are recognition and redistribution essentially in tension with one another? In ‘From redistribution to recognition? Dilemmas of justice in a post-socialist age’, Nancy Fraser explores the tensions between these two:

What is the relation between claims for recognition, aimed at remedying cultural injustice, and claims for redistribution, aimed at redressing economic injustice? And what sorts of mutual interferences can arise when both kinds of claims are made simultaneously? [...] Recognition claims often take the form of calling attention to, if not performatively creating, the putative specificity of some group, and then of affirming the value of that specificity. Thus, they tend to promote group differentiation. Redistribution

claims, in contrast, often call for abolishing economic arrangements that underpin group specificity. [...] Thus, they tend to promote group de-differentiation. The upshot is that the politics of recognition and the politics of redistribution appear to have mutually contradictory aims. Whereas the first tends to promote group differentiation, the second tends to undermine it (Fraser, 1995, p. 74).

In this context, however, it is the recognition of the right to survive and remain as a community member-the claim to a rightful share of subsistence living, to a rightful space in the community ecology-that underpins the claim to assistance. The distributed assistance, then, is more ameliorative than equity-producing, where the claim is not for equality, but the preservation of a common claim to ‘presence’ in the community which is threatened. It is precisely about preserving the status quo, in the face of precarity, and the responsibility for that belongs generally to the community, and specifically to the welfare organization.

Arguably, too, the claims are underpinned by common ethnicity and religion: virtually all the communities surveyed reported that all, or the vast majority of their community were Bamar and Buddhist, a not unusual situation for that part of the country. The obligation, in particular, of *parahita* organizations to help Buddhists, is clearly identified, and enables an extension of recognition beyond the local:

(envisioning and national network of organizations) In our Buddhist Myanmar, imagine, if wherever you were, if you were in difficulty, even though I can’t personally come and help you, I can contact someone nearby to help, if we have this (Male group member, Swe Le Oo village).

Where non-Bamar, non-Buddhists co-exist in villages, recognition appears more conditional, and to rely on a performative identity which conforms to Buddhist values:

Q: In your organization, in your community, are there people of other ethnicity, other religions?

A: Just Buddhists

Q: No others?

A: Well, just a few. They're quite rare. There's a few Christians.

Q: How many would there be? I mean, your group has 466 members.

A: three, four, maybe ten. They are who they are, they go their own way. They are polite.

Christians, they're polite. They go their way, we go our way. It's မေတ္တာတရား (*Metta daya*<sup>65</sup>) But they're a minority group, kind of living between families, so they don't really count. It's relaxed, peaceful (Male group leader, North quarter).

On one hand, the data did not yield any explicit evidence that claims would be denied to non-Bamar and non-Buddhists; however, the implicit conditioning, on the basis of ethnicity and religion, of recognition of claims to a rightful share of co-existence in a locality, are significant when we consider, in the next chapter, the wider context of claim-making in a country where simply being present has not been sufficient basis to make a claim to co-existence. This leads us, then, to consider the other end of the claim-making spectrum: the claims implicitly made by communities and community organizations on the State.

### **Absent State, Active communities: forbearance and the politics of redistribution**

Chapter 3 described the relative absence of the State from community welfare, oddly a situation which represents a significant regression from earlier manifestations of Statehood (Trager,

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<sup>65</sup> *Metta-daya* is the principle of lovingkindness (*metta*) and is core teaching and practice of Buddhism. More loosely applied, it can imply tolerance (*metta ta-de*) or an attitude of benevolence towards another. It is quite common to hear *metta* referred to as a kind of common denominator between Buddhists and Christians, but far less frequent to hear it referenced as a common belief shared by Buddhists and Muslims.

1958). Despite a considerable body of research documenting the link between social protection and poverty reduction (DfID, 2011), social protection, ‘whether in the form of social assistance or formal sector social security, has in the past not been a component of an explicit government strategy to address poverty, vulnerabilities and disparities’ (Nishino & Koehler, 2011, p. 10). Recent efforts to develop and implement a National Social Protection Strategy (DSW, 2015) have been hindered by inadequate financial and human resource capacity, and penetration remains low (Schjoedt, 2014). A recent review of social protection in Myanmar found a ‘lack of adequate formal social assistance mechanisms’ leaving ‘many households in the informal economy, in rural areas, disaster prone areas, and in the ethnic minority areas [...] at high risk of falling into poverty’ (Nishino & Koehler, 2011, p. 9).

A key constraint is limited fiscal space: Myanmar has a low tax base (3.7% to GDP) (Aye Thida Kyaw, 2012) and the results of more recent efforts to increase tax revenues from citizens, rather than corporations or extractive industries, have been modest to date (McCarthy, 2016b). By contrast, collective efforts for localized, self-organized collection and redistribution of welfare funds appear healthy: recent studies in two areas of central Myanmar contrast the level of tax paid as a percentage of household income (around 4%) with the amount of income spent on voluntary donations (8.5% (McCarthy, 2016b). Of pure financial contributions to state and non-state authorities, formal state taxes comprised 30% with 70% directed to non-state groups in the form of contributions/donations. (McCarthy, 2016b, pp. 6-7). The same survey demonstrated low levels of trust of the ability of the government both to collect taxes fairly, and redistribute according to appropriate needs and priorities, perhaps reflecting the impact of decades of non-representative government. This is in contrast with much higher levels of localized ‘trust’, illustrating a social contract that is stronger horizontally:



The lack of popular reliance and confidence in state institutions does not imply the absence of any notion of a social contract, however. Rather, there is in reality a robust vernacular idea of social obligation in Myanmar which sees non-state institutions, kinship and family networks as the providers of first and last resort in times of crises, as well as practical partners in delivery of public goods such as roads. In these contexts, provision of ‘supplementary’ support from government officials is often seen as a welcome but unexpected complement to assistance from the community (McCarthy, 2016c, p. 4).

In the absence of State provision, the community, with *parahita* spirit, will step in, with contributions of cash and labour, to maintain the conditions for sustaining life, despite the historically negative attitude of the State towards unregistered organizations. But what is the fee exacted from the State by the community as part of this implicit bargain? There are two main areas of redistribution by the State, all founded on implicit assumptions, and two main requirements of the groups by the State.

Firstly, the communities validate a low sense of expectation of the State: State-provided protection is absent, so we will provide it ourselves. For that, the State will recognize us with forbearance, with honour, with non-interference and with priority for other development projects. Forbearance as redistribution, as described in chapter 3, takes place where the State, in lieu of adequate provision of the means of subsistence, chooses to ignore legal violations, such as illegal tenancy or street vending by the poor (Holland, 2014). In this case, where previous military regimes enforced laws prohibiting associations, the current government, whilst upholding laws requiring registration, chooses not to enforce them, even when faced with public evidence that most organizations have failed to register (SPPRG, 2018). Toleration is not enough: organizations expect to be honoured by local government, and anticipate prioritization for

development assistance as reward for their unity and discipline (McCarthy, 2016b). The State is expected not to interfere, to make unreasonable demands on the organizations, or to harass or intimidate those doing ‘noble’ work. This points, finally, to the wider ecology of localized redistributive politics: that the practice of localized welfare itself then generates a collective ‘redistributive claim’ on State and non-State donors, not by virtue of demonstrating greater need, but by demonstrating a key quality of unity or organizational capacity (စည်းရုံးမှု *see youn hmu*) which underscores a ‘worthiness’ of eligibility. Hence, the State’s role in the local redistributive ecology is viewed not so much as a guarantor of universal citizen-based rights, but as a potential benefactor which rewards evidence of self-effort.

The second area of forbearance is taxation: the implicit argument is, again, that given that we are already funding welfare ourselves, where the State should be providing it, the State cannot make unreasonable demands on us in terms of tax. An example of this, dating back to 2011, is the policy on taxation for imported cars: import taxes prior to the reforms of President U Thein Sein meant that poor quality, second-hand cars could sell for tens of thousands of dollars (Kyaw Su Mon, 2013). An exemption was made, however, for cars to be used for religious or social purposes: and through this loophole were driven dozens, if not hundreds, of cars ostensibly to be used as ambulances by community *parahita* organizations.

From the State’s point of view, the conditions for forbearance are two-fold: firstly, the groups should remain non-political; secondly, the assumption that the group’s activities will not challenge the status quo, in terms of embedded power structures or economic inequalities. Whilst I will argue in the following section that the practices of *parahita* organizations do represent a form of politics, the organizations themselves explicitly and vigorously differentiate between

their actions, and politics. This is in part semantic, in part a reflection of a worldview which compartmentalizes the sacred and the secular, and in part a reflection of the emaciated state of notions of citizenship in Myanmar. The word used for politics နိုင်ငံရေး (*naing ngan ye*) is used almost exclusively when describing the activities of government, of politicians and political parties. As such, certain people are prohibited from politics (monks, nuns, other religious leaders), others are discouraged from involvement (business people and social workers). For many years, involvement in ‘politics’ was synonymous with affiliation to banned political parties such as the National League for Democracy (NLD), and as such marked you for harassment or imprisonment by the authorities of the time. Thus, group leaders emphasize the difference between what they do, and politics:

We say to members: don’t get involved in politics. Just do social works (Male group leader, Kyauk Phuu Kong village).

We do it for our own village. We don’t have any allegiance to a political party. It’s just for our village development (Female group member, Ywa Thit).

The redistribution taking place is a form of democratization, in that it both requires and rewards participation. It only works when there is consistency and transparency, hence the need for rules. The performance requires it to be both responsive and selective. Thus, assistance falls somewhere between a gift and a share: it is a gift, in that the claimant has no automatic right; it is a share, in that the claimant has a locally defined right to making a claim.

Likewise, redistribution only works where there is some form of targeting: poorer people are more likely to get the cash, and richer people more likely to be able to access the micro-finance loans through which the majority of the welfare funds are generated. In this scenario, richer

people borrow (sometimes even when they do not need to) for their livelihoods. They then are able to save money as they are not paying high interest rates on the loans, and can increase profitability of their business. They give more time, and tend to be in control of the group. Poorer people are more likely to get assistance, and give less time. Corporate projects (like road-building) bring benefits to all. But arguably, the system only works if, by and large, it maintains the economic status quo of the wealthier (who remain as wealthy as they were), and potentially reduce the poverty of the poorest.

There is then, a compromise of sorts: the State fails to provide welfare but accommodates and rewards communities who fill the welfare gaps. In 'State and Society' Joel Migdal describes the accommodation taking place where weaker States cede authority to 'strongmen' (Migdal, 2001). I would argue that the following passage is highly relevant to the rural context in Myanmar, where for decades 'strongmen'-usually military or military affiliated officials and businessmen-exerted authority in collusion with the State.

The state has become, then, the grand arena of accommodation. Such accommodation takes place on at least two levels. First, local and regional strongmen, politicians and implementors accommodate one another in a web of political, economic and social exchanges. Their bargaining determines the final allocation of state resources that have made their way into the region. Second, accommodation also exist at a much grander scale. The local stability that strongmen can guarantee-as long as they provide workable strategies of survival to the population- is critical to the overall stability of the regime (Migdal, 2001, p. 92).

In the current context, where State authority structure has weakened, what has taken its place? Occupying as they do a newly shaped space between existing administrative structures, religious institutions and traditions, *parahita* organizations, with their strong appeals to moral authority, clearly play a role in the political ecology. Whilst not being classical ‘strongmen’, the implicit accommodation between State and community welfare organizations, expressed through forbearance and privileging, acknowledges the significant role played by welfare organizations. The political dimensions of this will be explored in the following chapter, but critical to maintaining the ‘space’ for emergent welfare organizations are the implicit bargains between the State, the communities, the community organizations and community members. In other words, at various levels, it needs to ‘work’, and to ‘work’ in ways which fulfil a variety of expectations from different groups.

### **Welfare at work: the fruits of *parahita***

Part of the bargain, both between State and communities, and between community organizations and community members, is the maintenance of adequate conditions of life. Success, then, is measured largely against that metric: do *parahita* organizations make a tangible difference to the lives of poorer and more vulnerable community members? As Scott puts it, these are ‘modest but critical redistributive mechanisms [which] nonetheless do provide a minimal subsistence insurance for villagers’ (Scott, 1976, p. 5). One of the challenges here is determining indicators of ‘success’: what are the organizations expected to do, by different stakeholders?

Measuring the success of traditional community organizations using the same indicators as are used for State-led welfare programmes will perhaps miss the point, and inevitably result in a fairly negative critique of reciprocal arrangements (Morduch, 1999) by pointing to the insufficiency of welfare assistance to adequately cover the needs arising from shocks and

stresses, to the failure to include the poorest and most vulnerable (Habtom & Ruys, 2007), to exclusions on the basis of gender or ethnicity (Dercon & Krishnan, 2000) or to the lack of resilience of these systems to withstand broader shocks which affect the economic well-being of the whole community (Bhattamishra & Barrett, 2008). From the previous section, broadly speaking, there are expectations of various elements of the Myanmar government of the organizations to remain apolitical, to not significantly challenge the status quo, and to fill some gaps in welfare. For community members, the key expectations appear to be, firstly, that the organization is ‘there’ for them; that it is present, and that it allows community members to present themselves to it. Secondly, that it is responsive, within its capacity, to the kind of needs that are considered important: mainly sickness and death. Thirdly, that it functions in a transparent, inclusive and reasonably democratic way. This does not yet imply a collapsing of pre-existing hierarchies and power relations, but it does mean that anyone has the right to join, to attend meetings, to say her piece, to contribute, and to wear the t-shirt.

Having said this, large-scale surveys in rural Myanmar<sup>66</sup>, for which I was the principal investigator, have consistently identified a strong association between the presence of community welfare organizations, however rudimentary, and higher levels of resilience<sup>67</sup>, as

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<sup>66</sup> The findings reported here refer to data from four surveys: a nationwide survey of 22,000 rural households conducted in 2015 by SPPRG and the Department of Rural Development, with funding from LIFT and the FAO (Griffiths, 2016c); a nationwide survey of rural households as a project baseline for the Department of Rural Development’s poverty reduction programme, of 10,000 households, conducted in 2016 (Griffiths, 2016d); sequential panel studies of rural households conducted by LIFT in rural areas covering most of Myanmar, in 2015 and 2017 (Griffiths, 2017e; LIFT, 2018).

<sup>67</sup> Resilience is a notoriously challenging concept to define, with definitions usually bounded by the context in which resilience is being described (e.g. structural resilience of buildings, survival and regenerative capacity of ecosystems; ability of financial and banking systems to withstand shocks and stresses. For the Myanmar context, a considerable body of work undertaken by the Livelihood and Food Security Trust Fund (LIFT) has produced a working definition of resilience at household level as follows: “the actualization of behaviour which can be termed ‘non-erosive’ or ‘constructive’ coping, and is a function of the capacity to act, the will to act, and the ability to act, as influenced by governing frameworks which may be enabling or constraining of the desired action (and which potentially leads to greater future resilience and addressing of causes of threats and risks)” (LIFT, 2017). The measurement of resilience is equally complex, and again requires contextually adapted indicators. Again, in this case, LIFT developed an indicator, based on the “practices locally associated with resilience” (Speranza, Wiesmann,

evidenced by a trend towards more ability to cope with a range of shocks and stresses (Griffiths, 2017e). This association was found across all the different geographical areas of Myanmar, including more central areas such as the Dry Zone, and peripheral, more remote areas, and areas with higher rates of conflict. The association does not appear to significantly depend on other factors such as village size or development status.

Households in communities with a social organization had lower rates of debt due of consumptive loans and higher rates of more positive, investive coping such as investing in livelihoods (Griffiths, *fc.* 2019). Rates of household vulnerability were measured using a complex indicator set known as the ‘Umbrella Model’<sup>68</sup> (Griffiths, 2012) which enables classification of households into categories of increased vulnerability to shocks and hazards. This set of indicators functions as a vulnerability index, not only identifying households which are more at risk, but providing a more detailed analysis of the underlying contributory factors to their increased risk. Overall, analysis showed a positive correlation between the presence in the community of a social organizations and lower rates of vulnerability in those communities (Griffiths, *fc.* 2019). Interestingly, too, the presence of social organizations appears to be associated with lower degrees of inequality experienced by female-headed households, households with persons with disabilities and poor households. From data from the same large rural household surveys, poor households, female headed households and households with

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& Rist, 2014, p. 117) which measured the balance of constructive coping (defined as behaviours and strategies which would generally strengthen the household’s economic base, such as investment in livelihoods and savings) and erosive coping (drawing down savings, selling assets to pay for emergencies, and taking high-risk loans for crises like sickness and food insecurity). Using this indicator, a balance of more constructive coping leads to a more positive score, suggestive of a more favourable resilience profile.

<sup>68</sup> The Umbrella model, a vulnerability index, measures household vulnerability based on ten different household characteristics or capacities: economic dependency, debt, livelihood diversity, income/expenditure, water/sanitation, food security, health, assets, social capital and political capital. Indicators are collected for each factor, and each factor is classified as ‘vulnerable’ or ‘not vulnerable’ based on whether the score for that household is more than one standard deviation below the mean population score for that factor. If three or more of the ten factors for that household are classified as vulnerable, the household itself is classified as vulnerable overall.

persons with disabilities all experienced higher rates of vulnerability, as measured using the aforementioned vulnerability index. However, the presence of community welfare organizations was clearly associated with lower degrees of difference in vulnerability rates between poor and non-poor households, and households with and without persons with disabilities:

the degree of difference in risk of vulnerability (represented by Odds Ratio<sup>69</sup>) differed between villages with and without social organizations, with the additional risk of poor households being classified as vulnerable in a village with a social organization 13% lower than in villages without social organizations, and the risk of households with persons with disabilities in villages with social organizations being classified as vulnerable 29% lower than in villages without a social organization (Griffiths, *fc.* 2019, pp. pending) .

Likewise, the degree of income inequality in villages with community organizations was lower than in communities without such organizations. These findings do not confirm causality, as it is possible that the conditions of lower inequality make it more likely that a community organization would be formed. However, they are suggestive that something is being done, and being distributed, which makes tangible differences to poor and excluded households in villages with community organizations.

More compelling evidence comes from a recent study of community welfare organizations in Sagaing Region, including several of the villages featured in this research. Here, the organizations were provided with additional training and financial assistance to increase their

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<sup>69</sup> Odds Ratio is derived from calculating the Odds, which are ‘the ratio of the probability that the event of interest occurs to the probability that it does not [...] estimated by the ratio of the number of times that the event of interest occurs to the number of times that it does not’ (Bland & Altman, 2000, p. 1468). The Odds Ratio is a comparison of the Odds between two groups, or populations: in this case, the Odds of being classified as vulnerable in a group which does have a social organization, compared to the odds of being classified as vulnerable in a group which does not have a social organization.



income generating and welfare distribution capacity, and were then enrolled in a pilot programme to distribute a standardized welfare benefit (maternal and child cash transfer, the so-called ‘1000 day grant’). This resulted in the community organizations continuing to undertake their own welfare arrangements, and at the same time enabling pregnant women and children aged under 2 years of age to access a monthly grant of 20,000 kyats (around \$15).

Despite a relatively short implementation period (median benefit length was 18 months) the proportion of households classified as vulnerable<sup>70</sup> who received the cash benefit was reduced by half, with significant reductions in debt burdens for food insecurity (SPPRG, 2018). Whilst it is difficult to determine the extent to which the reduction in vulnerability was due to the monthly grant or to the community welfare, other projects delivering a similar maternal and child cash benefit in the absence of community welfare organizations (either using village midwives or micro-finance organizations) did not see such significant reductions in household vulnerability (LIFT, 2018). This suggests again that the role of community welfare is significant in addressing vulnerability, even where the actual levels of financial assistance are modest. The next section considers possible mechanisms by which redistributive practices may have contributed to positive changes, and achieved a degree of social protection.

### **Small is beautiful: the merits of recognition**

Even in cases where the financial capacity of community welfare organizations has been augmented by external funds, either from international or local donors, the actual amounts of assistance, in comparison with proposed State-provided benefits, remain small. However, there are three mechanisms by which the modest financial value of the assistance renders much larger effects: appropriateness, recognition, and inspiration. Among the key contributors to rural

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<sup>70</sup> Again using the Umbrella model vulnerability index.

precarity are high costs of healthcare or funerals, and the lack of suitable financial instruments to smooth payments (Thant Zaw Lwin et al., 2011). The main course of action is to borrow, often at high rates of interest, and with a high risk of asset forfeiture in the case of non-payment (LIFT, 2018). In that context, then, timely access to even a small amount of assistance can reduce debt burdens, and in most communities, cash assistance for health emergencies was supplemented by access to short-term, interest free loans. Given the rapidly erosive potential of emergency loans, these small interventions appear to have a significant impact on the vulnerability of poorer households. This has been shown too in findings from the aforementioned rural surveys, which found that, although households in villages without social organizations were likely to spend less overall, they were more likely to have debt resulting from borrowing for healthcare costs, to have a higher overall health-care related debt burden, and to have a higher proportion of healthcare expenditure as debt (Griffiths, *fc.* 2019). Organizations from villages included in this study also pointed to the impact of timely, appropriate intervention:

Now, we can get assistance straight away, not like before. For health, for funerals, instead of collecting donations each time, we can get help to them much quicker (Female group member, South Quarter).

The health situation in our community has visibly changed now that we can provide more assistance (Male group leader, Swe Le Oo).

Organizations acknowledged the financial limitations of their assistance, but at the same time could point to the benefits of the organization beyond the financial value of assistance.

Looking at our funds [...] we honour the elderly, we give awards to students, we assist with funerals [...] can we say there is improvement, development? Maybe not. But the elders are very satisfied စိတ်ချမ်းသာတယ် (*seik chanthar de*) when we honour them; the

students are motivated to study harder; the poor people get help (Female group member, Ywa Thit village).

The value of recognition, inclusion, is highly significant. In their study of *munno mukabi* community welfare organizations in Uganda, De Coninck and Drani point to the value of recognition as a key element of how and why community welfare organizations work:

Notwithstanding their weakening in some cases, the very poor have in the face of shocks and vulnerability resorted to, and have been supported by, informal solidarity mechanisms [...] Such mechanisms not only provide welfare benefits, but also more intangible and essential help: they allow the very poor a measure of recognition in their communities and, through the values of solidarity, trust and participation, enhance their social capital [...] This value base is essential to understand why such mechanisms often prove resilient and sustained (De Coninck & Drani, 2009, p. 19).

The recognition extends to recognition of the community: the collective nature of localized organizations does appear to enable more effective access to wider government and non-government services, such as credit, training and assistance. Rural survey data showed that villages with social organizations were 25% more likely to have two or more sources of government credit, compared to villages with no social organization (Griffiths, fc. 2019).

Members and leaders of the organizations interviewed reported significant changes in the overall unity and harmony of the village, more involvement of young people in the social affairs of the village, and better co-operation between older and younger generations. This points to a third mechanism by which the relatively modest levels of financial assistance can effect significant change: that of inspiration to innovate.

One of the conditions of precarity is the sharpening of risk: and for rural households in Myanmar, the risk environment, in terms of the benefits of investing surplus income into livelihoods, is fairly bleak. This risk-averse economic behaviour can tend to increase vulnerability, where the ‘Fear of risk can lead poor households to forgo potentially valuable new technologies and profitable production choices’ (Morduch, 1999, p. 187). The presence of a local organization, to which poorer households can both belong, enabling access micro-finance for their livelihoods, and to which they can turn to for help, potentially serves to re-calculate the risk perceptions of rural households, resulting in greater likelihood of positive investment in activities likely to increase long-term resilience (Griffiths, *fc.* 2019).

This increased sense of solidarity, connected with enhanced access to new ideas and technologies enabled through the networking ability of the organizations, ‘can provide an environment where well-calculated risks, leading to successful diversification of livelihoods and income sources, may contribute to greater resilience’ (Griffiths, *fc.* 2019, pp. pending). The welfare organizations may be facilitating enabling more effective adaptive capacity, through a process of enabling more vulnerable community members to engage in more ‘strategic’ behaviour (Certeau, 1988) in response to their precarity. The increased levels of social participation of women, persons with disabilities and other marginalized groups potentially also plays a part in re-shaping conceptions of risk.

These point to the effect of social capital, not only social capital located in individuals and households, but that located in communities; and again, not only social capital in terms of status and ‘face’, but the value of belonging, and the way in which social capital leverages other forms of capital, including financial and intellectual capital, in the form of learning and new ideas. However, social capital, and the means by which it is developed and maintained, may also have

negative effects (Portes, 2014), as seen in studies of community welfare organizations in Uganda (De Coninck & Drani, 2009), Eritrea (Habtom & Ruys, 2007) and other places, where arrangements deriving their validity from traditional norms, power structures, religious or ethnic identity, or a strong sense of bounded place, can not only hinder more transformative processes, but lead to exclusionary practices.

solidarity mechanisms, while inspired by traditional values of ‘togetherness’ and ‘neighbourliness’ can assume exploitative characteristics that trap the very poor into a situation akin to bondage. [...] traditional welfare mechanisms do not always unite people beyond their ethnic sub-divide. Thus, any form of cooperation or solidarity between the two different Banyankole sub-tribes, can be tenuous (De Coninck & Drani, 2009, p. 24).

The construction of solidarity based on the local, the visible, and common ethnicity and religion then posits potential limits to localized welfare, as described by Butler:

[They] valorise nearness as a condition for encountering and knowing the other, and so tend to figure ethical relations as binding upon those whose faces we can see, whose names we can pronounce, whom we can already recognize, whose forms and faces are familiar (Butler, 2015, p. 100).

This nearness, and relative homogeneity, in the area of our study, has enabled the relatively rapid development of welfare organizations, with high levels of community participation, around a central animating idea of *parahita*. However, to what extent is the concept of *parahita* tied to Burmese/Buddhist identity, and how does that then shape the forms of social solidarity and social capital which are central to this performative welfare? The following chapter examines in more detail the interplay between Buddhism, Bamar ethnicity and *parahita* as a concept, exploring the potential limits of *parahita*, and how the theoretical de-limiting effect of *parahita*,

expressing altruism in generic and unbounded terms as ‘for the good of the Other’ may be attenuated by its situation in localized forms. This leads to a further area of consideration, in Chapter 9, of the interplay between expressions of self-organized welfare and notions of citizenship.

## Chapter 8

### **Buddhism, *Parahita* and the Other: the boundaries of emergent welfare**

Recent communal violence, mainly perpetrated by Buddhist Burmese against Muslims living in Myanmar, has perplexed many Western observers unfamiliar with the complex identity politics of Southeast Asia (Nyi Nyi Kyaw, 2016). In particular, popular movements such as 969 and the Organization for the Protection of Race and Religion (အမျိုး ဘာသာ သာသနာ စောင့်ရှောက်ရေးအဖွဲ့, *amyo ba-tha sasana saung shauk ye ah-pwe*) led by prominent Buddhist monks, used social media tools such as Facebook to generate huge popular support for often violent protests against Muslims and other non-Buddhists (Einzenberger, 2016). They also mobilized public support to pressure the government to pass laws restricting marriage or conversion between faiths, and explicitly banning polygamy (Walton et al., 2015). These events have presented a brutal counter-narrative to more peaceful expressions of Buddhism. Yet these movements have, particularly in recent times, also explicitly appealed to the concept of *parahita* as an animating idea for their more exclusionary constructions of the ‘other’ (Aung Kyaw Min, 2017a). At the same time, counter-narratives from sites of communal violence describe how senior Buddhist clerics protected Muslims from violent mobs (Walton & Hayward, 2014). *Parahita* remains a term applied both by groups seeking to be more inclusive, and more exclusionary, often referring to the same basic ethical principles to justify different constructions of the ‘other’. One of the implicit questions in this account of localized welfare is the extent to which the local is generalizable, both in terms of the prevalence of this type of welfare practice in other areas, and the degree to which the core principle of *parahita*, as selfless altruism for the benefit of the other, extends beyond the ‘local’ in terms of redistributive potential to those beyond the village. If

*parahita* is ‘for the good of the other’, who counts as the ‘other’ who has a claim to my generosity? This already frames redistributive claims in ethical and relational dimensions, hinting at the performative expectations associated with claim-making. In the Myanmar context, the question is particularly explosive: does the framing of redistribution and welfare around *parahita* potentially enable, or constrain, the establishment of claim-making beyond established religious and ethnic boundaries? Put simply: does *parahita* offer the possibility for non-Muslims to acknowledge the redistributive claims of Muslims in Myanmar? Or vice-versa? Or does the framing of redistributive claim-making and altruism around *parahita* posit limits or boundaries to ethical obligations?

This chapter looks firstly at how the ‘other’, as one with a potential redistributive claim which could be made to a *parahita* welfare organization, is theoretically defined based on Buddhist understandings of *parahita*, and then practically defined in terms of eligibility for welfare or belonging. Whilst mainly determined by geographical proximity, the nature and validity of co-existence is shaped by performative expectations. I then look at what those performative expectations are, and how they relate to the way in which *parahita* is practically defined, and in turn how *parahita* shapes the performative expectations on others. Finally, the practical expression of *parahita* welfare in terms of active citizenry is described, illustrating a form of everyday politics which may usefully inform wider discourses on citizenship in Myanmar.

### ***Parahita* at the borderlands: understanding our neighbours as Others**

The most basic definitions of *parahita* emphasize the ethical dimension of altruism, the good of the other. As described here by a female group member of Hpaw Saw village, *parahita* is



Freeing yourself from prioritizing yourself and your family, working for the benefit of others.

In interviews with the village organizations in this study, the definition of *parahita* was made clearly in Buddhist terms, both in terms of how the meaning is articulated with words, and how it is performed with actions:

Let me explain *parahita*, according to our view. The Lord Buddha preached the *Byamaso daya*<sup>71</sup> four points. Every person, old or young, keeps these. These attitudes are မေတ္တာ *metta* (lovingkindness), ကရုဏာ *karuna* (compassion), မုတိတာ *mudita* (feelings of happiness at the good fortune of others), ဥပေက္ခာ *upeka* (Feelings of equanimity, derived from understandings of the transient nature of things, and non-self). If our attitude is right, we can sustain our *parahita* spirit (Male village elder, Aung Chan Thar village).

By appealing to *metta*, *karuna*, *mudita* and *upeka* as core values informing *parahita*, the idea of theoretical limits to *parahita* diminishes:

It has been an ideal of much of Indic spirituality in general, and Buddhism in particular, to attain a state of non-duality of one's self and other selves, to realize the union of all life and to overcome the phenomenal forms that disguise the basic oneness. The realization of one's identity with others, the elimination of distinction between the experience of happiness and sorrow of theirs, and the happiness and sorrow of one's self, is called *karuna* (Sarkisyanz, 1965, pp. 40-41).

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<sup>71</sup> Translated variably as 'The Four Brahma practices' or 'The four dwellings of Brahma' (Houtman, 1999, p. 312) and describing the key practices of Burmese Buddhism.

How is the ‘other’ constructed locally, in the communities where *parahita* is practiced? Two key elements inform the defining of the other: co-existence, and performance. When asked who was eligible for being part of the *parahita* organization, and who would be eligible for assistance, the response in all cases was simple: for assistance; those who belonged to the community, and for group membership, those who belonged to the community and who committed to the group. Criteria for determining community membership were somewhat contested. For example, eligibility for a UN-funded maternal and child cash grant required documentary evidence of belonging: identity cards, certificate of residence in that village, and a midwife’s certification of pregnancy (SPPRG, 2018). However, for village welfare-led benefits, such proof was not required: one community even described providing funeral assistance to a villager who had settled in another village after marrying, but whose family appealed for help.

The performative element linked to group membership relates to general conduct: attending meetings, keeping organizational rules, providing voluntary labour for funerals, festivals and community activities, contributing membership fees, and expressing the right attitude. These elements, put together and performed consistently by someone living in that community, are what then makes them a member of the group. Despite a lack of ethnic and religious diversity, and some reluctance on the part of some respondents to consider the possibility that such ‘others’ might even be interested in joining the organizations, all of the groups interviewed confirmed the same principle: membership is based on co-existence, and performance. Do this, and you become the ‘other’ of *parahita*, and in turn, all the others become your ‘others’ towards which *parahita* activities are directed.

This ethical performance, however, is in turn shaped by Burmese/Buddhist norms. The articulation of *parahita* in Buddhist terms is widespread, although the application is also broad,

being used as a tool to motivate activities for ‘the propagation of religion through activities such as teaching the precepts of Buddha to children’ (McCarthy, 2017, p. 172). This illustrates the degree of ‘interpretative plasticity’ (Reynolds, 2002, p. 157) of Buddhist terms and concepts. In expounding *parahita*, Ashin Sandar Thika elides core Buddhist virtues of *metta* (lovingkindness) and *karuna* (compassion) with *parahita*<sup>72</sup>:

*Para-* for other ; *hita* – to do for their benefit; if you can do it, that’s *metta*. If you can practice *karuna* to the level of *metta*, that’s *parahita*- doing for the benefit of others. By first realizing *karuna*, we can join up *metta* and *karuna*, like one word (*metta-karuna*) (Ashin Sandar Thika, 2014, pp. 80, *authors translation*)

Contemporary understandings of *parahita* form a significant part of what Matthew Walton describes as the Buddhist ‘moral universe’ which ‘delineates the boundaries of the political as well as what constitutes [...] legitimate forms of political authority and participation (Walton, 2012, pp. 3-4).

Other groups described the role of religion in forming and maintaining the groups: by incorporating Buddhist teaching events, both for adults and children, as part of the groups’ activities, by using group funds to open a library stocked with books on Buddhist teaching and moral character, and the critical role of instruction by Buddhist monks to the groups, sometimes in their capacity as a formal patron of the group.

The performance of *parahita*, in terms of the activities, again is often indistinguishable from religious practice, being embedded as part of a wider performance of Buddhist and Bamar

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<sup>72</sup> The Burmese text of the quote is included here: ပရ-သူတပါးရဲ့၊ ဟိတ - အကျိုးကိုတကယ်ဆောင်ရွက်ပေးနိုင်တဲ့အဆင့်က မေတ္တာပဲ။ ကရုဏာဟာမေတ္တာအဆင့်ထိရောက်သွားမှ ပရဟိတ - သူတပါးအကျိုးသယ်ပိုးနိုင်ပါတယ်။ ကရုဏာကိုအရင်းခံခဲ့တာမို့ ကရုဏာမေတ္တာ လို့တွဲပြောမယ်ဆိုပြောနိုင်တယ်။

identity. In fact, attempting to question a distinction between the activities of the *parahita* organizations as social, or religious, provokes only confusion. Thus, the collection of donations is done appealing to the virtue and merits of *dana* (donation), participation in the *parahita* activities brings expected rewards of *kutho* (good merit), and the groups themselves expend a considerable amount of funds, and energy, on activities which are more explicitly religious, such as the novitiation of young monks.

In a context where collective performance is crucial, all participate. In Buddhist villages, the maintenance of monks (*dana*) in a village is considered the responsibility of all village residents (Gil, 2008), both in terms of daily support, and the performance of festivals. daily contributions of food, and irregular donations, particularly at festival times. The corporate nature of the responsibility for the sangha, and by default the *sasana* (the propagation and maintenance of the Buddha's teaching and influence), is described in vivid terms by Manning Nash in his study of villages in the Mandalay area, conducted in the 1960's:

Buddhism is responsible for much of the group activity in Upper Burma and for many of the groupings that emerge in Burmese village society. Daily the monks go from house to house [...] The *shinbyu*<sup>73</sup> is the largest and most elaborate affair which a family undertakes. A family saves for this, stretches its means to give it, invites the whole village, friends, relatives, and acquaintances from neighbouring villages. The holding of a *shinbyu* is an organizational task beyond the capacity of any single household. To assist the givers of a *shinbyu* are organizations of men and women called the *Zubyo* (literally

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<sup>73</sup> *Shinbyu* is a festival to initiate monks into monastic life, usually as younger novices, a key rite of passage for Buddhist males.

bachelors) and the *aphyo* (literally spinsters) [...] A *shinbyu* mobilizes the whole village (Nash, 1963, pp. 291-292).

The performance of *dana* (donation) is very public, and whilst in some ways individual, events such as the annual *katain*, held after the end of Buddhist lent, which provides monks with robes and utensils, are usually communal. Buddhist festivals, or *pwes*, are often

the only time during which groups larger than a few families are to be found in congregation [...] Whilst] Worship and devotion tend to be private and individual and need no organization or cooperation [...] these ceremonies require an organizational apparatus. It is not Buddhism per se, but the Burmese insistence on publicity and large numbers at the ceremonies that makes for the organizational aspects (Nash, 1963, p. 292).

The performance itself is also reciprocal: from the donors comes the means for sustaining the material life of the *sangha* (the monastic community); from the monks come the means for sustaining the moral life of the community, in terms of instruction, rituals and the opportunity to practice *dana*, with the attendant opportunity to acquire *kutho* (good merit).

Participation in *parahita* organizations thus becomes part of the expected performance of community members: it is part of being Buddhist. It is also part of being Burmese, or Bamar-and perhaps more specifically, understood as being part of the traditions of rural Burmese:

We Myanmar, we Buddhists, we will have *parahita* organizations in our villages. It's part of our Burmese Buddhist tradition (Male group leader, Kyauk Phuu Kong village).

It's our village tradition, from way back, to do it like this (Male group leader, Swe Le Oo village).

When regarding the context of the *parahita* organizations studied here, which were in rural or semi-rural, mostly mono-ethnic and mono-religious communities, the interdependency of

Buddhism, Bamar ethnicity and identity and community identity is not surprising. Renowned Burma scholar U Hla Pe, in a lecture given in 1976, described the unified context of the life of the Burmese:

Buddhism, nevertheless, pervades the fabric of life of the Burmese Buddhist, in whose thought, speech and deed are reflected the teachings of the Buddha (Hla Pe, 1985, p. 169).

Only in the more urban settings did I find any reports of non-Bamar, non-Buddhist community members, and as described previously, their community status was considered largely contingent on their conformity to Bamar/Buddhist ethics and modes of practice. However, one organization sought to clarify that the group's performance was not religious in origin;

Well, most of the people here, needing funerals, most are Buddhist. Lots of poor people, for sure. When we do it [funeral services] for them, it should be free from religion, that's how it should be. It [*parahita*] is working for others (Male Group leader, South quarter).

Organizations in more urban areas, with greater diversity due to in-migration and a higher proportion of residents assigned to work there as government staff, were thus more likely to raise questions about the nature of the performance of *parahita*, if not of its general meaning. Thus, non-Bamar, non-Buddhists could be members of *parahita* organizations, provided they were willing and able to perform in ways which were consistent with existing forms. However, it is not clear how far this could extend: perhaps, as one group member described, to those who were in some way already Burmanized through marriage or behaviour, or who were known to behave in polite and acceptable ways. In other words, those whose identity was sufficiently consistent with the majority. This would, though, suggest that those retaining a different identity, or unable or unwilling to sufficiently conform to Burmese Buddhist norms, could find it more difficult to

participate in *parahita* based community welfare arrangements, as suggested by the comments made in the previous section by the village elder from Hpwa Saw.

Does this mean, then, that *parahita* is a concept located exclusively within Buddhist tradition? I would argue from my research that despite the articulations of *parahita* in Buddhist terms, and the general absence of the use of the term *parahita* in Christian or Muslim writings, that the descriptions of *parahita* continue to be in broader ethical terms, for which concepts such as *metta* and *karuna* are key conceptual terms. Both terms are found in non-Buddhist religious traditions and texts, as are broader ethical principles of solidarity and mutual aid, and altruistic giving. Likewise, larger rural surveys seeking to analyse the effect of community welfare associations found both the presence of such organizations, and their efficacy, to be similar in both Buddhist and non-Buddhist communities (Griffiths, 2016b). However, the performative dynamics of mutual welfare organizations in non-Buddhist contexts in Myanmar has not been studied, and so it is not clear if any parallels can be drawn between Christian or Islamic expressions of co-dependent welfare, and the *parahita* organizations found in more Burmese, Buddhist areas. Whether exclusively rooted in Buddhist traditions or not, these expressions of *parahita* form one significant narrative of Bamar/Buddhist identity, and by default, the identity of the ‘Other’ whose status is determined by their performative conformity. Moving from these local expressions of *parahita*, how do the ethical performative expectations expressed in *parahita* welfare organizations inform contemporary notions of Burmese-ness in Myanmar, which in turn represent a significant influence on the shaping of plural society in Myanmar?

### ***Byamaso* and the ethics of (not) being Burmese**

In October 2018 I facilitated a workshop for an interfaith organization dedicated to peacebuilding and reconciliation in Myanmar, hosted by the Light of Asia Monastery. A key part

of the discussions was exploring how identity, and particularly ethnic identity, is constructed in contemporary Myanmar. Participants described identity as a conferred status in Myanmar, where the visible public record of citizenship, the National Registration Card (NRC) shows both ethnic and religious identity on the pink-coloured, credit card sized document. However, the actual designation of both ethnic and religious status is largely made at the discretion of immigration officers, who frequently assign religious affiliation based on ethnic identity, and ethnic identity based on an arbitrary assessment of the likely lineage of the applicant's parents. This can result in some amusing oddities (a Roman Catholic priest designated as Buddhist on his identity card because his ethnicity was classified as 'Bamar'). However, more serious consequences arise when there is the conflation of ethnicity and religion as a category: Karen language speaking residents of a village in Karen State, having lived side by side in the same village for centuries, were classified as 'Karen' ethnicity if they were Buddhist, but 'Muslim' or 'Indian' if they were Muslim, despite an indistinguishable ethnic and linguistic heritage<sup>74</sup>. Such conflations have considerable historical precedent:

Until the 1921 census, the Indian population was classified by religion and not nationality [...] Attempts to distinguish by language [were] also flawed and Baxter noted that it led to confusion in the census between Arakanese Muslims and immigrants from India. From

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<sup>74</sup> In essence, there is an expectation that people from certain ethnic groups will practice a particular religion. Hence, the majority of Kachin, and Chin, and a large proportion of Karen, and a number of small groups in Northern and Eastern Shan States have been extensively Christianized, resulting in an expectation of Christian practice and identity. Conversely, groups such as Shan, Mon, Pa-O, Rakhine and a large proportion of Karen have only small numbers of non-Buddhist adherents, and so the normal expectation is that they will be Buddhist. This can be problematic where both ethnicity and religion are part of the information, along with name, father's name and place of birth, on the National Identity card. When somebody with an ethnic identity normally associated with one religion applies for a National Identity card stating a religion different from the 'normal' one. Current laws prohibit official changing of religious identity without prior scrutiny from a Township level committee, ostensibly to prevent conversion through marriage or other forms of coercion, and in reality part of the wider set of laws designed to prevent intermarriage between Buddhists and Muslims.



1921 onwards, a racial identification of immigrants was attempted in the census (Richell, 2006, p. 32).

The construction of the ‘Other’ in contemporary Myanmar society is, as has been described in Chapter 2 (‘Heads that count’), both complex and contested. The mechanisms used to construct official categories of identity are themselves rooted in the layered history of pre-colonial and colonial rule. Whilst ethnic and tribal affiliations were well-known in pre-colonial times, scholars point to the reign of King Anawrahta (1044-1077) as a key point of development of both the State in Myanmar, and of the identity of the Burman people, and by default, the ‘Other’ status of those not incorporated into those classified as Burman (Aung-Thwin & Aung-Thwin, 2013). Anawrahta’s legacy was firstly one of conquest, followed by State-building which explicitly linked the well-being of the State to the welfare of the Buddhist *sasana*, and making Buddhism the official religion of his realm (Htin Aung, 1967). However, in terms of identities, whilst some conquered ethnic groups such as the Mon were encouraged to retain their own language and customs, the majority of those living within the scope of Anawrahta’s rule were classified as ‘Bamar’, based on their assent to the broad ethical principles of *Byamaso*, a code of conduct based on Hindu and Buddhist teachings (Houtman, 1999; Htin Aung, 1967; Kyaw Kyaw Hlaing, 2014). This firstly established a dominant identity (Bamar) based on a common ethical performance defined by a religion (Buddhism), not on blood or kinship ties to a certain tribal group<sup>75</sup>, which is a critical point when considering the role of ethical performance in the shaping of Burmese/Buddhist identity in contemporary Myanmar. This is perhaps part of the historical background to the more recent finding, using DNA mapping, of the extraordinary heterogeneity of the ethnic heritage of those identified as Bamar. Whilst analysis of DNA from some other

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<sup>75</sup> I am indebted here to Saya San Min Naing for his explanation of this to me in October 2018

ethnic groups, such as Karen showed low levels of diversity, DNA from those identifying as Bamar were ‘exceptionally diverse with 80 different haplogroups and a maximum of 6 samples in the same haplogroup’ (Summerer et al., 2014, p. 4).

The close intertwining of Buddhism with identity, and the dual role of the ruler as the preserver of Buddhism, is also a crucial factor in both pre-independence and contemporary nationalistic movements in Burma/Myanmar. The ruler assumes ultimate responsibility for the propagation of the *Dhamma* (Buddhist teachings) and sustaining of the *Sangha* (the Buddhist clergy and community), and as sovereign of a people, is responsible for maintaining the economic system required to preserve Buddhism and the Buddhist way of life. This arrangement thus placed Buddhism at the core of power, and as a key legitimizing principle not only to justify suppression and assimilation, but as a differentiating principle with regard to the construction and legitimization of self-identity, and the identity of the ‘Other’ (Renard, 1987).

The formalization of ethnic categories under colonial rule was closely associated with the process of mapping the Empire (Sadan, 2007), where identity categories were derived from physical, geographical and linguistic characteristics, but remained broadly reflective of previous arrangements of dominance. Crucially, this took place against a backdrop of conquest by a foreign power bringing with it what was perceived as a foreign religion (Christianity) and, through the policy of encouraging migration into Burma of subjects from British India, an influx of Muslim and Hindu migrants (Chakravarti, 1971). The resultant displacement of the Burman ruler in his role as the guardian of Buddhism, and the preserver of the *Dhamma*, unleashed waves of existential anxiety amongst Buddhists in Burma, and formed a crucial part of nationalist narratives.

John Sydenham Furnival was a civil servant in the British Colonial administration, after which he took up academic postings in Cambridge before returning to Burma to serve as an advisor to U Nu's government. There, he published what is now considered to be one of the earliest academic works on the plural society: "Colonial Practice and Policy" (Furnival, 1956). What Furnival saw was the emergence of a plural society in colonial Burma, one 'broken up into groups of isolated individuals, [with] the disintegration of the social will' (Furnival, 1956, p. 310). The in-migration from other areas-particularly British India, began to then establish a pattern of 'cleavage along racial lines. The foreign elements live in the towns, the natives in rural areas. [...] The various peoples meet only in the market' (ibid, p. 311). One consequence of this, amongst others, was an erosion of the consensus on shared welfare-for example, the protection of forest land for common use. Furnival described this as a 'medley, where society 'comprises separate racial sections; each section is an aggregate of individuals rather than an organic whole' (ibid, p. 306). This essentially defined a 'sum of parts' plurality, where each group, or 'crowd' essentially knew its place and stayed there, with the effect of codifying the identity markers established during colonial rule. In the medley, then:

[T]hey [ethnic groups] mix but do not combine. Each group holds by its own religion, its own culture and language, its own ideas and ways. As individuals they meet, but only in the market-place [...] different sections of the community living side by side, but separately, within the same political unit. Even in the economic sphere there is division of labour along racial lines, Natives, Chinese, Indians and Europeans all have different functions, and within each major group subsections have particular occupations (ibid, pp. 304-305).

To put it crudely, Furnival's notion of plurality, and the governance required to sustain it, depends on clear demarcations of difference which are matters of public record, and which are determined externally to the subjects themselves. Thus in colonial Burma, you were 'Indian' or 'Chinese' or various forms of 'Native' through a process of identity determination which is in turn part of State-sponsored control. Although describing this, and the general approach of colonial rule, as 'the devils which devastated the tropics' (ibid, p. 312), little is offered by way of remedy.

The current system of citizenship registration continues to maintain the framework of ethnic identity initially codified in the colonial era, where ethnic identity (and to a significant extent, religious identity) as conferred and confirmed by the State influences who a person can marry, who they can vote for in elections<sup>76</sup>, representation in local government, and in many cases, citizenship rights (Lall & South, 2014; Walton, 2013). To a degree, the maintenance of this constructed plurality has perhaps been the most significant challenge to post-colonial governments. In his analysis of Furnival's concept, Lee (2009) argues for the crucial importance of a common social will, without which

order in plural society in the dependencies [...] cannot be attained through voluntary union. Instead, order in the tropical colonies was imposed by the colonial regime and by the force of economic circumstances. Ironically hence, the colonial power, which created the plural society in the first place, was also needed to ensure that the plural society did not dissolve into anarchy (Lee, 2009, p. 34).

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<sup>76</sup> Those with an ethnic minority status can vote for ethnic minority party representatives in elections, for example. Likewise, the government appoints special 'National Race Ministers' to represent the interests of different ethnic groups.

At the same time as propagating a ‘medley’ of national races, successive governments in Burma/Myanmar have, to a greater or lesser degree, simultaneously pursued a policy of homogenization described as Burmanization (Walton, 2013). Described as ‘a program of ethnic, cultural, religious, and linguistic assimilation’ (David, 2007, p. 117), Burmanization, is a process which many would argue has been continuous even throughout colonial rule (1824-1948) (Silverstein, 1959) and certainly beyond it. Post-independence, there was an immediate need for some basis for national unity amongst an ethnically and religiously diverse group, who had until recently been on opposing sides of a global conflict. Buddhism and Buddhist concepts were central to the nation’s founder General Aung San’s appeals for national unity, where ‘national unity is not only an emphasis arising from Buddhism, but is [...] the product of certain Buddhist practices’ (Houtman, 1999, p. 61). In describing the ‘mental culture’ of Burmese politics, Gustav Houtman repeatedly highlights the importance of Buddhist ideals in shaping Burmese political thought:

Buddhist ideas of national unity are based on the Buddhist concept of harmony as a product of mental culture [...] indeed socialism and democracy have themselves been understood primarily as political systems built upon this sense of national unity as harmony, as a by-product of Buddhist mental culture<sup>77</sup> (Houtman, 1999, pp. 64-65).

This intertwining of Buddhism and Burmese identity whilst not in itself unique in terms of ethnoreligious phenomena, runs through much of Myanmar’s history, ancient and modern:

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<sup>77</sup> An array of practices usually defined as meditation and contemplation (Houtman, 1999, p. 6).

The average Burman cannot tell where Burmanism ends and Buddhism begins, because the two are so intimately linked in his culture and history. What helps one helps the other (King, 1965, p. 75).

The result is a two-step identity process: firstly, that to be Burmese (Bamar) is to be Buddhist (Bechert & Gombrich, 1984); secondly, that ‘Burmese-ness’ is the dominant performative norm for those living in Myanmar, with the degree of ‘Otherness’ measured on relative conformity to ‘Burmese’ norms (Devi, 2014; Karlsson, 2009; South & Lall, 2017). Hence, in response to the question of whether non-Burmese or non-Buddhists could participate in *parahita* organizations, a village elder in Hpwa Saw village responded:

Well, there is that one person who is Christian, but they’re married to a Burmese, so it’s OK. We’re all just Bamar. What’s important is whether they are willing to participate actively (Male village elder, Hpwa Saw village).

In this case, the criteria for being included is framed in performative terms, where the performance is expected to be consistent with Burmese norms, and where such performative conformity enables that person to be considered sufficiently ‘Bamar’ despite being identified as non-Buddhist. Interestingly, the foundation for such a performance is the same as that articulated by King Anawrahta in the earliest known constitution, and which provided the basis for belonging to the ‘Bamar’ as a people: the four *Byamaso* principles of *metta* (lovingkindness), *karuna* (compassion), *mudita* (feelings of happiness at the good fortune of others), and *upeka* (feelings of equanimity, derived from understandings of the transient nature of things, and non-self): the ethical basis for ‘Burmese-ness’. Thus, in this framing, the identity of ‘Others’ is made in relation Burmese/Buddhists, but has the potential to circumvent more static non-Burmese,

non-Buddhist identity markers through conformity of ethical performance. *Parahita* welfare is particular expression of that ethical performance, and as such represents a powerful locus of framing ‘Others’.

*Parahita* is an important element of that ‘Burmese-ness’ but represents only one of several contested notions of how Buddhism influences contemporary ‘Burmese-ness’. These ‘contested narratives’ of Buddhism (Walton & Hayward, 2014) have been debated in very public ways, with very real consequences, frequently defined less by a doctrinal stance, and more by ‘notions of Burmese Buddhist national identity and traditional ideas about the fragility of Buddhism that have circulated within Theravada Buddhism for centuries’ (Walton & Hayward, 2014, p. x).

Thus, whilst organizations such as *Ma Ba Tha* appeal to concepts of Buddhist morality to mobilize for the defence of Buddhism, the *sangha* (Buddhist clergy) and ethnic purity, the same Buddhist doctrines are equally applied in articulating frameworks for ‘an ethic of treating the “other” which is central to religious pluralism’ (Walton & Hayward, 2014, p. 35). Walton advances the argument, shared by many inter-faith activities in Myanmar, that Buddhist principles inform an understanding of democracy, and pluralism, which offer far better protection for the *sasana* (propagation and maintenance of the Buddha’s teaching) (Walton & Hayward, 2014). This represents the inherent paradox of the ethical performative framings of belonging: by enabling ‘belonging’ to be determined by an ethical performance, the door is opened for those with different ethnic and religious identities to be included as eligible ‘Others’; at the same time, the expected performative obligations are determined by the religion and culture of the majority. Furthermore, the potential for framing belonging in ethical terms can equally be used as the basis for exclusion, for placing limits on the identity of the ‘other’ of *parahita*. Precisely because ‘those’ people do not conform to the expected performative standard,

they are not eligible ‘others’, either for welfare, or for wider belonging to Myanmar society in general. The embeddedness of *parahita* in Buddhist teachings is also a vulnerability to contested ideas of *parahita* itself, raising the possibility that *parahita* based welfare organizations are potentially equally at risk of promoting exclusionary, nationalist versions of ‘othering’ as they are of more inclusive welfare.

### **Politicizing *parahita***

Translation and invention do not always bring prosperity, at least not for everybody. Successive codifications of identity constructions built around ontologically fragile ethnic and religious identities themselves forged largely around the need for administrative tools to maintain hegemony (Boshier, 2016; Lee, 2009) As Cheesman (2017) has argued, the politics of identity, increasingly expressed using terms such as *တိုင်းရင်းသား* (*daing yin thar*)<sup>78</sup>, itself a highly contested term, is one of the most significant political issues in contemporary Myanmar. The term *daingyintha* has come to be translated as ‘national races’, and by drawing on successive citizenship laws has effectively surpassed citizenship as the ‘surpassing quality for the membership in the political community of Myanmar’ (Cheesman, 2017, p. 463). What current interpolations of *daingyintha* into the citizenship debate achieve is to situate otherness firmly into ethnic and religious categories which appeal to historical situatedness for validation. This continues the policies of previous governments, for whom

religious difference, like ethnic difference, marked individuals and groups as outside the national community and as potential threats to the integrity of the country. [...] as a result of this, Burmese nationalism became increasingly conflated with Buddhist religious

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<sup>78</sup> Meaning, literally, original one, or son of the soil.



identity, conveying a sense that to be authentically a citizen of Myanmar was to be Buddhist and ethnically Burman. This exacerbated the dynamic of non-Burman, non-Buddhist ‘others’ being considered a threat to the state, and tools of regional or global power interests (Walton & Hayward, 2014, p. 6).

These notions have been appropriated by successive iterations of groups described as ‘nationalist’, who appeal to the necessity of the preservation of racial, religious and cultural purity as essential to the preservation of the nation’s well-being, and the future of the *sasana* itself (Walton & Hayward, 2014). Their appeal is strongest in the rural central heartlands of Myanmar, with strong support from Buddhist women (McKay & Khin Chit Win, 2018; Walton et al., 2015). Yet these groups, such as *Ma Ba Tha* and its subsequent iterations, appeal to the same ethical performative notions as *parahita* (Walton & Hayward, 2014, pp. 25-26), thus co-locating welfare practice and violent exclusion within the same ethical framework.

Parallels can be found between community welfare organizations, and the *wunthanu* (loving one’s race) organizations nearly a century ago, where the ‘Loving one’s race and religion’ movement framed true Burmese belonging in terms of identification with and performance of Buddhism (Tharaphi Than, 2015). Contemporary movements likewise construct an ‘other’ based on ethnic and religious difference, but with the justification of ‘otherness’ nonetheless framed around the ‘other’s’ inability to meet performative expectations:

Labelling non-Buddhists, especially Rohingyas, as “others” and “wrong believers” helps compartmentalize the actions of a Buddhist. The teachings of Buddha are seen as not being applicable to actions toward “others,” and not acting according to Buddhist philosophy is justified if it is to protect religion and the Burman-Buddhist race (Tharaphi Than, 2015, p. 17).

This rhetoric, though, comes from an organization now self-identified as *Buddha Dhamma Parahita* Organization (Aung Kyaw Min, 2018), the new name for the outlawed *Ma Ba Tha* organization. As in the 1920's and 1930's, such rhetoric of othering creates an existential threat from 'others' who may nonetheless be numerically and economically an insignificant minority, whilst at the same time appealing to the broader ethical framework of *parahita*.

Thus, concerns about the risk of community welfare organizations being influenced, infiltrated or appropriated by larger networks of nationalist movements are rooted, as has been described earlier, in both historical and contemporary evidence, mainly the experience of the Saya San Rebellion. Does the presence of a culturally located, religious framing for *parahita* make groups more or less prone to the influence of more radical, ethnocentric religious teaching that is highly prevalent in rural central areas of Myanmar?

There are several challenges to exploring this issue: firstly, sensitivity, as at the time of interviewing, tensions between Buddhist groups and Muslim groups were high; secondly, category difficulties, where what one person may consider more extreme, another may accept as orthodox. This is particularly true when considering, for example, new laws prohibiting intermarriage between people of different religions, and banning religious conversion, which were framed in the name of 'protection of race and religion' and had high levels of support from rural Buddhist populations. Finally, with such issues, the interview format, conducted in groups, would not be likely to elicit nuanced responses to sensitive questions. However, a tactic was employed whereby the question was framed in a more abstract way, aimed at determining whether there was a perceived threat of groups, or any sort, which could potentially exert influence on their organization-be they political or religious. This allowed for discussions to take place without a 'named' threat. What emerged from these discussions were three main findings:

Firstly, the threat of ‘infiltration’ or ‘influence’ by external groups or organization was recognized as genuine:

It is important to maintain the group, and the leader should be able to study the situation [...] So what is the religious [situation] what is the political [situation]? Have they increased [indicating a problem]. So, when someone comes, what is their objective, who are they? Will it be beneficial? Is it true? (Male village elder, The Pyay Daw).

For the most part, the types of organizations considered to be a threat were mainly political parties: none of the groups, perhaps for the reasons described above, identified religious affiliated organizations as external groups posing a threat. This perhaps illustrates the dangers; for example, the widespread use of common symbols to express Buddhist unity (such as the multi-coloured flag ubiquitous to Buddhism in the region) is also used by more nationalist groups to symbolize a more exclusive Buddhist unity. As Schontal and Walton point out, the lines can be blurred: ‘what counts as Buddhist nationalism, Buddhist piety and even *Buddhism* can change dramatically from one context to the next’ (2016, p. 83).

Secondly, the main approach to dealing with perceived threats is to reinforce the group objectives and identity, which are framed around ‘social’ and ‘*parahita*’, as distinct from politics:

If someone says “I’m doing *parahita*” that’s good. Politics is separate. *Parahita* is separate (Male group member, Shwe Pauk Pin village).

We can control our organization based on our rules, and our principles. We do social work, not politics (Male Group leader, Kyauk Phuu Kong village).

This relies rather heavily, however, on a very narrow definition of politics which limits politics and political activity solely to the sphere of activity by professional politicians, political parties,

or activists whose focus is on anti-government protest. Issue-based activism, such as campaigns around environmental issues or education, even where public assembly takes place, is not typically classified as ‘politics’ in the Myanmar context (McCarthy, 2016a), in a way which illustrates the epistemological cleavage between citizenship and politics. The classification as ‘social’ and not ‘political’ is advantageous, enabling groups to avoid unnecessary government scrutiny and restrictions (and this itself almost certainly represent a legacy from Socialist and military rule, where involvement in politics carried risk of incarceration). An epistemological distance between ‘social’ and ‘political’ also allows for a more flexible interface with religious practice, which generally prohibits overt political expression by Buddhist monks<sup>79</sup>.

The ‘non-political’ labelling of *parahita* organizations potentially increases the possibility of engagement with other groups which, whilst not falling into the overt ‘political’ category, represents a form of politics linked to nationalist movements, such as the mobilization of *wunthanu* (loving one’s race) groups by nationalist movements in the 1920’s and 1930s. The location of the social organization in a space to some degree co-inhabited by religious institutions, and the overlap of categories of virtue with religious concepts (such as *metta* (lovingkindness) and *karuna* (compassion)) which themselves have considerable interpretative plasticity, perhaps then points to the threat of religious-inspired nationalism as a greater risk. Here, again, though, are issues of category: how would ‘nationalism’ be identified by village organizations, and even if it were, would it be identified as something external, or merely a

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<sup>79</sup> I use the term ‘overt’ as there is a long and contested discourse of ‘political Buddhism’, which encompasses a range of views on what constitutes ‘political’ behaviour (DeVotta, 2007; Matthews, 2001). Analysis of political movements in Sri Lanka, Thailand and Myanmar all feature dynamic involvement of Buddhist thought, Buddhist clergy, and Buddhist lay movements in popular uprisings, demonstrations and in some cases violent opposition to both established governments, and in some cases minority groups. It is most like that the epistemological cleavage found in *parahita* groups in Myanmar is derived from the epistemological cleavage in Buddhist thought with regard to politics and social responsibility.

continuation of localized expressions of piety and religiosity? As with Schonthal and Walton, rather than attempting to either define or debunk nationalist narratives, there is a need for an approach which

emphasizes the specific conditions under which particular understandings of Buddhism, Buddhist nationalism and monastic personhood appear logical, persuasive and plausible. [this] highlights the plasticity and politics of influential analytical categories, on the one hand, while also casting light on the real-life diversity and heterogeneity of the data those categories purport to interpret and organize (Schonthal & Walton, 2016, p. 83).

One critical step towards a more robust approach to reducing the risk of infiltration or influence is the delimitation of definitions of politics: or, to put it another way, to recognize the inherently political nature of *parahita* welfare. Instead of relying on a rather flimsy demarcation between the ‘social’ and the ‘political’, by regarding such social activism as a form of politics, all other forms of activism and politics are relativized as other forms of politics. The same rules then apply when considering the merits of other agencies and groups: does what they propose conform to expectations of *parahita*? Is it consistent with the objectives of the organization? Will it bring benefit to the community?

This redefining of the political needs to be combined with the re-imagining of the identity of self and other articulated in the previous section, placing considerations of benefit to the community alongside analysis of consistency with *parahita* as the good of the *other*: does the benefit to our village include or exclude some community members? Does benefit to *our* village disadvantage another village? Is greater unity and solidarity achieved on the basis of recognitions which exclude others, or recognitions which include others?

This then begins to define *parahita* in terms of the politics of justice: a justice not derived from remote authority, or even democratic consensus, but from a more mundane performance of altruistic welfare, where the other is constructed simultaneously with the self as mutual objects of *parahita*; where my performance is not possible without that other, and theirs not possible without mine. This is close to what Matthew Walton describes as the potential response to nationalist orientated discourses: an understanding of *Byamaso-daya* which links their ethical nature to practical expressions of pluralism, and a notion of protecting the *sasana* which assumes that ‘one can only protect oneself (and by extension the *sasana*) by protecting others’ (Walton & Hayward, 2014, p. 41). These can both find practical expressions in the kind of grassroots welfare studied in this research, which have the potential, at local level, to transform notions of othering in ways which can in turn re-shape wider notions of belonging and citizenship in contemporary Myanmar. The following section describes the kind of practical politics expressed by *parahita* welfare organizations, illustrating a kind of ‘rural citizenship’ which embodies its own form of everyday politics.

### **The politics of *Parahita***

General Aung San, the nation’s founder, understood politics in ordinary terms:

politics means your everyday life. It is you in fact [...] It is how you eat, sleep, work and live, with which politics is concerned (Maung Maung, 1962, p. 124-126).

Despite this, subsequent popular understandings of politics in Myanmar locate politics in a much more restricted space. Conceptions of politics, perhaps more so in rural areas, derive from distance: where politics is described by the term နိုင်ငံရေး (*naing ngan ye*) meaning ‘affairs of State’, this frequently has the effect of placing those ‘affairs’ in a place far removed from

ordinary life, and irrelevant to ordinary people (Walton, 2012). Although probably originally reflecting the power dynamics under the Burmese kings, where greater distance from the centre of power equated to a dilution of effect (Heine-Geldern, 1942), the compartmentalization of politics into a limited, clearly defined space relevant only to those at the extremes of power (rulers and their opponents) was successively reinforced during the Socialist and military government eras, where involvement in ‘politics’ was dangerous (Pedersen et al., 2000; Prasse-Freeman, 2016). This has, on the one hand, obscured ‘complicated practices in the everyday lives of citizens’ (Ardeth Thawngmung, 2011, p. 655) as a vital element of a political landscape dominated by larger political issues. On the other hand, the demarcation of politics as separate from daily life has enabled a space in which new expressions of politics have been able to emerge and flourish, whilst not actually being called politics. *Parahita* organizations are one example of this rather elaborate collective misrecognition, embracing, as Bourdieu puts it, the ‘taboo of making things explicit’ (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 96).

These then are the politics of everyday, the processes of ‘finding strategies to manage such quotidian matters as gaining access to food, clean water, electricity, transportation, and healthcare; figuring out how to obtain citizen IDs; and finding the most effective methods for dealing with the omnipresent local authorities’ (Ardeth Thawngmung, 2011, p. 641). In Myanmar, though, they are just not called politics. Analysis of the narratives from the *parahita* organizations suggests a hierarchy of actions with regard to everyday politics: individual actions orientated to survival and amelioration of conditions; collective actions to address welfare concerns; collective actions to directly address authorities regarding welfare concerns; and the action of political parties, elections and government appointed authorities. Only the last would be classified as နိုင်ငံရေး (*naing ngan ye*, politics), and collective actions to address welfare concerns

are generally described as လူမှုရေး (*lu hmu ye*)- meaning ‘social’, and various suffixes describe social actions, issues and organizations. This means that organizations can classify themselves as social, and avoid the possible dangers of politics:

Well, social work လူမှုရေး (*lu hmu ye*) doesn’t have much to do with that [politics]. Some politicians နိုင်ငံရေးသမား (*naing ngan th ma*) work for the good of the country, but some just for themselves. So we wouldn’t let them into our group [...] our group is for the good of the village, so we’re not really interested in what they [politicians] are doing. We just wouldn’t listen to them (Female group leader, Hpwa Saw village).

Despite this distinction and self-exclusion from ‘politics’, *parahita* organization nonetheless create and sustain spaces in which politics, of the more everyday form, is both practiced and organized. There are at least five ways in which forms of politics are expressed by the organizations. Firstly, politics in terms of citizen participation, organization and public communication. In describing their activities, the articulation of rights and responsibilities of group members; of organization around activities for the public good; of participation, transparency and accountability all speak of an organizational process which expresses many of the values of an active ‘practice’ of citizenship (Walton, 2017). The practice of such citizenship, with membership rolls, transparent recording, public discussion and deliberation, elections, leadership, and priority setting in a context of resource limitations, enable a political performance at community level where the responses of citizens to ordinary issues takes a collective form which can best be described as political:



*Parahita* is people centred. We who give our time have no opportunity to profit from it.

We record all the expenditure publicly on a blackboard, so we show it all in a transparent way to the public (Male group leader, Kyauk Phuu Kong village).

We have monthly meetings, and we encourage everyone to speak openly, not to speak behind everyone's back. Transparency is really important (Male group leader, Chaung Ma village).

We make decisions by getting consensus (Female group leader, Chaung Ma village).

Secondly, it can be argued, too, that the process by which welfare issues are addressed represents a form of politics. This form of localized redistribution, where funds from voluntary donations of money and labour, and borrowing and interest repayments by wealthier village members provide a source of assistance for poorer community members, relies on a strong social contract, transparency, consistency and the sanction of religious and administrative authorities. As emergent organizations, they have had to create and sustain their own legitimacy (Friedman & McAdam, 1992), which as we have seen takes place through a performance of *parahita* values. The organizations also place themselves in continuity with concerns of religious and ethnic identity, promoting a social capital which derives from a performative requirement based on Burmese, Buddhist identity, which, as will be described in the following section, may be problematic.

Thirdly, both the process and the effects of village *parahita* organizations in promoting harmony ညီညွတ်ရေး (*nyee-nyut ye*) and unity စည်းရုံးမှု (*see-youn hmu*) chime consistently with successive government narratives on national harmony and unity as national causes and key elements of 'discipline flourishing democracy' (Huang, 2017). Both Matthew Walton (2012) and Gustaaf

Houtman (1999) have described the 'moral universe' of Burmese political thought, deeply influenced by Buddhism, in which unity is both a core virtue, and a goal of political practice. For this reason, the organizations frequently referred to the achievement of unity as a defining feature and outcome of their organization:

It's all done harmoniously, all the village together. That is vital for our long-term future (Female group member, Shwe Pauk Pin village).

In the village, young people, old people, everyone is active and unified. Before, it was like, you live in your own place, you clear up your own ox dung [...] that's how it was. Now, we have meetings, events, the youth join in. Things have really improved, in physical terms, in terms of attitude and mindset (Male village elder, Aung Chan Thar village).

As noted before, the performance of unity is itself not only considered meritorious in a spiritual sense, but also in a political sense: demonstrating that the village possesses the collective virtues and disciplines which make it worthy to receive State benefits and grants.

Fourthly, however, the *parahita* welfare organizations studied in this research practice, in their own way, a form of protest. Self-organizing in this way, with little or no reference to the State, relativizes the State in terms of its moral authority in the community. The absence of effective State welfare requires that the State acknowledge, either officially or by forbearance, non-State actors inhabiting new spaces of political relevance. This largely represents a continuation of policies and practice under the military government, where

collective social action in and around Burma was often characterized by a central bifurcation: to directly contest the military State (by joining political parties, participating in student unions or organizing underground networks) or to avoid that domain entirely,

working to ameliorate damaging social conditions in non-adversarial ways (Prasse-Freeman, 2016, p. 98).

Where does self-organization, even where it eschews politics and protest, nonetheless become a form of protest?

When these supports [necessary for life] fall away and precarity is exposed, they [bodies] are mobilized in another way, seizing upon the supports that exist in order to make a claim that there can be no embodied life without social and institutional support [...] an alliance begins to enact the social order it seeks to bring about by establishing its own modes of sociability (Butler, 2015, p. 84).

Is not the imagining of community, or the re-imagining of community, involving appropriations of moral authority, a structuring of a moral community, and a relativization of the presence and role of the State, an act of resistance and protest? Does it represent a new alignment of popular will arranged in a way which places the onus on community well-being with the community, and largely asks that the government to look the other way, as a kind of subtle politics of resistance, such as that described by Ardeth Thawnghmung (2011)? This kind of imaginative re-ordering is perhaps an alternative to flight as means to limit the direct influence of the State, in what James C. Scott calls 'The Art of Not Being Governed' (Scott, 2014). To describe it as protest, with connotations of overt expressions of resistance, however, is dangerous, and none of the groups interviewed would do so. Perhaps this is another example of collective misrecognition: we are all doing politics, we are all protesting, and we all know it. But we choose, collectively, to call it something different, so it remains a space to which we, and we only, can lay exclusive claim. Linking to this, fifthly, is the political nature of recognition, where community members, and particular categories of community members are afforded status as community members, and

different actors (particularly youth) are afforded status as organizers and leaders within their community. The politics of recognition are not unproblematic, though: the absence of significant religious and ethnic diversity in the areas studied does not allow for authoritative comments on whether the construction of group identity on Buddhist-inspired *parahita* concepts results in a tendency for recognition to be contingent on individual identities conforming to those values. Recognition, too, takes place at a more collective level, where the determining of collective self-identity of many emergent welfare organizations is rooted in Buddhist and nationalist narratives. Studying welfare groups in the city of Taungoo<sup>80</sup> in central Myanmar, Gerard McCarthy noted:

Engaging in social action that preserves life, and to a less overt extent to support or propagate the nationally important character of Buddhism, is also the stated objective of many of Taungoo's biggest welfare groups. All see themselves as possessing, cultivating and putting into practice *parahita seit* or "social consciousness". This draws on the discourse of moral decline and protection of the Buddhist community that dominated the concerns of Buddhist civil society during the independence period. However, it is also deeply imbued with a social-welfare ethic predicated on practices of religious giving (dana) in the form of charitable giving and volunteering contributing to national development that has only come to prominence after the protests of 1988 and a subsequent shift in government policy towards civil society in the mid-1990's' (McCarthy, 2017, p. 171).

A key consideration is whether the 'unity' so prized by rural communities is contingent on a collective performance of conformity to Burmese, Buddhist forms. Or can a stronger articulation of identities of place provide an alternative narrative for solidarity which transcends identities

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<sup>80</sup> Taungoo is a large city in Western Bago Region, in Central Myanmar.

shaped by religious and ethnic markers? This would call for more plurality of performance, and returning to the idea of heterotopic spaces, the inversion or subversion of existing identities. Reflecting again on trends observed amongst welfare organizations in Taungoo, McCarthy sounds a note of warning of a rise in more exclusionary forms of recognition, where welfare associations were increasingly influenced by more partisan, exclusionary ideas:

A noticeable shift has thus occurred in the scope of moral social action during this period [referring to post-1990], with substantial implications for contemporary social protection dynamics as well as conceptions of entitlement and the drawing of boundaries of political community to the exclusion of Muslims (McCarthy, 2017, p. 171).

The close intertwining of Buddhism with Burmese identity, and of the concept of *parahita* with Buddhist notions of virtue and service underpins much of what McCarthy perceives as a trend of emergent welfare organizations to draw boundaries derived from ethnic and/or religious identity, reinforcing the kind of fragmented pluralism initially codified during colonial rule. The alternative are expressions of unity which are based on identification with place, and conditional on co-existence, rather than conformity to normative performance of national identity shaped around Burmese/Buddhist norms. This will be explored in the following chapter, which looks at the pitfalls and possibilities of emergent ecologies of redistribution in shaping local and national narratives of politics and welfare.

The promise of *parahita* to shape relations to the ‘other’ in ways potentially unbounded by ethnic and religious identity markers is in practice attenuated by the situation of *parahita*, in the case of the groups studied in this thesis, in contexts which are profoundly shaped by Burmese and Buddhist norms. The activity of *parahita* is thus attuned to performative expectations which derive from Burmese and Buddhist norms, further giving shape to a performance of everyday

politics which also derives from those norms. That performance of everyday politics is best described as an expression of citizenship. How then, do these *parahita* inspired expressions of welfare shape ideas not only of who belongs, and who ‘counts’, but of what belonging entails? This is the subject of the final chapter, which looks at the intersection of citizenship and welfare.

## Chapter 9

### **The moral economy of welfare: precarious performances of *parahita***

Days after the largest natural disaster in Myanmar's history displaced 2.4 million people from the fertile Delta region in May 2008, an editorial by a senior government official printed in the government-backed New Light of Myanmar newspaper, in denying the need for external aid, praised the self-reliant spirit of rural people in Myanmar:

The people (of the Irrawaddy delta<sup>81</sup>) can survive with self-reliant efforts even if they are not given chocolate bars from (the) international community. Myanmar people can easily get fish for dishes by just fishing in the fields and ditches. In the early monsoon, large edible frogs are abundant (Bell, 2008).

A few years later, facing a group of angry farmers unable to repay their debts due to rising prices, the Minister for Agriculture responded, 'Why don't you all eat one less meal a day?' (Kyi Kyi May, 2015). Precarity, at least for Myanmar, is considered the norm for rural life, and the expectation of policy-makers is that rural households, as they have always done, will somehow adapt, again, and find new ways to maintain themselves. Peasants are expected to be resilient, and to make their own resilience.

If precarity is best described as 'produced' vulnerability or risk (Rigg et al., 2016, pp. 66-67), what are the products, or consequences, of precarity, in terms of the re-shaping of forms of citizenship, belonging and community? Introducing a special issue of the Journal of Contemporary Asia focused on Precarity in Southeast Asia, Teresita Cruz-del Rosario and Jonathan Rigg highlight not only the various ways in which precarity usefully describes the

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<sup>81</sup> Irrawaddy is an alternative spelling of Ayearwaddy, and the article here refers to the Ayearwaddy Delta, the fertile, low-lying areas in the southwest of Myanmar.

emerging economic conditions of Southeast Asia, but also the consequences of precarity in terms of re-drawing borders of belonging:

The analytical value of the term can be appreciated in the sphere of geography, where precarity is manifested in the tenuous borders of the nation-state, as subject peoples demand for greater spaces to express their separate (ethnic/racial) identities and the nation-state becomes a site for contestation, negotiation, and adjustment (Cruz-del Rosario & Rigg, f.c. 2019, pp. pending).

Whilst the focus of Rigg and Cruz-del Rosario is more on the links between transnational development and precarity, the application is relevant to smaller units of community, where precarity, and responses to it, stretch at the existing fabric of belonging. The precarity described in rural areas of Myanmar is a consequence of changes to the rural economy, and in turn, has consequences on the nature of rural communities. Until now, this research has studied one form of response to precarity by rural communities: organized self-help. Analysing the peasant rebellions of pre-independence Burma and Vietnam, Scott describes three other potential responses:

Reliance on the non-peasant sector of the economy [...] reliance on state-supported forms of patronage and assistance [and] reliance on religious or oppositionist structures of protection and assistance (Scott, 1976, p. 204).

In contemporary Myanmar, these may not differ as sharply as in Scott's description. However, in the narratives of the Saya San rebellion, and of modern rural precarity, the responses to precarity matter greatly in terms of the kinds of belonging generated and sustained. Having considered a form of emergent response to rural precarity, expressed by *parahita* organizations, this chapter



will look at the intersection of precarity, State-led welfare responses and *parahita* welfare, and how these inform modes of citizenship in contemporary Myanmar.

As rural Myanmar faces precarious conditions reminiscent of those in both the 1920's and immediate post-war period, it is important to study the nature of the politics which are emerging from this precarious rural context, and to consider the potential offered by emergent *parahita* welfare organizations for addressing not only economic and social precarity, but the precarious living engendered by the deeply dysfunctional pluralism which has shaped Myanmar's social space. The better question then, is not 'How can this be scaled up?' but rather 'What can we learn from this?' In particular, what can be learned and applied to developing better, more inclusive approaches to welfare which, by building on a more plural performance, develop new, more inclusive modes of belonging, and of citizenship in Myanmar?

The place of *parahita* in the national consciousness, particularly of a younger generation, is evidenced by the widespread participation in organizations doing voluntary activities (McCarthy, 2017), with motivation often linked not only to perceptions of government inadequacy, but to notions of citizenship shaped around moral obligations. In that sense, the 'articulation of discourse is [...] a bodily act' (Glass & Rose-Redwood, 2014, p. 11), undertaken both as a form of protest and as an act of self-identity, which in turn informs the identity of the others to whom the *parahita* activities are directed-the boundaries of difference (Ornella, Knauss, & Höpflinger, 2014).

In this sense, *parahita* is a key element of how 'moral citizenship' is articulated in Myanmar (McCarthy, 2017), meaning that even without any explicit acknowledgement of *parahita* in public policy discourse on welfare and citizenship, *parahita*, with all its variations in meaning and practical expressions, continues to be a critical influence in how citizenship is practiced in

Myanmar (South & Lall, 2017). This chapter thus considers three approaches to considering the influence of *parahita* on policy and citizenship discourses: firstly, in terms of *parahita* welfare as a response to growing rural precarity, where the social solidarity engendered by localized welfare is both an opportunity and a threat to wider national development; secondly, by considering how *parahita* can inform discourses on redistributive policies, and finally, considering how the ideas of practical citizenship expressed on *parahita* welfare organizations can provide opportunities for public policy discourse on developing more inclusive forms of plural society—a discourse requiring, at its heart, a different kind of performance from government. Precarity is a significant reality in rural communities in Myanmar, and how governments and other stakeholders respond to it will impact greatly on the forms of citizenship which emerge in both rural, and urban contexts in Myanmar.

### **Precarity and the loss of life: what now for the peasant?**

The response from government and humanitarian agencies to precarity frequently ignores deeper structural issues which constrain the agency of rural households. In their narrative, resilience is a thing to be engineered through technology, better agricultural techniques, climate-resistant seeds, and cheaper finance (Yarzar Hein, 2012; Tin Htut Oo & Tin Maung Shwe, 2015; Than Tun, Kennedy, & Nischan, 2015). There is a tendency to ignore or marginalize less universalized local initiatives which fail to fit neatly into the modern development narrative (Infante Villarroel, 2015a; Roe, 1991), which prizes approaches which easily yield to economics of scale (Chambers, 2012). In my own experience of describing *parahita* welfare organizations to larger development agencies and donors, the response is typically twofold: surprise at the level of self-organization and initiative, and scepticism of its applicability, asking the question ‘But how can we scale it up?’

This demonstrates a long-standing tension between development narratives driven by Western science, and what has been term ‘indigenous’ knowledge. Here we see Western development science, presented as objective and value-free, being viewed as more universalizable and progressive; while indigenous knowledge is perceived as ‘artefactual’ local and limited (Briggs, 2005). The reality, however, of localized forms of knowledge and practice, is more complex and pragmatic:

farmers and others may, because of the demands of daily existence, develop a hybrid, mediated knowledge that is developed and continually re-worked, often in highly innovative ways. Indeed, it may be, therefore, that indigenous knowledge no longer exists in any untouched, pristine form, such that it may be more accurate to describe such knowledge as a local knowledge (Briggs, 2005, p. 105).

The description in the preceding chapters illustrates exactly that: innovative re-imagining to keep the tides of loss at bay, in the absence of effective State welfare. But digging deeper, both within the narratives of this research, and the narratives of pre-independence history, it is found that such localized, emergent innovations are not always benevolent, and not always successful:

as a cultivator with a set of vital and pressing needs rather than an ideologue with a long view, the peasant inevitably seizes the opportunities available to him-even though many of them may be disagreeable [...and...] entail great human cost (Scott, 1976, p. 204).

Whilst the personal choices available to a rural farmer may be varied, this research has focused more specifically on the corporate responses to welfare needs, and how these illustrate a form of politics deeply rooted to the local, to identities which are knowable and known.

The intersection of precarity, resilience, welfare and citizenship in contemporary rural Myanmar pivots on an understanding of what James C. Scott describes as the ‘moral economy of the

peasant' (Scott, 1976, pp. 6-7). Self-organized responses to precarious conditions which threatened subsistence were framed around a 'normative model of equity and justice' which express the 'standards of moral judgement' (ibid, p. 41). In Scott's study of rural communities in Burma and Vietnam in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, these arrangements of reciprocity were in no way 'radically egalitarian' (ibid, p. 5) but sought to organize and manage risk around the maintenance of subsistence. However, their response to precarious conditions, when such mechanisms broke down, was expressed in more violent terms, and in the case of Burma, focused on the threat of 'others' associated with the British colonial government, which included government officials, Indians and Karen Christians. In the context of the precarity caused by collapsing prices and insecure land tenure, Saya San could appeal to millenarian Buddhist teachings to motivate the existing village organizations into more violent protests (ibid, pp. 150-151).

What happens in rural communities in Myanmar has a profound effect on the country as a whole, and thus the existence of both rising inequalities between urban and rural areas, and within rural areas, should be of significant concern. Although Myanmar as a country remains largely rural and agrarian, the overlap between rural and urban economies increases, such that classifications of rural and urban are increasingly unstable. This is manifest in numerous ways: the increasing dependency of rural households on income from urban migrants (Ito & Griffiths, 2016), the increased urban transformation of previously more remote rural communities (Kong, Baek, & Lee, 2013), and the narrowing the rural-urban culture gap through improved road access, telecommunications and social media (Griffiths, 2017f). Moreover, the rural economy is intrinsically linked to the national economy, not simply in terms of food production and an agricultural export base, or even where rural populations tend to form a 'reserve army of labour' for industrialization (Brass, 2005, p. 162), but the reality that the household economy of many

rural households includes income derived from migrants to cities. Both as part of national economic growth strategies focusing on industrialization and demanding cheap labour; and as part of the economic strategy of rural households, the blurring of the boundaries between urban and rural thus reshape the nature of peasantry (World Bank/QSEM, 2016). This means, too, that rural precarity is national precarity, and trends in urban precarity in turn affect rural precarity, often perpetuating, or accentuating inequalities.

However, the influence of rural communities extends beyond economics. As described above, peasant movements have played an important role in the emergence of various forms of Statehood in Myanmar (Taylor, 1987), and populist movements drawing large support from rural areas remain a powerful force not only in Myanmar but in Southeast Asia<sup>82</sup>. In this way, too, peasant politics, perhaps best described as the collective responses to precarity, also tend to have national importance. This means, then, that precarity in rural areas is a significant issue for the country as a whole, and rural responses to precarity may influence wider national politics.

Economic precarity is linked to social precarity, and the fear of losing an identity and a way of life. At its simplest, this manifests as the effects of dislocation, as I found when researching the effects of forced relocation from a rural to a peri-urban area in Yangon Region, to make way for a large industrial development. The instantaneous change from a known pattern, where livelihood and food production were linked with land and weather, and with local social relations, to an environment where living and working were spatially and socially separate, caused significant psychological and economic hardship (Griffiths, 2018).

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<sup>82</sup> Witness the That-Rak-Thai and subsequent populist movements in support of former Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, whose support is strongest in rural areas, and has tended to frame Thai politics in terms of a rural majority against urban, royalist elites (Pye & Schaffar, 2008).

If precarity is the manifest unreliability of the past, the ‘loss of faith in a fantasy world to which generations have become accustomed’ (Puar, 2012, p. 166), the value of symbols of that known world may increase well beyond their actual utilitarian value. It is no accident that in the 1930’s Saya San rebellion the conditions of economic precarity were accompanied by a wider sense of anxiety of losing cultural and religious heritage, such as that described by Alicia Turner in ‘Saving Buddhism’ (2014). This not only helps explain the powerful appeal of millenarian Buddhist symbolism in Saya San’s day, but also the appeal of contemporary extremist organizations based on similar notions of cultural precarity, where economic precarity is linked to rapacious ‘others’ whose economic dominance is followed by the loss of cultural and religious identity (Walton & Hayward, 2014).

When rural households are expected to endlessly accommodate to the harsh realities of life, in the absence of policies intended to change structural realities (Jerneck & Olsson, 2008), and ‘unsustainable or socially unjust practices [...] persist’ (Pelling, 2010, p. 56), the likelihood is that, sooner or later, self-organized responses to precarity such as *parahita* organizations will either break down, or be increasingly at risk of more violent, exclusionary responses to precarity. Changes, such as out-migration, the collapse of local livelihoods, or the influx of migrants from other areas can in turn have profound effects on the social fabric of rural communities (Ito & Griffiths, 2016). Here, precarity is not simply poverty, vulnerability, or even uncertainty, but a produced condition of ‘exhaustion from constant change, uncertainty and unpredictability of economic, social, cultural and biological life’ (McCormack & Salmenniemi, 2016, p. 4). This co-existence of economic precarity with the sense of threat to land, culture and community is considered a critical axis of analysis for interpreting violent responses towards Muslim Rohingya

by Rakhine Buddhists in recent years (Burke, 2016), the consequences of which have been felt nationally.

What is needed, in policy terms, is an analysis of rural life which recognizes the conditions of precarity, as well as being able to contribute to an understanding of ‘post-peasant’ economics, as a way of articulating and defining the place of rural livelihoods, rural communities and the rural way of life within the national economy and social ecology. Here, ‘post-peasant’ is itself perhaps a contested term, used by Ernest Friedl in 1964 to describe

former peasants in contemporary societies which are shifting [...] to more highly industrial economies with [...] alternative types of agricultural organization [and] a transition by which rural peasantries gradually become an occupational, non-peasant segment fully integrated into a national culture and society (Friedl, 1964).

This term perhaps ignores the continual process of rural change (Rigg, 2001), and the often central place of rural culture in national identity (Piker, 1975). A different articulation of a post-peasant economy goes further than simply affirming either the economic or cultural value of the rural economy. Like libraries or post offices, it strives to understand the value beyond bald utilitarian calculations or appeals to the preservation of something of artefactual value, simply because people feel better when they know it is there. This treats the kind of social solidarity found in *parahita* organizations as a significant resource, not simply as a curious relic of tradition.

In that way, there is recognition that the contribution of rural communities to the nation goes beyond economic production or symbolic value: what is held in rural communities, arguably, are the keys to national identity, and resources to re-shape it, and notions of social capital which

offer new iterations of citizenship and belonging in the forms of everyday politics of redistribution.

At the same time, much like the critiques of Hirsch (2002) and Rigg (2001) on idyllic notions of the rural village, the essentially un-egalitarian nature of the rural communities studied in this research should also be acknowledged. Whilst specific data on economic inequalities is not available for these communities, data from large rural household surveys in Myanmar confirms significant degrees of inequalities within villages (Griffiths, 2016d). Despite evidence that the presence of welfare organizations is associated with lower degrees of inequalities experienced by women-headed households and households with persons with disabilities (Griffiths, f.c. 2019), the practices of the *parahita* organizations studied show fairly modest redistributive practice, and without any aim towards a more egalitarian society. The framing of redistribution in *parahita* terms does, on the one hand, appeal to and require participation and contributions which tend to result in more material gain for poorer village members, but at the same time, the hierarchical stratification of village society is not threatened. Whilst some groups have female office-bearers, and a more active lay leadership, the overall structure of the village society remained unchanged. The redistributive practice expressed in *parahita* terms, then, is less interested in addressing inequalities in any radical way. Rather, it is about a communal sharing of the responsibility to ensure adequate living standards in a community, in part as a way to maintain the status and honour of the village. Power remains largely unchallenged, except perhaps that through the performance of *parahita*, the village can express a more concerted form of resistance to the intrusion of the State, or make more vociferous claims upon the State on the basis of a more compelling collective moral performance.



Despite these limitations, the models of the albeit modest redistributive practice expressed by rural *parahita* organizations illustrate a form of citizenship, perhaps even a performance of citizenship, which has relevance to national discourses on welfare and inequalities, where the discussion on redistribution is conspicuous by its absence. Put simply: if effective State responses to precarity require a welfare model which is in some way redistributive, and if the establishment of a form of redistributive welfare system requires a degree of trust and participation from citizens, and if the current inability of government to establish such a system is largely due to a lack of trust and participation from citizens, then the first step in establishing a redistributive system is the establishment of trust and participation. It is here that the possibilities of *parahita* based welfare systems can be explored. To put it in another way: if trust can be built locally to oversee a modest, but transparent welfare redistributive programme locally, how could some of the principles underpinning local ecologies of redistribution be applied to develop a wider consensus for redistribution beyond the local?

### **Redistributive ecologies: a threatened species?**

Dialogues on welfare reform and social protection in Myanmar have taken place in the absence of discussions on redistribution (DSW, 2015), which is remarkable given the severe fiscal limitations of the central government resulting from a low tax base. It is less surprising given the complex redistributive history of Myanmar. Perhaps the largest and most recent redistributive policy took the form of land nationalization in the post-war period. Peasant revolts and movements in the 1920's and 1940's took place against a backdrop of declining smallholding: pre-war, nearly half of agricultural land in lower Myanmar was held by landlords - the majority of whom were non-resident (Taylor, 1987, p. 276). Post-war, successive land nationalization acts re-appropriated land held by mostly Indian (Chettiar) landlords. However, redistribution failed to

address economic inequalities between landowners and farmers: by 1963, ‘tenants were still paying rent to 350,000 landlords, one third of whom were aliens<sup>83</sup>’ (Taylor, 1987, p. 277).

Subsequent land acts nationalized and redistributed land to peasants for cultivation, whilst the land remained in State ownership, a state of affairs which remains true today (Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2008).

This perhaps illustrates the state of government policy with regard to rural populations:

Since 1962 the State has implemented significant changes in its relationship with the peasant population which appears to have been intended to achieve incompatible goals. The first was to ensure that the peasantry remained loyal and did not engage in rebellion [...] the second was to increase the resources that the State could extract from agriculture in order to finance the strengthening of the state [...] The efforts to implement these goals have led to compromise which have made it difficult, if not impossible, for the state to change agrarian relations; for when faced with a choice between antagonizing the peasant majority and increasing agriculture production, the state has normally chosen the former course (Taylor, 1987, pp. 348-349).

Public dialogue on inequalities, such as that convened by ActionAid and Mizzima Media Group in Yangon in 2017, also tends to highlight historically unequal distributive arrangements, not only of material resources, but of recognition, of political rights, and of power (Griffiths, 2017d; Walton, 2013). Dialogues as part of the peace process remain locked in issues of State<sup>84</sup> rights, rights to education in non-Burmese languages, and federalism. These in turn place limits on the

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<sup>83</sup> Referring to non-native landlords, mostly those of Indian descent who had migrated to Burma during British rule.

<sup>84</sup> Here referring to the powers ceded by the central government to administrative areas, called States and Regions. States (of which there are 7) tend to be named after a particular ethnic group which is considered to be the majority in that area, such as Kayah (Karen) State, Kachin State and Rakhine State.

ability of the State (central government) to explicitly appeal for taxation in redistributive terms. The dominant model is still one of paternalism, where the wealthy and powerful (including corporations, politicians and whoever else is considered ‘rich’) are responsible for taking care of everyone else (McCarthy, 2016c; Ardeth Thawngmung, 2003).

Despite the lack of fiscal space, the Myanmar government has set out ambitious plans for State welfare, centred around cash payments for older people, people with disabilities, and pregnant women and young children (DSW, 2015). What appears to be hampering progress in implementing the programme is the lack of sufficient institutional capacity, and a lack of ‘mature notions of citizenship’ (South & Lall, 2017, p. 12) as a foundation for the broader social contract needed to sustain the mandate for redistribution tax revenue. The success of a social contract, then, rests on a reciprocal relationship between the State and the public: ‘society is obligated to help with the construction of institutions [and] the state has to justify its existence through its normative role, i.e. [...] meeting the needs of individual citizens’ (South & Lall, 2017, p. 12). What is missing in the Myanmar social contract is public trust in government (Asia Foundation, 2014). In the absence of a well-developed modern state, competent institutions and established social contracts, ‘citizens have to take part in public life’ (South & Lall, 2017, p. 12).

Despite the apparent reluctance of citizens in Myanmar to contribute to centrally managed redistributive welfare, redistribution as a broad, but local concept is not alien to Myanmar. Gerard McCarthy’s surveys of participation in *parahita* organizations in Taungoo, whilst finding low levels of household expenditure on tax, conversely found much higher levels of voluntary contribution to social and religious organizations, of up to 10% of household incomes in most cases (McCarthy, 2016c). The examples described in this study illustrate strong commitment to a practice of redistribution, albeit on terms freighted with misrecognized forms of interest linked to

social status and religious merit. Such localized redistributive ecologies offer potential sources of grassroots legitimacy for the development of more regionalized and nationalized welfare programmes, potentially enabling at the establishment of localized social contracts which, in the long term, offer ways to address the chronic lack of trust in central government redistributive capacity which underlies Myanmar's low tax base. Returning to the question posed earlier in this chapter: given the trust deficit between citizens and government in contemporary Myanmar, how could some of the principles underpinning local ecologies of redistribution be applied to develop a wider consensus for redistribution beyond the local?

There are three key considerations: firstly, the performance of citizenship and democracy. What is of interest to policy makers are the forms of citizenship expressed by the *parahita* welfare organizations. In most cases, transparent processes of priority-setting and recording were conducted in open, inclusive meetings. Democratic processes of leadership selection and membership resulted in more gender-balanced, youth orientated leadership, and relatively sophisticated processes of revenue generation and redistribution were governed by mutually derived and maintained rules, constitutions and operational practice. In short, the practice of organizations illustrates the type of politics which take place in the corporate everyday, but which nonetheless have clear resonance with more formal, national political forms:

*Parahita* is people centred [...] We record all the expenditure publicly [...] so we show it all in a transparent way to the public (Male group leader, Kyauk Phuu Kong).

Group leaders identified and defined an animating idea (in this case *parahita*) to define operational space, shape group identity, and legitimize claims to moral and operational authority, much as political parties would do. These processes, representing both emergent forms, and re-imagining of existing forms and practices, suggest pathways by which formal government

institutions can relate to localized ecologies where social capital, and public trust in at least localized institutions, is high.

What this requires, secondly, is a challenge to the practice of forbearance<sup>85</sup>, where the deliberate policy of non-enforcement of laws and regulations represents a calculated transaction in lieu of material support. In the Myanmar context, the widespread practice of ‘understanding’ (Ardeth Thawngmung, 2011) between government and communities, where the government ‘looks away’ and chooses to not enforce sanctions against unregistered organizations, and exerts minimal pressure for local tax collection, can be seen to represent some form of welfare transaction. This suggests that government, both local and national, could define more explicitly the space for non-formal welfare arrangements, in ways which fulfil the need for recognition, and which acknowledge in constructive ways the role of citizens in contributing to both welfare and to promoting more plural modes of belonging.

Yawbawm Mangshang (2018) argues for a potentially viable approach to establishing a national social welfare system which involves, firstly, building on what is already there (in this case, community led initiatives) and secondly, linking that process to regionally-managed welfare programmes which mobilize local and central resources to meet local needs and priorities. This requires more interdependent ecologies, which to some extent are also already emergent in wider

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<sup>85</sup> The use of the term forbearance here refers back to the work of Alicia Holland cited in chapter 3, and explored in the Myanmar context in chapter 7. It refers to explicit, or implicit but deliberate non-enforcement of laws which allows people to live, work or otherwise undertake activities which would otherwise be prohibited. The deliberate non-enforcement is then seen as a form of transaction, often of welfare, where the State does not provide welfare payments as such, but instead selectively chooses not to enforce laws which allow people to pursue their livelihood. Examples of this, cited by Holland, include municipal governments who choose not to enforce laws on property squatting, due to the fact that the municipal government is not able to provide adequate housing for poorer families. Another example may be the non-enforcement of laws on street vending, again as a ‘forbearance’ transaction in lieu of adequate social protection for poor families who make their living from street selling. In the broader context of the groups studied here, the government’s failure to provide welfare may be compensated for by non-enforcement of laws restricting organizations, non-collection of taxes, and the preferential awarding of government grants to villages who demonstrate high levels of civic organization.

national movements such as U Kyaw Thu's free funeral organization networks (Wells & Kyaw Thu Aung, 2014), and perhaps less positively so in national networks for welfare based on ethnicity or religion.

In the end, perhaps two options for welfare policy emerge. Firstly, a more conventional, a centralized approach which defines redistributive claims largely based on citizenship and biological criteria (women, people with disabilities), where the State levies taxes on citizens and redistributes them to other citizens, based on State-determined criteria. This essentially builds a vertical State-citizen relationship, where citizenship is largely expressed in terms set by the State. The second policy approach involves the State partnering with more localized systems of welfare, such as those described in this research, to develop an outward-expanding, increasingly plural framework of redistribution. This potentially offers a pathway to establish greater trust between citizens and the State, and establishes modes of solidarity and citizenship which are defined both horizontally (between citizens) as well as vertically (between citizens and the State).

However, the challenge remains of how to shape State-led welfare approaches which are neither bound by 'national, cultural, religious or racial belonging' (Butler, 2015, p. 107) nor by the limits of localized ethical obligations, whilst at the same time recognizing the highly significant and valuable resource generated by *parahita*-inspired modes of redistributive welfare. Much of the current basis for claim-making in the Myanmar national context is rooted in notions of plurality designed primarily for effective governance and control (Steinberg, 1999, 2001) rather than for development. In the local ecologies of redistribution studied here, claim-making is weakly framed around local belonging, need, and to some extent a degree of moral worthiness (based on participation in community life), against a background of limited resources. What forms of plural

belonging, determined by developmental needs (and not security) can contribute to, and sustain a wider, national ecology of redistribution? To put it in specific terms: what kind of narrative is necessary to actualize a process which may redistribute resources from one locality, ethnic group or social strata to another, in a way which is sustainable economically and politically? *Parahita* organizations demonstrate the value of a boundary object concept in legitimizing a new moral and economic space; the performative elements which are associated with that continue to validate the redistributive authority of the organization. What concepts may be useful at national level, and what performative processes are needed to maintain redistributive authority? This, critically, can be a step in establishing a broader, plural ethic of obligation and collective performance, where a wider, more inclusive sense of obligation which is less bounded by locality or familiarity is maintained by interdependence, where we can, as Butler states

approach a notion of plurality that is thought together with both performativity and interdependency (Butler, 2015, p. 151).

This perhaps draws closer to more fluid concepts of community and claiming, whereby in an era of ‘perpetual co-existence’ (Bauman, 2013, p. 79) there are no final settlements of claims, rather a process by which claims for recognition and entitlement continue to be made and contested.

The following section considers the ways in which a welfare and social protection discourse informed by notions of *parahita* can shape the wider discourse on citizenship and public policy. In other words, how can the government of Myanmar, by drawing on ideas from *parahita*-based welfare organizations for its own welfare discourse, develop policies which enable more inclusive forms of plural society and belonging in Myanmar? What kind of performance from government is required to build and maintain a more inclusive plural society?

## **Citizen Khine: *parahita* and public policy**

The performance of government is key to its legitimacy (Rawls, 2009): but what manner of performance gives legitimacy to the government in *Myanmar*, at *this* time? What are the local and contemporary expectations of the identity and form of government which are then constituted through performance? Several of the communities interviewed for this research were taking part in a trial, funded by an international donor, to deliver a monthly cash grant to pregnant women and mothers of young children, as a pilot to test what is planned to be a central government funded initiative. In these villages, the grant was distributed through the community welfare (*parahita*) organizations, whilst in other parts of the country, it was done through midwives or through village administrators. During the interviews, I asked group members of their own opinions of the future scenario of such projects being handled by government staff. Few had any positive comments:

Administrative staff have their own responsibilities. It is mainly security and administration. So, their responsibility isn't for social things. So, it will be problematic if they do it. Same with midwives, they have their responsibilities (Male group leader, Swe Le Oo village).

You shouldn't confuse administration and social things. These are different roles (Female group member, Shwe Pauk Pin village).

Well, in Myanmar [...] government staff just have the ingrained habit<sup>86</sup> [...] the habits of corruption still haven't been broken (Male group leader, North Quarter).

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<sup>86</sup> The word used here is very strong ခေါက်ရိုးကျိုးတယ် *kauk-yo kyo day* which implies a deeply ingrained trait or habit.



But the main distinction made between group members and government staff delivering a grant was the attitude:

Government staff don't have *parahita* spirit [...] they will do the task, but as their duty  
(Male group member, Aung Chan Thar village).

The distinction was made by several groups between ဝန်ထမ်းစိတ် (*wun tan seit*) (staff attitude) and ဗဟိုဝန်ထမ်း (*parahita seit*) (volunteer attitude):

Employees, they have a different attitude. It's like doing their duty. It's not the same as social concern (Male group member, Kyauk Phuu Kong village).

The above comments illustrate the way in which, firstly, the level of public trust in government to actually deliver welfare was low, attributed mainly to issues of attitude and ethics. Secondly, it also illustrates the extent to which the expectations on government to provide this kind of welfare are also low. This in turn frames the expectations of citizens on themselves: if government can't be expected, or trusted to provide welfare, then firstly, citizens should not be expected to contribute tax revenues, and secondly, citizens and communities are expected to organize welfare themselves. In summary, the idea that government could, or even would provide welfare is not commonly held in the communities which were studied.

Although data on public expectations of government in Myanmar is limited, three elements of public expectation of government performance can be proposed, based on a review of existing literature. These are provision, patronage and protection. Civic knowledge surveys by the Asia Foundation demonstrated, not surprisingly, evidence that provision for citizens, in terms of basic services and infrastructure, represents a significant part of public expectations (Asia Foundation,

2014). However, intermingled with expectations of provision are expectations of patronage: the distribution of benefits by a benefactor as part of his/her obligation to ‘clients’ who in turn, remain loyal (Auyero, Lapegna, & Poma, 2009). Local MP’s are expected, primarily, to secure resources (mainly infrastructure) for their constituency: part of the ‘performance’ of people’s representatives is to secure a larger share of resources for their place, their people. Likewise, the government is expected to support the *sangha* (Buddhist clergy), both corporately and personally. State TV regularly televises donation ceremonies of senior political figures (Myanmar News Agency, 2018c). In a 2018 newspaper article analysing the performance of the regional government of Magwe region, water supply, electricity, vocational training and organization of religious festivals were cited as the key achievements of their second year (Myanmar News Agency, 2018b). Government religious patronage in 2017 extended beyond Buddhism, with government sponsored Christmas celebrations in Yangon Region (Aung Kyaw Min, 2017c), and nationwide inter-faith prayer meetings held by government order (Naw Betty Han, 2017).

However, the State as the protector, both of individual rights and, in the majority of cases, identity and religious institutions, increasingly informs the performance of government around issues of security (McCarthy, 2017a), which of necessity identifies ‘others’ who represent the threat from which protection is required. That ‘other’ has been variously constituted, from insurgents, to external actors, to Muslims (McCarthy & Menager, 2017). In this performance, rhetoric and actions are constrained by the limits of democratic tolerance. Prior to the 2015 elections, Muslim candidates were excluded from the candidate lists of the National League for Democracy for fears of being considered ‘Muslim friendly’ and hence not capable of ensuring the protection and interests of Buddhists (Sherwell, 2015).

In ‘Citizenship in Myanmar’ Matthew Walton argues that ‘for citizenship to be transformative, it must be participatory’ (South & Lall, 2017, p. 105). And yet surely what matters is not simply participation *per se*, but the nature and objectives of participation. Judith Butler describes this as performative agency: ‘The subject who can take responsibility for building a future must become capable of both translation and invention’ (Butler, 2010b, p. 155).

Translation and invention are essential to the re-interpreting of ideas into new inventive forms, and the formation of bodily alliances which claim and reclaim space for citizenry. What rural welfare organizations have achieved is to take an animating idea (*parahita*), translate it into the rural welfare context, and in doing so invent a form of politics which stresses both continuity and progress. The broader concept is perhaps not unique. In their study of traditional organizations of reciprocity in Eritrea, Habtom and Ruys identify the importance of re-interpreting tradition as a key aspect of providing legitimacy to both the organizations and broader development processes:

The importance of traditional institutions in facilitating modernization lies in the need for an adaptation mechanism, or a translator of new ideas through reference and contrast to pre-existing ones. (Habtom & Ruys, 2007, p. 232).

What is critical, however, is the performance: the enactment or embodiment of the idea, the ‘practicing of *parahita*’, and its expression in modes of redistributive welfare. This then enables what Matthew Walton describes as a moral framework of citizenship (Walton, 2017) based on the principles of consensus articulated in U Hpo Hlaing’s treatise to Myanmar’s last two monarchs:

Collective decision making, undertaken under ideal institutional structures, can open individuals to alternate or opposing perspectives, eroding their own self-interest and

functioning as a moral practice in itself. When [the individual] [...] can see [...] the benefit for the entire community of a particular decision, democratic participation can become a morally transformative activity itself (Walton & Steinberg, 2014, p. 42).

But how could this type of performance, enacted at a local level, be re-enacted at successive levels of governmental authority? In particular, what are the ways in which *parahita*, a concept associated with the ethnic culture and religion of the majority, could be transmuted, providing a wider appeal for altruistic citizenship across ethnic and religious diversity?

The utilization of moral imperatives for self-help by the Myanmar government is not new: long after Anawrahta's constitution based on *Byamaso daya*, socialist era policies created numerous institutions at local levels aimed at raising funds for education and local development. The widespread appeal to ကိုယ်တော်ကိုယ် (ko htu ko hta) self-help) spirit by successive governments has been well documented (McCarthy, 2016b). Yet what is needed here is not simply a re-invention or re-affirmation of self-help: it is the acknowledgement of a form of political expression embodied by the welfare organizations and animated by the idea of *parahita*.

But to do this, *parahita* may need further re-invention. Current expressions, retaining a degree of interest in terms of expectations of forbearance and patronage, also retain identities which may not be inclusive. Put another way: what re-imaginings of *parahita* could possibly motivate Buddhists to prioritize the good of the 'other' when that 'other' includes those who are perceived as a threat? I will argue here, that the politics expressed in *parahita* in fact subvert much of the purported altruism and disinterestedness claimed in the rhetoric, but that this subversion potentially enables *parahita* to break from its religious and cultural limits to inform wider welfare movements.

So long as ethnic identity politics are themselves constructed on the foundations of deterministic ethnic categories, then definitions of plurality which follow will, to a greater or lesser degree, fall within the vicinity of Furnival's medley, where 'others' remain external to us. What is needed, both academically and politically, are newer understandings of identity construction which reflect both contemporary intersectionality, and democratic and self-determinist notions of identity building (De Fina, 2007; Nagel, 1994). The 'performative' elements are necessarily both individual and collective: individual in the sense that one's identity is shaped, reshaped, validated and even challenged through performativity; and that the 'othering' element of identity - the way in which the 'I' is shaped by engaging with the 'other' - is also performative (Butler, 2011b). These also recognize the crucial role of intersectionality in identity construction (Phoenix & Pattynama, 2006), where gender, race, poverty, urbanism and other factors interact.

Butler contests the notion that 'ethical obligations emerge only in the contexts of established communities that are gathered within borders, are unified by the same language, and/or constitute a people or a nation' (Butler, 2015, p. 103). We are not bound only to the faces which we recognize, but to those which are unfamiliar, or even threatening to us. The question, though, is the nature of 'binding', the terms of obligation. Here again, the prospects appear limited for any wider application of reciprocity beyond the bounds of a specific location, where faces are known. Even for those whose faces or performances may not quite fit (different religion, different ethnicity, different attitude) allowances can be made, on a limited basis, on the grounds of historical co-existence, but these too may be limited. In specific terms, whilst *parahita* functions without theoretical limits, the ability of *parahita* to provide a convincing framework for an ethical duty to those beyond the local community, and village, is likely to be limited. Beyond the village, common ethnic and religious identities provide the basis for co-operation:

(envisioning and national network of organizations) In our Buddhist Myanmar, imagine, if wherever you were, if you were in difficulty, even though I can't personally come and help you, I can contact someone nearby to help, if we have this (Male group leader, Swe Le Oo).

However, what if the framing of a citizenship, and a belonging which placed a mutual ethical responsibility on each citizen, was based not on 'bearing similar marks of national, cultural, religious, or racial belonging' but on a 'set of ethical values by which one population is bound to another' (Butler, 2015, p. 107)? This opens a door of possibility for a way of belonging, and being, as a citizen, which is based on an ethical performance; and where the relationship with the 'other' in terms of my responsibility to them is also bound not by racial identity, but by that same ethical performance. But what 'set of ethical values' is able to define self and 'other' in ways which are not mutually self-limiting? Here again is encountered the problematics of nation and citizenship building linked to expectations of a performance orientated to some notional national identity, which has tended to slide into Burmanization. Witness the peculiar nature of identity performance in the Myanmar parliament: MPs are required to wear attire consistent with their ethnic identity (as described on their identity card) and yet in all other aspects are expected to conform to the linguistic and cultural norms of the majority culture (Ba Kaung, 2011). Because the Bamar/Burmese majority 'sets the norm for citizenship' delivering the required performance 'tends to be a relatively simple and straightforward matter for citizens from [that] community' (Holliday, 2014, p. 410).

Arguing that Burmese (and to some extent Buddhist) identity functions as the equivalent of whiteness in some western cultures, Matthew Walton highlights the 'tenuous position of non-Burmans within the national community [where] Burman-ness represents a dominant ethnic

identity that stands in for Myanmar (national) identity, which is thus never fully or securely available to non-Burmans' (Walton, 2013, p. 14). This privileging of access to performative norms of speech, dress, conduct and even justice (Walton, 2013, p. 14) locates citizenship within boundaries largely determined by Burman performativity.

Hence the dangers of locating identity, belonging and even citizenship within a framework of ethical performance. Even valorising coexistence through performative ethnics of citizenship (affirming citizenship to those who demonstrate a particular character to their co-existence) raises complex issues. Who determines the nature (character) of the performance? If the nature/character of the performance remains essentially tied to majority cultural and religious forms, the status quo remains largely unchallenged. Just as white privilege can only be dismantled by the dominant group, 'Burman dominance and privilege can be overcome only through active struggle and repudiation by Burmans' (Walton, 2013, p. 21).

Welfare reform and social protection offer one potential pathway, through a wider performance of social welfare by the State, where the boundaries of the 'community' are redefined to include co-existents. Here, there can be a wider expression the ideas of *parahita* as people centred, transparent, equitable, self-determined, locating self-interest in the wider interests of the community which in turn have tangible self-interests in terms of harmony, security, 'face', and which intersect with broader ethical principles such as *metta* and *karuna*, as a way of defining the other as primarily the object of *parahita* *seit*, of *parahita* activity, and thus whose relationship with the other is one introduced by co-existence, but maintained by mutual belonging in the cause of *parahita* welfare.

Does this then lead directly to universal welfare benefits? I would argue not, as although universal benefits may represent a part of broader welfare provision, these too quickly locate

eligibility within frames of belonging (such as requiring ID cards) which selectively recognize based on biological determinants of identity. A potential pathway, outlined by Yawbawm Mangshan involves an approach to developing national social protection which ‘builds on what is already there’ (Yawbawm Mangshan, 2018, p. 17) with the central government acting as a coordinator and funder of welfare programmes developed and delivered in co-operation with existing organizations and CBOs (including village organizations) and organized by State and Region, whilst retaining broader national objectives. This enables a performance in essentially three parts. Firstly, by engaging with the local, the State recognizes and accepts ‘otherness’ in the form of non-State bodies, and agrees to do so by accepting various forms of welfare expression. Secondly, State and Regional organization of welfare reduces the ‘gap’ of co-existence, where those living in a more locally defined area are more reasonably able to identify with different ‘others’ who are nonetheless co-existent, building a bridge to more national understandings of co-existence within wider borders. Thirdly, this enables mutuality to be built in two directions: there is the mutuality which functions locally, through community organizations, and networks of community organizations within a States and Region; there is then also a mutuality between the State and States/Regions, and the communities within them. There is thus a mutual need, centred around a performance in which all are involved. Thus, as Yawbawm Mangshan states:

The performance required of social protection delivery to build trust and legitimacy, then, requires contextually aware, inclusive processes, which are already in existence in localized forms across the country. Co-operation with such organizations by the state (rather than co-option of them) within a framework of localized accountability offers significant potential to establish a positive cycle of legitimacy, where increased trust



enables greater potential for the revenue generation necessary for enacting wider social protection (Yawbawm Mangshan, 2018, p. 20).

This results in a mutual granting of legitimacy, of legitimate belonging, and from here, the steps to newer iterations of belonging pertaining to citizenship are fewer. There is also a recognition that, contrary to articulations of ‘national unity’ built on notions of difference which affirm separateness, and construct belonging through the tolerance of difference by the majority on the grounds of minimal performance of majority values, the ‘other’, with all their differences, are essential to my own identity as it is performed. This begins to point back to the notion of precarity as essential to the human condition, and a fundamental characteristic of life lived in relation to the other:

I am already bound to you, and this is what it means to be the self that I am, receptive to you in ways that I cannot fully predict or control.[...] in other words, you may frighten me and threaten me, but my obligation to you must remain firm’ (Butler, 2015, p. 110).

The emergent forms of welfare studied here, inspired by *parahita*, represent a particular survival strategy in rural communities, embodying an expression of politics and citizenship which relativizes the State, and shapes modes of belonging both for those who are, and who are not included within the sphere of the ‘other’ in *parahita*’s altruism. On the one hand, their model of active citizenship, sustaining a significant level of redistribution and demonstrating high degrees of competence, represents a potential reservoir of public trust on which more widespread redistributive welfare initiatives could be built. At the same time, despite the theoretical limitless of *parahita* as an ethical concept, its bounding within a particular religious and ethnic performance not only potentially limits its wider applicability in developing welfare programmes, but also leaves open the risk that welfare and citizenship arrangements are shaped

in ways which exclude ‘others’ who may be unable to meet the performative expectations of the majority.

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