

*Exploring Ethnic Diversity in Burma*. Edited by Mikael Gravers. Copenhagen: Danish Research Council for the Humanities, 2007. 283 pp.

This fascinating collection of chapters on Myanmar's non-Burman (non-Bamar) ethnic communities stems from an international Burmese studies conference in Gothenburg, Sweden in 2002. It consists of a preface and nine chapters, beginning with a discerning introduction by the book's editor and chief contributor, Mikael Gravers of Aarhus University.

Issues of ethnicity are crucial to the formation of any modern nation state, sometimes a source of disagreement, but also as a key aspect of development, democratic or otherwise. These features are important in the case of Myanmar, where one third of the fifty million population is non-Burman. Even the physical or territorial infrastructure of the nation (seven regions with non-Burman ethnic majority and forty-seven per cent of the geography, and seven states with Burman majority) indicates something of the ethnic complexity. Gravers questions why the existential and emotional dimensions of ethnicity become engulfed in violent conflicts in some states and not others. Myanmar has seen its share of ethnic discord but, importantly, it could be argued that ethnicity was not part of "the pre-colonial power model" (p. 13). The political alliances established on tributary relationships between the "royal realm of Burma" (Myanma Naing Ngan) and various ethnic groups were more harmonious than what evolved after the British began mapping parts of the country in 1826.

Gravers sets down a brief historical survey of ethnic relationships, including the impact of World War II; the key Panglong Conference of 1947 (with its confirmation of the "cultural autonomy and democratic rights of all groups"); the 1982 limitation of citizenship to descendents of ethnic groups living in Burma before 1823; the state's "re-mythologized" history aimed at establishing an early Burman ethnic origin and identity; the various ceasefire agreements between the state and armed ethnic groups beginning in 1989; and the

current prospect of a proposed new constitution and state-controlled parliament, avoiding as it will any notion of federalism or sufficient flexibility in ethnic matters.

In a second chapter, Mandy Sadan reviews how the specific ethnic category “Kachin” relates to a collection of communities and sub-groups, claiming that the very term “Kachin” is non-indigenous (attributed to a nineteenth century Baptist missionary). The local ethnonyms of Wunpawng or Jinghpaw have been promoted as more appropriate terms. Sandra Dudley focuses on the Karenni refugee community in Thailand (just a small part of half a million refugees and asylum seekers from Myanmar) and how the exile experience itself becomes a key part of reformulating ethnic identity (e.g., contact with foreigners, NGOs, education). Kris Lehman (F.K.L. Chit Hlaing) reflects on ethnicity and culture as something communities (e.g., the Kayah and Kachin) attribute to themselves, often with a rich supporting primordial mythology, though in ancient Southeast Asian states and monarchies, there was nonetheless much pluralism and no attempt to “try to promote a uniform cultural identity among their subjects” (p. 109). Karin Dean focuses on how the Kachin define their “social space” as shared feelings, beliefs, attitudes, and clan relationships as something that crosses national borders (in this case, with China).

Ashley South considers the role of civil society (defined as NGOs, religious and cultural societies, professional and educational associations) in Myanmar, using the Mon as a case study. The chapter involves a good synopsis of Mon history, but shifts emphasis to the opening up of the Myanmar economy in the early 1990s and the gradual re-emergence of civil society in various parts of Myanmar. This important phenomenon engenders new networks and groups obviously and strategically different from traditional “insurgent” organizations. Though civil society has a limited space in Myanmar’s junta-dominated society, it deserves to be encouraged with international assistance and support where possible.

Takatani Michio addresses the Shan people from an ethnological perspective, providing an historical, geographic, and statistical survey of this nearly three-million-strong community and raising the crucial

issue of “the future of Shanization under Myanmar centralization” (p. 196). Lian Sakhong provides an important chapter on Chin identity and its relationship to the Christian faith. Apart from an interesting introduction to similarities between traditional Chin religion and Christianity which made the latter’s missionary outreach much easier, Sakhong considers the challenges confronting the Chin (eighty per cent are Christian) in a dominantly Buddhist state. This includes current anti-Christian repressions exercised by the Tatmadaw (army), though remarkably these assaults are given fresh theological meaning as “part of the plan of providence of God” (p. 224).

A final substantial contribution by editor Mikael Gravers on the Karen brings forward many strategic points concerning this complex ethnic group. The role of religion — animist, Buddhist, Christian — continues to have a profound defining effect, making a single presentation of a Karen community impossible. The notion of a Karen “state” (the “sanctified space” of Kawthoolei) was an anticipated but never realized reward for service to the crown during World War II. Its failure to materialize led to a highly fractured community with several militant organizations struggling against each other while still recognizing themselves as Karen. Clearly, as Gravers avers, a new Karen model of identity needs to emerge, demilitarized, obligated to support civil society, education and community social needs, and much less beholden to sectarianism and the notion of “eternal victimhood” (p. 253).

On balance, this book provides a thoughtful contemporary review of several of Myanmar’s larger ethnic minority communities and the challenges of keeping them as part of a unified state, currently characterized as aggressively hostile to meaningful regional autonomy, to say nothing of basic human liberties.

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