

Panel Abstract: Across the disciplines, Burma Studies has been late to initiate a conversation that question many of the concepts, categories, and frameworks that have informed the scholarship of the past decades. These concepts have informed not only scholarly discussion, but have formed part of the fabric of wider understandings of the politics and society of the country. Now that Burma is becoming again a focus both of scholarly investigation and of democratization, development, and investment, the time is ripe to begin a project of talking back to the conceptual inheritances that colonialism has bequeathed to the country and to Burma Studies. The participants of this multi-disciplinary panel each consider a particular conceptual inheritance that they have engaged with. We are united in the goal of questioning some of the fundamental concepts in our respective disciplines to understand their origins in the colonial era with British encounter, to trace their role in scholarship, and to present ways to think outside or beyond them. Panelists represent the disciplines of history, political science, and architectural studies. Together, the panel forms a conversation to show that there is nothing necessarily given or inevitable to our use of such ideas as “ethnicity” or “national races,” “governmentality,” “reform,” notions of the past, or ideas of spatial legibility in the design of Burmese cities. We hope to move the conversation on Burma beyond the limitations of these various concepts to bring about more fruitful ways of understanding the country.

Note from organisers: *The panel discussions will span two panel slots on 1 August 2014.*

Paper Abstracts:

Mons in the Center of the Own Histories: Taking History Out of the Nation-State – Patrick McCormick, École Française d’Extrême-Orient (EFEO), Yangon

Abstract: This paper is part of a larger project to evaluate Mon histories from both local Burmese perspectives and from those of international scholarship. Narratives of history written inside Burma, whether national or sub-national “ethnic” histories, spring from the same conceptual frameworks, a hybrid of colonial and indigenous conceptions and practices. Building on Prasenjit Duara’s idea of rescuing history from the nation, I remove Mon historical narratives from the Burmese nation to engage them in conversations in the larger international community. While respecting Mon concerns, I explore aspects of Mon pasts that Mon scholars tend to ignore or deem not central to creating a singular narrative of the past. Histories of the Burmese nation are linear, drawing a line between Pagan or even earlier eras and the modern nation-state of Myanmar. Sub-national histories, including those of the Mon, tend to replicate this logic. From Mon perspectives, much of writing Mon history is a project of maintaining a place in the modern nation state by stressing their ancientness and “priorsness” in relation to the Burmans. I try to place the Mons in the centre of their own past, neither subsidiary to the Burmese or Thai nations, to see new interpretive possibilities, rather than to establish new certainties and truths. In taking Mon history out of the Burmese nation, the Mons may appear in other lights as historical subjects, agents, and actors further afield in the region. Mon-language sources may not support what the logic of a history confirming a Mon nation demands.

Talking back to concepts of Agency and Reform in Burma - Aurore Candier, Associate Researcher, Centre Asie du Sud-Est (CASE), Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS)

Abstract: The international media is currently constructing an image of a wise and reformist president Thein Sein, whose government's openness and liberalism contrasts with the "dark age" of the former military government. This "golden" image bears a striking resemblance to the depictions of a wise reformist king Mindon Min (1852-1878) built in British colonial and Burmese national historiographies from the late 19th century onwards. I argue that the same conceptual legacy informs both representations. This essay is an attempt to "talk back" to one of these inheritances: the modern western concept of "reform." I explore how the Burmese concept of reform is distinct from the western concept. I look into the semantic field and the transformations of the Burmese concept of "reform," expressed through the verb *pyupyin*, which has connotations of "repairing" or "restoring" objects, institutions, customs, or ethics that have undergone decline. I then compare certain administrative reform projects, such as the tax and financial reforms, drafted under king Mindon in the 1860s-1870s and under U Thein Sein's presidency. Finally, I consider the role of 19th century British "informal imperialism" and the current international pressure on the Burmese reform process. Despite the differences in time, there are fundamental similarities in Burmese reform processes in response to international pressure. I conclude by arguing for the need to reflect upon the Burmese reform process beyond the limitations of the colonial concept of "reform." This re-examination will also shed a different light on what is commonly assumed to be "reform failures": where the modern western concept of reform calls for dramatic changes, the Burmese concept merely allows minor amendments in order to respect the original laws and their intentions.

Confidence and Ambivalence: The Construction of "Race" in the 1931 Census in Burma - Mary P. Callahan, University of Washington

Abstract: In 2013, the Myanmar Ministry of Immigration and Population announced that the upcoming 2014 national census – the first in more than 30 years – would collect data on *lu-myo* ("kind of people," "race," or "nationality"), with a code list derived in large part from a taxonomic proposition conjured in the British 1931 census. Although activists and groups that mobilize around *lu-myo* identities are now questioning the numbers of *lu-myo* categories and their labels, the ontology of "race" has rarely been interrogated in modern history. Indeed, one of the few unassailable "truths" shared universally across the political and ethnic spectra is that the colonial-vintage concept of "race" renders every individual measurable via a category that is to a large degree singular, indivisible, natural and unproblematic. This paper explores the 1931 census' classification of 135 ethnolinguistic races. British Indian officials brought with them the census tools developed earlier in the rest of India to make sense of Burma as what Appadurai characterized as a "museum or zoo of difference." For these officers, "race" was a scientific, measurable, immutable, verifiable category. And yet, despite the confident delivery of hundreds of precise statistics said to quantify and represent Burma's population, the 1931 census also reveals acute ambivalence and misgivings about the reliability of the colonial optic.

From Bengalis to Rohingyas: De-Indianizing Migrants, Global Rhetoric, and Colonial Categories – Jacques P. Leider, École Française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO)

Abstract: Isolated from its historical context, the question of the Muslims in Arakan (Rakhaing) has been represented in the media as a matter of citizenship rights and human rights. The communal violence there has been attributed to Islamophobic Buddhists and to government failures. This perspective takes no interest in the origins of social disruption or institutional dysfunction, nor do they foster a critical understanding of recent events because they rationalize the violence within a reductionist, dichotomous model in which the Rohingya fit the category of “victim” and the Buddhists (an alliance between the Arakanese and Myanmar government) are the “perpetrators.” This understanding of agency superficially matches the description of events (victims vs. perpetrators), but has little to do with the historical background. This paper questions this representation by focussing on two points: “Rohingya” as a Muslim identity in the making, which I refer to here as the de-Indianization of migrants. I recognize the historical agency of the Rohingya movement as an expression of political will. The corollary is a recognition that the Buddhists as actors have been shaped by political circumstances of outside domination and exploitation by either the Myanmar or the British colonial governments. Second, I draw attention to the “un-decolonized” nature of Myanmar’s “ethno-speak.” Building on previous criticisms which have pointed out the fluidity of ethnicities and the rigidity of their classification, I investigate the cultural, religious and ethnic dichotomies that are so prominent at the Arakanese frontier. I argue that the reductionist perspective has been successful only by remaining uncritical and insensitive to cultural complexity and instead focusing on a global human rights agenda. This perspective ignores the fact that the people on both sides live, think and argue within an antiquated framework that defines “race,” “religion” and “origins” as the essential terms of the confrontation.

The Legacy of Rangoon’s City Plan: Prescribing Modernity by Rational Design – Jayde Lin Roberts, Lecturer, Asian Languages and Studies, School of Humanities, University of Tasmania

Abstract: Designed as a capital city to serve the needs of the colonial state, British officials often described Rangoon as the only large “Indian” city that had grown based on a scientific plan. As in many colonial and capital cities, the port of Rangoon was reshaped to make the city and its residents “modern,” to create a highly regular and easily regulated space in which scientific rationality would civilize the primitive geography and population. This paper will examine the legacy of nineteenth century city planning as a western mechanistic practice that has greatly influenced conceptions of modernity in Rangoon and the country as a whole. That modernity has not only valorized science and rationality but also asserted a universal order that equates legibility with reason, and difference with disorder. These equivalences continue to affect the form and growth of Rangoon and the human interactions within the city. This research also investigates discourses from the Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution which prioritized science, and how the British put scientism into practice through planning to create a hierarchy of “worlds”: the intuitive, less- or un-planned as primitive versus the rectilinear, rationally planned as modern and advanced.

Maymyo (Pyin Oo Lwin), British Hill Station in Burma (1896): A Colonial Concept? - Amaury Lorin, Sciences Po Paris

Abstract: Among the many conceptual legacies that British colonialism has bequeathed to Burma, “hill stations” are a specific inheritance at the crossroads between both urban and cultural history, geography and colonial studies. The term “hill station” itself appeared and was used in colonial Asia for towns founded by European colonial rulers as refuges from summer heat. But these hill stations, built to look like “home,” were soon much more than new cities: some became centers of government and were places of the encounter between the colonizer and the colonized. They also gave rise to specific cultural practices. In this context, Maymyo rivaled with Dalat in Vietnam, Bandung in Indonesia, and Darjeeling, Simla, Mussoorie and Nainital in India. The British conquest of Burma included the creation of new cities. Established *ex nihilo* in 1896 by the British at an altitude of 1070 m to the northeast of Mandalay to escape damp Rangoon, Maymyo became the summer capital of British Burma and an important educational center with the main Government English High Schools. The recently restored British Club and the 176-hectare botanical garden built in 1915 were among many attempts at re-creating a home in the tropics. The criteria, both sanitary and strategic, for choosing the site reveal the high political ambitions that the British pinned on it. As a colonial innovation, the concept of Maymyo played a major role in the global British colonial project in Burma.

The Roots of Power in “Race” in Burma: Depictions of King Kyanzittha – Rosalie Metro, Independent Scholar

Abstract: I will examine the impact of colonial thought on Burmese history and on *Myanma/Bama* identity by comparing the way that King Kyanzittha was portrayed in the Myakan inscription and the *Glass Palace Chronicle*, against the stories about him in school textbooks produced by British authorities and by Burma’s parliamentary and military governments. Inspired by Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s (1995) insight that studying history requires us to unearth the “roots” of power by examining the production of narratives; I use critical discourse analysis to trace the silences that link these texts. I argue that while colonial historians did not invent the concern with group identity in Burmese history, their fascination with it sometimes led them to spotlight it in misleading ways. British historians, with less access to the Burmese historical sources that revealed Burma’s cosmopolitan past, accepted the *Glass Palace Chronicle’s* positioning of *Myanma* people as protagonists, while neglecting the political legacies of other *lmyò* (glossed as “race” or “ethnicity” in English). At the same time, the colonial passion for classification led the British to conceptualize groups in Burma as discrete races, each of which was assumed to have a distinct language, culture, character, and territory. They translated *Myanma lmyò* as “Burmans,” while dividing other *lmyò* such as *Gywan* into Shan, Kachin, and an array of subgroups. This reclassification enabled British historians to read a new plot into the *Glass Palace Chronicle’s* silence about non-*Myanma* power structures: racially motivated warfare dominated but never decisively won by the Burmans. Textbooks the parliamentary and military governments produced show that the state’s post-colonial interpretations of history reified British ideas of racial classification even while rejecting the legacy of colonialism. How historians in these different eras portray King Kyanzittha illustrates the intellectual impact of colonialism on Burmese identity and history.
