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Public Lectures

Rethinking Community in Myanmar: Practices of We-Formation among Muslims and Hindus in Urban Yangon

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Tuesday, 17. May

Time: 17:00 ct. – 19:00 ct.

Location: South Asia Institute,
Lecture Hall (010.01.05), 1st Floor

In my talk *Rethinking Community in Myanmar: Practices of We-Formation among Muslims and Hindus in Urban Yangon*, I will introduce the concept of “we-formation” as a fundamental yet underexplored capacity of humans to relate to one another outside of and apart from demarcated ethno-religious lines and corporate groups. We-formation is intended to complement the established sociological concept of community, which suggests shared origins, beliefs, values, and belonging. Community is not only a key term in academic debates; it is also a topic among my interlocutors in urban Yangon, who draw on it to make claims about themselves and others. Invoking “community” is a conscious and strategic act, even as it asserts and reinforces stereotypes of Hindus and Muslims as minorities. In Myanmar, this understanding of community keeps self-identified members of these groups in a subaltern position vis-à-vis the Buddhist majority population. I demonstrate the concept’s enduring political and legal role since being imposed on “Burmese Indians” under colonial British rule.

But as individuals are always more than members of groups, I draw on ethnomethodology and existential anthropology to reveal how people’s bodily movements, verbal articulations, and non-verbal expressions in communal spaces are crucial elements in practices of we-formation. My fieldwork in Yangon (from 2013 - 2020) in mosques and temples, during rituals and processions, and in private homes reveals a sensitivity to tacit and intercorporeal phenomena. I thereby develop a theoretical and methodological approach that reconciles individuality and intersubjectivity and that is applicable far beyond the Southeast Asian context. The focus on we-formation also offers insights into the dynamics of resistance to the attempted military coup of 2021. The newly formed civil disobedience movement derives its power not only from having a common enemy, but also from each individual’s determination to live freely in a more just society.