

Understanding Asia: Bridging Margins

Communal sense. We-formation and the work of community in Myanmar

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16:00 – 18:00 c.t.
Zoom event

While ethnic minority issues have not been adequately covered in Myanmar in general, this goes even more for the non-indigenous Hindus and Muslims of Yangon among whom I have carried out extended ethnographic research since 2013. I argue that their dominant *communal* portrayal dates from the predominant way to characterize subalterns in the British empire. In my talk "Communal Sense. We-formation and the work of community in Myanmar" I lay out the continuation of these policies through the various regimes in colonial Burma and contemporary Myanmar where the category of *community* has retained its distinct characterization as a marker of ethno-religious *others*, most recently enshrined in the "Race and Religion Laws." But at what point do individuals recognize themselves and are recognized by others as a *we*? What I call *the work of community* needs to be understood as a practice of colonial governance that has become naturalized to such an extent that until today, my interlocutors have internalized it themselves. However, we should not uncritically duplicate this taxonomic category, which is why I offer *communal sense* as a sensitizing concept that upholds that no individual can ever entirely become defined through such categorizing acts. What I call *practices of we-formation* are as important: we need to pay attention to often disregarded or overlooked moments where individuals come to encounter themselves as individual human beings, co-existing with others as well as intersubjectively sharing experiences. There, they become a *we* that is situational, contextual and non-dependent upon communal identity.

Prof. Dr. Judith Beyer specializes in political and legal anthropology. She conducts long-term ethnographic fieldwork in Central Asia (Kyrgyzstan) and Southeast Asia (Myanmar) and increasingly in Europe (multi-sited). Her research focuses on the anthropology of law, the anthropology of the state and statelessness, and theories of sociality and social order. Her current thematic interests are: the concept of community, activism, practices of traditionalization, and common sense. Theoretically, she draws on ethnomethodology, existential anthropology and the work of Jacques Lacan.