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Flying Through a Skyful of Lies:

Survival Strategies and the Politics of Fear in Urban Myanmar (Burma)

Monique Skidmore

Department of Anthropology,

McGill University, Montreal,

March, 1999.

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Abstract

This thesis concerns the cultural construction and mechanics of violence, domination, and survival under a Southeast Asian totalitarian regime. It entails an examination of the modern character of violence and domination in Myanmar (Burma) through the inscription of State power upon the bodies of Burmans and via the ramifications of the regime's alliance with the drug lords upon the urban struggle for survival. At times of extreme domination, fear, and degradation, very little space exists for psychological and physical resistance. Burmans seek escape from this situation by withdrawing into domains characterized by denial, numbness, and temporary madness. My concern is with the lived experience of totalitarianism, the way that individuals respond differently according to a prior series of lived experiences, and the particular idioms drawn upon to construct survival strategies.

An important culturally constructed strategy of survival in Myanmar entails the detaching of agency from the body while the mind "flies" to freedom. This strategy has a long history not only in Burmese, but also in other Southeast Asian histories, myths, and legends. Just as Burmese wizards fly to a mythical landscape in the foothills of the Himalayas when released from their physical bodies, so too do heroin addicts, prostitutes, psychiatric patients, and the urban poor flee to Burmese fantasylands to escape the domination of the military regime. This strategy, one of many adopted by urban residents, denies the State the final prize it so desperately craves: the willing participation of Burmans in a military society, the complete internalization of totalitarian ideology such that no other ideologies can exist and no space is left for their creation and negotiation. In the conclusion I argue that the regime is aware that it has failed in this task.

I also examine the possibility that the existence of multiple Burmese worlds or realities, in conjunction with a strong belief in the miraculous may offer new ground for research into the trauma of survivors of violence and terror. The construction of madness, death, and reanimation in Burmese culture, grounds particular survival strategies in logical, hopeful, and perhaps curative, rationalities.

Résumé

Cette thèse s'intéresse aux mécanismes et à la construction culturelle de la violence, de la domination et de la survie à l'intérieur d'un régime totalitaire du sud-est asiatique, le Myanmar (Birmanie). Elle examine comment la violence et la domination de l'état birman affecte les individus. Les alliances du régime militaire avec les barons de la drogue ont un effet direct sur la lutte pour la survie en milieu urbain. Les périodes de domination, de peur et de dégradation intenses laissent peu de place à la résistance physique et psychologique. Les Birmans cherchent à s'échapper de cette situation en se repliant dans des mondes caractérisés par le refus, la torpeur et la folie temporaire. Mon attention se porte principalement sur l'expérience vécue du totalitarisme, sur la manière dont les individus répondent différemment à une situation selon leurs expériences antérieures, et les schèmes avec lesquels ils élaborent des stratégies de survie.

La culture birmane suggère l'une de ces stratégies, la dissociation du corps et de l'esprit, alors que ce dernier s'envole vers la liberté. Cette stratégie a une longue histoire, non seulement chez les Birmans, mais aussi dans les mythes, histoires et légendes de l'Asie du sud-est en général. Tout comme les magiciens birmans s'envolent vers des paysages mythiques aux contreforts de l'Himalaya lorsqu'ils sont libérés de leur corps, les héroïnomanes, les prostituées, les patients psychiatriques, et les pauvres en milieu urbain s'envolent vers des pays imaginaires birmans afin d'échapper à la domination du régime militaire. Cette stratégie, l'une parmi d'autres que les citadins utilisent, nie à l'état la victoire finale dont il a désespérément besoin: la participation volontaire des Birmans à une société militaire et l'intériorisation complète de l'idéologie dominante de manière à ce qu'aucune autre idéologie ne puisse exister et afin que tout espace de création et de négociation soit inexistant. Dans la conclusion, je soutiens que le régime est conscient de son échec.

Je cherche également à savoir si l'imaginaire birman –qui conçoit l'existence de multiples réalités, ainsi qu'une solide croyance au miraculeux– peut permettre de mieux comprendre l'expérience de ceux qui ont survécu la violence et la terreur. Les conceptions birmanes de la folie, de la mort et de la réanimation encadrent des stratégies qui leur permettent de survivre ; elles ont peut-être même un rôle thérapeutique.

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ABYMU	All Burma Young Monks' Union
AFPFL	Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League
AFXB	Association Francois-Xavier Bagnoud
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ASSK	Aung San Suu Kyi
BCCI	Bank of Credit and Commerce International
BIA	Burma Independence Army
BSI	Bureau of Special Investigation
BSPP	Burma Socialist Programme Party
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CPB	Communist Party of Burma
DEA	Drug Enforcement Agency
DDSI	Defence Department of Special Investigations
GONGO	Government-Organized Non-Governmental Organization
HIV	Human Immuno-virus
IBC	International Business Center
ILO	International Labor Organization
I.V.	Intravenous
KIA	Kachin Independence Army
KKY	Ka Kwe Ye, government defence militia
KMT	Kuomintang, Chinese nationalist party of Chiang Kai-shek
KNU	Karen National Union
LORC	Law and Order Restoration Council
M.I.	Military Intelligence
Mawata	Township Law and Order Restoration Council
MMCWA	Myanmar Maternal and Child Welfare Association
MRC	Myanmar Red Cross
MWEA	Myanmar Women's Entrepreneurs Association
Nawata	State Law and Order Restoration Council
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NLD	National League for Democracy
NLM	New Light of Myanmar
No. 3	Brown Heroin
No. 4	White Heroin
Pawata	Province (Division) Law and Order Restoration Council
SB	Special Branch

SLORC	State Law and Order Restoration Council
SPDC	State Peace and Development Council
SSA	Shan State Army
TB	Tuberculosis
TMO	Township Medical Officer
UNDCP	United Nations Drug Control Program
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
UNHCR	United Nations High Commission for Refugees
USDA	Union Solidarity and Development Association
UWSA	United Wa State Army
VHW	Volunteer Health Worker
VOA	Voice of America
WHO	World Health Organization
Yawata	Local, Ward-level Law and Order Restoration Council
YCDC	Yangon City Development Committee
YDRU	Yangon Drug Rehabilitation Unit
YMBA	Young Men's Buddhist Association

Glossary

Abstract Thinking Thinking characterized by the ability to assume a mental set voluntarily, to shift voluntarily from one aspect of a situation to another, to keep in mind simultaneously various aspects of a situation, to grasp the essentials of a whole and to break a whole into parts, to discern common properties, to plan, to assume make-believe attitudes, and to think or act symbolically. The capacity for abstract thinking is frequently impaired in patients with organic mental disorders and schizophrenia.[1]

Affect The subjective and immediate experience of emotion attached to ideas or mental representations of objects.

Alcoholism Excessive dependence on or addiction to alcohol, usually to the point that the person's physical and mental health is threatened or harmed; may be episodic or continuous.

Amphetamine Central nervous system stimulant with a chemical structure and action closely related to the sympathomimetic amines; may be abused to prolong wakefulness and attentiveness. (Metamphetamine is also known as speed).

Arimettya The fifth and final Buddha, yet to come.

BurmaNet Internet site

Burmese Central lowland Tibeto-Burman ethnolinguistic group.

Chin Western upland Tibeto-Burman ethnolinguistic group occupying western Myanmar, parts of the Arakan Range, eastern Pakistan and India.[2]

Chinthe A mythical lion that guards pagodas and temples, usually located in pairs at the entrances.

Chlorpromazine Aliphatic phenothiazine derivative used primarily as an antipsychotic agent and in the treatment of nausea and vomiting. Mainly used to treat schizophrenia, mania, organic psychosis, and Tourette's disorder.

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[1] Psychiatric terms are taken from Harold I. Kaplan and Benjamin J. Saddok (Eds.), *Comprehensive Glossary of Psychiatry and Psychology* (1991).

[2] Ethnic groups and some cultural terms are taken from Joel and Ester Maring, *Historical and Cultural Dictionary of Burma* (1973).

Concrete Thinking Thinking characterized by actual things and events and immediate experience, rather than by abstractions; seen in young children, in those who have lost or never developed the ability to generalize (as in certain organic mental disorders), and in schizophrenic persons.

Delusions False beliefs that are firmly held, despite objective and obvious contradictory proof or evidence and despite the fact that other members of the culture do not share the belief. Types of delusion include: **bizarre delusion**, one that is patently absurd or fantastic; **delusion of control**, that a person's thoughts, feelings, or actions are not one's own but are being imposed by some external force; **delusion of grandeur**, exaggerated concept of one's importance, power, knowledge, or identity; **delusion of persecution**, that one is being attacked, harassed, cheated, or conspired against; **paranoid delusion**, combined delusion of grandeur and persecution.

Depression Mental state characterized by feelings of sadness, loneliness, despair, low self-esteem, and self-reproach; accompanying signs include psychomotor retardation or at times agitation, withdrawal from interpersonal contact, and vegetative symptoms such as insomnia and anorexia. The term refers either to a mood that is so characterized or to a mood disorder.

Dhamma The Word of the Buddha

Dobhame Asaione "We Burmans" Association, founded in 1935 as an amalgamation of two student nationalist groups committed to radical political action.

Electroconvulsive Therapy (ECT) Convulsive therapy, usually for depression, that involves the application of electric current to the brain for a fraction of a second through scalp electrodes to induce a convulsive reaction and unconsciousness.

Excitement: Agitated, purposeless motor activity uninfluenced by external stimuli.

Gaing Religious or mystic sects. *Gaing* can mean a party, sect, or group of followers of a particular leader or doctrine.

Galon A mythical bird, or Garuda.

Gautama The present Buddha

Haldol Tradename of Halperidol which is a Butyrophenone antipsychotic drug.

Hallucination False sensory perception occurring in the absence of any relevant external stimulation of the sensory modality involved.

Heroin Diacetylmorphine; an illicit, addictive alkaloid opioid that requires subsequent larger and larger amounts to achieve the same narcotic and analgesic effects.

Himawuntha Mythical landscape in the foothills of the Himalayas, the abode of Burmese wizards

Hintha A mythical and heraldic bird which was the national bird of the Mon kingdom of Pegu.

Htwetyap pauk "A place through which one leaves", possibly Himawuntha

Hypomania Mood abnormality with the qualitative characteristics of mania but somewhat less intense.

In A numerological practice

Insein A suburb of Yangon and the site of Insein Jail

Kachin An eastern upland Tibeto-Burman ethnolinguistic group of the Kachin state of Myanmar and the adjoining northern area of Shan State.

Karenni Karenni State is now named Kayah State, it is in eastern Myanmar bordering Thailand and is the home of the Karen, an Indo-Chinese group.

Karuna Foundation An extremely cheap health care system operated by the government in some areas.

Kokang A western Thai ethnolinguistic group of northeastern Myanmar, bordering China.

Kyat Burmese unit of currency. Divisible into 100 pyas. At the beginning of the fieldwork, the black market rate for the kyat was 135 kyats per U.S. dollar. By mid-1997 the rate was 174 kyats per U.S. dollar, and by mid-1998 the rate was approximately

300 kyats to the dollar. The official rate continues to hover around 6 kyats per dollar.

Lakh 100,000 kyat

Lanzin Socialist Party The mass political organization instituted by the Ne Win regime. The only political party permitted between 1962 and 1989.

Leik-Kan The secret, conspiratorial alliance that the junta postulates exists between the British and United States governments.

Lon Htein Riot police

Mon Lowland Mon-Khmer ethnolinguistic group who reside in both Myanmar and Thailand. Burmese Mon culture is Indian in origin.

Mount Popa An extinct volcano in central Myanmar, at the north end of the Pegu Yoma range, the central site of *Nat* Spiritism.

Naga Sacred five-headed snake whose figure is usually found on the many arches surrounding a pagoda.

Nat A *Nat* is a spirit of a royal Burman who died a violent death, either through physical combat, disease, or accidental death There are many other kinds of *Nats*, and new ones are created as others fade into obscurity. Until the time of Anawratha, the *Nat* spirit cult, centered around Mount Popa, contained thirty-six *Nats*. Anawratha added Thagyamin, a Buddhist deity, as the head of the pantheon.

Natkadaw A *Nat* spirit wife (medium)

Nyaungbintha "Pleasant banyan tree" township. The fictive township I have invented in order to protect my informants in the relocated townships. Data collected in the relocated townships on the outskirts of both Yangon and Mandalay is combined to create the conditions of a "typical" relocated township, *Nyaungbintha*, that I locate on the outskirts of Yangon.

Opium An extractable product of the poppy plant, *Papaver somniferum*, or its variety, *P. album*. An **opiate** is morphine or other alkaloids derived from opium.

Pongyi Monk

Psychosis Mental disorder in which a person's thoughts, affective response, ability to recognize reality, and ability to communicate and relate to others are sufficiently impaired to grossly interfere with his or her capacity to deal with reality; the classical characteristics of psychosis are impaired reality testing, hallucinations, delusions, and illusions.

Pwes Burmese theatrical performances or dramatic shows.

Sangha The institution of Buddhist monkhood.

Saya/Sayama Teacher or wise person

Saya San Revolt Also known as the Tharrawaddy Rebellion. An anti-British revolt (1930-32) originating in the Burmese delta area, spreading to twelve districts. It was led by a charismatic monk believed to have magical abilities. 10,000 rebels were killed and 9,000 prisoners were taken, 128 of which were executed.

Schizophrenia Term introduced by Eugen Bleuler for a psychotic mental disorder of unknown etiology characterized by disturbances in thinking, mood, and behavior. The thinking disturbance is manifested by a distortion of reality, sometimes with delusions and hallucinations, accompanied by a fragmentation of associations that results in characteristic disturbances of speech; the mood disturbance includes ambivalence and inappropriate or constricted affective responses; the behavior disturbance may be manifested by apathetic withdrawal or bizarre activity. Types of schizophrenia (as defined in DSM-IV) include disorganized, catatonic, paranoid, undifferentiated, and residual. Formerly called dementia praecox.

Seiq lei deh A Burmese idiom translated as "the mind wanders."

Tatmadaw Army

Three Gems The Buddha, The Dhamma, and the Sangha

Wa Northern upland Mon-Khmer ethnolinguistic group living in Wa state, a compact mountainous range extending north-south along the Salween river, and between the Salween and the Mekong rivers. Also residing in Yunnan province, China.

Ward The smallest division of political administration

Weikza A Burmese male who, through mastering alchemy, astrology, spells, signs, meditation, or other occult practices, has acquired magical powers and is immortal.

Yahanpyo An Order of Monks

Zawgyi Burmese wizard (see weikza).

Acknowledgements

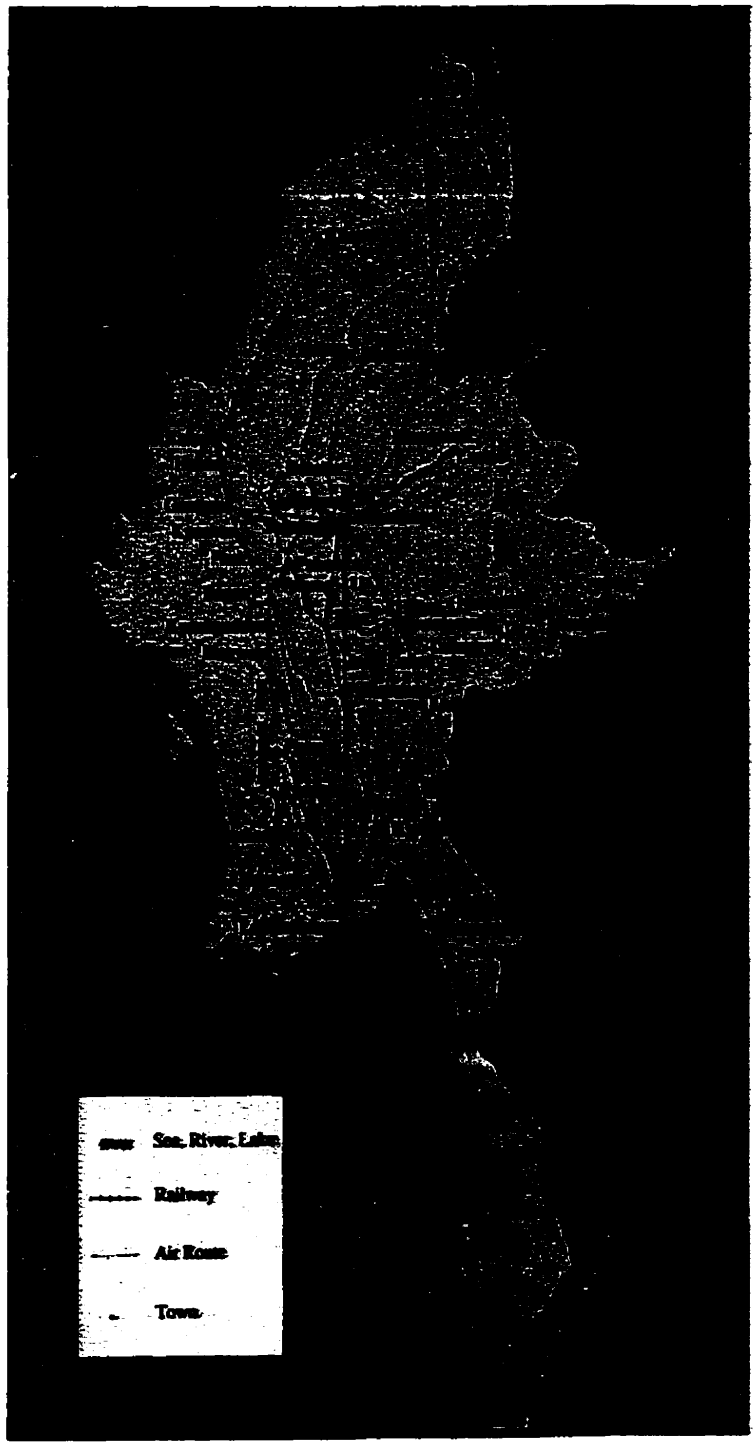
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Figure 1: Map of Myanmar (Burma)



Chapter One

Introduction

Then a golden mystery upheaved itself on the horizon
- a beautiful, winking wonder that blazed in the sun,
of a shape that was neither Muslim dome nor Hindu temple
spire. 'There's the old Shwedagon,' said my companion.
The gold dome said 'This is Burma, and it will be quite
unlike any land you know about.'

(Kipling, Letters from the East 1898)

One hundred years ago Rudyard Kipling gazed upon the Shwedagon pagoda. Today in order to do so, one has to peer past the "Visit Myanmar Year" dolls and the armed soldiers which occupy this once charming Eastern capital known formerly as Rangoon and now as Yangon. In that one hundred years between my own and Kipling's reflections upon the Shwedagon pagoda, much has changed in urban Myanmar. British colonialism had ended, forced out by the Japanese in World War II and a political battle for Independence that resulted in nine short years of democratic rule. A further thirty six years of ethnic insurgency, civil war, and military dictatorship stand between myself and Kipling's colonial romanticism.

The most oft heard advice about traveling in Myanmar is "Get out of Rangoon (Yangon) in order to see the *Real* Burma (Myanmar)." -Guide books, travel agents, and the Burmese junta promote a vision of Myanmar comprising ubiquitous and ancient pagodas and monasteries with their saffron robed monks nestled among thatched palm villages and rice paddies. It is a compelling image of "unspoiled" tourism advertising. The idea of reaching into the past for an "authentic" Asian experience is responsible for luring many travel-jaded Asian and Western tourists alike to this land. The contestation over what constitutes the "real" Myanmar is not just waged in travel office windows and guide books however, it is waged within and without Myanmar by a variety of groups, such as various ethnic minorities and expatriate organizations, who seek to impose a particular imagined community upon it. For me, one of the realities of Myanmar consists of peasants from the palm thatched villages being relocated and forced to work on government construction projects. Another reality is the saffron robed monks who are suborned by the military, sitting in their monasteries watching television, a gift from the government. The pagodas

are still there but they are dwarfed by monuments created by the narcoeconomy and comprise sites for the contestation and negotiation of reality, hegemony, and ideology.

This thesis is concerned with the cultural construction and mechanics of violence, domination, and survival under a Southeast Asian totalitarian regime. It entails an examination of the modern character of violence and domination in Myanmar through the production of Burmese "automata" via the ramifications of the military regime's narcoeconomy upon the urban struggle for survival. It is my assertion that at times of extreme domination and degradation, there is very little space for psychological and physical resistance. This situation is occurring in Myanmar as I write, and individuals and communities are seeking to escape from their situation by withdrawing into domains characterized by denial, feigned ignorance, and numbness. There is nothing fundamentally new here in human responses to massive degradation, although there is, of course, a culturally and historically specific context that has many complexities. Foucault reminds us of the existence of long standing political dreams such as that of a "pure community" and a "disciplined society" (Foucault [1979]1995:198).

The characteristics of totalitarianism in Myanmar differ from other cultures and from other historical periods in many ways. In this thesis I shall be concerned with tracing the lived experience of totalitarianism, the way that individuals respond differently according to a prior series of lived experiences, and the particular idioms drawn upon to construct individual and group strategies to survive the unending demands made by the military regime upon Burmans. I seek to bridge the powerful uses made of Foucauldian insights about the nature of power in society with the equally rich local knowledge that attending to the phenomenological level can bring. In this way I hope to draw attention to the diversity, complexity, confusion, courage, and the enormous resourcefulness of human beings to intolerable situations of terror and violence. This thesis also stands as testimony to the powerful observations of anti-fascist writers in the 1930s and 1940s including George Orwell and Walter Benjamin who warned of the dangers of losing freedom of speech, and of the seduction of both revolutionary glory and the culture of modernity.

An important culturally constructed strategy for survival in Myanmar entails the detaching of agency from the body while the mind "flies" to freedom. This strategy has a long history not only in Burmese, but also in other Southeast Asian histories, myths, and legends. Just as Burmese wizards fly to a mythical landscape in the foothills of the Himalayas when released from their physical bodies, so too do heroin addicts, prostitutes, psychiatric patients, and the urban poor flee to Burmese fantasylands to escape the domination of the military regime. This strategy, one of many adopted by urban residents, denies the State the final prize it so desperately craves: the willing participation of Burmans in a military society, including the complete internalization of a totalitarian ideology such that no other ideologies can exist, nor is a space left for their creation and negotiation. Such a hegemonic program also seeks to silence differences within the military so as to present

the illusion of a homogeneous and seamless strategy of domination. In the conclusion I argue that the regime is aware that it has failed in this task. I also examine the possibility that the existence of multiple Burmese worlds or realities, in conjunction with a strong belief in the miraculous, may offer new ground for research into the trauma of survivors of violence and terror. The construction of madness, death, and reanimation in Burmese culture grounds particular survival strategies in logical, hopeful, and perhaps curative rationalities.

1.1 A Theoretical Framework

Today many anthropologists believe that ideally theory emerges from fieldwork and as such, removing theory from data creates an artificial separation, a separation that suggests that both theory and fieldwork data can exist independent of context. In this thesis theory and data inform each other but in this introductory chapter I nevertheless describe the theoretical framework for the fieldwork analysis including the main conceptual themes that flow through the analysis. These themes are totalitarianism, the State, hegemony, ideology, culture, body, and survival strategies.

Totalitarianism

Kennedy and Louscher note that since 1945, over three-quarters of the new states that have emerged have undergone, at some time, direct military rule (Kennedy and Louscher 1991:1). Military dictatorships are thus not unusual, in fact they are very common in Asia as well as most other parts of the world. Poulantzas makes a distinction between "fascism as a mass movement before the seizure of power and fascism as an entrenched machinery of dictatorship" (Poulantzas 1974:preface). The Union of Myanmar can legitimately be considered a fascist state not only because the military dictatorship is entrenched and is currently writing a Constitution to ensure that this situation becomes permanent, but because the political system contains central elements of fascist dictatorships: the mobilization of the masses and the effective use of terror and propaganda (Laquer 1996:14). Another characteristic that distinguishes fascism from other authoritarian systems, such as communism, is that it accommodates religious institutions that agree to become subservient to the ultimate authority of the state (Laquer 1996:15). There are, of course, ways in which the Union of Myanmar differs from fascist parties such as those of Mussolini and Hitler, notably in its lack of territorial expansion. This is not to say that the Burmese military regime is not engaged in ferocious battles to establish solidarity over territory claimed by Myanmar's ethnic minority populations, but rather that it has no plans to invade China, Bangladesh, or its other neighbors. Similarly, the air of optimism with which writers in the 1930s described the emergence of new political plans by fascist groups in Europe is definitely lacking in Myanmar (Laquer 1996:16).

The Nazi regime and Italy under Mussolini are also referred to as totalitarian regimes by many writers (Laquer 1996:98). A recent edition of scholarship on Eastern Europe designates this area as one of former Marxist totalitarianism. Buvosky, like Laquer above, defines totalitarianism according to its manipulation of the population by terror (Buvosky 1990). Gray points to the pejorative connotations the term "totalitarianism" has in much of the Anglo-American literature but believes it is still a theoretically useful term when defined in a certain way. Thus, putting aside questions such as whether all totalitarian regimes are characterized by personality cults, and whether terror is an integral part of, or only a defining, evolving moment in such systems, Gray defines a totalitarian project as "the project of suppressing civil society - that sphere of autonomous institutions, protected by the rule of law, within which individuals and communities possessing divergent values and beliefs may coexist in peace" (Gray 1990:98). In the same volume, Paul argues that China is a totalitarian state but that it has not collapsed because the military commanders willing to give orders to shoot students (as in the Tianenmen Square massacre of 1989) are of the revolutionary generation, whereas in Eastern Europe they are three generations removed (Paul 1990:4). It should be remembered that Myanmar was the first nation to openly support the Chinese government's use of violence in suppressing the pro-democracy movement that surfaced at Tianenmen Square (Neher 1994:180).

We would be on fairly solid ground, therefore, to suggest that the Union of Myanmar constitutes a totalitarian or fascist state using the definitions given above. Gray's definition however presupposes that institutions can be autonomous, and that justice can be somehow independent of the state. Such definitions, and the scholarship supporting them, rarely get beyond terms such as 'peasantry' and 'bourgeoisie' or even 'State' to the lived experience of a totalitarian culture. Anthropologists who worked in Myanmar before the military coup of 1962 have not helped in this regard. Upon reading their manuscripts it almost seems as if a village study was conducted, and then prior to publication, a brief introduction was added explaining the political situation and paying lip service to the impact this may have had on the participants in their studies.

With regard to Manning Nash, Melford Spiro and David Pfanner's fieldwork in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the authors are cognizant of the relationship of macro level political struggles to daily life and they make insightful comments on this relationship. For example, Spiro has noted the Burmese tendency to "opt-out" of difficult situations. He writes that for Burmans, "There are plenty of frustrations, of course, but when life gets too difficult, the Burman can find some surcease in saying his beads, in worshipping at the pagoda, in watching a play, in participating in a festival" (Spiro 1967:12). And Nash understood the impact of national political upheaval upon village life as illustrated by his discussion of Burmese attitudes to government. He writes that Burmans:

have developed remarkable modes of dissimulation, so that it is impossible to tell beforehand whether the villager will be with or against one in a particular situation. And they know the bitter truth that, in last resort, it is force, violence, and coercive power that counts in political life. They are still prone to resort to arms when other channels fail; a whole generation schooled in war and civil war takes a long time to retrain and reorient (Nash 1965:8).

Despite these insights contained in the introduction to the authors' respective books, they go on to emphasize an essentialized, static view of enduring symbols of Burmese life, whether of the monk, *Nat* spiritism, or village "traditions." For example, Pfanner writes that "in spite of the political struggles which sometimes surround them" and the "increasing secularization of Burmese society and the progressive restriction of the activities of monks in secular affairs," the "stability" of Burmese Buddhism and its essential role of "social integration" remains unchanged (Pfanner 1962:95). Spiro also emphasizes a "basic" or essential Burmese life, unchanged by external structures such as "politics." He states that:

Although the villagers had frequently expressed many criticisms of the civilian government, the military takeover left them bewildered and anxious. Despite these changes and upheavals, there were few differences between the basic social and cultural patterns which I encountered...and those described in early- indeed, in the earliest- published reports on Burmese life by western writers (Spiro 1967:11).

This romanticization of Burmese life and the clear separation of messy variables such as politics from bounded anthropological analysis is, I hope, thoroughly exorcised in the following account which is informed by Foucault's concept of "discipline" and the spatialization of power throughout society and through the body. Before discussing these ideas, key anthropological concepts such as hegemony, ideology, and culture are defined.

Hegemony and Ideology

In a totalitarian society such as Myanmar, where domination and degradation reach extremely high levels, concepts such as hegemony and ideology are essential tools for sorting through the many levels of propaganda and concepts such as "voluntary labor," "voluntary participation" and "model" citizens and villages. Certain contemporary medical anthropologists have found the theorizing of Antonio Gramsci and Raymond Williams to hold significant heuristic potential for their fieldsites. The Comaroff's note that nowhere in Gramsci's writing is there a working definition of hegemony and for this reason, it has become infused with a great many interpretations and retained contemporary interest. Williams has interpreted Gramsci's notion of hegemony as "a lived system of meanings and values - constituting and constitutive" (Williams 1977:110). Comaroff and Comaroff (1991) and more recently, Ong and Peletz (1995), quote Hebdidge's (Hebdidge 1988:206) observation that for Gramsci ""nothing is anchored to...master narratives, to stable

(positive) identities, to fixed and certain meanings: all social and semantic relations are contestable, hence mutable." Always uncertain, hegemony is realized through the balancing of competing forces, not the crushing calculus of class domination" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991:20).

Comaroff and Comaroff insist that Raymond Williams has tried to directly:

> assert the superiority of the notion of hegemony over culture and/or ideology...Concealed in this argument is the idea that culture *plus* power *equals* hegemony, an equation that simplifies all three terms...But there is a problem with both the arithmetic of authority and the mathematics of meaning. Since it is possible, indeed inevitable, for some symbols and meanings *not* to be hegemonic - and impossible that any hegemony can claim all the signs in the world for its own- culture cannot be subsumed within hegemony (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991:21).

Unfortunately in much of the activist and opposition discourse on Burma created by expatriate and international organizations, meanings are in effect, reduced "to postures of power" and Burmese culture taken to be "subsumed within hegemony." It is necessary and analytically useful to define and keep distinct the concepts of hegemony, ideology and culture, a strategy that the Comaroff's argue can be found in Gramsci's work.

The Comaroff's see hegemony as an immutable, non-negotiable body of "constructs and conventions that have come to be shared and naturalized throughout a political community." Ideology is more flexible, more negotiable, it is "the expression and ultimately possession of a particular social group" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991:24). Hegemony thus "exists in reciprocal interdependence with ideology: it is that part of a dominant worldview which...having hidden itself in orthodoxy, no more appears as ideology as all." The Comaroffs are also aware of hegemony as unfinished process, always in the making, a process that:

> must be sustained over time and in such a way that it becomes, to all intents and purposes, invisible. For it is only by repetition that signs and practices cease to be perceived or remarked; that they are so habituated, so deeply inscribed in everyday routine, that they may no longer be seen as forms of control - or seen at all (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991:25).

Thus the Comaroff's view hegemony and ideology as two poles of a continuum within a cultural field, each "modality" associated with different forms of power (agentive and non-agentive). They have found these terms to be analytically powerful in societies where domination and colonialism are apparent, such as in the apartheid era in South Africa. They argue that as the hegemony of apartheid began to crack apart the state increasingly relied upon agentive power as its responses became more overtly brutal. But when hegemonic practices become diffused through the political community, "their

authority is internalized through habitual practice" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991:28). Within this cultural field, "social knowledge and experience situate themselves along a *chain of consciousness* between the two poles of hegemony and ideology." Between the conscious (at the ideological pole) and the unconscious (the hegemonic pole) is a space described as a:

> realm of partial recognition, of inchoate awareness, of ambiguous perception, and, sometimes, of creative tension: that liminal space of human experience in which people discern acts and facts but cannot or do not order them into narrative descriptions or even into articulate conceptions of the world; in which signs and events are observed, but in a hazy, translucent light; in which individuals or groups know that something is happening to them but find it difficult to put their fingers on quite what it is (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991:29).

The authors argue that it is from within this space that signifiers and practices may recede into hegemony or arise as ideology. It is this space in which my thesis is situated, and it is the reason why contemporary Myanmar, like colonial South Africa, cannot be reduced to analyses of 'domination and resistance', it is altogether too complex and too fluid. It is particularly important in countries with cultural histories that make use of possession, altered states of consciousness, and strong supernatural belief systems, to consider the question of consciousness in relation to both culture and ideology. As we shall see, there is an awareness of a pervasive sense of "wrongness" in urban Myanmar, a not-quite fully conscious feeling that some Burmans have described in various contexts as a Burmese "Fairytale," a jarring juxtaposition of military and civilian life that lends an air of surreality to Burmese cities.

Culture

Few terms in anthropology are as contested as "culture." Brightman suggests that culture has become a "straw" concept, infused with all those aspects of social theory that each author wishes to denounce, such as homogeneity, abstractness, and ahistoricism (Brightman 1995). Several writers call for an end to such a concept, to be replaced by Foucauldian terms such as "discourse" and Bourdieu's "practice" (Abu-Lughod 1991). One strand of theory takes aboard postmodern critiques of older, more static views of culture, but still retains the heuristic value of a notion that can cross gender, ethnic, and generational boundaries. Thus the "common sense," taken-for-granted "nature" of culture is subject to negotiation and contestation as globalization and other trans-national forces impact the "unspoken authority of everyday life" (Lock and Kaufert 1998:5). This changing concept of culture, informed by Gramsci and Williams, is exemplified by the work of Jean and John Comaroff who define it as the "space of signifying practice, the semantic ground on which human beings seek to construct and represent themselves and

others- and hence, society and history" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991:21-2). They argue that culture: "has form as well as content; is born in action as well as thought; is a product of human creativity as well as mimesis; and, above all, is empowered. But it is not all empowered in the same way, all of the time" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991:21-2).

Jean and John Comaroff prefer to use the wider term, "cultural field" to emphasize the "partially integrated" way in which a plurality of cultures may exist in the same context, such as in colonial societies (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991:27-8). Hegemony and ideology then: "are two dominant forms in which power enters - or, more accurately, is entailed in culture" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991:22 quoted in Lock and Kaufert 1998:4-5). The Comaroffs believe that the relationship between power and culture can thus be understood by attending to the workings of hegemony and ideology throughout the cultural field. In fact, ideologies can sometimes be expressed as cultural differences within a particular field (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991:28). Myanmar has a plurality of cultures, multiple systems of signs in which State hegemony looms large and is inscripted onto the bodies of Burmans who become mobile signifiers of State domination. But what does it mean to speak of the Burmese State and the Burmese body?

State and Body in Myanmar

Throughout this thesis I refer to the Burmese state as the "State" in accordance with Michael Taussig's use of the term "State" to emphasize the monolithic and fearful qualities of governments that use terror, violence, and symbolic violence to maintain their grip on power. In *Discipline and Punish,* Foucault has described a transformation in the mechanics of power at the level of the State from pre-modern to modern. He illustrates this phenomenon through the diffusion of the "political anatomy" of the Panopticon throughout European society in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He argues that a corresponding shift occurred in the conception of the body through what he has termed, "Discipline." It is salient that the Burmese military junta calls its vision of an authoritarian society, "Disciplined Democracy."

I have suggested that Myanmar constitutes a totalitarian State. The mechanics of totalitarianism are, however, in transition as the Burmese State is transformed from pre-modern to modern. A circumstance that took the better part of two centuries during Europe's "classical age," global economic forces ensure that Myanmar makes such a transition much faster. Foucault argues that:

> war as strategy is a continuation of politics. But is must not be forgotten that 'politics' has been conceived as a continuation, if not exactly and directly of war, at least of the military model as a fundamental means of preventing civil disorder...The classical age saw the birth of...meticulous military and political tactics by which the control of bodies and individual forces was exercised within states (Foucault [1979] 1995:160).

Foucault writes of an eighteenth century European dream of a military society that utilized "a [military] technique and a body of knowledge that could project their schema over the social body" (Foucault [1979]1995:168-9). The military technique follows the model of Bentham's Panopticon and this new strategy generates knowledge that extends the reach of State power to micro levels of society such as the family and the body.

Before the European Enlightenment, Foucault argues that the mode of employment of power was brute force and there existed the notion of punishment as spectacle: a display of the naked power of the State. A key symbol of this era was the dungeon whose function was "to enclose, to deprive of light and to hide" (Foucault [1979]1995:200). But Bentham described a system of surveillance where a supervisor in a central tower could see, at every moment, each incarcerated individual in a fan-shaped series of individual cells. Foucault argues that in contrast to the dungeons of the pre-modern state, in the Panopticon:

> Full lighting and the eye of a supervisor capture better than darkness, which ultimately protected. Visibility is a trap...Each individual, in his place, is securely confined to a cell from which he is seen from the front by the supervisor; but the side walls prevent him from coming into contact with his companions. He is seen, but does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject of communication. The arrangement of his room, opposite the central tower, imposes on him an axial visibility; but the divisions of the ring, those separated cells, imply a lateral visibility. (Foucault [1979]1995:200).

This new technique of incarceration is, Foucault contends:

> an important mechanism, for it automatizes and disindividualizes power. Power has its principle not so much in a prison as in a certain concerted distribution of bodies, surfaces, lights, gazes, in an arrangement whose internal mechanisms produce the relation in which individuals are caught up...[The prisoner] inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection. By this very fact, the external power may throw off its physical weight; it tends to be non-corporeal" (Foucault [1979]1995:202-3).

It is Foucault's argument that the Panopticon is a defining moment in the change from the pre-modern to the modern state. He argues that in this transformation bodies are no longer subject to brutal oppression, but instead, to subtle and diffuse repression. Modern and postmodern bodies are *surveilled* and punished in secrecy and silence. The body is, for Foucault, central to the political economy of the modern state and power is inscribed upon it. He argues that the creation of productive and subjected bodies by the state is a "strategy" of the "body politic" in modernity. He writes that the body is:

directly involved in the political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs. This political investment of the body is bound up, in accordance with complex reciprocal relations, with its economic use; it is largely as a force of production that the body is invested with relations of power and domination...the body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body (Foucault [1979] 1995:26).

These strategies of the body politic produce two kinds of bodies, docile and automated: "A body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved. The celebrated automata, on the other hand, were not only a way of illustrating an organism, they were also political puppets, small-scale models of power" (Foucault [1979]1995:136). In addition, the body becomes a mobile unit of power, and Foucault gives us the example of the soldier. He states that: "The individual body becomes an element that may be placed, moved, articulated on others...The soldier is above all a fragment of mobile space" (Foucault [1979] 1995:164).

The model of the Panopticon becomes, in modernity, a model for the diffusion of power throughout the social body. The "techniques" and "formulas" for subjugating and automating bodies become general blueprints that any institution or style of government can adopt. Like the Wizard of Oz, Foucault tells us that: "Any individual, taken almost at random, can operate the machine (Foucault [1979]1995:202). These blueprints are called "disciplines." Discipline:

proceeds from the distribution of individuals in space. To achieve this end it employs several techniques...Discipline sometimes requires *enclosure*...But the principle of 'enclosure' is neither constant, nor indispensable, nor sufficient as disciplinary machinery. This machinery works space in a much more flexible and detailed way. It does this first of all on the principle of elementary location or *partitioning*...It was a procedure, therefore, aimed at knowing, mastering and using. Discipline organizes an analytical space" (Foucault [1979]1995:141-3).

These analytical spaces become functional sights such as hospitals, prisons, and factories. In discipline, it is the interstices, the spaces between units that are crucial: aisles between factory workers or desks in a school room, junctions at hospital corridors at which nurses' stations could be positioned. Thus, discipline "individualizes bodies by a location that does not give them a fixed position, but distributes them and circulates them in a network of relations" (Foucault [1979]1995:144-5). It was through the techniques of discipline that the principles of the Panopticon were "unlocked" and began to function "in a diffused, multiple polyvalent way throughout the whole social body" (Foucault [1979]1995:208-9).

Foucault thus describes a pre-modern state that employed brute force to maintain power and a transformation during the European classical age (~1650-1800) in which the state entered the age of modernity. Bodies became disciplined in another way, power became at once visible and unverifiable. These two kinds of power, one direct and wielded by institutions, the other secretive and diffused throughout society, correspond to different bodies. The disciplined body of modernity is inscribed with state power, complicit in its own surveillance, docile and automated as required by a capitalist economy. Foucault notes that:

> There are two images, then, of discipline. At one extreme, the discipline-blockade, the enclosed institution...At the other extreme, with panopticism, is the discipline-mechanism: a functional mechanism that must improve the exercise of power by making it lighter, more rapid, more effective, a design of subtle coercion for a society to come. The movement from one project to another, from a scheme of exceptional discipline to one of a generalized surveillance, rests on a historical transformation: the gradual extension of the mechanism of discipline throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, their spread throughout the whole social body, the formation of what might be called in general the disciplinary society (Foucault [1979]1995:209).

Myanmar is difficult to characterize as pre-modern, modern, or postmodern. In the countryside and in Burmese prisons and labor camps it is reasonable to conclude that Foucault's "discipline-blockade" applies. However the construction of Military Intelligence's new "spy centre" (Selth 1995), its mass mobilization of the population in the form of forced labor and "mass rallies," and its changing techniques of surveillance and punishment suggest that a transformation is occurring. In this thesis I will argue that the creation of a docile, automated body by the military regime is the surest evidence that mechanisms of discipline are spreading through Burmese society.

This thesis could, perhaps, be a thesis about Burmese selves, or Burmese persons, but instead it is about mindful bodies, a term used in medical anthropology as defined by Schepper Hughes and Lock (1987) but also used in Theravada Buddhist meditation in Myanmar (Houtman 1999, forthcoming). I use the term 'body' in two ways. Firstly, to emphasize technologies of power that are inscribed upon Burmans and of the ways in which Burmese bodies are made to resemble commodities by the military regime. I use the term *automata* to describe this process of commodification, whether it be for sexual, labor, or ideological purposes.

However, following Lock (Lock 1993a; 1993b) I wish to problematize the Burmese body as well as decenter the notion that there is one entity known as a "Burmese body" where there are forty seven million *flexible* Burmese bodies who inhabit Myanmar, in the same way as there are forty seven million ways in which individual experience situates each Burman along the chain of consciousness that the Comaroffs have defined as

strung between hegemony and ideology (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991).

Lock notes that "Foucault, concerned with the epistemic shift to modernity, which he critiqued with respect to its "objectifying practices," has been roundly castigated for not spelling out the implementation of the "micro-physics" of power in praxis" (Lock 1993a:140). In this thesis I am very much concerned with the micro-physics of power in several urban populations, especially the differential way in which power is negotiated, inscribed, and attained at the level of individuals, local worlds, and in different dimensions of existence such as the world of dreams. This is a project already attempted by Anagnost for the Chinese body and its relation to the Chinese State. She defines such as project as attempting to understand:

> how individuals become stitched into subject positions within the state's ritual forms and how far these positionings have the power to structure people's lived reality - to define their social being and even their inner sense of themselves. I push my argument further, however, to explore how the production of docile political subjects...conceals the internal fragmentation and diversity not only of "the people," but also within the party organization itself (Anagnost 1994:131).

In the second half of the thesis I will turn from describing the inscription of power upon the bodies of Burmans, to describe the way that Burmans, in response to this State-mandated automated body, construct their own bodies, bodies that are culturally and historically familiar. This body is flexible, unbounded, and unregulated by the regime and it is embedded within a cultural history of dissociation and altered states of consciousness. Thus the Foucauldian body is a vital aspect of a study of Burmese experiences of totalitarianism, but it is also necessary to attend to the phenomenological level of lived experience and to understand that individuals experience and express the results of domination in different ways and in an ongoing, fragmented process. This process results in the cultural production of a body which I describe as a Burmese puppet, in order to distinguish it from the creation of automated bodies by the regime.

Technologies of the Self: Survival Strategies

Many medical anthropological studies have started out from the experience of physical distress and traced the history of the construction of the distress as a named illness, and the institutional and community attitudes that are associated with it. Fewer studies have started from a position of examining a particular dimension of existence and how individuals and groups respond to this circumstance. Very few medical anthropologists ask why some people "choose" a particular idiom or idioms to express distress, and not others (with the noticeable exception of Mark Nichter (Nichter 1981)). This is not a return to social atomism (de Certeau 1984:xi) or methodological individualism, but an understanding that under conditions of extreme repression, where

non-political association is severely limited, individual strategies are more important than collective ones. This perspective draws from recent theory advocating the replacement of the term "culture" with the term "practice" (Ortner 1984; Abu-Lughod 1991), a perspective that recognizes that individuals can be "sites of agency both in relation to conduct and to the reproduction and transformation of systems or structures (in their diverse senses)" (Brightman 1995:14).

Rather than focus upon a particular sickness or manifestation of distress, I have listened to the concerns of actors as part of their local worlds and written about those elements of life under totalitarianism which they judge to be the most significant. I have called the resultant pathways for action which arise from the disordered life worlds of individuals and their common experiences, "survival strategies." I use the term strategy to emphasize the improvising, constructive, and processual characteristics of meanings and decisions made by Burmans in the midst of their everyday state of emergency. De Certeau has distinguished between *tactics* and *strategies*. His distinction is primarily spatial: strategies require a space where "a subject of will and power...can be isolated from an "environment." A strategy assumes a place that can be circumscribed as *proper (propre)* and thus "serve as the basis for generating relations with an exterior distinct from it" (de Certeau 1984:xix). Tactics, conversely, do not have the luxury of a space apart, they are "ways of operating" within existing social structures. Burmans are continually in the process of trying to make these spaces that are free from domination, and I describe these acts of "making" as strategies of survival in a culture of fear.

Sometimes these strategies embody an element of "resistance" but when considering violence as a dimension of human existence, resistance is only one of the many strategies adopted by individuals and groups in their everyday lives. Violence is, as Nordstrom and Martin have evinced, not necessarily a means to an end at the level of everyday lives, but rather "a powerful component of sociocultural reality" (Nordstrom and Martin 1992:4). The authors suggest that anthropologists turn their attention towards "tactics of survival [rather] than strategies of power" (Nordstrom and Martin 1992:4).

This work is concerned both with strategies of power and strategies of survival or, in Foucault's terms, technologies of domination and technologies of the self. I take as crucial Foucault's own realization that a finely grained analysis of the experience of domination is only possible when both these technologies are studied. In between his earlier writings on Discipline and his later work on Sexuality, Foucault reflected upon such techniques. He noted that:

> one can distinguish three major types of techniques:...techniques of production, techniques of signification or communication, and techniques of domination. But I became more and more aware that there is another type of technique: techniques which permit individuals to affect, by their own means, a certain number of operations on their own bodies, their own souls, their own thoughts, their own conduct...Let us call these

kind of techniques technologies of the self. If one wants to analyze the genealogy of subject in Western civilization, one has to take into account not only techniques of domination, but also techniques of the self. One has to show the interaction between these two types of self. When I was studying asylums, prisons, and so on, I perhaps insisted too much on the techniques of domination. What we call discipline is something really important in this kind of institution. But it is only one aspect of the art of governing people in our societies. Having studied the field of power relations taking domination techniques as a point of departure, I should like, in the years to come, to study power relations, especially in the field of sexuality, starting from the technique of the self. In every culture, I think, this self-technology implies a set of truth obligations: learning what is truth, discovering the truth, being enlightened by truth, telling the truth. All these are considered important either for the constitution or for the transformation of the self (Foucault 1985:367).

Accordingly I focus this work not only upon the technologies of domination apparent in urban Myanmar, but also upon the technologies of the self.

The traditional interest by anthropologists of Burma in psychological phenomena is continued in this thesis via the notion of survival strategies. Burmans are actively engaged in constructing action pathways. If the current political situation in Myanmar appears static or "stuck in time" it is because Burmans are engaging different notions and dimensions of temporality such as "waiting," an active, intentional strategy that collapses time. By starting with concerns apparent in local Burmese worlds I avoid the medicalization and reification of earlier studies (such as Spiro 1967) and include a politically informed, multidimensional understanding for behaviour which previous Burmese scholars have designated as "pathological."

1.2 Fieldwork and Ethnography in a Totalitarian State

This thesis is the result of a year's fieldwork conducted in the two largest urban centers of Myanmar, Yangon and Mandalay. Since 1989 the newly formed State Law and Order Restoration Council (known by its Orwellian acronym, SLORC) began forcibly relocating residents of downtown Yangon and Mandalay to paddy fields on the outskirts of these cities. Known as the "new fields," these relocated townships are fertile grounds not only for anthropological fieldwork but for the diseases associated with severe poverty and the consequences of familial and social structure breakdown including malnutrition, high infant and maternal mortality, prostitution and sexual bartering, cholera, tuberculosis, and physical abuse. In order to best protect informants, I have combined my observations and interviews from the relocated townships into one fictional township located on the outskirts of Yangon. I have named this township *Nyaungbintha* (ညောင်ပင်သာ) or "pleasant banyan tree" township in the manner in which villages and townships are named throughout Myanmar. There is precedent for this approach as Melford Spiro (1967) and Manning

Nash (1965) also created pseudonyms for the villages in which they worked prior to the military coup in 1962.

Fieldwork was conducted primarily in Yangon and was often difficult and occasionally dangerous. In the following chapter I explain my adoption of the names that the SLORC has decreed for Rangoon (now Yangon) and Burma (now the Union of Myanmar.

This is not a "usual" anthropological thesis. Physical danger exists for the participants in this study if their names are revealed. Accordingly, narratives, informant statements, and life histories use fictitious Burmese names and individuals are identified only by approximate age and sometimes by occupation. I have used names common among the Burman majority, not to make any kind of political statement, but to best protect informants by deliberately not referring to ethnic identities. It is unfortunate that a level of richness of anthropological detail is not apparent. The details of everyday life that anthropologists learn from engaging in participant observation fieldwork were certainly available to me, but it would have been irresponsible to become known as having more than a passing acquaintance with particular Burmans. Although I ate, shopped, and spent time at pagodas with Burmese friends, it was not frequent, and never more than once in the same location. This situation and the restrictions placed upon foreigners in Myanmar means that there are holes in the data that I hope to be able to fill at a later date. I hope that my knowledge of Burmese everyday life comes through in this thesis, although perhaps a majority of things I have learnt in and about Myanmar cannot be printed, it would be unethical to reveal information that could result in harm to my informants.

The most difficult aspect of living in Myanmar is constructing gossamer-like strands of trust that function as webs of communication and psychological support. Friendships are intense and short and Burmans and expatriates alike become possessive of relationships founded on real trust. But Myanmar is a land of secrets, and knowledge is the most precious commodity. I found the weight of secrets shared between some friends and not others, between one "level" of knowledge and another, a difficult burden which wore away at me over the course of the fieldwork. It is almost impossible to live in Myanmar and not lose a certain perspective. Living under the military regime affects Burmans and expatriates alike. Secretiveness, distrust, and bitterness is stamped, to some extent, upon everyone who lives under this totalitarian regime. The hard won but delicate threads of trust began to unravel each time I left for R&R in Bangkok or Australia, and when I finally left the field many of them weathered and broke under the pressure of the fear that my departure generated in Rangoon: fear of having entrusted one's secrets and therefore one's safety, possibly one's life and the life of one's family, to someone else. Although these webs of trust are fragile and fleeting, I feel their weight acutely and strive hard to protect the identity of all informants.

Over the course of the fieldwork it became increasingly difficult to differentiate between "us" and "the regime" at the level of the public service. I played by the rules set down by the regime that I not ask political questions in the medical institutions to which I was given access. The use of cameras at the psychiatric hospital was forbidden and issues such as these were usually negotiated informally upon my arrival. As far as I can ascertain, my research visa was the first one given out for a year's field research in Burma since the military coup of 1962. The visa allowed me to travel freely in Myanmar and did not restrict me to urban areas. The visa did not specifically forbid me from conducting research on political issues, it stated that I may conduct anthropological research on health issues. It is illegal for Burmans to speak about politics however, and public servants must record their conversations with foreigners. I am also the first "Westerner" to be given access to the patients and to documentation of the Traditional Medicine hospitals and clinics, the Yangon Psychiatric Hospital, and the Drug Rehabilitation Unit[1]. I did not subject any of the patients or staff at these institutions to any questions not directly related to the health of the patients, and the way in which the institutions functioned. While reminding myself that at some stage, everyone makes a choice as to their degree of collaboration with the regime, I found many of the higher level medical personnel and Health Ministry staff to be extraordinarily polite, urbane, caring individuals whom I could not but help like immensely. My avoidance of personal connections and interviews of a political nature will, I hope, protect them from the consequences of this work.

In the remainder of this chapter I outline the constructions of violence in anthropology and explain the parameters of violence as a substantive domain of Burmese life. In chapter two I introduce readers to the imagined nation of the Union of Myanmar. Chapter three describes the vision of a totalitarian Buddhist utopia envisaged by the military regime and the parameters and boundaries of this imagined nation state. Chapter four specifies the mechanics of domination such as propaganda, censorship, disinformation and surveillance. The fifth chapter explains how power is exercised by the military regime so as to create an urban landscape of domination and the way that power is spatialized through the body. I elaborate a political geography of Yangon and the production of Burmese automata by the State. In chapter six I examine the State's construction of fear and terror through the strategic use of political violence and the possible long term consequences of the alienation, vulnerability, and flatness of affect that results. In the following chapter I explore some of the techniques adopted by urban residents to fight back against the regime's propaganda and to remind themselves of what is "true" and "real." In chapter eight I stress the variety of survival strategies constructed to survive life under totalitarianism. I explore strategies that range from leaving the country permanently, to collaboration, complicity, and withdrawal to interior worlds. I describe in this chapter the fragmentation of the body and the detaching of agency from the body as Burmese

[1] WHO studies are conducted occasionally, and there is a 1989 article published in the *Indian Journal of Sociology* regarding the Drug Rehabilitation Unit.

prostitutes send their minds flying to safety.

The first half of the thesis is about the population gagged, "sewn up" like Taussig's Imbunché of Chilean legend. The few informant interviews used in this section were given to me fearfully and with great courage. I have drawn much of the remaining data from censored material, to symbolically recreate the conditions of secrecy and anonymity that exist in Burma. Much of the material for the second half of the thesis was obtained in places where I had official permission to be. This understanding, and the ability to interview patients without the presence of hospital staff, gave patients some choice as to the way in which they answered my questions.

In the final chapters I present ethnographic data from the Yangon Psychiatric Hospital and its attached Drug Rehabilitation Unit. In these chapters I analyze madness and heroin addiction as mediators between emotional distress and the sociopolitical situation. In chapter nine I convey the moral logic that informs the confinement, diagnosis, treatment and construction of the "mentally ill" patient. Chapter ten details the strategies by which Burmese psychiatric patients conceive their illness and suffering as fundamentally linked to the socio-historical and current political situation. I explore the cultural construction of madness in Burmese culture and its relationship to violence. Chapter eleven describes the refusal of a generation of Burmese men to participate in the politicization of their daily lives and the various mechanisms by which they seek escape. In this chapter heroin is portrayed by the young men as a political conspiracy and a way of life unparalleled in contemporary Myanmar. In the conclusion I argue that Burmans have a rich cultural store of techniques for surviving extreme domination and degradation and that an understanding of the survival strategies created and enacted by Burmans suggests new research regarding the treatment of Southeast Asian survivors of violence.

Walter Benjamin searched for "counter images" to use in his montage process to puncture the artificial fairy lights of the state phantasmagoria. This is also my aim in reproducing these stories from the margins of Burmese society. Michael Taussig has written of the need to find a position from which to write against terror. I have found it here, amongst the mud, rats, and open sewerage drains of the relocated townships and the psychiatric institution with its attached drug rehabilitation unit.

1.3 The Cultural Construction of Violence

A recent *New York Times* article states that the world is going through a pre-millenial "global purging of the soul" as it reflects upon the drawing to a close of "a bloody century." The author cites a number of reasons for this global phenomenon including:

the passing from power of the generation that lived the war years; the end of the cold war with its bending of truth to strategic imperatives...Here, as in other countries, there appears to be an almost physical realization of the sheer weight of the century's slaughter, and the triumph of the ideology of human rights in a post-ideological age leads to the examination of past brutality (Cohen 1997).

The author's hypothesis of the triumph of human rights over ideologies such as totalitarianism and communism is, of course, nonsense. Such egocentric theorizing is due in part to a selective focus of Western media upon certain areas of the world (and a selective ignorance of ongoing American imperialism). In the years following the Second World War, and especially since the fall of the Berlin Wall, social theory has moved away from a significant theme of the first half of the twentieth century: totalitarianism. The shifting focus toward issues of nationality, ethnic identity, and the "globalization" of economies in anthropology has also had an effect on the way in which violence has been studied and represented.

There is a general understanding among anthropologists and other researchers of conflict that the twentieth century is the most "violent" century of the last two millennia and this conclusion is often arrived at by counting the number of "significant" conflicts in any one year (see for example, Robben and Nordstrom 1995:2; Sluka 1995:276-7). The other way in which this conclusion is arrived at is to consider the number of "innocent civilians" (civilians are always innocent, never complicit) who become 'caught up' in violence.

Violence is now widely conceived in anthropology as a dimension of human experience. Farmer, and Robben and Nordstrom make the point that the older functional anthropological definition needed to be expanded so as to provide a fuller experiential account of human existence. Robben and Nordstrom state that:

War, rebellion, resistance, rape, torture, and defiance, as well as peace, victory, humor, boredom, and ingenuity, will have to be understood together through their expression in the everyday if we are to take the issue of the human construction of existence in earnest. A too narrow conceptualization of violence prevents us from realizing that what is at stake is not simply destruction but also reconstruction, not just death, but also survival (Robben and Nordstrom 1995:6).

Whereas Robben and Nordstrom seek to expand the definition by placing violence within the realm of human experience, Farmer shows us how violence is embedded in the institutions which shape everyday experience such as the economy. Specifically, Farmer conceives of violence as having three social axes: (i) direct violence: state, torture, domestic, (ii) indirect violence: fear and terror, surveillance, rumour, gossip and suspicion, and (iii) structural violence: poverty, gender, and ethnicity (Farmer 1992). Farmer's definition of violence is an example of Jean and John Comaroff's conception of hegemony. In some societies violence has not only become a dominant ideology, it has entered the

realm of the "taken for granted" aspects of everyday life. Nordstrom and Martin argue that violence as hegemony often goes unremarked upon in the anthropological literature. The authors write that:

> There is a tendency in the social sciences to study violence when it is manifested, even while recognizing that its genesis lies in structural violence. In other words, the view supported is that violence ceases when violent actions stop. Yet its ideational manifestation is as crucial as its more concrete expression. Violence, like Simmel's (1950:151) statement on domination, "is not so much the exploitation of the other as much as the mere consciousness of the possibility." Thus, the continual reproduction of violence is in all likelihood linked to the fact that while the legitimacy of its use is contested, its existence as part of the cultural repertoire is not (Nordstrom and Martin 1992:8).

The recent anthropological interest in issues of violence and terror are almost always conceived and researched within the context of "resistance." An exception to this has been the study of State-sponsored violence in Latin America during the "dirty wars." Even in these studies however, there is almost always an opposition force, a resistance movement to the use of violence by the State to maintain control.

In this thesis I wish to collapse the distinction made between violence and resistance in recent anthropological literature. This dualism polarizes and thus reifies complex action pathways that are contingent upon local, global, and socio-historical factors. Lock and Kaufert raise the problem of defining resistance in anthropology. Realizing that one's responses to a particular system of domination may be limited, they use Scott's example of "foot-dragging" in Malaysia to include token resistance within narrow constraints of individual lives and circumstances (Lock and Kaufert 1998:11-2). In defining a "hidden transcript" that differs from the "public transcript," Scott is able to examine subtle ways of refusing domination, a spectrum of strategies that cannot be reduced simply to "resistance" (Scott 1985;1990;1992). Abu-Lughod (1990) and Lewin (1998) write against the romantic desire to read resistance, even the most surreptitious or symbolic forms of resistance, into almost any activity. Fegan (1986) and Kielmann (1998) argue that resistance entails the conscious intention to resist in a particular situation. Foucault's maxim that resistance occurs wherever power is employed is perhaps Eurocentric, for in Myanmar the idea that resistance to domination is necessary is *not* taken-for-granted. Rather, the concept of resistance, if accepted, is continually negotiated on a wide variety of levels from the community, to individual bodies. Resistance is altogether too polarizing and ethnographically "thin" to hold the complexity and subtlety by which populations interact with each other and with a dominating "Other" on a daily basis, on a multitude of levels, and in various dimensions of existence (including the spiritual realm). These relationships are contested and negotiated by individuals, groups, classes, and across divisions such as languages, borders, and generations.

Resistance is, above all, a priority, whereas it is often accepted unproblematically in the anthropological literature as a social fact. Whether it is attributed to academic analysts or to ethnographic subjects, it is contingent on a space existing within local worlds for anti-hegemonic practices and discourses, what the Comaroff's have described as both ideology and the space between ideology and hegemony. In Myanmar, resistance is sometimes simply not considered necessary, an efficient use of time and resources, or a sensible strategy. Other ways of thinking about hegemony, other priorities such as adequate food, water, and shelter, and other world views that include power in alternate forms, as well as other moralities and ways of knowing, all come into play when individuals and groups in Myanmar consider changing the oppressive circumstances with which they live. This simplification ignores notions such as collaboration, complicity, and refusal to participate.[2]

Lock and Kaufert's recent volume concerning "pragmatic women" emphasizes the complexity of such decisions as well as the ability of individuals and collectivities to pursue a variety of strategies simultaneously, a practical approach to the issues of everyday life that does not make an artificial distinction between resistance and complicity. Significantly, they also imply that a focus upon resistance within a particular cultural field may be too narrow a focus, ignoring trans-national processes and knowledge systems. In relation to the "pragmatic women" who are the subjects of their analysis, Lock and Kaufert argue that: "Whatever their declared ethnicity and wherever their geographical location, the majority of women are responding today not simply to "traditional" and local hegemonies, but also to the effects that globally circulating knowledge and practices have on their lives" (Lock and Kaufert 1998:23).

Comaroff and Comaroff argue against the postmodern thesis that all meaning is ""polymorphously perverse," the polysemic, amorphous solvent of everyday discourse" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991:16). Seremetakis reminds us that for those who suffer from structural violence such as poverty and domination "there can be no holistic experience in the margins" because of cultural fragmentation caused by "external and internal dominations" (Seremetakis 1991:2). Lock and Kaufert note that "increasingly in the present global political climate, people find themselves marginalized through isolation or expulsion from community and family. For example, young women in many Asian countries are sold by their families into servitude as poorly paid labor or as sex workers" (Lock and Kaufert 1998:24). Far from meaning being always contested and fluid, Seremetakis and Lock and Kaufert's arguments contest the ease with which some postmodern writers believe meaning can be created. Thus Lock and Kaufert suggest that resistance, like meaning, may not be created, fluid, and open for individuals and communities living in extreme poverty and/or under extreme dominating or demeaning situations. They write that:

[2] A related point is made by James Scott: "we ought not to assume that the real subjects of our analysis have absolutely nothing else to talk about except domination and resistance" (Scott 1990:111 fn 5).

The possibilities for resistance or critical reflection in situations of extreme isolation where structural violence is at its most constraining as Scott noted (1990), are minimal. When the evil conditions under which so many women live and work are taken into account, then the type of postmodern analysis which plays with the idea of multiplicity, with the possibilities for individual remaking of the world, and with the invention of "incalculable choreographies" (McDonald 1982) seems flagrantly irresponsible...one must ask exactly what concepts such as "choice" and "voluntary" mean (Lock and Kaufert 1998:24).

Accordingly, this thesis addresses the notion of power in society in a fuller, more sophisticated manner than that available through the use of the dichotomy resistance/domination and the more extreme postmodern claims to the fluidity and openness of options which is clearly not the case in a totalitarian state.

Chapter Two

The Everyday State of Emergency

2.1 An Introduction to Myanmar

The area of ethnographic inquiry is the People's Union of Myanmar (မြန်မာနိုင်ငံတော်) which until 1989 was known as Burma (ဗမာ). The current military regime changed the name of Burma to Myanmar because of its perceived colonial associations and in a bid to be known as the "fathers" of a new nation. According to Taylor, 'Myanma'[3] in Burmese denotes "the idea of the Burmese people as a group of persons distinct from all the rest of humanity who live under this state" (Taylor 1987:2). Political parties both within and without Myanmar refuse to use the new names as the changes were made without consultation with the population.

Burma's 671,000 km² borders the Andaman Sea, the Bay of Bengal, Bangladesh, China, India, Laos, Thailand, and Tibet (see Figure 1). Most of these borders are flanked by mountain ranges including the Himalayas in the north. The central riverland plains of Burma are the agricultural heart of the nation with the major north-south river, the Ayeyarwady, flowing to the large delta area which spills into the Gulf of Martaban. The Thanlwin river forms much of the border with China, and the Mekong likewise forms the border between Laos, Thailand and Myanmar (The Golden Triangle). The Shan Plateau is a rugged, mountainous area bordering China, and tropical jungle covers much of the area bordering Thailand.

"Burma" and the "Union of Myanmar" denote "imagined communities" (Anderson 1991) and in this thesis we will be discussing a variety of imagined nations. I have adopted the military regime's names for Burma. This means that I refer to Rangoon as Yangon, as well as streets, markets, and other locations by their "new" names. Most international organizations continue to use the older names and the Burmese political opposition use these names to separate their vision of Myanmar from that of the military junta. My use of the new names reflects the lived reality of the majority of Burmans who have not left the country. In everyday conversations (even those amongst trusted friends, held in private) it is rare in Yangon and Mandalay to hear the old names used. I have been guided by other works such as those which refer to the Democratic Kampuchea (DK) period in Cambodia to denote the lived reality of life under the Khmer Rouge regime. Thus, whilst not agreeing with the undemocratic manner in which the names have been changed, it is important to emphasize that Burmans now live under a military regime who have created a Union of

[3]No one seems to know why the military government added "r" to the end of the Burmese word "Myanma."

Myanmar, however repressive and terrifying. Another valid strategy would have been to refer to Burma when discussing events prior to the junta's name changes, but Burmans obviously do not call their country Burma when discussing events prior to 1989, and Myanmar, for events after that time. Above all, I have been guided by local usage. It grates on my nerves to have to use the word Myanmar so frequently, but it also highlights for me the sense of 'wrongness' that envelops everyday life in Myanmar.

The idea of British Burma was created during British expansion throughout Asia where three Anglo-Burman wars in the nineteenth century progressively incorporated more territory into the British Raj. Burmese Kingship ended abruptly in 1885 with the Third Anglo-Burman War (Smith 1965:39) and the deposing of King Thibaw (Taylor 1987:1). Upper Myanmar was annexed "and the entire country considered a province of the British Indian Empire" (Maung Maung 1963:20). Burma was thus imagined as a province of India. In many ethnic minority hill areas, a handful of Baptist missionaries were the face of colonization. In these outer areas, Burma, as an integrated part of the British Empire, was established in name rather than fact. Many remote areas remained free of any kind of British control.

The Union of Myanmar was until recently a socialist community imagined both by ethnic Burmans and the ruling junta. The defining moment, or origin myth, of this community derives from the "Panglong Spirit." Panglong is a small town in Shan State where, in 1947, General Aung San (representing ethnic Burmans) met with ethnic leaders to sign the Panglong Agreement. Under the agreement, upon independence from Britain, ethnic minority groups agreed to become incorporated into the Republic of the Union of Burma but maintained their right to secede after several years. This tenuous agreement, immediately abandoned by all ethnic minorities upon Independence, is a vision of a united upland-lowland community.[4] In reality, Arakan[5] is the Rohingya (predominantly Muslim) homeland, and northern Myanmar is increasingly a province of China in all but name. Until recently, Shan State was under the autonomous control of several Shan armies (this situation continues to change), and a large area bordering Thailand was a self declared state (Kawthoolei) governed by the Karen National Union. Various independent armies controlled an area under heavy opium cultivation bordering China, and in the Northwest, minorities such as the Naga and the Chin have had their communities artificially divided by the India/Myanmar and Bangladesh/Myanmar borders. The SLORC (State Law and Order Restoration Council) signed peace treaties with all armed ethnic groups with the exception of the Karen and war continues to be waged against them in Southeast Myanmar.

Buddhism has, since the seventh century, created trans-national religious communities in Central and South Asia. And finally, the "Western" imagination has also created a distinction between the imagined Oriental communities of South/Southeast Asia and the Himalayan nations (Adams 1996). Eighty-five percent of the forty seven million

[4] Aung San Suu Kyi subscribes to the vision of Union of Burma as defined by the Panglong Agreement.
[5] The Glossary lists many of Myanmar's ethnic groups and political associations.

Burmans are Buddhist, 4% Muslim, and 4.5% are Christian. (Very little official credence is given to the almost unanimous belief in animism in Burma). Burmese is the *lingua franca* of the nation (EIU 1993:48). In this thesis I am concerned with the two largest cities of Myanmar, Yangon and Mandalay, both of which are mainly populated with the ethnic Burman population although these have significant residents of Chinese and South Asian origin as well as ethnic minorities such as the Karen and Mon. As such this thesis does not touch upon the ethnic insurgencies of the Kachin, Chin, Shan, Karen and the other ethnic minorities who have declared war upon the military regime since 1962.

Kin terminology emphasizes age groups rather than vertical linkages and unlike China, there is no ancestor worship in Myanmar. Women do not take the names of their husbands when they marry, and anyone may change their name as often as they like without any formal procedure although this is rapidly changing with the increased control local security offices have over the recording of significant life events in Myanmar. Throughout the thesis I have assigned fictive names to informants designating them as "U" if they are male and older than me, or "Maung" if they are younger. Older women are designated as "Daw" and younger women by "Ma." Residence patterns in Myanmar are most commonly matrilocal with extended families living in the same house or in separate houses within one compound. Inheritance is bilateral and kin ties are not of importance unless relatives wish to emphasize the bond (Henderson et al. 1971:67-8).

Residence and marriage patterns have, however, been significantly altered by the enacting of the military regime's totalitarian vision. Relocated townships on the outskirts of Yangon and Mandalay were initially created through the forced movement of urban dwellers in the wake of the 1988 pro-democracy uprising, but after several years they have developed a mixed character. Originally they had no services such as safe water supplies, shade, and construction materials. Basic health care facilities and other infrastructure are slowly provided, in part by international non-governmental organizations. In some relocated townships the regime has established "industrial zones" which provide low paying manual labor jobs that have alleviated the chronic unemployment and underemployment of these townships. In other townships however, there is no industrial zone and unemployment remains extremely high. This has resulted in a very high mobility rate of the population, especially young men, who travel long distances (such as to gem mines) to find employment. These men often return only for the rainy season.

Residents of the relocated townships include farmers who have been dispossessed of their farming land and given small residential plots. They lack skills that would allow them to work in a peri-urban environment now that they can no longer farm their land. The regime grants land for housing to its employees which means a "non poor" group of residents also exist in the townships. Increasingly the relocated townships are sites for land speculation, as they are usually located only a few kilometers from the cities.

On the basis of my extensive research in the relocated townships, I have concluded that forcible relocation has resulted in families being assigned to smaller plots of land which has caused the break-up of existing extended family living structures. This has in turn resulted in a lack of social and economic support mechanisms. The loss of existing businesses and assets, coupled with the high unemployment of the townships has resulted in increased mobility among satellite populations. Women are thus often left alone to provide for themselves and their children. The increased mobility of males has resulted in men having wives and children in more than one town and in extremely high divorce and abandonment rates. When combined with the rates of premature and accidental death, it becomes difficult to find women over thirty-five in the relocated townships who have not had more than one husband. High divorce and abandonment rates and a lack of employment force women to remarry quickly. It is difficult to find single women for these reasons in the relocated townships, and those who live alone with their children must often turn to prostitution. A high rate of remarriage means that children live with a succession of step-relatives and this has also resulted in fear (both real and perceived) of rape by stepfathers and stepbrothers. Incest and rape within the home are issues unexplored in Myanmar, but have repeatedly been expressed to me in the relocated townships.

Prostitution has reached epidemic proportions in the townships with the common figure quoted by prostitutes being "one in three women" engaged in prostitution at any one time. Because of several factors, including the need for township officials to generate additional income (through accepting bribes from pimps), sexual bartering for basic economic needs by women, and other economic (and possibly also male psychological) factors, have increased both the supply and demand side of the equation.

Increased powerlessness of males may result in increased rates of physical abuse. Psychological stressors on men include a cultural belief in the male as the financial provider of the household unit, and the pain (common to both men and women) of being uprooted from their previous land and social relations. Alcohol consumption is very high in the relocated townships and women in these townships consistently make the link between alcohol abuse and the physical abuse of women and children.

Lack of income results in a general deterioration of health indicators and the most common killers in refugee situations are also the most common in the relocated townships (that is: diarrhea, measles, ARI, malnutrition, and malaria where prevalent) (UNHCR 1995:13). The UNHCR findings on the consequences of the above trends in refugee camps are also applicable to the peri-urban townships. For example, UNHCR cites an increase in the sexual transmission of HIV in refugee situations for the following reasons, all of which are germane to relocated townships: "The disintegration of community and family life leads to the break-up of stable relationships and the disruption of social norms governing sexuality. Both children and adults may be coerced into sex to gain access to basic needs such as shelter, security, food, and money" (UNHCR 1995:33).

2.2 A Framework for Contemporary Political Events

Burmese history may be divided into several epochs: the time of the kings; British colonial rule; World War II, the Japanese invasion and the rise of the nationalist movement; sporadic post-Independence democracy; and the ongoing period of military dictatorship. Prior to British colonization, the only significant institutions in Myanmar were the Sangha (the order of monks) and the monarchy. The anthropological literature regarding the relationship between religion and politics in Southeast Asia is often conceptualized in terms of a relationship between memory (referring to cosmology and the past), and imagination (especially imagined communities and nationalist identities). Authors such as Anderson and Keyes state that before Southeast Asian nations underwent modernization (new administrative institutions, introduction of mass communication, print media, increased communication speeds), a community's cosmology was a fairly accurate representation of the community hierarchy and functioning, and vice versa. This cosmology was almost always envisioned in theological or sacred terms. But with the arrival of European colonization, Southeast Asian communities were subjected to new systems of administration, communication, and transportation. In creating nationalist movements, Anderson argues that Southeast Asians reconstructed their past and used these social memories to imagine a new identity and vision for the future (Anderson 1991:40).

The modern nation state thus represents an alien intrusion sundering the mating of cosmology with community (Keyes et al. 1994:4). Many authors argue that this is the reason for the current violent actions of separatist and military groups in Southeast Asia. For example within the Sri Lankan context, a dominant belief would seem to be that violence, which has often been inseparable from Buddhist identity in Sri Lanka in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, is not a product of mytho-historical complexes (Tambiah 1992:154) but is instead formed within a colonial and post colonial atmosphere apparent in Sri Lanka. Kapferer argues that "Modern nationalist ideology, that fuels and supports the present tragic situation of inter ethnic hostility and warfare was formed in the colonial and post colonial situations of the emergence of the modern nation-state" (Kapferer 1988:90-1).

Unfortunately, such accounts deny the long history of violence in Southeast Asia and present European colonialism as the only significant form of domination when in fact South and Southeast Asian nations routinely sacked neighbouring kingdoms in an ongoing cycle of retaliation. Such conflict has its roots in a variety of complex factors including the desire for land, irrigation and water, sea ports and Buddhist relics. The present political situation in Southeast Asia cannot be simplified and dehistoricized by postulating sweeping social forces such as colonialism as the source of current violence.

It cannot be denied, however, that British colonialism has had an enormous impact upon the collective Burmese psyche, the memory of which the current military regime distorts and repeats ad nauseum. Many administrative procedures put in place by the British have survived in Myanmar where the population has internalized a sense of inferiority with regards to notions such as "civilization." This shame at being "backward" (that is, non-industrialized) wars with a fierce sense of "racial superiority" which finds expression in discrimination and occasional violence against Burmans with religious affiliations other than that of Buddhism. The sundering of cosmology and history from daily realities certainly occurred in Myanmar, and as in most colonized countries, the acute sense of powerlessness felt by the Burmese manifests itself in a continued non-participatory attitude and in millennial beliefs.

Veena Das has stated that: "The very moment of the birth of India as a nation free from colonial domination was also the scene of unprecedented collective violence" at which approximately 100,000 women were abducted and raped (Das 1996:67). Das poses the question of the changes this violence has had upon "the experiences of self, community, and nation" and she answers that: "At the very least these scenes of violence constitute the (perhaps metaphysical) threshold within which the scenes of ordinary life are lived" (Das 1996:68). As we shall see, the threshold for violence is certainly high in Myanmar but this has been the case for over a millennium. In fact the last Burmese King (King Thibaw) killed 6,000 of his closest relatives before the British captured Upper Myanmar. I am certainly not suggesting here that Myanmar, like the rest of Southeast Asia, has not been profoundly altered by colonialism, or that the struggle for independence and for power in the post-Independence world has not had violence as a central characteristic. I am suggesting, however, that to see colonialism as the source of violence in Southeast Asia, and in Myanmar particularly, is to posit a pre-colonial world of harmony. Myanmar in fact has a very bloody past and thus there has been no break in the violence. The question instead must be, "how does this high threshold for violence affect the everyday realities of life in Burma?"

British colonialism effectively ended in December, 1941, when Japan invaded Myanmar. An impressive array of British military paraphernalia including medals and insignia can be found in Myanmar, souvenirs from an indecorous rapid withdrawal from the country. The *Thirty Comrades*, a group of university students who have dominated the political landscape until the present time, went to Japan for military training and upon their return established the Burma Independence Army (BIA) and a pre-Independence cabinet (Lintner 1990:20,25). Many authors and expatriate Burmans have speculated on the "indoctrination" that the *Thirty Comrades* may have received when they trained in Japan. Some contributors to the Internet site *The BurmaNet*, suggest that ethnocentrism and xenophobia are now part of the military's guiding ideology, but their training was brief, and Myanmar has its own long roots of ethnocentrism and xenophobia, without needing to

borrow them from Japan. In addition, Smith asserts that independence activists had turned to India and China prior to the Japanese invasion, but it was Japan that had been infiltrating the student movement in Yangon for some time and "offered the more immediate prospect of arms and training" (Smith 1991:57). Many scholars do, however, point to the significant influence of Japan upon Myanmar, primarily in terms of financial aid (Steinberg 1988) but also in business contacts and a solidarity of "Asian values."

Amongst the *Thirty Comrades* was Aung San, who became the leader of the Communist Party of Burma (CPB), the Burmese Independence Army (BIA), and the pre-Independence cabinet (Smith 1991:57). Other members of the thirty comrades included U Nu, who became the first democratically elected prime minister, and Ne Win, who led the 1962 military coup and ruled Myanmar from 1962 to 1989. Aung San's pre-Independence cabinet signed an agreement with Britain guaranteeing independence for Myanmar within one year, but Aung San (or the General, as he came to be known) was assassinated in 1947 by a rival political faction (Lintner 1990:26). Myanmar finally gained Independence in 1948 (Taylor 1987:1), and U Nu became prime minister (Lintner 1990:26).

In 1962 the military, headed by General Ne Win, staged a coup and formed a Revolutionary Council which adopted, as Aung San had argued for, a secular state. Although demonstrations by monks continued (up to 10,000 in one Yangon Rally) (Houtart 1977:239), the Sangha has in general complied with the directives set out by the government that it refrain from political activism. In 1963 the military government announced that it had created a synthesis of Buddhism and Socialism, and this was to be known as the "Burmese Road to Socialism" (Houtart 1977:244). Silverstein has declared that this a period in which the "nationalization of the society and the Burmanization of its culture" occurred (Silverstein 1980:11-2). With the new Constitution of 1974, "emphasis on local culture, language, and history gave way to national culture, language, and history" (Silverstein 1980:242).

In 1988 student demonstrations for democracy were joined by hundreds of thousands of Burmese throughout Myanmar. The military crackdown resulted in the deaths of thousands, with incarceration and torture being documented by Amnesty International. The rioting was sufficient to cause General Ne Win to resign, but it is widely believed among urban Burmans that he continues to wield power in Myanmar as evident by his October 1997 meeting with Suharto in Indonesia. On the twelfth of August 1988, Sein Lwin resigned after what Kreager describes as a "violent regime of eighteen days" (Kreager 1991:298). On the eighteenth of September the feared SLORC was established (State Law and Order Restoration Council) and martial law enacted (Kreager 1991:299).

In 1989 the National League for Democracy (NLD) was founded which included the daughter of Aung San, Aung San Suu Kyi, who emerged, at the end of the violent student protests, as the only alternative to the repressive regime (with the exception of the wars being waged by the ethnic minorities). In July 1989 Aung San Suu Kyi was placed

under house arrest (Kreager 1991:300). In 1990 the regime held an election in which the NLD won over 80% of available seats. The junta responded by imprisoning, exiling, and killing more than one hundred of the elected NLD parliamentarians, effectively quelling the opposition. Aung San Suu Kyi was awarded the Sakharov Prize for freedom of thought in 1991, followed by the Nobel Peace Prize in the same year. In 1992 she was awarded the Simon Bolivar Prize for Freedom by UNESCO.

Aung San Suu Kyi was finally released in July, 1995, almost six years to the day since her imprisonment began. Japan claimed responsibility for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi, although a United States Senate Bill to ban investment in Myanmar and an American boycott of World Bank loans to Myanmar were certainly important factors in the SLORC decision. Since her release Aung San Suu Kyi has remained in Myanmar and continuously spoken of the need for dialogue with the junta as the only acceptable path to democracy. The news of her release as well as all other news of her activities is censored by the government-controlled press. The release of Aung San Suu Kyi is widely regarded as a demonstration by the SLORC of their confidence in their degree of control over the population. After her release, Aung San Suu Kyi and other NLD leaders began a series of weekend rallies staged from her compound on University Avenue. This was stopped by the military in late 1996. Many diplomats in Myanmar believed that refusing access to Aung San Suu Kyi would provoke dissent among the student population and this was perhaps a factor in the democracy protests in December 1996. Houtman writes of an Aung San Suu cult and of the importance of charismatic leaders in a country unfamiliar with the democratic process (Houtman 1999, forthcoming). Burmans have whispered to me: "What do you think of our Lady? Did we choose a good leader?" Faith in the strength of Aung San Suu Kyi gives a great many Burmans the strength to survive in this totalitarian state.

Das argues that at the time of Partition of Pakistan and India, massive violence perpetrated against women occurred as the shift was made from tradition to modernity or from "husband is god" to "nation is god" (Das 1996:75). This led to a "usual" amount of violence against women occurring at "every communal riot since the Partition" (Das 1996:89). In Myanmar this partial shift from tradition to modernity has entailed a move from "husband is god" to "army is god." Women traditionally found some power within the household, at the market, and at religious events and in religious organizations, which under the military regime in Burma have all been suborned and infiltrated. Men have lost even more power however, and I would argue this shift from colonialism to the regime's vision of modernity has also led to massive violence being perpetrated against women, but it is a much quieter violence that that of which Das writes. The men which Das calls "monsters" for their perpetration of crimes against women, I conceptualize as powerless and dominated. As in the refugee literature, men's powerlessness is one reason for an increased violence against women seen in situations of upheaval, such as the relocated townships which are a focus of this study (UNHCR 1995). In a militarized state with an

over-armed Army, it is no wonder that the threshold for violence is high.

Steinberg has written of the expanding military *(Tatmadaw)* from its 1988 level of 180 000 to its present 320 000 (with an anticipated 500 000 by the end of the decade). He points out that this kind of rapid expansion is "essentially labour rather than capital intensive" since the regime is, to all extents and purposes, bankrupt and can only afford this expansion if it continues to print currency (Steinberg 1997:167). Steinberg also points to the low education levels of the twenty-one man SLORC,[6] "ten have only secondary school education or less [Saw Maung, for example, left school at thirteen], and only four have university degrees or their equivalent" (Steinberg 1997:166), in addition there is the problem of "the military's arrogance, an arrogance born of a sense of belonging to a superior culture" (Steinberg 1997:173). The author thus argues that the Burmese army is unable to treat the ethnic minorities as "peers." He is essentially arguing that the military leadership is "unconsciously" Burmanizing Myanmar's ethnic minorities and this is evident in the drawing up of the new Constitution. The Military has conscripted Burmans to the army but it has also provided, like the monasteries, a place for impoverished children in the ongoing economic crisis that envelops Myanmar. The military provides food, clothing, shelter, a stipend, a pension, and many benefits also accrue to the family members of military recruits. Portering for the army is on the basis of forced labor. Residents of *Nyaungbintha* report having public buses hijacked by the military with the men and boys taken for army portering. For ethnic Burmans, the military is one of the only forms of social advancement in contemporary Burmese society. In these ways the military continues to grow.

The direct involvement of the military in the opium trade in the Northeast of Myanmar, coupled with an influx of hard currency through timber and oil concessions, as well as increased tourism has given the army a financial edge which it is effectively using to eliminate groups such as the Karen. Several thousand students fled to the Karen border areas after the 1988 mass killings of students, and they have been integral to the process of forming a democratic coalition between all ethnic groups in Myanmar[7].

The long term influence of the cultural giant, China, is, as Smith reminds us, a matter of speculation. It often seems forgotten in colonial discourse that China invaded Myanmar with Kubla-Khan occupying Bagan (Pagan) in 1287 (Vatikiotis 1996:181). Vatikiotis notes China's growing influence in Southeast Asia. He argues that trade over the Myanmar-China border in now worth more that 1.5 billion dollars annually and points to Myanmar's bartering for one billion dollars in arms and its acquiescence to Chinese demands to place "electronic listening posts on islands in the Andaman sea" which "effectively gave the Chinese military access to the entrance of the Straits of Malacca"

[6] I do not agree, however, that higher education in essential for political leadership.

[7] Of the estimated 10,000 students who arrived at the border areas, malaria took a huge toll and approximately only 600 students remain at the border. Many students left the jungle for Bangkok, and still others returned to Yangon. Another wave of students left Yangon after the December 1996 pro-democracy demonstrations.

(Vatikiotis 1996:186). Significant migration of Chinese into Myanmar occurred most recently during colonial times and in the past decade. If we also consider the new highways linking Myanmar to China, not to mention the transformation of Yangon and Mandalay skylines with the profits of the narcotics trade (see below), then the influence of China is indeed formidable.

The fieldwork from which this thesis derives begins within a year of Aung San Suu Kyi's release from house arrest and the beginning of the public speeches given from her compound on University Avenue in Yangon. During the fieldwork I witnessed the barricading of University Avenue and the violent intervention of the army to stop Burmans having contact with Aung San Suu Kyi. I also witnessed the arrest of hundreds of NLD members and their supporters as political prisoners as well as a series of hit-and-run anti-government demonstrations and the increasing militarization of the capital as universities were closed, monasteries sealed off. Yangon took on the appearance of a city under military occupation, as indeed it was. In late 1997 the military junta changed its name from the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). Rumors abound as to the reason for the change but the regime initially created an advisory council and moved SLORC members noted for their corruption onto this council. It then disbanded the council, arresting several former SLORC ministers and confiscating their assets. The Minister of Commerce and his fleet of Mercedes is a notable example. Significantly, the only members of the SPDC who now live in Yangon are the four highest members, the other SPDC members are regional commanders who act like traditional warlords over their respective command areas. The regime cleaned up its corrupt image (somewhat) and at the same time reduced the chances for a military coup occurring in the capital.

2.3 The Narcoeconomy

In the previous section Steinberg argues that the Burmese military regime is effectively bankrupt. Foreign debt, Steinberg claims, is around six billion dollars with almost no foreign reserves. Many authors contend that upon forming the SLORC, the military regime had to liberalize the economy and increase tourist visas because of a severe shortage of hard currency. Accordingly, the junta designated 1996 "Visit Myanmar Year" and hoped to increase the number of tourists from 8,000 in 1991 and 26,251 in 1993-94 to 500,000 in 1996 (EIU 1994:44). (The regime had to down-size its figures to 50,000 visitors for Visit Myanmar Year and has now decided to indefinitely extend "Visit Myanmar Year"). All Burmese scholars agree that Japanese aid (Steinberg 1988) and illegal trade in narcotics, gems, and teak have sustained the junta through the 1980s and 1990s although when the Burmese gas fields begin production in 1999, these sources of income may become unnecessary.

Ronald Renard roundly chastises recent Burmese scholars for failing to adequately emphasize the subject of opium in Burmese history. He also suggests that economic studies of Burma such as those by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) focus upon individual drug lords, glamorizing them and making little comment on the enormous social and economic impact of the opium trade. Renard asks if: "Could not part of the reason for twenty-six foreign banks opening representative offices in Burma, a country with no clear concept of private land ownership, 40 percent annual inflation, and a lack of industrial capacity, be that there is a thriving opium trade?" (Renard 1996:xiv-xv). Renard charts a "temporary decline in narcotics abuse" after the military coup of 1962 which he attributes to "a strong Burmese government and military" (Renard 1996:6). However as time passed the economy worsened and new insurgencies broke out. The author states that from "...this lawless chaos, which indirectly resulted from the Burmese Way to Socialism, opium production grew" (Renard 1996:7). US State Department figures chart a large increase in opium production since the inception of the SLORC/SPDC (Renard 1996) and a reduction in opium production as part of the regime's anti-drug effort, a reduction that amounts to what the United Nations International Narcotics Control Board describes as "minimal in view of the vast production" of opium (UNINCB 1992:24).

In the official media the military regime delights in pointing out that in the nineteenth century the British and to a lesser extent, the United States, sold opium to China in order to offset huge trading deficits, and that the Opium Wars (1839 and 1856) were part of this economic struggle. The state media often states that opium production and heroin trafficking are European evils initially introduced to Asia by the British when in fact it was Arabian traders who are recorded as being the first merchants to introduce opium to China in 400 A.D.

The official media also alerts its audience to the complicity of CIA officials in the production of opium in the Golden Triangle in order to fund organizations seen as bulwarks against communism in Southeast Asia, particularly the remnants of the Kuomingtang Army who had fled China to take up residence in the Golden Triangle.[8] Smith notes that "First encouraged by the British, it was the CIA-backed Kuomingtang Chinese [KMT] who in the 1950s promoted the trade to its international dimensions" (Smith 1991:314). Scholars have amply documented this complicity (McCoy 1972;1991; Smith 1991; Lintner 1994a; 1994b; Renard 1996). In recent years the involvement of the highest levels of the Burmese military regime in the production and export of heroin has also been documented and this documentation is an on-going process (Lintner 1990;1991;1994b;1996a;1996b).

Smith has chronicled the formation of the *KKY* (*Ka Kwe Ye* or "home guard") militia units whose leaders were usually local chieftains, some of whom have become major players in the Burmese drug trade. Smith has summarized the involvement and

[8] This includes the creation by the CIA of the "Air America" charter airline to fly opium out of Myanmar and Laos.

motives of the Burmese army in the production of heroin. He argues that it is certain that:

> the *Tatmadaw* has had no compunctions in dealing with organisations and individuals involved in the narcotics trade, especially with the KKY defence militia of the 1960s and early 1970s. For years army officers and prominent traffickers, especially former KKY commander Khun Sa, have had a close understanding (Smith 1991:315).

In 1962, Lo Hsing-han took over the leadership of the Kokang KKY. Renard writes that following military successes: "Lo's opium business was aided thereafter with the protection afforded his [opium] caravans by local Burmese officials" (Renard 1996:59). The KKY units were disbanded in 1973 because of international concern over their links with the opium trade. Renard further argues that the breakup of the Communist Party of Burma created factionalism in the drug trade in north-eastern Myanmar, and this allowed the Burmese military to enter the drug business in Kokang in a significant way (Renard 1996:62).

A recent *Frontline*[8] documentary entitled *The Opium Kings* by veteran researcher Adrian Cowell, showed footage of drug lord Lo Hsing-han embracing Lieutenant Khin Nyunt, Secretary No. 1 of the SLORC (who now occupies the same position in the SPDC). Smith argues that the best example of the military regime's ambivalence about the drug lords status in Myanmar has been:

> the case of former Kokang *KKY* commander and insurgent leader Lo Hsing-han, who, having been extradited from Thailand...in 1973 as the 'Mr Big' of narcotics trafficking and condemned to death, was released from gaol in 1980...In 1989 few observers...were surprised, then, when he resurfaced...to again play a prominent role on the *Tatmadaw* side in fueling the CPB [Communist Party of Burma] defections. Opium and this time heroin production again soared. It would be fair to say that all these parties, including Khun Sa and the *Tatmadaw*, started out with varying degrees of political sincerity, but have inevitably become tainted by the endemic corruption of the international narcotics trade...a trade that comes dangerously close to the upper echelons of power" (Smith 1991:315).

Renard speculates on whether this military involvement perhaps extends to institutionalized laundering of drug profits on the part of both the military and the drug barons. He cites a U.S. State Department document questioning if the 1990 tax amnesty offered by the SLORC to all Burmans was not perhaps a "means whereby narcotics producers and traffickers could launder their proceeds" (U.S. Department of State 1992: 232 quoted in Renard 1996:66). He notes that:

[8] SBS Broadcasting station in Australia aired the program.

Because the Myanmar Foreign Trade Bank had used the BCCI [Bank of Credit and Commerce International that collapsed in 1991] to handle international money transfers from Hong Kong to Rangoon, some observers believed that the BCCI may have facilitated heroin deals for those in Burma...Newspaper reports linked the BCCI with money laundering for drug dealers and suggested that Khun San had funneled financial transfers through the BCCI ("Drug Barons" 1991). The BCCI and traders in narcotics were able to move large sums of money without fear of having it traced (Renard 1996:66).

Bertil Lintner contends that the direct involvement of the military regime in heroin production in Myanmar has significantly increased since the inception of the SLORC in 1989 and reports in *The Economist* support this view. Lintner quotes sources in Thailand and Myanmar who point to the Burmese military's role in protecting heroin refineries. He states that:

There is plenty of evidence that Khun Sa is still plying his deadly trade. Former associates of the warlord say he has adopted the Burmese name U Htet Aung..."But he is far from out of the dope business, regardless of what the government wants to tell," declares a Western narcotics-intelligence analyst..."There are no more big, centralized opium refining areas in the Homong area [of Myanmar] any more," says one former associate of Khun Sa. "But smaller, more mobile refineries have been established all over the place. Khun Sa's people pay the Burmese a few hundred thousand kyats to stay out of a particular area for a couple of weeks," he says, referring to the Burmese army. "Then they make heroin there for a while, and move on." At Loi Khi Lek, near the Salween River [in Myanmar], both local tribal sources and Western drug enforcement officials say government troops have even been hired to guard the local heroin factory, currently the biggest anywhere near the Thai border (Lintner 1996:37-8).

The Economist makes the point that it is hard to prove the definitive involvement of SLORC members in the heroin business, even though a number of recent photographs have been taken of senior SLORC members with Lo Hsing-han and Khun Sa. This journal contents that:

Observers of the drug trade are divided over whether Myanmar's leaders profit personally from the traffic in heroin. Opium is most heavily cultivated in areas of Myanmar that are not under government control. But the most rapid expansion of production since 1988 has been in parts of the country that the government does control. Most of the independent drug barons operating in Myanmar, Khun Sa excepted,[10] have cordial relations with the junta. Western officials have been irritated by the sight of drug suspects playing golf in Yangon with Myanmar's generals. "We call them traffickers and they call them leaders of ethnic minorities," says a diplomat" (Economist 1995:31).

[10] This article was written prior to Khun Sa's "surrender" to the Burmese regime in January 1996.

The most drastic changes to the Yangon and Mandalay urban environments since the inception of the SLORC/SPDC has been the result of what several authors have termed the "narcoeconomy" (Bernstein and Kean 1997; The Hindu 1997; Levy and Scott-Clarke 1998). This term refers to the infusion of Myanmar's economy with the profits from the narcotic trade. Such narcotics include heroin, amphetamines and opium. The term "narcoeconomy" refers to the laundering of these drug profits by both the military and the drug lords of Myanmar such as Khun Sa and Lo Hsing-han (Bernstein and Kean 1997). The regime has entered into a series of "joint enterprise" arrangements such as hotels, investment corporations, and wharves, with local and foreign companies in the past several years. Shareholders and capital contributors to these investments are the Generals and the drug barons.

Jane's Intelligence Review documents these joint venture dealings including the United Wa State Army's (UWSA) company, the Myanmar Kyon Yeom Group and its subsidiary, the National Races Co-operative Society. The Kokang warlord, Yang Mao-liang's company known as the Peace Myanmar Group is also documented, along with Lo Hsing-han's Asia World company. Lo Hsing-han's Kokang Export Import and Construction had a significant share holding in the "Trader's Hotel", a recent hotel constructed in downtown Yangon. In all, *Jane's Intelligence Review* lists Myanmar's eight major drug barons and their companies that now invest in joint-ventures with the military government. The authors conclude that:

> the repatriation and laundering of narco-profits as well as the impunity enjoyed by the [drug] barons has clearly become institutionalized: a 'don't-ask' policy' over the source of funds used by Burma's new generation of narco-capitalists has been adopted at the highest levels of government...the reality is a creeping criminalisation of the national economy, narco-capitalists and their close associates are now involved in running ports, toll roads, airlines, banks and industries, often in joint ventures with the government...This wary but mutually beneficial relationship between the junta and the narco-barons is a habit that is likely to prove...[hard] to break (Davis and Hawke 1989:26).

In the following chapters we will examine the effects of the narcoeconomy upon the urban struggle for survival, and the ways in which individual Burmans are caught up in the regime's rush to "modernize" the country using the profits of the heroin trade.

2.4 Contemporary Political Activism of Burmese Monks

Having described the political and economic climate of contemporary Myanmar, in the remainder of this chapter I wish to focus upon violence as a significant dimension in Burmese life. In this section I will problematize the taken for granted notion in both Asia and the West that Buddhism and, by extension, Buddhists, are inherently non-violent. This

myth usually comes wrapped in a soporific view of an "unchanging" Southeast Asian rural life of innocence and harmony. In Southeast Asia, however, there is a strong tradition of the warrior monk and of political activism by the Sangha (the order of monks) as documented by a variety of scholars, notably Stanley Tambiah (1984;1992).

Burmese Buddhism prescribes a certain kind of social interaction which, although stressing individual responsibility, includes a set of lived practices and common history which allows intrapersonal, regional, and national religious identities to be established (Nash 1966). Despite the pervasiveness of Buddhism that scholars argue is characteristic of Burmese life, prior to Buddhism's arrival in Myanmar there were a number of animist religions, the best documented of which is *Nat* Spiritism, itself a combination of several older animist religions. The particular form of Burmese Buddhism is significantly shaped by *Nat* Spiritism. Following Tambiah (1984), the total field of religious beliefs (excluding Christianity and Islam) includes were-tiger cults, demons, wizards, witches, Naga (serpent) cults, *Nats*, and other spirits which inhabit the heavens and hells of Buddhist and animist cosmology, as well as the veneration of the Buddha. This world view allows Burmese access to different levels of reality such as the world of dreams and the world of spirits. Burmans also draw a practice of temporarily withdrawing from the world into other realities or dimensions from this Buddhist and animist heritage. During *Nat* possession episodes, *Natkadaws* (*Nat* spirit wives or mediums) enter a trance state and this inhabitation of the human body by various spirits is a common theme in the Burmese folk literature. Similarly, the most popular form of Burmese meditation, *vissipana*, involves a heightened mindfulness of the body such that the mind can become free of earthly concerns. Houtman documents the use of this form of temporary escape by political prisoners in Burmese jails (Houtman 1999, forthcoming).

Theravada Buddhism originated in India in the sixth century B.C. (Spiro 1980:18). Almost all authors agree Theravada became the pervasive element of Burmese culture in the eleventh century (Smith 1965:11,18; Silverstein 1980:11-2). Religious beliefs and the political activism of the Sangha has played a pivotal role in Myanmar from very early times. As patrons of Buddhism, the kings of Bagan, Bago, and Mandalay (Ava) supported the Sangha in a relationship analogous to that described by Tambiah in Thailand (Tambiah 1976; 1984). Burmese monarchs traditionally appointed the head of the Sangha in Myanmar. The British, having killed the last Burmese monarch, refused to do so, causing a crisis within the Sangha (Maung Maung 1963:125). With the introduction of secular schools by the British (with new subjects such as algebra), the Sangha lost its position as the chief educator of the Burmese populace (except in remote areas) as the state moved towards secularism.

1906 marked the beginning of the contemporary period of political activism of the Sangha with the founding of the YMBA, the Young Monks Buddhist Association in Mandalay. This organization was funded by the Asia Foundation of the U.S.A. (it was

often anti-communist) and modeled on its Christian equivalent, the YMCA (Smith 1965:88,189; Lintner 1990:16). In 1920 the YMBA was transformed into a broader party, the GCBA (Lintner 1990:16). This middle class movement began to agitate for freedom from colonialism. Maung Maung notes that during the 1930s several other organizations were founded by young monks, but the general feeling in the country was of a "more serious pursuit of religion" and thus these movements did not garner widespread support (U Maung Maung 1990:5-6).

Successful movements included those established by the monk, U Ottama. Lintner contends that U Ottama's fiery speeches "transformed a basically political issue, nationalism and independence for Burma, into a religious one in a manner which appealed even to those who had not received a British education" (Lintner 1990:17). U Ottama encouraged the fledgling student nationalist movement. A more violent movement that was particularly successful was the Saya San revolt which began in the Tharawaddy district and came to be known throughout southern Myanmar. Saya San wanted to be the new king of Burma, and his followers, *galons*, were named "after a powerful bird in Hindu mythology [and] believed that their tattoos and amulets would make them invulnerable to British bullets" (Lintner 1990:16-7).

In 1937 Burma was officially declared to be no longer a province of India (Smith 1965:39). Meanwhile the students had organized themselves into the *Dohbama Asiaone*, or "Our Burma Association" and called themselves *Thakins*, which is a term meaning "Master" by which the British insisted upon being addressed (Lintner 1990:17-8). The *Thakins* participated in hunger strikes in 1938 led by U Ottama and another political activist monk, U Wisara (Maung Maung 1963:125).

The period from 1950 to 1962 is one of very close association between the Sangha and the democratically elected post independence government of U Nu in which the Buddha Sasana Council was established to provide an interface between monks and the parliament (Smith 1965:148). It is also a period marked by the increased participation of monks in grassroots political activism such as the protest of 3000 monks over Sasana reform in 1951 (Houtart 1977:239). In 1954 U Nu initiated a program of Buddhist revival which included massive funding of Buddhist projects (Houtart 1977:23). The government had once again become the patron of Buddhism. The most visible and significant manifestation of this patronage was the convening of the Sixth Buddhist Council in Yangon in 1954 on the 2500th anniversary of the birth of Gautama Buddha (Spiro 1980:18; Smith 1965:158).

Buddhist political activism continued however, with the public controversy over religious education in schools (Maung Maung 1963:117-120). In 1955 senior monks established their own political organization, the All Burma Presiding Monks Association who gave their support to U Nu (Smith 1965:190). This contrasts with the YMBA/GCBA who supported the more violent protests of Aung San's AFPFL (Anti-Fascist People's

Freedom League).

Then in 1958 U Nu's party split in two, and U Nu appointed Ne Win as head of a caretaker government until elections could be held. The Union Sangha League was created in 1960 to provide electoral support for U Nu (Houtart 1977:238) who won the election and resumed leadership of the country (Maung Maung 1963:116). U Nu spent one month at Mt. Popa[11] in 1961 and urged the population to pray not only to Buddha, but also to the *Nat* Spirits. U Nu's continual references to the power of animist spirits such as *Nats* were seen by a significant proportion of the population to be polluting the purity of Buddhism in Myanmar, but when U Nu ordered 60,000 sand pagodas[12] to be built on a particular night at a particularly auspicious time, the population followed his directive. U Nu stated that the sand pagodas were necessary "to avert impending dangers and to achieve complete peace and tranquility in the Union" (Smith 1965:161). Some people labeled U Nu a *yaukkyar-natkadaw* (a male-priestess of *Nats*) and called his beliefs "bogus Buddhism" (Smith 1965:161).

The current wave of State imposed violence in Myanmar differs substantially from the ethnic violence of most other Southeast Asian nations such as Sri Lanka since it is not a case of two ethnic minorities killing each other. Instead, a brutal military dominates and degrades the population. There are certainly some similarities with ethnic violence such as that occurring in other Southeast Asian Theravada Buddhist nations, however, there has been a history of ready resort to violence by Buddhist monks in defense of Buddhism.[13] This has included monks resorting to violence to protect Myanmar from the perceived evils of Islam and a xenophobic belief in their own racial superiority. There has also been a reaction to colonial rule and to Christian missionization, and an aligning of the monks with the youth population, as in Sri Lanka. But in Myanmar the British and later Ne Win and the SLORC/SPDC have refused to patronize Buddhism, and thus the Sangha joined with the nationalist and democracy movements. The regime has effectively halted the political activism of the Sangha against the state, but Smith warns of the potential role of the monks in future uprisings against the regime through the *Yahanpyo* movement. Smith notes that the left-wing Yahanpyo movement was:

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[11] Mt. Popa is the centre of *Nat* Spiritism in central Myanmar.

[12] Spiro has noted that "the building of sand pagodas of specified dimensions is a means of averting collective disaster" (Spiro 1967:104-5).

[13] The most common political activities of Burmese monks have been:
(i) "The holding of a closed meeting at which resolutions are passed and later sent to the government" (Smith 1965:195).
(ii) Demonstrations (Smith 1965:196).
(iii) Poster campaigns (Smith 1965:196).
(iv) Outright coercion of legislators through picketing (Smith 1965:196).
(v) Hiding of arms in monasteries for rebel forces (Smith 1965:197).

popular among young monks in Mandalay; in the 1950s it was run along military lines and monks were permitted to keep weapons in their monasteries. Also in the 1950s, Yahanpyo monks often turned up at fairs and public meetings to act as unofficial policemen. And in 1988 Burma's estimated 150,000 monks, including the long-suppressed Yahanpyo order, again took to the streets to police the great pro-democracy demonstrations. *Pongyis* [monks] organised many of the strike centres in Rangoon, Moulmein and Mandalay (Smith 1991:181) [original italics].

In recent years, as Myanmar's economic and political crisis has continued, the number of people (especially children) entering the monasteries as monks and nuns has increased. Like the military, the monasteries provide food and shelter for children and aged Burmans whose families cannot support them. And like the military, the Sangha is one of the few avenues of social advancement in Myanmar. In the following chapters I will describe the fear that the regime holds of the revolutionary potential of the Sangha, and the way that, in times of crisis and political upheaval, the Burmese population turns to the Sangha for direction. This fear is evident in the restrictions the junta is even now placing upon the movements of monks.

2.5 Orwell's Menagerie: Political Violence and Fear have become a Way of Life

The rise of Communism and Nazism in Europe in the first half of the twentieth century was the subject of much social theory at the time. The Frankfurt School in particular wrote of the changing tides in social opinion and the narrowing of social tolerance in Germany in the 1930s and 40s. These philosophers and historians of social change looked to other historical periods to make sense of the present. In this thesis I am particularly concerned with the work of Walter Benjamin and Theodore Adorno and with that of another anti-fascist writer, George Orwell. The partition of the world into increasingly smaller ethnic groupings and larger economic groups has occurred as the specter of totalitarianism faded from Europe and Communism. The insights of the theorists of the Frankfurt School are however extremely relevant to the current political situation in Myanmar and, I suspect, in China and perhaps Laos and North Korea. Current Asian totalitarian regimes mirror many of the characteristics which Benjamin noted were present in the Nazi regime.

Michael Taussig has written of his search, via anthropology and social critique, to find a "position from which to write against terror" (Taussig 1987). Taussig identifies a logic or "poetics," that binds the ruler to the ruled: "As I view this landscape created as much by social as by natural history I am forced to ask whether or not there is a poetics of imagery, sensuous and passionate, that is active in binding ruled to ruler and colonized to colonizer" (Taussig 1987:287). Referring to his fieldwork in Northern Ireland, Alan

Feldman suggests that such a logic is intensified in the industrial wastelands of post-colonialism. He writes that in:

> The growing autonomy of violence as a self-legitimating sphere of social discourse and transaction...processes of autonomization and fragmentation emerged from the ideological, cultural, and material collapse of industrial capitalism in post-World War II Northern Ireland (Feldman 1991:5).

Violence is, for Feldman, the defining characteristic of the bond between the rulers and the ruled. Violence has, at least for as long as there are records, been a substantive dimension of Burmese existence. From the continual raiding and sacking back and forth over the Thai-Myanmar border, to the invasion of Kubla-Khan's Mogul armies, to the arbitrary and absolute power of Burmese monarchs, Myanmar is a country where violence is a familiar method for negotiation, acquisition, and expression of power.

Documentation surviving the colonial period indicates that the prevalence of violence, particularly murder (including state mandated hangings) substantially increased at this time. Shelden's research indicates that Myanmar:

> Was infamous for having the highest crime rate in the Empire, and murder in particular was a widespread problem, the number of cases having more than doubled in the last ten years. As one scholar has pointed out, the murder rate in some parts of the country was six times higher than Chicago's during the days of Al Capone...A large part of the problem was the lawlessness of *dacoit* gangs, small groups of men who roamed the country, mostly at night, looking for homes to rob. Thievery was frequently accompanied by murder...The annual editions of the *Report of the Police Administration of Burma* are filled with gruesome details of crimes by dacoits...The high rate of crime was partly related to the country's political instability. There was widespread animosity toward British rule, and many young Burmese had lost respect for law and order under the system imposed upon them by the foreign power (Shelden 1991:82).

Shelden quotes cases involving immolation of live victims, the rape of female children, and many brutal slayings as part of burglaries in the cities and villages (Shelden 1991:82). Medical journals of the period note the large number of sword *(dah)* wounds presented to English physicians (Shenoi 1928).

Smith has documented the way that insurgency and armed political opposition are the central means of attaining power in Myanmar. I have excerpted the following sections that trace a history of uprising and violence in Myanmar. Smith argues that:

> The formation of local *Tats*, or pocket armies, is well established among the peasantry of Lower and Upper Burma and for centuries village raiding was something of a local sport. Using this tradition to their advantage...kings would quickly raise levies for their military campaigns. But this tradition was often turned against them...In such war local loyalties were usually decisive...While British records describe rebel

bands which sprang up across the country in the late 1880s as 'dacoits', there is evidence that they expressed a political voice...Even in this century some villages in Upper Burma have been known as *myin* (cavalry) or *thenat* (musketeer) villages, indicating their recent military service and duties...[during colonialism] Intra-village raiding was also very much a feature of life in the hills and, when not feuding with each other, ethnic groups in the Kachin and Karenni hills often raided villages in the valleys and plains...Despite the semblance of colonial order in Rangoon, the *pax Brittanica* hardly touched the volatile social conditions in the countryside. In the largely unadministered Frontier Areas...spontaneous uprisings continued throughout much of British rule as late as 1938, 80 heads were taken in one battle during an outbreak of intra-village raiding in the Naga hills (Smith 1991:90-1).

The military training in Japan of the *Thirty Comrades* has been mentioned above, and these men went on to create a political landscape that still bears their imprint today. Not all of these *Comrades* have worked for the government all the time however. Loyalties and ideologies changed as Myanmar's political landscape became what Smith describes as "an unholy mess" (Smith 1991:221). Thus Smith writes that it is not unusual:

even today, for commanders of rival sides to know one another. This situation reached a peak in the early 1970s when several other heroes of the national liberation movement [the Thirty Comrades]...joined U Nu and Bo Let Ya in the rebel underground...But such personal rivalries cannot account for the sheer scale of Burma's insurgencies. Armed struggle, as events in 1988 again demonstrated, is a consistent and often spontaneous way of expressing political opposition. As diverse rebel movements continue to rise and fall with bewildering frequency, in many parts of rural Burma insurgency has become a way of life (Smith 1991:89).

Referring to the formation of ethnic insurgent armies, Smith writes that:

in 1967, Ne Win desperately tried to defuse [the situation] by allowing any insurgent or simply "bandit" group to reform as a local *Ka Kwe Ye (KKY)* government defence militia. Free to continue policing and trading in their own areas as they saw fit, the KKY system seriously undermined the SSA's [Stan State Army] plans and several local militia units defected, including...Khun Sa's SUA [Shan United Army] and a number of Kokanganese and Wa militia...Eventually over twenty KKY units were formed, but they brought hardly any decrease in the overall levels of lawlessness. Since many KKY were already financing their struggles from opium trafficking and the thriving Vietnam War arms black market, there was a huge explosion in weaponry and narcotics trading, this time by government protected groups (Smith 1991:221).

Smith concludes that narcotics, insurgency, and the politics of rivalry are helplessly fused together in Myanmar's contemporary history.

Violence is also characteristic of Myanmar's brief period of parliamentary democracy, including the assassination of the entire cabinet and future prime minister, Aung San. The military regime is of course responsible for the deaths of thousands of soldiers, members of the ethnic minorities, political opponents, and the pro-democracy demonstrators who participated in the 1988 "Strike."

I mention the violence perpetrated in Myanmar, not as a historical record of "Burmese violence" but as an introduction to some thoughts on the long term consequences of cultures in which violence has become a "self-legitimating" and self-propagating domain. As Feldman notes, "violence detaches itself from initial contexts and becomes the condition of its own reproduction" (Feldman 1991:20). This domain becomes bounded by the recognition of the signs, symbols, and "rules" of violence. In Myanmar this involves an understanding of the way that arrest and interrogation is conducted. Senior members of the National League for Democracy keep a small suitcase inside the front door with provisions necessary for arrest and detention in police cells or in Insein Jail. Burmans are aware of the "steps" that are taken in intimidating and threatening political opposition. The pattern of escalation is understood and either deliberately acceded to, or deliberately flaunted. In either situation the rules are well understood. Such a pattern begins with verbal warnings, then phone tapping, followed by the phone being cut off, residences being surrounded by military intelligence and soldiers, and finally, arrest and detention. Feldman has described a similar situation in Northern Ireland where: "Republican, Loyalist, and state violence have fused into an enclosed sphere of cognition, exchange, and symbiotic representation" (Feldman 1991:4). This symbiotic representation of dominant ideology and opposition apparent in Myanmar's cities is one way in which violence has become a way of life, and why the "threshold" for violence is so high in Myanmar at present.

George Orwell, like Benjamin, and more recently, Taussig, found a way to write against terror, specifically, the terror of the totalitarian state. Writing at the same time as Benjamin when totalitarianism was spreading throughout Europe, Orwell himself faced an untimely death (from tuberculosis). Orwell's first job was in the Indian Imperial police force in Myanmar where he served in several districts as a policeman. It was here that he witnessed the brutalities of colonial law (including many executions) and the Burmese hatred of their English masters. The lesson of Orwell's life and works goes to the heart of this thesis. Through the mechanisms of "face" and "freedom of speech," Orwell teaches us the long term effects of the logic that binds rulers and the ruled, and the violence it engenders and maintains long after colonial powers have returned to Europe. Orwell saw himself as a victim (on the side of the rulers) of this logic. This is best illustrated by the "two-sides" of Orwell's Burmese experience.

Orwell writes of the rule of violence which he believes characterizes colonial and especially totalitarian regimes and which makes victims out of everyone within the sphere of violence. Commenting upon the brutal repression of the Saya San rebellion in Myanmar

in the 1930's, James Scott recalls Orwell's "hidden transcript," a barely concealed desire for violence as revenge against the hatred that the Burmans displayed towards their colonizers:

> In the brutality of the repression that followed one could detect an acting out of the admission that Orwell struggled against and that undoubtably found open admission in the whites only club that "the greatest joy in the world would be to drive a bayonet into a Buddhist priest's guts." Many-perhaps most-hidden transcripts remain just that: hidden from public view and never "enacted" (Scott 1992:77-8).

But while subscribing to the "hidden transcript," Orwell nonetheless did his job as well as he was able, believing that he was "damned if he did and damned if he didn't." A case in point is Orwell's shooting of an elephant in Mandalay that had escaped its handlers. Orwell comes across the elephant grazing peacefully in a rice field. Loath to shoot the animal, he must because a large Burmese audience has gathered and expects Orwell to play the part of the conquering colonizer. Shelden notes that:

> In "Shooting an Elephant" [1936] the killing of the beast assumes enormous significance because the decision to shoot it has nothing to do with any threat from it...Orwell must shoot the elephant because he must live up to the image that the system has imposed upon him. "A sahib has got to act like a sahib; he has got to appear resolute, to know his own mind and do definite things." But under such circumstances he really has no mind of his own, no will that can be exercised independently; he can act only as a sahib would act. He was "an absurd puppet," Orwell says, "pushed to and from by the will of those yellow faces behind...When the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys." In the end he kills the elephant "solely to avoid looking a fool" (Shelden 1991:108).

This ascription to the dominant ideology of colonial power and authority gave Orwell a lifelong abhorrence for the self-perpetuating dominance of authoritarian rule. James Scott poses the problem thus:

> The public transcript as a kind of self-hypnosis within ruling groups to buck up their courage, improve their cohesion, display their power, and convince themselves anew of their high moral purpose? The possibility is not all that farfetched. It is precisely what Orwell was referring to when he noted how the image of the brave sahib (refracted through the fear of derision) gave him the pluck to face the elephant (Scott 1990:67-9).

In another "animal story" we can see the flip-side to the self-perpetuating violence of authoritarian rule: the absolute need to keep violence abstract. In Orwell's biography, Shelden writes that "David Astor recalled Orwell's earnest advice on raising chickens: "It's not a good idea to give the chickens names," he confided, "because then you can't eat

them"" (Shelden 1991:359). Orwell saw the importance for perpetrators of violence to keep violence abstract and depersonalized. To counter this dehumanization of victims, Orwell wrote *A Hanging* based upon hangings he watched in his role of policing the "yellow-faces" of Myanmar: "The whole point of the work is to bring home the horrific reality of an act that is so much easier to sanction in the abstract if one never has to witness it in the flesh. No denial is too insignificant because each one helps to convey a sense of what is lost when a life is destroyed" (Shelden 1991:103).

Just as important as the dehumanization of victims, is the larger-than-life overfamiliarity that populations are encouraged to have with their totalitarian leaders. This makes violence against "faceless" political opponents more palatable as these opponents have worked against the "face" of authority. Thus Taussig writes of the image of the dictator everywhere:

> His image is everywhere, a controlled frenzy of kitch across the cultured landscape, the bridges, the bus stops, the money, cigar wrappers...not to mention his statue centering every hamlet, village, town and city ...It's as if there is, finally, nothing...nothing to represent other than this effusion (Taussig 1997:112).

In Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, it is the face of Big Brother that obscures the faces and identities of political opponents. In *Shooting the Elephant*, Orwell shows us that saving of official "face" and its corollary, the abstraction of violence, can become institutionalized, mythologized, and naturalized as part of the hegemony of totalitarianism.

But how does the dominant ideology become "everyday" reality? Orwell would argue that the long term consequences of authoritarian rule, what Benjamin has described as the "everyday state of emergency" comes about largely because of a lack of freedom of speech (Orwell 1937:175-180). The institutionalization of violence, as a routine method of bolstering the faith in a ruling ideology of domination by force of arms, is achieved by the rote phrases of totalitarian propaganda writers and speech makers, what Orwell terms "Newspeak":

> "the only language in the world whose vocabulary gets shorter every year." Of course, Big Brother likes it because it deprives people of their freedom to make choices. Before it corrupts politically, Newspeak corrupts morally, since it allows writers to cheat themselves and their readers with ready-made prose (Shelden 1991:394).

Orwell is emphasizing that communities can become complacent or not realize the key importance of free speech until their rights have been eroded. In Myanmar the population is unaware of the crucial importance of free speech because they have rarely experienced it:

Orwell made the point [in 1984] that freedom of speech is always at risk, even in democratic countries, because "the law is no protection." No matter what laws exist, the only real protection is the force of public opinion. "If large numbers of people are interested in freedom of speech, there will be freedom of speech" (Orwell quoted in Shelden 1991:399).

But coupled to an erosion of freedom of speech is the "seduction of revolutionary glory," a point also made by Benjamin and the Frankfurt School. A germane example is the trouble that Orwell had in finding a publisher for his political novel, *Animal Farm*, because of its implied criticism of Stalin at a time when he was allied with Britain against Hitler:

This kind of reasoning held that any criticism of the Soviets was "playing into the hands" of the Nazis. Orwell was astounded to see how often he was told that he could not address all the aspects of a question because doing so might "play into the hands" of one enemy or another. He thought that this phrase was "a sort of charm or incantation to silence uncomfortable truths" (Shelden 1991:365).

Similarly, Benjamin saw the urban populations of Europe slumbering, living a fairytale of consumerism and patriotism while their revolutionary potential lay dormant. The myth of patriotism, often construed in revolutionary terms, was, in Orwell's mind, the chief reason for his difficulty in publishing *Animal Farm* in World War II-era Europe:

The Soviets had expounded a mythology of the Russian Revolution that had given their activities a sacred aura. The revolution was glorious, and everything done in its name was automatically part of that glory. Orwell saw how this powerful image had seduced not only the Spanish revolutionaries...but well-meaning socialists everywhere...What better way to fight that myth than to create a mythical story of animals whose successful revolt against tyranny degenerates into a greedy struggle for power?...The enemy, however, was not really Stalin and his agents, but the power of myths to suppress rational thought [this is why Benjamin wanted to awaken people from the urban "fairytale" to their "revolutionary potential"] and to substitute high-sounding slogans for real debate (Shelden 1991:365).

Combined with the lack of freedom of speech is thus the "power of myths to suppress rational thought." Taken together with the logic of saving "face," a logic that binds the ruler to the ruled, writers of the 1930s and 1940s such as Orwell and Benjamin speak to us of the long term consequences they saw arising from the appeasement of totalitarian rulers.

2.6 Pure Repression

I asked Bertil Lintner, a well known anti-regime writer and long-time Myanmar analyst who lives in Thailand, for his opinion regarding the primary means by which the regime maintains power and engenders fear. His response is simple: "pure repression."

Lintner cites the example of the demise of the Burmese democracy movement which was a sophisticated movement decimated in 1990 when the army invaded and occupied the monasteries of Mandalay. Burmese monks immolated themselves during the 1988 pro-democracy uprising and on the twenty-seventh of August 1988, the monks of Mandalay excommunicated the SLORC for the shootings of the pro-democracy protesters which occurred on the eight of August, 1988 (known as "The Strike"). The Sangha were once again proving to be an extremely powerful political force in Burmese history, a force which the SLORC immediately repressed. In late October 1990, the army "security units" raided and surrounded monasteries in Mandalay. Lintner dates this period as the death of the democracy movement in Myanmar:

> The monk rebellion and the subsequent occupation of all (135?) monasteries in Mandalay was effectively the collapse of the democracy movement. It was considered a joke in '88 that the SLORC could govern. ALL professional people (teachers, lawyers, etc.) were members of the NLD. When Amnesty started collecting information on Burma they said they had never come across such a sophisticated democracy movement. Now, it's completely decapitated (Bertil Lintner, personal communication, April 1996).

Approximately six years after the monk rebellion in Mandalay was repressed, the democracy movement had recovered to the extent that the military regime again acted to repress it. During my fieldwork in 1996 and 1997 there were two ways in which Burmans agitated for change. The first series of incidents concerns attempts by the National League for Democracy (NLD) to organize a party congress. The other incidents represented the first time student groups devoted to attaining a democratically elected government dared organize themselves to openly oppose the regime.

The increasing resistance by the military to the growing number of people willing to risk violence to attend the NLD speeches on weekends, led to a crackdown on access to University Avenue (the road on which Aung San Suu Kyi's house is located), until it was finally barricaded at the beginning of December, 1996. Whilst the roadside speeches were being given by NLD members, Military Intelligence personnel photographed audiences and arrested anyone found handing out leaflets.[14] Tension in the country escalated dramatically when hundreds of NLD members, supporters, and their families were arrested in both 1996 and 1997 as they tried to attend NLD party congresses. As Aung San Suu Kyi explains:

> Thrice over the last eighteen months, the authorities have interfered with our plans to hold a party congress. The first time in May 1996, our elected members of Parliament who had been invited to attend the congress were arrested. The second time, in September 1996, NLD members who had come to attend the congress arranged to be held in my house were denied entry. Again in May 1997 when we arranged another congress,

[14] The *New Light of Myanmar* reports in September, "Actions taken against nine subversive youths-youths arrested for passing out leaflets at Aung San Suu Kyi's roadside talks" (NLM 1996n:12).

the authorities adopted similar measures (Aung San Suu Kyi 1997).

The other series of incidents occurred just after Aung San Suu Kyi's speeches were halted by the military. Burma analysts hypothesized that, denied access to Suu Kyi, students would begin agitation and indeed that was the case as these journalistic reports relate:

School ended abruptly for Burmese scholars last week as policemen locked the gates of Rangoon's campuses, clogged the capital's streets with barbed-wire-strung barricades and even marshaled students out of town...For two weeks Rangoon...experienced a wave of student protests that reminded nearly everyone of 1988...Last week's demonstrations showed signs of developing into an enduring movement. They continued despite the closure of all universities and some high schools. The gatherings were smaller than the two overnight rallies of the preceding week, which attracted thousands, but they were bolder, being held in daylight before phalanxes of riot police and armed soldiers. Unlike their 1988 predecessors, the students didn't bother to hide their faces behind masks[15] (Spaeth 1996:18).

Another major demonstration was held on Dec. 6, when several hundred students congregated at a busy intersection near Yangon University. Riot police cordoned off the area and used water cannons and batons to disperse the crowd early next morning -- but not before ordinary citizens revealed where their sympathies lay by stoning the police (Sangwon Suh and Faulder 1996).

These incidents illustrate that when opposition to military rule arises from the miasma of fear engendered by the regime, the Generals act without hesitation to repress all such movements. It is this fear of violence and death which undoubtably disables the population, as this narrative of U Kyaw Sein, a well educated man in his forties illustrates:

> "In our country there are so many insurgents and so many parties. For example, KIA [Kachin Independence Army], KNU [Karen National Union], SSA [Shan State Army], these SSA are communists. The majority of the KIA are communists, but now they've surrendered. At that time the Communist Party of Burma is the BCP, in [name withheld] near Prome. So some of the underground members of these parties joined as students, university teachers, government service, and soldiers (secretly joined). So in our [group of] friends, first year students, he [a well known Burmese political activist, name withheld] came back from Ko Ko Island to attend University. He was sentenced to jail as a first year student in 1962. Then he came back in 1973. He is a communist. His older brother was killed in...[name withheld]. We formed a Red Guard to keep up with the Communists. My friend also came back to the first year students, he is also a Red Guard. He

[15] Although some students didn't wear masks, at least half of the students I saw opposing the riot police wore scarves wrapped around their faces.

trained in Ko Ko Island, in prison. He lectured about Communism and we read many books about Communism. At that time, I trusted that our country must be[come] a communist country like China. All of my friends also agreed.

Ten years later, so many of my friends were in prison and were tortured and beaten, some were dead, and in China the Red Guard movement has ceased. Also in Burma the Red Guard are imprisoned, jailed, killed, disabled because of physical torture..."

The routinization of repression through mass arrests, columns of soldiers confronting students, and phalanxes of riot police seen regularly at 'democracy flash points' in the major cities had resulted in an atmosphere of "waiting." Outwardly the daily hustle and bustle of city living goes on, but fear is never far from the surface. Quite often smiles do not reach Burmese eyes, for they are often making surreptitious sweeps through their range of vision; it is a habit of self-reassurance prudent in this atmosphere of "terror as usual."

2.7 Terror as Usual

Michael Taussig has written of the difficulty of effectively counter representing terror when explanations of terror can "barely be distinguished from the stories contained in those explanations." Taussig grappled with this difficulty until he "realized that this problem of interpretation is decisive for terror, not only making effective counter discourse so difficult but also making the terribleness of death squads, disappearances, and torture all the more effective in crippling of peoples' capacity to resist" (Taussig 1987:128). It is not only terror's sense-destroying properties which make description and interpretation difficult, it is also the inability to convey the sensory "overload" of being caught up in "terror's talk" (Taussig 1987:128). Taussig describes this as:

the violent and unexpected ruptures in consciousness that such a situation carries...a state of doubleness of social being in which one moves in bursts between somehow accepting the situation as normal, only to be thrown into a panic or shocked into disorientation by an event, a rumor, a sight, something said, or not said- something that even while it requires the normal in order to make its impact, destroys it (Taussig 1993:17-8).

Feldman has called this latter problem, "cultural anesthesia," a term he uses to describe Adorno's belief that as the state moves from pre-modern to modern, the ways in which pain can be inflicted upon individuals multiplies (Adorno 1973). Since pain is experienced somatically or sensorially, "cultural anesthesia" implies a certain unbridgeable distance between being caught up in the terror or pain of a particular locale or situation, and trying

to relay the affective experience of extreme fear or pain to those outside the boundaries of those circumstances (Feldman 1994:90).

Terror is such an everyday, taken for granted dimension of living in Myanmar that Burmans only allow themselves to acknowledge that they are frightened about the most violent or panic-inducing phenomena. Each time the regime adds a level of surveillance, propaganda, or repression to urban living, Burmans try to adapt to this new condition by a variety of trusted strategies which are the subject of the following chapters. An important means of living in a constant "state of emergency" (Benjamin 1969:257) is to chart its topography, to discern the routines, cycles, and "down time" of the military calendar. This need to find a logic, or order, to the disordering structures of terror is a strategy for minimizing fear. Taussig has argued that it was in the imagination of European colonialists in the Colombian jungle that terror was created and then projected upon the "natural" world. He notes that European attempts to make 'clarity from confusion' gave an allusion of control over their circumstances (Taussig 1987:127-9).

Such a landscape of terror is chartered by urban Burman residents on an annual basis. Traditionally the months of the wet season in Southeast Asia have been a time when monks are consigned to monasteries and the farming population have more leisure time. At this time of year violence is more often plotted than enacted. For the last fifty years or so in Myanmar the 'dry season offensive' has often marked a return to the killing of ethnic minorities and government soldiers in a series of wars that Martin Smith estimates has killed approximately 10,000 Burmans each year for over four decades (Smith 1991:101). The planning of action in Myanmar by the military and civilians alike often occurs at astrologically auspicious times such as Full Moon Days. The most significant of these events is "Armed Forces Day" which occurs in the middle of the dry season and is often the climax in the annual cycle of "terror as usual" in Yangon.

Each year there is a build up of tension in the capital with the "militarization" of the city and its making over into a battlefield as Armed Forces Days on the twenty-seventh of March approaches. Streets are closed off for "rehearsals," and billboards advertising the achievements of the *Tatmadaw* (army) appear (see Figure 2 for the "Armed Forces Day Objectives"). In 1997 the fear that this militarization engendered was characterized by a rising sense of menace. Soldiers wearing flak jackets, soldiers carrying bayonets, soldiers "sweeping" mines on U Wizara Road with sticks, and soldiers waving batons were present throughout the capital. The sheer number of troops was astonishing. In the central Yangon area, armed soldiers were stationed every fifty yards facing the roadways. They hid behind bushes, in school yards, and buildings. Military helicopters were present in the sky and the main arteries were clogged with the troop carriers full of wide-eyed soldiers staring at the new billboards of consumerism that line Yangon's road system. Armed Forces Day was the culmination of this ostentatious display of the symbols and accoutrements of military rule and repression.

In 1997 the preparation for the Armed Forces Day "celebration" coincided with the already large volume of troops and tanks present in the city (a response to the student demonstration the previous December). This was a warning to students and residents of the readiness with which the regime intends to respond to further "disturbances." The most visible display of battle readiness was at the City Hall, recently made the USDA[16] headquarters which is next to the revered Sule Pagoda. Tanks, barricades, and barbed wire jutted out onto the street, which is not only the major intersection in Yangon, but also the main bus terminus in the downtown area. This heightened atmosphere of quiet terror had two outcomes. The first was a growing sense of inevitability as Yangon residents began ticking off their mental checklist of details that were being met that preceded the democracy

Figure 2: Armed Forces Day Objectives



uprising in 1988. The most fearful aspect of the Armed Forces Day preparation was undoubtably the arrival in the city of troops from "Up-country." These troops came in to quell any further uprising and the fear they generated was largely due to the fact that because they are from "Up-country" and are widely believed to be of Chin origin, they would have minimal kinship links with Yangon residents and would therefore be willing to fire upon them. A much respected middle aged man confided in me that in 1988 the government brought down troops from "Up-Country" that consisted mainly of soldiers from ethnic minorities: "They've bought Chin soldiers down. They don't understand Myanmar language. Like in 1988, you know?" This concern was voiced to me by almost everyone I spoke to in December, it was seen as the clearest indication that the elements were falling into place for some kind of reenactment of the 1988 violence.

[16] Union Solidarity and Development Association which has forcibly recruited members to "protect" Myanmar from its enemies (see the section on the formation of GONGOs).

The second consequence of the city taking on the look of a combat zone was to lead Yangon residents to reflect upon the improvements to the military capability of the *Tatmadaw* since the democracy uprising in 1988. As Daw San Lay, a thirty-year-old woman commented in response to my question:

> *"What do you think will happen?"*
> "Everyone is talking about the situation. They are afraid because they prepare their guns and batons and they have a lot of weapons. The soldiers beat other people. Some students and some other civilians. You know the Japanese reporter? The soldiers beat him. Now he's in hospital. The beat foreigners, other journalists. Yesterday in Dagon Myo Thit my friend said that a large group, about 600, people with bags [i.e. students] were gathering. There were many police. Many soldiers took shields and batons to the University compound to beat, to strike, many big sticks, not small ones, and all the schools are closed today. Today we have to go back [home] early. The students will continue their strike and a confrontation will happen. The police are not going to stop or give in."
> *"Do you think this is like 1988?"*
> "No. They are preparing guns and cannons. The whole night, especially at midnight, they check all around the town.
> Our city now looks like a battlefield. All the soldiers aim their guns, ready."
> *"Ready for what?"*
> "Ready to fight something, it looks like. It may be a demonstration to frighten people."

Thus some Yangon residents were aware of the psychological strategies enacted by the SLORC and speculated that the militarization of the city could be a threat rather than a preparation for battle.

A final reaction to the build up of militarization and terror between December 1996 and March 1997 is salient to any discussion of violence and "terror as usual." Feldman and Taussig have written about the routinization of violence by the State as it comes to monopolize the use of violence, and package it into discreet areas of society such as the prison, the security forces, and so on (Feldman 1994; Taussig 1993). Recalling the insistence of Yangon residents that the Chin troops did not speak Burmese, I was conscious of the deliberate attempt Burmans made to distance themselves from the application of violence. There appeared to be a need to keep violence abstract and depersonalized. Families of army personnel were not blamed, stigmatized, or feared during this period of psychological warfare because they were not "Chin." It is of import that the democracy leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, refuses to condemn the army for the deaths of thousands of Burmans, rather, she blames the Generals for high-jacking the army but has

stated several times that she believes she can work with the army (Houtman 1999, forthcoming; Carey 1997:18-9). In this way people can believe that the person holding the gun, the bayonet, or manning the tank is just, in Feldman's words, a tool using a tool, not responsible for their actions and therefore, ultimately, forgivable[17] (Feldman 1991:56).

The achievement of an everyday state of emergency is surely a triumph for the Burmese Generals. The ability to resist the regime is enormously weakened by the topography of terror which overlays the urban geography. But living with an ongoing state of emergency requires a knowledge of local events around which tension and fear coalesce, and an ability to separate the terrorizing of the population via psychological warfare from genuine preparations for the enactment of violence. When violence appears inevitable, Yangon residents attempt to keep violence abstract and depersonalized. During the student demonstrations on the university campuses a friend told me of a scene she had witnessed earlier that morning. On her way to work she had seen a soldier emerging from his house in a wealthy neighbourhood holding a baton, "ready for a day of beating up students," while holding his baby son in his other arm, and his wife was holding out his lunch box for him. I remembered Taussig's words: "Terror as usual."

[17] It is also my hypothesis that this is why Military Intelligence wear their trademark aviator-style dark sunglasses. At the end of the day the glasses can be removed and intelligence personnel can return to their family and community life. The sunglasses provide a crucial psychological space between victim and perpetrator.

A Mountain of Gold: Imagining a Buddhist Totalitarian Utopia

At a time when the mother land Union was on the brink of being burnt down to ashes by hellfires in the 1988 disturbances, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (Tatmadaw) saved it in the nick of time. It then endeavoured to avert the terrible fate in store for the nation and build it up into a mountain of gold.

-State/Media 30th September 1996

3.1 Introduction

The usurping of civilian power in the military coup of 1962 created new systems of social relations in which power wielded by the Army (*Tatmadaw*) was made manifest at all levels of public and private life. The formation of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) in 1989 intensified these new relations as the State exercised power at increasingly local levels, a process that continues under the SLORC's new reincarnation, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). The way in which this power is exercised conforms to a vision of a Burmese utopian totalitarian society of which the Army forms the foundation. Since 1989 the SLORC/SPDC has begun defining the boundaries of this new nation and imbuing it with the symbols and attributes of nationhood. This new landscape of authority is peopled by "model" citizens who, through a range of brutal methodologies, are selected and then indoctrinated into the dominant ideology. The process of producing hegemony is not automatic, however, and individuals sometimes create counter ideologies or accept State rhetoric differentially. Sometimes their bodies are compliant, but their minds are not. This familiar process of domination is perhaps more acutely felt in Myanmar because of the vulnerability of the population to State propaganda in the absence of other sources of information. In this chapter I detail the specific methods used by the regime to realize its authoritarian vision so as to set the stage for the way in which individuals and groups make sense of their increasingly disordered life worlds and create strategies for action.

3.2 Citizenship and Political Risk: Eradication, Disappearing, and Attempted Genocide

Myanmar bears many of the characteristics of an 'Orwellian' state. As noted earlier, George Orwell served as a policeman in the Indian Imperial Police in the 1920s, and several authors and Myanmar watchers credit much of Orwell's sense of social justice to his experiences in Myanmar. The vision of society he portrayed in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is chillingly real and alive in Myanmar now. Since the creation of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) in 1989 (in the wake of the pro-democracy demonstrations and their brutal suppression), the Burmese military regime has begun to enact a vision for an imagined totalitarian utopia which it has named "The People's Union of Myanmar." Like the totalitarian society depicted in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, all those who do not fit the regime's vision are either eliminated without recourse or "remodeled" into "appropriate citizens." In this section I am concerned with both elaborating this chilling vision of the present and the future and laying out the means by which the military junta goes about its grim task of realizing this vision.

The remodeling of populations in line with political and nationalist ideology is perhaps common to all nation states. It is certainly common in Asia where the Khmer Rouge defined the "People of the Year Zero" and went about exterminating all those who did not fit the image of a communist cadre (Kiernan 1991:224). Similarly, Chinese peasants are currently undergoing "remodeling" in China, according to Anagnost, in line with "a deep and abiding concern that relates bodily quality to national strength...This pervasive articulation between bodily vitality and national transcendence continues in present Chinese practice" (Anagnost 1995:28). The author argues that China's *One Child* policy is a direct result of a belief that the "quality" of Chinese bodies is low because there are too many Chinese bodies. Anagnost writes that "This construction of people as [currently] unready for the political process" must be remedied by significant remodeling of the peasantry so that they can become more like their wealthier and healthier urban cousins (Anagnost 1995:29). A twentieth century nationalist discourse about the need for strong bodies to protect China's interests has become embodied in Chinese women for whom compulsory contraception and sterilization is necessary if they are to become model, modern Chinese citizens. It is no coincidence that fit Chinese bodies are better able to participate in the global labor market where China has a monopoly on "cheap" labor (Anagnost 1995:30). Finally, in Myanmar's second most populous neighbor, India, Veena Das has written of the remodeling of women who were abducted during the riots at Partition in 1947 and the children who were the "fruit of the plunder" (Das 1995:226). National discourses linked state honor with family and male honor, and these discourses became inscripted onto the bodies of women and changed the lives of a generation of children. Das writes that in order to redress the loss of honor of husbands, families, and

States, the children:

...who resulted from violent unions- were absorbed by the refugee camps and orphanages established by the state. Women who were in the early stages of pregnancy were taken to Jullundher for "medical treatment," a euphemism for abortion, thus obliterating the signs of sexual congress with other men (Das 1995:228).

In each of these cases noted above, remodeling of citizens involved an exorcism of the Other. For the Khmer Rouge the Other, even though they were fellow Cambodians, were imbued with "Vietnamese minds" (Kiernan 1991:224). In China, the Other are both the rural peasantry (who must exorcise beliefs about the value of "quantity" over "quality" in regards to children) and an unborn generation of Chinese children. In India, the Other is the "seed" of difference, regardless of whether that "seed" is Hindu, Seikh, Muslim, Indian, or Pakistani. In each situation, historically derived distinctions between self and Other have been appropriated as nationalist ideology by the state.

The same process is occurring in Myanmar where historically familiar distinctions between self and Other are being appropriated into a totalitarian discourse in order to define model citizens. The Comaroff's definition of hegemony (cited in the introduction) involves an understanding of why "power has so often been seen to lie in silences, what it prevents an individual from thinking and saying, what it puts beyond the limits of the rational and the credible. In a quite literal sense, hegemony is habit forming" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991:23). In its nationalistic rhetoric, the regime exaggerates and manipulates 'self versus Other' distinctions in Burmese society. This process is described by Delaney and Yanagisako as the "naturalizing" of power by moving cultural stereotypes out of the role of ideology, into the realm of hegemony (Delaney and Yanagisako 1995). In the remainder of this section I will discuss the regime's exaggeration of some of these common dualisms before returning to this process of hegemony-in-the-making (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991:25) that is contingent upon the presence of a vulnerable, isolated population without access to international media.

Villages in Myanmar have traditionally been surrounded by fences to deter roving bands of robbers. Townships are characterized by their enclosed "local" areas that require local knowledge to navigate. "Strangers" are conspicuous in this closed system. Within the townships there are words for strangers (such as *lu sein* လူစိမ်း) to differentiate them from people who belong. There is no doubt that in many parts of lower Myanmar, strangers are viewed with suspicion. I asked Burmans why they were suspicious of strangers and they pointed to high rates of theft, people fraudulently soliciting donations, and the danger of speaking to those people the local *LORC* (Law and Order Restoration Council) had not vetted. There is an extreme dependency on the government and its many representatives in

the townships that incorporates this older notion of "the stranger."[18]

In line with much recent discourse in Southeast Asia about "Asian values," Myanmar's military government have attempted to align themselves with their ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) partners so as to define a "non-Asian Other." Prior to the inception of the current SLORC/SPDC regime, Myanmar had refused to join ASEAN, preferring a policy of non-alignment (Neher 1994:180). Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia are leading the van-guard of what Vatikiotis calls the "low-intensity ideological divide between Asia and the West" (Vatikiotis 1996:94). Vatikiotis argues that:

> ruling elites in Southeast Asia have begun to erect fences around what they regard as the core values of their own societies, claiming these as the basis of the region's social harmony and economic success. Collective social norms, respect for authority and suppression of individual interest before that of the community or the state are some of the common denominators claimed by the region's elites (Vatikiotis 1996:111).

But for Vatikiotis the heart of the matter is that "the loudest drum-beating about Asian values comes from conservatist politicians anxious to perpetuate nationalist virtues and the life of their regimes" (Vatikiotis 1996:93).

In Myanmar, Self/Other distinctions are being reworked by totalitarian propaganda writers as both a means of reinforcing solidarity and as a way of creating sameness, an ideology of homogeneity at any cost. The concept of Self has recently been expanded by the junta to include other Southeast Asian nations. This is a new definition recently adopted by the regime in line with its strengthening links with Asian investors, aid donors, and with ASEAN. The neocolonial[19] propaganda with which Burmans are inundated, invokes a conception of the world strictly divided into East and West. The "West" is defined by the dictatorship as: "Those such as the American State Department, the White House, a group of insane American Congressmen, VOA, BBC, CIA, CNN, Amnesty International [who] have long been immorally interfering in the internal affairs of Myanmar for long" (sic)

[18] The unwillingness to talk to strangers is in my experience directly proportional to the degree of authoritarian control wielded by the SLORC/SPDC in any one ward or village. For example, in 1994 while I was traveling in Shan State, farmers ran from the fields clapping their hands together as I passed. They had not seen "white people" since the British left and I was greeted without fear or suspicion but with great curiosity. As one Burman reminded me, there is a Burmese saying: "If two dogs are barking in the street, Burmans will run out to see what they are barking about." This curiosity is well shuttered behind a wall of dependency in the relocated townships however where the incessant government propaganda (about the neocolonial ambitions of Westerners to enslave the Burmans) reaches everyone.

[19] The military regime uses the term "neocolonial" to emphasize its belief that Britain and the Unites States, in a secret alliance, are trying to colonize Myanmar. The regime hints that the aid the United States gave to remnants of the Chinese Kuomintang Army in Myanmar beginning in the 1960s, and its part in the nineteenth century sale of opium to China , effectively resulted in the American colonization of Myanmar. They also add that the United States interferes with other nations internal governance. By postulating a secret alliance between Britain and the United States, the regime argues that a conspiracy exists for these two nations to recolonize Myanmar. The first wave of this recolonization is the existence of "neocolonial propaganda" spread by "internal and external destructive elements" such as the National League for Democracy.

(NLM 1996a). Burmans are incited to be fiercely protective of their new nation because it is a country of strategic importance to the West. It is:

> rich in natural resources so their mouths are watering. Moreover they are feeling vindictive against Myanmar Naing-Ngan that had broken free from colonial rule and gained independence. They are scheming to enslave, dominate and exploit again the Myanmar Naing-Ngan that is desirable in all aspects (NLM 1996a).

Further, hatred is incited against Westerners. The regime argues that Aung San Suu Kyi: "does not know that she should hate the white colonialists, feel hurt, abhor and detest them, to denounce and condemn them and to boycott them" (NLM 1996c:5). This incitement to hatred was made manifest in the death while in custody of political prisoner and Honorary Consul for the Netherlands, Leo Nicholls. Amnesty has documented his death thus:

> In June, prisoner of conscience James Leander Nicholls, a Myanmar national of European and Burmese descent, who suffered from a heart condition, died after having reportedly been deprived of sleep for four nights. A close friend of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, he had been sentenced to three years' imprisonment in May under Section 6(1) of the 1933 Burma Wireless Act for operating unregistered telephone and facsimile lines from his home (Amnesty International 1997a).

The regime denied it had killed Leo Nicholls and instead described him as a "bad hat," (NLM 1996g:5) a term traditionally used in Myanmar to define those who have transgressed Burmese norms (Maung Khe Sein and Withey 1965:55). Nicholl's death was a salient reminder to Yangon residents (especially the Diplomatic community) that the regime's newly imagined community is inherently political in nature and will eliminate all "Others" who obstruct its vision for a totalitarian utopia.

The military junta has a very narrow definition of what constitutes a Burmese citizen. He or she is primarily defined in three ways, the most important of which is on the basis of a so-called genetic heritage. The second is based on physical appearance, and the third index is religion. The metanarrative which flows between the lines of SLORC/SPDC speeches and the State media is that only a Buddhist, Burman body is eligible for citizenship. In the imagined totalitarian utopia, citizens do not represent a political threat to the regime's dream of the Army (*Tatmadaw*) becoming the central pivot of Burmese political life.

Burmese citizenship laws deny citizenship to those who cannot trace their heritage back to 1823 on both sides of their family to the majority ethnic Burmans (Smith 1991:34). As mentioned earlier, the influx of Chinese and Indian entrepreneurial families during the period of British colonization led to the caveat in the Independence Constitution, that

foreigners could not be considered for election to the highest office in Myanmar. The first Anglo-Burmese War (1823) was thus defined as the year from which citizenship was not automatically conferred on Myanmar's residents. Burmans must prove that they can trace their families' residence patterns back to prewar Myanmar. This is a law that the present regime has found convenient to adopt and transform into an even more restricted definition of citizenship. The intricacies of citizenship requirements aside, however, at the most basic and brutally efficient level, an eradication process is taking place to eliminate all those who do not fit the vision of the new Union of Myanmar. The attempted ethnic genocide campaigns such as the "Four-Cuts" campaigns, the military offensive designed to "disappear" the predominantly Christian KNU [Karen National Union], the burning down of mosques, and the bulldozing of Christian cemeteries are obvious examples. Wars with ethnic minorities are an attempt to forcibly submit non-Burmans to elimination or the process of "Burmanization." Death or exile are the penalties for all those who refuse to be compliant "national races." National Races can never be citizens: the junta's vision entails a "second-class" status of "Residents" to non-Burmans.

Via its "reeducation" programs, Burmese citizens are taught the values and behaviour appropriate to inhabitants of the military's authoritarian utopia. This is an ongoing process in Myanmar where the majority Burman population continues its rule from the heartland of ethnic Burman culture (the Ayeyarwady river plains) towards the peripheries (the upland areas that are home to Myanmar's ethnic minorities). Giving the example of Myanmar's first Toungoo empire (1580-1635), Lieberman argues that it was necessary for Burmese monarchs to subdue ethnic minorities such as the Shan to swell the ranks of their armies to fuel military conquest and expansion (Lieberman 1984:30-1). The idea that Burmans are the superior race is a strong cultural theme of which almost all inhabitants in Burma are made aware from the earliest age. Several institutions of "Burmese-ness" have been created such as the *University for the Development of National Races*, the *Ministry of Culture*, and the *University of Culture*. In 1996, General Khin Nyunt gave a speech in which he defined the objective of the University for the Development of National Races to "train students to understand, respect and safeguard noble tradition and culture of national races" (NLM 1996o). These institutions give authority to the established status quo regarding ethnicity in Burma as well as being the ultimate arbiters of what defines "Burmese-ness".

The Union of Myanmar is ringed with refugee camps catering to all those who have fled government repression and refuse to be made over into model residents. Amnesty International has conservatively estimated that 200,000 refugees live in the Thai border camps or have moved into Thai cities. As well, 26,000 remain in Bangladesh refugee camps and 10,000 Mon refugees were forcibly repatriated by the Thai government in 1995-6 (Amnesty International 1997a; 1997b). For those ethnic minorities who remain in Burma, Amnesty reports a campaign of human rights violations by the military. Amnesty

states that:

> These abuses, including extrajudicial executions; ill-treatment in the context of forced portering and labor; and intimidation during forcible relocations occur both in the context of counter-insurgency operations, and in areas where cease-fires hold... [the junta] continues to commit human rights violations in ethnic minority areas with complete impunity (Amnesty International 1997b).

The second indicator of a model citizen is based on physical appearance in which foreignness and miscegenation are defined in terms of skin color and often equated with religious belief. Ironically, traits of whiteness and godliness formed the foundation with which the British justified to themselves the perceived moral necessity of their colonization of Burma. These same traits define "Burmese-ness." This phenomenon has been exacerbated by the regime which since 1962 has implemented isolationist policies and promoted a xenophobic stance. Burmans hoist umbrellas to prevent their skin from darkening, and one can purchase creams in local markets which purport to whiten or lighten skin tone. Thanaka (သနပ်ခါး) is a paste made from a bark which is reported to have many healthful properties but one of its main uses is to prevent the skin from darkening (အိုး သာလု ဝတ္ထု).[20] Of all the nationalities, it is Indians whom many Burmans most despise. When asked to explain this position, "darkness" is almost always used as the primary evidence that Indians are inferior to Burmans. In everyday conversations, topics involving China and Thailand frequently arise, usually in relation to trade goods. One could be forgiven for thinking that Myanmar does not border India, it is never mentioned, but in this silence lies an unspoken Other whom Burmans guard against, despite their strong cultural ties with India as evident in architecture, language, and various customs (Coedès 1967).

Missing from this discourse of Otherness[21] is the looming presence of China. Following the demise of Chinese funding for the Communist Party of Burma, diplomatic relations with China were resumed in full (Chi-shad Liang 1997) but Myanmar's historical relationship with China is rarely mentioned by the State-sponsored media. Although

[20] (U Tha Hla 1974).

[21] The best indication of the new meaning of "Other" comes from the drafting of the new constitution. Diller notes that in order to qualify as a President under the not yet completed constitution, a candidate must display an impressive array of qualifications. For example, a prospective candidate must have "twenty years continuous residency, political, administrative, military and economic experience." In addition, "the president's spouse, children and children's spouses may not be citizens of foreign powers or entitled to rights and privileges as foreign citizens" (Diller 1997:38). It can safely be assumed that anyone who does not fit this criteria could be categorized as "Other" in contemporary Burmese society. This has presented problems for a number of SLORC/SPDC members who seek to exorcise the "Other" within themselves. A recent bomb at General Tin Oo's house is thought by many Diplomats to be due to his daughter's involvement with a Japanese *yakuza* criminal. Secretary Number One, Khin Nyunt, recently publicly disowned his son for his relationship with a Singaporean air stewardess. Various Myanmar opposition groups delight in pointing out that former dictator, Ne Win, is "half-Chinese" and had an affair with an Australian citizen.

Burmans of South Asian and Chinese descent meet with discrimination in Myanmar, the economic power of the Chinese in Southeast Asia as well as the influence of China on this region is increasing. This theme is carried by many recent works on Southeast Asia (such as Vatikiotis 1996:181; Neher and Marlay 1995:14; Christie 1996:204). The relationship between Khin Nyunt and the drug barons, Khun Sa and Lo Hsing-han, bears more than a passing similarity with Suharto's relationship with the wealthy Chinese entrepreneurial elite in Indonesia, especially Liem Sio Liong (Schwarz 1994:109). The growing influence of China in the political, economic, and strategic domains continues apace in Myanmar and is met with silence from the official media despite fervent protests by Mandalay residents that their city is becoming a satellite of Yunnan.

Miscegenation is thus a significant impetus in social life. While the strategy to colonize the ethnic minority groups continues, those who belong to other nationalities such as those of Chinese or South Asian origin are considered to be tainting the purity of Burmese blood. A series of forcible deportations of Muslims has occurred. Amnesty International states that there are:

> reliable reports about the persecution of Muslims during the 1997 SLORC offensive against the KNU in the Kayin State. Mosques were burned, Korans were destroyed, and Muslims were forcibly evicted from their villages. Many Muslims of South Asian origin have lived in Kayin State for over a century...[They] have suffered from a variety of human rights violations at the hands of the SLORC, including forced labor and forcible relocation under threat of death (Amnesty International 1997b).

The model Burmese body must therefore be both genetically pure and of appropriate appearance, and in addition, the model Burmese person must be Buddhist, preferably Theravada Buddhist. In such a predominantly Buddhist nation, it is not surprising that religion is an axis along which inclusiveness is defined. It is hard to envision a time in the history of Southeast Asian Theravada Buddhist nations when the monarchy and the Sangha[22] were not the primary (and usually the only significant) institutions in social, religious, and political life. Social concepts such as race and religion are elided in Burma such that to be labeled as Muslim connotes darkness, South Asian origins, and exclusion. Similarly, to be labeled Kachin often invokes associations such as Christianity and its link to Western missionaries as well as "uncivilized" and thus non-Burman. At other times, but less frequently, the criterion of language is used. Burmans often deny that minority groups of Chinese origin such as the Wa and Kokang live in Burma or are Burmese, and go as far as to deny that members of these groups can speak Burmese.

Muslim communities are designated as "Others" by the number "786." The burning of mosques in 1996 and 1997 was reputed to have to begun with an incident involving the rape of a Buddhist monk's young female relative by one or more Indian brothers who were

[22] Organization of Monks

made to pay compensation for the incident. It seems that this incident probably did happen, but there is no doubt that the regime had been distributing anti-Muslim pamphlets for several months, and that the Mandalay monasteries had been infiltrated by the military so that anti-government sentiment could be channeled into anti-Muslim sentiment. Discrimination on the basis of religion is institutionalized in Myanmar: all Muslim businesses must display the number "786" as part of the address of their shop. Muslims whose obituaries are listed in the newspapers also carry this number.

Not only religious differences but also miscegenation is intricately linked to politics in Myanmar. All those who have lost "purity of genealogy" are defined as enemies of the State (NLM 1996w:5). This discourse on racial purity refers frequently to Aung San Suu Kyi, who is the symbol of opposition in Myanmar. Aung San Suu Kyi is routinely accused by the State media of having diluted Burmese blood by marrying a foreigner, Englishman Michael Aris. The discourse on genealogical purity employs the same ideologies of domination used by the British to define inclusiveness, and links such inclusiveness to the right to rule and take part in the political process. Citizenship has become an index of political trustworthiness. Uli Linke has noted that Whiteness, and other markers of power which I have delineated, whitewash class and socioeconomic differences to validate the ruling ideology (Linke 1997).

Social class is however entwined with citizenship. Not only can citizenship be bought for a price, but Myanmar's social hierarchy, especially in the major urban centers, has changed significantly since Ne Win's military coup. Before 1962 a group of upper class Yangon residents lived in the colonial mansions around Inya Lake. After the coup, Burmans had to take sides although these families continued to live together. Thus Aung San Suu Kyi lives in a large compound across the Lake from Ne Win. It is not unusual for marriages between NLD members and supporters and high ranking military officials to take place in Yangon since they often come from the same group of families who formed the upper class prior to the coup (a point emphasized in the introduction). Issues such as complicity become forever muddied in the exclusive streets of Yangon's wealthy suburbs.

Perhaps the simplest way in which inappropriate citizens are defined is through being labeled as mentally ill. For example, the regime has no problem defining a large group of people at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder who do not fit the vision of the type of Burman who will live in the Utopia of the Union of Myanmar. Within Yangon, the psychiatric hospital, jails, orphanages, and "women's homes" overflow with the homeless, the HIV positive, the poor, and the "unruly," many of whom are diagnosed as mentally ill. The local *LORCs*[23] have the responsibility for ensuring there are no "undesirables" in their residential wards. Thus many psychiatric patients' notes include arrest warrants from the *LORCs*. "Undesirable" especially means those who do not follow Myanmar's strict social mores. For example, displays of anger are taken as a sign of mental illness, and the person is often involuntarily incarcerated and subjected to treatment at the psychiatric hospital.

[23] There is a LORC (Law and Order Restoration Council) responsible for each ward and for each township.

Begging and "wandering away from home" (this includes street children) are also judged to be evidence of mental illness. Street children, the victims of the BSPP[24] and the SLORC's disastrous economic policies and self-enriching strategies, are put in jail or delivered to the social welfare department who manage the orphanages and State homes.[25]

According to the regime's philosophy, behaviour that varies from the narrow range of Burmese norms is "pathological". HIV is the best example of this phenomenon. For many years in Yangon there have been rumors of the death of people who were HIV positive, including Burmese prostitutes repatriated from Thai brothels (usually because of their HIV positive status). AFXB[26] is an Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) which began operating in Burma to ensure that prostitutes stopped being murdered when they were deported from Thailand. Recently, certain soldiers, all of whom are mandatorily tested for HIV, have been "disappearing" but after protests from well connected citizens, HIV-positive soldiers are now being "dismissed." Rather than a compassionate space existing in the regime's ideology, however, this change of policy illustrates that the most dominant ideology in Myanmar today concerns the power of money in conjunction with the need to keep these wealthy, well connected Burmans comfortable with the actions of the regime. "Dismissal" is another tool for maintaining power while heading off potential opposition.

In this section I have examined the parameters of citizenship and the belief that good citizens must be loyal to the regime. I have highlighted the common themes of whiteness and religious superiority in the ideology of domination which was used to validate the colonization of Myanmar by the British and is now being appropriated by the Burmese military to justify its right to rule through repression. Markers of purity, including whiteness, Buddhism, and even socioeconomic class are elided by the military and non-military alike in Myanmar to create the ideal Burmese citizen. The eliding of historically familiar distinctions between Burmans and Others is appropriated by a regime determined to remodel Burmans into appropriate citizens and to eliminate those who fail this process. This process, common to so many nations striving to create a unitary nationalistic consciousness in the aftermath of colonialism, has a much better chance of succeeding in Myanmar than perhaps any other nation. This is because it is hard to imagine a nation as effectively isolated from global information flows for the latter decades of the twentieth century. In the Comaroff's terminology, it is both rational and credible to subscribe to what seems to be a strongly xenophobic ideology. There has been very little space in Myanmar in recent years for the creation of counter ideologies. The dissemination of information is extremely limited and the censorship of the media occurs systematically (this will be the subject of the following chapter). Very low English literacy rates, especially for the post-

[24] Burma Socialist Programme Party, the only political party allowed during the Ne Win era.

[25] In chapter nine we will see the parallels between the regime's definition of madness with that of Pinel and the consequent logic of the "moral therapy" of incarceration in Myanmar's psychiatric hospital.

[26] Association Francois-Xavier Bagnoud

military coup generation[s] ensures that the only "news" available to many Burmans is scripted by the regime.

In the introduction it was noted that Foucault's analysis of the Panopticon model included a breaking of horizontal linkages between individuals who were confined to cells and *surveilled* from without. This model is applicable to the alienated contemporary Burmese society as fear of informers (as described in the following chapter) isolates individuals, and effectively halts the flow of information and hence the formation of counter ideologies. With such limited resources, it is not surprising that Burmans are vulnerable to the propaganda that daily, voluminously, assails them. It is not difficult to envisage such nationalist rhetoric, one that draws from culturally familiar stereotypes, entering the taken-for-granted realm of consciousness. In this way, State power is naturalized and the regime's hegemonic discourse often prevails.

3.3 Defining "Association" and the Relationship of Civilian Organizations to the State

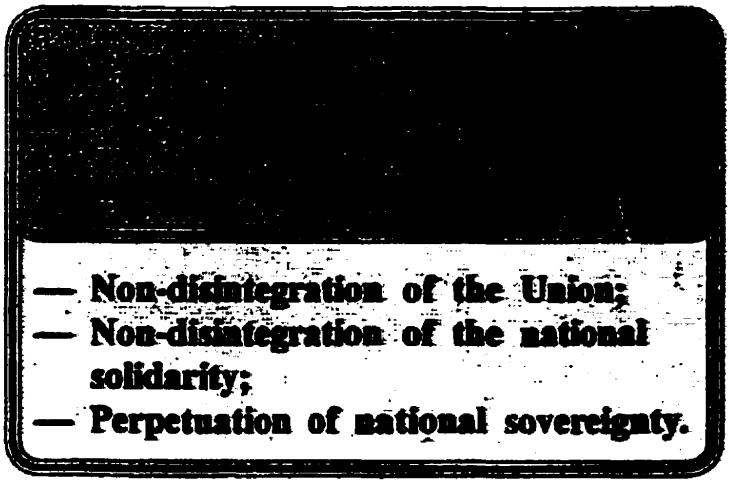
The citizens of the military utopia envisaged by the junta are constantly policed at a myriad of levels so as to ensure that relations between individuals, especially the formation of groups, only occurs in a politically appropriate manner. The junta has promulgated a rule denying the right of assembly in groups of more than five persons (Diller 1997:35) and Law 5/96 promulgated in June 1996 that provides for prison sentences for up to twenty years for the public expression of political views (Amnesty International 1996:1). As part of its program to create "model" citizens, a system of surveillance which reaches into every home, and a fear of a recurrence of "the Strike,"[27] the SLORC/SPDC has created organizations of enforced mass participation (see Figure 3 for the regime's discourse on "unity" and nationalism). Many of these organizations serve the function of politicizing health and are familiar to Burmans because similar organizations existed in the 1962-1989 BSPP (Burma Socialist Programme Party) period. These organizations differ in their intensity and political objectives however. Some of these organizations are known as GONGOS: "Government Organized Non-Governmental Organizations."[28] An example of a civilian organization or NGO which has been subverted by the regime into a GONGO is the Myanmar Women's Entrepreneurial Association (MWEA) which was founded by women entrepreneurs but over a period of eighteen months was completely suborned by the military to the end that SLORC/SPDC wives became controlling board members, and the Association is now a mouthpiece of the junta on "women's" issues.

[27] The 1988 pro-democracy uprising is referred to a the Strike, *ye gwin* (ရေကြဲ). It is also known as the Four-Eights and the 8-8-8-8 uprising as it occurred on the eighth day of the eight month of 1988 in the Gregorian calender.

[28] (also known among the Yangon expatriate community as GRINGOs: Government Recruited and Indoctrinated NGOs).

Another germane example is the recently created Karuna Foundation which cuts off the reliance of the population on the private health care industry (ensuring the continued development of dependency upon the government) and makes donating to the Foundation an act of political necessity for foreign and local entrepreneurs and companies. During my time in the field, the State newspapers daily ran articles about donor ceremonies or noted amounts of money donated to the Karuna Foundation. Millions of kyats have been donated and duly photographed in a propaganda exercise designed to show the cooperation between the private sector, Myanmar's wealthy elite, and the Generals. In a further chapter we will

Figure 3: State Ideology: Our Three Main National Causes



see how refusing to be photographed as a donor is a form of token resistance to the government. The establishment of these free health care facilities also functions to create an environment where impoverished Burmans become complicit in their own surveillance. There is then no place in the Union of Myanmar for civilian organizations and no concept of a non-political organization. First and foremost, the Union of Myanmar is a military State under which civilians have no individual rights or independence.

3.4 Manipulating Burmese Social Relations

In the previous sections I have been concerned with elaborating the means for selecting appropriate citizens and the imbuing of Burmans with the dominant ideology so that they come to resemble 'model' Myanmar citizens: appropriate inhabitants of the imagined nation of the Union of Myanmar. I have suggested that there are almost no forums in Myanmar that are non-politicized and we shall see in future chapters the consequences of such a policy for both the individual and the community. In this and the following section I examine the way in which the Information and Psychological Warfare Ministries and Departments have, since 1962, elevated to an art form the use of familiar idioms and practices for political purposes. The manipulation of key Burmese traits such as *anade*, respect, and "face," by the regime will be described. James Scott has called the reaction of a subject population to such manipulation, the "dissembling of the weak in the face of power" such that the actions of Burmans "take on a stereotyped, ritualistic cast" (Scott 1992:55-6).

The Burmese polity has always been controlled by a small elite. Alliances between states were uncommon. In the introduction I explained that Burmese monarchs and warlords ruled their realms with little negotiation. I emphasized that there are no notions such as "democracy" in the social psyche except for a brief period from Independence to the military coup in 1962. An edict issued in 1638 by Kin Tha-lun stated that: "I am the great and noble king who has dominion over eight realms that I have demarcated, and over every single person [therein]. All people depend on the king alone and there is no one who is not owned by him" (RUL 45235 Edict 78, 1000 tazaung-mòn wax. quoted in Lieberman 1984:100-11). Neher and Marlay note that: "The Burmese have never lived under a government that observes civil liberties" (Neher and Marlay 1995:113). The authors quote David Steinberg as concluding that Myanmar is "probably the most monolithically military-controlled state in the world" (Steinberg quoted in Neher and Marlay 1995:121), although such statements might be challenged by the existence of nations such as North Korea. In addition to a mode of rule which places great emphasis upon hierarchy and absolute authority, Myanmar conforms to a strict social code of behavior. These two systems combined form the framework within which not only strategies of terror and control are formulated, but also the responses made to them. Further, these social systems in part engender attitudes conceived in Myanmar as "Burmese personality traits" (*Bamasa chin*). The regime carefully manipulates several of these traits to facilitate the maintenance of its rule.

General Ne Win continued the long tradition of authoritarian rule in Myanmar (which almost ended with the formation of a post-Independence democratically-elected government). There is a general perception in Myanmar that Ne Win surrounded himself by those he could out-think. He valued traits such as unquestioning loyalty, subservience,

and obedience. The exception was his protege, Khin Nyunt. When the SLORC was formed, educated Yangon residents were unbelieving that such "uneducated village boys," the "sons of Ne Win" could run a country. Thus during the BSPP period and continuing with the SLORC/SPDC era, the polity has been controlled by a few men at a time who, though uneducated, were wise enough to stop intelligent Burmans rising up through the ranks to be in a position where they may challenge the existing leadership. This had practical ramifications at all levels of the bureaucracy in Myanmar. What is perhaps the most insidious instrument of British colonial rule remaining in Asia, the bureaucracy, is in Myanmar an inert, labyrinthian monster. The continuous transfer of key officials to all regions of Myanmar limits both the effectiveness of officials as well as limiting individual's abilities to create their own domains of influence within the bureaucracy. For example, the head of the psychiatric hospital and its senior staff are replaced every two or three years ensuring that reform policies are never carried through to completion. This effective strategy not only limits an individual's sphere of influence, it also makes association between individuals and between public servants difficult and the formation of viable opposition groups becomes almost impossible.

Coupled to this method of tight leadership is the strict social code which exists in Myanmar. Sarah Bekker has suggested that Myanmar's strict social rules leave little room for negotiation and the expression of certain emotions, and this largely explains the high rate of homicide and other serious crimes in Myanmar (Bekker 1981). If this is the case, it is certainly a situation which has been exacerbated by the authoritarian rule of the junta, and its further narrowing of the acceptable boundaries of Burmese behaviour.

Perhaps the most influential social norm is *anade* which implies a set of social and interpersonal rules of behaviour, responsibility, and most importantly, obligation. *Anade* (အနာထယ်) can be described as a feeling of compassion for others such that a consideration of the feelings of others becomes of paramount importance. *Anade* acts as a restraint against behavior which could in some way offend, anger, or humiliate another person. Burmese researchers argue that *anade* is a key element of Burmese personality. They report that personality traits such as compassion, diffidence and "delicacy of feeling" are associated with this "personality syndrome" (Bekker 1989:110). Bekker, a social psychologist, contends that *anade* means that there is no outlet for minor aggression in Myanmar, and Myanmar's high murder rate can be explained by *anade*. She argues that:

> Burma's paradox of a basically gentle and unaggressive population combined with a high murder rate can perhaps only be understood...in terms of the fact that small amounts of aggression are not permitted as social sanctions...More often than not, such violence occurs on the part of a previously gentle and mild person. His neighbors will look upon this frightening event as a kind of supernatural possession and will not be likely to change their basic attitude toward him (Bekker 1989:130-1).

Bekker states that *anade* causes a significant amount of psychological isolation among family members, friends, and spouses who do not attempt to know the private feelings or emotional state of those people with whom they share the same room or house "because it will make it easier for all if each one only shows his happy, sociable, active side" (Bekker 1989:25). She further postulates a relationship between individual psyches and a national psyche with a common logic tying them together: "Neutrality as a national policy is an affirmation of the psychological state that comes out in his private life as *anade*" (Bekker 1989:35). On a national level, *anade* translates to giving in to often unreasonable demands: A Burmese talking of China says, "They are always insisting on things, and we have to give in"" (Bekker 1989:36). An Australian diplomat, Jon Philp, suggests that Bekker's analysis is too one-sided. Although *anade* limits responses in interpersonal situations, Philp argues that *anade* is equally used as a form of manipulation to put others at a disadvantage. By stating that an individual feels *anade* about making a request, the other person is hard pressed to deny the request, regardless of how improper the request may be (Jon Philp, personal communication, 1998).

A second social norm is "respect" which is related to social hierarchy and equally informs social life. There are five types of respect which every Burman child is taught. They are respect for the Buddha, for the Sangha (the monks), the Dhamma (the Buddhist doctrine), for teachers, and for elders. Unmentioned in this old adage, but extremely important with the advent of capitalism and consumerism in Myanmar, is respect for business superiors. The Burmese term for respect denotes a wider range of meanings than the English sense of the term.

Related to both *anade* and respect is "face" and its corollary, "loss of face." Again related to social hierarchy, face involves the public recognition of the apparent conformance of individuals and families to Burmese norms and cultural aspirations. A parent's loss of face could result in the children being unable to make advantageous marriages and forge ties to increase employment opportunities and access to the black market. An extreme example of loss of face is leprosy which leads to the complete ostracism of a family and even distantly related members in the neighbourhood. Employers refuse to allow Burmans so afflicted to continue work even if they do not have the disease. The thinking inherent in contagious magic is at play here: leprosy and loss of face are contagious via association. These themes pervade not only Burmese daily life, but are important elements of social life in many Asian nations. Unfortunately such comparisons often result in a form of cultural determinism (as noted by Robison et al. 1993:14). It is, however, important to understand that value placed in the idea of a social self informs behavior and decisions in many Asian nations and that the degree of importance accorded to such forms of social interaction may be much greater than many Westerners realize. It is usually thought appropriate that the social self should dominate individual interests.

Ne Win was cleverly able to tap into some of the prominent themes in Burmese social relations such as jealousy and rivalry which involve the negotiation of *anade*, respect, and "face." Myanmar has a long history of petty empire building and Ne Win exploited this phenomenon and the traits which it engendered. For example, poison pen letters are a Burmese tradition for working within the social rules yet gaining personal power through the downfall of one's rivals. Burmese social norms such as *anade* restrain the possible responses to such letters. In *Burmese Days*, George Orwell demonstrates the efficacy of this form of personal power play as the evil U Po Kyin plots to destroy the reputation and career of Dr. Veraswami:

> There will be no risk, but we have to go slowly...How does one ruin a clerk? Easy; an accusation, two dozen witnesses, dismissal and imprisonment. But that will not do here. Softly, softly, softly is my way. No scandal, and above all no official enquiry. There must be no accusations that can be answered, and yet within three months I must fix it in the head of every European in Kyauktada that the doctor is a villain...When a man has a black face, suspicion *is* proof. A few anonymous letters will work wonders. It is only a question of persisting; accuse, accuse, go on accusing...One anonymous letter after another, to every European in turn (Orwell 1965:11-2).

In *Burmese Days*, poison letters could destroy characters. Poison pen letters are routinely intertwined with political violence in Myanmar and have been for a considerable time. A friend related to me the story of a poison pen letter sent to the government which resulted in his father being arrested and interrogated for two days. Fear of losing face is the axis around which the powerful social norms of respect/prestige and *anade* revolve. A poison pen letter requires no proof, merely insinuation. Once "face" is lost, one's position in the social hierarchy, and the position of one's family and friends, falters and *anade* limits the forms of redress available against implications and innuendo that cannot be proven to be either true or false. James Scott has written of the ways in which the exercise of this kind of power in Southeast Asia "stretches the ordinary meaning of "power" almost beyond recognition" (Scott 1992:55). These personal power plays designed to build power bases and win favor with the military regime are mirrored in the relations the SLORC/SPDC and its predecessors have with the military, with entrepreneurs, and with the public service. This cultural milieu in which prominent social relations are manipulated, and in which the power of the State infiltrates social and interpersonal relations, is the framework in which political violence and fear have become everyday components of social reality.

3.5 Desemanticization: Defining the Symbolic and Sociocultural Content of the Union of Myanmar

In addition to the symbolic and actual violence promulgated by the military dictatorship, there is a prolific propaganda campaign being waged upon the population that uses familiar Burmese icons for political ends. In the previous section the manipulation of key Burmese norms and social relations was elaborated. Integral to the regime's campaign to design a new social order, cultural symbols are given new meanings while the old meanings continue to have resonance. This subtle and extremely effective strategy is glossed by Bakhtin as "desemanticization," and summarized by Feldman as the situation:

> ...in which two or more conflictual, discontinuous, heterogeneous, or polarized social codes are present in the same set of signifiers. These composite signs trace a history of desemanticization: their incomplete detachment from prior references and their realignment with new meanings and inferences (Feldman 1991:12).

This strategy makes it easier for Burmans to transfer their acceptance or tacit assumptions about the objects previously designated by these symbols to the new objects designated by the signifiers: the SLORC/SPDC, its monuments, spectacles, and boundaries. All nations take symbols of office and of authority and the SLORC is no exception. An example of this shift in meaning concerns the mythical Chinthe, a winged-lion of Buddhist legend which stands guard at the foot of pagodas throughout Myanmar (figure 4 shows a pair of Chinthe guarding an entrance way to the Shwedagon pagoda). This symbol with its associations of authority, ferocity, protection, and Buddhism, was coopted by the Chindits in the Second World War. The Chindit operation was an anti-Japanese operation led by the Allies during the Japanese invasion of Myanmar in the Second World War. The troops who fought behind enemy lines contributed to the enormous anti-Japanese sentiment within Burma at the time. Most recently the Chinthe has been appropriated by the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), an organization which Aung San Suu Kyi has likened to the Hitler Youth Movement. This organization forcibly recruits young members who must fulfill a number of political "duties." It is impossible to detach the strong religious force of the Chinthe-as-Buddhist-symbol from its new incarnation as a symbol of involuntary recruitment and political repression. This process has occurred a thousand-fold in Myanmar and threatens to trip up Burmans in the confusion which is daily inserted into everyday lives. Most particularly in its appropriation of Buddhism has the junta worked a wonder of propaganda eliding veneration of the Buddha into an unspoken yet somehow tacit acknowledgement of the regime as the defender of Buddhism and only rightful rulers. Through a process of desemanticization of Buddhist symbols, the dictatorship is carefully laying claim to the role

of *cakkavarti* or World Conqueror on the earthly plane, a leadership usually reserved for monarchs who establish order in the world so that Buddhist monks can get on with the process of showing, through example, the path to Enlightenment (Tambiah 1976).

Strong cultural symbols such as the Chintha become part of what the Comaroffs have described as a symbolic struggle central to the process of "producing" hegemony (1991:25,31). We may speculate that Buddhists who have a deep commitment to their faith may be less likely to attribute new meanings to the Chintha than, say, Muslims or Christians for whom the Chintha has more vague referents attached to its image. This

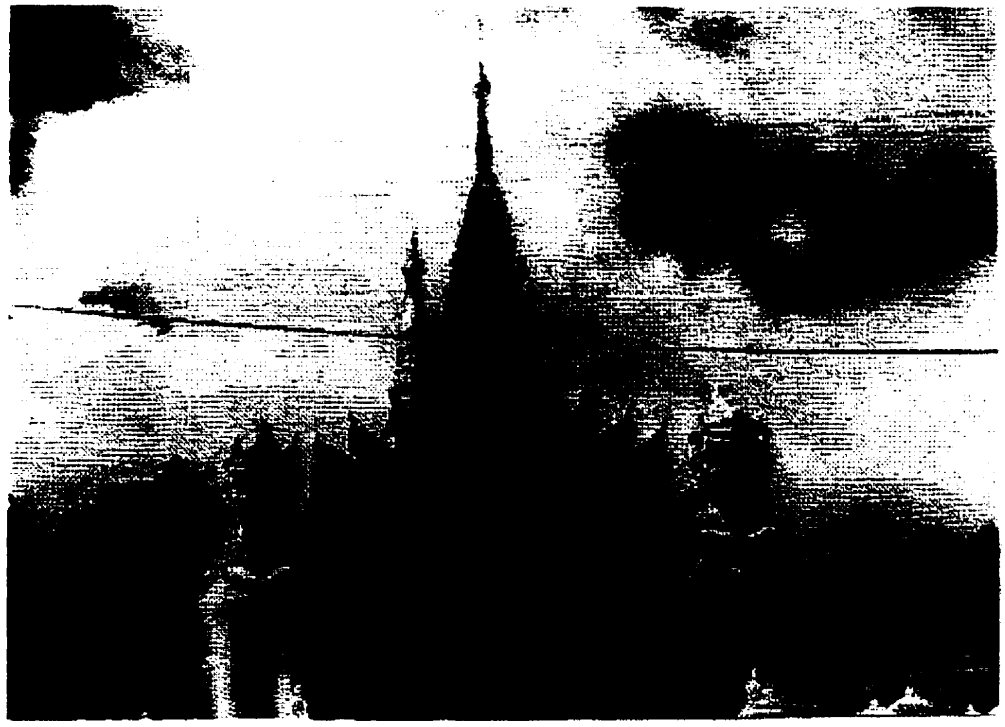


Figure 4: Chintha Guard the Entrance to the Shwedagon Pagoda

particular strategy of desemanticization is, however, extremely clever and subtle, whereas much of the regime's assertion of control over everyday ways of thinking is more contested. For example, in the introduction the narrative of a thirty-year-old woman was presented. Her views were elicited on the rapid militarization of Yangon in response to student demonstrations in December 1996. Although clearly fearful, this young woman did not completely internalize the regime's threats of imminent violence, she was aware that

instead, the saber rattling of the military could be a psychological tactic to subdue the population. Similarly, as mentioned above, the xenophobic statements promoted by the military government about other countries has recently been replaced by an ideology of Asian brotherhood. Burmans are thus presented with two contrasting views of Asian Others and rather than internalizing this new rhetoric, some Yangon and Mandalay residents have begun to questions both sets of assertions. For example, another young woman in her mid-thirties had just returned from a trip to Bangkok where she had seen the prostitution industry of Patpong Road. These scenes, shocking to most Burmans, had confirmed many of the prejudices she had learned about Thais over the course of her life. She asked me if it was true that Thais ate Burmese children because if so, why was the regime forming an economic union with Thailand? This woman formed part of a coterie of young, educated, university women who had a variety of stances on the regime's latest pro-ASEAN discourse. One of these women repeated a common Yangon rumor that Myanmar's entrance to ASEAN was part of a secret Muslim conspiracy that would result in the Buddhist architecture of Yangon being replaced with Muslim mosque-style domes and minarets at the completion of Suharto's visit to Yangon. This woman had internalized the much older anti-Muslim sentiment in Myanmar and the propaganda concerning the need to be alert against the domination of South Asian entrepreneurs during the colonial era and had rejected the recent pro-ASEAN rhetoric. And finally, another woman in this group, confusing South Asian ethnicity with Islam, assumed that since Malaysia, Indonesia and India had large Muslim populations, India must be a member of ASEAN. This young woman asked me if it was true that all Indians are "mentally ill" [said in English] and if so, why should Myanmar form an alliance with them? Clearly then there is a space in which new State rhetoric is compared with rumors, folk beliefs, and previous experiences. State ideology is accepted and internalized differentially even among a group of relatively homogeneous educated Burmese women of the same age group. That is not to say that collective expressions and ideologies do not exist in Myanmar, but an awareness is necessary of the different ways and degrees in which ideologies are internalized and adopted by individuals.

In their discussion on ideology, Jean and John Comaroff note that subordinate populations struggle to assert their ideologies against a dominant order or group (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991:24). Recent feminist approaches to subjectivity in anthropology take this contention further. These approaches argue against the internalization of a particular ideology, such as those related to gender or class, and instead bring an understanding of the processual formation of the self and the role of experience in the adoption and internalization of particular ideologies. This focus upon individual experience is rare in the anthropological literature. Culture, institutions, or "subordinate groups" are usually taken as the broad units of analysis in the anthropological literature. Lock and Kaufert note the:

growing recognition that it is inappropriate to conceptualize a "one culture/one gender system" when representing women...believing [instead] that the behavior and subjectivity of individual women cannot be explicated on the basis of gender alone, even when appropriately contextualized...gender is cross-cut by other categories of class, religion, language, and ethnicity, whether at the local level...or at the level of international politics (Lock and Kaufert 1998:3).

Using gender as their tool of analysis, these writers argue that broad cultural ideologies are incorporated by individuals into their knowledge and meaning frameworks differentially. Zito and Barlow draw a distinction between individuals and "subject positions" to emphasize how a person's use or expression of an idiom or ideology is fluid and ever-changing and contingent upon personal experience. They argue that:

Focusing on subject positionalities instead of "individuals" takes into account that selves are processual and that they change over a lifetime of experiences; that one person can simultaneously occupy many "subject positions" (woman, female, mother, daughter, wife, reader, consumer); and that these dynamics are constructed within an ensemble of social relations...Subjectivity as a category enables scholars to grant human selves conditional, specific, historical unities rather than essential qualities that everywhere and in every epoch interact according to the same set of universal laws (Zito and Barlow 1994:9-10).

Such a framework is especially important in Myanmar where, as Foucault notes for systems designed to discipline the body, "The crowd, a compact mass, a locus of multiple exchanges, individualities merging together, a collective effect, is abolished and replaced by a collection of separate individualities" (Foucault [1979]1995:201).

3.6 Defining the World View of the Union of Myanmar: Cosmology, History, and Geography

Through the application of Burmese and Buddhist symbols to the military regime and its organs of domination, and via the manipulation and politicization of Burmese social conventions and relations, the junta inculcates Burmans with the dominant ideology of totalitarian rule: the politicization of everyday life and the central role of the Army in Burmese society. In order to forge a new society however, the Union of Myanmar needs the accoutrements of nationhood. Like authoritarian regimes such as those of Mussolini and Hitler, the vision of a utopian society requires its own view of its place in the world and the cosmos. Much of the "work" of a totalitarian culture (following Obeyesekere 1985) consists of devising appropriate symbols and spectacles of nationhood using disinformation, confusion, and techniques such as the naturalization of social inequalities described above. In the following sections I describe the creation of a Burmese geo-body (following Thongchai Winichakul 1989) and a military body politic using relentless and

repetitive propaganda.

Prior to 1989, the predominant Burmese origin myth[29] cited by Yangon residents consisted of two mythical birds known as Hintha which descended to earth in the middle of a lake not far from Yangon to create the land known as Burma and the people known as the Burmese. The dictatorship's origin myth situates the *Tatmadaw* (the Burmese Army and hence the SLORC/SPDC) rising like a phoenix from the "hell fires" of the 1988 pro-democracy uprising to restore "law and order." Here we have rebirth of a nation through sacrifice, and regeneration through death which Taussig describes as "a primitivist appropriation of mimetic faculty crucial to the instituting of power as rationality in modern bureaucratic organization of which the exemplar is the state" (Taussig 1997:78). The junta has appropriated, through mimicry, the origin myth of both the Hintha creating a new society, and the phoenix's rebirth, in order to naturalize the usurping of civilian power by the military. Continuous repetition of this totalitarian origin myth is a strategy on the part of the military to take the 1962 coup out of the realm of contestation, into the "taken for granted" assumptions that Burmans make about their world. In Jean and John Comaroff's terms, this new origin myth facilitates military hegemony.

As part of its campaign to confuse those things that Burmans take to be "true" or apparent, the regime also tries to recreate memories in an appropriate form, and to revise history and geography. Benjamin stated that the revision of history by the victors was "the strongest narcotic of the [nineteenth] century" (Benjamin quoted in Buck-Morss 1985:218). Examples of such revisionist history regarding the democracy uprising and its brutal suppression in 1988 include reducing of country wide demonstrations to "a brawl in a tea shop" and accusing the National League for Democracy of beheading innocent people in the streets during this period.[30] In Myanmar this historicization is another narcotic to numb and render docile.

Thongchai Winichakul conceives geography as a contested discourse. He analyzes control over the definition of "Thainess" and argues that it is linked to the wider struggle for power in Thailand, a struggle that intimately involves the military. His analysis of Thailand is equally applicable to the new Union of Myanmar. He argues that: "The relations between mapping and military force are emphasized here as the mutual operation of knowledge and power in executing the truth of geographical knowledge" (Thongchai Winichakul 1994:18). Thongchai Winichakul states that geography and the "geo-body" so defined is about more than land, more even than territoriality and sovereignty. It is a socially constructed "man-made territorial definition which creates effects-- by classifying, communicating, and enforcement-- on people, things, and relationships" (Thongchai

[29] I refer here to the most popular origin myth among the majority Burman population in Yangon. It is not my intention to imply that origin myths for other groups within Myanmar do not exist or are or less significance.

[30] There are State media reports of mobs in Yangon's suburbs killing policemen with homemade weapons but there is no evidence that any political organization was involved (The Working People's Daily 1988:1).

Winichakul 1994:17). There is, however, nothing imaginary about the borders that the military regime fights to control. The Burmese government has been frantically digging out the banks of the River Moei in order to divert its course so that the border between Thailand and Myanmar is situated further into Thailand than previously agreed upon.

The relationship that Myanmar has with other nations is defined, however, via the medium of propaganda rather than physically digging water courses. I have described above the way that Self/Other distinctions made in the State-sponsored media reinforce solidarity and strive to create homogeneity among Burmans. In this nationalistic discourse a significant amount of hostility towards the "West" is apparent. In the following State media rendering of the world's history and geography, a simultaneous fascination with the "West" is, however, evident in the regime's claim to an essentialized "sameness" of Burmans and Americans. In the run-up to United States sanctions against Myanmar, the Generals waged a propaganda campaign against the United States. The following piece was aimed at making it seem to Burmans as if the United States government acts entirely arbitrarily, imposing sanctions irrespective of the wishes of those who elected it. The State media argues that:

> Myanmar and the United States are the farthest and at the same time the nearest countries. For the United States, Myanmar is the most distant country in the world...They can also be described as the nearest countries. It is because one is situated on one side and another on the other side of the globe; they are touching back to back though they are facing opposite directions. If a long pole, for instance, were to be stuck straight into the earth from Myanmar town of Katha it will reach an American town in Texas State. So, if we talk about the land of the earth, Myanmar and the US can be described as the same mass. This is no imagination. The linkage of the two nations can be calculated with reference to latitude and longitude lines. Moreover, a clear evidence is that almost all the rich resources on the US are found in the earth here in Myanmar. Though the two nations are most distant the interior earth is of the same mass (NLM 1996u:5)

As mentioned earlier, the Union of Myanmar stands in a relationship with another imagined community, ASEAN. ASEAN is an economic trading block that measures quality of life and living conditions purely in economic terms. At the opening of the 1997 ASEAN Conference, Malaysia's Prime Minister, Mahathir, compared the quality of lives of ASEAN citizens with the rest of the world without ever once deviating from an economic analysis. Recent stock market drops and currency devaluations, as well as the Hun Sen coup in Cambodia, the Indonesian anti-Suharto riots, and the health hazards represented by the uncontrolled burning of forest fires in Indonesia, belie the myth of a stable, wealthy, ASEAN population. What is important to the Burmese junta however, is that the Union of Myanmar be active in the construction of this myth of "Asian democracy" and "Asian values." These dominant ideologies circulate daily through the newspapers, magazines,

television broadcasts, at involuntary mass rallies, in opening speeches, and at all other forums in which the population is made a captive audience to the vision of the State. The authoritarian vision elaborated in the ceaseless propaganda is made manifest in both Myanmar's physical boundaries and the trans-national relationships which establish a totalitarian Burmese geo-body.

In this chapter several major parameters of the envisaged totalitarian utopia of the Union of Myanmar are described. From eradication, "disappearing" and attempted genocide, to defining the culture, history, and cosmology of the People's Union of Myanmar, the junta has begun the task of making its authoritarian fantasy a reality. New Government institutions are being created to arbitrate on the validity of "Burmese-ness." In addition, techniques such as desemanticization and poison pen letters pervade the sociocultural milieu ensuring that Burmese citizens are the models of subordination and docility. In such a disordering of everyday life, Burmans must clear a path through confusion and obfuscation but this does not mean that hegemony is a given. Hegemony is always in the making, and there is currently a space in Myanmar where conflicting ideologies can be weighed against personal experience and discarded or adopted to varying degrees. However, this is not a large space and, as we shall see in the following chapter, this process of working against hegemony is made even more difficult by the vulnerability of the Burmese population. This vulnerability is experienced primarily through the prevalence of informers and the routine employment of ancillary techniques for controlling information and creating disinformation.

Chapter Four

Contesting Alternate Visions: The Mechanics of Domination

Amnesty International, Asia Watch...foul-air propaganda machines raising hue and cry about "violating human rights."
State media 26 October 1996

4.1 Gathering and Controlling Information

In the previous chapter I explained that the creation of the Union of Myanmar is in the hands of the State *Law and Order* Restoration Council (and now the State Peace and Development Council). As Taussig has pointed out, it is in the interests of regimes of fear to create and maintain a state of *disorder* (Taussig 1993). Totalitarian regimes require war and other systems of disorder (such as economic crisis) to legitimate the need for the Army to wrest control from an existing government. When Ne Win stepped down from power he advocated an eventual return to civilian government. Successive Generals have, however, been determined to rule the country by force. The possibility of opposition to the Generals' rule over time has necessitated extending control over the lives of Burmans at ever more local levels. In this chapter I examine the specific mechanisms of control and domination employed by the regime. Propaganda, censorship, disinformation, and surveillance are the primary vehicles of control as well as the arrest of journalists from international media organizations in order to stop alternate versions of the "truth" existing.

4.2 Propaganda: Creating the Gray Spaces of Confusion

For the last thirty six years the military junta has adopted panoptic surveillance and methods such as placing informers in public sites to gather information about the activities of Burmans. Since 1994, however, the face of urban Myanmar has changed dramatically: multi-storied buildings made from modern materials, bridges, department stores, and other staples of the "modern" city have emerged from a frenzy of construction. Perhaps the most remarkable changes are from the use of bicycles and pony-carts to cars and "pick-ups," the installation of phone lines to many parts of the country, and the increasing electrification of the nation. Rapid changes in forms of communication, transportation, and construction are defined by Anderson as central elements of modernization in Southeast Asia (Anderson 1991). Such changes have occurred alongside a transformation in the way that the intelligence and "information" apparatus of the State functions. Manual surveillance is still

intensive, but a range of supra-panoptic methods are now used by Military Intelligence from their new headquarters (Selth 1995). A state-of-the-art "spy center" exists which can intercept phone conversations, facsimiles, e-mail, and other electronic communications. The changing forms of both intelligence gathering and the delivery of state ideology has ushered in a new era of uncertainty. This "SLORC/SPDC era" is less arbitrary than the "Ne Win era" but it is perhaps even more frightening because Burmans are continually questioning and having to make distinctions between what is real and meaningful and what are lies in their everyday lives.

Burma has learnt much of its intelligence and propaganda techniques from China but the comparatively docile propaganda seen in Chinese cities takes on a more sinister and overtly violent aspect in Myanmar. For example, Chinese "Model Towns" such as Zhangiagong have their own "Booklet of Rules," "Neighbourhood Committees," and numerous signboards exhorting citizens to be clean, and so on. There is the continual celebration of "Spiritual Civilization" with its attendant songs, videos, and dances. As in Myanmar, Model Villages have awards for "Model Citizens." In Myanmar however, "Model Citizens" are rewarded by being put to work (without pay) on Government edifices such as the Tooth Relic Pagodas.[31] Rather than exhorting the population be clean, Burmese signs and other forms of mass propaganda exhort violence, extreme nationalism, and unremitting loyalty. Examples include:

Only when there is discipline will there be progress.
Down with the minions of colonialism[32]
Crush all destructive elements.
Beware of aboveground and underground destructive elements.
Observance of discipline leads to safety.
Anyone who is riotous, destructive and unruly is our enemy.

The slogans listed above are examples of the temporary and mobile form of ideology dissemination that the Burmese military regime has adopted. This technique is evidence of both the urban and modern character of much of the political violence which consumes many parts of the world. Baudrillard argues that the phenomenon of the "City" can be productively viewed as a "zone of signs, the media and the code" (Baudrillard 1993:77). In Yangon and Mandalay, Baudrillard's thesis is exemplified by the State's propaganda signboards. These mobile threats of violence spring up at intersections, outside tourist accommodations and attractions, and in front of foreign institutions such as the

[31] These pagodas have been built by the Generals to house the Chinese Tooth Relic Pagoda on its State visits to Myanmar. I have interviewed over one hundred families in Mandalay and Yangon who report being forced to work on the construction of the Tooth Relic Pagodas.

[32] Diplomats from various embassies enjoyed posing underneath the signs that read "Down with the minions of colonialism." Minions of colonialism are defined as American and British citizens as well as any Burman who is "duped" into acting as an "agent" for the American and British "colonial masters."

United States Embassy (figures 6, 7, and 8 show examples of mobile propaganda signboards). Taussig has remarked that such propaganda is a "political art-form par excellence" which he describes as "mimesis unto death," the perpetual replication of the ideology of the State. He interprets such threats of violence as the "embellishment of the space of death created as memorial to the founding violence" (Taussig 1997:78). In other words, the violence with which the regime routinely threatens Burmans and expatriates serves to remind Burmans of the original violence that birthed the SLORC (in this case, the deaths of pro-democracy supporters in the 1988 democracy uprising). By using the word "memorial," Taussig implies that such threats of violence act almost as a glorification of the deadly power of the State.

Taussig also views propaganda billboards, or slogans, as evidence of the ascendancy of the motor-car and the industrial complex which gives rise to it. Salient to the modern character of violence in Myanmar, Taussig comments on the changing methods of propaganda which track the changes of an increasingly mobile population. He states that:

> Verbal equivalent of the portrait, the slogan as oracular statement is also equivalent to the monument bringing together death, memory, and the state, only the slogan is more mobile as befits the modernity of the freeway age when sacred centers give way to nomadic movement from slogan to slogan (Taussig 1997:113).

Like monuments, Taussig argues that this mobile form of propaganda reminds us of the founding violence of the regime and commemorates both this violence and the power that it confers upon the State.

New forms of intensive surveillance and the effective targeting and relentless bombarding of the population with propaganda[33] are thus primary methods by which the regime maintains control. Like a blunt instrument, this propaganda becomes effective because of its magnitude and its continual repetition. China is an old hand at this kind of ideological indoctrination. A notable example is Mao Tse-tung's *Selected Writings* which formed the basis for the "cultural education" of the Chinese masses (Lee 1991). In Myanmar, the difference lies perhaps in the nakedness with which violence is threatened and the increased vulnerability of the population to such propaganda. Without access to alternate forms of information, the sheer volume of this propaganda threatens to trip up Burmans in the "facts" of their nation's history and current political situation, and thus the regime creates gray spaces of confusion in which complicity may begin.[34]

[33] The increasingly mobile population of the major cities in Myanmar are also increasingly upwardly mobile and their new found wealth has resulted in thousands of television sets being purchased and the addition of satellite dishes to the rapidly changing urban skyline. Television is a new phenomenon in Myanmar and only permitted by the former dictator Ne Win on the grounds that it provided an intensive delivery system for State ideology that could penetrate households (Smith 1991).

[34] See Figure 5 for State ideology that is reprinted in every Burmese newspaper, manuscript, and read out before "news" bulletins broadcast by the State television and radio stations.

Figure 5: State Ideology Reprinted in Every Burmese Newspaper and Manuscript

Four political objectives

* Stability of the State, community peace and tranquillity, prevalence of law and order
* National reconsolidation
* Emergence of a new enduring State Constitution
* Building of a new modern developed nation in accord with the new State Constitution

Four economic objectives

* Development of agriculture as the base and all-round development of other sectors of the economy as well
* Proper evolution of the market-oriented economic system
* Development of the economy inviting participation in terms of technical know-how and investments from sources inside the country and abroad
* The initiative to shape the national economy must be kept in the hands of the State and the national peoples

Four social objectives

* Uplift of the morale and morality of the entire nation
* Uplift of national prestige and integrity and preservation and safeguarding of cultural heritage and national character
* Uplift of dynamism of patriotic spirit
* Uplift of health, fitness and education standards of the entire nation

Figure 6: A People's Desire Signboard

Figure 7: "National Races" Propaganda

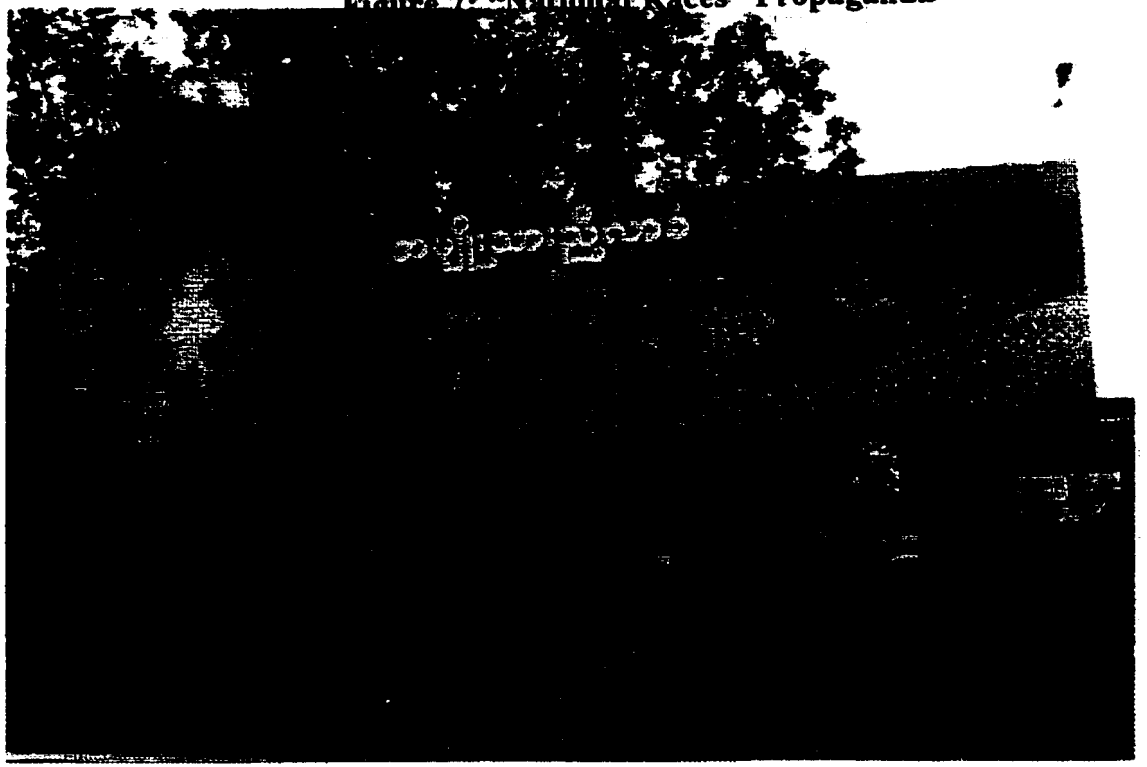


Figure 8: A Pro-Army Signboard



4.3 Puppets, Puppet Masters, and the Demonization of Aung San Suu Kyi

In this section I examine the means by which the Nobel Peace Prize winner, Aung San Suu Kyi, is defined as "Other." In doing so, the regime stereotypes gender assumptions in Burmese culture as it extends such assumptions to the level of the State. As Jean and John Comaroff have noted, cultural fields consist of fluid systems of signs and symbols. Culture is an unfinished space of signifying practices. This concept of culture is elaborated in contemporary feminist literature where the "naturalization" of gender hierarchies into institutions and nationalist discourse is recognized as state ideology. Delaney and Yanagisako argue that hegemonic power relations can be deconstructed by recognizing how broad cultural ideologies (such as male superiority) are incorporated into nationalist rhetoric as the "natural" order of things. Delaney argues that "nationalism should not be understood in terms of explicit political ideologies, as is conventional, but in terms of larger cultural systems (kinship and religion)" (Delaney 1995:177). Delaney analyzes how gendered assumptions linking women with nature and motherhood were transported to the national level in Turkey. She writes that:

> The rhetoric of kinship and descent that provides for a person's identity and legitimacy was deployed to give national identity and legitimacy to the new citizens...Building upon familiar meanings and concepts, Atatürk used them symbolically to bind a people to a land and to provide a more general and more inclusive identity (Delaney 1995:187-8).

In Myanmar, relations between men and women are informed by the Buddhist notion of *pon* or glory. Put simply, men have *pon*, and women, lower on the wheel of rebirth, don't have it. This means women can never have the same status as men in Myanmar. But as Delaney notes, "culture is not a natural but an acquired characteristic" and in Turkey Atatürk "taught" Turks how such culturally familiar themes could be expanded to the national stage where, in the rhetoric of national unity, the state became Father, and the boundaries of modern Turkey came to symbolize the Motherland. Thus Delaney notes that "Atatürk often presented himself as the quintessential teacher with blackboard and chalk as he went around the country giving lessons in nationalism" (Delaney 1995:188-9). I describe how the Generals "teach" Burmans this same lesson. In portraying Aung San Suu Kyi as Other in many different ways, the regime seeks to create the perception among the populace that she is ineligible for political leadership.

The major threat to the regime within the urban centers of Myanmar comes from the National League for Democracy (NLD). Universities can be closed and monasteries can be sealed off, but the NLD refuses to disband or cease speaking out against the regime. In particular, Nobel Peace Prize winner, Aung San Suu Kyi poses a special risk because her

father is revered as the father of Burmese Independence and the founder of the Army. He is thus the ancestral progenitor of the SLORC/SPDC. In addition, Aung San Suu Kyi's popularity is such that her death or extradition could cause rioting which may lead to revolution. The technique which the junta has decided upon is to undermine NLD support through arrest and intimidation of its members and supporters, and through an intensive propaganda campaign in which up to half of the State newspapers may be devoted to anti-Aung San Suu Kyi articles on any one day. Aung San Suu Kyi has recently commented on these personal attacks. She notes that:

> It has been remarked by journalists that never elsewhere have they come across such vicious attacks carried out by the state media against a single individual as takes place in Burma. The newspapers controlled by the military regime (which calls our country Myanmar) regularly print articles vilifying me. There are times when such articles run daily for months without respite. Periodically, some of these articles are collected and brought out in book form. These books are, of course, widely advertised by the government controlled press (Aung San Suu Kyi 1998).

Arrest and intimidation is most difficult in Yangon simply because of the number of people involved and thus the propaganda campaign provides an additional warning to urban residents in case they are entertaining the notion of supporting the NLD.

This propaganda campaign aims to demonize Aung San Suu Kyi and to represent her as the antithesis of the Generals. In particular she is portrayed as politically inexperienced, non-human, and anti-Buddhist. The most common way in which Aung San Suu Kyi is portrayed as unfit to participate in the political process in Myanmar, however, is her gender. Gender stereotypes are exaggerated in State propaganda to forever exclude women from Burmese political life.

The personality and motivation analysis conducted by the Ministry of Information appeared almost every day during the course of the fieldwork. In addition to Aung San Suu Kyi, another female adversary of the military dictatorship is New York based, Maureen Aung Thwin, who is the director of the *Burma Project*. The junta categorizes these women by their feminine "nature" which they imply is inherently duplicitous and untrustworthy. One newspaper article stated that her "feminist nature makes Aung San Suu Kyi unsuitable to rule" (NLM 1996f:3). The State media cites as evidence of the dangerous aspects of the "feminine nature," the use by Aung San Suu Kyi and Maureen Aung Thwin of their "womanly wiles" (sic) to gain their objectives (objectives driven by greed, lust, and pride). The following report of Maureen Aung Thwin's actions appeared in the New Light of Myanmar in October 1996:

She got married with an American citizen...Such a one of marred genealogy has no right to say anything about Myanmar and there is no reason to believe what she says...She has been able to take money out of the [Soros] foundation using her womanly wiles and guiles in addition to the pretext of democracy and human rights (NLM 1996x:5).

The marriage of both Aung San Suu Kyi and Maureen Aung Thwin to non-Burmans is a considerable source of anxiety to the regime, and the fear of miscegenation described in the previous chapter is apparent in discourse relating to these political foes.

The true place for the Burmese woman is, in fact, the home. Women have no place in politics in the Union of Myanmar and since all public life is politicized, they have no place in the entire public sphere.[35] The State media reports that:

It is believed that there is no cause to care about and hold talks with an ordinary housewife [Aung San Suu Kyi], who had returned to the country just recently and had never even tasted pickled bamboo shoot curry,[36] in the matter of emergence of a new State (NLM 1996s:5).

The most common reference to Aung San Suu Kyi's "feminine nature" is to her alleged prostitution. From July to October in 1996 the State media published a series of linked articles suggesting that Aung San Suu Kyi engages in prostitution of both the body and the nation. Here we see the fusion of both a Buddhist (and older Hindu) notion of women as polluting and less spiritually pure (therefore, more corporeal) with the notion of male superiority and fitness to govern. Although these references may seem oblique or mild, there is no doubt in Myanmar as to the meaning behind the innuendoes. In September 1996 as part of a series of articles entitled *What is Aung San Suu Kyi? Whither goest she?*, the immorality of the Christian West is deplored and Aung San Suu Kyi is accused of adopting the "loose" values of the West. The article states that: "When other cultures are sowing the seed of devoted affection, the west is just like getting married [sic] just for the sake of mere convenience...As for the west they value their Christian culture only on paper" (NLM 1996q:3). This article was placed beside a piece chronicling bad queens and consorts[37] in Burmese history, again suggesting that Aung San Suu Kyi should be included in their ranks. It states that:

[35] The exception to this rule is the regime's use of the wives of the upper echelon of military leaders. These women are encouraged to take a visible role in promoting the myth that women's rights are a priority for the regime. The formation of the Maternal and Child Welfare Society and the Women's Entrepreneurial Association can be seen as finding a role for the "SLORC wives" and extends the regime's control throughout society. Like the term for family in Myanmar that translates directly as "mother-son group," the "SLORC wives" act as surrogates for the extension of State power at regional levels.

[36] The reference to pickled bamboo shoot curry signifies Aung San Suu Kyi's foreignness. The junta seeks to portray Aung San Suu Kyi as ignorant of common Burmese habits and everyday practices.

[37] The title of this article holds an additional meaning as the most common term for a prostitute in Myanmar is "bad woman," *maema makaumbu* (မိန်းမမကောင်းကွဲး)

The savior of the nation was assailed with insolence by Daw Suu verbally, and in deed, (sic) too, she tried to push it into the abyss...If in such as [sic] situation she would persist in attempting to break up national solidarity and jeopardise national sovereignty...she would become a big, main culprit in Myanmar history. Narathu of Bagan Period, Nanmadaw Mai Nu of Konbaung Period and Supayalat of Yadanabon Period might possibly have some redeeming feature (sic) but Daw Suu has none (NLM 1996s:3).

In the following month articles appeared with continual references to Aung San Suu Kyi, prostitution, and "massage" which is often a pseudonym for prostitution in Southeast Asia. Prostitutes, those individuals masquerading as masseurs, and Aung San Suu Kyi, are accused of breaking the "good tradition[s]" of Myanmar. One article decries Burmese women engaged in prostitution in neighboring countries and says that what Aung San Suu Kyi is doing is worse. It states that the:

business of prostitution is no small one, that young Myanmar girls would be lured to go abroad as raw materials for it, and that those out to make dollars would pick selections of Myanmar belles to serve them up at sauna [sic] and massage parlours for the incessant influx of foreign tourists...Whoa, Saya, whoa! My coming here is not about such lurid news that is painful to the ears. I have come with some news that is even more so...Michael Aris is pulling the strings and his wife, Mrs. Michael Aris [Aung San Suu Kyi] is dancing accordingly, with proper time beat [sic], to the dictates of the CIA (NLM 1996aa:3).

For Burmans, however, the most blatant propaganda involves the descriptions of Aung San Suu Kyi's *hta-mein* or *htami* which the State media translates as "Myanmar woman's nether garments" [sic] (NLM 1996f:3). The regime implies that politics and sexual intercourse have become mixed for Aung San Suu Kyi, who pursues one in order to achieve the other. The State-sponsored media state that: "in some townships [NLD members]...quit en masse group after group, having lost confidence in the political aims that had gotten near the hem of Mrs Michael Aris' *hta-mein*"[38] (NLM 1996z:3). This propaganda peaked in July 1996 when the NLD were attempting to hold an annual congress. At this time the regime accused various groups of grabbing Aung San Suu Kyi's "nether garments." The media reported that "In the 'Htami' (Woman's nether garment) (sic) grabbing contest between the BCP [Burma Communist Party] and the West bloc, the latter is the winner" (NLM 1996f:3).

The overarching logic tying together the articles which daily attack the character of Aung San Suu Kyi is explained to Burmans through the metaphor of puppets (Figure 9 shows the cover of a State publication that depicts Aung San Suu Kyi as a puppet). The weak will of Aung San Suu Kyi, her "feminine" and "animal-like nature," allow the regime to posit not only that she will prostitute herself but also that she will prostitute her nation to Britain and the United States. Thus in an article in June of 1995 entitled, *Let's tell the truth,*

[38] Depending upon the degree of the propaganda, Aung San Suu Kyi is addressed by a variety of terms. In this case she is referred to as Mrs. Michael Aris, completely denying her any status as a Burman.

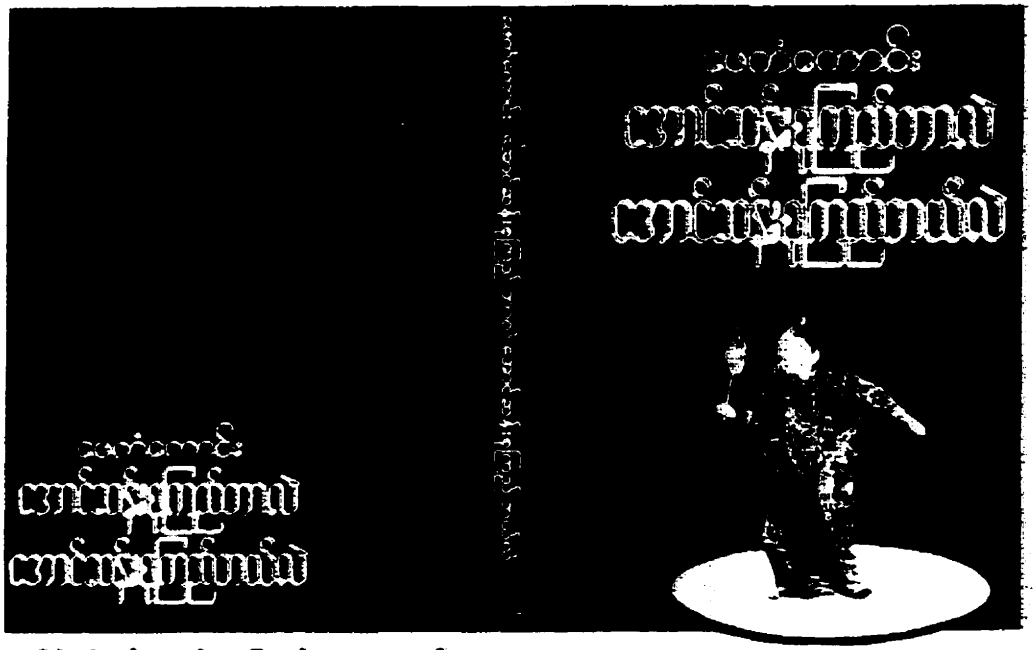
Figure 9: Aung San Suu Kyi is Portrayed as a Puppet by the Regime

What is Aung San Suu Kyi?
Whither goest she?

To place on record with historical evidences vividly and firmly portraying the characteristics of those who emerged at the turn of Myanma political history and practised political trickery;

What is Aung San Suu Kyi? Is she an advocate of democracy, or peace? Is she a person who disrupts peace and stability? Is she a person with her own concepts? Is she a puppet? Is she making dollars by engaging in democracy show-job?

Whither goest she? While trudging along the path of Myanma politics the person unwittingly loses the way; to keep the public informed assessment is thus made on where she is heading.



Limited copies. Rush your orders.
The book will be published before end of May.

News and Periodicals Enterprise

it is reported that Aung San Suu Kyi's "htami dress moved from its nether garments every time the puppeteer [Michael Aris] pulled the strings" (NLM 1996d). The regime has seized upon the familiar cultural idiom of puppetry as their model for explaining to the population how it has come to be that some Burmans are acting in ways that oppose the State. "K" has written about Myanmar's showcase for its particular forms of theater and music, the *pwe*, or festival. He writes that:

> The most famous of *pwes* are marionette *pwes*, or *yokethe pwes* which traditionally included 27 puppets, each up to a meter high. The cast includes...important figures in Burmese life. The Burmese marionette tradition is thought to have emerged in the second half of the eighteenth century as a brainchild of the Minister for Royal Entertainment, U Thaw. Puppets could act in ways that the sexually modest Burmese would not be able repeat in public (K 1981:14).

Aung San Suu Kyi is continually portrayed as a female puppet whose strings are being held and pulled by her husband, Michael Aris. She is: "a traitor puppet who is blatantly betraying the national cause and dancing to the delight of neo-colonialists Leik and Kan" [sic] (NLM 1996e:5). The "Leik-Kan" alliance is a reference to the Chinese Opium Wars of the nineteenth century when both Britain and the United States were breaking the Chinese law prohibiting the sale of opium to China. The regime alleges that Aung San Suu Kyi's husband acts as a messenger from the conspiratorial "Leik-Kan" alliance. That is, the junta portrays in the national media a conspiratorial, secret group comprised of governmental representatives of both the British and United States Governments that funds and dictates to Aung San Suu Kyi methods for overthrowing the regime in order to "recolonize" Myanmar. Aung San Suu Kyi is portrayed as a witless, hapless stooge of her "neocolonial masters." She and her husband, Michael Aris, thus indulge in "pillow talk" wherein "instructions" are relayed to her. The "dance" of the puppet is sexually suggestive, implying that Aung San Suu Kyi prostitutes herself before the "Leik-Kan" secret alliance.

The exaggeration of gender stereotypes is just one of the many levels of "Otherness" that the regime attributes to Aung San Suu Kyi in order to disqualify her from the political arena. She is also portrayed as an Indian Other, a lower class Other, an uncivilized, savage Other, an evil non-Buddhist Other, as well as a non-human Other.

The social status of Aung San Suu Kyi is called into question by the State media in order to suggest that only certain classes in Myanmar have the potential for leadership. The regime states that only social misfits and troublemakers attend her rallies. Denigrating cultural stereotypes of Burmans of South Asian origin are used to portray the democracy advocate as belonging to the very lowest social classes of Myanmar. She is called a *chetyar*

and those who attended her roadside speeches[39] are labeled as *awalas* and *jalebis*.[40] Her followers are further denigrated by their status being described as "not even that of the cleaners of the development committee"[41] (NLM 1996y:3).

Aung San Suu Kyi's status is further downgraded by her association with all things 'uncivilized', savage, and wild. This discourse is heavily influenced by Buddhism. The primary thrust has been to represent Aung San Suu Kyi as a disciple of the animistic *Nat* spirit cult and therefore un-Buddhist. She is also likened to other non-Buddhist elements in Burmese culture such as witches, sorcerers, and astrologers who divine the future. As noted in the previous chapter, the Union of Myanmar is an imagined Buddhist nation, and there is no place in this vision for non-Buddhists. She is thus depicted as an ogre, and "worse than evil spirits and wild cats" (NLM 1996p:5). The official media states that:

> Aung San Suu Kyi is a bad daughter who had not fulfilled her obligations toward her parents; Aung San Suu Kyi is a woman with an extreme pride much more than a true woman should possess and went after fame with a vain glory [sic] and is a selfish person. Aung San Suu Kyi is a person who fails to understand the gratitude she owed to the State and is evil educated [sic] person like an ogre...Aung San Suu Kyi has chosen a foreigner who is not of own [sic] race and blood as her spouse and has given birth to two sons of mixed blood (NLM 1996s:5).

The inappropriateness of Aung San Suu Kyi as a political leader is explained by the Information Ministry in terms of her animal-like nature which is concerned only with survival and sexual intercourse. Routinely Aung San Suu Kyi is portrayed as the antithesis of a good Buddhist for indulging in quackery, black magic, and sorcery. Examples of such pronouncements include:

> Though the Sayamagyi employed black magician's means as in a saying "The more critical the patient's condition, the happier the quack doctor", things did not turn out as she expected (NLM 1996t:5).

> Don't consult a fortune teller! It is certain that there will be traffic closure [sic] tomorrow due to the interference of the sorceress (NLM 1996y:3).

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[39] As noted earlier, after her release from house arrest, Aung San Suu Kyi and other leading members of the NLD gave speeches by standing behind the fence of Aung San Suu Kyi's compound so as not to violate the law which forbids freedom of assembly in public places. Known as the "democratic fora," (Carey 1997:18) NLD supporters stood outside her home to hear the speeches which the regime disallowed by blocking off access to her house in late 1996.

[40] These are Indian terms referring to the "lowest class" of occupations which traditionally Indians performed for the British in Myanmar.

[41] The Yangon City Development Committee (YCDC) hires "cleaners" to dredge out lakes, sweep away garbage and to perform other manual chores.

As they were not those who came to watch the nat-pwe[42] or the roadside magician's show (NLM 1996y:3).

The "traffic closure" refers to the blockading of streets around Aung San Suu Kyi's compound by the junta to restrict NLD political activities including the weekend roadside speeches. The regime's propaganda portrays the longer commuting times for city workers that has resulted from these road closures as due to the selfish nature of the democracy advocate. The "roadside magicians's show" also refers to the NLD's speeches on Saturday and Sunday afternoons. These political rallies are labeled as *Nat* pwe's and magical shows by the junta to stress the insignificance and fantasy-like nature of the NLD's aspirations to participate in the national political process. The regime also likens Aung San Suu Kyi to a *Natkadaw*, a female priestess of *Nats*. Former Prime Minister, U Nu has written of the intense sexual appetites, polygamous natures, seductive beauty, and semen-less orgasms which characterize *Nats*, and which places them firmly in contradiction with Buddhist morality (U Nu 1988:4-9).

Thus far I have been concerned with elaborating not only the discrimination against women, certain races, classes, and religions in Myanmar, but also the way in which these assumptions and exaggerated stereotypes are transferred to Aung San Suu Kyi to portray her as fundamentally Other, alien to all that Burmans recognize as familiar and bearing legitimate authority for leadership. I have suggested that the metaphor of puppetry is used as a logical and culturally familiar means of tying these very different categorizations of Aung San Suu Kyi together.

The metaphor of puppets is also emblematic of the broader program of the Generals to stop other sources of information reaching the population. Those who control the strings of the Burmese puppets also control what constitutes "truth" in Myanmar. The only truth that the regime allows to exist within its borders is of the existence of a military state inhabited by Burmese marionettes. The regime's continual use of the puppet metaphor is also revealing of the junta's conception of the Burmese population as gullible children who need to be led. This is a major flaw in their reasoning, however, because it drastically underestimates the intelligence and resourcefulness of the Burman population who are acutely aware of the Doublespeak being promulgated and who, as we shall see, have a series of adages which remind them in times of doubt of the duplicity of the regime's propaganda.

A fundamental error lies in the use of familiar cultural symbols in its routine propaganda. Although effective techniques such as desemanticization have been employed by the Generals, they have underestimated the ability of their captive population to also employ such symbols and elements of Burmese cultural life to their advantage. The attempt to use gender inequality and Burmese stereotypes in nationalist discourse as justification for the military's fitness to rule the country has not yet succeeded in changing this ideology

[42] A *Nat* pwe is a festival which propitiates local *Nats* and is a popular form of entertainment, especially around Mandalay.

of male superiority into a hegemonic discourse. A counter ideology exists where Aung San Suu Kyi is glorified as "The Lady" and whose gendered attributes are used in a positive way by the opposition movement to justify her fitness to rule. Houtman has documented the existence of an "Aung San Suu Kyi cult," part of the long tradition of charismatic leaders in Myanmar (Pye 1963). Houtman reports that Aung San Suu Kyi is also referred to as the "Goddess of University Avenue," *tekato langa naqthami* (တက္ကသိုလ်လမ်းက နတ်သမီး)[43] and a "female *bodhisattva*" (a *bodhisattva* is a future Buddha) and notes the reported thickening of the right side of Buddha images in Myanmar which is believed by many Burmans to be a good omen for the success of Aung San Suu Kyi as well as testifying to her spiritual strength (Houtman 1999, forthcoming). Thus familiar religious/supernatural beliefs can also be used to create counter ideologies to the program of naturalizing gender inequalities currently underway in the State media. In subsequent chapters I describe the appropriation of the puppet metaphor by Burmans as another counter ideology. We will see how the metaphor of puppetry allows Burmans to create hidden spaces often inaccessible to the regime.

4.4 Censorship and Self-Censorship

In the previous two sections I have suggested that new forms of intelligence gathering and propaganda dissemination are accompanied by the careful realigning of familiar cultural idioms and symbols with State ideology and the accoutrements of nationhood. In the case of Aung San Suu Kyi, cultural stereotypes are used to shift public opinion away from her revolutionary potential. These new methods of control are effective means of making reality into a confusing and surreal experience where the "truth" has to be sifted from the large volume of "SLORC/SPDC noise" on a daily basis. Perhaps even more important than convincing the population of its own version of the present/future, the government must block out all alternate forms of information which would otherwise allow Burmans to construct their own visions of the future. In the following sections I describe several such censorship attempts by the military regime and the possible long-term consequences of such censorship.

The arrest of western journalists has become a commonplace means of stopping the "truth" getting out. For example, on September 29, 1996, a photographer who had been given a press visa to enter Myanmar was placed under "hotel arrest" and a white board was used to erase his video footage. In December 1996 during the student demonstrations, a Japanese journalist was hospitalized after suffering a beating at the hands of the military, and other journalists and activists have been bodily searched for film which has been

[43] Although Houtman has correctly, I believe, translated this term as "female goddess," the phrase literally translates as female Nat spirit, and colloquially means "prostitute." These derogatory, anti-Buddhist meanings are thus appropriated to connote respect and spiritual strength as they are newly applied to Aung San Suu Kyi.

confiscated. After each of these incidents of arrest and "detaining," the regime did its best to "disappear" evidence. This includes the jailing of Burmans and the expulsion of foreigners. The *New Light of Myanmar* ran a story in August 1996, stating that: "Action [had been] taken against Win Htein and accomplices for subversive acts to destabilize nation" (NLM 1996k:7,12). This concerned an interview that U Win Htein gave journalist Evan Williams where he pointed out to the cameraman a pair of M.I. following U Win Htein on motorbikes. He was sentenced to seven years jail and was moved from Insein jail to Myitkina jail, away from family and friends who could provide him with food, medical supplies, and psychological support. Official media stated that: "Win Htein and the others were sentenced for malicious acts aimed at destruction of the peace and stability of the state...Win Htein agitated and organised members of the NLD...to provide news and figures that would be detrimental to the agricultural plans of the state" (Reuters 1996:5). Recently Daw San San, a prominent NLD leader, was jailed for twenty five years under a 1923 Official Secrets Law for giving an interview to the BBC (Lintner 1998) and six political activists, four of them former members of the All Burma Democratic Student's Forum (ABDSF) were sentenced to death (Financial Times 1998; Bangkok Post 1998). "Disappearing" alternate versions of the truth continues apace in Myanmar.

The junta is particularly wary of visual images because of the strong belief that "seeing is believing." For example, most Burmans will take as true reported sightings of ghosts and visions, as well as the performance of magic, miracles, and so on. It is hard work for the government to make people disbelieve images and therein lies the power of television. The regime was particularly startled to learn that within a few hours of the mass arrests of National League for Democracy members at their 1996 Annual Conference, video footage and a mounting tally of the number of arrests was being aired by media outlets around the world. Even more annoying, the BBC and VOA routinely report these numbers in their Burmese language broadcasts which means that the vast majority of Burmans who cannot speak English, are able to hear news about their country which is otherwise censored within Myanmar. Through this episode the Generals became aware of the speed with which international media services can generate news. Subsequently, journalist visas became tightly controlled and the regime began holding a monthly press conference so that it could feed the international media outlets their own version of the "truth." These press conferences were halted after several months when it became obvious that the attending journalists would not refrain from asking "hard" political questions and writing about the regime's refusal to answer such questions. The most recent strategy is to deny visas to most journalists and to send out an "Information Sheet" to journalists and the ***BurmaNet*** to disseminate their vision of the Union of Myanmar to an international audience.

The control of international broadcasts is thus of great concern to the military junta and it occasionally blocks the BBC and VOA radio signals to stop alternate "truths" entering Myanmar. The regime has issued a two volume tome entitled, *A Skyful of Lies*, the title referring to the satellite and radio transmissions from the BBC and VOA (Figure 10 shows a cartoon that appeared in the State media suggesting that these radio stations "slant" the truth). In the neighbourhood in which I lived for several months (an area containing army barracks and high ranking military officials), the position of satellite dishes are hurriedly altered during the periods in which mass arrests of NLD members and suspected supporters occurs. The dishes are rotated such that they can no longer receive the BBC as the regime conducts "surprise" spot-checks to arrest people for watching the BBC.[44] The common belief on the streets of Yangon is that there are only three thousand legally

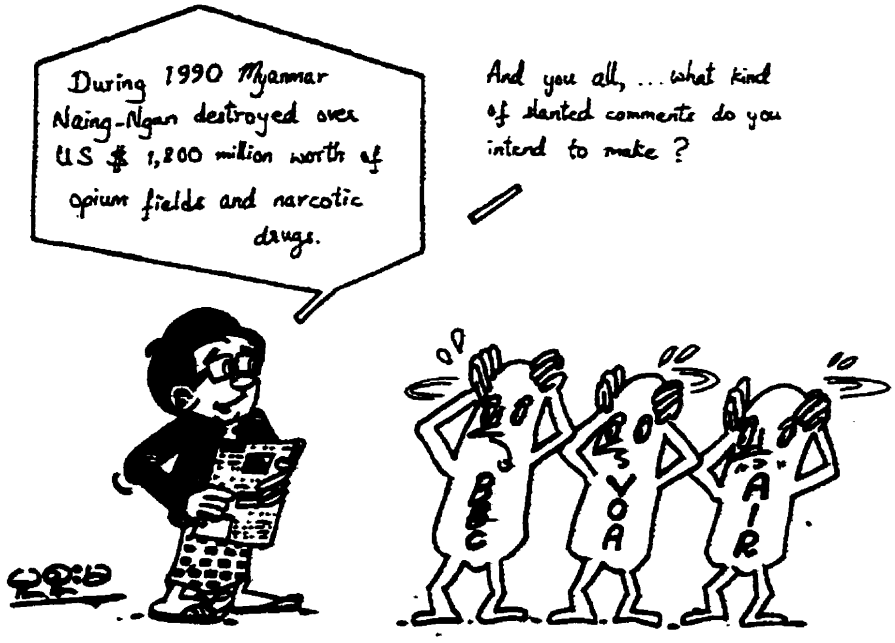


Figure 10: A Skyful of Lies: Cartoon Appearing in State Media

[44] Of course, a bribe ensures that adequate warning is given of "surprise" checks.

registered satellite dishes in Myanmar, the thousands of other dishes are thus illegal. I bought a "receiver box" (satellite receiver) during the June 1996 arrest period and it took Burmese friends several hours to find an electronics shop that would admit to selling satellite receivers. The receivers had been dispersed to relatives in the various townships in preparation for the stores being raided by the government. These manual methods of control rely upon the fear that rumors and propaganda create to stop Burmans watching and listening to information from "outside."

A more effective means for "disappearing" alternate versions of the "truth" takes the crude form of 'ripping out, inking over, and blacking out' Burmese written expression. Academic Anna Allott has written a short history of press censorship in Myanmar. Beginning with the Press Review Department of the U Nu government which began censoring material in 1961, an ongoing period of denial of freedom of speech and expression has occurred (Allott 1994:5). Allott documents the arrest of newspaper editors, the cessation of all publications in 1963, and the creation of the Ministry of Information newspapers and journals. Allott further details the way in which the combination of the formation of The Press Scrutiny Board (1962), the Printers' and Publishers' Registration Act of 1962, the Printers' and Publishers' Central Registration Board (1975), arrests of editors and writers, and author's Blacklists, led to a situation in which, by 1982, "the process of Censorship in Burma had settled into a routine that appears to be in place today, when *nearly all* manuscripts...of books have to be submitted [to the government] before printing" (Allott 1994:11-2).The author concludes that:

> the majority of pieces published in Burma today do not have any overt or hidden political message, as most works with even a hint of such messages are refused publication. The consequent trivialization of Burmese imaginative literature has been immensely discouraging to all serious and independent-minded writers. Some feel that they can now only produce work that is intrinsically without worth (Allott 1994:3).

Anthropologist Jennifer Leehey has documented the censorship of "hidden transcripts" when they break through into public discourse, particularly through the satirical methods of clowns and cartoonists. Using the medium of cartoons she shows how "the very existence of the cartoons reveals a shared, not-quite-public spirit of opposition" (Leehey 1997:154). Leehey's analysis of the cartoons underscores the conflicting realities and alternate visions of Myanmar and it's population which, despite the best efforts of the junta, continue to exist. The cartoons:

> raise questions about the impact of economic changes and the new "development" projects which are underway. They satirize SLORC propaganda, and point to the gross inefficiencies of the state bureaucracy. On a more subtle level, these cartoons reflect the Burmese recognition of the grotesque absurdity of the world they live in, the reality they are obliged to accept. They reveal a world in which surface appearances

cannot be trusted, and norms of morality and rationality are being steadily eroded...they suggest a sense of isolation and powerlessness. And yet, they are also hopeful, for they show that the SLORC has not succeeded, in the words of one observer, in turning the people of Burma into "mindless sheep" (Leehey 1997:154).

The "hands-on" approach to destroying visual images, reducing to static international broadcasts, and destroying literary and artistic works which may contain guarded political or economic commentary is undoubtably crude but effective. However the long-term and ultimately more efficient result of such manual censorship involves the waves of panic, fear, suspicion, and rumor that such censorship evokes. Each time an act of censorship is witnessed or rumored, many frightened Burmans begin a process of self-censorship. Thus in the same way outlined above that propaganda dissemination and intelligence gathering functions, self-censorship leads to a questioning of those taken for granted assumptions about the way in which daily life is experienced and expressed. Self-censorship is a step into a gray future where confusion is possible and where complicity becomes more difficult to define.[45]

4.5 Informers and Informing: Dissolving Boundaries

A variety of crude yet powerful forms of information censorship and dissemination are described above. Nothing creates more self-censorship and fear however than the possibility of one's actions and words being reported to the regime. Informers are the key to the military junta's maintenance of control. Informers create an extraordinary amount of fear, covertness, suspicion, and self-censorship. When I asked a forty-year-old man why he was afraid to go to Aung San Suu Kyi's house on the weekends to listen to her speeches he replied: "it is because of government spies in the crowd and because they have taken over every sector of Burma." In effect, the Burman population take upon themselves the task of the military. As the following sections reveal, it becomes unnecessary for the regime to place informers in public places and use recording and listening devices to stop political planning and dissension: the level of fear in Yangon and Mandalay is such that the merest possibility of informers and "bugs" is a powerful force for self-censorship.

The regime will pay anyone who provides them with information on a once-off, ad hoc, or regular basis (an essential form of survival for many impoverished families). Although the junta has its own Military Intelligence (M.I.) it also makes use of the legion of Burmese who sell information whenever they happen across it, and they cleverly use the Burmese tendency to enjoy gossiping, spying, and informing which has grown up as a

[45] Discerning strategies such as complicity and collaboration is an anthropological exercise. Burmans don't start out with the assumption that they must resist the government. As I explain in later chapters, the ability to define "resistance" and the formulation of strategies to agitate for change is a process in which the majority poor of Myanmar cannot afford to participate.

consequence of a violent, hierarchical society.

There are then three classes of informers in Myanmar. The first type are the professional informers from departments such as the Department of Special Investigations (DDSI) and the Bureau of Special Investigations (BSI). The second class of informers are hired, or passive informers who stay in one place and listen and pass on anything they hear. This can include school teachers or tea shop owners. And finally there are informers of opportunity. I often heard it remarked in Myanmar by the diplomatic community that the Burmese love informing. I propose rather, a climate of informing has grown out of the intense gossip which maintains relationships in the villages and from the climate of censorship and arbitrariness. This uncertain climate has led not only to the need to find out information about the situation in order to make informed action plans, but also the arbitrary economic system and its inherent corruption which makes informing a necessity for survival for some families. The dividing of informants into three categories implies that these are voluntary informers and this is not so. Hotels are required to hire government informers, and individuals are threatened and coerced to become informers. This situation has led to people informing *in case the government finds out about a piece of information which that individual did not inform the government about.* Informing becomes a necessary form of self preservation. A hotel worker, Ma Mya Mya Thein, related to me that:

"Sometimes M.I. come to the ...[Hotel] and ask me."
"What do they ask you?"
"A lot of questions, For example: Monique- what time did she leave? When will she come back?"
"Are you scared of M.I?"
"I don't like them. Sometimes they pretend to be beggars, sometimes they pretend to be fools."

I asked Ma Mya Mya Thein:
"Why don't you go to Suu Kyi's house?"
To which she relied:
"They take photos and sometimes they come in the middle of the night, at midnight, and arrest people."

This young woman's personal experience with M.I. makes it logical for her assume that informers are everywhere. The strategic placement of M.I. in areas where Burmans congregate (such as tea shops and trishaw 'gates') serves to further this belief. Foucault argues that the modern form of deployment of state power consists of making citizens believe that the exercise of such power is permanent. The myth of informers everywhere, all of the time, is a classic example of the diffusion throughout society of the operating

mechanism of Bentham's Panopticon. Foucault writes that the "major effect of the Panopticon" is:

> to arrange things [such] that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; [so that] that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary...Bentham laid down the principle that power should be visible and unverifiable (Foucault [1979]1995:201).

The almost unanimous perception in Myanmar that informers are everywhere is certainly a triumph of the panoptic model of state power. It leads to an ever-narrowing circle of friends whom an individual can trust. As I discuss further on, only being able to trust school friends is evidence of the alienation and breakdown of networks of trust that the Generals have successfully engendered.

Perhaps the most frightened section of the population (with the possible exception of those involved in the democracy movement) is the public service. Public servants cannot have overt views on any topics relating to politics or the economy.[46] Their livelihoods are bound to the public service because if they lose their job they lose not only their occupation but also their house and their pension, and their lives immediately become much more difficult because they are no longer on the "right" side. Burmans rely upon "glue," *kaq* (ကပ်) to fix relationships and networks of advantage between "patrons," "clients," and "friends" in place. The public service, like the military, is a useful source of "glue." Losing access to privileges and to certain facets of the black market (such as fuel) can be a serious economic disadvantage.

Not only are informers a threat to public servants during office hours, they are also at risk from informers in the community at large. All public servants must sign a statement pledging to record any conversations with foreigners and never to discuss politics with anyone. But these rules need not be written because they are basic survival skills which Burmans learn very early in life as U Swe Swe, an educated Burmese male explains:

> "You will never discuss any politics with anyone. You will tend to talk to very close friends you went to school with about politics, but no one else you meet. They have informers.I don't think someone I am going to open my heart to is going to be an informer. Informers are probably effective...the blue collars [sic] [shrugs] but I wouldn't discuss politics with anyone on the street. Informers become informers because they're paid. I don't think a lot. I don't work in an organization for that reason. I don't want to deal with people I don't want to. I don't want to be stumbling across informers. But for my friends who work in government offices

[46] In 1988 many government records were burnt during the democracy uprising. The newly formed SLORC made all government employees fill in a series of questions about their degree of loyalty to the State. Those who could not denounce the democracy movement and pledge 100% loyalty to the regime were, for the most part, allowed to resign their positions (normally government servants are bonded for up to ten years).

who have responsible positions or official ranks, they have to be very careful. Because informers are planted there by the government. So they are forced to deal with these people. You have to be careful when talking to these people. All these hotels, these restaurants, they have informers there. They are forced to take on five percent government employees, take them on and employ them. Partly also because the government is calling themselves security conscious, they need to know everything. Knowing everything makes them feel secure, that's why they need informers."

U Swe Swe comes from a well connected family and has lived all his life within the limits imposed by government censors and the necessary forms of self-censorship. Like Ma Mya Mya Thein above, he practices self-censorship in public and even in private unless he can be sure of the loyalties of his relatives.

The new forms of both intelligence gathering and the dissemination of state ideology that are described above are designed to stop alternate visions of the future and the existing present. There is only one "truth" which may be voiced and enacted in the public domain, and this truth is of the centrality of the military in Burmese life and the legitimacy of the Generals as the true inheritors of the monarchical mantle of leadership. The longer term consequences of intensive surveillance and propaganda is self-censorship which lessens the fear of "being caught." Self-censorship is a powerful prophylactic against the fear which the regime engenders but it also creates confusion about what is real and true and it leads to a situation where it is almost impossible to separate out analytic concepts such as "resistance" from "complicity" and "acceptance." Such an artificial separation, as made frequently in the anthropological literature, fails to consider the confusion generated by fear and the multiple strategies that, in this case, Burmans may adopt at any one time to reduce this burden of fear. As the following chapter reveals however, the regime is not content to control the flow of information in the public domain, it also seeks to control, reconstruct, and regulate space (including the distinction between the "public" and the "private"). The primary mechanism for controlling space in Myanmar is to control Burmese bodies.

Chapter Five

Power, Space, and the Body

> *Benjamin shared with us other émigrés the error that spirit and cunning can possibly accomplish something against a force which no longer recognizes spirit as something autonomous, but only as a means to its own ends, and therefore no longer fears a confrontation with it.*
>
> *(Adorno 1962:121)*

5.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter I examined the control of information and the monitoring of Burmese conversations, movements, and associations. The techniques detailed above form one arm of the broader strategy to enact the vision of a Buddhist totalitarian utopia, a "mountain of gold," as dreamed by the Burmese Generals. The second arm of this strategy entails the exercise of power in a landscape of domination and the movement of bodies through particular spatial configurations. In other words, the spatialization of power through the body. I am concerned with elaborating the ways in which Burmese urban spaces and Burmese bodies are being reconfigured, reconstituted, and reborn in their new incarnations as tools of the State. Due to the rule making it illegal for Burmans to talk to foreigners about politics, very few Burmans are willing to speak out on this topic, and such discussions can lead to an increase in the burden of fear that is already carried. In this chapter then, I am not able to present a great deal of narrative evidence. I have compensated in part for this limitation by detailing a series of tactics carried out by the regime to control the movements of Burmans. In this and the following chapter I continue to illustrate the many layers of domination that exist, and the pervasiveness of military power throughout the social body.

5.2 Deterritorialization: The Spatialization of Power

I have described earlier the most direct means of repressing the urban populations of Myanmar. I turn now to describing less obvious techniques of domination employed by the regime, techniques that are concerned with the control of space through the reconfiguration of both Burmese urban spaces and Burmese bodies. One of the many ways

in which the military junta contests and reconstructs reality is through a process of deterritorialization. Several categories of deterritorialization are discussed in this section. Other categories, deterritorialization via the construction of narcoarchitecture, and the deterritorialization of bodies, appear later.

"Deterritorialization" is a term used by both Franco (1985) and Feldman (1991). Feldman argues that when terror becomes a means to enforce domination, violence is the primary force that maps social space (Feldman 1991:35). Although (or perhaps, because) violence spatializes power, we need not assume that "cultures of terror" are uniform, mono-dimensional constructions. A notion of physical and/or symbolic sanctuaries is useful as it adds temporal, geographic, and metaphorical depth to analyses of cultures of terror, reminding us of the uncertainty, ambiguity and unevenness of the terror which emanates from the "space of death" (Taussig 1987:1992).

A useful tool for analyzing the way in which individuals experience life under a totalitarian regime is the the concept of the sanctuary space. In recent work on Cambodia I suggested that Buddhist sites such as Angkor Wat have long been seen in Southeast Asia as sanctuary spaces. I further suggested that reclaiming these social spaces from areas of violence and warfare may establish coherency in local worlds destabilized by violence (Skidmore 1994;1996). Drawing upon Bachelard's concept of the "sanctuary" as an immune space, Jean Franco has noted that the home, Church, and convent have a long history in Latin America of being a secure and thus a sanctuary space. She argues that:

> In Latin America, this sense of refuge and the sacredness that attaches to certain figures like the mother, the virgin, the nun and the priest acquire even greater significance, both because the Church and the home retained a traditional topography and traditional practices over a very long period, and also because during periods when the state was relatively weak these institutions were the only functioning social organizations (Franco 1985:416).

Franco warns of the consequences that destroying a sanctuary space can have for individuals and collectivities, which she refers to as a eulogized space (Franco 1985:416). But in Latin America sanctuary spaces such as the home, convent, Church, and even diplomatic space have been invaded by "the overarmed military." Sanctuary spaces have been cleverly suborned by the State in a process known as deterritorialization. Franco contends such an assault:

> is not as incompatible as it might seem with the military government's organization of its discourse around the sanctity of Church and family. Indeed these convenient abstractions, which once referred to well-defined physical spaces, have subtly shifted their change in meaning...This process can be described as "deterritorialization" (Franco 1985:415-6).

The subtle yet effective shift in ranges of meanings and the referents additionally attached to symbols is consistent with Bachelard's emphasis on the temporal and spatial aspects of knowledge acquisition and retention (Game 1995), and on the not always fully conscious space in which images are created by individuals, and meaning attributed to them (Serlin 1992). The use of deterritorialization by the State in both Latin America and Myanmar leads to the disordering of life worlds, an arbitrariness rules, whereby no one feels safe. As one diplomat told me: "You don't know where the walls are anymore" (Jon Philp, personal communication 1997).

In conjunction with the monastery, the pagoda (or wat) is the primary "imagined"[47] sanctuary space in Theravada Buddhist Southeast Asia (Skidmore 1994;1996). Other sanctuary spaces also exist, such as the monastery and the home. As in Latin America these are feminized spaces in the sense that monks vow celibacy and thus are differentiated from "men." Moreover, the manager of the household in Myanmar is traditionally female. Unlike monasteries, pagodas are communal spaces available to women and families. The pagoda is a sanctuary space usually surrounded by a lush garden setting where families picnic on weekends. Lovers are sanctioned by their elders to meet in the pagoda grounds and a wide variety of healers offer their services, including astrologers and hermit monks. Since the British invasion of Myanmar however, when Burmese forces massed at their most sacred site, the Shwedagon pagoda, the pagoda has taken on additional symbolic meaning as a political site whose sanctuary has been repeatedly violated by the regime. During the colonial period, the wearing of shoes by Europeans inside pagoda grounds became a central rallying point for pro-independence activists. The wearing of shoes within pagoda grounds became emblematic of the violation of Burmese sovereign space by the British. The National League for Democracy (NLD) has also attempted to hold rallies at the Shwedagon (thus contributing to its politicization), and the junta transports school children and other coerced groups to the Shwedagon to witness "nation building" ceremonies. In addition to these politicizations of the premier Buddhist sanctuary space, both the monastery and the pagoda grounds have been infiltrated by government officials and informers.

Perhaps the most significant manner in which sanctuary spaces have been deterritorialized in Myanmar is the colonization of the Sangha (Order of monks) by the junta. I mentioned earlier the monk rebellion which was repressed by the army in 1990, and the invasion of the monasteries in Mandalay. As in other parts of Theravada Buddhist Southeast Asia, a great majority of the male population become monks for at least three months as a sign of respect for their families, but many stay for several years, or re-enter an order upon retirement. Informers were placed in monasteries, and all monks were

[47] The fact that traditionally the predominant political institutions in Southeast Asia have been the Sangha and the Monarchy means that pagodas and monasteries have never existed as isolated, non-political spaces. However, there is no doubt from the testimonies given by psychiatric patients and recovering heroin addicts (chapters 9-11) that the pagoda remains a dominant symbol of freedom and safety in the Burmese cultural imagination and is a central model for experience, its expression, and action upon the world.

forced to sign a declaration of endorsement for the government and pledge not to "disrupt the stability of the State." Following this, a campaign was initiated to suborn many Burmese monks. On March 16, 1997, seven years after the Generals had begun their campaign of buying monks televisions, trips abroad, lavish new buildings, and so on, political agitation by monks in Mandalay surfaced again. During a period of street rioting in Mandalay,[48] monks demonstrated against reports that Mandalay's holiest Buddha image at the Maha Muni pagoda had been vandalized, as well as against a series of other issues and allegations relating to the Sangha and their families. This protest spread to Yangon where the regime had begun blockading monks in their monasteries. One of the oldest Yangon monasteries, Mango Grove (Forest) (သရက်တော) Monastery was surrounded by barbed wire and barricades. Monks were warned to stay inside. The All Burma Young Monks' Union (ABYMU) report that over four hundred monks have been arrested in the ensuing unrest, and that the monks have been forcibly disrobed in prison. The *Payiyatti* Sangha examination for monks was postponed by the Generals and the monks sent back to their villages from the monasteries. The ABYMU have demanded that the regime release the monks it has arrested dating from the excommunication by monks of the SLORC in 1990 (the *Pattam Nikkujana Kamma* boycott) (ABYMU 1997). The invasion of monasteries by the military and its suborning of many monks in the years since the democracy uprising are evidence of the efficiency of the technique of deterritorialization. The monastery and the pagoda are no longer safe havens for those who wish to escape the politicization of Burmese life.

Deterritorialization occurs in several other ways in Yangon. One method is the renaming of the nation, townships, and streets. In Yangon it is rare to hear "Burma" or "Rangoon" used in everyday speech. Colonial names are replaced with names more appropriate to the new nation. War heroes, victorious warrior kings, and so on, are used to rewrite familiar locales with military figures. For example, Scott's Market has become General Aung San Market, named after the architect of Burmese Independence and the founder of the Army.

Quite often the renaming of roads and parks is preceded by the demolishing of existing structures and the rapid construction of new edifices. Whole city blocks disappear in a matter of days, it's population put onto trucks with very few belongings and forcibly relocated to the new townships that the government has established on rice fields outside the major cities. This exertion of control through physically uprooting people is a devastatingly successfully policy in the short term as it disables people's information and friendship networks, thus adding to feelings of alienation already rampant in Yangon.

[48] One diplomat described to me the way in which the SLORC manipulated anti-government protest into a religious hatred issue via the use of informers or, as he described the anti-Muslim demonstrations in Mandalay, "Monks in combat boots," referring to the infiltration of the Sangha by the army (i.e. informants) (Simeon Gilding, personal communication 1997).

Rewriting and rebuilding the landscape does not erase people's memories however. Underneath the government names there are local names for things. For example, although Yangon residents navigate by a building known as IBC (the optimistically named International Business Centre), there is not a soul in Yangon who does not know that the IBC (a large, white structure) has been built on the site of the "White Bridge," a scene of brutal repression by the SLORC where university students were murdered, "so that the white bridge ran red" (Greenwood 1994).

Relocating, rebuilding and renaming are, however, effective strategies in the longer term because both life spans and memories are comparatively short in Myanmar due to high infant mortality, maternal mortality, and the prevalence of diseases due to sanitation, high accidental death rates, and other poor health indicators. In addition, knowledge is most often handed down orally, especially during the Ne Win period and the first years of the SLORC regime when paper was extremely rare. Knowledge has traditionally been written on palm leaves[49] and kept in monasteries that until the British colonial period, was the primary source of written education. It is unusual to find paper and writing implements in Burmese houses (with the exception of the educated, upper class in the cities). A large percentage of the population was born after the Strike, or remember it as children. Thus the demolishing of structures, neighborhoods, lifestyles, and the rewriting of history to erase the red stains from the White Bridge eventually wins out in Myanmar.

The removing of a sense of both safety and familiarity is a potent tool of domination designed to initially confuse and eventually cause submission and a tacit acceptance of the new "reality" of the Union of Myanmar. Deterritorialization is however only a side effect of the restructuring of urban space, the main aim of which is to create an environment in which disciplined bodies participate in the joint projects of reproducing state ideology and creating a totalitarian utopia.

5.3 Burmese Phantasmagoria

Walter Benjamin has advocated a radical view of history, one in which the concept of "order" is extraordinary, where the potential for equality and revolutionary change are subsumed by a myth of prosperity. In the introduction I quoted journalistic statements wondering how violence could "still" exist in the world at the end of the twentieth century. Benjamin has written of this view of history and this myth of peace and harmony in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. He writes that:

> The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the "state of emergency" in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly recognize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against Fascism. One reason why Fascism has a chance is that in the name of

[49] (hence the circular Burmese script which minimizes the tearing of the palm leaves)

progress its opponents treat it as a historical norm. The current amazement that the things we are experiencing are "still" possible in the twentieth century is *not* philosophical. This amazement is not the beginning of knowledge- unless it is the knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable (Benjamin 1969:257).

In *Passagen Werk*, Benjamin presents a "secular, sociopsychological theory of modernity as a dreamworld, and a conception of collective "awakening" from it as synonymous with revolutionary class consciousness" (Buck-Morss 1989:253). Benjamin's review of history had convinced him that a particular political constellation of "national unity, patriotism, and consumerism" recurred throughout history and this formula "inevitably resulted in the betrayal of the working class" (Buck-Morss 1989:322). This circumstance constitutes, for Benjamin, a state of emergency. Benjamin explains this theory with references to Arcades, state spectacles, and the body as commodity.

In the introduction I defined the term "body" in line with Foucault's notion of the disciplined body of modernity but added a caveat that such a model needed to be grounded in the phenomenological, experiential dimension of everyday life. Within the Burmese cultural field I have stated that there are multiple systems of signs in which State hegemony looms, and is inscripted onto the bodies of Burmans who become mobile signifiers of State domination. I have argued that for Foucault, the body is central to the political economy of the modern state, that the state creates productive and subjected bodies (as do corporations). Bodies are both docile and automated. Automated bodies become mobile units of power, fragments of "mobile space" (Foucault [1979]1995:164). The distribution of individuals in space occurs through a number of techniques, or "Disciplines" that organize space in certain ways. As I noted in the introduction, "Discipline": "individualizes bodies by a location that does not give them a fixed position, but distributes them and circulates them in a network of relations" (Foucault [1979]1995:144-5). The disciplined body is thus inscribed with state power, complicit in its own surveillance, docile and automated.

Such a conception of the body is apparent in both the work of Benjamin, and in contemporary Myanmar where, as the state moves from pre-modern to modern, a new Burmese body is being created, one better suited to capitalist discipline. Benjamin noted that with the advent of Arcades, the precursors to modern shopping malls, and other materialistic fantasylands such as World Expositions, the "bourgeois dream of democracy" underwent a form of censorship in the early twentieth century where "freedom was equated with the ability to consume" (Benjamin quoted in Buck-Morss 1989:322). This is precisely the version of "democracy" promulgated by the Burmese military regime. Model Burmese citizens (that is, the friends and families of the Generals and those willing to buy into their system of corruption) are entitled to partake in this totalitarian form of democracy, and recently Secretary No. 1, Khin Nyunt, has stated that the creation of a middle class is a

prerequisite for Burmese democracy, a democracy that is increasingly referred to by the Generals as "disciplined democracy" (Bangkok Post 1997).

In this section I am concerned with describing emergent forms of Burmese "phantasmagoria" (following Benjamin) and with defining the "spectacles" created by the military regime. The Burmese body is used as a commodity in these spectacles to establish the army as the focal point of State power and the basis of all social life (following Taussig 1997). I also describe the rapid construction boom in Yangon and Mandalay as a kind of "heroin" spectacle that provides not only enduring symbols of State domination of the landscape and the population but also a convenient forum for laundering money produced by the heroin trade.

Beginning with the phenomenon of the Arcades, Benjamin describes the re-enchantment of post-industrial Europe[50] with the range of new consumer goods encased in a glass fairyland (the Arcades). Benjamin noted the changing perception of "people as producers" to "people as consumers." He adopts Marx's definition of "phantasmagoria" to describe this process, "to refer to the deceptive appearances of commodities as "fetishes" in the workplace...for Benjamin, the key to the new urban phantasmagoria was not so much the commodity-in-the-market as the commodity-on-display" (Buck-Morss 1989:81). The Arcades gave the impression of novelty through the variety of material objects available for consumption. Rather than selecting a fabric for a milliner to make a hat, Arcades stocked an array of hats which could be visibly consumed even if the customer could not afford to purchase a hat. The Arcades gave an allusion of plenty and of wealth with large expanses of glass and bright lighting.

The emergent forms of modernism described by Benjamin in France and Germany are evident in the envisaged utopia of the Union of Myanmar. In the past five years the junta has constructed its own "fairy grottoes." Burmese Fairylands include Joint-Venture Asian Department Stores, "Duty-Free" Stores, and karaoke nightclubs. In the Sino-Burmese Department Stores, gaping Burmans ride up and down escalators, unable to afford the products well guarded by the staff. The escalators are free, however, and represent as great a spectacle as the rows of glittering Chinese cookware. The banks of television screens in these department stores are similarly the scene of mass gatherings as scores of monks (from Up-country, I was repeatedly told) come daily to watch Bon Jovi music videos on this latest miracle of technology. Then there is the ultimate in surreal phantasms, "Happyland" and "Fantasyland" amusement parks where young couples and

[50] Here Benjamin is referring to Weber's thesis that modernity has issued in a new form of rationality that informs the state bureaucracy, capitalist-market relations, law and many other social elements. This rationality demystified and de-enchanted the world, a condition that Benjamin believes is reversed with the advent of mass commodification.

groups of young men wander around eating "snacks."[51] They cannot afford to sample the wonders of Fantasyland, such as video games, because they have spent all their money on the entrance fee. A few wealthy young men playing video games are thus the models on which the Fantasyland or Happyland goers base their experience of the Modern. Like the Department Stores, this is a voyeuristic experience.

Benjamin extends his concept of phantasmagoria to include political phantasmagoria. The most ostentatious form of this emergent modernism is the Spectacle. Taussig states that "Occasionally these everyday productions, routinized as they are, have to blow up and achieve the scale of the spectacular so as to maintain the explosive promise of [military dictatorship]" (Taussig 1997:149). Benjamin sees State spectacles, such as Armed Forces Day, as evidence of this conjunction of violence and modernity as embodied in mass consumption. Spectacles are thus enacted narratives of State power (and enforced participation and witnessing) which both naturalize and mythify State dominance.

The list of State spectacles in Myanmar is long, but the most common ones are the mass rallies held all over Myanmar to denounce "internal and external traitorous elements" and the enormous use of forced labor in Myanmar.[52] These spectacles are the subject of later sections. In addition there is a calendar of military celebrations such as Armed Forces Day and the endless "opening ceremonies" of roads, bridges, hospitals, universities, and other monuments which immortalize the founding violence of the State. (See Figure 11 for the preparations for the opening spectacle of the USDA headquarters in Mandalay; Figure 12 for the preparations for a road opening ceremony in the relocated townships; and Figure 14 for a junta member cutting a ribbon at yet another spectacle of enforced participation in Yangon). Burmese phantasmagoria such as Happyland, the Sino-Burmese Department Stores, and State spectacles such as Armed Forces Day constitute a "promise lying dormant" regarding the violence that the State will use to ensure complicity with its ideology of "democracy as the freedom to consume" (Taussig 1997:149).

Walter Benjamin was particularly interested in a phantasmagoric event known as the World Exposition. At World Expositions, the wonders of the industrial age, the new means of production, are displayed in "national pavilions" as evidence of the irrefutable upward progress of humanity. New products and new machines with which to mass produce objects are encased in expensive pavilions. The pavilions are designed to promote a sense of wonder and optimism. Benjamin noted that at World Expositions, "As part of the new imperialism, "national" pavilions promoted national grandeur, transforming patriotism itself into a commodity-on-display" (Buck-Morss 1989:89).

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[51] Burmans are particularly fond of the word "snack," *moun* (ဟင်္သုန်). A snack is a meal substitute in the sense that it can ward off full blown hunger pangs for a hour or two. Betel is the premiere Southeast Asian "snack" which is an appetite suppressant as well as a mild hallucinogen which makes tedious and repetitive work a little more bearable.

[52] I include forced labor as an example of a State spectacle because it is another enforced performance where Burmans must not complain or resist participating in the State's "nation-building endeavors."

The pinnacle of spectacle, patriotism, and commodification, was for Benjamin, the Olympic Games which replaced World Expositions as the ultimate global spectacle. Benjamin had earlier written of the top floor of the Arcades (which he described as "fairy grottoes") in which "angels are nesting" (Benjamin 1983:614,700 quoted in Buck-Morss 1989:83). Here Benjamin is referring to prostitutes who sat in the upstairs windows of the Arcades, their bodies transformed into commodities for sale. It was in the 1936 Olympic Games, however, that Benjamin noted a further transformation of the body into a "body-as-commodity" in which the body becomes the only commodity on display (Benjamin 1983:256). Buck-Morss notes that:

> Germany hosted no international expositions in the thirties. Instead, Hitler presided over the new form of mass spectacle that would supersede them in our own era (when world expositions have become unprofitable). The Olympic Games were held in Berlin in 1936 at the new eighty-five thousand-seat "Olympic Stadium". Here the fittest in human bodies, rather than the latest in industrial machines, were put on display, performing for mass audiences. Television was used experimentally at these (games) (Buck-Morss 1989:325).

Benjamin's analysis of the Arcades, World Expositions, and the Olympic Games as involving both patriotism and body-as-commodity can be seen in the annual spectacles of National Trade Fairs and National Races' Cultural Fairs in Yangon. Here the new workhorses of the industrial age, including outboard motors and surgical equipment are on the display, but so too are pavilions of "authentic ethnic culture," transforming each of Myanmar's minority groups into a "commodity-on-display." In addition, the enforced participation of Burmans in the never ending cycle of "opening ceremonies" (such as the Visit Myanmar Year opening events), mass rallies, and forced labor transform the Burmese body into a commodity for consumption by the State (figure 13 shows the ultimate SLORC spectacle to date, the opening ceremony for "Visit Myanmar Year"). As Feldman has noted however, a spectacle is only powerful when it is consumed by an audience and State spectacles are solely intended for internal consumption[53] (Feldman, personal communication, 1997). In Myanmar the State uses the bodies of Burmans to participate in its Spectacles which are then consumed by other Burmans who watch, read, and listen to the State media and the propaganda of the Information Ministry. State spectacles thus use the body as a commodity, consumed by both the State as a tool to establish the junta as the ultimate power in Myanmar, and by the Burmese public as both ideology and entertainment.

[53] The exception are the public displays of "drug burning" which are intended to show to the United States in particular, the serious efforts on the part of the military regime to eradicate heroin and amphetamine production in Myanmar. Linter contends that former DEA attaché, Angelo Saladino, suggested "drug burning" to the regime without the permission of the US Embassy in Yangon (Lintner 1993:24).

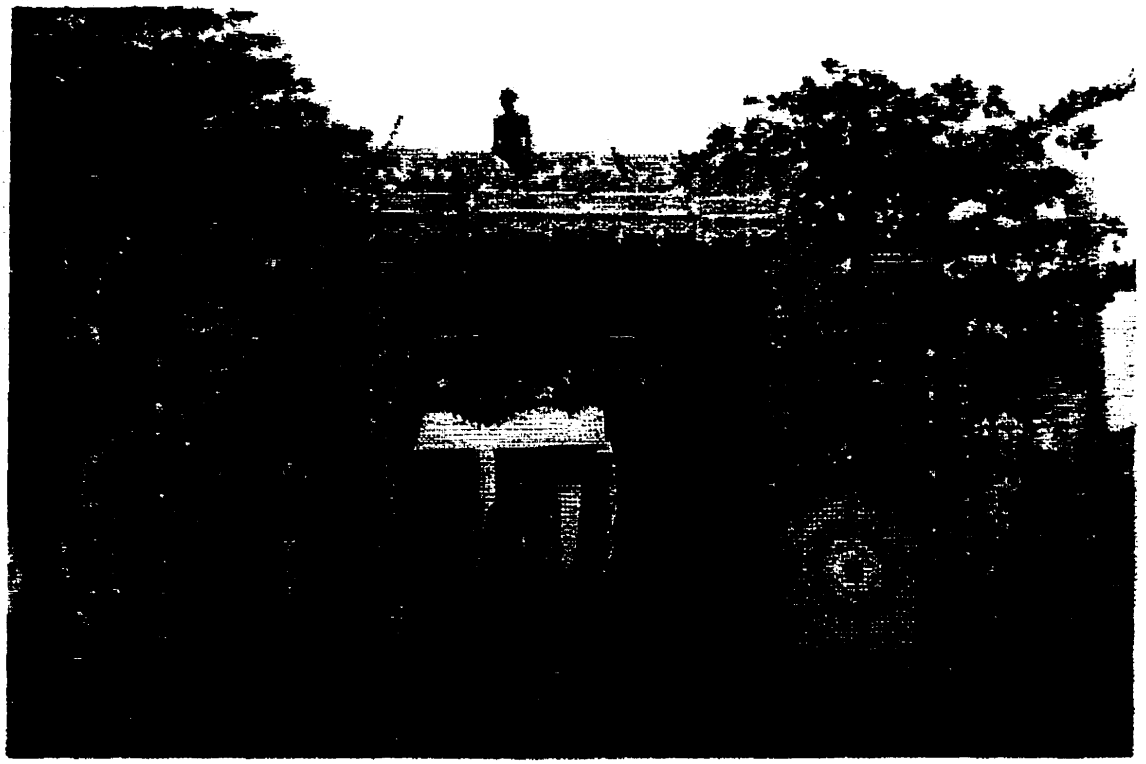
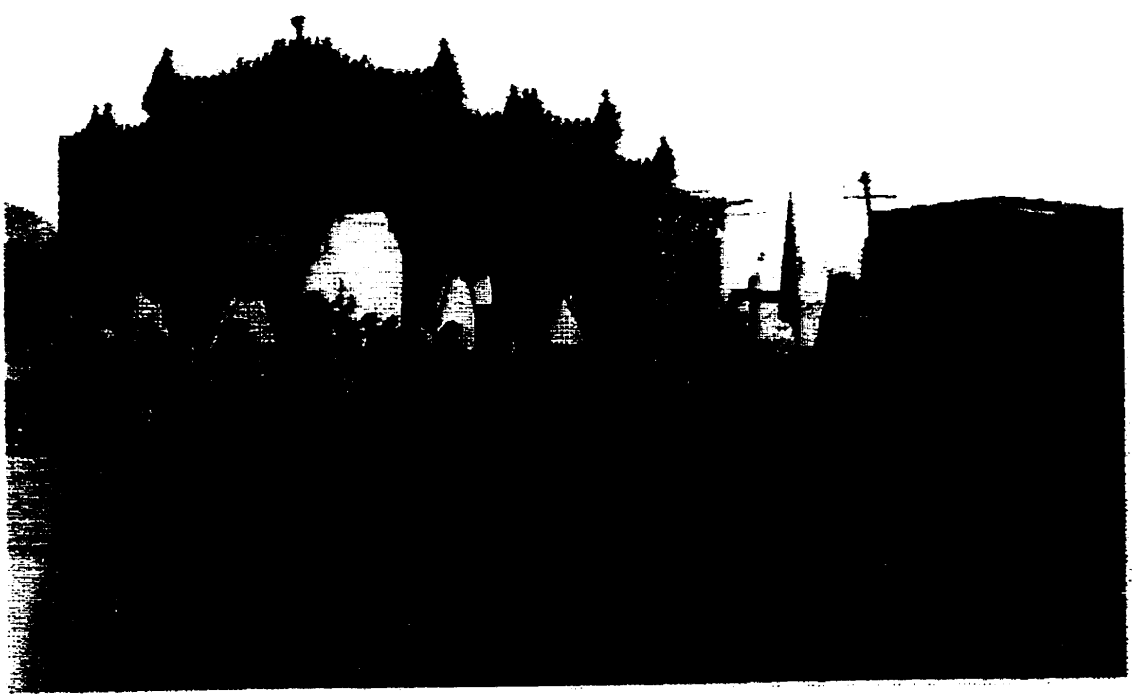


Figure 11: Preparations for the Opening of the USDA Headquarters in Mandalay

Figure 12: Preparations for a Road Opening in *Nyaungbintha*



Not only State spectacles, but also a "new urbanism" comprise for Benjamin the construction of what he terms 'modern phantasmagoria' in twentieth century Europe. Benjamin has defined this new urbanism which reconfigured urban space and replaces existing social and physical relations with a landscape imbued with a "totalitarian aesthetic." Buck-Morss comments that:

> The role of the state in constructing the modern phantasmagoria was not limited to world fairs. Benjamin deals centrally with the new urbanism financed by the state, which was contemporaneous with the fairs, and which in Paris was the obsessive occupation of...Baron Haussmann. The phantasmagoric illusions fostered by this "artist of demolition" figured heavily in the mythic imagery of historical progress, and functioned as a monument to the state's role in achieving it. As a classic example of reification, urban "renewal" projects attempted to create social utopia...but class antagonisms were thereby covered up, not eliminated. Haussmann's slum "clearance" simply broke up working-class neighborhoods and moved the eyesores and health hazards of poverty out of central Paris and into the suburbs. His system of public parks and "pleasure grounds" provided the illusion of social equality, while behind the scenes his building projects initiated a boom in real estate speculation whereby the government expanded the private coffers of capitalists with public funds...The demolition of Paris occurred on a massive scale, as destructive to the old Paris as any invading army might have been...In fact, the plan, based on a politics of imperial centralization, was a totalitarian aesthetics (Buck-Morss 1989:90).

The transformation of Paris via a totalitarian aesthetic, which as we shall see bears many similarities to the current destruction of Yangon and Mandalay, is described by both Baudrillard and Benjamin as a form of terrorism imposed upon a population. Baudrillard notes that totalitarian aesthetics embody an ideology of death-in-life, a "death drive" also apparent in commodity fetishism. The destruction and demolition of homes, neighborhoods, and sites of religious and cultural tradition and significance occurred as a consequence, almost a side effect, of a totalitarian architecture that placed a new landscape in place that glorified the control and authoritarian vision of its leaders who ruled from the center towards the peripheries: "For Benjamin, this was the very form of fascism, that is to say, a certain exacerbated form of ideology, an aesthetic perversion of politics, pushing the acceptance of a culture of death to the point of jubilation" (Baudrillard 1993:186). There is no doubt that Benjamin also considered Haussmann's urban renewal to be a way of immortalizing the state at the expense of the lives of Parisians. He remarked that: "Empire style is the style of revolutionary terrorism from which the state is an end in itself" (Benjamin quoted in Buck-Morss 1989:316).

Benjamin was acutely aware that the state enriched not only itself, but also the capitalist class in its "urban renewal" and "public works" projects. Buck-Morss emphasizes this conjunction of a political and economic agenda in her analysis of Benjamin's work

when she states that: "Later entries [in *Passagen-Werk*] emphasize how Haussmann's public works programs drew political support for the state, controlled labor through state employment, and economically benefited the capitalist class" (Buck-Morss 1989:313). Benjamin's observation is salient to the current destruction and construction occurring in the major cities of Myanmar. A new urbanism (underwritten by a totalitarian aesthetic) and the resultant enrichment of the capitalist class has been occurring since the Burmese military regime selectively opened-up the economy to foreign investment in 1994. In the following section I describe Yangon and Mandalay's urban renewal which the regime has euphemistically called its "huts-to-highrise" scheme and explore a modern Burmese phenomenon: "narcoarchitecture."

Figure 13: Visit Myanmar Year Opening Spectacle



Figure 14: A Road Opening Spectacle



5.4 The New Urbanism

Benjamin's totalitarian aesthetics and the process of occupying and destroying a city are as evident in Yangon in the 1990s as they were in Haussmann's *New Paris*. Following Ne Win's military coup of 1962, the regime confiscated a large number of buildings in central Yangon. The SLORC/SPDC has commandeered even more buildings and built marble "defence" edifices such as the "*Tatmadaw* Museum" and "*Tatmadaw* Hall." The wealthiest suburbs of Yangon (where the homes of Generals and Ne Win are known by everyone) have become restricted "no-go" areas. These "V.I.P." zones are patrolled by armed guards with automatic submachine guns and public transportation is disallowed in these areas. Traffic is rerouted around these new SLORC/SPDC edifices and the homes of the Generals with their guard towers, barricades, and barbed-wire palisades. In Bahan, the central suburb that contains the Shwedagon pagoda and many other important Buddhist sites, new pagodas such as "Ne Win's pagoda" (*Maha Wizaya*) have arisen. (Burmans make an exaggerated and very deliberate effort to pretend than "Ne Win's" pagoda does not exist. It is very poorly patronized and spoken of only with disdain. Most Yangon residents seem to be making a conscious effort not to include any reference to the pagoda in their conversations. When I asked a good friend about this phenomenon she told me that although Buddhism theoretically allows one to build a pagoda to increase one's merit store and thereby ensure a better rebirth, she was of the opinion that only those with a "pure heart" and "good intentions" would in fact be granted a better rebirth).

Monasteries have been enlarged and marble and gold paint adorn Bahan as testimony to the regime's commitment to Buddhism. Even the Shwedagon Pagoda itself has fallen victim to the regime's 'golden facade' projects. The stairways at the four cardinal directions have been enlarged with marble stairs and teak roofing. Perhaps the most symbolic "modernization" of the Buddhist faith in Myanmar is the installation of an escalator so that pilgrims no longer need to walk barefoot up the many stairs to the central pagoda platform (which is a way of gaining merit) but can now watch others labor up the stairways as they ascend slowly on this wonder of modern technology. I mentioned earlier that the only other escalators I know of in Myanmar are in a Chinese Department Store and I regard the Shwedagon's escalator as a key symbol of the junta's goal of making Buddhism a voyeuristic, commercial experience, denuded of its deeply held convictions and thus devoid of the potential for political resistance.[54] These projects are part of a huge public works program throughout the country that involves the building of roads, railways,

[54] The escalator also reminded me of a visit to Myanmar in 1994 where in Bagan I entered one of the many temples whose outer form was decked in fairy lights. A wizened monk sat between two donation boxes. One box was labeled "pagoda," the other "electricity." The monk pointed his staff at each box in turn and told me that I would make the same amount of merit donating money for the electrification of the pagoda at night as I would donating to the pagoda and monastery upkeep.

"model" villages and "model" towns by forced labor.

The most drastic changes to the Yangon and Mandalay urban environments has been the result of the "narcoeconomy." This term refers to the infusion of Myanmar's economy with the profits from the narcotic trade and it is often remarked that the military junta would not have maintained power throughout the 1990s without economic assistance from Japan and without the profits from narcotics production (such as Bernstein and Kean 1996). Such narcotics include heroin, amphetamines and opium. Although the regime is directly implicated in the production of narcotics, as noted in the introductory chapter, the term "narcoeconomy" refers to the laundering of these profits by both the military and the "Drug Lords" of Myanmar such as Khun Sa and Lo Hsein-han. The regime has entered into a series of "joint enterprise" arrangements such as hotels, investment corporations, and wharves, with local and foreign companies in the past several years. Shareholders and capital contributors to these investments are the Generals and the drug barons.

The building rule in Yangon has traditionally been that no buildings are to be taller than the pagoda located in the center of town, the Sule Pagoda, from which all distances in Myanmar are measured. The direct involvement of the military regime in the Burmese narcoeconomy has however resulted in a type of development which may be termed "narcoarchitecture," a collection of "joint enterprise" concrete skyscrapers and other buildings that are changing the Yangon and Mandalay skylines (figure 15 shows how the junta's "Joint-Venture" projects are transforming the Yangon skyline. The Sule pagoda stands dwarfed by such architecture). Hotels such as the Trader's and Shangri-La Hotels for which Lo Hsing-han contributed capital and laundered heroin profits (Bernstein and Kean 1997), are examples of "development and modernization" that has engulfed the capital cities in a frenzy of construction. This narcoarchitecture comprises a collection of grotesque parodies such as monstrous concrete blocks of hotels containing hundreds of rooms that remain empty due to the dearth of tourists.[55] These monstrosities are hastily constructed, employing hundreds of construction workers in the place of automation and are often made of flimsy materials.

But it is not only hotels that have radically changed the urban environment since 1995. Under the auspices of the greatest SLORC spectacle of all, "Visit Myanmar Year," the capital cities have undergone a facade change where buildings have been whitewashed and pagodas painted with yellow paint to mimic gold plating.[56] Like Haussmann's urban

[55] The building frenzy is slowing down, at least in Yangon, as the Asian currency crisis of 1998 restricts the number of high risk and long term ventures (and this definitely includes Myanmar) that can be created by Asian financiers. The currency devaluations has also meant that less Asian tourists can afford to travel in Myanmar and expand their businesses there, which further reduces the demand for accommodation.

[56] The enforced beautification of Myanmar, such as the compulsory painting of all buildings, has become an annual event during the SLORC/SPDC rule. Needless to say, paint is not provided by the regime and jail terms await those who refuse to "beautify." A salient example of Scott's "weapons of the weak" such as "foot dragging" (Scott 1985:29), roofs are not cleared of debris before the painting begins and homes are often painted during monsoon downpours. Within a month, the buildings look as if the face-lift never occurred.



Figure 15: The Burmese Junta's "Joint-Venture" Projects Are Transforming the Urban Skyline

renewal program the inner city has been partially destroyed,[57] removed to make way for a "modern" environment such as the creation of parks and other "pleasure grounds." And as in Paris, whole communities have been relocated because their houses stood in the way of the Generals' vision, of its narcoarchitecture and monuments to military power such as the Defence Force parks and the Tooth Relic pagodas.

An elderly male acquaintance had his land confiscated in April 1996 and was given a plot in an outlying township. It was rumored that his land was taken to make way for a road to the Tooth Relic pagoda but it was also rumored that his house stood in the way of a road being constructed to link the downtown area with Ne Win's daughter's hotel.

Like narcoarchitecture, the Tooth Relic pagodas in Yangon and Mandalay are typical of the conjunction of economic and political agendas which Benjamin noted occurred in Europe. The Tooth Relic pagodas were constructed with a significant proportion of forced labor to provide a venue in which the Chinese Tooth Relic could be viewed by Burmans as the Tooth Relic procession travelled around the country. The Tooth Relic pagodas and their accompanying spectacles are used to signify to Burmans the successful way in which the military regime: (i) has become the main patrons and defenders of Buddhism and thus are the legitimate rules of Myanmar, (ii) has become accepted internationally, as evidenced by the Chinese government allowing Myanmar to "borrow" the Tooth Relic, and (iii) has adopted the symbols and attributes of nationhood as established in the series of Spectacles which accompany the Tooth Relic on its journeys around the country (which culminate in the permanent enshrinement of Tooth Relic replicas in the Tooth Relic pagodas) (Schober 1997:16). The Tooth Relic pagodas are quintessential symbols of the capitalist-Buddhist-totalitarian conjunction in Myanmar, spectacles created from concrete to immortalize the corruption of the regime, to enforce labor and mass participation, and as an attempt to draw political "support" for the State through fear of reprisals.

The urban renewal program has involved major population movements beginning with the relocation of urban residents after the 1988 democracy uprising and the disassembling of communities who held similar political views (Neher 1994:170). Forcibly relocating these communities to outlying paddy fields also placed them in an area that the junta planned to "develop" with the aid of both cheap and forced labor. Infrastructure in the "relocated townships" is built by coercing households to contribute labor (i.e. forced labor) while the housing "developments" in the government's "Industrial Zones" in these townships utilize daily manual labor at less than subsistence rates. Daw Khin Mar Lay, an educated woman in her mid-thirties, told me about the way in which her family became separated after 1988:

[57] Haussman's agenda included the broadening of urban thoroughfares so that tanks and troop columns could easily access sites of insurrection.

"After 1988 the government thought our neighbourhood was too rebellious. We owned an apartment building with twenty apartments in it. It was taken by the SLORC. As compensation we were given two buildings a long way out of Yangon that my mother and sister now live in. I move around apartments every twelve months as the rent increases 5,000 or 10,000 kyats each year."

There is no doubt that urban residents deplore the effects of government corruption and the regime's alliance with the heroin trade upon the urban environment. A recent *Bangkok Post* article quoted a Mandalay resident as saying that "there are three lines of business here: the green line, the red line, and the white line. That's jade, rubies and heroin" (Mansfield 1998). It is perhaps only a coincidence that the word "line" in Burmese is used in the most common of Burmese phrases, "line money," *line ngwe* (လိုင်းငွေ) to refer to official bribery which must be paid in order for almost any transaction or appointment to occur in Myanmar. Anna Allott's collection of censored Burmese writings includes Nyi Pu Lay's story entitled *The Python*, reproduced in Appendix One. Allott's analysis of the short story gives a quick insight into the concerns of Mandalay residents about the changes that the regime's increasing alliance with the controller's of heroin production and other illegal activities have wrought. She writes that:

The python of the title refers to the Chinese and Sino-Burmese businessmen, drug traffickers, and gem dealers, who are disliked by many Burmese, since they are perceived as moving into Mandalay, and squeezing out the Burmese: laundering their illegal profits by investing in property, they are seen as driving up house prices to a point where the Burmese...are forced to sell up and move out of their old family houses, in prime downtown sites, to the outer suburbs, the "new pastures" of the story, many of which have been newly built on former paddy fields. Since 1988, when Nyi Pu Lay wrote this story, the influx of Chinese has increased as a result of the SLORC's deals with the Wa and Kokang, who are ethnic Chinese from the Northeast Shan State, the main heroin producing area. Many Burmese resent that their city, the former royal capital and a symbol of Burmese independence, is becoming a satellite town on Yunnan Province in China...it is never explicitly mentioned in the story that U Myo Khin is Chinese...His illegal business activities are indicated by the fact that none of his money bundles have been through the bank (Allott 1994:86-7).

In this section we have seen how Walter Benjamin's insight regarding a historical nexus of nationalism, political power and consumerism are evident in Myanmar's largest cities. The Burmese body has become an object of State consumption through its spectacles of mass participation. But the Burmese population have also become consumers of bodies when they view these spactacles on State television. Thus by watching television, Burmans view the body as a commodity and consume it as both ideology and mass entertainment. Through the junta's urban renewal program, communities have been disassembled and

relocated to make way for narcoarchitecture. Such a program bears similarities to the destruction of Paris examined by Benjamin and is also imbued with a centralizing totalitarian aesthetic. In the Spectacles created by the military regime and in its "joint-venture" enterprises we see the clearest evidence of the totalitarian utopian vision of Burmese society where democracy is equated with the freedom to consume. It is of no relevance to either the Burmese junta or to the European governments of Benjamin's era that the working class have no money to spend in the fairylands of consumerism. As I noted above, Benjamin's chief concern was with the body not as a market commodity, but as a commodity-on-display. Buck-Morss notes that the organizers of the 1867 World Fair gave free entrance tickets to 400,000 French workers. They were encouraged to ""make the "pilgrimage" to these shrines of industry, to view on display the wonders that their own class had produced but could not afford to own, or to marvel at machines that would displace them" (Buck-Morss 1989:88). Benjamin argues that the value of the items on display becomes irrelevant except in so much as they can increase the symbolic value of a commodity. This symbolic value is a "purely representational value" (Buck-Morss 1989:79-80). What is of import to the State is the changing *image* of the body to one of consumption rather than production, even if that consumption is solely a voyeuristic process for Burmans, because, in formulating this new notion of the consumer, the route is paved for bodies to become commodities and for a new system of relations between individuals and between individuals and the State to be established. In creating a Burmese body that is simultaneously a producer and a consumer, the State inscribes docility upon the Burmese population. The new system has been described by Foucault under the rubric of "Discipline."

5.5 The Movement of Bodies through Militarized Space and the Political Geography of Yangon

In the previous sections we examined the spatialization of power throughout the urban areas via a process of deterritorialization, and suggested ways in which bodies can become tools of the State. In the present section I describe the continually changing constitution of urban space in Yangon during the fieldwork period as the military continues to enact its vision of a military State and as it responds to threats to this vision by the NLD and student protesters. At the community level, space, and the movement of bodies through urban space, is controlled through visible surveillance and by continually changing the landscape such that "safe" areas become dangerous. At the level of the family and the individual, the regime has set in place a system of micro-control. At the level of the physical body, I describe a process where the strategic placement of disciplinary bodies by the Burmese military ensures both the control of space and the exclusive exercise of power in that space.

The various forms of surveillance conducted by the Burmese military regime are discussed in earlier chapters where it was noted that new supra-panoptic surveillance methods are being used in tandem with old-fashioned manual spying methods to gather information. The newer forms of espionage such as phone, e-mail and facsimile inspection create complicity, however, because they require Burmans to willingly submit to the scrutiny of the regime and regularly record their whereabouts. One of the effects of the myriad forms of surveillance employed in Myanmar is "self-censorship" where residents are too terrified to speak or plan action against the regime because of the *possibility* of being *surveilled*. Despite the effectiveness of the self-censorship generated by fear of surveillance and informers however, the military regime maintains a continual visible presence on the streets of Myanmar's cities. Hiding behind barricades and bushes, and peering out of public buildings and construction sights, Myanmar's army appears to be on the watch for anti-government behavior and always listening. In reality, most soldiers can be found asleep under bushes in the heat of the midday sun. Their presence is most effective during the peak hour traffic jams when they signify the "Big Brother" aspects of the regime. This technique is aimed at reinforcing the already rampant fear regarding random surveillance. To see armed soldiers lining the streets and manning barricades[51] is to be continually re-shocked by a sense of dis-ease, of a continuing "wrongness" about the environment in which one is living.

In addition to the ways in which space and bodies are being reconfigured via the modern phantasmagoria of the State and its spectacles, the Map in Appendix Two traces the way in which the SLORC, with their instruments of control and of symbolic violence, have imposed a new spatial configuration upon Yangon. In some ways this is the second political geography to be elaborated for Yangon. Greenwood has constructed a map displaying the landmarks of the 1988 pro-democracy uprising and its bloody suppression (Greenwood 1994). In the present political geography, the body of soldiers move through spaces no longer available to civilians and the bodies of civilians are routed into configurations demarcated by violence, both real and symbolic. As Feldman has noted, "Political violence reorganizes the material world in a phantasm, into a spectacle of historical transformation" (Feldman 1991:80). The Map displays a chronology of events that occurred from May 1996 to May 1997 in central Yangon. At each of these sites the junta positioned soldiers, tanks, and barricades in response to the open resistance shown by both National League for Democracy supporters and by student demonstrators who staged a series of hit and run protests in December 1996. The immediate effect of sudden road closures and the militarization of the capital was to reroute civilian life. Commuting to

[51] Child soldiers added to the ranks of the Army during its occupation of the Burmese capital. Hats fell down over the faces of these children and military fatigues dwarfed their thin frames, reinforcing to me the central military tactic in this urban warfare of placing the bodies of soldiers in public places to claim those areas as sovereign. I was reminded of the opposite practice of placing the bodies of Iraqi civilians around sites of "national security" during the Gulf War, where the bodies of civilians were used to reconfigure "military targets" as public and hence civilian space.

daily workplaces involves negotiating road blocks, tanks, and resultant traffic gridlock in a city which had almost no vehicles only three years ago. Channeling the population into certain routes with the aid of crowd barriers, barricades, and barbed wire, the regime began shepherding Yangon residents like sheep beneath the watchful eye of the State.

During the fieldwork period the city was continually changing and being demarcated by violence, and this includes what may perhaps be called the "symbolic" or potential violence of tanks, barricades, and the positioning of armed soldiers, and road blockages. Like the mobile threats of violence contained in the regime's propaganda signboards, so these weapons common to battlefields and war zones lay by the side of the road or were positioned in alleyways as a sign of both the characteristics of urban warfare and the "battle readiness" of the riot police.

Evidence that the junta controls *all* space is the temporary sequestering of areas ostensibly for the "public." Like other forms of deterritorialization mentioned above, this continual military inhabitation of civilian areas ensures that 'public' and 'private' have no meaning in Myanmar. Streets are routinely closed, parks, stadiums and sports grounds become staging areas for tanks, troop carriers, and bayonet-wielding troops in formation. Some streets become one way streets, others have a series of armed soldiers manning barricades to ensure that only residents use those streets. Other roads are patrolled by soldiers and sometimes soldiers can even appear in one's garden, ostensibly in order to ensure "order" in a particular area.

The list of sites of control and forms of control is almost endless, new permutations appear to be dreamed up by the military on a daily basis. On a fiercely hot and humid day at the end of the dry season I sat in the midst of midday traffic grid-locked by sudden road closures and made the following list of sites and symbols of military control and locales where people try to carve out safety areas for themselves:

Military departments and other military sites, jails, the psychiatric hospital, social welfare department "homes," USDA offices, government "donated" buildings such as Ne Win's pagoda and the Tooth Relic pagodas, bomb blasts[59] (i.e. General Tin Oo's house, American Embassy, People's Desire Signboards, Tooth Relic pagoda), road closures, forced rallies, showground: "the corral" (named by the NLD as the OK Corral because that is where they are initially interned when the mass arrests occur), Military Intelligence

[59] I was surprised to hear Yangon residents creating a temporal shift between political violence in Yangon before and after several small bombs exploded around the city. No one claimed responsibility for the bombings. The regime immediately blamed a collection of "underground" subversive groups, but almost all Yangon residents that I interviewed believed that the military planted the bombs to maintain feelings of insecurity and vulnerability. Residents believe that the bomb blasts constitute "terrorism" and is somehow more "wrong" because it targets civilians as well as the military. I found this distinction between "innocent" civilians and political activists very disturbing as it reinforces the belief in Yangon that civilians are always innocent, never complicit. I hope to have demonstrated in this thesis the impossibility of demarcating violence to certain areas or segments of society, and to especially have demonstrated that complicity is ubiquitous in Myanmar and it is most often impossible to draw simplistic distinctions between "us" and "them."

with their distinctive pressed longyis and sunglasses (two-way radios and cameras), Lon Htein (riot police). Other important '88 sites, i.e. the White Bridge, Inya Lake, tea shops, a landscape of violence and resistance. Sanctuaries: pagodas, some parks, meditation centers, monasteries where you can live permanently (*Dhamma taiq*), pilgrimage sites, mystic cults, NLD flags, university campuses.

These changing sites of control form the basis of the unmarked topography of Yangon, a chronicle of events that occurred while I was in the field that now overlays the landmarks from the previous period of dissent, 1988. The list demonstrates how an urban geography is continually being reconfigured and reconstituted by violence and the struggle for power in Yangon.

The political geography of Yangon thus imbues the city with disorientation, a continual changing of previously accessible streets of buildings and the sudden appearance of tanks and soldiers. In addition, curfews[60] and barricades maintain the control of these spaces by controlling the movement of civilians. The continual spatial reconfiguring significantly increases the degree of confusion and flux felt by individuals, families, and wards. For example, the presence of soldiers and guns is immediately disquietening and disordering. The apparent randomness of their arrivals and departures, street closures, and appearance of barricades, creates an existential sense of disorder as previously stable geographies become moving landscapes of "no-go" areas.

This spatialization of power through the mobilization of bodies is a dangerous game that can be played by resistance groups as well as by the regime. By massing, if only for short periods, in key areas around the city, the NLD and the student demonstrators illustrate that when resistance is present, rather than the SLORC using violence as a means of demarcating areas of control, violence itself becomes the only arbiter of space. These changing sites then of both military domination and brave but fleeting resistance to the regime form an unmarked topography of contested spaces which people must traverse everyday.

Resistance points arise and are quickly repressed by the regime as it moves in the Army to occupy space which the students and resisters have temporarily claimed as theirs. Road junctions are points of assembly and mass protest and as such are examples of changing sites of resistance. Junctions are important ways of orienting yourself in Yangon, soldiers and civilians alike are well aware of the way their city functions as a battlefield and the strategic position of road junctions in the war zone. Perhaps the two most famous in Yangon are the Kokaing junction which is the nearest cross street to Aung San Suu Kyi's residence, and Hledan junction.

An assassination attempt was made against Aung San Suu Kyi at the Kokaing junction and violent conflicts have occurred between NLD supporters and the government at this site (this includes the paid USDA members the government has begun ferrying to the

[60] During the period of fieldwork there was an official curfew in Mandalay and martial law was enacted but these mandates were unofficially enforced in Yangon (see Micro-control).

sites of planned violence and intimidation). On the second of November, 1996, I dropped a friend off near Aung San Suu Kyi's residence on University Avenue. This was the day upon which the regime decided Aung San Suu Kyi's roadside speeches were going to be banned and physical violence and intimidation was used to dissuade people from entering University Avenue. I saw monks being jostled and pushed back by the military, and young men trying to defend themselves with umbrellas as the soldiers beat them with batons to force them away from the area.

The other junction is Hledan. This is a very busy and populated intersection because of the nearby market and its location as a major bus terminus. The residents of Hledan are particularly anti-military, it is one of the areas of dissent the junta did not forcibly relocate in the aftermath of the 1988 Strike. In December 1996, students staged a sit-in which was broken up by police using water cannons.[61] The usual summary arrest without representation, charges being laid, interrogation, and lengthy jail terms for political prisoners followed this incident. The following statement is given by Daw Tin Tin Myint who witnessed these events and who sheltered students involved in the sit-down strike:

> "In Hledan we are united. We also support the opposition. We all support the students, that is why they [the SLORC] hate us so much. In the end there were only one hundred and fifty students in the triangle sitting very quietly and thousands of people shouting."
> [Then I heard] "Are you going to sit there all night? Do something, fight them."
> "There was only one or two voices, M.I., and they started to throw stones [at the military, in a bid to cause the army to rush the students]. Then the water cannons came and the arrests. People came running up the stairs. Everyone opened the door for them to hide. The military said: "We are very disappointed you hid them. Next time, if you open your doors, you will lose your homes."
> Now they're not allowed back in [if the residents leave their houses], so they are eating dried food."

The student demonstrations consisted of a series of sit-down strikes (such as the one at Hledan junction), and well organized 'hit-and-run' protests that seemed to be occurring all over the city, reversing the regime's topography of militarized and "no-go" areas as well as breaking up laws such as those forbidding freedom of assembly. I witnessed several of these flash protests and noticed a remarkable thing at one in Ahlone township on December 15, 1996. The protesters gathered in a knot and stood about sixty meters away from a roadblock manned by soldiers who were madly scrambling to get to the scene of each strike. Approximately eighty soldiers stood in front of twelve troop

[61] Having learned of the speed with which the international media record Burmese military violence, and on the eve of the SLORC's admission to ASEAN, the regime responded with water cannons rather than bullets in this instance.

carriers with their weapons aimed at the students. They covered the whole street and there were sometimes several rows of soldiers lined up in formation. The surprising element for me was the number of people who came to watch these demonstrations. About half of the onlookers stood within firing range. I listened with amazement as for the first time since 1988, Yangon residents began to speak to each other in public about what was occurring. Fear was evident in the conversations and the body posture of the witnesses but the character of the fear was that of anticipation, a barely repressed hope for change. I remember thinking that I was well within the range of the new SLORC weapons but I doubt many of the people there realized their range.

The response of the military to this event was not only to arrest demonstrators, but also to commandeer more space and to populate it with soldiers as well as its weapons of crowd control, such as barricades. On December 8, 1996, the Australian Broadcasting Service (ABC) reported that two major roads near the "disturbances" remained closed. On that occasion I wrote the following fieldnote:

> In actuality the whole area from Parami, Pye, Kaba Aye, and U Wizara are blocked as well as many side streets. Security forces remain on patrol after "crushing" a demonstration by students. Security around the scene is tight and the university is barricaded off. 260 people were arrested, almost all released. More than 1000 took part in the protest.

The regime also responded to this threat to their vision of an authoritarian future by canceling civil activities that involve the assembly of large groups of people. For example, marathons,[62] convocations and school exams were canceled. Even the annual water festival, a time when the regime grants a reprieve from its own repressive rules, was in April 1997, a somber affair. Yangon residents worried that the final days would be even more violent than usual (participants have by this stage been drinking heavily for the better part of a week), but the regime pulled down most of the "pandals"[63] it had built to stage the water festival.

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[62] As part of its emphasis upon bodies as commodities for State consumption, the regime has instituted a policy of creating "fit" bodies. This policy parallels the mass organization of Burmans into political organizations (GONGOs). The rhetoric of national defence and the need for readiness and vigilance is extended to include the health and fitness of Burmese bodies. The regime has thus adopted the slogan of "Myanmar Sports: The World to Conquer," and extended its militarist rhetoric to the rest of society. The State media is full of images of fit Burmese bodies through its promotion of Burmese marathons, body building competitions, golf tournaments, aerobics competitions for women, and Asian sporting events to which Myanmar has fielded teams. Significant prize money is offered as inducement and before each marathon, Yangon and Mandalay's streets are clogged at dawn with Burmans practicing for such events. The image of the model Burmese body that is being promulgated is fit and ready for combat.

[63] A "pandal" is a temporary wooden dais that is constructed on front of Ministries, hotels, and other businesses, as well as at important road junctions. Water hoses are sprayed from the pandals at Burmans who walk, ride, or drive past the pandals.

In summary, the conspicuous presence of troops and the rerouting of civilians within Myanmar's cities are strategies characterized by the reconfiguring of urban space and traditional lifeways through violence. I have also described the reconstitution of militarized space and time (by breaking curfews and assembling in groups) by National League for Democracy members and supporters, and by student demonstrators. The sense-destroying character of violence becomes its chief characteristic in this urban battle, in which power becomes spatialized through the mobilization of the bodies of Burmese soldiers. Deterritorialization, disorientation, and a continual sense of "wrongness" pervade Burmese cities as individuals, family, and communities negotiate new pathways through the maze of military weapons and edifices (immortalized spectacles) on a daily basis. In the following section the focus of the battle to control all space and abolish the distinction between "public" and "private" is narrowed to what may be termed "micro-control": the attempt to infiltrate the community, family, and the individual in order to expose innermost feelings and intimate conversations to the gaze of the regime.

5.6 Micro-control

Since the formation of the State Law and Order Restoration Council in 1989, the regime has instituted a hierarchy of control at ever more micro levels of everyday life. For the majority of urban Burmans this means that the regime is able to exercise an astonishing degree of surveillance and control over individual, family, and community life. Burmans recite the well established chain of command that they have been taught as follows: *"NaWaTa, PaWaTa, MaWaTa, YaWaTa"* (နဝတ၊ ပဝတ၊ မဝတ၊ ယဝတ). This translates as:

State Law and Order Restoration Council,
Provincial Law and Order Restoration Council,
Township Law and Order Restoration Council, and
Ward Law and Order Restoration Council.

The Ward Law and Order Restoration Council (*Yawata*) represents the military regime at the level of actual communities and has become the keeper of records chronicling all births, death, marriages, movement and residency, and the "volunteer labor" of Burmans who are divided into zones of influence known as Wards.

The *Yawatas* provide a crucial political function in their day to day monitoring of the events that occur within each ward. Perhaps the most important of these from the perspective of the regime's continuing ability to maintain power is the monitoring of urban space. By this I mean that all movement must be reported and permitted by the *Yawata* and the location of each of Myanmar's residents must be recorded by the *Yawata* each night. The *LORCs* (another term for the *Yawata*) in both the ward where an individual usually resides, and the ward in which the person plans on spending the night, must be notified. This rules also applies to expatriates and tourists.

Communities considered "rebellious" by the regime and communities whose houses stood in the way of the government's "urban renewal" scheme have been disassembled and forcibly relocated to the "new fields," rice fields bordering the capital cities. Life in the relocated townships is marked by the sorrow of being uprooted from their previous neighborhoods as well as frustration at the difficulties of trying to begin again in a rice field with no safe water, shade, or other facilities such as access to emergency health care. The control of space in the relocated townships is absolute. The Ward *LORC* office usually faces a large vacant space which opens onto the central structures of community life: pagoda, school, and market. Monitoring ward activities during the day is thus an easy task due to the panoptic geography of the township. At night however the *LORCs* must rely upon intimidation to control the movement of communities. During the student demonstrations in December 1996, the *LORCs* in Yangon enforced an unofficial curfew. A young male in his early-twenties, Maung Htay Hlaing, told me that on the night of the eighth of December: "At 11.30 pm I went outside (Insein) to see what was happening. The *Yawata* told me to go inside." And during another unofficial curfew in March 1997, a young female friend, Ma Thanda Win, told me that "They haven't declared any curfew in words, but the elders[64] have told young people not to go out at night. Everyone now has to inform the *LORC* if they want to travel at night."

The opening of several areas in Myanmar to tourists has posed a special problem for the ward officials since they cannot directly coerce or intimidate foreigners who are legally entitled to walk the streets of these townships and talk to residents. In the townships in which I have worked, the *Yawata* have continually hindered my movements, followed me on motorbikes, and made people repeat the questions I had put to them. The *LORCs* complained to higher authorities that I had been seen with a camera and that I declined to sign the "visitor's book," that is, I refused to be complicit in my own surveillance. This all occurred on occasions when I had been given official permission to be in those wards and to take pictures "surreptitiously". One senior health official told me, "They have been trained to act like that for thirty five years. It's a hard habit to break." It is of course a fear of reprisals and loss of both position and "face" that prompts ward officials to such zealous surveillance.

Micro-control at the ward and township levels is a tripartite strategy of control. The *Yawata* is the most feared, but the ward "leaders" and the "GONGOs" (see 5.8) also investigate and report upon the most intimate levels of personal and community life. "Leadership" within the wards is similar to the more traditional Burmese concept of the head-man and Yangon and Mandalay residents refer to "the head-man of our street." Every ten households in the cities have a "Ten House Leader." Similarly, every street has a

[64] The two generations of Burmese born under military dictatorship have begun to interchange the term for "elders" with the term for "leaders," showing how the long standing Burmese tradition of authority in communities resting in the hands of elders is quickly being replaced by the government officials in each ward.

"Street Leader" and every one hundred houses, which is roughly one block, has a "100 House Leader." This is a hierarchy of control below the *Yawata* and answerable to it. In each ward a battle occurs each time a leader or *Yawata* official is appointed. Some townships manage to have NLD members appointed to these positions, and the character of a ward in often indicated by the political persuasions of its leaders. The presence of "community leaders" means that a steady supply of individual and family misdemeanors is available to the *Yawata* and hence to the *Mawata*, *Pawata*, and so on.

I have described the way in which the control of space and of the body occurs at the micro-level in Myanmar through a hierarchy of control at the level of the community. In conjunction with the reconfiguring of urban space by violence, the regime creates fear, confusion, generates self censorship, and continually forces Burmans to choose whether to disobey the Generals or to conform to the intimidatory practices and techniques of surveillance outlined above. In the following section I narrow the focus of the exercise of power and the control of space by the military junta further through an examination of the control of individual bodies in Myanmar.

5.7 Burmese Automata

In the previous discussion of the totalitarian aesthetic which underpins the urban renewal of Yangon, I described how both Benjamin and Baudrillard see in this authoritarian vision a zealous celebration of the "acceptance of a culture of death" (Baudrillard 1993:186) in the scant regard paid to the lives, traditions and communities of displaced urban residents. In this section I describe the deterritorialization of the body, the making of the body an "unsafe" zone and its reconstruction as an "automata" or tool of the State. As Kafka reminds us, narratives of violence are often written/enacted upon the body (Kafka 1948). But how (and why) does the Burmese State produce what I call "Burmese automata?" The answer is deceptively simple: the enforced building of monuments which testify to State power (such as roads, railways, and defence force monuments) and the enforced participation of Burmese bodies in mass spectacles (such as political rallies, "Opening Ceremonies," and "ethnic Trade Fairs") are attempts by the regime to force Burmans to both acknowledge and accept their nation as a totalitarian utopia of which the *Tatmadaw* is the progenitor, patriarch, and central pivot of Burmese life. In the production of Burmese automata, the regime reproduces itself and extends its celebration of the culture of death into the very bodies of its subject population. Of course the State does not consciously make Burmese automata, the regime requires Burmans to willingly assent to the rule of the Generals. The hollowness with which Burmans conduct themselves at the compulsory State spectacles and forced labor sites is however, as we will explore in chapter eight, sometimes a conscious decision on the part of Burmans to give their bodies over to the State. ***Burmans often allow themselves to be made into automata, it is a***

deliberate survival strategy.

That is not to suggest however, that the regime's self-enriching economic policies have not resulted in Burmans having to participate as daily laborers under hazardous and very poor conditions simply for enough money to procure the necessities of survival. The following excerpts from a Burmese short story graphically depict the way in which the struggle for survival through continuous, repetitive, manual labor is strongly felt by Burmans to be responsible for feelings of alienation and surreality. This is a tale of a concrete salesman. He works from a warehouse where there are hundreds of laborers working for less than subsistence wages carrying cement, bricks, and other materials of "urban renewal" that will immortalize, in cement, the conjunction of modernity and State power, and will cement the alliance that the Generals have made with the drug lords. Taussig insists: "let us not forget that [the] most concrete of images in modernity, [is] concrete itself" (Taussig 1997:149).

In the following excerpts of the short story, *Ko Ma*, written by a well known Burmese writer, the young man buys and cells concrete and has a morbid fascination with it, a metaphor for the Burmese fascination with modernity and the West. He becomes suddenly ill and sees a variety of doctors and is subjected to a barrage of biomedical tests. In the final section of the story, Ko Ma has become imbued with the same properties of the substance he has sold. This story can be read as a metaphor for the changes occurring as the State moves from pre-modern to modern within the context of authoritarianism:[45]

Ko Ma[46]

...Chaque partie de mon corps fut radiographiée. Ma tête, ma poitrine, mes côtes, la partie inférieure de mon torse, mes pieds, mes bras, mes mains. Après avoir examiné les radios, le médecin qui aurait dû établir un diagnostic, se trouva mal à son tour. Les gouttes de sueur qui perlaient sur son front étraient grosses comme le bout de mon auriculaire.
"Votre corps est constitué de la manière la plus étrange qui soit. Je n'ai jamias rien vu de tel. Pas un médecin au monde n'aura étudié ce genre d'anatomie."
"Expliquez-vous, s'il vous plait."
Le médecine leva les radios vers la lumière et les examina à nouveau.
"D'abord, vos os ne sont pas ceux d'un homme normal, ils ressemblent plutôt à des barres de fer soudées les unes aux autres. Ensuite, votre corps paraît rempli de fines particules, elles sont si nombreuses que c'est effrayant, et je ne saurais dire en quoi elles consistent.

[45] Watching the General's narcoarchitecture arise almost overnight in Yangon and Mandalay, it was difficult not to notice the concrete, mud, and Plaster of Paris which covers the bare chested bodies of thousands of construction workers. The short story describes a magical transformation of human to material, of flesh to stone. But there is another miraculous transformation occurring here, it is the transformation of the white powder (heroin) to the gray powder (concrete) and of black money to white money.

[46] The short story is reproduced in its entirety in Appendix Three. The story has been translated from Burmese to French by Violaine Brisou. Unfortunately, the original Burmese version is not presently available.

-Des barres de fer, c'est bien ça?
-Oui, regardez. Sur les radios. Elles apparaissent plus blanches que de coutume, et aux joints elles n'ont pas d'articulations comme en ont normalement les os, elles ont l'air d'être mises bout à bout."

Je me représentais les barres de fer d'un pouce de diamètre, quant aux fines particules, était-ce du ciment en poudre? Je savais que le ciment est composé de poudre de chaux cuite et d'un peu de poudre de quartz, le mélange obtenu est extrêment lourd, ces particules, ça ne pouvait être que ça. Pourtant, je me chargeais uniquement de la vente, j'avais donc peu d'occasions de respirer la poussière de ciment. Cependant, elle apparaissait sur les radios, n'est-ce pas complètement étrange?

Mon corps n'était-il qu'un assemblage de barres de fer dans un bloc de ciment? N'étais-je réellement qu'un homme de béton? Quand cela avait-il commencé? Pourquoi cela devait-il arriver maintenant? Et comment se faisait-il que je sois encore en vie? Étais-je encore un homme ordinaire? Je ne comprenais plus rien.

Le docteur attrapa son sac et repartit l'air complètement hagard.

Quelques neuf semaines plus tard, je me retrouvais à l'hôpital pour de bon. On dut presque m'y transporter à l'aide d'une grue. De nouvelles radios montrèrent que les particules étaient encore plus nombreuses, on me dit que tout mon corps en était plein. Je ne pouvais plus remuer les pieds ni les chevilles. C'est pour ça qu'on m'avait hospitalisé. Les tests chimiques effectués sur mon tissu musculaire au département de recherche sur les maladies, révélèrent qu'il était composé de chaux et de quartz, les cellules de chair s'étaient petit à petit desséchées, ainsi que tous les fluides de mon corps. J'appris cela grâce à mon cerveau qui ne s'était pas encore durci.

Quelques quatre semaines plus tard, mes pieds s'effritèrent, comme du ciment desséché entre des briques. Mon coeur, cependant, battait encore. Ma bouche remuait. Mais je ne respirais plus, ne buvais plus et mes larmes ne pouvaient plus couler. Je n'avais plus aucun moyen de montrer mes émotions, tout mon corps s'était durci. Mes paupières ne battaient plus, mes yeux restaient grand ouverts et j'étais las de la vue du carrelage qui recouvrait les murs de l'hôpital. J'aurais alors bien voulu dire quelques mots, mais cela m'était impossible: "Il faut continuer à faire marcher notre entreprise, ne penser à rien d'autre, les affaires sont bonnes, il y a de la demande sur le marché du ciment et des barres de fer." Mais je ne pouvais plus parler. Jour après jour, ma bouche s'était devenue glacée. Ma femme, mes amis, mes enfants me rendirent visite, mais j'étais incapable de les distinguer les une des autres....

Ainsi, disons que je suis mort glacé et dur comme du roc. Et, le jour de mes funérailles, c'est avec étonnement que les gens regardèrent passer le cortège qui allait non pas au-devant d'une voiture funéraire, mais d'une grue...Je n'ai peur que d'une chose. Ma femme fera couler ma pierre tombale dans le ciment que nous vendons. Ma tombe sera peu profonde. Réfléchissez un peu. Les acheteurs de barres de fer pourront facilement déterrer

le cadavre d'un homme en fer et le mettre en pièces, que ferai-je alors? Que ferai-je s'ils cassent mon enveloppe de ciment et s'emparent de mes os de fer?
Quand il s'agit de ciment, les gens sont comme possédés par le diable. Quant aux barres de fer, ils feraient n'importe quoi pour en avoir.C'est la seule chose qui m'effraie.

Little by little, the human is replaced with the artificial. Concrete powder invades the cells of the body and solidifies. The concrete salesman, Ko Ma, whose name is a play on the Burmese word for concrete, is thus a powerful metaphor for the ways in which Burmans are made over into Burmese automata: slowly suborned, slowly regulated and disciplined through both dehumanizing, repetitive labor under hazardous conditions and in the repetition of State ideology at State spectacles.

In *Les fleurs du mal* [The Flowers of Evil] (1857) Baudelaire transposes the machine over the human body. Benjamin has commented that "Machinery becomes in Baudelaire the sign of destructive powers. Not the least of such machinery is the human skeleton" (Benjamin 1985:684). The word "*armature*" can mean both skeleton and scaffold, and signifies the mechanistic dimensions of the modern Burmese body, dimensions that eventually overwhelm *Ko Ma*, until his corporeal body atrophies and is transformed into iron bars embedded in a concrete bloc. It is a graphic depiction of a process of inscribing a new set of social relations upon the modern body. Comaroff and Comaroff remind us that "For commodity production, the dominant mode of value creation in modern capitalism, makes a whole world of social relations in its own image." Thus for the Comaroffs, ideology "reside[s] unseen in the commodity form itself" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991:23). When bodies become commodities, this ideology is conferred upon them directly.

Feldman has written about the way that the seed of violent conflict has flourished in the wastelands of industrial culture in Northern Ireland. He looks back at the writers of the Frankfurt School such as Adorno to see how the commodity fetish merges with what he describes as a technology of death. The site of this merger is the body. He gives the example of a soldier holding a gun and argues that the Irish body becomes an instrument of violence, a "tool holding a tool," or a "political form" fusing with a "commodity form" (Feldman 1991:234-5). I see in Feldman's analysis the way in which Brecht's surreal landscapes can become the site for Foucault's spatialization of power through the body, "because in modernity, political power increasingly becomes a matter of regimenting the circulation of bodies in time and space in a matter analogous to things" (Feldman 1991:8). I imagine Benjamin's "sandwich board-man" as the best example of this process. Analogous to the inscription of power upon flesh, the sandwich board-man carries upon his body the ideology of the State (or more recently, of the corporation) as he circles through the city. His body has become a commodity-on-display, a mobile signifier of State ideology and State power.

The inscription of power upon bodies is integral to the dissemination of Foucault's "Disciplines" throughout society. Anagnost has addressed the manner of bodies as circulating systems of symbols of State power in China. She argues that although State power is undoubtably inscribed upon Chinese bodies and that bodies "are now the vehicles for the circulation of signs in a play of representations that makes power visible" (Anagnost 1994:138), nevertheless there is still a space she contends, between domination and the complete internalization of such domination. Anagnost argues that:

> In China we see many technologies of power that at first appear to be fully disciplinary in Foucault's sense of this term- placing persons on a grid that makes even intimate areas of practice visible to a panoptic gaze. Exposed to that gaze are the gaps between actual practice and the model...I suggest, however that the knowledge these technologies produce is quite differently constructed...What we are observing here is perhaps not altogether a disciplinary technology in Foucault's sense, but rather something that resembles more closely what he called a semiotechnique that, in order to work, must make its subjects visible, but with a visibility that is produced at large by the circulation of signs throughout the social body. Signs play on the surface of subjects, reordering their outward practice rather than their inner psyches. It is not that these techniques fail to affect one's sense of self, but they affect it more in terms of a submersion of the self into a moral category, a state of selflessness that merges into the collectivity, than by elaborating the self in all its particularity (Anagnost 1994:149-150).

Feldman and Anagnost's analysis also fits well with Baudelaire's terrain of amoral economic landscapes where the prostitute is emblematic of the body as commodity (Buck-Morss 1989:183,429). As we shall see, the amoral economic landscapes formed by the regime's narcoeconomy regiments the bodies of prostitutes, drug addicts, construction and other manual workers, and forced laborers, and reifies these bodies to the level of consumer goods. This commodification of the body is integral to the junta's technologies of domination. As brutal and repressive as this system is however, hegemony is never complete or total and, as Anagnost has noted for China, there is a also a space in Myanmar where State domination and ideology is not completely internalized and it is also apparent in the story of Ko Ma. In the final section of the story, Ko Ma's solidified body enters a coma where his mind his free from such domination:

> Mon état fut défini comme un mal inconnu que même la médecine de la fin du 20ème siècle ne pouvait idnetifier.
>
> Ainsi, disons que je suis mort glacé et dur comme du roc. Et, le jour de mes funérailles, c'est avec étonnement que les gens regardèrent passer le cortège qui allait non pas au-devant d'une voiture funéraire, mais d'une grue.
>
> Bien que je fusse réduit à l'état d'un bloc de béton, j'étain encore conscient, mais cela, moi seul le savais.

Moi seul savais que je n'était pas mort, et que dans mon corps inerte, mon espirit vivait encore. Personne ne connaissait ma souffrance.

En language scientifique, on parle de coma. Et moi, on m'appelle Ko Ma, autant dire, le coma de Ko Ma.

In the following sections I examine the uses which the regime makes of Burmese automata in mass rallies and projects that use Burmese bodies as unpaid labor and as mobile carriers of State ideology.

5.8 The Political Role of GONGOs

Earlier in this chapter I discussed the movement of bodies through politicized urban spaces. In the following sections I describe the regimentation of Burmans through time and space using the organizational power of the newly created quasi-government structures, the GONGOs. In previous chapters the creation of Government Organized Non-Governmental Organizations (GONGOs) has been described, such as the formation, in September 1993, of the Union Solidarity and Development Association (Diller 1997:39). In the introduction I suggested that one index of totalitarianism is the mass mobilization of the population, and this is certainly occurring via such organizations. Burmans readily identify with these organizations because of the prior existence of the *Lanzin* Socialist Party, in which citizens were required to enlist, during the reign of Ne Win. The circulation of bodies as commodities for State consumption is described at the Mass Rallies and Forced Labor sites created by the regime. It is my contention that the regime circulates the bodies of the Burmese automata described above through these politicized domains of military control. In such a way the regime attempts to create a space of domination that encompasses the entire urban landscape.

In order to solidify mass spectacles that further the myth of absolute State power, the regime has created GONGOS. Modeled upon international Non-Governmental Organizations, the GONGOs ostensibly have "Objectives" concerning public health and development. They are in fact a ready way of mobilizing the population quickly. Aung San Suu Kyi has likened one such organization, the USDA (Union Solidarity and Development Association) to the Nazi Hitler movement when its members were paid to assassinate (or perhaps only to intimidate) her at the junction outside her home. The USDA members were ferried in by the regime and police looked on as an iron bar was used to smash the glass of Aung San Suu Kyi's car. One of the occupants in the car was injured, blood could be seen streaming down his face, before the car was able to pull away.

GONGOS link "health" with political violence, domination, and repression. In conjunction with local township health officials, the GONGOs such as the Myanmar Red Cross (MRC) and the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) explicitly

link their two "duties" which are "health promotion" and the crushing of "destructive elements." For example, a New Light of Myanmar editorial stated that "Red Cross executives [are] exhorted to drive for materialization of national policy, health planning" (NLM 1996i:6). The editorial describes the mandate of the USDA as follows: "USDA members urged to ward off destructive elements in cooperation with the people" (NLM1996i:2). GONGOS such as the USDA, MRC and MMCWA (Myanmar Maternal and Child Welfare Association) commonly enforce membership although there are individuals who join voluntarily.

Members of GONGOs must appear at government spectacles a minimum of seven times per year. GONGOs function at a level below that of the military and the police, on a par with institutions such as public servants and teachers. Like public servants, members of GONGOs are used for forced labor such as the building of the Tooth Relic pagodas, but their higher levels function as supervisors for forced labor at both government construction sites and in the townships. For example, a senior Red Cross Leader told me that one of the jobs of the Red Cross members is to coordinate with the local *LORCs* to ensure that local communities conduct forced labor on a regular basis (usually weekly).

The GONGOs have become extremely influential within the relocated townships bordering Yangon and Mandalay. Other more traditional organizations are being displaced[67] and township dwellers increasingly feel that they are dwarfed by the large number of GONGOS and the heavy influence they have over everyday lives. The GONGOS have become yet another layer of power and domination and this extremely effective strategy smothers dissent as the SLORC increases the reach of its arm into every aspect of daily life. Within an average peri-urban ward, the government presence is conveyed by the *Yawata*, the 100 house leader, the ten house leader, the Street Leader, the USDA, MMCWA, MRC, Fire Brigade, and the Auxiliary Fire Brigade. These organizations go from house to house with monotonous regularity demanding "donations." One of the most distinctive aspects of the relocated townships is the loud disjunctive music from the competing "fund raising drives" along the main roads and which blares from mobile "voluntary contribution" vehicles. In order to stay in favor (and avoid the serious consequences which can come which refusal to cooperate), residents continually (on an almost daily basis) give their money to these quasi-governmental organizations.

It is hard to penetrate the dense tangles by which Burmans participate in their own surveillance. The formation of GONGOs and the advantages (and consequences of not joining), of becoming "plugged-in" to the system of hierarchy and patronage has led to most people in Yangon and Mandalay living with members of government departments or organizations. The SLORC have successfully, in a few short years, inserted themselves into almost every home. Performing politicized "duties" as a member of a governmental or quasi-governmental organization has become normalized. Belonging to one or more

[67] Such organizations include bachelor's and spinster's organizations and religious groups oriented toward community events such as weddings and funerals.

organizations does not engender feelings of betrayal in family members or colleagues, it is simply taken as another "given" like so many other elements in Burmese lives. Complicity is again impossible to define in this situation as advantages accrue to GONGO members (such as "getting close" to *Yawata* officials and therefore to access systems of patronage). Disadvantages for not joining range from being failed in school exams to losing jobs, access to certain black market avenues, prestige and power within local communities, and an increased risk of political persecution.

5.9 The Performance of Forced Labor

In the previous section I noted that GONGOs and government organizations such as the Fire Brigade and Auxiliary Fire Brigade are continually demanding "donations" from houses, businesses, and passing traffic. The work-time lost from the continual demands of forced labor must be factored in to this loss of income. Forcibly relocated townships have suffered much in this respect because the building of infrastructure occurs through the institution of forced labor in Myanmar. Forced labor is defined by the International Labor Organization (ILO) as follows: "Under the Convention Against Forced Labor (ILO No. 29) which Burma has signed and ratified, forced labor means "all workers or service which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which that said person has not offered himself [or herself] voluntarily" (ERI and SAIN 1996).

Previous forms of corvée and "community" labor utilized in Southeast Asia are very different from the forced labor being imposed upon Burmans in their townships. For example, working on a road consecutively for seven days without payment or compensation is clearly not an act of community maintenance, but the expansion of the junta's infrastructure. In previous years, villagers who did not keep their portion of the communal boundary fence in good order were simply warned that they would not be able to live within its bounds. In contrast, the threat of violence and retaliation (that makes resistance difficult or impossible) hangs over township dwellers who refuse to participate in forced labor. In addition, as I describe below, a system of corruption and patronage exists which makes the notion of "community" labor absurd.

Township residents must sign a "forced labor" registrar logging on and off forced labor sites. In many townships, an average of four hours on Saturdays and sometimes Sundays must be given up to forced labor, enforced by the many levels of power within the townships. This is in addition to being forcibly taken to government infrastructure sites and put to work indefinitely without pay or recourse to complain. Within Myanmar forced labor has reached epidemic proportions as the State readily sacrifices the lives of its

population in order to immortalize itself in the landscape.[66]

The *Yadana* pipeline has been seized upon by human rights activists as an example of the solidification of the military regime through forced labor. The Burmese regime has signed a number of "joint-venture" contracts with international organizations such as Total of France, Texaco of Britain, and Unocol of the United States. Primarily gas and oil concessions, one particular project has been the subject of intense anti-regime lobbying. The *Yadana* gas fields project is a joint venture operation which aims to ship gas from the sight of its recovery offshore in Myanmar, across a huge pipeline into Thailand beginning in 1998. Activist groups that have interviewed forced laborers involved in the construction of the pipeline conclude that their "research indicates that gross human rights violations, including summary executions, torture, forced labor and forced relocations, have occurred as a result of natural gas developments funded by European and North American corporations" (ERI and SAIN 1996:i). The forced labor that has ensued as a result of the regime's need for the hard currency represented by gas revenues has caused Yozo Yokata, Special UN Reporteur to Myanmar, to comment that "The pipeline is simply a new landscape in which...control is now exerted" (Yokata 1995:26).

Forced labor is, like everything else in Myanmar, optional if sufficient "line money" (bribery) is paid to the relevant officials. A high ranking government Health worker in of one Myanmar's largest cities told me about another common way in which forced labor could be avoided by senior public servants by conducting "telephone duty" once a week, where an employee remains at the government offices after hours answering the phone. This is of course, forced labor, but is preferable to carrying rocks and other tasks mandated at the construction sites. The other method this particular public servant uses to avoid doing manual work usually involved in forced labor is to accept the position of "supervisor" of forced labor. This complicity is revealed in a narrative given by Daw Si Si Win, a highly placed public servant:

> "There are "model" health workers, they are brought to [name of city withheld] and put up in a camp. I think they're shown the sights. While they're there, they're sent to work on the Tooth Relic pagoda. They get a certificate as a "model worker" and have one up one the other VHW's [volunteer health workers]. It is a form of motivation in the townships. I was called to attend two opening day ceremonies...last month but I said I was sick. A lot of people don't have to do voluntary labor on the [Tooth Relic] pagoda because they do telephone duty."

[66] Such forced labor includes the use of Burmans as mine sweepers and porters in malarious and insurgent-controlled areas. Deaths and injuries from falling masonry at the Tooth Relic pagodas has led many residents of *Nyaungbintha* to pay large "fees" so that their family members would not be made to participate in forced labor and therefore be spared the hazards of working at these sites.

Executive members of GONGOs are used to coordinate groups of people which span townships such as forced labor projects and for enforced performances. This is particularly evident in the marshaling of the population for the series of mass rallies conducted in 1996. The State media describes this process as follows:

> To organize all constructive forces the Government is encouraging social organizations including Myanmar Red Cross Society to enable them to further develop and actively participate in working in that direction...Assistance of organizations or activities on self-reliance basis (sic) for social welfare and health and fitness of the people in border areas has helped consolidate national unity...Other social, donor and wellwisher organizations declared at a recent mass rally that they are committed to safeguarding the stability of the State and further developing economic and social infrastructures. It is a national duty of all well wishers and social organizations as well as the public to cooperate with the Government's nation-building endeavours (NLM 1996j:6).

In the relocated townships the USDA provide a ready source of forced labor and the State media are constantly lauding their "voluntary" efforts. An article in the *New Light of Myanmar* in August 1996 details the USDA training of "volunteers" at a Tooth Relic pagoda at which Secretary No. 1 officiates. It reports that "Khin Nyunt...greets trainees of Basic Multiplier Course No 2/96 for Executives of Mon State USDA at the construction site of Tooth Relic Pagoda" (NLM 1996h:12). Khin Nyunt has gone so far as to state that every citizen must be a part of such organizations. In an article boasting that the membership of the USDA was over four million, he is further quoted as stating that: "Every youth willing to serve public interests imbued with humanitarian spirit must be organized into USDA (sic)" (NLM 1996m).

5.10 Mass Rallies and Other Enforced Performances

In response to the political rallies held by the NLD after the release of Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest, the military regime created a series of spectacles of enforced participation: Mass Rallies. Mass Rallies were convened throughout the nation in any area that was sufficiently under the control of the government and that had a large enough population base. These techniques have been used during the Ne Win era and were convened in every state and district. Organized through the GONGOs and other existing government-controlled groups such as the public service, one member of each family (unless they could afford the bribe) had to assemble at a certain point and march in formation to stadiums or sports grounds. If a family contained a member of a GONGO or a public servant, the family had to send that member plus an additional member. At the sports fields these captive audiences sat in silence for several hours, a mute witness to the fury of the Generals to opposition to their rule.

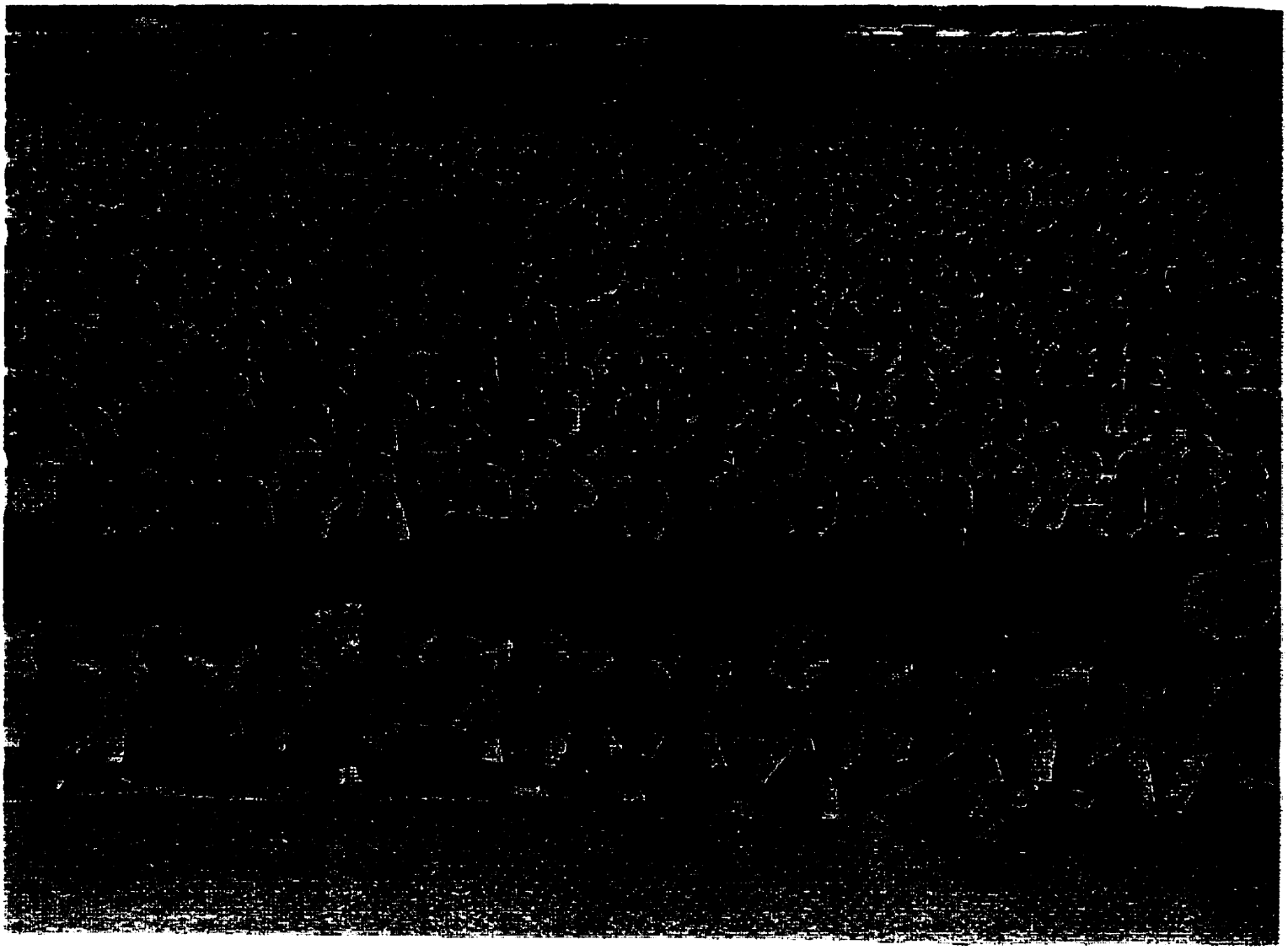


Figure 16: A Mass Rally of Enforced Participation

For several months the media was saturated by the vitriolic, xenophobic statements made at the Mass Rallies with their exhortation of the public to commit violence against foreign "interferers" and Burmans who support them. I was constantly struck by the way in which Burmans were made over into automata, only later did I discover that the process of becoming an automaton is often a conscious strategy of survival. Figures 16, 17, and 18 show some of the mass rallies in progess. After watching hours of television footage and newspaper photographs of millions of Burmans sitting as still as Burmese wooden puppets, I made the following fieldnote:

On Myanmar TV every night at 7:55pm the government objectives are shown and read out as are the People's Desire Objectives. The news consisted of relaying the mass rally at a particular sports field in Yangon. The crowds were solemn, statue-like, lips firm, many mouths downturned, a dull, listless look in their eyes, dour, not a word muttered, expressionless like ranks of wooden dolls, eyes glued to the speaker. The only movement, a few women fanning themselves with whatever propaganda material was at hand. The rallies ended in slogan chanting: people limply raising their fists above their heads and repeating the necessary slogans. This was followed on the "News" by the opening of a bridge, yet another captive audience, expressionless, arms rigidly extended, hands on knees.

I remember comparing these images with the animated faces of the people who listened to the NLD speeches outside Aung San Suu Kyi's home. Aung San Suu Kyi has written:

University Avenue became more lively after my release from house arrest, especially at weekends when our supporters gathered to hear U Kyi Maung, U Tin U and I speak about the political, economic, and social conditions within our country. But the authorities placed increasing restrictions on the activities of the NLD culminating in December 1996 with a blockade of the road to my house (Aung San Suu Kyi 1997).

The faces of the people listening to Aung San Suu Kyi telling her audience to "just say no" to the order to attend mass rallies, shone with enthusiasm and a joy they found impossible to hide. Tears ran past their smiles as Military Intelligence snapped surveillance photographs of them and would later follow them home and intimidate their families.

Forced participation involves more than involuntary labor and mass rallies in Myanmar. It includes compulsory attendance at all of the Spectacles created by the regime. Public servants and members of GONGOs must attend these spectacles on a regular basis. If one is unlucky enough to be deemed a "national race," this participation often involves "ethnic dancing" or the demonstration of other "ethnic" skills which become commodities exchanged with the regime.

In this section I have discussed several means by which the regime uses Burmese bodies. I have suggested that Burmans are mobilized, regimented, and circulated as mobile signs of State hegemony through various sites of military domination and this serves the

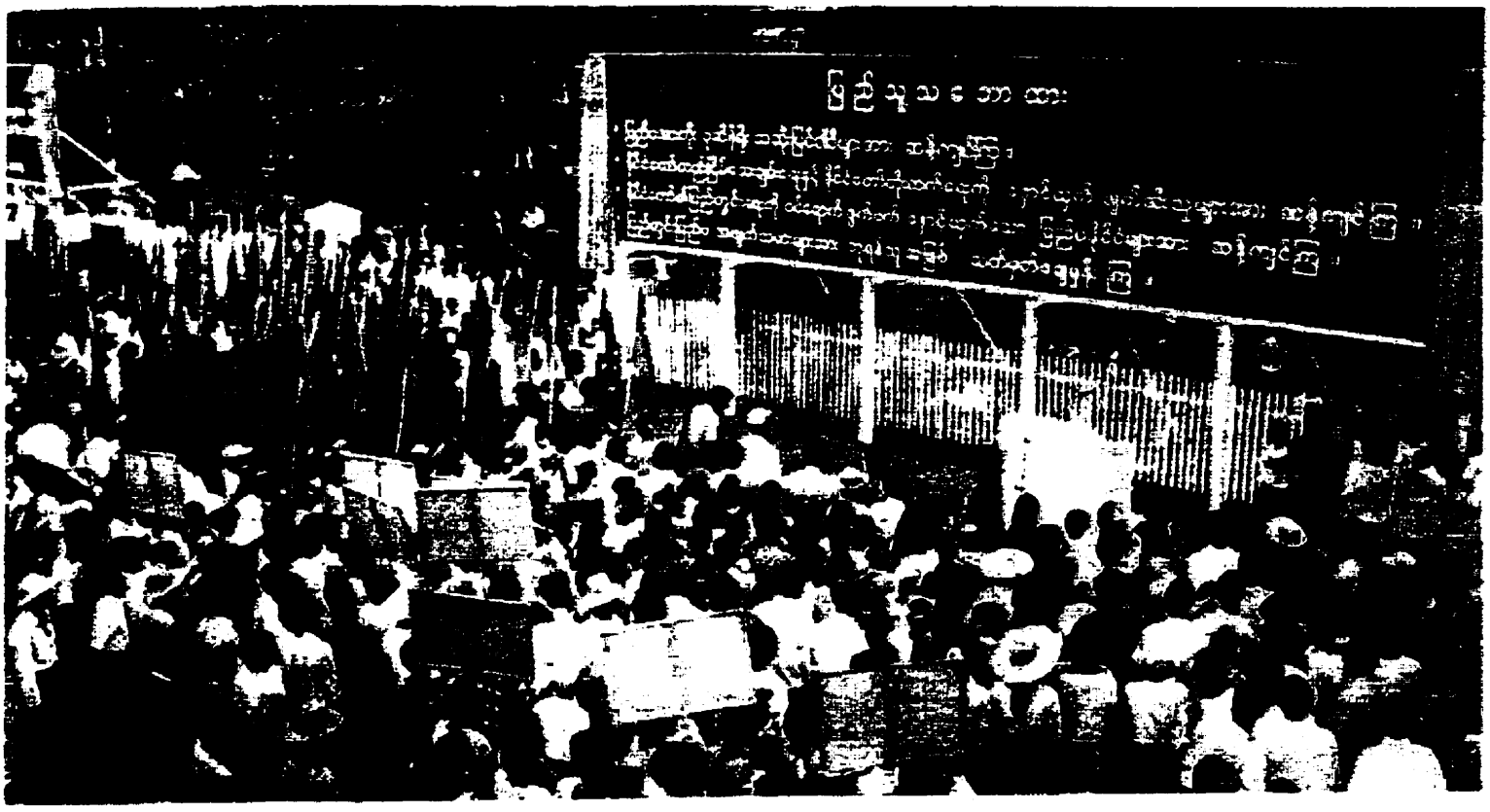


Figure 17: A Mass Rally to Inaugurate a "People's Desire" Signboard

dual function of promoting the myth of absolute State power and establishing control of urban space by controlling the movement of individuals through this reconfigured landscape of domination. In this chapter I have theorized that the production of Burmese automata not only serves the purpose of providing a huge labor pool for the government, but, in conjunction with the executive levels of the GONGOs, it is able to rapidly mobilize a large proportion of the population in a structured formation. This "state of readiness" creates a heightened sense of tension in the capital, and reinforces the everyday state of emergency which exists in Myanmar. Finally, I have suggested that this process is not absolute, that a small space exists where State ideology is not completely internalized. The metaphor in *Ko Ma* used to represent this process is the comatose body with a form of consciousness free to depart the body. That such a severe process is necessary to escape the politicization and automation of everyday life indicates the smallness of this space of incomplete hegemony.

5.11 The Body Silent

In yet another example of the regime's Orwellian Doublespeak, the silence emanating from the Burmese automata at the mass rallies is described by the State media as a resounding noise, a verification of the anger of the masses. The State reported that "Mass Rallies to Support Constructive tasks and to denounce the destructionists were held throughout the length and breadth of the country and the reverberating sounds shattered the ears of Aung San Suu Kyi like the crack of thunder" (NLM 1996r:5). Silence is in fact a profound, torrential, deafening cacophony in Yangon and Mandalay. Silent, alienated bodies sit in tea shops where the tables are placed at a distance from each other so that the military intelligence and informers at neighboring tables cannot overhear conversations. And Anna Allott writes that "Since 1991, the tea shop owners have been told that they will be held personally responsible for anyone found discussing antigovernment politics on their premises, and the omnipresent informers have practically stifled discussions" (Allott 1994:58). A friend, U Kyauk Maung, led me to realize how long this kind of behavior has been the norm in Myanmar. He commented that "The space between tables [in tea shops] is much further than in the West. In my father's day people wouldn't eat in restaurants if the tables were closely packed. They demanded privacy. These places are always, always packed with informers." Of course, it doesn't matter anymore whether informants and intelligence personnel are actually monitoring conversations, Burmans have been conditioned for a generation now to be silent. Burmans are aware of wiretaps on their phones and fax machines and silences are apparent in certain topics of conversation never uttered in front of strangers, in hotel rooms, or on public transportation. As U Kyauk Maung reminded me, "Sometimes our phone gets tapped. They can just come and take you away, this is what dictatorship is."

In this chapter I have reflected upon the most direct means employed by the regime to repress the population and the atmosphere of "terror as usual" that underpins the everyday state of emergency. I have described how space and bodies are integral to the creation, enactment, and construction of modern phantasmagoria including military spectacles in Myanmar. The political geography of Yangon has been described as an unspoken but tacitly acknowledged battle zone that is continually contested, deterritorialized, and politicized, whose contours are demarcated by violence. I have suggested that the production of Burmese automata may not be entirely the result of the regime's ability to silence all opposition to its authoritarian vision of a military utopia. Instead I argue that the "hollowing out" of the Burmese body and its refusal to voice either affirmation or resistance may be partially or wholly a conscious strategy for survival. It is to other ways in which Burmans respond to living in their silent state of emergency, and to the strategies for survival that they construct, to which we now turn.



Figure 18: A Mass Rally of Enforced Participation

Chapter Six

Cultural Ramifications of the SLORC Vision

Before staging demonstrations, the students and youths gathered in front of the National League for Democracy and while they were doing so, they stopped the No 45 Bus ...plying from Tamwe to Insein and took off and threw away the miniature flags of the Union of Burma and the Tatmadaw which were put on the bus in commemoration of the Armed Forces Day.

The Working People's Daily 26/3/1989

6.1 Introduction

In the following chapters I examine the experience of living under a military dictatorship in terms of the strategies that individuals and collectivities construct and enact to survive the junta's authoritarian vision. It is my thesis that political violence has become a self-perpetuating and enclosed domain that encompasses the Generals and their subjects alike. I begin by examining one particular way that experience is mediated by culture. I examine the State's construction of fear and terror as part of the "work" of the strategic use of political violence. I will discuss how the successful construction of fear and terror has resulted in alienation, vulnerability, and a flatness of affect that may seriously effect the future of both individuals and civil society in Myanmar.

As I have noted in previous chapters, both the military and opposition groups use the bodies of individuals to establish dominion of territory and domination over them within the urban landscape. The Burmese body can be conceived of as a primary signifier of this bounded sphere of representations and ideologies of violence. For example, at both the government's mass rallies and during the "mass arrests" of political opposition groups, the regime herds Burmans into the sports grounds to demonstrate their domination of both people and public space, and to remind urban Burmans of the politicization and militarization of their own bodies and of the landscape. In this and the following chapters we will examine some of the methods and long term consequences of living within a social space demarcated by violence, where everyday life is politicized and the body is construed almost exclusively as a political subject.

6.2 Violence as a Temporal Marker

An important factor in the creation of the imagined totalitarian utopia of the "Union of Myanmar" is what Anderson describes as "temporal homogeneity" (Anderson 1991). In the case of Myanmar, however, it is violence that has become a temporal marker and that creates a shared system of meanings and understandings. Feldman argues that etching bodies with the power of the State changes the concept of time for the affected individuals, that time becomes a mimetic and recursive faculty. But in defining the manner in which individuals perceive time, Feldman also believes that the State is cut off from a secret history of the body, that it is not privy to this sense of time, this "clandestine history of alterity" (Feldman 1991:80). The sense of time that the military regime creates includes the historicizing myths of State power and dominance which we see embedded in State monuments and spectacles such as Armed Forces Day. However, the clandestine history of alterity is also visible in the scars, broken teeth, and other bodily markers of imprisonment and torture inscribed on the body of Burmans, and also in the way in which Burmans conceive time as flowing differently from the birth of the state of emergency, the eighth of the eighth, eighty-eight, the day known as "the Strike."

"The Strike" is a temporal marker evident in language, illness, and life histories, as the following chapters will illustrate. Although the pro-democracy uprising occurred over several weeks, many Burmans date the "Four-Eights," the day that the military opened fire upon the protesters, as the day that marked the end of a certain way of life. Prisoners were released from jail (as there were no wardens present), property was damaged, work ceased, and many people, especially students, left the country for fear of their lives. Some of these students fled to the jungles where many contracted malaria and some subsequently died. With the formation of the State Law and Order Restoration Council, whole neighborhoods were disassembled and relocated. Thus to many people, the end of the demonstrations meant an end to their old way of life, neighbourhood, some of their friends and family, their land, occupations, and so on. Universities remained closed for several years and the economic crisis deepened leading to more unemployment. On September 5, 1987, the regime seized the assets of many people and devalued the currency, pauperizing whole communities overnight. The value of the currency in circulation was decreased by sixty to eighty percent (Carey 1997:7). Primarily though, it was the upper class who suffered most, the class most intimidating to a fledgling dictatorship. In the relocated townships there were no services or amenities, and of course, no jobs.

Not only are events dated as to their proximity to the Strike (such as "It was one year after the Strike..."), but time is also conceived to flow differently. Time no longer "flows," it now "pools." The population comprises a nation in waiting as Schwarz has suggested of Indonesia during the Suharto era (Schwarz 1994). Not only is the population waiting for democracy, employment, and so on, they also wait for violence. For example,

during the rainy season, political action is "planned" rather than enacted. Myanmar is heavy with the continued expectation that "something will happen," it is a time framework conceived in terms of "waiting on events." There is a Burmese term, *mo ko* (မိုးခို), which means both to take shelter from the monsoon rains and also to suspend operations, especially military operations, for the duration of the rainy season. This is a tense waiting period, a belief that one is waiting for a sudden moment, a moment when, as one political activist explained to me, "a spark could ignite." I have mentioned previously the way in which Burmans chart the temporal topography of their cities in a cycle of terror. Since 1988 this landscape is charged with the possibility of violence and the uneasy silence of waiting.

6.3 Freedom of Speech and the Seduction of Revolutionary Glory

I have suggested that in *Shooting an Elephant*, Orwell shows us how the necessary compliance with a dominant transcript of the absolute and perpetual nature of State hegemony serves to perpetuate this transcript and to make victims of the rulers as much as of the ruled. In Myanmar, military governments have, since 1962, married militarization with "modernization" and economic development, and legitimated their role as Buddhist-sanctioned leaders. Scott has described the conformation to such a platform as a kind of "self-hypnosis," one that Orwell became immediately aware of upon his return to England for leave (Orwell 1937:175-180). An experienced political analyst, Jon Philp, has suggested to me that this has also occurred in contemporary Myanmar. Asked why the SLORC held free and fair elections in 1990, he replied, "Because, for just a moment, the SLORC believed their own propaganda" (Jon Philp, personal communication, April 1997). And one cannot but hear the outraged Generals in the State media's assertion that Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy is "concocting news as if the entire government machinery in the wrong" (sic) (NLM 1996l:6,12).

Freedom of speech is a novel concept in Myanmar, related to other unusual concepts such as democracy that have existed in the history of Myanmar only in the brief period between independence and the military coup, and even then the parliamentary cabinet was assassinated in a bomb blast. The most unusual factor in Myanmar's recent history however, is the spectacular isolation that the Ne Win socialist regime managed to impose. Many trade goods were disallowed (except for the military leaders). More important than material items however (from the point of view of "revolution"), is the isolation of information, of international media, of a knowledge of Myanmar's history, and of the rise of popular movements. Even now the news of student demonstrations and popular protests in Asian countries is censored in Myanmar. Orwell's point is that without access to alternate sources of information and ideas, the saturating propaganda of totalitarian writers seems more plausible, and myths of state dominance are made all the

more powerful. As I have suggested in earlier chapters, many Burmans espouse racial, classist, and sexist ideologies, believing the military spin doctors' persuasive arguments about the "purity" of such "Burmese" ways of thinking.

With the introduction of certain "open-market" policies by the regime, Burmans have been inundated with consumer capitalism, a "fairytale" that many people will sell their souls (and their bodies) to achieve. Combined with the poor standard of education (and the continued closure of the universities),[66] Burmans are neither taught nor encouraged to think critically of the ideologies and myths that the regime naturalizes as "everyday knowledge." This is what Orwell meant by the seduction of the revolutionary spirit, and it is why the junta portrays itself as being vigilant against, and "crushing" its "internal" enemies. As Orwell noted, however, the real enemy of totalitarian regimes is freedom of speech and the dissemination of critical information, something Benjamin despaired was being lost in the uncritical adoption of mass commodification (Benjamin 1969:255).

Orwell also noted the seductive power of the revolutionary spirit, and the adoption of anti-democratic practices and ideologies by "socialists everywhere" in their desire to become victorious of enemies whom their own propaganda writers demonize. This scenario is unfortunately being played out by the sectors of the expatriate Burmese community at present and it demonstrates clearly the long term consequences of living in a state of emergency. Members of the expatriate Burmese community contribute to an Internet list known as the *BurmaNet*. The *BurmaNet* has been successful in lobbying for United States sanctions against new investment in Myanmar and for raising awareness and popular protest against companies doing business with the Burmese military regime. Financed by a grant from George Soros' *Open Society*, the *BurmaNet* was designed to allow the free exchange of views on issues regarding Myanmar. However, many Burmans who fled the violence in Myanmar have adopted fundamentalist positions, demonizing the regime (which requires little imagination) and often insisting that the sinister hand of former dictator Ne Win is behind all forms of repression in Myanmar (even though he is one of the oldest Burmans alive). Suspicion, distrust, factionalism and personal rivalries compete with the regime's own "[dis]Information Sheet[s]." Many *BurmaNet* subscribers advocate the censorship of any and all opinions that do not maintain a fundamentalist line against the regime. Poison pen letters, verbal abuse, slander, and threats of violence greet academics, journalists, Burmans and non-Burmans alike who express opinions differing from those who monopolize, through fear and the threat of violence, the Internet site. Using pseudonyms, some *BurmaNet* subscribers threaten those whose opinions differ from their own if they persist in writing "falsehoods." Fear of surveillance, impostors, and spies are unfortunate consequences of living in a state of emergency. A recent example

[66] It is difficult to recall another nation that has no tertiary education at present. This situation has occurred for half of the last decade. Consistent with the prestige of modernity in Myanmar (and many other post-colonial nations), a great many Burmans place enormous prestige upon education. The critical long-term import of the closure of universities by the SLORC/SPDC is often unrecognized in international discourse about the nature of the military regime's repression.

involves an article written by a former aide to Aung San Suu Kyi who spent three years as a political prisoner in Myanmar. She writes of "The Burmese Fairytale," pointing out that:

> Like many Burmese, I am tired of living in a fairytale. For years, outsiders portrayed the troubles of my country as a morality play; good against evil, with no shades of gray in between- a simplistic picture...We are tired of wasting time...That may sound like pro-government propaganda, but I haven't changed since I joined the democracy movement in August 1988. I have lived most of my life under the 1962-88 socialist regime- another fairy tale, this one of isolation...I have no regrets about going to jail and blame no one for it...Almost a decade after it all began, we are concerned that the work we started had been squandered and the momentum wasted (Ma Thangyi 1998).

This article appeared in the *Far Eastern Economic Review* and was posted on the *BurmaNet* where strident, abusive, and threatening opposition was voiced to such "government propaganda" being allowed on the Internet site.

Threats of violence and the fear they generate (and accusations of junta sympathies) are used to silence opposition to the radical stance of some *BurmaNet* subscribers. This radical stance is precisely what Orwell had in mind when he criticized the Spanish socialists for succumbing to the romance of the "revolutionary spirit." Orwell was describing a myth, an imagined community that would exist, founded on the violent overthrow of a previous political and social order. Despite the rivalries and distrust I have mentioned above, many expatriate Burmans agree with Aung San Suu Kyi that the overthrow of totalitarianism should take place using non-violent means. These two seemingly incongruent positions are adopted because of another dominant Burmese myth. Many expatriate Burmans are waiting for a day when they will triumphantly return to Myanmar and share their much needed skills and education with the Burmese masses. This nostalgic myth draws its power from the belief that Myanmar is not a country founded on violence. Recently the Chairman of the National League for Democracy stated that: "The Burmese people are by nature law abiding, peace loving and gentle" (U Tin Oo 1998). Unfortunately, the climate of violence and fear that exists within Myanmar and that reaches all those who have families and friends in Myanmar, has led to the expatriate Burmese community often adopting the same propaganda and censorship techniques of the very regime they seek to overthrow. The seduction of "revolutionary glory" and the nostalgic myth of a non-violent past, are but some of the long term ramifications of a history of isolation and authoritarian rule.

6.4 The State Construction of Affect

A number of emotions, or feelings, such as suspicion, distrust, and fear have been described as part of the experience of living in a state of emergency. Lock has pointed out that such emotions can be profitably analyzed via an examination of the politics of

embodied emotion (Lock 1993b:139). Appadurai has made a study of the "community of sentiment" generated through the conscious application of praise to social relationships and situations in which there is a desire to "create a chain of communications of feeling, not by unmediated empathy between the emotional "interiors" of specific individuals but by recourse to a shared, and relatively fixed set, of public gestures" (Appadurai 1990:107). Appadurai asserts that praise is never a neutral act. The bonds of sentiment which praise creates are an example, not only of the cultural construction of affect, but also the political construction of affect, since "Such bonds are part of the politics of everyday life, and such politics is cultural and not biological, since its messages and its media are publicly expressed, construed, and appraised" (Appadurai 1990:110). The political construction of affect thus lies at the intersection of experience, body, politics, and discourse. In the previous section I have argued that violence has become an arbiter of such domains, and in this section I wish to pursue the affect of violence upon Burmans, namely, the state construction of fear and terror (these two affects differing only in intensity).

Jenkins distinguishes between the state construction of affect and the phenomenology of affect by "degree and self-reference." The state construction of affect is a "relatively enduring situation" as opposed to "relatively discrete traumatic events". She contends that the Salvadoran state constructed affect by what Marx termed the "transforming of quantity into quality." (Jenkins 1991:153). The collective experience of State induced terror, paranoia, anxiety, (including the surreal feeling of unreality that accompanies psychological warfare) is, according to Martin-Baró, a global phenomenon. It is "the dominant process that subordinates all other social, economic, political and cultural processes" (Jenkins 1991:153). Both Taussig and Jenkins maintain that the state constructs affect, in both cases terror, through the personification of affects such that they become "things-in-themselves" (Jenkins 1991:153; Taussig 1992:5). Terror becomes a self-perpetuating force that must be collectively denied in order for individuals to survive this particular form of psychological warfare. Taussig states that "paranoia" is also constructed by the state through techniques of silencing and by the "strategic use of uncertainty and mystery" (Taussig 1992:16-7,26). Similar to the devaluation and medicalization of political and religious experience in Myanmar by the military regime (as we shall see in the following chapters), Jenkins analyzes the strategic use of medical and religious terminology to pathologize "improper" sentiments. She argues that:

> The state construction of the eminently evil "other"...is accomplished through reference to "savages" and "mental illness"- indeed, the listening audience is informed that adherence to Marxist doctrine causes mental illness. Religious officials are interviewed summarizing the barbarism and hideous crimes against humanity that the FMLN are accused of committing (Jenkins 1991:146).

When conceptualizing the way in which power constrains and creates experience and expression, the State construction of fear and terror illustrates one precise mechanism of the mediation of experience by culture. The Burmese military State is conscious of its ability to manipulate emotions. In fact, there is a department in the Ministry of Defense devoted to the State Construction of Affect: the Department of Psychological Warfare and its collaborator in propaganda, the Ministry of Information. I have discussed previously the use of propaganda and State spectacles to make more credible the regime's claims to absolute authority. But they also generate fear, and as I have discussed previously, various forms of deterritorialization perpetuate this fear. Taussig has succinctly captured the insecurity of dictatorships and their overcompensation by way of larger-than-life spectacles, monuments, and signboards, and the way that the regime's fear of change or loss of power generates fear among the subject population by creating feelings of surreality and an uneasy sense of 'wrongness.' He asks: "What is the state graffiti hovering between

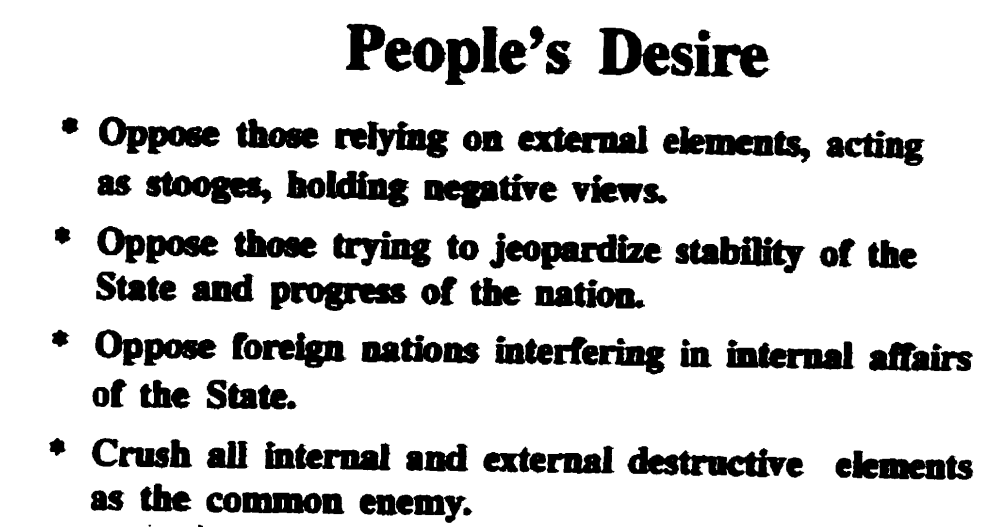


Figure 19: State Propaganda: The People's Desire

the absurd and the horrific, inching towards sanctity?...Note also the aura specific of stately presence, the signs of paranoia - their signs of fear that make you fear" (Taussig 1997:147).

The Burmese military regime deliberately creates a number of collective affective states as voiced in the "People's Desire" ideology (see figure 19). A series of affective "tones" are "set" including the need for defence and alertness against foreign invasion and the defilement of Burmese culture and morals. Nobel peace prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi, a victim of assassination attempts and "house arrest," has written about the emotions which the Burmese regime has so successfully generated. She comments that in Myanmar

there are many kinds of fear, including:

> Fear of imprisonment, fear of torture, fear of death, fear of losing friends, family, property or means of livelihood, fear of poverty, fear of isolation, fear of failure...It is not easy for a people conditioned by fear under the iron rule of the principle that might is right to free themselves from the enervating miasma of fear. Yet even under the most crushing state machinery courage rises up again and again, for fear is not the natural state of civilized man (Aung San Suu Kyi 1990:184).

Fear is thus the primary emotion constructed by the regime. At times this fear is an incidental, unplanned side-effect of the regime's policies such as the Orwellian acronym 'SLORC.' But the majority of the time, strategic and symbolic violence is used to engender fear and terror. It is the "work" of totalitarian culture (Obeyesekere 1985), a major element in the disabling of forty seven million Burmans by a small military elite. In this section we will explore the way that fear distorts perspectives and how the deterritorialization of fear through the use of violence is exacerbated by rumors and nightmares. I then discuss the texture of fear in Yangon and Mandalay, the conflicting and amplifying themes of certainty, rigidity, menace, thrill, and rage. I examine the feeling of being trapped and of alienation, the breakdown of trust, and the silence that pervades these domains of fear. I explore different ways in which fear is experienced as vulnerability, and finally the conditioned responses to fear, the self-produced Burmese automata that is perhaps the saddest consequence of living in a state of fear.

Fear is most commonly experienced as a distortion and disorientation of perspective. It gives everyday life a surreal dimension that emphasizes negative aspects to such a large extent that thoughts involving the "future" are flattened and silenced. These thoughts are replaced by wild, black fantasies which colonize both the waking world and the dream world. This distortion and disorientation coincides with the topography of fear and terror I have mentioned previously, climaxing at times of military spectacles and mass arrests. For example, during the tense months of the military build-up of forces in Yangon and Mandalay (December 1996 to March 1997), I, along with many Burmans, experienced an array of feelings triggered by the strategic use of symbolic violence and aggression, among which tanks deployed by the regime were extraordinarily effective. Fear creates thoughts, scenarios, actions, and nightmares that are out of proportion to the actual likelihood of an individual being "caught up" in political violence.

The first indication that political violence was creating terror came from two conversations with friends, one of whom was Ma Khin Nu, a young woman recently graduated from university. She lives a life carefully regulated and chaperoned by her mother and grandmother. After a few weeks of getting to know each other well, I ventured

the subject of the political situation. I made the following fieldnote of our conversation:[70]

Last night I asked Ma Khin Nu about the "situation." She whispered that she was very afraid. She was very disturbed by my questions and couldn't get to sleep that night. The next morning she told me that she hadn't slept at all and was worried about what she'd told me. She had told me only that she is afraid because of the love she bears Aung San Suu Kyi and that, (her eyes glinted as she thought about telling me this) she knew Aung San Suu Kyi's phone number. Sometimes, when she is sure no one is listening, she recites it to herself. This is her personal form of resistance, and revealing it to someone for the first time has terrified her and left her sleepless.

This conversation was in some ways a watershed in Ma Khin Nu's life. Realizing that she had trusted someone, over the next year she began to covertly listen to the BBC broadcasts (in Burmese) on a short wave radio, involving her family in her subversive activities. The second indication of the state's construction of terror came from a middle-aged friend, Daw Tint Tint Khine, who has been involved in active but extremely careful resistance to the regime's policies for many years. Her husband has been imprisoned for daring to agitate for democracy and she knows well the fear generated by opposing the regime. She spoke of the everyday dimensions of fear in urban Myanmar:

> "Paranoia is so widespread you don't think about it anymore. We all live in this delusion. It's blanketed all around us, you surround yourself in this abnormal world where this is not an abnormal way to live."

Within several months of living in Yangon, I was also caught up in the fear, evident in my own suspiciousness, covertness, and nightmares. Towards the end of my fieldwork I made the following fieldnote:

The drink truck is labeled "Loi Htei," but every time I see it my heart seems to stop momentarily, and in that silence I force myself to look again, and I realize that yet again I have made a false connection between a drink company (Loi Htei) and the dreaded Lon Htein (Riot Police). Often the riot police dress up in other uniforms, such as as traffic police at the Kokaing junction. As everyone knows however, traffic police and regular soldiers are reed thin, these guys have muscle and are twice the size.

[70] This conversation was the first time I had deliberately broached the subject of fear with an informant. The enormous amount of fear that talking about fear generated alerted me to the inappropriateness of this style of interviewing. In all future political conversations, I asked informants whether they would be willing, at some time in the future, to have a conversation based upon their experience of the political situation. This gave informants a chance to indefinitely postpone such a meeting and it gave willing informants a chance to marshal their thoughts and set up meetings in locations that they felt were secure, and at time of their choosing.

The *Lon Htein* were often manning barricades at the corner of my street, replete with machine guns, sometimes fitted with bayonets, and bullet-proof vests. I recalled a statement by Feldman: "Interspersed with mimetic violence are beatings that serve to diffuse the boundaries between the real and the imaginary" (Feldman 1991:122).

This exaggerated fear increases when one comes into direct contact with the institutions that support the regime. On one occasion I was visiting the Traditional Medicine Department where I had (I thought), established a degree of rapport with senior staff. The Director seemed very agitated in late November, when Aung San Suu Kyi's roadside speeches were still being permitted by the junta. He asked me if I had been going to Aung San Suu Kyi's house and when I replied in the negative, he asked if I had been involved in subversive matters. He then refused my request to speak to patients alone, saying that perhaps my Burmese was not good enough to understand the subtleties of the language. I offered to bring along an interpreter for those patients who spoke dialects. The Director replied that Burmese has many different possible English interpretations for each word and such a person may give me politically subversive translations. Later I made this fieldnote:

When I returned from the Traditional Medicine Department I felt shaken up, as if I was an insignificant Hobbit facing an overwhelming evil, both in size and wickedness. This feeling was not in perspective at the time, but moments such as these became common as I passed soldiers in various parts of the city. My husband noted that we always avoided that main road leading to the Shwedagon because of the silent intimidation involved in walking past the military barracks. But U Wizara also became a road I wanted to avoid because of the stop checks (on white cars[71]) and the military presence as well as being the address of the Traditional Medicine Department which also felt like a dangerous place to me now.

This exaggeration of danger becomes clearer when it is articulated by groups or collectivities. When the government closed the universities, parents began sending their children into the countryside to stay with relatives. There was terror and panic and a rush to leave Yangon, but at that time only a small group of students had been beaten up and sprayed with water cannons. When Maung Tin, a young man I knew from Mandalay, called his mother to tell her he would be staying in Yangon for an extra week she whispered urgently, "come home now!" and hung up the phone, too terrified to speak any longer. I do not mean to downplay the actual atrocities perpetrated by the dictatorship, but rather to draw attention to the powerful impact that the state construction of terror can have upon everyday life under conditions of dictatorship.

The deterritorialization of fear, by techniques such as the reconstruction of urban space using the bodies of soldiers and the weapons of urban warfare (such as tanks and barricades) is exacerbated by rumor. A desire for knowledge in urban Myanmar is

[71] White-colored cars often belong to international organizations including the United Nations and private companies and thus are likely to contain the wealthiest citizens.

primarily fulfilled by the passing of rumors. Although the trading of rumors can bring social capital (status, prestige, respect, personal power) to an individual, in Myanmar rumors are extremely important because they are one of the few forms of information that allow individuals and families to speculate on outcomes, to gamble on courses of action, to assess options, and to weigh probabilities. De Certeau notes that rumor crystallizes and reifies diverse opinions. He states that rumor:

> which is always injunctive, [is] the initiator and result of a leveling of space, the creator of mass motions that shore up an order by adding make-believe to make-do or -be. Narratives diversify; rumors totalize. Although there is always an oscillation from one to the other...narratives are becoming more private and fading into out-of-the-way neighborhoods, families, or individuals, while rumour is rampant (De Certeau 1985:143).

In urban Burmese spaces, rumor has become a dominant form of discourse as it presents an impression of clarity. It is a sense-making device in the disorienting environment of the everyday state of emergency. It is however, also a carrier of terror as rumors often confirm the worst fears of individuals. The numbers of arrested demonstrators or opposition members, the number of riot police or tanks, as well as the number of killed or tortured, can be exaggerated in the rapid and whispered exchange of rumors.

Perhaps the most disorienting dimension of the state's construction of fear and terror is the penetration of these emotions into the dream world. For several weeks after leaving Myanmar I continued to have violent nightmares, dreams that were revisited in the writing of the thesis. One night after dining with an American and a British friend, both interested in the Burmese political situation, we were followed first on foot, and then by car, by Military Intelligence. They were obvious and unguarded in their surveillance and it was not difficult to escape the surveillance. However, the incident caused a sleepless night and a mad scramble to get my fieldnotes safely out of the country. On another occasion, my husband and I photographed the military roadblocks on University Avenue that barricaded Aung San Suu Kyi's compound. Returning to our apartment we had an afternoon nap where we both dreamed vividly. This was how I explained my dream to my husband: "We were having an afternoon nap and they followed us, and I woke up, (as I did in actuality) and you'd been shot to death several times, and I had several bullet wounds. That's when I knew that being there does bad things to your mind." My husband awoke at the same time and was also shaken by the vivid violence of his dream. He had dreamt that after taking the photographs, we had been followed by M.I., who burst into our room at the moment he awakened. Despite the ardent efforts many Burmans make to escape the politicization of their lives, markers of the regime's oppression such as soldiers, murder, and military intelligence impress so deeply upon one's experience that even in sleep, they are inescapable.

Fear itself is finely nuanced in urban Myanmar, although the regime is perhaps unaware of the multi-textured effect it is creating. For example, fear translates to terror and panic at certain moments, but at other times it is tinged with menace, thrill, certainty, and rigidity. By certainty I mean the feeling engendered when you stand in front of the troops with their rifles aimed at you and you know, with certainty, that the soldier at the other end of the weapon, himself a tool of the State, will kill you if you advance any further.This knowledge feels like it is lodged viscerally, it is not a stomach churning feeling, but more like a cold sharp stone lodged amongst your vital organs. At other times this fear when confronted by the regime's weapons translates into a rigidity, a paralysis. And then there is the omnipresent menace, such as when you drive or walk past an open gate or turn a corner and are confronted by a physical manifestation of State Power, such as a tank. But the tank is not simply itself a menace, a brooding store of potential lethality: it is also the military personnel with their reflective dark glasses, helmets, and boots who generate menace. Your eyes involuntarily move over the reflective surfaces to the matte gun which seems to absorb your gaze. It is hard to stop staring. It is in that instant that once again you are assailed by the renewed realization (made dull by the continuous nature of the state of emergency) that this is not a joke, not a game, and not an inflation or paranoid turn of thought. You are shocked with the renewed realization that these men are prepared to kill you.

Such fear, whether it is tinged with certainty, menace, or rigidity, can lead to rage. When people's (especially young people's) dissatisfaction with the regime grows to an apex, such as when access to Aung San Suu Kyi was denied, and when the universities are closed, there is a great need to control this rage. As Scott has commented:

> In any established system of domination, it is not just a question of masking one's feelings and producing the correct speech acts and gestures in their place. Rather, it is often a question of controlling what would be a natural impulse to rage, insult, anger, and the violence that such feelings prompt...Conformity in the face of domination is thus occasionally- and unforgettably- a question of suppressing a violent rage in the interest of oneself and loved ones (Scott 1992:63).

Such frustrations can lead to another dimension of fear, the thrill of fear, where terror is tinged with expectation, surprise, and suspense. The thrill of fear that many Yangon residents experienced during the student demonstrations in December 1996 is the response of relief at the possibility of an end to this continual "waiting for something to happen" feeling that pervades the state of emergency.

Burmans commonly use the hand symbol of a thumb pressed into the palm when referring to the military. It symbolizes the "over-the-top" force that the regime uses, it is a symbol of brutality, but also of miniaturization, which is a theme we shall explore in chapter eight. Burmans commonly accompany this gesture with the phrase "pressed

down," indicative of the experience of feeling trapped and pinned down. A psychiatric patient told me that he felt as if "the whole world pressed down on me." This is the sentiment expressed in the gesture. It is also a feeling of claustrophobia which has been described to me as "being in a fish bowl." One woman described her experience as: "the intimidation of waiting outside *her* house- like being in a fish bowl, the way they succeed in making the frightened feel even more frightened." A journalist described to me "running the gauntlet," the enormous fear involved in waiting outside Aung San Suu Kyi's house. It is a fear of constant and intense surveillance.

Fear of surveillance, of being "crushed" (to use the regime's metaphor for the infliction of political violence), and of being unable to suppress rage, culminates in alienation, a nation of individuals unable and unwilling to trust each other. For those Burmans born from around 1950 onwards (the vast majority of the population), school is often fondly remembered as a time of no worries, when trust was never an issue between friends. After school however, friendships based on trust are seldom formed and political conversations are conducted amongst old school friends and some family members only. This breakdown in interpersonal relations also results in community organizations not being formed, or trusted, as friendship and support networks. Aung San Suu Kyi has written that:

> The greatest obstacle in the way of peace and progress in Burma is a lack of trust: trust between the government and the people, between different ethnic groups, between the military and civilian forces. Trust is a precious commodity that is easily lost, but hard indeed to take root (Aung San Suu Kyi 1997:x).

The military dictatorship thus effectively manages to isolate Burmese people into small knots of friendship. This sense of isolation is commonly expressed as: *thwe aah lweh deh, seiq macha ya bu* (သွားအားလွယ်တယ်၊ စိတ်မချရဘူး။) which can be translated as "they're [M.I.] always listening, you can't trust anyone." As Daw May Ohn, a middle-aged professional woman told me:

> "If you speak about politics people become silent or make a silly laugh. If you don't call it fear, then what do you call it?...Just now, when someone bought our things, we stopped our conversation...I don't want them [my friends] to know what they don't need to know. It's a formula."

This situation has become so serious that Burmans in their teens and early twenties don't even consider trusting other Burmans as this vignette by Ma Win Win Mae, a young Burmese woman, illustrates:

"The people who do not have any strong feelings for any particular parties and who want promotions, want to make face,[72] they inform a lot."

"Who to?"

"They can inform to the people who are in charge of any government department and who are friendly with them. They cannot inform to people who don't know them."

"Is it hard to make friends and trust people?"

"I never think in terms of trust and not trusting. I make friends with everyone, just chit-chat. I give the impression that I am very kind and friendly...But I don't have anything on a deep level with them...because you don't trust anyone except yourself. If anybody tells us in a taxi, for example, that the government is very stupid or anything, you just keep quiet, you just listen to it. You better not trust that the taxi driver is the supporter of [opposition] politics. Maybe they are from BSI [Bureau of Special Investigations] or SB [Special Branch]. Vegetable sellers and taxi drivers that are really informers, they are legal informers. Such kinds of stories are very common. I've never met such a person, but it's best to stay very quiet if you want to stay well."[73]

Besides alienation, vulnerability is perhaps the most common way that fear is experienced on an everyday basis in urban centers. Vulnerability is experienced with regard to the economy, the arbitrariness of institutions as well as the military, and of course, the vulnerability to arrest and interrogation without recourse, to which almost all of the population are liable.

The General's disastrous economic mismanagement forces people to engage in the black, or informal, economy in order to survive. Official salaries and pensions are not adequate for the necessities of a family's survival. Commodities such as fuel are rationed and often run out, meaning that fuel is one of many essential items that must be purchased on the black market. Using the black market has the added advantage of saving money, which can then be used as "line-money" (bribery) to facilitate business ventures, access to education, and employment opportunities. An enormous amount of fear is generated by the knowledge that at any time a Burman can "legally" be arrested for his or her illegal black market transactions. The higher up the social and employment ladder one is (if one is a public servant), the more access one has to the informal economy. The risks are higher because of the amount of money involved, but the opportunities for making money are also greater. This leads to feelings of vulnerability and the tendency to stop making plans for the future. Families are always living in the present, uncertain when or if they will suffer the

[72] To "make face" is to gain respect, personal power, or prestige through social actions.

[73] I have been struck be the parallels between informers and witches. Like witches, informers are seldom, if ever actually seen or known, and it is informer discourse- talking about informers that, like witch discourse, is how Burmans experience informers in their midst.

ire of the military. Most Burmans agree that the degree of arbitrariness of enforcement involved in economic illegalities is slightly less now than it was under the capricious Ne Win junta.

A related sense of vulnerability is created because of the complete lack of trust Burmans have in their institutions. This may have long term effects upon the notion of "civil" society in Myanmar. The banking sector is a good example because the military governments have, at various times, wiped out the higher denomination currency notes, closed banks, and refused to allow money to be withdrawn. This has provided the junta with hard currency but led people to invest in gold and store it in private homes. As one Chinese friend told me, prior to the 1988 currency devaluation, her wise grandmother had converted her kyats to gold bars and even now continues to hide them under her bed.

The general lack of law and order in Myanmar is also experienced in institutions other than the banking sector. Since all institutions are nationalized, they are also considered to be compromised. A few examples are germane. The enormous fervor over lottery tickets in Myanmar is evidence in both a strong belief in the miraculous (to be explored in a the following chapter), and the desperation of even the poorest families in *Nyaungbintha* who will spend money essential for family survival on Thai lottery tickets (the Thai lottery is illegal in Myanmar). Ma Mya May, a teenage mother working as a prostitute in *Nyaungbintha* told me that: "If you what to smuggle things, or participate in the illegal lottery, you have to pay the local *LORC*, the police, and so on. You always give line money." Daw Thida Aung, a doctor in her thirties who works in *Nyaungbintha* told me that about fifty percent of families participate in the lottery. They buy one ticket at a time, for ten kyats:

> "Some families "go crazy" and spend 10,000 kyats.[74] People generally prefer the Thai lottery which is illegal but which gives much more prize money. It's illegal because they often can't repay the money and people lose their money. The military, police, and doctors sell the tickets. You ask a trishaw driver where to buy it."

The involvement of the police and the military in bribery, corruption, and the black market has led to a complete lack of faith in "security" oriented institutions. During my fieldwork, inflation ran at around 40% per year but this figure escalated dramatically in the latter half of 1997 and 1998 when the "Asian economic crisis" reached Myanmar. Therefore, public servants real salaries dropped dramatically, leaving them particularly reliant upon corruption. For example, traffic police, one of the most loathed civil service divisions, are encountered by urban residents on a daily basis. Their salaries are so low they are reduced to stopping cars and blatantly demanding money. For several years the traffic police in Yangon have said to motorists, "Give me tea money," meaning the amount of money

[74] At an exchange rate of 164 kyats to the U.S. dollar, 10,000 kyats is equal to $61 which is almost one-third of average yearly income (see the Glossary for exchange rates).

generally spent at a tea shop (anywhere from fifteen to forty kyats). This amount began to increase in 1997, until a male friend in his fifties, U Ba Pe, recounted to me a conversation he had had coming to work that morning when stopped by traffic police. He said to the traffic policeman: "Do you want tea money?" U Ba Pe was quite surprised to receive the reply: "No, not tea money, it's too little, give me beer money. Give me five hundred kyats."

The vulnerability produced by a breakdown in institutional integrity has become routine, just another exigency of everyday life in Myanmar, as U Min Oo, a sailor in his late-thirties told me in December, at the end of the student demonstrations:

> *"Are people frightened?"*
> "It's about 50-50. They have Suu Kyi legally in jail so now everyone and the students are saying everyday, "Why, why why?" Now I think things will be quiet. I think it's not the end. I think it's the beginning."
> [He points to the left] "That's the President's Old Place- Ne Win's place. Things were very bad then. Now it is run by military men: his sons. So nothing has changed. The government is like an old song, you know? If you want something done, you pay money, they're mostly police."

Within the regime's institutions, vulnerability is experienced with regard to the need to rely upon cronyism and patron-client relations to secure work. U Khin Maung Din, an educated man in his forties, explains this vulnerability as follows:

> "The problem is a lot of these people who are in the government at the moment, their parents worked under the BSPP and people who are obscure would become a Minister later on. That's how Ne Win ruled the country, calling people from that kind of level. They became generals and thought they'd made it because they're smart. So if you have the right connections you can rise up. If there's a government change, then what they've worked for, all the contacts, they will lose it all. I'm talking about mid-rank officers, that's how they think."

U Khin Maung Din has expressed the need to create contacts within the public service and that once forged, careers are made or lost depending upon the fortunes of their allies. There are however, other aspects to public service life that contribute to insecurity. Officials must do nothing wrong, and they accomplish this in two ways. The first is to adhere to the public service maxim that I have mentioned previously, "don't do anything, don't get involved, don't get fired." The second is to be "slorcier than the SLORC." This phrase means that, as in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, public servants must appear to be even more zealous in their support of the State than the military junta itself. Especially at the

higher levels of the government service (including the GONGOs), an extra degree of fear exists. The regime places low ranking officers in the public service both to ensure the loyalty of civil servants and to actually get things done, since non-military personnel are too frightened to take any initiative whatsoever.

Vulnerability is thus generated through involvement in the black market, the public service, and via an increased sense of insecurity due to a lack of faith in Burmese institutions. The greatest sense of vulnerability is however produced by the lack of recourse to a fair justice system under a totalitarian regime, as U Khin Maung Din explains:

> *"Do you think the government controls people through fear?"*
> "[Yes], they do."
> *"How?"*
> "You have no law and order here, they can do whatever they like- they can arrest you and impose a sentence without any proof. That's how they do it, and people know that this is the case. There's no regulation that says I can't do it, there's no regulation that says I can do it...I am not safe because there is no rule or law saying what I'm doing is right, or what I'm doing is wrong...You are never safe because you can't do anything right. You're not safe, but I don't live in fear because of what may happen someday."
> *"Is this why you haven't become involved in the opposition?"*
> "I'm scared. I don't think this is the right climate to get involved. My father is dead against it. I have a skill, and I market it, it's all I have. The image I see of a politician (Ne Win doesn't go out, give public speeches), I just see him as a dictator with a gun. I'm scared because of the repercussions which would come to my whole family. My sister lost her job because my father was active in politics. I don't want my father to be pulled in for interrogation. My mother is not well. I know this is a dictatorship and I know well what a dictatorship is, and I hope by now you know it well also....Sometimes our phone gets tapped. They can just come and take you away. This is what dictatorship is."

Two generations of Burmans have now grown up with the terror of the regime coming in the middle of the night to "search and seize," as U Winn explains:

> "When they [the military] come to your house, they come with a prison van. They normally inform the local authority. The local authority has power. They make them step out and then they seize them and come and surround the house and burst into all the rooms. They search and ask lots and lots of questions. "Put all your jewelry in a locked box." They take an inventory of all the things in the house, apprehend whoever they want to and take them away for interrogation. The family never gets

told what's going on until they see them [the detainees] back again."

Like most other places in Southeast Asia, Myanmar is full of stray dogs, many who bark and bite with little provocation. Sometimes these animals are crazed with hunger and pain and in Myanmar the term "mad dog" has come to be used as a slang term for Military Intelligence. The dogs barking at night has come to take on an additional sinister meaning related to Military Intelligence, as one veteran political opponent, U Aung Than, explains: "We never eat properly, we never sleep properly. We are always listening for the dogs barking because they [M.I.] come to get people at night."

An incidental response to the State construction of fear and terror is Silence. Not Silence in the sense of absence, rather in the sense of a numb calmness in the eye of a storm, a temporary relief from the surrounding terror. This numbness (silence and inactivity) is a conditioned response. In May 1996, I drove past Aung San Suu Kyi's house as people were arriving (including international media crews) for the roadside speeches. I asked the fifty-year-old woman I was with, Daw Hla Hla, an English tutor, about the situation. She answered: "Burmese people really want democracy," but she doubted it would ever happen: "Burmese people are not brave. Some are afraid, some are cowards." I asked her if the feeling in Yangon now was one of fear: "Yes, of course. And we have been trained to [fear] for twenty six years."

Another professional woman of the same age, Daw Aye Kyi, suggested that there are two main conditioned responses to terror. The first is the absolute lack of expectation. She stated that Burmans have learnt to get rid of "expectation" as a response to events. The second conditioned response is that of emotional flatness, a calm that emerges from the panic occasioned by terror of the military coming to arrest you:

> "Please let it be a dream." You try to pray, but can't find the beginning, can't find the end. You swear it's the truth (သစ္စာပြုတယ်). If you are in a normal situation, you wouldn't be able to stand this sort of thing but if something is already happening and you are facing this, surprisingly you go very calm (မချိမဆံ့), ready to face the situation."

This surely is a serious long term consequence of living under a totalitarian regime. This phenomenon of the mind becoming very calm, *makyomaseh* (မချိမဆံ့), is a significant strategy adopted by Burmans to ameliorate the panic, vulnerability and alienation characteristic of contemporary urban Burmese life. It is not difficult to imagine this same strategy being adopted on an enormous scale by the forced participants in the regime's spectacles such as mass rallies and forced labor. This hypothesis was confirmed by Daw Aye Kyi. I asked her if she had noticed the blank, featureless expressions and rigid comportment of the participants of the mass rallies and she replied:

"Yes. Tens of thousands of them. Can you do this by just pretending? It comes from the heart. Or you see people just biding away the time. My son said in the school that no one wants to become a USDA [member]. And the teachers say "please don't give us any trouble." The teachers threatened them that "If you don't come [to the opening of the Southern stairway of the Shwedagon pagoda, another SLORC spectacle], we will fail you.""

In this chapter I have shown how political violence and fear have become a way of life in Myanmar; how violence has become a self-propagating domain and a temporal marker in recent Burmese history and everyday experience. I have suggested that writers against totalitarianism prior to the second World War such as George Orwell and Walter Benjamin warn us of the long term dangers of living in a state of emergency. Orwell suggests that effects of everyday domination include an erosion in the value ascribed to freedom of speech, and the seduction of revolutionary glory that leads to appeasement, and in Benjamin's case, to the eliding of nationalism and patriotism with commodification and "modernism." I have proposed that such long term consequences can be seen in the expatriate Burmese Internet forum devoted to an "Open" Burmese society. I have also discussed the State's construction of fear and terror in Myanmar in its many forms and intensities. I argue that two generations of Burmans have now grown up in an environment of alienation and distrust. These people try both to construct a blank exterior to their persona and, often ineffectively as we have seen in this chapter, to numb their thoughts and senses. In the following chapters I will reflect upon the conscious adoption of numbness, of the conscious reconstruction of the body as a Burmese puppet, or automaton, as a response to the regime's reign of terror. It is my hypothesis that the production of Burmese automata involves a conscious dissociation of "mind" from "body" and that this strategy has serious long term effects upon the future of both individuals and society.

Chapter Seven

Absurdity and the Cultural Production of Everyday Reality

> *It goes without saying that this ultimate totalitarian fantasy in which there is no life outside relations of domination does not even remotely approximate the situation of any real society as a whole.*
>
> *(Scott 1990:83)*

7.1 Remembering What is Real

The censorship of news sources coupled with the barrage of State propaganda results in Burmans adopting other, older methods to gain knowledge about their situation so as to choose appropriate action pathways. These include rumour, astrology, numerology, recourse to the supernatural (*Nats*), and Buddhism. In the everyday world of rumor, fear, and the struggle for survival in Myanmar, Burmans rely upon several techniques to resist the "seduction of revolutionary glory" and the relentless propaganda which continually threatens to destroy "socioconceptual coherency" (cf. Nordstrom 1992). In this chapter we will explore some of the means by which Burmans fight back against the regime's vision of a totalitarian utopia. Urban Burmans use "no news," "negative news," "sayings," betting, and Absurdity as yardsticks against which disinformation and propaganda can be measured.

7.2 "No News" and "Negative News"

The censorship of both internal and international information networks necessitates alternative ways of accessing information, and for this Burmans turn to culturally tested truths and to powers of authority higher than the regime. One of the most interesting ways of obtaining information in Myanmar is through the phenomena known as "no news." This means that when something serious is happening, such as the March 1997 offensive against the Karen in Mon State, there will be absolutely no news about it. This absence alerts Burmans to the fact that something is indeed happening and they tune in to illegal transmissions of the BBC and VOA. Linked to "no news" is "negative news." For example, whenever the United States passes a resolution against Myanmar, the State media

carries news of HIV infection rates, drug addiction, and crime in American cities, again alerting Burmans to the fact that the US are doing something that the regime vehemently opposes. During the NLD arrests in June 1996, the *New Light of Myanmar* carried stories about terrorism in the U.S and its embassies and military bases abroad, the Valujet plane crash, violent crime in the United States, and American interference in other country's affairs such as Cuba and Iraq (NLM 1996d). The seductive and effective method used here is to create "Doublespeak" about the junta's own actions, and in the same breath, include a piece of information that has a grain of truth in it, even though the events have been severely distorted. For example, the democracy uprising in 1988 and the death of at least three thousand Yangon residents is occasionally portrayed in the State media as merely a "brawl in a tea shop." A contributing minor factor in the "Strike" did indeed involve a fight in a tea shop frequented by students. But it was the police incarceration and beating of three students involved in the incident that finally enraged enough students and their families to begin the "Strike."

"No News" time is also characterized by Yangon residents as a marked and rapid increase in propaganda, such as the newspapers reporting in one day up to fifty new buildings, organizations, or public works being opened. This nonsensical babble is supposed to stop Yangon residents wondering about issues such as the effects of American sanctions, the failure of the rice crop, and government offensives against ethnic minorities. Even during the 1988 democracy uprising, *The Guardian* (then the official English newspaper) and it's Burmese equivalent, continued to print "nonsense" stories with no substantive content. This "news" breaks down meaning, leaving the never-ending propaganda buzzing in one's ears and creating the need to rely upon rumors, astrology, and Buddhist tenets, in order to predict a safe course of action.

7.3 Astrology, Numerology, and Buddhism

Myanmar's complex and rich culture gives Burmans a wide range of magical and religious means of discerning future portents and for protecting oneself against negative consequences. Luck and coincidence have long been attributed to wider forces such as supernatural entities, Buddhist cosmology, astrology, and numerology. Terms such as "auspiciousness" link weather patterns,[75] planet positions, and the waxing and waning of the moon with daily events, and are essential for most Burmans when planning important activities. Supernatural entities are controlled, and black witchcraft is performed, using numerological practices as well as tattoos and amulets.

[75] For example, Armed Forces Day falls in the middle of the dry season but in recent years it has often rained on this day. The weather becomes an intense topic of conversation in the days leading to Armed Forces Day. Burmans strongly believe that the sociopolitical situation is a microcosm of the universe and that events occurring in the universe affect the sociopolitical situation, and vice versa. Thus bad weather on Armed Forces Day is indicative of disharmony and evil in the Burmese sociopolitical domain.

Burmese numerological practices include knowledge of *in* (အင်). Maung Htin Aung includes *in* in the "cult of the runes." He notes that: "The runes consisted of magical squares containing either letters of the Burmese alphabet or arithmetical figures, and it is believed that every potent rune is guarded by a guardian god" (Maung Htin Aung 1959:54). The cult dissociated itself from magic and witchcraft practices in the fifteenth century and became imbued with aspects of alchemic and Buddhist practice (Maung Htin Aung 1959:54-55). Many Burmans credit the successful use of *in* as a primary factor in the withdrawal of the British from Myanmar since *in* can be used to "overcome opposing forces" (Maung Htin Aung 1959:79 fn 28). *In* have multiple uses in Myanmar. In a review of indigenous medicine, *The Report of the Committee of Enquiry into the Indigenous System of Medicine* (1951) chronicles several uses including:[76] (i) charms used for treatment against evil spirits; (ii) the administration of the ashes of burned *in* orally as disease treatment; (iii) tattooing of *in* for spirit protection, snake bite protection and other wounds; (iv) as love potions or to win the esteem of superiors (Government of Burma 1951:18-9).

Spiro also reports an older practice of inscribing *in* on metal for insertion underneath the skin, and that *in* are also used in China (Spiro 1967:36,176). He gives two examples of *in:* a symbol of a Bull made from letters of the Burmese alphabet, and a magical Buddha drawn with nine strokes using Burmese letters. He describes in some depth both the therapeutic use of the *in* and the symbolism and significance of the magical Buddha (Spiro 1967:36). Tin Nyunt Pu demonstrates the importance of *in* as a vehicle for the expression of emotional distress and/or "mental" illness. He describes how patients diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia at the State Mental Hospital (now the Yangon Psychiatric Hospital) conceptualize their illness as friends, neighbors, and other lay people burning *in* to cause them harm (Tin Nyunt Pu 1980:226-7).

In would therefore appear to be used both therapeutically, as in the exorcism documented by Spiro, and as an expression of illness or dis-ease. In Myanmar at present, *in* are most commonly used to avert problems of an economic nature as well as grave illness and marital problems. The dire economic situation with its rampant inflation and chronic unemployment, is compounded by the rush to "modernization" which is a chief characteristic of the military regime. Figure 20 reproduces an *in* that is very common in Yangon. Drawn by a charismatic monk with a cult following, one of its chief uses is by taxi drivers as protection against car accidents. There is a short verse to be uttered, which gives the *in* both magical and Buddhist power.

[76]The report states that: "The Inns are Burmese alphabets and numerals written in the form of animals or geometrical figures. They may be written on paper, leaves, silver or gold leaves, or tattooed with ink and medicines over the body. Those that are written on materials such as the palm leaf or silver or gold leaf are carried on the person as charms, and are used in the treatment of diseases against the evil spirits" (Government of Burma 1951:18-9).

Another important form of protection, especially in rural areas and amongst sailors, is tattooing. In 1928, Shenoi reports that tattoos of birds and animals was a very common practice throughout Myanmar, especially for protection against *dah* (sword) cuts and gunshot wounds (Shenoi 1928:127). Crawford notes that in the nineteenth century almost all Burmese males were tattooed from the navel to the knee. Not only bird and animal figures, but also *Nats*, demons, and *in*, which were tattooed in a painful, expensive procedure (Crawford 1834:95-6 quoted in Spiro 1967:37). Spiro finds such extensive tattooing very unusual in men under forty years of age, although tattooing regularly occurs on a smaller scale as supernatural protection (Spiro 1967:37). Although less common now,

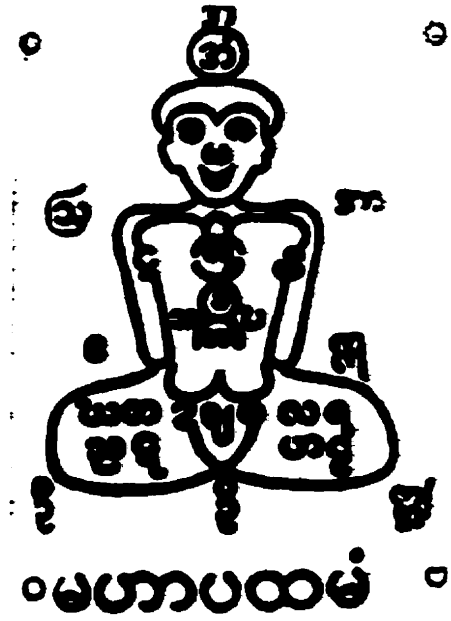


Figure 20: Magical *In* Used by Taxi-Drivers to Prevent Accidents

tattooing is still a thriving business in Yangon, with "modern" electrical implements used in favor of the previous wooden tools (Violaine Brisou, personal communication 1997).

Astrology has been an important means of predicting the future in Myanmar for over a millennium. A ninth century Chinese chronicle, the Man-Shu, mentions many Burmese astrologers and fortune tellers (Mi Mi Khaing 1962:20). Many Burmese monographs emphasize the importance of astrology in Burmese daily life. Mi Mi Khaing describes the prominent role of the astrologer in predicting periods of illness, calculating karmic debt, and creating horoscopes of the life span (Mi Mi Khaing 1962:63-4).

The military junta also depends upon these forms of knowledge, and the previous dictator, Ne Win, is famed for his gaggle of astrologers and his conversion of the currency to numbers divisible by Nine: his lucky number. However, astrologers also played an important subversive role during the Ne Win era by predicting the demise of the regime, something all paying clients desperately wanted to hear (figure 23 depicts a young man consulting an astrologer at the Shwedagon pagoda). The junta has, however, created an Astrology Council that registers and controls the types of information that astrologers are legally allowed to give to the public. The fortune telling of military leaders is disallowed, but I have had Aung San Suu Kyi's future told to me by an astrologer, U Hla Pe, who recounted the intimidatory visits of military Colonels to his office. The astrologer recounted the Colonel's conversation: "You're getting old. You want a happy and safe old age, don't you? Well, don't make any political forecasts." U Hla Pe is terrified and states that all his fellow astrologers are similarly cowed. The regime is thus well aware of the power of astrological "truths" in Myanmar as bases for future action.

Another old and tested way of finding "truth" is by reading Buddhist doctrine, and the "Dhamma" (the Word of the Buddha) is given as much reverence as Buddhist images in Myanmar (see figure 21). That is why the building of "Ne Win's pagoda" has aroused such anger in Yangon. Because of the extremely strong belief in reincarnation, Burmans are incensed with Ne Win's attempt to circumvent the evil he has committed earlier in his life by making a large amount of merit before he dies.[77] Scott has commented that "Fantasy life among dominated groups is also likely to take the form of *schadenfreude*: joy at the misfortunes of others," such as calling down curses (Scott 1992:67). Burmese Buddhists don't need to do this however, they know that on the scale of merit, the Generals are doing particularly badly and will have a very unpleasant collective rebirth. George Orwell understood this aspect of Burmese culture in his tale of the evil fat Burman who is the headman of the village in *Burmese Days*. After years of raping young girls, lying, cheating, murdering, and other debaucheries, the headman had planned (as Ne Win has done) to build a huge pagoda to even out the merit debt he had accumulated throughout his life. Much to the reader's delight however, Orwell's headman dies without being able to complete his pagoda and his wife is often awakened at night from terrible scenarios of her husband's everlasting torment.

7.4 Betting and "Sayings"

In addition to strategies such as reading the metanarrative underlying periods of "no news" and "negative news" in the State media, and turning to Buddhism, supernaturalism, astrology, and numerology, Burmans also devise a number of "street" practices. These

[77] One of the most common ways of warding off evil and misfortune in Myanamr is through *Nat* spirit propitiation. Figure 22 shows a woman calling upon the *Nat* spirit, Bo Bo Gyi, to advise a course of future action.

include gambling on political events and lampooning official slogans and titles. Such political "truths" are continually being contested and renegotiated by both the regime's propaganda writers and members of the general public.

Combining the need for money and a common hatred of the regime, gambling in Chinatown has an overt political element. During times of rapid currency devaluation, the junta arrests money changers, money lenders, and closes gold and jewelry stores, many of which are owned by Chinese. Yangon residents love to quote the latest odds given by the Chinese book-makers (about the probable demise of the junta) as a form of resistance to the regime. It makes them realize that, as Buddhism teaches, everything on this earth is temporary, and the regime cannot last forever. In this sense, it also reminds Burmans of their strong belief in the miraculous, and exhorts them not to give up hope for change. It is a good example of the most common statement made by Burmans about the military dictatorship: "*I resist in my mind only.*" Following the book-makers odds is thus a form of conscious resistance. Such betting has become so well known that journalists from international media organizations have commented upon its subversive elements: "For now most diplomats believe that the generals are firmly in control. But they may not be reading the same signs as the bookies in Rangoon's Chinatown. The betting line is 3-1 that SLORC will collapse by February" (Moreau 1996:21).

An important aspect of the Chinese book-makers odds is that they remind Burmans that there are two "sides" in Myanmar and that a war between these two sides is ongoing. In this respect, betting fulfills a similar function to that of certain Burmese sayings. Burmese is a highly idiomatic language with a large number of proverbs, and it is comprised of monosyllables that are joined together to form longer words and phrases. Burmans love to play with their language, and one index of good poetry is the multiple ways in which a particular word interacts with other words in different lines and stanzas. Burmans have employed this love of language-play to remind themselves of what is "true" and which "side" is which in this ongoing war of the People versus the Generals.

There are many examples of this phenomenon such as the derogatory saying used to refer to the regime's mass political movement, the USDA (Union Solidarity and Development Organization). Burmans refer disdainfully to this organization as: *kjaun ye gjou deh alouq* (ခြင်္သေ့ရေချိုးတဲ့အလုပ်) which means, "the cat washes itself." This refers to the way that cats wash themselves and therefore don't need to be washed by humans. The USDA is said to involve itself in washing cats, a useless, "make work" task of no value. Other sayings heard in urban areas include, "If they [the Generals] say it's black, then it's white," and *thu khou lu lu yiq* (သူခိုးလူလူယစ်) "the thief shouts "thief" in the crowd" and *nga pyu ga pye ne pyan bye* (ငပြူးကပြေနေပြန်ပြီး) "the man with wide eyes." These sayings refer to the way that the regime accuses its enemies of treachery, murder, and violence, at the same time that it is itself perpetrating these offenses. Burmans remind themselves of the propaganda component of the State media by renaming the official English language

newspaper, *The New Light of Myanmar*, as "The Dim Light of Myanmar." In a similar way, the propaganda signboards entitled "The People's Desire" are referred to as the "No People's Desire." Another saying popular among school children is: *lu maiq aa pe* (လူမိုက်အားပေး) "We're not going to support the bad guys" which is used when referring to the many demands the State makes upon the time of school children. This includes school children's attendance at State spectacles as well as their active participation in the revision of Burmese history along the lines that the *Tatmadaw* is the foundation of Burmese society.

A "random utterance"[78] *Ta-baung* (တဘောင်) is a prophecy uttered by madmen and children. It seems to be based on the belief that spirits, gods, demons, and other supernatural beings can temporarily possess those not fully in control of their minds, and speak through them. One such random utterance (the author is anonymous) concerns the building of the Tooth Relic pagodas in Yangon and Mandalay: *sawdaw hnit suu aywaetuu, pyithu lee mwe taq lee kwae* (စွယ်တော်နှစ်ဆူအရွယ်တူ၊ ပြည်သူလည်းမွဲ၊ တပ်လည်းကွဲ။) "Two tooth temples are similar, people beggared; army fissured." This circumstance is presumed to have come to pass as the population is impoverished and the SLORC has recently changed its name to the SPDC (State Peace and Development Council) and removed some of the more corrupt ministers. Another saying attributed to a comedian deals with the corruption of the regime: *sein swan Kyi yauq bye la? yauq ba bye pho Khin Nyunt* (စိန်ထွန်းကြည်ရောက်ပြီလား၊ ရောက်ပါပြီဖိုးခင်ညွန့်။) Do you come, *Yadana* Tun Kyi?" The second one replied, "Yes I do, *Pho* Khin Nyunt." *Yadana* means jewel and *Pho* means heroin, alluding to the former commerce minister's involvement in the smuggling of gems, and Secretary Number One, (Khin Nyunt's) well known alliances with drug lords such as Lo Hsein-han. Other sayings refer to the disbelief Burmans have in the willingness of the regime to hand over power after a new constitution has been drafted[79], and thus they refer to the National Convention as the "timeless convention" *amotha nyi la geh mahouq, amyedan nyi la geh* (အမျိုးသားညီလာခံမဟုတ်၊ အမြဲတန်းညီလာခံ။) as the Convention Committee has already been working on a constitution since 1994. And finally, Sayagyi, an expatriate Burmese activist, notes that:

> The SLORC and SPDC transformed many villages into model villages throughout the country. Ministers visited there and the villagers have to entertain them with good food and dances. So the villagers are saying that their village is not a model village, but a model dining village: [*sanpya kyei ywa mahouq, sanpya kjwe ywa*] စံပြကျေးရွာ မဟုတ်၊ စံပြကြွေးရွာ။ (Sayagyi, personal communication 1998).

In the sayings given above, Burmans use their love of language-play and their sharp sense of humor to remind themselves (when they are in private, among trusted friends) of the corruption and despotism of the regime. Burmans also use humor to seek

[78] I am indebted to "Sayagyi" for providing me with many of these "sayings" and permission to use them.
[79] Figure 24 reproduces the State ideology regarding the National Convention.

out and deride the absurd dimension of totalitarian rule, a process that is made easier by a regime intent on parodying itself, much to the delight of urban Burmans.

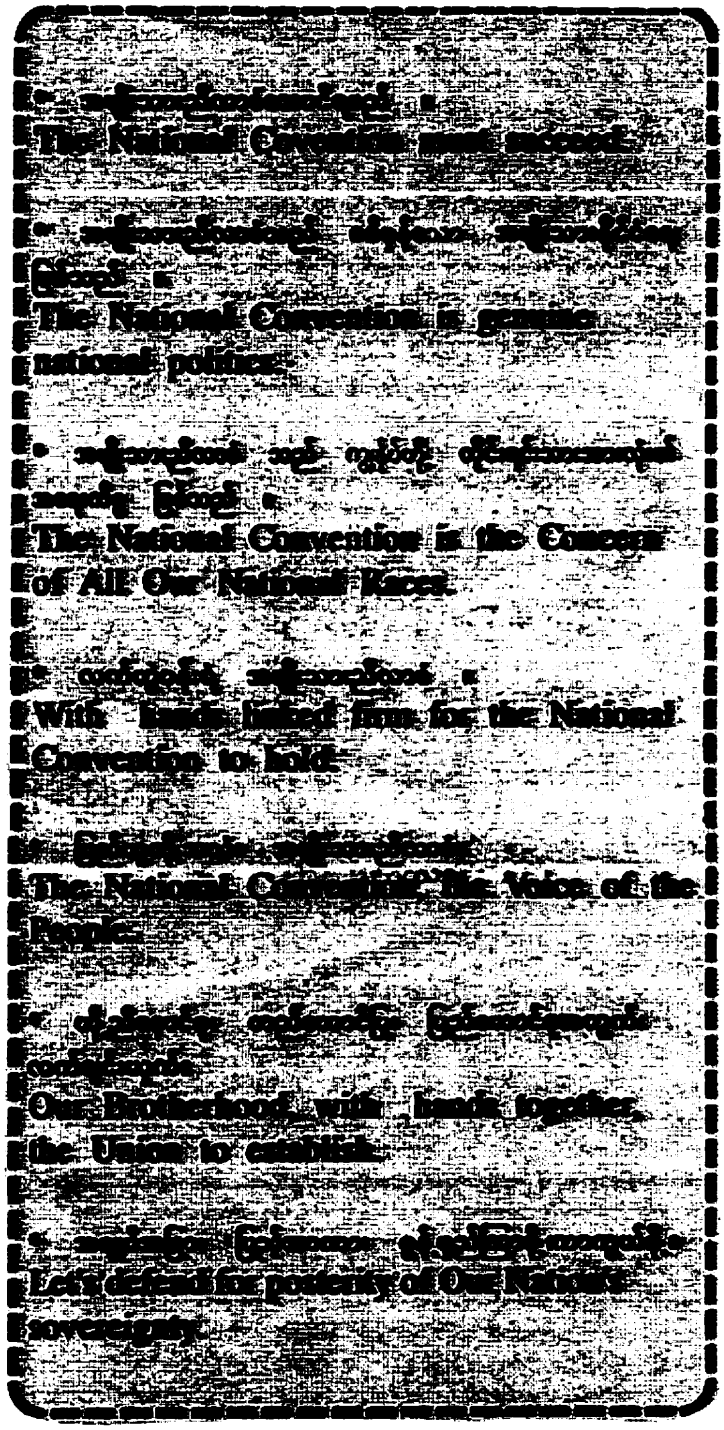


Figure 24: State Ideology: The National Convention

7.5 The Absurdity of the State

Taussig has defined kitsch as an "appropriate aesthetic for the magic of the state" (Taussig 1997:94). The absurdity of the "larger-than-life" aspects of State phantasmagoria in Myanmar can be described as a kind of "karaoke fascism," a vision of modernity dominated by karaoke nightclubs (with "private rooms" where prostitutes earn their living). Adams has commented upon the emergence of karaoke in Lhasa, Tibet, and its value as a metaphor for modernity. She argues that:

> Karaoke is a spectacle of *scripted simulation*, and this phenomenon describes cultural performances of modernity emerging from particular constructions of cultural difference in Lhasa...It is a simulation concealing not a more authentic or truthful act but the absence of a *real* act. Karaoke takes as its reality principle the idea of role-playing, but creates a site where role-playing is itself satirized, revealing the simulated character of acting...karaoke is thus not a representation but a simulcrum of fixed and singular authenticity. This does not mean the performance is not real. One the contrary, it means that the simulation *is* the reality (Adams 1995:510-1).

In its rush to modernize the nation, parts of Myanmar now resemble a vast Burmese wonderland, a simulcrum of modernity cobbling together an array of consumerist-Buddhist-kitsch, like the temples of Bagan lit up with fairylights. Following Adams, it is not the case that an authentic Asian experience is being concealed, such as the Buddhist pagodas beneath the fairylights, rather this Buddhist-kitsch *is* reality and the experience of the Modern for many Burmans. The cities are dominated at night by garish flashing neon signs. Below the signs are rows of small shops, all cluttered to overflowing with cheap Chinese plasticware in lurid colors.

Benjamin has commented that "Surrealism is the death of the last century through farce" (Benjamin quoted in Buck-Morss 1989:271). As Shattuck has noted, humor, for surrealists, constitutes the realization of discontinuities and inconsistencies in the dominant ideology: "Laughter," wrote Jarry, "is born out of the discovery of the contradictory" (Shattuck 1965:25). Burmans are acutely aware of the enormous disjunction between the Burmese fairyland created by the regime's "open market" policies and its alliance with the heroin trade, and the impoverished relocated townships it has simultaneously created. These discordancies are noted and remembered using black humor in Yangon, primarily through the notion of absurdity.

Emblematic of this sense of absurdity are the "Visit Myanmar Year" dolls, macabre parodies of a fat Burmese child (previously a popular cartoon figure) carrying a briefcase (see figure 25). Their grotesque and gargantuum proportions are captured in an essay posted anonymously on the *BurmaNet*:

In Rangoon, reminders that one is 'Visiting Myanmar' abound. Enormous, concrete 'Visit Myanmar Year' dolls leer at you from traffic islands. Mold is growing on their faces and their hair is missing in patches, causing them to resemble rancid cake decorations, or the sinister doll of a low budget horror flick. In one hand the doll is gripping a menacing black attache case. What does it contain? Number 4 heroin according to Rangoon dwellers (Anonymous 1997).

Absurdity abounds in Myanmar and is impossible to ignore. Even during my questioning at the Traditional Medicine Department about my possible "political" activities, this sense of absurdity surfaced. Halfway through the interview, the Department was plunged into darkness and we sat, quietly, sipping coffee and eating cake, waiting to see if

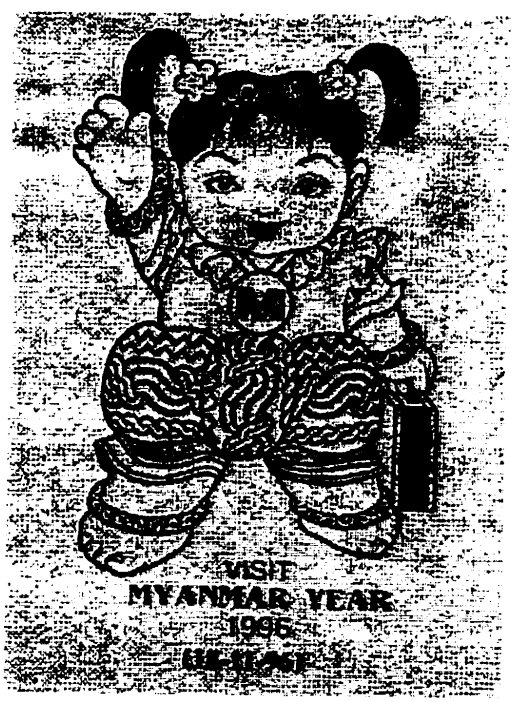


Figure 25: The Visit Myanmar Doll

the power would return. On a previous visit the Director had informed me that there was not enough power to use the air-conditioner and the photocopier that graced his office. Similarly, wandering lost through the labyrinthian Ministry of Health complexes, one can come across great, decrepit ballrooms with enormous circular sweeping staircases. Peeling paint, hanging wires and mold now inhabit these British-made vestiges, and it is hard to imagine that a totalitarian regime can inspire so much fear when its institutions are sheltered in such colonial relics waiting for the electricity to return.

The foot soldiers of this regime are just as "absurd." I have mentioned earlier that during the militarization of Yangon in December 1996 to March 1997, child soldiers lined the roads, their hats falling over their faces, their uniforms rolled up at the ankles. At midday these fearsome soldiers crawled under bushes and crept behind trees to take a nap. I remember thinking that if another nation wanted to invade Myanmar, midday would be a good time. A diplomatic friend had two soldiers appear in her garden where they took up residence for several days, ostensibly to survey the T-intersection in front of her house. The absurdity of having soldiers in one's garden (on diplomatic property) was made apparent when my friend made them toast and tea for breakfast each morning and served it to them in the front yard.

During my stay in Myanmar I noticed that Military Intelligence (M.I.) are attempting to use surveillance techniques which appear to be very stupid to the eyes of Burmans and foreigners alike. For example, during former Indonesian President Suharto's visit to Myanmar a strange sight could be witnessed on U Wizara Road. This road contains the Armed Forces Museum, Parade Ground, and other military structures. Daily throughout Suharto's visit there suddenly appeared on the grassy median strip of U Wizara Road approximately one hundred men in small groups who appeared to be reading to each other, drinking tea, or relaxing under trees. This was not only suspicious since the regime heavily restricts pedestrian and motor transport in front of its compounds, but these gentlemen of leisure were also noted to be wearing the pressed longyis and oversized aviation-style sunglasses which everyone in Myanmar knows are the trademark of Military Intelligence.

But while Burmans poke fun at the ridiculous aspects of state power and the "kitschy-ness" of its vision of modernity, this laughter is fearful and hurried, often more ironic and sarcastic than humorous. Taussig has noted that while the "art" of assuming power:

> seems to be second nature to the magicians and sorcerers who have peopled history, it is not at all easy for modern state machinery to pull this off without looking gauche or stupid. Given the power involved, however, nobody does dare laugh, not just for fear of reprisal, but precisely because of the power that arises from just this risk of absurdity (Taussig 1997:94-5).

The regime fears being parodied, not being taken seriously, not feared enough. Thus Burmese clowns and comedians are imprisoned. I remember thinking that one of the saddest aspects of the dictatorship is its attempt to gag all humor in Myanmar. Two of Myanmar's most famous and loved clowns, Par Par Lay and Lu Zaw are among the many clowns imprisoned by the regime. The regime explained the consequences of voicing aloud the absurdities of the State in its official media prior to imprisoning the clowns after their appearance at a festival held in Aung San Suu Kyi's residence. As the State media reported:

"Then came the turn of comedians Par Par Lay and Lu Zaw. The two in synchrony attacked any undertakings of the Na Wa Ta Government [SLORC], disparaging its dignity, making it a laughing stock and inciting riot and instability" (NLM 1996e:5). Par Par Lay has since died in prison. Although laughing at the absurdity of the State aids Burmans in understanding the discontinuities and contradictions in the regime's ideology and practices, it remains a dangerous endeavour.

Burmans thus chart changes in the tenor and volume of propaganda to discern changing military strategies and the possible negative effect of outside events upon the regime. Other, older sources of information are sought for "truth" however, such as the Dhamma, the words of the Buddha. Protection is sought from the regime and the everyday chaos it creates in urban Myanmar in the form of amulets, magical *in*, and tattoos, to name but a fraction of Myanmar's rich cultural store of magic and symbolism. Action strategies are created on the basis of astrology and numerology, with the movements of planets and the predictive power of numbers considered more reliable than government propaganda. These strategies demonstrate that State hegemony is by no means a *fait accompli* in Myanmar. After almost four decades of dictatorial rule, many Burmans define an "us" radically opposed to the Generals. Burmans find a dark amusement in the absurdity of the State and use creativity to construct sayings and bets about the regime. But a military nation that imprisons its clowns sees little humor in these subversive acts and retribution is swift for those who are caught.

Chapter Eight

Survival Strategies and the Psychological Consequences of Living under Totalitarianism

Money laundering [in Myanmar] is out of control, and shady magnates flanked by bodyguards with AK-47s dominate seedy nightclubs funded by drugs money
(The Hindu 1997)

8.1 Introduction

In contrast to the variety of "reality checks" described above, in this chapter I present several methods by which Burmans express the distress they suffer from the repression and confusion generated by the enactment of the regime's vision of a totalitarian Buddhist utopia. I explore the will to resist and the open and collective resistance practiced against the dictatorship. I also consider a variety of other strategies adopted by Burmans to survive the military regime, such as compromising, collaboration, opportunism, and the reasons why Burmans say they adopt these strategies. I suggest that the decisions people make about their compliance with the dictates of the regime are complex and made within a gray space of confusion, and one hampered by a lack of resources and a terrible burden of fear. I then turn to strategies of escape, both permanent and temporary. In particular I will examine miniature worlds of waiting, the strong belief in the miraculous, the dissociation and fragmentation of the body into a puppet or automaton with a free-flying "mind."

8.2 Open and Collective Resistance

Despite the "miasma of fear" that Aung San Suu Kyi has described cloaking Myanmar, there is both open and collective resistance to the military regime. The continued existence of the National League for Democracy, despite its dwindling ranks as members are imprisoned, intimidated, and die in custody, is testimony to the enormous desire for change in Myanmar in the face of overwhelming repression. Those who braved the military roadblocks and military intelligence photographers to attend the NLD roadside speeches give further evidence of the desire for change. The will to resist is also evident in the numbers of people arrested and later imprisoned for handing out leaflets at the roadside talks. The large number of political prisoners (as documented by Amnesty International) in Burmese jails signifies the open defiance that has persisted through almost four decades of

military dictatorship.

Demonstrations by monks, students, and pro-democracy supporters, as well as sporadic worker's strikes (such as miners and garment factory workers) prove that the regime has not been completely successful in reconstructing Burmans as model citizens. The occasional bomb blast under symbols of repression such as the "People's Desire" signboards are enough to convince the regime of the need to keep increasing its control over the everyday lives of its subject population.

Collective resistance under the cover of anonymity is more common than open defiance in urban Myanmar. I have described how the residents of Hledan opened their doors and windows to the students who had staged a sit-down strike at their junction. When the military began using water cannons to break up the students (so that they could be arrested individually and thus not provoke a 'mob' riot), Hledan residents sheltered the students in their homes. United, they were able to deny individual acts of defiance.

Attendance at state entertainment events is another example of the way in which other hidden transcripts (Scott 1990) emerge in Myanmar. Although Burmans would generally prefer not to patronize official sporting events, high unemployment and a lack of recreational facilities (together with a love of sport, gambling, and competition) combine to make some events too tempting to resist. Anonymity at sporting events allows hidden transcripts to be enacted publicly. George Orwell has written of the insults screamed by Burmans on the sidelines of a British football match during his time in Myanmar. Scott notes that in Orwell's description:

> Burmans managed to insinuate almost routinely a contempt for the British, while being careful never to venture a more dangerous open defiance...taking advantage of a crowd or of an ambiguous accident, they manage in a thousand artful ways to imply that they are grudging conscripts to the performance...Behind the "anti-European" acts that Orwell noted was undoubtably a far more elaborate hidden transcript, an entire discourse, linked to Burman culture, religion, and the experience of colonial rule (Scott 1992:77).

Upon reading this I was struck by how little the situation has changed for Burmans. I recalled a friend's description of another football match seventy years later between the Army and the Customs Department, where the hidden transcript again breaks through under the cover of anonymity:

> "Everyone at the Sports Festival is against the Army. First the Army scored and everyone was quiet except the soldiers who were saluting. The people started shouting out *sitha ayu* (စစ်သည်အရူး) [the word for soldier is attached to a derogatory term for madness]. They called out a lot of things. My son said that they shouted defence slogans, "gagwe! gagwe!" Then my son started shouting out *lee, lee* (လီးလီး) [penis, penis]. Then everyone started chanting it. Louder, lots of dirty

swear words. At one point the soldiers were so angry that they threw a bottle at the spectators. The people started throwing stones at the soldiers. The soldiers began arresting people, one of them they arrested by the hair. Then the people cried, "Aren't you going to arrest the soldier who threw the bottle?" So they did, but everyone thinks he'll be released as soon as he gets out of sight. When Khin Nyunt gave out the prizes there was a lot of cheering for the first prize- [awarded to] Customs, but then no one cheered [for the army]. Then a voice said, "Hey, aren't you going to show sympathy for the soldiers and clap them?" The people responded by shouting, "Why should we?" No one cheered, then they started yelling, "We love Customs! We love Customs!""

Many urban residents also make a conscious decision to resist the renaming and reconstruction of the urban landscape. I have noted that Yangon residents pointedly ignore "Ne Win's pagoda." I became aware of this type of resistance very early in my fieldwork when seeking directions to the Traditional Medicine Hospital. Burmans refuse to refer to this hospital by its name, preferring to direct me to "Daw Khin Kyi's hospital." Daw Khin Kyi is Aung San Suu Kyi's mother who was a nurse and later a politician. A hospital, her namesake, now stands abandoned beside the Traditional Medicine Hospital.

A small amount of resistance is also practiced by the wealthy urban elite who have enough money and influence to be able to perform token acts of resistance. The regime monitors such defiance closely however. Schober notes that the construction of the Tooth Relic pagodas is part of a broader scheme to legitimate the rule of the military within a Buddhist paradigm (figure 26 shows the procession of the Tooth Relic from Mingaladon airport in Yangon to the Tooth Relic pagoda). Schober also argues, however, that donations to the pagodas serve to make merit for the military leaders who inaugurated the projects and thus Burmans withhold donations or decline from attending donor ceremonies as a token resistance. Schober describes how such resistance is conducted and the threat of menace with which the regime responds. She argues that:

Political dissent is often expressed in religious terms and constitutes a countertext to SLORC's hegemonic discourse and ritual theater...Voices of political dissent emerge from religious donations that circumvent the state's collection network. Especially among elites, political resentment is expressed in perfunctory donations to the state's religious causes, while more generous offerings (dana) are made to sources of merit deemed worthy of support...Absence from participation in State-sponsored merit making ritual is another common way to resist the state. Some frankly state they will not participate in acts of merit sponsored by the state. The NLM[68] rewards such every-day forms of resistance mostly with silence. Occasionally, however, voices of dissent emerge even in NLM reports. One such example is found in the daily lists of

[68] NLM: *The New Light of Myanmar*. The English-version daily State newspaper.

major donors published in the NLM during the Sacred Tooth[81] tour. A tabulation over the course of six weeks indicates that on any given day, nearly half of the donors chose to be absent from rituals acknowledging their donations and SLORC's patronage, despite their large contributions (Schober 1997: 28-9).

In a footnote Schober adds that: "The paper's statistics on less than unanimous participation in the state's ritual patronage can also be seen as a veiled threat to those who stayed away from such ceremonies, while their names and actions were known to the authorities" (Schober 1997: 29 fn 53).

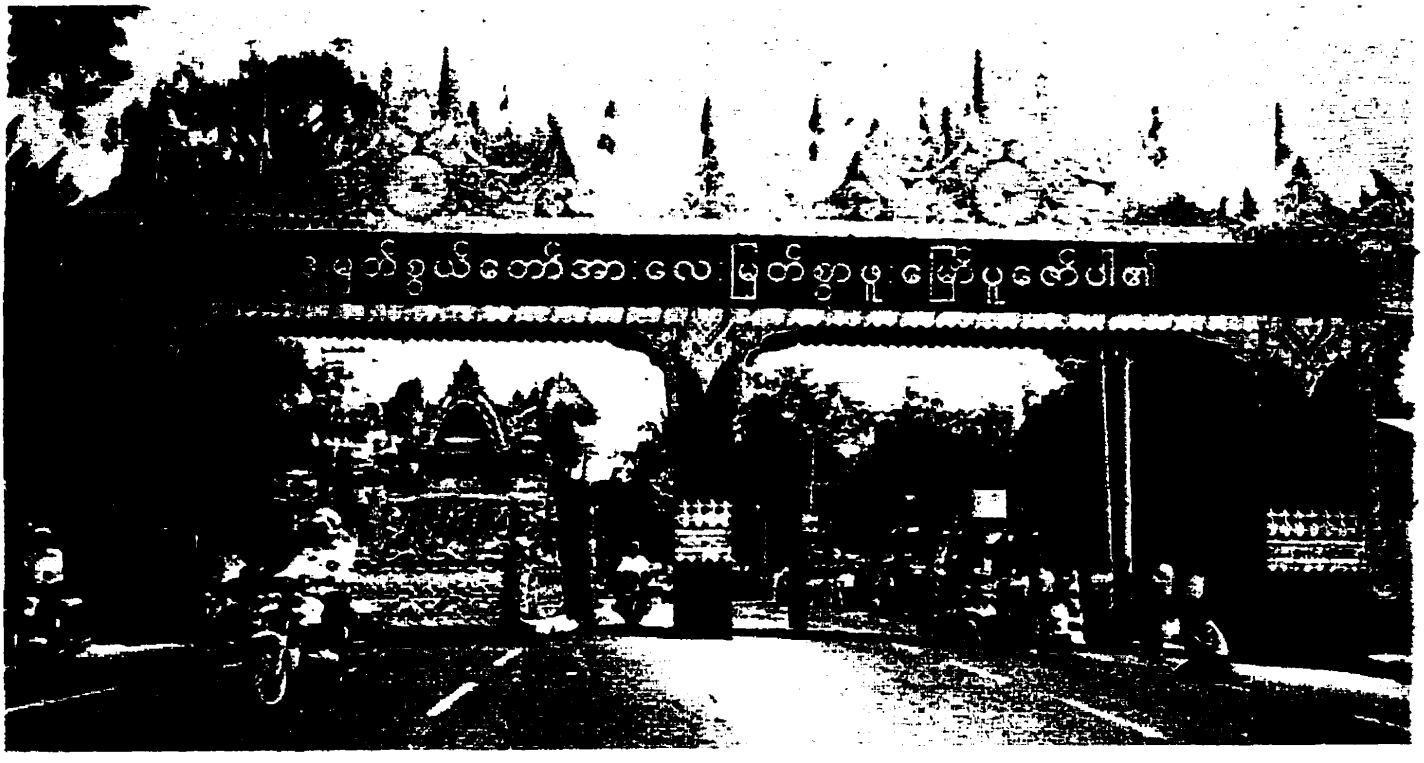


Figure 26: State Spectacle: The Tooth Relic Being Conveyed to the Yangon Tooth Relic Pagoda

[81] The Tooth Relic pagodas were constructed to house a Sacred Tooth of the Buddha, on loan from China, during its tour of Myanmar.

Some of the strategies I have discussed carry more risk than others. With all the strategies, however, the hidden messenger delivers a public message. Burmans make a large and fundamental distinction between those things done with their enduring consciousness (which is designated as "mind" in Myanmar), and those actions carried out by the temporary, decaying, corporeal dimension of their person. I have earlier noted that the most common reply of Burmans of all social classes and ages to the question of resistance is "*I resist in my mind only.*" Such resistance is in fact extremely significant for Buddhists. Even seemingly inconsequential forms of resistance, such as refusing to be present at donor ceremonies,[82] or refusing to allow the regime to remove previous elements of the landscape from public memory, require an enormous amount of courage because these acts constitute resistance of the most important kind: that of the mind. Resisting in the mind does not, however, mean that Burmans do not suffer distress at the fear and confusion that such strategies engender, and which daily threaten to overturn stable assumptions and erase tacit knowledge. Most Burmans opt for strategies that minimize the burden of fear.

8.3 Water Falls, Fish Follow

My first few months in Myanmar were spent asking myself, "why don't Burmans revolt?" It took me a while to realize that I was asking the wrong question. I should have been asking "what is of significance to Burmans in their local worlds?" Burmans have a range of priorities different from those of people who live in comfortable democracies. There is, for example, very little familiarity with concepts such as democracy and freedom of speech and therefore few expectations about them. Daw San San Pwint, who had spent time in Europe brought this home to me, using my weakness for chocolate and the difficulty of finding chocolate in Myanmar. She commented that:

> "They [Burmans] are not interested in freedom, or whether Aung San Suu Kyi comes to govern or not. For them, their interests go to one level only. The only thing they [can] care about is their next meal. They are not aware of these rights. If a child had never known that chocolate had existed then he would never want to taste it. I have tasted it, and I want my country to taste it too."

[82] Donor ceremonies, as described earlier, are a way of patronizing Buddhism in Myanmar. For example, giving food to the long lines of monks who wend their way through urban streets is a form of donation and a means of making merit. Donating robes to monks, and money, flowers, or gold leaf to pagodas or monasteries is also a donation that accrues merit. The most lavish donations are accompanied by ceremonies where items are presented directly to abbots. In contemporary Myanmar, donor ceremonies are also conducted where citizens donate money or equipment to the regime. There is little that is voluntary or spontaneous about these donations, however.

James Scott realized that, "Power relations are not, alas, so straightforward that we can call what is said in power-laden contexts as "false" and what is said offstage as "true"" (Scott 1992:58). In this section I explore strategies such as complicity, collaboration, going with the flow, opportunism, anonymous or collective resistance, and the cultural attitudes and ethics that reinforce these strategies.

At the most fundamental level, the Burmese priority is for survival, and this often involves complicity and opportunistic collaboration. The huge burden of fear placed upon the shoulders of Burmans by the military regime leads many of them to search for a piece of common ground with the Generals, to define a space that is, if not neutral, then at least not openly hostile. Whilst still a rejection of the dominant ideology of totalitarianism, it is a compromise, and also a rejection of the more fundamental views of the expatriate Burmese community, who do not have to live choked with fear for their own safety.[83] It is primarily a strategy designed to minimize fear.

Opportunism is perhaps an outgrowth of this most common survival goal in Myanmar: that of physical survival. Simply finding enough money to allow one's family to eat regular meals and stave off the landlord or landlady's demands for rent, is enough, for the great majority of Burmans. Becoming voluntarily involved with the GONGOs is a luxury only those who live above subsistence can contemplate. Ma Kinmama Maw, a teenager working as a prostitute who lives in *Nyaungbintha*, told me that she had not earned any money for a week because the regime had closed the "People's Park." She stated that it was because "some big day is coming up." Ma Kinmama Maw was unaware of the rehearsals for Armed Forces Day and oblivious to the militarization of the city that had occurred. Her only concern was that the place she earned her living was closed. Short of open revolution, political resistance (and even an awareness of the regime's goals and strategies) is a strategy that only the well-fed can employ in Myanmar, and that population is very small. Rather, revolts have frequently been brought about not by the wealthy, educated middle and upper classes, but by the peasantry, whose severe financial situation threatens to rob them of the essentials for physical survival. The 1988 democracy uprising started in the countryside because of the threat of starvation. Bertil Lintner summarized this as: "1988 started with demonetization and with Delta farmers who liberated the rice trucks: the situation was so much worse [in the countryside] than in urban areas." A university professor summarized this poignant reality as, "When I'm starving, I'll fight."

Besides being strategies of survival, collaboration, complicity, and opportunism are also examples of a more general attitude in Myanmar promoting compromise, a formula often expressed as "Water flows, fish follows." This emphasis upon compromise is attained through a focus upon both collective values, and a focus on cognitive reframing. By this I mean that some Burmans continually strive to change their mode of thinking

[83] I do not mean to imply that expatriate Burmans do not continue to live in fear for the safety of their loved ones, simply that a different perspective is inescapably formed upon leaving the everyday confines of totalitarianism.

about the current political situation from one of rage, frustration, or despair (to mention but a few possible responses) to one of forgiveness.

One reason for joining the government service is thus to subvert it from within. Public servants commonly refer to the current political situation by shrugging and saying: "water falls, fish follow." A university professor explained this proverb as: "It's a belief that somehow if you go along, there will come a point when you can change things." I suggest that this proverb is being applied to the current situation because it is also illustrative of a very strong belief in the miraculous, as documented by Mendelson (see section 8.4). Whilst many Burmans use this saying to explain working in the public service, they always imply that this is an unrealistic, naive strategy. Perhaps, then, it is more a form of "self talk" that Burmans use to rationalize to themselves the involvement of their friends in the public service, rather than a deeply held belief about the possibility of subversion from within the ranks of government employees.

A strategy of focusing upon collective values is evidenced by Burmans finding parts of the regime's ideology that they can live with, such as a love of the motherland. The sense of pride in Myanmar, its resources, people, and achievements, can lead many Burmans to passively and tentatively accept the xenophobic and anti-Western rhetoric with which they are bombarded. In this sense, some Burmans stop resisting the tide of propaganda and are borne along with it, minimizing the need to struggle and contest the reality that the regime presents. A love of motherland is elided by the junta with a belief in a "duty" to the nation and this again makes it easier for Burmans to join the regime's organizations of mass participation such as the MMCWA, the Red Cross, and the USDA. As I have mentioned previously, these GONGOs conflate "health duties" with political support for the military government. The State can be "helped," as long as individuals in the community are also benefiting from these activities.

Another method of "going with the flow" concerns the change to a market economy in the past few years. Some Burmans (primarily urban dwellers) have inserted themselves into the liberalization of the economy and once inside, subvert its application. This method incorporates an element of resistance to the concept of an "open market" promulgated by the regime but which in reality only "opens" business opportunities for the Generals, their friends and relatives, and their allies in the drug trade. Even though foreign investment has had virtually no impact upon Burmans unconnected with the regime, it has led to a very small class of urban Burmans creating a small degree of wealth. To achieve this, however, this emergent bourgeois class must make economic deals with the military which serves ultimately to bolster the personal wealth of the Generals and their families. Burmans are well aware of this, and of the rampant corruption which oils the machinery of government and thus of the economy as well. The blame for Myanmar's poverty and unemployment is placed squarely at the feet of the Generals. Burmans refuse to become involved in the charade of "politics" in Myanmar and instead invest their energies into resisting the

enforced poverty that the regime has thrust upon them. But rather than using their wealth to reinvest into the regime's economy (and hence, the General's pockets), some Burmans use their new found wealth for material and leisure pursuits (such as buying satellite dishes) and as leverage to buy personal influence and prestige at the community level. In this sense, some individuals use government organizations to further their own everyday strategies of economic survival. Resulting community influence also leads to prestige and status at the local level, factors that are very important to Burmans and that have more to do with a desire for personal gain than with a desire to support the junta. Certainly Burmans speak with disdain of such people who collude with the regime for personal power.

Despite this compromise of finding common ground with the regime, all Burmans must make a decision at some point as to their degree of collaboration. Unless they are active in the opposition, or have left the country, all Burmans collaborate to some degree. Joining the public service, for example, is an additional degree of collaboration, and it is a decision few Burmans make lightly. It involves swearing loyalty to the aims of the dictators, and it is difficult not to internalize some of the propaganda when working for the government.

A salient example of opportunism is involvement with the GONGOs. The Myanmar Red Cross, for example, is perceived by many young people in *Nyaungbintha* as a social club for unemployed youth. The Myanmar Maternal and Child Welfare Society, on the other hand, provides opportunities for women to become well known in their communities. A young female receptionist, Ma Swe, explains that:

> "People join the MMCWA because it is seen as elite and signifies [that members have] money left over from buying necessities, as there is a membership fee and the cost of uniforms. They are very close to the *LORC* and it is one way of getting contacts and "favors." Some people join because they want to, for these reasons, but others join because they are told they have an obligation to [are coerced] by the TMOs [Township Medical Officers] and other government officials."

It must also be said that swimming against the current is tiring, and many Burmans succumb to the despair of their situation, to hopelessness, and to a sense of betrayal that wider political organizations (such as the Chinese Communist Party) have not supported the population against the military. When friends become imprisoned, the desire to forget about the socio-political situation is great and, as we shall see in the following sections, this desire to forget tempts Burmans to choose strategies of escape rather than confrontation.

This attitude of compromise is reinforced by a strong Buddhist ethic pervasive in Burmese society. The older generations of ethnic Burmans are, in general, staunch Buddhists, for whom Buddhism is the central guiding focus of their lives, a filter through

which events are understood and attributed with meaning. It is therefore with a great sense of unease that older Burmans watch their children and grandchildren actively resist the regime. Buddhist parents view the preaching of revolution as anti-Buddhist, potentially conflicting with the non-violent tenets of Buddhism. They worry that their children and grandchildren will break central Buddhist rules such as the injunction against killing, and of course they live in fear for the safety of their loved ones should they be caught by Military Intelligence. Parents beseech their children to read Buddhist philosophy, and to actively strive, as they do, to forgive the regime, for this is the path to Enlightenment. Fear for the safety of their parents, as well as a strong desire to please the older generation, leads many Burmans to adopt the strategy of "resisting in the mind only."

Public servants have often told me of their search for understanding. Many come to the conclusion that the Generals believe that they are making Myanmar a better place. A senior public servant told me quietly, one evening while walking at sunset in her garden, that: "I believe that the Generals honestly believe that they are doing the right thing for the people." Many public servants strive hard every day to continually forgive the regime for its repression. Standing on a Buddhist hilltop, overlooking the Ayeyarwady, another senior government official murmured quietly to me that: "Most foreigners don't understand how being Buddhist both makes us, and allows us, to put up with the government. We must find it in our hearts to forgive them again, everyday." The Burmese saying used over and over again in Myanmar is: ***kwin hluq taq deh*** (ခွင့်လွှတ်တတ်တယ်), "We have to forgive them." Forgiveness is a crucial step on the path towards Enlightenment, a recognition of the temporality and, ultimately, the meaningless, of earthly concerns.

There are several other key reasons why Burmans "go with the flow" of domination. This Burmese emphasis upon collaboration is apparent at all levels of social life. Political collaboration is part of a broader theme of respect, conciliation, and reciprocity involved in the functioning of kinship obligations in Myanmar. Kinship and the hierarchy of respect is an important axis in Burmese culture, especially with regards to the respect due to parents and elders. In a following chapter we will see just how powerful fictive kin relations can be among young groups of boys who feel immense pressure to use heroin so as to remain "brothers." A young woman entrepreneur, Ma Wa Wa, who is barely more than a teenager, told me of a female friend who had decided to marry a student known for his support of the NLD. Whilst respecting the courage shown by the couple, Ma Wa Wa feared that the young woman had a "long life ahead of her and a hard road." She had made a decision which took her away from a peer group that relied upon powerful "aunts" (the wives of high ranking military officers) to secure them employment and business opportunities. I have met Burmans who have become communists, prostitutes, civil servants, and heroin addicts because of the strength of their friendships with members of those groups. It is difficult to subscribe to ideologies and practices that conflict with the social obligation inherent in kin and fictive kin relations (for Burmese kin relations see Mi

Mi Khiang 1962; Spiro 1977; Nash 1965:59-73).

In this section I have suggested that there are many reasons why Burmans appear not to be resisting the military regime. I have argued that priorities often differ from those who live external to the situation. Rather, Burmans adopt survival strategies, including giving priority to the need to ameliorate fear, hunger, to find employment, and the desire to exert local influence and personal power. Whilst rejecting the domination of the regime, Burmans must often also reject the call for change because of both a lack of resources and the precedence given to different priorities, priorities that are also influenced by central themes and ethics in Burmese life including Buddhism and the strength of kin relations. The appropriate strategy for many Burmans incorporates the gray areas of both confusion and complicity.

8.4 Waiting for Change

In this thesis I have tried to de-romanticize and de-essentialize previous views of a passive, nonviolent, harmonious "Burma." I focus upon the confusion that surrounds notions such as "resistance" in Myanmar. Recent work on Myanmar perpetuates these images of the submissive Burman, resigned to fate and enslaved to the laws of *karma*. For example, Neher and Marlay comment that: "Despite the unpopularity of the military regime, the Burman population has seemed almost passive. One possible reason for their apparent acquiescence in their own misrule is the deference Burmese culture traditionally accords to those in authority" (Neher and Marlay 1995:124). In earlier chapters I emphasized the complete lack of respect that Burmans have "traditionally" shown kings, warlords, chieftains, and other overlords whom they perceive as unjust. Pocket armies, bands of *dacoits*, and various local and regional militia belie the interpretation of Burmans as "passive" and "respectful of authority." In the following sections we will see that the "traditional" notion of authority relates primarily to kinship in contemporary urban Myanmar.

In the previous section I have explored a number of strategies that Burmans adopt to make life under a totalitarian regime less fearful. These include degrees of collaboration and complicity. These are not patterns of passive submission. Another logic is also at work in Myanmar that, at the outset, may erroneously appear to be a "pattern of conformity." It is in some way a "Cinderella" complex, a strong belief in the miraculous. It is a belief that at any moment, a miracle may occur and one's life may be completely transformed. This hope of freedom and escape makes the strategy of "waiting" a positive one rather than a passive acceptance of domination. In this section I explore "waiting" as a survival strategy via the notion of subjunctivization, and note its positive and negative attributes.

Victor Turner has described what he terms a "subjunctive mood" in the following way:

> I sometimes talk about the liminal phase being dominantly in the "subjunctive mood" of culture, the mood of maybe, might-be, as-if, hypothesis, fantasy, conjecture, desire...Liminality can perhaps be described as a fructile chaos, a fertile nothingness, a storehouse of possibilities, not by any means a random assemblage but a striving after new forms and structure, a gestation process, a fetation of modes appropriate to and anticipating postliminal existence (Turner 1990:12).

In the medical anthropological and ethnopsychiatric literature, "subjunctive" elements of narrative have been identified. The exploration of illness narratives has revealed the significance of a subjunctivizing style, of the possibility of some kind of hope that the general situation in which individuals and groups are enmeshed may improve. In addition, the potential for healing may be maintained throughout an illness episode by leaving the future open and "unemplotted" as Del Vecchio Good and Good discovered when they collected narratives from epileptics and their families in Turkey. They state that:

> Most of the families we interviewed maintained a deep investment in the openness of the future, in its indeterminacy, in the presence of potent and mysterious dimensions of reality and the possibilities for healing...It is this quality of reality that we have characterized as 'subjunctive'...Narrative succeeds by 'subjunctivizing reality,' a phrase we take from Bruner [1986:26]..."To be in the subjunctive mode is...to be trafficking in human possibilities rather than in settled certainties," Bruner writes [1986:26] (Good and Del Vecchio Good 1994:838).

Within these illness narratives the authors found blanks, negations, contradictions, and a rejection of the anticipated. They interpret this phenomena as emphasizing the unknowable dimensions of reality. By maintaining a space for the unexpected, the narrators and their families hold hope for eventual healing. The most vivid way in which a space for the unexpected was present in the narratives was through "encounters with the mysterious." These parts of the narratives hinted at the ability of powers (religious/supernatural) beyond the access of everyday experience to be brought to bear upon the illness (Good and Del Vecchio Good 1994:839-40).

Subjunctivization opens onto a larger discourse involving the simultaneous occupation of individuals or collectivities in various alternate realities, or alternate ways of knowing and experiencing daily life. Sartre defined imagination as subjective, but it can also be understood, using Turner's definition, as a subjunctive process. Sartre states that imagination is the "whole of consciousness" (as opposed to a contingent, extra quality of the brain) which always retains the ability to create a montage of the real and the unreal at any instant: "every concrete and real situation of consciousness in the world is pregnant

with imagination...consciousness is always 'in a situation' because it is always free, it always and at each moment has the concrete *possibility* of producing the unreal" (Sartre 1972:216).

Dreams can also be conceived as "spaces for subjunctivization." Desjarlais argues that similar imagery to that found in other experiential domains can be seen in Yolmo dreams, in fact, "it is likely that the recollection of dreams offer a creative forum through which Yolmo sensibilities are continuously forged and reforged" (Desjarlais 1992:56). Desjarlais demonstrates the way in which individual and collectivities move between realities, or, in the case of "soul flight," occupy several realities or subjunctive modes simultaneously. He writes that "When a villager dreams, the *sems* [heartmind] travels to the place and time envisioned...[this place] exists for the villagers as an ontic reality, with the heartmind traveling to the space-time imagined" (Desjarlais 1992:56). Dreams thus transport the crucial part of the person (*sems*), physically and temporally to another reality, while the rest of the body remains anchored to the first.

In Myanmar, a strong belief in the miraculous provides as example of the subjunctive mode in which most Burmans exist. This belief that almost anything is possible has been described by several researchers in Myanmar. Sarah Bekker has suggested that as the nation has become progressively impoverished, Burmans increasingly turn to the miraculous as a strategy for improving their daily lives. She cites the construction of an ornate temple in Yangon with its stress on supernatural imagery as evidence of this recent phenomenon (Bekker 1989). Ferguson and Mendelson report the existence of *gaings* (religious or mystic sects) in the Mandalay area some of which are formed around *weikzas*. *Weikzas* are "conceived of as a human who has acquired supranormal powers through mastery of alchemy, astrology, spells, signs, meditation, or other occult arts" (Ferguson and Mendelson 1981:63). They contend that *weikzas* have much political import in Myanmar at present. *Weikzas* are never female, and once they have attained a certain level of mastery, they are for all intents and purposes, immortal. By remaining on earth until the coming of the final Buddha, they can instantaneously achieve Enlightenment (Ferguson and Mendelson 1981:63-4). The most famous *weikza* is Bo Bo Aung who is believed to have been whisked away by the last Burmese prince (*Sethya*) to the heavens, thus setting the stage for millenarian movements focusing upon the return of the monarchy (Ferguson and Mendelson 1981:68).

The formation of groups of lay people around forest monks, hermits, *sayas*[54] and *weikzas* as *gaings* is a familiar theme in colonial Burma. The majority of these movements "centered around...Bo Bo Aung, who would restore the royal tradition and bring about Buddhist paradise on earth" (Ferguson and Mendelson 1981:68). There are also *gaings* described as *Nat weikza* groups since they focus upon *Nats* who possess them and whom they try to imitate. Ferguson and Mendelson note that a significant number of monks

[54] *Saya* means "teacher" or "master." It can be applied to almost any trade or profession. In this case it refers to indigenous medicine practitioners, some of whom are monks.

appear to be associated with these *gaings* (Ferguson and Mendelson 1981:71).

Schober has researched the formation of *gaings* in Myanmar. Denying that *gaings* are merely a millenarian or messianic phenomenon, she argues that while the leaders and the "social composition" of the *gaings* change frequently, *gaings* have existed in Myanmar during times marked by an absence of crises (Schober 1988:13). In 1981-2 Schober researched mystic cults in Myanmar (*htwetyap pauk gaing*). *Htwetyap pauk* means "a place through which one leaves" referring to the area in the Himalayas that members believe they go to after the death of their physical body, and before they either enter the cycle of rebirth again, or attain Enlightenment (Schober 1988:14). She notes that Bo Bo Aung and Bo Min Gaung are known to nearly all Burmese and are the heroes of mystic legends, appearing in meditation and dreams to a select few (Schober 1988:19).

The author further argues that the term *gaing* refers to any community group who share "a common source of merit and power" (Schober 1988:19). Separate *gaings* are formed from followers who congregate around one particular mystic. Membership of mystic *gaings* is based on shared secret codes for knowledge about metals, moon phases, and other lore essential to occult practices (Schober 1988:16). Schober notes that "most people involved with mystic practices live ordinary lives of householders and visit their mystic teachers only occasionally, anywhere from a few hours to a few days or weeks" (Schober 1988:17).

With little historical evidence, Ferguson and Mendelson have postulated that *weikza* belief and the formation of *gaings* around them is largely a nineteenth century phenomenon due almost exclusively to the tensions of colonialism and the killing of the last Burmese monarch. These authors note that further evidence could change this hypothesis, although it is supported by Spiro who states that "belief in weikza powers was exacerbated by westernization and independence" (Ferguson and Mendelson 1981:79). Belief in this symbol of modernity proves, argue Ferguson and Mendelson, that "a pervasive and intense belief in the miraculous continues to underlie the world view of Burmese Buddhists" (Ferguson and Mendelson 1981:74).

Unlike Schober's conclusion, it is Ferguson and Mendelson's thesis that the *weikza* is a potent symbol of political protest. *Weikzas* and their *gaings* present an alternate view of Myanmar's future, one in which Buddhist and occult mastery empower a repressed population concerned with the achievement of Enlightenment. Spiro agrees with Mendelson that "for many Burmese even meditation is a means for the acquisition of power (an animist notion) rather than wisdom (a Buddhist notion)" (Spiro 1967:271). Other millenarian movements by such charismatic leaders as Saya San are reminders of the depth of faith and magnitude of support such leaders can generate. The Burmese military remain unconvinced that *weikzas* are not bent on political control. Commenting on the censorship by the military regime of much *weikza* printed material, the authors state that:

The present regime's constant concern with insurrections and its susceptibility to revolutionary charismatic leaders of the Saya San type would seem to make it necessary for the expression of only the most indirect and discreet claims of a millennial nature. Deteriorating economic conditions and the lack of political freedom certainly are the soil from which messianic weikza leaders could suddenly sprout (Ferguson and Mendelson 1981:74).

The subjunctive dimension of "possibility" thus has significant political import in Myanmar, as it has the potential to mobilize segments of the population into organized resistance groups. Subjunctivization is much more important at a phenomenological level, however, because it is a core idiom with which Burmans experience their world and act upon it. A Swiss group of balloonists attempting to fly around the world recently landed in Myanmar. A Burmese farmer was reported by CNN to have described the balloon landing[85] thus: "I thought it was a Buddha flying through the sky." It is not difficult to understand how she thought the balloon more likely to be a Buddha than a mechanical device since her worldview incorporates the notion of Buddhas and of "possibility," whereas she had had no experience of flying machines.

The lack of a category of "coincidence" is part of what gives omens, portents, and magical and Buddhist visions causal links with events in the mundane world. The frenzy of interest in lotteries in Myanmar is an example of subjunctivization providing such a model for action. Since there is always a possibility of the miraculous occurring, the lottery is a viable strategy for emerging from poverty. Ma Cho Cho, a woman in her twenties who lives in a relocated township, recounted to me several recent occurrences that involved the miraculous:

> "I saw a cobra snake that went up into the roof when I was changing the leaves (သစ်ပြုတ်) at the shrine. It went into a big hole in the roof. I dropped the big pot but it didn't break, so I went and bought some lottery tickets. Last week I dreamed of a pagoda and Shin Upagote."[86]
> *"What did you think it means?"*
> "I think it means that I will receive some money."
> *"Did you get any?"*
> "No, just my regular income."

[85] The Breitling Orbiter 2 Balloon

[86] Shin Upagote is one of the four Burmese Buddhist "saints" from whom favors can be solicited through the use of spells (Spiro 1967:44). Maung Htin Aung states that Shin Upagote is an element of Mahayana Buddhism who, using his magical powers, subdues the God Mara, "the arch enemy of Buddhism." He notes that: "The Burmese believe that Shin Upagote still lives in a floating brazen palace in the southern ocean, and that he too can be invoked to come by a prayer of special formula, and that his mere invisible presence will prevent storms and floods. Some believe also that he can be invoked when danger in the form of some physical violence threatens" (Maung Htin Aung 1959:132-3).

Given the logic outlined above, is not surprising that Burmans adopt "waiting" and a belief in the miraculous as strategies of suffering. There is a long history of this strategy in both Myanmar and other Southeast Asian nations. In Myanmar, Smith notes that there are written records extending back more than one hundred and fifty years describing millennial sects that combine elements of animism, Buddhism and Christianity. Smith mentions the *Leke* sect that dates to 1860 as one such surviving movement (1991:426). Stern argues that millennial cults that await either the Buddha (or, more recently, Christ) are apparent throughout the history of Theravada Buddhist kingdoms (1968) and Smith notes that other Southeast Asian groups such as the Khmu and Hmong in Laos also have such traditions (1991:427). Mendelson has argued that such millennial sects bridge a gap between animism and Buddhism (1960; 1961a; 1961b) but Spiro has noted that much of the millennial imagery and impetus seems derives from older Hindu and Mahayana Buddhist elements (Spiro 1967:241) which fits with the diffusion of this phenomenon throughout South and East Asia, including the Himalayas.

Many Burmans have fled Myanmar in fear of their lives and over time, some of their family members have joined them in the safety of other countries. Some of the most militant students who led the 1988 democracy uprising have graduated from universities in Thailand, the United States and other countries, and have become activists employing the *BurmaNet* and NGOs to publicize their message of resistance. The majority of urban Burmans however, adopt a strategy[67] in which their "minds" leave temporarily, while "waiting" for change. In this remainder of this section I explore some of the miniature worlds in which Burmans find temporary respite.

In the European fairy tale, Cinderella had to be back before midnight or her coach turned into a pumpkin. Burmans also amuse themselves temporarily with the equivalent of a medieval ball, but this strategy, like Cinderella's, is only a short respite from the drudgery of everyday life and from the never ending babble of nonsensical propaganda and threats of violence. Burmans still continue to adopt a subjunctive mode of thinking where the possibility exists that their present reality, like that of Cinderella, may be transformed utterly by a miraculous event. The future remains open, but temporary strategies must be employed in the interim. In previous chapters we have explored the surreal quality of urban Myanmar, the fascist wonderland where political power and patriotism fuse with an ideology of unbridled development and "modernization." I have described spectacles such as "Trade Fairs" where the latest mechanical products to enter Myanmar are proudly displayed at the "Tatmadaw Hall." Shopping has become an exercise in surreality, an absurd juxtaposition of sweaty laborers bent double beneath the weight of charcoal and cement sacks and the whiteness of the marble foyers of department stores and luxury hotels. "Fantasyland," "Happyland" and other Burmese amusement parks lure young people with the novelty of "Western" amusements such as old pin-ball machines and "novelty-prize" games with robot arms that can be manipulated to win acrylic toys. Outside

[67] This is not necessarily a conscious "strategy."

the "downtown" areas, in the forcibly relocated townships and the countryside, Buddhist and *Nat* festivals, puppet shows and other forms of street theater have traditionally been the main forms of leisure. But times change, and these traditional forms of entertainment are periodic, whereas township and village residents can escape their lives on a daily basis via a form of escapism manifested as the "video hut" phenomenon.

Allott's collection of censored literature contains a short story by Ne Win Myint entitled *The Advertising Wagon*, a story that takes the "video hut" as its subject. In her commentary, Allott writes:

> Since 1988, thousands of video parlors have sprung up in villages throughout Burma. Much of the machines run off batteries since the villages do not have electricity. The owner charges three to five kyats per person and an audience of a hundred or so cram into a small hut to watch. Hundreds of low-budget videos are shot in Burma each year, mostly simple love stories and action pictures, which are unlikely to fall foul of the censors. The foreign videos that are shown are usually easy-to-understand action pictures...There are many neighbourhood rental shops in larger towns...A shortage of film stock in the last ten years has meant that many directors have switched to making videos...In the villages, however, the traveling cinema or bioscope troupe has almost died out, replaced by the video-player, just as the introduction of film in the 1920s and 1930s led to the decline of traditional puppet shows (Allott 1994:33-5).

In both the urban movie theaters and the video huts, there are several standard story lines around which endless permutations are created. They include violent action/adventure movies (often very low quality imported films), occasional sex and nudity,[ss] and most frequently, a Cinderella story. Burmese women roll their eyes dramatically when discussing this theme and they invariably describe a wealthy young girl who falls in love with a "man from the wrong side of the tracks." The parents forbid the marriage, the young woman is heart-broken. Suddenly, consistent with a strong belief in the miraculous, an amazing event occurs such as the death of a rich aunt, or the purchase of a winning lottery ticket, and the young man is then free to marry his sweetheart. For the price of a few cents, Burmans can imagine themselves as Cinderellas. The waiting for their lives to be transformed has, for a few hours at least, finally occurred.

[ss] It is almost impossible to get a Burman to admit to the existence of sex, nudity, and pornography on video in Myanmar. A female physician from a rural background told me a story of an elder in her village who still wore a traditional top-knot hairstyle. The elder loudly decried the immorality and indecency of modern videos and refused to partake in the village gatherings when the films were being shown. At a certain point in the night however, the shadow of a man with a top-knot would be projected against the screen as the elder secretly entered the hut. He was duly noted to sneak out again before the end of the video, much to the delight of the audience who, while stifling laughter, never confronted the man with their knowledge out of respect for his status as an elder within the community.

A young mother in *Nyaungbintha*, Ma Nu Nu Swe, told me that: "I don't go to the video shops in the rainy season, but in the summertime I go once or twice [per week] in the evenings. When I feel upset and I want to relax my mind, I go there." The word for "upset" used here is *sa waq ne ye* (စားဝတ်နေရေး) and means "the basic necessities of survival," translating literally as "food, clothing, shelter, and water." Ma Nu Nu Swe is referring to her worries over her severe impoverishment and the video hut allows her to temporarily inhabit a world where she can forget about the continual struggle to afford the basic necessities of life. The poorest women in the townships cannot afford to leave their neighborhoods, and they spend their time "resting" and sleeping. One woman, Daw Khin Mya Kyu, commenting on her use of video huts, said that "It only makes me happy for a while. When I come back home, I feel unhappy again and just go to sleep," a strategy common to impoverished, miserable people all over the world. In Myanmar, however, a strong belief in the miraculous allows Burmans to imagine that such a miraculous change in circumstances may also befall them. Until such time, they continue to pay a few cents for the luxury of forgetting about the present.

It is my hypothesis that this subjunctive category of possibility makes "waiting" a positive strategy of suffering in Myanmar. The following poem entitled *Over the Mountain Ranges*, was written by a prominent Burmese writer and translated by anthropologist Jennifer Leehey, in Yangon in 1995. The poem powerfully depicts this strategy as hopeful and active:

တောင်တန်းတွေပေါ်မှာ	Over The Mountain Ranges
မျက်လုံးထဲမှာ	in the eyes
ရေတွင်း ရှိတယ်။	there is a well
ပါးစပ်ဘဲမှာ	in the mouth
သဲကန္တာရ ရှိတယ်။	there is a desert
နားထဲ	in the ears
ခြေတစ်ပေါင်ကျိုး အရူးတစ်ယောက်	a mad man with a broken leg
ကခုန်လို	is doing a jumping dance
အစာ အိမ်ထဲမှာ	in the stomach
ရထုပိုဒ်စုံ တစ်ပုဒ် ရှိတယ်။	a complete poem
နှလုံးသားထဲ	in the heart
ကလေးတွေ	children are playing
တူတူပုန်းကြ	hide and seek

ဦးနောက် ထဲမတော	in the brain
ရည်းစား လုဘက် နှစ်ဦး	two rivals in love
စားချင်း ယှဉ်ခုတ်လို။	are fighting with swords
လက်ထဲမှာ	in the hand
မပေးလိုက်ရတဲ့ ပန်းတစ်ပွင့်	a flower which hasn't been presented
နှမ်းစပြု။	is starting to wither
ငါ	I--
အိပ်ပျော်ရင်း လမ်လျှောက်	sleepwalking
တောင်တန်းကြီးတွေပေါ်မှာ	over the mountain ranges
ငါ့ကိုယ်ငါ ဖိပြီး	pressing and sharpening myself.
သွေးနေမိရဲ့။	

Leehey's analysis is salient:

In "Over the Mountain Ranges" one hears the deep frustration of a people who have seen the failure of their democracy movement...The overall image of the poem is of a body, with its various organs disassociated from internal experience: thoughts, emotions, aspirations. The poem evokes the experience of sleepwalking, moving through life without fully engaging in it. I believe this is an accurate description of the way many people in Rangoon are living out their lives. People carry on with the physical requirements of survival, while the dreams and aspirations they felt during the period of democracy demonstrations lie dormant. People are afraid to feel much at all. The image of the mouth, barren as a desert, suggests to me the profound silence in Burma. The longing to speak-- an impulse as insistent as thirst-- can find no satisfaction. And while the mouth is silent, the ear is full of noise. The mad man trying to dance on one leg suggests the state with its absurd incompetence, and the jumping dance in the ear is like the steady barrage of nonsensical propaganda which comes out of the state-run media, subverting people's sense of what is true and real. The image of the stomach containing a poem suggests emptiness and hunger, but also possibility: the possibility of expression, the possibility of hope...Hope and happiness are elusive, however; like children playing hide and seek, they come and go. And all positive feelings are marked by ambivalence: emotions are conflicted like the rivals in the brain with their swords...All this time, one has been holding a flower, waiting to present it in offering to truth...perhaps to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi herself...But time has passed and the flower has started to wither. One is almost ready to toss it away. In the final stanza, some of the confusion clears. The experience of sleepwalking through life, silent and numb, is now perceived as a kind of endurance training. Just as a body is strengthened by hiking over mountain ranges, the spirit is strengthened through this tension of waiting. Dissociated from the body, the spirit is disciplining itself, sharpening itself like a knife, preparing itself for future action. There is a hint of threatened violence here in the image of a sharpened knife... (Leehey 1996:6-11).

Over the Mountain Ranges suggests that a positive strategy of suffering, that of endurance training, has begun in Yangon. Individual defences are honed like knives, and psychologically valued states such as hope and determinism are shored up. The threat of madness, of violence (dismembering), and of silencing are are never far away in Myanmar. Sleepwalking not only invokes disembodiment, but also the escape to more hopeful, subjunctive realities. Sleepwalking is emblematic of a wider paradigm of escaping while waiting for the miraculous to occur.

Waiting can also be viewed in a less positive light, where fear paralyzes Burmans into inactivity. Waiting becomes a timeless strategy, trapping Burmans in worlds whose boundaries are delimited by fear. Burmans make statements such as "Until my lucky stars come again," and "Now is not the time to become involved" to signal this period of withdrawal. Burmans may become trapped between two impossible situations: the current socio-political situation, and the new society they wish to see emerge, but are too frightened to actively pursue. A professional man in his early-forties, U Tun Aung Chain, describes the situation in which many of his friends find themselves:

> "What I see is a lot of people, friends, who work for the military, who don't like this [situation]. But they don't see a better alternative. Especially us [the younger generations], we have never known anything different. They're very familiar with the system here and they have climbed up the ladder to get power. And there are many people who hope that one day the government will change and start doing something to help the people. At the same time, they don't know Aung San Suu Kyi. A lot of people question what change they [the National League for Democracy] are going to bring in if they get into power."

Whilst subjunctivization keeps alive the hope of escape and the possibility of an end to suffering, a fear of change (itself created by the lack of freedom of speech and the censorship of ideas in Myanmar) represents a negative strategy of waiting. Regardless of whether Burmans are adopting a positive and hopeful, or fearful strategy, waiting may partially remove Burmans from the everyday world. Time is deferred as Burmans sleepwalk through other, more hopeful subjunctive realities, the spirit of which Stewart has captured in her work on the world of miniatures as follows:

> The miniature is a world of arrested time, its stiffness emphasizes the activity that is outside its borders. And this effect is reciprocal, for once we attend to the miniature world, the outside world stops and is lost to us. In this it resembles other fantasy structures: the return from Oz, or Narnia, or even sleep (Stewart 1984:67).

In this section I have explored "waiting" as a response or strategy enacted to survive an everyday state of emergency. I have suggested that Burmans' strong belief in the miraculous is an example of a subjunctive mode in which "possibility" exists. The worlds that Burmans create in which to wait is represented in *Over the Mountain Ranges* as Burmese bodies sleepwalking through a landscape not controlled by the dictatorship. This space for subjunctivization is also the subject of cults and millenarian sects or *gaings* in Myanmar and as such are closely monitored by the junta for potential political opposition. This subjunctive space of possibility allows us to see waiting as an active, positive strategy of suffering, rather than one of fatefulness and submission. But for some Burmans, waiting may be conceived as a static world whose inhabitants are paralyzed by fear.

8.5 The Fragmentation of the Body: Corpse, Silence, and the Absence of Mind

In the previous section I have suggested that Burmans regularly turn to entertainment that allows their mind to wander from their present troubles. In the final sections of the chapter we will examine a more serious form of "wandering," namely that of bodily dissociation and the withdrawal of attention from all but the most necessary daily chores. The psychological and ethnopsychiatric literature contains a large number of studies of patients who have "withdrawn" into an inner realm, and the anthropological literature is replete with examples of soul loss or soul flight, such as the butterfly fairy in Myanmar (see section 8.6). In Cambodia, psychiatrists Hiegal and Landrac have considered this phenomenon among survivors of the Khmer Rouge Era (1975-1979). They concluded that some individuals created an inner psychological space characterized by numbness of the senses and thought processes in order to survive the atrocities they witnessed and the pain they suffered (Hiegal and Landrac 1993). Kleinman and Kleinman have described an "inner psychocultural process of absorption" within the realms of illness and performance (Kleinman and Kleinman 1994:718). They argue that in severely traumatic or dangerous circumstances, dissociation is a mechanism by which attention is withdrawn from the situation and located in a safer domain. The Burmese term for this phenomenon is *ajoun pjaun* (အာရုံပြောင်း) which means to transfer attention from one object to another, or to divert attention away from something. The prerequisite for dissociation is a threat to the integrity of the self, which can be an individual, intersubjective, or a collective phenomenon. As to the relocation of the 'self,' Kleinman and Kleinman contend that the safe space "may be one's imaginings, an alternative self, or concentration on a highly focused part of the social field. Perception, imagination, and memory are absorbed into that particular focus" (Kleinman and Kleinman 1994:717-8).

In *Pacing the Void*, Kirmayer has described a spectrum of dissociative practices. Dissociation is most often categorized by psychiatrists as pathological and in following chapters I will present the statements of patients at the Yangon Psychiatric Hospital who clearly fall into this category. Such patients, many of whom if diagnosed in North America would be categorized as having dissociative identity disorder (DID) (formerly called multiple personality disorder), form one end of the dissociative spectrum. At this end of the spectrum, trance behavior is interpreted by psychiatrists as causing serious ruptures to the integrity of the self and to the individual's ability to function in everyday social life. Aligned along this dissociative spectrum are possession cults, shamanistic or spiritual healing, "the posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) patient reliving his or her trauma...the DID patient tracing his or her amnesias...or any hypnotic subject engaged in a simple task like arm levitation" (Kirmayer 1994:96). At the far opposite end of the spectrum to DID is daydreaming, reverie, and automated tasks. Kirmayer notes that:

> Children spend much time absorbed in imagination, but the frequency of reveries diminishes with age...in Western societies, formal education and the workplace both devalue daydreaming as a waste of time...Reverie remains a source of creation, emotion-laden metaphors, images, and ideas...Much of what is called *unconscious* in popular psychology is better understood as reverie that occurs on the fringes of consciousness. Absorption in reverie or daydreaming is often included as a form of dissociative experience. Finally...much time is spent in nonconscious, automatic, or mindless behavior...for example...memories are encoded, stored, and recalled automatically (Kirmayer 1994:99).

Kirmayer argues that individuals shift rapidly along this spectrum, from self consciousness to a variety of dissociative states. He notes that "A shift to unself-conscious awareness is viewed as distraction" and that "For some authors, shifts away from self consciousness to absorption through externally focused attention or reverie may also be considered forms of dissociation" (Kirmayer 1994:102-3).

In previous chapters I have described the enforced participation of Burmans in a never-ending cycle of State spectacles and forced labor. I have also suggested that Burmans who are employed as manual laborers in the rapidly developing downtown area and in the regime's Industrial Zones must work for less than subsistence wages doing back-breaking repetitive work, often under hazardous conditions. I cited the short story of the concrete salesman who feels as if his body is turning to concrete, the substance that construction workers inhale, carry, and that cakes their bodies each day, as emblematic of the alienation Burmans feel towards their bodies. We have seen the way that Burmans attend State spectacles as rigid, silent masses which I likened to wooden Burmese puppets. I have suggested that the regime appropriates the bodies of Burmans for its nation building endeavors. But I have also hypothesized that there may be more occurring here than is apparent in the State media's carefully constructed images. Burmans are using an old

cultural strategy of dissociation (such as *Nat* spirit possession) at the same time as the State is consuming Burmese bodies for labor and for the reproduction of State ideology. Feldman has stated that: "Multiple and antagonistic counter discourses and acts can be attached to the same performance, thereby transforming its semantic efficacy" (Feldman 1991:15).This is a sophisticated notion of resistance, one of a fracturing of the notion of the body only, or even primarily, as a site of centralizing authority. It is my hypothesis that we can identify a Nietzschean "multiplicity-of-being," a sometimes conscious decentering and fracturing by Burmans of the notion of both bodies and States as nuclei of authority. Burmans are engaged in a variety of strategies that involve different degrees of dissociation, from possession to automation. "Waiting" is one such strategy in which attention is withdrawn (*ajoun pjaun*) from the social field. I have further postulated that mimicking death via the adoption of the automaton role is another dissociation strategy. Several authors have written of the positive and negative implications that such a strategy might have.

Feldman, for example, describes how political prisoners reconfigure their bodies as automatons. They mimic corpses as a way of resisting and surviving violence and domination. His insight is applicable on a national scale in Myanmar. He argues that:

> the experienced captive exchanges his body for silence. He mimics his death and transforms himself into a cipher...In this process, the prisoner literally autonomizes the body and sends it out into the space of interrogation as a detachable part of his political agency...*Was this exchange what Adorno was searching for in the mimesis of reification- the extraction of a modicum of resistance in the death-like parody of domination?* [original italics] (Feldman 1991:138,144).

Adorno writes of the mimesis of reification where mimesis involves "making oneself similar to the environment" (Adorno quoted in Cahn 1984:31), an argument derived from biology. Cahn comments that for Adorno:

> Mimicry mediates between two states: life and death...Other animals, man among them, feign death in the face of danger, they delude their enemy into believing that they are a stone, a leaf, or already dead. For these animals mimicry is a means of survival. In psycho-analytic terms, they survive because they are able to almost totally identify with something other than themselves, with dead, lifeless material...In a kind of literal reification (*Verdinglichung*) this mimetic survival evades death by playing dead (Cahn 1984:32-3).

Mimesis is more than imitation, it is an active adaptive strategy of "identifying with" the regime, "Literally, it is an "identification with the aggressor" according to the principle that "becoming one with the enemy immunizes you"" (Cahn 1984:33).

But there is no clear delineation between "subject and object or inner and outer" in the mimetic attitude, and Adorno concludes that ultimately this strategy of survival is a "triumphant failure." As Cahn explains, Adorno believed that in most cases individuals lose something integral to the integrity of the self when such a strategy is adopted: "Historically only the process of self-alienation through mimesis strengthens the subject enough for it to become self-identical and no longer stand in danger of losing itself in the process of "identifying with"" (Cahn 1984:35). In other words, unless a fragmentation of the individual through a process of "self-alienation" occurs, Adorno believed that mimetic strategies result in complicity.

Like Adorno, Taussig warns of the danger of such a strategy, as he too perceives the mimicking of death as a disfiguring of the integrity of the self. He recalls the fear that both residents and visitors to military-ruled nations encounter when they pass the barricades and check-points manned by armed guards. He asks if:

> As you pass through in your car at a snail's pace, coiling like a spring, awaiting the policeman, arm at the ready, to nod you on, does not your all too studied casualness, your studied disconcern, resemble the zombie-faces of the entranced...Do you not for ever so prolonged a brief moment of tensedness become possessed by the spirit- the spirit of the state? We would do well to remember that (Taussig 1997:148).

Taussig notes the decompression of time, the way that automata of the mass rallies and forced labor sites enter a miniature world of watching and waiting where time is deferred. He argues that the individual:

> becomes corpse-like which is something more and less than death, the corpse being but the beginning, the materialization of death...charged like a spring compressed in the utter stillness of this corpse-performance collapsing giant rhythms of quietude and decay into staged proportion of telescoped time (Taussig, 1997: 166-7).

The Generals have created a voyeuristic culture of watching (and its implied flip side of waiting) as opposed to a population that is actively creating the regime's envisioned totalitarian utopia.

Once autonomized, Burmans begin Baudrillard's process of exchanging production for repetition, thus not actually accomplishing anything on behalf of the government (Baudrillard 1993:29-30). As Baudrillard notes, this is an illusion of production since there is no use-value in the repetitive and absurd work of the government machinery (such as sitting for hours listening to the speeches of the regime). Baudrillard too offers hope for the subversive project of the willing automaton. He writes that: "As long as we can still discover a 'production' corresponding (even if this is only in the imagination) to individual or social needs...the worst individual or historical situations are bearable" (Baudrillard

1993:30). Baudrillard's thesis suggests that productive work is still being accomplished in the form of the creation of a survival ethic and thus conscious, positive resistance to the regime is occurring. Unlike Adorno, Baudrillard sees a situation where the mimesis of death will eventually "wear out" the aggressors (Baudrillard 1993:38).

Like Baudrillard and contra Adorno, Feldman (following Foucault) considers the appropriation of the automaton body to be an empowering strategy for the dominated. He asserts that:

> this construction of the Other (by the state) is a transfer of force, an empowering investiture of alterity, that can be played back against the state, so that the "copy" can affect the "model"...The prisoner's capacity to resist exploits the principle of auto-domination and auto-punition that Foucault identifies with panoptic penal regimes. In assuming "responsibility for the constraints of power" and "making" them play spontaneously upon himself, *he inscribes in himself the power relation...* [emphasis added](Foucault 1979: 202-3 quoted in Feldman 1991:178].

In the appropriation of the automated body, the Burman thus becomes a watcher, viewing the actions of his or her body from a safe distant place. Houtman suggests that the Burmese body has become objectified, as Buddhism teaches through meditation. He argues that by focusing attention on the body and its processes, Burmans are able to appropriate and internalize the panoptic gaze of the State (Houtman, 1999 forthcoming). I would argue, rather, that borrowing a strategy of withdrawing attention from the social field, as is occurring in both Buddhist meditation and the sites of State control such as the mass rallies, does not mean that Burmans are objectifying their bodies simply because the State in engaged in such a process. As Kirmayer has noted, a great many daily tasks are accomplished with little self conscious involvement (Kirmayer 1994:99-100). To refocus one's attention is not necessarily an act of objectification.

There are, then, two distinct strands of thought as to the efficacy of disembodiment and the parodying of death as a strategy of survival in the face of violence and domination. One is entirely destructive, while the other can be mobilized to create power, however marginalized. In the following section I map some of the landscapes accessed by disembodied Burmese selves while their corporeal components wait in silence and rigidity at State spectacles and as mechanical laborers on State projects. I then return to the strategy of dissociation and the possibility of reanimating automata when the danger has finally passed.

8.6 Miniature Worlds: The Mind Wanders

I noted above that Kleinman and Kleinman and Kirmayer contend that one form of dissociation is an intense concentration upon one area of the social field. Kirmayer argues that reverie and daydreaming are considered forms of dissociation that are neither wholly conscious nor wholly unconscious. In this section I examine a particular Burmese idiom known as "the mind wanders" in order to describe the experience of withdrawal into miniature worlds of everyday experience.

Seiq lei deh (စိတ်လေတယ်) translates as "idleness/the mind wanders or drifts."[89] Kirmayer argues that daydreaming and reverie are considered forms of dissociation that are neither wholly conscious nor wholly unconscious. *Seiq lei deh* is a cultural idiom used to express feelings of "state of mind" which accompany high unemployment rates and the inward focus of many women[90] in the relocated townships and is slightly further along Kirmayer's spectrum of dissociation. This state is not confined to women however, as male psychiatric patients also use this idiom. It does, however, seem to be more commonly used by women. This state is linked to another common idiom, *seiq ma kaum bu* (စိတ်မကောင်းဘူး) which means that "my mind is not good." It is conceived of as a temporary form of insanity caused by grief or strong negative emotions. These two idioms are linked by the assumption that Burmans are absolved of personal responsibility for their actions during this time. Thus common replies to "what do you do during the day?" Or, "what did you do between your last child birth and your new marriage/job" include statements such as "my mind wandered" or "my mind was not good" or "I was mad at that time."

To be in that state of "my mind wanders" involves an active, intentional ignorance of social conditions and events. It is a refusal to think about the sociopolitical situation and and to psychologize one's feelings. Emotions are buried beneath this layer of "numbness," a term that Burmans commonly use in everyday conversation. Kirmayer, following Spiegel et al. (1988), argues that the recall of certain emotions is dependent upon certain affective states. The recreation of a particular emotion is necessary to recall linked memories (Kirmayer 1994:100). If this is the case, and, as I have argued earlier, the State constructs affects such as fear and terror, then *refusing to recall memories may be linked to refusing to remember certain affective states*. Intentionally ignoring the political situation or engaging in social life (by focusing upon minutiae, daydreaming, sleeping, watching videos, and so on) would thus facilitate the ongoing process of actively forgetting events. In the remainder of the thesis we will see how prostitutes, heroin addicts, and psychiatric patients numb their bodies and minds using techniques such as miniaturization, drugs, and Buddhist practices such as meditation. To give a few examples obtained from women

[89] This term is related to two other terms: *seiq shaq* (စိတ်ရှပ်)- to be mixed up and confused in the mind and *seiq gasa* (စိတ်ကစား) which means to flit about, the mind becomes unstable. The Burmese language has a plethora of terms that link mental instability with violence, anger, grief, unhappiness, and madness.

[90] I do not have any data to be able to make a similar assertion about men in the relocated townships.

working as prostitutes in the relocated townships: One woman, Ma Si Si Win, was willing to talk about the "physical" act of sexual intercourse, but "not the mind." She told me that she numbed her mind and body, *seiq toe deh* (စိတ်ထုံတယ်), with alcohol to survive the ordeal. Like many commercial sex workers around the world, Burmese prostitutes construct a wall around themselves so that when they are told that AIDS is incurable and that they will likely die if they contract it, they answer: "Yes, yes, if I get it, I'll die." Another woman working as a prostitute, Ma Khin Yi, told me in response to a question about AIDS: "I don't want to know because I'm scared to find out." And to questions such as "why did you elope?" and "why did you become a prostitute?" The answer is often, *seiq lei deh*, "my mind wandered."

In the previous section I suggested that the survival strategy of waiting can be viewed as a positive strategy of suffering, or conversely as a prison whose inhabitants are paralyzed by fear. Regardless of whether withdrawal is a positive or negative strategy, however, there is no doubt that for Burmans who remain in the country, miniature worlds of absorption and withdrawal are created. This phenomenon, that Geertz reminds us is common throughout Asia (Geertz 1973), is not entirely a trance state, it is most often described as a state of numbness, *seiq toe deh*. These miniature worlds are, as we shall see, created from a cultural history of Buddhism and spirit possession, and the current political situation where alienation is occurring on an enormous scale.

Miniature Worlds of Existence

Some of the worlds to which Burmans escape the politicization of everyday life are simply miniature worlds of their everyday existence. These worlds exist in the here-and-now, accompanied by the idiom "the mind wanders." Such worlds are characterized by miniature time which Stewart calls "deferred time." Referring to the labor involved in constructing miniature books, Stewart argues that: "From the beginning, the miniature books speaks of infinite time, of the time of labor, lost in its multiplicity, and of the time of the world, collapsed within a minimum of physical space" (Stewart 1984:39). In the worlds of waiting that Burmans construct there is also the infinite time of unemployment, resting and sleeping, time devoted to waiting, but here the mind is not engaged in pursuing more hopeful, subjunctive realities, it is instead wandering through an anesthetized miniature space. Burmese miniature worlds involve the numbness of thought and affect in conjunction with the focusing or absorbing of the mind in the minutiae of daily life.

In miniature Burmese worlds, processes such as reflection, memory, and emotion are shut out, and instead the minutiae of everyday life takes on an exaggerated focus or absorption. Working with young unemployed women in *Nyaungbintha*, I came to learn how circumscribed their lives are. How a trip to the market is the highlight of a day, unless one can afford to go to the video hut and lose oneself among the Burmese Cinderellas. Such women often go through the labor-intensive chore of starting a fire and watching a

large pot of rice slowly cook, up to three times a day. Although this could have been done once in the morning, these women have nothing else to do. Several hours each day are spent sleeping, "resting" or "daydreaming."

Perhaps most startling is the lack of communication between neighbors. Like the wooden persona of Burmese automata, miniature worlds are characterized by silence: the verbal equivalent of numbness. Feldman discusses the positive use of silence as a creative tactic for survival. He writes that survival "generates cultural depth through absence. It is a productive and not an inhibiting process. There is an indirect voice of silence that inflects and intensifies the reception of form and content" (Feldman 1991:12). Although Burmans will keep a close eye on their neighbors (bamboo fences seem especially suited to this occupation), when Burmans converse with their neighbors it is most often about the minutiae of daily life: the need for a child to have new sandals; the leak in the roof, queries about rice, salted fish, and beans. Fears, reflections, and comments on the political situation go unvoiced. In general, there is no concept of trust and no need for such trust as thought-feelings are firmly swallowed and held down, away from the humor and surface banter of everyday conversations with self, family, and friends. In the miniature world of Burmese everyday existence, essential chores to do with the basic necessities of life (food, clothing, and shelter) become an almost exclusive focus and loom large in everyday thoughts and conversations. This absorbed focus of the mind is starkly juxtaposed with the rigid wooden bodies that Burmans present to the State for its consumption.

Worlds of Ignorance

Urban residents deliberately refuse to think and to psychologize about the current situation. That is why a great many Burmans (prostitutes, school teachers, merchants, and psychiatric patients alike) made a physical choking sound when my questions forced them to dive into the thought-feelings upon which they normally skim across: a lump deep in their chest that welled up through their throat and became verbalized as huge shuddering sobs, as though tears had been held back for years. It is difficult to explain the level of intimate contact made at these moments as psychological barriers are allowed to come crashing down. There is a good reason for these barriers: how can individuals remain continually conscious of disappointment in their lives, and of their fear for their children's future? How can they dwell on the disappearance or torture of friends and relatives, or of the children who fled the regime to Thailand, and from whom they have heard nothing in almost ten years? It must be remembered that in Myanmar, strong negative emotions such as grief and anger threaten to bring madness. Forgetting becomes an active, ongoing process necessary for psychological coherence, sometimes conscious, and other times as a barely discerned mental habit.

The "passive Asian nature" that forms the basis of so much orientalizing discourse (Said 1978) is, as noted earlier, often applied to Asian citizens who live under a one-party rule such as China and Myanmar. Contemporary anthropologists have done much to dispel this myth. In China for example, Anna Anagnost has analyzed the seeming passive indifference of Chinese citizens to Communist rule as evidenced by their participation in the many state rituals that serve to reinforce state power. In relation to the ritual to create "Model Citizens" in China, Anagnost notes that:

> At one level these designations are signs that connote a subliminal message about submission to the power of the state. To aspire to inclusion within the connotations of this sign is to announce, in Havel's words, that "I know what I must do. I behave in the manner expected of me. I can be depended upon and am beyond approach. I am obedient and therefore I have the right to be left in peace" (1986:42). Conformity with the model appears to originate from a "disinterested conviction" about the moral values it represents (Anagnost 1994:134).

In a similar way as that described by Anagnost in China, Burmans find ways to make life go on as if there was no military dictatorship. At a bodily level, this active, intentional ignorance of the everyday state of emergency is characterized by inertia. If an individual does nothing, it is more difficult to accuse that person of doing something wrong. Thus Burmans consciously ignore and avoid politics. Most deliberately stay away from "flash points" of confrontation such as those described earlier in the political geography of Yangon. This is why, as one woman noted, the "threshold of fear" can continue to rise in Myanmar. It is also why urban Burmans will state that they are not afraid on a daily basis. They attempt to chart sanctuary spaces and believe that they need not be constantly afraid if they stay within these boundaries. As we have discussed earlier however, the regime is constantly deterritorializing sanctuary spaces. Orwell has warned of the dangers of ignorance and appeasement. Anna Allott explains this Burmese logic in the context of a Burmese short story.

The Middle of May (the hottest time of year when the "mango" showers are beginning as a prelude to the monsoon rains), is a short story written by one of Myanmar's best loved cartoonists, U Win Pe. After defecting to the National League for Democracy, U Win Pe was imprisoned by the SLORC. He writes of a small plant that falls off a truck when passing through a small village. The villages are unwilling to do anything about it other than stare at the plant until one young man picks it up and is subsequently subjected to the other villagers' desires, harassment, and curiosity. Eventually he must give the plant to a village child who has become so desirous of it, he may die from fever if he does not receive it. Anna Allott's commentary on U Win Pe's story shows how it exemplifies the current attitude in Myanmar: in order to be safe, one should close one's eyes, ears, and mouth:

"The Middle of May," could be seen as an ironic illustration of a saying that has been often heard in Rangoon in recent years: "malok, mashok, mapyok," which in English can be rendered as "don't do anything, don't get involved, [then you] won't get fired." It suggests that the best way to keep out of political trouble and avoid personal loss and suffering is to keep one's head down and avoid taking any initiative (Allott 1994:60).

Perhaps this refusal to think can also be seen in the armed forces. The young soldier described earlier, who carried his son in one arm and his baton in the other, was perhaps also carrying out orders without reflection. The routinization of violence becomes automatic.

Finally, a refusal to think is also useful as a form of immunity from propaganda. Refusing to read newspapers or watch Myanmar Television programming creates even more isolation from the world as a small amount of "outside" news is also broadcast. The advantages of such a strategy far outweigh the disadvantages however, as Burmans can ignore the daily onslaught of propaganda. In a similar way, urban Burmans simply refrain from focusing upon the junta's propaganda signboards. Merleau Ponty has argued that objects in one's field of view have no solidity, no identity, until we focus upon them. He gives the example of a boulder, which is nameless, formless in our perception until such time as it becomes an object to be surmounted (Merleau Ponty 1962). Yangon and Mandalay residents slide their eyes over the billboards, refusing to focus upon them, thus denying them a reality in their social field.

The Mind Flies to Freedom

Another strategy of escape in Myanmar is for the mind to "fly," as opposed to the confused, drifting implied in the term *seiq lei deh*. This state also involves a deeper state of trance. Upon realizing that Burmese women engaged in prostitution in the relocated townships were frequently describing a pattern of dissociation characterized by "flying," I began to ask the women, "How do you feel when you are having sex?" Examples of some of the replies appear below. All of these women were interviewed in *Nyaungbintha* as its high unemployment rates combined with the uprooting of urban dwellers from their previous lifestyles, occupations, and patronage networks, has led to an epidemic of prostitution. The most commonly quoted figure given by women in *Nyaungbintha* is that one-third of women of reproductive age are engaged in prostitution at any one time. Based upon my own interviews with over fifty such women, I believe this figure to be close to the mark. The women whose stories are reproduced here are more fortunate than other prostitutes I have interviewed in *Nyaungbintha*, in the sense that they do not have to prostitute themselves in the mud under bridges or on the floor of Yangon and Mandalay's markets, or on the government's boats and tankers. Most of these women are based in brothels. I interivews these women in a neutral location away from pimps and family

members. Each woman has between three and eleven "clients" during the day. These are known as "shorts" or "hits" as opposed to a "long" or "night-order" that involves between one and twelve men. Long orders generally average around three men, but there is no limit to the number of times each man will require intercourse. Over thirty percent of the women and girls interviewed stated that being raped was the impetus for becoming a prostitute, most often using the rationale that "My life is ruined now so I may as well make some money," or "I'm not good for anything else now..."

The first vignette comes from a twenty-nine-year-old woman with six siblings, Ma Khin Me Si, who lives in the urban area but works as a prostitute in *Nyaungbintha*. The daughter of an army officer, she was married at seventeen to a man who physically abused her after drinking alcohol. On average, Ma Khin Me Si was beaten once every three or four days. Upon divorcing her husband when she was twenty-four-years-of-age, she tried a variety of jobs but was eventually lured into prostitution by the extremely active recruitment network that exists in *Nyaungbintha*. When asked how she feels about having sex for money, Ma Khin Me Si replies that:

> "[I feel] Nothing. I am earning money, that's all. I feel pain, that's all."
> *"And your mind?"*
> "My mind is not here. My mind flies to my parents because I am...[breaks off, tears stream down her face]."

In the next statement, a twenty-year-old woman, Ma Aye Aye, describes her experience of working as a prostitute in one of Yangon's recently opened nightclubs where she is paired with Thai, French, Malaysian, and Chinese customers who pay her between forty and one hundred U.S. dollars as a tip, on top of the 2000 kyats (approximately $12 U.S.) she is paid by the pimp. This job is a new one for her, until a few months ago she was supporting her child by having intercourse with ten to twelve men every day in *Nyaungbintha*. Ma Aye Aye says that:

> "When I am having sex, I take my mind far away from my present situation."

In the next statement, the crucial importance of the mother-daughter bond (Nash 1965) is apparent. Ma Shwe Shwe, a twenty-one-year-old woman, cried throughout the interview. She states that:

> "My father has already died and my nieces and nephews were starving at home. I didn't know what to do. That's why I've sacrificed my own life...After I became sick, my mother begged me not to do it again. I've given my mother so much trouble throughout my life. Only now I am aware of my actions and I've stopped

giving her trouble."

Ma Shwe Shwe and her mother lied to their neighbors about Ma Shwe Shwe staying with her uncle during the week so that they wouldn't know she was working in a brothel. Ma Shwe Shwe cries that "I can't stay apart from my mother, that's why I didn't go to Mandalay." In this respect she is different from many women working as prostitutes in Myanmar who follow a route around the country that coincides with harvests, pagoda festivals and other cycles of income generation and spending. Another young woman, Ma U Gon, states that:

> "When I am having sex, my mind flies to my mother...My mind is always inside my mother."

In the following vignette, a sixteen-year-old girl, Ma Nge, tells of her experience of having sex with four to five men each night. Ma Nge has recently become pregnant and been beaten by her family who now realize that she is engaged in the prostitution industry. However, since her family in Southern Myanmar is desperately poor, and as her father is unemployed, Ma Nge's mother has decided to continue to accept the money that her daughter brings home without telling her husband of its source:

> "Actually, I'm not fond of sex but I have to do it because they pay me. I put my mind somewhere else when I have to sleep with clients, like the places I've visited such as my school which I like the most [At this point Ma Nge begins to cry as she explains that she misses going to school, but that her parents can't afford to pay the fees]."

The final vignette is given by Ma Nyun Nyun Me, a twenty-one-year-old woman who has never been to school and again we can see the strength of the mother-daughter bond. She began to cry as soon as she mentioned her family. Ma Nyun Myun Me is recovering from an illness (most likely typhoid or hepatitis) and states that by working as a prostitute she has "sacrificed my life for my family. I will do anything to stop them from starving...my life is ruined, spoiled, I don't even have any money for myself." When asked about the experience of working as a prostitute Ma Nyun Nyun Me says that:

> "My mind flies during sex."
> *"Where does your mind go to?"*
> "To my home."
> *"Where?"*
> "To my mother...In my mother's heart."

The strategy of dissociation, of the mind "wandering," "flying" and "sleepwalking" is a culturally and historically familiar theme in Burmese culture. As in many parts of Asia, spirit possession and the ability of parts of consciousness to leave the body and travel to other locations or dimensions is well documented. The powerful male shamans of the Himalayas, whose spirit selves travel as birds seeking knowledge of their patients' afflictions, are well known (Kalweit 1992:11). I have cited Desjarlais's study of Nepalese daily life where the heart-mind can fly to other dimensions (Desjarlais 1992). In Theravada Buddhist Sri Lanka, Bruce Kapferer argues that during demonic possession an individual becomes more "demon" than "I" or "self" for a period of time. Exorcism is required to reincorporate the self and pull together the fragmented body. Kapferer concludes that the psychological reintegration of self into body and the thrusting of the demon outside of society continues to be played out at a national level (Kapferer 1988:101). The tradition of a flexible body with detachable agency is thus common throughout the Asian region.

In Myanmar the best documented example of the porous nature of the body is *Nat* spirit possession (see figure 28 for a *Nat* spirit possession ritual in progress). Melford Spiro analyzed Burmese possession in the 1960s, "culture and personality" mode which tended to medicalize (by referring to possession as hallucination, delusions, and so on) and psychologize such phenomena. It is through the example of *Nat* possession that Spiro elaborates a functionalist theory of projection and the existence of culturally constituted defense mechanisms. Spiro interpreted the role of *Natkadaw* (*Nat* spirit wife) as a religious role which some Burmese (mainly women) adopt as a culturally constituted defense mechanism. This defense mechanism centers on "psychological conflict and prevent[s] mental disorder by providing outlets for the expression of frustrated or expressed needs" (Wedenoja 1980:297). Spiro argued that possession is a defense against mental illness, but the mechanism of possession is projection, and witches are manifestations of this projection. Spiro takes as his basic assumption that the Burmese perceive their world as hostile,[91] not only the supernatural world, but also the domain of human interpersonal relationships (Hitson Weidman 1969; Spiro 1959). Spiro believes that the Burmese impute hostility to malevolent forces such as witches, and to fellow human beings. He argues that "a perception (hostility) may be *generalized* from one aspect of the social field to other aspects, or segments, and a drive (hostility) may be *projected* from oneself onto others" (Avruch 1990:27). Further, this projection is the result of an ego transference. That is, due to aberrant child rearing habits children feel hostility towards their parents, and generalize this hostility to the world at large, and to the perceived neglectful parents. In Spiro's Burmese studies, possession is consistently medicalized and reified to "dissociation" and hallucinogenic states. The meaning of possession is consistently transformed from indigenous understandings to a "motivational scientific explanation," that assumes, without evidence, that possession is an example of psychopathology (Spiro 1967).

[91] An almost identical thesis has been written by Hitson Weidman (1969) and Hitson Weidman and Funkenstein (1959).



Figure 27: (above) A "Nat-Scape"
Figure 28: A Nat Pwe

There are many other accounts of the fluidity of the Burmese body, however, and these each demonstrate how "mind flight" or "soul flight" [in the earlier English literature] is a culturally familiar theme in Myanmar. Another such account involves the *leikpya*, (လိပ်ပြာ) which is variously translated as butterfly fairy, butterfly soul, or Burmese soul. Spiro classifies *leikpya* as the souls of the dead, one of three kinds of Burmese ghosts (Spiro 1967:33). He states that these ghosts are "mildly harmful spirits who represent the persistence, rather than the rebirth, of the spirit of the deceased" (Spiro 1967:34). It is also the explanation urban residents gave Spiro for their belief in spirits. He writes that "A *Nat* or a ghost, they explain, is the reborn *leikpya* of the deceased" (Spiro 1967:70). Ferguson and Mendelson explain that many Burmese beings such as *Nats* and *weikzas* linger on the earthly plane long after their physical bodies have died (Ferguson and Mendelson 1981:64). Ba Han comments that Orthodox Buddhists insist that the *leikpya* is really *jiva*, the life principle, and that the belief is similar to the Hindu notion of the soul being able to leave the body when the individual is sleeping (Ba Han 1968:6-8). A recently widowed woman in *Nyaungbintha*, Daw Yin Nu, who has turned to prostitution to support her family related to me the story of her husband's ghost:

> "I grieve for my husband. Whenever I look around my house there is something that he made, I feel it even when looking at the children. Now he is a ghost, haunting us every night. I must help him release his soul. He is so worried about me, and that's why his ghost can't be freed (ကျမယောကျ်ားကမကျွတ်ဘူး)."

Ba Han writes that witch-doctors state that an absence of an individual's *leikpya* is a cause of sickness which they remedy by compelling the wandering butterfly fairy to return to the body. But butterfly spirits can become intertwined with other butterfly spirits. He explains that:

> When two persons are wrapped up in each other, as in the case of a child and its mother or of a husband and his wife, their butterfly fairies are closely knit together. On the death of one, it is feared that the butterfly fairy of the other will follow that of the departed. To prevent this calamity a witch-doctor is asked to perform the *leikpya -kwe* ceremony (Separation of the butterfly fairies) (Ba Han 1968:7).

Like spirit "souls" in other parts of Southeast Asia, there is a folkloric literature about the fleeing of humans, both literally and metaphorically, to the realm of the nature (the wild forests and jungles) in times of crisis. Eggar has published a short "folk-tale" from Amarapura, near Mandalay, about a young Burmese girl whose *leikpya* leaves her body and is exchanged permanently with the *leikpya* of a pig:

Win-laik-pya means "the inner thing" (*Win*) and "butterfly" (*laik-pya*). When anyone is sound asleep, the soul-butterfly escapes and flits far and wide, going wherever it wills. It meets the soul-butterflies of other persons, or of animals, and disports with them, returning in a flash when the sleeper awakes. If the awakening is too sudden, there is a risk that the soul-butterfly will not be able to return to its rightful body (Eggar 1957:420).

In *Over the Mountain Ranges* we learn of Burmans walking over the Burmese mountainous jungles. The sparsely inhabited regions of Myanmar (often the homes of Myanmar's many ethnic minorities) occupy a special place in the majority Burman collective psyche. Since the Burmese body is not a rigidly bound entity, as evidenced by the *leikpya*, elements of consciousness can flee, during times of crisis, to the culturally constructed "natural" sanctuaries.

A recurrent myth-theme in the Burmese literature is the refuge of the Himalayas, in particular *Himawuntha*, "the Himalayan forest where Queen Maya conceived Gautama the Buddha" (Ferguson and Mendelson 1981:73). This primordial forest is similar to the "*Nat*-scape," a forest growing on the top of Mt. Popa, and populated with even more mythical beings.[92] *Himawuntha* is an earthly realm where beings, about to attain Enlightenment, can go to so that they will not accumulate any further karmic death in this rebirth. *Weikzas* such as Bo Bo Aung and Bo Min Gaung are in this category (Schober 1988:19). As I have mentioned earlier, *Htwetyap pauk* mystics believe that *htwetyap pauk* is a place in the Himalayas where they will, like the *weikzas* before them, await their "final going out" (Schober 1988:19).

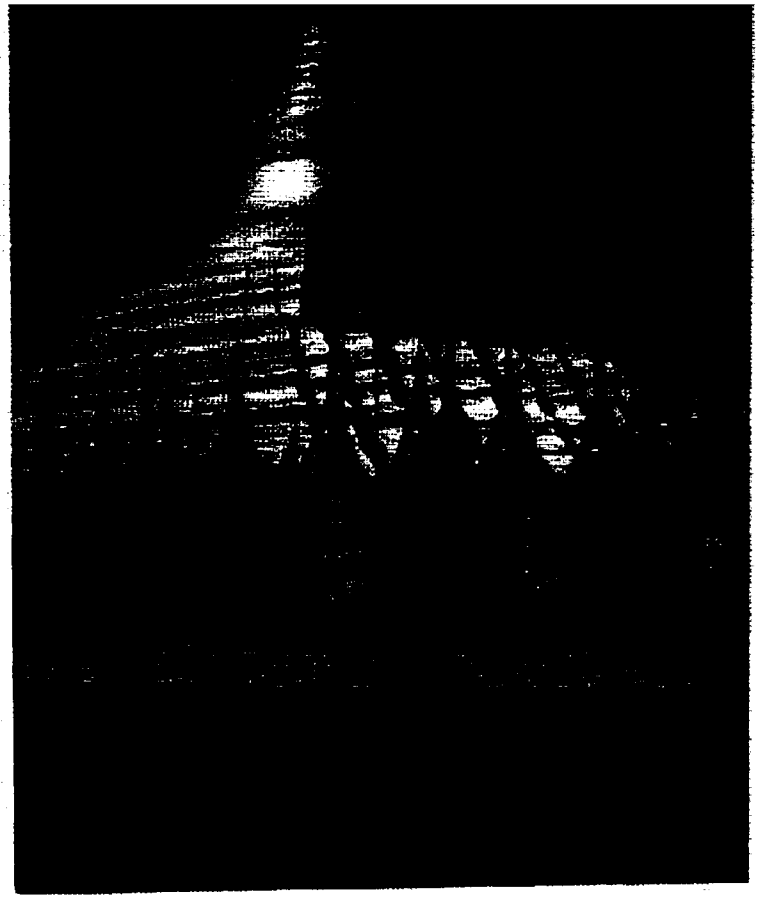
In urban Myanmar, young Burmans have not been taught much of this cultural knowledge. When they need to send their minds flying to safety, they often travel to places within the urban landscape that they have visited before, such as school, theaters, and parks. The *Nat* Spiritist tradition is strongest in the areas around Mandalay and Mt. Popa, and most long time Yangon residents have less familiarity with the rich cultural store of escape routes than those who live "Up-Country."

The narratives of Burmans collected for this thesis illustrate that landscapes of escape can be both internal and external. Absorbing focus into the minutiae of daily life and the flight to a mother's heart are examples of internal worlds. However, Burmans often remove their physical bodies to miniature Buddhist worlds embodied by monasteries and pagodas. Aung San Suu Kyi and other NLD members draw heavily upon meditation and the silence of monasteries: they, like many other people, retreat at times of crisis, a temporary withdrawal from the world through Buddhism.

Gustaaf Houtman has analyzed the complex means by which senior National League for Democracy members use Buddhism to free their minds when they are imprisoned. Houtman explains the meanings of *samatha* and *vissipana* in terms of their

[92] Figure 27 shows another "*Nat*-scape," this one a rural landscape ruled over by five *Nats* who hold the power of the monsoon rains.





Figures 29, 30, 31: Buddhist Landscapes



practice and utilization by democracy activists and political prisoners. At the most basic level, *Samatha* is a set of practices that facilitates the practice of *vissipana* meditation. Together these two techniques are designated as "mental culture" by Houtman who states that "Mental culture is, above all, a training of liberating the mind" (Houtman 1999, forthcoming). Houtman defines *samatha* as being: "Represented by such varied practices as 'counting the beads,' 'kindling fire' [alchemy], 'sending loving-kindness,' 'drawing caballic squares' [*in*] and 'reciting formulae' [*parittas*]" and argues that "*samatha* practice...is an avenue to instrumental power in this world" (Houtman 1999, forthcoming). Houtman further defines *samatha* and its creation of power by noting that:

> The Buddha is supposed to have rejected most *samatha* practices of his time, particularly when practised for their own sake without follow-up with *vissipana*. *Samatha* is therefore ambiguous...at the level of its many pre- or extra-Buddhist hermetic practices, and in its identification with instrumental control over *loki* [the mundane world], it is regarded as non-Buddhist...Unlike *samatha* which produces a mind-created state at will, *vissipana* seeks to attain direct perception and transparency of all processes that actually take place in mind. In short, *samatha* creates worlds [*loki*], whereas *vissipana* breaks them down and sees them for what they are...As *samatha* leads to various kinds of power, the junta does not like freely roaming practitioners whom it does not support. In particular, the clean-up of religion during the 1980s involved arrest of many *samatha* meditators which, it was feared, if taken up by the populace at large, might lead to revolts (Houtman 1999, forthcoming).

Houtman emphasizes that *vissipana* is not a means of escaping the world, but it is clear in his description of *samatha* that there is a pre-Buddhist and a Buddhist process of creating alternate worlds. I propose that *samatha*, like spirit and animal possession, is a culturally familiar model that Burmans may draw upon in times of crisis to create the worlds described in this chapter. As we will see in the following chapters, many Burmans, including psychiatric patients and recovering heroin addicts, use *vissipana* meditation and the chanting of *parittas* (Buddhist verses, a form of *samatha*) to escape to worlds of light and calm.[93]

8.7 Burmese Wizardry

Is the inscription of silence and the rigid configuration of the corpse onto the body the beginning of the death of coherent concepts of self and society, or is it reversible? Can Burmans eventually emerge from the worlds to which they have escaped? Can viable notions of civil society, institutions, and trust reemerge in Myanmar in the absence of a culture of terror? Is it possible that the memory and images of Burmese supernaturalism allow for a recovery of self and society? Or is Myanmar to suffer the same fate as Kafka's

[93] Figures 29, 30, and 31 show landscapes transformed by Buddhist practice. Figure 29 shows a watchtower at Mandalay Palace. Figure 30 shows the Shwedagon pagoda, and Figure 31 shows the Bagan plain.

Penal Colony (Kafka 1948), where entering the world of the Space of Death (Taussig 1987) leads the rulers and the ruled alike into a shared vortex of violence and madness?

In the previous sections I have suggested that two bodies of thought emerge regarding the mimesis of death. The rigid wooden puppets that the State constructs as Model Workers are appropriated by Burmans as a survival strategy that involves dissociating the body from the mind. Adorno and Taussig see such a strategy as ultimately doomed to fail, whilst Baudrillard and Feldman point out the empowering aspects of the strategy and its proof that domination is never absolute. As Feldman has noted, violence becomes an enclosed sphere, a shared culture. Its long term effects consist of replicating this shared environment of alienation, and both politicizing and disabling structures such as "civil society," "community" and "association." In light of these differing emphases on the uses of mimesis, it is perhaps useful to draw upon a theme seldom elaborated in contemporary Burmese culture but which is well known, and provides a link with the strong belief in the miraculous.

This idiom is Burmese wizardry, embodied in the figure of the *zawgyi* (ဇော်ဂျီ).[94] A *zawgyi* is also defined as an alchemist who possesses supernatural powers. To become a *zawgyi*, a Burmans uses alchemy to create a Philosopher's Stone which is then eaten. The Burman promptly dies and the body is buried for seven days after which time he emerges, reborn as an immortal wizard. The *zawgyi* possesses a number of startling properties including the ability to fly through the air. The abode of the *zawgyi* is the mythical kingdom of Himawuntha, a fertile garden in the foothills of the Himalayas. As noted above, like the portals of *Hwety pauk* mysticism and the magical forests of Mt. Popa, this space of delight is construed as a place of waiting (Maung Htin Aung 1959:45).[95]

The temporary nature of the body and its continual decay even during life is reflected upon at length during Theravada Buddhist meditation. The life of the monk and nun is austere and mindful of the body as the source of craving, desire, and hence, of all suffering. The rigid bodies so easily adopted by Burmans at State Spectacles, and the repetitive labor carried out by both forced and manual laborers at the regime's urban construction sites, is made possible by the conditioning of meditative techniques from an early age. This in no way lessens the suffering of Burmans, but it does provide a framework for their experience of totalitarianism and for constructing and enacting strategies of survival, such as dissociation. The reversibility of such strategies is presently unknown and dependent upon individual psychologies and many other factors. The recent experience of other Theravada Buddhist nations such as Cambodia (Ebihara et al. 1994) and Sri Lanka (Tambiah 1992) suggest, however, that violence inscribes deep scars upon

[94] The *zawgyi* puppet is one of the most popular in Burmese puppet plays.

[95] Maung Htin Aung writes that *zawgyis* leave human company for the slopes of the Himalayas where fruit maidens grow on magical trees. These trees grow fruit similarly shaped to young women. The *zawgyis* animate the fruit maidens and thus avoid the need for human female company whilst awaiting the future Buddha. Maung Htin Aung also argues that Himawuntha has been "Buddhafied" such that *zawgyi's* now wait in Himawuntha for the coming of the fifth and final Buddha (Maung Htin Aung 1959:45).

individuals and communities. The *zawgyi* provides a useful tool for thinking about Burmese conceptions of death and the possibilities for reanimation. A belief not only in the miraculous, but also in the positive attributes of "waiting" as embodied in both *Hwety pauk* mysticism and the figure of the *zawgyi* has significant cultural and psychological strength in Myanmar. It makes strategies such as compromising and collaborating with the military dictatorship easier to understand. Not only are Burmans seeking to reduce their crippling burden of fear, they are also practicing the maxim, "Water flows, fish follow," safe in the knowledge that they exist in a subjunctive world where the possibility of miraculous change exists. The model of the *zawgyi* also makes more comprehensible the strategy of the dissociation and fragmentation of the body as a sometimes deliberate and again, subjunctive strategy. Perhaps the mimesis of death by Burmese puppets or automata can be viewed in this light, rather than as an eschatological process. Burmese myths and cosmology contain many examples of Burmans who have, through death and subsequent reanimation, become immortal, and now wait in other dimensions for the coming of the ultimate arbiter of power in Myanmar, the fifth and final Buddha, Arimettaya.

In the following chapters I will explore the explanatory models and survival strategies devised by psychiatric patients and recovering heroin addicts in order to understand, at the phenomenological level, the experience of violence and illness in urban Myanmar. These illness testimonies and life histories draw upon the themes outlined in this chapter, and describe additional subjunctive realities in which not only temporary escape, but also healing, may occur.

Chapter Nine

Confinement and Moral Therapy: The Yangon Psychiatric Hospital

> *What we call psychiatric practice is a certain moral tactic contemporary with the end of the eighteenth century, preserved in the rites of asylum life, and overlaid by the myths of positivism.*
>
> *(Foucault 1965:276)*

9.1 Introduction

In the preceding chapters I have discussed the creation and enactment of a particular vision of society as imagined by the Burmese military regime. Such a vision comprises a new Union of Myanmar, a Buddhist totalitarian utopia, of which the Army (*Tatmadaw*) is the primary institution and foundation of all social life. I have explored the ways in which inclusion in this vision is carefully regulated by the regime as well as the many methods by which conformity with this vision is achieved. I have described some of the cultural, communal and individual strategies which Burmans create to survive living under a military dictatorship. In particular I noted the production of Burmese automata by the junta, a process which is appropriated by some Burmans as a conscious strategy whereby their bodies are given to the regime but minds are sent "flying" to safety. Burmese minds fly to sanctuary spaces such as Buddhist landscapes as well as interior (miniature) worlds of "waiting," where skills required for defiance and revolt are honed like knives. In the final chapters I now turn to discussing two ethnographic sites wherein the body is again reincarnated as a political subject, and where Burmans negotiate between the reality of a dictatorship as presented to them by the regime, and other alternate realities or dimensions of existence. At these field sites, the Yangon Psychiatric Hospital and the Yangon Drug Rehabilitation Unit, we will bear witness to this everyday struggle to both survive economically and to continually reconstruct networks of comprehension and meaning.

The fundamental importance of conceiving sickness as both a medical and a socio-political phenomenon is emphasized in this and the following chapters. I am concerned with analyzing "mental illness" in Myanmar as a mechanism by which the relationship between emotional distress and wider elements of Burmese culture are mediated. The

testimonies presented in the following chapter accentuate many of the key themes of the preceding chapters. Consistent with the demarcation of both urban landscape and the bodies that inhabit urban space, violence also defines the margins of these communities. Violence is an integral part of this politicized environment in which Burmese psychiatric patients find parallels with their own experiences. In fact violence is often the defining symptom of madness in the eyes of the community. Many of the interviews in the following chapter that involve the use of violence, are given by former military personnel. I shall also describe in this chapter, the cultural construction of madness outside the psychiatric institution, and its relation to the diagnoses constructed by the psychiatric staff. The moral therapeutic regimen of the Hospital is explained so as to set the scene for the patients interviews which follow in chapter ten.

There is a wide spectrum of individuals in terms of illness at the Hospital. As an anthropologist and not a clinician, I make the following observations as a lay person, supplemented with recourse to psychiatric texts and conversations with psychiatrists in Canada. My observations differ from those of the American psychiatrist, Dr. Iserman, who briefly visited the Hospital, as well as those of the psychiatric staff. I begin this analysis from the assumption that all psychiatric diagnoses are *social* facts, interdependent with ideology, experience, culture, and history. Diagnoses are, therefore, social constructions and do not stand independent of culture or belief systems and cannot necessarily be generalized across societies and ethnic groups (Young 1993). In addition, there are differences among diagnoses, they did not evolve everywhere at the same time, from the same antecedents (Young 1995).

As in many psychiatric institutions around the world, patients at the Hospital include political prisoners as well as those who are mentally ill. Since their inception, asylums have been institutions of incarceration for those who do not act in accordance with the accepted norms of social behavior (Bloch and Reddaway 1984). In Myanmar this includes homeless people and beggars. There are also a range of murderers, arsonists, and others who have committed crimes and are believed to be mentally ill. Additionally, there are a large number of severely ill patients. These patients are readmitted every few months or years, heavily medicated, and released until the next time. It is not surprising, when so few psychiatric institutions exist in Myanmar, that there is a high population of chronic patients with acute patients being treated more often as outpatients. Patients are medicated to different degrees, some are incorrectly medicated (such as the sedation of individuals found begging in the urban areas), and many cannot afford the medications prescribed for them or do not take the medication unless they are forced to do so.

The patient statements in chapter ten are brief for several reasons. The first involves patient chronicity: many patients have multiple symptoms and have spent many years in and out of the hospital. In addition, as I have mentioned above, patients are heavily medicated with a combination of tranquilizers such as Chlorpromazine, Haldol, and

Diazepam. Patients often fall asleep during interviews, or slip off stools as they forget to support themselves and as their limbs fall asleep. Burmans tell stories about themselves in an astonishingly consistent format. Testimonies often begin with, "I shall tell you the story of my short life..." or "In my short life..." indicating that this life is not only fleeting but also only one in a succession of reincarnations. A variation on the "name, rank, serial number" military narrative, Burmans relate a hierarchy of core elements in their lives. These include father's name and occupation, level of education attained, occupation, ethnicity, religion, marital status, and number of siblings and children.[96] Burmans, especially rural Burmans, are very surprised to be asked to comment on aspects of their life that would entail sentences beginning with "I think" or "I feel." Particularly in the psychiatric population, Burmans are surprised to learn that their life and illness stories can hold value for others. The military-style stereotyping is also a function of the repressive political situation where freedom of speech is denied and where Burmans have learnt to stay safe by keeping thoughts on their life and the political situation well guarded.

The statements made in the following chapter are startling in the way that they are carefully constructed to form an argument for immediate release. I cannot discount that, despite stringent efforts to ensure that informed consent was both given and understood, patients distrusted my presence in a government institution. My presence was continually explained to the patients as a student from a Canadian university, but some patients may have refused to believe that they were being offered a choice as to their participation. This may have occurred despite hospital staff reinforcing to patients that my questions were not part of hospital procedure, and that their answers would in no way hasten nor hinder their release. Approximately ten percent of patients declined to be interviewed, and another ten percent (almost all of whom were admitted for alcohol dependence) made it clear in their curt replies that they did not intend to participate in the process but did not want to appear to refuse. Although this could possibly be attributed in part to feelings of *anade*, given the perceived power discrepancy between our relative positions, patients had no reason to divulge information to me, and some understandably declined to do so. These interviews thus stand out in contrast to those of the informants that I have quoted in preceding chapters in terms of clarity and organization.

The patient statements are also short and pervaded with a feeling of submission because of the current political situation. Cécile Rousseau argues that during the Pol Pot era in Cambodia, Khmers learnt to silence internal narratives because the Khmer Rouge ideology and practices were based on destroying coherence and links with the past. Constructing stories or meanings was dangerous and difficult (Cécile Rousseau, personal communication 1998). In a similar way, Burmans have learnt not to construct internal narratives (as I have explained in the previous chapter), where many urban Burmans refuse

[96] I speculate that this information is the minimum required for schooling and employment opportunities and through their association with government bureaucracy, Burmans learn which facts about their lives are salient for administrative purposes.

to reflect upon, or involve themselves, in the current sociopolitical situation. They refuse to make meanings and to draw conclusions while living in a constant state of emergency. Even so, some patients have constructed illness narratives (following Kleinman 1988), but the majority of patients are both too ill, and too well conditioned, to give life stories to strangers.

In addition to asking patients to tell me the story of their life or their sickness, I have also asked patients about their dreams, and if they have been hearing voices. I ask these question for two reasons. The first is because the staff at the Hospital find answers to these questions very revealing in terms of the classificatory grids they construct for each patient. The second reason is that in the patient statements there are consistent references to voices and dream imagery. I will argue that these continual references indicate a cultural conception of the borderline between reason and insanity, and emphasize both the importance of religion and the supernatural and the salience of alternate realities to Burmese psychiatric patients. Despite the advantages of such an interviewing strategy, this bias that I have introduced may have added to the stereotyped nature of the patient statements. In a sense, these questions may have reinforced in the minds of the patients, the importance of accounts about dreams and voices within the psychiatric institution. This bias is balanced, somewhat, by the significant number of times that patients spoke spontaneously about their experiences of dreams and voices.

9.2 An Introduction to the History and Functioning of the Yangon Psychiatric Hospital

The first biomedical, or "Western" psychiatric institution was created in Myanmar in 1886. The Rangoon Lunatic Asylum had fifty beds and quickly became overcrowded (Puthu 1959:199-200). A *Report on the Lunatic Asylums of Burma* for the years 1906-1908 complains of great overcrowding, and the subsequent creation of a new jail at Minbu for criminal lunatics "for whom special treatment is not essential" (Indian Medical Gazette 1910:153). A card system of surveillance was created so that "keepers" could know of dangerous or suicidal tendencies in the patients, and this led to a decrease in the death rates at the two institutions (Indian Medical Gazette 1910:153).

Another report, this time on the *Mental Hospitals in Burma* in 1927 examined the breakdown of admissions and the day to day running of the Hospitals. The report found that 75% of admissions were between twenty and forty years-of-age, almost half were from the "cultivator class," and there was a nine-to-one ratio of males to females. The author concludes that mentally ill women are less of a burden to their families and thus are treated at home (Forster 1927).



Figure 32: Yangon Psychiatric Hospital

Figure 33: Medicines For Sale in Front of the Yangon Psychiatric Hospital



The Hospitals were found to be self-supporting, even generating surplus through sale of goods. Patients wove their own bedding and clothing and maintained vegetable gardens and a small number of livestock. Those patients not involved in gardening and other activities, exercise daily. There was no strict division between inside and outside, or patients and community, as Forster explains:

> A gramophone is supplied to each section; *pwès* are occasionally held, and a band plays once a month during the dry season...annual sports were held this year and successful competitors were given small money prizes. A special diet is issued on all these occasions as well as on special religious festivals. Various journals and newspapers were circulated with beneficial results. Certain patients go under escort to churches, pagodas and bioscopes, and a few visit friends. Chinlon, football and badminton are played everyday (Forster 1927:237).

In 1932 a study was conducted of psychiatric training available in India and this included Myanmar since it was a province of India at the time. Berkeley Hill found that the Rangoon Medical College devoted no time to the study of psychiatry and mental pathology, however twelve lectures were given annually by the Superintendent of Tadagale Mental Hospital. No clinical work was undertaken although the lectures were given with "illustrative cases of common types of insanity." The Government Medical School in Rangoon followed a similar format with only lectures being given (Berkeley-Hill 1932:579-80).

By 1933 the inpatient population of the Tadagale (Burmese) Mental Hospital had risen to 1250, and this problem was promptly remedied by deporting Chinese and Indian chronic patients, reducing the inpatient population to 700 (Puthu 1959:199-200).

In 1934 a study of general paralysis of the insane was conducted in Myanmar. Fraser found that a high proportion of patients admitted to the Mental Hospital because of syphilitic and malarial induced insanity were Buddhists. This interested Forster because this type of insanity is very rare in neighboring India. Fraser reviewed the sociological literature of Myanmar and came to three conclusions: (a) "the Burman is apt to be mentally myopic; he lives for the moment," whereas caste restrictions limit promiscuity in India; (b) the more severe cases are from lower socioeconomic classes whereas patients of a "better class" seek treatment more quickly and thus have better recovery rates; and (c) treatment is not sought until the condition is very severe because "insanity is still looked on as due to the malign influence of *Nats*...the first appeal for treatment...is to Buddhist monks or unqualified native practitioners" (Fraser 1934:663-4).

The Tadagale Mental Hospital, which became an army base for the duration of World War II, was reopened at the end of the war. It provided 625 beds for three categories of patients: (a) voluntary boarders, (b) civil certified patients, and (c) criminal and opium addicted patients (Puthu 1959:199-200).

Puthu found in 1959 that the attendants at Burmese psychiatric institutions were untrained and "the attitude of kindliness and sympathy are sorely lacking in the majority of them" (Puthu 1959:201). Puthu laments that the "non-boisterous, non-suicidal, and non-dangerous" patients, who are "however still 'a little mental' are not taken back to their homes by their relatives." Puthu further notes that patients are often given over to the care of the psychiatric institutions with feelings of relief, and then abandoned. The author believes psychiatric social workers are necessary community mediators (Puthu 1959:201).

In 1967, over fifty percent of cases admitted to the State Mental Hospital were diagnosed with schizophrenia. These patients were found to be more literate on average than the rest of the population (Kyaw Zin and Tin Nyunt Pu 1970:314). The patients diagnosed with schizophrenia believed their illness to be the result of: (a) possession, by the thirty-seven inner and thirty-seven outer spirits, lesser demons and spirits, and witches, (b) paranoid schizophrenics believed that *in* were being buried beneath their houses, and (c) they had attained special powers through meditation. The authors write that "western" influences are clearly seen in paranoid schizophrenics who believe their auditory hallucinations to be coming through radios and who believe microphones to be hidden around them (Tin Nyunt Pu 1980:13-4). Tin Nyunt Pu argues that excitation and aggression rather than depression and apathy are by far the most common presentation symptoms of Burmese mental patients (Tin Nyunt Pu 1980:13-4).

The most recent information regarding "Western" psychiatry in Myanmar comes from an unpublished study of 1000 patients admitted to the Yangon Psychiatric Hospital.[97] The study looks at changes in the number of diagnoses in the years 1981 and 1991. It shows that while the percentage of diagnoses of drug abuse, epilepsy, and depression have remained stable, the number of patients diagnosed with manic depressive psychoses and anxiety neuroses has declined. As well, there is an increased percentage of patients diagnosed with schizophrenia and alcohol dependence syndrome. The current superintendent has created the first hospital-wide review of cases since 1991. His data indicates that the types of differential diagnosis vary widely depending upon the current staff members, level of training, and access to textbooks and international psychiatric journals. There are presently[98] 130 medical officers and 260 regional medical officers who are trained to identify the following five psychiatric conditions: (a) psychosis (b) neurosis (c) epilepsy (d) alcohol and drug dependence, and (e) mental subnormality. There is currently underway a process of decentralizing psychiatric services and a move away from large asylums.

Despite this move towards decentralization, The Yangon Psychiatric Hospital remains the government's premiere research and treatment facility for mental illness. The twelve-hundred bed hospital occupied fifty acres until 1996 when the government built a

[97] (figure 32 shows the central administrative complex of the Hospital)
[98] as of September, 1994.

pagoda (to house the Buddha Tooth Relic, on loan from China) that adjoins the Hospital grounds. The Hospital gave up some of its land and is in the process of creating new staff housing and relocating some wards, including the Drug Rehabilitation Unit. On any one day an average of 850 beds are filled. The Hospital may be moved to a new site a further ten miles away called *Lei Taung Kan* (လေတောင်ကန်).

Patients arise at six in the morning when, the present Superintendent informed me, patients "attend to personal hygiene and then [commence] their work activities." I have observed that attendance to personal hygiene includes women defecating by crouching above open sewer drains which run adjacent to the wards. Yangon residents remember a particularly severe dysentery epidemic in 1993, and one woman told me of her brother-in-law who, along with about ten other people, died at the psychiatric hospital at that time because of unsanitary conditions and insufficient medical care.

Information regarding the structure and working of the psychiatric hospital was given out extremely reluctantly and much of the information I have gathered from inference and observation. For example, there are several psychiatric units whose composition is currently changing. There are currently two male units, two female units, a Drug Rehabilitation Unit and a newly established children's ward. There is also a "Professional Ward" to which I was assigned. As the pediatric ward was only established during my last month in Yangon, I interviewed children who had been admitted to the adult wards.

Within the psychiatric wards there is a division between acute, chronic, and forensic patients. Forensic patients are referred to as criminal patients, in the same way that abortion is referred to as criminal abortion. Forensic patients are locked in a separate cell block while they await psychiatric evaluation, or for the terms of their imprisonment as decided by the Courts. Such patients are segregated according to gender, but when I inquired about the female forensic patients I was told that there are only two. I was given the impression that these two patients were long term prisoners, but like so much else at the Psychiatric hospital, I was discouraged from inquiring further on the subject. In my experience, male patients who commit murder are placed in the forensic ward, whereas female patients who commit the same crimes are places in the general female ward as opposed to a female forensic ward. This is because women are very seldom multiple murderers, they have most often killed one of their children. In addition, very few women join the Army and the vast majority of violent offenders at the psychiatric hospital whom I interviewed were ex-Army personnel.

For those patients who are not incarcerated, "work duties" are sometimes interrupted by the schedule of rounds and treatment. Bedside rounds are conducted on Monday morning at 9am and Grand Rounds on Tuesday morning. Rounds of the female wards are conducted on Friday morning. On Thursday evenings acute patients have psychotherapy and on Monday evenings it is the turn of the chronic patients. This is generally group psychotherapy.

New patients are admitted to the hospital on Wednesdays and Sundays. There is an outpatient department at the hospital and until the pediatric ward was established in 1997, most children were seen as outpatients. Psychiatric Hospital staff attend the outpatient clinic of Yangon Hospital East, Yangon Hospital West, and Insein Hospital on a weekly basis. At these hospital outpatient departments, the Yangon Psychiatric Hospital staff train physicians to identify mental illnesses. This training is part of a wider WHO funded movement to decentralize psychiatric treatment. In 1990 the WHO began a community based mental health project aimed at decentralizing mental health care into primary health care. This involves the training of health workers from the Township medical offices and rural health centers.

During my time at the Psychiatric hospital there was only one fully trained psychiatrist. Known as "The Professor," he was transferred in mid-1997 as part of the government's rotation of all civil servants through rural and urban areas. I have previously mentioned the way that this limits long term reforms within the public service, but it also constrains the empire building and patron-client relations that are an established means of allocating resources (such as job opportunities and black market goods) in Myanmar. I was not able to ascertain if the Professor's replacement was also a psychiatrist. The Professor trained in a British university and he has stated that he is trained in "the melancholia tradition of Freud," although psychoanalytically trained professionals would disagree that his diagnoses utilize a Freudian perspective. Physicians who wish to practice psychiatry in Myanmar complete a diploma course in psychiatric medicine of two years full-time study or eighteen-months study combined with a one-year internship. It is a postgraduate course, and a medical degree is a necessary prerequisite as is the passing of an entrance exam. This course had been offered since 1978 as part of the National Mental Health Project.

In the interview room there is the "professional unit" (male/female ward) blackboard which lists the people who will be brought before the head of that Unit for interview and review. Every patient has his or her pulse and blood pressure noted upon admission and each physician is responsible for approximately fifty patients. Use of controversial treatments such as electroconvulsive therapy vary, according to several nursing staff, upon the clinician.

9.3 Institutional Psychiatric Culture

From the inception of Bedlam, social theorists, politicians, and physicians have criticized the growth of an institutional psychiatric culture that devalues patient experience and delegitimizes patient suffering. Goffman (1961), Foucault (1965), and Szasz (1961; 1963; 1970) have all been influential in describing the psychiatric hospital as an *incarceral archipelago*, a bloated, bureaucratic system of practices that would be unacceptable for all but the insane. Goffman has written of the commonalities of institutional practices and of

the Kafkaesque quality of asylums where patients undergo an anti-therapeutic experience, the experience of having their identity removed, their lives regulated and curtailed, and all the attributes of their regular lives and habits suspended (Goffman 1961). Other theorists and physicians have criticized such negative, cynical, and nihilistic views of the psychiatric hospital as a jail for the socially unacceptable, arguing that contemporary facilities in the West are a far cry from the asylum life of Europe in the seventeenth to early twentieth century. At the Yangon Psychiatric Hospital, the lack of resources and large ratio of patients to staff make the insights of Goffman, Foucault, and even Szasz, credible assessments of the disadvantages of involuntary commitment.

The sound most evocative for me of the Psychiatric hospital is the swinging of metal doors upon rusting hinges. The psychiatric hospital was previously a British jail, and it remains a feared institution, not only because of its association with insanity, but also because of its previous incarnation as a colonial prison. The Hospital was, as I noted above, first opened in 1886. Between 1845 and the first world war, asylums in Britain were constructed like jails, and the Burmese jail must have seemed well suited to the needs of an asylum. Jones writes that these asylums "illustrate vividly in their physical structure the changes which took place in asylums régimes. High walls and long drives kept patients away from the outside world. Long straight corridors made for easy surveillance" (Jones 1993:119).

Interviews were permitted in the "professorial units." (It was never made clear to me why these units are "professorial" units except that the highest ranking staff work in these units and I have the impression that the more unusual and diagnostically challenging patients are admitted to these wards). These units are in better condition than the other wards. Each ward has its own characteristics that depend largely upon the staff who work there. For example, the male professorial ward, *Ayer* Ward, is well kept and cheerful. Patients are given a considerable degree of freedom. Family members and friends are free to visit regularly and to provide patients with food and material possessions. Private conversations may be held, and family members are encouraged to attend interviews and diagnostic sessions. Other aspects of daily life are however interrupted with set rules (such as patients sitting in straight lines in the corridors on "hair-cutting day") and access to tea shops and other everyday activities are disallowed. This daily routine is thus quite different to that initiated by the British when the psychiatric hospital was first created at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Patients are free to wander through the hospital grounds at certain times, and their behavior is generally not modified unless it is disturbing other patients. For example, after I had been in the ward for a week or two, some patients took on a role as my guardian, and would dutifully line up patients for me to interview and remove other patients who wandered into the interview room. Several patients tried to urinate and spit on me, or to kiss and grab me, but they were usually restrained by the patients who assigned themselves

as 'guards' or "younger brothers" (ဆေးထိုး). These 'guards' were usually patients whom I had already interviewed. These patients also alerted me to happenings within the ward such as when a patient, who had become possessed by a *Nat* Spirit, was dancing in front of the shrine in the main hallway of the Ward. (They also carefully shepherded occasional rats and mice out of the interview room).

Perhaps it is implicit in all psychiatric institutions that a hierarchy will exist among the hospital population. In Myanmar this status system is related to the strength, charisma, and financial status of individual patients. Similar to published reports of Burmese prisons (such as Win Naing Oo 1995), the lack of facilities at the Psychiatric Hospital means that access to resources is governed by a hierarchy of rules enforced by threats of violence. All but the most destitute of patients[99] must provide their own food and many patients bring other goods such as bedding and clothing with them. These items are stolen from smaller, weaker, or less wealthy patients and become the property of psychiatric patients according to a predetermined scale of importance within each ward. Many patients complained to me of having their food and clothing stolen by other patients. Patients at the adjoining Drug Rehabilitation Unit often expressed the belief that illegal drugs such as metamphetamine *seiq kjwa sae* (ဆေးကြွေးစေး), enter both the psychiatric hospital and the Drug Rehabilitation Unit according to this patient hierarchy.

At other government institutions such as the Traditional Medicine Hospital in Yangon, I was forced to sign a book when entering and leaving the facility. This was not the case at the psychiatric hospital although a certain code of secrecy remains. The Psychiatric hospital allowed me access to patients in an interviewing room for four hours per week for one year. This was the only institution at which I was able to interview patients without staff present.[100] This is partly because the staff at the Psychiatric Hospital are less afraid of foreigners and because in Myanmar psychiatric patients are considered to be mad, and their testimonies therefore invalid.

The diagnostic process is striking in its complete devaluation of patient testimonies. Relatives, friends, and police are considered much more reliable observers of a patient's behavior, and their speculation regarding a patient's motives is noted with interest. Patients are often brought into a room in which ten to thirty staff members are present. They are placed across a long table from the staff and questioned for about five minutes before being sent from the room. The staff then discuss the patient's illness and the appropriate treatment course, after an almost punctilious series of diagnostic categories have been constructed. Once it is established that the patient is thinking abstractly (as opposed to

[99] There are twenty female patients in this category but I have not ascertained the number of male patients that the hospital provides with food and clothing.

[100] I have respected the rules laid down by the Ministry of Health and by the psychiatric hospital that I ask only a series of questions submitted to the psychiatric hospital beforehand. At no time did I ask any questions related to the political situation. Questions to staff members were strictly in regard to hospital procedures and patient illnesses. I was not permitted to view any therapy such as E.C.T. or psychotherapy.

concretely),[101] the patient is of no further use to the staff as a source of information about the causes of illness or with regard to discerning the diagnosis.[102]

Perhaps the exaggerated emphasis placed upon the classification process inherent in psychiatric diagnosis is an attempt by hospital physicians to escape a feeling of powerlessness inherent in their overwhelming responsibilities to cater for so many patients with very limited resources. Their classificatory grid may provide a means of demonstrating competency and efficiency in an otherwise very inefficient system. It is salient to ponder the assumption that biomedical diagnoses can be of use in a situation where medication is expensive and often unavailable, where drug abuse is pervasive throughout the society, where psychotherapy and other psychiatric techniques aim to elicit subconscious "truths" (which is why patient testimonies are so devalued), and where violence and fear are an everyday aspect of life outside the Hospital.

Only a handful of medications are prescribed on a regular basis. Chlorpromazine is prescribed in almost all cases. Sedatives such as Haldol[103] are also prescribed regularly. Medication must be purchased by the patients who use "private medical shops" *apyin saekan* (အပြင်ဆေးခန်း) that rarely have cold chains[104] and are not regulated. [105] Chlorpromazine, for example, is smuggled in from China and is often out of date by the time it is purchased by psychiatric patients (figure 33 shows a medicine "shack" in front of the Yangon Psychiatric Hospital that sells a variety of unregulated psychiatric pharmaceuticals).

9.4 The Cultural Construction of Madness

In the section above I have suggested that the psychiatric hospital employs an "exaggerated" form of western psychiatric diagnostic classification. Patient Notes are filled with observations of patient's behavior and "mad" speech, but the patient's themselves are silent. As Foucault has noted, "Madness never speaks for itself" (Foucault 1965). In this section we will explore the way that madness is constructed outside the Hospital and the concurrence of Burmese and psychiatric cultures, evident in the way that the psychiatric staff represent themselves to their patients. I will describe the causal relationships that

[101] Psychiatric terms are defined in the Glossary.

[102] Occasionally it is decided that a patient requires psychotherapy and prior to the evening group psychotherapy session, the senior staff member present will lecture the patient for up to half an hour about the reasons for his or her illness.

[103] Haldol- the brand name for Halperidol which, like chlorpromazine, is a tranquilizer.

[104] The term 'cold chain' refers to the constant refrigeration of medications within the range of their prescribed operating temperatures. Medications can spend months in transit and years in the glass cabinets of medicine "shops" and clinics without refrigeration. When refrigeration is provided for pharmaceuticals it is frequently not attached to a generator and the power is out in Yangon several times per week, often for two or three days at a time. This situation becomes much worse outside the capital.

[105] Regulation would only ensure compliance with pharmaceutical standards if (a) appropriate laws for the storage of pharmaceuticals existed in Myanmar and (b) regulators were not vulnerable to bribery.

exists in Burmese culture between the body, the environment, and sociopolitical and economic conditions. We will explore the large borderland between madness and sanity in Burmese culture, and the way in which individuals adopt different idioms to express their experience of fragility, of fear, and of sickness.

"Mental illness" and "madness" are terms not used by Burmans unless they have a medical background. The mind is perceived as either good or bad, but this is not a dichotomy, rather a continuum, or a series of spaces, and out of which a Burman can easily move. It is encompassed by many terms, the most common being *seiq yawga* (စိတ်ရောဂ) "mind-disease" and *seiq makaunbu* (စိတ်မကောင်းဘူး) "mind-not good" and occasionally by "brain-disease" *aunhauq yawga* (ဦးနှောက်ရောဂ) and *aunhaunq makaunbu* (ဦးနှောက်မကောင်းဘူး) "brain-not good." Brain and mind are used interchangeably indicating that the locus of the mind in Burmese culture is the brain.[106]

The following observations are shared by what I judge to be a majority of ethnic Burmans and also a majority of urban residents with the exception of some Burmans trained in the biomedical sciences. The cultural construction of madness[107] in Myanmar is closely linked to illness and the conceptualization of the body as a microcosm of the universe, and vice versa. Unpredictable or violent weather can, it is believed, lead to illness, and many illnesses in Myanmar can eventually, if left untreated, result in madness. Environmental causes of illness and eventual madness can include changes in lifestyle, such as the forcible relocation of urban residents. In the relocated townships illness is attributed to hardships such as "having to sleep on the ground" and "misty weather." Sociocultural, political, and economic factors all directly effect wellness and can lead to madness. This logic is exemplified by "women's disease" *miyeq yawga* (မီးရောဂ), a category of sickness that can lead to madness, described as "menstrual psychosis" at the psychiatric hospital.

Women's reproductive health, and in fact, almost all of women's health problems are placed under the single rubric of women's disease. This term incorporates the word *mi* (မီး) (fire), denoting the danger from both death and madness that is inherent in women's reproductive processes. There is a Burmese saying, "A woman pregnant is like a man going on a raft." The danger chiefly stems from changes to blood flow within the body. Blood flow is in turn related to large processes such as the permeability of bodies to the environment, and the balance necessary for good health based on Ayurvedic and/or Galenic causation systems.

[106] For example, *auhnauq pyeq* (ဦးနှောက်ပျက်) contains the word for "brain" but means "to be mentally deranged." Similarly, *auhnauq shin* (ဦးနှောက်ရှင်း) is translated as "to clear one's mind" and also contains the word for "brain."

[107] It is not my intention to posit a culture-wide, homogeneous, static belief system. Rather, this information is based upon consensus views given by groups of women in the relocated townships and represents a shared agreement of women from both urban, peri-urban, and rural backgrounds in *Nyaungbintha*.

The most common "women's disease" relates to menstruation. Broadly conceived, when blood does not flow regularly and strongly during menstruation, *thwe htein* (သွေးထိန်း), blood pools within the body,[108] forming a hard ball (these are often conceived by Burmese physicians as ovarian or uterus cancers or by indigenous medical practitioners as ulcers). This solidified ball of blood rises up through the body, causing pain in the back and in the base of the neck, *zeqkjodaga* (စက်ကြောတက), as it travels towards the head. Moving further upwards, the blood ball causes headaches and "mind" problems such as dizziness and, if untreated, will cause madness and even death. This is why most Burmese women take "blood medicine," *thwe sae* (သွေးဆေး), on a daily basis.

A rich causal scheme is elaborated by Burmese women regarding blood flow, madness due to women's disease, and socioeconomic and political circumstances. Not having enough money for basic needs can make women unhappy, *seiq sinyeq* (စိတ်ဆင်းရဲ), which can lead to unhappiness or the mind not being "good" after childbirth, *medwindeh seiq sin yeq* (မီးတွင်းထဲစိတ်ဆင်းရဲ). This in turn can lead to the mother "going" mad, *yu thwa naing* (ရူးသွားနိုင်), or to having a "wrong" mind, *seiq mamhan* (စိတ်မမှန်). Both unhappiness of the mind and a "wrong" mind can lead to death from "shock," *lanbye thwa naing* (လန့်ပြီးသွားနိုင်). High living costs can mean that women can't afford to have children and when they become pregnant, over twenty methods of abortion have been described to me as being in common use. Complications stemming from abortion can cause too much blood loss (since they are illegal and must be performed secretly) which, assuming the woman survives, can lead to weakness, of both the body/mind and the blood, *thwe aah neh* (သွေးအားနည်း), that in turn can result in "abnormal psychology," *seiqzalo pauq pyan thwa* (စိတ္တဇလိုဖေါက်ပြန်သွား). Thus we can see that socioeconomic and political events such as forcible relocation and poverty are directly linked in popular discourse to irregularities in blood flow and eventually to madness.

Madness is also linked to sociality. A Burman is thought to have a mental illness if he or she transgresses norms of Burmese behavior. For example, while walking with a Burmese friend, we happened upon a woman shouting obscenities. My friend was frightened and whispered that the woman could be mad, *seiq yawga* (စိတ်ရောဂ) "mind-disease," because "when she is angry, it shows on her face." The link between insanity and anger is strong in Myanmar, and there are many terms which link these two phenomena such as *seiq tee* (စိတ်ထ) which means both to become enraged and to be seized with a fit of lunacy. Displays of anger (especially those involving violence) are almost always seen as evidence of mental illness, but so is showing an improper lack of respect to elders, teachers, monks, and other authority figures, and refusing to follow the "traditional" life-path which includes work, marriage, and children. Homosexual men and

[108] This is described as clotted blood, *thwe zei* (သွေးဇေး), or as impure or diseased blood, *thwe so* (သွေးဆိုး).

women, as well as individuals who have no desire to work, are also suspected of being mentally ill.

A recurring sign of madness in the statements made by patients at the psychiatric hospital is hearing voices. Voices and dreams mark the borderline between reason and unreason at the psychiatric hospital, but also in wider Burmese culture. In general, this borderline is a broad continuum between the mind being good, and the mind being bad. Conversely, in the psychiatric hospital, all voices and dreams (medicalized as delusions, fantasies, and so on) constitute evidence of madness, of unreason. There is a large place in Burmese culture where voices and dreams are not only reasonable, but also privileged sites for accessing other realities such as visions during meditation, or the voices of *Nats* speaking through spirit mediums (Mendelson 1961; Nash J. 1962; Spiro 1967). Continual reference to voices and dreams (even when unsolicited) indicate that a supernatural/religious framework is fundamental to Burmese culture and Burmese conceptions of sickness and wellness. It also emphasizes the significance of the other-worldly dimensions to everyday Burmese life.

So when do Burmans cross over the border zone into insanity in Burmese cultural constructions of madness? To begin with, the cultural construction of madness that I have been displaying in a linear fashion must also be imaged as a dimension of Burmese experience that Burmans can be instantly transported to *and* from. Madness can thus be a space temporarily entered and just as quickly, departed from. In the previous chapter I suggested the usefulness of the figure of the Burmese *zawgyi*, or wizard, as a possible positive cultural model for death and reanimation. In a similar way, common Burmese phrases such as "I was mad at the time," "I was mad with grief then" and "my mind was wandering" convey this sense of temporary madness, a location quickly arrived at and just as quickly exited from, seemingly without long term consequences. We can see this logic in Sarah Bekker's analysis of murder in Burmese culture. She notes that when a Burman commits murder, it is often viewed by his or her relatives and neighbors as a form of temporary insanity or a case of spirit possession, and community attitudes towards the offender will not be substantially altered because of the violent act (Bekker 1989).

Why, then, do Burmese families abandon their relatives at the psychiatric hospital when they may be only "temporarily mad?" The answer has to do with cultural conceptions of the transmission of the state of madness. The notes of patients at the psychiatric hospital meticulously detail any evidence of madness in any of the patients' relatives, no matter how distant or tenuous the association may be. It is quite common to see madness, alcoholism, and violent behavior recorded in the patient's great-grandmother/father. Like most diseases in Myanmar (especially leprosy and AIDS), a contagious magic is thought to be at work in transmitting the condition of unreason through both blood and indirect association. By indirect association I mean that simply being in the same room as a mad person or a leper can cause the disease, *yawga* (ယောဂ), to manifest in other persons present. And if the

disease does not jump between people through association, it is absolutely certain that the social stigma attached to such people will also become attached to the individuals present and their relatives and friends. This is why even the "temporarily mad" are sometimes abandoned by their relatives at the psychiatric hospital. In these economically difficult times, when Burmans need to ensure advantageous weddings for their children and secure employment, they don't need the social stigma attached to having a mentally ill relative hampering their efforts to survive. One woman in Mandalay, whose husband was fired when he was discovered to have leprosy, told me of the pain of losing not only their only source of income, but also the friendship of relatives and neighbors. After successful treatment with antibiotics and the favorable intercession of Bo Bo Gyi (a *Nat* Spirit), life went back to normal, friends and employment resecured. The instant transportability to the domain of madness is however a reason why madness carries great stigma, it can reappear in any family member, at any time. This is why great importance is placed upon the Family History portion of patient admission procedures at the Yangon Psychiatric Hospital. The staff have internalized the science of genetics and thus believe they are immune from madness by association. However, they are also convinced that madness, deriving as it does in Myanmar from an excess of emotion, is an extremely potent genetic trait that can appear after many generations of absence and can be transmitted through any blood link, even great-great-grandmothers or cousins three times removed.

9.5 Moral Therapy

As early as 1959 Puthu declared that patients who were "only a little mental" were often abandoned by their relatives at the The Yangon Psychiatric Hospital. It is still the case that Burmans leave relatives who do not act in accordance with Burman norms of sociability at the Yangon Psychiatric Hospital. These patients often act in ways considered unorthodox for a Burman, as defined by Burmese culture and by the military. In this section I will present the parallels between the moral therapy practiced in some British and French psychiatric institutions in the eighteenth century, and the therapeutic attitude underpinning the functioning of the Yangon Psychiatric Hospital.

Foucault's thesis in *The Birth of the Asylum* is that the renowned French psychiatrist, Pinel, created a moral therapeutic consistent with the norms of western European bourgeois society at the close of the eighteenth century. This moral system involved inculcating guilt in patients, not because they are mad, but because in their madness they have transgressed the moral boundaries of bourgeois society. Pinel's definition of insanity is thus an identification with the primary vices in bourgeois society: theft, indolence, and religious fanaticism, what Foucault labels a rejection of the "moral and social uniformity" of the period. Foucault describes Pinel's moral treatment as:

a morality that will prevail from within upon those who are strangers to it and in whom insanity is already present before it has made itself manifest. In the first case, the asylum must act as an awakening and a reminder, invoking a forgotten nature; in the second, it must act by means of a social shift in order to snatch the individual from his condition...The operation as practiced by Pinel was relatively complex: to effect moral syntheses, not by assuring an ethical continuity between the world of madness and the world of reason, but by practicing a social segregation that would guarantee bourgeois morality a universality of fact and permit it to be imposed as a law upon all forms of insanity...[Pinel's asylum was] a site of moral syntheses where insanities born on the outer limits of society were eliminated (Foucault 1965: 259-260).

Moral syntheses in Pinel's asylum required laws of enforcement. Bourgeois morality became codified in the laws relating to insanity and confinement, with the result being that the asylum became a "juridical space." Foucault argues that:

The asylum of the age of positivism, which it is Pinel's glory to have founded, is not a free realm of observation, diagnosis, and therapeutics; it is a juridical space where one is accused, judged, and condemned, and from which one is never released except by the version of this trial in psychological depth- that is, by remorse (Foucault 1965:269).

Digby argues that "Moral treatment as it was understood by its practitioners in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries meant that psychological methods were employed to help in what was seen as a mental disorder. Intrinsically they did not possess either a humane or an ethical character" (Digby 1985:33). In criticizing Foucault's account of moral therapy during the classical age (~1650-1800), Scull argues that Foucault's thesis "failed to provide us with any coherent or persuasive account of how professional control over madness was secured by physicians" (Scull 1989:19). Scull criticizes Foucault for conflating the moral therapy practiced by Tuke in Britain and Pinel in France and the different historical and religious backgrounds that informed their work. Pinel practiced *traitement moral* (treatment through the emotions) whereas Tuke practiced a Quaker-style treatment, a moral therapy based on the Quaker belief that each individual has an inner light that distinguishes good from evil. Many of Foucault's critics fail to see how Foucault came to the conclusion that moral therapy was repressive (see, for example Digby 1985; Jones 1993). Jones argues that "many modern therapeutic groups operate on very similar principles" to the moral therapy practices at Tuke's Retreat (Jones 1993:31). Moral therapy was in fact a threat to the medical establishment, offering a psychiatric praxis independent of the medical profession (Jones 1993:31).

I argue that the Yangon Psychiatric Hospital's moral therapeutic bears similarities to that instituted by Pinel, as opposed to Tuke. Consonant with the Burmese cultural construction of madness, individuals who have transgressed the acceptable bounds of reason are subjected to incarceration and psychiatric treatment. Madness, as Foucault notes

following Pinel, must be punished because it has broken the social code, and only an understanding of this code accompanied by feelings of remorse will constitute healing and hence release. Guilt is central to the reawakening of a forgotten nature at the psychiatric hospital. Patients must first feel guilt because they are responsible for a forbidden act such as an outburst of frustration or anger, or perhaps an eruption of rage such as murder or screaming and destroying property. As we have discussed in the previous section, anger and violence are the primary culturally constructed signs of madness.

The hospital also inculcates guilt in the form of an "inner awareness" of guilt *because* the patient is mad. Patients must bring to consciousness "submerged" or "unconscious feelings." This is not a voluntary process, and injections of tranquilizers render patients semi-conscious for this purpose. This process allows guilt to be assigned and responsibility to be shouldered by individual patients for the misdeeds which brought them to the hospital. During group interview sessions, a patient must face a room of medical personnel, and agree that their experience and understanding of their illness was in fact, nonsense, and that the contents of their dreams and experiences are not only false, but also of no value. This admission is taken as proof that the patient has recovered from a "delusionary" or "hallucinatory" temporary state. The moral "system" of diagnosis, treatment, and incarceration, jumps back and forth from the first kind of guilt to the second. As intrinsic to psychiatric culture, these two kinds of guilt become conflated in the diagnostic process, in the lectures given to patients by the staff, and in staff discourse. Like psychiatric patients everywhere, Burmese patients must feel "ashamed" and "embarrassed" of their mad behavior, anything else suggests professional incompetence on the part of the staff, as the following examples suggest.

One morning in late June 1996, I arrived at the female ward to which I had been assigned at nine a.m, prior to the arrival of the Professor and his entourage of students and other staff members. Daw Pu Kywe, whom I judged to be in her mid-thirties, was standing on a bench in the corridor, screaming and yelling. She was lifting her clothes up, pretending to take food offered to her and spitting it out, all the time keeping up a loud stream of invective. Eight patients and staff members ran to Daw Pu Kywe and pulled her

down from the bench. She fell to the ground, her *eingyi*[109] and *longyi*[110] undone. The *longyi* (she was wearing nothing under it) flopped loosely from her waist. She was being held down by both patients and staff while a nurse injected a sedative into her arm. She was then lifted, legs splayed, into a room. Approximately twenty patients had gathered to watch the show.

Once Daw Pu Kywe had been sedated, the staff filed into the "interview room" and no word was made of the incident. On another occasion I arrived to find the staff pouring over the notes of a fourteen-year-old boy, Maung Htay, who had tried to commit suicide that morning by hanging himself with his *longyi*. My impression is that this incident caused much embarrassment to the staff who were ashamed that such an incident occurred in their ward. And as we shall see in a statement given by a young man later in the chapter, his referral to the psychiatric hospital was occasioned by his attempted suicide. The physicians muttered that it would be "disgraceful" and "embarrassing" for him to commit suicide in a psychiatric ward. We can see here that these patients have violated the moral code of the hospital, their behavior is "shameful" (as it would be outside the hospital), rather than indicative of the seriousness of their illness (which is also considered, but it is clear that a moral judgment is also operative).

It is because moral therapy is primarily aimed at correction of improper social values rather than at healing a sickness, that it is not necessary for Burmese physicians to be trained in psychiatry, (although it is a privilege they would welcome). Foucault notes the mystification of medical practice and its conflation with juridical and moral punishment. He states that:

> It is not as a scientist that *homo medicus* has authority in the asylum, but as a wise man. If the medical profession is required, it is as a juridical and moral guarantee, not in the name of science...For the medical enterprise is only a part of the enormous moral task that must be accomplished at the asylum, and which alone can ensure the cure of the insane (Foucault 1965:270).

[109] An *eingyi* is a tight fitting blouse worn by women, often matching the *longyi*.

[110] A *longyi* consists of two meters of material sewn together to form a tube of fabric which is wrapped tightly around the waist. A piece of black fabric is sewn onto the top border of the *longyi* which is twisted and tucked into the *longyi* to ensure that it doesn't fall down. A *longyi* results in back pain if one is not trained to walk, as all Burmans are, in a *longyi*, from a very early age. It is not possible to take large steps in a *longyi* and they continually become loose and must be tightened. The combination of closely fitted garments, small steps, and the sway of the hips necessary to walk in a *longyi*, are attributes of sexual attractiveness of women in Myanmar. The slimness of a man's hips in a *longyi* is also a form of sexual desirability. Proper etiquette for women dictates that a woman should look upwards, unconcernedly and without embarrassment, while retying one's *longyi* in public. Men tie the *longyi* with a knot near the navel. I have never seen a Burman wear anything under a *longyi*, although western "nether garments" (as the official media refers to them) are being sold at markets and department stores. Different regions have distinctive *longyi* patterns and farmers tend to wear *longyis* at a shorter length. In the Mandalay area *longyis* are lifted above the ankle, often to show off jewelry worn around the ankles. *Longyis* have multiple uses such as providing baby slings, as a blanket, a towel, and for carrying goods.

Thus although diploma accreditation for post graduate psychiatric studies exist, there are only a few fully trained psychiatrists in Myanmar, and now that the Professor has been rotated as part of his rural term, I am not aware of any psychiatrists currently employed at the nation's largest psychiatric facility. Although a similar moral therapy to that practiced by Pinel seems to be occurring at the Hospital, it is not based upon the same logic. Psychiatric reformers such as Pinel and Tuke believed that the treatment of mentally ill persons by the medical establishment failed utterly in providing relief or cure. The period of the ascendancy of moral therapy was relatively short however, and by the 1830s in Britain, moral therapy was to become assimilated within the medical treatment of insanity and subordinate to it (Scull 1989:160). With the two world wars, the development of psychotropic drugs, and the anti-psychiatry of Goffman, Foucault, and Szasz among others, contributed to psychiatric institutions changing their status under the law and the way they were perceived by the general public. The diagnostic process in psychiatry has always been closely intertwined with sociopolitical factors, and Bloch and Reddaway argue that psychiatry has always aligned itself with the status quo (Bloch and Reddaway 1984:14), a status quo that has changed significantly since Foucault's classical age. Burmans have eagerly adopted Western science and medicine as introduced to them by the British, and this includes the prescribing of psychotropic drugs. In fact, as I describe in chapter eleven, pharmaceuticals delivered via injections are attributed with almost miraculous qualities by much of the population. The status ascribed to the medical establishment is similarly adopted and the routines of discipline and regulation implicit in psychiatric and (following Goffman 1961) institutional culture in general, are practiced at the psychiatric hospital. Moral therapy is practiced because of the remarkable harmony between Burmese cultural conceptions of madness and something resembling Pinel's treatment of the emotions, but it is not practiced because of a belief in the intrinsic worthlessness of medical treatment for mental illness. Rather, this is a system that has evolved within the constraints upon resources and training for psychiatric practice in Myanmar.

Mockery

In the previous discussion of cultural constructions of madness, I argue that the existence of a "temporary" category means that Burmans do not substantially alter their conception of a person because of an episode of "mad" behavior. In other words, madness is not considered a life-long or incurable affliction. However, during the time that the patient is considered to be transported to the space of madness, mockery is a form of communication between sane and insane persons. Mockery is a tone that can range from sarcasm to "laughing at" a person in order to make the person understand that his or her behavior is not reasonable or acceptable. At the psychiatric hospital, mockery is the primary form of communication between the patients and the staff (although most of the

senior staff employ mockery much less often than their junior colleagues).

The most striking way in which the Burmese psychiatric hospital differs from contemporary psychiatric institutions in Western nations is in the use of mockery as a moral therapeutic. This is best illustrated by comparing non-Burman observers of the psychiatric hospital with my observations of Burmese behavior towards patients and their discourse about patients. As noted in my brief history of Western psychiatry in Myanmar, Puthu found in 1959 that the attendants at Burmese psychiatric institutions were untrained and that "the attitude of kindliness and sympathy are sorely lacking in the majority of them" (Puthu 1959:201). On my first day at the psychiatric hospital, the previous Superintendent gave me a very limited tour of the facilities, culminating in their premiere men's ward, *Ayer* Ward. This ward contains three cells with cement floors, bars over the doors and windows, and a bucket and wooden pallet in each cell. The (former) Superintendent leered at the patients, called out to them, and laughed loudly at them before turning back to the main building. In 1996 I was able to witness an examination of a patient at the Yangon Psychiatric Hospital by an American psychiatrist, Dr. David Iserman from a Californian based NGO, *Doctor to Doctor*. The attitude of the Burman staff towards the patients was at first puzzling to me and it was somewhat unnerving for the American psychiatrist. The Burmese staff giggled and whispered about the patient (and about the foreign psychiatrist). I wrote the following fieldnote as a I witnessed this American-Burmese psychiatric encounter:

> The American psychiatrist is recommending the advantages of getting to know patients as "human beings," "individuals," and not necessarily medicating, but talking...When he starts talking about patients' dreams, the doctor sitting behind me begins to laugh...Dr. Iserman is surprised by the lack of compassion that appears to be shown to the patients by the staff.

Andrews has written of the fee that Bethlehem Hospital (better known as Bedlam) charged visitors to laugh at the patients (Andrews 1991) and Jones notes that "In the second half of the eighteenth century, going to Bethlehem to laugh at the lunatics was a popular entertainment for the idle and the curious" (Jones 1993:9). In their role as moral guardians and as elements in the larger Burmese military judicial system, Burmese psychiatric staff do not engage in dialogue with the patients. The physician can learn nothing from the patient, but the patient learns that expressing his or views leads only to mockery or silence. The patients do however provide much amusement for the staff and they laugh openly in the face of patients who describe the dreams and "delusions" that they are experiencing.

The behavior I had originally thought to be callous (such as the former Superintendent laughing at patients confined to cells), I came over time to believe is a method routinely employed in Myanmar to teach Burmans correct social behavior. This is

similar to the procedure for child rearing (Mi Mi Khaing 1962; Nash 1965) that has been inappropriately interpreted as "sadistic" by some researchers (Hitson and Funkenstein 1959; Hitson 1969; Spiro 1969). By laughing at those patients' experiences that do not conform to Burmese norms of behavior, the staff signal to the patients that their behavior is inappropriate. In effect, that such behavior is ridiculous and childlike, evidence that like children, the patients have not learnt appropriate social and moral norms. This laughter is thus ridiculing foolishness, and it is tinged with fear. Whether this routine procedure is infact callous and counter productive is difficult to discern. Certainly patients whom I interviewed repeatedly over the course of a year admitted that the way they were thinking and feeling at the time of their previous interviews was "crazy" and unrealistic. There is a remarkable concurrence between psychiatric institutional culture and Burmese cultural attitudes towards mental illness and improper socialization. Patients are often shamefaced and coy about previous behavior, but do not appear to feel a large amount of guilt or remorse. I am not sure if such patients had learned that admitting that their illness experiences are unreasonable is a necessary part of patient's therapeutic emplotment (following Mattingly 1994) and a necessary "realization" if a patient is to be "cured" and hence "released" (Young 1993). It is possible that patients learn that by denying the validity of their experiences, they can be certified as "cured." Despite the professed belief in a genetic basis of insanity, perhaps mockery is also a method for some staff to keep madness (through association) at bay. In any case, like the exaggerated form of diagnosis employed by the staff, mockery effectively silences patients.

The following testimonies illustrate these issues about the silencing of patient experience, and the moral therapeutic at work. The statements also highlight the patient's eventual understanding that in order to be cured, previous behavior must be acknowledged as "crazy." The interviews are given by a young man on three separate occasions. In the first interview, Maung San Tin's life history is given to me a few hours after I observed the patient being interviewed by the Professor. In the second interview, Maung San Tin is presented to the American psychiatrist, Dr. David Iserman, as an educative experience for the staff. I conducted the final interview four months after the second interview. This twenty-five-year-old patient was admitted to the psychiatric hospital in February, 1996. The admitting diagnosis was "acute excitement." He is well known to the staff and is quite articulate, a substantial part of the interview was conducted in English. Currently unemployed and unmarried, Maung San Tin completed school and his illness is documented as beginning when he was nineteen-years-old when school teachers and peers became suspicious that he was becoming a thief. His Patient Notes indicate that at age twenty-two he had "fits" for one month which were controlled by anticonvulsants. The admitting diagnosis at that time was "encephalitis or meningitis."[iii] His family is at least middle class as evidenced by his ability to travel outside Myanmar, that he has never needed to be employed, and his ability to afford his current prescription of several

[iii] Encephalitis, meningitis, malaria, and several other diseases can cause an inflammation of the brain.

expensive medications.[112] In the first two interviews Maung San Tin appears very drowsy as a result of the medication but he is more alert in the final interview. The professor tells me that the man has a "delusion of control":

> "I'm twenty-five-years-old. I live in [township in Yangon, name withheld]. I'm Buddhist. I came here because I wanted to take out eyes. I'm not married. I came last night. I've come to this hospital fifteen times. I don't like this hospital. I come here often. When I was four-years-old I was cured of a brain mistake/illness. When I was in eighth standard I took science subject(s).[113] I couldn't pass tenth standard. I got this disease when I was nineteen-years-old. I don't like my life. I think I'm a fool [insane]...I hear voices in my ear. I heard the voices. The neighborhood told me that I'm a thief... I have a dream. In my dream, two suns rise."

In the second interview, which is conducted by Dr. David Iserman in front of twenty-two people, the Professor explains details of the case as does the physician of the ward to which Maung San Tin is assigned. The Professor explains that the patient has been transferred from the Drug Rehabilitation Unit where he underwent heroin detoxification. He states that he is not presently hearing voices but that he heard voices when he lived in Singapore and also when he had moved to Japan. He says that he moved from Singapore to Japan when he couldn't purchase heroin there. The Professor informs us that when Maung San Tin lived in Japan there was one violent episode with the police and then he returned to Myanmar. (This is a common route taken by Burmese heroin addicts, as we shall see in chapter eleven).

Maung San Tin is prominently displaying a medallion of an *Arahat.*[114] He admits that he stole money from the *Sayadaw*[115] of the monastery in which he was staying to buy drugs. He tells Dr. David Iserman that he believes himself to be "a dead body" (a walking zombie) and that if he doesn't kill himself, his brothers will die, and this is why he attempted suicide. He further states that because he's done "evil things" at the monastery, he's going to go to hell where there are "*peikthas.*"[116]

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[112] (His grandmother is currently administering to him a daily regime of Burocenezin 50mg, Haldol 2mg, and Carbamazepine 400mg).

[113] Students are assigned subjects in a hierarchy of value. The most prestigious subjects are science subjects and the patient is indicating that he was a promising student. I have met many university students who "play dumb" in their final years of schooling so that they won't be admitted to science degrees majoring in physics or chemistry at university. I have also met many wage labourers who have graduated from university with science degrees in physics and chemistry and who cannot find employment in these fields.

[114] An *Arahat* is a monk who, because of his exemplary Buddhist life, now resides in a Buddhist paradise and who can be beseeched to provide favors such as protection for mortals. In Spiro's classification of Burmese supernaturalism, *arahats* are *ariyas* (Spiro 1967:44).

[115] *Sayadaw* is a term referring to the monk in charge of the monastery.

[116] *Peikthas*: demons who inhabit the lowest planes of Buddhist cosmology.

The Professor and Maung San Tin's assigned physician explain to us that the monastery to which the patient refers is one of the Buddhist monasteries that treat heroin addiction and alcoholism in Myanmar. Maung San Tin continually used drugs while at the monastery and is reported to have become aggressive. He was sent to the Drug Rehabilitation Unit and treated for depression then referred to the psychiatric hospital because he attempted suicide. Suicide violates the moral therapeutic of psychiatric hospitals, and physicians stated that it would be "disgraceful" and "embarrassing" for him to commit suicide in a ward. He also is reported to have schizophrenic tendencies. The doctors inform us that Maung San Tin is "still delusional, [and] one particular delusion remains, that he was killed by someone at the monastery then the *Sayadaw* hit him on the head and brought him back to life." According to Maung San Tin, this explains why his body is dead but his mind is alive. The Burmese physician renders her diagnosis of "guilt" and Dr. Iserman is asked for his opinion. Dr. Iserman asks a series of further questions and then agrees with the Burmese physician that Maung San Tin is suffering a large amount of guilt. He advances a theory that the young man is unable to individuate his sense of self from that of his brothers (and that is why he wants to kill both himself and his brothers).

A few days later I asked the Burmese physician about the diagnosis given by the American psychiatrist. She disagrees with the diagnosis and politely pointed to difficulties of translation and that Dr. Iserman was asked to make a diagnosis when he had had no time to establish rapport with Maung San Tin. In addition, the psychiatrist was unfamiliar with the many facets of Buddhism and Burmese culture which the case involves. Maung San Tin gave me the following narrative four months later:

> "Today I'm not feeling well. I've become mentally deranged. I'm suffering beyond endurance. Since my arrival at this hospital I have lived in a difficult situation. It's due to the trouble/suffering of poverty. Now I've become well. I wanted to take out people's eyes because I was mentally deranged. In the beginning I didn't want to take other people's eyes. And then after I came to this hospital I became depressed. Because I'm not allowed to return home, my brain has become wrecked/destroyed and I wanted to take out everyone' eyes. I'm not happy at this hospital. I want to go home but my grandfather hasn't come for me. The Doctor gave me E.C.T.[117] I couldn't sleep in this hospital because I was depressed...I have dreams. Some are good, some are bad. In my dreams, two suns rise...Before, I heard voices in my ear. Now I don't hear the voices anymore. When I return home I will sit in teashops. I give myself encouragement/support."

[117] E.C.T: Electroconvulsive therapy

Central to the construction of these statements is the silencing and absenting of Maung San Tin from the diagnostic process. His experience of illness is ridiculed and of value only as so much entertainment value for bored officials, and in providing the raw material for the categorization of illness. Maung San Tin realizes that he must state that his experience is invalid (and ridiculous) in order to be "cured" and hence "released." We can also see the emphasis that is placed upon punctilious diagnosis such that an American psychiatrist was asked not about medication, psychotherapy, or prognosis, but about the appropriate diagnostic categories of the patient's illness. Patients at the Yangon Psychiatric Hospital have become adept at giving statements that are politically correct, appropriately submissive, and are oriented towards convincing staff (and myself) of the validity of their being released. Such statements are designed to profess an interiorization of guilt on the part of the patient and a rejection of previous sickness experiences as meaningful.

In this chapter I have suggested that anger and violence have long been understood in Burmese life as primary symptoms of madness. I have further suggested that patients at the Yangon Psychiatric Hospital are treated according to a moral therapeutic regimen that requires their submission to medico-legal procedures (medical interventions and technologies). This approach is suited to an institution with many patients but few resources, and its principles accord well with Burmese conceptions of madness. Unreasonable behavior is thus mocked in order to lead patients to understand that they are not acting in accordance with Burmese norms of sociability, and Burmans must profess that their illness experiences are invalid in order to be pronounced "cured."

Chapter Ten

Pagodas of the Mind: Everyday Negotiations of Reality in a Burmese Psychiatric Hospital

10.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter we discussed ways in which madness is constructed in Myanmar. I have described how the experience and expression of emotional distress is silenced at the Yangon Psychiatric Hospital with the patient physically absented from the interview room. I turn now to the testimonies of the psychiatric patients that are discarded by hospital staff. I will examine the frameworks in which psychiatric patients conceptualize their illness and create strategies for healing. Patients at the Yangon Psychiatric Hospital conceive their sickness and suffering as fundamentally and inextricably linked to the socio-historical, economic, political, and interpersonal domains. Burmans make no distinction between the healing of self and the healing of society. In these statements we see central concerns, themes, and dominant images in contemporary Burmese society. Violence wends its way through the interviews presented in this chapter, emphasizing again that violence is a substantive dimension not only of Burmese life in general, but of the lives of psychiatric patients in particular, who use it as a context in which they find parallels with their own experience. Patients conceive their illnesses in very different terms to the moral explanations given by hospital staff. The role of institutional praxis in shaping their statements is considered in this chapter, in conjunction with the accommodations patients make to their conceptions of illness and healing in light of their confrontation with a "modern scientific" worldview. Finally, I will explore some of the alternate dimensions of Burmese reality, the manifestations of power in these worlds, and the connections between these planes and the waking world.

10.2 Dissociation and the Illness Narrative

In previous chapters I have described a spectrum of dissociation that includes automatic behavior, day-dreaming, possession, and out-of-body-experiences. Many of the patients at the Yangon Psychiatric Hospital are, as I have mentioned, chronically ill and heavily medicated. Some of these patients inhabit the far end of the dissociation spectrum, in the realm of what psychiatrists over the last decade have taken to calling dissociative disorders, conversion disorders, histrionic personality, and somatoform disorders

(Merksey 1996:112-3).

The flourishing of new disorders in psychiatry, under which older diagnoses such as Multiple Personality Disorder are now subsumed, is part of a broader resurgence of interest in the work of Pierre Janet and his theory that "consciousness could be narrowed or 'retracted'" (Merksey 1996:100). Janet's work, and the interpretations of it offered by Freud and Breuer, assumes that dissociation is a negative event (Merskey 1996:101). Janet believed that continuing recourse to dissociative strategies in the face of traumatic events leads to an inability to "adapt" and that eventually "the patient ends in a state of chronic helplessness" (Van der Kolk and Van der Hart 1989:1533). Inherent in the conceptualization of dissociation for many psychiatrists, is Janet's belief that dissociation is evidence of psychopathology. Kirmayer, for example, defines dissociation negatively. He argues that "If dissociative phenomena do have an obvious common feature, it is a negative one: they are ruptures in the normally expected integration of psychological functions and the social presentation of the self" (Kirmayer 1994:92).

Kirmayer argues that through a process of creating narratives, these "gaps" in awareness, memory, and identity, are bridged and an attempt is made to recreate coherent meaning (Kirmayer 1994:106). Kirmayer acknowledges that: "cultures differ in their tolerance for gaps in narratives, unmotivated events, happenings attributed to extrinsic agencies, and the radical shifts in perspective that accompany shifts in states of mind" (Kirmayer 1994:106). Further, Kirmayer then argues that in cultures other than those of North America (and I assume he is excluding the indigenous populations of North America) multiple personalities "appear in the context of spirit possession" (Kirmayer 1994:112). The alternate personalities are not "the idiosyncratic childhood of the individual," as in North America, but are *culturally* identified beings, such as *Nat* spirits" [my italics]. Kirmayer implies that narrative "integration" of dissociative experiences is not necessary in this context because: "Some form of overarching integration is provided by the social system that assigns culturally appropriate and intelligible roles and identities to the inhabiting spirits. The plural voices of the self are then contained by a larger social order" (Kirmayer 1994:112).

There are two salient points here which bear directly upon the act of giving statements about illness at the Yangon Psychiatric Hospital. The first regards the notion that dissociation is a negative, psychopathological event.[118] Ludwig has noted that "The widespread prevalence of dissociative reactions and their many forms and guises argues for their playing important functions in man and their possessing great survival value" (Ludwig 1983:95). In addition, Van der Kolk and Van der Hart point to Frankel's (Frankel 1976) work on hypnosis that shows "how dissociative mechanisms are used to cope with a variety of challenges, from daily stresses to catastrophic trauma" (Van der Kolk and Van

[118] Although Kirmayer argues that dissociation is evidence of psychopathology in the West, he argues that it is sometimes a positive experience when it is part of healing ceremonies or other culturally valued circumstances (Kirmayer 1994).

der Hart 1989:1535). My thesis in previous chapters has been that appropriating the image of Burmese puppets and sending their minds flying to safety is but one of many dissociative strategies adopted by Burmans to survive living under a totalitarian regime. I have further argued that the kinds of dissociative experiences that I have described may constitute positive strategies of suffering and are not evidence of psychopathology. The assumption that there should be a stable, unified construction of "identity" and reality under all circumstances is perhaps only a myth of Western psychotherapy. The Burmese conception of a fluid, porous body is, of course, also applicable to the concept of identity since aspects of enduring consciousness can inhabit other bodies, can travel to other places, and can be temporarily replaced by other entities such as in the story of the young girl whose butterfly spirit became entwined with that of a pig (Eggar 1957).

At the Yangon Psychiatric Hospital however, chronically ill patients are clearly not employing positive strategies of suffering. They are much too ill and too sedated to be "consciously" employing any kind of survival strategy at all. Kirmayer has argued that in North American culture, individuals must create narratives to smooth over the "gaps" in memory and identity that occur during dissociation. Kirmayer further argues that many groups who do not construct individual illness narratives have "cultural" narratives concerning the meaning of dissociation, and that these collective meanings of dissociative experience may be positive and socially valued. In the Burmese context, *Nat* spiritism is an example of a "cultural narrative." However, widespread beliefs such as *Nat* spiritism do not serve to "weld together self-continuity and a socially credible personhood" for patients at the Yangon Psychiatric Hospital (Kirmayer 1994:104). Patients at the Hospital do not avoid creating narratives because they have wider "cultural" narratives about the meaning of dissociation. They do not create narratives because they are too ill to do so, and because it is not a culturally valued format for the expression of illness.

The concept of "illness narratives" has become a central methodological tool in medical anthropology, especially since the publication in 1988 of Arthur Kleinman's *The Illness Narratives*. Illness narratives place an illness event within a broader framework of a life-in-progress. In psychiatry, illness narratives "integrate" aspects of the self or life events. I have refrained from calling the statements made by patients at the Yangon Psychiatric Hospital, "narratives." They are often repetitive and unstructured, and I have not included most of them. The patients focused upon giving me a certain recounting of their symptoms and their treatment and conduct while at the Hospital so as to make the best case for why they should be released. The testimonies are about submission to Hospital procedures and rebellion in their constantly voiced desire to be "free."

Given such chronic illness and disorganized statements, it is perhaps salient to question the value of eliciting such testimonies. The statements are, however, an important insight into the way that cultural themes, symbols and images dominant in society are reflected and appropriated in the expression of even a severe illness experience. It is not

surprising that in a culture where political violence and fear have become a way of life, that violence pervades these testimonies. The patients are not, however, making statements as either commentaries on the political situation, nor are they expressing "resistance" to it. Further, I am not suggesting here that mental illness in Myanmar is a direct result of the actions of the military dictatorship. I am, however, suggesting that we can fruitfully interpret these patient statements as a bricolage of themes, images, and events occurring in the world around them that are adopted to give meaning, content, and expression to their experiences of illness. In the following sections I analyze the statements using a variety of anthropological techniques to show the way that these cultural themes and dominant images and concerns are projected upon the experience of mental illness in Myanmar.

10.3 Madness, Voices, and Institutional Praxis

As I have mentioned above, illness narratives have become an established way for medical anthropologists to examine how the experience and expression of emotional distress changes over time and is fitted into an overarching life-in-progress. Despite my argument that the patient statements in this chapter do not, for the most part, constitute illness narratives, there is nevertheless significant heuristic value in some forms of narrative analysis for these statements. For example, Saris has argued that a consideration of the role institutions play in shaping discourse, gives an intersubjective dimension to narrative analysis in which relations of power intersect with personal experience. He contends that:

> Making a larger analytical place for a concept of "institution" in our understanding of narratives of "personal" experience is a strategy for knitting together the presence of agency, meaning, and power in the production of stories. This extrasubjective aspect to the production of an illness narrative exists beyond the patient/therapist/family context that has been fruitfully explored in recent years...so much of the discipline operates in expressly or covertly institutionalized settings. By "institution"...I mean a structure (physical, conceptual or both) that "sets up" discourse and...I am defining institutions, then, as bundles of technologies, narrative styles, models of discourse, and, as importantly, erasures and silences (Saris 1995:41-2).

A focus upon situated narrative analyses and their institutional context thus provides access to the ways in which experience is situated within webs of power. Saris contends that this relationship can be examined by attending to the "topography" of the narrative. He identifies reference points in the narrative topography which he argues are often psychiatric institutions or elements of psychiatric praxis (Saris 1995:56). There are several reference points in the topographies of patient statements at the Yangon Psychiatric Hospital. These include voices, dream images, medication, incarceration, and

electroconvulsive therapy (E.C.T). An important subtext can also be discerned winding its way through these topographies. The subtext concerns the ongoing search for coherence and the constant struggle for meaning in a shifting world composed of several domains of experience. The relationship of these domains to each other is often confusing and nonsensical to many patients. Psychiatric technologies such as medication, incarceration, and electroconvulsive therapy alter the flow of this subtext, often stranding patients on islands of confusion where a sense of wrongness is keenly felt but cannot be articulated.

"Reality" in Burmese culture covers a large terrain, in part because of the wide range of supernatural beliefs in Myanmar, but mainly because the subjunctive category of *possibility* is very large in Myanmar. I have stated earlier that Ferguson and Mendelson describe this category of "possibility" as a strong belief in the miraculous, and I have demonstrated the importance of this subjunctive mode in the formulation of survival strategies for life under a totalitarian regime. The centrality of the subjunctive mode to Burmese understandings of their experience of the world makes the task of distinguishing what is possible, from what is not possible, very difficult at times. I have also suggested in the previous chapter that the border zone between reason and unreason is correspondingly large. For example, healing, visions and future portents can be imparted to individuals in dreams. It is not considered impossible for voices, heard in the dream mode, to suggest courses of action that will bring power, healing or good fortune in the waking world. Psychiatric patients sort through the various dimensions that constitute their reality in order to differentiate what they describe as "real" from "unreal" voices, dream scenarios, and omens.

The relationship of voices and dreams to madness is fathomed by patients in two main ways. The first is in terms of violence that is inflicted, perceived, or experienced by patients, and the second is a good/bad and real/not real distinction, a phenomenon that is reported in the psychiatric literature of many countries. Often patients decide that bad dreams or voices are unlikely to be real or else they are associated with violence and madness. Again there is never the denial of possibility, but this categorization allows patients to construct strategies for healing and to discard others. In the following vignette, Daw Than Myint, who is in her mid-thirties, is confused as to why voices should be located in her ear and why these voices are not real in the everyday world *apyin loka or lupyeh* (အပြင်လောက or လူပြည်). The reference to hearing voices at midnight suggests that Daw Than Myint is formulating a supernatural explanation for the voices in her ear, especially the involvement of witches who often carry out their malevolent deeds at midnight when Burmans would normally be asleep:[119][120]

[119] Burmese military intelligence (M.I.) uses the fear of supernatural powers working evil at midnight to their advantage by waiting until "the middle of the night" to conduct raids and arrests of pro-democracy supporters.

[120] Burmese women working as prostitutes often comment upon the difficulty of staying awake past 9 p.m., and their annoyance with "clients" who won't go to sleep after that time.

"I live in [Yangon township, name withheld]. I'm abnormal. I'm afraid because I've heard voices in my ear. I live with my aunt at my house...I told her I'd come back when I feel better. I heard the voices at midnight. The voices will kill me. Someone said that, but I don't know who. These voices are not real outside. I just heard voices...I heard the voices in my ear, I don't know why..."

Many of the statements collected at the psychiatric hospital detail the added confusion that results from electroconvulsive therapy. Ma Myint Myint Win's experience below (she is in her early-twenties) is similar to Daw Than Myint's above, as she also strives to differentiate "good" from "bad" voices, as well as voices that exist in the everyday (that is, the "outside") world:

" I live in [name of Township withheld]. I came here because I heard voices in my ear. I heard the voices two years ago. I don't know which voices. The voices started asking me "what?" I have no voices since coming to this hospital. The voices are other people's voices."
"Do you have dreams?"
"I have a dream. My dream is about E.C.T. I'm not afraid of E.C.T. I'm Buddhist. I meditate. I say *parittas.*[121] I hear the voices when I say *parittas.* I don't know which voices. Sometimes I hear voices. These voices are good. I meditate a little..."

Voices and violent dreams are perceived by Daw Khin Khin So (she is in her mid-thirties), to be real:

"I live in [Yangon township, name withheld]. I came here because my speech isn't truthful. I'm married. My husband works for [government department, name withheld]. I've been here four times. The first time I had five injections [almost certainly Diazepam]. The second time I had E.C.T. I had it three times. The last time I had E.C.T. four times. I don't know why. I don't have a mental illness. I got this disease in 1992. I couldn't sleep at night. I have voices in my ear so my husband sent me here. Now I have no voices. In 1992 I heard the voices. Other people [different voices] told me to get married again. These voices were male and female. They're real voices. I hear the voice often."
"Do you have dreams?"
"I have dreams. In my dreams someone cut me with a knife, so I was startled [awake]. I don't have any voices when I meditate and say *parittas.* I hear the voices when I sleep. The treatment of having both meditation and taking the medicine is

[121] Parittas (ပရိတ် and ပရိတ်ကြီး), Pali verses to ward off evil or harm, part of the Theravada Buddhist practice of *Samatha.*

good."

It is the significance of both the voices and dreams, and the psychiatric treatment, that confuses Daw Khin Khin So. Like the person who wields a knife in her dream, she cannot understand why she is being "hurt" in both her dreams and at the psychiatric hospital. Perhaps some of the confusion that surrounds the status of "voices" is due to painful and confusing electroconvulsive therapy. Both experiences have in common an element of what she perceives as random and unwarranted violence.

The following statement was given to me by a former soldier, U Saw Lwin, who is in his mid-forties. The Court reports and Patient Notes state that the patient murdered his younger sister by slitting her throat. U Saw Lwin has been told this but he is very confused about "who" is telling the truth:

"I am a Buddhist. I was a government servant in the *Tatmadaw*. I came to this hospital because I killed my younger sister. I don't know why I did it.

When I was a child I attended the monastery school until fourth standard. I was happy. Then I went to the government school. I attended fifth standard in [name of Township withheld]. I was happy at school because in my free time I participated in sports competitions. When I reached sixth standard I changed to Middle School because I moved houses. I moved to [name of village withheld]. When I left school I joined the Army. I was happy in the Army. For over thirty years I worked in the army. In the Army I was happy. I performed my duty for my country. I fought the rebels. I joined the army with my thirty-three friends. I attended the Army school until ninth standard. I fought the K.I.A.[122] and the Shan rebels. I sent the news of the face-to-face fighting in the battles to headquarters. It was a little difficult. I found food for the porters to eat. It took four or five months. And then I left the Army.

After I left the Army I supported my younger brother so he could go to school. I gave him an education at the Army school. Now he is a health worker. I felt this disease when I killed my younger sister. I was sentenced to three years in jail by the court.

This problem started in 1989. After I left the Army I became a farmer and a fisherman, but because of this disease I couldn't continue to work. I had E.C.T. and I also had an E.C.G.[123] The police told me that I have this problem because my brain is not good. So they sent me here. After I had E.C.T. my brain was not diseased [anymore] and they told me I was well. I was sentenced to three years in jail by the court. I won my case in court. I got this problem because I worked so hard. Because my health is not good, I can't see and I can't hear. After I had the

[122] Kachin Independence Army
[123] Electrocardiogram

E.C.T. I didn't feel well, so I took vurovisin[124] (ဗုရိုဗစ်ဆင်) and then I felt better.

I can't explain this problem. Sometimes doubt enters my mind. Someone said that my younger sister is not dead. Someone said that I am well because I took my Medicine and that my younger sister isn't dead. Someone told me that she is some place. I want to work at another job. I lived in *Ayer* ward for three years. For the last three days I haven't been able to sleep. I don't know why. I'm not hearing voices. I heard voices when I killed my sister. One of the voices in my ear ordered me to kill my younger sister. After [her death] I couldn't see or hear. After I had E.C.T. I could hear voices in my ear. The voices tell me what I must do. Many voices told me to live here. In 1989 I couldn't hear any voices."

In this testimony we can see that U Saw Lwin is besieged by "voices," doubt, and by conflicting opinions. During the interview he sat with his arms crossed in front of him, his face filled with confusion. He was intent upon discerning the truth of the situation about his sister's death and the reasons for it, and it was difficult to watch the turmoil that played across his face throughout the interview. He shook his head from side to side when describing his doubts about his sister's death. As in the previous narrative, E.C.T. is a confusing factor, and is in this case linked to another biomedical technology, the electrocardiograph (E.C.G.). In Myanmar both procedures regularly draw blood and are powered by dubious electrical sources.[125] The voices are only perceived at times of violence and as well, the voices demand violence. Although not explicitly stated, we could surmise that U Saw Lwin perceives himself to be temporarily mad at the times when he hears voices since these voices command violence, and violence is a sure sign of madness in Myanmar. The following vignette by a young woman, Ma Hla Kyi, demonstrates again that "bad" voices are linked to violence and hence madness, and that electroconvulsive therapy may compound the difficulties of making sense of the voices:

"I didn't hear voices. Only mad patients can hear voices...I don't like this hospital because I [have to] have medical injections. I had E.C.T. I'm afraid...The doctor advised me to take E.C.T. because I needed it...I had [the] shock[s]. This hospital was called the "fools jail" before, now this hospital is called the psychiatric hospital."

[124] This is the most popular B Vitamin injection which is given to almost all patients who consult physicians and *yanku's* (community healers) in Myanmar. Residents of the forcibly relocated townships have told me that expired batches of vitamins are injected with syringes that have been used many times before. Interviews with healers in the relocated townships suggest that needles are boiled between uses. Vurovisin is thought to compensate for amenorrhea, lack of sleep, inadequate food and malnourishment and to make blood "stronger." It is also thought to diminish weakness, dizziness, and blurriness of vision.

[125] I had two electrocardiograms during my fieldwork in Myanmar. The first one took several hours as the electricity went on and off. The second E.C.G. a few days later used large electrodes that caused pinpricks of blood around the edges of the electrode seals.

The bewilderment of patients forcibly subjected to procedures occurs, as we have seen in the previous illness testimonies, without the patients being informed as to the rationale for such treatment. In the following account given by Daw Mi Mi Sein, a woman in her early-thirties, her experience of illness is significantly altered by the confusing sensations that occur with tranquilizing medications. This change is experienced in her "brain," muscles, and mouth:

> "I'm single. I became a Buddhist nun when I was sixteen-years-old. I say *parittas* because I'm afraid of ghosts. I didn't tell anybody in my house [that I am afraid of ghosts] so they thought me a fool [insane], and sent me here. When I arrived at this hospital I was frightened because I saw the mentally ill patients. At first I didn't know that this is a psychiatric hospital. I'm Buddhist. I have a problem if I haven't been saying *parittas*. Natural sleep is the best. When I'm at my house, my brain is not clear. When I take the medicine and sleep, my brain is dull. Natural sleep is the best for health. Now, I sleep after worshipping [saying *parittas*]...When I take the medicine my tongue is heavy and the liquid drops in my mouth. My muscles are taut. My brain is not clear."

The following narrative is given by Daw Khin May Kyee, a woman in her late-thirties, who attacked her mother and tried to commit suicide by cutting herself with scissors. Daw Khin May Kyee is articulate and gives herself a diagnosis of depression as opposed to madness. She further explains that the depression is due to her wish to attend law school and to learn skills to enable her to work. Medication, in this case, Chlorpromazine, symbolizes the domination of both her family (her mother and her uncle who is a physician) and the Burmese medico-legal establishment:

> "I live in [name withheld] Township. I don't remember things exactly. At first, I watched videos and danced at my house. My mother scolded me because I didn't take the Medicine. I take Chlorpromazine medicine. And then my mother pushed me. I pushed her back. At that time my mother shouted out for help. People arrested me and they brought me to my uncle. My uncle gave me "I.V."[126] and an injection and then I slept. My mother didn't talk to me at home. I lived with my uncle and then they brought me here. I got this disease because I'm lonely at my house. I live with my mother and sister at the house. My mother does not allow me to go outside. I have stayed in my house for about five or six months. I didn't watch any pwes.[127] I want to work. My two elder sisters live in Singapore. I want to go to Singapore. My mother and two hospital staff brought me here. I'm not a fool [insane]. I think my disease is depression. I get depressed when anyone scolds

[126] An intravenous "drip," usually of saline to rehydrate the body.
[127] *Nat* spirit festivals

me. I cry and shout when I'm depressed. I tried to commit suicide with scissors. Somebody told me I was a prostitute (lit. "bad woman"). I want to learn the computer and the typewriter. If I have a certificate I could get a job with a company. I'm a law student. I failed the final exam. I wanted to read and answer the H. G. P. [school exams] but they sold my school books. I want to live my life by myself and be self-supporting."

In this interview, Daw Khin May Kyee complains of loneliness although she lives with her mother and her sister. It is likely that the Daw Khin May Kyee is bored. Her mother, believing Daw Khin May Kyee to be mentally ill, has refused to allow her to leave the house for the past five or six months.

From the stories related above we can see that incarceration in the Yangon Psychiatric Hospital is often a frightening and baffling experience. The patients' struggle to find coherency is made more difficult by the fear of electroconvulsive therapy and the side effects of tranquilizing medications. These experiences may further compound the process of sorting out if voices or dreams are real and beneficial, or are espousing violence and constitute evidence of madness.

10.4 Individual Idioms of Emotional Distress

The meanings of illness and the pathway to healing is encoded for most patients at the Yangon Psychiatric Hospital within a religious/supernatural paradigm. Obeyesekere's hypothesis is that emotional distress and the response of Buddhists to grief and suffering cannot be understood without reference to a religious world view that both constitutes experience and filters responses. He contends that:

If they [Buddhists] are afflicted with bereavement and loss..they can generalize their despair from the self to the world at large and give it Buddhist meaning and significance. This happens in other great religious traditions also, but the Buddhist provides special occasions for ontological reflection on despair...It is almost impossible for a Sinhala person to use words expressing sorrow without articulating them to the Buddhist tradition (Obeyesekere 1985:140-4).

The statements of psychiatric patients in Myanmar certainly support Obeyesekere's argument. There are several key ways by which patients conceive of the relationship between religion/supernaturalism and health. These include the power of making merit at pagodas, the importance of warding off ghosts by chanting Buddhist verses (*Paritta*s or *Suttas*), as well as propitiating *Nats* and guarding against witchcraft.

The Shwedagon pagoda is the most revered Buddhist monument in Myanmar and it is here that many patients believe they will receive healing. Linked to the merit (karmic) system, worshiping at the Shwedagon is thought to accrue more merit than at any other pagoda in Myanmar. For those illnesses that are considered to affect the mind because of a high merit debt, the fastest way to achieve wellness is by paying obeisance to the Buddha at the Shwedagon pagoda. The Shwedagon represents, for many Buddhists, an inter-lifetime space within which the future can be changed through a lessening of the karmic debt that has been accrued in past lives. The more serious the illness, the larger the merit debt. Illness is a physical manifestation of a high karmic debt. In the following vignettes, the first by U Tin Oo, a man in his early-thirties, and the second by Ma Hla Kyi, who is a teenager, health is equated with paying obeisance to the Buddha:

> "I'm Buddhist. I'm [ethnicity withheld] nationality. I arrived at this hospital because I'd visited the Shwedagon pagoda. My cousin sent me to this hospital. I don't know why they sent me [here]. I'm neither happy nor unhappy with my life. My father has died. My father drank alcohol. I want to return home. I'll be back after I worship at the Shwedagon pagoda..."

> "I felt this disease when I was fifteen-years-old. I don't have any disease. I don't like this hospital. It's a fools' jail...They sent me here but they told me I was going to the Shwedagon pagoda. I haven't seen my parents in about a year. The doctor won't allow me to return home because I cry...I have a dream. It's about a lottery number. I buy lottery tickets because I want to donate. If I get a lot of money, I'll donate [the money to the Buddhist pagoda]. I'm Buddhist. Sometimes when I meditate and say *parittas*, I have the dream. When I say *parittas*, I get the lottery number in my head...I'm happy when I go to visit the pagoda. I feel well if I do [venerate] the Buddha and the Dhamma."[128]

In these accounts we see that healing is related to a broad illness causation scheme. Not paying obeisance to the Buddha may result in bad dreams and bad health since events in the dream world affect what happens in the waking world and vice versa. Another good example is the lottery ticket number that appears to a young girl, Ma Hla Kyi, in her dreams and which can be used to bring her power in the waking world. She intends to use the winning monies to donate to the Shwedagon pagoda, a strategy that will make merit and result in a better rebirth.

Many other contexts for conceptualizing madness exist in Myanmar and can be identified in the statements made by patients. Idioms such as spirit possession and the malevolent use of numerology (*in*) coexist with themes of violence in which patients find resonances with their own experience and that recur as dominant images. In Kleinman's

[128] Buddhist scripture

Explanatory Model approach to conceptualizing doctor-patient negotiations, the patient's *Explanatory Model* includes an understanding that although collective models of illness exist such as cultural, folk, and "scientific" explanations, there is a further level of understanding, that of the individual. An individual may hold several explanatory models of illness, or fragments thereof, simultaneously (Kleinman 1988). In an earlier work, Ortigues et al. argue that distinctive networks of association, for example, those relating to personal experience, folk, cultural and "scientific" explanations of illness, are called into play by individuals under particular circumstances (Ortigues et al. 1968). In Myanmar, *Nat* spirit possession is one such idiom embedded in chains of association, that individuals use in different ways to both understand and articulate their personal experiences of illness.

A great deal of spirit possession and other dissociative or trance states are reported by patients, their relatives and the staff at the Psychiatric Hospital. The following interview of two sisters illustrates the medicalization of spirit possession and the particular ways in which each sister employs the spirit possession idiom as part of her explanatory model of illness.

On a morning in June, 1996, two sisters are brought into the interview room at the female professorial ward, accompanied by their mother. On previous admissions they have been diagnosed as having schizophrenia. According to the mother, the elder sister, Daw Yuzana Khin who is in her mid-thirties, has been eating leaves, pieces of blanket, and wandering away from the house naked. Her mother says she sometimes believes she is being possessed by *Nats*. Daw Yuzana Khin denies this. According to the mother's descriptions of the symptoms, the doctor concludes that Daw Yuzana Khin has schizophrenia and reminds me that the patient has no awareness of her "innerness." On the basis of explanations given to me by the hospital staff, "innerness" is considered to be both an ability to psychologize about illness symptoms, as well as an understanding of subconscious and unconscious levels of thought and behavior. Truth is believed, by the Professor and his followers, to reside not in patient statements or behavior, but in these levels of thought that lie below consciousness.

The younger sister, Ma Saw Yi, is in her mid-twenties and was first admitted to the psychiatric hospital in 1989 and diagnosed with hypomania. She was last admitted one month before the current admission. According to both Ma Saw Yi and her mother, she swears and hears voices that disturb her, they are what she calls "commenting voices" that comment on her every decision. They tell her to go out, to hurt other people, and to swear at people. They also comment on everything that she does. Her husband left her when she was seven months pregnant. The physician informs me that Ma Saw Yi has paranoid delusions about her husband. She wants to kill him. She writes letters about her husband and she laughs and claps her hands while writing them. The physician tells me that Ma Saw Yi is also paranoid about her neighbor. The physician continues to make notes, explaining to me that Ma Saw Yi previously had a boyfriend and that she is interested in

sex. She believes her husband's shadow enters her body at times. The doctor concludes that this description is fantasy, not grandiosity, that she is not manic and is incapable of thinking in an abstract manner. She concludes that Ma Saw Yi is schizophrenic. The sisters will be admitted for one week and prescribed Chlorpromazine which the mother purchases in the medical "shack" in front of the psychiatric hospital.

The possession accounts rendered by the mother constitute an extremely common idiom of experience and expression in Myanmar of very long standing. The regime seeks a similar end to both Buddhism and *Nat* spiritism: the reduction of powerful belief systems that could act as the foundation for mass political opposition to the junta. Its means for achieving this goal differs in each case, however. Buddhism is suborned in contemporary Myanmar through both physical repression and commercialization, whereas *Nat* spiritism is normalized as a sign of mental illness. Both methods utilize an ideology of the 'will to be modern,' one by using the products of industrialization and mass production, the other by using medical technologies to invalidate religious and political opposition. *Nat* spirit possession is thus a familiar theme for Burmans not only as a central element of the *Nat* spirit cultus, but also because the military regime has been attacking *Nat* spiritism in the State-sponsored media. Even young urban Burmans who have no experience of *Nat* spirit possession are aware that the regime seeks to discredit belief in *Nats*.

The primary means of reducing the power of the *Nat* spirit cult has been to attack it as pre-modern. Spiro notes that: "the army, concerned with modernization and economic development, is actively opposed to the Nat cultus, both for the "magical" habits of thinking that is encourages and for its draining of capital into non-productive channels" (Spiro 1967:62). The regime initially banned films and other productions referring to *Nats* and attempted to ban street *Nat* festivals (pwes), finally having to concede that *Nat* pwes could continue on "side streets" only. In its recent attacks on Aung San Suu Kyi, the military junta has labeled the democracy advocate as a female shaman of the *Nat* cult (*natkadaw*).[129] As I have noted earlier, the State-sponsored media decrees that *Nat* spiritism is indicative of mental illness and that the pro-democracy leader is mentally ill. Aung San Suu Kyi's fight for democracy is reduced, in the State media, from political opposition to the dictatorship to an individual suffering from a disease. And as mentioned above, the testimonies of "mad" people are also rendered invalid.

At the Yangon Psychiatric Hospital, the patients' experience of possession is reified to "delusion," "hallucination" and "fantasy" by the attendant doctors. Since it is not possible in the doctor's scientific world view for bodies to become possessed by supernatural beings, the physician concludes as in the case of the sisters above, that the delusions are beyond the realm of the possible (and hence the reasonable) and the patients are thus diagnosed as schizophrenics.

[129] A *Nat* spirit wife: a woman who enters into a lifelong relationship with a particular *Nat*, becoming a spirit medium for the *Nat* and is said to have married the *Nat*.

The *Nat* spirit cult is thus utilized by individuals and groups for different purposes. At a political level, the idiom of spirit possession has been used as evidence of political dissension and as a symbol of political resistance. But there are several other ways that the idiom can be adopted in Myanmar. At the Psychiatric Hospital many of the patients who have been diagnosed as schizophrenic appear to me to be severely distressed and very ill. They are not interested in the potential political aspects of the spirit possession idiom, but some Burmans use the possession idiom to effect changes in everyday lives, as evidenced by the woman in the previous chapter whose husband had been diagnosed with leprosy, and who invoked the *Nat* Spirit, Bo Bo Gyi, for healing. For the most severely ill patients, possession perhaps resonates with the violent disordering of their lives that their illness has caused. In the case of the sisters diagnosed with schizophrenia described above, the elder sister's confession to her mother that she believes herself frequently possessed by *Nats* perhaps provides (to herself) an explanation for her unusual behavior. *Nat* Spirits are renowned for their inversion of Buddhist norms of morality and Burmese norms of behavior. Daw Yuzana Khin's nudity, her "wandering" into strange territory, and her consumption of unusual items such as leaves and bedding, are consistent with the behavior of *Nats*, or a human possessed by *Nats*. The younger sister invokes the idiom of possession to explain her sexual feelings in the absence of her husband (when her husband's shadow enters her body) as well as the voices that comment upon her behavior. In writing letters to her husband that describe his imminent death, perhaps Ma Saw Yi is seeking to exorcise her husband's shadow from her body.

Whereas paying obeisance to the *Nats* does not ensure a better rebirth, (there is no karmic system involved in this form of animism), *Nats* are widely believed to hold enormous power over everyday lives (especially in rural areas). Most Burmans do not make a distinction between various elements of the total religious field (following Tambiah, 1984), and thus *Nats*, along with Buddhism, are also drawn upon to explain illness in Myanmar. In the following two testimonies, it is primarily *Nat* Spirits who hold the power over health, and towards whom a proper devotional attitude must be directed. In the first interview, Daw Khin Than, who is in her early-forties, believes that she is pregnant and mentions several abortificants that she has taken to terminate the pregnancy. The Patient Notes state that Daw Khin Than is an alcoholic. It seems reasonable to infer from the Patient Notes that she began drinking heavily upon the death of her husband. Her ill-health is primarily conceived of by herself in terms of *Nat* Spiritism although she also mentions the need to recite Buddhist *parittas*:

> "I am a farmer. I live with my father. I came here to stop [my] alcoholism. I took blood tonic. I took it for one week.[138] I took it after lunch. I also take it at night. I bought it at a shop in my village. I have come to this hospital because I have a baby

[138]The continual use of large doses of "blood tonic" over a period of a week is taken to induce an abortion, indicating that the woman was pregnant or thought that she was pregnant.

in my womb (*thakja* သားဖြာ). I have paralysis. So I mixed alcohol, and turmeric.[131] I tremble when I begin to stop drinking alcohol. I was sick whenever I stopped drinking alcohol. I have been drinking alcohol for nearly one year. My husband has died. I'm fine when I drink a little alcohol. Now I can eat when I don't drink alcohol. When I made a profit I bought rice. I live with my father. My father is old. My house needs repairs. I'll go to the *Nat* pwe...I'll give a pig, a chicken, alcohol, coconut, banana, and seven betels for the *Nats*. That's traditional. I do this every year. I go to the *Nat* pwe three times every year. I do it when I'm not feeling well. If I don't go to the *Nat* pwe I'll become a fool [insane]. I do it every year. My parents started the tradition. I'm not a *Natkadaw*. I have no children. I cut my womb (သားဖြာ)...I want to return home. My father is old. My economic situation is not good...I won't drink when I return home. I head the voices before. These are women's voices. I say *parittas*. I'm very happy when I live with my father. I was afraid when my husband died."

Like Daw Khin Than's statement above, U Thaw Kaung's testimony (he is middle aged) also emphasizes the power that *Nats* are believed to exert over daily personal matters such as health:

"My short life is that my parents are farmers. I have my own farm. I'm a Buddhist. I am religious. I worship the Buddha. I say *parittas*."
"Do you have dreams?"
"When I have dreams, my dreams are good. In my dream I meet *Nats* from heaven and from hell. When I don't worship, I have bad dreams. In my dreams I meet ghosts."

In the previous vignette, a lack of devotional attitude to any supernatural beings may cause ill health for U Thaw Kaung and this is the most common illness explanatory scheme advanced by patients at the Yangon Psychiatric Hospital. Although a majority of urban residents emplot their illness experiences and plans for healing within a Buddhist idiom, many patients also refer to *Nats* and other supernatural entities. In the following testimony, a rural teenager, Maung Aung Khin, conceives of illness with reference to Buddhism, *Nat* spiritism, and witchcraft:

"I finished tenth standard.[132] I'm a Buddhist, I was born in [village name withheld]. I live in [Yangon township name withheld]. I don't know how I came to be at this hospital. I don't have a disease. My uncle's brother-in-law brought

[131] The combination of alcohol and turmeric (often with palm sugar) is one of the most common home-made abortificants.
[132] The final year of secondary school education.

me here. I didn't do any work around the house. My parents are farmers. My aunt's husband and his son bewitched me. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't breathe for seven days. They also schemed about my inheritance. They tried to kill me. I live with my grandfather. They sounded a knock on the [rice]pot and killed me. After I heard the sound of the pot I was frightened in my mind. Now I'm fine. I beat/hit my mother and the household *Nat*. I used to take drugs. I used them for a year. I drank alcohol."

"Why did you begin taking drugs?"

"I took drugs because I liked them. I used to have a dream. In my dream the whole world pressed down on me. I also dreamed about the pagoda. I want to go home."

In this statement, violence directed at the mother and the household *Nat*, as well as the consumption of alcohol and other drugs, signifies to Maung Aung Khin the frightening effects of bewitchment. Another patient's notes contain the observation that "the patient had seen a black dog at midnight and since then she had persecutory delusions and could not sleep properly." As in many other locations, black animals signify the presence of witchcraft in Myanmar, and particularly in rural areas it is a significant idiom in which illness is contextualized.

In this section we have discussed how individuals adopt culturally, historically, and politically familiar idioms to understand and express their experience of mental illness. I have touched upon only a fraction of these idioms. Other common illness explanations in Burmese life include familial and peer relations, as well as hierarchies of respect and prestige, idioms common in many cultures, especially those of Southeast Asia. Ortigues et al. have suggested that patients who have a fragile sense of self may take up one or more of these idioms to give meaning to the often bewildering experience of mental illness (Ortigues et al. 1968). For example, in the statement above, witchcraft and violence towards family members is a disordering and frightening occurrence but they provide the young man with an explanation for his behavior and a context that it both culturally familiar and one that can lead to healing strategies. In the following section we will see how some patients are able to place these illness experiences within the wider framework of their life-in-progress in order to give meaning to their suffering.

10.5 Intertextualization: Deriving Meaning from Madness

An interesting finding at the psychiatric hospital is that Burmans use a process called "intertextualization" common in many psychiatric institutions throughout the world, where patients incorporate myths and legends as part of the story they give about their life. Saris notes that intertextuality, the strategy of linking internal states with political events,

and of refracting experience through religious or historical texts, is often added to narrative to give historical or political depth. He gives the example of Finbar, an Irish psychiatric patient, who endows one of the key characters in his narrative with a complex subjectivity by occasionally substituting the character with a biblical figure. Saris concludes that intertextuality is "a way of communicating whereby the narrator draws the reader/hearer into a peculiar world" (Saris 1995:62). I would argue that intertextuality is more than just a device to create a link between the audience and the world evoked by the narrator, it may also have the potential to create meaning for the narrator by placing the experience within an epic political, historical, or religious frame. The experience may then be transformed into a positive link in a larger chain of events whose ultimate aim or outcome is one valued by the narrator.

Earlier in this chapter we discussed the life history of U Saw Lwin, a man accused of killing his sister. U Saw Lwin fought in the Army for most of his adult life. When telling of his enlistment, he recounts that "I joined the army with my thirty-three friends." The "thirty-three" friends is a reference to two important elements of Burmese mythology, history, and culture. Both elements are inherently political. The first concerns the thirty-three *Nats*. Although the *Nat* Spirit cult now consists of thirty-seven *Nats*, the cult was for many years one of thirty-three *Nats*: Spiro notes that: "only thirty-three Nats comprised the original list of Nats, whose images King Anawratha placed in the Shwezigon pagoda of Pagan in 1059. These included a group of thirty-two Nats, plus the Hindu-derived Buddhist *deva*, Sakka" (Spiro 1967:52). Different interpretations exist for the addition of another four *Nats* to the pantheon and as we have noted earlier, new *Nats* are occasionally added to the list as other *Nats* fade into obscurity.

The political overtones in this reference of the "thirty-three friends" to the *Nats* is more overt in the second reference which is to the Thirty Comrades, a group of young Burmese pro-Independence activists who founded the Burma Independence Army and "who had traveled to Japan with Aung San in 1941 to begin armed training for the anti-British uprising" (Smith 1991:8). The BIA is the forerunner or the *Tatmadaw* in which the patient served. It was founded by Aung San who later became renowned as the architect of Burmese Independence. The Army in general, and the Thirty Comrades in particular, have influenced the political landscape of Myanmar ever since. By associating himself with both the spirits of Burmese royalty who have died violent deaths, and the architects of Burmese Independence and the Army, U Saw Lwin is giving himself and his suffering a place among the history-making events and persona of Burmese culture.

The most common form of intertextualization at the psychiatric hospital involves the placing of the patient's activities within Buddhist legends, as the following example typifies. A middle-aged man, U So Thein, is being monitored carefully in case he tries to commit suicide. His notes describe his condition as follows: "complaining of hearing voices (goat voices)...tried to assault his father...says he has abdominal pain, sleep

disturbances...previous history of alcohol, marijuana, heroin, Phensydyl (codeine) and Diazepam (sedative)."

U So Thein is accused of murdering his sister, assaulting his father, attempting suicide, and attempting to assault others. He states that his name is *Asadathada* (အဆတသတ) and that he worships the Buddha. In the scriptures, Gautama Buddha met this man, *Asadathada*, who is described as a wicked man who fought with the Buddha. U So Thein states that not only has he fought with the Buddha, but further evidence of his wickedness is his assaulting his sister with a brick. He is convinced that he can only be forgiven for this terrible act by killing fifty people with sharp weapons who want to destroy him, or perhaps five-hundred persons, he is not sure of the correct number. Whilst denying that he is feeling suicidal he states that he wants to kill himself with sharp weapons.

I have presented an analytical frame wherein by placing themselves in the midst of a Buddhist epic, many psychiatric patients give their lives a sense of meaning and an understanding of the experience of incarceration, heavy sedation, electroconvulsive therapy, and other medical "treatments" to which they are subjected. A second interpretation is also possible, however. Rather than making meaning of the illness experience, U So Thein may instead be using culturally familiar images such as those contained in stories of Gautama Buddha, as the raw material for his dreams, images, or "delusions." In either case, U So Thein's statement alerts us once again to the significance of Buddhist teaching, metaphors, and imagery in the lives of Burmans.

The interviews presented in this chapter emphasize the clash of two very different world views, a clash that is occurring in almost every facet of Burmese urban life. One one hand the psychiatric staff conform to a "modern scientific" moral therapeutic based on the "truth" of brain disease. Patients who conceive of illness and healing within a wide variety of other idioms in Myanmar confront this alternate belief system upon their incarceration at the psychiatric hospital. In the following section we will explore some of the accommodations that patients make in their understandings of the meaning of sickness as a result of psychiatric institutionalization.

10.6 Buddhism and Chlorpromazine: The Burmese Road to Health

During the course of the research, one of the most common observations made by psychiatric patients regarding healing is that activities geared towards religious and/or supernatural ends, in conjunction with psychiatric medications, result in good health. The most commonly stated combination is Buddhism and Chlorpromazine. In this way Burmans select aspects of psychiatric institutionalization that they find beneficial (for whatever reason) and incorporate these elements into a supernatural/religious explanatory scheme. As to why patients choose to take Chlorpromazine, there are several possible

explanations. To begin with, many patients feel unbalanced as evidenced by phrases such as "my mind is not good." Traditional Burmese medicines each have ninety-six therapeutic uses and realign the five basic elements, including concentrations of all substances within the body. They re-attune the body with the cosmos (State Traditional Medical Council, n.d). It may be then, that psychiatric medications are incorporated into this scheme, since outside the hospital vitamin injections are frequently sought to rebalance the body and reenergize it. The second reason, as repeatedly voiced in the following interviews, is that tranquilizers such as Chlorpromazine bring a dreamless sleep (at least, patients state that they do not remember dreaming). Thus Chlorpromazine brings a respite from visions, often of violence, and from "voices." It is also possible that patients agree to take medication because it will hasten their release from the hospital. In the previous section we saw how a young woman perceived Chlorpromazine to be symbolic of her domination by both her family and the medico-legal institutions of the State. I cannot rule out the possibility that by including accounts of the efficacy of medication in these narratives, patients sought to convince me of their "sanity" and hence of their worthiness for release.

The following statements given by two young women are typical of the accounts given by patients that link Buddhism and Chlorpromazine together as an efficacious healing strategy. In the first interview, Ma San San Me who is in her mid-twenties, is describing her arrest for arson and in the second testimony, Daw Khin May Si who is in her mid-thirties, is describing her arrest for vagrancy:

> "I live in [a Yangon township, name withheld]. I came here because I have a case. It's [been] about two years. It's an arson case. I started to get this disease when I wasn't feeling well. The police sent me to this hospital. They sent me because I have a mental illness. I started to have this disease when I was sick. I couldn't answer the exam [questions]. My house burned down. It was an accident. The police arrested me. I lived at the police station for about a month. It's an arson case. And then they sent me here. I've been here twice. The first time I lived here for three months and then I returned home. I had a mental illness when I was young. I heard voices. They were commanding voices which I heard in my ear. The man told me [things] but I don't know who. I heard the voices in my ear, these voices said that someone will kill me. I couldn't control my mind and what I do when I hear those voices in my ear...I don't meditate, I'm Buddhist. I say *parittas*. My mind is quiet when I have parittas. It's good. I like this hospital. I can't sleep when I don't take this medicine. The cure of *parittas* and the cure of the medicine is good. I went to the monastery, I wanted to become a nun at the monastery. The monk wouldn't accept me because I didn't come with my parents."

"I live in [name of Yangon township withheld]. I came here because I have a mental illness. Now I don't have that disease. I don't remember what happened before. I have felt this mental illness for about three years. The police want to certify that I'm not mad. This hospital will give them the document. I'm married. I'm working at the moment. I have two children, they live with my sister. I was fine for five or six years after I came to this hospital. This time the police sent me here. I don't remember my disease. I felt faint when I started to get this disease. I didn't know where I was. Now I sell betel. The building at the top of my street collapsed and so I got this disease. I picked-up the stick there.[133] The children teased me. I informed the police that I have a dream. My dream is about the pagoda and the graveyard...It means I must read the Buddhist words and say *parittas* and make merits. I read Buddha's words. I'm happy. The *parittas* are good so I'm well in my mind. My health is good now. I like this hospital, my health is good. I pity the other patients. The medicine treatment is good in this hospital. Now I don't need to take medicine. The treatment of the *parittas* and the treatment of the medicine is good..."

The synergistic effect of reciting Buddhist *parittas*, meditating, and taking Chlorpromazine is thus considered to be a successful strategy for many patients. Even though patients are involuntarily medicated and subjected to other psychiatric treatments, these patients selectively attribute efficacy to the medications but reject other treatments, such as electroconvulsive therapy, as efficacious. It would be interesting to know how Chlorpromazine affects the experience of meditation. In the first vignette, Ma San San Me, who is accused of committing arson, adopted the *"meditation + medicine"* strategy only after her plan to enter a monastery and live the life of a nun was unsuccessful. In the second interview, Daw Khin May Si learns in the dream world that healing will occur in the waking world if she devotes herself to Buddhism.

Many patients stated that meditation allows the mind to be "controlled," to be quiet, and sometimes it banishes voices. Medication brings sleep that also stops the patients from hearing voices. The medicine itself is not thought to be curative, merely to bring symptomatic relief by allowing sleep. As we shall see in the next chapter, similar to the patients at the Drug Rehabilitation Unit who take Diazepam, Valium, and other prescription drugs, it is the sedative properties of psychiatric drugs that patients appreciate.

[133] The police report indicates that the woman was "found" carrying a stick with her. Since one of the reasons the woman may have been carrying the stick is because she intended to beat someone with it, and because violence is the premiere symptom of mental illness in Myanmar, the police thought it prudent to arrest her.

10.7 Madness and Violence

Just as suffering is "a medical and socio-historical fact" (Wartofsky, quoted in Good 1985), so we must consider not only the medical but also the cultural, political and socio-historical elements of the experience of healing in Myanmar. The compartmentalization of experience into "medical" and "non-medical" domains at the psychiatric hospital and its attached Drug Rehabilitation Unit is based on the reifying logic of the government which distinguishes all social life as either "political" or "non-political." No such distinctions exist in everyday Burmese life: healing is simultaneously a supernatural/religious and a sociopolitical phenomenon, and in the patients statements we can see reflections of core elements and symbols of cultural and religious life. In previous sections I have used concepts such as intertextualization to emphasize religious and cultural contexts in which psychiatric patients situate their illnesses. In this section we see the "healing" of both illness and the social world (be that a disordering of family, communal, economic, or political life) is conceptualized as occurring through religious/supernatural means, especially by making merit.

Burmese patients find echoes of their own experience of madness in the political violence perpetrated by the regime. As we have discussed in the previous chapter, violence is commonly perceived by Burmans and Westerners alike as extrinsic to Burman "nature" and Burmese "culture." In Myanmar, the government justifies its use of political violence as a necessary mechanism for "restoring" law and order. The Ministry of Information repeatedly states that all other forms of political violence are carried out by "puppets of external forces." When violence is conceived as non-political, that is, violence that occurs outside of military installations, prisons and the armed battles conducted by the Army, it is most often attributed to mental illness. These explanations for the manifestation of violent acts in Myanmar share two characteristics: they each postulate violence as temporary, and responsibility is never attributed to individual Burmans. For example, the regime blames its "necessary" use of violence on the desire of "internal and external elements," and the "minions of colonialism" who jeopardize the "peace and tranquility of the nation." The Generals thus blame political violence on groups opposing the totalitarian policies of the regime. When violent acts cannot be attributed to foreigners (because too many Burmans have witnessed such violence), it is assumed that Burmans have been unwittingly duped by foreigners and their lack of education or experience is blamed for this temporary lack of judgment. This is the spin that the junta's propaganda writers put on the student democracy demonstrations in December 1996.

Violence weaves through the statements of patients at the psychiatric hospital and the current political situation provides not only a context in which to situate their illness, but also a vocabulary of terms and events with which to express their experience of illness. Janis Jenkins has described a number of levels at which violence appears in the narratives

of female refugees from El Salvador, including societal and familial violence (such as domestic violence, sexual abuse, and structural violence in the form of poverty) as well as violent dream images (Jenkins 1991). Violence is at once subject matter and an idiom of distress.

In the Burmese language there is an abundance of terms which link the social situation to insanity. For example *seiq nauq* (စိတ်နောက်) means both to be worried or upset and to be insane. Social conditions are directly linked in the Burmese causal belief system with "mental stress" *seiq saun* (စိတ်ဆောင်း) which results in physical disability as a result of this mental stress *seiq saun kokjepyiq* (စိတ်ဆောင်းကိုယ်ကြပ်ဖြစ်). If unchecked, *seiq nauq* and *seiq saun* can lead to madness and eventual death. In recounting their symptoms and articulating their plans for healing, violence suffuses the interviews at multiple levels, including dream images and through voices commanding or promising violence. Violence also appears as subject matter. A large majority of the patients interviewed who stand convicted or accused of murder are former government soldiers. Their statements contain violent acts such as murder as well as descriptions of battles, and images of death and dying on the various battlefields of Myanmar. I mentioned previously that Smith estimates that over the last four decades, 10,000 persons per year have died in the fighting between the military and the ethnic minorities. The continued growth of the Burmese Army is perhaps another reason why many of the perpetrators of violence are soldiers who have been schooled in the use of deadly force. Violence is also present at a more abstract level, as a disruptive (perhaps even a violent) force of illness, an unbalancing occurrence in patient's lives. Patients draw upon political violence and the current repressive environment to provide a context for illness experiences, and to articulate the jarring and forceful nature of symptoms and treatment.

Prior to the military coup of 1962, Manning Nash documented the scale of merit acquisition in a Burmese village. His conclusion is that the most powerful way of increasing one's chances for a better rebirth is to build a pagoda, since this conveys the most merit for one's money (Nash 1965). Dreams of psychiatric patients are filled with images from the current political situation; some are about the imprisonment of the National League for Democracy leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, *and* the need to build pagodas also emerges as a theme. In their dreams, patients visit pagodas because this is how they see themselves as obtaining healing. As Obeyesekere has noted for Sri Lanka, healing for social, environmental, and individuals worlds (including all forms of mental illness and emotional distress) are almost always conceived of in terms of religion (Obeyesekere 1985). In the following statements, healing for emotional distress is equated with a healing of the political situation through Buddhism, specifically through the building of pagodas. The following vignette is given by U Ngwe Ya, a Yangon resident in his mid-forties:

"I'm a Buddhist. I'm married. I have four daughters. All of them are girls. They are all students. I am a farmer. I own my farm. I came here because I am disappointed [with my life]. I was disappointed because the government wouldn't lend me money and the other reason is that the other farmers won't repay me the money I lent them. I have been to *Kitaya* hospital[134] before. In order to get me to come here, my brother and brother-in-law lied to me...

I will tell you about my short life. When I was young, I was happy. My father was the village headman. When I got married I didn't have enough money and was very poor. This is the third time I've been to this hospital...I dream about the children of my past life. In my dream I will visit the pagoda. In my dream I will visit a pagoda in upper Myanmar. I will also build a pagoda in my dream. When I say *parittas*, I can see the children of my previous life. When I say *parittas* I see the married daughter of my former life. I want to meet the daughter of my previous life and build a pagoda with her. In my previous life I did not build a pagoda. I have a place to build a pagoda. It is in [name of township withheld]. I want to know if Aung San Suu Kyi can come or not...When I came to this hospital I couldn't hear voices in my ear anymore. I want to make [robes] for the monks. Once before I made clothes for the monks. It takes me fifty days."

U Ngwe Ya is designated as "unemployed" by the hospital and his claim to be a farmer is taken as another of the "grandiose delusions" he is diagnosed as suffering.[135] He is a frequently returning patient who was admitted voluntarily according to the Patient Notes. U Ngwe Ya believes that in his previous life he was the father of Aung San Suu Kyi. Both the democracy leader's virtual house arrest and U Ngwe Ya's current situation are due to his failure to build a pagoda in this past life in his estimation. Healing for both his illness and Aung San Suu Kyi's present situation (being branded an enemy of the State), can occur through the building of a pagoda in his home village. He thus needs permission from the regime for Aung San Suu Kyi to be allowed to accompany him on his merit-making task. The knowledge of the source of both his illness and the current political situation comes from his previous lives, which are accessed via the medium of Buddhist dreams. In this testimony we can also discern structural violence in the form of poverty as evidenced by his need for a loan and his poverty after marriage. Family disjunction is also present, the signs of madness perceived by his family leads him to feel betrayed by the "lies" his brother and brother-in-law told him in order to get him to the psychiatric hospital.

The following life story concerns another man in his mid-forties, U Sein Htay, and was given to me shortly after his arrest by the local *Yawata*[136] for fighting. The officials committed him to the psychiatric hospital where he was found to be positive for codeine

[134] *Kitaya* is a ward of the Yangon Psychiatric Hospital.

[135] He has finished taking 5 mg of Haldol daily and continues to take 300mg of buromazine.

[136] Yawata (ရပ်ကြီး): the local government officials at the ward level.

which is an illegal substance in Myanmar.[137] As with the majority of patients I interviewed who were arrested for violent acts, U Sein Htay is an ex-soldier. The *Yawata* officials stated that the man went armed with a sword and a "double-hook" weapon to the local army barracks to ask if he should sleep there or at home. U Sein Htay denies that he intended violence and refused to be admitted to the psychiatric hospital:

> "I have always lived in [name of township withheld] Township in Yangon. I'm married. I have three sons and three daughters. I believe in both Buddhism and Christianity. I am a retired *Tatmadaw* man. I left the *Tatmadaw* in 1969. I performed my duties as a Tatmadaw man in the armed forces. When I was in the *Tatmadaw* armed forces I gave up [lost] one eye [in the fighting]. I came to this hospital because I was arguing with another person out the front of the *Yawata* office and people thought I was mad and sent me here. I have been here before...I can hear many noisy voices in my ear. These voices are confusing. In my ear I can hear voices calling my wife and children...
>
> I will tell you the story of my short life. When I lived in [name of town withheld], I sold spectacles. The neighborhood ignored my family. They decided that I was mad. I was put in Insein jail twice. But it was not my fault and I returned home. When I returned home my wife wasn't there. So I looked for my wife. When I found my wife, I lost my identity card (ဓာတ်ပုံတင်), Finally, everyone thought I was mad so they sent me to this hospital."

U Sein Htay's Notes are quite extensive. In his initial interview he said that he has been hearing multiple, confusing voices for over a year. Sometimes these voices tell him to hit people. He also said that the *Yawata* were trying to kill him and his children. The sister in charge of the ward called this a "delusion" and proceeded to tell me about other "delusions" that U Sein Htay had voiced:

(a) the National League for Democracy[138] had seized his family (his children) but one son had stayed in the village

(b) He is familiar with Khun Sa and asked him if he has now allied with the government.[139]

(c) He said he was related to a man who is a former Minister of Railways.[140]

(d) He was traced by other people through the radio.[141]

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[137] His current medication consists of injections of 150 mg of Chlorpromazine over three days combined with 300mg of oral Chlorpromazine daily, 15 mg of stelazine and 4mg of Artein (orally) daily.

[138] The main political opposition of which Aung San Suu Kyi is the General Secretary.

[139] Undoubtably the most notorious heroin producer in the world. In 1996 Khun Sa "surrendered" to the Burmese regime.

[140] The staff view this "grandiose delusion" as blatant name dropping intended to curry favor with the Staff.

[141] I have previously noted that in 1969 researchers at the Yangon (then Rangoon) Psychiatric Hospital reported that the auditory hallucinations of paranoid schizophrenics included voices coming from radios and hidden microphones recording their conversations.

Violence saturates U Sein Htay's story at several levels. In the subject matter of the statement it is present as acts he committed himself such as arming himself with a weapon, arguing, and fighting in the military. He also perceives violence as being inflicted upon him, such as his loss of an eye whilst fighting in the Army, the voices that command violence, the belief that the *Yawata* will kill his children and himself, the kidnapping of his children, and the use of the radio to trace his whereabouts. The current sociopolitical situation, including the corruption and nepotism that makes official "contacts" necessary for survival, as well as the enormous burden of fear produced by the preying of Military Intelligence upon the population, is also reflected in U Sein Htay's interview. Other key figures in the political landscape such as Khun Sa and Aung San Suu Kyi contextualize his experience of illness.

It can hardly be a coincidence that so many of the patients whose stories appear in this and the previous chapter date their illnesses to 1989. The end of 1988 saw the democracy uprising (known as "The Strike" and its bloody suppression). 1989 marks the beginning of the reign of the SLORC and the militarization of Yangon. The Strike may have precipitated mental illnesses in fragile or vulnerable persons, but it may also serve to contextualize incidents of emotional distress since the Strike was an enormous disruption in Yangon's social world and I have described earlier how it has come to be the key temporal marker in Burmese life histories. The link between social disorder and mental disorder is perhaps symbolized by the use of key political idioms from the post-Strike landscape (such as Aung San Suu Kyi) in so many of the most distressed patients' narratives. Aung San Suu Kyi is again present in the next vignette, and in the following testimony, a young woman, Ma Khin Than Than, cannot distinguish between herself and Aung San Suu Kyi, or between the voices of friends and enemies:

> "I was born in December 1969. I got a B.A. degree from [university name withheld]. My father's name is [name withheld]. I have three siblings. I am the eldest son in my family. I am twenty-seven-years-old. I am a Buddhist. I came to this hospital because my mind is abnormal. This is the first time I've been here...
>
> I will tell you about my short life starting from when I was two years old. When I was two-years-old my parents separated and I lived with my grandparents in [name of town withheld]. I wasn't happy when I was young because of my parents' separation. Now I live together with them again. Now all the time at home I'm violent and short-tempered. These feelings of violence and short-temperedness started in 1988. When I was living the life of a student I read a lot of literature. I wanted to be a tutor in the university. Before 1988 I had joined the Socialist *Lanzin* party.
>
> In 1988 there was a Strike. My violence and short temperedness began in 1988. At that time I was nineteen-years-old. In the 1988 Strike I was a student leader. I

preached [to the students]. I gave bags of rice to the Strikers [boycotters]. I prevented the country from being destroyed. I attended the meeting at *Yei Nan Chaun*.

After the Strike I returned to school. I came to the psychiatric hospital because when I was at home I was short tempered and I beat the walls and floor with my heel, so I came here. The last time I came here the doctor gave me medical treatment.

I don't hate my country and its people. I also don't hate the government. I also don't hate Aung San Suu Kyi. I also don't hate myself. [Now] I work within the law/rules. I don't work outside the law/rules. Now, all the time, everything is still good. I am not short tempered. I have lots of girlfriends. Everyone's mind is pure. I pity the government workers [hospital staff]. I pity them because they are so busy. I was violent because I was frustrated. I wanted, firstly, to become a monk, and then secondly to have a wife. I want to have a wife so that I can have a rest. I don't want children [but] I love children. I want to return home. I like freedom. I want to return home so I can be free."

"I'm [in my mid-thirties] and I'm not married. I'm a [occupation withheld]. I came here because I have a problem at my house. I've run away from my house to Yangon. I have "men problems" at my house. I don't have many boyfriends. I have a problem at my house. It involves sex. When I was young I had a sexual problem. My mind became confused with my boyfriend's mind so I was sent to this hospital. The men came to me one by one. They came into my mind. Everyone tells me I'm a political leader. They ask me if I dare to die like Aung San Suu Kyi? I am a substitute for Aung San Suu Kyi. I heard the voices before. The voices tell me about the Army. I heard the voices of General Mind (ဗိုလ်စိတ်). These voices ordered me to fight a battle with my mind. The Army ordered me [to fight the battle]. I heard the man's voice in the afternoon. He loves me, he said. I heard voices in my ear. The voices are Military Intelligence ordering me to do something...I don't like this hospital. I'm tired. My hand and leg are heavy because I took the medicine."

These two testimonies present startling evidence for the significant way that "mental illness" is interposed between the emotional distress of psychiatric patients and the current socio-political situation in Myanmar. Like psychiatric patients everywhere, Burmans at the Yangon Psychiatric Hospital exhibit symptoms of mental illness but they express and experience their illness within a unique socio-political, historical, and supernatural framework. And like psychiatric patients everywhere, metaphors are drawn upon to express the experience of altered states of consciousness. Lucas, for example, has

described the same metaphor of the rock band, "The Doors," and their use of Lysergic acid (LSD), that patients diagnosed with schizophrenia in Australia use to explain "the opening of the Doors of perception" (Lucas 1997). Knowledge of illness etiology is imparted to patients at the Yangon Psychiatric Hospital through Buddhist visions in dreams and meditative states and by voices heard in the dream world. Key elements of the social landscape as well as the fear and violence which shape this landscape is of concern to psychiatric patients as presented in their statements. In the first statement below, given by Maung Ba Saw Myint, family disjunction causes separation and a move to his grandmother's house. It is hard to adequately describe the strength placed in family bonds in Myanmar. Parental separation is frequently given to me as a reason for children becoming prostitutes, heroin addicts, and "going mad." Maung Ba Saw Myint posits his violence as beginning in 1988 when he was active in the political opposition as a student leader. It is not clear from Maung Ba Saw Myint's statement if he was a student leader, in which case he is a political prisoner, or if he is using the 1988 Strike as a disjunctive event that resonates with his own family crisis that resulted in the separation of his parents. The Hospital staff do not take these assertions of political leadership seriously, but it is used by the patient to explain to himself why he is ill. In preventing "the country from being destroyed," his mind became abnormal. Violence is also manifest in the rage that leads him to beat upon the walls and floor and his frustration at life paths that he believes he cannot pursue. In Ma Khin Than Than's vignette, violence is represented by the voices of Military Intelligence penetrating her mind, thrusting the Army, battles, and even "General Mind" inside her mind.

To the hospital staff, the references made by Maung Ba Saw Myint and Ma Khin Than Than to the world outside the hospital grounds, are fodder for amusement and provide the raw materials for prodigious note-taking. To patients however, emotional distress and the political situation are complexly laced together. Many of the patients have interpreted healing for society as healing of self (as evident in U Ngwe Ya's wish to free Aung San Suu Kyi from her current situation of confinement), a task that is best accomplished at monasteries and pagodas. For those patients now incarcerated in the psychiatric hospital however, other ways must be found to travel to places where healing can occur. In the two following vignettes, dreaming and meditation both give access to the supernatural world. Patients make no distinction between the realm they enter when they dream and the dimension they attain when meditating. A distinction is however made between this meditation/dream world and the everyday world that exists "outside," as if the meditation/dream world is an interior, bounded space. The first statement is given by Ma Sein Sein who is in her early-thirties. The killer that she meets in the dream world is also "real" in the "outside" world:

"I am not married. I came here because I'm worried about my brother. I don't have any mental illness. I didn't hear voices in my ear. I am a student. I'm worried about my brother. I'm worried because other people try to dominate my brother. I like my life. There is nothing important in my life. I like this hospital a little. I forget 75% [of] when I speak. I remember when someone touches and warns me [about what I have been saying]. All of my family live contentedly at my house. I haven't been to other hospitals...I have a dream. I forget the start of my dream. When I have the dream..."

Her mother interrupts with:

"She told me about her dream before, when she didn't have this disease. In her dream someone will kill and hurt my family. The killer in her dream is real in the outside. She found the man who is in her dream and she saw the same place and she nearly fainted when she was going to school."

Insurgent and military battles occur at night in the following life history, as does the fighting that Ma Pyone, a young girl, witnesses in her dreams. These battles are confused and interchangeable in Ma Pyone's experience:

"I live in [name of village withheld]. I came here because I have fits. I got this disease when I was nine-years-old. The disease started because I burned my leg. I have felt this disease for about four years. Now I'm feeling well. I fall asleep after the fits [and] I cannot speak. I got this disease because I fell off my bicycle... I have dreams. In my dreams the soldiers arrested my parents. I looked for them. My father is a teacher and my mother is a [names an ethnic minority] rebel. I tried to find my mother because she's disappeared. I can't find my mother so I cry every night. My aunt sent me here. My mother and uncle are [ethnic group] rebels. I'm not afraid for my mother. My mother has guns. My uncle killed the Burmese soldiers. I want to go to Thailand. My uncle lives in Thailand. He is a leader of the rebel organization. I have seen battles between Burmese soldiers and [ethnic group] rebels. I saw it every night. Four Burmese soldiers died. I like the government soldiers. My aunt has not come for me for about one month."

In the last few statements we can see that the waking world permeates the dream world and vice versa. It is therefore not surprising that violence runs through the dream/meditation world as can be seen again in the following statement of Daw San Lay, (a woman in her mid-thirties) whose dream is infiltrated by the Burmese military:

"I was married, now I'm separated. I have no children. My husband married again. I separated from him because our minds did not coincide. Now my husband comes and visits me...Sometimes I hear voices. Sometimes I have no voices. I hear singing and praying voices. I don't think they are real voices..Sometimes I have dreams. They are about a car accident. I meditate, I've been a nun. I had a dream last night. My dream was about a battle. All the people were soldiers..."

The permeability of various dimensions or realities is a source of confusion for many psychiatric patients, and we saw earlier how biomedical technologies and medico-legal procedures can compound this confusion. In the following two vignettes it is crucial for the young mothers to determine in which realities or planes their children are alive:

"I heard someone calling me when no one was around. I saw all the ghosts laughing and shouting at me. When I hear the noises, I'm afraid and I faint. I try to control my mind. At first I stayed with my relatives [affines] then I stayed with my sister. After I became mentally "disordered," I lived with my mother. My mother asked me to do housework and when I refused she berated me.

I dreamt that my last child has died and is following me [into the "real" or waking world]. I'm sad because this dream is the truth and my child has died in the real world. This child is of my own blood. I cried not only in the dream but also outside."

"Can you tell me about the noises?"

"...The commands are like, "I'm thirsty, I'm thirsty." "So why don't you go have a drink?" "It's good for you, it's cool." At that time I followed the commands. Another example is "run away, someone will kill you"...Whenever I hear the instructions repeatedly, I can't control my mind anymore and I follow some of the instructions. I think they are all good for me to follow."

"I live in [Yangon township, name withheld]. I'm married, I've married twice. I came here because I fainted at my house. I was looking after my child because he was sick. I lacked sleep so I fainted. I came here because I wanted to take a rest. I can't hear noisy voices. My first husband died of tuberculosis. I have four children from my first marriage. The youngest child died from tuberculosis. My husband had been cured at the Traditional Medicine [hospital, clinic, or practitioner]. And then my mother told me to marry again. I had one child and [then] my disease returned. I had a mental illness when I was twenty-five-years-old. I heard the voices. These voices are someone calling me voices. It's the ghost voice and [the] laugh voice. At first I was afraid when I heard the voices, but now I'm not afraid. I lived with my sisters, then I lived with my mother. My sister's children live with

me...I have a dream. In my dream, my baby dies. I don't think it's real, in my mind."

Violence perfuses the previous six interviews in several additional ways: as narrated events such as fighting, sexual abuse, the death of soldiers, in battles between insurgents and soldiers, and in the death of family members from tuberculosis. Patient's perceive violence, or the threat of violence, including "people" dominating a patient's brother and violence in the dream world. This is perhaps the most common form of narrated violence and includes murderers in both the dream and waking world, in addition to funerals, knife battles, car accidents, battles between soldiers, and the death of babies in both worlds. In a society where violence is an everyday reality and it's presence is made manifest in a series of shared symbols, rules, and boundary markers, it should not be surprising that violence enters the testimonies of Burmese psychiatric patients on so many levels. It is salient that key political symbols in the post-1988 topography are employed by patients who perhaps find resonances between the disordering, fragmenting experience of illness, incarceration, and treatment and the fear and violence that characterizes the everyday state of emergency in contemporary Myanmar. (Such key symbols are absent in the narratives of Burmans outside the Yangon Psychiatric Hospital, residing perhaps in the silences and gaps in conversations and memories). I mentioned earlier a number of "random utterances" known as *ta baung* in Myanmar. A *ta baung* is uttered by children and madmen and is considered to be prophetic. It is interesting that "madmen" (ရူး) are able to voice key political symbols that cannot expressed by the "sane" population, and that, as in many cultures, this vocalization is often considered prophetic, a true rendering of events and their outcomes. Perhaps Burmese "mad" men and women represent danger to the Generals not only because they cannot be molded into "Model Citizens" but also because madness bestows upon them an authoritative voice, a voice with which the military believes they speak out loud political truths that contradict the reality of the military dictatorship as the supreme arbiter of power in Myanmar. I have argued in this chapter, however, that to construe these patients as making political commentary or expressing political resistance is to misinterpret the process by which patients attempt to struggle with and make sense of their illness experience and to explain it within their cultural, historical, and religious frameworks to Hospital staff, visiting psychiatrists, and anthropologists.

In this chapter I have portrayed a clash of two world views and the accommodation that Burmese patients make to the dominant scientific ideology at the psychiatric hospital. The struggle to make sense of sickness and give meaning to suffering occurs through a variety of means such as intertextualization. This process is made more difficult by the pain, confusion, and side effects occasioned by medication and institutionalization. Healing is conceptualized by patients in a religious/supernatural framework and they travel metaphorically through several dimensions or realities in order to try to find the knowledge

and power required for healing. I have suggested that patients find resonance in both the current socio-political situation and in political and structural violence with their experience of illness. I have also contended that political violence is just one of many culturally familiar idioms that patients draw upon, but that we should not be surprised to find violence as a key theme in patient statements as this reflects the lived reality of life under a totalitarian regime.

Chapter Eleven

The People's Desire: Narratives of Male Heroin Addicts

Mass rallies to denounce the dangers posed by narcotic drug abuses are held from time to time...
The Working People's Daily 23/1/1988

11.1 Introduction

In this chapter I describe the culture of the Yangon Drug Rehabilitation Unit and the more general culture of drug use in Yangon. I examine the reasons that young men give for beginning and then returning to heroin, the magical qualities attributed to needles, and most importantly, the experience of addiction in Myanmar. It is my contention that the extremely heavy use of sedative drugs taken to induce "a feeling of nothingness," "blurriness," and "dizziness" is yet another means by which Burmans refuse to participate in the politicization of their daily lives and seek escape. The most common experience associated with addiction is that of the mind "flying" and "traveling" and of the body "floating" away. From the moment Aung San Suu Kyi's book *Freedom from Fear* was published (1990), heroin has been known throughout Myanmar as "freedom from fear."

The narratives of young men arrested and/or involuntarily incarcerated at the Drug Rehabilitation Unit are presented in this chapter. Their crime is invariably possession of heroin although most of the patients have a wide range of drug dependencies. Some patients are arrested because they have track marks[142] on their arms. I begin by outlining the role of the military regime in producing heroin, profiting from its export, and assisting in the addiction of a generation of young men and boys. I explore the medicalization, incarceration, and moral therapeutic process that transforms heroin use into a potential political threat that is contained at the Unit. The patients at the Drug Rehabilitation Unit are in no doubt that their addiction constitutes a "political trick" perpetrated by the junta upon the Burmese population. The narratives presented in this chapter also leave no doubt that both the closure of universities after the democracy uprising in 1988, and the flood of heroin on the market as part of the government's need for money in order to expand the army and reestablish power throughout the country, has resulted in a "lost generation" of

[142] I use the term "track marks" to indicate the scars and healing wounds that can be seen to follow the veins of individuals who have been injecting substances into their veins.

young men, heroin addicts, almost all of whom will die from AIDS.

Perhaps the saddest aspect of the enormous use of heroin in Myanmar is that it has ruined the lives of a sector of society who would otherwise have become future leaders in industry, academia, and other professions. This wealthy, educated population of society has access to passports and visas, something denied to most of the population. Their wealth gives them access to opportunities other Burmans do not even dream about. For example, many of these young men became addicted in the years following the 1988 democracy uprising, when heroin flooded the domestic market and when universities were closed and a curfew imposed. Many of these young men have been abroad to work or study, especially to Japan, Taiwan, Malaysia, Singapore, Australia, and Thailand. Their shared identity is also evidenced by a sign which they all make, the mimicking with their hand of a needle being inserted into a vein. During the interviews they make this gesture rather than using words to explain the process of injecting heroin.

The data collected on heroin use is restricted in many ways. I asked a series of officially sanctioned questions relating to life experiences and the culture of drug use. Although I was given access to patients by senior people in the Ministry of Health, as is common at many government medical facilities, staff at lower levels directly and indirectly stymied my efforts. This was not at all malicious, in fact, most were plainly torn between aiding and hindering me, but the decision came down to fear. Public servants fear for their livelihoods (and that of their families) if blame for any negative consequences of my work should be leveled against them. Thus although I was authorized to interview all the patients at the Drug Rehabilitation Unit who wished to participate in the study, there is a certain class of patients whom the staff pretended didn't exist. This elite class includes the sons of high ranking military officials as well as Burmese television and film celebrities.

There is a space in the Patient Notes for checking the social class of patients and I was never given Notes for patients described as High or Upper class. Very few patients interviewed were from the far reaches of either end of the social spectrum, on most Patients Notes, the social class designation was "average" or occasionally, "above average." Even when I requested the most wealthy patients, I was not given access to them. As I mention later in this chapter, the patients were certainly aware that this class of patients existed and often volunteered the names of such patients and their occupations and family links.

The other main limitation in the data, is the lack of female narratives as there are no women at the Unit. There are several reasons for this. In the majority ethnic Burman areas, women have traditionally had a very low level of drug use, including opium and alcohol. The exception is nicotine as many older women smoke enormous, fat cheroot cigars. Whilst there are a variety of factors that result in a low level of heroin use among women, the idiom of spirit possession bears special mention as it has traditionally been adopted primarily by women, and may perhaps be an idiom of distress adopted in some situations (as opposed to other idioms such as substance abuse). Another important factor is that

young women are usually well chaperoned by mothers, aunts, grandmothers, and fictive kin aunts and older sisters. I do not know of any female heroin addicts, although I heard mention of two who were incarcerated in the psychiatric hospital, but it may have been only a rumor. Associating with prostitutes, as well as alcohol and all other drug use is associated with men, with male peer groups, and with teashops. So too is heroin use in Myanmar. Young men have much more freedom than women at a younger age, and range about town in close knit age groups. Thus it is young men and boys who are given freedom, leisure time, and "pocket money," much more readily than their female siblings. As noted in chapter nine, the psychiatric hospital incarcerates very few women in their "forensic" ward and I do not know if there are other factors contributing to the lack of women also arrested for heroin abuse.

Another restriction in this data is the lack of interviews from family members. As I mention further on in the chapter, many of these young men have family members who are addicts, and it is not surprising that they do not visit their relatives in this institution. The emphasis on arrest and the criminalization of heroin use has resulted in a great stigma being attached to these men, and many families avoid visiting their relatives for the eight weeks of their incarceration. This would seem to be especially true for those young men caught in the cycle of heroin use, arrest, mandatory detoxification, release, followed by reusing heroin, arrest, and so on.

Unlike the patients at the adjoining psychiatric hospital, these young men are alert, coherent, and eager to tell their stories. They were all interviewed in the period following their initial two week intensive detoxification period. Emerging from this harrowing time, many of the patients began a period of reflection about their lives, one that resulted in either resignation to the probability of resuming the use pattern described above, or a desire (and sometimes a commitment) not to reuse. However, a large number of patients also refused to reflect upon their addiction, seeing no alternative life ways that could compare to the isolation and tranquility of the heroin sensation. Heroin addiction is a dominant image, a recurring thought during waking and sleeping hours for the young men who are surviving without heroin for the first time in several months (or years). Nevertheless, there is no confusion, sleepiness, or clumsiness as displayed by the heavily medicated patients interviewed at the psychiatric hospital. There are many long term studies of what is often referred to as "stable addict" populations who have continued heroin and methadone use intermittently for over twenty years (see for example, Rosenbaum 1981; Peele 1985; Senay 1985; Corty et al. 1987; Goldstein and Herrera 1995). These studies suggest that recovering heroin addicts may often be suffering from depression but that they are lucid and able to give coherent life stories to researchers.

11.2 Heroin in Myanmar: Consequences of the Regime and the Narcoeconomy

Ronald Renard, a member of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in Thailand, has criticized moral judgments made about the non-medical use of opium by Burmese scholars as well as the romanticism which pervades the literature on opium and heroin in Myanmar. He writes that the literature is:

> distorted by the romance of the so-called Golden Triangle and its warlords, caravans, illegal substances, rebels, and intrigue...More mundane, but no less significant, topics in relation to narcotics, such as the loss of social values, user communities, and rehabilitation efforts, are all too easily ignored (Renard, 1996: xvi).

In the introductory section concerning the narcoeconomy, recent scholarship tracing the links between the Burmese military, drug trafficking, and money laundering was cited. Renard also comments that:

> Those who do not see laws as a deterrent, mostly users themselves, are generally ignored in surveys of drug use. Perhaps because governmental authorities view narcotics users as repugnant or insignificant, they spend little time soliciting information from them. By doing so, however, narcotics authorities overlook a rich source of data (Renard, 1996: 10).

Renard is certainly correct in his assertion. The patients at the Yangon Drug Rehabilitation Unit are well aware of the presence of major heroin traffickers such as Khun Sa and Lo Hsing-han in Yangon, they have become household names. These young men are in no doubt as to the purposive collusion of the Generals with the Traffickers. Similarly, they are also adamant that the agenda of the military regime has, since 1989, been to addict the young male population. One shrewd young man in his early-twenties, Maung Chit Maung, noted that the government spectacles began at the same time as heroin flooded the Yangon market. In his opinion, heroin is supplied by the regime as one of several control tactics in response to the Strike (the name given to the 1988 democracy uprising). Maung Chit Maung believes that the government created spectacles in tandem with increasing the heroin supply:

> "All young people want to experiment. Rich people are more spoiled [corrupt/indolent], the poor steal [for heroin] here and there...heroin is produced in Myanmar so there is a ready supply in this country. I thought I used drugs early [in life], but now, ten-year-old boys are injecting. Before, there were only older boys in the alcohol shops. But now they are all youngsters. As I found out, youngsters are spoiled more after the Strike. That is related to the political situation. There was

a Strike[143] [in 1988] when I was in seventh standard. If boys used drugs, they didn't listen to anyone and wanted to offend the government. They held Strikes [in 1988] at the schools but those parties [newly formed political parties] broke up later. Some became underground [political parties]. The rest scattered around town. After the Strike, they [the SLORC] organized a lot of fun fairs. People didn't have time to work! Then people's interests changed and they started to become ruined. They themselves [SLORC] supplied heroin, but now they aren't. This is a political trick."

These young men profess a highly cynical attitude towards the regime, in part because of their education levels which are often much higher than the rest of the population. (When the universities are open, they are available to those students who are exceptionally bright, and to those students whose parents can afford to pay for school exams to be shown to the students in advance, and to those who can afford private tuition in addition to government schooling). The young men interviewed believe that the regime allowed the urban market to become flooded with heroin in the aftermath of the pro-democracy uprising in 1988. They also note that heroin is becoming increasingly expensive in Yangon and attribute this to the military. These are the young men who have refused to adopt the militarist rhetoric that saturates the country. Whilst many of their fathers and relatives are military officers, these patients are often the youngest members of their families, and as such are allowed more space in choosing a career than their older siblings. Their cynicism steers them away from the military life.

With the exception of the youngest addicts, most inpatients can trace the flood of heroin into an already expansive market back to the end of 1988, immediately following the Strike when heroin became cheap and codeine-based drugs such as Phensydyl[144] became expensive. This "trick," they believe, has resulted in a whole generation of Burmese youth to turn to heroin, as Maung Tun Aung Kyaw explains:

"There were more drug addicts after 1988 here. Probably this [heroin addiction] was a political trick. So much heroin came in at that time. Also freshers started using drugs. I saw dead bodies rolled in maps[145] just in front of me. They were

[143] Maung Chit Maung is referring to the failed pro-democracy uprising against the military regime in 1988 which is known as the "Strike." It is thought of as a combination of miniature "Strikes" organized by "Strike committees." At some of the miniature Strikes, Burmese monks became Myanmar's de-facto police, organizing, adjudicating, and marshaling the urban population as they have in previous times throughout Burmese history (Smith 1991:248).

[144] Phensydyl, pronounced "Fancydine" (ဖင်စိုက်ဒိုင်း) in Myanmar, is illegal.

[145] This young man is referring to the colorful maps of Myanmar printed by the Government printing presses that are sold on the black market. The maps are over a meter in both length and width and are sold on the streets in front of tourist areas. In 1988 when the military killed over three thousand demonstrators in the downtown Yangon area, the bodies were wrapped in whatever was at hand and the large maps were used for this purpose.

thrown by the roads. More and more [people used heroin] after the Strike."

The narratives given above indicate a desire on the part of recovering heroin addicts to communicate their feelings about their society. Like the psychiatric hospital however, narratives are of little use to the staff at the Yangon Drug Rehabilitation Unit where the focus is not on lifestyle, availability of heroin, or harm reduction. Rather, heroin addiction is perceived as predominantly a criminal issue, but also as medical and a moral issue.

11.3 The Yangon Drug Rehabilitation Unit

In chapter nine I suggested that the Yangon Psychiatric Hospital depoliticizes idioms of distress and suffering by a process of medicalization where the experience of illness is reduced to disease pathology. I have also asserted that the moral order of the psychiatric hospital hinges upon a logic of incarceration. Through these technologies of normalization (Foucault 1979), the Yangon Drug Rehabilitation Unit also becomes an organ of domination and an integral component of the military State. In this section I explore similar issues of medicalization, incarceration, and the existence of a moral ideology that draws upon anti-Western sentiment and orthodox Buddhist conceptions of narcotics.

The Yangon Drug Rehabilitation Unit (YDRU) lies within the grounds of the Yangon Psychiatric Hospital but is set apart from it. The majority of patients are involuntarily incarcerated, and all are registered.The head of the Drug Rehabilitation Unit is given the title of "Consultant." The Drug Rehabilitation Unit is the jewel in the crown of the regime's response to drug addiction in Myanmar. Like drug treatment centers in Thailand, the Burmese government is experimenting with the incorporation of elements of Theravada Buddhism in its program.[146] In mid 1996 I was told by the staff at the Drug Rehabilitation Unit that altogether there are 60,000 registered addicts, seventy-percent of whom are heroin addicts. Sixty to seventy-percent of registered addicts are HIV positive but this number increases to eighty to eighty-five percent of registered addicts in Mandalay and a staggering ninety to ninety-five percent of addicts are HIV positive in Kachin State.[147]

[146] There are six major drug treatment centers for training, research, and "drug related problems." There are twenty two smaller drug treatment centers.

[147] An article published in the *Indian Journal of Social Work* in 1989 gives an account of a one month stay in a Burmese detoxification center and in rehabilitation centers "in which the client receives vocational training and psychotherapy" (Gandevia 1989:61). Although a counseling room exists at the Yangon Drug Rehabilitation Unit, the precarious state of the health system in Myanmar has worsened significantly since the inception of the SLORC in 1989 when Gandevia's article was published, the research for which was conducted before the democracy uprising in 1988 in the last months of Ne Win's rule.

[148] There is an out-patient department for patients who have been through the program and who are advised to come in for regular monitoring for up to two years. This is the only follow up treatment that the patients receive, and patients rarely comply with the order to return regularly. Initial assessment is made here, and arrest cases are presented to the Hospital by the police. All patients have a physical examination and a urine test and sometimes a blood test. I understand this to mean that patients are occasionally tested without their consent for HIV. Detoxification lasts two weeks and then the patients work five days a week for the remaining six weeks of their mandatory rehabilitation. Patients "can choose what to do in the afternoons: painting, work, or meditation" (Consultant, YDRU, personal communication 1997). The average number of in-patients is eighty three. The program is funded in part by the World Health Organization (WHO).

Ronald Renard notes that because heroin and opium addiction were medicalized as diseases in late nineteenth century Britain, rehabilitation policies in Myanmar (influenced by the colonial administration) have most often aimed at rapid detoxification without adequate follow up. He states that:

> By 1930, two methods were being used in Burma: the immediate cessation of opium use (quitting "cold turkey") and gradual cessation. Some mild users were placed in prison, deprived of opium, and compelled to engage in heavy physical labor. Although managing to detoxify the patients, the "violent" suffering they underwent (League of Nations 1930:32) no doubt was a factor in the high rate of relapse" (Renard 1996: 79).

The current Consultant gave me the following interview about the day to day running of the Yangon Drug Rehabilitation Unit.[149] The interview suggests that there is no difference in the 1930 policy to the current policy, both are characterized by the violent suffering they inflict upon heroin users. We can also see a basic lack of biomedical knowledge as evident in the conflation of depression with psychosis and the reduction of a patient's symptoms upon admission at the Unit to "complications" that may impinge upon the successful statistics that the Unit is compiling. This suggests that although heroin addiction is medicalized as a disease, there is more to the therapeutic attitude than just medicalization. The Consultant reports that:

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[148] I had interviewed a large number of patients admitted for alcohol addiction to the Psychiatric Hospital. I asked the Consultant why some of the drug dependency patients were admitted to the psychiatric wards and others were admitted to the Drug Rehabilitation Unit. He explained to me that the patients at the Unit were "mentally OK" but had a "behavioral problem" whereas patients who were not deemed to be "mentally OK" were sent to the psychiatric wards. It would seem that alcohol abuse is primarily conceived of as a moral issue in Myanmar.

[149] This interview was given in English. The printed patient notes at the Drug Rehabilitation Unit are in English and the nurses and physicians notes are a mix of Burmese and a little English.

"Starting from 1976 they introduced methadone to this hospital. The UNFD (the old UNDCP) funded the methadone program. In Britain they use twenty to sixty milligrams. One-hundred milligrams is very rare. Here, if you give one-hundred-and-twenty milligrams of methadone, the patient may still seek another dose of heroin- so here I think we should [have to] give two-hundred milligrams. [He leans forward in his chair and begins ticking off points on his fingers.] It's hard because of (a) Purity (ninety to ninety-five percent). It's very high here, in the UK it's maybe twenty to thirty-percent, (b) Dose: patients here use from four to five, to fifteen to twenty milligrams of heroin per day. (In Europe, 0.5 to one milligram is the maximum dose). (c) Eighty to ninety-percent [of users] inject; (d) Frequency: In Europe two to three times per day. Here, twenty to thirty times per day. [Also] Type of drug: In Europe they usually use brown heroin (No. 3), the toxicity level or euphoria level may be less than the Golden Triangle area where it is white and very pure. Also, methadone is very expensive. Now we are utilizing opium liquid (tincture)[150] produced here at the Myanmar Pharmaceuticals Industry. We've used this since 1983."

"Can you tell me about the types of treatment you give here?"

"Most addicts start withdrawal in the night or the early morning. They often load up just before they come into the hospital. Eight to twelve hours (opium) and six to eight hours (heroin) "use"...There are two types of treatment (1) symptomatic, (2) gradual withdrawal. For symptomatic treatment it is seven days with very severe withdrawal symptoms. We give tranquilizers, analgesics, antihistamine, vitamins, and a drip. The symptoms usually disappear in seventy-two to ninety-six hours: no pain, muscle cramps, insomnia, etcetera. In order to decide if a patient is going to have the "symptomatic" treatment, he must be not under sixteen, [in case he has] suicidal tendencies, or over seventy-five-years-of-age [in case he has "complications"]. They must have been addicted for less than a year and not mixing drugs. If his motivation is good, [then we] go for symptomatic treatment."

"What do you mean by complications?"

"Complications: like lung, heart disease, depressive symptoms, tuberculosis: these [TB] patients may die within one or two days of completing symptomatic treatment, because opium is a very good cough suppressant. We've lost five patients this way in twenty eight years. Also hypertension, opium is a good tranquilizer."

"Can you explain what you mean by depressive symptoms?"

"Depression: hill tribes have a lack of facilities so they take opium for psychotic symptoms,[151] so if you stop the opium you may cause psychoses."

[150] This is opium oil, not methadone. It is used as a heroin substitute.

[151] The categories of differential diagnosis given to psychiatric patients are defined in the Glossary.

"You mentioned a second type of treatment- gradual withdrawal?"

"All Burmese hospitals use the gradual withdrawal program. Ninety-percent of patients detox with this regime. We combine opium or methadone."

"What is the dose?"

"For example, one gram per day, we usually give some tranquilizers, fifty milligrams per day and one-hundred milligrams overnight. We use chlorpromazine (and for alcohol [addiction]) because they already have a high tolerance. [As well] Analgesic/Paracetamol/Buspro- a good analgesic at three times [per day]. [In addition,] antihistamine with withdrawal, for lock jaw, [and for] sneezing, they need a high dose. As a last resort, Valium, Diazepam, twenty or thirty milligrams intravenously to knock down the patient."

There are apparent contradictions and inaccuracies in the Consultant's narrative. He suggests that heroin users inject twenty to thirty times per day but then concedes that the narcotic effect lasts about six to eight hours. He also believes that euphoria is directly related to quality. No mention is made by the staff of the long term effects of heroin use where users usually do not feel euphoria, but simply a release from pain.[152] The compulsory work that patients engaged in in 1930 is also continuing at the Drug Rehabilitation Unit.[153]

On my first official visit to the Drug Rehabilitation Unit I asked officials about the incidence of AIDS. They showed me a cell from which a man had just been taken to hospital. They explained to me that AIDS patients remain at the Unit until they are too weak to get up and it becomes a hazard for the staff to bathe them and clear out fecal matter and

[152] Stephens notes that "Tolerance describes an adjustment process whereby the body requires increasingly larger amounts of drug to achieve the same effects" (Stephens 1991:6) and cross-tolerance refers to the ability to transfer an addiction or tolerance level for one drug to another drug in the same pharmacological category, such as transferring the addiction of heroin to methadone (Stephens 1991:6-7). There are few long term physiological consequences to continuing to use heroin. Problems arise from allergic reactions to the substances used to dilute heroin, from infections at the site of injection, from overdoses, and from the psychological consequences of depression and anomie that may follow withdrawal (Hofmann 1975; Stephens 1991).

[153] The Consultant showed me the chicken breeding program which he is pioneering. There are approximately 550 chickens which the patients look after. The profits, the Consultant told me, go to the staff which discourages them from participation in what many patients assured me is a flourishing black market in psychiatric pharmaceuticals. In addition to chicken husbandry, there are sixteen pigs and twenty-six piglets. The Consultant told me that he used 300,000 kyats of his own money to start the project. He estimates he can make 100,000 kyats per month from the industry, and based on the price of a scrawny chicken in Burmese markets at the time of the interview (600 kyats), I think this is a realistic estimate assuming there are enough people who can afford to buy chickens. Two of the hospital staff work as supervisors, and five work as farmers. The Consultant believes that "Many patients are very happy in their job." He went on to tell me that "in six months I'd like to open an extension at Hlaingthayar. I'm going to organize ten to twenty ex-addicts to start a project. The money comes from their parents" [again, the Consultant is showing shrewd business sense]. The Consultant also wishes to open a tea shop run by ex-addicts and a workshop for repairing machinery in the hospital. On a previous tour of the facilities I was shown patients welding hospital beds together.

bedding from the cell. The threshold point seems to be when patients become incontinent. They are then removed to a hospital to die. They do not receive any AIDS treatment at the Drug Rehabilitation Unit. I was shown a chart which ran the length of the wall and, if one looked hard enough and over a large enough period of time, one could discern a slight decrease in the number of heroin addicts. However one of the senior staff enthusiastically told me about his plans for longitudinal studies of heroin addicts ten or fifteen years further on. I found this bureaucratic compilation of statistics obscene, since he had just finished telling me that approximately ninety-percent of all patients at the Unit are HIV positive.[154] This knowledge is not imparted to patients. They are tested without their knowledge or consent and no treatment or counseling is offered to them. Patient Notes often state that a patient has been tested for HIV, but all the patients deny giving consent or knowing about the tests or the results. The inanity of creating long term studies on patients, almost all of whom will certainly be dead in fifteen years time, epitomized to me the regime's approach to health. The studies created at the WHO funded "documentation center" allow the government to legitimize its incarceration of young people, forcing them through the extremely painful withdrawal process, testing them for HIV without consent, and then sending them out into the same heroin culture with the full knowledge that they will return regularly until they finally overdose or die from AIDS. This is the Burmese road to "Health for All by 2000."[155]

The keeping of Patient Notes seems to be a half-hearted exercise at the Drug Rehabilitation Unit. Crude stereotypes are created regarding ethnicity and religion. For example, Muslims and Christians are regularly represented in the Notes as Buddhists.[156] Patient Notes are also frequently wrong about the "social class" of the in-patient, and the Additional Form which asks about sexual preferences and practices is rarely filled out. Because of the regularity with which most patients are sent to the Unit, the Notes for each subsequent admission become briefer. In fact, these notes are frequently up to four years

[154] This contradicts the figure of 60-70% also given to me by Drug Rehabilitation Staff ten months earlier.

[155] The motto of the WHO is "Health for All by 2000." In order to achieve its aim, the WHO has engaged in a number of research activities with the Ministry of Health in Yangon and has supplied HIV test kits. I am concerned about the lack of informed consent in Myanmar. For example, in a 1992 study published in *The Lancet*, Frerichs et al. studied serum and saliva from a variety of Burmese subcultures such as intravenous drug addicts and prostitutes who were selected "by health officials according to a protocol" (Frerichs et al. 1992:1497). In my experience in both hospitals and in the relocated townships, informed consent has never been sought in Myanmar for any type of medical research. A variety of such studies have been conducted using subjects from the both "registered" list of drug addicts and from the general population and the ethics of conducting studies without informed consent must be seriously questioned. In the event that informed consent is sought, I have witnessed this form of "voluntary" participation in government health programs and it inevitably involves the threat of loss of privileges in the community (which can include losing jobs, etc.). Burmans have no concept of "voluntary participation," they have never had the option of saying "no" and this needs to be made a central issue with those organizations such as the Department of Epidemiology at UCLA who conduct collaborative research with the military regime.

[156] The Consultant's use of the term "hill tribes" is now politically incorrect in Myanmar where the regime is designating ethnic minorities as "National Races." Implicit in the junta's rhetoric regarding heroin and AIDS is that these "evils" are spread by the ethnic minorities, especially those who are not Buddhists.

out of date. For example, I regularly read Notes which stated that a particular patient smoked heroin and didn't have track marks when in fact the patient had been injecting heroin for the past several years and had new track marks on his body.

As in most parts of the world, substance addiction is considered to be a criminal issue. The way that the staff at the Unit refer to patients as "cases" which is also the word used for legal action (as in a "court case") illustrates that patients are conceived mainly in criminal terms by the staff and this is one of the reasons for which the staff comply with the "violent suffering" inflicted upon the young addicts. Renard argues that contemporary Burmese narcotics laws "result from the criminalization of dangerous drugs; in themselves, these laws cause part of the problem." In 1974 the junta created the *Narcotic and Dangerous Drugs Law* which "called for the compulsory medical treatment of all narcotic users," the penalties for drug use and trafficking varied between the death sentence and ten years imprisonment, and these terms were increased in 1983 (Renard 1996:52). There are several pieces of legislation under which patients have been sent to either the Drug Rehabilitation Unit or to Insein Jail, such as *Drug Act 15* which is regularly used by township judges to deal with anyone the police arrest. This has come to include young men sitting in teashops who have track marks on their arms irrespective of whether they are found to be in possession of heroin or needles (which are still illegal).[157] Absconding from the Drug Rehabilitation Unit is a criminal offense. Quite often it is the patient's family, especially the mother, who returns her son to the Drug Rehabilitation Unit. One teenager told me he feels lucky to have been arrested so that he can be forcibly made to undergo detoxification. Maung Ohn Shwe proudly related to me his refusal to inform on his heroin supplier or to cooperate with the police in any way:

> "In Malaysia, when my brother went out to work, I went out to look for heroin. So my brother sent me back [to Yangon]. But my mother [had] sent me Malaysia so I wouldn't spoil [i.e. become spoiled because of the indolent lifestyle of wealthy children in Yangon]. At that time, my father was still alive and she didn't want me [here]. But my sister thought I would be even more spoiled there so they sent me back here. My income was 60-70,000 kyats per month. Actually, I'm very lucky that I've been arrested with the *Drug Act*. My headmistress found me out, they didn't get [any] needles when they caught me. They ask where I could buy it...[but] I kept refusing."

[157] The issue of being caught with needles as implying that an individual is involved in an illegality is similar to the arrest by police of women caught carrying condoms since they are thought to be prostitutes. Needles and condoms, the bread and butter of NGO public health programs, are used by the police as evidence of criminal intent.

Unlike Maung Ohn Shwe, many patients are ambivalent about entering the program. They realize the danger of their continuing addiction but they also resent their involuntary incarceration as this statement by Maung Khin Maung Maung suggests:

> "I was arrested in 1994 not because I used drugs, but because I ran away from the hospital. It wasn't that I could stand [to be] with[out] drugs. We all four friends planned and ran away from the hospital. Then we didn't go back to our homes, we went and stayed at a friend's house. I want to give up heroin, [because] eventually I'll suffer."

One consequence of the criminalization of opium and heroin is the creation of a lucrative black market that reduces the efficacy of the Unit as a drug-free space for rehabilitation. The Consultant has mentioned to me his desire to stop the flourishing black market trade in pharmaceuticals in which some staff at the Psychiatric Hospital and the Drug Rehabilitation Unit are engaged. Patients at both of these centers have spoken to me of the great demand for drugs by the inmates, and they include Insein Jail in this categorization. Not only are drugs sold by some staff members outside the hospital, they are also sold to patients, and drugs are brought in by family members and friends which are sold at great profit especially in the Drug Rehabilitation Unit where the patients are much wealthier than in the Psychiatric Hospital. The black market trade in drugs causes tension and discord and in the following case of Maung Kyaw Sein, a man in his early-twenties,[158] leads sometimes to violence and imprisonment:

[158] To my surprise, many of my conversations with patients at the Unit involved much laughter and ironic comments as patients reflected upon the mistakes they believe they had made in their lives. I think in part this is because these interviews were conducted towards the end of my fieldwork when I had learned how to "joke" in Burmese. I had originally thought Burmans had a macabre sense of humor and it took some daring to venture making jokes since they are frequently made on sensitive issues. For example, one well educated man was explaining to me how, as his bags of heroin grew larger at each purchase, he used the money from his business. I said to him laughingly, "So you pretty much used up all the profit from your business!" He thought this was hilarious and responded, guffawing loudly, "Not just the profit, also all the capital!"

Many of the interviews began in a relaxed way because after my first day at the Unit, every in-patient knew my name, my university affiliation, and the purpose of my visits. They also knew the questions I was asking. I would begin each interview by attaining informed consent but patients began holding up a hand and waving it the air saying in Burmese, "Yes, yes, I know, I know, get on with it! Ask me the questions!"

In the present narrative the patient begins in a serious tone to tell me the story of his addiction but when he starts recounting the laws under which he has been imprisoned, we begin to laugh. He adopts a comical, thoughtful pose and then recites yet another law which he has broken. Just as quickly the conversation becomes serious again as he reflects upon his desire for heroin. Above all, these humorous interludes emphasized to me the youth of the patients, they are from a new generation who are less afraid to speak their mind and to satirize their own position and that of the regime.

"I've been here nine or ten times. My childhood was just normal. I've been ruined since I was twelve-years-old. I took pills, drunk Phensydyl and chewed betel leaves. At seventeen I started injecting heroin. I just tried the popular things, I didn't have any intentions [to become an addict or to use regularly] then. My family life was happy. My family didn't know I had been addicted since 1992. At that time a bottle cost fifteen kyats[159] and I had to go to Kyeh Taw township to inject. I injected up to four or five times a day with my own needles. The reasons why most young people in Myanmar use drugs is because of so much unemployment, they are bored and hanging around and injecting heroin with friends. I injected until 1990. Then I stopped it in 1991. I started again in 1992 and I injected one to two bottles per day at eighty kyats a bottle.[160] I smoked with others and also injected. I didn't know whether I could give up or not at the time but when I got out from hospital I decided to stop it. As for the last time, I didn't give it up. I was upset when I separated from my girlfriend. She was Burmese, a Buddhist, living in [name of town withheld]. Her parents got her married [arranged for her marriage]. I can forget about the disappointment [of the arranged marriage] when I'm using drugs. The feeling that I get when I'm using drugs is very good. You'll know better when you use it yourself...I met with professional injectors originally, using my own needles. They charged five kyats. I didn't know how to inject then. I got heroin near Kyimindine market...near the fire station. I usually picked up the heroin from houses. If you buy two bottles a day, they'll do home delivery. I bought three bottles a day so there was no need to go out and collect it. I used a quarter of a bottle at a time. A half bottle for the morning, a half bottle at noon, and half a bottle at four p.m. and a half bottle at midnight.

I never share needles with others. I've bought so many of my own. In the case of sharing needles, I use [mine] first and then I give it to others... I've been arrested before, but I solved it outside myself [i.e. was able to bribe police or local township officials]. I want to give up drugs, but I like it too. And also I have pain. When I attended this hospital in 1992, I faced people from upstairs and downstairs fighting in that building. [It was] because Artein (like Diazepam) which we could not get in the hospital, was not being shared equally, so we fought for it. The doctors came and solved the problem, but we fought again because we were all going crazy. At that time 1500 tablets [lit. "pieces of drugs"] came in. I got ninety tablets. I took them while I was fighting. I didn't understand/comprehend anything, I just wanted to stop [people] with my knife. It was on my mind. The people from downstairs locked the door. But we really fought. So the head doctor sent us, three of us, to

[159] Heroin is measured in sixty milligram penicillin bottles. A penicillin bottle is known as a *Da-zeiq* and the most common dose is one quarter of a *Da-zeiq*. In 1992, a penicillin bottle full of heroin would have cost approximately 12.5 U.S. pennies in Yangon (at an exchange rate of 120 kyats to the U.S. dollar).

[160] Eighty kyats is approximately sixty-seven U.S. pennies (at an exchange rate of 120 kyats to the U.S. dollar).

the police station. I stayed inside for four and a half months. Then they sent me to Insein Jail. Because my family paid them very well, I could stay well in the jail. Since then, I've felt pained that I've been charged with *Drug Act 15* when I was trying to give up. Also *Act 61* because I destroyed hospital assets. [Also] *Act 19c* because I held a weapon, a knife. I was trying to set fire to the hospital because I was going mad with drugs. I drank for six months after leaving the hospital. Then I met with my old friends. My family never complained. They allowed me to drink as much as I liked, Mom prepared it for me, but "Not Drugs." I refused the first time I met with my friends, also the second, but I couldn't refuse the third time because there were a lot of people injecting and smoking in front of me...Some people use heroin because it is a popular item. But for us, we actually like it."

This narrative reveals a glimpse of the culture and conditions of the Drug Rehabilitation Unit. The accommodation area is a L-shaped concrete building built by the British which, since it is part of the psychiatric hospital and was originally a Jail, has large metal doors on each of the "cells." The upstairs section consists of a large dormitory and patients who have completed the two week detoxification program are lodged in this dormitory. They are thus without drugs such as the tincture of opium given to those undergoing "symptomatic treatment" and this explains the level of discord which exists between "upstairs" and "downstairs." A definite hierarchy related to wealth and "upstairs versus downstairs" exists in the hospital. In addition, the ground floor contains the nurses station and the documentation center. This accommodation is temporary. Previously the Drug Rehabilitation Unit has been in another area of the Psychiatric Hospital and some of the metal doors (replete with bars) had been removed.[161]

The heroin addicts at the Drug Rehabilitation Unit inscribe on their bodies the political economy of the military regime, and its relentless drive to create the utopian vision of the Union of Myanmar. Their track marks, thrombosed veins and subcutaneous abscesses signify the history of the "political trick" which they believe has been perpetrated upon them by the regime. Track marks carve into the body of young men their criminality and their lack of rights regarding arrest and incarceration. Their identity, inscribed into the

[161] The original plan was to move the Drug Rehabilitation Unit to a vacant piece of land adjoining the northern end of the Psychiatric Hospital. However, the building of the Tooth Relic pagoda has necessitated a certain amount of Psychiatric Hospital land to be relinquished to the government. This is turn has meant that the Staff quarters have had to be rebuilt and the Drug Rehabilitation Unit was relocated. There are plans to move the entire Psychiatric Hospital and Drug Rehabilitation Unit further out of town, about two miles away from the airport. I have heard two explanations for this. The first is that it is not deemed acceptable by the regime to have "insane people and drug addicts" in close proximity to the Tooth Relic pagoda. This reasoning is consistent with the moral order of both the psychiatric hospital and the rehabilitation unit. The more pragmatic reason is that the fifty acres of the Psychiatric Hospital site has become prime real estate which the regime can put to different use. The temporary site on which the Drug Rehabilitation now sits is thus in need of paving, painting, and so on, and these are tasks in which the patients are engaged in the afternoons.

flesh around their veins, marks them as criminals in the eyes of the police and often the judges as well. One man related to me his tale of being in a police station lock-up for fourteen days. He was picked up at a teashop because police saw track marks. A large sense of injustice is felt by those people who are arrested because of their track marks, especially when they have just completed a mandatory detoxification program and have not as yet succumbed again to No. 4.[162]

The current junta's attitude to narcotic use (that it is "evil") has been influenced by a list of historical factors (see Renard 1996; Smith 1991) that includes orthodox Buddhism and has Buddhist moral overtones. Renard argues that "Because strict Buddhists traditionally refrained from taking narcotic drugs and because the writers of Burmese chronicles in the pre-colonial era tended towards Buddhist orthodoxy, little about opium is recorded in early Burmese writings" (Renard 1996:xiii). Renard notes that in the fourteenth century, kings who controlled the Mon and Burman river deltas were discouraging the use of opium. Renard believes that the use of opium was generally confined to the lower social classes and that prior to the British colonization, opium's "use was under control in the Burman societal fabric" (Renard 1996:17). The author argues that "Even today, the consumption of *sura maraya* (drink and, as interpreted by many Buddhists in Burma, opiates) is considered sinful [italics added] (Renard 1996:17). Renard writes that in contemporary Myanmar, "it is almost as if the Buddhist injunction against intoxicants has spread to the scholars writing about Burma" (Renard 1996:xiv).

This Buddhist morality informs many people's attitudes towards narcotics in Myanmar and it is, I believe, a reason for the Unit's staff, and for monks participating in the regime's rehabilitation program. In recent years this Buddhist morality has been appropriated by the Generals. The State-sponsored media accuses Great Britain and the United States of: "creating the problem of narcotic drugs all along since the 19th century...These miseries will continue to burn all mankind ceaselessly. Black opium, white opium and their appendage AIDS will destroy all throughout the world who do not seek refuge in the Three Gems" (NLM 1996m:5). The Three Gems (the Buddha, the Sangha, and the Dhamma) refer to the particular constellation of Theravada Buddhism as it is practiced in Myanmar. This rhetoric is one example of the many ways in which the regime is aligning itself with orthodox Buddhist interpretations of narcotic use and is part of a broader strategy to portray the dictatorship as striving for drug control. The public spectacles of burning narcotics has become a common propaganda technique designed for international consumption. In addition, a newly created narco-museum in the midst of the Golden Triangle is a monument built by the Generals to immortalize their efforts at narcotics eradication. The belief that narcotics users are evil is overlaid with the belief that they have a disease and that they are criminals. This heavily loaded combination of labels seeks to contain a significant political threat. Unlike the psychiatric hospital in which the

[162] No.4 heroin is the white, refined powder and No.3 is brown heroin which requires additional refining to reach the purity of No.4 heroin.

moral order I have described earlier is tacit and covert, at the Drug Rehabilitation Unit it is the *raison d'etre*. Incarceration, arrest, and registration occurs as these young men present a danger to the regime in several ways.

To begin with, this is an educated, young group of men from average to high social classes who have powerful and wealthy families. As I have mentioned above, they have foregone the opportunity to become the "sons of the nation" by joining the military where many of these men would swiftly rise to officer class and they would have the opportunity to attend the Tatmadaw's elite military academies. They are also cynical enough to realize that the Burmese Sangha is virtually impotent against the regime, and that many monks have been suborned. These young men and teenage boys are suspended, then, between the two means of gaining power in Burmese society. But with the opening up of the economy in 1994, merchants are again becoming a wealthy class in urban Myanmar and some of the patients at the Drug Rehabilitation Unit have chosen this path. What really worries the regime however, is that in conjunction with rejecting the vision of a totalitarian Buddhist utopia, the Unit's patients are in a prime position to join with the pro-democracy student movement. Their education, their links with other students, their age, and their indulgent families are a combination of factors that makes this heroin generation a potential political threat to the military junta. In addition, the affluence of this young elite generation makes them visible to the international media and this is another reason for the regime incarcerating its addicts. Although this generation may perhaps have been wantonly addicted by a dictatorship intent on suppressing political opposition, there is no doubt that addicts, like prostitutes, beggars, and homeless children, have no future in the totalitarian dream that is being enacted by the Generals.

11.4 The Spectrum of Drug Use in Urban Myanmar

Heroin is part of a wide spectrum of pervasive drug use throughout Myanmar and the majority of patients at the Drug Rehabilitation Unit have a history of a range of drug use. This fact is recognized by the staff at the Unit and in the Patient Notes eleven drugs are listed for the admitting medical officer to check off, and there is also a section for "other" drugs. Increasingly with the recent establishment of metamphetamine producing laboratories in Shan State (with either the direct involvement, protection, or "blind eye" of the military involved), Speed, Ecstasy and other "tabs" can be found in Myanmar. The drugs listed in the patient notes are: "heroin,[163] opium, pethidine, morphine, codeine (sic) (comethazine) methadone, marijuana, methaqualone, nitrazepan, barbiturates, Diazepam (Valium)."

[163] Smoking heroin commonly precedes injection, either intramuscularly, subcutaneously, or intravenously, and smoking was the preferred technique of use for American soldiers in Vietnam (Robbins 1973).

It is my argument that it is the availability and low price of heroin after 1988 which is the primary reason why it is the current "drug of choice" among young people. Other reasons for the popularity of heroin will be elaborated in the following section. Besides heroin however, there are a large number of drugs which offer Burmans freedom and numbness away from their everyday world as the following interview with Maung San Hlaing, a man in his late-twenties, suggests:

> "I live in [Yangon township name withheld]. Both my parents are alive...I'm a driver. I drink alcohol when I come home.
> *Can you tell me about your childhood. For example, was it happy?*
> I grew up by working. I studied until eighth standard. I got married when I was twenty-four-years-old. I drink alcohol but I'm not addicted. I'm also not addicted to Diazepam. I take one or two pills [Diazepam] when I can't sleep without alcohol. But they think I'm addicted so they sent me here. I drink alcohol as I like. I drink it only after dinner, I do not drink it every day. I don't think I'm addicted. I drink alcohol because it gives me freedom. I drink alcohol within a limit, so it's OK. I take Diazepam only at night when I can't sleep."

As noted above, the population of heroin users at the Drug Rehabilitation Unit is educated, wealthy, and mobile, and many parents send their children to other Asian nations in an effort to get them away from peer pressure and the severe unemployment combined with the abundance of cheap, highly refined heroin. However, many parents don't realize that their children are already addicted, and their lives become a desperate search for heroin or replacement drugs in these other countries. This is especially dangerous since many Asian nations carry severe drug penalties such as mandatory death sentences for heroin use, importation, or trafficking. Several patients spoke of the less pure No.3 heroin (as opposed to the preferred and most abundant form of heroin in Myanmar, No.4) which they purchased in countries such as Malaysia and Taiwan as a substitute for No.4.

Many patients describe self-medicating, that is, trying to use drugs with less addictive power which still have a little of "the taste" of heroin. One patient describes alcohol and another cigarettes as having vaguely "heroin-like" properties. One older man (over forty-years-of-age) described taking morphine both intravenously and intramuscularly to try to alleviate the pain associated with heroin withdrawal, only to find himself addicted to morphine. He still finds this preferable to being addicted to heroin. In fact a great many long time heroin users have a barbiturate dependency.

As well as self-medicating, many patients use a multiple drug regime as a harm reduction strategy. Opium, Diazepam, and marijuana are singled out as drugs which can occasionally be substituted for heroin, and can aid in ameliorating heroin withdrawal pain and sleeplessness. One young, unemployed, single man who is on the "red card" list (i.e.

suicide watch) describes self-medicating in order to stop his heroin addiction. He reported taking Diazepam to sleep and codeine for the pain of withdrawal symptoms. Other patients try to switch from injecting to smoking to lessen the harm of continual injections and the risk of using shared needles. And finally, parents will let their children indulge in other potentially harmful activities if that diverts them from heroin use. One patient told me how his parents allowed him to drink alcohol for six months after leaving the Drug Rehabilitation Unit, and his mother even prepared it for him so long as he would try to stay away from heroin.

11.5 The Changing Pattern of Drug Use in Yangon

The influx of Burmese and Afghani heroin to North America has led to the average age of the heroin using population dropping dramatically in the last decade and a switch from cocaine to heroin use (The Economist 1995) (and it is no coincidence that this is the period of the SLORC/SPDC's patronage of the heroin trade). In Myanmar the sheer abundance has led to changing patterns of consumption. Prior to 1988 drugs containing codeine which were smuggled into Myanmar were the drugs of choice. After 1988 the floodgates of heroin opened up, addicting a generation of young men. In the past few years the price of heroin has been steadily increasing, but the wealth of the military class has also been increasing since the junta selectively opened up the marketplace to foreign trade and has allowed limited growth of the private sector.

Heroin use among children from ten to fourteen-years-of-age is very common in Yangon. Heroin is available at schools, at teashops neighboring schools, as well as houses around schools. Similarly, heroin is abundant on university campuses as the following vignettes illustrate. The first statement is given by Maung Tun Lwin, a man in his late teens:

> "I've come here three times. I live with my parents. I'm in final year at [name of institution withheld]. I started using drugs in 1993. I made friends with drug addicts and I became one. I've got a supply...People living here are mostly drug addicts because some like the taste and some can spend a lot. A cheap price and high supply are also main factors. The main thing is that we can get the things very easily. Some other drugs can also be found easily...I can get this drug from teashops, from my work and my colleagues."

> "I live with my parents in [Yangon township, name withheld]. I sat for my tenth standard exam. I don't have any particular desire to get out of this hospital yet. I've been here twice. I've been a drug addict since 1992. I tried drugs with my friends at school and I've been addicted since then. I've already tried all other drugs, but I like

heroin."

"I could get heroin near my school so when school was over, I'd inject first and then go back to my house."

"Drugs are very common here. You can get them anywhere. And the price is not so high. People can get them easily so they try them easily. When I wanted heroin I asked others to get it for me, I also went along [to the sellers]. After I knew the sellers, I bought it by myself. I was injected by a friend. I never share needles. I want to give up drugs. I could stop using it if I didn't meet with my friends."

Until about 1994 the pattern of heroin consumption was that children, teenagers, and young men would begin taking cough medicine's such as *Brown's* which contained codeine. After that they would seek out codeine tablets and then move on to barbiturates such as Diazepam. Opium was the next substance (or Methaqualone), and finally heroin. However, the plentifulness, ease of availability, and increasing incomes means that even as the price of heroin rises, children are beginning to start with heroin and within a week are addicted. As one man told me, "heroin is easier to buy than candy." Another patient told me it was available on every street in Yangon. The following vignettes illustrate his point:

"I started using drugs in [date withheld] when I was fourteen-years-old. I started with heroin. I started injecting because it was good. I used it together with my friend. Nothing happened the first one or two times. But I became addicted after the third or fourth time. The house which sold heroin was just beside mine so I was curious to inject."

"Drugs are actually hard to find and are expensive. Things are not so impoverished and there are a lot of barriers. It costs 2000 kyats per bottle.[164] They sell drugs with connections, by [continually] changing places."

It is extremely easy to watch drug sales being conducted. In Yankin township, for example, there is a large number of military and public servant housing complexes. The children of this non-poor class (I hesitate to call them working or middle class, such distinctions have little resonance in Myanmar) are able to afford to buy clothing, western appliances and other accoutrements perceived to be associated with modernity including heroin. In this township heroin is sold on virtually every street corner with little pretense. I have seen bags of white powder changing hands many times. The dealers simply smile at me when they realize I understand what is occurring. When I mentioned this to two patients at the Drug Rehabilitation Unit, one told me that: "All levels of people use drugs

[164] 2000 kyats is equivalent to US $12 (at a rate of 164 kyats to the US dollar).

here. I got drugs from tea shops, then private houses, and by the roadside." The second man, Maung Chit Hlaing, told me about his arrest and incarceration for a month in 1994:

> "I was arrested for a month in 1994. At that time, things[drugs] were easily available in Yankin township. Not because my friends persuaded me to do so, but because I followed in their steps. The people who live in Yankin township are mostly government servants so their sons use drugs while their parents go to work."

One of the older patients at the unit, U Lin Yone, a man approaching forty years-of-age, has been using drugs since 1974. His story illustrates the older generation of users who follow the previous consumption plan of moving "up" the scale of "hardness" of drugs:

> "I'm married. I have a...child. I've been here four times. I've used drugs since '74. I [first] tried smoking heroin with friends and I liked the taste. Then I changed from heroin to morphine because heroin is difficult to buy. But heroin is the best which I like most. I've liked it since [my] school years when I hung with my friends here and there. I want a cure for these drugs and I'll try to [give up heroin] because my son is getting older. When I used drugs, I didn't want parents, a wife, and children."

11.6 Reasons given for taking drugs

In the previous sections I have elaborated a number of reasons which heroin addicts at the Yangon Drug Rehabilitation Unit give for their use of heroin. In this section I discuss the modern character of heroin in urban Myanmar and the fundamental importance of peers to Burmans of all ages, but especially teenagers and young men.

It was with a decidedly malicious sense of glee that the patients told me about various Generals' sons and relatives as well as famous Burmese actors who were currently undergoing detoxification whom I was never intended to meet. I have not been able to verify if these patient's actually existed, but I did meet a famous Burmese actress who had come to tour the facility in order to decide whether or not to patronize it. About fifty yards away from the main cell block there is a small colonial building flanked by beautiful (paper flower) trees in which the meditation room and two private rooms are located. These rooms have usually non-functional air conditioning systems as well as chairs, a coffee table, and a private toilet and sink. I met two of the patients in these private rooms, they were both young men who had made their own money through companies and thus were not directly linked to high ranking military personnel.

The population of the Drug Rehabilitation Unit share several characteristics. I have been able to identify the heroin culture at various teashops and restaurants based on these characteristics. Many of the patients wear long sleeves which is very unusual in Burma except during the cool, dry season from December to February. They do so to hide the track marks made by repeated injections into the veins in their arms and hands. For the same reason, many patients wear trousers. Sometimes these track marks look like terrible burns or blisters following the veins. After the first week or so, patients stopped wearing long-sleeved shirts when they came to speak with me (these interviews were conducted in the hot season). After this time the patients seemed to have come to some sort of collective decision about me, and the narratives flowed quickly and frankly. A few patients declined to be interviewed, they were very young and from mountainous areas and were of various ethnicities. I asked one of these young men where he bought heroin and he replied, "in the jungle."

The track marks that identify heroin users bring together two populations who have historically not had good relations, Burmans and Chinese. As mentioned earlier, the ethnic Chinese Wa and Kokang and the remnants of Chang Kai-Shek's Kuomingtang Army (KMT) have played (and continue to play) a major role in the heroin trade in Myanmar and ethnic Burmans become enraged at the degree of Chinese ownership of northern cities such as Mandalay. In this culture of heroin addiction however, ethnic Chinese men are often connected to sources of supply or have moved to Yangon from Upper Myanmar. In either case, they are one of the less impoverished sectors of Burmese society and are thus vulnerable to the lure of heroin.

In Myanmar, kinship links can, as I have demonstrated in earlier chapters, be very strong. But they can also lie inactivated unless both parties desire these bonds (Nash 1965). In general, horizontal rather than vertical linkages are emphasized in terms of friendships, with the exception of the powerful figure of the grandmother in Burmese society who continues to wield significant power in the household, especially over younger females. Horizontal kinship linkages are less important on a practical level than fictive kinship, especially the fictive kin brother relationship. Age mates have come to have special significance since the 1962 military coup because individuals have, as I have described in earlier chapters, come to trust only that group of friends and relatives with whom they have grown up and gone to school. It is impossible to overestimate the extreme importance of peer group approval in Myanmar, especially for young males. Bekker and Guillon offer psychological explanations for this phenomenon. Guillon states that a "non conceptualized sense of belonging" in Burma "must be mediated by the other" (Guillon 1976:189). In other words the Burmese sense of self is in large part defined according to one's relationships with others: a deeply social sense of self. Guillon implies that this social orientation is fostered by Buddhism which is evident in lack of a term for "I" in the Burmese language.

As detailed earlier, Sarah Bekker has examined the concept of *anade* to understand Burmese interpersonal and even international relations. She concludes that *anade* makes a consideration of the feelings of others of paramount importance. Anade acts as a restraint against behavior which could in some way offend, anger, or humiliate another person. I was surprised to learn that almost all the patients whom I interviewed believed that not wanting to offend their peers, and wanting to be part of a group of friends, could so easily lead to heroin use. The strength of horizontal kinship linkages and peer dynamics (involving Guillon's deeply socialized sense of self, and Bekker's description of anade), lead to a view of young male interpersonal relations as extremely powerful in youth decision making processes.

In recent years the selective opening up of the Burmese economy has meant that department stores selling luxury and Western merchandise have recently began operating in Yangon. The desire for consumer goods is enough to drive some girls into prostitution. This is a process that is increasing as global capitalism reaches into local worlds creating a desire for modernity. Heroin has become associated with modernity and its relentless consumption. The image of the modern young person in Myanmar today is of a young man riding a motorbike bedecked in leather jacket and dark sunglasses. A slim Burman beauty sits behind him. The desire for popularity and the approval of peers in youth culture thus includes popularity with girls and being seen participating in glamorous activities and trendy places. Unfortunately heroin has become a "glamorous" drug in many parts of the world, and Myanmar is no exception as the following interviews by a university student, Maung Zali Maw, and a school student, Maung Lei, attest:

> "I started using drugs in 1993. I didn't think this drug could affect me so much. I just tried it for fun. I also tried other drugs as a youth. That doesn't mean I was only interested in drugs, but I'm familiar [in proximity] to drugs. I used drugs not because I was bored but because school time is just so much fun. We were just smoking and drinking for fun. As a student here it's quite free at school and we skip classes to have fun. Not all the people who skip class are drug addicts. If you make friends with drug addicts and are persuaded by them because you are interested, [then] you'll try [drugs]. If your friends don't do that and they are good boys, you definitely won't try drugs. But for myself, I wouldn't take the initiative and try drugs. Here the rate of drug addicts is high because the number of people who like drugs is high. The reasons that people are forced to use drugs are: "closeness/familiarity/proximity" to drugs, their background, and their family and social problems which make them upset. Also related to these factors are the cheap price and high supply. There are drug addicts at all the universities and things [i.e. drugs] can be bought there."

"I am [a teenager]. Now I'm in [school year withheld]. Now it's the holidays. I've been here once, my family sent me. I used drugs the first time because my friends persuaded me. Young people in Myanmar, some feel proud being drug addicts. Some like heroin. Girls like drug addicts because they can talk very well. They don't know what they're saying but all the words are poetic."

The combination of affluence, unemployment and boredom also afflicts this group of Burmans who watch familiar aspects of culture which Burmans describe as "traditional culture" disappearing, and realize that without a livelihood they cannot have access to the consumer society in the manner of their parents. Since 1988, universities and some other education institutions have been intermittently closed including a period of several years after the democracy uprising and since December, 1996. For those students lucky enough to have obtained a degree, there are almost no professional positions available. It seems that most of the taxi drivers in Yangon have a degree in physics or engineering. As Renard notes, many young men have moved to ruby and jade mining areas where lawlessness, heroin addiction, HIV, and prostitution flourish (Renard 1996:75).

Affluent Burmans give their children substantial "pocket money" which is augmented by money from grandparents and other relatives. This money is enough to maintain a heroin habit and the illegality of heroin only makes it more desirable to peer groups who are bored and unemployed. The satellite receivers of the military families and the urban nouveau riche show young Burmans a lifestyle previously unimagined in Myanmar. They learn of a lifestyle where "entertainment" and "leisure" have become industries, rather than the voyeuristic experience of an unemployed generation of young Burmese men. Tennis courts, swimming pools, and international sports competitions are mentioned wistfully by these young men and who realize that in other parts of the world young people often have access to a wide range of leisure activities denied to Burmans. The following vignettes by Maung Mhu Aung and Maung Aye Maung give a sense of this desire:

"Generally there are a lot of drug addicts in Myanmar as there are a lot of drug sellers. There are some other reasons: there is not much leisure here such as swimming pool facilities, tennis courts, without charges. If we could get those, youngsters wouldn't head that way. But now they charge in every way so people head for drugs."

"The reason why most youngsters from Myanmar use drugs is so many are unemployed and bored, hanging around and injecting heroin with their friends."

I was often tempted to ask the young men at the Drug Rehabilitation Unit about the level of supervision they receive from both parents and teachers. The patients often remarked on the lack of supervision at school and the ease with which school can be skipped. Unfortunately a significant proportion of patients interviewed were not "persuaded" to use heroin by their peers, but by family members who were already addicted. Brothers, uncles, and sometimes fathers do not make any effort to dissuade the younger members of their families from trying heroin. Several patients told me that their brothers had warned them to stay away from heroin since they knew the pain of addiction but this only resulted in the patients wanting to try heroin even more.

The plentiful supply of heroin makes it difficult for recovering addicts to stay away from the drug, especially when they are in the company of their peers. The two main reasons given for reusing heroin upon release from the Unit is peer pressure and social problems. For a group of people who have been accustomed to a very solitary existence without interpersonal problems, readjusting to everyday life is very difficult, especially in the absence of any counseling or life-skills training. A twenty-two-year-old man, Maung Paw Tun, who had been through the program many times, reused heroin after his latest admission to the Drug Rehabilitation Unit as a form of self-medication for "unhappiness" and "disappointment" (*seiq nyiq deh*) when his girlfriend's parents arranged for her marriage to another man. Maung Paw Tun states that: "She was Burmese and Buddhist, living in [location withheld]. Her parents got her married. I could forget about my disappointment when I was using drugs..." Other patients state marital problems such as divorce and fiancees canceling their engagement as reasons for their turning to heroin once again. Patients tell stories of their friends who have left the Unit in previous weeks and have either suffered a fatal overdose or have been rearrested. With no hope for a political solution and no chance of a lifestyle change once they leave the Unit, it is not surprising that heroin is an enticing alternative.

11.7 The Magic of Needles

I wish to call attention to a phenomenon that concerns the perceived magical qualities of syringes in Myanmar. The syringe is the core symbol of biomedicine in Myanmar. It represents unfathomable technology, miraculously rapid cures, and symbolizes all that is "Other" from Burmese indigenous medicine.

With the advent of television in recent years (albeit an extremely limited government system for distributing propaganda more effectively), public health messages are produced for mass consumption. These public health messages have often concerned AIDS and HIV infection. In most of the forcibly relocated townships around Yangon and Mandalay, women whom I interviewed could tell me that "needles cause AIDS." They know that AIDS is an incurable disease and that "unnecessary injections" should be avoided. Some

people are even aware, especially among the addicted population, that sharing needles is a risk factor for HIV infection. However, outside the Drug Rehabilitation Unit and the Burmese medical community, I have never heard an explanation for how "needles cause AIDS." This belief is part of a broader belief that needles can cause both instant healing but also disease. In 1928 Shenoi reported the use of magical golden needles (related to the widespread practice of alchemy in Myanmar) that monks inserted under the skin of patients as a prophylactic against evil and ill health (Shenoi 1928). Many people are unable to differentiate between the mode of delivery of the pharmaceutical and the pharmaceutical itself. Injections are seen to have rapid results in many cases, and this magical quality is also assumed to be a reason for AIDS being caused by using needles too much.

Shooting galleries, places where heroin users are injected with heroin by "professional injectors," are now comparatively rare in Yangon. Beyrer, an epidemiologist working in Thailand, believes that teashop owners in Myanmar who also work as professional injectors, inject up to forty men at a time with a single syringe (Beyrer 1998). This assertion is not supported by my research in Yangon. There were many professional injectors in the 1980s in Yangon, but now they work in more covert surroundings. The fear of needles is the main reason for which young men initially seek out professional injectors. Once they have learned how to inject themselves, they prefer to keep the five kyat fee for the injection to themselves. With the large number of heroin users in Yangon, shooting galleries seem to have become less necessary as there are always friends who can initiate the first time user into the culture of heroin addiction.[165]

Some patients, those who have no wish to give up and who state that they do not care about their lives anymore, continue to share needles knowing the risks of HIV infection. More than fifty-percent of the patients interviewed did not inject with needles that had already been used for someone else. One man explained to me: "I never share needles with others. I've bought so many of my own. In the case of sharing needles, I use first and then I give it to others." The following vignette by Maung Sein is typical of the experience of the majority of patients interviewed:

> "I've met with professional injectors. I used them before when I couldn't inject by myself but then later on I did it by myself. I don't share needles, I'm afraid of AIDS. I think this is the last time I [will need to] try to give up. Now I'm growing older. I started using drugs when I was twenty-five-years-old and now I'm already [age withheld]. I plan to go abroad to South Korea. I don't want to stay here anymore. I'm afraid I'll use drugs again if I meet up with my friends. I'll go there permanently as my younger brothers are there."

[165] Renard, also conducting research in Thailand, argues that Burmese heroin addicts cut their foreheads and grind heroin into the wound (Renard 1996). Again, this contention is not supported by this research although I do not doubt that the stories heard by Beyrer and Renard are true for remote areas where syringes are rare, or for practices of previous years when there was a shortage of needles.

11.8 The People's Desire: The Culture and Experience of Heroin Addiction in Yangon

Addiction is a phenomenon that promotes characteristics of the strategy for resistance outlined in previous chapters of concentrating on the minutiae of daily life. I have hypothesized that this strategy is in some ways a response to the politicization of every aspect of daily and family life. I further assert that heroin use is mainly a solitary and non-performative activity, and may constitute another response to the elaborate State Spectacles and their enforced performative dimensions. Much has been speculated about the "shooting galleries" of Myanmar, but as I have noted above, heroin addicts do not come together to use heroin as part of a social scene or group, although it may have begun that way. In fact, the young heroin addicts in this study tend to shun groups of people, preferring to be alone. As one addict expressed it to me: "I became afraid of crowds by using drugs. I didn't want to go out."

It could be argued that refusing to form collectivities and have communal experiences is an expressive performance of individuality or feelings of anomie but even when addicts do want to participate in social life, such as marriage and work, they are deemed socially unacceptable. In Burmese culture men are the primary income earners, and money and a strong work ethic are the major considerations for marriage, especially for arranged marriages. Heroin use is illegal and considered shameful as one young boy, Maung Win Maung, explained to me: "Other people will lose respect for me if they know that I am in hospital. Dad and Mom know that I use drugs. All parents ask their sons to stop if they're using drugs, but they can't."

In previous chapters I have outlined the history of altered states of consciousness in Myanmar, and the flight to realms free of contemporary crises. Heroin is a solitary experience in the everyday world, but it opens portals to imaginary worlds, especially to the world of dreams. The following narrative presents the experience of addiction of Maung Khin, a young man in his mid-twenties who has been admitted many times to the Drug Rehabilitation Unit, and who has had many opportunities to reflect upon his experience of addiction:

> "I live in [name withheld] township. I was born in Myanmar. I do [occupation withheld]. I studied until ninth standard. I'm not married. I became addicted after the Strike. At first, I took pills with my friends. I also ran away from home. I became addicted [to heroin] while I was staying in Mandalay with friends. [I ran away] because I couldn't study for the eighth standard exam very well and I fought with the teacher. Our friends all discussed it and we decided to run away from home. We took one lakh [100,000 kyats, indicating that these children came from wealthy families]. We spent it in Mandalay. When we finished all the money, we

came back [to Yangon]. Our families wouldn't accept us back so we stayed on the street for a month. I've been addicted to drugs since then. There was seven of us altogether. This happened only after the Strike. I quit school after the Strike[165]...I couldn't live without heroin because of both a physical and a mental desire...Fun-loving young people [often] run away from home. The run away because, for example, they are worried that their mothers will scold them if they don't do well in exams.

After injecting heroin I feel dirty and I go to sleep. For a long time, there is no feeling. When I inject heroin, at the moment of injection, I only feel it in my mouth. It could be said that injecting gives me a pleasant feeling. If I couldn't inject, I become "wrong," I vomit a yellow liquid, [and begin] yawning. I have tears rolling down. It can't be substituted, the feeling is only abolished/released by injecting. It's effectiveness is fearful...No matter who persuades you, it can only be cured if you want to be cured. Here there's high unemployment so young people are not doing anything and they are meeting with bad friends. I could be cured if I could get a job that I am interested in.

I've "cured" [tried to give up heroin] three times. First, I "cured" at home and I stopped using [heroin] for two years. Then I meditated for eight months. I sat for the exam again. Then I went to tuition and met up with my old friends, and I used [heroin] with them again. As for the the second time, I was sad because my father had died. There was no one to take care of the business. I accompanied my sister to the market. I looked for a shop, I could get drugs at the market. I've been to Malaysia. My brother is there. I could only get Number Three there. I mixed Number Three with lemon juice and stored it with cotton[wool] in a bottle and kept it ready. Here, heroin has to be mixed with water before it can be used. I'd been there for eight months and then my brother sent me back. I came back to the hospital where my father died. After six months, I did [occupation withheld] in *Bojouq* Market. I had a lot of money in hand and I met with my friends.

It can be said that I've changed because I'm cured now. My family wants me to get married. I'm afraid that if I meet a girl I like, I'll change my mind. I intend to start a business. A drug addict doesn't have to do any [business/work]. Meditation is the best way to cure drugs. If I really put my mind to it, drugs can be stopped. But at the right time, I look for drugs. Then I inject. [When I meditate] I keep my mind calm, I can't be greedy. The other day a guy got out from [this] hospital. He died on Friday.

...sometimes [when I take heroin], I dream. The dreams I had while I was "curing" were frightening. Falling, being called by black shadows. Suddenly I'd wake up when someone gave me drugs and I was ready to inject. The first three weeks in the

[165] Universities and some schools were closed after the Strike for several years. They have been closed several times since the 1962 military coup and again since December 1996.

hospital made me crazy. Here in the hospital we're cured from heroin using opium. I dreamt sweet dreams when I used drugs. For example I went to nice places such as "going around" with my friends.

Heroin can be bought anywhere. I had to place an order and they'd deliver it to me...I met with a professional injector. I bought one pound of heroin at a time. One day a friend who injected came to me and said, "why do you smoke? It's just wasted. Try to inject." I was afraid of needles so I didn't dare do it. He injected for me...If he didn't come, I didn't dare to inject it [on my own]. I also didn't smoke anymore because I was afraid to waste it."

In this narrative we can see the way in which heroin gives access to dreamscapes while anesthetizing the body. The mind escapes from the political and economic situation (emphasized by his referral to the 1988 Strike). For Maung Hkin the everyday world is something he only returns to in order to take more drugs. These key themes are woven through the narratives of the young men at the Drug Rehabilitation Unit.

Although heroin opens doors to imaginary worlds, other strategies are identified by the heroin addicts as successfully, or at least temporarily, quelling the addictive desire, and at the same time creating a "calm" or "focused" mind. Meditation is the number one alternate strategy mentioned as seen in this vignette by Maung Kyaw Nyein:

"It was nice to use my imagination while using drugs. I could dream whatever I wanted and get to sleep. I dreamt about all the experiences I had in the afternoon. I want to stop using drugs. When I am outside, I use once, twice, and I become addicted again. Meditation can help to cure drugs. I reduced it from two times to one [i.e. number of injections per day]. Through meditation I've lost the desire to have drugs."

The Drug Rehabilitation Unit does indeed have a meditation center. A monk from the Panditarama Monastery in Myanmar's most affluent neighborhood, Golden Valley, comes to the hospital on weekdays in the afternoons and leads meditation sessions. Unfortunately meditation is only used for therapeutic purposes by a small number of patients. The young men were quick to point out that meditation is one of the choices they are given in the afternoons and it is physically much easier than painting or gardening, or the other manual work patients are required to perform. Much as the young men have rejected the "traditional" role of monks, they are also rejecting meditation perhaps because they are less familiar with it than the older generations of Burmans. Perhaps a rejection of meditation is in some way a rejection of the suborning of monks by the military, and their complicity in the incarceration of addicts.

As Maung Kyan Nyein's statement suggests, heroin allows Burmese youths to "forget," "not to care about anything," and in calming the mind, a phrase continually heard throughout my time at the Drug Rehabilitation Unit, a sense of control is sought and found even though patients know that this particular pathway for finding "calmness" is fraught with danger. One man told me: "Drugs kill the human life cycle. [But] the mind can be controlled and it is very calm while using drugs." Another stated that: "When I used that drug [heroin], I felt something like the feeling before I sleep, it was good. I could control my mind when I used drugs. I could concentrate on a particular thing like a movie." And a third young man reported that: "When I use drugs, my mind becomes very calm, it's very relaxing."

Another man told be that he began using heroin in order to escape from feeling bad and now feels nothing. He said that he took heroin "due to my depressed mind." Another patient, Maung Po, expresses his experience of addiction as now being incapable of being able to care about anything at all, including his own life. Maung Po speaks of the ease of procuring both heroin and Diazepam in Yangon's most notorious prison, Insein Jail. He knows about the risks of contracting AIDS, and that it is incurable, but he finds himself unable to care except during fleeting periods of "good moods":

> "I felt dirty while I was using drugs but I liked the taste. I think that the dirtiness is more than that of the real situation in nature [i.e. the dirtiness is more in the mind]. I used opium and nicotine because they taste a bit like heroin. I could live without drugs if I didn't need to have them. But I don't think I could stop at the place where I get them. I have a desire to stop it sometimes. I'm no longer interested in education through using drugs. I've been arrested twice and it upsets my parents. Maybe people have a bad opinion of me but I don't care much at all. I've been in Insein Jail for sixteen months. It was not so different (in terms of food), from this hospital. But it was quite boring staying in jail and there was nothing to do. I used drugs sometimes in jail. Heroin and Diazepam especially could be bought. Sometimes I injected by myself but sometimes with my friends. Sometimes we shared needles and injected together. I know about AIDS but I don't care much. Sometimes, when I'm in a good mood, I want to give up drugs. I think it could kill my human life."

As in most varieties of Burmese Buddhist meditation, once the mind is calm and focused, it can leave the body. This experience is consistently compared with the mind flying to other more appealing destinations, to landscapes of the imagination, memory, or dreamscapes. Interestingly, in these accounts, when the mind flies away, the body is experienced as floating. It is unclear whether the body is trying to float away, to follow the mind, or if this is simply an anesthetic feeling of lightness and numbness induced by the

heroin. Irrespective of the basis of this feeling, heroin addicts in Yangon experience the post-injection or post-smoking rush as their minds detach from their bodies, and their bodies start floating. I asked Maung Po San, a man in his late-twenties, how he felt when he injected heroin and his response was: "I feel as if my body is floating and I am interested in nothing but heroin. My mind flies away to places, like the places I've once visited, and parks and museums." Another man told me: "My mind flies away to places, like the places I've visited before, such as parks and theaters." And a third man stated: "This is the last time I give up this drug, I've decided [meaning that he intends to never use heroin again]. As for the last time, all kinds of bad things happened [the patient is referring to the withdrawal symptoms and longer term psychological consequences of the detoxification process]...while using drugs, I can dream whatever I like. For example, I dream of traveling."

Thus addiction can be a bearable, even enjoyable experience, and between thirty and forty-percent of the more than fifty patients interviewed stated that they had no intention of giving up heroin. They simply saw no need and no incentive. The addiction was not being replaced by a more palatable existence: "While using drugs, my mind is calm and pleasant. I get annoyed if someone ruins that situation. My life is quite happy."

Even though addiction can be a pleasurable experience if the "escapes" are frequent enough, the need to inject is at times so wholly consuming that dangers such as AIDS are never given even a second's thought. Maung Khe Sein explained to me that when he is suffering withdrawal symptoms he will inject wherever he can find heroin, even if it is beside the road in the full view of other people and without caring about how many other users have injected with the same needle. He emphasized that at such moments heroin is the only thought his mind can hold.

Other addicts come to realize that heroin, which initially allows access to alternate realities, eventually enters and consumes those very landscapes in which heroin addicts are seeking sanctuary. For example, almost all of the patients reported that their dreams are consumed by their addiction. They dream of how to locate drugs, how to pay for them, where they can go to inject them, and how they'll feel once they've injected: "I dream of the places that I can get drugs when I'm using."

This negative experience of addiction continues as the time period between "hits" decreases, and patients must find more money and must inject or smoke heroin more frequently in order to maintain the same level of intoxication (Stimsa and Oppenheimer 1982). At this point in the conversations, patients invariably begin to speak of the double nature of heroin addiction: of the desire to escape "bad feelings" in the everyday world which takes on an additional meaning when relief from the addiction can now only be found through continued and more frequent drug use. I asked U Sing, who had been a heroin addict for five years and whose previous admission form sited an intake of 400 milligrams of heroin intravenously per day, how he felt when he injected heroin. He

replied, "When I take it I feel dizzy, not very good feelings, just bad feelings if I don't."

Very few of the patients who had had previous admissions were able to state they didn't know of anyone who had died of a heroin overdose. What most often began as a peer group exercise becomes an experience of the immanence of something dangerous occurring. Some patients never reach this point, in a sense they have moved beyond it, they have stopped caring about anything at all. But other patients begin seeing their friends dying and this leads them to reflect upon the same future for themselves. U Tin, a man in his thirties, reports:

> "I live with my parents...I've been here fifteen times already. I wanted to be cured from drugs so I came here. The last time, I reused drugs when I went back. When I was about twenty-years-old, I started using drugs by drinking *Phensydyl*. I've got drug addicted friends. Now some are dead and some are in jail. None of them died of HIV."

Pain and possible death thus constitute one aspect of addictive experience in Myanmar, but the mind flying to freedom is another aspect. A dying body, but a free mind, is the trade-off that many Burmese heroin addicts unwittingly make when they become addicted. The following vignette by Maung Aye So illustrates these different sides of addictive experience:

> "I studied until ninth standard then I worked digging gem stones at [name of town withheld]. I could get heroin there but I didn't do it. I was afraid I'd die. I was chasing after money and I wasn't interested in drugs. Things [drugs] are very common there. Once you start, you'll continue to use it, ninety-percent [of users] could die. When I started using heroin I didn't know anything [about it] on the first day but I was addicted a week later. I couldn't stand to be without it after that. Tears were rolling down, then yawning, vomiting, and having a runny nose. Muscles like my heart and lungs gave me great problems. The feeling at that time was bad. Even while I was using, it was good only at the time of injecting. It was not good when the effectiveness began declining after five hours. I felt as if my body was floating and I was interested in nothing but heroin. My mind would fly [away]...

As mentioned above, there are several strategies which patients use to try and counter the feelings of addiction, and meditation is cited as the most successful method. In addition to the mind flying away, prior to their admittance to the Drug Rehabilitation Unit, the young male addicts "escaped" to several other dimensions. Maung Hla Pe told me about becoming absorbed by music and videos:

"I went to the meditation center before. I am painting now. We have to do one job after another. It is nice that meditation makes the mind calm. Also painting time can [make me] forget about heroin. I didn't go out when I used drugs. I would watch videos and listen to cassettes. It is not pleasant to be addicted to heroin. We can be killed."

Even more common than listening to music and watching videos is the total absorption into the world presented by a text. A seventeen-year-old student, Maung Ko Thein, who has been addicted for several years said that: "It was nice injecting heroin. I'd lay down and read books." Another stated that: "I felt dirty while I was using drugs and at that time, I just read books."

For some addicts it doesn't matter where they escape to, so long as they no longer have to function in the everyday world. I asked Maung Hla Myaing, a young man who had been injecting both opium and heroin for three years and taking opium orally, about this subject. He was arrested for possession and running away from the hospital. Maung Hla Myaing told me that he likes to take heroin because it makes his mind blurry or befuddled. Another man, U Ba Khaing, told me that dizziness was preferable to consciousness. U Ba Khaing man has an I.V. heroin addiction as well as an opium and comethazine dependency, and has been addicted to heroin for three years. Part way through the interview he seemed to break down, he said he felt very dizzy and the interview was terminated. This happened just at the stage where he began telling me that he wanted to be dizzy in order to block out the present.

It is clear from the narratives presented in this chapter that heroin addicts become anesthetized as opposed to experiencing euphoria. The high number of Diazepam users among this population would further support this conclusion. For example, I read in one patient's notes that he takes opium orally and both heroin and Diazepam intravenously. He has an income of seven-hundred kyats per month. When he was admitted he was taking two-hundred milligrams of heroin intravenously per day as well as ten tablets of Diazepam. The notes of a second patient report alcohol and Diazepam dependence, and questions if other barbiturates such as Valium are being taken. The notes state that two bottles of beer are drank each day and that the patient may also have an opium dependence. It is hard to conceive of this patient being in either a coherent or euphoric state for much of the time. And finally, a third patient's notes describe a twenty-one-year-old man with an intravenous heroin addiction who also has an opium, marijuana, and methaqualone dependence. These patients inject less frequently, usually three times per day.

I mentioned above the lack of euphoria experienced by the Drug Rehabilitation Unit population because this contradicts the "official" experience of addiction as presented to me by the staff at the Unit. The staff often use the word "euphoria" when explaining why patients use heroin and how they experience addiction. This reminded me of the

government workers from the Social Welfare Department who told me about the "chronic" prostitutes who "can't get enough sex." These simplistic, erroneous beliefs about the experience of addicts and prostitutes threaten to whitewash the reasons for which these activities are practiced and justify, from a Buddhist moral standpoint, the arrest and incarceration of sex workers and drug addicts.

Withdrawal begins six to eight hours following the last injection or inhalation of heroin and the physical symptoms of withdrawal abate within a few days or with the re-use of heroin. Depression and other psychological effects can last for many months, even years. In *The Street Addict Role*, Stephens notes that "street addicts will point out that their motivation for using drugs often changes after they become addicted. Whereas prior to addiction, they used drugs to get "high," they must now first "feed their habits" (i.e., avoid withdrawal) and then, if there are any drugs left over, get high" (Stephens 1991:7). Similarly, Faupel writes that "When tolerance levels increase substantially, for most users it is no longer a matter of getting high but rather of avoiding withdrawal symptoms" (Faupel 1991:2). Staff do not take into account tolerance when creating narratives about the euphoria and "thrill seeking" nature of heroin addicts in Myanmar. This difference of viewpoints reached a climax when I explained to Drug Rehabilitation Staff that many patients described the feeling of their body floating when they were intoxicated with heroin. My understanding is that this is not experienced as a psychological feeling of floating, but as a feeling of lightness in the limbs. But the staff would not countenance the idea that addicts are not engulfed in a blaze of euphoria and stated bluntly that: "This is not at all true and if they told you that then they are lying."

This moral attitude of the staff conflicts with the Patient Admission Form in which the admitting staff member must check off the reasons for which the patient has been using heroin. There are nine possible category responses. These are: "Experimentation; to satisfy curiosity; to achieve a sense of belonging, Peer's pressure (sic), to express independence/hostility, to have pleasurable or thrilling experience (sic), self treatment, *to escape from something*, delinquent-Deviant behavior" [my italics]. Thus although the staff realize that heroin addicts are often seeking to escape from something, they continue to perpetuate the official response that heroin addicts are experiencing euphoria when they smoke or inject heroin.

In this chapter in which the narratives of patients at the Yangon Drug Rehabilitation Unit are presented, I have argued that a process of medicalizing, criminalizing, and moralizing is occurring, to contain what the regime sees as a potentially potent political threat. I have suggested that heroin is only one drug among a cornucopia of mind-altering substances which Burmans take to change their perception of reality. Heroin is especially useful as it opens the door to the world of dreams, memory, and the imagination. I have further suggested that heroin addicts believe that the military regime is deliberately addicting its young population. The unspoken assumption here is that an addicted

population is not interested in political resistance. The political economy of the narco-regime is inscribed onto the bodies of young men in the form of scars (track marks), thrombosed veins and subcutaneous abscesses which identify these young men as "criminals" and without legal defense. Having injected or smoked heroin, the minds of these young men "fly" or travel" to other destinations while their anesthetized bodies float, awaiting their return. This solitary, numbing of experience is non-performative and non-communicative, it is an attempt to escape from the current situation. Eventually however the drug which has opened up the portals to alternative dimensions intrudes upon and eventually consumes those worlds in which addicts are seeking refuge. Based on involuntary testing for HIV, the government estimates that ninety-percent of the Drug Rehabilitation Unit patients are HIV positive. They are given no treatment and will most likely die of either a heroin overdose or AIDS. The patients are in no doubt that this is an evil "political trick" perpetrated by a government with no respect for the individual lives of the youthful population at large.

Stephens describes the sensation of heroin injection as two-fold. He states that: "Upon injection there is the intense "rush" which is dramatic and short-lived and is followed by a semi-somnolent state known as the "nod." The "nod" lasts longer and in it the addict feels a sense of overall well-being" (Stephens 1991:9). The patients at the Yangon Drug Rehabilitation Unit speak of the "rush" only in reference to the alleviation of withdrawal symptoms and find the "semi-somnolent state" to be one of escape. Researchers have argued that heroin use is both a psychological escape and a retreat from society (Merton 1938), whilst others argues that it is a "badge of membership" within a subculture (Stephens 1991) and implies a purposive, creation of an alternate world and a social identity (Preble and Casey 1969; Biernacki 1979; Adler 1985; Goldstein 1979; Rosenbaum 1981; Hanson et al. 1985; Faupel 1991). Each of these analyses have resonance in Yangon as heroin is both a defining characteristic of a group of affluent, unemployed, educated Burmese men, as well as a means of "traveling" to environments otherwise unavailable to them. It has been argued that heroin addicts are addicted to the narcotic in a physical sense but they are equally addicted to a lifestyle, a subculture of addiction and illicit "highs" (Stephens 1991). Heroin is not only freedom from fear in Yangon, it is also freedom from boredom, unemployment, closed education facilities, and a future proscribed by the dictates of a totalitarian regime. The psychiatric, psychological, and sociological literature on heroin addiction over the last three decades is littered with terms such as "addictive personality," "deviance," "personality disorder," "social roles," "drug using community," and "stable addict." These studies suggest underlying physical or psychopathological origins for addiction or homogenize heroin use into categories including "junkie," "street addict," and "stable user," and so on. It is almost impossible to see a study that is not consumed by the relation between heroin use and crime. In this chapter I have demonstrated that the categorization of heroin addicts, either medically or

socially, serves to obfuscate a more complex process that cannot be reduced to simple motives. The purity, cheapness, and availability of heroin in Myanmar sets this situation apart from many of the studies conducted in the West. There is no coherency of meaning here, no enduring camaraderie, ethics, or consensus among brothers of crime, "junkies," or "street-users." There are however, many young men who find few palatable or persuasive alternatives to the escapism offered by heroin in contemporary Myanmar.

Chapter Twelve

Conclusion: "Going to Sleep with Karaoke Culture"

> *With the general strike, all these fine things disappear; the revolution appears as a clear, simple revolt, and no place is reserved either for the sociologists or for the elegant amateurs of social reforms or for the intellectuals who have made it their profession to think for the proletariat.*
>
> *(Sorel 1919:250)*

After only a year's fieldwork in Myanmar, there can be few conclusions. Rather, this work is a continuation of an examination of the ways in which madness, religion, and violence intersect in Theravada Buddhist Southeast Asia. At the beginning of the thesis I quoted Rudyard Kipling's vision of the Shwedagon pagoda as emblematic of the romantic and often orientalized imagined communities thrust upon this patch of land perched below the Himalayas, between the world's two most populous nations, India and China. I have described in detail the particular imagined community that the Burmese military regime seeks to impose upon Myanmar. I have examined methods of eradicating, "modeling" and defining Burmese citizenship based on the regime's belief that citizens will be loyal to the regime. I have also detailed a number of methods such as desemanticization, deterritorialization, and relentless propaganda that play upon cultural stereotypes of Otherness to create a homogenized, politicized community. It is a process described by the Comaroff's as hegemony-in-the-making (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991).

This process of making hegemony is further explored in the creation of a political geography and the atomization or alienation of Burmans from each other. Fear of informers, micro-control at increasingly local levels, censorship, disinformation, surveillance, and other methods to halt the flow of information help to create a population vulnerable to the mobile propaganda signboards, mass rallies, the creation of organizations of mass political participation, and the manipulation of familiar ideas and symbols. In defining the political geography of Yangon, I have also demonstrated how the regime spatializes power through the movement of bodies through militarized space. I have suggested that as the Burmese State moves from pre-modern to modern, a new set of social relations are being inscribed upon the Burmese body as depicted by Foucault in his discussion of "Discipline." This new Burmese body is inscribed with State power,

complicit in its own surveillance, docile, and automated.

In its adoption of the rhetoric of "Disciplined Democracy," the current junta has created a never-ending series of politico-commercial spectacles that establish the body as a commodity for State consumption. I have further asserted that the junta has recreated the urban landscape of Yangon and Mandalay into a heroin spectacle and that Myanmar's cities are awash in the profits laundered from the drug trade. Commercial phantasmagoria define the experience of the modern for most Burmans as a voyeuristic one, whereas political spectacles are enacted narratives of State power (and enforced participation and witnessing) that both naturalize and mythify State power. As a commodity-on-display at mass rallies, forced labor sites, as army porters, and at other State spectacles, the regime creates a legion of Burmese automata, mobile signifiers of State hegemony. I have suggested that the story of Ko Ma, the concrete salesman, is a powerful metaphor for the ways in which Burmans are made over into Burmese automata: slowly suborned, slowly regulated, and disciplined both through dehumanizing, repetetive labor, and in the repetitive State ideology presented in its spectacles.

Scott has commented that:

> Onerous and involuntary subordination can also, perhaps, be made legitimate providing that subordinates are more or less completely atomized and kept under close observation. What is involved is the total abolition of any social realm of discursive freedom. In other words...[when] all social relations are hierarchical and surveillance is perfect. It goes without saying that this ultimate totalitarian fantasy in which there is no life outside relations of domination does not even remotely approximate the situation of any real society as a whole (Scott 1990:83).

The regime is adept at creating what I have termed, gray spaces, where confusion and complicity can exist. I have introduced the term 'resistance' in order to show how this term, as currently employed in anthropology, cannot hold the complex reactions and strategies of individual Burmans to totalitarian domination. I have described a shadowed landscape of complicity, collaboration, internal subversion, collective, anonymous resistance, open defiance, sayings, prophecies, and opportunism. This landscape is perfused with a dark humor that is both fearful and mocking of the attempt to create what Scott has described above as the ultimate totalitarian fantasy.

Ko Ma's life ends with his dissociated mind looking down upon his comatose body. The mind is an enduring aspect of Burmese consciousness housed, temporarily, in a porous, flexible body. This story is also a metaphor for the small space that exists in contemporary Myanmar for the creation and negotiation of counter ideologies. Although the regime has certainly not succeeded in having its captive population completely internalize State ideology, there is no doubt that at times it has come dangerously near to its goal. Burmans have responded with statements such as "Water flows, fish follow" to

suggest subversion from within, and "I resist in my mind only." The latter statement suggests what I have described as strategies of dissociation. In their ascription of child-like innocence to their subject population, the Generals have severely underestimated the intelligence and creativity of the Burmese people. Burmans have appropriated the regime's metaphor for the process of automation, the Burmese puppet, and imbued it with new meanings and counter agendas. Burmans have deliberately hollowed out their lived experience (following Baudelaire 1857) as a strategy to survive extreme domination and degradation. A spectrum of dissociative practices are adopted, some of which are clearly negative strategies at the far end of the dissociative spectrum, as we see in psychiatric patients and among heroin addicts. But I have also suggested a number of positive strategies of suffering that combine with a strong belief in the miraculous. These strategies include waiting, following magical or immortal beings such as *weikzas*, miraculous revelations or changes (in both a Buddhist and a *Nat* spirit idiom), in the forms of power revealed or bestowed in possession, dreams, visions, or portents. Further strategies include the escapism promised by Burmese fantasylands such as Happyland and video huts, dreaming, day-dreaming, and the creation of inner, miniature worlds of existence through a deliberate focus upon the minutiae of daily life to the exclusion of the politicized world around them.

Burmans use the culturally and historically familiar idiom of dissociation to send their minds flying to safety. This is often conceived of as the mind wandering, of temporary madness, or of the mind fleeing to other domains such as Buddhist and *Nat* landscapes, mythical wilderness landscapes, and flight "to my mother's heart," indicating the strength and resilience of the mother-daughter bond in the face of desperate poverty which leads so many young women in the relocated townships to prostitution.

But I have also suggested that this alienation, expressed as an autonomization and numbing of the senses and thought processes is an inherently dangerous strategy. At the mass rallies, Burmans consciously make their bodies into puppets, stiff, wooden, and hollow. I have posed the question as to whether this hollowing out of lived experience is reversible, and if there are long term consequences to such a strategy. In describing the many reasons why Burmans do not openly revolt against the dictators, I have mentioned that violence has become a way of life and a temporal marker. Freedom of speech and democracy are attributed different values when physical survival is an overwhelming priority. In this permanent state of emergency, terror is common place, as is a loss of perspective, and an inability to trust people or form lasting associations as two generations of Burmans have now learnt self-censorship from the earliest age.

One of the consequences of the militarization of all sectors of society in conjunction with the fierce propaganda of the Army as savior of the nation, is that many urban Burmans have become afraid that alternate forms of government may arise only from massive violence and civil war, and that such new governments may prove to be just as

inept. Thus many fear that the NLD has no experience of governance, and many urban Burmans point to the lack of economists in both the regime and the NLD. Carey notes that: "As Singapore's Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew recently put it: If I were Aung San Suu Kyi, I think I'd rather be behind a fence and be a symbol than be found to be impotent to lead the country...I have visited [Myanmar] and I know that there is only one instrument of government, and that is the army'" (Carey 1997:5). The "solution" to the current political situation will be a wholly Burmese one, but if the experience of other Southeast Asian nations such as Cambodia are salient, then the long term consequences of political violence and fear becoming a way of life will be a perpetuation of this cycle.

I have further suggested that the Burmese *zawgyi*, or wizard, is a model that we can use to understand how individual Burmans may perceive reanimation after the mimicked death of the body. I have repeatedly drawn attention to the way in which the self in Myanmar is conceived of as a detachable part of the body and that it is of much greater value than the Burmese Buddhist body which is viewed as temporary and decaying. That is why the Generals know that ultimately they have failed: they have lost their bid to be recognized by their captive population as the legitimate bearers of Buddhist nationhood, because Burmans, in what will perhaps eventually prove to be a great risk to their integrity, have escaped the regime. Their minds fly to safety whilst they await eventual or miraculous change in Myanmar. The despair of the Generals and (their belief that they have been betrayed from within) can be heard in the State media pronouncement that the Burmese population have "gone to sleep with karaoke culture" (NLM 1996r:5). Having introduced a form of karaoke fascism that links patriotism and State power with rapid unbridled modernism (that includes the laundering of profits from the heroin trade), the population have seized upon these kitsch spectacles as forums of temporary escape. Karaoke is emblematic for the regime of the population's ability to escape their constant barrage of nonsensical propaganda and to successfully resist the complete internalization of such propaganda. Burmans have chosen a scripted performance other than that pressed upon them by the regime.

I wish to add two final thoughts, one optimistic, and one pessimistic. With the recent overthrow of Suharto, Indonesia has given an enormous psychological lift to those who fight, or who secretly wish, for democracy and human rights, and perhaps it is just a matter of time until Burmans arise sufficiently from their "miasma of fear" to confront the dictators. On an individual, psychological level, one can only wonder if these strategies of internal fragmentation can be sufficiently patched together to form a healed and whole person. Both George Orwell and his main character in *Burmese Days*, Flory, found the tension involved in holding onto very different public and private transcripts in Myanmar, too difficult in the end. The alienation and loneliness of Burmese strategies require great courage and hope. It is salient to recall Orwell's reflections upon his character, Flory, in the moments before he committed suicide in the jungles of Myanmar. Flory "had learned to

live inwardly, secretly, in books and secret thoughts that could not be uttered...But it is a corrupting thing to live one's life in secret" (Orwell, quoted in Shelden 1991:92).

Appendix One

"The Python"

Nyi Pu Lay

The front door, which was always kept closed, had been opened.

Sitting in the front room, U Taw Daw was gazing vacantly out onto the road. The armchair in which he was reclining had once belonged to his father. Rather than covering it in nylon or cloth, his father had upholstered it in leather so that it would endure years of use. In the days when the cover had been new, the leather had been stiff and strong smelling. His father had sat there throughout his many discussions concerning all shapes and sizes of beans and pulses with his broker friends. Here, his father had read his way through the newspapers of the day: *Ludu, Bahosi, Man-khit.* And here, he had riffled his way through the piles of bank notes bearing the signature of the then-treasury secretary, Maung Kaung. In those days, they had lived in a big wooden house on stilts, painted with creosote. When he had grown up, his father had pulled down the old house and built a new two-story brick building, and it was in this home that U Taw Daw had learned all he knew about chick and pigeon peas and every variety of bean.

Nowadays, the armchair's leather cover had been worn as soft as velvet, and although the leather was not burnished or polished, the color shone out of its smooth surface, and the seams had all but sunk into the material. Contact with years of *longyis* had frayed some of the stitching, and the padding at the head of the chair was stained brown with coconut hair oil. The embroidery on the headrest was his father's own handiwork, and the stitches were so regular that one might have thought that they had been sewn by machine.

The clock that his father had used to teach him how to tell the time was still attached to the east wall. To this day, a piece of paper was attached to the base with red letters SUN in his father's hand, boxed off in blue pencil- it was a note to remind him to rewind the clock once a week. Although the face of the clock had begun to yellow, the black Roman numerals still stood out clearly. Second by second, it still kept good time. Two of its hands told the hour, and a third pointed to the date: all three still rotated correctly and today the third hand was pointing to the fifth day of the month.

U Taw Daw sat gazing around him at the house, the compound, the furniture, all the household goods and kitchen utensils, down to the thermos flask and betel box- everything he saw had been left to him by his parents.

His thoughts then turned to his younger half brother, U Aung Toe, and his nephew, Maung Thant Zin. U Taw Daw's business had been sliding downhill for some time. Despite the fact that none of the three had any weakness for gambling or drinking or other forms of entertainment, they still had to dip into their savings from time to time, and,

while dipping in on the one hand, they were still trying to earn on the other, but little by little, like an evaporating mothball, their bundle of savings was diminishing. Nowadays, they had to work hard just to repay the money that they had borrowed.

Business was not booming. He bought when the price was high but then all went awry and the price of his stockpiled beans didn't rise as it should have, so that when he sold his beans, he failed to make a profit. In fact, business was a disaster. Although he could bear one bad year, or even two, after three or four bad years on the run, he was in deep trouble. Just as a boat cast adrift must be chased by another boat, so, the sums of money that had drained away had to be chased by more money. And once he discovered he was no longer able to send good money after bad, what was to be done? He and his wife had often discussed this very question. The first person to come up with advice had been Ko Nyi Aung, one of their relatives, who was a property broker. "Uncle," he had said, "I could easily get you eight hundred thousand kyats for this place of yours."

When U Taw Daw had heard this, he had flown into a rage and came close to beating him. "Get out! Get out!" he had spluttered, his face bright red with fury. But it had only been a little misunderstanding between age and youth. Ko Nyi Aung had not taken offense, and had apologized to his uncle, saying that he had no idea that he was so attached to the place. Soon after, he was to be found coming and going in his regular manner, and he never missed coming with gifts for his elders on festival days.

Outside in the road, the bicycles streamed past. U Taw Daw's house was close to the petrol pump used by the buses plying the routes all around town, so that buses from all lines rumbled by outside. This was the business quarter of Mandalay, full of brokers and merchants, and full of warehouses, bean-processing factories, oil mills, wheat mills, car-maintenance workshops and video parlors. As he gazed out onto the road, U Taw Daw shivered and put on his jacket. The workers from the bean factory across the road had started to lay out a tarpaulin to spread out the beans. On the roof of the building, he noticed a row of pigeons sitting gazing expectantly at the tarpaulin, waiting for their supper.

Through the fence posts of the compound, U Taw Daw caught sight of his wife returning from the market, twenty minutes earlier than usual. From afar, Daw Daw Thwin tried to gauge her husband's expression. He had been gloomy for many days, but in the last two or three, his despondency had become more obvious.

Carrying her basket by her side, Daw Daw Thwin went straight in through the house to the kitchen at the back. Neither said a word to the other. Sitting in his armchair, U Taw Daw continued to stare out at the road. Usually, when Daw Daw Thwin returned from the market, he would get up to open the gate of the compound for her, and help her with her shopping basket. "What are you going to cook for me today, Ma Thwin?" he would ask, and she would perhaps reply, "Shall I cook us up some fish with some nice sour soup?" Or, if it had been a day when she bought pork: "I thought I'd cook you a bit of that pork curry that you like, dear." Whatever dish Daw Daw Thwin suggested, U Taw Daw

invariably responded, "Mmm, that'd be just fine." But today, they behaved as if they were hardly on speaking terms, like a couple on the verge of divorce.

Suddenly his reverie was interrupted by the appearance of his younger brother, U Aung Toe, his breathing becoming even more constricted, as if a weight were bearing down on his chest. Again he forced a smile.

The man placed the bag on the bench and Nyi Aung carried out the introductions: "Uncle, Aunty, this is Ko Myo Khin." As U Taw Daw was wondering what to do next, the newcomer stretched out his hand towards him. Caught off guard by the unexpected gesture, U Taw Daw rose hastily from his armchair and grasped the proffered hand. When he touched it, he noticed how cold and clammy the palm was, the skin as soft and supple as a girl's. U Aung Toe broke in, "Sit down, please, sit down in this chair here." "Yes, sit down, do sit down, Ko Myo Khin," urged U Taw Daw.

The room again fell silent. Each smiled at the other, although they had not a thing to smile about. "It's all wrong that we should be silent like this," thought U Taw Daw, and he blurted out, "Ko Myo Khin, are you from these parts? Were you born in Mandalay?"

No sooner had he asked the question than he realized he had made a mistake. He felt embarrassed at the thought of appearing unduly nosy.

"He says he hasn't been in this city long, Uncle," interrupted Ko Nyi Aung. After a while, Daw Daw Thwin went back out into the kitchen again. The new comer simply smiled.

From the moment Ko Myo Khin had stepped through the doorway, they had all been sizing him up. Quite young; in the prime of his life; maybe about forty or so. On his wrist he wore a gold watch which was set off well by his yellow-toned skin. On his left ring finger was a bright green ring. He was smartly dressed, and U Taw Daw guessed that his clothes must be quite expensive.

Bundles of bank notes were plainly visible, protruding from the snakeskin bag, and U Taw Daw was thinking that once he took his money, the house and land would no longer be his. He and his wife would be forced to move out to the so-called new pastures in the suburbs that were more in keeping with their financial means.

Ko Myo Khin started to undo the string tying up the bag containing the money. U Taw Daw wondered if Ko Nyi Aung had mentioned that they wanted to stay on in the house for another two weeks. He had assumed that the buyer would not pay up in full until they actually moved out, so would he hold some back? He took the handkerchief from his pocket and wiped the bead of sweat from his brow.

U Myo Khin tipped out the contents of the snakeskin bag onto the long table on which U Taw Daw's father had once displayed samples of his beans and pulses to other brokers. Holding up the two corners of the bag he shook it out until the last bits of dust came tumbling out with bundles of money. Three or four bundles fell off the edge of the table. Of all of the bundles of green, turquoise, crimson, and brown notes, the crimson

notes predominated. If anyone had asked, U Taw Daw would have had to admit that he had never handled so much money in his life.

His eyes glazed over and he stared straight ahead without seeing a thing. He was remembering the people to whom he owed everything, his parents, and was only brought back to earth by the voice of U Myo Khin. What was that the man had just said? U Taw Daw started and stared about him wildly.

Ko Nyi Aung repeated what the buyer had said. "Ko Myo Khin says he brought the money along without counting it properly first. He just bundled it up. So Uncle Aung Toe and Thant Zin should check it carefully. Whatever's missing, you're just to say, he'll make up the shortfall."

U Aung Toe put a little water in a teacup and put it down next to him so that he could wet his thumb and index finger as he counted the money. Thant Zin spat the betel juice into the spittoon. They started to count the money and Ko Nyi Aung made a move to close the front door so that people outside would not be able to see them counting. But Ko Myo Khin indicated with a wave of his hand that it should be left open.

Ko Myo Khin was apparently suffering none of the agonies being endured by U Taw Daw; he was sitting calmly on the wooden chair, and far from inspecting the rear of the house, he did not even bother to inspect the immediate interior. This was the first time he had stepped across the threshold; yet here he was, behaving more like a man who had just come home to his own hearth than someone buying a house.

U Aung Toe and his son were counting the money deliberately, placing the bundles of money to one side after each had been counted. U Taw Daw sat wondering if it would help any if he took part in the counting of the money rather than just looking on. He knew that in his present state of mind it would be easy to make a mistake. But he felt a need to assuage his misery by some methodical counting. He brooded over the merits of joining in and finally lifted his eyes which had been glued to the floor. He had come to a decision.

He would count the money. That way, the whole business would be over much more quickly. Ko Myo Khin and Ko Aung Toe and everyone else would leave the sooner and he would be left in peace.

The first thing he did was to search for a bundle of notes stapled together by the bank. But he failed to find a single one. As he reached for a bundle, Ko Nyi Aung immediately glanced across at his uncle in surprise, as if to say that this was no way for his uncle to behave. U Taw Daw, who could not bear to be on the receiving end of such a look, pretended not to notice. His hands were trembling so much that it was only with concentrated effort that he succeeded in untying the bundle and started to count ten kyat notes. Holding down the bundle with the heel of his left hand, he turned the notes over one by one with his right index finger as if his fingers were climbing stairs step by step. This was the method that his father had taught him. Carefully he counted the thousand notes and found neither a note short nor a note too many. U Taw Daw picked out another bundle and

as he counted, he could feel Ko Nyi Aung's eyes upon him. Ko Myo Khin stood up and wandered out to the car, as if the counting of the money had nothing to do with him whatsoever, as if he knew without a shadow of a doubt that the counters were not going to try and pull a fast one. He did not even look back over his shoulder. U Taw Daw wanted to call across to his brother and nephew to make sure that they counted correctly, but in Ko Myo Khin's absence, perhaps it was better to say nothing so that any misunderstanding could be avoided.

Ko Myo Khin walked back to the house carrying a gold cigarette case which he had left in the car. U Taw Daw realized with embarrassment that he had neglected to offer his guests anything to smoke- although, on reflection, Ko Myo Khin did not strike him as the sort who would accept the offer of a cheroot. Meanwhile, the bundle he was counting only seemed to contain ninety-eight notes. He scratched his head and then began counting again very slowly from the beginning. As he counted, he was praying that there would not be any missing after all. If there really was a shortfall, what was he to do? Should he mention it? U Aung Toe and his son had been counting for some time, but he hadn't heard *them* say that they had found any shortfall. U Taw Daw had previously been wetting his fingers from U Aung Toe's teacup; but now he counted his bundle again, using his own spit.

He stopped at nine and heaved a huge sigh of relief, not bothering to recount the last note which remained under his finger. He fished out his handkerchief from his pocket and took off his jacket. Ko Nyi Aung looked the other way and lit up a cigarette offered to him by Ko Myo Khin.

As they counted the money, the seconds ticked by and started to mount up. By now they had counted about a quarter of Ko Myo Khin's pile of money and so far not one of them had said that a bundle was short.

Next, U Taw Daw picked up a bundle of forty-five kyat notes, while Ko Myo Khin picked up the newspaper and started to read. Ko Nyi Aung inhaled his cigarette with a long, drawn out breath.

U Taw Daw had counted the bundle carefully. One forty-five kyat note was missing. This time there was no mistake. One forty-five kyat note, out of a pile of over a million. It would be embarrassing to mention it. He held the bundle in his hand and wondered what he should do. "It had to be my bundle, didn't it?" he thought to himself and looked over to Thant Zin who was counting his bundle. "There's one short," he whispered and held up a single finger as he passed over the bundle. The finger shook imperceptibly. Ko Myo Khin lowered his newspaper and looked up.

Almost unable to contain himself, U Taw Daw followed Thant Zin's every movement and counted along with him under his breath. Thant Zin was clearly a faster and more accurate counter than himself. The bundle under his fingers passed from thick to thin. U Taw Daw was on the edge of his seat asking "How many? How many?" like an accused man waiting for the sentence to be passed down. He and Thant Zin arrived simultaneously

at the final figure. Thant Zin pushed the incomplete bundle across to Ko Myo Khin saying, "Here, you count it too," but the latter simply smiled and slowly shook his head. Reaching into a bundle of money he was keeping separate, he pulled out a forty-five kyat note and handed it to Thant Zin.

As the pile of counted notes grew, so did U Taw Daw feel his strength ebbing away. U Aung Toe said that his bundle was two notes short. Thant Zin made as if to count it again to be sure, but Ko Myo Khin again just smiled, and, saying something which U Aung Toe could not understand, gestured with the palm of his hand that it would not be necessary to recount it and took out two fifteen kyat notes. He appeared not to want to waste any time. He lit up a cigarette and returned to reading the newspaper, looking like a man without a care in the world, quite unruffled, more like an automaton than a human being.

All that could be heard was the sound of the old clock ticking and the quiet rustle of notes. U Taw Daw finished a bundle and decided that he could not count another note. Leaning back in the armchair he looked long and hard at this man, Ko Myo Khin, who had come to buy his house for eleven *lakhs*[167] when four months ago it had only been valued at eight. Ko Myo Khin was still perusing the newspaper, his lips moving as he read as if he was spelling out each line word by word.

"Did Maung Nyi Aung mention that we would like to stay on here another two weeks?" asked U Taw Daw.

The money counters stopped with their fingers in midair. Speaking in the same slow manner as he had been perusing the newspaper, Ko Myo Khin said something that none of them understood except Ko Nyi Aung, who repeated it for their benefit: "If you want to stay on another two weeks, you can stay. I will still give you the money now in full. But please make sure that you move out on the day you say you will."

[167] One *lakh* equals 100,000 kyats.

Road
20
28
16
22
Inseln
Road
I8
I7
I2
7
37
6.8
38
I0
11
9
5
I3
I5
I4
Yankin Road
Kaba Aye Pagoda Road
24
35
32
East Race Course Road
Thamaing Road
4
23
3
31

MAP LEGEND

Scale: 1cm = 340m.

1- YCDC- USDA headquarters and city hall tanks, barricades, barbed wire
2- U Wizara Road- tanks
3- Pyay Rd- Defence Ministry No. 2- tanks
4- Sports Ground- tanks
5-Kokaing Junction, also at Saya San Rd, 29 September, 1996, arrests- barricades (Lon Htein)
6- Inyamyaing and Thanlwin Rd - barricades, guards (bullet proof vests) (December 1996 onwards)
7- Inya- barricades and barbed wire seal off he University of Yangon (December 1996-January 1997).
8- Aung San Suu Kyi's House
9- 9 November 1996 attack on Suu Kyi's convoy where area was sealed off by USDA
10- Kyi Maung's house
11- First attack on Suu Kyi in front of Kyi Maung's house, 1996
12- Second attack on Suu Kyi
13- Sedona Hotel, in November, 1996, arrests made at gathering places around the hotel (Yankin township)
14- Goodlif point (Yankin Township), Speech made by the NLD, November, 1996.
15- Gathering at Thukawaddy, (Yankin Township) November 1996
16- Hledan junction: Baton charge, arrests, people being hidden by Hledan township, December 1996.
17- Radio and TV blocks, December 1996 onwards.
18- Digging up cemetary.
19- Botataung Campus- the sight of student demonstrations in December, 1996
20- Kyimindine Campus- the sight of student demonstrations in December, 1996
21- Dagon Campus- (not shown) the sight of student demonstrations in December, 1996
22- Hlaing Campus- the sight of student demonstrations in December, 1996
23- Kyaukasan "Corral" (showgrounds).
24- Tooth Relic Pagoda
25- Ne Win's Pagoda
26- Shwedagon Pagoda- student demonstration on December 2, 1996 at 6 a.m. Students taken to the "Corral".
27- Insein Prison
28- Scene of Government "Press Conferences"
29- General Tin Oo's house

30- Defence Ministry
31- Ne Win's house
32- tea shop at bus station
33- Mosques vandalized and damaged, 1997.
34- North Okkalapa- house and mosques vandalized and damaged, 1997.
35-Kyimindine- under a bridge, a demonstration by monks in late March, 1997.
36- Sight of protests by Monks (purely concerned with affairs of monks, no anti-Muslim hostilities), 1997.
37- Mango grove monastery,blockaded by military in 1997.
38- NLD U Tin Oo's house
39- National League for Democracy Headquarters. In September, 1996 the NLD were stopped from holding meetings there.
40- Medical Institute No. 1- the sight of student demonstrations in December, 1996
41- Dental Institute- the sight of student demonstrations in December, 1996
42- Yangon Institute of Technology- the sight of student demonstrations in December, 1996

Appendix Three

KO MA (Monsieur Dur)[1]

1

Si je me souviens bien, je ne me suis pas pesé depuis longtemps. On peut vivre sans. Et puis j'ai passé l'âge où l'on se pèse une fois par semaine, observe son corps du haut en bas et surveille son régime.

Nous, les Birmans, traversons trois âges. Durant le premier, il faut s'instruire, au deuxième, s'enrichir, au troisième, méditer.

Me voilà au deuxième. Je me suis tellement enrichi que je ne sais même plus où mettre mes biens.

Je sais déjà depuis longtemps que l'argent permet de s'offrir les nourritures les plus raffinées, les vêtements les plus élégants et les médicaments les plus efficaces.

Alors je continue à m'enrichir par tous les moyens, avec acharnement. Et j'y réussis. Nous vivons à une époque propice aux affaires, alors il faut étendre son linge tant que le soleil brille.

Je vends du ciment, en achète, récupère le surplus, le met en poudre, fabrique de l'ersatz de ciment. J'achète des barres de fer à qui veut bien en vendre, les revends. On ne m'appelle même plus par mon nom. On m'a surnommé Ko Ma.

C'est parce qu'on appelle ces matériaux de construction "kon Ma" que les gens me surnomment Ko Ma (Monsieur Dur),où encore Ko Than gyan (Monsieur Barre de fer). Je les laisse faire, ça m'est égal, je n'ai rien à perdre.

Mais j'ai changé de sujet. Tout à l'heure, j'ai dit que je ne m'étais pas pesé depuis longtemps. C'est ça, si je me souviens bien, je ne me suis pas pesé depuis bien des années, je crois.

Hé... pourtant non, un soir, je me suis pesé. J'avais garé ma voiture de 2 millions de kyats dans la rue Pansodan et alors que je marchais vaquant à mes affaires, je me suis retrouvé devant une balance à l'angle de la rue dans un petit coin près d'une boutique de thé. Il faisait déjà sombre. Très sombre.

Le propriétaire de la balance était un vieillard terne et courbé. Sa balance rouillée avait été repeinte.

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[1] "Ko Ma" (1993 unpublished manuscript). The short story was translated from Burmese to French by Violaine Brisou and reprinted with permission from the author (whose name is withheld). A Burmese version of the short story is not currently available.

J'avais remarqué ça grâce à la lumière du lampadaire et à celle de la bougie posée sur une soucoupe près de la balance.

Généralement, se peser est un acte prémédité.

Je crois que j'étais le premier client. Le vieillard n'avait pas l'air de guetter avec une impatience folle celui qui viendrait poser ses pieds sur son engin.

Il semblait plutôt s'en être remis au destin : qu'il gagne 1 ou 2 kyats, il s'en contenterait.

Cette balance me captiva. Il est pourtant rare que mon attention se porte sur autre chose que les billets de banque qui m'apparaissent comme un éclair blanc entre les barres de fer et la poussière de ciment.

Mais, ce jour-là, un changement devait survenir dans ma vie. La balance avait attiré mon attention. Je décidai donc de me peser.

J'eus de plus en plus envie de monter sur cette balance. Si je le faisais, la petite aiguille s'arrêterait tout d'un coup sur un chiffre.

Et j'avais envie de connaître ce chiffre. Je me demandais combien je pesais. 120 livres ? 220 ou encore 250? Je voulais vraiment savoir.

Avec ce ventre protubérant, ces trois bourrelets dans la nuque, ces avant-bras et ces mollets énormes, cette peau basanée, combien pouvait donc peser ce corps semblable à celui d'un jeune éléphant?

Il fallait que je le sâche ! Je quittai mes tongues de Mandalay à 600 kyats et m'apprêtais à monter sur la balance.

Le vieillard qui regardait d'un air hagard son engin sursauta en me voyant quitter mes chaussures.

Puis il fit mine d'être heureux d'avoir un client devant lui.

Ayant attrapé un vieux chiffon, le pauvre vieux se mit même à essuyer la balance. Ensuite il s'empara de la bougie, pour pouvoir lire les chiffres.

Je compris alors qu'il était prêt. Je montai. La balance disparut sous mes pieds.

Lorsque je fus en équilibre et confortablement installé, le vieillard, à l'aide de sa bougie, essaya de lire à travers le cadran le chiffre indiqué par la petite aiguille noire qui s'était enfuie de peur. Mais pas moyen, ce fut impossible.

A partir de ce soir-là, ma vie commença à se remplir d'événements extraordinaires.

Depuis, j'ai une maladie dont personne au monde n'a jamais été affecté. Elle a attiré ici des spécialistes de nombreux pays.

Ils m'ont examiné sous tous les angles, ils ont émis des diagnostics, ils ont donné des noms à ma maladie.

Ce soir-là, alors que le vieillard essayait de lire l'aiguille de sa balance, il nous arriva à tous les deux quelque chose de tout à fait inattendu.

J'en parlerai discrètement. Au lieu de payer le prix de 1 kyat indiqué sur la balance je dus donner 800 kyats. Soit quatre billets de 200 kyats.

Que faire d'autre ? Au moment où j'étais monté sur la balance, l'aiguille avait traversé le cadran comme une flèche, disparaissant pour toujours.

Je pris peur et descendis de l'engin avec précaution. Très doucement. C'est qu'il me semblait déjà sentir quelque chose sous la plante de mes pieds. Et comme je l'avais pensé, lorsque je posai les pieds par terre, la balance était désossée.

<< Combien vaut votre balance ?>>

Le vieillard leva les yeux et me regarda comme s'il venait d'être frappé par un météore d'un autre monde. Je veux simplement dire qu'il me regarda avec étonnement.

<< 500 kyats, elle est très vieille, c'est un ami qui...>>

Que me dit-il ? Je n'y pris garde. Je lui donnai 800 kyats. Ensuite je ressentis enfin le choc. J'avais une sensation désagréable collée dans la poitrine.

Je ne sus jamais combien je pesais. Mais le pire, c'était que mon cœur battait à toute allure.

2

Arrivé devant mon immeuble, je remarquai quelque chose d'étrange : au moment où je descendais de la voiture, elle eut un rebond comme si elle avait été libérée de la pression d'un objet extrêmement lourd. Je crois que même le chauffeur s'en aperçut à la manière dont il me regarda.

Avant de monter chez moi, je me dirigeai vers les hangars de la cour Ouest. Je voulais voir les sacs de ciment qui s'entassaient dans les quatre hangars énormes.

J'aimerais à nouveau éprouver cette sensation. C'est un de mes vices. Les sacs qui remplissaient le hangar jusqu'au plafond offraient une vision presque effrayante. Les sacs de ciment produit localement étaient les plus nombreux.

Ils étaient entassés selon leur provenance, Tchin Khin, Theyè, Myaingkalé. Le ciment importé de l'étranger était stocké dans un hangar à part. Celui-ci était également plein.

<< Hé ! On les vend combien ?

- 580.

- Bien.

- Aujourd'hui on en a vendu plus de 4000, patron.

- Bien, bien.

- On a encore eu un arrivage de barres de fer d'un pouce de diamètre, je ne sais plus où les mettre. J'aimerais bien les changer de place.

- Laisse-les où elles sont. Un camion doit venir les prendre demain. On aura une sortie de deux tonnes.

- Bien patron.>>

J'entrai dans le hangar. Le vaste espace était vivement éclairé par les lumières électriques, 30 ou 40 ouvriers remplissaient des sacs de ciment en poudre. Le ciment recouvrait complètement le sol, on devait en avoir jusqu'aux mollets.

Certains remplissaient les sacs à l'aide d'une pelle, d'autres les cousaient. Quant aux femmes, elle pulvérisaient les morceaux de ciment durci.

<< Il y a beaucoup de sacs déchirés ? Pourquoi est-ce que vous les acceptez ?

- Il n'y a pas que des sacs déchirés, il y a aussi de la poudre de boue.

- On a un client qui veut 2 tonnes de ciment mélangé.

- On ne veut pas des clients qui n'achètent que 40 sacs, vous entendez ? Ça fait du travail pour rien. Quand les sacs sont pleins, pesez-les, ils risquent d'être trop remplis.

- Oui patron.>>

Je tournai le dos aux ouvriers qui remplissaient, soulevaient et déplaçaient les sacs. Avec leur face couverte de poussière grise qui cerclait leurs yeux, ils ressemblaient à des singes; je me dirigeai vers les barres de fer.

Alors que je montai sur les barres empilées à l'extérieur de l'usine, je remarquai que les paquets qui formaient un escalier, se tassaient brusquement à chacun de mes pas. Mais je ne m'en souciai pas, c'est comme ça quand on monte sur une pile de barres de fer. Je demandai qu'on m'ouvre la porte du hangar qui débordait de ciment, la vision qui s'offrait à moi me comblait.

Je n'aurais échangé cette sensation pour rien au monde. Désormais on utilisait mon ciment et mes barres de fer dans bien des endroits.

Alors que je redescendais l'escalier de barres tout à cette pensée, je perdis l'équilibre. Comme j'allai tomber à la renverse, mon employé, Maung Thaung, qui se

trouvait là, voulut me rattraper à bout de bras, il me retint, mais j'étais trop lourd pour lui, il ne fit qu'amortir ma chute et je l'écrasai.

J'eus plus de peur que de mal. Mais le pauvre Maung Thaung se cassa la jambe. Ce n'était pas grave, on loua une voiture et l'envoya à l'hôpital.

Après l'incident, en montant l'escalier pour aller chez moi, j'eus envie de rire en me rappelant les paroles du pauvre garçon effrayé:

<< Patron, vous êtes drôlement lourd, j'ai eu l'impression d'être écrasé par un éléphant.>>

En arrivant chez moi, je m'allongeai sur ma chaise-longue. Je réfléchissais. Que s'était-il passé aujourd'hui ? Pourquoi étais-je si lourd ? Ne savais-je pas que j'étais lourd ? Pas plus que d'habitude. Je me sentais agile. Le garçon qui s'était retrouvé à l'hôpital s'en sortirait-il ? etc...

Soudain, l'armature en acier de ma chaise-longue se brisa comme du rotin. La toile se déchira et je passai au travers.

<< Oh ! A Ko* est tombé !>>

La bonne qui m'apportait un coca cola glacé avait crié d'une voix perçante. Peu après, des ouvriers arrivèrent du hangar. Il fallut dix gaillards pour m'amener jusqu'à mon lit. Alors qu'ils me soulevaient, je remarquai qu'ils étaient couverts de sueur; on aurait dit qu'ils transportaient un bloc de fonte.

Que se passait-il ? Que se passait-il ?! Que m'arrivait-il ?!

A ce moment-là, j'entendis la voix de ma femme qui revenait du centre de méditation. Elle arriva près de mon lit toute agitée, et folle d'inquiétude.

<< Que t'arrive-t-il A Ko ?!>>

Je n'oublierai jamais son cri rempli de surprise. Lorsqu'elle essuya mon front trempé, ce n'était pas de la sueur qui salissait son mouchoir, mais un mélange blanc et rougeâtre de ciment en poudre et de rouille.

<< Mon Dieu, mon Dieu !>>

3

Le pire, c'était que moi-même, je ne ressentais rien d'anormal. J'étais comme les autres. Je mangeais, je vivais, et j'avais de l'appétit. Je me sentais léger.

---

* A ko : signifie "grand frère". C'est ainsi qu'on s'adresse à un homme un peu plus âgé.

Mais vous connaissez ma femme. Comme on est riche, elle en fait toujours trop, elle exagère tout. En trois semaines, j'avais déjà consulté une vingtaine de médecins.

Passer au travers d'une chaise longue était une maladie qui n'avait rien d'anormal. On dépensa des mille et des cents. Les médecins se succédèrent, et pas un seul d'entre eux ne put établir un diagnostic.

Mais comme je n'aime pas contrarier ma femme, je la laissais faire. Cependant, le vingt et unième docteur me prescrit quelque chose de différent: il m'ordonna de faire des radios.

Je ne m'y connais pas très bien dans ce domaine. Ma femme demanda s'il s'agissait d'ultra sons, le médecin répondit que non, qu'il fallait faire des radios. Et pour ne pas le contrarier, j'allai faire des radios.

Chaque partie de mon corps fut radiographiée. Ma tête, ma poitrine, mes côtes, la partie inférieure de mon torse, mes pieds, mes bras, mes mains. Après avoir examiné les radios, le médecin, au lieu d'établir un diagnostic, se trouva mal à son tour. Les gouttes de sueur qui perlaient sur son front étaient grosses comme le bout de mon auriculaire.

<< Votre corps est constitué de la manière la plus étrange qui soit. Je n'ai jamais rien vu de tel. Pas un médecin au monde n'aura étudié ce genre d'anatomie.

- Expliquez-vous, s'il vous plaît.>>

Le médecin leva les radios vers la lumière et les examina à nouveau.

<< D'abord, vos os ne sont pas ceux d'un homme normal, ils ressemblent plutôt à des barres de fer mises bout à bout. Ensuite, votre corps paraît rempli de fines particules, elles sont si nombreuses que c'en est effrayant, et je ne saurais dire en quoi elles consistent.

- Des barres de fer, c'est bien ça ?

- Oui, regardez. Sur les radios. Elles apparaissent plus blanches que de coutume, et aux joints elles n'ont pas d'articulations comme en ont normalement les os.>>

Je me représentais les barres de fer d'un pouce de diamètre, quant aux fines particules, était-ce du ciment en poudre ?

Je savais que le ciment est composé de poudre de chaux cuite et d'un peu de poudre de quartz, le mélange obtenu est extrêmement lourd, ces particules, ça ne pouvait être que ça. Pourtant, je me chargeais uniquement de la vente, j'avais donc rarement

l'occasion de respirer la poussière de ciment. Cependant, elle apparaissait sur les radios, n'est-ce pas complètement étrange ?

Mon corps n'était-il qu'un assemblage de barres de fer dans un bloc de ciment ? N'étais-je réellement qu'un homme de béton ? Quand cela avait-il commencé ? Pourquoi cela devait-il arriver maintenant ? Et comment se faisait-il que je sois encore en vie ? Étais-je encore un homme ordinaire ? Je ne comprenais plus rien.

Le docteur attrapa son sac et partit l'air complètement hagard.

4

Quelques neuf semaines plus tard, je me retrouvais à l'hôpital pour de bon. On dut presque m'y transporter à l'aide d'une grue.

De nouvelles radios montrèrent que les particules étaient encore plus nombreuses, on me dit que tout mon corps en était plein.

Je ne pouvais plus remuer les pieds ni les chevilles. C'est pour ça qu'on m'avait hospitalisé.

Les tests chimiques effectués sur mon tissu musculaire au département de recherche sur les maladies, révélèrent qu'il était composé de chaux et de quartz, les cellules de chair s'étaient petit à petit desséchées, ainsi que tous les fluides de mon corps. J'appris cela grâce à mon cerveau qui ne s'était pas encore durci.

Ma femme s'occupait de mon entreprise. Comme autrefois, les sacs de ciment remplissaient les hangars jusqu'au plafond, offrant une vision repoussante et les barres de fer s'entassaient.

Mes affaires continuaient à prospérer, le ciment et les barres de fer allaient et venaient et les billets de banques entraient comme des éclairs blancs, tandis qu'à l'hôpital, dans une chambre pour moi tout seul, j'étais alité, et bien entendu calme comme un bloc de béton.

5

Quelques quatre semaines plus tard, mes pieds s'effritèrent, comme du ciment desséché entre des briques. Mon cœur, cependant, battait encore.

Ma bouche remuait. Mais je ne respirais plus, ne buvais plus et mes larmes ne pouvaient plus couler. Je n'avais plus aucun moyen de montrer mes émotions, tout mon corps s'était durci.

Mes paupières ne battaient plus, mes yeux restaient grand ouverts et j'étais las de la vue du carrelage qui recouvrait les murs de l'hôpital. J'aurais alors bien voulu dire quelques mots, mais cela m'était impossible:

<< Il faut continuer à faire marcher notre entreprise, ne penser à rien d'autre, les affaires sont bonnes, il y a de la demande sur le marché du ciment et des barres de fer.>>

Mais je ne pouvais rien articuler. Jour après jour, ma bouche s'était durcie et était devenue glacée. Ma femme, mes amis, mes enfants me rendirent visite, mais j'étais incapable de les distinguer les uns des autres. Les médecins qui vinrent de l'étranger pour m'examiner et étudier mon mal repartirent tous après avoir sué à grosses gouttes.

Mon état fut défini comme un mal inconnu que même la médecine de la fin du XXème siècle ne pouvait identifier.

Ainsi, disons que je suis mort glacé et dur comme du roc. Et, le jour de mes funérailles, des passants stupéfaits regardèrent passer le cortège qui allait non pas au-devant d'une voiture funéraire, mais d'une grue.

Bien que réduit à l'état d'un bloc de béton, je suis encore conscient, mais cela, moi seul le sais.

Moi seul sais que je ne suis pas mort, et que dans mon corps inerte, mon esprit subsiste. Personne ne connait ma souffrance.

En langage scientifique, on parle de coma. Et moi, on m'appelle Ko Ma, autant dire, le coma de Ko Ma.

6

Je n'ai peur que d'une chose. Ma femme fera couler ma pierre tombale dans le ciment que nous vendons. Ma tombe est peu profonde. Réfléchissez un peu.

Les acheteurs de barres de fer pourront facilement déterrer le cadavre d'un homme en fer et le mettre en pièces, que ferai-je alors ?

Que ferai-je s'ils cassent mon enveloppe de ciment et s'emparent de mes os de fer ?

Quand il s'agit de ciment, les gens sont comme possédés par le diable. Quant aux barres de fer, ils feraient n'importe quoi pour en avoir.

C'est la seule chose qui m'effraie.

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