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The Historical Visual Economy of Photography in Burma

Mandy Sadan
Lecturer in the History of South East Asia,
School of Oriental & African Studies, University of London
ms114@soas.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper presents an outline of the development of photography in Burma from the early colonial period to the end of the 1980s. It explores the relationship between early studios and the training of Burma-born photographers, the expansion of the photographic economy in the 1950s, and the challenges created by nationalisation after 1963. Using extensive interviews with local photographers and archival materials, it explores innovations around photography in the longer term. In doing so, it argues that recent developments using digital media are part of a much longer tradition of local technical innovation than is usually considered the case.

Keywords

Burma – photography – Burma VJ – history – visual economy

Background to the Research

To date, little research has been conducted into the history of photography in Burma from the perspective of Burmese photographers. There is a lacuna in our knowledge relating to histories of photography beyond the colonial context in which photography was first introduced to the country. In particular, we know little about Burmese photographers in their own right, and the relationship of photography to the wider political, social, and economic environment in which it operated, especially during the years of military dictatorship before the coming of the 'digital age'. We understand little about how image-making

practices and technologies were locally appropriated, about the relationships between Burmese photographers and others, and about how the networks that were generated under colonial rule perpetuated beyond the colonial period. Similarly, while we understand, or have the tools for working out, something of how images circulated in the colonial state, especially in developing forms of print media within and between social, cultural, and political networks, we currently know little about how these circulations were continued or transformed in the post-colonial state, and what pressures for those continuities or transformations there might have been.

There may be an assumption that the social control of the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) under General Ne Win (Steinberg 2010; Taylor 1987; Department of Information 1962) must have been so totalizing that any photographic output must surely have been of a generic nature, similar in essence perhaps to Soviet-style socialist realism, albeit with an idiosyncratic Burmese and Buddhist bent. In fact, the wider history of photography in Burma helps us to unearth a story of much greater potential complexity, as popular photography continued to occupy a civil space in Burmese society far into the history of the Burmese Way to Socialism. It becomes a potentially enlightening subject for understanding the ways in which ordinary people maintained their own personal and social identities during the harshest days of military dictatorship. Providing some detailed knowledge about the development of photographic and related practices 'within' Burma, not just 'of' Burma (Jarvis 2011; Selth 2008; Ferguson 2012), is the starting point for this article.

The research discussed here was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) UK, as part of the project 'Optical Allusions: Photography, Ethnicity and Ideologies of Conflict in Burma'.[1] The project took a historical approach to the study of local photographic practices in Burma, and an ini-

1 ESRC Reference No. RES-000-22-2668. This article was originally prepared for inclusion in the panel 'Contesting the State: Violence, Identity and Sovereign Practices in Southeast Asia', convened by Dr Laurens Bakker and Professor Frans Hüsken (Radboud University, the Netherlands) and Dr Lee Wilson (Cambridge University, UK and the University Of Queensland, Australia) at the 25th ASEASUK conference, Swansea University, 11–13 September 2009. The research is part of a longer project to understand the social and cultural histories of conflict in Burma from the early nineteenth century onwards; see also Sadan 2013. Many people have assisted in this research, but I would particularly like to express my gratitude to Thi Ha Thwe, who undertook most of the field interviews in Burma, as well as Ko Thaw Tar Soe, Ko Zaw Myint Oo, and Professor Robert Anderson for their assistance. I am also grateful to Lee Wilson and Laurens Bakker for their comments on early drafts of the paper on which this article is based, and the anonymized comments of reviewers at *Bijdragen*. The usual disclaimers apply.

tial key objective of the project was to undertake an exploratory study into the research potential of the images created by Burma's many armed groups. It was in this area that my own research focused.[2] The project was premised on the belief that careful study of image production could help us to understand better the processes by which ideological justifications of resistance in the border regions of Burma became entrenched over many decades. The armed organizations that have controlled these areas for much of Burma's post-independence history have in many cases accumulated relatively large, albeit loosely collated, 'archives' of visual documentation. Working with images such as these could give valuable depth to our understanding of the social and economic underpinnings of some of Asia's most entrenched, yet, in many ways, least known conflicts.

However, while preliminary research was conducted into the prospects of working with visual material created by these groups, the project was also very much aware of the fact that more knowledge was needed about the wider development of photographic technologies and practices throughout Burma. This wider context should also inform how we might interpret and understand the production, circulation, and consumption of these other materials—their 'visual economy'. The notion of the visual economy that framed this research is clearly influenced by the work of Deborah Poole (1997). Poole's work on images of race in Latin America emphasizes how studying the production, circulation, and consumption of images helps us to explore meaning-making around various kinds of visual media. The analytical framework she proposes helps us to break away from a purely image-content-led analysis to consider wider social worlds in which images as material artefacts are located and 'live' (Pinney 1997; Appadurai 1986). The research framework was also influenced by the work of David Guss (2000) and his 'system of production' analysis. Both of these constructs were points of reference for this exploratory research and demanded that the scope of the photographic-practices studied should be framed broadly. This implied incorporating a careful study of photography within the Burmese centre as a vital component.

2 Findings from this part of the research are not included in this article. Hkanhpa Sadan, Hkun Sa Mahkaw, Hkuensai Jaiyen, Saingchuen Soikhamhuang, Decholphol Walingta, Lieng Lern, Nai Hong Sa, Tah Doh Moh, Paul Keenan, Kareng Tu Ja, Dau Hka, and Major General Sumlut Gun Maw were critical in the development of work in ethnic-minority regions, and to them I am exceedingly grateful.

Funding of the research project started just prior to the Saffron Revolution, a political protest led most visibly by some of Burma's Theravada Buddhist monks in 2007, which resulted in restricted access to the country for some time (Steinberg 2010). Then, in May 2008, Cyclone Nargis struck the south of the country (Steinberg 2010; Cheesman, Skidmore, and Wilson 2010), where many of the oldest photographic centres had been located.[3] These were difficult, challenging times in Burma, including for the local researchers on this project. Indeed, it seemed highly questionable whether interjecting a research project of this type into this setting at this point, when so many, more pressing concerns seemed to predominate, would be appropriate.

Yet, new image technologies clearly had the capacity to influence the transformation of Burma politically in the contemporary setting. The fact that images of the Saffron Revolution and the aftermath of Nargis were seen globally was an indicator of this changed technical-political reality.[4] In 2007, coverage of the monks' protest proved that it was clearly no longer possible to restrict the availability of cameras and camera phones, or access to satellite communications through which images could be disseminated (Chowdhury 2008; Mottaz 2010). The visual record of the Saffron Revolution was a stark contrast to the blackout that surrounded the traumatic events that had taken place in 1988; a few shaky camera shots were all that filtered into the wider world at that time (Lintner 1990). In 2007, however, the world turned its gaze upon Burma in a new way, with international newsrooms transfixed by the sight of monks marching against the military government. A local photographer friend of mine took what was to become an iconic image: that of a monk holding an upturned alms bowl. Rather than being circulated through local underground networks, in 2007 this image went viral.[5]

3 British colonial rule in Burma, which provides the historical backdrop to the expansion of photography in Burma in the nineteenth century, increased in power through three wars in 1824–26, 1852, and 1885. Power was initially concentrated in the south, in what later became the provinces of Tennaserim and Pegu. These areas subsequently became the sites for the development of early printing presses and photographic businesses in the country.

4 One of the debates that proliferated from the horror of Nargis and the response of the military regime to relief efforts was whether or not the UN Security Council could have instigated the Responsibility to Protect. See, for example, Cohen 2009 and Serrano 2010.

5 The image can be seen on a wide range of websites engaged in Burma-related issues, including recently on the academic blog *The Conversation* at http://theconversation.com/aung-san-suu-kyis-election-bid-is-the-litmus-test-for-reform-in-burma-4908; see also http://www

Since those pivotal events, visibility has come to define for many a sense of progress in Burma's political life. Indeed, the capacity to *see* Daw Aung San Suu Kyi after years of house arrest has subsequently come to symbolize this sense of progress for many. This kind of visibility has now largely become the norm and seems less striking than it was even in 2007. It is clear that whatever the outcomes of the current political developments, there is no possibility of removing from sight that which we have already seen, or of eradicating the associations made between political progress and Burma's tangible visibility. The prevalence of digital media and social networking also ensures this outcome, with vast virtual archives located in remote servers storing images on a grand scale.[6]

Interest in the photographic output of Burmese photographers, therefore, has been defined to date more by contemporary concerns with digital images as a functional element of current political change and transnational activism rather than anything else.[7] Historically, there has been comparatively little interest in photographers of Burmese origin, or in the local history of photographic practices as a means of making more sense of some of these contemporary developments with visual technologies. The limitations of our understanding of the history of image taking in Burma can be seen by considering the way in which the film *Burma VJ* gained international interest. In 2007, images and image-taking were clearly vitally important as political tools of protest and

.altsean.org/Photogalleries/SRPhotogallery.htm for a range of images that were published helping to bring world attention to the demonstrations. See also http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/7017636.stm on the photographer Kenji Nagai, who was killed during the protests, again reinforcing the significance of the visual in international reportage of these events.

6 Of course, internet freedom is an ongoing issue, and 'the censor' has technically been removed as a political tool. However, it is only relatively recently (since September 2011) that the government has experimented with relaxing some of its controls. The movie *Burma VJ* demonstrated the local, innovative ways of extending the possible boundaries over a longer period. In June 2013, a local NGO held an inaugural Internet Freedom Forum in Yangon; see http://www.freedomhouse.org/article/freedom-house-grantee-holds-first-ever-internet-freedom-forum-burma

7 This includes the use of images by advocacy groups, such as the Karen Human Rights Group (see http://khrg.org/photo-and-video), which has extensive collections of photographic images taken by its local networks. Shan Herald Agency for News in Chiang Mai (SHAN) also has extensive photographic archives and utilizes them in the drafting of a large number of reports and briefings. Digitizing this collection was one of the outcomes of this project and I am grateful to Hkuensai Jaiyen and Lieng Lern for their support.

resistance, and, not coincidentally, this was the critical moment at which local video and photo journalists emerged on the international media scene. Their ingenuity and bravery were encapsulated in the movie *Burma VJ*, screened to admiring audiences around the globe as visibility helped to transform Burma's place in the global political consciousness.[8] The difficulties in which local VJs had to operate also ensured that this sense of visibility became intimately connected with the social, economic, and political changes that have gained further ground in recent years. Yet, perhaps we should try to understand *Burma VJ* as part of a much longer, more continuous experience of careful social navigation by image takers to circumvent the apparently totalitarian state controls. The study of photographs taken by Burmese photographers, extending back into the BSPP-era and beyond, can be a useful tool for prising open what has been represented by outside observers as, largely, an apparently hermetically sealed Burmese society under military dictatorship over many decades. It is against this background that the research conducted during this project will be framed in this article.

Locating Burmese Photographers in Colonial Burma

As noted, photography was a technology that was introduced to Burma at the time of colonial rule, and we know something of how colonial practices developed during this time (Falconer 2000, 2005; Singer 1993; Jarvis 2011). Interest in the history of photography in Burma has tended to focus on foreign photographers, such as Felice Beato, J. Jackson, or Philip Klier, or amateur ethnographers, such as Lt Col J.H. Green (Singer 1993; Suen 2008; Dell 2000).[9] More has been written elsewhere on the subject of colonial photography and so the concern in this short piece will be to delineate ways in which this quite diverse range of

8 Østergaard 2008; Davis 2009. The movie did provoke some controversy over the editing and reconstruction process; see, for example, Andrew Marshall, 'Burma VJ: Truth as casualty', *Time*, 29-1-2009 and various rejoinders, such as http://stillinmotion.typepad.com/still_in_motion/2009/03/this-is-getting-old.html.

9 Much of the literature on colonial photography in Burma is very rich. Perhaps the leading expert on colonial photography in Burma is John Falconer, lead curator of visual arts at the British Library. I am very grateful to him for his support and encouragement of my interest in photography in recent years. Falconer 2000 is a very useful introductory essay on the practices of colonial ethnographic documentation through photography. Andrew Jarvis of the University of Cambridge is also conducting detailed, rigorous research on the very earliest photographers of the country and their links across the Indian Ocean.

individuals and their business interests interacted with a changing technical-economic environment and an emerging local network of photographers of Burmese origin.

Colonial interest in photography in Burma was as old as the technology itself, and expanded in tandem with the expansion of the colonial state (Tagg 1988; Ryan 1997). Some well-known photographers of the mid and late nineteenth century, such as John M'Cosh (1805–1885), were employed by the state and recorded its activities as Britain consolidated its control over Lower, Central and then Upper Burma (Marien 2006). The soldier and keen amateur photographer Willoughby Wallace Hooper (1837–1912) recorded the military Expeditionary Force as it went northwards along the Irrawaddy to Mandalay in 1885 with the objective of removing the Konbaung dynasty from power.[10] Other foreign photographers came to Burma independently, and a number of these were of international significance in the history of photography, such as Felice Beato (1832–1909).[11] Yet others simply travelled through the country taking images, such as the photographers attached to Bourne & Shepherd's studios in India, while a few, such as J. Jackson, stayed to establish photographic businesses in Burma from the early 1860s onwards.[12] There were foreign-owned studios in the 1870s in outlying districts, or *mofussil*, such as Moulmein, for example, (Falconer 2005). These independent photographers might ally their skills at times to colonial needs, such as documenting the visits of viceroys and dignitaries, but most in the end had to develop more expansive business interests. They increasingly became oriented towards supplying photographic mementos and souvenirs to the wide variety of foreign visitors who travelled through the country, as well as supplying Burmese elites who had an interest in the new technology.[13] Photographers from the outset had a complex

10 The photographic record of these latter events was published as a souvenir album (Hooper 1887).

11 There has been controversy over the dates of Beato's career and his death, but according to the latest research he died in 1909. Beato is best known for the influence he had upon photography in Japan, which has been the focus of a relatively extensive amount of research.

12 The first photographer listed in *The Bengal directory* (later *Thacker's Indian directory*) was E.M. Pascal, who is listed under the 'Trade' section as living in Rangoon and working as a photographer (*The Bengal directory* 1864:177). Privates Bentley and Jackson are listed as photographers resident in Rangoon from 1865 onwards.

13 Their mode of operations is revealed in the pages of the *Rangoon Weekly Gazette* and elsewhere. An advert under the heading 'Photography', dated 1-2-1887, states: 'Mr. J. Jackson having returned from Maulmein his studio No. 15 Phayre St. will be open for portraits daily

relationship with official and non-official image-taking in Burma. The colonial state's need to utilize skilled freelance technical professionals to take photographic images on a scale beyond its own capacities was evident during these years.

We know little about the engagement of Burmese people with photography at this time. There was evidently interaction with the technology, and interest in studio portraiture, among wealthy Burmese people, although the motivations behind the images of local officials and others are not always clear (Suen 2008).[14] Although we know little of the response to the images or the technology from a Burmese perspective at this time, there was evidently interest in photography at the court in Mandalay. In 1871 it was reported that the British political agent Captain Strover presented a photograph album containing views of Ceylon to King Mindon,[15] and there had apparently been a studio of some description at the royal palace in the days of King Thibaw, which reportedly employed a French photographer as the supervisor (Hooper 1887). The ravaging of the royal palace in 1885 unearthed an important, now iconic image of King Thibaw and his wife, Queen Supayalat, depicting them before their fall and taken in what was referred to by Hooper as 'the palace photographic studio' (Hooper 1887).[16] What is certain, however, is that the relative costs of studio photography and amateur camera ownership would have meant that the

(Sunday excepted) from 7am to 3 PM. A new set of Maulmein views, also views of places of interest in Upper and Lower Burma, groups and characters on sale.' MC1198 NPL, British Library Newspaper Archive.

14 Felice Beato's studio portraits are best known for their representation of local elites and other 'representative types', but it is not clear to what extent these were initiated by the local officials depicted or not, as many were clearly staged to appeal to the tourist market.

15 Diary of the political agent at Mandalay (Captain Strover), 4-10-1871, L/PS/6/599, India Office Records, British Library (IOR): 'I present your Majesty with a photographic album containing views of Ceylon—the principal pagodas, monasteries, &c. The Government of Ceylon have forwarded the album for presentment to your Majesty.' He remarked that the king seemed to be pleased with the gift.

16 It is not certain who took this photograph. It is sometimes incorrectly attributed to Felice Beato because of similarities in style, but Beato was not in Burma at this time. One print from this subsequently oft-reproduced image of Thibaw and Supayalat, derived from a collection made in Rangoon by Percy Scott of the Public Works Department and presented to the Royal Commonwealth Society Library of Cambridge University as early as 1904, states that the original photographer was J. Jackson. Janus catalogue of Cambridge University Archives and Libraries, http://janus.lib.cam.ac.uk/db/node.xsp?id=EAD/GBR/0115/Y3029D (accessed 17-2-2010).

vast majority of ordinary Burmese people would not have been able to engage actively with photography at all.[17]

It is difficult to trace clearly the connections between foreign and Burma-born photographers in these early years of colonial expansion in the country.[18] The global art market in colonial photography from Burma has also not helped in this regard, as albums that do occasionally appear for sale are sometimes dismantled by online brokers to sell the images contained within individually, in the process destroying vital evidence that could help us to understand the contextual economy of these images.[19] However, one source that can help us to delineate basic linkages between the early studios and local photographers is *Thacker's Indian directory*.[20] This is the equivalent of a cross between a Yellow Pages and an A–Z street map, and it gives some enticing clues about the changing commercial environment during the period of British colonial rule, of which photographic production and consumption were a part. The art historian Noel Singer (1993) made profitable use of this as a source for tracing colonial-era studios with a focus towards photographers of foreign origin. However, a detailed reading of *Thacker's* covering a period of decades reveals some interesting dynamics between and within local studios and their relationship to a wider commercial environment. The directory has to be used with great care, as it evidently omits far more than it contains, and as such the engagement of wealthy urban Burmese people with photography is barely evident in

17 The portable Kodak camera cost about $5 in 1896, but the Brownie was developed in order to bring the price down to $1. See http://www.kodak.com/ek/US/en/Our_Company/History_of_Kodak/Building_the_Foundation.htm

18 Many museums and archives in Europe—including, in the UK, the British Library, Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge University Centre of South Asian Studies, Pitt Rivers Museum at the University of Oxford, the Green Centre for World Art at Brighton Pavilion and Museums—have relatively extensive holdings of photographic material from colonial Burma, and most have catalogues that are available online. In addition, there are private collections in the public domain, such as the Alkazi Collection, which contain materials from Burma. My thanks to Philip Grover for his comments in relation to this latter collection.

19 A site of relatively rich pickings for such artefacts is eBay. Clearly some of the images for sale are reprints of originals, but there is also evidence of albums being broken up to sell on the images of specific locations to niche buyers. To a historian, this is nothing less than source vandalism.

20 Burma was, of course, administered as part of British India until the 1935 Government of India Act was implemented. Burma formally separated its administration from India in 1937.

it at all.[21] However, it does provide clues about general shifts and patterns in the photographic economy, which are helpful for delineating a context of change. What follows is a basic narrative of the emergence of a Burmese-led photographic economy derived from a careful reading of this source. Thereafter, at the end of the article, the memories of some Burmese photographers regarding their professional histories, which were documented as part of this research, will be considered

Burmese Photographers in Early-Colonial-Era Studios

The entries for the bigger studios and outlets, such as F. Beato Ltd and Watts & Skeen, start to include the names of Burmese members of staff by the 1890s. From this it is clear that some locally born photographers, assistants, and technicians had been incorporated by foreign studios during this time and obtained training from them. For example, Maung Po Chit and Maung Win are listed as assistants in the studio of 'photo artists' Johannes & Co. in Mandalay in 1894 (*Thacker's Indian directory* 1894, 1:788). Mandalay also saw the first locally born assistant enter the studio of F. Beato. In 1891, Beato advertised his services as a 'landscape photographer' and listed Frank Glass as his assistant (*Thacker's Indian directory* 1891, 1:740). By 1896, however, he described himself as 'photographer and curio dealer' and listed Maung Po Saw as one of his two assistants (*Thacker's Indian directory* 1896, 1:845). However, there are no local names listed in the entries for the studios in Rangoon at this time and none are listed in the separate Burmese business section under the heading 'Photographers'. Clearly, these early foreign-owned studios were of some significance as sites for the transmission of new technologies to those interested in learning the art, and provided some locally born photographers with access to the expensive equipment with which they could be trained in the trade.

21 Until the 1890s, Burmese- and Chinese-owned businesses were listed under a separate heading in the commercial section of the listings. However, to be listed the business owner would have to feel that the investment in the advert would be worthwhile given the known client base. The directory could obviously not map in any detail the scale of independent camera-ownership. These amateurs, and those who worked outside studios, would generally be dependent upon a more limited number of studios' photographic agents to develop their work.

The Changing Nature of Photographic Studio Businesses

Nonetheless, this was a time of ongoing challenge in the photographic economy. By the end of the nineteenth century, many of the early foreign-owned photographic studios noticeably expanded their range of business interests in *Thacker's* listings. This was no doubt partly a result of the changing nature of photographic technologies. Kodak, for example, introduced its smaller, more portable cameras using film rolls instead of paper around this time, while also providing postal services for the printing of images.[22] These technological changes challenged the old studios, and *Thacker's* makes it clear that many of them developed corollary business interests through souvenir and curio sales to expand their incomes, extending also the range of outlets for their photographic mementos in the form of postcards and tourist prints (*Thacker's Indian directory* 1899:913).[23] Felice Beato's Mandalay studio expanded into Rangoon, where it advertised itself as a retailer of Burmese carvings, silk, silverware, and curios, and only in a subsidiary way as a photographic studio.[24] One notable addition to the Beato company portfolio was that they took over proprietorship of Watts & Skeen, one of the best-known photographic studios in Rangoon (*Thacker's Indian directory* 1904:1394).[25] The take-over provided them with a large photographic stock that F. Beato Ltd could potentially exploit to its own advantage in developing an even wider range of photographic souvenirs.[26] Their former photographic assistants left to set up their own studio, Wagstaff & Co (*Thacker's Indian directory* 1905:1459). Clearly, the foreign-owned photographic studios were now having to adapt to the new range of portable technologies that were available and the changed photographic economy in the country, or else they would go out of business.

By 1905, the first separate listing for a supplier of photo materials is provided in *Thacker's*, showing how the expansion of amateur camera ownership created a need for such specialist provisions; F. Beato Ltd was one of the two

22 See, for example, http://www.kodak.com/ek/US/en/Our_Company/History_of_Kodak/Building_the_Foundation.htm

23 By this time, Johannes & Co. list themselves as 'photographers, auctioneers and dairy farmers'.

24 Beato's business had a very prominent place in the advertisement section of *Thacker's* in 1902; see inserts between pp. 1430 and 1431.

25 Watts & Skeen are still listed as a photographic business on p. 1398, but it is clear that they have been taken over by F. Beato Ltd.

26 Watts & Skeen continued to trade under this name, but the company was owned now by F. Beato Ltd.

listed suppliers (*Thacker's Indian directory* 1905:1459).[27] Further evidence of this changing technical-commercial environment is given in the advertisement of 1907 for P. Klier & Co (*Thacker's Indian directory* 1907:562–575). Klier's was one of the longest-established of the colonial-era studios, and it has left an important legacy of historical images.[28] In 1907 it was situated perfectly, from a business perspective, next door to the travel agents Thomas Cook & Sons on Signal Pagoda Road. Klier's company advertised itself as having '[t]he largest selection of views of Burma and pictorial postcards' while offering to undertake developing and printing work for 'amateurs', clearly with a view to developing locally the prints of travellers returning from their travels around the country on a Cook's Tour, as well as the photographic output of an increasing number of enthusiastic amateurs, foreign certainly but also some who were Burma-born (*Thacker's Indian directory* 1907:562–575). The key to this development in the photographic economy related to Burma's trading connections outwards into the global networks that imperial incorporation facilitated. This changing economic and technological environment had an impact upon the capacity of locally born photographers and Asian business networks that ran through the region to carve out a bigger space in the colonial photographic-studio market in key urban centres, as will be seen.

In all this movement and change, one particularly interesting connection suggests itself. In 1901, J. Jackson, one of the first of the colonial-era arrivals to commit to developing a life in Burma as a studio and documentary photographer, moved his business, J. Jackson & Co., from 15 Phayre Street to 278 Dalhousie Street.[29] However, for a while J. Jackson & Co. seems to have shared these new premises with the tailor and gentleman's outfitter Mehdy & Co (*Thacker's Indian directory* 1904:1398). Such an association could have provided a potentially profitable outlet for expanding a photographic business along more traditional lines, given the local predilection for recording the acquisition of particularly fine pieces of clothing and documenting photographically the various social and cultural events, such as weddings and religious cere-

27 The other is Stevenson & Co of 22 Lewis Street. In 1914, Wagstaff & Co., who seem also to have been an important training ground for local photographers (personal communication, Thi Ha Thwe, 31-07-2008) moved into 21 Lewis Street (*Thacker's Indian directory* 1914:605).

28 See, for example, the catalogue listings in the British Library at http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/indiaofficeselect/.

29 From this point, he is listed as a photo engraver as well as a photographer. Note that subsequently former colonial street names have nearly all been changed to Burmese names (*Thacker's Indian directory* 1901).

monies, at which new clothes would have been a desirable pre-requisite (Noack 2011).[30] Although it must be conjecture, it is an enticing thought that here may be evidence of a different kind of adaptation to local challenges: a foreign-owned photographic business (indeed, the oldest) choosing to act symbiotically in relation to a clothing shop owned by a non-European, looking inwards towards Burmese society rather than outwards to a world of tourists and travellers, and thereby responding to an emerging local visual economy in which photography was starting to gain traction as being important in a local social context.

By the end of the century, therefore, the business environment was increasingly pressurized for photographers taking traditional-style photographs in a studio. The early European professional photographers were now being sidelined in certain respects by a wide range of enthusiastic amateurs, Indian Civil Service men, representatives of global companies such as Steel Brothers, military personnel, and missionaries. This latter group of men and women could take their Box Brownies and roll films into new and supposedly 'remote' areas of the country and beyond.[31] These people largely just required supplies and technical help to develop their films. As the first generation of foreign photographers passed away or left, the spaces of colonial image-production seemed set to be decolonized. However, this was a far from linear process of moving ownership of the premises from the colonizer to the colonized. Cameras had to be imported from abroad, as did the equipment to service those cameras and to print the images, especially as film photography became more popular; such stock was expensive and also required technical expertise. The expansion of other colonizing powers also added a new dynamic. Japanese interests in the region were reflected economically in urban Rangoon by the fact that Japanese-owned souvenir shops and studios, such as Nikko Studio, became visible on the streets of the colonial capital, filling a niche that was vacated when the early European-owned studios went out of business, or were bought out, in the

30 Interview with U Lay Lwin, March–April 2009. He commented that it was common for university students in the 1970s–1980s to request photographs when they had a new item of dress.

31 The work of J.H. Green, for example, and other amateur ethnographers, was facilitated mainly by this more versatile and mobile technology. See Dell 2000 for a collection of essays about the context of such images, and about how the meanings of these images might change over time. For a fuller account of this process in relation to the changing interpretation and meanings of colonial-era ethnographic photography in Burma, see Sadan 2007.

first decade of the twentieth century.[32] In some respects, therefore, the photographic economy mirrors the issues of concern to Burmese nationalists in the years leading towards independence from Britain in 1948. In particular, the lack of local economic capacity relative to other business community networks seems to have been significant in impeding the emergence of Burmese-owned photographic business premises from among the trainees of the colonial studios until after World War I. Rather, it seems that Burma-born photographers still had to emerge through the space occupied by Indian-owned businesses in Rangoon,[33] of which that of D.A. Ahuja is best known.

D.A. Ahuja

Ahuja was of much local significance in the training of Burmese photographers. He is not listed in *Thacker's* directory until 1901; even then, he is not listed as a photographer, but merely as a resident at 87 Dalhousie Street, a near-neighbour of J. Jackson. Yet, in that year he in fact published a manual in Burmese, whose English title reads *Photography in Burmese for amateurs*.[34] This revealed not only that he was already a fairly well-established Rangoon photographer and photographic dealer, but also that there was evidently sufficient interest among the Burmese-speaking, urban elite population to merit such a publication, and a very healthy demand among them for camera equipment, according to his own advertisement. Clearly, there is an important element of the local photographic economy that is concealed rather than revealed by *Thacker's*.

Although Ahuja's birthplace or date of arrival in Burma (assuming he came from India) is not known,[35] he employed many assistants and technicians of both Indian and Burmese origin, right up until the demise of the D.A. Ahuja

32 See http://www.ayeyarwady.com/Photo-e/old_burma/index.htm for images taken in the Nikko Photo Studio in Toungoo, which was owned by Shiro Shimamura.

33 A similar dynamic seems to have occurred in Pyay (Prome) around Chinese-owned studios, although this requires more research. Interviews with Ma Aye Aye Than, March 2009.

34 My thanks to Dr Michael Charney for pointing this out to me. It should be noted, of course, that businesses paid for their directory entries and they might only choose to do so if they felt that their businesses might benefit from exposure to the audience to which *Thacker's* was directed.

35 Ahuja is a common family name especially among the Sikh communities of the Punjab, and in Sindh. The caste is deemed to be a business caste.

studio just before Ne Win's final seizure of power in 1962.[36] A good proportion of his Burmese-language manual was devoted to discussion of the technical and chemical processes of image development and printing, the management of which has long been the biggest technical-economic challenge for photographers in Burma. In this way, Ahuja attained a pre-eminent position within a critical domain of technical knowledge and many in this older circle of photographers sustained their dominant positions in this way in the longer term.[37] He relied heavily on his India-derived commercial networks to connect this to a business in photographic-equipment sales, using the Bibby Steamers to bring in a wide variety of equipment and supplies at a cheap rate and with a reliable timeframe.[38]

It was not until 1908 that D.A. Ahuja acquired a listing in *Thacker's* that detailed his business as that of 'Photographer & Photo Supplier' for the first time, although not in the separate 'Trades' listings (*Thacker's Indian directory* 1910:650).[39] In that same year, F. Beato Ltd expanded their directory presence dramatically, listing their branches in Mandalay and Colombo and their work as agents for The Great Eastern Mines Ltd and Rangoon Electric Consortium (*Thacker's Indian directory* 1908:586). It seems that Beato had already left Burma by then, and he is believed to have died in 1909 (Bennett 2009:241). However, in 1912, Ahuja becomes the heir to F. Beato & Co., taking over the Beato company, closing the Beato stores but taking over proprietorship of Watts & Skeen, which continued to trade under this name. Ahuja and his business networks of Indian origins had occupied the central place in the photographic economy of colonial Rangoon that Beato had long held, having taken over two of the principal sites of colonial photographic production. To achieve this, he

36 It was also reported by U Aye Than, March 2009, his former employee, that he had a German wife and relied on import networks especially with Germany, which became increasingly expensive and difficult to access in the 1950s. This is believed to have contributed to the failure of his business before 1962.

37 Many of the photographers interviewed during this project referred to the issue of training manuals and their availability or lack thereof, and that this was one way in which technical knowledge became controlled by some rather than others. Chinese photographers were able to access manuals imported from Taiwan. Thi Ha Thwe's interviews with Ma Aye Aye Than, March 2009.

38 The Bibby Steamers to Rangoon were known as some of the most reliable: 'In 1891 "Lancashire" recorded the best time for the run to Burma in 23 days and 20 hours and Bibby Line established superiority on the route gaining the reputation for reliability by never having had a voyage disrupted.' (http://www.bibbyline.co.uk/timeline.php; accessed 27-06-2013).

39 The previous year it had been listed as a 'manufacturing jewellers'.

brought in a bigger management group for the company, listing many partners, apparently all of Indian origin, while he was now manager of his own photography business as well as Watts & Skeen (*Thacker's Indian directory* 1912:565, 579).[40]

An Emerging Class of Burmese Professional Photographers

Ahuja's influence on the wider visual economy of early-twentieth-century Burma then went on to be significant, not least for the linkages that developed out of his studio with an emerging Burmese cinematographical tradition. The least respectable aspect of this was that a few of the photographers trained in Ahuja's studio gained a reputation as early promoters of Burmese pornography, connecting with the far-reaching prostitution networks that flourished in the port city of Rangoon (Than 2011).[41] Yet it was also out of the D.A. Ahuja photographic business that one of the earliest Burman-owned studios emerged in the capital: London Art. This studio was trading as early as 1915, although again it had no listing in *Thacker's*.[42] It was set up with Ohn Maung, one of the founding figures of Burmese cinema, at the centre.[43] The history of Burmese cinema and its links with photography lies beyond the scope of this article, but it is a history that would benefit from greater critical enquiry.[44] Ohn Maung was listed as an assistant at Ahuja's in 1915 (as Mg. Ohn), but clearly this new technology had already attracted the interest of a vibrant urban elite, of which he was a part (*Thacker's Indian directory* 1912:573). This elite included women photographers in some cases.[45] One of the earliest was reported to be Daw Hkin Myaing. Born in the Karen State in 1887, she turned to working as a photographer in 1916, following the death of her husband. Her son later

40 His partners for 1912 were listed as C.A. Ahuja, T.N. Ahuja, M.R. Ahuja, K.N. Kundanani, T.P. Rajpal, D.B. Makhija 'etc.'. Ahuja initially retained the services of the Watts & Skeen assistant, W. Vandyke, but the latter seems to have left by the following year. A London correspondent was also listed, John Murdoch & Co. This was apparently initially a printing and publishing company, set up in 1871. (http://www.gracesguide.co.uk/John_G._Murdoch_and_Co; accessed 27-06-2013).

41 Interview with U Aye Than, March 2009.

42 Personal communication, Thi Ha Thwe, 31-07-2008.

43 Personal communication, Thi Ha Thwe, 31-07-2008.

44 My thanks to the anonymous reviewer of this article for his/her comments in relation to this issue.

45 Personal communication, Thi Ha Thwe, 18-03-2009.

went on to own the Ko Lay Photo Studio. Reflecting how the wider economic and political environment influenced the decolonization of spaces of photographic production in Burma, London Art moved into premises that had been occupied by a Japanese studio until they went out of business during World War I.[46]

During the inter-war years, there was an emerging and significant local market for the visual arts in which photography was situated centrally, along with cinematography. Burmese photographers managed to take control of important aspects of the visual economy by taking advantage of an expanding array of outlets for photographic consumption. Important in this respect was the introduction into Burma in the late 1920s of the half-tone block print, which meant that photographs could be reproduced in journals and newspapers.[47] There was a very lively press in Burma before independence, but without the block print, it had not been possible to illustrate these media with photographic images other than through engravings. However, the potential political impact of this development in the visual economy of nationalism became clear during the Saya San rebellion of the early 1930s (Aung-Thwin 2010). On this occasion, a photograph appears to have been circulated in the journal *Thuriya* of rebel farmers who had been decapitated by the British authorities as punishment for their involvement in the uprising.[48]

Images of corporal punishment were not unusual in nineteenth-century circles of photographic consumption, and were important in the colonial state's apparatus of power.[49] Images from Hooper's documentation of the 1885 Expeditionary Force had been part of this wider 'tradition'. Superficially, Hooper's images appear mundane, even banal given the context in which they were taken. Yet, as Provost-Marshall, Hooper had responsibility for overseeing executions after the fall of Mandalay. Hooper was later accused of causing undue distress to some enemy combatants ('dacoits') by delaying the proceedings so

46 Personal communication, Thi Ha Thwe, 31-07-2008.

47 Personal communication, Thi Ha Thwe, 04-07-2008.

48 Personal communication, Thi Ha Thwe, 31-07-2008

49 This reverberates through many of the colonial records. See, for example, from the British Library India Office Records (IOR): 'House of Commons question on decapitation of dead dacoits', 1887, L/PJ/6/196; 'House of Commons question on alleged decapitation of dead dacoits in Burma', 1890, L/PJ/6/281; 'Decapitation of two dacoits by a party of Gurkha police in Burma', 1890, L/PJ/6/283; 'House of Commons Question—enquiries into the condition of the Andaman tribesmen in view of killing by head hunters from Burma', 1927, L/PJ/6/1844—1328. See also the files on the abolition of headhunting and slavery in the Sir Spencer Harcourt Butler Collection, 1915–28, MSS. Eur. F.116.

that better images could be obtained and evidence extorted (Falconer 1983).[50] Nearly five decades after Hooper's images, photographs of colonial violence inflicted upon rebellious Burmese protagonists were again being circulated, but this time along new trajectories over which Burmese nationalists could now take control. In this case, Benjamin's (2008 [1936]) contention that the power of the photograph to mobilize populist action is derived especially from the democratizing potential of the caption, holds true. The image published in *Thuriya* reportedly did much to fire popular anger and resistance even further, and it is the first explicit context that has been reported of an image mobilizing political action in the country. In this respect, the sites of photographic production, circulation, and consumption at a more general level were clearly ripe for decolonization.

Expanding the Market for Images in the 1950s

The Union of Burma assumed independent sovereignty in January 1948. In 1950, a group of amateur Burmese photographers established their own society, called the Rangoon Photographic Society, although it was based in the buildings of the British Council. It soon changed its name to the Burma Photographic Society and aspired to improve the technical knowledge and experience of Burmese photographers. Some members, such as U Khin Lay Maung, also taught on various public courses, including the first journalism course to be run at the Rangoon Arts and Social Science University in 1952. Yet the commodity supply chain of photography was still, inevitably, dependent upon a world beyond Burma. Nonetheless, the early 1950s saw a dramatic expansion in

50 A detailed transcript of the Court of Inquiry proceedings is available in the India Office Records at L/MIL/3/960. The *Times* correspondent, Mr Moylan, had filed a report, published on 12 January 1886, which stated: 'The Provost-Marshal, who is an ardent amateur photographer, is desirous of securing views of the persons executed at the precise moment when they are struck by the bullet. To secure this result, after the orders 'Ready', 'Present', have been given to the firing party, the Provost-Marshal fixes his camera on the prisoners, who at times are kept waiting some minutes in that position [...] So far, no satisfactory negative has been obtained, and the experiments are likely to be continued.' Reported in Letter from Adjutant General in India, No. 1788-A, dated 4-5-1886. The details and interpretation were later brought into question, and Hooper received no additional punishment than that which was handed down to him at the time (loss of honours and his dismissal of the post of Provost-Marshal, among other things). However, the essential fact that Hooper was attempting to photograph these men at the point of death was not questioned.

the presence of Burmese-owned photographic businesses, technical importers, and suppliers, as evidenced by the prevalence of commercial advertisements in the local press.[51] In these early years, there was a rapid increase in the availability of new, more portable cameras made in Germany, the United States, Japan, and elsewhere, and many local importers tried to establish themselves as sole agents for the latest technology of particular companies. The main limitation was that they could not provide colour-processing of film. This new technology seemed to outstrip local capacities to master it without the necessary equipment and techniques.[52] Although images were not truly black-and-white but sepia, hand-colouring of images remained the norm where colour was desired. Yet, professional photographers were acutely aware of these developments outside the country.

The large numbers of advertisements for camera equipment and supplies in this first decade following independence meant that there was evidently an increase in personal camera ownership among the urban elite of Burma at this time, too. This was matched by the rapidly increasing number of spaces in which photography could be displayed and circulated. With the vernacular press growing in these early years, many local magazines, such as *Myawaddy* and *Dagon*, set about instituting regular photographic competitions. These seem to have provided an important impetus for a more widespread engagement with photography beyond professional circles. However, the images submitted, especially those of young women taken to adorn the front covers of the magazines, were also vehicles for social discussion and debate, as Chie Ikeya (2011) has noted, especially concerning the status of young women as vectors of

51 The *Nation* newspaper dramatically increased its graphic content in these first years of independence, and it also contained many advertisements for photography studios and supplies. For example, on 9 April 1951, an advert for U Han Shein and Sons, 174 Bagaya Phongyi St, Sanchoung, Rangoon, stated: 'Condor Cameras— Just arrived!—Triumph of Italy, Hot cake of England—Latest precision camera of the highest quality—come and inspect it for yourself.' The paper also carries many adverts for T.N. Ahuja as the sole supplier for Kodak films, and others, such as the Mya Photo Syndicate, who on 24 April 1951 advertised that they were now selling the new automatic rolleiflex f.2.8 at prices of 1,375 rupees and 1,090 rupees. On 24 July 1951, U Hla Oung & Co Ltd of 204 Phayre St advertised themselves as the sole local agents for Contax. *The Nation*, MC1199B NPL, British Library Newspaper Archive.

52 Although colour film was relatively easy to use and inexpensive in the mid to late 1950s outside of Burma, it was not until the 1960s that it became very widespread globally. In Burma, colour was not introduced until the mid to late 1970s, and was then largely controlled by the nationalized photo laboratory that specialized in this for some years initially. Interview with U Aung Thu Myaing, April 2008.

undesirable, secularist, and western forms of modernity. In these years, when there was still no local professional model class within which photographers might discover their muse, having one's photograph taken and submitting it for publication in vernacular magazines, advertising posters, and so on, was something of an aspiration for a certain group of young, urban, educated young women.[53]

From the perspective of the professional photographers who were seeking to create and maintain their own social standing as technicians and experts, this expansion in amateur photography also imposed a challenge. These technical experts sought to assert a degree of control over this sphere by the introduction of clearer guidelines for the technical standard of the photographs to be sent in,[54] matched by a proliferation of competitions in which nomination and approval by senior photographers was an important prerequisite for success. In this process, one can see most clearly for the first time an important localized control of the professional domain, of which more shall be said shortly. Perhaps the most significant photographic competition to have been promoted during this time was that to commemorate the birthday of General Aung San in February 1951, following his assassination in 1947.[55] This seems to have been the first attempt to generate a photographic iconography of the nationalist leader, establishing a political tradition that in many respects continues through representations of military-political authority today, with these images engendering an iconography of nationalism for the political class.

Alongside these developments, in the 1950s there seems to have been increasingly turbulent social interaction with the photograph and its relationship as agent or mediator of destabilized social hierarchies, moral values, and the well-known contest between a western-oriented sense of modernity and its relationship to Burmese Buddhism. Photography and its close cousin, cinematography, created tensions within certain elements of the Burmese Buddhist *sangha* at this time. In the 1950s there were reports of monks in Katha protesting outside cinema halls.[56] This reflected the tensions over the visual in a vari-

53 Interview with U Aye Than, March 2009; personal communication, Thi Ha Thwe, 20-08-2009.

54 Personal communication, Thi Ha Thwe, 20-08-2009.

55 The first public celebration of Bogyoke Aung San's birthday included a special exhibition held in the City Hall in which photographs, personal effects, and other pictures 'depicting Burma's struggle for freedom' were displayed. MC1199B NPL, 13-02-1951, British Library Newspaper Archive. Also personal communications, Thi Ha Thwe, 31-07-2008.

56 'Katha objects to cinema near monastery', *The Nation*, 15-02-1951, MC1199B NPL, British Library Newspaper Archive. This small article on the front page is accompanied by an

ety of forms as Burma negotiated the meanings of images to its post-colonized society.

Today, the photographing of leading figures in the Burmese *sangha* has become widely accepted and, indeed, pagodas have frequently become major sites for the circulation and consumption of photographic images, including historical ones.[57] Displaying a photograph (typically taken in standard large-format size) of a monk to whom one pays particular respect is a common feature in Burmese households. In recent decades, the presence of a large photograph of the Thamanya Sayadaw U Vinaya was, for many people, a means by which their support for the National League for Democracy could be expressed within their homes, but in a way that was beyond the ability of the Buddhist military junta to suppress (Jordt 2007; Tosa 2009; Houtman 1999).[58] The latent challenge of Burma's many subsidiary religious figures on the populist edges of Buddhist orthodoxy was also potentially expanded through photographic media (Schober 2012; Brac de la Perrière 2012). This was seen in these and later years through the circulation of photographic images of the *weikza* Bo Min Gaung in various embodied forms (Spiro 1982).[59] The emergence of these practices, and the development of apparently normative responses over time, especially in the relationship of photography to religious icons, seems potentially to be a very fruitful and enlightening area for further research (Klima 2001).

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interesting photo showing protestors, with the caption 'Picture shows 2000 people who marched in processsion after holding a protest meeting against the action of the Deputy Commissioner, Katha, in allowing a cinema to be built near the Maha Zedi pagoda. The crowd turned out to support the objections of the leading priests and the representatives of Buddhist and other lay societies.'

57 This was particularly well known at the Shwe San Daw Pagoda, Pyay, where a museum is host to a display of historical photographic images. Interview with U Mya Shwe, March 2010.

58 The revered monk was known for his insistence on *metta* and non-violence, and was known for a variety of local-infrastructure developments in the environs of his monastery, which were intended to help local people. He was openly critical of the ruling military government and made positive statements of support for Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.

59 There were, of course, many references to spirits and 'aura' in the popular reception of early photography in Europe. This could make a good comparative study along the lines suggested by Klima 2001.

The Expanding State and Official Photographic Identities

All of these developments reflect the various ways in which photography's social and political potential was explored during the years following independence. Clearly, in the 1950s, there was an ongoing negotiation between Burmese photographers and Burmese society at different levels about which subjects required photographic attention, on what occasions and with what intentions one might visit a studio, and how frequently such images might require re-inscription.[60] With many people claiming to distrust the moral place occupied by the studios in Burmese society, photography had a latent power to disclose tensions between generations, between social classes, and between genders. It also had the capacity to expose tensions between racial and ethnic groups.

The cause of the demise of the Ahuja studio, for example, is not entirely clear, though the end of World War II had apparently already seen many of his Burmese photographers walk out; yet one can only surmise the degree to which Burmese nationalist sentiment mixed with a heavy dose of anti-Indian rhetoric may have contributed to this development (Smith 1999).[61] Ahuja's business did not outlast the so-called Democracy Era. Chinese-owned studios, too, were often accused of being cut-throat in relation to neighbouring businesses, while retaining for themselves the lucrative business of photographically recording the life events of Chinese communities because of their special claims to knowledge.[62] ID cards also map onto these issues. It was reported in Sagaing that there were protests by monks over the demand that they, too, should carry identity cards,[63] and ID cards and passports were two state documents that

60 The photography of social events was a lucrative outlet for many Burmese photographers. For example, in *The Nation* of 3 April 1951, T.N. Ahuja was advertising not only the availability of Box Brownies but also that photographs of the following events were for sale: Miss Hallbergh's birthday party; '99' Club Easter dance; Cocktail [sic] at Ceylon legation; Snaps at Rangoon Sailing Club regatta; Cocktail at Indonesian Embassy; Cocktail at Capt and Mrs Rottier's residence. *The Nation*, 03-04-1951, MC1199B NPL, British Library Newspaper Archive.

61 Interview with U Aye Than, March 2009.

62 *The Nation* newspaper for December 21st 1950 mentions that there had been a fire at a Chinese-owned photographic studio in Myitkyina, the capital of Kachin State. The cause was unknown (although house fires are common), but this demonstrates that there were photographic studios in this region at this time. Interview with Ma Aye Aye Than, March 2009.

63 Report that the Sagaing Sayadaw called a mass meeting of all Sagaing Sanghas to protest the introduction of identity cards for monks; the protest was held at Aung Ngwe Tha

had a significant part to play in the expansion of photography nationwide in these years and under military rule.[64] Whilst ostensibly these should be photographs at their most 'literal' in their objectification of the subject, there seems to have been a well-established tradition of retouching the photo ID image when undertaken in a studio.[65] Different developing techniques, and different papers and films, could produce a variety of outcomes in relation to skin tone and contrast, which could be manipulated, while noses could be reshaped or hair darkened.[66] Passport images were also advertised as suitable for display in the home by some studios, showing them to be quite prized photographic representations for some.[67] ID card photographers in areas such as the Chin Hills and Naga Hills report that they carried with them a variety of shirts and other items of clothing, so that sitters could be dressed appropriately.[68] There was clearly an opportunity within the chemical layering of images in ID photos for an associated layering of discourses about race, ethnicity, modernity, and visual stereotyping that could, again, be rich material for further enquiry, perhaps surprisingly so for those more familiar with that nemesis of photographic artistry, the modern PhotoMe Booth.[69]

Cinema Hall in Mandalay, which was packed to capacity. *The Nation*, 18-12-1950, MC1199B NPL, British Library Newspaper Archive.

64 It was notable that in research on the founding of the Kachin Independence Army, one of its first soldiers initially went undercover in the Hukawng Valley under the guise of being a photographer. This was because there was nowhere that was exempt from the need for state photographic documentation; see Sadan 2013.

65 Interview with Ma Aye Aye Than, March 2009; interview with U Lay Lwin, 2009.

66 Interview with Ma Aye Aye Than, March 2009.

67 Advert for T.N. Ahuja: 'Take your passport photos and get one beautifully mounted copy free.' *The Nation*, 19-05-1951, MC1199B NPL, British Library Newspaper Archive.

68 Interview with U Aye Than, March 2009.

69 The issue of whether one can or cannot obtain a photo ID card has been a subject of much contest in the debates about the Muslim communities in the east of the country, sometimes referred to as Rohingya. For a summary of issues leading up to the 2010 elections and the politicization of this issue, see http://www.dvb.no/elections/rohingya-minority-given-id-cards/8592.

Technical Challenges and the Ingenuity of Will in a Nationalized Visual Economy

Yet it was an increasingly difficult situation for professional Burmese photographers during the latter years of the 1950s and into the early 1960s, as the economy deteriorated and supplies of film, paper, and print became harder to obtain. Following the coup of 1962, key areas of the economy were nationalized with the passing of the Enterprise Nationalization Law in 1963. This covered all import-export trades, including that of photographic equipment and supplies. Inevitably, this had a significant impact on local photographers. Cameras and equipment were subject to strict quotas, and the black market in illegal foreign imports made widespread personal ownership prohibitively expensive. Increasingly tight censorship controls were also introduced until finally, in 1965, privately owned newspapers were banned altogether, which also affected the circulation and consumption of photographic images (Holmes 1967; Allot 1994).

However, this was not a state that had no need of photographers and, in some respects, the nature of the Burmese Way to Socialism depended upon the visibility of its ideology in action; the state apparatus seemed obsessively concerned with documenting itself in any and every way possible. This, at least, ensured an income for many local photographers who worked on a freelance basis for government departments and related organizations, or else within them in their propaganda and information sections. The state's need to document itself visually, allied particularly with the introduction of photographic ID cards, had already laid the foundations for the expansion of photography into many apparently 'remote' and rural areas, as mentioned. This meant that there was now a rationale for having a photographer in even the most out of the way places. Photographers were co-opted by the state, but this also meant that technically independent, freelance photographers could access the official quota system, while also giving them more secure access to the black market. This had some surprising dimensions. For example, it provided some access to recently published photography manuals and journals, so that many stayed abreast of the latest technologies, even if they could not access them directly.[70] Remarkably to outside observers attuned to the notion that the Burmese citizenry were completely secluded from outside contact during these years, some availed themselves of the pre-paid postage service for getting colour prints from major companies such as Kodak and Fuji, using agents to send and return the

70 Interview with U Lay Lwin, March–April 2009.

packages.[71] In short, Burmese photographers were not ignorant of outside technologies throughout this whole period, and many adopted creative, ingenious techniques for maximizing the range of their output. What was required was tenacity and ingenuity to make the most of the limited supplies and range of outputs for photographic production. Many photographers, therefore, occupied a liminal civil-state space.

Social Space and 'Non-State' Visual Identities

Allied with the accumulation of visual evidence by the military state was the ever-expanding need for social documentation from the people, who had a huge appetite for photographic mementoes of their lives. People continued the social discussion about their lives, hopes, and futures through photographic images of significant events that defined their social and familial roles. Photography undoubtedly introduced new modernities of state intervention through its insistence on the image as a mediator of identity, through censorship and the delimitation of fields of moral value, and through representations of the 'ideal' woman, the 'ideal' family, and so on (Ikeya 2011). However, in so doing, the image was always capable of being underwritten by a subtext, a populist caption, so that those images could become a site of personal control, if not subversion. Georg Noack (2011) has started to unravel how photographic portraiture during these years provided a space of imaginative escapism, with sitters experimenting with clothes and poses that might challenge the realities of their own lives, as well as the normative social values of accepted behaviour (Noack 2011). Following the military coup of 1962, portrait photography could be an important outlet for individual identities in a highly controlled political setting. The reality was that popular social photography was in many ways an area of social and intellectual life over which the state's control was in some respects limited, even among its own officials when they entered their homes as social individuals. They, too, relied upon photographers in a non-state, freelance capacity to affirm their autonomous identities through the production of family photographic albums, records of family rituals, festivals, ceremonies, and other markers of their lives.

A good example of the complex social space that photography opened up is provided by the account of photography in and around Rangoon (Yangon) University during the 1970s and 1980s. There were apparently more than thirty

71 Interview with U Lay Lwin, March–April 2009.

photographers working full-time around the campus or in close proximity to the halls of residence at any one time during these years.[72] According to U Lay Lwin, there was a constant demand for photographic documentation by the students. He noted that female students were the main drivers for his business, but there were also meetings of various kinds that required a photographic record to such an extent that it was easily a full-time job for most of these photographers. While individual students could not afford to own cameras themselves, it was possible to pay a few *kyat* for a single photograph from a roll of film, which the photographer would develop and print in a short space of time.[73] Students very rarely refused to pay or collect the images, so that the photographers generally had no fear of losing out financially in this arrangement.[74] U Lay Lwin describes how the aesthetic choices of the students changed over time, and how he also influenced this by trying to stay ahead of his rivals and by introducing new techniques to the students: telephoto lenses for close-ups; soft-focus lenses; glossy paper; different settings and poses. In each of these developments, those being photographed made choices about the nature of their representation, creating a vital record of a life beyond the control of the state censor. Photographic consumption among university students was on a relatively vast scale, therefore, even though few of them owned a camera of their own.

Expertise and Innovation: The Precursor of the *Burma VJ*

Yet, the knowledge of technical expertise in relation to developing and printing images was not as widespread among Burmese photographers as the capacity to take images. There was still a technical hierarchy between those who owned photographic premises, where image development could take place, and those who did not.[75] Those who developed films and processed prints often prided themselves on being expert chemists, who were able to manage the erratic sup-

72 Interview with U Lay Lwin, March–April 2009.

73 He recalls that he would typically charge four *kyat* for a 3"×2" photo and that he would take about 50 photos per day. The photographers organized themselves into an association called the University (Main) Photographic Association. Interview with U Lay Lwin, March–April 2009.

74 It was reported that in rural areas the credit system could create real problems when people could not pay for the photographs. Interview with U Lay Lwin, March–April 2009; interview with Ma Aye Aye Than, March 2009.

75 Interview with U Lay Lwin, March–April 2009.

ply of chemicals coming into the country and their widely variable quality. In this studio system, one can get a sense of an indigenously Burmese set of social and cultural practices, too. Some photographers reportedly relied upon traditional measuring techniques when using the unpredictable set of chemicals to which they had access. These measurements were largely made visually rather than quantitatively, and this frequently had a detrimental effect upon the quality of the negative and positive images given the erratic nature and quantity of supplies.[76] Some seem to have suffered long-term health problems as a result of their constant interaction with dangerous chemicals.[77] However, others such as U Lay Lwin elevated their knowledge of chemistry to an art form. This knowledge was deeply embedded in the environment in which they lived. With little, if any, electricity, even for fans and lights and certainly not for de-humidifiers and air conditioners, they had to understand the smallest details of changing temperatures, the kind of light that was produced at different times of day and times of year, and how to balance the ever-changing humidity, all of which would affect the final print.

Even in government-run darkrooms, professional practice took on overtones of religious ritual.[78] Shoes had to be removed before entering and the studio had to be treated by the employees as a site of religious significance, of merit-making, in line with the workshops of more traditional craftsmen, who adhered to rituals of performance in their work and who conceived of their art as an act of meditation and Buddhist merit. The training seemed also to be constructed somewhat similarly to the concept of a *gaing*, which took the form of a group of followers whose objective was to support and receive higher-level training from a (usually spiritual) leader.[79] The professionalization of the photographic industry also brings about this comparison with local practices of network development, as one of its main characteristics was the advancement through competitions and patronage, as noted, with leading photographers offering patronage to young trainees, who would compete in photographic competitions at which their patrons were members of the jury panel; obtaining independent self-elevation in this system was very difficult without a hierarchi-

76 Interview with U Lay Lwin, March–April 2009.

77 Interview with U Lay Lwin, March–April 2009.

78 Interview with U Aung Thu Myaing, April 2008. My thanks, too, to Thi Ha Thwe for also confirming this point.

79 See entry 'gaing', in Oxford Index, (accessed 17-06-2014).: 'The chief characteristics of a *gaing* are: a distinctive monastic lineage, some form of hierarchical organizational structure, separate rules, rituals, and behavioural practices, affiliation across local boundaries, and some recognition by the secular authorities.'

cally defined patron or trainer, although this fell short of being a fully fledged guild system. Yet few of these patrons would pay their trainees or 'supporters' very much, if anything.

Through a more limited number of expert photographers, who owned studios where other photographers could come and learn new skills, rent out equipment, or rent space for developing images, there was a tradition of building relationships with a widely dispersed range of subsidiary photographers. It was also critical in this situation that leading figures retained their advantages by staying ahead technically. Many photographers of this period explain their technical choices through a range of binaries: whether to focus on 'indoor' or 'outdoor' photography; whether to concentrate on black-and-white or colour. Each decision was determined by the need to invest substantially in new technologies and by whether or not that was a viable economic choice.[80] The same was true with the arrival of digital technology. We see this clearly with U Lay Lwin. He continued to hone his craft for many decades. During the decade from the mid 70s to the mid 80s, he estimated that he trained nearly 400 young people in photography. In recent years, however, he decided to explore what the new digital technologies could offer and made the decision to change one more time, announcing to the many trainees that he had supported over the last four decades that he was now moving to digital image-making and was prepared to teach them the new form.

This is not the Burma that we are typically accustomed to hearing about, in which it is assumed that people were sealed off from the outside world during these years of dictatorship, completely unaware of developments and potentially traumatized by the 'shock of the new'. It is instead a world in which the ingenuity and technical skills of the *Burma VJ* are seen to be a product of a much-longer tradition of visual technological adaptation, ingenuity, and creativity under conditions of severe constraint. It is a world that has the potential to unlock many more questions than could be outlined here, offering an opportunity that might enable us to see a more complex social and political environment than is normally the case. Indeed, without being sensitive to understanding this environment more fully, our present attempts to appreciate the significance of current changes, too, may prove to be inadequate.

80 Interview with U Lay Lwin, March–April 2009. He commented that the decision to change technologies or add new ones was a major financial undertaking. For example, in the early 1970s, a Canon G3 cost about 6,000 *kyat*.

Conclusion

It was noted at the beginning of this article that little attention had been given to the history of photography in Burma from the perspective of Burmese photographers. There are a host of theoretical concerns relating to the analysis of photographic images that have not been touched upon in this piece, the objective being rather to delineate a framework for understanding this subject empirically. It is hoped that by outlining some initial findings from this relatively small-scale research project, the potential that such enquiries might offer have become apparent. These lines of research help us to appreciate in more nuanced, finely graded ways Burmese social history on its own terms. Such research can help in the development of a more insightful understanding of the nature of the Burmese state and society as it moved from the colonial to the post-colonial era, as well as a better understanding of the contemporary reconfigurations of those influential histories in the present. However, even this brief description of the historical photographic economy in Burma helps to create a bridge outwards from an overly narrow obsession with present events to a sense of the social and historical origins of everyday image-taking and its political framework. In this sense, it is clear that the research findings presented here represent only the smallest tip of a much greater social and political iceberg of experience, resistance, and compliance that shall have to be better understood if we are to appreciate the nature of Burma's contemporary challenges as it manages its own political transition.

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