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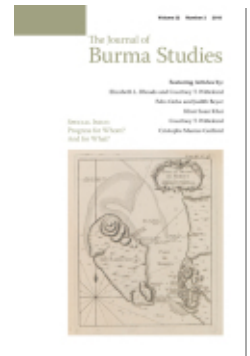
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Felix Girke and Judith Beyer

Introduction

It is no exaggeration to state that "the transition" has become one of the most prominent concepts currently applied to Myanmar. Other widely used terms such as civil society, institutional change, media freedom, legal reform, multi-party elections, and especially democracy itself, are routinely and conceptually linked to transition. This ubiquity is noteworthy. While transition can simply mean a passage from one state to another, it usually conveys purposeful and directed progress, a teleological promise of achieving a new and qualitatively superior state of being. To be "in transition," as the country allegedly is, serves in effect as a disclaimer, a legitimation and explanation of unfulfilled hopes and aspirations. The putative threshold of transitioning beyond transition is rarely made explicit. But there must be a next stage to be achieved, or else the concept loses its footing very quickly.

Consider how publishing houses have advertised some recent books on Myanmar.[1] The ad copy of *Myanmar's Transition: Openings, Obstacles and Opportunities* (Cheesman et al., eds., 2012) begins, "With the world watching closely, Myanmar began a process of political, administrative and institutional transition from 30 January 2011."[2] The publisher of *Citizenship in Myanmar: Ways of Being in and from Burma* (South and

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[1]   As a caveat: of course, the authors themselves have only limited say in regard to the final titles of their books, and at times even less how those are advertised.

[2]   https://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg/publication/1246

Lall, eds., 2017) introduces it with the sentence, "Myanmar is going through a period of profound—and contested—transition."[3] *Democratisation in Myanmar* (Kipgen 2016) receives a similar framing from another publisher: "This topical book studies the process of democratic transition in Myanmar. It outlines the factors that contributed to the political transition in the country and the circumstances in which the transition from military rule of nearly five decades to democracy took place."[4] Finally, the *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Myanmar* (Simpson et al., eds., 2018) is presented in the following terms: "After decades of mismanagement and direct military rule, Myanmar's contested transition to a more democratic government has rapidly shifted the outlook in this significant Southeast Asian nation."[5] Already such a brief pronouncement might well raise questions about precisely when the beginning of the transition in Myanmar occurred, the defining aspects of "the transition," the nature of the "contestation," and how the antecedent and subsequent stages that "the transition" bridges should be identified. But before addressing the more substantive issue of what "transition" means, in general and specifically in reference to Myanmar, the more basic and foundational point is that "transition" clearly sells. More bluntly, the suspicion arises that to not reference "the transition" as a part of a narrative or even dramatic framing of current events in Myanmar might be economically unwise.

The pattern continues in another field of academic production: conferences. We encourage the reader to recapitulate recent calls for papers in Myanmar Studies and assess how "transition" was used in framing the more particular problematic—if not the focus of the conference itself. Consider this announcement of a roundtable on "Myanmar in Transition: Challenges and Opportunities" at the 2nd International

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3   https://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg/publication/2291
4   https://www.routledge.com/Democratisation-of-Myanmar/Kipgen /p/book/9781138119710
5   https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315743677 -40

Conference on Burma/Myanmar Studies, which postulated the following:

> Myanmar's transition today is really the fourth of many "transitions:" 1, from independence in 1948 to 1958; 2, from 1958 to 1962; 3, from the March 1962 coup d'état and the Revolutionary Council; until 4, the introduction of the new constitution—granting considerable powers to the military—and the NLD victory in the election of 2015.[6]

By suggesting that transition does not lead anywhere but to a new transition, and that the permanent state of transition set in immediately with independence, this abstract inadvertently underlines an arbitrariness inherent in the concept. "Transition" here becomes a label for historical periods rather than a reference to a particular kind of political progress from A to B. So what does the ubiquity of the word—or even its hypertrophy—signify? The original, rather technical use of the word (discussed below) has been superseded by a shorthand referentiality that promises an adequate framing for what goes on in Myanmar.

A concept that suggests or even predicts an eventual end to turbulence has a certain appeal. But it is far from a neutral term. From its initial propagation in the context of worldwide political changes, often called the "third wave of democracy" (Huntington 1991),[7] the term was loaded with presuppositions on history and social change. Before it came to Myanmar it found less-than-innocent application in various other locations. In Myanmar it has the potential to become a "god-term" as it did in other places. Rhetorician Kenneth Burke proposes,

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6   Held Feb. 16, 2018 at the University of Mandalay (http://burma conference.com/?p=531).
7   According to Huntington, the first wave lasted from 1828–1922 and the second wave from 1943–1962. Every "wave" was followed by a "wave of autocratization" (1926–1942 and 1958/62–1974 respectively; Huntington 1991: 16).

> From such ambiguity is derived that irony of historical development whereby the very strength in the affirming of a given term may the better enable men to make a world that departs from it. For the affirming of the term as their god-term enables men to go far afield without sensing a loss of orientation. And by the time the extent of their departure is enough to become generally obvious, the stability of the new order they have built in the name of the old order gives them the strength to abandon their old god-term and adopt another (Burke 1945: 54).

So by providing orientation, a god-term enables agency in its name, to the point where the paradigm is too entrenched to be easily dislodged, even as it becomes dysfunctional. Eric Weaver, in his *The Ethics of Rhetoric*, defines a "god term" as an "expression about which all other expressions are ranked as subordinate. . . . Its force imparts to the others their lesser degree of force" (1953: 212). His prime example resonates with our case:

> Yet if one has to select the one term which in our day carries the greatest blessing, and—to apply a useful test—whose antonym carries the greatest rebuke, one will not go far wrong in naming "progress." [. . .] It would be difficult to think of any type of person or of any institution which could not be recommended to the public through the enhancing power of this word (ibid).

From this philosophical perspective, caution and even suspicion seem advised when a concept proliferates as "transition" currently does in reference to Myanmar. Burke suggests that a god-term is treacherous in that it ". . . explain[s] too little by explaining too much" (1945: 107). The seeming inevitability of "transition" in book titles and ad copy, as well as newspaper op-eds and other media output, suggests that it is well along the way of becoming such an unbound signifier.

In this article, we challenge the concept's current status in both academic studies and in more general reporting. Its gratuitous use, we argue, stands in the way of scholarship rather

than aiding it. "The transition" has come to Myanmar, and rather than taking that for granted by accepting that it refers to a specific historical process, we look at how it was brought there, by whom, and what work it is made to do. Rather than treating it as an analytical term, we suggest that it is better considered as a "migratory model," an explanatory (and often legitimizing) conceptual device that travels the world by means of people, media, and organizational infrastructures. We can learn from other comparable developments elsewhere.

In 1970, Dankwart Rustow offered a nuanced but somewhat abstracted historical reflection on how democracy comes about, and introduced the term transition for such a process. A later and more vocal generation of "transitologists," including authors such as Adam Przeworksi (1991) and Samuel P. Huntington (1991), built a theoretical model on the analysis of a small number of case studies where authoritarian regimes gave way to democratic systems of governance. These states were henceforth referred to as states "in transition." Transitologists focused on the demise of authoritarianism in Greece, Portugal, and Spain in the 1970s, the end of military dictatorships in Latin America in the 1980s, and the construction of new post-Soviet states following the break-up of the Soviet Union in the 1990s. Transitology became a sub-discipline within comparative political science. It distinguished between totalitarian, authoritarian, and democratic regimes (the so-called "regime trias," see Linz 1975), and articulated some characteristics of states that were "in transition," defining three sub-stages of the process: liberalization, democratization, and consolidation.[8] These stages echo Rustow's earlier sequence from the

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8   For political science, see O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986: 7–9), Przeworski (1991: 51–53), Merkel (1999; 2000), and Merkel and Croissant (2004). In economics, literature on "transition" includes the so-called "shock therapy" approach by Sacks and Lipton (1990) and institutional economics as developed by Murrell (1993). Moreover, scholars in legal studies explore the effects of "legal transplantation" or critique the export of "rule of law" (e.g. Barry 1992; Pribán et al. 2003; Graziadei 2009).

necessary "background condition" of "national unity" to the political struggles of a "preparatory phase" and the deliberate choice of elites in the "decision phase" to allow democracy to come to the final "habituation phase" (1970: 350–361). Eventually, scholars regarded transition as a promising analytical tool in this new branch of social science, and expected the world to accord with the model even if that meant simplifying assumptions about historical progress or engaging in work to facilitate the predicted changes. With the model, it seemed possible to analyze and give a prognosis of the future in parts of the world undergoing massive structural changes. After the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, the break-up of the Soviet Union, and the establishment of new post-Soviet republics in the early 1990s, transition became a dominant scientific concept alongside concepts such as civil society, development cooperation, good governance, and democratization (see Beyer 2006 for the case of post-Soviet Central Asia). Just as these other concepts have become popularized, transition (ever refined by political scientists) is no longer confined to the vocabulary of academics or policy-makers. International organizations, politicians, the media, and lay people who are exposed to rapid change and who seek a frame to make sense of their experiences have adopted it just as much. We observe the same developments in Myanmar today.[9]

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9   In the meantime, however, "transitology" has been heavily critiqued from within the social sciences for a lack of fit between projection and reality. There were different views within transitology on how to react to the actual situations in very different "transitioning" countries. Solutions ranged from maintaining the usual concepts to modifying the basic definitions of "consolidation" or even "democracy" itself. The idea that democracies could simply be engineered was eventually dismissed by most scholars, due to the heterogeneity of regimes, the multiplicity of "incomplete" democracies, and a new acknowledgement of uncertainty. Thomas Carothers, known for his criticism of the unilineal notion of total societal change, called for an end of the theoretical assumptions about transition as early as 2002: "The transition paradigm was a product of a certain time—the heady early days of the third wave—and that time has passed now. It is necessary for democratization activists to move to new frameworks, new debates, and eventually a new paradigm of political change—one suited to the landscape of today,

"The Transition" in Myanmar

Most relevant for the discussion at hand is the use of transition in strictly academic works covering Myanmar. The WorldCat bibliographic database contains 403 titles that include both "Myanmar" and "Transition." This seems to be lot for a rather narrow categorization; hence, the discussion here is by necessity selective. We discuss select works here not to indict but to take stock, to pick apart what Myanmar Studies scholars are doing when they talk about "the transition."[10]

Academic Usage

An early instance, Ashley South's 2004 paper on "Political Transition in Myanmar: A New Model for Democratization," was published well before "the transition" in Myanmar is usually held to have begun. In fact, the paper is future-oriented, occasioned by the 2003 "Road Map" outlined by the government at the time. South argues that while many opposition groups are working on "elite-level regime change" (2004: 234), "civil society" is "essential to any process of sustained democratization" (ibid). Throughout his text, transition as a concept is first and foremost linked to democracy, as well as to ideas such as accountability, dialogue, the tension between top-down and bottom-up processes, and ceasefires. He also introduces a tension between gradual and more sudden (revolutionary?) shifts. Even in 2004, it was clear to South that any

not the lingering hopes of an earlier era" (Carothers 2002: 20). He suggested that consultants and transition researchers should stop wondering how far the transition in one particular country had progressed and instead investigate what was actually happening in the countries (Carothers 2002: 18). Some anthropologists explicitly heeded this call for the post-socialist context (e.g., Burawoy and Verdery 1999; Hann 2002; Beyer 2016).

10 Inclusion in the list is mostly based on visibility. Myanmar Studies is marked by a porous membrane between scholarship, activism, and journalism that palpably impacts the positionality of academics. Such divisions are more pronounced and even policed in other area studies, for better or for worse.

transition would likely be tightly managed by the military, an estimation well borne out by the events since. South's use of the term, then, labels a dynamic that will eventually lead to an end of military government in Myanmar. He understands such "change" (another commonly used concept in the text) to be urgent and morally required. One can read between the lines his regret that fundamental, sudden, and large-scale change is unlikely. That said, transition is not defined here.

A prominent and more recent (but still inevitably by now dated) focus on "the transition" is provided in the volume *Myanmar's Transition* edited by Cheesman, Skidmore, and Wilson (2012), a collection of contributions to the 11th Burma Update conference held at the Australian National University (ANU) in Canberra in 2011. Even before the introduction proper, the editors outline recent developments in a "background" section: Following the 2003 Road Map, the new constitution was adopted in 2008 and elections were held two years later. Subsequently Aung San Suu Kyi was freed, the new parliament assembled, and on March 30, 2011, the Thein Sein government took over (2012: xi). The editors deem the reforms as having "significant procedural and substantive flaws" (ibid), failing to address "ongoing conflicts," "human rights abuses," insufficient "rule of law," and unconstrained military, and "only slowly and partially" granting "freedoms." In this brief section, the word transition as such is not used once, but its dominating presence in the title it seems to denote insufficient change. The editors do not deny that there are ongoing reforms, but to label the period that sees the onset of these reforms as "the transition" signifies that the changes are not enough yet. The introduction to the volume, "Interpreting the transition in Myanmar" (Skidmore and Wilson 2012) substantiates this impression—it also neither explains nor defines the word transition. In fact, the volume's index has no entry for transition. This would be understandable if all chapters used the term *passim*. But the book title itself and the title of the introduction present the term very prominently, so not defining "the transition" feels like a missed opportunity. Instead, under a series of thematic headings, the introduction

assesses where change has begun but remains lacking in scope, depth, scale, legitimacy, or thoroughness in the realms of politics/democracy, reconciliation, military involvement, rule of law, human rights, and media. The last section asks, "Should the nature of international assistance change?" (2012: 17–19), effectively giving the last word to foreign observers to critically judge the change that has taken place.

Nehginpao Kipgen, early on in his *Democratisation of Myanmar*, wants to understand "how and when non-democratic regimes relent and yield to pressures for transition to democracy" (2016: 1). Even without reciting the findings from Lakoff and Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By* (2003) in detail, the metaphoric use of "pressure" here is notable. Who presses against what? What happens when "pressure" is exerted? Do people or impersonal forces of history exert pressure? Kipgen does in fact go into detail regarding these questions. The phrase above nevertheless conjures up the image of an inexorable march forward. But in contrast to the other sources cited so far, he also provides an account of various theoretical approaches that have dealt in democratization. Among them is Donald Share's distinction between "four major types of transition from authoritarian regime to democracy" (Kipgen 2016: 7). Eventually, he even discusses those approaches that "focus on the dangers of post-transition" (2016: 8) and the eventual achievement of "consolidation." Throughout his introduction, he offers numerous criteria for judging the success of transition and reviews earlier work by Bünte (2011), Lidauer (2012), McCarthy (2012), and Kyaw Yin Hlaing (2012) on Myanmar's transition, all of which he finds too narrow (Kipgen 2016: 20–23). He also focuses on developments current at the time of writing. But despite the detailed theoretical overview of what transition has come to denote in political science, his own use of the concept eventually suffers from slippages: the distinctions between the technical terms transition and consolidation or between transition and democracy itself are not clearly maintained. In later chapters, "the transition process" ends up rather reified, as a taken-for-granted sequence rather than the application of a model on a complex dynamic. But is it not the

very applicability of the model that should be tested? Kipgen elides the theoretical question he introduces, that of a possible shift from transition to consolidation in Myanmar.[11]

The Effects of "Transition" Talk

From these three examples we can abstract four distinct ways transition is used in academic work on Myanmar: (1) as a label that offers a shorthand referentiality but remains undefined; (2) as a complaint about change that, even while it is occurring, is "too little, too late;" (3) as a political science concept with a theoretical Überbau it appears to lose as soon as it is applied to actual events in Myanmar; and (4) as a beacon of hope to rally around for those who want to see "true" democracy arise in Myanmar someday. To use the vocabulary in Kipgen's theoretical review, we do not find, for example, texts that consider when "the transition" in Myanmar might shift from democratization into consolidation.[12] Inevitably the transition becomes detached from its origins in political theory and its specific relation to other technical terms.[13]

This becomes particularly palpable in cases where we can trace a somewhat generic use of transition in academic work into another sort of genre: international non-governmental organization (INGO) and development vocabulary. INGOs and other transnational actors regularly adopt the term to

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11 Of course there are also publications that avoid this specific problem. As a prime example, Egreteau and Robinne, while not entirely disavowing "transition," prioritize their term "metamorphosis" (2016: 4) to encompass both "change and resilience," to avoid the sense of a fundamental shift, and to sidestep theoretical preconceptions about current events.

12 To reprise the finding mentioned above: WorldCat offers only 18 entries on "Myanmar AND Consolidation," few of which discuss democratization at all.

13 An early intervention by Chang and Shen (2010) fittingly entitled "Challenging the transitologist approach" suggested that Myanmar did not fit with the expectations of analysts in the 1980s. The ingredients for a democratization process were all there, but the transition failed to occur. Their call for caution in applying the concept seems to have been dismissed.

frame their own activities that are focused on human rights training, seminars about democracy, and other capacity-building programs. The tendency of foreigners to create their own jobs in the name of transition has increased in the last decade (compare Schaffar 2014). Again, examples are numerous. A report by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) entitled "Myanmar in Transition. Opportunities and Challenges" (2012) illustrates this.[14] Here, "transition" is a chimera, both political and economic, with politics taken as a precondition for enabling economics—e.g., "broad-ranging reforms" can lead to a "strong foundation for growth" (ADB 2012: viii). The economic transition, in effect, means "opening up to trade, encouraging foreign investment, and deepening its financial sector" (ADB 2012: vii). Myanmar is called "brave" for making these "new moves" (ADB 2012: vii); but the ADB also calls for Myanmar to consider more reforms and policy shifts before it can be recognized as a free market economy. To place Myanmar into the category of countries that need to change their economic policies, their political institutions, their judicial sector, and the way citizens participate in decision-making processes for their own good (or transnational players will see no benefit in investing in them) suggests an eventual end to this sort of transition. This is, again, a promise that peddles hope but carries a sense of looming menace as well.

To a degree, this example impacts the discussion on democratization as summarized above, which still dominates the use of transition in Myanmar studies. It indicates that the word is more polyvalent still. It is context-sensitive, and even in economic usage it is applied as an interpretive frame that urges action of a certain kind.[15]

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14 Note the obvious parallels with Cheesman et al. (2012). A subsequent McKinsey report (Chhor et al. 2013) in facts cites the ADB publication several times as well as content from Cheesman et al. (2012), giving an indication of how information as well as interpretation migrates.

15 Reading such texts for their uses of "transition," another seeming inevitability becomes apparent: the chronological marking of the new beginning. There is strong a tendency to start texts with a momentous "Since 2010, Myanmar has . . ." Of course, it is not always 2010 that is named; other

"Transition" in the Vernacular

If we take into account exhibitions by art galleries, conferences held by cultural institutes, and other events in Myanmar cities that offer a take on transition, the record becomes even more blurry. "The transition" does not gain in contour. This exercise, then, must be left to the reader. Foreign academics, aid workers, investors, and tourists were largely barred from interacting with the population for decades, but with improved access to the country, there has been a massive surge of interest and engagement over the last few years. To better communicate their concerns, to ensure compatibility with funding programs, to fit with UN categories, to attract investors and to display modernity, people in Myanmar have picked up the vocabulary that offers global recognition. In the country we have found a tangible upsurge in the use of English terms, especially of high concepts such as the ones listed above, that carry within them not one single referent, but encapsulate complex dynamics while promising avenues for change and development. But that the term transition is used in so many different arenas and for seemingly different agendas raises the question of how it proliferates. Does the usage of the term transition trickle down? Does it spread like a virus? How commonly one encounters Myanmar versions of "transition" in everyday life probably depends a great deal on one's local contacts, social milieus, and strata. To us, နိုင်ငံရေး အကူးအပြောင်း ကာလ was most often suggested as a translation. *Nain-ngan-yay-akuu-apyaung-kar-la* translates approximately as "period of political change," and seems less burdened by the strong teleology that marks the English expression, let alone the technical meaning. Still, ကူး has such

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years from 2008 (with the landmark of the new constitution) to 2012 (the by-elections with NLD participation) make appearances as well. Few still mention the Road Map, possibly as it is an unwelcome reminder of how recent events have followed a script. We see this as a rhetorical means to establish a narrative with a seemingly unambiguous beginning. For a similar observation in the case of the post-Soviet context see Beyer (2016), particularly her conclusion.

a wide semantic spread that this point is of course open to debate. The Burmese Language Commission, in the 1993 edition of its dictionary, interestingly offers ကူးပြောင်းဆဲကာလ for "period of transition." While the emphasis on "the political" that is so clearly implied in the use of the English "transition" in reference to Myanmar was apparently absent at the time of publication, the particle ဆဲ seems to express a "still," the ongoing nature of a process, which fits well with the use of transition as a never-ending phase of change that we keep encountering.[16]

That said, while acknowledging the general relevance of the vernacular use of နိုင်ငံရေး အကူးအပြောင်း ကာလ and potential alternative versions, we do not have the requisite data to make solid claims about its spectrum of interpretations and connotations. At any rate, even the English word "transition" is regularly encountered as a loanword in Myanmar speech events. Patrick McCormick emphasizes the auratic effect of using English terms as a "citation" while speaking Burmese: it affords an opportunity to link up with a global discourse and all the cultural capital that comes with a "high prestige" language (see also Jenny 2015).[17]

With the above in mind, it seems clear that "transition" is not a consistent label for a clearly identifiable sequence of time in reference to Myanmar. Nor are people who wield the word equally attentive to its theoretical particularity. Hence, we would ask what precisely people are doing when they speak or write of transition. To invoke transition is a speech act that to us alternatively seeks to frame or legitimize an inchoate set of processes, or simply serves to skip over the entire question of the qualities of ongoing change. As Burke stated, by saying too much, it says too little (1945: 107). To apply this frame is to equally evoke a set of presuppositions about democracy, authoritarianism, and various freedoms, presuppositions

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16 We are grateful to Patrick McCormick for this piece of information.
17 There are other terms in this field that invite the question of their translatability, for example the eviscerative metaphor of the "opening up" of the country.

that remain unexplained and even unspoken themselves, rendered superfluous by the term transition itself. Hence, to imbue "the transition" with independent life or agency is an endorsement rather than an analysis of its vernacular (and sometimes seemingly technical) uses.

Transition as a Migratory Model

This brings us back to transition as just one of several internationally established terms used to categorize, explain, and / or justify policies and intervention, terms that are usually backed up by institutions, supported by technologies, made materially manifest in infrastructure, and embodied in transnational actors. These operational capacities suggest that they are not merely terms, but that each encapsulates assumptions about the way the world works: they are migratory models, as our brief review of transitology demonstrated. As they arrive in Myanmar, these models demand local reaction and adaptation, as translatability of the usually English concepts and their fit with local conditions are far from given, in an evident refusal of the modernist conceit of global convergence. Examples for such migratory models include concepts currently important in Myanmar such as community, rule of law, indigeneity, activism, civil society, and many others. In studying Myanmar, trying to understand, analyze, and systematize the current changes that are taking place in front of the backdrop of several historical watersheds over the last years, we find the concept of migratory models particularly useful.

Migratory models are "models of" something and usually "models for" something. That is, they are guides both for understanding and for action (like "religion" in Geertz' by now classical approach [1973][18]). Tracing the trajectories of such migratory models is a perpetual but specific epistemological challenge for academic investigations under conditions of cultural difference. The concept of migratory models

18 See Schilbrack (2005) for a critical yet sympathetic update on Geertz' original conception.

takes very seriously the shifts triggered by colonial contact, de-colonization, and globalization in a very broad sense. On the one hand, we no longer assume that *any* social milieu offers us insights into pristine, solely indigenous ideas and practices. On the other, we no more assume that transpositions of institutions, ideas, ideologies, and practices happen unproblematically and without friction or creative adaptation.

Our notion of migratory models is inspired by the "travelling models" framework developed by the anthropologists Behrends, Rottenburg, and Park (2014). In their approach, deterritorializing an existing model produces a portable token, which then can be re-territorialized elsewhere. But its congruity with the "original" is an empirical matter: that a model travels does not necessarily speak of its functional superiority. Its "aura," its allure on the global stage, plays a large part (2014: 17; compare Streck 2011 on the rhetorical power of aura). Mediators, skilled actors who do the transporting and the re-territorialization, who are as a rule aided by "social and material technologies," occupy a central role (2014: 2).

Kaufmann and Rottenburg (2012) discuss this very dynamic in terms of "translation," and emphasize that both the traveling element (i.e., the token) as well as the recipient context will undergo change in the process. Even the sender context potentially undergoes change (as when academics stop using analytical terms that have been picked up by the people they are about). Their threshold for translation to occur is when "in its new context, the transferred content will be picked up positively or negatively or in creative adaptation and triggers its own dynamics there" (2012: 221).[19] In effect, this shifts the approach beyond the strict binary of sending and receiving contexts. All there is to find is a series of world-crossing translations (Behrends et al. 2014: 4). Empirically, such translations

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19 Their larger theoretical frame of reference is W.V.O. Quine's indeterminacy of translation, with the twist that they instead follow Latour, Callon, and the field of Science and Technology Studies (STS) in trying to sift out the positioned actants involved, the translations they undertake, and the way they relate to each other (2012: 224–225).

can be identified in concrete situations, in institutional change, in shifting media discourses, and in various other arenas.[20]

This marks a theoretical advancement in that it focuses on how competing emic understandings of terms (which are really models) are acted upon through frictions, translations, and interest-guided strategies. More concretely, the framework of migratory models allows us articulate some pointed inquiries that transcend the case of "transition" as such. It goes beyond the scope of this paper to answer the questions listed below, each of which could serve as the basis of for a dedicated research project. We put these questions forward as an ongoing challenge that could benefit Myanmar studies in a wider sense, especially in that they might lead to constructive syntheses of sociological and theoretical concerns and deep regional and philological expertise.

- Do we have to see suddenly popular notions as imposed concepts that serve identifiable agendas or as more inchoate sites of local initiative?
- How do translation attempts make use of norms, justifications, and positions of legitimacy and authority?
- How do rationality and aura play off each other in particular projects?
- Do any translation processes of "travel-enabled ideas" (Kaufmann/Rottenburg 2012) in Myanmar have a tangible impact on the respective sending contexts?
- What roles do culture and language play in such conceptual translations, as any globalized (English) terms stand uneasily vis-à-vis their local counterparts, which might spring from ancient Pali and be shot through with Buddhist connotations?[21]

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20 In a way, this is a special form of cultural contact. See Brandstetter et al. (2004) for a relevant overview.

21 This was a widely mediatized topic over the last years; see for example, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/20/world/asia/those-who-would-remake-myanmar-find-that-words-fail-them.html?ref=topics&_r=0 and the reply here: https://www.mmtimes.com/opinion/16231-is-democracy-really-lost-in-translation.html.

- Do models that arrive also depart again, be it through thorough vernacularization, active dismissal, or some other as yet unidentified means?

The current persecution of the Rohingya in Myanmar, who have fled to Bangladesh in the hundreds of thousands, has unfortunately revealed another set of migratory models that are eagerly adopted by some while being vehemently rejected by others: racism, ethnic cleansing, and genocide. While it might seem overly detached to discuss human suffering at this scale in terms of "models," our understanding of the situation in Myanmar hinges on it regardless, as much of what is going in media, politics, and other sites of debate is evidence of the various actors trying to get their model applied, rather than their opponents'.

It stands to reason that the territorialization of migratory models stimulates new knowledge arrangements, as when experts aspire to gatekeeper functions in the local information ecology. Experts' cultural capital hinges on the non-knowledge of others, ideally on an institutionalization of non-knowledge that at the same time demands a relation of trust and support. Hence, key positions have fallen to local elites, to re-pats (i.e., foreign-educated Myanmar citizens who return to their "transitioning" home country), and to ex-pats, who often arrive in Myanmar after diverse postings all over the world with certain expectations, skills, and blueprints ready to be applied in yet another setting.

This brings us to the key point that underlies our use of "migratory" rather than "traveling" models. The term "migratory" emphasizes that there is direction to the travel, that there is context that occasions the arrival of models in a place, and that the models belong to a wider wave of migration that includes people, institutions, technology, and other models. Finally, "migratory" to us suggests the temporal pattern that we have learned is an intrinsic part of transitology as well. The models and their accompanying infrastructure have arrived, and have made themselves at home in Myanmar. But they might well leave again or even be forced to, and go to

roost elsewhere where conditions have become more favorable yet.

For our approach to transition this means that we need to prioritize understanding its use as materializations of a speech act, as attempts to frame the situation in the country in a certain way towards a certain purpose, through the creation of a certain, ideal-typical imaginary and an accompanying infrastructure that suggests a more or less inevitable sequence of events and changes. For this, though, we might have to forego the treacherous certainty of actually accepting that Myanmar is currently in a state that can be analytically defined as transition.

Conclusion

Myanmar is just the most recent (while admittedly spectacular) case of a country where a transition has arrived and transformed the way people discuss their situation and what to expect in terms of social change. To speak of "the transition" sets a time period apart from the before and the after, and implies a qualitative shift. This, of course, means that whatever is going on now will pass. It also emphasizes that what came before has now become malleable.

Transition encapsulates assumptions about what is happening and why, and by being encapsulated, these assumptions in their various iterations—because of course the fine details are infinitely debatable—are removed from discussion and analysis. This gratuitous language use and neglect of analysis in favor of shorthand referentiality allows connection to an ever-growing chorus (and corpus) of other texts that frame Myanmar as being "in transition."

There is an analogy in the use of transition today to earlier modernization discourse and its fetishisation of "development" (with echoes of Weaver's god-term of "progress"). Both "development" and "transition" are based on teleology. The details, however, are instructively different: modernization theory projects a trajectory towards ever greater complexity and differentiation. Since early armchair evolutionists

(and probably some before them) assumed a steady and irreversible trajectory of societies from savagery to primitivism to civilization, this thought model has been prominent in the study of social change in general (e.g., Parsons 1966). "Transition" encapsulates an analogous "more of X is better" idea. But rather than taking complexity as its paradigm, it promises ever greater freedom: freedom of media, of civil society, of justice, of opinion, and of the market, where democracy is the final stage of the process. This of course corresponds to the notion of an "open society" and its concomitant plurality, so the older modernization discourse is never far away.[22] To wit, we see that "more of" market economy, rule of law, democracy, media freedom, and pluralistic multicultural interethnic civil society are tacitly understood as progress over an earlier order that lacked such achievements. All our textual examples show that transition as well as development have essentially narrative characteristics. They serve to posit a before and an after, they present obstacles and opportunities to be overcome, and they suggest a proper path that leads to a happy ending for all involved. We are doubtful of these promises.

To identify "transition" as a migratory model entails a shift in perspective from historicizing to analytic. It also enforces a distance from gratuitous (or sales-oriented) uses of the word by other actors who are directly involved in the political dynamics in Myanmar. Recognizing that one of the defining features of "transition" is that it migrates to places that have been walled off from western interventions for a certain period, places that can be easily diagnosed to have a "democracy deficit" usually due to military rule, precludes a casual use of the term. Who is to say that actions and policies in the name of "the transition" will in fact be beneficial

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22 It is, for example, no coincidence that George Soros has shifted the attention of his Open Society Foundation from post-Soviet Central Asia and increasingly authoritarian Russia to Myanmar. He is an expert on transition, arguing that after the fall of the Soviet Union, "I moved in and picked up the pieces" (https://www.huffingtonpost.com/tom-nagorski/george -soros-on-myanmar-a_b_7189326.html).

for a significant part of a population, rather than select elites who profit from eased restrictions on trade and investment? We know from post-socialist contexts that it is precisely those elites who argue that democracy cannot be fulfilled "just yet" as their country is still "in transition."[23]

Moreover, places such as Myanmar must be considered vulnerable not only to internal authoritarianism but also to foreign interventions. So while it is difficult to dispute that something fundamental is shifting (especially when maintaining methodological nationalism), the comparison to and experience from other places reveal that transition is also a business. This is not quite in the sense recently suggested by Melissa Crouch in her publication, *The Business of Transition* (2017), which focuses on the specific business of law reform in times of transition, but with the stronger suggestion that importing "transition" to yet another country is a business in itself.

That each transition claims local particularity as "the transition," while applying generic models and making standardized promises familiar from transitions elsewhere, suggests that all can be seen as comparable translation efforts. The comparison to other countries allows for hindsight that might well be applicable to Myanmar in the future. For example, we know of few cases where a country that was said to be "in a transitory stage" or "in transition" since the 1980s has ever comprehensively shed the label. The word might fade from popular use, but never is a marked threshold crossed to enter a post-transition stage. Transition leaves with a whimper, not with a bang, which is surprising considering the strong

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23 A particular challenge in the final editing of this text was to decide when to put the word transition into quotation marks and when not to: Eventually, we opted to use the extra highlighting for turns of phrase such as "in transition" or "the transition," or when wanting to highlight the labeling process as such. It is typical for the terminological slippage that we diagnose for this migratory model (and others) that it becomes difficult to keep apart whether a sentence is about something (say, a transition) or about the classification of something (as "a transition"); but both need to be kept apart.

teleological promise it carries. But what happens to god-terms in the long run? While we do not yet know what will eventually replace "the transition" in Myanmar, we expect that the transition industry will move on to other previously closed settings that are now "opening up," as much as Myanmar did (or did not) after 2008 or 2009 or 2010 or 2011. Where will be the next stop? Venezuela, Cuba, North Korea, or Syria?

At that point, the gloss on transition might have worn off, and people in Myanmar will likely be left with a disenchanted word, a former bugle call that will increasingly ring false, especially in contrast to what was expected in terms of democratic and broader social progress. Our argument, in summary, is that when scholars buy into the language of transition—the language of policy advisors and economic hopefuls, a cargo-cult rhetoric that serves well to cover other interests—they do not do anybody any favors. In analogy to Aurore Candier's studies on the role of the notion of "reform" in 19th century Myanmar (2010), our task should lie in studying the dynamics of the migratory model as well as tangible social dynamics without the crutch of transition and other god-terms to lend a misleading sense of coherence and direction to our data.

An observer 80 years ago already considered Myanmar to be on the threshold of self-actualization but not *quite* there yet. In 1938, Sir Arthur Page sketched an imaginary of the country's progress, in many ways similar to the one offered by international consultants today:

> Politically underdeveloped, with vast material resources untapped, with only one trunk road from north to south and grievously inadequate communications from east to west, Burma stands like a *débutante* at her first grown-up dance, glittering, laughing, happy; but slightly unstrung by the new freedom that is hers. She needs a steady hand to guide her or she may lose her head and throw away her chances. Let her partners, European, Indian, and of her own blood, hold her firmly as she steps away so gaily to take her place among the nations, for she has yet to gain experience, and hers is a great adventure. May she

> learn the lesson of the ages while the day is still young, and in the fullness of time win herself an honoured place within the British Commonwealth of Nations (Page 1938: 10).

The title of his speech was "Burma in transition."

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