

Book Review of Judith Beyer. *Rethinking Community in Myanmar* (2024). University of Hawai'i Press.

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An overwhelmingly large research focus on ethno-religious minorities across the world has assigned them a marginal status and generally emphasized the constraints the communities face. Very few studies delve into the depths of such communities beyond marginality and constraints. *Rethinking Community in Myanmar: Practices of We-Formation among Muslims and Hindus in Urban Yangon* proficiently sheds light on the experiences of communities through the lived realities of the individuals. The communal portraits of such communities have been akin to presenting a homogenized and static reproduction of narratives and perspectives that to a large extent define these groups of people. Judith Beyer, in her latest book, challenges and problematizes these often taken-for-granted pervasive attributes attached to such communities and examines the “tensions between individuality and membership” (9) and intricately explores “we-formation” as a concept that enables individuals to identify themselves as a part of one or a few different communities. In the words of the author, this book “explores and theorises practices of we-formation” which are “largely pre-reflective” (5). She compellingly engages with the individuals who constitute the collectives of communities to observe, reflect, and articulate their intersecting experiences. Through the documented individuality throughout the narrations in her writings, she reaffirms that the community becomes stagnant without the impulses of the individuals, as they can reorient public spaces and community interactions (Williams 2002). In her profoundly ambitious and creative book, she places at the center the individuality of the Muslim and Hindu interlocutors who compose their respective communities and the consequential belonging in Myanmar. Using an interesting combination of ethnomethodology and existential anthropology, Beyer carefully attends to the expressions of “individual dispositions” who negotiate their essentialized “belonging to a community of the cultural others” with “subordinate positions” (28–29).

A common theme throughout is the understanding of the importance of an individual's perspective on coexistence and

intersubjectivity (36), which often gets overlooked and even omitted in the course of understanding a community. As anthropologist Wolf (1956) had long cautioned, studying communities alone will not advance our understanding of a society; it is important to engage with small groups and individuals to construct our ideas of a system. In addition to accommodating the nature and characteristics of the Muslim and Hindu communities in Myanmar, Beyer presents the complexities and multiplicities of not just the community itself but the individuals who constitute them. Importantly, Beyer notes that the term “community” does not have an equivalent in the local vernacular and connotes contextual and usage-related variability, though most often it is used to distinguish groups along ethno-religious lines (76). Furthermore, the author sheds light on how individuals who belong to and represent different communities respond to the rapidly changing political times and socioeconomic transformations—which may be along or against the grain. The ample case studies presented bring out the nuances of individuals who in their unique ways contribute to we-formation and challenge the existing hegemony (93). These semantic and cultural nuances elevate the anthropological richness of the book while further complicating the subject. The author emphasizes that the we-formation may not be a conscious process (112) and that it may emerge in the places alongside the work of the community (137).

The book is organized into six chapters in addition to the introduction and conclusion. Each chapter begins with people's experiences, embodiments, practices, and actions that capture the essence of a specific topic. The author then unpacks and elaborates on those experiences and contextualizes them within historical roots, cultural participations, and contemporary manifestations of community and communalism in Myanmar. Chapter 1, “Classifying the Indian Other,” links the historical consequences of the colonial regime and the diverse Indian populations that now make up present-day Myanmar. It presents

the layers of communities and communalities within the Indian-Other and the connotations these bear. Given the critical role of the relationship these communities have with the majority Bamar Buddhists and the state (Cheeseman and Farrelly 2016), it is reasonable to begin with the contextualization of the Indian Other. The next chapter, “Making Oneself a(t) Home,” unpacks the contesting yet competing meaning of “home” for the Muslim and Hindu communities in Myanmar. Beyer organizes this chapter around the inherent issues—legal, security-related, socioeconomic, or political—faced by the minority ethno-religious communities in Myanmar, showing how for certain people “home” is conflated with contentions around identity, citizenship, and the politics that envelop them. Chapter 3, “Caught by the Goddess,” captures the microcosm of sub-ethnic categorization and the expansive spectrum of faith groups within the broad communities of Muslims and Hindus. The author expounds on an important aspect of recognizing and reshuffling ethnic and religious boundaries that are integrated within the process of we-formation (114). This is of particular significance to anthropological studies on identities that acknowledge that boundaries are dynamic as well as volatile. In the next chapter, “The Making of a Community in Court,” Beyer describes how communities are formed through their relationship with the physical places of worship (138) in Myanmar and often involve the intersection of politico-religious and legal jurisdictions that are entrenched in identity hierarchies. Chapter 5, “Marrying ‘Up’: Self Objects, Race and Class,” explores how marrying across communal, sectarian, caste, or class divides conforms to or shifts the community boundaries, all while the we-formation continues. It demonstrates how the interplay of several identity vectors shapes communities and highlights the possibilities for individuals to accommodate, embrace, or transcend established community and communal boundaries. The final chapter, “Belonging, Suffering and the Body of Others,” is embedded in the anthropological interpreta-

tion of existentialist literature. It engages with the intimate experiences of the body, the political, and the interpersonal and intercommunal relationship individuals have as they navigate the everydayness through their bodies.

This book is an original and timely study on ethno-religious minority groups, about whom there is limited in-depth knowledge, based in a country that continues to be largely overlooked in research. Beyer’s work on “we-formation” as a conceptual and methodological paradigm is highly significant not only in anthropological undertakings, but can be a robust tool to explore and understand the predicaments and pursuits of minority communities in conflict-prone regions or in contexts with a history of conflict. It can also be used as a framework to understand the “hows” and “whys” of resilience and community building in conflict zones and post-conflict societies. The book powerfully sensitizes readers against the homogeneity of ethno-religious minority groups and compels them to rethink the notions of community through the narrations of lived experiences of people. While the book deserves merit for its highly descriptive content, novel perspectives, and fascinating methodological usage, it may come across as heavy to those who are not familiar with Myanmar as a country. Understandably, the subject of the book is extensive, but it would have been helpful to get deeper insights into the geopolitical factors and influences (particularly from India and Bangladesh) that are critical in shaping the Muslim and Hindu communities in Myanmar today. Sometimes, the “we” in we-formation can be drawn from the “imagined” global community, which affects the specific local context—this is increasingly important in contextualizing contemporary communal hostilities in Myanmar and South Asia in general. Lastly, it would have been interesting to learn of the role of digital media in we-formation in these communities in Myanmar or the scope of digital communities given the reported dominance that social media has in their everyday experiences.