

# Threat and virtuous defence: Listening to narratives of religious conflict in six Myanmar cities

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## Abstract

*Myanmar has been the site of serious conflicts between Buddhist and Muslim communities since June 2012. This working paper presents findings from a research project we convened to better understand the production of this violence, and to use this understanding to support local groups working for peace. Based on interviews with 78 local residents of six cities, we find a narrative that presents Islam as an existential threat to race and religion and Muslims in Myanmar as a potential personal threat to individuals and communities. This narrative is reinforced by three inter-related sets of arguments that make reference to international events, events within Myanmar, and personal experiences. Drawing on these findings, we present conclusions that question the current focus on 'rumours' and 'hate speech' and identify important parallels between discourse in Myanmar and rhetoric connected to the Global War on Terror. We also raise pressing questions for future consideration that deal with the construction of historical memory and the role of the state and other authorities in either challenging or reinforcing images of Muslims as a threat. We believe that a better understanding of the production of violence within Myanmar can help inform more effective responses to religious conflict.*

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## Introduction

Myanmar has been the site of serious conflicts between Buddhist and Muslim communities, particularly in Rakhine State where at least 146,000 persons have been displaced since the first riots in June 2012.<sup>2</sup> This violence has been the subject of regular international English-language media coverage as well as responses by diplomats and the United Nations (UN), including a closed-door briefing on Myanmar at the UN Security Council.<sup>3</sup> International attention has focused on the situation for Muslims who seek to be recognized as ethnic Rohingya, periodic riotous violence, and the extreme anti-Muslim rhetoric of some Buddhist leaders. As far back as 2013, but with increasing frequency, international organizations dedicated to monitoring and early warning of mass violence have been issuing alarms. These include the International State Crime Initiative at the University of London, which says it has found evidence that violence has been organized and has moved through four identified stages of preparation for genocide.<sup>4</sup> ‘The parallels to the Nazi genocide are striking,’ George Soros told attendees at a conference the Norwegian Nobel Institute hosted in Oslo during May 2015.<sup>5</sup> The conference also included an appeal from three Nobel laureates to stop violence and persecution in Myanmar that they called ‘nothing less than genocide.’<sup>6</sup>

The Government of Myanmar has been quick to reject these allegations and has steadfastly refused citizenship for any people that identify as Rohingya.<sup>7</sup> Following the conference in Oslo, for example, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs published a statement calling the proceedings ‘unbalanced and negative.’<sup>8</sup> This response mirrored the way that the state in Myanmar has long responded to external criticisms of the country’s human rights record and in that sense it was not particularly unusual. But the response by U Zaw Aye Maung, the Rakhine Affairs Minister for Yangon Region, is more telling; a few days after the Oslo conference, he was quoted by the Reuters news agency as saying, ‘if genocide was taking place in Rakhine State, then it was against ethnic Rakhine Buddhists.’<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For data on displacement as of January 2015, see UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, “Myanmar: Internal Displacement in Rakhine State (Jan 2015)” (UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), January 2015), [http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Affected\\_Map\\_IDP\\_Sites\\_Rakhine\\_OCHA\\_Jan2015\\_A4.pdf](http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Affected_Map_IDP_Sites_Rakhine_OCHA_Jan2015_A4.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Louis Charbonneau, “U.N. Council Has First-ever Briefing on Rights in Myanmar,” *Reuters*, May 28, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/05/28/us-myanmar-un-idUSKBN0OD2K320150528>.

<sup>4</sup> “The Most Persecuted People on Earth?,” *The Economist*, June 13, 2015, <http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21654124-myanmars-muslim-minority-have-been-attacked-impunity-stripped-vote-and-driven>.

<sup>5</sup> George Soros, “As a Jew in Budapest, I Too Was a Rohingya,” *Newsweek*, May 31, 2015, <http://www.newsweek.com/soros-jew-budapest-i-too-was-rohingya-337443>.

<sup>6</sup> “Burma Rejects ‘Unbalanced’ Rohingya Remarks by Nobel Prize Winners,” *The Guardian*, May 31, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/31/burma-rejects-unbalanced-rohingya-remarks-by-nobel-prize-winners>.

<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that very small numbers of Muslims in Rakhine State have been granted citizenship if they identify as ‘Bengali’ and can provide documentation to demonstrate that they meet the requirements defined in Myanmar’s 1982 citizenship law. Yet even this population has not been allowed the freedom of movement and other rights that go along with citizenship. See, Nyein Nyein, “New Citizens Kept Grounded in Myanmar’s Rakhine State,” *The Irrawaddy*, June 16, 2015, <http://www.irrawaddy.org/burma/new-citizens-kept-grounded-in-arakan-state.html>.

<sup>8</sup> “Burma Rejects ‘Unbalanced’ Rohingya Remarks by Nobel Prize Winners.”

<sup>9</sup> Timothy McLaughlin and Aubrey Belford, “Myanmar Says Persecution Not the Cause of Migrant Crisis (Corrected),” *Reuters*, June 5, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/06/05/asia-migrants-wrapup-2-pix-tv-graphicsco-idUSL3N0YK51P20150605>.

U Zaw Aye Maung's statement is telling because it illustrated a conception of victim and violator that is diametrically opposed to the one made visible in international discourse. There are, of course, many conceptions of religious conflict in Myanmar,<sup>10</sup> but while U Zaw Aye Maung's statement appears extreme in comparison to international discourses, in the domestic context this is not the case.<sup>11</sup> 'Fear is not just on the side of the Muslims, but on the side of the Buddhists as well,' Daw Aung San Suu Kyi explained to the BBC in October 2013. 'There's a perception that Muslim power, global Muslim power, is very great.'<sup>12</sup> These perceptions are reflected in the rhetoric of public figures and Buddhist leaders from groups including the '969 movement' and Organization for the Protection of Race and Religion (colloquially known by its Burmese acronym 'Ma Ba Tha'). These groups have risen to prominence within the last three years as they have mobilized to project an existential threat, in which Buddhism is vulnerable and needing protection lest it be supplanted by Islam as the majority religion in Myanmar.<sup>13</sup> Internationally, the most extreme examples of their speech have attracted media attention, including references to Muslims as 'rabid dogs' and invasive species.<sup>14</sup> Domestically, they have established themselves as forces with clear and powerful social and political influence.<sup>15</sup>

Yet, these narratives of threat and self-defence are emergent works in progress, as are the groups seeking to produce them. The widespread popularity of groups like 969 and Ma Ba Tha may be inferred from

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<sup>10</sup> Including those that would not accept defining it as a religious conflict.

<sup>11</sup> Two months later, for example, the central-government appointed minister for Rakhine State justified movement restrictions imposed on Rohingya by saying, 'There has been communal violence in the state. Not just 2012 but in 1942 they had carried out a genocide in north Rakhine and an entire village was wiped out. Over 2,000 Rakhine people, including old men and women as well as children, were killed. The people of Rakhine continue to be afraid of them. They run away from them whenever they see them.' See, "'There's No Persecution, Just That Govt Will Not Use Rohingya In Official National Documents'," *Outlook India*, July 13, 2015, <http://www.outlookindia.com/article/theres-no-persecution-just-that-govt-will-not-use-rohingya-in-official-national-documents/294782>.

<sup>12</sup> "Suu Kyi Blames Burma Violence on 'Climate of Fear'," *BBC News*, October 24, 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-24651359>.

<sup>13</sup> Nyi Nyi Kyaw, "Securitization and Islamophobia Analysis of the 969 Movement in Myanmar" (Islam, Law and the State in Myanmar, Centre for Asian Legal Studies, National University Singapore, 2014); Kyaw San Wai, "Myanmar's Religious Violence: A Buddhist 'Siege Mentality' at Work," *S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies Commentaries* No. 037/2014 (February 20, 2014); Matthew J Walton and Susan Hayward, *Contesting Buddhist Narratives: Democratization, Nationalism, and Communal Violence in Myanmar*, Policy Studies (Southeast Asia), No. 71 (Honolulu: East-West Center, 2014), <http://www.eastwestcenter.org/publications/contesting-buddhist-narratives-democratization-nationalism-and-communal-violence-in-mya>.

<sup>14</sup> TIME magazine, for example, ran a cover story in 2013 featuring one leader, labelling him 'the face of Buddhist terror.' See, Hannah Beech, "The Face of Buddhist Terror," *Time Magazine*, July 1, 2013, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2146000,00.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Their iconography is readily visible across Myanmar; they have been able to successfully influence lawmaking, winning passage through parliament of the first of a package of four 'race and religion protection' laws for which they also garnered millions of signatures, though that rights groups have warned they are discriminatory and violate international human rights standards; and they have participated in, organized, or supported vocal demonstrations in Yangon, Mandalay, and Sittwe supporting their proposed legislative agenda and opposing 'biased,' 'pro-Muslim' or 'pro-Rohingya' activities by the UN, the Organization of Islamic Conference, and international non-governmental organizations. Most recently, they seem to have almost instantaneously put a halt to several development projects planned in the vicinity of the revered Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon, threatening massive protests and, at least according to one report, receiving a promise from military representatives that the projects would be halted or substantially altered. See, Lawi Weng, "Myanmar Military Promises Yangon Highrises 'Will Be Stopped': Nationalist Group," *The Irrawaddy*, June 22, 2015, <http://www.irrawaddy.org/burma/military-promises-shwedagon-highrises-will-be-stopped-ma-ba-tha.html>.

their visibility and influence, but they are also barely three years old.<sup>16</sup> While the rhetoric of 969 and Ma Ba Tha leaders is well documented, less understood are the discourses of non-elites in Myanmar. How do people perceive the threat to Buddhism that 969 and Ma Ba Tha leaders describe? Are there persistent features of the way such narratives circulate in different parts of the country? Identifying such features is the first step towards understanding how these narratives are being produced, who is contributing to their production, and the social and historical factors that lend them their animating power.

Understanding the production of narratives about religious conflict in Myanmar is necessary if responses are to be crafted – by domestic or international actors – that help to lessen violence or promote peace and reconciliation. Similarly, understanding the ways narratives of threat are being mobilized is important so that they are not unintentionally strengthened. Discourse *about* violence in Myanmar can contribute to the mobilization *of* that violence, and all who speak about violence need to consider the relationships between their own discourse and conflict.<sup>17</sup> Such considerations are impossible without listening to the ways non-elites discuss religious conflict. Listening need not equate with agreement, nor entail ignoring the voices of marginalized minorities. But it is a necessary first step. Necessary because it will lead to better responses, and because it is an ethical matter and way to de-escalate a growing sense among Buddhists that their fears and perceptions are being ignored.

Research for this paper consisted of a series of ‘Listening Project’ interviews with 78 local residents of six Myanmar cities. Interviews were conducted with members of the four main religions in Myanmar, but the bulk of the interviews were conducted with Buddhists. This Listening Project can help us answer an empirical question: what are the ways in which people who perceive Islam as a threat to Buddhism justify this sense? But because conflict is ongoing, it can also help us frame an important political question: what are influential actors in Myanmar society doing that directly or indirectly contributes to violence, or to peace and reconciliation? After first introducing research methodology and basic findings, this paper focuses on understanding how people talk about religious conflict, and seeks to deepen an understanding of the way a narrative of threat and self-defence that is visible in the rhetoric of religious and political leaders circulates in the discourses of non-elites. From this it draws two important conclusions regarding common understandings of violence in Myanmar, and clarifies the nature of three questions that point to urgent next steps for policy makers, activists, academics, and all who may be interested in reducing conflict or promoting peace and reconciliation.

## Research methods: Listening in six Myanmar cities

Research for this paper was carried out as a part of the Myanmar Media and Society (M.MAS) Research Project, established as a partnership between St Antony’s College, Oxford University, and the Myanmar ICT for Development Organization (MIDO). Launched in January 2015, the M.MAS project has consisted of two interrelated components: First, trainings in qualitative research skills<sup>18</sup> and comparative scholarship on collective violence in other times and places<sup>19</sup> for activists<sup>20</sup> in six cities: four cities that

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<sup>16</sup> The roots of the ‘969’ movement stretch further than three years, but the movement began its rise to contemporary prominence at the end of 2012; Ma Ba Tha was formed in January 2014.

<sup>17</sup> For an insightful development of this argument in the Indian context, see Paul R. Brass, *Theft of an Idol: Text and Context in the Representation of Collective Violence* (Princeton University Press, 1997); Paul R. Brass, *The Production of Hindu-Muslim Violence in Contemporary India* (University of Washington Press, 2003). For an exploration of the relationship between discourses about Myanmar and politics within Myanmar, see Elliott Prasse-Freeman, “Fostering an Objectionable Burma Discourse,” *Journal of Burma Studies* 18, no. 1 (2014): 97–122, doi:10.1353/jbs.2014.0010.

<sup>18</sup> Training focused on two areas of qualitative research: interviewing and participant observation.

<sup>19</sup> Training focused on research by three authors: Jonathan Leader Maynard, “Rethinking the Role of Ideology in Mass Atrocities,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26 (2014): 1–21, doi:10.1080/09546553.2013.796934; Brass,

have experienced recent violence (Sittwe, Meiktila, Mandalay, and Lashio) and two that have not (Pathein and Mawlamyine).<sup>21</sup> Second, a series of small group discussions and ‘Listening Project’ interviews with local residents in these six cities. These two components are interrelated; many of the young activists elected to conduct their own Listening Project interviews, and the trainings and subsequent research have both contributed to the development of new ideas for actions that the groups are now undertaking. The discussions about framing, justifying, and enacting violence that took place during trainings also helped us in analyzing interviews in each location, by clarifying local incidents and dynamics.

The M.MAS project was convened out of a desire to better understand the production of violence in Myanmar and to use this understanding to support local groups working for peace. Methodologically, it can be challenging to investigate the production of violence; these challenges are accentuated by the fraught contemporary context in Myanmar. Moreover, it is important not to presume that Buddhist-Muslim ‘communal conflict’ is of central concern to people in Myanmar, or that people necessarily understand violence that has occurred to date as ‘communal’ or define it in religious terms as Buddhist vs Muslim.<sup>22</sup> These concerns prompted the Listening Project approach.<sup>23</sup>

During February, March, and April 2015 we conducted 68 interviews with a total of 78 persons across the six research areas. We also organised trainings for groups of 7-10 activists<sup>24</sup> in each city during the same time; afterwards participants volunteered to conduct their own interviews as well as assist us with arranging interviews with local residents. At the end of May 2015, 48 of these activists then came together at a monastery outside Mandalay to discuss what they had learned from their interviews, as well as participant observation undertaken in the months since the initial trainings.

Interviews were conducted with subjects (referred to as ‘narrators’ in this paper) according to a loose but consistent format, consisting of three parts. The first asked a set of basic questions to establish familiarity and an easily discernable connection between the questions and the interviewers. These questions focused on biographical information, including work and voluntary activities, experience living or travelling in other parts of Myanmar, and familiarity with ‘other people’, that is, people of other ethnicities, religions,

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*The Production of Hindu-Muslim Violence in Contemporary India*; Ashutosh Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India*, 2 edition (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003).

<sup>20</sup> Training participants are University students and members of local civil society organizations working on a variety of issues including, among others, peace and interfaith harmony; environmental protection and land rights; social development; health; and legal aid. The majority of the participants are Buddhist, but Hindu, Christian, and Muslim participants joined as well.

<sup>21</sup> Because the project was motivated by a desire to understand how people might, explicitly or implicitly, justify violence, research was focused on areas that have experience violence. However, inspired by Varshney’s work, the project also sought to include perspectives from at least two areas that have not experienced violence: Mawlamyine and Pathein. Mawlamyine was selected because it is the putative location from which the ‘969’ movement was launched; as the capital of Mon State, including it also meant that the project could maintain a research focus that was equally balanced between ethnic states and majority Burman regions. Pathein was selected as the sixth city because the Delta is generally excluded from discussions of religious conflict in Myanmar, yet the research team had heard strong indications that conditions there were tense between religious groups.

<sup>22</sup> Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India*, 3rd ed. (Oxford University Press, 1998)

<sup>23</sup> In another setting, this research may have been called an oral history. ‘Listening Project’ was chosen as the framing because the Phnom Penh based Center for Peace and Conflict Studies (CPCS) has conducted a number of insightful ‘Listening Projects’ in Myanmar and the methodology, or at least the name, is familiar for many within Myanmar civil society. CPCS, in turn, has based their approach on methodology developed by Collaborative Development Action/Boston. See, <http://www.centrepeaceconflictstudies.org/> and <http://cdacollaborative.org/>. M.MAS was inspired by the work of these groups but would not arrogate complete fidelity to their approach.

<sup>24</sup> Training participants were invited based upon the research team’s prior connections in each area, including individuals known from prior collaboration or those who were introduced by people known to the team.

or geographic origin. We also asked questions about use of mobile phones and where they access news, out of interest as well as to establish a connection between our questions and our backgrounds.<sup>25</sup> The second set of questions asked people to share their concerns for the whole country. After working with them to brainstorm between three and five concerns, we then asked them to choose their primary concern and then probed to encourage them to explain their concerns more fully. People required various amounts of prompting, from extensive follow-up questioning to none at all. Typical follow-up questions included ‘what are you worried might happen?’ ‘how long have you been worried about this?’ (or, ‘when did you start worrying about this?’), and ‘where did you learn about this?’ or ‘with whom do you discuss this?’ After engaging in this discussion, we then repeated the same process, but positioned the questions as about the narrator’s local area rather than the whole country. The third set of questions were about the narrator’s hopes for the future (‘in the next three years, what would you like to change?’) and open time for them to add anything else they felt to be important.

In making decisions about who to interview, we set a quota to ensure that interviews included a diversity of perspectives that accounted for gender, age, religion, and class. Ethnicity was felt to be too diverse to include, but we maintained a generally even division between ethnic Bamar and non-Bamar narrators. Class was also difficult to define practically, and so we agreed to seek interviews with a mind to diversity of educational backgrounds<sup>26</sup> as a rough proxy for class.<sup>27</sup> However, in practice we found it difficult or disruptive to ask people questions about their educational backgrounds, particularly for those narrators who had had limited experience with schooling, and so in the end this information was not consistently collected. The training participants assisted with approaching or introducing us to narrators, and where educational background was not recorded we used other locally-understood markers of class position to assist us in including a diversity of perspectives. Individuals interviewed by the authors are summarized in Table 1 below; an additional 96 interviews by training participants are not cited because they have not been analysed for this paper, though these informed group reflection discussions during the Mandalay meeting that, in turn, informs this paper.

**Table 1.**

City	# Inter-views	Men	Wom-en	Over 40	Under 40	Budd-hist	Chris-tian	Hindu	Mus-lim
Lashio	13	8	8	4	12	7	2	3	4
Mandalay	8	4	7	4	7	6	2	1	2
Mawlamyine	13	8	5	3	10	5	2	3	3
Meiktila	9	6	5	7	4	4	1	4	2
Sittwe	16	13	5	11	7	10	1	2	5
Patheingyi	9	5	4	4	5	7	0	1	1
<b>Totals</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>17</b>

<sup>25</sup> Part of the informed consent process included introducing ourselves, which entailed explaining the ‘Myanmar Media and Society Research Project’ as well as the ‘Myanmar ICT for Development Organisation.’ In light of this, we decided that, in the interview interaction, it would help make narrators more comfortable if we began the interview with questions that were both easy (age, work experiences, etc) and easily contextualized in light of how we had introduced ourselves. Later, we would ask follow-up questions about where the narrators may have heard a specific anecdote or piece of information. Such questions were better framed in light of an earlier conversation about information sources; if we had asked them only later in the interview, they may have been taken as an accusation or implying that the narrator was otherwise ill-informed.

<sup>26</sup> Three categories were defined: high school or college graduates; those with education up to some high school but not graduated; and those with no education or education below high school level.

<sup>27</sup> Varshney adopts a similar approach, using literacy rather than the level of formal education reached. See, Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life*, 19.

The interview approach described above was designed to open a conversation about concerns related to religious conflict, while seeking to avoid presuming that this was a salient issue for narrators. Whether or not we succeeded in keeping the conversation wholly open – and whether or not such an encounter is ever possible – our interest was not in ascertaining or quantifying a particular ranking of national or local concerns and locating religious conflict therein.. Instead, we wanted to create an environment that was conducive to generating open conversations about the issue of conflict and provide a sense of how conflict is present within the fluctuating constellation of concerns that any person has at a given time

## Research findings and analysis

It should be no surprise that we heard a diverse array of issues raised, but we can also see clear patterns. Figures 2 and 3 illustrate the diversity of those concerns narrators chose as their ‘largest’ or ‘number one,’ – acknowledging that we have also done some work to collapse related but distinct issues into single categories, such as categorizing topics that were described as ‘violence against Muslims/Buddhists,’ ‘religious harmony,’ ‘the Bengali case,’ etc., into ‘religious conflict.’ Rather than present a tally of issues ranked, which implies a survey with a pre-defined set of categories, the tables below are designed to present those topics raised and foreground the similarities and differences between cities without creating the impression that we designated any set of issues for discussion, though narrators may have assumed we had interests and tailored their responses thusly.

**Figure 2. Primary national concerns**

Lashio	Mandalay	Meiktila	Mawlamyine	Patheingyi	Sittwe
Civil war/ national peace	Civil war/ national peace	Civil war/ national peace		Civil war/ national peace	Civil war/ national peace
ID cards/ citizenship					ID cards/ citizenship
Religious conflict	Religious conflict	Religious conflict	Religious conflict		Religious conflict
Health			Health		
Education	Education	Education			Education
Livelihoods/ economy	Livelihoods/ economy		Livelihoods/ economy	Livelihoods/ economy	
	2015 elections/ democracy		2015 elections/ democracy	2015 elections/ democracy	2015 elections/ democracy
	Fire				

As might be expected, primary concerns highlighted by narrators reflecting on their local areas encompass a wider array of issues.

**Figure 3. Primary local concerns**

Lashio	Mandalay	Meiktila	Mawlamyine	Patheingyi	Sittwe
Civil war/ national peace	Civil war/ national peace		Civil war/ national peace		
ID cards/ citizenship					
Drugs					
Land			Land		
Education	Education		Education	Education	Education

Religious conflict		Religious conflict	Religious conflict		Religious conflict
	Livelihoods/economy		Livelihoods/economy		
	Electricity				
			2015 Elections/democracy	2015 Elections/democracy	
			Health		Health
			Rule of Law		
				Corrupted values of youth	
				Environment	
					Food
					Housing

Religious conflict was regularly emphasized by narrators in every city except Patheingyi. Nonetheless, in Patheingyi nearly all narrators included religious conflict within those issues that concerned them for the whole country or the Patheingyi area, though they did not choose it as their central concern. Yet, when people across all six cities told us that something like religious conflict caused them to feel concern, this could mean different things. For some, this related to concerns about the way that the spectre of additional riots might be used to postpone elections in 2015 or legitimate a resumption of military rule. For others, this was empathy and distress at the suffering of people from both religious communities. For many, it was a feeling of threat, to the narrators as individuals and to their religious, ethnic, and/or national communities. And for many, it was a sometimes contradictory set of feelings that combined and exceeded the above.

In Mawlamyine, for example, a Buddhist man we interviewed spoke articulately and at length about the importance of the 2015 elections and the ongoing ceasefire process. Eventually, however, he decided to identify religious conflict as his primary concern for the whole country:

A: I'd like to say that religious conflict is the biggest issue.

Q: Since when do you feel like this religious conflict is the biggest issue for the country?

A: Since the incident happened in Rakhine State, and as the tension has grown recently, the hatred towards Islam has grown. I have concerns for the actions upon [Burma] that will be taken by the middle part.

Q: What do you mean 'by the middle part'?

A: ISIS from the Middle East. If they declare Jihad on Burma, that can be a problem for us as well as the whole ASEAN community. I am worried about it.<sup>28</sup>

He had previously stated his commitment to peace and progressive social action; he had also expressed concern for hatred against another religion; and he identified a genuine fear.

### *Muslims as threat*

Many of the people we spoke with articulated a narrative about Islam in general and in Myanmar, that posits Islam as an intrinsically violent religion and Muslims in Myanmar as potentially dangerous. This dominant narrative can be loosely grouped into two interrelated conceptions of threat. Firstly, Muslims were presented as an existential threat to race and religion. Narrators repeatedly referenced the

<sup>28</sup> Man, 26, Buddhist, Myanmar, Mawlamyine, March 2015 MSPT MLM 2.

vulnerability of Buddhism or a particular ethnic community to being erased or supplanted in Myanmar. Variants on the phrase ‘one people swallowing another’ were regularly used, for example, invoking the slogan of the Ministry of Immigration and Population: ‘A nation will not disappear even if it is swallowed up by the earth. But a nation will disappear if it is swallowed up by another people.’<sup>29</sup> Secondly, Muslims were presented as a personal threat to the narrator or to the narrator’s local community of residence.

Narrators described Muslims as violent, untrustworthy, and devout. This is an understanding of Islam in unitary terms, as a homogenous and universal category. Islamic religious practices were referenced to prove this, in terms both general (‘Islam is an ideology of violence’) and specific. Cow butchering was a common example. Cows are revered by many in Myanmar and, for some Buddhists (and all Hindus), beef is taboo.<sup>30</sup> Even for those Buddhists who eat beef, that Islam would require butchering a revered animal is a powerful statement about violence embedded within the religion. Another common example given was the position of women, especially their perceived treatment and perceived lack of freedoms within Islam. In conceiving of Islam as intrinsically violent, narrators thus constructed an image of Muslims in which being devout is equivalent to being violent. That is, the image is of ‘Muslims’ as an Other that is dangerous *because of religious belief*. Outward indications of religious devotion such as the sound of prayer or clothing choices, then, are not just markers of difference but of ‘extremism’ and the potential for violence. The following excerpt from an interview with a young Buddhist man in the Ayeyarwady Delta comes close to illustrating the connection drawn between views of Muslim devoutness and ‘extremism’:

My aunt’s husband is Muslim... As he is my aunt’s husband, we tried to see him as an uncle at first. Later, what happened was, they are very good at mobilizing for their religion. They are very religious people... For them, from children to old people, they only trust their god. Then, eventually, they persuaded my aunt to their religion. At first, my aunt worshipped [Buddha] but later, she did not. He would persuade her with different ways until he got it. Now, she and the children who she gave birth to became Muslim... I was also a friend with an Islam [Muslim]... However, as I observed his behavior and his beliefs, I noticed that he was very serious in his religious belief. To say it rudely, he was like an extremist. I didn’t discuss this with him... I just lived innocently with him. If he asked me, I talked to him and if he called me, I answered... However, I was not comfortable. He is from a different religion and also an extremist... At that time, I really wanted to do something to him but I tried to control myself. Later, it was fine. I just let it go and didn’t argue with him much.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> In Myanmar, ‘*Myay myo yweh lu myo: ma pyouk: lu myo hma lu myo: pyouk meh.*’ Note that, although *lu myo:* can be translated as ‘nation,’ ‘ethnicity,’ or simply ‘people,’ here we understand it to refer to ‘nation.’ As of July 2015, signs bearing this slogan still hang on the walls behind immigration officers at township level immigration offices. A much larger sign bearing this slogan hangs in the office of the Minister of Immigration and Population. See, Sai Latt, “Burma’s Ominous Political Debate over Ethnicity,” *The Irrawaddy*, June 25, 2013, <http://www.irrawaddy.org/contributor/burmas-ominous-political-debate-over-ethnicity.html>.

<sup>30</sup> There is no consistent doctrinal position within Myanmar Buddhism regarding the consumption of beef. While some Buddhists in Myanmar might attribute their abstinence from eating beef to ‘religious’ reasons, some who also identify as Buddhist might forego eating it for reasons more related to astrology, magical practice, or simply because, as in other rural environments, farmers are reliant on cows for labor and food production. In the past, sizeable movements opposing the slaughter and consumption of beef have arisen in Myanmar. One of the more notable recent efforts was by the famous Ledi Sayadaw around the turn of the twentieth century, who argued that, if the Burmese were to have any hope of winning their freedom from British colonial rule, they must cultivate their collective moral practice more assiduously; he suggested that people refrain from eating beef. See, Erik Braun, *The Birth of Insight: Meditation, Modern Buddhism, and the Burmese Monk Ledi Sayadaw* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2013).

<sup>31</sup> Man, 20, Buddhist, Myanmar, Patheon February 2015 MSPT 5.

Devotion, when understood to be synonymous with extremism, helps to establish the nature of a perceived Muslim threat: all devout Muslims are potentially dangerous. Component to this was the idea that Muslims seek to expand and overtake other religions, as a function of a colonizing imperative (or an unwillingness to assimilate) asserted to originate within Islamic teaching. Some narrators explained this as the meaning of Jihad or a requirement contained within Sharia. Both words are in common usage, though understanding of their meaning may vary and may not conform to common Muslim understandings of these concepts. A few narrators situated such claims historically, with references to countries such as Afghanistan or Indonesia, places that are understood to have once been Buddhist but which are now Muslim. For Myanmar, this specter of a ‘Muslim takeover’ was explained as potentially occurring through a variety of mechanisms that require vigilance on the part of Buddhists. This is primarily a demographic argument, about rapid Muslim population growth driven by large families, intermarriage and forced conversion of Buddhist women, illegal immigration from Bangladesh, and the use of violence or economic power.

### *Justifying arguments*

In our interviews, people called upon an identifiable, persistent set of arguments to illustrate the idea that Islam is violent and Muslims present an existential or personal threat. These arguments can be loosely grouped into three interrelated strands: references to international events, events within Myanmar, and personal experiences.

We use the term ‘argument’ here because, by asking narrators to choose their primary concerns and then explain them, the interview encounter obliged narrators to justify their choices. Different narrators approached this differently, with some investing clear energy into not only answering our questions but into persuading us to agree. In Lashio, for example, we interviewed a mother who works at the central office of the Shan State Ma Ba Tha. She spoke to us earnestly, sometimes seeming to be on the verge of tears, and with a high degree of certainty about the information she presented:

In my opinion, for the first point, it is religion. They [Muslims] are swallowing our religion... I am so worried about it for our future generations, our grand children and so on. In our time, horrible things like this happen to our religion. For the future of our children, I am so worried that our religion will disappear. I have these worries and concerns. I don't want this religion to disappear for our future generation. I want it to last forever.<sup>32</sup>

Given that this woman told us she had left her previous employment to come work for Ma Ba Tha because of her desire to protect Buddhism, it is not surprising that she stated her views strongly. She is also, not surprisingly, a particularly illustrative narrator who synthesized and repeated all three strands of arguments we heard others make in varying permutations:

The things that happened took place not far from our work place – members of the other religion rape children like your daughter's age, and we read about that in the news and also see it in real life... Their religion is terrorism. They lured people to convert to their religion by force; they don't have freedom of belief in their religion. If a Burmese Buddhist got married to one of them, every opportunity would be lost. Even a drop of blood from them is very dangerous. The blood of terror. They have been taught this since they were children, so it's very terrifying. We say, ‘don't kill’... They say, ‘kill, if you kill you will be blessed’... Now, in the news, we see about their Jihad in other countries, cutting off peoples' heads. Horrible things, burning people alive... I

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<sup>32</sup> Woman, 38, Buddhist, Myanmar, Lashio, March 2015 Lashio MSPT 9.

don't want to see our Buddhists suffer like that. That's why I want to show people the horror of their religion. I want everyone to know.<sup>33</sup>

In this excerpt, the narrator utilizes the first strand of argument, which makes reference to international events. She is making a claim about Islam as a religion that promotes violence and then calling on a variety of examples to illustrate her point. She appears to be referencing ISIS, as many other narrators did. Given the time period in which we conducted research for this paper, references to ISIS were topical, but we also heard mention of a variety of other international events. In the following excerpt from an interview in Mawlamyine, for example, the narrator had just told us he was afraid to interact with Muslims:

Q: In that case, why are you afraid to communicate with Muslims?

A: They are very strong in racism and always live separately from us. Even if they come and communicate with us, their mind-sets are not honest.

Q: Can you give me some examples?

A: I can give many examples of worldwide incidents. For example, they attacked the World Trade Center in America and you can also see [examples] in Myanmar. They are the sources of these incidents. Nowadays, we are more and more afraid of them and also you can see the situation of ISIS. I don't trust Islam in Myanmar because of this ISIS. For example, Islam [Muslims] from Indonesia are involved in ISIS so nobody can say that Islam [Muslims] in Myanmar are not involved or participating in the processes of ISIS. That is why we are afraid of them.<sup>34</sup>

Here, the narrator weaves together reference to events abroad and inside Myanmar to explain his generalized fear of Muslims. Importantly, this excerpt illustrates how international media accounts in Myanmar diverge from the way conflict is discussed on an everyday basis in Myanmar. International accounts position Muslims as primarily victims of violence whereas many narrators saw Muslims as perpetrators. This narrator in Mawlamyine did not go as far as U Zaw Aye Maung and say that the Buddhist Rakhine people have suffered genocide but he – and other narrators – did present recent instances of conflict as instigated by Muslims who acted as aggressors or who otherwise brought retaliatory violence on themselves.

The second strand of argument we heard was reference to events within Myanmar or the narrator's immediate local area. In many cases this entailed reference to riots, either in Rakhine State or in other places that have been the site of collective violence. Other common references were to incidents of sexual violence or forced conversion of Buddhist women and desecration or disrespect of religious objects such as Buddha statues. In the following excerpt from an interview in a teashop in Sittwe, the narrator invokes a variety of examples to illustrate her point, oscillating between references to incidents during large-scale riots and to more quotidian events. As she explained these things to us she grew increasingly animated, even jovial, looking at us and over us to draw in those bystanders not yet included in our conversation:

For them, if Rakhine are bad to them, they just cut the Rakhine's neck. This is the thing that they preach. We can also hear that... When they preach, they talk like that. They said, 'Allah, don't you see us. What are you doing? Just kill these Rakhine'... They will act according to whether the situation gives them the chance... At night, they steal people's things... For them [those who live closer to the Muslim area], they cannot even leave their shoes out. They will be stolen... If

<sup>33</sup> Woman, 38, Buddhist, Myanmar, Lashio, March 2015 Lashio MSPT 9.

<sup>34</sup> Man, 36, Buddhist, Chinese/Myanmar, Mawlamyine, March 2015 MLM MSPT 13.

they kill an Arakan<sup>35</sup> man and if we catch him [the killer], we do not kill him. We just hand him over to the police. If they catch an Arakan man, they cut his neck and kill him. When there was a conflict, they showed us like this [violent gesture] and told us, ‘we will do this to your Arakan people.’ One person from Section #--- was killed. They cut off his flesh and cooked and ate it. Then, they cut off his head and showed other people. They are very wicked.<sup>36</sup>

People also made reference to personal experiences with Muslims, making up the third strand of argument. It is important to note, however, that this strand was far less common than the other two. That is, narrators more regularly invoked events internationally or elsewhere in Myanmar, or characterized as personal experiences events that might blur the boundary between things lived or witnessed and things heard recounted. Nonetheless, we did hear references to personal grievance, in which people explained that they had individually been wronged by Muslims. For example:

They are bad, if it is related to females. They destroy girls, to be frank. They have those habits. For us, we care for others as brothers and sisters but for them they would like to take advantage in any circumstance. Even for donations, they would ask for donations only to support members of their own religion and they do not care for others... I have lived in the Islamic community; I have studied them a lot. When we ask for water, they would spit [into the cup] first and let you drink. So disgusting... When I was [working as a truck driver], I rented a place in their compound, so I know them well.<sup>37</sup>

### *Violence and virtuous self-defence*

We have chosen to organize our interpretation of these interviews spatially, in order to emphasize the way narrators situated their concerns in a global context. Using space as an organizing principle helps clarify how a dominant demographic majority (Buddhists) can fear a demographic minority (Muslims): the concerns presented are with Muslims *inside* Myanmar as the local embodiment of a global threat seen to *surround* Myanmar. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was pilloried by non-Burmese observers for her 2013 BBC interview,<sup>38</sup> but in situating domestic fears in a global context she was descriptively accurate; fear in Myanmar is not (only) of a small minority population, but of a global threat felt to be both descending upon the country and growing within it.

In her exploration of Hindu-Sikh violence in India, Veena Das has described similar discourses, making note of an important shift: when ‘*fear of the other*’ is transformed into the notion that *the other is fearsome*.<sup>39</sup> In the Myanmar context, the arguments we interpreted above regularly consisted of such a shift. With the narrative of Muslims as a threat established, people described how this prompted them to direct their gaze towards individual Muslims with uncertainty and concern. In Mawlamyine for example, a young ethnic Karen woman we spoke to in a Church compound described discussing this feeling with her friends:

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<sup>35</sup> Note this narrator moved back and forth between ‘Rakhine’ and ‘Arakan,’ which are two terms for the same ethnic nationality.

<sup>36</sup> Woman, 49, Buddhist, Rakhine, Sittwe, February 2015 Sittwe MSPT 9.

<sup>37</sup> Man, 54, Hindu-Buddhist, Thitagu, Mawlamyine March 2015 MLM MSPT 12.

<sup>38</sup> David Blair, “How Can Aung San Suu Kyi – a Nobel Peace Prize Winner – Fail to Condemn anti-Muslim Violence?,” *The Telegraph (UK)*, October 24, 2013, <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/davidblair/100242929/how-can-aung-san-suu-kyi-a-nobel-peace-prize-winner-fail-to-condemn-anti-muslim-violence/>.

<sup>39</sup> Veena Das, “Specificities: Official Narratives, Rumour, and the Social Production of Hate,” *Social Identities* 4, no. 1 (February 1998): 125, doi:10.1080/13504639851915. (emphasis original)

A: According to [what I hear from] other people, I am worried that ISIS will affect us, and in our country we have many Muslims. When I see they [ISIS] cut peoples' heads off, it will be a problem if this comes to us. Some of my friends tell me, if they see Muslims, they are scared of them even though they might not have [plans of cutting peoples' heads off] in their mind. It is like seeing the news about that and then having fear when looking at these people [Muslims in Myanmar].

Q: You mention, you are feeling scared, when did you start to feel like that?

A: It happened after seeing that news and the Rakhine problem. Since then the news always pops up about it. I am worried that ISIS's actions will affect the world or will affect our country.<sup>40</sup>

This is the shift that makes a generalized threat specific; when the Other is made fearsome, any Other that one encounters is potentially dangerous. In the context of such a sense of threat, beholding a Muslim is thus to see not a person but the embodiment of a threat; a body that, whatever is known about it as a neighbor or even friend, always contains the potential for aggression and danger and thus must always potentially require or deserve violence. Jonathan Leader Maynard has described arguments like these as an ideology of threat that, in many other times and places, has played an important role in justifying mass violence. This ideology of threat, Maynard notes, is often partnered with a sense of virtuous self-defence, in which violence may be normatively allowed or even required.<sup>41</sup>

This paired sense of threat and self-defence showed through in our interviews. The woman we spoke with at the Ma Ba Tha office in Lashio, after all, told us she does everything she can to warn other Buddhists about the 'horror' of Islam. In our work with youth activists, as well, Maynard's research has been a valuable teaching tool that has helped us to analyze discourses about conflict in everyday conversation, popular media, novels, music and film, social media, and religious teaching. In sessions analyzing such discourses in each city, the young activists generated a host of examples illustrating the relationship between a conception of threat and virtuous self-defence. 'Killing a Kalar<sup>42</sup> is only half a sin,' one participant noted, quoting a popular book. 'Taking action to protect your own race is complying with Buddha's teachings,' noted another participant, quoting a Buddhist leader. When the groups from all six cities came together to share and reflect on what they had learned, we took a collective vote on those ideologies most common, influential, and worth focusing on in activist work. These ideologies of threat and virtuous self-defence were, without controversy, voted as most salient.

It should be no surprise, then, that perpetrators of anti-Muslim riots have been described shouting both 'Muslims, be gone' and singing Myanmar's national anthem<sup>43</sup> or shouting, 'We are Buddhist martyrs.'<sup>44</sup> This not to say that explaining such incidents can be reduced to the rhetorical statements of participants. Collective violence is a process; large-scale violence such as riots – let alone pogroms or genocide – are not singular events that spontaneously erupt or explode, but moments in extended periods of mass

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<sup>40</sup> Woman, 34, Christian, Karen, Mawlamyine, March 2015 MLM MSPT 11.

<sup>41</sup> Leader Maynard, "Rethinking the Role of Ideology in Mass Atrocities."

<sup>42</sup> The word *kalar*, which can simply mean 'foreigner' but is currently associated with people who appear to be from South Asia, has acquired strongly derogatory connotations in many situations and in cases like this has come to signify anyone who is foreign, has darker skin, or is Muslim. Debate within Myanmar about use of the term is strong and ongoing, with many who would say that it is not a pejorative term. In this case, the term is used to define a potential object of violence; that the word itself implies disregard for the persons so classified is clear.

<sup>43</sup> Than Naing Soe and Si Thu Lwin, "Curfew Announced after Rumour Sparks Violence," *The Myanmar Times*, July 4, 2015, <http://www.mmmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/10890-curfew-imposed-in-riot-hit-mandalay.html>.

<sup>44</sup> Thomas Fuller and Wai Moe, "Buddhist-Muslim Mayhem Hits Myanmar's No. 2 City," *The New York Times*, July 3, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/04/world/asia/buddhist-muslim-mayhem-hits-myanmars-no-2-city.html>.

mobilization.<sup>45</sup> This process is both cultural and political;<sup>46</sup> the motivations of those individuals who themselves participate in riotous violence matter, but so too do the ideologies of a wider swathe of society. Violence is not limited to riots. The narrative of threat described here also serves to justify discriminatory laws, administrative actions, and a demonstrated lack of care for the suffering of a religious Other.

A dominant narrative of threat and self-defence also helps to explain the ferocity of backlash against attempts by foreign governments and inter-governmental bodies to promote recognition of citizenship for the Rohingya. Rejecting such calls is, understood in this light, integral to national security; Rakhine State is often referred to as Myanmar's 'western gate,' the front line in a battle to protect Myanmar from an invasion that would make Islam into the dominant religion for Rakhine State and then, eventually, the entire country.

Now, they are using the term 'Rohingya' and they systematically planned for it and used it since the beginning. They want the Bu Thee Taung / Maung Taw area [townships in northern Rakhine State, near the Bangladesh border] to be under their control. If they get that area, what can happen? They want to cooperate with Bangladesh as they are from the same ethnicity and the same religion. They did it systematically. Most of the people here also think the same way... It is a concern not only for this region but for the whole country... In Myanmar, there are borders on every side; in the north, east, south and west. If one border is broken, it is dangerous for the whole country. The people who will suffer first are the closest ones.<sup>47</sup>

The feelings of those who have not participated in violence nonetheless help to shape the degree to which violence is 'thinkable', and the degree to which individuals, civil society, and the state work for peace. In this regard, the narratives discussed above are also an auspice for indicting or attacking those who do not sufficiently acknowledge or defend against the threat. Such attacks take the form of both personal harassment and public denunciations by other high-profile public figures, as well as shaming campaigns that are becoming increasingly common on social media. Public figures including social activists,<sup>48</sup> politicians,<sup>49</sup> and government authorities<sup>50</sup> that appear sympathetic to Islam are regularly subject to such attacks, as are non-elites in everyday life.<sup>51</sup> Journalists, too, have come under fire for covering violence

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<sup>45</sup> Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *Leveling Crowds: Ethnonationalist Conflicts and Collective Violence in South Asia* (University of California Press, 1996); Brass, *The Production of Hindu-Muslim Violence in Contemporary India*.

<sup>46</sup> Thomas Blom Hansen, *The Saffron Wave: Democracy and Hindu Nationalism in Modern India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

<sup>47</sup> Man, 60, Buddhist, Rakhine, Sittwe, March 2015 MSPT 11.

<sup>48</sup> After 150 civil society organizations signed a petition opposing a package of 'race and religion protection' laws proposed by Ma Ba Tha, they were branded traitors by 969 and Ma Ba Tha leaders and subject to harassment, including death threats. See, Yen Snaing, "Myanmar Activists Face Threats After Opposing Interfaith Marriage Bill," *The Irrawaddy*, June 4, 2014, <http://www.irrawaddy.org/burma/activists-face-violent-threats-opposing-interfaith-marriage-bill.html>.

<sup>49</sup> Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is regularly framed as 'pro-Muslim,' but other politicians are also subject to attack. In May 2015, for example, a former member of her National League for Democracy party was sentenced to two years for 'insulting' religion during a speech in which he criticised hate speech by Buddhist leaders. See, Naw Noreen, "Htin Lin Oo Sentenced to Two Years with Labour," *Democratic Voice of Burma*, June 2, 2015, <http://www.dvb.no/news/htin-lin-oo-sentenced-to-two-years-with-labour-burma-myanmar/51679>.

<sup>50</sup> During the research period, for example, a 969-affiliated Facebook account posted the photograph and phone number of a local ward authority who had refused 969 monks permission to hold a public sermon. Screenshots of the shaming campaign are on file with the authors.

<sup>51</sup> For examples of the way fear of such attacks prompts people to limit public participation in calls for peace, see Matt Schissler, "May Flowers," *New Mandala*, May 17, 2014, <http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/2014/05/17/may-flowers/>.

committed by Buddhists.<sup>52</sup> In these attacks individuals are framed as traitors, individuals who are not only failing to protect their religion but, in so doing, marking themselves as betrayers of their religion, race, and nation.

### *Producing narratives, reconciling contradictions*

It is important to emphasize again that our intention is not to quantify the degree to which people in Myanmar accept the allegations of threat from Islam or to determine the popularity or influence of groups like 969 and Ma Ba Tha. The above is an in-depth exploration of the ways that people who believe Islam is a threat justified such a narrative, and what such a narrative may justify in turn. Other people we interviewed did explicitly reject such arguments. Rather than see this as a strict dichotomy between two camps, however, it is more useful to recognize that people are attempting to navigate everyday lives in which they must both manage their shifting understandings of past and current events and their relationships with people around them. The following excerpt from an interview with a teacher in Patheingyi illustrates this point:

For the Rakhine issue, the people who come through the border, how can we call them? Bengali? They came into the country. As we are bordering other countries, there can be a population flow problem. However, as we couldn't stop them systematically in the first place, we can't send back the people who are already here. This is not good to say, but I want our country to be a pure Buddhist county. We can allow the other religions, but I want our Buddhist [population] to increase. I can have empathy as a human being but I am also afraid that one ethnic group will swallow another. However, we do not know who started this problem and who is right. For now, I think both sides have made mistakes. If the Rakhine people who I know hear that I have answered in this way, they will hate me.<sup>53</sup>

Interpretation of the current moment and past events is still open and a function of myriad factors: the individual's personal experiences, the information known, and relationships with others who may have different and stronger views on the issues in question. Conceptions of threat and anti-Muslim antagonism in Myanmar are actively being made, in conversation and contestation with the dynamic views of others and with discourses that circulate within society. In explaining the way such discourses can cohere to form a narrative of threat, anthropologist Stanley Tambiah's concepts of focalization and transvaluation are helpful:

These are linked processes by which a series of local incidents and small-scale disputes, occasioned by religious, commercial, interfamilial, or other issues, and involving people in direct contact with one another, cumulatively build up... focalization progressively denudes local incidents and disputes of their contextual particulars, and transvaluation distorts, abstracts, and aggregates those incidents into larger collective issues of national or ethnic interest.<sup>54</sup>

In Myanmar, focalization is occurring as people emphasize religion and religious difference. This was most visible, for example, when narrators identified religion as the cause of negative personal experiences or crimes, rather than the specifics of the incident in question. Transvaluation, similarly, is visible when

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<sup>52</sup> A post circulating on social media during the Meiktila riots in March 2013, for example, provided instructions for destroying the cameras of journalists attempting to cover the violence. For a thorough discussion of such obstacles, see, Sean Gleeson, "For Burma's Journalists, a Bumpy Road to 'Discipline-Flourishing Democracy,'" *The Irrawaddy*, June 17, 2015, <http://www.irrawaddy.org/burma/for-burmas-journalists-a-bumpy-road-to-discipline-flourishing-democracy.html>.

<sup>53</sup> Woman, 42, Buddhist, Karen, Patheingyi February 2015 Patheingyi MSPT 6.

<sup>54</sup> Tambiah, *Leveling Crowds*, 81.

conflicts over land and population movement in Rakhine State are framed in religious terms, which both imbues an issue urgent for ethnic Rakhine communities with national import and connects it to a globalized fear of Islam.

Both of Tambiah's concepts are valuable because they underscore that it is the everyday interpretive acts of people in Myanmar that are helping to produce this sense of threat, illustrated and reinforced through the selective interpretation of stories from their everyday lives, reports of events in Myanmar, and international news. But such interpretive acts must occur in light of a larger narrative framework. 'Little stories feed into a narrative with ethnocidal momentum... but only insofar as they are framed by larger narratives,' Arjun Appadurai argues. 'Such narratives typically come from states and large-scale, well-organized political forces. Such forces can never produce the contingent conditions for the reception of their narratives... but without them many sparks would die quietly, long before they become fires.'<sup>55</sup> This echoes findings from long-term participant observation in western Yangon, which illustrates the interplay between everyday life and the written and oral discourse of organized groups such as 969 and Ma Ba Tha.<sup>56</sup>

Many people share the perception of Islam as inherently a threat and thus irredeemably at odds with Buddhists and Buddhism. But many others are seeking to reconcile such a narrative with contradictory memories and experiences of religious co-existence and friendship. The teacher from Patheingyi continued:

Q: When did you start to worry about this issue [religious conflict]?

A: It was when the Rakhine conflict started.

Q: During this time, what kinds of changes have you seen?

A: I think they [Buddhists and Muslims] do not like each other and hate each other... This is what I see but I didn't ask any other people, so, it's just my opinion. I think they are being cautious. In the past they loved each other but now they may have doubts... In the past, families might have very close relationships but now they might be careful and watch each other's steps.<sup>57</sup>

As in the above excerpt, nearly everyone described their concerns about Islam or inter-religious tension as recent, marking the 2012 riots in Rakhine State or other more recent incidents as the origin point of such a sense. Noting this is not to say that anti-Muslim sentiments did not exist in Myanmar prior to 2012, or that Muslims did not experience violence before this date. But that almost every person we interviewed in all six cities defined their concerns as relatively recent is important to recognize because, for each person, this articulated sense of prior co-existence required them to do subsequent interpretive work:

Before I joined this association [Ma Ba Tha], I felt that we are all the same human beings in my heart... There was no discrimination in my mind. Not only I felt this way, all Buddhists have this same feeling. But after the [riots in May 2013] took place, I knew that the situation was not the same anymore... This is the weakness [of Buddhists], we don't know what [Muslims] are doing to our religion, or making our religion shrink. I didn't notice this, but when I studied about it in detail I found out that it's a dangerous issue. So we have to find ways to protect our religion.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2006), 91–92.

<sup>56</sup> See, Matt Schissler, "New Technologies, Established Practices: Developing Narratives of Muslim Threat in Myanmar," in *Islam and the State in Myanmar: Muslim-Buddhist Relations and the Politics of Belonging*, ed. Melissa Crouch (Forthcoming, Oxford University Press, 2015). See also a semi-regular series of essays reflecting on these observations published by the Australian National University blog *New Mandala*, <http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/author/matt/>.

<sup>57</sup> Woman, 42, Buddhist, Karen, Patheingyi February 2015 Patheingyi MSPT 6.

<sup>58</sup> Woman, 38, Buddhist, Myanmar, Lashio, March 2015 Lashio MSPT 9.

This excerpt from the woman at the Ma Ba Tha office in Lashio illustrates the way many people understand their concerns as contemporary. It also illustrates the work that people must do to reconcile the contradiction between this narrative of threat and past experiences that do not match this narrative. In this excerpt from Lashio, the narrator accomplishes this by saying that she had only become aware of the threat from Islam following the riot in Lashio and subsequent ‘study’ with Ma Ba Tha. Variants on this were common, in which people described being newly informed or awoken; if the two religious communities had co-existed peacefully before, this telling says, it was because they did not know of the danger within their midst. That many dated this awakening to 2012 or later is relevant for additional reasons explored in the next section, though other origin points have also been noted, including the popularisation of a book about the dangers of Islam in the late 1990s<sup>59</sup> or the perception that in approximately the early 2000s Muslims began emphasizing their difference through dress and religious practice.

Not everyone, however, reconciled memories of harmony with recent tension and violence in this way.

I have doubts. That religious conflict [riots in July 2014] was created by the government. But I don’t think they can make it happen again, because people have noticed it... Not long ago conflict happened, but I understood what was going on [that it had been manufactured] because Muslims and Buddhists got along in the past. It [July riots] happened out of nowhere.<sup>60</sup>

Rather than accept recent violence as an example of Muslim aggression and evidence of Muslim threat, some explicitly sought to reject such a narrative. We heard versions of this in each of the six cities, statements positioned to both reject the idea that violence in a given local area spoke to the ‘truth’ of relations between religious groups and to reject the idea that religion is driving conflict across Myanmar. Most commonly, this operated in the form of explaining violence as the product of outside machinations rather than as the local manifestation of religious antagonism. Some narrators explicitly named the government, the military, or individuals within the government or military as behind conflict, though many others did not put a name to their suspicion.

A: Concerning this recent incident [riots in May 2013], we tried to figure it out and later we came to know that it was not created by people from Lashio... It was a relief for us to learn that. We pondered more about this problem with local people from Lashio and discussed it so that things like this won’t happen in the future...

Q: Where do you learn this?

A: Not from any one place, the whole town knows about it. We heard that they have plans, and they implement their plans... It is a good thing that no one from Lashio was involved. We just take care so that such things won’t happen in the future.<sup>61</sup>

Listening across six Myanmar cities helped us to identify a set of arguments that persistently feature in the construction of Islam as a threat for the country and for Buddhism in general. But this research also clarifies that this sense of threat and related antagonism towards Muslims is not pre-defined nor does it exist within a static set of relations. It is being produced through the mutually reinforcing interaction of everyday discourse and a narrative framework that draws on global discourses related to Islam but is also

<sup>59</sup> Published under the name *Disappearance of the Race is a Thing to Fear (A-myo: pyauk hma so: kyauk saya)*, this booklet (sometimes broken into a series of smaller volumes) consisted of arguments about the risk that Buddhism faces from Islam, including apocryphal stories of Muslims committing crimes against Buddhists and the loss of Buddhism in other places across the world.

<sup>60</sup> Man, 19, Buddhist, Myanmar, Mandalay, April 2015 MSPT 6.

<sup>61</sup> Man, 38, Christian, Kachin, Lashio, March 2015 MSPT 10.

being promoted, directly and indirectly, by influential actors in Myanmar society. For individuals, navigating this terrain requires interpreting contemporary events as well as reconsidering what is known about the past. People have diverse memories of religious relations in Myanmar and where these are inconsistent with contemporary experience, it is either these memories or their understanding of the contemporary moment that must be recast.

## Conclusions and questions

More listening is needed. Narratives of threat and self-defence like those discussed here are not static. Such narratives will change, both in the arguments used to justify them and in their object. More than a few narrators, for example, made note of concerns about Chinese in Myanmar. ‘Here, we only hate the Kalar,’ the young man who had earlier seen Muslim devotion as a synecdoche for Islamic extremism told us. ‘But the people who are destroying our country are the Chinese people... Even though people say that they hate Kalar, the Chinese people are the ones who are turning our country into a slave.’<sup>62</sup> Nonetheless, we have sought to nuance understanding of how narratives about threat and virtuous self-defence in Myanmar are being produced in everyday life, including describing common features of the ways in which such a narrative is justified. This understanding generates two conclusions and clarifies three questions that we believe are important for anyone interested in reducing conflict or promoting peace and reconciliation in Myanmar.

### *Expand focus beyond ‘hate speech’ and ‘rumours’*

Common understandings of collective violence in Myanmar that emphasise the centrality of ‘hate speech’ and ‘rumours,’ need to be rethought, along with responses which make them the principal focus. By recognizing the narrative of Muslim threat as a ‘master narrative’ in Myanmar at present, we also recognize that hate speech is not necessary in order to construct a narrative of Muslim threat. In our interviews, respondents expressed anti-Muslim sentiments not through overtly hateful or dehumanizing speech, but rather through reference to ostensibly reasonable and credible sources such as international news coverage of global events.<sup>63</sup> Simply put, there was no need to use hate speech when, as Appadurai notes, the larger narrative framework is established and need only be illustrated and reinforced through reference to individual ‘little stories.’

This does not mean that hate speech is not present in Myanmar. Monks such as U Wirathu are visible offenders in this category, as are a number of particularly aggressive politicians and public figures. Hate speech *is a serious problem*. In Myanmar, hate speech makes it difficult, even dangerous, to offer opposing viewpoints. To the degree that hate speech is legitimized by media outlets, religious, or government authorities, it shifts the boundaries of acceptable discourse about an enemy Other, further marginalizing and dehumanizing those in that category while also naturalizing the characteristics that make them fearsome. But, if we make ‘hate speech’ our central focus, we risk missing the other ways in which the narrative of Islamic threat is being produced and reinforced. Focusing primarily on the worst instances of hate speech risks obscuring the other actions that are effectively mobilizing and solidifying the sense of threat in Myanmar. These need more attention.

Similarly, an understanding of violence in Myanmar that concentrates on rumours or misinformation directs focus towards only one of the myriad forms taken by discourses supporting narratives of Muslim

<sup>62</sup> Man, 20, Buddhist, Myanmar, Patheon February 2015 MSPT 5.

<sup>63</sup> This coincides with literature on organized hate movements that employ rhetorics of what Meddaugh and Kay have called ‘reasonable racism,’ which they define as ‘tempered discourse that emphasizes pseudorational discussions of race, and subsequently may cast a wider net in attracting audiences.’ See, Priscilla Marie Meddaugh and Jack Kay, “Hate Speech or ‘Reasonable Racism?’ The Other in Stormfront,” *Journal of Mass Media Ethics: Exploring Questions of Media Morality* 24, no. 4 (October 30, 2009): 251–68, doi:10.1080/08900520903320936.

threat. A focus on the falsity of some individual ‘little stories’ reinforces a questionable image of Myanmar people as naïve consumers and evaluators of information. This is an assumption that would, for example, look at those arguments justifying a sense of Muslim threat and highlight as problematic only those that are found to be untrue. Application of such an organizing principle to those arguments interpreted in this research would result in excising a large number of justifications that we heard to be important. Many of the ‘little stories’ narrators raised were not rumours, per se, but references to killings by ISIS or other incidents of violence committed by Muslims. In other cases, narrators referenced events in Myanmar that did indeed occur, elsewhere in the country, in their local area, or in their own lives.

Misinformation about Islam and rumours of local and international events are in wide circulation, and are particularly visible on social media. These should be seen as important, but to focus on them exclusively is both insufficient and potentially harmful, for three reasons: First, in the encounter in which a given little story is being discussed, to make the truth or falsity of the story the central issue is to implicitly concede the premise that if the facts of the little story are true, then so too is the larger narrative about threat from Islam – and the potential legitimacy of violence. While this is not a result required by any sense of formal logic, it is the result that follows from the interpersonal interaction.<sup>64</sup>

Second, the sources referenced for such little stories are often religious leaders, family members, or neighbours. To call such a story untrue is to accuse such speakers of lying. This is untenable, particularly when the speaker is a religious leader speaking on a matter related to Buddhism. In such a context, counter-claims may inadvertently worsen conflict. Contestation by non-Buddhists against monastic pronouncements could be interpreted as attacks on Buddhism itself.<sup>65</sup> It may also be perceived as denying the experiences of those who have faced violence or who feel that they are part of a victimized collective. Especially as the perceived denial of Buddhist suffering in Myanmar is a persistent complaint regarding outside analysis of the conflict, it is particularly important to make sure that individual experiences of violence are acknowledged and addressed. This does not imply a need to accept, for example, U Zaw Aye Maung’s claim that the Rakhine people have been victims of genocide. Simply that attention to the unequal burdens of violence or discrimination suffered by different religious and ethnic communities in Myanmar ought to be balanced by sufficient recognition of personal experiences of suffering.

The central question then is not whether or not a given little story is true but how it is interpreted, and the way it is used to bolster the larger narrative of Muslims as a threat or to produce a discrete moment in

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<sup>64</sup> Exploring this dynamic as it relates to the contestation of anti-Muslim narratives in Myanmar, see Schissler, “New Technologies, Established Practices: Developing Narratives of Muslim Threat in Myanmar.”

<sup>65</sup> Responding to claims made by religious leaders is an important instance in which attempting to respond to a given claim is complicated by the authority of speaker. One frequently-cited example is the claim (briefly described above and mentioned by several of our interviewees) that certain countries in the world, such as Afghanistan or Indonesia, ‘used to be’ Buddhist but are now Muslim, which supports the sense that Buddhism is in existential danger. Scholarly consensus on this issue would dispute whether any of those countries could have ever been labelled as ‘Buddhist’ (not to mention the fact that they were not bounded or categorized as ‘countries’ until relatively recently), rather than simply containing Buddhist communities of practice or at most Buddhist-influenced polities (On the religious history of the Indonesian island of Sumatra, for example, see F.M. Schnitger, *Forgotten Kingdoms in Sumatra* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1939)). While disputing the historical veracity of these claims would be an important part of any response seeking to change the narratives associated with Islam in Myanmar, it needs to be done carefully and ideally by those who have sufficient authority in relevant spheres, such as other monks. Otherwise it could risk reinforcing a feeling that Buddhists are being particularly targeted by international criticism, a feeling that feeds into the narrative of existential threat and virtuous defence. Disputing these inaccurate historical accounts also needs to take into consideration the factual elements within them. So, for example, although Afghanistan was not formerly a ‘Buddhist country,’ the presence of large Buddhist monuments and the historical existence of Buddhist communities in that region does contribute to an intuitive sense that the region used to be ‘Buddhist.’

which people are mobilized towards violent action. In many of the cases above, while the basic facts of the given story may be known and true ('a person at this time and place was killed'), it is not these facts but the way in which they are interpreted that reinforces the larger narrative. This is Tambiah's concept of focalization and transvaluation at work. Questioning the efficacy of a focus on refuting rumours is not to say that they are not important in the production of violence. For example, a rumour that members of another religious group in an identified time and place have just committed a horrendous crime or are preparing for an attack could be used to mobilize violence in the name of revenge or pre-emptive action. But actual events, such as a crime committed by a person from the other religion, can be similarly used. The focus, then, must be on the use of a given story, regardless of its discrete accuracy.

### *Recognize analogies between discourses in Myanmar and the Global War on Terror*

There are clear parallels between the discourses about Islam that we have summarized above and those that have become common worldwide since the expansion of a global 'War on Terror.' Those arguments all operate under the assumption that Islam is unitary, violent, and seeking to expand, which are defining features of 'Islamophobia' in many parts of the world.<sup>66</sup> The analogy that best illustrates the circulation of these discourses in Myanmar is anti-Muslim discourse in the United States after September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001. Just as in the United States during that period, there is a kind of urgency felt by those who perceive Islam as a threat in Myanmar. And, where people believe Buddhists to have been the victims of recent Muslim aggressions in Rakhine State and elsewhere, there is also the siege mentality that accompanies feeling attacked and needing to close ranks. Three considerations stem from this.

First, recognizing parallels between narratives of Muslim threat inside Myanmar and those originating outside the country underscores how the latter may serve to reinforce the former. Writing and rhetoric about 'Islamic terrorism' has real impacts in Myanmar. Unsubstantiated headlines that crow of a terror threat in Myanmar, like those recently published by Newsweek and the Independent,<sup>67</sup> are dangerous and irresponsible.<sup>68</sup> As one social activist in Myanmar put to one of the authors, 'spreading such an idea in Myanmar is a killing license.' Similarly, well-meaning attempts to promote peace in Myanmar by, for example, warning that repression and discrimination could fuel extremism will also serve to reinforce the narrative that every Muslim is a potential terrorist-in-waiting.

More subtle trends in western discourses about Islam and terrorism are important, too. People in Myanmar who are regularly presented with claims about a domestic Muslim threat – including what may appear to be outlandish rumours – assess these claims in a context that is also influenced by international media. To the extent that media coverage reinforces Islamophobia in countries such as the United States, so too does it in Myanmar. Myanmar is preparing for hotly contested national elections. We have

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<sup>66</sup> Andrew Shryock, ed., *Islamophobia / Islamophilia: Beyond the Politics of Enemy and Friend* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010).

<sup>67</sup> See, Eilish O'Gara, "Isis Look to Recruit Rohingya Muslims Fleeing Myanmar," *Newsweek*, June 2, 2015, <http://europe.newsweek.com/isis-look-recruit-rohingya-muslims-fleeing-myanmar-328087>; Peter Popham, "Burma's 'Great Terror' Moves a Step Closer as Taliban Urges Rohingya to 'Take up the Sword'," *The Independent (UK)*, June 14, 2015, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/burmas-great-terror-moves-a-step-closer-as-taliban-urges-rohingya-to-take-up-the-sword-10319254.html>.

<sup>68</sup> Carlos Sardiña Galache and Veronica Pedrosa, "In Myanmar, Muslims Arrested for Joining Terror Group That Doesn't Exist," *The Intercept*, May 25, 2015, <https://firstlook.org/theintercept/2015/05/25/myanmar-muslims-arrested-joining-terror-group-doesnt-exist/>; Francis Wade, "The Dangers of Echoing Propaganda on Burma's 'terrorist Threat'," *Asian Correspondent*, June 15, 2015, <http://asiancorrespondent.com/133551/echoing-propaganda-on-burmas-terrorist-threat/>; Elliott Brennan and Christopher O'Hara, "The Rohingya and Islamic Extremism: A Convenient Myth," Policy Brief (Institute for Security & Development Policy, June 15, 2015), [http://www.isdp.eu/publications/index.php?option=com\\_jombib&task=showbib&id=6642](http://www.isdp.eu/publications/index.php?option=com_jombib&task=showbib&id=6642).

identified the analogy between discourses in Myanmar and the US after 2001. In the US, similar sentiments and security rhetoric became an integral part of the 2004 elections, supporting political agendas while also demonizing Muslim communities in the US and worldwide. We should expect similar dynamics in Myanmar, while hoping for less violent outcomes.

Secondly, recognizing these parallels helps to explain how an apparent contradiction between violence against Muslims and commitments to human rights, religious freedom, or inter-faith harmony may be managed. That is to say, they are managed in ways similar to ways that countries such as the United States justify indefinite detention or torture: both are couched in terms of national security, and as legitimated exceptions to otherwise universal principles. Narrators regularly made clear the ways in which such discourses can co-exist; their expressions of fear or their misperceptions about Islam were in many cases complemented by stated commitments to inter-communal harmony and non-discrimination. ‘We are all the same human beings in my heart... There is no discrimination in my mind,’ the woman at the Ma Ba Tha office told us, before launching into an extended exposition about how the dangers of Islam now required that she devote her life to warning people of this threat.

Finally, recognizing these parallels also highlights the hypocrisy embedded in criticisms of Myanmar that are applied to discourses or uses of violence that are also visible in the home countries or cultures of the critic. The ferocity of responses to international attempts to promote recognition of Rohingya citizenship claims, for example, is primarily a function of the way it is understood to be a defence of national security. But insofar as people frame the ‘Rohingya problem’ as an issue of religion rather than (or in addition to) immigration, they would also feel in their perception of threat an alignment with the Global War on Terror. The corollary to this is that to feel criticised for defending against such a threat is to feel that Myanmar is being held to a standard other states are not. Illustrating this for example, presidential spokesman U Ye Htut rejected calls for an international investigation into violence in northern Rakhine State during January 2014 by pointing to the United States government’s refusal to allow a probe into its detention facility at Guantanamo Bay.<sup>69</sup> This is not to say that, for example, the Myanmar government should not be criticized for the continuation of anti-Muslim violence in Myanmar. Rather it is to say that such criticisms should take into account that in Myanmar they are received and contextualized globally, just as are conceptions of Muslim threat.

### *How is the historical lineage of contemporary conflict being constructed?*

We have noted the sense of contradiction that narrators had to manage, between memories of past co-existence and present tension. In discussing concerns about religious conflict, we consistently heard the assertion that such concerns are recent, dated to ‘the Rakhine case’ (June 2012) or local examples of riotous violence. This was more noticeable outside Rakhine State, but even in Sittwe we heard comparisons between current conflict and an image of a peaceful past. The following excerpt is from a University-educated teacher in Sittwe, who came and sat down with us at a teashop, almost without our request – she had heard we were speaking to another man in the area and volunteered.

In the past, we had students from different ethnicities and religions. Now, we do not have them anymore... We taught them and there was no conflict. We didn’t hope that these kinds of things would happen... There was a Bengali issue here in 2012. It is important. One people will swallow another people. So, we have to stop them. As a citizen of Myanmar, I am worried... In the past, I was not so worried as we just lived together. They [“Bengalis”<sup>70</sup>] were also in this section [of the

<sup>69</sup> Gemima Harvey, “Myanmar: The Worsening Plight of the Rohingya,” *The Diplomat*, March 19, 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/03/myanmar-the-worsening-plight-of-the-rohingya/>.

<sup>70</sup> In this case, the ‘they’ she refers to throughout the interview she defines as ‘Bengalis,’ which is the way many in Rakhine – and across Myanmar – refer to people who are seeking to be recognised as Rohingya.

city]... When people are at peace, there is no problem but when they start to have conflict, they become opposed to each other. If you live in a house, if you do not have good relationship with your neighbour, it is dangerous. If you do not have a good relationship, you will do bad things.<sup>71</sup>

This excerpt presents a temporal definition of the conflict as contemporary and marked as different from memories preceding it. We can also note this temporal definition in an absence: narrators made a persistent set of arguments to justify a sense of Muslim threat, but these arguments did not often include references to a history of grievance against Muslims in Myanmar. Those arguments made tended to be either universal claims about Islam, and thus timeless, or relatively contemporary, and thus not presented as evidence that Muslims and Buddhists in Myanmar have always been at odds. Indeed, narrators presenting a narrative of threat often did so by acknowledging past coexistence and explaining this as a function of a Buddhist failure to adequately recognize the ‘truth’ of the Muslim threat. This is noticeably different than, for example, the ways that ethnic conflicts in Myanmar are often discussed; in the authors’ experiences in Karen, Mon, or Kachin communities, for example, history and memory of wrongs suffered at the hands of Burmans is often explicit in discourse.<sup>72</sup>

Narrators did not invoke a sense of having been victimized by Muslims *in Myanmar* across a long arc of history. This is not to say that recent violence has no history or that temporal frames of a longer duration were not present in the justifications presented by narrators. Muslims in Myanmar have faced violence and discrimination at times before 2012. Concerns that people expressed about Islam or Buddhism more generally were situated historically: arguments about countries once Buddhist and now lost or about immigration patterns and growth in Muslim populations both entail a temporal frame that stretches back centuries. But these arguments are not about presenting a history of antagonism that is defined as between Buddhists and Muslims and operating inside Myanmar; rhetorically, narrators did not often make reference to longer histories of grievance between the two religious communities. The only place where old examples of conflict were used to illustrate conceptions of present threat was in Rakhine State, where we heard reference to immigration from Bangladesh and Mujahideen massacres of Rakhine villages in the early 1940s. While our narrators did not commonly point to historical grievances in their arguments, our methods do not allow for us to project this onto the general population. Additionally, our interview arrangements could have discouraged reference to historical grievance. However, narrators did raise historical grievances in relation to other issues of importance such as complaints about education and governance in Myanmar, which were variously situated in relation to the socialist and post-1988 eras. This clarifies an important question.

How is the historical lineage of contemporary Buddhist-Muslim conflict being constructed in Myanmar, and what beliefs about the irreconcilability of religious communities does this support? This is an important question, for two reasons. First, it is significant that people are *asserting a contradiction between past and present*, regardless of instances of violence or periods of antagonism that have been salient at other times in Myanmar. Such an assertion is a decision, and a decision that needs to be better understood as it may serve as a foundation for mobilizing alternative narratives that contest ideologies of threat and self-defence. The converse is also significant. Working for peace and reconciliation would be manifestly more difficult if this contradiction ceases to be expressed, if the two communities are understood to have always been at odds.

Second, individual memories and collective conceptions of history are mutable. This underscores the importance of understanding religious conflict in Myanmar not as a *prior and ossified set of relationships*

<sup>71</sup> Woman, 54, Buddhist, Rakhine, Sittwe February 2015 Sittwe MSPT 12.

<sup>72</sup> For a thorough exploration of the everyday salience of such senses of grievance in the Karen context, see Stephen Campbell, “Articulating Grievance in Southeast Myanmar,” in *Civil Wars in South Asia: State, Sovereignty, Development*, ed. Aparna Sundar and Nandini Sundar (India: SAGE Publications, 2015).

but as something mobilized in any given moment with referents that can change, including notions about history and its relationship to the present. Veena Das has described the production of violence in India as a systematic forgetting,<sup>73</sup> and this should be a concern in Myanmar. Many of the people we spoke with drew on recollections of communal concord, but some also explicitly disavowed these memories. Over the time span of a lifetime, a generation that experiences Buddhist-Muslim relations primarily in terms of suspicion and violence would help to establish perceptions of this as primordial fact. ‘Maybe this is true for old people,’ a twenty-year-old activist said to two of the authors after we discussed this sense of contradiction. ‘But we young people have had no chance for remembering this kind of harmony.’ Significantly, she is from Kyaukse, an area in central Myanmar that was the site of serious Buddhist-Muslim violence during October 2003.<sup>74</sup>

The complement to forgetting is the recasting of old events in a new light and, through this, the creation of new memory. This could mean re-defining previous instances of violence that may not have been collectively interpreted as ‘religious’ conflict in those terms. Both processes could contribute to establishing a conception of contemporary religious conflict as inevitable and historically determined. Academics, NGOs, and media outlets need to be careful that they do not inadvertently bolster such communalization of conflict as well; lazy historicization that equates contemporary violence with, for example, Indo-Burman riots in the 1930s reinforces attempts to present religious antagonism as a historical fact and thus irreconcilable. Instead, inquiring after the specific constellation of conditions that are producing violence and accompanying justifying narratives would challenge efforts to solidify inter-religious antagonism and facilitate work for reconciliation and peace.

### *Who is contradicting – or reinforcing – narratives of Muslim threat?*

This paper has detailed a set of arguments that are persistently used to justify a narrative of Muslim threat. The next question that must be investigated is what influential actors in society are doing to contribute to this narrative. Such a question could also be positioned in the reverse, as asking what influential actors in Myanmar society are doing that would contradict this narrative. It may seem paradoxical to recommend such an investigation in a paper that has focused on the discourse of non-elites, but this is not so for two reasons. First, as we and others have noted, those little stories detailed above need to be interpreted in light of a larger narrative framework. Connections between the justifications summarized in this paper and extreme hate speech or egregious rumour are clear, but this research suggests that these are not the only ways in which the narrative framework is being constructed. Second, it is important for outsiders to consider the ways that their discourse about violence influences conflict. To locate the cause of violence as primarily in the fears or hatreds that lie within the hearts of some Myanmar people is to generalize and equalize involvement in conflict across society. This is an understanding of mass violence as tragedy; such an understanding makes everyone, and thus no one, accountable.<sup>75</sup> Conversely, asking questions about the contributions identifiable actors in Myanmar society make to conflict can help to demystify the production of violence or, at least, avoid obscuring it further.

Our research findings suggest that when religious, state, and other prominent political leaders make rhetorical commitments to principles such as human rights, peace, or religious harmony, these should be read in the context of an established narrative of threat. It should not be assumed that such statements are

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<sup>73</sup> Das, “Specificities,” 113.

<sup>74</sup> For a news report on the violence published at the time, see “Muslim Minority Attacked in Myanmar,” *Al Jazeera*, November 3, 2003, <http://www.aljazeera.com/archive/2003/11/200841011362824245.html>. Notably, U Wirathu also hails from Kyaukse and was sentenced to 25 years in prison for inciting this violence. He was released in early 2012.

<sup>75</sup> For an extended discussion of this dynamic in the context of Hindu-Muslim violence in India, see Brass, *The Production of Hindu-Muslim Violence in Contemporary India*.

at odds with this narrative; recognizing the operation of this narrative exposes readings that may be common for Myanmar audiences but not obvious for outsiders. President U Thein Sein, for example, has made public commitments to human rights and warned of those who are ‘domestically and internationally spreading extremism.’<sup>76</sup> But while such comments can be read as references to monks such as U Wirathu, it is also possible to read such a statement as directed against *Muslim* extremists. There is, in other words, nothing about such statements that requires contradicting the narrative of Muslim threat and virtuous defence. Reading the president’s statement in the opposite direction, to be consonant with or even supportive of the narrative of threat would require minimal interpretive work. Indeed, such a reading would actually be more congruous with his prior statements: after the TIME magazine cover story branded U Wirathu ‘the face of Buddhist terror,’ for example, the President referred to the monk as a ‘son of Buddha’ and banned the sale of the magazine issue.<sup>77</sup>

Our research suggests two questions that should help clarify how influential actors in Myanmar society are contributing to conflict. First, how are instances of riotous violence explained and who is identified as victim and aggressor? If people are marking their concerns with Buddhist-Muslim conflict to 2012 or other recent instances of violence, and there is a common sense that Buddhists were victims during this time, this indicates that the explanations presented for these incidents need to be considered. This applies to the explanations offered by media, religious, and political leaders. It also applies to the state, insofar as the policing after a given incident – in which more people from one side are arrested than the other – is a powerful statement about who was attacked and who did the attacking. This operates as a statement about the ‘truth’ of who did what to whom, as defined by the state’s legal proceeding. But, perhaps more importantly, it is a statement about whose use of violence is legitimate, as evidenced by whose uses of violence are punished and whose are not. These considerations apply to large-scale instances of riotous violence, but also to other cases that, though they do not have a national profile, are nonetheless locally significant. Legislative and administrative moves understood to protect one religion from another or privilege public speech and action by representatives of one religious group, along with implicit or explicit condoning of the rationale and rhetoric of 969 and Ma Ba Tha, are other moves that help to reinforce the sense of threat. Most dangerous of all are statements by authorities that imply or assert risks of ‘Islamic terrorism’ in Myanmar.<sup>78</sup>

Second, how is Islam being represented, and is it as a unitary and fearsome Other? This is the question that helps us see the wider array of contributions that the state and social, religious, and political leaders are making which help to justify a sense of Muslim threat. Clearly, 969 and Ma Ba Tha present such an image of Islam. But so too do government authorities when they limit their concern for extreme speech to choice of words, while implicitly or explicitly accepting that the motivation (protection of Buddhism from Islam) is legitimate. Individual news stories that, directly or indirectly, explain violence in Myanmar and abroad as the function of unitary and violent Islam also reinforce the larger narrative. But the editorial decisions of private sector and state-owned media matter too; a similarly unitary and violent image is visible in the aggregate of stories published, and not published, in the international affairs sections of their papers. It would be valuable, for example, to compare the quantity and quality of coverage of international news related to Islam in Myanmar language media to, for example, the international affairs coverage in other regional papers.

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<sup>76</sup> Nirmal Ghosh, “Myanmar Alert to Extremism Threat,” *The Straits Time*, January 18, 2015, <http://www.asianewsnet.net/news-70566.html>.

<sup>77</sup> Hanna Hindstrom, “Burma President Backs anti-Muslim ‘hate Preacher’ Wirathu,” *Democratic Voice of Burma*, June 24, 2013, <http://www.dvb.no/news/politics-news/burma-president-backs-anti-muslim-%E2%80%98hate-preacher%E2%80%99-wirathu/28955>.

<sup>78</sup> Galache and Pedrosa, “In Myanmar, Muslims Arrested for Joining Terror Group That Doesn’t Exist.”

Without facing such threat narratives head-on, they go uncontested – even at moments and by actors otherwise thought to be promoting harmony, tolerance, or peace. In reflecting on the ways in which current narratives of threat and self-defence are produced or reinforced – directly and indirectly – by people in positions of authority, anyone interested in preventing violence must consider efforts that encourage such authorities to speak, as it were, in different ways about Muslim threats – through public statements, but also via domestic policy action and enforcement. This also reinforces the importance of backing local civil society efforts to counter narratives of threat and self-defence. But this research underscores that this would not only include those who identify (or are identified) as peacemakers, but also those whose stated focus is elsewhere but who have the credibility, connections, and bravery to work for peace at the most difficult moments. These local actors exist, but they are not always the ones first identified by outsiders who would intervene. Local groups and individuals often have a greater understanding and sensitivity to the ways in which narratives of existential threat to Buddhism are mobilized, and how they may be countered – as well as who is (or is not) countering them. We should listen.