

Anachronistic Misinterpretation: The Distortion of Myanmar's Past Through 'Racial Cleansing'

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Abstract

The notion of "racial cleansing" is historically incoherent within Myanmar's cultural and religious history. Precolonial and early modern Myanmar was structured through shared civilizational systems rather than inflexible racial or ethnic categories. Zahed and Jenkins (2022) traced the reasoning behind "racial cleansing" through the "organic" production of national unity, territorial disputes, majoritarian villainizing, state abuse, and identity politics, while Debnath et al. (2022) illuminated geo-strategic and economic agendas of states. However, the existence of ethnic domination or exclusion does not satisfy the assertion of "racial purity," especially when the concept of ethnic homogeneity is itself subject to scrutiny.

This paper examines whether Burmese conflicts can be adequately understood through rigid racial categories. It recontextualizes these conflicts through shifting forms of religious legitimacy, moral order, and socio-political authority. Drawing from accounts of precolonial Buddhist kingship, Sangha-state relations, and communal ritual infrastructures, the study distinguishes modern racialized state projects from earlier systems of hierarchical belonging. Through Bhabha's "Third Space" (1994), Myanmar's cultural and religious formations reveal hybrid zones of encounter that bridged diverse communities while simultaneously producing forms of hierarchical belonging. Hence, the study preliminarily argues that presentist racial interpretations obscure the historical fluidity of Myanmar's cultural and religious formations while overlooking the role of colonial and postcolonial racialization.