Racial Capitalism and Peasant Insurgency in Colonial Myanmar

by Jonathan Saha

By the time Lu Gyi guided police officers to two shallow graves in the jungles a few miles north of the small central Myanmar village of Inbinhla, the heat of the summer had long since dissipated through the monsoon rains into the cool of the winter months. It had been a summer of insurgency. The district of Prome, where Inbinhla was located and where Lu Gyi lived, had been at the centre of one of the most widespread and bloody insurrections against British rule on the subcontinent since the 1857 Uprising. The rebellion had begun in December 1930 and raged throughout 1931. Peasants rose collectively to murder headmen, burn down administrative buildings, and seize arms from imperial outposts. More than half the colony's districts went into revolt. Just over a year later, when Lu Gyi led the police to the scene of his crimes, the rebellion continued in pockets of resistance across the colony. But it no longer posed a significant threat to state authority. The number of surrendering rebels had reached around 3,500, approximately 9,000 had been captured, and an estimated 3,000 killed.[1] The nineteen-year-old Lu Gyi had direct experience of these defeats. The bullet wounds on his flank would still have been healing from the 'annihilation' of his band of local rebels, the Lion Army, a month earlier in a one-sided clash with the 17th Dogra Regiment; a seasoned battalion of Indian troops raised in hills of Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, and Punjab. This was the last in a series of skirmishes that had decimated the Lion Army's strength since October. Arriving at the graves the authorities found the remains of six men in a state of advanced decomposition, all of whom were subsequently identified as being Indian cattle-herders.[2]

This massacre – by no means the most violent episode in the rebellion – is both a tragedy and a puzzle. These men had been murdered just a few days before the Lion Army was defeated. At one of the hastily arranged special courts that the colonial regime had set up to process the waves of captured rebels, Lu Gyi offered no defence for his involvement in their deaths. His full confession was provided with no mitigation for his actions or any attempt to diminish his role. He faced the gallows before he reached his twenties.[3] The motivations for the murders are obscure and hard to discern. A closer look at the killings reveals that anti-Indian racism was no simple motive for a historian to apprehend. The literature on the history of peasant rebellions in colonial Asia, a vast field which dominated methodological debates in the 1970s and early 1980s, provides inadequate tools for understanding the massacre. For the most part, inter-communal tensions were perceived to be peripheral to the central problem of peasants' motives for revolt.

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Where it has been addressed, the communal violence committed by one group of peasants against other similarly marginalized agrarian populations in their struggles to overthrow oppressive regimes has often been framed as an unfortunate epiphenomenon. It has been read as a sign of inherent flaws in the peasantry's political consciousness that might have otherwise augured a more complete social revolution.[4] But by exorcizing this condescending view of peasant rebellions and engaging with the analytic of racial capitalism, peasant communal violence might be interpreted anew.

The revolt of 1930–32, in which Lu Gyi was but a minor protagonist, is best known as the Hsaya San Rebellion after the man believed to be its instigator and figurehead. It was once a topic of heated academic debate that generated broader paradigms for interpreting peasant rebellions. In a much-lauded intervention, James Scott used it as a case study for outlining the 'subsistence ethic' that he argued underpinned peasants' decisions to rebel. In this analysis, the rigid taxation of the colonial state and the vagaries of the world market undermined the peasantry's subsistence. Scott's contention that cultivators were risk-averse actors was then disputed by others who viewed them instead as active participants in markets who sought to maximize their returns. Research into the rebellion has also informed debates over the millenarian character of anticolonial peasant revolts, particularly through the work of Michael Adas.[5] However, since these publications, the fame of the rebellion has declined and it has inspired only a small number of further publications, insightful though they are.[6] More widely, the study of peasant rebellions against colonial rule in Asia has declined as a field. The rapid disappearance of such uprisings from the pages of even the work of the *Subaltern Studies* collective of historians from the mid 1980s is illustrative of this decline.[7] This essay's micro-historical focus on this one massacre, committed in the dying embers of the revolt, contends that studying peasant insurgency remains a powerful way to shed light on broader historical forces: in this instance, racialization.

Taking seriously the contention that race is, as Stuart Hall so evocatively phrased it, a 'floating signifier' – one that through historically contingent, unstable, and violently enforced power relations attaches itself to an array of phenotypical differences among humans – makes it imperative to historicize the ascription of 'Indian' to the victims of this massacre.[8] The commonly reproduced narrative of a rising tide of anti-Indian sentiments within the Burmese nationalist movement during the interwar years, well-supported as it is, glosses over the acts through which people were ascribed as 'Indian', as well as the underlying processes through which the descriptor 'Indian' comes itself to be understood as connoting a race foreign to Myanmar. Studies typically take racial differences to be self-evident, in the process treating race as an established ideological framework for the actors involved.[9] Contrary to this approach, there is a growing literature that traces shifting indigenous conceptions of human difference through vernacular texts, particularly as they were refigured by Burmese actors navigating colonial modernity.[10] These two historical narratives need to be brought together to understand the racialization at work when Lu Gyi and his comrades separated the men who they perceived to be Indian from a larger group of Bamar cattle-herders, and murdered them at the edge of the jungle.

However, bringing the political history of nationalist xenophobia together with the intellectual history of shifting conceptions of human difference is not enough to solve the puzzle of the motivations behind the massacre. These broader processes require grounding in the specific historical conjunction within which the rebellion played out. The social-economic tensions and ecological pressures in the colony, and in the villages around Prome in particular, need to be excavated. In addition, the dynamics of the conflict between insurgents and the Indian Army need recognition as an animating factor in the rebellion. Working through these layered historical contexts, any sense of inevitability in the sporadic anti-Indian violence that punctuated the Hsaya San rebellion evaporates. This violence was contingent upon local factors and the trajectory of the insurgency. Moreover, the violence had an arbitrary element as the identities of the victims were not always clear. While they were identified as Indian by both the peasant rebels and the colonial state, these identifications were weak and unstable. A close reading of the massacre shows that it was not an attack on a self-evidently discrete community, but a racializing act that entailed the ascription of racial difference by one set of subaltern actors onto another.

But before I delve into these layers of history, it is worth stepping back to take stock of the larger stakes involved in advocating such an approach. In the most immediate field of Myanmar studies, engaging with racial capitalism, and particularly the idea of racialization, pushes historians away from conceiving of colonialism as engendering a 'plural society'. The 'plural society' is a longstanding politico-economic model which holds that under colonialism Burmese society was made up of discrete racial groups occupying distinct segments of the economy. The model, descriptively useful though it may be, treats market forces and racial differences as uninterrogated givens. I argue here instead that colonialism is better understood as engendering racial capitalism. Working with the analytic of racial capitalism entails excavating the deeper historical forces that underpinned the emergence of colonial Myanmar's so-called plural society by studying the tensions of agrarian capitalism alongside changing conceptions of race.[11] In this way, I also answer recent calls for the reintegration of class as a category of analysis in studies of Burmese racial politics.[12] Situated in a geographically broader field this argument can be read as part of a general call for greater critical engagement with the history of capitalism in Southeast Asia.[13] But there is a wider methodological contention that goes beyond these more-or-less geographically-bound areas of historiography.

While the connections between capitalism and racialization have been traced within the pages of *History Workshop Journal*, these discussions have been almost exclusively focused on the impact and legacy of transatlantic slavery in British society.[14] There are compelling reasons for this, not least the pressing contemporary relevance of such histories in Britain today, but a corrective is still necessary.[15] Racial capitalism is an analytic with considerable interpretative power, germane to a range of historical conjunctures; however, currently it risks being consumed by Atlantic histories.[16] Shifting this geographic focus and scale of analysis, racial capitalism is deployed here to illuminate what was ultimately a

minor massacre in rural Myanmar, one overshadowed even at the time by the general turmoil and tumult of insurgency and counter-insurgency. Through this shift, the essay embeds the analytic of racial capitalism in a foundational imperative of history from below, the desire to examine larger social forces through the lives of marginalized peoples.

The essay has a nested structure that moves from looking at the colony over the course of nearly a century, to homing in on a single district during the revolt, before closing with an analysis of the massacre itself. It begins with the larger picture of changing socio-economic relations on Myanmar's rice frontier from the mid nineteenth century through to the interwar years, tracing how producing rice for the global market shifted from being an opportunity for Burmese migrants to becoming essential for peasants' livelihoods. It then draws out the links between this shift and the reimagining of understandings of human difference into more fixed notions of race. The following section sketches the dynamics of the rebellion as it played out in the district of Prome, paying particular attention to its emotional arc.[17] Finally, I return to Lu Gyi and the murder of cattle-herders near Inbinhla, the reader now acquainted with the layers of historical context at work in the atrocity from the previous two sections. This nested structure is not only a narrative conceit; it also demonstrates that racialization occurred at different scales and temporalities. I conclude by reflecting on the methodological implications of this for the analytic of racial capitalism.

THE AYEYARWADY DELTA, 1850–1920

Sometimes it is possible to see the world in a grain of rice, and a complex nexus of social relations were implicated in a kernel grown during the nineteenth century in the south of Myanmar. Here the Ayeyarwady River fanned out into a dense network of streams and creeks before flowing into the Andaman Sea, depositing fertile soil as it went. Between 1850 and 1920, vast expanses of ancient mangrove forest were cleared and paddy fields rapidly colonized the alluvial plains. This ecological transformation was realized through the labour of migrants who followed the river downstream from the drier climes of central Myanmar. The work of these newly arrived humans, oxen, and buffalo, who moved in unprecedented numbers, made the colony by the early twentieth century the world's largest exporter of rice. Their rice fed colonized labouring populations across the British Empire, including people as far flung as the plantations of the Caribbean, but most fatefully in neighbouring Bengal. As was exposed in the terrible famine of 1943, Burmese rice was crucial to a global web of interdependence that underpinned food security in a period of rapid imperial expansion. On the delta itself, however, peasants faced precarity and poverty even while they eyed the possibility of social advancement and wealth.[18]

It was a febrile climate for a pioneering peasant cultivator to navigate. The deltaic districts of the colony were characterized by bureaucratic corruption, manipulative landgrabbers, conflicts with tigers, snakes, crocodiles and elephants, and occasional outbreaks of epidemic disease.[19] But this was also a region of newly found prosperity for some recent migrants. Cultivators had to cut down

mangrove forest, dig out the remaining network of roots, and burn away dense undergrowth before the land could be ploughed for paddy. This labour-intensive process could take several years. In the meantime, the cultivator had to survive on credit provided by Bamar and Indian money-lenders.[20] Of the latter, Chettiar bankers – a community of Tamil Hindus with considerable Indian Ocean connections – were particularly notable in providing credit to producers as the rice paddy expanded. Later however, especially when the rice prices collapsed in the Great Depression and the Hsaya San rebellion broke out, they came to be regarded as a rapacious alien community.[21] At all times an unfortunate encounter with wild boars, dishonest policemen, malaria, or cattle thieves could cause peasants to fall deeper into debt, even to lose the land that they had worked so hard to bring under cultivation. During the boom years, though, for many these risks were offset by potential rewards. As littoral hamlets swelled into bustling market towns, some growing fivefold in population in the space of two decades, industrially produced consumer goods made their way to the delta.[22] In addition to this greater consumption, the chance to accumulate wealth through the ownership of land and cattle was a powerful inducement; even though most of the profit from the production of rice was not retained by these primary producers, but extracted by creditors, mill-owners, and traders.[23]

This period, which stretched until the opening decade of the twentieth century, might be characterized as a time in which the market provided opportunities to migrant cultivators. By the interwar years this had changed, and market participation became a necessity. Producing rice for global consumption was now integral to most peasants' livelihoods on the delta at the same time as opportunities for accumulation were diminishing. This squeeze was in part because environmental limits were beginning to be met. Myanmar's prodigious expansion in rice production was not the result of improved techniques or technological advances, but achieved through the cultivation of more and more land. This resulted in growing ecological pressures on land use, as well as on water and forest resources, as the frontier began to close. These pressures were compounded and exacerbated by increasing levels of debt, and greater social differentiation and land alienation. Although the obfuscatory and slippery categories of the colonial record make it hard to discern how much land was being accumulated by non-cultivators, as a general trend the number and proportion of landless peasants grew, as did the amount of land owned by absentee landlords, who included Chettiar moneylenders foreclosing on mortgages.[24] In imagining how this was experienced by peasants, it must be kept in mind that these were not the same people who had migrated to the delta during the boom years. By the interwar years much of the peasantry would have been born and raised on the delta, rather than being hopeful recent migrants. These second and third-generation cultivators would have had few alternatives for social reproduction other than to produce rice for the world market. This shift from market participation being an opportunity to being an imperative is the very shift that Ellen Meiksins Wood has persuasively argued defines the emergence of capitalism as a specific set of social relations.[25]

The period from the 1850s through to the 1920s, during which peasant involvement in the global rice market went from opportunity to imperative, was also the time when Burmese notions of human difference, while never becoming singular or fixed, took on greater congruence with imperial conceptions of religion and race as closed categories. However, not all historians agree with this characterization. Piecing together pre-colonial conceptions of human difference has proved to be an area of tentative claims and vituperous debate. Disputes have turned on questions over the fluidity or fixity of ethnic identities prior to the nineteenth century, as well as disagreements over whether the foundations of Burmese nationality were primordial or modern. Different positions in these disputes rely on very different understandings of the changes engendered by the advent of British colonialism. Did it precipitate a profound rupture in mentalities, or was it a fleeting interregnum in an otherwise continuous cultural history? Did it fundamentally alter the trajectory of the region's history, or accelerate processes that were already underway?[26]

While I find myself persuaded more by the view that imperialism amounted to a decisive break which ushered in novel modalities of thought, there can be no denying the depth of intellectual continuities. Theravada Buddhism was long central to notions of community and identity, transcending the divide between the pre-colonial and colonial periods. In this role, Buddhism was not a fixed endowment derived from Pali scriptures. It was a living set of practices and beliefs that extended beyond the Sangha (the Buddhist community of ordained monks and nuns) and developed over time in contested relations between states and their subjects. Although this was as true for Konbaung dynasty (1752 to 1885) as it was for the British Raj, the latter fostered a stifling governing logic that attempted to confine religion to demarcated areas of life situated within an overarching secular structure. The challenges thrown up by this colonial attempt to diminish the role of Buddhism in Myanmar were taken up by both the monkhood and the laity, particularly from the 1880s, who rallied behind the need to preserve the teachings of the Buddha.[27] In this encounter Buddhism itself was reconceptualized, becoming entangled with the concept of race, as well as those of nation and gender – concepts that were themselves being navigated by Burmese intellectuals in their writings, culminating, perhaps most notably, in the often exclusionary politics of prominent radical nationalist groups during the 1930s, such as the Dobama Asiayone.

In this way, Buddhism provided an underlying salvific imperative that was drawn through a complex of shifting concepts. The resulting ideas and practices underpinned emergent political subjectivities. One way that historians have sought to capture these changes has been to trace the shifting meanings of key Burmese terms for human difference. For instance, *lūmyui"*,[28] literally translated as human-type, changed over the course of the nineteenth century from connoting different groups primarily on the basis of their Karmic status and proximity to dynastic authority towards instead coming to resemble the more modular Euro-American concepts of nation and race, with the attendant implication of human difference being to a large extent culturally and biologically fixed.[29] By the start of the twentieth century, associated words for indigeneity, foreigners, and different

mixed-race communities had proliferated and become commonplace. These terms held political implications. They were categories through which the colonial state sought to govern. They were also the categories deployed by anti-colonial nationalists when articulating their grievances against British imperialism, most markedly in concerns over levels of migration from other regions of British India.[30] As Tharaphi Than has shown, the nationalist groups that had been organizing the rice-cultivating peasantry in the delta during the decade prior to the uprising, called *vaṃsānu 'asaṅ*'" – loving one's race, or patriotic, associations – harnessed Buddhist religious concerns to racial ones, with long-lasting legacies.[31] These were the frameworks through which the changing socio-economic situation on the delta was understood. As a result, what it meant to be a peasant was informed by racial categories.

This co-constitution of race and class in colonial Myanmar can be interrogated through the category of 'peasant' itself. The Burmese word for 'peasant', *thoṅ'sūlay'samā"*, is as broad and permissive as its English equivalent in terms of the peoples and practices that it connotes. The word is a compound of *thoṅ'sū*, which refers to peasants engaged in shifting cultivation common in the highlands, and *lay'samā"*, which refers to cultivators of paddy. As least some of the cultivator organizations that emerged across the delta during the 1920s referred to themselves as *lay'samā"* associations.[32] Burmese writers during the interwar period deployed this umbrella concept of the peasant to interpret the economic situation in Myanmar, sometimes using it interchangeably with 'poor folk'. Tellingly, it was articulated with understandings of racial indigeneity. Radical nationalists in the 1930s used the term when they translated leftist texts and wrote their own analyses of the fissures of colonial society. This new generation of nationalists, often highly influenced by Marxism and from rural origins themselves, saw an exploitative alignment of race and class emerging through colonialism. They lamented that Indians were taking up positions as traders, moneylenders, bureaucrats, and migrant labourers at the expense of an implicitly ethnic-Bamar peasantry. Frequently suffixing the word 'peasant' with 'Bamar' and 'indigenous', it was almost axiomatic to these radical nationalist activists, as well as to veteran reactionary Burmese politicians such as U Saw, that the peasantry was an *already* racialized group belonging to indigenous communities. In this sense, the peasantry was racially inscribed as autochthonous, despite the recent history of migration to the delta. This definition was not necessarily employed in an openly xenophobic way but was a habit of thought. The indigenous Bamar peasant was a residual category counterposed to foreigners.[33] As such, so-called Indians, despite some having lived in the colony for multiple generations and being intimately tied to the rural economy, were excluded from the peasantry.

Conceiving of 'peasant' as a racialized category encourages us to locate the violence targeting impoverished Indians within longer-term changes within agrarian society. It also means that racialization needs to be taken seriously as a process in-and-of-itself and not reduced to being an inchoate expression of class consciousness. It follows that the massacre of Indian cattle-herders cannot be glossed as a proxy for settling economic grievances with Chettiar moneylenders.

Instead, in the context of an incipient crisis of social reproduction and an emergent Buddhist-inspired, ethnically-chauvinistic nationalism, anti-Indian attacks are better understood as acts affirming a racialized peasant identity. This is a subtle but vital interpretative revision made possible by a framework that keeps the emergence of both capitalist social relations and racial categories in focus. Through this framework, racial divisions are not assumed to have been ever present factors in history but are viewed instead as the culminative effect of profound shifts in material relations and mentalities. Nevertheless, this scale of analysis remains somewhat abstract. It is not apparent how these larger historical processes were experienced and interpreted by the peasants themselves. To glean glimpses of that subaltern view we must narrow our scope, as it is only by paying close attention to the dynamics of the unfolding insurgency that the immediate triggers for anti-Indian violence can be uncovered.

THE DISTRICT OF PROME, 1931

In the district of Prome, Myanmar's topographic and cultural diversity converged. It was, and remains, an administrative unit nestled in the valley stretching between the Chin Hills and Pegu Yomas, bisected by the Ayeyarwady river. Sitting in the vale of these ranges, the area had long been a crossroads between the northern dry zone, Arakan to the west, and the deltaic south. By the late eighteenth century the district's eponymous capital had a large Muslim population, and the town was renowned for its historic significance in major pre-colonial wars, as well as for its ancient Buddhist architecture. Prior to British rule, the town was already an important transport hub between the various centrally located dynastic capitals and commercial towns on the coast. It housed a royal stable of elephants and sat on both the country's major river and a well-used road. Indeed, the district was the historic interface between fifteenth-century kingdoms in the north and south of Myanmar, and it retained something of this geographically liminal position into the colonial period, when it became an important railway town.[34]

Economically, the district was predominantly orientated towards rice cultivation. But being well north of the deltaic regions and the agrarian littoral frontier, it differed in its composition. The consolidation of land into the hands of a smaller number of owners was considerably less marked. Members of the Royal Commission into Agriculture questioning witnesses in the late 1920s worried about the excessive 'fragmentation' of land ownership in Prome. They were concerned that peasants holding such small plots were vulnerable, given that the average size of plots in the district was estimated to be nine acres – less than half that of districts a hundred miles further south. In this context, the margins for rice-cultivating peasants in the district were likely to have been narrower and the effects of the drop in global rice prices resulting from the Great Depression were probably more acutely felt. Imperial officials responding to the Commission's questions noted that this precarity was managed through the district's peasants collaborating with one another to collectively negotiate the market. These concerns were supported by settlement reports that also highlighted the peculiarly scattered and small-scale nature of peasant landholding, the low quality of the local soil, and the high levels of indebtedness and

poverty in the district. The heightened precarity of peasants in Prome, and the resultant collective mutual support among them, may have been factors in the strength of the insurgency locally.[35]

At the same time, there was greater diversity in crops than in the more monocultural deltaic districts. Sesamum too was a primary crop, cultivated to the north of Prome town – one which experienced a poor harvest in 1930. Rice cultivation was further supplemented by groundnuts, cotton, jowar (sorghum), and tobacco – all of which were also cash crops mostly for ailing internal markets.[36] Perhaps just as important as agrarian precarity in giving rise to peasants' economic grievances in the district, Prome was a crucial node in imperial forestry. Large British firms, such as the Bombay Burmah Trading Corporation, held leases granting them privileged access to forests on the Pegu Yomas which led to conflicts with peasants over timber and other forest products.[37] Finally, the district was at a point of confluence between two circuits of cattle migration, believed at the time to be in conflict with one another. The town was an important site for the movement of oxen from breeding grounds in the Shan States in the northeast of the colony to meet the demands of rice cultivation. At the same time, herds of oxen from India supplied milk to urban populations along the railway lines, and Prome was a prominent site in this trade.[38] In sum, while the district had a deep history of intercommunal exchange, it also had simmering socio-economic tensions over land, forest rights, and cattle.

Although the insurgency had begun around Tharrawaddy in December 1930 – over 100 miles south of Prome and almost six months earlier than any revolts in that district – when insurrection did eventually break out in Prome the district quickly became the epicentre of the revolt. In late May 1931, telegrams from the Government of Burma to the Government of India reported that the insurrection in Prome was struggling to garner support beyond the four villages that had initially risen against the state. But the numbers of surrendering rebels from the district in the months that followed suggest that these reports were playing down the size of the revolt. By mid-July over a thousand rebels had surrendered in Prome. This contrasted with just forty in Tharrawaddy and one solitary person in the neighbouring district of Thayetmyo. By the end of this month the number had nearly doubled, meaning that the district of Prome accounted for nearly two-thirds of all surrendering rebels during the whole revolt.[39] Rather than being isolated to a few villages, these figures suggest a widespread revolt swiftly – and as we shall see, brutally – put down. However, insurgency in the district had not been extinguished. As surrenders began to tail off in early August, two new rebel bands were formed in the environs of the town of Paungdè, some forty miles south of Prome town. These were the Tiger Army and the Lion Army. August was also the point at which the insurgents moved away from direct confrontation with the state and adopted guerrilla tactics, perhaps in part because the height of the monsoon provided these newly-formed forces with a temporary climatic advantage for this type of warfare.

The wave of surrenders and the formation of two self-styled peasant armies in Prome both followed the single bloodiest episode of the counter-insurgency. This

took place in Paukkaung township in the east of the district at the start of June. Over 7,000 Indian Army troops had been deployed to the colony during the previous months to reinforce a counter-insurgency campaign that was floundering as widespread rebellions broke out across the delta, spreading to central areas, and reaching as far as the Shan States. Acting on information that a band of around a hundred rebels was camped out near Paukkaung, a mixed force of the Burma Frontier Service and a platoon of the 2/15th Punjab Regiment headed out from their station in Prome to attack. Whether the information had been provided as a ruse to lure them into an ambush, it is impossible to say with any certainty, but they arrived at the location only to find it abandoned. Then, without warning, an estimated 500 rebels attacked them mostly armed with knives, using the surrounding jungle as cover so as to engage their enemies in close combat. The rebels managed to claim twenty-two lives in the ensuing conflict, but the counter-insurgency forces were able to hold them back, and before retreating killed, at a conservative estimate, a hundred and fifty rebels. But it was not the scale of the killing that resulted in notoriety. After regrouping, a small party of police returned to the site of the battle and decapitated the bodies of the fallen rebels. Sixteen of the disembodied heads were then taken to the police headquarters at Prome town, ostensibly for the purpose of identification.[40]

If the intention had been purely to identify the rebels, as macabre as such a procedure was, the police took no care in handling the sensitive situation. A local photographer by the name of Durga managed to capture three clear images of the heads on display at the station and sent these to the Burmese-language nationalist newspaper *Sūriya*, which published them. This prompted prominent nationalist politician U Saw to write to the Secretary of State for India on the matter.[41] In early 1932 the veteran Labour MP, David Rhys Grenfell, continued to ask about the incident in parliament.[42] The report into the exposure of the heads, drafted by the newly appointed Special Commissioner for the rebellion, Walter Booth-Gravely and published in July 1931, was an attempt to manage the story as it broke. Emphasizing the continued danger that colonial forces confronted, the beheadings were presented as an emergency measure that elicited vital information on the villages involved in the revolt. The war diaries, however, candidly admitted that the decapitations had a 'tremendous moral effect' on the rebels.[43]

Darker motives still went unexpressed. Durga was not the only photographer on the scene. A personal collection of photographs taken by a British officer serving in the counter-insurgency forces contains several shots of decapitated heads from Prome.[44] They are accompanied by a series of photographs of the lifeless bodies of rebels. The images bear the hallmarks of trophies. An element of revenge was probably involved in these beheadings: early in the revolt, a white forest ranger, Horace Fields-Clarke, had been dragged from his bungalow and decapitated, his head apparently being taken to Hsaya San himself.[45] Although Booth-Gravely sought to attribute the decapitations to a clinical decision in fraught circumstances, this was an excessive act of desecration. The evidence that he had himself compiled in support of his report contradicted his conclusions. Rather than just twenty-four heads being cut off, as was officially claimed,

Burmese witnesses, including a loyal village headman who went to the scene looking for his relatives, found that every corpse had been beheaded. Their statements describe an overwhelmingly grim scene as they searched hopelessly through the headless remains of over a hundred rebels.[46]

The emotional impact of this traumatic event on the peasants of Prome can only be imagined. Judging by the wave of surrendering rebels from the district, one response was to acknowledge defeat. The counter tendency to this was increased resolve. Villagers gathered in meetings and selected leaders from among their number, adopting the names of predatory large cats to symbolize their strength.[47] They deployed new tactics, particularly incendiarism. They avoided direct confrontations with government forces, picking out softer targets. But they were relentlessly pursued by troops from the north-western regions of British India. Both the Tiger Army and the Lion Army were gradually decimated before being forced into final stand-offs in the last months of 1931. What influence the racial identity of counter-insurgency forces had on these peasant rebels is hard to discern. It is possible that some association might have developed between these combatants and migrants from the subcontinent, but at most this would have only added to a rising tide of communal violence that had preceded the revolt.[48] Either way, the ubiquity of violence in the district, the bitter experience of defeat, and the change in insurgents' tactics provided the conditions for the massacre on the road from Prome to Paungdè, less than forty miles from the scene of this earlier atrocity.

NEAR INBINHLA VILLAGE, DECEMBER 1931

Even with the context provided in the previous sections, the murder of six apparently 'Indian' cattle-herders remains a puzzle. How did Lu Gyi, along with his two comrades, decide who was an Indian? This empirical question implicitly poses a methodological one: how can historians study racist violence without retrospectively reifying the racialization of its victims? I argue that if we are to avoid this act of reification we must be alert to the possibility that perpetrators' racial ascriptions often misrepresented their victims' self-identity.

Gleaning this misrepresentation from the documentation produced by the revolt requires careful work. The archive of the Hsaya San Rebellion served both Clio and counter-insurgency, to paraphrase Ranajit Guha. Inspired by Guha, we can read against the grain of colonial officials' categorizations of South Asian victims of the revolt as 'Indian'.[49] The police went through a process of identifying those killed by the rebels. This entailed determining their race. Rather than a process of discovery, this can be read as an act of ascription. The state, in investigating who these victims were, imposed their own categories onto them. The overarching label of 'Indian' may not have been the primary ethnonym used by victims themselves. It was a label that reinforced and relied upon the notion of there being an inherent difference between Myanmar and India, a separation that was at this point still embryonic in geo-political terms. It also elided the diversity of the subcontinent itself.[50] Moreover, these categories were overlaid onto the violent acts that they were investigating. While there may have been some

congruency in this double-layered text, the colonial categories that formed the basis for common-sense imperial understandings often struggled to account for the messy realities of everyday life.[51] In pulling apart the assumptions at work within these investigations, an interpretative space is opened for uncovering the partially submerged meaning of peasant violence.

Peasant insurgents are discerning in whom they attack.[52] This discriminatory identification of enemies was quite clearly at work in the Inbinhla massacre. It was one of a spate of recorded attacks on Indians in rural Myanmar during 1931 that had resulted in the deaths of sixty-five people by August.[53] Nevertheless, it is difficult to be certain whether these six men were murdered because they were Indian *and* cattle-herders, or whether targeting cattle-herders was a strategy for getting to Indians, given the preponderance of subcontinental migrants in this line of work. In other words, it is unclear whether grievances over cattle ownership were material to the massacre. There is some contextual evidence to support this latter interpretation. This was not the only occasion during the revolt that Indian cattle-herders had been singled out for attacks.[54] The cost of cattle had increased throughout the early twentieth century, and ownership showed signs of becoming more concentrated in fewer hands. Settlement reports from the delta noted a growing racial aspect to this, with Indians being most likely to own more than one yoke – although they were also just as often without any cattle at all, owing no doubt to class divisions.[55] Additionally, Indian-owned oxen were blamed by both imperial officials and local cultivators for spreading disease and instigating crossbreeding, believed to lower the quality of indigenous stock.[56] But the cattle-herders killed in the Inbinhla massacre were not owners of cattle, they were hired by slaughterhouse owners, dealers, and breeders from Paungdè, and their assailants would probably have been aware of this. The incident occurred the day after the weekly cattle market held in Prome town. Prospective buyers travelled there with herders by train on the morning of the market. Once they had purchased their cattle, the new owners hired herders to lead their newly acquired animals back along the road while themselves travelling back on the railway. Paungdè, where the Lion and Tiger Armies emerged, was a regional centre of cattle ownership; a temporary home to animals that were resold or leased to peasants, or butchered for meat.[57] As a result, the day after the cattle market the road to Paungdè was routinely used by cattle-herders. The decision to target this road on this day indicates forethought and planning, rather than spontaneous opportunism. The three rebels, Lu Gyi, Aung Chein, and his brother, On Nyun – one of the leaders of the Lion Army – waited by the side of the road for cattle-herders to come to them.

They arrived in two groups. The first party of cattle-herders was Mya Maung, Abdul Saman, and Basan Meah, who led ten bullocks and two buffalo. They were confronted by On Nyun, who was armed with a gun. Abdul Saman and Basan Meah, both of whom are described in the legal records as Indian, were separated from Mya Maung, who was Bamar. Lu Gyi and Aung Chein took Abdul Saman and Basan Meah away and murdered them. After being threatened by On Nyun, Mya Maung managed to escape when the second party arrived. This second group was a larger one of ten men bringing with them twenty-five buffalo. On Nyun

stopped them on the pretence of inspecting their cattle passes. He then threatened a cattle-herder called Ismail – a man who was identified in the documents as a 'Zarabadi', more commonly written Zerbadi, a term used predominantly for Bamar Muslims. Ismail was compelled to tie up the four cattle-herders who were identified as Indian; men named Hatti, Abdul Suttar, Hyder Ali, and On Thu. Ismail and the remaining cattle-herders were then released on the condition that they would not speak of the event. What happened to the cattle is not recorded, but presumably they too were released. On Nyun, Lu Gyi, and Aung Chein then took their captives to a site a furlong further from the shallow grave containing the bodies of Abdul Saman and Basan Meah, and murdered them.[58]

The legal documents referred to the victims as Indian throughout, although there was some recognition of subnational ethnic differences in the documentation. Hatti was described as an 'Ooriya', and Abdul Suttar as a 'Chittagonian'. All the dead were identified by their family members from fragments of clothing and what could be discerned from their bodily remains. This suggests at least some rootedness in the area, particularly as two were identified by their wives. State statistics suggest that temporary migrants were mostly single men at this time, whose stay in the country lasted for less than a year.[59] But two differentiations were apparent in the murders that the colonial categorization of the murdered men as 'Indian' glosses over. The first was the decision not to kill Ismail. Zerbadi Muslims were a community whose leaders in the 1930s were calling for greater recognition of their indigeneity, in a climate of growing Islamophobic violence in Rangoon.[60] Given the Buddhist elements to the revolt, Ismail might have been a potential target for the Lion Army. The second was the decision to kill On Thu, whose name might have been Burmese; although the imprecision of colonial-era transcription makes it impossible to say for sure. He was identified by his wife, Ma Me Yin, from his shirt, coat and Burmese-style sarong. Her name is unmistakably Burmese.[61] These glimpses into the victims' wider social lives are insufficient to reconstruct how they might have self-identified, but they do show that the ascription of 'Indian' to some of them in the legal records obscured Myanmar's religious and racial complexity and fluidity.

Set in the context of the time, the argument that this massacre was an act of racialized violence remains a compelling interpretation, but a central question remains: what was the basis of the rebels' ascription of racial difference? Was their attire read as foreign? The description of the remains of On Thu's clothing suggests this was not the case. Was it language or accent that were heard as indicators of foreignness? Or more crudely, a reading of the physical phenotypic differences between the cattle-herders that formed the rudimental basis for the fatal separation? These questions cannot be answered satisfactorily. Despite the discriminatory imperative of insurgent violence, there is intrinsically a degree of arbitrariness to racializing violence. In asking these questions, I am underscoring my contention that people's lived experiences in colonial Myanmar did not always conform to the prevailing racial categorizations. Even if On Thu was killed for being an Indian, this does not mean that this was how he thought of himself.

CONCLUSION

There is a tendency for studies of racial capitalism to take a planetary ambit, reproducing some of the totalizing tendencies apparent in the historical materialist tradition that the concept emerged through and in tension with. Late nineteenth-century European imperialism is read in these grand narratives as expropriating land and resources from populations across the globe who were simultaneously racialized as civilizationally backward. This is not to say that these studies lack nuance or that they are reductive in their historical explanations of these phenomena. Care has consistently been taken by those popularizing the concept to emphasize that racialization is not to be understood as a capitalist conspiracy, but as a mode of oppression with its own roots and logics that become entangled and structurally embedded in capitalist expansion.[62] Nevertheless, read on this epochal scale, subjective experience slips out of view.

Despite a skew towards the Americas and the Atlantic world, these big-picture, schematic overviews of racial capitalism are beginning to inspire studies rooted in specific regions. Recent work has begun to deploy racial capitalism as an analytic for the history of colonial India. Undoubtedly, both race and capital have been longstanding topics within the rich historiography on South Asia, but this literature breaks new ground by directly engaging with the work of key Black theorists, particularly through the insights of Cedric Robinson on the feudal origins of racial oppression. The result has already been mutually productive for both the history of British imperialism on the subcontinent and the history of racial capitalism more widely. Mishal Khan and Sheetal Chhabria's recent work underscores the plurality of racializations in colonial India, arguing that human differentiation emerged as much out of pre-existing feudal and caste hierarchies as out of the imperatives of changing labour relations and nascent liberal ideologies of capitalist colonial modernity. Alongside a recent article by Onur Ulas Ince, which emphasizes the modernity of the racialization of Indian labour over feudal legacies in British liberal thought, Khan's essay also pulls the geographic focus towards South Asia while proposing that the abolition of slavery in the British Empire was pivotal to wider shifts in the racialization of labour.[63] Together these studies emphasize that there were layers of racialization at work as myriad forms of subordination became enmeshed in global capitalism. In short, a vital insight that emerges from this early work applying the analytic of racial capitalism to colonial India is that racialization was pluralistic and palimpsestic in nature.

This study, however, draws attention to a further problem: how did capitalism contribute to race becoming a meaningful category in the lived experiences of subaltern groups? To address this problem, racial capitalism needs to be conceived of as an analytic trained on the relationship between the workings of capitalism and processes of racialization. In other words, the literature on racial capitalism helps us to refine the parameters of what we want to explain (our *explanandum*) rather than providing a ready-made explanation (*explanans*).[64] Anti-Indian violence in Myanmar can be usefully understood as a manifestation of racial capitalism, but this insight does not tell us why the massacres occurred during the Hsaya San rebellion. To address this more precise question, we must reckon with the

contingency of racialization at different scales of analysis, and move from the study of racial capitalism as an ideology to racial capitalism as a lived experience. In this way, historians can avoid reifying race in our narratives as if it was necessarily the lens through which subjugated people themselves interpreted the world.

As I hope to have shown, the Inbinhla massacre suggests two contingent processes of racialization at work during a profound crisis of social reproduction: the affirmation of a majoritarian subaltern racial identity, and the violent ascription of racial difference to minoritized subalterns. In indulging in murderous anti-Indian violence, peasant rebels were affirming their own racial identities while ascribing racial categories to others. This racialization was not a cause of the rebellion. Such a claim would overstate the case. Anti-Indian violence was not a common feature of acts of rebellion, and there was one notable instance of a south Indian man playing a prominent role in the insurgency.[65] But longer-term processes of racialization, that were coterminous with the emergence of agrarian capitalism in the colony, shaped the form that the uprising took. As the tide turned against peasant insurgents during 1931, some rebels moved from confrontations with the state to attacks on softer, civilian targets. These resulting massacres exposed the implicit racializations at play in the revolt. This insight into the Hsaya San Rebellion suggests that the global crisis of capitalism of the early 1930s catalysed racialization in Myanmar.

This argument highlights two larger historical problems that, although beyond the scope of this essay, demand further consideration. The first is how subaltern struggles against capitalist exploitation can reinforce racialization. The second is how capitalism's periodic global crises precipitate racialized violence. The analytic of racial capitalism provides a framework for engaging these two interrelated problems; problems that are of pressing relevance to contemporary Myanmar and beyond. It may be that the contestation and contractions of capitalism reinforce racialization as much as its expropriations and expansion.

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65 IOR, L/PJ/6 2022: 'Appeal from the order of the special judge of Tharrawaddy dated the 8th September 1931', pp. 145–53.